A woman in a purple Victorian dress is seen from behind, looking out over a tropical beach at night. The moon is full and bright in the dark sky, reflecting on the water. Palm trees are silhouetted against the night sky. The overall mood is romantic and serene.

LIGHT
of a
NILE
MOON

a sweet victorian romance

K. LYN SMITH

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LIGHT
of a
NILE
MOON

a sweet victorian romance

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DEDICATION

For Mom and Dad, who read all my books, even though I've told you it's
not required.

Your love story is the best one of all.

With love, your favorite daughter.



"We love because it is
the only true adventure."

- Nikki Giovanni

PROLOGUE



SHEPHEARD'S HOTEL, CAIRO — 1846

“Travel becomes you,” Rhys Evelyn told his sister. They were taking tea beneath the sunshade on Shepherd’s broad veranda after a day spent exploring the noisy bazaars of Cairo. Fiona, who’d put off her blacks only two months before, was in fine looks and he was happy to see it. She’d mourned her husband long enough, but now her eyes were bright with interest at all that surrounded them and her cheeks pink from the heat.

Rhys swatted a mosquito as Fiona idly fingered the edges of a small scarab pendant hanging round her neck. “I think I might make a career of traveling,” she said. “Can I do that—is there such a thing?”

“You can do whatever you like, I imagine. Foster left you well situated.”

“He did, at that,” she said. “But you needn’t worry I’ll force my company on all your travels. I appreciate your indulgence this time—truly, you’re the best of brothers—but I know you have your railway investors to see to. I’ve been thinking I should engage a companion and make a grand tour of the Continent.”

Rhys lifted his brows, pleased to hear it. His sister could use some female companionship. Or perhaps... He hesitated, but it needed to be said. “Or perhaps you’ll engage another husband?”

Her eyes turned soft before she forced a smile. “I don’t think I’ll marry again, Rhys. Although,” she added ruefully, “it would be nice to lose this name. ‘Fiona Foster’ makes me sound like a third-rate actress.”

Rhys’s lips twisted with a smile. “Don’t be ridiculous,” he argued with heat. “You’re second rate, at the very least.” She didn’t toss her almond

biscuit at him, but he could tell the urge was there. “And you should never say never,” he continued. “You may change your mind one day, and then I’d have to tease you about it.”

She dropped the pendant and neatly changed the subject. “I think we should visit St. George’s tomorrow, as long as we return in time to catch Shepherd’s fireworks display.”

“St. George’s? Are you thinking to join the nunnery there? I have to warn you, Fiona, I’m not certain the sisters will have you.”

Fiona did lob a piece of biscuit at him then, which he caught and popped into his mouth before her poor manners could get them tossed from the place. “I’ve no plans to join a nunnery,” she said repressively. “But Mrs. Bracebridge—you recall the lady we met two days ago—she said the frescoes in the church are not to be missed.”

“Then I suppose we shall have to see them for ourselves.”

Fiona lifted the pendant once more and angled her head to study the piece. “Do you think it’s worth anything?” She’d found the amulet in a box of sand-crustured relics she’d bought off an enterprising street urchin.

“There must be a hundred more like it in the bazaar we just left,” he replied. Or in the shops where counterfeit artifacts were churned out like buttons.

“You, brother, have no imagination. No sense of adventure or appreciation for the romance of the past.”

“I have a greater appreciation for the coin of the present,” he said wryly, “and I’d like to see you keep yours.”

Her amulet was crafted of red carnelian (or paste, he suspected) wrapped in gold wire (which was probably painted). The figure was topped by a dull blue disc in ancient imitation of the Nile moon, and a line of tiny etchings marked the back. The edges of the carvings had been dulled by time (or perhaps a bit of sanding paper).

His sister had been intrigued by it, though, so he’d helped her thread a thin chain through a small hole in the top. Similar holes on the sides added a touch of authenticity, hinting that there might once have been wings attached to the thing.

It wasn’t his sister’s usual style and, truth be told, he found it rather ugly. But he couldn’t deny the scarab, a symbol of rebirth, was appropriate for Fiona. She’d been resurrected during their travels, nearly returned from a woman weighted by grief to the carefree sister he’d always known. And paste

or not, that was invaluable.

Rhys and Fiona toured St. George's not-to-be-missed frescoes, which Rhys conceded were impressive. After viewing the vibrant paintings, the abbess, a dark-robed woman in her seventh decade, invited them to see more of the convent. She led them up steep stairs, where windows cut into the stone afforded a distant view of the pyramids on their vast plain. The upper floor also held a small room where several of the sisters were busy dispensing medicines and dressing wounds.

"You've a hospital?" Fiona asked with interest.

"For nearly six centuries now," the abbess said. "The ill and injured of all faiths seek advice and treatment here." As she spoke, a young girl emerged from the small infirmary with an infant on her hip. "That is little Amira, an orphan girl. She found a baby in the streets some months ago and adopted him. The baby's taken ill, though, and Amira brings him here for medicine."

Fiona's brows pulled low, and Rhys's own heart pinched at the story. Before his sister could open her purse, though, he urged her along. A bank draft would go much further toward meeting the hospital's needs than a few coins from the bottom of his sister's reticule.

They returned to Shepheard's as the day's heat was peaking, and Rhys thought how nice it would be to enjoy a cold English rain. They'd not seen a drop of the stuff since landing in Africa. His imaginings were interrupted, though, when they reached their suite of rooms to find the door ajar. Small scratches at the lock were evidence that a less-than-expert pick had been at work.

"Rhys?" Fiona whispered as she, too, eyed the lock.

Urging his sister behind him, he nudged the door open and moved through their rooms with cautious steps. Cushions in the small sitting room had been tossed about, and Fiona's vanity drawers were upended, her jewelry scattered across the carpet. Their clothing lay in heaps upon the floor, and his sister's box of artifacts was emptied. Several items were broken and lay strewn across the desk.

Nothing appeared to be missing, though. This hadn't been a robbery so much as a search, and an unfruitful one, at that.

The Egyptian authorities were called and Mr. Shepherd himself summoned Britain's consul-general. Sir Rupert Daventry was a thin, mustachioed man. He sucked his teeth, studying Rhys and Fiona with a considering eye before saying, "It's unfortunate, certainly, but these things will happen. You're sure nothing is missing?"

"As far as we can tell," Rhys said, crossing his arms.

Sir Rupert pressed his knees and rose to take his leave. As he passed Fiona, his gaze dropped to her pendant on its thin chain. "That's an interesting piece you have, Mrs. Foster. A souvenir from your time in Cairo, I take it?"

"Yes," Fiona said, reaching up to touch the amulet. "What could be more reminiscent of our travels here than a scarab?"

"Hmm. Well, the governor has issued a number of decrees to restrict the unsanctioned movement of artifacts. It's silly, truly, when every man, woman and child eagerly sells every bit that's dug up, but that's the way of it now. Where did you say you found it?"

Fiona frowned. "It's merely a trifle I bought off a boy in Old Cairo. It's charming, but I'm sure it's not but a bit of paste and paint." Rhys cocked a brow at that, but his sister avoided his gaze.

"Yes, well, a thief might mistake it for something more. You can't be too careful. If you'd like, I can secure your valuables—including your paste pendant—at the consulate until you're ready to return to England."

Fiona's hand tightened on the pendant, and Rhys replied for them. "I'm sure that's not necessary, Sir Rupert. Mr. Shepherd keeps a safe in his office if it comes to it."

Sir Rupert sucked his teeth once more then gave them a short nod. "Very well then. Let me know if you change your mind."

The next day, Rhys and Fiona navigated the shops of Old Cairo where sunlight threaded through the canopy of crowded balconies and overhanging rooftops. As they moved through the narrow lanes, unease settled in Rhys's chest. He couldn't lose the feeling that they were being watched. Followed, even. Perhaps it was only his imagination. He and Fiona had both been on edge since the incident at the hotel.

Rhys had taken a closer look at her pendant the night before, and now he

wasn't so certain it was merely paste. But even if it were authentic, it was no different from the artifacts being dug up by the dozens every day. He'd not been able to make out anything special about the thing.

All of that was beside the point, though, as he'd sold it not more than an hour past to an antiques dealer near the port. A fact for which his sister was still upbraiding him.

"You had no right to sell my pendant," she said again with a firm set to her jaw that he knew well. "I dare say, you become more and more like Father every day."

"I'm nothing like him," Rhys said with heat, though he knew Fiona only meant to provoke him. She had a special talent for it.

Their father had been the second son of a second son, who'd enjoyed some success as an officer in His Majesty's Army. After resigning his commission, he'd used his talent for trading information to grow a tidy income. And on discovering his boy's skill with all things mechanical, and locks in particular, he'd grown his enterprise further, pressing a young Rhys into service securing the odd letter or incriminating missive from unsuspecting gentlemen's safes. The man had been an autocratic scoundrel, and his sister's comparison was hardly a flattering one.

"It's better this way," Rhys continued, his voice low. "I secured a good price for it, and you can buy something else with the funds. Something pretty."

"You can't truly think someone is looking for my scarab," she said irritably, her wide blue skirts narrowly missing a young boy with a pair of goats. "You yourself said there must be thousands like it in the bazaar."

"I believe I said, 'a hundred.' Don't exaggerate. But as none of your jewelry was taken, or any of the other artifacts from your box, this is the only thing that makes sense. It's the only reason someone would have searched our rooms."

"You still had no right to make this decision without discussing it with me."

Rhys stopped and turned to face his sister squarely. The day was hot, and his temper had grown short. Fiona's fair skin was flushed, whether from the sun or the heat of her own emotions, he couldn't say. "I'll buy you another bauble," he bit out. "Ten more if you wish."

Her eyes narrowed. "I fail to see how selling the amulet will—"

Rhys threw his hands up, knowing it was pointless to argue with his

sister when she was set on her course. “Fiona, it’s done,” he said, turning. He strode ahead, forging a path through the crowd.

He turned at the spice seller’s stall to gauge her temper, but his sister was nowhere to be seen. He stopped and crossed his arms to wait for her. When she didn’t appear, he narrowed his gaze over the crowd as it flowed around him. Had she ducked into one of the shops out of pique? That wasn’t like Fiona. She was more direct in her obstinacy until the wind left her sails.

She’d forgive him in short order, and they’d resume their pleasant accord, although a tiny bit of guilt pinched at him for the way he’d handled the matter with her pendant. He probably should have discussed it with her first, but the end result would have been the same.

His gaze raked the crowd before him once more and then, at the far end of the lane, he spied it: a flash of blue as a woman was ushered through a dark doorway.

“Fiona!”



Rhys paced his suite at Shepherd’s and dragged a hand through his hair once more. The hour was late, nearing midnight. The traffic below his balcony was still loud, the air still hot, the smells of the city still present, but his mind was wrapped in a surreal fog.

He could scarcely believe it, but Fiona had simply... disappeared. One moment she’d been there, arguing with him, and the next she’d been swallowed by the shadows. He’d called out and run after her, frustrated with the crowds that impeded his progress, only to find the building where she’d gone empty.

Only, Fiona wasn’t simply gone. She’d been taken. Thoughts of what she must be going through, of the terror she must be feeling, nearly choked the breath from him.

Twenty-four hours of searching had not revealed any sign of his sister. If the shop owners in Old Cairo knew anything, none of them were speaking of the tall, pale Englishwoman. Fiona was noticeable, and he found it hard to believe no one had seen her being taken from their streets. He’d returned to Shepherd’s often, his heart buoyant with hope that Fiona had found her way back, only to sink once again on finding their suite still and empty.

He sank onto the settee in the sitting room and held his head in his

hands. Closing his eyes, he pondered what to do next. When he opened them again, it took a moment for him to regain his bearings. He'd fallen asleep, but something had awoken him. He held himself still, listening. Then he heard it: a faint breath in the room's stillness. A shadow moved in the moonlight, and before he could react, the cold steel of a blade touched his throat.

"Where's the amulet?" a heavily accented voice asked.

Rhys's pulse thrummed loudly in his ears. "Where's my sister?"

The blade pressed more firmly against his throat. Sweat slicked his brow as he tried to discern his attacker's face. The dim light caught a pale scar on the man's cheek but did little to dispel the shadows about his eyes. The man was thin, though there was determination in the press of his knife. But Rhys was fast and strong and larger than his visitor. He was confident he could overtake the man, and his muscles tightened in readiness.

"The Collector will trade your sister for the amulet."

Rhys stilled. Fiona was alive! His heart thumped with relief, and he swallowed against the steel at his throat. "Who is the Collector? Where is he keeping her?"

"He is a man you do not want to cross."

"Whatever he's paying you, I'll double it if you take me to my sister."

The man hesitated, and the pressure against Rhys's throat eased.

"Do you have a sister?" Rhys asked. "A wife or a cousin, perhaps, under your protection? You must know I'll do what's necessary to protect my sister. Take me to her, and I'll see that you're well rewarded."

The knife shifted against Rhys's throat once more. "I cannot." Not *I will not*, but *I cannot*.

"There's no need to do another man's bidding," Rhys pressed, "when you can profit from your own enterprise."

"I do no one's bidding," the man spat. "You have one day to deliver the amulet."

"I don't have it."

"Then you must get it. You have one day," he repeated.

"Where should I bring it?"

"I will find you."

It was clear Rhys would learn nothing more here, but if he bided his time, waited until the man left, he'd follow him. Perhaps his visitor would lead him to this Collector or even to Fiona. Inaction soured his stomach when he wanted nothing more than to leap from the settee and throttle the man, but

waiting was the most sensible course.

The man straightened and slowly removed the blade from Rhys's throat. As he did so, another figure stepped from the shadows. Before Rhys could react, the second man delivered a powerful blow with his fist, and darkness edged Rhys's vision.

When he woke again, dawn was lighting the sky. Rhys rose to sitting, groaning at the pain in his head. He planted his elbows on his knees and tugged at his hair in frustration. He'd let the man—his only lead to Fiona—get away. He rose, ignoring the ache in his head as he stabbed his feet into his boots. He set out for the port, determined to buy the pendant back. If he needed to, he'd call on old skills to break into the dealer's shop and steal it.

As it turned out, there was no need to resort to thievery. A light shone from within the shop when he arrived. Mr. Osman, a thin fellow with smooth skin the color of cream tea, remembered Rhys. He stood back to admit him, although he'd not yet opened for the day.

"The scarab? Yes, I recall it," he said in response to Rhys's fevered inquiry.

"I need to buy it back."

Osman frowned. "But I don't have it," he said. "I sold it to a museum gentleman."

Rhys stared at the man, unable and unwilling to believe his wretched luck. He inhaled deeply and asked, "Do you know where I can find him?"

"I imagine he must be on his way back to England by now."

CHAPTER ONE



BRITISH MUSEUM, LONDON

Miss Helen Corbyn was grateful for the full skirts that hid her tapping foot. It wasn't that she didn't appreciate Lord Thorsby's account of his latest mummy acquisition, but she'd much rather be reading ancient texts than debating mummification techniques.

But texts were dull by all standards but hers, and not likely to garner any interest at the Trustees' annual ball. And so, she tapped impatiently while the crowd in the Egyptian-Saloon-turned-ballroom made all the appropriate noises of awe and delighted disgust.

The museum had been transformed for the evening in an effort to pry more purses open with the exotic lure of the ancients. Lotus-embroidered silk draped the walls and elaborate arrangements filled with pomegranates, dates and figs adorned the refreshments table. Many of the exhibits had been rearranged, allowing for an impromptu dance floor which had been chalked with hieroglyphics. Helen had had to bite her tongue against pointing out the errors made in *that* endeavor, but London's elite didn't seem to mind the inaccuracies. Indeed, they'd done their part in the affair, turning out in numbers, eager for their purses to be emptied. And eager for more tales from Lord Thorsby's recent travels.

She'd once considered him a potential suitor, but any thoughts she'd had in that direction had been effectively quashed tonight. He'd just returned from six months in Egypt, and she'd taken extra care with her hair in anticipation of meeting him again. But then the baron's first words on seeing her had been, "Miss Corbyn, I'm curious to know what you make of the

inscription I found in the tomb of a Late Dynasty queen.”

Helen wasn't a lady who required flowery compliments or professions of undying affection. As a rule, she preferred a well-informed discussion of ancient artifacts to empty platitudes, but an inquiry about her general well-being would not have gone amiss. The man had been gone for six months, after all. It was then that she realized her unique knowledge of ancient languages attracted Lord Thorsby far more than any softer sentiment ever would.

She found she wished for a bit more romance. A bit more dash. She wished, quite simply, for a bit more. Their interaction had left her feeling curiously disappointed and mildly irritated. What she'd *not* felt, rather tellingly, was pain in the area of her heart.

When Lord Thorsby turned to address a question from one of the Trustees, she excused herself and slipped into the museum's dimly lit corridors. She strode purposefully, tugging the elbow-length gloves from her hands as she walked. Her crimson taffeta skirts gave a satisfactory *swish* with each step.

While many of Lord Thorsby's newest crates had yet to be unpacked, she'd discovered some text fragments in one of his earlier shipments. She'd spent much of the past week engrossed in the fragile bits. They offered oblique hints toward the elusive Pharaoh's Trinity, a three-piece amulet said to contain an alchemist's recipe for an immortality elixir. She didn't believe in such things, but the Trinity was legendary. It was the stuff of archaeologists' bedtime stories, and the notion that the fabled amulet might actually exist caused energy to trip along her spine.

She would embark soon for her own journey to Egypt, and she meant to have another peek at the texts before she left. To that end, she aimed herself in the direction of the small workroom where they were kept. As she traveled the long corridor behind the museum's public rooms, the light of the Egyptian Saloon's gas sconces grew fainter, and the strains of the Trustees' string quartet faded.

This portion of the museum was a warren of passages and storage rooms, and she was thankful for the long afternoons she'd spent translating for Professor Tyndale—afternoons that afforded her more than a passing knowledge of the museum's back corridors. Despite that distinct advantage, her sense of direction wasn't her most stellar quality. It was a fact of which her siblings were forever reminding her, and she paused once, then again,

before turning down another corridor.

She must be behind the Memphis fist by now. Cool, inky blackness shrouded the corridor, and she knew the rooms to either side were crowded with coffins and long-dead kings. The mummified remains of children and their leather-skinned mothers. Helen wasn't a squeamish sort of female—her brother Edmund had long since seen to that—and the dead didn't normally unsettle her. But here, alone in the midnight stillness of the museum's dark passageways, she could almost imagine their whispers against her neck. She rubbed the tops of her arms and hurried toward the workroom. It should be just down the next corridor. Or was it two halls over?

Faint squares of light slowly emerged from the blackness ahead—not enough to see by, but enough to hint at the windows that looked onto the museum's rear garden. Had she come too far then?

She turned the next corner and—“Ooof!”

Helen lifted her hands to steady herself, certain she'd run into one of the Egyptian stone sarcophagi. Her gloves fell unheeded to the floor as she felt the coolness of smooth linen draping the stone and beneath that, a curious warmth.

Sarcophagi were not warm.

She quickly pulled her hands away, but not before the warmth moved on an inhale. She stumbled back a step. There weren't supposed to be any guests in this part of the museum, and she felt certain the watch would have carried lanterns. This was no member of the museum's staff.

She opened and closed her mouth. Finally, she forced out with more authority than she felt, “Who goes there?” Stiffening her carriage to give her courage, she added, “You should know the watch are on their way.”

“Stand aside.” The low whisper rasped along Helen's spine, lifting the hairs at her nape. The softly spoken command had the opposite effect as its speaker intended, though, for her feet became lead weights that refused to move.

She drew a breath to call out, but large hands gripped her, startling an ineffectual squeak from her corseted lungs. One hand covered her mouth while the other spun her around. A heavy arm pressed her ribs, holding her firmly against a man's chest.

Her heart raced at the familiarity, and her hands grew damp. With a considerable effort that left dents in her palms, she stilled their shaking. Why had she left the Trustees' ball again? She was moments from certain death, or

worse, and she couldn't recall why she'd felt such an impatience to wander the museum's back corridors.

"Who are you?" The raspy whisper sounded in her ear again, close enough to flutter the hair at her temple. Her eyes widened as gooseflesh rose along her bare arms. She considered biting the hand at her mouth. The man was much too large, though, and she'd never do enough damage to escape before he caught her again.

"Miss"—she cleared the mouse from her throat—"Miss Helen Corbyn." She couldn't see his face from the way he was holding her, and his hand muffled her words. When he loosened his grip, she added, "My father is Horatio Corbyn, president of the Royal Astronomical Society. My grandfather is Lord Ashford. He's an earl with vast holdings. If it's money you want—"

"Love," he said, his low voice vibrating against her back, "you can rest easy. There's nothing you have that I want."

She snapped her mouth closed as her pulse thrummed in her ears.

"If I release you, can I trust you to count to one hundred before you sound the alarm?"

Helen frowned. He was letting her go? She nodded slowly, detecting the barest trace of sandalwood soap in the warm air between them. It was the oddest sort of thing to notice, but truly, what sort of criminal carried such a pleasing scent? Shouldn't he smell of... oh, she didn't know... brimstone and sweat?

The arm at her waist relaxed its hold and slowly fell away. Cool air replaced the heat that had been there. "I'm going to remove my hand from your mouth," he whispered into her ear, and she shivered. "Begin counting and don't move. Do you understand?"

She nodded again, and his hand eased from her mouth. She considered screaming then thought better of it. The intruder seemed inclined to leave her, and it would be best not to upset that plan.

"Count," he ordered.

She inhaled a shaky breath and licked her lips. "One. Two..."

Something soft brushed her arm, and her breath hitched until she realized it was naught but her own glove, retrieved from the floor and pressed into her keeping. The man moved past her in the corridor then, and as he did, a thread of light from the garden window caught his profile. A dark cloth draped his head and lower face in the Arab style, and pale eyes shimmered

silver in the moonlight.

Rhys never would have confessed the words aloud but... he missed balls. Cotillions and routs and interminable midnight suppers. Mindless social events where he'd nothing with which to concern himself but watered punch and the occasional aggressive female.

It wasn't that he missed dancing, although he'd never complained about the feel of a lady's waist beneath his hand as they turned in a waltz. No, he missed the *normalcy* of the life he'd made for himself and Fiona.

Who knew the sudden appearance of the inconvenient lady before him, with her crisp taffeta and carefully styled tresses, would prompt such wistful longing? But more than dancing for his own enjoyment, he yearned to see Fiona twirling once again. His jaw firmed on that thought, and he was reminded of his purpose.

"You should know the watch are on their way." The taffeta lady's voice was soft and cultured, richer than he would have expected from one so petite. She was bluffing, he was certain of it, but he'd not survived this long by underestimating his adversary.

When she moved as if to sound the alarm, he quickly pressed a hand to her mouth. Her skirts rustled against his rougher linen clothing, and he felt the stiff bones of her stays beneath the hand he held to her middle.

Of all the nights for him to retrieve the amulet... The museum was normally tucked up by this time, hushed and still beneath the weight of history filling its halls. He'd certainly not expected to encounter anyone. It should have been a simple enough task to slip in and out the back, but then nothing about the past weeks had been simple.

The lady shifted in his arms, and he caught the faintest scent of flowers rising from her hair. The fragrance was at once sweet and exotic, spicy and completely at odds with the refined, silk-clad Englishwoman pressed against him. Night jasmine, he thought, bright and wild. It put him in mind of lush hanging gardens in Persia, but he'd have sworn the lady before him was more the English-holly-and-boxwood sort.

He'd been too long in the desert. The sun had turned his brains to dust, but the feel of cool silk beneath his fingertips nearly undid him. He closed his eyes and when she agreed to count, he slowly lowered his hand from her

mouth.

“One, two,” she whispered. He was pleased and not a little relieved when she obeyed his command. He’d thought this life far behind him—had worked hard, in fact, to put distance between himself and the hangman’s noose. To be caught now by a tiny slip of a woman was the height of irony. Despite that, he couldn’t deny the unexpected current that flashed through his veins. It was fear, of course. Fear for Fiona if he failed in his mission. It had nothing to do with the warm weight of the woman in his arms, and it most definitely was *not* the thrill of adventure.

When he was confident the lady wouldn’t scream, at least for as long as it took him to escape, he pressed her fallen gloves into her soft hands and edged past her. Miss Helen Corbyn, daughter of the president of the Royal Astronomical Society, granddaughter of Earl Something-or-Other, continued counting into the darkness.

He found the window he’d left open—the museum’s locks had been laughable—and checked his pocket once more. Satisfied to feel the smooth edge of the amulet inside, he climbed through the opening. As he went, he chanced one more look over his shoulder, unsurprised to see Miss Corbyn angling for a glimpse of him.

CHAPTER TWO



Helen counted as far as thirty-five, then she lifted her skirts and ran. Her slippers slid on the smooth marble as she turned first one way, then the other, trying to regain her bearings in the dark maze of corridors. She rushed about for an embarrassing length of time, following the strains of the Trustees' quartet until finally spying the lights of the gathering ahead. She tugged her gloves back on and stood breathless in the Egyptian Saloon's entry.

Her heart slowly regained its normal rhythm as men in dark evening suits and women in colorful silks began a new set. Her mother chatted with a group near the bust of Rameses II, and Lord Thorsby's arm was now occupied by Professor Tyndale's niece. The baron's attentions, which earlier had been so fixed on his mummy, were now diverted as he leaned his head close to the young lady. Lydia Tyndale, with her vibrant laugh and flirtatious eyes, had that effect on gentlemen, although Helen doubted the lady had ever *seen* an ancient text, much less translated one.

The pair looked up, and Miss Tyndale's features pinched when she spotted Helen. It was a familiar expression, and one that often mirrored Helen's own feelings. In a practiced but not unexpected maneuver, Lydia rearranged herself to draw Lord Thorsby's gaze away from the entry. Helen resisted the urge to roll her eyes at the other woman's efforts, but only just.

Finally, she found her quarry. Her father and Professor Tyndale stood talking with two more gentlemen, and she wound her way through the crowd to their side.

"Helen, dear, did you find your handkerchief?" her father asked. The wry look on Harry Corbyn's face said he knew her flimsy excuse for leaving the gathering had been just that.

"Yes, Papa. Although, I wonder if I might have a private word with you

and the professor?”

Both men nodded their agreement. Of course, by the time she explained what had occurred and the watch had been summoned, the sandalwood-scented thief was nowhere to be found. The unlocked window through which he'd escaped was re-secured, but there was no sign that any of the locked rooms had been disturbed.

Professor Tyndale cleared his throat. His brown eyes tipped down in concern as he said, “It appears you interrupted the man before he could make off with anything of significance. It was well done, Miss Corbyn, although I wouldn't have liked you to place yourself in any danger.” The aging gentleman patted her hand before excusing himself to alert one of the Trustees.

“I don't like it, Helen,” her father said. “You could have been injured, or worse. You're certain the thief didn't harm you? He didn't touch you, did he?”

“I'm certain, Papa,” Helen said with a twist to her lips. Nothing good would come of telling her father about the man's impertinence, and if Helen were honest, she was still a trifle breathless over the whole incident. The intruder's arm had been strong as he'd held her to him, his chest firm as she imagined a man's chest ought to be. Lydia Tyndale, she was certain, could not claim an evening half so exciting.

Her father eyed her skeptically. He'd always had a confounding sixth sense about her and her siblings' veracity that had found them out more often than not. He didn't press the point, though, saying instead, “If this is what you encounter within the confines of the British Museum, I don't even wish to contemplate the dangers you'll face abroad.”

Helen's decision to accompany Professor Tyndale and his wife to Egypt was an old topic, and she thought they'd long since exhausted it. “Papa,” she said gently, “we've already discussed this. I'll be perfectly safe with the professor, and you know this is a singular opportunity that I've no intention of missing.”

“I know, I know. But that doesn't mean I have to like it.”

“And besides,” Helen added, smoothing a wrinkle on his dark sleeve, “it's as you said. Tonight's danger occurred within the British Museum. Soon, I'll be leaving the thief behind to plague good Englishmen and women while I escape to another continent altogether. You should be relieved for my departure.”

It was a poor argument, but she hoped to tease her father past his objections. He merely scowled, though, unconvinced and unmoved.

She was five and twenty and well past the age when her father would forbid her from going, but one word from Harry Corbyn and the professor would withdraw his invitation. While he'd been nothing but kind to her in the time she'd assisted him with his work, she had no illusions about where his loyalties lay.

Her father crossed his arms and his gaze landed on Lord Thorsby, who was still being chatted up by Miss Tyndale. In a surprising change of topic, he said, "Have you cut Thorsby loose then?"

She frowned at his choice of words but said, "I don't think we suit, Papa."

"Thorsby's a respectable peer, despite his eccentricities." Helen quirked an ironic brow at her father, who was known in London circles as a bit of an eccentric himself. "Nevertheless," he continued wryly, "I understand he'll return to Egypt soon. If you were to marry, his connections would be helpful to have in Cairo."

"You would have me marry for connections?"

"I wish you to remain safe during your time abroad. A husband like Thorsby could assist in that regard."

"Papa..." Helen shook her head. Her father had shown no particular preference for Lord Thorsby as a potential match for his daughter. That he was pushing her to encourage the man's suit said much about his worries for her voyage.

"Have you truly considered the journey, poppet? It will be long and uncomfortable, and you know sea travel doesn't agree with you."

He wasn't wrong, and Helen swallowed at the thought of the queasy days ahead of her. In the weeks since she'd accepted the professor's invitation, she'd busied herself with the planning necessary for a year abroad. The flurry of activity had been as much to satisfy her need to prepare as to distract herself from the coming voyage.

Her family had traveled to Paris ten summers before when several of her mother's paintings had been accepted by the French *Académie*. For Helen, the journey had been an unmitigated disaster. She'd endured both the crossing and the return bent over a porcelain basin, and that had merely been a short trip across the Channel. It certainly didn't compare to the weeks of ocean travel she was about to endure.

Helen hadn't seen the land of the Pharaohs since her infancy, when her father had held a temporary post in Egypt, but she'd spent years studying its history. Her interest was far more than academic, though—more than she could satisfy with books and scholarly journals. She longed to experience the heat of the desert and the lush delta of the Nile. The food and the people and the *languages*! The contrasts of hot and cold, light and dark, new and old. How a body could *not* long for such vitality was beyond her.

She craved Adventure. Yearned for it with a heat that set her heart to pounding and her blood to simmering. If returning to Egypt meant she must set foot on another ship, then she'd find a way to withstand the experience.

"I've considered the journey, Papa," she said gently. "Mama never let *mal de mer* keep her at home, and I'm not about to give in to it either."

Her father gazed across the room to where her mother watched them. The way his eyes lit on seeing her, even after nearly three decades of marriage, was precisely the reason Helen knew she and Lord Thorsby were not suited for one another. She'd have a love like her parents' or none at all, and she'd begun to reconcile herself to the latter. Which was just as well, she reminded herself. With her travels to Egypt and her work with the professor, there'd be little time or opportunity for romantic distractions.

"You'll write?" her father asked.

"I've told you I will. Every day if I can, but you know there's only one post office in all of Egypt."

"Nevertheless, I'll expect regular letters. If I don't have them, be assured I'll book passage on the next ship for Alexandria."

"I'd expect nothing less," Helen replied with a squeeze to his arm, warmed—if slightly vexed—by his concern.

"And you'll be careful of the sun? You've your mother's fair coloring, and she always burned easily in the Egyptian sun."

"That's because Mama always forgets her bonnet," Helen said. Then, seeing the firm set to her father's expression, she promised, "But I shall be careful of the sun."

He rubbed his jaw. "And you've packed Wilkinson's guide?"

Helen gave a short laugh, but she couldn't help her appreciation for Sir John Gardner Wilkinson's guidebook—the preeminent authority on all things Egypt—that her father had gifted her with the week before. "Papa! You know me. I've a trunk full of books. The porters will despise me, but I'll be the most prepared Englishwoman ever to set foot on Egyptian sand."

“Of course. What was I thinking?” He smiled, and his grey eyes crinkled at the corners in the way she loved. His smile faded then as he said, “Go do what you need to do, Helen, then come home safely to us.”

CHAPTER THREE



VALLETTA, MALTA

Four days. Rhys chafed at the delay. He'd been given a firm deadline for making his return to Cairo, and the consequences for failing had been explained in very clear terms.

He'd been fortunate to secure passage aboard the P&O Steam Company's *Oriental*. The seas had been smooth, the steam plentiful. Once he reached the Egyptian port of Alexandria, another few days' travel should have had him in Cairo ahead of schedule.

It had all seemed too easy, so it was only fitting that the *Oriental* developed a problem with the paddle shaft as it limped into port at Valletta. The paddle shaft sounded important, and he was certain he wouldn't wish to travel without it, but now he was meant to sit on his heels for another *four days* while repairs were made. This new delay would be cutting things much too close.

He ran a hand through his hair as he stood in the harbor office. His French was abysmal and his Maltese negligible, so he addressed the P&O agent in broken Italian. "Isn't there another ship bound for Alexandria?" he asked. "I don't need a cabin. Deck passage is fine, or I'll work if there's a seaman who's taken ill. It's imperative that I reach Alexandria as soon as possible."

The reed-thin agent with a reed-thin mustache looked up from his paperwork and shook his head. His reply came in near-perfect English, and Rhys tucked his Italian away to embarrass himself with later.

"The French have a packet bound for Alexandria," the agent said, "but

she won't leave for another ten days. I suppose you could take passage on a merchant ship to Constantinople and make the journey by way of Syria, but you'd not arrive any sooner. You'll do better to wait for the repairs to the *Oriental*."

The man turned back to his paperwork, ignorant or uncaring of the impatience that nearly choked the breath from Rhys. He closed his eyes with a sigh and forced the muscles in his neck to relax.

Hoisting his leather satchel higher on his shoulder, he considered his options. He'd passed a hotel at the foot of Strada Reale that appeared comfortable and well-kept, but more importantly, it lay within steps of the port. He could stay there and check the ships regularly. There was nothing else for it unless he wished to swim to Africa.



Two days later, Rhys tipped the hotel boy and surveyed the generous luncheon the kitchens had sent up. Quail and eel, roasted vegetables, bread and honey and dates, wine, coffee and a jelly or some such that jiggled a bit when he shook the bowl. It was more than an entire company of ravenous men could eat, and he was but one man with little appetite.

Despite his regular visits to the harbor office, no other ships had magically appeared to whisk him to Alexandria, and his anxiety had stretched until he thought it might break with an audible snap.

He'd be no use to Fiona if he were weak from hunger, though, so he forced in a slow breath and lifted the filigreed lid on the coffee. He poured a cup and sniffed at the dark brew. It was suspiciously thick, but he took a tentative sip as he watched the bustling port below his balcony window. For all the English pomp over Turkish coffee, he'd never grown accustomed to it. His lip curled at the heavy bitterness, and he emptied the remainder of the cup into a leafy potted plant.

Below, an elderly couple accompanied by two young women in elegant silks made their way to the harbor office. Two porters led their party, driving donkey carts heavily laden with trunks and bandboxes.

Rhys chewed a date without tasting it as he observed their movements. He hoped they weren't sailing for Alexandria, for they'd be sorely disappointed with the delay. The gentleman entered the P&O agent's office while the ladies waited outside, and Rhys sliced a bite of quail as he studied

them.

One of the young women, a tall, slender figure in pale grey stripes, shaded her eyes against the bright Maltese sun and gazed about the quay with lazy disinterest. Even from the distance of his balcony, he could tell she had fine features, with a superior tilt to her nose and sable hair that curled beneath her bonnet. In short, she'd be a handful, and probably not a delightful one.

Her companion was shorter, and although he would not have described her as plump, she had curves where there ought to be curves. There was a rare energy about her that the other lady lacked, a crisp vibrancy that went beyond the rich hue of her gown to color the very air.

She swayed slightly with the legs of one newly landed, and her gown of plum silk shimmered as she moved until it turned nearly black. It was one of those curious fabrics that appeared one color in a certain light until the wearer turned to reveal another, richer hue. Fiona had redone her drawing room some months past, rhapsodizing over curtains that changed color depending on one's perspective. Shot silk, he thought she'd called them.

The shot-silk lady plucked a book from the depths of her pleats and turned to her place. The volume wasn't one of the tiny, journal-type books the ladies carried about either, but a full-sized tome that left Rhys wondering what else she concealed within the folds of her skirts. An artist's set, perhaps, complete with easel? The thought caused a rare smile to tip his lips.

When she shifted to speak with the older lady, more of her face was revealed in profile. There was something about the curve of her cheek that seemed familiar, and Rhys leaned forward with new interest.

The lady in stripes turned then and spied him watching them. She stilled for a beat and then, rather predictably, her lips curved into a coy smile. Caught, Rhys could do nothing but nod politely.

Her companion turned more fully toward him, and recognition caused his heart to thump in his chest. He hurriedly ducked back into the shadows of his suite.

It was none other than the jasmine-scented Miss Helen Corbyn who stood beneath his window. Daughter of the president of the Royal Astronomical Society, granddaughter to Lord Something-Or-Other, disrupter of thieves.

The devil take it.

CHAPTER FOUR



Areprieve! Despite her eagerness to reach Africa, Helen could hardly believe her good fortune to have two more days on terra firma. The sailing from London, around the peninsula to Marseilles, and finally to the port at Malta had been every bit as horrific as she'd expected. The expense of her first-class passage was a shame, as most of her fine meals had been cast over the side of the ship in spectacular fashion.

So no, she certainly didn't mind a brief respite before she must set foot on another floating craft of torment.

Even as Helen silently rejoiced over this latest turn, Lydia Tyndale huffed a sigh at the professor's news. "Truly, Uncle? We must kick our heels here for two more days?" Her nose wrinkled at the noisy and industrious port. Lydia crossed her arms and if not for her voluminous skirts, Helen thought they might have seen her stamp a slipped foot on the rough cobbles.

"There appear to be a number of hotels nearby," Helen said. "I'm certain we can find acceptable rooms for the duration, and we'll be close at hand when the *Oriental* is fit to sail again."

To Helen's surprise, Lydia brightened, and a speculative look came into her eyes as she pointed at the building behind them. "There! This looks fine enough, don't you think, Uncle?"

Helen checked her frown. Lydia Tyndale was rarely pleasant for the sake of being pleasant, and her about-face was most suspicious. The younger lady's eye was trained on a point two stories up, and Helen followed her gaze to a row of balconied suites. Several windows were open to allow gauzy curtains to flutter in the sea breeze, but the colonnaded balconies were empty of guests.

The establishment was well situated to command a full view of the port.

A small plaque near the entrance declared it the Clarence Hotel, kept by a Madame Goubau, and Helen quickly thumbed her guidebook to the appropriate page.

“The Clarence,” she said. “Wilkinson indicates the *table d’hôte* is at six o’clock, and the house has the advantage of hot and cold baths.”

“Yes,” the professor said with a slow stroke of his side whiskers. “I suppose this hotel will do as well as any of them.”

Lydia’s lips curved in satisfaction, only to fall again some moments later on learning she and Helen would be required to share a room. “But Uncle,” she protested, “surely there are enough rooms for us to have our own? Miss Corbyn *reads*,” she explained. When her uncle only blinked at this indictment, she added in an overloud whisper, “In the *morning*. She rises much too early for polite society.”

“Er, well, the ship’s delay has left many travelers to seek their accommodations, Lydia,” the professor explained with a gentle pat atop his niece’s hand. “It’s only while we’re in port, and then we’ll see about securing your own cabin aboard the *Oriental*.”

In an attempt at keeping the peace, Helen threaded her arm through the younger lady’s. “I solemnly promise not to read before nine,” she said. Lydia blanched at that, and Helen wondered not for the first time how the professor had come to have such a spoiled young lady for his niece.



Some moments later, their travel things having been sorted and delivered to their room, Helen stood before the mirror and untied her bonnet strings. The room was charming and nicely appointed, with a bed large enough for two, a small sitting area with a damask couch and two chairs, and a writing desk. A balcony, framed with the same gauzy curtains she’d seen from the street, presented a pretty picture of Valletta’s busy port.

She’d pen today’s letter to her parents then see about posting the thick stack she’d accumulated over the voyage thus far. While she was almost certain her father had been teasing when he threatened to come for her, it wasn’t a theory she wished to test by neglecting to send her letters.

As Helen fluffed the hair at her temples, Lydia glided between her and the glass to pinch her own cheeks. With a silent press of her lips, Helen waited for the younger lady to finish before she resumed her repairs.

“I plan to write a letter now that we’re settled,” she said as Lydia strode to the balcony, “but then we could explore the city, if you’d like.”

“You write entirely too many letters.”

Helen bit her tongue and reminded herself that Lydia, who’d been orphaned at a young age, no longer had parents to whom she could write. It was a strategy Helen deployed whenever her empathy for the other woman ran low, and one she’d been obliged to use more and more of late.

The young woman leaned over the edge of the balcony and peered down the length of the hotel. When she brought her head back inside, Helen added cheerfully, “I’m certain your aunt and uncle would enjoy an outing to see the cathedral or perhaps the castle of St. Elmo.”

Lydia groaned. “You may accompany them. I’ve no wish to pass my time in a dusty church or crumbling castle. Unbutton me, please.” Lydia presented her back so Helen might play lady’s maid.

“How will you spend your afternoon?” Helen asked as she loosened the column of tiny buttons.

“I shall find some way to amuse myself. Perhaps I’ll find the other guests entertaining.”

Helen frowned. She wasn’t Lydia Tyndale’s keeper, but as the older—and more sensible—of the two of them, she felt compelled to remind her, “Of course, you can’t go about alone. Are you certain you wouldn’t rather join us? We can meet the other guests together at tea.”

Lydia stepped from the gown then pulled a fresh one from the wardrobe—predictably, she’d taken more than her share of the space. The gown was fetching in pale blue with bell sleeves and ruching at the elbows. Lydia tossed it carelessly onto the bed to await the ministrations of the hotel maid.

“I am quite certain,” Lydia said emphatically.

Helen bent to retrieve her writing set from her trunk as a soft knock sounded at the door. Lydia jumped up and pushed the blue gown at Helen. “That will be the maid, who I’m sure doesn’t speak a lick of English. Tell her to have a care not to crease the sleeves.”

Rhys quickly ducked back into his room as the door next to his opened. He recognized Miss Corbyn’s rich voice as she greeted the hotel maid in... Maltese? The words weren’t Italian—he knew enough of the language to

know that much—but what young Englishwoman studied the native tongue of Malta?

He didn't think Miss Corbyn had seen enough of him in London to recognize him. He didn't wish to challenge the notion, though, so he remained out of sight behind his door. He listened, not understanding a bit of their exchange but enjoying the cadence of her voice as she gave the maid some sort of direction.

“Tell her not to burn the fabric!”

That voice, coming from the interior of the lady's room, wasn't nearly so melodious. Miss Corbyn paused in her speech, and Rhys could almost hear her eyes roll. He pressed his lips on a smile as he waited for her exchange with the maid to finish. When the door clicked shut, he waited another beat then, hearing nothing, slipped from his room.

He considered securing his valuables in Madame Goubau's safe as he strode down the hotel's long corridor, but he quickly discarded the notion. He'd never be able to relax while the amulet was out of his possession. Not that he was relaxed now, but at least he knew the blasted thing was secure and close at hand.

He ventured down to the docks and made the rounds of the shipping offices, inquiring as he'd done for the past two days for any earlier sailings. The responses were all the same. *No* (English), *No!* (Italian) and *Le* (which he finally understood to be the Maltese negative).

Fiona, he thought with a heavy heart, *I'm coming*.

As he made his way back to the Clarence, he spied Miss Corbyn's plum skirts swishing their way toward the castle at the far end of Strada Reale. At least her party had gone out. With luck, he could avoid them for the duration of his stay.



Professor Tyndale was captivated by the history of the fortress at St. Elmo, and pulling him away in time for tea required the efforts of both Helen and his lady wife. Helen was certain they'd receive a tongue lashing from Lydia for their tardiness, but they returned to the unexpected sound of Lydia's happy chatter. She and Mrs. Tyndale paused to remove their bonnets and Professor Tyndale his hat, and together they followed Lydia's tinkling laughter into the hotel's small parlor.

“Aunt! Uncle!” Lydia exclaimed on seeing them. She perched on the edge of a small velvet couch across from another couple and a lone gentleman. Her eyes were bright with excitement, her cheeks a charming pink. Helen was pleased to see the hotel maid had neither creased the sleeves of her blue gown nor burnt the fabric with her iron.

“Come,” Lydia said. “Meet my new friends. Mr. and Mrs. Sheffield are returning to York from India, and Mr. Evelyn, who has no wife to join him on his travels, sails with us to Alexandria. I’ve persuaded him to join us for tea.”

This last was spoken with lowered lashes and a dimpled smile cast in the gentleman’s direction. The foolish girl was oblivious or simply uncaring of the impropriety of persuading a single man to tea without a proper introduction.

For all of Lydia’s impropriety, Mr. Evelyn seemed a mannerly sort as he bowed politely over Mrs. Tyndale’s hand. He was a man of some height, with neither paunch nor frailty, but nicely made shoulders that filled a tailored coat. His dark hair was combed back to reveal a smooth brow beneath his widow’s peak, and his complexion bore the faintly bronzed hue of one who spent his time out of doors.

While the sum of these features was pleasing, it was his eyes that commanded Helen’s attention. Framed by small lines at the corners, they were grey and weightless like smoke and quite at odds with his sun-touched skin and dark hair. Set beneath a pair of thick brows, they lent him an air of inscrutability Helen suspected he’d not have had with ordinary brown eyes, and it took some effort to keep herself from staring.

Mr. Evelyn didn’t share her dilemma. His eyes rarely found hers as he conversed with the group, and she quickly relegated him to the company of rather ordinary Englishmen whose heads were easily turned by Miss Lydia Tyndale.

Though, to be fair, his manner wasn’t the fawning sort. In fact, he listened politely to Lydia’s account of their travels, but there was a general tightness to his jaw that suggested he was eager to make his farewells.

To Helen, he said very little until she asked him directly, “Is Alexandria your destination, sir, or merely a stop in your travels?”

His smile, when he offered it, was slight. “My plans, as of now, are uncertain, Miss Corbyn.”

“What brings you so far from our English shores?” Mrs. Sheffield asked.

“Oh, never say you’re another Egypt-mad gentleman, Mr. Evelyn,” Lydia said before he could reply. “Or at the very least, assure us you collect the pretty bits rather than the dreadful ones. I daresay, Miss Corbyn and her suitor, Lord Thorsby, share an unnatural liking for the ghastliest relics.” She smiled to take the sting from her words, but Helen wasn’t fooled.

Lydia Tyndale, she’d learned, always had a strategy, and Helen didn’t doubt she wished to manage Mr. Evelyn’s opinion before he could form one. But whether Lydia meant to warn him of Helen’s unladylike interest in antiquities or simply imply an understanding with Lord Thorsby that didn’t exist, she couldn’t say.

Mr. Evelyn’s eyes narrowed the merest bit at Lydia’s words. The gentleman seemed disinclined to have his opinion managed for him, and Helen’s estimation climbed a notch.

“Indeed?” he said politely. “Have you no interest then in the ‘pretty bits,’ Miss Corbyn?”

“On the contrary. I’m exceedingly fond of them, but it’s quite possible my notion of ‘pretty’ is not the same as yours.”

He looked as if he might make a reply, and she found herself leaning forward to hear it. When he dipped his head and said only, “Quite so,” she was oddly disappointed.

As soon as politeness allowed, he made his excuses and quit the room, and she had no further opportunity to consider the taciturn Mr. Evelyn and his pale eyes.

CHAPTER FIVE



ABOARD THE *ORIENTAL*

Helen exhaled slowly as she attached a pair of pearl earbobs before the mirror in her cabin. The sickness that had plagued her during the first portion of the journey had lessened, thankfully, but she moved carefully lest she upset her stomach's fragile truce.

Lydia had gleefully regaled her each night with all that she had missed at supper, from the pleasant conversation at the captain's table to the fine meals "fit for the grandest estate."

Tonight, Helen meant to experience it for herself.

Lydia had been pleased to the point of insult on learning she and Helen each had a cabin to themselves, one next to the other with the professor and Mrs. Tyndale across the corridor. The cabins were spacious and well-appointed with plush rugs, polished mahogany furnishings and tasteful Eastern decor. Each cabin had a sitting area and a private room for washing as well as two berths.

Helen thought the expense of paying for two beds was silly—a person could only sleep in one at a time—but she wouldn't complain as she enjoyed the time apart from the other woman as much as she suspected Lydia did.

A female attendant, an Armenian named Dalita, had been provided for the ladies to share between them. Lydia, of course, had insisted that Dalita attend her first, as her hair took longer to style in the complex arrangement she preferred.

Helen had agreed (there was little point in arguing the matter) and styled and pinned her own hair. She sat then with Wilkinson's guidebook to await

Dalita's assistance with the last of her buttons.

The *Oriental*, she learned, had been acquired from the Americans. Its hold could accommodate an impressive number of carriages—both two- and four-wheeled—as well as horses, mules, dogs and assorted other animals. To her delight, Wilkinson's account included a fare schedule for transporting giraffes and gazelles from Africa, and she wondered if their voyage home might include such fascinating cargo.

Finally, Dalita's knock sounded at the door. As Helen crossed the thick carpet, the ship rolled on a steep swell and bile rose once again in her throat. She swallowed, pressing a hand to her stomach, and waited for the rolling to ease. When it did and her stomach settled without further upset, she let out a relieved sigh. Some moments later, fully buttoned and gloved, Helen joined the Tyndales.

"I'm so relieved to know you're feeling better, Miss Corbyn," Mrs. Tyndale said graciously as she threaded an arm through Helen's.

"As am I," Helen replied with a smile. The professor's wife was a kindly, grandmotherly sort of woman who'd fretted over Helen's travel sickness. "It's a delight to see something more than the walls of my own cabin," she said with feeling.

As they made their way to the first-class dining saloon, laughter, conversation and even the sound of a harmonica could be heard from the deck passengers, who passed the voyage forward of the funnel. Although Helen would not have liked traveling on the deck, the third-class passengers did seem to be enjoying themselves.

Lydia, who walked ahead with the professor, turned to say in all earnestness, "I really do think they should design the ships on a different plan. The division between deck and cabin passengers is by no means sufficient."

"What do you mean?" Helen asked, although she could guess the direction of the other woman's thoughts. Miss Lydia Tyndale's father had been a viscount. Her consequence had suffered when she went to live with her untitled uncle, and she had never quite got over it.

"Now that all sorts of people go abroad, there really ought to be some better means of dividing the classes."

Helen's brows dipped. "What do you propose? A brick wall of some sort? Or perhaps the deck passengers should travel in the hold with the giraffes and gazelles."

Lydia's eyes widened at that before she scowled. "Don't tease me so. I will not believe there are giraffes and gazelles in the hold. But a wall... yes, that should work. Uncle, can you suggest it to the captain?"

Helen pressed her lips against a smile as the professor frowned. "Er, yes," he said. "If the conversation allows, I'll be sure to mention it."

They passed the gentlemen's smoking room and the ladies' sitting room. As they neared the dining saloon, Mr. Rhys Evelyn appeared in the corridor dressed in formal supper attire. With his hair combed back above the dark slashes of his brows, his expression was rather austere, and Helen wondered what might cause him to smile.

"Mr. Evelyn," Professor Tyndale said.

Lydia smiled coyly and asked, "Do you dine with us again tonight?"

He greeted them with a dip of his head. "Tyndale. Ladies." His gaze slid briefly to Helen before coming back to Lydia. "I'm afraid I won't be able to join you this evening, Miss Tyndale. I've a prior engagement in the, er, gentlemen's parlor."

Lydia pursed her lips in a pretty pout, and Helen checked her own frown. She was certain, judging by his attire, that Mr. Evelyn had intended to take his supper in the dining saloon as Lydia said he'd done for the past nights.

So far as Helen knew, the only thing different about this night was, well, her. Had he changed his course because she joined them? She was used to gentlemen fawning over Miss Tyndale, but what had Helen ever done to put Mr. Evelyn off?

She received a fierce frown from Lydia when the gentleman wasn't looking, and her suspicions were confirmed by the other lady's irritation. She'd not been imagining Mr. Evelyn's avoidance then.

Before she could give the matter further thought, the ship pitched and rolled sharply. Helen's hands grew damp, her stomach turning with the sudden motion, and she swallowed.

Mr. Evelyn extended a steadying hand to her elbow, eyeing her with something akin to sympathy in his pale eyes. When the ship settled into its placid passage once more, he quickly dropped his hand to his side and tipped his head at them.

"Good evening, Professor. Ladies," he said with one final glance at Helen before he left them in the corridor.

Lydia sailed ahead toward the dining room. As she passed Helen, she

leaned close to whisper, “Mr. Evelyn is not the sort to be deceived by fragile airs.”

Helen fought the urge to cast her gaze toward the ceiling, though it required some effort. But she was on a voyage to Egypt and her seasickness had finally abated. (Somewhat.) She’d not allow anything or anyone to upset her good mood. She followed the Tyndales, resolved to forget Mr. Evelyn’s odd behavior and Lydia’s temper and simply enjoy the evening.

The *Oriental’s* dining saloon was large and airy, with high ceilings and tall windows. She pulled her gloves from her fingers as they approached the captain’s table. It was elegantly set as Lydia had promised it would be, with fine linens, silver, and Sèvres porcelain in the Eastern style.

The course offerings were liberal and well prepared, and attendants were on hand to do the carving. Sherry, Madeira and claret flowed freely as bowls of creamy soup were set before them. Helen shook her head at the wine and opted for soda water, not wishing to anger her stomach when they’d reached such a tentative accord.

But when the ship rolled again during a course of roasted pheasant, she knew she’d been overly optimistic. Her hands shook and perspiration dampened her hairline. She closed her eyes on an inhale, willing her senses to settle, but bile rose once more. She quickly pushed back from the table before she could embarrass herself.

“Miss Corbyn.” Professor Tyndale stood abruptly as Helen hurried away.

“She’ll be fine, Uncle. Here, the footman has brought round some spiced carrots.”

Helen fled the dining room and raced against her pitching stomach, trying to recall which corridor led to her cabin. The halls crossing the interior of the ship all looked the same. Finally, with unparalleled relief, she wrenched the knob on her door and pushed her way inside.

She leaned against the cool wood momentarily, grateful to have reached the solitude of her cabin without disgracing herself. The room was dark after the lamp-lit corridor, with naught but a tiny bit of moonlight finding its way through the porthole. She stumbled toward the corner where she knew she’d find the basin, and her foot struck a table where she didn’t recall there being one. She winced at the pain.

Suddenly, she stopped and sniffed. The barest trace of masculine soap teased her nose. Her breath stilled as the hairs on her neck stood at attention.

She wasn't alone.

Rhys moved on silent feet toward the intruder. He carried his watch on his person, and he'd secured his satchel in the bottom of the cabin's wardrobe for the night, but it wouldn't take a tremendous amount of genius to guess its location. Even the Collector's underlings, who'd never made any claims to genius, might eventually work it out.

This particular intruder was a bumbling sot who didn't even make an attempt at stealth. The man knocked into a low table then grunted softly, and Rhys stopped at the sound. His intruder was a... female?

In the light of the rising moon shining through his porthole, she turned, and her woman's silhouette reached for a candlestick on the nearby desk. She lifted it and spun, and Rhys gripped her arm before she could brain him with the heavy silver plate.

"You!" she hissed in surprise.

He couldn't see her features in the shadows, but he paused at the shock in her voice. If she didn't know who occupied the cabin she intended to rob, then she'd not come for the amulet. He maintained his grip, unwilling to let her go until he knew more.

Her next words surprised him further, her voice a low whisper as she said, "Why are you in my cabin?"

His own surprise forced a soft laugh from him. His intruder wasn't a thief but a lost passenger! "I'm afraid you're mistaken, madam. You've found your way to *my* cabin." As he spoke, the barest trace of night jasmine drifted to him, and he knew. Despite the improbability of it, he had Miss Helen Corbyn in his arms once more.

She flinched at his words, and he let her go. She held fast to her candlestick, although she did lower it a notch. He felt her scrutiny as they stood in the shadows. The similarity to that night in the museum's back corridors was unmistakable. If he could recognize her from her scent alone, it was only a matter of time before she did the same, unless he could distract her. Set her back on her heels.

He affected a tone of wry amusement. "Miss Corbyn, I wouldn't have thought you the sort to rely on such common tricks to trap a man. What would your Lord... Thorsby say? What would he have to say?"

She gasped. “Tricks? I’m afraid I don’t take your meaning.”

“Lying in wait in a man’s cabin,” he said. “I imagine one of the Tyndales will arrive to find us soon. Will it be the professor?” he asked as he lit the remaining branch of candles. The sooner he could dispel the museum-like shadows, the better. “Or perhaps the lovely Miss Lydia, although I can’t imagine her the sort to further another woman’s plot.”

“A man’s cabin... I would never...” Miss Corbyn’s words trailed off, and she lowered the candlestick another few inches to gaze about them. Her eyes landed on the coat he’d hung on the valet when he returned from his aborted supper. His shaving things atop the vanity and finally his boots beside the wardrobe.

“Oh! Mr. Evelyn,” she said breathlessly. “I must apologize—” The ship rolled then, pitching her toward him. She paled, her skin turning to chalk beneath a faint sheen of sweat before she muttered, “Oh, no.”

Recognizing the signs, he thrust her from him and scrambled for the basin. He held the porcelain beneath her, arms extended as far as they would go, as she retched. He waited, wincing as she emptied her stomach.

When she finished, they both stared at his carpet for a long beat. Finally, Rhys lowered the basin to reach for his handkerchief.

“I’m so sorry,” she whispered, mortification lacing her words as she took the linen square. Despite her embarrassment, she looked up and met his eye. “For everything. For mistaking your room, for...” She waved a hand to indicate all that had passed between them. “Is this not the port side?” she asked, and his pity grew.

“This is the starboard side, Miss Corbyn.” He reached for her glove, which had fallen to the floor, and pressed it gently into her hand.

She studied it for an overlong moment before saying, “Of course it is. Again, I must apologize.”

“Think nothing of it. I’m certain I’ve been in worse situations.”

She eyed him skeptically then, to his surprise, she smiled. “You’ve my condolences then, for the wretched life you’ve led, Mr. Evelyn.” She turned her gaze to the candlestick, which she’d curiously held tight to while she retched. Setting it gingerly atop the desk, she made to go.

“Will you allow me to escort you back to your cabin?” he asked, silently cursing his tongue. The less time he spent in the lady’s company, the better, but he couldn’t leave her to wander the corridors endlessly. He thought she might refuse his offer, but then she nodded stiffly and waited at the door

while he shrugged into his coat.

Helen's face burned with the heat of her mortification as Mr. Evelyn led them along the corridor to her port-side cabin. She'd nearly been sick on the man's shoes and would have if not for his quick actions in collecting the basin. But he'd been nothing but kind—offering his handkerchief and his escort and brushing aside her apology as if he were accustomed to ladies casting their accounts at his feet.

When they reached her cabin, she stopped and turned to take her leave of him.

“You're certain this is the one?” he asked.

Her lips twisted wryly, but she checked the number again. 7P. P for *Port*. Why had she not looked more closely before she invaded his cabin?

Her wretched stomach, that was why. The cursed thing had caused her to flee headlong into the first number seven cabin she came to, no matter that it had been on the wrong side of the ship.

“I'm certain,” she said with a nod. “And I thank you for your escort.”

“It's been my pleasure.”

“You are a bold liar, Mr. Evelyn, but I suppose politeness demands it.”

He smiled, the merest tilting of his lips, and her breath caught. The action deepened the lines at the corners of his eyes and sent a ripple along her spine that was at odds with the warm night.

“May I suggest lemonade?” he said softly.

“Lemonade?”

“My sister Fiona suffered—suffers—from travel sickness. Lemonade always settles her stomach.”

Helen's father had pressed a sackful of ginger candies into her hands at Southampton. Shortly after that, her mother had tucked a tin of peppermints into her reticule. Sadly, neither of their offerings had done the trick.

“I shall have to try your sister's remedy,” she said.

Mr. Evelyn's smile slipped before he gave her a brief nod of farewell. “Good evening, Miss Corbyn.” And with that, he was gone.

A door behind Helen clicked open, and she turned to find Lydia scowling from her own cabin. “What are you about?” she asked in a harsh whisper.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Where have you been? We thought you’d returned to your cabin, but it appears we were wrong.” Lydia thrust Helen’s reticule at her, which she’d forgotten in her haste to flee the dining saloon.

“Thank you,” Helen said as she took the beaded bag.

“Just so you know, I don’t think Mr. Evelyn will be interested in a bookish lady. He seems much more the sort for dancing and flirting.”

Helen pressed her lips against a sharp retort and said only, “I’m sure you must be right.” She turned her back on the other woman and let herself into 7P.

Lydia’s door slammed, shaking the wall between them, and Helen leaned against her own door. Despite Lydia’s assumptions, Helen was not interested in Mr. Evelyn. She was on her way to Africa for a year’s worth of deciphering and translating, sorting and cataloguing. She didn’t have time for schoolgirl silliness, and certainly not over *this* man.

When he’d leaned close to press her glove into her hand, his sandalwood scent had flung her back to the museum’s dark corridor. Now, the inevitable question rose in her mind: Was it possible Mr. Evelyn and the museum thief were the same man?

She laughed aloud at her foolishness. Of course, they weren’t. Many men must share the same sandalwood soap. It was true, Mr. Evelyn’s eyes were pale like the museum intruder’s had been. Added to that bit of incriminating evidence, Mr. Evelyn had been vague about his purpose in Egypt. Helen knew there were unscrupulous men who skirted the legalities to trade in antiquities. Artifact smugglers who cared more for the weight of their own purses than the historical value of the items they plundered. A man like that wouldn’t hesitate to take advantage of a lady lost in the ship’s corridors, but Mr. Evelyn had been all that was courteous.

She shook her head. Despite the similarities, she simply couldn’t reconcile the two men. One was a rather ordinary Englishman—extraordinary eyes notwithstanding—while the other... The other had been shrouded in mystery and moonlight. One had quite ordinary shaving things in his cabin while the other sent a shiver tripping along her spine whenever she allowed her thoughts to return to the night of the Trustees’ ball.

She was creating excitement where there was none. Mr. Rhys Evelyn was not the museum’s midnight intruder. She was certain of it.

CHAPTER SIX



ALEXANDRIA, EGYPT

The hour was late when the *Oriental* reached the waters off Alexandria, and a heavy moon hung low like a pearl earring above the port. Rhys's fingers drummed a tattoo on the railing. The ship wasn't more than a mile from shore, but the captain had been obliged to put off his steam and drop anchor rather than risk the treacherous channel at night. The *Oriental* would idle until morning, when a pilot would come to guide them through the old port. It was but one more delay that had Rhys clawing at his neckcloth.

He returned to his cabin and removed the scarab from its hiding place. Then, reaching for his bag, he retrieved a second amulet, a piece he'd commissioned in London before the *Oriental* sailed.

He unwrapped the thin linen from each and studied them, pleased with the match. There was no discernible variation between the two. An untrained eye like his own wouldn't detect a difference. His insistence on secrecy and haste had resulted in a ridiculously steep price from his London contact, but the precaution eased his nerves. He replaced the replica in his bag and lifted the original to the light, turning the scarab first one way then another to try to understand its appeal.

As far as artifacts went, it was a rather unremarkable piece. It was inconceivable that such a small, inanimate thing could hold sway over men, and he wondered, not for the first time, how his life had come to this. How Fiona's life had come to this. He wasn't a saint by any stretch—years as his father's lock-pick had seen to that. But certainly, Fiona hadn't done anything to warrant their current circumstances.

At the first hint that their father thought to embroil her in his schemes, Rhys had spirited his sister away to their mother's aunt in Surrey. They'd been twelve then, and Fiona had been expressive in her displeasure with what she'd called his high-handedness, though she'd come to love Aunt Rose. And against all reason, the lady had grown fond of the pair of them, for when she passed five years later, she bequeathed her estate and a small fortune to them. Armed with hope and heavy pockets, Rhys had left his father's employ and never looked back.

He'd spent the past decade and more inventing things. Filling his workshop with all manner of tools and gears, cogs and sketches. And then, when he gained a bit of confidence, he'd invested in others' inventions. He'd made quite a fortune of his own, in fact, for all the good it was doing him now.

He thought of his sister and her mischievous smile, and his eyes grew damp. He dashed the moisture away with an impatient thumb. He'd told Miss Corbyn that Fiona suffered from a similar travel sickness. *Suffered*—past tense. Had some corner of his mind accepted what his heart could not? Had he already begun to mourn her? His chest ached with the pain of his thoughts, and he rubbed a fist there to ease the burning. No, he wouldn't believe she was gone. He'd surely feel an emptiness, a void, if she were. Fiona still lived.

He re-wrapped the linen and secured the amulet once more. Then, frustrated with his forced inaction, he went to pace the deck.

The moon's luster shone across the black water and highlighted the edges of Pompey's Pillar, rising from Alexandria's low skyline. In other circumstances, he might have found the view pleasing. Romantic, even. He might have enjoyed sharing it with a young lady at his side. Miss Corbyn's green eyes came swiftly to mind before he shoved the image aside. He studied the dark water instead and wondered if he could swim the distance.

He needed to make his way to Cairo, not kick his heels for another night. Down below, movement caught his eye, and he spied a small craft piloted by a single man. The boatman dipped an oar and navigated around the larger ships as he made for the shore.

"You there!" Rhys called. "Good sir!"

The boatman looked up and Rhys leaned over the side of the *Oriental*. "Five *piastres* if you'll take me ashore," he called down.

The man shouted a lengthy reply in a language Rhys didn't comprehend. It was neither French nor Arabic.

“Five *piastres*,” he repeated, louder this time, and pointed toward the shore. The man shook his head and began stroking again, pulling away from the *Oriental*. “Wait!” Rhys called.

“Perhaps I can be of assistance,” a soft voice said from his side. He turned to find Miss Corbyn, conjured from his earlier thoughts. She offered a tentative smile, and the moon lit her smooth auburn curls as she approached the rail. Before he could respond, she leaned over the side and called down to the man in a foreign tongue.

The man stopped his rowing and replied in the same cadence, and Rhys looked at Miss Corbyn with new appreciation. First, Maltese and now... He didn't know what language that was.

“It's a Nubian dialect,” Miss Corbyn said, reading his confusion. “He says you must pay an additional ten *piastres* for the Custom House fee. Fifty will cover passage to the Custom House and the loan of one camel.”

Fifty *piastres* was extortionate to Rhys's way of thinking, but he had his own camel, stabled near the port if the livery master there hadn't sold her. He told Miss Corbyn as much.

She leaned toward him and whispered, “I think you can secure passage for much less if you wait until the morning.”

“I don't wish to wait,” he ground out then added, “if you please.” In the end, they settled upon thirty *piastres*, without the camel, and Rhys hurried back to his cabin to fetch his satchel.

A pilot met the *Oriental* the next morning to escort the ship through the harbor. From Alexandria, Helen and the Tyndales would journey another four days, navigating first the Mahmudiyyah canal around the old port city before following the Nile upriver to Cairo, where the professor's post awaited.

But first, they'd explore some of the ancient city's sights. Helen and the professor had bent their heads together on a vigorous plan to make the best use of their time. As the *Oriental* neared the shallows, Helen's feet itched to begin her Egyptian adventure.

She wondered how Mr. Evelyn fared and whether he'd made it safely ashore the previous night. He'd been insistent on escaping the ship, as if he were eager to avoid the Custom House or to make an important appointment.

But it had been late, and she couldn't imagine what sort of engagement

required him to leave so precipitously. Nighttime rendezvous were reserved for social pursuits (which she supposed was an entirely possible explanation) or matters of a more irregular nature. Clandestine, even, or—

No. She was allowing her imagination to run away with her again. She shoved her thoughts aside and focused on the day's excitement. She'd arrived in Egypt!

Once the anchor was lowered, an armada of small boats arrived to take the passengers ashore with their baggage. She marveled at the noisy activity below as the crew shouted and sorted massive piles of trunks and bags and portmanteaus from the ship's hold.

"We'll be fortunate to reach Cairo with all of our possessions," Lydia said with a sour expression. Helen couldn't disagree, although she hoped her books survived the sorting.

They passed through the Custom House and were met with a swarm of donkey drivers. Each vied for attention with vehement shouts and gesticulations, recommending in broken English, French or Italian his own animal above all others.

Whenever Helen or the professor offered a reply in their native tongue, the drivers jumped in surprise before quickly moving on to seek a more bewildered arrival. Helen saw more than one fellow traveler nearly forced onto the back of a donkey by the driver's aggressiveness, and she was thankful for her facility with languages.

Alexandria, she was delighted to see, far surpassed her imagination.

Men and women in various styles of local dress filled the streets, which were narrow and irregular and redolent with exotic spices and food and incense. Bins filled with dried mint and caraway, ground cinnamon and blue chamomile enticed her with their earthy fragrance. Their party passed a cart heavy with copper pots, and a small, dark-eyed child watched them solemnly, gold bracelets stacked high on her olive-skinned arms.

And the camels! The majestic beasts, which were much larger than Helen had expected, groaned and lumbered about, common as dogs.

They called first at the consul-general's residence, as befitted the granddaughter of a peer of the realm and an emissary for the British Museum. The professor expressed his disappointment on learning the gentleman was not in residence, but he thought they might catch him up in Cairo.

Helen had met Sir Rupert Daventry in London the year of her come-out, but he was a powerful and influential man, and she doubted he recalled the

occasion. His absence, though, afforded them more time to see the city, and they soon exhausted themselves with visits to Pompey's Pillar and St. Mark's Cathedral.

The city was loud and colorful, and she was intrigued by the languages and the people, although she could have done without the flies. They were larger and more numerous than English flies, their buzzing a constant source of irritation. She kept these latter thoughts to herself, though, as she'd no wish to sully her first impressions of Africa with negative thoughts.

Lydia, however, showed no such restraint. She complained frequently about the insects and the dust and the press of bodies. It was already spring, and Helen wondered how the young lady would fare in a few weeks when the hot *khamsin* winds were upon them.

Lydia's upset was so great, in fact, that they were obliged to seek out the European shops in the Frank quarter to soothe her nerves. She'd been disappointed to discover the flies were not particular about where they buzzed and even now, she swatted at another while the professor negotiated a fine length of ruby silk.

"I don't know why we couldn't have gone directly to the *Tamarisk*," she said, referring to the boat that would take them down the canal to the Nile. "We've not seen anything today that Uncle can't read about in one of Miss Corbyn's guidebooks, and certainly without all these dreadful bugs." She waved her hand once more in front of her face.

"My dear, the *Tamarisk* isn't ready for passengers to board yet," Mrs. Tyndale explained for what must have been the third time. "But," she said, brightening, "perhaps we should go see the baths when we've finished here. They sound lovely from the description Miss Corbyn shared with us, and I'm sure such a refined outing would be just the thing to revive our spirits. What do you say?"

The older lady pressed her hands together in supplication, but whether her plea was for Lydia's acquiescence or patience from a higher power, Helen couldn't say.

Lydia, who rarely approved of anything recommended by Helen, surprised them by saying, "I suppose so. At least we'll be free"—wave—"of these infernal flies."

Helen counted it a success that she ranked a notch above the "infernal flies" as far as irritants to Miss Lydia Tyndale went.

And so, they traveled next along a broad avenue lined with date palms,

bananas and oleander until they reached a long building with low archways. The professor was promptly taken away to the men's side while Helen and the Tyndale ladies followed an ebony-skinned woman into a vaulted rotunda. The attendant provided them each with a large sponge and a generous dab of soft Egyptian soap, which Lydia sniffed with suspicion.

"What is this?" she asked.

The attendant replied in heavily accented English, "It is the soap."

Lydia frowned at Helen expectantly, and Helen translated, "It's soap. Do you smell the jasmine? My grandmother procured some for me when she learned I would be traveling to Egypt."

Lydia sniffed again. "Don't they have a nice cake of French lavender?"

Helen inhaled for patience. But it was clear Lydia expected her to translate, despite there being no need, so she turned to the attendant and said, "She wishes to know if you've any European soap."

The attendant shook her head.

"I'm certain you'll enjoy this soap, Lydia dear," Mrs. Tyndale said, but Lydia remained unconvinced.

The attendant led the way to the private bathing rooms. Helen made note of all the details she'd describe for her parents, from the creamy marble lining the walls to steaming tendrils of perfumed vapor. Water trickled from a central fountain to throw a soft hush over everything, and the whole of it put her in mind of a lush scene from the tales of *One Thousand and One Nights*. It was enough to make one believe the bustling streets of Alexandria had simply vanished, as if by an ancient spell.

Helen thought Mrs. Tyndale's suggestion had been an inspired one and that Lydia might enjoy the respite, but when they rejoined the professor sometime later, Lydia's frown still hadn't eased.

"Aunt," Lydia said wearily, "I've developed a head-ache. I should like to have a lie-down." It was clear the younger lady's energy was flagging with all the unfamiliar sights, sounds and smells she'd experienced. Helen knew a moment of remorse as she herself had been a poor travel companion on the sea crossing.

"I believe we could all use a rest," Mrs. Tyndale said. "I've brought some laudanum with me that will set your head to rights." To her husband, she added, "Henry, do you think we could find the *Tamarisk* now and settle in?"

The professor nodded. "I'll see you ladies aboard, then I'll check on the

last of our provisions. Miss Corbyn was gracious enough to prepare a list of our necessities, so I anticipate the journey to Cairo will be a very pleasant one indeed.”

By the time they reached the canal where the *Tamarisk* was docked, several other passengers had arrived, and the crew were busily preparing for the journey. Lydia promptly found her cabin and closed the door on Alexandria.

“Well,” Mrs. Tyndale said with a tight smile. “It’s been an exciting day, and I think Lydia has the right of it.”

Helen smiled. “Go enjoy your lie-down, ma’am. I should like to write a letter first, and then I plan to do the same.”



On leaving the *Oriental*, Rhys had promptly started for the livery stable where he’d left his camel, only to be accosted by a thin girl of eight or nine who’d thrust a note into his hand. He took the paper and called out to her, intent on learning the source of the missive, but she disappeared into the night in a swirl of dark skirts and hair.

He unfolded the paper to find the name of a street in the heart of Alexandria’s Turkish quarter and the single instruction, *Bring the amulet tomorrow.*

A heavy inhale lodged in his chest. This was not their arrangement. He was supposed to go to Cairo, where he’d exchange the scarab for his sister. Fiona had been taken in Cairo, but was it possible she’d been brought here to Alexandria?

He looked up from the note, certain he was being watched, but nothing seemed amiss. His heart sped at the thought that the past weeks of worry and dread might soon be at an end. Or, quite possibly, he might be walking into a trap. He passed an uneasy night, worrying and wondering if he made the right decision to linger in Alexandria, or if he should have gone directly to Cairo.

Now, it was morning and he stood outside a busy coffee house in the Turkish quarter, watching and waiting. A pair of men played backgammon at a nearby table, and the sweet smoke of water pipes competed with the smell of strong coffee.

He examined the faces of the people around him as the sun heated the air. He’d wait one more hour. If no one contacted him in that time, he’d set

out for Cairo. The notion that he was wasting time while his sister waited for him made his skin itch.

Just then, a tall, thin figure rounded the building. Dark eyes were set deep beneath black brows, and a smooth scar in the shape of a sickle marked his left cheek. Rhys had since learned his name—Akeem—but despite weeks of searching, he was the only connection Rhys had to the man who'd taken his sister.

He straightened and fought the desire to plant his fist in the man's face. "Akeem," he said, his voice low.

Akeem stopped. "Evelyn. You were expected days ago."

"There were delays, but I came as soon as I could. Where is the Collector? I have what he wants, but he'll not see it until I have my sister."

Akeem's dark eyes narrowed. "You brought the amulet?" His voice was low and intense, and he eyed Rhys's coat as if he might discern the scarab through the canvas. Akeem clearly had little faith in Rhys's intelligence if he thought the amulet would be so easily found.

"No one sees it until I see my sister," Rhys repeated through his teeth.

With an exhale of annoyance, Akeem said, "I would see this matter settled, Evelyn, but the Collector won't be pleased with your lack of cooperation. You were told to bring the amulet."

"I was also told," Rhys bit out, "that I would receive my sister in exchange, but I begin to think you don't have the authority to negotiate for the Collector. Where is he? I'll go to him directly."

The scar on Akeem's cheek shifted as his jaw tightened. It was the barest motion, but it was enough to set Rhys's heart to pounding. For the merest moment, he wondered if *Akeem* weren't this Collector person, but he quickly dismissed the notion. The man was naught but a hired underling, clearly working at the direction of another.

"The Collector isn't in Alexandria, is he?" At the other man's silence, Rhys took a step forward, then another. "Is he still in Cairo? Is my sister still there?"

Akeem's eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly before he said, "I have been tasked with retrieving the amulet in Alexandria. Bring it to the bottom of the Pont Vieux and leave it at the largest date palm. Someone will contact you with the information on your sister's location."

Rhys frowned. Did they think him so foolish to believe if he left the amulet under a *tree*, they'd simply return his sister to him? He'd been strung

along at the end of the Collector's tether for too long, but he had what the man wanted. "I told you, I'll not give up the scarab until—"

Akeem gave a short laugh, a low sound that iced the blood in Rhys's veins. "You are not in a position to give the orders, Evelyn. Leave the amulet at the tree, and you will have what you want. Fail in this, and your sister will pay the price. The Collector is not a patient man, and he grows tired of this game."

Rhys sucked in a heavy breath and nodded reluctantly, but he'd not play the fool. His sister's life might very well depend upon it. He'd leave the amulet, but he'd watch to see who retrieved it. If luck were with him—and to be honest, he was due a little favor from the gods—then he'd follow the amulet back to the Collector. To his sister.

Akeem left him, and as Rhys wound his way through the dirty streets of the Turkish quarter, he couldn't help the feeling that he was being watched. The weight of the pistol inside his coat offered poor comfort as he crossed the city.

CHAPTER SEVEN



Helen finished a lengthy letter to her parents, taking time to describe the *Tamarisk* and the glorious details of the baths they'd visited. Although her parents had probably seen similar sights during their years in Egypt, she knew they would read her letters to her siblings and grandparents. Aster and Eloise would appreciate the detail, even if Edmund would not.

Despite what she'd told Mrs. Tyndale, she was too excited to rest, so she went to stand at the rail. She left her bonnet in her room—she was mindful of her father's warning about the Egyptian sun, but she wished to feel it on her face for just a bit.

It was a relief to be off the *Oriental*. She looked forward to the next part of their journey, as river travel had never disagreed with her, and she eagerly anticipated her first view of the majestic Nile. Wilkinson's guidebook described the route to Cairo, especially the stretch along the canal, as uninteresting and uninspiring. This portion, however, bustled with activity.

Thin dirt tracks lined both sides of the water where horses would tow the boats along the fifty-mile stretch of canal to the Nile. Beyond the tow track, buskers hawked their wares along a wide boulevard. And everywhere, porters in long robes carried provisions aboard the docked vessels while more men sorted the great piles of trunks and bags that had been brought from the port.

Helen shook her head once more at the chaos as one poor traveler's bandbox tumbled from a large pile to land perilously close to the water.

A crowd of darkly handsome male travelers—Italians by the sound of it—could be heard from the next boat. They were loud and boisterous in the celebration of their holiday, and one young man shouted something inappropriate, in Italian, toward Helen's deck.

Her neck heated. She was tempted to respond in kind, if only to show

them she understood the crude words if not their meaning, then she thought better of it. She was the granddaughter of an earl, after all. She was above such displays, no matter that her lips twitched with the urge.

When their attention was captured by something on the opposite shore, she gave in to her curiosity and cast a furtive glance toward their boat. Scholarly interest, she told herself. That's all her curiosity was—an academic interest in their customs and behavior, much as she had for the ancient Egyptians.

Then something on the shore caught her eye. She frowned and straightened at the rail. There, amidst the towering pile of baggage waiting to be loaded onto the Italians' vessel, was a trunk that looked suspiciously like... Lydia's. And behind that... Helen's carpet bag—the one with Wilkinson's guidebook!

She hurriedly glanced around her own boat for someone—anyone—to assist in sorting the confusion. The professor hadn't returned yet from his errand, and the captain was nowhere to be found. She tried to get the attention of the porters loading provisions aboard the *Tamarisk*, but they were singularly focused on their task.

She looked up again and was dismayed to see two men beginning to load the Italian boat. They lifted heavy trunks atop their shoulders and stepped nimbly onto the deck with their burdens.

“Wait!” she called in Arabic, but they couldn't hear her above the noise of the Italian travelers.

A door opened behind her, and Lydia's head appeared from her cabin. “What are you going on about?” she asked, looking remarkably bright eyed for one who'd retired to her cabin with a head-ache and a bottle of laudanum.

“There's been some confusion with our things,” Helen explained, still trying to get the attention of the porters.

“Well, I'm certain shouting like one of the natives won't help matters.”

Helen gritted her teeth and said tightly, “The porters are preparing to load your trunk onto the next boat.”

Lydia's eyes narrowed then widened in alarm, and she nearly stepped out onto the deck in her pink dressing gown. “Can't you fix it?” she hissed, but Helen had already begun walking.

Lifting her skirts, she hurried down the wooden plank to where the porters were gathered. As she reached them, her bag toppled from atop a tall stack of trunks to land at her feet. Bending, she hefted it into her arms then

explained the problem with Lydia's trunk. The men stared intently at her uncovered hair as she spoke, and she regretted leaving her bonnet in her cabin. Finally, after much confusion and gesticulating, the men nodded and agreed to deliver the English trunk to the proper craft.

Helen released a heavy exhale, relieved that disaster had been averted. Gripping her bag, she navigated the mud and grass of the tow track back to the *Tamarisk*. As she neared the plank, she was surprised to see Mr. Evelyn at the mouth of a nearby alley.

She was equally surprised by his transformation. Gone was the polished gentleman from the *Oriental*. This man was dressed informally in boots and a dark neckcloth. A felt hat left his eyes in shadow while a traveler's canvas frock coat over a vest and bleached linen shirt made him appear a proper explorer. An adventurer bent on discovery. A thief set on—No. Her imagination was being ridiculous. Nevertheless, her pulse increased its pace.

She waited to see if he would notice her, but he turned without a glance in her direction and strode down the narrow lane. She straightened her shoulders, not the least bit disappointed. Then she spied his leather satchel—the one he'd carried off the *Oriental*—at the base of a large date palm. He'd left his bag.

She hesitated briefly before calling out. "Mr. Evelyn!"

He couldn't hear her above the noise of the street. She shifted her bag in her arms, uncertain, but she knew how dismayed she'd be if her own things were lost. Decision made, she hurried across the boulevard and retrieved his satchel.

A donkey cart rattled past, and she lost sight of Mr. Evelyn momentarily. When the lane cleared, he stood in the shadows of a small alcove, hands on his hips. He spied her, and his eyes dropped to the bag in her arms then widened in dismay.

"You forgot your bag," she explained as she hurried forward beneath the weight of her burden. He shook his head, oddly distressed at her appearance. Before she could reach him, though, two men entered the mouth of the alley. They held their hands low, and Helen gasped to see light glinting off steel blades as they approached. Their eyes were dark and flat, intent on their purpose.

"Mr. Evelyn!" she warned, but the men, it seemed, weren't aiming for him. With a start, she realized they were coming toward her. She backed away but came up hard against a shop wall. The assailant closest to her

lunged, and she held Mr. Evelyn's bag in front of her as a poor shield. Before the man's knife could strike, though, he cried out. Helen peeled her eyes open to see Mr. Evelyn had left his alcove. His brows were low, and he held his own knife as her assailant clutched one shoulder.

Helen inched along the wall, but the second man blocked her passage, his expression fierce. Her heart pounded in her throat and when she thought he, too, might lunge for her, he was seized from behind by Mr. Evelyn. Soon the three of them were circling one another, knives flashing in the sun.

Helen clutched helplessly at both bags. She considered dropping Mr. Evelyn's where she stood and fleeing back to the canal. It was a cowardly thought, but at least then she might be able to send aid to him—two men against one were hardly fair odds. But as she slid along the wall, the fight moved, blocking her path. With the building at her back and the men before her, there was nowhere to go.

She was relieved to see Mr. Evelyn had some skill, although she was hardly a suitable judge. His reflexes were quick, though, and he blocked one attack after another. She winced when the second assailant came at him from the side, but he dodged and parried, his knife flashing through the air. He twisted one way then another before drawing more blood across the shoulder of the first attacker. The man clutched his arm as his knife skittered across the ground, and Helen released her breath in a whoosh.

Mr. Evelyn kicked out with his booted foot, sending the man to land hard on his knees. He jumped back in time to avoid a slice to his torso from the second assailant, but his own knife was knocked from his hand in the effort. Mr. Evelyn struck out with a tight fist, and there was a sickening crunch as his hand met the assailant's jaw. Helen gasped at the sound, but Mr. Evelyn barely flinched as the man crumpled to the ground.

She looked up to see the first assailant had regained his feet and was barreling toward her. She pressed herself tighter against the wall as if she might disappear into the mortar. Oh, why hadn't she run?

Then, recalling Mr. Evelyn's handy footwork, she put her own foot out as the man reached her. To her surprise, he tripped to roll across the uneven pavement. Her relief was short lived as a third assailant arrived at the mouth of the alley. Mr. Evelyn dove to one side as the crack of a gun echoed off the cobbles. The sound was deafening, but more alarming was the spray of dust and shattered brick as the bullet hit the wall near Helen's cheek.

She was numb with shock and deaf to Mr. Evelyn's words as he seized

her hand and pulled her through a dark doorway.

Miss Lydia Tyndale watched from her berth aboard the *Tamarisk* as Miss Corbyn pursued Mr. Evelyn down a nearby alley. The foolish woman actually lifted her skirts and *chased* the man as if she were desperate for his attentions. Had she no shame? And why couldn't Lydia's uncle—why couldn't *anyone*—see it?

She scoffed at the woman's foolishness then let out a relieved sigh when one of the porters lifted Lydia's trunk onto the deck of the *Tamarisk*. At least *that* matter had been sorted, no thanks to Miss Corbyn. Lydia turned from the window and patted her hair in the cabin's small mirror then smoothed a wrinkle from her gown.

For whatever reason, men were intrigued by the bookish Miss Corbyn. Why, it had taken an unprecedented effort to divert Lord Thorsby's attentions at the Trustee's ball, and Lydia, who'd already had the pleasure of three seasons, worried that her charms had begun to fade. To her way of thinking, this journey was her final chance to secure a husband. A lord, preferably, although she wouldn't be too particular if a suitably flush gentleman showed her the proper interest. The notion rankled, as the daughter of a viscount really ought to find herself a title to marry, but needs must and all that.

She'd been skeptical of finding a gentleman in Egypt, of all places, but her aunt had assured her she'd sparkle amongst the society of Cairo. It was the only reason she'd agreed to come, not that they'd given her much choice. So, she'd find herself an English gentleman, marry swiftly, and persuade him to return to England post-haste. This land, with its bugs and dirt and noisy people, would be naught but a distant memory in short order.

Miss Corbyn was welcome to it, as far as Lydia was concerned.

She finished her toilette, patting a cloth dampened with rose water about her eyes. Beyond her door, a loud popping noise came from the direction of the shops, and she paused. Then with a shrug and a fortifying breath, she left the cabin to join her aunt and uncle at the rail.

Two attractive gentlemen glanced up and nodded as she walked across the deck. She offered them a coy smile, which they returned with interested grins of their own, and Lydia was grateful for the time she'd taken to repair herself. Even more so for having passed up her aunt's laudanum. Nothing put

a gentleman off more than a lady nearing unconsciousness.

The boat rocked slightly as a pair of sturdy horses began to tug it along the canal. Lydia reached the rail in time to hear her aunt ask, "What was that noise, Henry? Was that a... a gunshot?" Her aunt's whisper was breathless as she pressed a hand to her chest.

What was this? Guns! Lydia inhaled sharply and glanced around, but all seemed in order aboard the *Tamarisk*. The sooner she could return to England, the better.

"No, my dear," her uncle said as he patted her aunt's hand. "I'm sure it was no such thing. It was probably just an overturned cart."

There was a tightness about his eyes as he spoke. He's lying, Lydia thought. It was a gun. Were they under attack from the heathen populace?

"Well, that's a relief," her aunt replied with a small chuckle. "Although, certainly not for the driver of the cart." She turned to Lydia. "Do you think we should wake Miss Corbyn? I'm certain she would enjoy the view as we set out."

Lydia stilled for a long beat, then a smile tipped her lips. "No, Aunt. I'm sure Miss Corbyn wouldn't wish to be disturbed."



Rhys tugged Miss Corbyn's hand until she had no choice but to follow him through the narrow doorway. They navigated twisting corridors and wound through shops and coffee houses, and all the while he was conscious of the men pursuing them. And of the bag Miss Corbyn had retrieved from beneath the date palm, which now bounced uselessly at his side. Was there ever a man with worse luck?

His hand gripping the strap of the satchel throbbed, and he forced aside the pain clouding his thoughts. He towed Miss Corbyn along behind him, weaving and dodging bins of spices, heavy copper pots and tightly woven baskets.

"Mr. Evelyn!" Miss Corbyn pulled her hand with some force until he released it, and he realized she must have been calling him. "I have to return to the Tyndales. The *Tamarisk* will leave its mooring soon."

The crack of another gunshot preempted any reply he might have made. Miss Corbyn flinched and nearly dropped her bag as calls of alarm rose across the bazaar. Rhys reached for the handle, and pain shot through his

hand as he took up her bag with his own then led them through the throng once more.

After some more moments of dashing and dodging, they ducked into a dimly lit spice shop at the top of the bazaar. Rhys pulled his companion into the shadows away from the window. His breath was loud in the stillness, and Miss Corbyn's chest rose and fell rapidly as she stood beside him. He watched the street as he tried to think.

His attackers had made straight for Miss Corbyn and Rhys's bag. Clearly, they knew what it contained. He could only assume they were working with Akeem, which meant they must be more of the Collector's underlings sent to retrieve the amulet. There'd been no time to confirm the matter, nor had the men been inclined to discussion. He removed the gun from his coat and checked it once more.

"You have a *pistol*?" Miss Corbyn hissed. "Why haven't you been using it?"

His jaw tightened. "Have you not seen the crowd in the bazaar?" he bit out. Indeed, there were far too many people—too many women and children—to risk firing his own weapon. He'd pulled the gun back in the alley, but Miss Corbyn had been too close to her assailant to risk taking the shot, so he'd settled for his fists and knife.

Her brows dipped as she considered his words. He thought she might argue, but she simply nodded. "You make a valid point," she said as she crouched next to him to study the street beyond the window.

The market crowd continued to mill about outside. Rhys spied the man whose nose he'd bloodied, craning his neck to peer over the crowd. Far worse than their current predicament, though, was the awful truth of the day's events: Rhys had missed any opportunity to follow the amulet to his sister. He swallowed, eyes closed, and his heart thumped heavily. He wondered if it would ever recover its normal pace.

"What are we to do?" Miss Corbyn whispered into the stillness.

He opened his eyes. The sooner he returned Miss Corbyn to her boat, the better. He'd have a better chance of evading his pursuers alone, and then he'd go to Cairo. He'd find the Collector.

"We'll return to the canal," he replied with more confidence than he felt. "The *Tamarisk*, you said?"

Miss Corbyn nodded.

The proprietor of the spice shop watched them, a curious expression on

his face as he gazed at Miss Corbyn's auburn tresses. Rhys guessed he'd never seen hair the color of old copper before. Although, given the man's vocation, perhaps dried chilies or ground cinnamon was a more apt description. Rhys acknowledged the man in broken Arabic before ushering Miss Corbyn through the small building to a door at the back.

Easing it open a crack, he studied the alley. There was no sign of their pursuers. Miss Corbyn's sigh of relief was audible. They slowly left the cool shadows of the shop, and she turned, her skirts swinging as she strode purposefully away from him.

"Miss Corbyn," he called. "The canal is this way."

She stopped, frowning at him over her shoulder. "You're certain?"

"Quite."

The sun had traveled some distance across the sky by the time they reached the canal, only to find the *Tamarisk's* berth empty.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Helen stared at the vacant mooring where the *Tamarisk* had been docked, and her stomach twisted with fear. She glanced around then, thinking to find the Tyndales waiting for her onshore with their baggage, but there was no one. They'd gone. She could hardly comprehend it, but the evidence lay before her in the *Tamarisk's* empty berth.

Still in a fog of disbelief, she thought perhaps she'd returned to the wrong place. Her sense of direction had never been good, and maybe Mr. Evelyn's was just as poor. She surveyed the canal hopefully, but her shoulders quickly dropped when she recognized the Italian boat with its noisy revelers departing the bank.

She looked up at Mr. Evelyn, unsurprised to see a frown pitching his brows low. His dismay mirrored her own. What must he think, to know that her companions had sailed without her? She thought back to her last exchange with the Tyndales, when she'd told Mrs. Tyndale she meant to have a nap.

That was it! They must think her asleep in her cabin. It was all an unfortunate misunderstanding. As soon as they realized she'd been left behind, they'd return for her. She exhaled her relief.

"It's a simple misunderstanding," she said brightly. The words sounded desperate even to her own ears. Mr. Evelyn eyed her with something akin to pity, and she forced starch into her spine. "They'll return as soon as they realize I'm not aboard."

"Was no one aware you'd left the boat?"

Helen's smile froze as she recalled her last conversation with Lydia. Lydia, who knew she'd left the deck of the *Tamarisk*. She frowned but refused to allow the ugly suspicion purchase in her mind. No one, not even

the selfish Lydia, could be so cruel.

But, Helen thought with dismay, her absence might go unnoticed for some time. She'd spent long hours in her cabin aboard the *Oriental*, nursing her poor stomach. It would be easy enough for the Tyndales to believe she'd taken to her quarters again.

The question of what to do next pressed on her thoughts. Part of her wished to sit on the bank of the canal and wait for the Tyndales to come for her, no matter how long that might be. Another, more rational part considered taking a room in a respectable hotel while she waited, but there was no telling what dangers a single female might encounter in the meantime. If only the consul-general were in residence, she could entreat him to wire ahead to Cairo on her behalf.

She was not foolish enough to undertake the trip to Cairo on her own, even with Wilkinson's book to guide her. She clenched her fists and tightened her lips against a bubble of hysteria. She was a person who preferred action to waiting, and she *hated* feeling helpless.

"Kafr Abu Homs," Mr. Evelyn said softly.

She tilted her head in question. "Pardon?"

"The canal flows for about fifty miles until it meets the Nile at Atfa, but the *Tamarisk* will have to stop and change horses before that, at Kafr Abu Homs. If we follow the canal, we can overtake it and reunite you with your friends."

Of course! Why hadn't she thought of that? The *Tamarisk* would take some hours to navigate the canal. Pulled along by the canal company's horses, its passage would be slow and ponderous. She needn't wait for the Tyndales to return, nor must she travel all the way to Cairo. With luck, she could be back aboard the *Tamarisk* in time for supper.

Her relief had her clutching her hands in excitement. Then, picturing her map of the delta, she frowned. "Wouldn't it be better to cross Lake Edku and wait for them at Atfa, rather than follow the canal? Surely, that would be a more certain route to intercept the *Tamarisk*."

He shook his head. "As a crow flies, perhaps, but the canal was dug around the lake for the chief purpose of improving travel. The water level at this time of year is too low for a smooth sail across Edku, and we'd probably miss the *Tamarisk* altogether."

Helen studied him, then she considered the lowering sun and her unfamiliarity with the city and its landscape, not to mention her poor sense of

direction. Despite her vast amount of preparation, no reading could compare with the knowledge of experience. And Mr. Evelyn did seem knowledgeable. And experienced.

“How far is it to Kafr Abu Homs?” she asked.

“A few hours’ ride, perhaps. We might catch them up sooner than that, but we should go directly.”

She nodded, relieved to have a course of action. “Very well. Let us go then.”

But before he could lead the way, a shout sounded from a nearby alley. Their pursuers had found them again. Mr. Evelyn groaned, and she scrambled to retrieve her bag as he pulled her back into the sheltering maze of the bazaar.

Miss Corbyn clutched her bag to her as if she carried the incomparable Rosetta Stone. More than once Rhys had thought to relieve her of the thing—toss it into the canal perhaps, as it certainly didn’t help their speed.

But then he’d glance at her face and discard the idea. She’d been abandoned by her party, intentionally if he were to hazard a guess. Her bag was all she had. His jaw tightened at the cruelty of it. He was many things, but he wasn’t such a blackguard to take her only possession.

Not more than five minutes had passed since they’d last been spotted, and he feared it was only a matter of time before they were found again. With a decisive tug, he pulled Miss Corbyn into a garment seller’s shop.

“How do they keep finding us?” she asked breathlessly.

He shook his head and waved a hand vaguely to indicate her person. “Your hair,” he said, placing his hands on his hips as he tried to regain his breath. The devil take it, but his hand ached.

“My—my hair?”

“And your... form.” The distinctive silhouette of her gown, with its tight bodice, narrow waist and voluminous skirts, wasn’t hard to spot. He was surprised they’d evaded their pursuers this long. “You don’t precisely fit with the local residents,” he continued. “Many of them have never seen a European female, much less one with hair like”—she frowned, and he checked his words—“like that,” he finished.

“Let me see if I understand. You’re saying it’s *my* fault these men are

chasing us?”

“Not in so many words, but... you don’t happen to have a cloak in your bag, do you?”

She turned her attention to the bag at her feet. “A cloak? No, I’ve only books.”

He coughed a laugh. “Books?”

“And some medicines and... and a sleeping apparatus.”

His brows dipped low. He should have tossed her things after all.

“Wilkinson highly recommends it. It’s the most ingenious design, really, to keep the bugs—”

“So, no cloak?”

She stopped and shook her head.

“No hat or bonnet?”

At another shake of her head, he turned to study the shop’s large wooden trunks. They were piled high with cottons and linen, garments of every sort, while bolts of colorful silk neatly lined two walls. He began moving through the piles, pulling items and thrusting them into her arms.

After some moments at this endeavor, she whispered, “You mean for us to don disguises. How clever!” And then she began returning items to the trunks. “But no one will ever mistake me for a Nubian, and besides, surely such measures aren’t necessary.”

“Desperate times, Miss Corbyn.”

She stared at him for a beat then nodded as she started her own collection. “What will become of my”—she swallowed, and he wondered if she’d be able to say the word “petticoats”—“my *things*?”

“We’ll leave them.”

She stilled at that. “Leave them? That seems a bit excessive.”

“Unless you wish to carry them, but I assure you, a lady toting her petticoats through the streets will be a much more noteworthy sight.”

Her cheeks colored at his plain-speaking, but she pressed on. “Surely, there’s some value to be had. My—my *things* are made of fine cotton!” she hissed.

“Then by all means,” he said as he motioned toward the bearded shopkeeper, “you’re welcome to negotiate a price for them.”

He’d no wish to think of Miss Corbyn’s petticoats, much less continue to discuss them, so he turned his attention to a tall stack of woven head cloths. Behind him, Miss Corbyn was silent for a long moment before she

began an earnest discussion in rapid Arabic. When Rhys turned, he saw she'd found the shop owner's wife. With her hem lifted two—possibly three— inches, she was negotiating a hard bargain for her flounced underthings.

Rhys quickly averted his gaze and wondered at this lady who couldn't even say the word "petticoat" but had no issue engaging with the locals in their language.

Then he wondered at himself—what was he thinking to help her catch the *Tamarisk*? He didn't have time to play noble escort for a stranded female. He needed to find the Collector. He needed to keep his wits about him. He needed to remain alive. A female would hinder his efforts in every regard.

He eyed the door and wondered if he could slip out. Perhaps he could retrieve his camel and be on his way before Miss Corbyn finished her negotiations. She was fluent in the language and resourceful. Without the draw of the amulet in his bag, she'd be safe enough. She'd find her way to the consul-general or a hotel or convent or some such. The granddaughter of Lord Whatshisname wouldn't remain abandoned for long.

He exhaled heavily. As tempting as the notion was, he wasn't the sort of man who left a woman behind. That thought brought him up short, and he swallowed against a sudden lump in his throat. Fiona might argue he was *precisely* that sort of man, but he'd not do it again.

He'd see Miss Corbyn reunited with the Tyndales, and then he'd go his own way. Alone.



Helen stared down at herself and wondered how she'd ever be able to emerge from behind the screen. She'd removed her gown and petticoats to pull a loose, embroidered garment of pale blue cotton over her shift and stays. Though modestly cut, the robe swung and drifted about her as she moved.

She felt like an entirely different person.

Without the heavy, voluminous layers between her and the outer garment, there was so much... air. She could feel the brush of the cotton against her stockinged legs. It was absolutely decadent and, she was certain, indecent. Why, she might as well traipse about in her night rail!

"Is all well, Miss Corbyn?" Mr. Evelyn spoke from beyond the screen, and she started.

Was all well?

No! *Nothing* was well. She'd been left behind, stranded in an unknown land with an unknown man for companion. She'd yet to post today's letter to her parents, and people had been *shooting* at them.

No, all was not well.

But she'd longed for adventure. She'd wished for it, and now an Arab *jinni* or one of the Egyptian gods had seen fit to deliver it to her feet.

With surprise, she realized she'd been muttering aloud. The silence on the other side of the screen was deafening, and heat flooded her face. Finally, Mr. Evelyn coughed and cleared his throat before moving away.

She inhaled a slow breath to calm the racing of her heart then lifted a lovely indigo scarf. She lowered it over her russet curls, wrapping the linen loosely about her head and neck and tucking her hair beneath the woven edges.

There was no mirror to gauge the effect, but she imagined she must appear a proper Arab *aimra'a*. It would surely be enough to escape the notice of the men who'd been chasing them. Mr. Evelyn would have no cause for further complaint.

"Miss Corbyn? We should go." His voice was low beyond the screen, with just enough of a rough edge to vibrate along her spine. It brought to mind her museum thief. *The* museum thief. He certainly wasn't *hers*, and he certainly wasn't Mr. Evelyn. It was ridiculous to even think it.

Museum thieves didn't hold basins for peaky ladies. She forced her thoughts aside and stepped out from behind the screen.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

She looked up and her mouth dried. He was still dressed informally in his explorer's garb, but he'd added a dark grey head scarf. He wore it loose as she did hers, wrapped to cover his neck and hair, the ends looped over his left shoulder. His cheeks were rough with the hint of night whiskers, and in that moment, with his penetrating pale gaze, she had no trouble believing this ordinary Englishman and her dangerous museum thief were one.

Her heart thumped in her chest. Truthfully, what did she know of Mr. Rhys Evelyn? A shiver lifted the hairs on her nape as she eyed his profile. Was she about to entrust her life and her person to a... a criminal? Did she have a choice?

Go do what you need to do, Helen, and come home safely to us.

She didn't think casting her lot with an unknown man was what her father had in mind, but the shadows beyond the shop grew longer by the

minute. She puffed her cheeks with a sigh and nodded.
“I’m ready.”

CHAPTER NINE



Rhys's heart tripped in his chest when Miss Corbyn emerged from behind the screen. She wore a flowing *jalabiya* that tempted the imagination more than it concealed and a deep blue scarf that set off her spice-bin coloring. All in all, she looked like a vibrant sunset after a summer storm.

He frowned at the fanciful thought and drew a slow breath, even as he acknowledged that, for all her efforts, she would never pass for a local woman. With her pale skin and moss-green irises, no one would mistake her for a native to this part of the world, but at least her hair was covered. It no longer waved at their pursuers like a flag before a bull, and their passage through the ancient streets of Alexandria proved easier than Rhys had a right to expect.

Miss Corbyn walked quietly at his side as he led them to the livery where he'd stabled his camel. He knew the events of the past hours must have taken their toll on her nerves, as they had on his. There'd been that tiny moment behind the screen when he thought she might have been unraveling, but she'd done a creditable job collecting herself. There'd not been one hint of the vapors. No breathy whimpers of distress or complaints about the filthy streets.

Miss Corbyn was quite unlike the other ladies of his acquaintance, save one. His sister had a similar air about her, and he had no doubt that Miss Corbyn's spirit was as practical as it was capable.

The lowering sun illuminated the city's low skyline with fiery hues, and the air was thick with the combined scents of spices, warm bread, and goats. They wound their way through narrow lanes and alleys to the livery, where a donkey shuffled in his stall and a trio of mules chewed hay in an adjacent enclosure.

Rhys pulled a coin from his pocket and summoned a small boy to his side.

“I will assist you, *effendi*.” Malik, who’d aided him in his travels before, beamed a wide, gap-toothed grin as Rhys delivered instructions in broken Arabic.

When he finished, Malik eagerly snatched the coin and ran off to procure provisions and a couple of tents. While Rhys had every expectation of reuniting Miss Corbyn with her friends as soon as possible, he didn’t wish to be caught unprepared. He turned, surprised to find the lady standing close behind him.

She’d been pensive when they reached the livery, but now her eyes glinted with humor. She pressed her lips and he thought she might be fighting a smile. When he lifted his brows in inquiry, she said, “I’m curious to see if the boy’s successful in bringing the tailor.”

“The tailor?”

Her grin broke free. “Yes, *al-khayaat*, but the rest was spoken well enough. I imagine he’ll guess your meaning and that you wished to request... tents, perhaps? *Al-khiyam*.”

Rhys scrubbed a hand over his face and snorted a disbelieving laugh. The *tailor*. Would his tongue never reconcile itself to this language? “Malik will sort it,” he said with more confidence than he felt.

“You’ve worked with him before?” she said as Rhys entered the paddock.

“I have. He’s young but eager to please.” And a coin from Rhys would feed Malik’s family for a week.

Rhys approached his camel with a blanket. She was an impressive beast with a thick, nearly white coat. Her shoulder was taller than he was, and she greeted him by trying to chew the scarf from his head.

Miss Corbyn eyed the animal warily as she trailed Rhys across the hard-packed dirt. With a gentle tug of the reins, he lowered the camel to her knees. “Though you may not believe it,” he said over his shoulder, “I’m better at reading the Arabic language than speaking it.” He settled the blanket on the camel’s back then layered thick, wool-stuffed pads over it.

“That’s often the way of it,” Miss Corbyn said. “I find when speaking that it helps to focus on the spirit of the message rather than the perfection of the words.”

“You make it sound effortless, but I assure you, I gave up on perfection

long ago.”

She pressed her lips and studied his camel’s large teeth. “While I can appreciate the novel experience of riding a camel, would a horse not be a better mode of travel?”

“In the city, yes. A horse would navigate the streets with greater speed, but for longer distances in this climate, a camel has more endurance.” It was the reason—the *only* reason—he’d exchanged his own mount for the lumbering beast when he’d made the journey from Cairo weeks before.

Once he had the pads positioned to smooth out the contours of the camel’s hump, he reached for the saddle. It was a large wooden frame covered in leather and decorated with brass tacks, and he hid a grimace at the pain in his hand when he hefted it onto the camel’s back.

In a voice so soft he almost didn’t hear it, Miss Corbyn said, “You’re procuring tents. Do you think we’ll not intercept the *Tamarisk*?”

He’d knelt to fasten the girth straps, but he straightened at the question. Her apprehension was clear in the high set of her shoulders. He considered lying, but he said simply, “I don’t know.”

She closed her eyes and nodded.

Before he could stop the words, he added, “But I’ll do my best to see you safely reunited with your party.”

She opened her eyes and studied him, measuring and assessing until he thought she’d burn a hole in his forehead. Finally, she nodded again, more firmly this time.

He resumed his task, attaching an ornate halter and a fringed leather leg-rest before finally adding a pair of elaborately woven saddlebags to either side of the animal’s hump. By the time he was finished, his hand throbbed fiercely, and tassels hung from every possible surface of the animal.

“How did you come by the tack for your camel?” Miss Corbyn asked.

Rhys combed his fingers through the woolly hair on the animal’s long neck. “The trader who sold her to me offered it for a bargain when he learned I had none.”

Miss Corbyn cocked her head, eyeing the impressive display. Finally, she smiled. “I think the trader has recognized you for a bachelor, Mr. Evelyn.”

“I’ve no doubt he’s recognized me for a fool, but how do you mean?”

“He’s outfitted you as a young Arab on the hunt for a wife.”

She smiled—a cheeky curving of her lips—and he couldn’t help his

answering grin. Then, with a suggestive wiggle of his brows, he said, “Only one wife? Perhaps he thinks me a married man looking to expand my harem.”

She considered him for a moment then dismissed the suggestion with a soft snort. “No, I don’t think he took you for *that* much of a fool.”

He laughed, immeasurably grateful that if he must divert from his purpose, at least he’d been fortunate to land with Miss Corbyn rather than someone like Miss Tyndale.

But that didn’t lessen the urgency behind his mission. Grateful or not, the sooner he saw Miss Corbyn returned to her party, the better. Then he could focus on tracking down the elusive Collector, finding his sister and leaving the dust of Africa far behind.



Helen’s cheeks warmed beneath Mr. Evelyn’s pale gaze as they spoke of wives and harems. She didn’t consider herself a missish sort of female. She’d come across a number of ancient texts detailing highly inappropriate themes and had rarely—or barely—batted an eye.

But those had been far-away tales of people long dead—certainly not living, breathing men with wiggling eyebrows. Her imagination conjured him as a sultan or sheik with a contingent of beautiful wives garbed in bright flowing robes. Would he have a favorite? she wondered. And how did a man with multiple wives decide where to lay his head each night? Certainly, there’d have to be a schedule of sorts—

She checked her thoughts before they could stray too far down an inappropriate path.

He took her carpet bag and began distributing the weight of her books between the saddle bags. Relieved at the prospect of such an unimaginative task, she hurriedly lent her assistance, passing him her volume of *Larcher’s Notes on Herodotus* then Champollion’s *Phonetic System of Hieroglyphics, Letters and Grammar*. Captain Smyth’s *Alexandria* and Parke’s *Nubia* were next. She held Wilkinson’s guide to the last so it might end up on top.

Mr. Evelyn accepted each volume in silence with only the lift of his brow to indicate what he thought of her extensive preparation. But when she handed him her folded copy of Colonel Leake’s *Map of Egypt*, he paused before carefully tucking it within reach.

Next, she handed over her box of medicines and finally, the sleeping

apparatus she'd yet to try. In its unassembled state, the thing appeared little more than a bundle of bedsheets and reeds. Mr. Evelyn's eyes narrowed in curiosity as he studied the parcel, but he held his silence and added it to the rest of her things.

The boy returned with two more bags, and thankfully, no tailor.

"Well done," Mr. Evelyn said. "*Shukran.*" Malik grinned his gap-toothed smile before disappearing, and Mr. Evelyn began securing the additional bags.

All that remained was the man's satchel. Helen retrieved it and hesitated. It seemed excessively forward to open the man's bag, but surely the camel would be more comfortable if the weight she carried were evenly distributed.

"I have it," he said gruffly as he snatched the leather bag from her hands.

She nodded and held her tongue, although she thought he was rather tetchy about something which, only hours before, he'd carelessly left on the street. Now, he settled the strap across his chest like the scabbard of a Berber warrior. With one last check of the camel's tack, he looked to Helen.

She swallowed. While she eagerly welcomed adventure, she'd never expected it would come in the form of such a large creature. Or that she'd be required to ride *with* Mr. Evelyn on said creature. She wasn't an expert on camel saddles, but this one appeared a bit small for two people. The pair of them would be pressed quite closely to one another. Heat filled her cheeks as he gave her a brief bow.

"Your chariot, my lady."



Miss Corbyn, who'd maintained a healthy distance from his camel thus far, hesitated. Her manner left Rhys to assume the many tomes he'd just packed in his saddle bags had not sufficiently prepared her for the experience of riding such an animal.

He lifted a hand to rub the pale fur of the camel's neck and spoke in low tones. "Approach her slowly from the side. You always want to remain out of kicking range."

Miss Corbyn glanced at him, her brows pitched in a steep V. "Yes," she said, nodding. "I've read that it's best not to agitate a camel."

“They’re friendly, by and large. Show respect and she’ll do the same.”

“Are you very knowledgeable about the beasts, Mr. Evelyn?”

“Passably so,” he said, dropping his hand.

“That’s hardly a recommendation.”

“I’ve been traveling in Egypt for some time now. While I don’t consider myself an expert, I think I can manage to get us up on her properly. It’s not as difficult as it seems.”

Miss Corbyn quirked an eyebrow at him. “It looks quite awkward to me.”

His camel, who’d been pleasantly quiet so far, chose that moment to issue one of her low, throaty groans. “Mnaaaaaarrrrrhhhh!”

Miss Corbyn stopped at the sound, her apprehension obvious.

“Camels are vocal creatures. She’s only trying to make your acquaintance.”

“What do you call her?” Miss Corbyn asked.

He hesitated long enough that the lady angled her head at him in expectation. “Fiona,” he finally replied.

She considered him and the camel, and he knew the precise moment she made the connection, for she coughed a surprised laugh. “You named your camel after your sister?”

“The similarities can’t be ignored.”

“Truly?”

“Both ladies are tall, fair-haired and a trifle obstinate.”

Miss Corbyn smiled, the action lighting her face, and her shoulders relaxed somewhat. As she reached his side, Rhys settled himself on the saddle. Then, taking her hand, he said, “Place your foot there and steady yourself with the pommel.”

Her eyes narrowed as she studied the saddle, then with a decisive nod, she placed her hands and feet where he’d instructed. He assisted her to a sidesaddle position then instructed her to lean toward him.

“I beg your pardon?” Her shoulders went rigid again, her torso board-stiff as she held herself as far from Rhys as she could.

“The animal will come up on her hind legs first. The way you’re positioned, you’ll sail right over her neck like a rag doll.”

“Oh!” Miss Corbyn adjusted her position slightly but not nearly enough. Rhys hesitated then wrapped one arm about her to pull her close. Her frame was slight but nicely curved, a sharp reminder of the night he’d held her in

the museum's shadows. Somewhere, there must be an etiquette guide warning against precisely this scenario. If there wasn't, there ought to be.

Never take a lady up on your camel, no matter the circumstances.

Even with the scarf covering her hair, Miss Corbyn's wild jasmine scent drifted up between them. He drew a slow breath for fortitude. Then with a slight motion on the reins, the camel rose. With his arm still around Miss Corbyn, Rhys leaned them both so they remained upright as the camel got her front legs beneath her.

"Ha!" Miss Corbyn said. "We're up!"

Her delight put him in mind of his sister's first camel excursion. Fiona's worldly sarcasm had yielded to glee once she was settled atop the animal. Miss Corbyn surveyed their surroundings from her high perch, and the warmth of her smile spread through his chest.

CHAPTER TEN



They left the livery and Rhys guided them along the brackish canal. The streets and alleys were still lively with the sounds of the ancient city. He scrutinized their surroundings for any sign of his pursuers, but there were no shouts to indicate they'd been found.

The waters of the canal were a wide ribbon flowing smooth and dark in the late afternoon, and he began to relax. Perhaps this would be an easy matter, after all, to return Miss Corbyn to the *Tamarisk*. He might be able to set out after the Collector before too much time had passed.

Before he could allow that thought to take root, he pushed it aside ruthlessly. In his experience, *nothing* in this land was as easy as it ought to be.

Despite Miss Corbyn's earlier pleasure at finding herself atop a camel, she'd grown stiff again. Her shoulders had climbed toward her ears, and she leaned as far from him as she could without falling over the camel's neck. They had miles ahead of them; she'd be horribly uncomfortable by the time they reached Kafr Abu Homs if she remained so tightly coiled.

He cleared his throat and loosened his grip at her side, which had grown tighter than he realized. In an effort to put her at her ease, he said, "Is this your first time on the African continent, Miss Corbyn?"

She canted her head at him, clearly bemused by such an ordinary question amidst their extraordinary situation. "No, Mr. Evelyn. In truth, I was born in Cairo. My family returned to England when I was an infant, but it's always been my greatest wish to come back to Egypt."

"And is it all you hoped it would be?" A flush climbed his neck as the ridiculous words left his mouth, and he added, "Present circumstances notwithstanding, of course."

She laughed softly. “To be honest, it’s quite a bit more than I imagined. Everything seems... louder. Larger, somehow, but delightfully so.”

“Yes,” he agreed, “Egypt certainly makes an impression. How did you come to be traveling with the Tyndales?”

He leaned his head to listen as she explained the professor’s post as emissary for the British Museum. Miss Corbyn was to aid him in cataloguing the latest antiquities that were being unearthed.

“The professor has enjoyed a long correspondence with not only the Egyptian Museum but the Order of Osiris as well. The Order,” she explained, “was established by the governor himself for the express purpose of preserving Egypt’s heritage.” Her eyes cut to him as she added, “Their task is a noble endeavor. The illegal trade of antiquities poses a grave threat to Egypt’s cultural heritage. It imperils ancient sites and undermines the veracity of the historical record.” All of this was spoken with a measured intensity, and Rhys had the impression he’d just received a lecture.

“You’re very knowledgeable on the topic,” he said slowly.

“It’s a topic worth knowing.”

He wondered what Miss Corbyn would make of Fiona’s amulet, and he had half a mind to show it to her. But then, given the lady’s clear opinion on the illegal movement of artifacts, perhaps that wasn’t the wisest course.

So instead, he asked, “Do you have a particular area of interest? Pottery, or mummies and tombs, perhaps?”

“My brother Edmund would have preferred the latter, I think. He’s always said there’s fortune to be had in searching out the tombs, but my interest lies primarily in ancient texts.”

Although Rhys had never encountered a female scholar, it made sense, given her clear facility with languages, that she’d have an interest in the old tongues.

She released her grip on the pommel long enough to tuck a stray lock of hair beneath her scarf. The lowering sun outlined her profile, lining the gentle slope of her nose and the curve of her cheek. His arms had tightened about her again. He forced himself to relax and wished he’d had two camels for them instead of the one.

“As pleasant as our conversation has been, Mr. Evelyn, I think you’ll have a hard time filling your harem with polite small talk.”

Her words surprised a cough from him. “You think a bit more dash is needed?”

“Oh, I’d say a lot more. Egypt is a land of majestic mystery, of ancient kingdoms and alluring secrets. It demands boldness, sir, not boiled-turnip niceties.”

What would she say, he wondered, if she knew he’d been the one in the museum that night? If she knew he’d held her pressed against him as he enjoyed the warm, sweet scent of her hair? Would she find that bold enough? Or would she be appalled to know she rode with a former lock-pick? Then, sobering, he reminded himself “former” was no longer an accurate description.

He sighed and said only, “I happen to enjoy boiled turnips, Miss Corbyn. They’re a reliable and sturdy vegetable.”

Her lips tilted into a smile before she said, “Surely, there’s something to be said for conversation that’s... reliable and sturdy... but I’m afraid you’ll need to add a bit of spice if you hope to win yourself another bride. You can’t rely on your camel to do all the work. Perhaps you’ve some impressive tales of bravery to share?”

“If I hope to win another bride, Miss Corbyn? Are you vying for the position? You don’t strike me as the sort of lady who would share a husband.”

She gasped and turned, and he was delighted to see her cheeks had pinkened. “Of course not! I was merely speaking in hypotheticals.”

“Hypotheticals,” he repeated. “Of course. Regardless, I can’t imagine your Lord Thorsby would approve.”

She shifted on the saddle. He thought she’d not respond to that sally, but she finally said, “Not that it’s any of your concern, but Lord Thorsby and I do not have an understanding. Miss Tyndale... well, I’m not certain why she would have implied such a thing.”

Rhys recalled the flirtatious Miss Tyndale’s attempts to secure his notice in Valletta. He’d suspected she was up to something, but to hear from Miss Corbyn herself that there was no understanding between her and this Thorsby... Her words caused a curious flutter behind his rib cage that he settled with an irritated frown.

“I merely thought to tease you,” Miss Corbyn continued, “much as I do my siblings, I suppose. We used to play games with my father—make up stories and such—to pass the time on long carriage rides.”

Stories? The silence between them stretched until, with a sigh, he said slowly, “Well, it’s true I’ve had a few adventures in Egypt.”

She tilted her head, and her shoulders eased a bit. “Have you now?”

He nodded, wondering what the lady would find sufficiently entertaining. Given her intrepid spirit, he wasn’t certain he was up to the task. Nevertheless, he found himself saying, “I once led a caravan of traders across the desert—”

“The unforgiving desert.”

“Pardon?”

“For a truly compelling tale, the desert should be unforgiving.”

Rhys dipped his head. “My apologies. We were crossing the *unforgiving* desert, when, in the midst of the fifty-day winds, we were ambushed by a tribe of nomadic warriors.”

Miss Corbyn’s brows dipped charmingly as she considered this. “Were they Tuareg? The Tuareg are very protective of their trade routes.”

“Yes, well, they might have been, I suppose. But in the course of the ambush, they...” He hesitated. Miss Corbyn canted her head in anticipation and he continued. “They took a lady from our party.”

“How dreadful,” she whispered.

“I managed to avoid capture.” Rhys cleared his throat, which had gone dry.

“With your strength and quick reflexes, I would imagine.”

“Just so,” he said with an impatient frown. “*Anyway*, I negotiated my way past the guards and was able to free the lady.”

“From within their camp? How did you accomplish that in the face of such poor odds?”

Miss Corbyn, it would seem, was a very active participant in the storytelling process. He considered her question for a beat then said, “You see, I’d hidden a dagger in my boot—”

“That is the first place any respectable guard would look.”

“Where would you have me hide it?”

“I don’t know. In a book, perhaps? No one ever looks in a book.”

“Fine. I’d hidden my dagger in a *book*. Once I was inside their camp, I distracted the guards with a poem”—Miss Corbyn frowned at that—“then I cut the lady’s bonds. We barely escaped with our lives.”

“That’s the end? That seems a bit abrupt.”

“That is not the end,” he said. “As it turns out, the lady was in possession of a valuable... statue.”

“Oh?” She tilted her head at this twist in his plot. “How intriguing.”

Rhys swallowed. “Intriguing is not the least of it, Miss Corbyn. The warriors had been hired to kidnap the lady by a villain who coveted the artifact. A vile man known only as the Collector.”

Miss Corbyn straightened and pulled her head back to look at him. “The Collector?”

“I take it you do not approve of the moniker?”

“I suppose it serves in a pinch, although it seems a bit... uninspiring, don’t you think?”

Rhys couldn’t agree more.

“Perhaps he should have a name more befitting the dangerous allure of Egypt,” Miss Corbyn suggested.

With another sigh, Rhys searched his mind. They’d already established that his Arabic skills were limited, so he seized the first word that came to him. “How about... Al-Zahria?”

Miss Corbyn’s lips twitched. “Not Al-Zahria!” she exclaimed.

He was pleased by her breathlessness, which was convincing enough that he almost thought it genuine. Miss Corbyn had a talent fit for the theater. “The one and only,” he said. “I outwitted Al-Zahria with my cleverness to save both the lady and the artifact. The warriors were so impressed with my resourcefulness that they made me an honorary member of their tribe.”

“Hmm...” she said. “I can see why. It must have been quite remarkable indeed, to take down a man as vile as the Flowerpot. Did you drop him from the balcony?”

The Flowerpot? Rhys chuckled and surrendered. “I did as you said, Miss Corbyn, and focused on the spirit of the message rather than the perfection of the words. You have only yourself to blame.”

She nodded once in acknowledgement. “Well done, Mr. Evelyn. You and your camel may yet find a bride. While it’s true you’ve not mastered the language of the region, at least you have its heart.”

He smiled at her words as the camel swayed beneath them. His fear for his sister was still there—Fiona was never far from his thoughts—but Rhys realized he’d smiled more in the past minutes with Miss Corbyn than he had in the past weeks. While he was frustrated with the lady’s effect on his plans, he couldn’t deny the pleasure he’d found in their conversation.

The evening had cooled with the sun’s descent, and Alexandria’s bustle yielded to the wide plains of the delta, where lone farms and tiny settlements speckled the map along the canal route. The moon was up, and the stars were

out. And Miss Corbyn, he was pleased to note, had relaxed against him.

Helen smiled to herself at Mr. Evelyn's ridiculous tale. She liked that although he was possessed of intelligence, he didn't take himself too seriously. That much was evident in the man's willingness to shrug off his abysmal language skills. His smile, though, when it dared to appear, was tempered by a strain about his eyes that she couldn't name. Sorrow or regret, fear or anxiety, she couldn't say.

But all that aside, he was a man and she an unmarried lady, and their circumstances were far from proper. So, when she caught herself relaxing against him again, she quickly straightened her spine and leaned forward. Just enough to distance herself from Mr. Evelyn's warmth but not so much to pitch herself over the camel's neck.

That would be something for her letters home, although, in truth, it would be best if her pen never mentioned this particular excursion. Maybe when she was forty to her father's seventy... perhaps then she might tell him of the time she'd ridden a camel across the Nile delta with a man who was not her husband. No, she quickly decided. There probably weren't enough years in their lives to make such a disclosure advisable.

She shifted on the saddle, crossing and re-crossing her ankles as she considered their surroundings. An endless line of palms, papyrus and flowering rushes fringed the canal, and a network of old water channels laced the marshy delta beyond that. They passed the occasional mud-hut settlement or the remains of an ancient village, but she had to admit Wilkinson had the right of it: the prospect along the canal was wholly unremarkable. Given the excitement of the past hours, though, the monotony of their passage was not unwelcome.

Helen was immeasurably grateful they'd not been found by their pursuers. She supposed she ought to press Mr. Evelyn on the unsavory men who'd attacked them in Alexandria, but she only wished to find the *Tamarisk*. She didn't need to know more about the troubles plaguing her travel companion, although she'd convinced herself yet again that he was nothing more than he seemed—an English gentleman on an Egyptian holiday.

He'd neither bristled nor countered when she'd delivered her little

smuggling speech, and surely, were he a smuggler of artifacts, he would have done so. The conclusion, once again, that he most certainly was not the museum thief left her insides feeling strangely unsettled when it should have done the precise opposite.

It wasn't that she wished to pursue the acquaintance of a common thief, but she could no longer deny the way her heart pounded whenever she allowed herself to recall that night. The rasp of the man's whisper, the press of his chest as he held her against him, the solid strength of his arms—

She stopped and brought her thoughts to heel with an iron will.

A pair of birds fluttered in the reeds at the edge of the canal, and the first stars winked overhead. As the camel swayed from side to side, she searched her mind for a distraction, something to break the silence that had lengthened between them.

"A camel's gait is quite different from a horse's, is it not?" she asked. Then she winced; her attempt was no better than the boiled-turnip pleasantries of which she'd accused him.

He hesitated, and the saddle creaked as he shifted. "You're not about to... that is..."

Helen frowned as she tried to make sense of his dithering. Then his meaning struck, and her face ignited.

"No! I'm not feeling poorly, if that's what you're asking. It was merely an observation, that is all."

The air between them relaxed, if such a thing could be said of air, and he asked, "So, it's only boats that cause your travel sickness?"

"Yes, and only sea-boats, at that. I've never become ill on a lake or a river. My father—who is an astronomer and not a physician, mind you—has tried to devise a formula to explain the phenomenon. He insists it must be something to do with gravity and inertia and angular velocity, but I think it's just a contrary stomach."

"I've never met an astronomer. Your father must be an interesting sort."

"Interesting? My father is that, although perhaps you meant to say overly analytical? Eccentric, maybe? A touch overprotective? He's all of those and more. He may be a brilliant scientist, but he's a father first, I suppose, and he can't help but try to solve my problem with his numbers."

"And yet, you're a lady of words."

"I tried to follow in his footsteps, but my eldest sister inherited all of our father's genius for maths." Helen couldn't help her low shudder. "And good

luck to her, I say.”

Mr. Evelyn chuckled, the sound rumbling against her before he continued. “Well then, to return to your observation, you are correct. A camel has a pacing gait, where the legs on the same side of her body move together. It’s quite different from a horse’s natural gait, although some horses pace as well.”

Helen cocked her head to the side and considered his words. “Do you know, I’ve never given the matter much thought before, but I suppose you’re right.” She considered their slow pace and the miles ahead of them. “How fast do you think a camel can run? Are they capable of galloping?”

“I believe so, though I’m not sure I’d like to put Fiona to the test. I imagine it must be a jarring ride.”

“Hmm. It’s too bad the railroad hasn’t come to Egypt yet.” With the railroad, none of her current problems would have ever happened. She and the Tyndales would have set out promptly for Cairo, without the need for the *Tamarisk* and its poor timing. She certainly wouldn’t have been caught up in Mr. Evelyn’s troubles and forced to flee Alexandria.... Why, she might be dressing for supper right this moment! But then she’d not have had an occasion to ride a camel, or to hear Mr. Evelyn’s tale of the Flowerpot villain....

“It’s only a matter of time,” he said, and she returned her attention to the conversation.

“The railway? Do you think it will come soon?”

“I do. There’s already a proposal for a line from Alexandria to Cairo. I originally came to Egypt some months ago, on behalf of an investment consortium back in England. We hope to learn more of the railway’s plans before we invest in it.”

An investment consortium! How... ordinary. Surely nothing could be further from artifact smuggling.

“Alexandria to Cairo is a sensible route,” Helen said. “Have you had much success with your inquiries?”

He hesitated before saying, “Not as much as I would have liked.”

The words were softly spoken, and Helen sensed a greater meaning in them than perhaps he intended. Uncertain, she said, “You’ve not enjoyed your time here, I take it? Present circumstances notwithstanding, of course.” She smiled as she returned his words to him, but his response was short.

“No, Miss Corbyn, I have not.”

She frowned at the finality of his tone. Ordinary or not, the man was impossible to interpret, and she couldn't decide from one moment to the next if she actually *liked* him. Secrets and mystery were well and good for museum thieves, but not, she was discovering, for men one was forced by circumstance to rely upon.

They continued to follow the ribbon of the canal, the silence lengthening between them once more. As the moon floated higher, the sounds of night came out to play like an exotic symphony. The rhythmic trill of insects and the occasional percussive splash at the edge of the water. The hushed melody of the wind in the reeds and papyrus along the bank.

A red fox darted into a clump of thorny shrubbery at the canal's edge. Helen's eyes grew heavy, and she realized with a start that she'd been leaning against her escort again. She shifted and sat straighter, adjusting her feet where her ankles crossed below the saddle. Although the night had turned cool, she was warm beneath her scarf and robe with Mr. Evelyn's heat surrounding her.

He spoke and his voice vibrated against her. "We need to stop and rest the camel."

They'd been riding for more than three hours and hadn't encountered another boat on the canal for the last thirty minutes. If Professor Tyndale had turned back for her, by boat or by mount, he'd not come this way.

Helen swallowed her anxiety. She wished to continue on, to push the camel to a gallop no matter how jarring the ride might be, but she saw the wisdom of allowing her to rest. But doing so would not help them reach the *Tamarisk* any faster.

Mr. Evelyn guided them to a stand of palms some feet from the edge of the canal. His hand tightened at her waist as, with one flick of the reins, he urged Fiona to her knees once more. The motion was fluid, the camel's legs folding like an articulated wooden toy, and Helen marveled that she'd not sailed over the camel's neck like Mr. Evelyn's rag doll.

Together they removed the heavy bags and wooden saddle to give the camel some relief. A wooden tethering bar had been conveniently positioned near the water, and Mr. Evelyn looped Fiona's reins about it so she might drink her fill.

After arranging the saddle and blankets beneath the palms, he lit a small oil lantern from Malik's bag and steadied it in the sand near their feet. Once all was settled, he handed Helen a water flask, and her eyes widened.

“Your hand!” she exclaimed. It wasn’t fear that tightened the corners of his eyes. It was *pain*. His fingers holding the flask were swollen, his bruised skin the color of ink.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Rhys narrowed his eyes at Miss Corbyn's exclamation and looked down. He allowed her to lift his hand, her fingers gentle as she inspected him carefully. "You've injured it. Is it broken, do you think?"

Concern etched her features, and he swallowed, the movement catching in his throat. He thought to retrieve his hand, but the soothing touch of her cool fingers stayed him, and he said, "I don't believe so." Her frown grew, and he hurried to add, "It's naught but bruised knuckles, I think. A minor fracture, at worst."

Her eyes flicked up to his. "My brother Edmund broke his hand when we were children," she said. She pushed Rhys onto the saddle and then, without ceremony, shoved his sleeve up. She gently turned and pressed on the bones of his hand, and he held his grimace. "The color of your arm is good, so I don't believe there's any impediment to the flow of blood."

"Are you a physician as well as a language scholar?" he asked. She tossed him an annoyed frown, and he was surprised by how much he liked it. He stifled his grin to ask, "Did you observe the treatment of your brother's injury?"

Her annoyance was quickly forgotten, and she chuckled as she rummaged in the saddle bags. "Oh, no. Edmund blamed me for his misfortune and wouldn't allow me near him. There was no chance of my observing Dr. Grey's technique."

"How were you responsible for his injury?"

She straightened, one hand on her hip. "Not that I'm wholly to blame, mind you, but I might have challenged him to fly from my grandfather's rooftop," she said airily. "At any rate, our nursery bed linens were wholly inadequate to the task. To be fair, Aster and Edmund predicted as much, but I

can be rather convincing when I set my mind to it.”

“A fact I’ll do well to remember,” he said. He couldn’t help his smile as he thought of this petite bundle—as she surely must have been even then—persuading her brother to fly. It sounded precisely like the sort of mischief he and Fiona might have gotten up to.

“I know I have some powders for the pain in here,” she said as she continued to dig. “And I’m sure we can fashion a splint for you. Wilkinson’s guide is silent on the subject—I don’t think he could have possibly addressed every circumstance for the Egyptian traveler—but I’ve another book that should assist us.” She removed her wooden medicine box with a low, “Aha!”

Rhys tried to flex his hand, but it had stiffened in the past hours with the swelling. “I can’t help but notice you’re rather well-prepared,” he said.

“I should hate not to be. Why suffer any inconvenience when it can be prevented with a reasonable amount of preparation?”

An unexpected flash of irritation tightened Rhys’s jaw. He and Fiona had been prepared when they’d set out for Africa, but none of their efforts had mattered. His tone was sharper than he intended when he said, “And how are your efforts serving you now? Is this”—he waved his good hand expansively—“where you imagined all your preparation would lead? I can’t help but think your efforts were wasted.”

“Of course not,” she said, eyes wide. “None of us can predict the future or alter our Creator’s plan for us. But just as your preparation has given us light”—she indicated Malik’s lantern at his feet—“mine has given us powders for your pain.” She lowered her voice to a near whisper. “You’ll see. All will come out as it’s meant to.”

Rhys couldn’t help his frown, although he regretted his earlier sharpness. “Are you so certain of that?”

She stared at him as if trying to see his thoughts, and he shifted on the saddle. “I am,” she said softly.

He didn’t know if she referred to his hand or finding the Tyndales or life in general, but he envied her certainty. “You believe there’s a greater hand at work here?”

“Do you not?”

He shrugged. It was much easier to believe their lives were nothing but random bits of chance, and poorly timed bits at that. It would require a cruel Creator indeed to have taken his sister from him. To inflict such terror and misery on them both.

Miss Corbyn turned back to her medicine box, her features hidden by the edge of her scarf as she continued. “No matter your beliefs—in God, the fates, Egyptian myths—it stretches the imagination to think our lives are nothing but happenstance, without connection to a larger plan. Why else would you have forgotten your bag at the precise moment I left the *Tamarisk* to retrieve my own? And how could you have forgotten your bag anyway? It wasn’t as if you carried more than one.”

He pushed the heel of his boot into the silt at his feet. While he wouldn’t share that he hadn’t *forgotten* his bag precisely, neither could he deny there’d been an elegant timing to the whole debacle. Everything—from Miss Corbyn’s retrieval of his bag to the attack in the bazaar to the departure of the *Tamarisk*—everything had gone wrong at precisely the right moment to bring them to this point.

Perhaps there was something to her argument after all. The notion twisted his gut; it had been some time since he’d believed in, much less relied upon, a power greater than himself. But if their meeting in Alexandria hadn’t been mere happenstance—if there was a greater purpose to it—the devil take him if he knew what it was.

He recalled then Miss Corbyn’s earlier claim to persuasiveness and shook off his thoughts with a slow roll of his shoulders.

She removed a paper-wrapped packet of powder from her box and began to mix it with a small amount of water. Rhys watched her work as his hand continued to throb.

When she finished, she handed him the bowl. “Drink this,” she said without preamble.

He sniffed at it suspiciously. “Is it laudanum?”

“It’s a milder concoction.” At his continued skepticism, she added, “It consists of a tiny bit of powdered opium, some willow bark and chamomile.” She paused, narrowing her eyes at him. “You don’t have an opium habit, do you?”

He shook his head. He’d not taken laudanum or any other opium since he’d been a boy of eight or nine, suffering a broken foot. One of his father’s jobs had gone askew, and Rhys had been required to make a hasty exit. He quickly shut his mind to the memory and, with one last sniff at the bowl, he drained it. The bitterness of the concoction sent a shudder rippling through him.

Miss Corbyn returned to her medicine box and came up next with a roll

of linen bandages.

“I don’t need a splint,” he assured her. “The powder should be sufficient.”

“Of course, you need a splint. It’s possible you’ve one or more bones that are broken.”

“A splint will only be a hindrance.” When he found the Collector, he didn’t wish to be encumbered.

“A splint will help to stabilize the hand. Broken bones can shift and heal poorly, which can cause stiffness and affect the mobility of the limb. They can also lead to infection. A splint will help ensure the hand is stronger once it’s healed.”

Her voice was firm and prim, not unlike that of a governess explaining the importance of verb conjugations to a troublesome charge. He might have paid more attention to his lessons with a governess like Miss Corbyn. His lips twitched, but he said firmly, “No splint.”

She eyed him then the roll of linen in her hand. “No man ever defeated the dastardly Flowerpot with a poorly treated hand.”

He snorted. “And if we encounter him along our travels, what then? Am I to beat him about the head with this wondrous splint?”

“Hmm... That might work.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Is this an example of your powers of persuasion?”

She settled her hands on her hips, and in the low light of the lantern, he could see the shadowy outline of her curves beneath the *jalabiya*. “That depends. Is it working?”

“Is what working?”

She frowned her annoyance, and while he might normally have been intrigued by the sight she presented, he found himself stifling a yawn. Truth be told, the day’s events had left him too tired to argue the matter.

“Fine,” he grumbled. “Prepare the splint if you must, but not too tight.”

She grinned, entirely too pleased with herself. She left him then to search the edge of the canal, returning with a short but sturdy reed that she halved with a self-satisfied grin.

“Reeds and other plant material have been used for splints for thousands of years,” she said in her governess voice as she prepared her supplies.

She leaned toward him, and he inhaled her jasmine scent. Dimly, he thought the powder must have begun working, because he barely felt the pain

as her soft fingers wound the linen over and around his hand.

“I’ve never wrapped a mummy before,” she said with a twitch of her lips. She finished much too soon and secured the end with a knot.

“Don’t become too excited,” he cautioned. “I’m not dead yet.”

Helen nudged Mr. Evelyn’s boot with her foot. “Mr. Evelyn,” she hissed. She prodded him again, this time more firmly. He grunted and leaned a bit to the left. She hurried to push his shoulder until he was upright once more, his back leaning against the date palm. If he landed on his face, she’d never get him up again.

The man, it seemed, was more sensitive to opium powder than either of them had anticipated. She’d mixed only the merest bit, but his eyelids had begun lowering as soon as she finished wrapping his splint. By the time she’d replaced her supplies in the saddle bags and returned to his side, he’d been asleep.

He released a low snore that might have been amusing if she weren’t so anxious to reach the *Tamarisk*.

“Mr. Evelyn.” *Nudge*. “Please”—*nudge*—“wake up.” Nothing. Helen placed her hands on her hips and surveyed their surroundings.

A long, low mound interrupted the horizon some distance ahead—most likely the remains of an ancient village, as they’d passed several such bumps in the landscape. She’d find no help ahead of them.

Behind them lay a small but tidy cluster of mud homes. No light shone from the structures. Regardless, they were too far for her to find any help there, not without leaving the man and his camel for an extended length of time.

The camel! With a start, she realized Fiona had come loose from her tether to wander along the water’s edge. The animal stood silhouetted against the low moon as she tugged lazily at a clump of grasses. With a quick glance to ensure Mr. Evelyn had not slid from the tree, Helen crossed to the camel on hurried feet.

With a frown, she tried to recall everything she’d read about the beasts to prepare for her travels. Sadly, it seemed Mr. Evelyn’s thoughts on preparation won out in this case as none of her volumes had provided a single bit of instruction on retrieving a wandering ruminant. That, she thought,

might have been a useful bit of information to have.

As if sensing her pursuit, the camel shuffled farther away. “Fiona,” Helen said softly, using the same low pitch Mr. Evelyn had used with the animal. Coming from him, the sound was soft and persuasive. Velvety, like the voice a lover might use (or so she assumed). But while it sent ripples along her spine when Mr. Evelyn spoke, Helen felt ridiculous whispering to a camel.

She released a heavy sigh then approached the animal slowly from the side, careful to hold herself well out of kicking range. The reins were just there. Two more feet and she’d have—

“Mnaaaaaarrrrrhhhh!”

The camel released one of her low bellows and Helen jumped. A moment passed, then another, and she slowly coaxed her eyes open.

Fiona tossed her head, chewing with exaggerated indifference, wholly unconcerned with the distress she was causing. Then the animal turned and sniffed Helen’s scarf, her wide camel lips closing about the edge of the blue linen. As she nibbled, Helen reached for the reins.

“Fiona,” she said persuasively as the camel continued tugging at her scarf. “Mr. Evelyn has decided to have a nap, so it’s just the two of us ladies. And while I’m sure the grasses along this part of the canal are delightful, I’d be ever so grateful if you’d come this way.”

To her surprise, the camel began walking with her. She stifled a shout of triumph and led the way, but when they reached the hitching bar, the camel continued walking, pulling Helen with her across the tow path.

“Fiona—” Helen whispered urgently, but the animal simply sniffed Mr. Evelyn’s hair before folding herself next to him. Helen groaned to see he’d toppled from his perch atop the saddle to lay awkwardly upon the ground. Thankfully, he hadn’t landed on his injured hand, although he’d have a horrid pain in his neck when he awoke.

Helen secured Fiona’s lead around the palm then considered the man. Another nudge to his foot yielded no results so, with a shoulder-rounding sigh, she arranged the blanket over him then settled herself against the tree.

CHAPTER TWELVE



Rhys cracked one eye open and winced at the sharp pain in his neck. He'd slept, the first dreamless sleep he'd enjoyed in the weeks since Fiona had been taken. He ran his tongue over his teeth, wondering at the cotton in his mouth and the cushion beneath his head. He licked his dry lips and looked up.

A brilliant moon lit the landscape, silvering the contours of Miss Corbyn's face as she slept above him. She sat propped against a palm, her scarf unwound to serve as a blanket while his camel snored behind them. It was Miss Corbyn's lap that cushioned his head, her thigh that cushioned his hand. A curious warmth filled him as he tried to recall how they'd come to such an arrangement.

His bruised hand. The *Tamarisk*. The men who'd tried to kill him. Ah, that brought it all back with crashing vigor. He removed his hand from Miss Corbyn's leg, perhaps a bit more slowly than he should have.

He rose, careful not to disturb her, and inspected her precise wrapping. The pale linen was bright in the moonlight and while he didn't like the immobility of it, he had to admit the pain was considerably lessened. He'd rarely taken opium powder, and it had never occurred to him that Miss Corbyn's "tiny bit" would put him out like a tap to the head.

Gauging by the moon's position, he'd not slept more than an hour, two at the most. But their chances of overtaking the *Tamarisk*, which had been slim from the outset, faded to nothing as the minutes passed. He wondered if Miss Corbyn realized the futility of their task.

He crossed to the canal and removed the scarf to splash his neck one-handed. The night was cool, the water cold, and it cleared the remaining cobwebs left by the lady's powder. He stood and leaned against the hitching

bar. As he did so, the moonlight caught the lettering on the wood. *Kafr Abu Homs*.

He released a sigh of equal parts frustration and irony and, running his good hand through his hair, considered their situation. They could continue on as they were in futile pursuit of the *Tamarisk*, or they could abandon the canal—and the Tyndales—to cut across the delta. It would shorten his route to Cairo by hours, but Miss Corbyn would have to resign herself to abandoning their plan and reuniting with the Tyndales at a much later point in the journey.

Or they could turn back. Undoubtedly, Miss Corbyn would fare better to return the way they'd come. She'd find a nice hotel to await the professor's return. She could seek assistance from the foreign office and preserve her reputation, if there was any left after their hours alone together. That would certainly be a better course for her than spending the next days alone with Rhys, but it would mean another delay in his search for his sister.

He pulled a worn card from his pocket and smoothed the bent corner. Fiona stared back at him from the paper, her eyes a mirror to his own. She'd been enthusiastic about the novelty of sitting for a photograph until she learned she'd have to remain still for the duration. Rhys smiled at the memory. Telling his sister not to move was like telling her not to breathe, and he wasn't surprised the image was slightly blurred.

He swallowed thickly. His desperation, his fear for Fiona, rose until it threatened to choke him. He shoved it aside and forced a slow breath in and out.

There was no way around it: he had to get to Cairo. It was where Fiona had been taken from him and where Rhys had first heard of this mysterious Collector. It was where he'd find his sister. He'd not allow anything or anyone, even the charming Miss Corbyn, to deter him from his purpose. Whether or not she wished it, they were going to Cairo.

Helen's chest grew curiously tight when she saw what Mr. Evelyn held in his unwrapped hand. It was a photograph of a woman, and even from a distance, Helen could see she was beautiful. Mr. Evelyn's shoulders were rounded in misery, and she wondered at the lady's identity. Back in Valletta, Lydia had said he had no wife, but could this lady be his *betrotthed*? Her face

flamed as she thought of the times she'd teased him about his harem. She swallowed and tucked the ends of her scarf more securely.

"How much farther is it to Kafr Abu Homs?" she asked, dismayed by the threadiness of her voice.

He hastily tucked the photograph away then turned. She waited, but he remained silent, staring at her for a long beat before finally spreading his arms. "This is it," he said.

Helen heard his words, but she didn't immediately grasp their meaning. Then, eyes wide, she gazed at the emptiness about them. "This... this is it? That can't be right."

He nodded toward the mud huts in the distance then motioned to the hitching bar. "See for yourself."

Brows pulled low, she approached the wooden structure. Unclear what he wished for her to see, she looked at him inquiringly.

"The other side," he said.

She stepped around to the side facing the canal. Leaning down, she peered more closely, only to straighten quickly at the words painted on the wood in faded black Arabic lettering: *Kafr Abu Homs*.

She swallowed as the last of her hope faded, and the stark reality of their situation landed solidly in the pit of her stomach. They'd not catch the Tyndales. Once the *Tamarisk* left the canal for the Nile, it would move under its own steam to make good time to Cairo.

As long as she'd held hope that they might overtake the craft or encounter the professor as he returned to Alexandria, she'd been able to convince herself the events of the day were only a minor, albeit inconvenient, delay. Not an outright disaster.

Now she must face the truth: she was well and truly stranded.

Emotions poured through her, each one hot and burning and more intense than the last. Disbelief. Worry. Anger. She settled on the latter as it was the only one capable of cutting through her mind-numbing fear.

"We should have crossed the lake like I suggested," she said a bit sharply, and Mr. Evelyn frowned. She pushed on. "We'd have reached Atfa by now. What if Professor Tyndale returned to Alexandria by that route? It's possible we've missed him altogether."

Why had she let this man, an utter stranger, convince her otherwise? His argument had seemed reasonable at the time, but she should have known, by the mere fact that men were *shooting* at him, that his counsel wasn't to be

trusted.

Her mind raced as her rational self argued that all would be well. It would. They'd simply return to Alexandria. She'd take a room, perhaps at Rey's hotel, and await the consul-general's return. Sir Rupert would wire his contacts in Cairo. All would eventually be sorted, but probably not before the professor alerted her father to her disappearance. She closed her eyes on that thought. Oh, how her family would worry, and for no reason. All would certainly come out right in the end. She must believe it.

"Lake Edku would not have been any faster," Mr. Evelyn said tightly, recalling her to the conversation. Gone was the man who'd held a basin for her. The soft, persuasive voice he used with his camel had turned to steel. He strode past her to where they'd left their things, and she hurried her steps to follow him. "We'll leave the canal to cross the delta," he said over his shoulder. "You can rejoin the Tyndales in Cairo."

She blinked. He'd offered no discussion, given no consideration to her thoughts on the matter. And certainly, no concern for her reputation and what days alone with a gentleman—betrothed or not—would do to it.

"No," she said firmly. "It will be better if we return to Alexandria."

"I'm not returning to Alexandria. In case you've forgotten, there are men back there intent on my demise."

She conceded he made a sound point, but it hardly recommended him as a safe escort. But as he happened to be the only escort she had for the moment, she thought she should know more. "Who were those men?"

"I don't know."

"Well then, do you know *why* they were shooting at us?"

His eyes narrowed, the fine lines at the edges tightening. "No."

She studied him for a long beat. Then, pulling a heavy breath, she said, "I find that hard to believe, Mr. Evelyn."

He looked up from where he'd begun folding Fiona's blanket. His pale eyes were hard in the moonlight, like chips of ice, and she swallowed.

"Believe what you will, madam." He set the blanket aside and knelt to untie Fiona's lead from the base of the palm. "But know that I leave in five minutes, with or without you."

Stunned, she stared at his back. "You'd simply leave me here?"

He stood. His back was straight, his shoulders broad, and her disbelief evaporated. Something had happened since she'd held his hand to wrap it—and it was something to do with the photograph of his lovely lady if she were

to guess. Her stomach dipped uncomfortably on that thought, and she wasn't even close to the sea.

Whatever the reason, Mr. Evelyn was determined on his course, and she didn't doubt that he would take his camel and leave her standing in the dust of Kafr Abu Homs. Her anger rose again. "You are no gentleman, sir!"

"On that, we are agreed."

"And after I treated your hand!"

"I believe the verb you are looking for is 'drugged.' After you *drugged* me."

"How was I to know you have a sensitivity to opium? It was the merest bit, truly. Certainly not enough to fell a grown man."

He frowned but didn't respond.

Helen, who'd gained quite a bit of steam, added, "And this is a poor thank-you for the simple courtesy of rescuing and returning your bag to you. I should think your escort back to Alexandria is the least you can offer."

He spun so quickly she took two tiny steps back. "Rescue? You *interfered*, madam, in something of which you know nothing about."

Helen's mouth dried at the intensity of his gaze. Before she could sort his words, he lifted one of the saddle bags and began removing her books. One by one, he tossed the volumes to land with a heavy thud. Wilkinson's guide slid onto the dirt at her feet as she continued to gape at him. When he pocketed her map of Egypt for himself, she was forced to acknowledge the truth. He was truly leaving her!

It was *miles* back to Alexandria. She couldn't allow him to leave. Even if she could find someone at the Kafr Abu Homs settlement to assist her, it would take the better part of a day to return on her own.

"You need me," she said as she began gathering her books to her chest. "You'll not get far without my assistance."

He lifted a dark eyebrow as he settled the blanket on the camel's back. "I've gone thirty years without your assistance, Miss Corbyn. You can rest easy there's nothing you can offer that I *need*."

Helen gasped as the refrain she'd heard every night in her sleep for the past weeks resurfaced. *There's nothing you have that I want.*

Her mouth refused to close. Finally, she found her voice. "It was you! That night in the museum." She hurried to the camel's other side to gauge his reaction.

Mr. Evelyn slowed in his task of tightening Fiona's tack, but he didn't

stop. Was that bewilderment in his gaze or consternation that she'd caught him out? She faltered, wondering if her ears had been playing tricks. She closed her eyes, overwhelmed with uncertainty.

He was an *investor*, she reminded herself, not a smuggler. He'd mentioned a sister—a relation so dear to him that he'd named his camel after her. A man with a sister could be trusted, couldn't he? Oh, she was a fool to even think such a thing, that much was certain. Perhaps her father had been right to worry.

When she opened her eyes again, Fiona had risen to her feet. Mr. Evelyn was seated on the saddle like a proud caliph, scarf wrapped about his head, pale eyes shimmering in the moonlight. He looked quite magnificent, and her stupid heart thumped heavily at the sight, not the least bit concerned for her dilemma.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



“Your hand won’t heal properly without the splint. It’s quite possible you’ll find yourself with a misshapen lump, or worse, a putrid infection that will require severing the limb.” Miss Corbyn emphasized the last words with a bit more relish than Rhys thought a gently bred granddaughter-of-an-earl ought to have done.

Frustrated with his immobility, he’d discarded Miss Corbyn’s linen wrapping an hour or more past, despite the lady’s frown. She sat awkwardly on the saddle, angled as far from him as possible, so he couldn’t gauge her expression. Her tone, though, painted a clear enough picture.

“It’s no more than a bruise,” he assured her through his teeth.

“And you know this because you’re a physician?” she said, to which he didn’t think a reply was necessary.

The camel swayed beneath them as Miss Corbyn held her gaze on the horizon. The landscape unrolled before them in an endless green marsh dotted with clumps of acacia and date palms. They’d long since left the canal to cross the delta on one of the many well-worn routes that laced the plain, riding through what was left of the night and well into the next day. The lady hadn’t spoken a word to him for hours, although he’d sensed her thinking plenty of them. In the past minutes, though, she’d loosened the reins on her tongue, and it galloped freely.

“You weren’t truly going to leave me. If I’d not agreed to accompany you to Cairo, you would have eventually come around.” There was a long pause and then, “Wouldn’t you have?”

“I suppose we’ll never know, will we?” Rhys said, idly swatting an insect that buzzed at his ear. Of course, he wouldn’t have truly left her—not for long at any rate. He wasn’t such a churlish scoundrel as that, but he’d

seen the indecision on her face. She didn't trust him, and he couldn't fault her for it, but he didn't have the luxury of time or the desire to debate alternatives. He'd merely urged her thinking along to its inevitable conclusion. But the devil take it, did she have to go on so?

“—you've bent the corner of Wilkinson's guide beyond repair. I'll have you know, that was a gift from my father—”

He lost the thread of her rant as his mind wandered. Miss Corbyn's waist was just as curved today as it had been yesterday, and her warm jasmine scent rose between them. He thought the fragrance would have worn off by now, or at least yielded to the stronger odor of camel, but no. The lady seemed intent on torturing him with her spicy-sweet scent.

Some moments later, she finally paused and canted her head to one side. When he was certain she must be plotting his painful end, she surprised him with a question. “What does your sister think of your camel's name?”

He cleared his throat and considered his reply for a few paces before saying, “I'm more concerned with what my camel thinks. It's a fair bet she'll be insulted if she ever meets her namesake.”

Miss Corbyn shifted on the saddle, and he could sense her smile beyond the edge of her scarf. “Will you tell me about her?”

“My camel?”

“Your sister!”

He closed his eyes and inhaled a heavy breath. Opened his mouth then closed it again when his throat grew tight. “Perhaps another time.”

He thought she might protest, but he heard only the smallest of sighs before she opened Colonel Leake's map. She angled herself into a more comfortable position as she turned the map first one way then another to get her bearings. Rhys didn't deceive himself that he'd been forgiven, but perhaps they might find a bit of the accord they'd shared before he threatened to leave her. As she studied her map, Rhys felt his own tension slowly ease.

Daylight faded as the afternoon yielded to evening. It had been some hours since they'd slept at Kafr Abu Homs and even more since he'd eaten. His stomach protested, and he thought longingly of the small breakfast he'd hastily downed before finding Akeem outside the coffee house in Alexandria. It seemed a lifetime ago, but then this land, where the past often overtook the present, had a way of bending and stretching time.

He spied a small pool at the edge of an ancient settlement just ahead. The narrow bank looked to be fairly dry, and there were plenty of sturdy,

tent-staking reeds rimming the water. As they drew near, he slowed Fiona and said, "We'll camp here."

Miss Corbyn straightened. "According to the map, we must be nearing the Nile by now." Despite their circumstances, he detected excitement in her voice, and he recalled his own first glimpse of the majestic river. No words could describe it, and no English experience could prepare one for the view.

"It's another two hours' ride from here. We'll reach it tomorrow as we near Tanta."

"It's so close? Wouldn't it be better to push on a bit more? Surely—"

"We'll camp here." Her brows dipped at his high-handedness. His fear and worry were making him a bear to be around. He cleared his throat and softened his voice to add, "Bandits, Miss Corbyn. They've been active near Tanta, and I'd prefer to avoid them. We'll stop while there's still a bit of light to set our camp by then make an early start in the morning." His stomach announced his hunger again and he added, "And I'd like to see what Malik has packed for our supper, if that meets with your approval."

She closed her mouth on whatever argument she'd been preparing. Her brow eased as she said grudgingly, "I... I suppose that is a sound plan."

Miss Corbyn seemed happiest when she had some measure of control. Or the appearance of control, at any rate. It was a trait with which he was well familiar.

They dismounted, and he set to preparing their camp. He placed Fiona's saddle near a small palm and fashioned a second seat of sorts from the camel's blanket. Thankfully, Malik had delivered two small tents, rather than tailors, and Rhys unfolded the canvas. His brows lifted when, instead of settling herself atop the saddle, Miss Corbyn stepped to the water's edge to collect reeds. They worked in agreeable, if not wholly companionable, silence, and the tents were up sooner than he expected.

A shallow pit filled with bits of dry tinder completed their camp. Although the day's sun had been warm, the night would be cool, and they'd welcome the warmth of a fire. He filled their skins with water and allowed Miss Corbyn some privacy with one of them while he rinsed his own face and neck at the edge of the pool.

He returned to find her seated atop the saddle and a small kettle on the fire. She'd removed her scarf, and the firelight caught occasional threads of gold and amber in her hair as she moved.

He lowered himself slowly to the blanket and sat with his back to the

palm, one knee bent. Nearly twenty-four hours atop a camel had left his muscles spent and aching, and he knew Miss Corbyn must be feeling the same. He bit back a groan, grateful when she passed him a small tin plate. She'd piled it with flat bread and salted beef from Malik's provisions, as well as dates and dried apricots.

She checked the kettle and added tea leaves before settling back onto the saddle. "How does your hand fare?" she asked as she nibbled her own supper. Her bites were small and delicate as if she dined at a fine London table. For a moment, he indulged in the fantasy that he was back in England until his dining companion waved at a buzzing fly.

"It's well enough," he replied. In truth, his hand was stiff and swollen and had turned an intriguing shade of purple. It was not, however, putrid, despite how she might have wished it. And though he disliked admitting it, her powder had done a rather impressive job of relieving the pain. He cleared his throat and conceded, "It still aches a bit, but the pain is much improved. Thank you."

She smiled around a date. It was an I-told-you-so sort of smile that told him she would be the devil for some poor chap to live with someday. Exasperating, probably. Irritating, undoubtedly. But soft and vibrant and most assuredly, never dull. There was a rare spark to her, not unlike the fireworks he'd seen in London on the occasion of Her Majesty's marriage. A life with Miss Corbyn would surely be an adventure all its own. The thought brought him up short, and he returned to his meal with diligence.

She turned then and the firelight dispelled the shadows about her face. He pushed aside his musings and lowered his bread to ask, "Did you happen to bring any salves in your medicine box?"

Her brows dipped into a perfect V. "Salve? Yes, why? Are the gnats biting? I've noticed they're rather more aggressive than our English variety." As she spoke, she waved another insect from her face.

"I was thinking more of a remedy for sunburn."

She peered down at him, checking him over, and he said, "For *you*, Miss Corbyn."

His meaning finally took, and she raised one hand to her brow with a gasp. "Me?"

He nodded.

"Is it very bad?" She patted her forehead gingerly.

He shook his head. "It's not so bad," he lied. Her forehead and the

bridge of her nose were a delightful pink, but come morning, she'd be as crimson as a holly berry.

She hurriedly popped the last of her bread into her mouth then lifted the medicine box onto her lap. "I've some elderflower lotion in here somewhere," she said as she rummaged through the contents. "Lemon cream would be better, but I didn't bring the proper ingredients for that. And who's to say I'd find fresh cream in the middle of the desert anyway?"

Miss Corbyn, he'd noticed, tended to run on a bit when she was rattled. She finally retrieved a small bottle with triumph, and her teeth nibbled her lower lip as she worked the cork. Rhys watched her fumble with the container for a moment more before he reached over and took it from her. His fingers grazed hers and she trembled. He doubted he had such an effect, so it must have been dismay that caused the slight tremor in her hands.

He stood and pulled her up from the saddle, holding her fingers lightly in his to still their shaking.

"What—?"

"It's only sunburn, Miss Corbyn," he said, confused by her obvious distress.

"I know," she said softly.

"You'll be uncomfortable for a few days, but it will pass."

"Of course, you're right. It's only... I promised my father—" She stopped. Her eyes were suspiciously bright, and she blinked once. Twice.

Rhys's pulse sped at the unexpected threat of tears. He'd not have thought Miss Corbyn a watery sort of female, and he was relieved when she regained her composure.

With a swallow and a shaky smile, she said, "My father was concerned about this journey. I promised him nothing unfortunate would happen, but I've gone and lost the Tyndales. Or perhaps they've lost me, I'm not really certain. And now... now I've acquired a sunburn. I promised I would be cautious. He'll be disappointed, and I can't blame him. It's an understatement to say nothing has gone quite as I planned."

Sunburn. Miss Corbyn had been stranded and shot at and all but chased out of Alexandria and *that* was what had her near tears? Then, in a rare flash of insight, Rhys realized it wasn't the sunburn that caused her misery but the thought of disappointing a loved one. And that was a torture he knew all too well.

She sniffed delicately. He wished he had a clean handkerchief to offer,

but in their flight from Alexandria, he'd not had the opportunity to retrieve fresh linen. With a resigned sigh, he put one finger to her chin and lifted her face toward him.

Her eyes widened as he pushed a stray tress from her cheek. The lock curled against his finger like a length of cool satin ribbon, and he tucked it behind the soft shell of her ear. She watched as he opened her bottle and poured a measure of the fragrant elderflower liniment onto his fingers.

"Come now, Miss Corbyn," he said, smoothing a stripe of the lotion across her forehead. "Surely, your father will be distressed to hear of your troubles, as any father would be, but I can't imagine he'll be disappointed. The man you described knows you would have done everything in your power to keep your promise. And besides, what's happened to 'All will come out as it's meant to'?"

He rubbed more lotion along the thin line of her nose. Her skin was smooth like the petals of a flower, and her eyes watched him curiously, assessing. They were wide, deep green rimmed in blue and fringed with thick auburn lashes. They shimmered with her tears and put him in mind of a verdant oasis, lush and life-sustaining. His gaze dropped unexpectedly to her lips, which were full and pink in the twilight. His chest suddenly felt tight, his throat dry, and he lowered his hand.

"You're right, Mr. Evelyn. I needed that reminder. *All will be well.*" Her words were crisp and firm, and he wasn't sure if she aimed to convince him or herself.



Helen swallowed as a breeze ruffled the palm fronds above their camp. Mr. Evelyn stood near enough that she could count the dark whiskers above his lip. His sandalwood scent spiced the air between them, and she fisted her hands before she could lift them to his chest. Her cheeks heated at the thought, although that could well have been the sunburn.

When his gaze dropped to her lips, her face ignited. That, most definitely, was *not* the sunburn.

He thought to kiss her, she was almost certain of it. It would be imprudent to permit such a thing. Highly improper, of course. Although... it was sure to be educational, and she was a firm believer in a proper education for females.

She couldn't claim the quantity of beaus of which Lydia Tyndale boasted, but Helen had received some kisses in her time. Four, to be precise. The year of her come-out, she'd permitted the occasional peck from an interested suitor, but none had caused her face to heat.

And then there'd been Mr. Stevens, a Cambridge gentleman who'd studied with the professor two summers before. He'd stolen a kiss behind the museum's Lycian Room, his lips quickly sliding across hers to land wetly on her cheek. The incident had been blessedly swift, and she'd spent the rest of the summer devising ever more creative excuses to avoid the man's company.

So, while her kissing experience wasn't completely lacking, none of her forays supported the amount of poets' ink and paper devoted to the topic. She was certain there must be more to a proper kiss, and she was curious to know if Mr. Evelyn might fill in the missing bits.

But, as disastrous as her travels had been thus far, she'd enough sense not to complicate them further. Her reputation was already teetering atop a steep cliff. There was no need to give it a push. And then there was the matter of the photograph he carried.

Before she could sort her thoughts on *that*, he dropped his hand and stepped back, and the air around them cooled. Helen swallowed and forced aside thoughts of kisses and dark whiskers.

With a start, she recalled the kettle on the fire. "The tea!" She hurried to set out cups then used her scarf to lift the kettle from the fire. "I hope you take yours strong, Mr. Evelyn. And without milk, although I believe Malik has sent some sugar cubes. He's a resourceful young man to have outfitted us so well on such short notice."

Mr. Evelyn snorted. "He is resourceful, I'll grant you that. Although, I've decided it's best not to question the source of his finds."

Helen stopped her pouring and eyed their small camp with a frown. "What do you mean? Does he steal them?"

"Not everything, I imagine, but some. It allows more of the coin to go into his own pocket. Or rather, his family's."

"But," she stuttered, "but that's wrong!"

"It's survival, Miss Corbyn. Malik has a mother and eight sisters to feed. Would you fault a man for doing what he must to protect his own? Would you have his sisters suffer for his honor?"

His gaze was intense as he awaited her answer, and Helen felt she was

being tested. She considered her words carefully. “But there must be another way he can earn his wage. Stealing is against the law, not to mention God’s commandment,” she said firmly. She added a lump of sugar to her cup then at his nod, she dropped two into his. It was the strangest thing, debating morality by the light of an Egyptian moon, and over tea at that.

“What about honoring thy father and mother?”

Helen narrowed her eyes as she stirred. “You can’t use one commandment to justify breaking another.”

“Come, Miss Corbyn. You seem like a milk-in-first sort who’s not averse to breaking a rule now and then to suit your purposes. A lady scholar is hardly one to march to society’s tune.”

“A ‘lady scholar’ is not illegal.”

“But what if your parents had forbidden it? Would you have honored them and abandoned your studies? Or is the commandment against thievery the only one you prize?”

Helen stopped stirring and frowned. Opened and closed her mouth. “But they didn’t forbid it,” she said finally. “If they were the sort of parents to forbid a child’s education and learning, rather than foster and encourage it, then I wouldn’t hold the same academic aspirations. So, Mr. Evelyn, your question is utterly without merit.”

“Utterly?” he repeated.

“Utterly.” The fire popped in the silence as Helen sipped her tea.

“Do you enjoy your tea with its pilfered sugar?” he asked.

“Oh!” she said in exasperation. She leapt to her feet and tossed the remains of her tea onto the fire. As satisfying as the hiss and sizzle was, she would rather have tossed her cup at his head. “I think you take pleasure in being perverse,” she said sourly. “You bait me with arguments about morality but refuse to speak when I ask a perfectly reasonable question about your sister.”

Mr. Evelyn chuckled. “And this from the lady who scoffs at boiled-turnip niceties.”

“That is hardly the point. Our situation”—she waved a hand to encompass the sleeping camel and their camp—“is dismaying enough as it is. Surely, it wouldn’t hurt to know a little more about one another.”

He was quiet for a moment as insects chirped about them, then he surprised her with a capitulation. “What is it you wish to know about my sister?”

Helen stilled at the question, but he appeared to be in earnest. She quickly recovered and took her seat again. “Well, I already know her name, and that she’s tall and fair-haired.”

“Don’t forget obstinate,” he reminded her.

“And obstinate. Although,” she added with a frown, “I suspect that might be a case of the pot censuring the kettle. Is your sister older than you or younger?”

“Older.” She prompted him with her silence until he added, “By ten minutes. We’re twins.”

“Twins! I’ve always thought it might be nice to have a twin.”

“Well, it’s not.”

She twisted to face him more fully. The fire cast shadows on his expression, but she could see his words for the lie they were. “It’s not? I can imagine the troubles you would encounter if you were of the same sex. A twin might take your favorite gown when you plan to wear it, for example, but what complaint can you have?”

He acknowledged her with a modest dip of his head. “I concede it would be vexing if Fiona always borrowed my favorite frock, but in truth,” he said softly, “I have no complaint.” The corners of his eyes turned down and Helen frowned, uncertain at his mood.

“I imagine a twin understands you better than most,” she said hesitantly. “That must be a comfort, to have another who knows you so completely.”

He remained silent for a long beat before saying, “Is that what you want, Miss Corbyn? To be known completely?”

Helen opened her mouth then closed it again. She didn’t think they were talking about siblings. “Yes,” she admitted. “That’s what romantic love must be, don’t you think? Two souls knowing one another, their edges fitting together so seamlessly that they can’t help but belong to one another.”

He didn’t respond, his gaze fixed on the fire before them, and warmth filled her cheeks. When she thought he might dismiss her words altogether, he spoke. “Rather like a key fitted to a finely crafted lock, I suppose.”

Her brows dipped low as she considered his words. The image they formed in her mind was so... right. “Yes,” she said on a slow breath. “Precisely that. When two souls are a match for one another, the door opens.”

“And where does this metaphorical door lead?”

She smiled, no longer caring if he thought her ridiculous. “To an adventure to surpass all adventures. To joy and peace—the sort that can only

come from knowing you're where you're meant to be.”

His gaze shifted, his pale eyes shimmering and reflecting the light. “Such a thing must be rare indeed. If you don't find this ideal, what then? Will you forsake marriage and a family, or will you compromise your desires?”

Helen didn't have to think long on her answer. “This world is full of adventures, but I think I'd rather encounter them alone than with another who doesn't share my heart.”

“A bleak prospect, to be sure.”

His gaze returned to the fire and Helen knew. “The photograph you carry... it's your sister, is it not?”

“Yes,” he said softly, and her heart lightened. The beautiful lady wasn't his betrothed. She was his *sister*. She began to smile, unaccountably relieved, but then he added, “Fiona traveled with me to Egypt. We were to make a holiday of it, but she was taken in Cairo nearly two months ago.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Miss Corbyn didn't interrupt as Rhys told of his sister's abduction, although he was certain she wished to. But she merely waited, hands folded in her lap as he spoke. "Now you know why I must press on to Cairo," he finished.

The silence grew as Miss Corbyn absorbed all that he'd told her. Her fine brows pulled low over her eyes as her thoughts played across her features. The fire had nearly gone out and he rose to tend it.

"The Collector," she finally whispered. "Your story about the lady and her artifact... It was true." Then she gasped. "And I was right! It *was* you in the museum that night." The realization that he'd been the man in the shadows appeared as a charming blush on her cheeks before she continued. "You came for your sister's amulet."

Rhys snorted a disbelieving laugh, still not quite comprehending the farce that had become his life. "I argued with Fiona's captors that I no longer had the piece—that it was bound for England, in fact—but they were insistent."

"And so, you returned to London..."

He nodded. "I hated leaving Egypt without Fiona, but I'd already wasted time searching for her without success. I couldn't see any other way."

The fire caught once more, popping in the stillness, and he resumed his seat. Miss Corbyn studied him for a long moment before straightening, eyes wide. "So, this means you're not... you're not an artifact smuggler?"

Rhys couldn't help but laugh at her expression, which leaned closer to dismay than the relief one might expect. "Miss Corbyn, you sound disappointed."

"No," she said softly, if a little too swiftly. "Of course not. The illegal

trade of artifacts robs us all of the opportunity to appreciate this land's unique history."

"I've not led a saint's life," he confessed and her eyes widened. "But I don't count artifact smuggling among my sins."

"That is reassuring."

He rubbed his jaw. The lady was a study in contrasts. She argued quite earnestly against the illegal trade of artifacts and staunchly defended the commandments. And yet, he suspected there was a part of her that delighted in the thrill of the illicit. The pair of them were matched in that regard, for as much as he'd fought to put distance between himself and his former life as a lock-pick, he couldn't deny the exhilaration he'd felt in the museum's dark corridors.

"Come, Miss Corbyn," he challenged. "You claim relief, but I know you're a lady who enjoys a bit of dash with her adventure. Was the experience of encountering a thief in the night not the merest bit exciting?"

"It was not," she said firmly as she smoothed the fabric of her *jalabiya* over her knees. She wouldn't meet his eyes, but her governess voice returned as she said, "It was frightening and unnerving, and no sensible lady would wish for such an encounter."

Rhys bit back his grin to say, "I will refrain from pointing out the obvious argument to *that* statement and instead offer my apologies for frightening you—"

She waved his words away impatiently. "Oh, never mind that, but the door was still locked when the watch investigated. There was no sign anyone had disturbed the storage room. How were you able to come and go, unless"—her brows dipped as a thought occurred to her—"unless you involved the watchmen in your scheme?"

"The watchmen are innocent of any wrongdoing," he assured her. He rubbed the back of his neck and added, "Locks are an especial hobby of mine."

"Locks?"

He nodded. "And watches and pens... Farm implements. Steam engines. I build things."

Her eyes widened. "You're an inventor!"

"Of sorts. I've a workshop on my estate in Surrey, although I also invest in others' inventions. I believe I told you my original purpose in Egypt was to see about a railway venture."

She nodded, watching him with new eyes, and warmth flooded him at her regard. “Pens,” she said. “Truly?”

Of all that he’d listed, *that* was what captured her interest? Pens? Miss Corbyn was a rare one, but he couldn’t fault her interest, as he himself had spent untold hours with the devices. He reached into his vest pocket and withdrew his latest prototype. Removing the barrel, he showed her the mechanism inside.

“The ink goes in this cylinder here,” he said, pointing. Then, as he worked the tiny gear and spring mechanism, the nib retracted into the barrel, and she grinned her pleasure.

“Why, it’s brilliant! A body could take a pen anywhere with a design like that.”

“It’s a bit unreliable and prone to leaking,” he said, lest she overestimate his accomplishment. “I’ve ruined many a coat in the name of progress.”

“My brother Edmund fancies himself something of an inventor in the field of photography. I’m certain the two of you would have much to talk about, although I doubt he’s ever designed anything half so clever as your retractable pen.”

Her words pleased him more than they ought to have done.

Miss Corbyn soon returned them to the matter at hand, brow creasing as she said, “The men who attacked you in Alexandria—do you think they’re involved in your sister’s disappearance? Could they have been working on behalf of this Collector person?”

“I didn’t recognize them—the man I met had a scar on one cheek—but I believe it’s likely. No one else knows I have the amulet again.”

She gasped. “When you left your bag at the canal, you were leaving it for them. I interrupted your exchange. If I’d not returned your bag to you... Oh, I’m terribly sorry,” she said softly, and his heart twisted at the remorse in her voice.

“You couldn’t have known.”

“What will you do now?” she asked.

“I have to find the Collector, of course.” Even as he said the words, he heard how ridiculous they sounded. He felt like a character seeking the villain in some hack penny dreadful novel.

“It’s a truly horrid moniker, isn’t it? Everyone collects things. Why, Professor Tyndale could be the Collector. *You* could be the Collector.”

“I believe that’s rather the point of it. It’s cryptic while hiding the man’s

true identity.”

“Hmm.” She didn’t bother hiding her disdain. “And what do we do when we find the Collector?”

“We,” he said with emphasis, “do not do anything.”

She rolled her eyes at that, and he hid a smile. Then, cocking her head to one side, she asked, “Have you gone to the consul-general about your sister? Sir Rupert Daventry must know Cairo and its criminals as well as anyone.”

Rhys gave a rueful laugh. “I did go to him, as well as the Egyptian authorities and my railway contacts, all of whom have quite a few connections of their own. I even spoke with an *effendi* in the governor’s office,” he said, referring to the honorific given to esteemed gentlemen and officials.

“They were unhelpful?”

Rhys shook his head. “Sir Rupert made some inquiries. He even had his own men search Old Cairo, but unfortunately, they turned up nothing. He did invite us to stay at his villa once I have Fiona again—he claims it’s as good as being on English soil and no one will dare threaten her there. But I’m afraid one missing Englishwoman is simply not a priority for a man who negotiates treaties with his breakfast.”

Miss Corbyn’s lips twisted as she considered his words. “Perhaps I might have better success securing Sir Rupert’s attention. I am the granddaughter of an earl, after all.”

He smiled, recalling the first time she’d made such a claim. He’d been holding her close to his chest in the back corridors of the British Museum, and her jasmine scent had been as intoxicating then as it was now. He thought she must be remembering the occasion as well, for her cheeks colored.

“You may try, certainly,” he said. “But in the end, it’s left to me to find my sister.”

“But you don’t have to do it alone.”

Her words were softly spoken, and they sent warmth to fill him for the brief moment he allowed himself to believe them. At his continued silence, she gave him a weak smile and said, “May I—may I see the amulet?”

He hesitated. After safeguarding the scarab for so long, sharing it with another didn’t come easily. But perhaps she might decipher why the blasted thing was so important, and *that* was assistance he’d happily accept.

He retrieved the linen-wrapped bundle from his satchel and passed it to her. She slowly unwrapped the amulet then knelt closer to the light of the

fire, turning the pendant first one way then another to study it.

Her lips tilted down in a frown before she said softly, "I'm sorry, Mr. Evelyn. This piece isn't authentic. It's a forgery. A finely-crafted one, but a forgery, nonetheless." Her worry was palpable as she returned the amulet to him.

Rhys stared at her for a long moment, considering. She was good, that much was clear. He slowly pulled his watch from his pocket, explaining, "I had a replica made in London. There was time before my ship sailed, and it seemed like a prudent course..." He moved the hands on his watch forward then back again, listening for the telltale sound of the lock mechanism. Finally, he heard it, and the small hidden compartment opened with a soft click.

Miss Corbyn's sharp inhale was audible. "How clever," she murmured.

"I thought so at first, but now I'm not so certain," he said wryly as he emptied the compartment into his hand. She looked up, brows raised in inquiry, and he added, "I mentioned the bandits near Tanta. I imagine a watch might be one of the first things they would take. Even if they don't know of the hidden compartment—"

"—its contents are at risk by virtue of being hidden within an article of value."

"Precisely."

"I see your point," she said, but she held any further comments on the matter as he handed her the amulet. She slowly turned the small scarab in her fingers, and he was struck by the intent expression on her face. After some moments of studying the artifact, she said, "You found this in one of the storage rooms of the museum?"

"Yes. Once I learned where the new shipments were stored, it was a simple enough matter to locate the crates from Mr. Osman's shop."

"I need more light," she murmured as she ran a finger over the symbols etched onto the back of the pendant. "Can you bring the lantern, please?"

Rhys obliged her, lighting the lantern and crouching next to her as she continued to examine the amulet.

"It's from a late dynasty..." She adjusted the angle of the lantern then gasped. "Look here," she said, holding the scarab so he could see. As she angled the lantern first one way, then another, the light revealed additional barely-there scratches he'd not seen before. "I doubt the casual observer would notice these symbols," she said softly.

“Can you read them?” he asked, trying and failing to ignore the gentle curve of her neck as she bent her head in study. He swallowed and forced his attention back to the pendant in her hand.

“Most of them. I’d need to study the piece in more detail, but”—her excitement was evident in the increased tempo of her words—“Mr. Evelyn, if I’m not mistaken, this is part of the Pharaoh’s Trinity. Do you understand what that means?”

“The Pharaoh’s Trinity? That sounds...” Dangerous. Cursed. “Intriguing?”

“Mr. Evelyn! It means your sister is safe as long as you have this. It gives you an immeasurable advantage. This Collector person won’t do anything to risk losing this amulet.”

Rhys stared at her as his heart skipped in his chest. Then, because he couldn’t help himself, he kissed her. It was a hard kiss and not the least bit gentle as it should have been. She stilled for a heavy beat as his lips pressed hers, then to his surprise, she stepped closer and returned his kiss. What had begun as a brief but fervent kiss of elation quickly grew into something deeper.

With the amulet clutched in one fist, she settled her hands on his shoulders. When she lifted onto her toes, he pulled her tight against him. His hand traveled the contour of her spine, feeling the warm and weightless form of her beneath the loose blue cotton. Her lips were as soft as a whisper, and she tasted of moonlight—glowing and mysterious.

Their edges fit together perfectly. Never had he kissed a lady who felt so right in his arms. Dimly, he thought if he ever sorted this Collector business, he might like to enjoy more kisses with Miss Cor—

The Collector. His sister was still missing. As elated as he was, as perfect as Miss Corbyn’s lips felt beneath his, he couldn’t lose sight of that fact. He slowly withdrew and ran a hand through his hair.

“My apologies,” he said gruffly. His voice was not his own, and he cleared his throat.

Her lips were parted and red from their kiss, and she wore a gratifyingly stunned look that sent his already racing heart into full gallop. Her chest rose and fell as she pulled in a heavy breath and cleared her own throat.

“N—no, it’s quite all right,” she said as she returned the amulet to him with shaking fingers. “I understand the emotions of the moment must be overwhelming. I myself can be overcome by a marvelous find, and this one

—”

“Miss Corbyn,” he interrupted. “Please tell me about the Pharaoh’s Trinity.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Heavens! Was *that* what she'd been missing? The poets' ink and paper had not been wasted after all. Helen could still feel the press of Mr. Evelyn's warm hand along her spine. She lifted a shaky hand and gingerly touched her lips. They burned with a feverish tingle, and even her hair felt electrified, as if she'd come too close to one of Edmund's experiments.

But far more important than the delicious sensations Mr. Evelyn's lips had wrought was the relief she felt to have the truth. Mr. Evelyn was *not* a smuggler of artifacts, nor did he make a habit of robbing museums.

While she couldn't deny the excitement of their encounter behind the Egyptian Saloon, the knowledge that he was simply a man concerned for his sister was welcome, and her tension eased along with her uncertainties about his character.

He spoke, his words dim as if coming to her through water. "Tell me about the Pharaoh's Trinity."

The Pharaoh's Trinity... right. Her pulse thrummed a rapid beat, this time for purely academic reasons. No one would ever believe she'd beheld such a legendary piece. It belonged in a museum where it could be studied, not hidden in Mr. Evelyn's watch, although she understood his need for secrecy and security. His sister's very life depended on it.

She recalled his earlier question: *Would you fault a man for doing what he must to protect his own?* She pressed her lips against a niggling sense of shame. She'd been so rigid in her argument when the truth of the matter was simple: she and Mr. Evelyn weren't so very different in this regard, as she'd do whatever was needed to protect a member of her own family. Perhaps she would do well to seek more understanding. To extend more empathy.

He motioned to the saddle and they settled back in their places. He

leaned close enough that she caught whiffs of his sandalwood scent as she shared the legend of the Trinity.

“The texts tell of a powerful amulet coveted by pharaohs and alchemists alike. It’s comprised of three pieces,” she said. “A scarab beetle’s body and two jeweled wings that can be attached to either side.”

“I suspected as much from the holes,” he said.

“Professor Tyndale believes the Order of Osiris may have uncovered one of the wings in a market in Nubia, although it’s not a fact that’s widely known. He’s been invited to consult on the authenticity of their find, and I myself have seen obscure references to the Trinity in some newly unearthed texts.”

He turned the amulet in his fingers with a frown. “But I’ve seen countless artifacts like this scarab. How can this piece be any different?”

“The Trinity is special,” Helen said with a smile. “It’s said that when it’s fully assembled, the etchings on the back provide an alchemist’s recipe.”

“A recipe? To turn lead into gold or some such nonsense?”

“It’s not nonsense to those who believe, but this recipe doesn’t promise to create wealth. It provides direction for an immortality elixir.”

Mr. Evelyn snorted but remained silent as she continued.

“According to the legend, the Trinity was originally created by Thoth, who was, among other things, the god of magic. Thoth, it’s said, crafted the amulet from sacred carnelian and other gems and personally inscribed the recipe for the elixir of immortality on its back. He gave the amulet to the pharaoh Anuk and warned that its power was both great and dangerous, and that only a worthy and pure-hearted individual could safely wield it.”

“Worthy and pure-hearted,” Mr. Evelyn said skeptically. “It sounds like a recipe for failure more than anything.”

Helen smiled at his scorn, for he wasn’t far from the truth. “Just so,” she said. “Anuk became greedy and began to trade the elixir to gain power and wealth. He amassed a great army and conquered neighboring lands, but he became increasingly worried about losing the amulet’s power. He ordered his priests to hide the amulet in the deepest chambers of his temple where it was guarded by legions of fierce warriors.”

She explained that as the centuries passed, the Trinity was lost to history. “It was rumored to have been stolen by a slave, who broke past the guards and took the amulet before vanishing into the desert. It’s said the three pieces were spread wide across the kingdom, and a curse placed upon them to

prevent others from abusing the Trinity's power. Of course, no one knows the truth for certain. Or at least, we haven't found the full extent of it in the ancient texts, merely small bits here and there."

The hour had grown late as Helen's tale unfolded, and the air had taken on a distinct chill. She wrapped her scarf about her and stretched her feet closer to the fire. Mr. Evelyn leaned against the palm and crossed his arms with a frown.

"And you think this fantastical tale is enough to protect my sister?"

"I think it is, for anyone who believes in it. And anyone desperate enough to kidnap an innocent Englishwoman must believe in it, or at least in the power it can bring."

"But there's a flaw in the tale, Miss Corbyn, one large enough to drive a horse and team through."

She lifted her brows.

"If this elixir worked, then where is Anuk now?"

She leaned near him to whisper, "Perhaps he walks among us now. Perhaps *he* is the Collector, seeking to reclaim his amulet."

"And perhaps you, Miss Corbyn, have read too many novels."

She smiled. "It doesn't matter if *we* believe in the Trinity's power. Clearly, the Collector does, and the fact that you hold one of the pieces can only work to your advantage. Even if he were to acquire the wings, they're worthless without the scarab's body."

"I only hope you're right," he said.

She reached out and gripped his good hand in hers. Giving it a gentle squeeze, she said, "I am. You'll find your sister, Mr. Evelyn. I have every confidence she'll be returned to you soon."

Rhys waited while Miss Corbyn retrieved her "sleeping apparatus" from Fiona's saddle bag, then he doused the lantern. Whatever the curious contraption was, she was certain she'd not enjoy a wink of sleep without it.

He lay in his tent mere feet from hers and replayed the events of the evening. From Miss Corbyn's revelations about the amulet... to their kiss... to her confident assurances that he'd find his sister. But always he came back to that kiss. He'd never enjoyed one like it, and he didn't think the difference was merely the softness of Miss Corbyn's lips or her seductive jasmine scent.

The difference was, quite simply, Miss Corbyn. Helen.

He smiled to himself. Sleep would be slow to come as his heart refused to settle its skipping pace, but he had something he'd not enjoyed in a long while: hope.

He closed his eyes, and a vision quickly formed of Helen in her tent as she readied herself for sleep. She'd probably wear her hair in a braid as ladies did, and he imagined soft russet tendrils curling about her ears. He tried to picture her with her can't-sleep-without-it apparatus, but the image wouldn't form.

His mind was well acquainted with mechanical devices, but he couldn't make sense of the thing, with its linens and sticks. He gave the matter considerable thought, turning it first one way then another, until his mind finally gave in to sleep.

When next he opened his eyes, light was rimming the edge of the earth beyond the canvas of his tent. He rose and checked the security of the amulet out of habit then put the kettle back on the fire. Taking a clean shirt from his satchel, he washed at the edge of the pool. He rubbed a hand over his whiskered cheeks, which could do with a warm towel and a sharp blade. When he returned from the pool's edge, a soft rustling sounded from Helen's tent. She was awake.

"Miss Corbyn?" he said outside her canvas. The rustling stopped, and the lady released a heavy sigh. He hesitated before asking, "Would you like tea?"

"Yeeesss..."

She didn't follow that with anything else, so he asked, "Are you well?"

There was more rustling and another sigh. "Mr. Evelyn, I'm afraid I need your assistance."

Rhys's brow furrowed. "Um... of course. What—?"

"My sleeping apparatus has become tangled. I need you to untangle it, but you must promise to close your eyes."

Rhys pressed his lips in amusement. "How can I assist you with my eyes closed?"

She hesitated before deploying her governess voice. "Very well, you have a valid point. You may look long enough to establish a plan, but then you must close your eyes."

He needed a *plan*? "All right," he said hesitantly. "May I come in?"

"Yes."

Rhys pulled back the flap of the tent and poked his head in. Then he choked on a laugh as his brows climbed toward his hairline. Helen was trussed up like a well-wrapped mummy in a bundle of cloth and netting that covered her from tip to toe. The netting hung like a shroud from the upper reed of her tent to cover her face. It appeared to be sewn onto a giant linen stocking that held the lady herself, and the whole of it was twisted to such a degree that rendered her immobile, like a pea in a pod.

“What in the devil’s name is that?” he asked before he could check his words.

“It’s called a Levinge,” she said, still using her governess voice. “It was named for its inventor, and it comes highly recommended to keep out the mosquitoes and drafts.”

“It looks”—he coughed to hide his laughter then tried again. “It looks to be doing a fine job keeping you in.”

The netting wasn’t so thick that he couldn’t see her scowl. “Mr. Evelyn —”

“Very well. Where’s the exit?” he asked, eyeing the contraption with interest. The concept was an intriguing one for keeping the insects at bay, but the execution lacked finesse. Perhaps with an added bit of reinforcement there—

“Mr. Evelyn.”

Rhys pulled his attention back to Helen.

“The exit is meant to be on the side,” she explained, motioning toward her hip with an elbow, “but it’s... migrated to the back.”

“A vigorous sleeper, are you?” Rhys gave up trying to control his grin.

“Just untie me, please,” she bit out. “Eyes closed, remember.”

“Miss Corbyn, we’ve shared a kiss. Surely, there’s no harm if I just—”

“Mr. Evelyn, I’m only wearing my shift, so eyes closed, if you please.”

Rhys swallowed against the picture her words painted on the canvas of his mind. “Very well.” He obliged her and closed his eyes, biting his lip against another grin. “If you’ll just turn a bit...”

He ran his hands along her form, feeling the smooth contour of her hip and waist. The image his touch created was far more vivid than if she’d allowed him to keep his eyes open, but he’d not tell her that. Finally, he found what felt like a tie just above the small of her back. The pea-sized knot was fast, though, and his fingers turned to thumbs as he fumbled with the cord.

“Mr. Evelyn,” she said impatiently, “do you have it?”

“Don’t you think, given the circumstances, that you might call me Rhys?” His neck had grown uncomfortably warm in the small space. He opened one eye to gauge his progress on the knot and frowned to see it was an impossible feat, even without the added complication of Helen’s curves beneath his hand.

“Do you have it?” she repeated through clenched teeth.

Rhys pulled his knife from his boot and neatly sliced the cord imprisoning her. “I have it,” he said.

She breathed a relieved sigh, and Rhys backed out of the tent to seek the cooling water of the pool once more.



Helen’s face burned hotter than a thousand suns by the time she joined Mr. Evelyn for a breakfast of tea and oatcakes, and only some of the heat could be blamed on her sunburn. The rest was pure and complete mortification. She would have frowned her displeasure with the morning’s events, but her forehead was tight, and her nose hurt when she wrinkled it, so she made an extra effort not to be annoyed. It was proving difficult.

When she’d finally extricated herself from the fiendish Levinge, she’d stuffed the thing into the darkest corner of the saddle bag. Sir John Gardner Wilkinson would have her strong opinion on his recommendation as soon as she had her letter writing things back. For now, though, she forced her forehead to smooth and resolved to think only positive, non-wrinkling thoughts.

And there were plenty of good thoughts to be had. For starters, Mr. Evelyn—or his sister, rather—had discovered part of the Pharaoh’s Trinity. She was nearly certain the piece she’d held the night before was the mythical scarab’s body. Just wait until she told the professor!

And that brought to mind another glorious thought: they were but a day’s ride from Cairo. Surely, she’d be reunited with the Tyndales soon. She barely enjoyed the relief that certainty brought before her mind spun on its heel to return to precisely where it had been all through the night... Mr. Evelyn’s kiss.

Despite the morning’s mortifying encounter, despite the man’s poorly concealed laughter at her expense, she found herself grinning. She pressed

her lips into a firm line lest she appear feeble minded. As they finished their breakfast, he passed her a hat. It was a drab, broad-brimmed affair made of felt, and she turned it slowly in her hands. At her confused frown, he cleared his throat and said simply, "For the sun."

"Oh! How thoughtful! Thank you." First a kiss, and now kindness. His consideration was completely at odds with the man who'd threatened to leave her the day before. She took his offering and settled it over her scarf. She knew she must have been a sight, but fair-skinned ladies couldn't afford to be particular.

"We should go soon," he said as he flipped his watch closed.

The act reminded her of the Pharaoh's Trinity tucked up in its secret compartment. "Mr. Evelyn," she said, "I've been thinking about the amulet."

He lowered his teacup to gaze at her over the rim. "And?"

"And as clever as your secret compartment is, I have to agree with you. I can't think it's safe to carry such a valuable piece about in your watch."

Mr. Evelyn nodded as he kicked dirt onto their fire. "I've been trying to think of a better place for it. Do you suggest I hide it in my boot, perhaps alongside my dagger?"

Helen snorted at the reminder of his ridiculous tale of the Flowerpot villain. "Now you're just being ridiculous. But maybe..." She tapped her chin, thinking. The notion was too simple, really, but it just might work. "Consider this," she said.

He listened, arms crossed as she explained. She thought he might scoff at the least, or protest, but he lifted one hand to rub his jaw, brows lowered in thought. Finally, he said, "I'll allow, it could work."

Grinning, she jumped and began gathering supplies from the saddlebags. As she worked, he knelt beside her, offering comment and critique, until they were both satisfied with the amulet's new hiding place.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



ABOARD THE *TAMARISK*

Miss Lydia Tyndale had almost decided that removing to Africa might not be such a horrid fate after all. She'd learned, to her delight, that one of the gentlemen who'd smiled at her when they first boarded the *Tamarisk*, was unattached. Mr. Northcott traveled to Cairo with an older brother, a sister and his parents. The sister was a silly peahen, but Lydia was prepared to overlook that. If she managed things properly with the gentleman, she might not be obliged to remain in this dry, drab, insect-infested land much longer.

She offered up a smile as one of her new companions made a joke. She was careful not to smile too broadly, of course, but she lent the expression enough sweetness to indicate a pleasant, agreeable nature.

"Miss Tyndale," Mr. Northcott said, "what will you do first on arriving in Cairo?"

What would she do first? She would secure the services of the hotel maid and enjoy a proper toilette—and certainly not a bath with foreign soap. She didn't think that was what he meant, though.

"Tea," she said. "I've heard Mr. Shephard's hotel sets a fine tea table, and I should like to enjoy it without the floor moving beneath me."

Mr. Northcott laughed as he'd been expected to. "Say you'll join us on the veranda when we arrive, with your aunt and uncle, of course."

Lydia nodded her head in genteel acceptance of the invitation. Tea! It was hardly a marriage proposal, but she must remember to take things one step at a time.

"I dare say something has upset your aunt," Miss Northcott said in her

feathery tone. Lydia looked across the small parlor to where her aunt hurried to her uncle's side, a frown pulling her brow low. She spoke to him in hushed tones, hands fluttering in agitation. Her uncle's head jerked back at her words, and his eyes widened in dismay.

Lydia sighed softly to herself. Miss Corbyn was about to disrupt things once again.

“Henry! I must speak with you at once.”

Professor Henry Tyndale pressed his wife's hands to still their fluttering. “Dorothea, what has you in such a taking?”

“It's Miss Corbyn. Oh, Henry, she's not here!”

“Calm yourself,” he said. “What do you mean, she's not here?”

“You know I've been worried for her—the poor thing doesn't suffer sea travel well. But we haven't seen her since we left Alexandria, so I knocked on the door of her cabin. When she didn't answer, I called out, just to see if she needed anything, of course. She still didn't answer so I turned the knob. It was unlocked, Henry. Her cabin is empty, and her things are still packed away in her trunk. Oh, what do you think has happened?”

Henry's stomach pitched uncomfortably at his wife's words, but he needed to see for himself. “Let us go,” he said as he ushered his wife from the *Tamarisk's* parlor.

They reached the narrow doorway of Miss Corbyn's cabin, and it was just as his wife had said. The room was empty, the lady's trunk still full and neatly packed. Sunlight through the small window showed that her bonnet hung on a peg near the bed and a letter addressed to her parents lay atop the small desk. They were the only indications that Miss Corbyn had ever been in the room.

“When did you see her last?” he said gruffly. “Tell me everything.”

When his wife finished, he removed his glasses to pinch the bridge of his nose. He'd assured Harry Corbyn on more than one occasion that he'd see his daughter returned to him safely. His stomach pitched and rolled again. How could they have lost the young woman? More importantly, *where* had they lost her? Miss Corbyn was a sensible sort and quite resourceful, but he wasn't ignorant of the dangers an unaccompanied lady faced. He couldn't help but worry for her safety.

“I should have been more diligent,” he muttered.

“Do you think she’s fallen overboard? Oh, Henry, I feel absolutely horrid. I should have checked on her sooner.” Dorothea gripped her hands tightly before her, twisting them as she spoke.

He stilled her hands with his own, his heart hurting at what he must say. “I don’t think Miss Corbyn has fallen overboard, but I do think it’s time we speak with Lydia.” He looked at his wife meaningfully.

Dorothea’s brow dipped lower and she stared at her hands. “Henry, you can’t think she—that Lydia would—” His wife’s eyes filled, and she swallowed before sitting heavily on the end of Miss Corbyn’s bed. “Oh, dear. I fear we’ve been too indulgent with our niece.”

Henry couldn’t disagree. When Lydia’s parents had died ten years before, he and Dorothea, who’d not been blessed with children of their own, had readily accepted the charge of his brother’s only child. But their love and affection, though well-intentioned, had not been tempered with the firm guidance a young lady required. Instead of curbing her whims and correcting her faults, they’d allowed her grief free rein, permitting her to indulge in every fancy she desired. Now, he feared, she’d grown into a young woman of great beauty and charm but lacking in the virtues of self-restraint and humility.

And, if his suspicions were true, basic kindness.

Lydia had expected the summons to Miss Corbyn’s cabin, but she had not expected her uncle’s firm stare. She glanced around the small room with wide eyes. “What do you mean, Miss Corbyn isn’t here? Where could she have gone?”

“My dear,” her aunt said, clasping her hands delicately in her lap. “It doesn’t appear as if she’s been aboard since we left Alexandria. Do you have any knowledge of Miss Corbyn’s whereabouts?”

“Of course not, Aunt.” Lydia affected an expression of mild offense. Then, with a delicate gasp, she said, “You don’t think she’s fallen overboard, do you? She has always liked to walk along the deck.”

Her aunt frowned as her uncle lifted an eyebrow. “She has always kept to her cabin, too *ill* to walk along the deck,” he said.

Lydia swallowed, her cheeks warm in the still air. “Well, she always

said as how she might *like* to walk along the deck. Perhaps she left her cabin last night. It would have been dark. Maybe she stumbled....” Her voice trailed off as she realized the absurdity of that fabrication. Lies grounded in truth were much more believable.

“I must speak to the captain,” her uncle said. “We’ll disembark as soon as possible.”

“Disembark? But, Uncle, we’re almost to Cairo. Perhaps Mr. Northcott’s family would permit me to remain—”

“We’ll all disembark together,” he said, his gaze reproachful. “We’ll not leave Miss Corbyn stranded and alone in a foreign land.”

He turned to leave, and Lydia’s heart raced. They were going to ruin everything. They were going to make her leave the *Tamarisk* and Mr. Northcott, and all of Lydia’s plans would crumble to dust. “Miss Corbyn left with Mr. Evelyn,” she blurted.

“What?” Her aunt’s hand fluttered at her neckline. “What are you saying? Lydia, if you know where Miss Corbyn has gone, you must tell us.”

Lydia shifted uncomfortably on her feet, but in for a penny, as the saying went. With a swallow, she murmured, “She left the *Tamarisk* in Alexandria.” Drawing a breath, Lydia forced her eyes to meet her aunt’s gaze. “I saw her on the shore with Mr. Evelyn. She was pursuing him most shamefully.”

Her uncle’s frown grew. “And you didn’t think to mention this earlier?”

Lydia shook her head. “I didn’t wish to cause a scandal, or to damage Miss Corbyn’s reputation more than she’d already done herself. I thought it would be best to keep what I saw to myself.”

Her aunt looked skeptical. “I can’t believe it of Miss Corbyn. Are you sure you’re telling us everything, Lydia?”

Lydia’s hand fisted the fabric of her skirt. “I’m sorry, Aunt. I wish I had known what she was planning. I know how much you enjoyed her company.”

“We’ll disembark as soon as possible,” her uncle repeated, and Lydia resisted the urge to stamp her foot. He shook his head as he left, but Lydia couldn’t be certain if the disappointment on his face was for her or Miss Corbyn.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Helen's felt hat acquitted itself admirably against the sun. They'd been riding for an hour or more, and she'd begun to drowse as Fiona ambled beneath them. Mr. Evelyn startled her when he spoke, his voice deep and rich behind her.

"Helen."

His use of her given name sent heat flooding her cheeks. She turned and he flinched as the hat's brim struck him across the bridge of his nose.

"Yes?"

"Look there."

She turned, following his gaze. A warm breeze tugged at the edges of her scarf, and the sun shimmered above the horizon. And then she saw it. In the distance, a hint of blue smudged the earth. As they rode, it grew larger and more distinct, stretching before them like a lazy feline taking the best spot in the sun.

The Nile! Her chest tightened at the magnificent expanse that lay before them.

The road grew more populated as they neared the river, and sparse settlements became little towns. Birds wheeled overhead, their cries harsh as they searched the river below for prey.

Presently, they passed a handful of whitewashed villas with latticed windows and tall palms and then another cluster of mud-brick buildings. A farm of some sort, it was set some distance from the main road. A long, narrow drive led to a small enclosure where children played with a stick and wooden ball. Nearby, camels and horses stood in the welcome shade of a mimosa tree.

In an unexpected turn, Mr. Evelyn guided Fiona down the drive and

Helen frowned. "What is this? Why are we stopping?" For all his earlier kindness, Mr. Evelyn could be a bit heedless when it came to decisions that affected others.

"You need your own mount."

"I do? But we're almost to Cairo."

"Yes, and unless you wish to arrive at Mr. Shepherd's hotel as we are, you need your own mount. Otherwise, I fear we'll be quite the talk among the other guests."

Her sunburn pulled as her brow lowered, and she forced her expression to relax. "You make a good argument," she conceded, "although gossip is probably unavoidable whether we arrive on one camel or six. But if you thought to procure another camel, you might have said as much."

"I'm saying as much now."

Helen pressed her lips in irritation. "My point," she said with emphasis, "is that you might have consulted me regarding your plans. We are traveling together, after all."

She felt him sigh behind her. "Miss Corbyn," he said with exaggerated slowness, "would you like to accompany me to acquire another mount?"

After a brief consideration, she said, "Mr. Evelyn, your question merely serves to inform me of your intentions, which is not the same as discussing them so we might arrive at a plan together. However, as I've already conceded you make a good point, then yes, I would like to accompany you. Thank you for asking."

"Excellent," he bit out. "I'm glad we have that settled."

His annoyance caused an unexpected grin to threaten her own irritation. They neared the largest of the buildings and a short round man emerged from within. His smile grew on seeing them.

"Masri," Mr. Evelyn called to him. "My camel will be pleased to greet her sire again."

Helen twisted on the saddle, catching him across the nose again with her hat. "This is where you acquired Fiona?"

He nodded. "It is."

"And her tack?"

He nodded again.

"Well, why didn't you say so?" Fiona folded to the ground, and Helen hurried to dismount.

Masri's round belly preceded him as he approached them. "Mr. Evelyn!" he exclaimed in his thick accent. He motioned to a young boy, who led Fiona to the enclosed yard to be unsaddled. Masri turned back to Rhys and began speaking in rapid and enthusiastic Arabic. Rhys understood enough of the language to catch the essentials, then he haltingly introduced Helen.

She greeted the man in what Rhys assumed must have been flawless Arabic, as Masri's smile widened. His wife emerged from the house with two children attached to her indigo *jalabiya*. She soon whisked Helen away amidst a flurry of excited gesticulation.

Masri began to follow them, but Rhys held him back with a glance. Speaking in a low tone, he said, "When I was last here, I asked you about a man known as the Collector."

Masri's eyes slid away from Rhys before he replied. "And I told you then I do not know anything of this man."

"And now? Have you still not heard anything?"

Masri remained silent for a long beat. "I have not."

Rhys's jaw tightened. "He still has my sister," he said softly. "If you know anything, if you've *heard* anything, no matter how insignificant, I beg you to tell me."

Masri's gaze shifted to take in his home and stables behind Rhys and the children playing in the yard. Finally, he said, "I'm sorry, my friend. I do not know anything of this man you seek."

Rhys nodded, head bent, hands on his hips.

"But," Masri said, swallowing, "I imagine a man as powerful as the one you describe must make his home in Cairo."

Rhys's head came up and he narrowed his eyes on the shorter man.

"Even if he travels the length of Wadi el-Nil," Masri continued, "I imagine a man like that must return to his home now and then." He looked at Rhys meaningfully. "Now, especially."

Rhys's breath stilled. It was the surest confirmation he'd received that the Collector was indeed in Cairo. He nodded. "I think you must be very astute, Mr. Masri, to imagine such things. Do you imagine anything else? The location of his residence, perhaps, or where he stables his horse?"

Masri's gaze slid away again. "I do not."

Rhys rubbed his jaw. Masri's information wasn't much, but it was more

than he'd had an hour before. He nodded his appreciation to the trader. "Show me your cattle, my friend."

Masri grinned and the heaviness of the moment lifted. "I have some fine camels for you today as well as some new horses. They are sturdy and will make your journey to Cairo a short one."

"Hmm... we shall see," Rhys said vaguely. He'd already determined to acquire a pair of horses for the remainder of their journey into Cairo, but it wouldn't do to tip his hand too soon.

"But first," Masri continued, "you must see my children. The youngest has grown since you were here, although she has taken a cough that worries my wife."

He led the way into the Masri home, where Rhys made appropriate noises over the man's offspring. Helen was nowhere to be seen, although Rhys could hear Mrs. Masri chattering in a back room somewhere.

At Masri's invitation, Rhys lowered himself onto a large, tasseled cushion. The trader's oldest daughter, a pretty girl of nine or ten, offered Rhys a cup of *karkadeh*, which he accepted with a nod of thanks. As he drank the sour hibiscus tea, Helen emerged from the Masris' back room with a toddler on her hip. The child's head rested on her shoulder as Helen gently stroked dark curls away from a sweaty brow. Rhys's heart skipped unexpectedly at the sight. His mind quickly flashed ahead five years to an image of Helen holding her own child, perhaps one with shining, russet curls. He swallowed and stood as she approached them.

"I need my medicine box," she said to Rhys, then she turned to Mr. Masri and repeated the same in Arabic, describing the box that could be found in their saddle bags. "I have something that should help little Mariam's cough," she explained.

Rhys stepped to her side, a frown creasing his brow. "It's not opium, is it?"

She frowned in irritation. It was a look he was growing used to seeing, and not one that was altogether unwelcome. "It's not but a bit of camphor," she said. "I'll mix it with some oil to create a rub Mrs. Masri can apply to Mariam's chest. I doubt it will cure the cough altogether, but it should give her some relief."

Rhys nodded and went with Masri to retrieve her box. When they returned, the ladies began mixing Helen's camphor, heads bent together. Rhys was nearly overwhelmed by a rush of affection for the woman who'd

become his unexpected traveling companion. With her scarf and *jalabiya*, she was as suited to Masri's small parlor as an earl's granddaughter might appear in an opulent ballroom. With her intelligence and easy manner, she adapted and molded herself to any situation, and he couldn't say he'd ever encountered anyone quite like her.

"It worked, no?" Masri said softly.

Rhys realized he'd been caught staring. He pulled his attention back to his host and frowned in confusion at the man's words.

"The camel... the tack," Masri clarified with a nod toward Helen. He unleashed a rapid string of Arabic that Rhys was pressed to follow, but he caught the phrase "your bride." A laugh bubbled up in Rhys's chest, and he suppressed it. Helen had an annoying tendency to be right. His camel's tack *had* been selected with the aim of earning him a wife.

He started to correct Masri on the matter of his bride, then he stopped. The explanations would be too lengthy for his limited Arabic skills. Besides, he and Helen had shared a kiss and he'd cut her from her sleeping apparatus. Didn't that make her his on some level, anyway?

He looked to where Mrs. Masri had begun rubbing the camphor on little Mariam's chest a short distance away. Helen's cheeks, which had escaped the worst of her sunburn, were now a delightful shade of pink to match her nose. She kept her gaze carefully averted from him and Masri, although Rhys suspected she heard every bit of their conversation. He clapped Masri on the shoulder.

"*Shukran, sadiqi,*" he said. *Thank you, my friend.* Helen drew in a sharp inhale, and Rhys hid his grin.

"Another camel," Masri said slowly, "perhaps another wife, eh?"

Helen's frown grew, and Rhys's own smile fell as he followed Masri from the house.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Helen was certain there must be ladies who weren't prone to blushing, and she wished she were one of them. As it was, her cheeks and ears burned hotter than her forehead. She swallowed as Mr. Evelyn left with Mr. Masri and tried to focus on her task. Another wife, indeed!

Mariam drifted off to sleep in her mother's arms, her cough soothed for a time. Mrs. Masri placed a hand on Helen's shoulder and offered a soft consolation. "Do not be concerned if he takes another wife. It's clear to see you have your husband's heart, and that is what matters most."

Helen smiled weakly then followed the other woman outside where Mr. Masri had brought out several horses for Mr. Evelyn's inspection. The gentlemen stood at the fence near a tall chestnut mare as Mr. Masri pointed out the horse's many attributes.

"My camels are the best for long journeys, but for the streets of Cairo, you will need a horse."

Mr. Evelyn rubbed his chin, brows pitched low as he considered the animal.

"And if you seek the best horse along the Nile, she is the one," Mr. Masri continued, rubbing his fingers through the mare's thick mane. "Only five hundred *piastres*. A horse of this quality will cost you seven hundred in Cairo."

Mr. Evelyn shook his head. "She's too tall."

"Ah, you wish something more suitable for your bride then." Mr. Masri moved them down the fence to a small bay whose ears twitched as she eyed them. "Do not let her size fool you. This one is a wise choice for traveling the city without emptying your purse."

"Is she sure of foot?" Mr. Evelyn asked.

“She is steady,” Mr. Masri confirmed. “And for you, my friend, I will make a special price. Only four hundred *piastres*.” He tugged on the horse’s lead and guided her about, demonstrating the mare’s even gait.

Mr. Evelyn made some noises of indecision, and Helen silently applauded his negotiating skills. She’d assumed from the number of tassels hanging from Fiona’s tack, that he’d blindly accepted whatever the trader had sold him, but it was clear he had a strategy.

He shook his head and started to walk away, muttering, “I’m sorry, Masri. It’s too much.”

Mr. Masri moved closer to say, “If you are concerned about the price, I will add the saddle bags. They are sewn from the softest leather in my cousin’s shop, with many compartments to make a functional yet attractive accessory.”

Mr. Evelyn looked up and spied Helen at the fence. Without betraying his bargaining position, he gave her a slow wink, and her insides turned to warm jelly.

Their host grinned, clearly enjoying the game. “You do not want to miss this opportunity, my friend. Camel or horse, all of my mounts are prized. I had another *inglizi* not more than an hour ago who insisted on three of my best camels for himself, his wife and his niece,” Mr. Masri said, and Helen’s head snapped to attention.

“What did you say?” she asked.

Rhys listened attentively, trying to follow the thread of their rapid exchange as Helen peppered Masri with questions. From what he could make out, an older gentleman had recently passed through with his wife and niece. They’d left one of the English boats near Tanta but had been beset by bandits who’d stolen their provisions and newly acquired horses. Forced to travel the road by foot, the small family had arrived at Masri’s farm uninjured but travel weary.

“Can you describe the man and his family?” Helen asked. “What did they look like?” She gripped Rhys’s arm in her eagerness, and he settled a hand over hers.

“Ah, yes,” Masri said, “The gentleman, he was pale with the round shoulders of age. His Arabic was good, though I think not so excellent as

yours.”

Helen, who colored prettily when talk turned to wives and harems, didn't blush in the slightest at Masri's compliment. She merely nodded, taking his words for fact, and urged him to continue.

Masri stroked his smooth cheeks and considered. “His lady wife was fluttery like a bird, about your height but with a large English bonnet.”

Helen's hand tightened on Rhys's arm as she leaned forward. “And the niece?”

Masri frowned. “The young lady, she was not made for this land. She wilts like the petunia in the sun, and she is spotted from insects, although why the bugs would bite such sour fruit, only Allah knows.”

Helen turned to Rhys. “It's them, it must be!” Then, spinning back to Masri, she said, “They purchased camels. Do you know their destination?” Masri nodded and she fired more questions at him to learn the Tyndales were making their way back to Alexandria.

Rhys smiled at Helen's obvious relief and elation, even as his stomach twisted. He was relieved for her, certainly. He'd be a churlish cad not to be, but such news meant he must again change his course. It was one more delay in his search for the Collector.

But once he reunited Helen with her party, he would be unencumbered once more. Surely, he would make better time traveling to Cairo alone. That thought should have been more satisfying than it was—his sister would certainly appreciate his haste in coming to her—but the notion of continuing on without Helen left him feeling a bit... somber. And that momentary indulgence left him feeling horribly selfish.

“We'll take the mares,” he said to Masri gruffly, interrupting Helen's enthusiastic expressions of gratitude. “Both of them. Fit them out for speed if you will, Masri.”

The lady looked at him in surprise, as if she'd forgotten his presence despite holding fast to his arm during her exchange with Masri. A frown furrowed her sunburned brow as she considered him, and he saw the wheels of her mind turning like a coach gaining speed on a down slope. Rhys dropped her arm to press the required coins into Masri's hand, then he began helping the man saddle Helen's new mount.

She followed them, little puffs of dust rising behind her rapid steps. He glanced up from where he'd placed a saddle on the bay's back, eyeing her briefly across the animal. Masri passed him the bridle and he turned to take it,

but not before Helen's eyes narrowed in an expression he'd come to recognize. Like the crackling air that presaged a coming dust storm, her features predicted difficulties ahead. Clearly, she took exception once again to his ordering of their plans.

He may have been slow to learn, but that wasn't to say he was incapable of it. After a beat of silence, he spoke to her across the mare as he tightened the girth. "Helen," he said. "I would like to find the Tyndales before too much time has passed. Are you in agreement with that course of action?"

Her frown deepened. Ah, yes. Now came the discussion part. "But your sister," she said. "We're so close to Cairo. You can't afford the time it will take to—"

He shook his head. "If we go now and quickly, we can overtake the Tyndales before they've traveled much farther."

"Like we overtook them at Kafr Abu Homs?"

Rhys frowned and adjusted the stirrup as she continued.

"How do we know which road they've taken?" she asked. "There are any number of routes they might have chosen."

His jaw tightened. She wasn't incorrect, but the devil take it if he knew what to do about it.

"Rhys," she continued, "I realize we must be close to the Tyndales, but you have to find the Collector. The answer is simple: we must continue on to Cairo as we were. I'll go to the consul-general there, and his office will get word to the professor in Alexandria. You can't delay your search any longer."

Rhys's brow dipped in surprise and not just at her use of his given name. *This* was why he didn't waste time with discussion. They'd spent the past hours rushing to catch the Tyndales, and now that they were closer than ever, she chose a different and altogether unexpected course. It was utterly confounding.

"Your sister's life is paramount," she whispered.

He couldn't disagree, but he also couldn't ask Helen to travel with him to Cairo, *away* from the Tyndales. To do so went against all reason and was certainly not in her best interest. He swallowed at the impossibility of their situation, rubbing his jaw.

She gazed at him earnestly, her delicate brows pitched to a point, the scarf draped loosely over her cinnamon hair. Without his permission, this lady had worked her way into his heart. He found himself unexpectedly

captivated by her intelligence and humor, her beauty and wit. But he'd spent the past weeks with the singular goal of finding and returning his sister to England. As soon as he had Fiona back, they would be on the next steamer to England, but now, for the first time since Fiona had been taken, the thought of leaving Egypt caused a pain of regret to tighten his chest.

"I've caused you to delay your search too many times," Helen continued. "I retrieved your bag in Alexandria, then I gave you the opium in Kafr Abu Homs and now—" She stopped and drew a heavy inhale as she came around to his side of the mare.

He gave her a shaky smile. "I won't deny all you say is true," he said. "You're like a mosquito trapped in my tent."

She scowled, but humor sparked in her eyes.

He grew serious. "Are you certain?"

She nodded, and her hand curled into his. "I'm certain."

The knot loosened in his chest, and he squeezed her hand lightly. "Thank you," he said simply, but his voice carried the weight of everything he couldn't express.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



Helen's elation on hearing Mr. Masri's account of the English travelers had been immediate, for there could be no other "sour fruit" quite like Lydia. But then she realized the significance of this news. To go after the Tyndales would be one more delay in Rhys's search for his sister, and her heart had plummeted at the thought.

They'd reached yet another impossible predicament. She couldn't venture after the Tyndales alone, but neither could she allow Rhys to abandon his search to accompany her. Proposing that they continue to Cairo together had been the only sensible course. Rhys's softly spoken gratitude and the gentle press of his hand on hers only confirmed she'd made the right choice.

She smiled and dropped his hand as Mr. Masri approached them.

"You do not need to choose Cairo or Alexandria," he said. At their matching expressions of confusion, he clarified, "The gentleman has gone to seek supplies for his family's journey. I sent him to my cousin's shop in Selamun not more than ten minutes before you arrived."

"Selamun," Rhys said. "That's this side of the river, is it not?"

Mr. Masri nodded. "You will find my cousin's shop next to the blacksmith."

Helen's heart quickened and she raced to retrieve her map. She unfolded it atop the fence rail, and they leaned their heads close to study it. "It's here," Rhys said, pointing to a spot not more than a couple of miles from where they stood.

Helen looked up and caught his eye. They stared at one another in stunned disbelief before she jumped to help him secure the mare's tack.

A couple of miles! Could it truly be so simple? Then she reminded herself of the hours spent chasing the Tyndales, and she laughed at the

ridiculous question. This journey could never be described as simple. Rhys glanced over at her and grinned as if he knew the direction of her thoughts.

They took their leave of Mr. Masri and his wife in less than five minutes. Helen pressed her bottle of camphor into Mrs. Masri's hand with a gentle stroke of Mariam's brow, then she and her new mount led the way to the long drive. As Rhys followed her, Mr. Masri motioned to him and Helen hung back.

"I will have another fine camel for you when you are ready to take another wife." Mr. Masri's tone was one of amusement, and the tips of Helen's ears burned.

Rhys leaned toward the trader, and the mare danced beneath Helen as she shamelessly strained to hear his reply. "Miss Corbyn assures me I'm not so much a fool as that."

The trader laughed and clapped Rhys on the back in a show of masculine fellowship that crossed the barriers of culture and language. Shaking her head, Helen turned the mare down the drive as Mr. Masri called a farewell to Rhys. "*Ma'a salaama*, my friend. May you find all that you seek."

Rhys's horse soon drew alongside Helen's, and she chanced a glance at him from the corner of her eye. He wore a poorly concealed grin that she felt compelled to correct.

"For the sake of clarity," she began, "I never said you were not a fool. I merely said I didn't think the trader would have taken you for one. There is a distinct difference."

Rhys chuckled and shook his head. "Do you ever grow weary of being right?"

"No."

Helen nudged the mare into a canter to the sound of his laughter behind her. A moment later, he called out. She ignored him to continue riding until she heard him say, "Miss Corbyn, it's this way."



The road to Selamun was narrow and winding and edged with thick clumps of river grass. It followed a sweeping curve in the Nile, bending to the river's power as all things did. The river lapped at its edges as it pushed on toward the sea, and in the distance, workers toiled in the broad fields of a

sugar cane plantation.

They rode in silence for some minutes, their teasing forgotten. Helen studied the man as he cantered alongside her. He sat tall and straight in the saddle, the scarf looped loosely about his neck and shoulders, the wide strap of his bag a dark slash across his chest. He'd been a proud caliph atop his camel; now, atop his horse, she imagined him a fierce warrior sheik.

With his pale eyes, whiskered jaw and explorer's attire, she wondered how she'd not recognized him for her museum thief sooner. Her heart increased its pace at the recollection of that night, of the mystery and intrigue—and the thrill—of the unknown intruder who'd boldly pressed her to him.

She wasn't a silly bit of fluff to mistake such an event for romance. But now she knew the man behind the mystery, and Rhys was so much more than a phantom thief. He was mysterious and intriguing and thrilling, yes, but he was also a gentleman with a devilish sense of humor and a quick wit, despite his linguistic failings. He was ordinary and mysterious, rough and polished, serious and spirited.

He was a bit autocratic, it was true, but she supposed that was to be expected from one with such fierce determination. And his never-flagging efforts on behalf of his sister spoke of a heart that loved deeply.

And he was a good man, despite the circumstances of their first meeting. Despite his own confession that he'd not lived a saint's life. She could well believe it, but she'd come to realize the line between good and bad, right and wrong, wasn't as clearly drawn as one might expect.

In truth, Rhys was the most unique gentleman she'd ever met, and she was fascinated by his contrasts. Quite simply, he defied categorization.

She desperately hoped he was successful in his search for his sister, although she couldn't like the thought of the Pharaoh's Trinity landing in the hands of this Collector. But if Rhys lost his sister—and surely, Helen was to blame for many of his delays—his pain would almost be too much to witness. Her eyes misted and she blinked quickly.

He looked at her in question.

"It's just a bit of sand," she said, and he nodded.

The low buildings of Selamun soon appeared in the distance, and her stomach pitched anxiously. If Mr. Masri was correct, the Tyndales were just beyond the next curve. She would soon be reunited with them, and Rhys would leave her to continue his search. He continued to watch her, his expression inscrutable, and she forced a smile.

The main street of Selamun was noisy as people bustled along a line of vibrant shop stalls. Helen sat straighter on the mare as she glanced from side to side, seeking some sign of the Tyndales.

They neared the lane where Masri said they'd find his cousin's shop, and Rhys spotted two ladies in English attire among the market-goers. "Helen," he said with a nod toward the ladies. "Your companions are there."

She turned to where he indicated. Her face beamed her relief, and when she grinned at Rhys, a pang tightened his chest. He dismounted and assisted her from the mare, his hands spanning the gentle curve of her waist. He held her a moment longer than necessary as she gazed up at him. Her lips were parted, and he was reminded of their kiss until she stepped back from him with a soft smile. He dropped his hands and she hurried forward to hail the Tyndales.

When he caught up with her, she was folded in Mrs. Tyndale's grandmotherly embrace, and he detected the barest shimmer of tears in her eyes as she let out a shaky laugh. Mrs. Tyndale showed no such restraint, however, and tears flowed unchecked down her plump cheeks as she clasped Helen to her.

"My dear, you're here! Henry!" Mrs. Tyndale called toward the shop behind them before turning back to Helen. "We've been so worried for you. Are you well?"

"I'm quite well, ma'am," Helen assured the older lady.

Miss Lydia Tyndale seemed anything but pleased with their reunion. She stood sullenly, arms folded as her aunt exclaimed over Helen. Rhys couldn't help but notice the young lady's appearance had undergone a remarkable change since he'd last seen her aboard the *Oriental*. Her gown was dusty and stained, her curls limp, her lips dry and peeling, and her face dotted with insect bites. It seemed the proud and lovely miss had come a bit unraveled.

Tyndale emerged from the shop behind them, arms laden with burlap sacks. His eyes widened on seeing Helen in his wife's embrace, and he quickly set his burden aside to take her hands in his.

Mrs. Tyndale reluctantly released her charge, then she spied Rhys. Her brow dipped low in confusion to form a map of wrinkles across her forehead. "Mr. Evelyn! You're here as well. How nice it is to see you again, although I

must say, this is an... unexpected surprise.” She looked to Helen, a question in her gaze which Helen promptly answered.

“When I realized the *Tamarisk* had left Alexandria, Mr. Evelyn graciously accompanied me to find you. He’s been tireless in his efforts and a perfect gentleman,” she assured them. Rhys thought that might have been gilding the lily a bit, but Mrs. Tyndale’s frown eased. Her husband, though, assessed Rhys with a measure of fatherly skepticism.

“But I don’t understand,” Mrs. Tyndale said. “Whyever did you leave the *Tamarisk*?”

It was Helen’s turn to frown. “There was some confusion with the porters and our baggage. I went ashore to sort it before our things were taken aboard the wrong boat.” Her eyes darted to Miss Tyndale, whose expression had grown more peevish. “Did Miss Tyndale not tell you?”

All gazes swung to the young lady, who said, “I—I forgot about the baggage trouble. I had a head-ache, if you’ll recall, and had taken some of Aunt’s laudanum. I’m afraid I wasn’t myself, but I saw you pursuing Mr. Evelyn, and quite shamefully, I might add. I naturally assumed that you’d arranged to leave with him.”

There was a beat of silence as everyone took this in. Rhys opened his mouth, intent on defending Helen, but he stopped at the expression on her face. It was clear she debated the wisdom of holding her tongue or unleashing it. He silently voted for unleashing and was pleased when she straightened, eyes narrowed on the other lady.

She only reached the willowy Miss Tyndale’s shoulder, but she was magnificent in her scarf and felt hat. Eyes flashing, she spoke so softly that Rhys had to lean closer to hear. “I *pursued* Mr. Evelyn for the sole purpose of returning his bag to him. But you assumed—*naturally*—that I would abandon the opportunity to continue my work with your uncle? That I would repay his kindnesses with such a turn? That I would turn my back on society and my family to run away with... what? An *adventurer*?”

Well, Rhys thought that was a bit harsh.

“Miss Tyndale, some ladies’ principles may permit such behavior, but I can assure you mine do not. You malign not only me but Mr. Evelyn with your words, and I think an apology is in order.”

Miss Tyndale looked to her uncle who merely frowned in expectation. Realizing she’d find no aid from that quarter, she relented.

“Very well,” she said mulishly. “I apologize if I misunderstood your

intentions.” Her chin jutted stubbornly, but the effect was ruined when she reached a hand up to scratch her ear. “Oh! These infernal bugs!” And with that, she spun away. Mrs. Tyndale followed her, taking the young woman’s hand in hers despite the lady’s petulant scowl.

“Professor,” Helen began, “I must apologize if my words were unkind —”

The gentleman waved her apology aside with one hand. “It was well done, Miss Corbyn. I fear Lydia should have received such plain-speaking long before now.” He turned to Rhys. “Mr. Evelyn, we’ve been beside ourselves with worry since learning Miss Corbyn wasn’t aboard the *Tamarisk*. I must thank you for seeing her safely returned to us.” He stressed the word *safely* and eyed Rhys with a question.

Rhys pushed aside thoughts of the kiss he and Helen had shared. Looking Tyndale in the eye, he willed him to see that Helen remained unsullied, though a bit sunburned, for her time with him. “The lady is quite resourceful,” he said, “and I’ve no doubt she would have found her way back to you with or without my aid.”

The older man studied him for a beat longer before extending his hand, which Rhys took.

“Mr. Masri’s cousin has invited us to dine with his family,” Tyndale said. “I imagine he would welcome two more to his table, and it will do us all good to regroup for a bit before we continue our journey. Will you stay and join us?”

Rhys glanced at Helen, torn. He wondered if he ought to accompany the Tyndales on their journey to Cairo. They’d lost Helen once already, and they’d been beset by *bandits*. He ought to travel with them, if only to ensure her safety, but there wasn’t time for further delays. He had to find the Collector. Fiona needed him, and there was no one to see to *her* safety.

“Mr. Evelyn has pressing matters to attend to in Cairo,” Helen said. “I’m certain he must be anxious to continue his journey.” She looked at him, her eyes encouraging as she gave him a little smile.

“Indeed,” Rhys said, though it pained him to do so. “I’m afraid I can’t stay.” He’d simply have to trust Tyndale to see Helen to Cairo without incident. The notion caused his chest to tighten, and he felt as if his heart were being torn in two—with half given over to his sister and half to Helen.

“Of course, of course,” Tyndale said. “We’ve kept you from your travels long enough.” Then, with a nod of farewell, he took himself off to collect his

wife and niece.

Helen turned to Rhys. Her smile remained, but it didn't reach her eyes. "Mr. Evelyn," she said softly as they began walking toward their mounts. "I thank you for your assistance, but your sister awaits you. You must hurry. Perhaps we shall meet again in Cairo. At the very least, I shall see that the horse is returned to you." He frowned at that but she continued. "And I still intend to speak with the consul-general on your behalf, although I've every confidence you will have found your sister by then."

Rhys swallowed and nodded his agreement. He didn't know what lay ahead for him and Fiona, or if he'd ever see Helen again. As soon as he had his sister back, he'd return to Surrey and his workshop while Helen remained in Egypt, cataloguing her relics. It was unlikely their paths would have occasion to cross again.

They'd reached his horse, and she handed him the reins. His hesitation must have been evident as Helen whispered softly, "Go."

As he rode from Selamun, his heart thumped against his breastbone, clamoring to escape and return to the lady behind him. He pushed the feeling aside. He had to find Fiona. Nothing else mattered.

CHAPTER TWENTY



Helen watched Rhys's horse disappear into the afternoon haze that shimmered over the dusty road. Her feet wanted to follow, and it was with effort that she forced them to remain where they were. A heaviness settled in her chest, and she offered a silent prayer for his safety as he traveled the road to Cairo.

She missed him already, and he'd only been gone three minutes. How had she grown so attached to the man in such a brief time? Surely, this feeling would pass once the excitement of their journey together had faded.

The argument was a weak one, and not easily believed. Despite how empty she felt now, she knew it would be much worse for her when he left for England. She had no doubt he would go once he found his sister.

She'd seen the indecision on his face, had known the conflict that tugged at him as he considered whether to take himself off to find the Collector and his sister or escort Helen and the Tyndales. But she couldn't allow him to delay his search for his sister any longer. Helen was with friends now. She could look after herself, but Rhys's sister needed him.

The thought didn't ease her heart, and she reminded herself she had work with the professor to anticipate. Months of translating and transcribing that would occupy her time and her thoughts. She certainly didn't need her mind distracted with musings about Rhys.

A soft hand touched her sleeve, and she turned to find Mrs. Tyndale gazing at her tenderly. Helen's smile wobbled a bit and she firmed her jaw.

"We are so happy to have you back with us once again, my dear. And I must apologize for Lydia. She's young and foolish, it's true, but her actions have been inexcusable."

Heat bloomed across Helen's face and throat as she considered the

younger woman's deceit. Lydia had known Helen was not aboard the *Tamarisk* when it departed Alexandria, but she'd said nothing. Helen recalled her clear-eyed gaze when she'd stepped out of her cabin—Lydia's senses hadn't been dulled by laudanum, no matter how she might try to convince them otherwise.

All the past hours of anxiety and fear could have been avoided if Miss Lydia Tyndale had been an honorable, considerate sort of lady. As it was, she was little more than a selfish child who'd expressed neither regret nor remorse for her actions. Helen found it hard to forgive such a poor character.

But she recalled her aim to extend more understanding. With effort, she considered the lady across the lane whose lips had become dried and chapped by the sun and wind. What must the past weeks have been like for one as miserable as Lydia Tyndale? Despite Helen's travel sickness, she loved the thrill of adventure, the excitement of new discovery. She'd dreamed of returning to Egypt for as long as she could remember, but what must the experience have been for one who'd dreamed of other things? Of a husband and home in England. Of parties and shopping with acquaintances. In truth, she knew little of the other woman's desires.

As she and Mrs. Tyndale watched, Lydia swatted an insect in irritation. Helen released her anger on a low sigh. "I think the fates are meting out their judgment, Mrs. Tyndale."



Rhys urged the mare to a gallop, feeling the sleek muscles contract beneath him. As he rode, the sun made its slow trek toward the horizon. Distant farms and villages dotted the landscape, and the Nile flowed to his left, an endless strand reflecting the pinks and oranges of the late afternoon sky. Slow feluccas and low barges plied the river, moving lazily in the current as the water lapped at their wooden hulls. All of it was blurred by his haste.

Rhys focused on the road ahead and the odd bend in the path, watching for any sign of the bandits who'd been active in the area or the men who were intent on obtaining the amulet. Akeem was still out there somewhere, and he didn't think he'd seen the last of him. More than once, a rustle in the grasses ahead caught his attention. He would tense, alert and prepared, only to find it was the wind or a long-legged egret.

Afternoon rolled into night, and Rhys used the moon and the river as his guide, pushing his horse onward. His thoughts returned with regularity to Helen, and he berated himself for leaving her. He couldn't help but worry for her safety, knowing she and the Tyndales would soon take the same road he traveled.

Perhaps, if they didn't mind the delay, they'd wait for another steamer. But the company's boats would already be full with passengers from Alexandria, and it was unlikely they'd be able to secure passage this far from the port city.

As dawn began to lighten the sky, he detected the faint, flickering glow of Cairo's oil lamps. They illuminated the silhouette of the city's walls and minarets and the imposing citadel looming high atop its hill in the distance. It was a captivating sight that promised romance and adventure and inspired the heart to a faster pace if one had the luxury to enjoy it. It was a sight Helen would have loved.

As he drew closer, the lazy sounds of the river gave way to the noise of the city waking beyond its walls: carts clattering over clay pavers, the bleating of goats and sheep, the *muezzin's* first call to prayer echoing from the mosques.

He approached the Bab al-Nasr gate and a pair of guards straightened, weapons at the ready. Rhys slowed his horse to a stop and called out to them.

The guards eyed him warily. "What is your business in Cairo at such an early hour?"

"I've come to see my sister," Rhys said, thinking a simple answer would be the most expedient.

The guards exchanged a look, and the one closest to Rhys, a thin man with a dark beard, placed a hand on the hilt of his sword. Rhys forced his expression to remain calm.

"We're looking for a man—an Englishman like yourself. What is your name?"

Rhys considered the men for half a beat before replying. "Levinge," he said, with a silent apology to Helen's sleeping apparatus inventor.

"Do you have papers?"

Rhys sucked his teeth and shook his head. "I was set upon by bandits outside Tanta. I'm afraid they made off with my papers."

"Dismount, if you will," the man said. At Rhys's hesitation, his partner took a step forward, and the pair stood elbow to elbow. With an inhale, Rhys

nodded and dismounted.

“What’s this English bloke done?” he asked conversationally.

“He’s suspected of smuggling artifacts.”

“Ah,” Rhys said. “The illegal trade of antiquities is a serious matter indeed. It undermines the veracity of the historical record.”

One guard lifted a woolly eyebrow at this but remained silent as his partner began inspecting Rhys’s mount. The Collector, it would seem, wasn’t willing to leave any stone—or saddle—untuned.

Then, as Helen had predicted, they instructed him to remove his boots. While one of the men inspected the stitching and soles, the other began patting Rhys’s vest pockets.

The guard found his watch and held it up for his partner to see. The gold glinted in the low light as the piece spun on its chain. Rhys immediately saw the error of his lie, for as he’d told Helen, no bandit would leave the watch. He held his breath, assessing his surroundings for an escape in case the guards possessed more sense than he’d credited them with.

But the man merely flipped the case open before closing it with a snap and pocketing the watch.

Jaw tight, Rhys said, “That was a gift.”

The guard flicked him a careless glance before resuming his search.

“This all seems a bit excessive,” Rhys added in mild protest, but his words went unheeded.

The bearded guard left Rhys’s boots and motioned to his satchel. Rhys frowned but handed the bag over. The guard rifled the contents, removing first a tin of tooth powder and a change of clothes before pulling a worn green book from the depths. One corner was bent, and a leather thong wrapped the cover. The guard turned the book in his hand.

“Sir John Gardner Wilkinson,” Rhys said. “His advice has been invaluable during our travels. Although,” he added, “my sister wasn’t overly impressed with the man’s recommended sleeping apparatus.”

The guard’s brows dipped, but he dropped the book back into Rhys’s satchel. “You may go.”

Rhys’s heart thumped heavily as he took the bag, and he resisted the urge to sigh his relief. His pockets were one watch lighter, but the guards hadn’t found the hollowed-out space in the center of Helen’s book. Despite the improbability of it, her ploy had worked. Sweat beaded his hairline as he realized how close he’d come to losing his only advantage against the

Collector.

And although he'd not gained nearly as much information as he would have liked from the guards, he now knew one thing for certain: the Collector wasn't just a king among criminals. He also held a degree of influence with the city's officials. Retrieving his sister might prove more difficult than he thought.

Helen stood with the professor outside the home of Mr. Masri's cousin, Mr. Ibrahim. It was a modest clay-brick dwelling nestled near the bank of the Nile and adorned with colorful flowers and potted plants. Inside, Mr. Ibrahim and his wife had welcomed them warmly with a traditional Egyptian meal of lamb, rice and vegetables. As the Ibrahims and Tyndales prepared to retire for the evening, Helen had finally found a quiet moment with the professor.

His cheeks flushed as he eyed her. "And you're certain this piece that Evelyn carries is part of the Pharaoh's Trinity?" he said. "There are hundreds of artifacts unearthed every day. I imagine there must be any number that might be mistaken for it, and you and I both know there's little evidence the Trinity even exists."

She hadn't mentioned the amulet to him earlier—to do so would only have delayed Rhys's departure—but now her heart quickened as she retrieved her journal. She turned the pages quickly then handed her book to the professor. "Mr. Evelyn permitted me to make a sketch. I'm as certain as I can be without seeing the other two pieces. Did you not say the Order of Osiris believes they may have found one of the wings?"

"Hmm," he said, running a blunt finger over her drawing. "Nothing is confirmed, of course, but I'll know more when I meet with my contacts at the Egyptian Museum."

"Then we must go to them in Cairo. Perhaps they know something of the Collector. Between your contacts and any assistance I can secure from the consul-general, perhaps we'll learn something that will aid Mr. Evelyn in his search for his sister."

He frowned as he considered her words. "Certainly, the museum will be interested to hear of Mr. Evelyn's scarab. But the men who attacked you in Alexandria," he said, "you believe they were working on behalf of this Collector person?"

“Yes,” Helen said with a nod. “We think they sought to recover the amulet when I interrupted their exchange.”

“Then this Collector is a very dangerous man indeed,” he said gravely. “I can’t approve your further involvement in the matter, and I think your father would agree.”

Helen swallowed. “I’m already involved. I can’t leave Mr. Evelyn and his sister unaided, not if it’s within my power to help.” At his continued silence, she added, “Surely, a discreet appeal to the consul-general will be safe enough.”

The professor rubbed his chin thoughtfully, brow furrowed. Finally, he released a deep sigh. “Perhaps.”

They studied her drawing for a moment longer, then she addressed the other matter on her mind. “Is my father aware... that is...” She stopped, afraid to ask the question but needing to know the answer. It had been some time since she’d posted a letter to her parents, and they would begin to worry soon if they didn’t hear from her.

“You wish to know if I posted the letter you wrote aboard the *Tamarisk*?”

Helen’s brows climbed. “Did you?”

He nodded. “I sent it by messenger in Tanta, though I was uncertain about the wisdom of doing such a thing. I feared there was every chance I would soon be writing your father with more somber news since we weren’t yet assured of your safety, but I thought your parents should have your latest correspondence as quickly as possible.”

“Thank you,” Helen said earnestly before dropping an impulsive kiss on the professor’s cheek.

He cleared his throat then patted her hand. Helen’s relief was profound. She certainly didn’t wish to keep anything from her father, but she’d rather not cause him to worry unnecessarily. She’d not even begun her year in Cairo yet. There would be plenty of opportunities for him to worry over her later.



Helen and the Tyndales arrived at Shephard’s Hotel late the following afternoon, having begun the day well before the sun graced the horizon. Remarkably, not a single protest had been voiced by Lydia over the early hour of their departure. She seemed as keen to reach their destination as the

rest of their party.

Helen on her horse and the Tyndales on their camels made an odd parade through the towns and villages they passed. More than once, Helen checked the urge to spur her mount to a gallop so she might reach Cairo and Rhys that much sooner.

She worried for his safety and hoped his travels had been unimpeded. At least they'd taken the time to secure the amulet where it would have the least chance of loss. Although the tiny compartment in his watch was very clever, she was pleased with how nicely Wilkinson's guide had served. No one would think to steal a book.

They entered the hotel in their travel dust, and the hushed elegance of the space stood in stark contrast to the noisy bustle outside its walls. The main receiving room boasted high ceilings, plush sofas and ornate chandeliers that twinkled and glimmered like so many stars. Water trickled softly from a tiled fountain, and oil paintings in gilt frames depicted scenes from Egypt's storied history.

Mr. Shepherd himself greeted them with a smile, offering well-appointed accommodations with bathing rooms and "the most comfortable European mattresses." Their trunks, he assured them, had already arrived from the *Tamarisk* and had been sent up to be unpacked by the hotel maids.

Helen longed for a proper bath, but first she needed to learn if Rhys had arrived. But before she could address Mr. Shepherd, they were greeted by none other than Lord Thorsby as he crossed to the hotel's entrance. He carried his hat, appearing not the least bit travel worn, and his handsome refinement was a stark comparison to their ragged group.

"Miss Corbyn," he said warmly, casting a curious glance at her Arab garb before greeting the Tyndales.

Lydia's cheeks reddened in obvious mortification. To be seen by anyone in such a rumpled condition must have been distressing for her, and Lord Thorsby wasn't simply anyone. Lydia returned the baron's greeting with a bit more reservation and a bit less sparkle and charm than was her custom, and a twinge of unexpected compassion tightened Helen's lips.

"We didn't realize you were returning to Egypt so soon," Professor Tyndale said.

Lord Thorsby nodded, turning his hat in his hand. "My matters in London were quickly sorted, and I was able to travel much sooner than anticipated." With another glance toward Helen, he added in a teasing voice,

“But it seems I may be too late to prevent our Miss Corbyn from decamping to join the native population.”

Helen checked her frown of irritation, but before anyone could volunteer an explanation, she motioned to her *jalabiya* and explained, “We’ve only just arrived ourselves, but as you might have guessed, there was some trouble with our baggage.”

He shook his head. “Ah, the port in Alexandria—it’s certainly not for the faint of heart. It’s a wonder any of our things make it to our final destination.”

He inquired after their impressions of Egypt, and when he shared his plans for exploring a nearby temple, Helen clenched her hands in frustration. There was no time for idle conversation, not when Rhys’s progress toward locating his sister was unknown. Lydia, however, listened intently to each word the baron spoke.

“I believe Miss Tyndale might enjoy hearing more of your recent discoveries,” Helen said. “Perhaps you can share with her how you came to be in possession of”—she searched her memory for something Lydia wouldn’t deem ghastly—“Queen Hatshepsut’s jeweled collar.”

Lord Thorsby tipped his head. “Oh-ho! That’s quite the tale. I would be happy to tell you about it, Miss Tyndale. I’m certain the rigors of your journey have left you fatigued, but perhaps we might take a turn about the gardens once you’ve had sufficient time to refresh yourself.”

Lydia darted a suspicious glance at Helen, who merely smiled in encouragement. Lydia nodded in hesitant acceptance of Lord Thorsby’s invitation, and Helen seized the moment to approach the hotel owner.

“Mr. Shephard,” she began, “my acquaintance, Mr. Rhys Evelyn, has taken rooms at your hotel. I wonder if he’s arrived yet?”

“Ah, yes. Mr. Evelyn returned only this morning after some weeks away.”

Helen’s heart increased its pace and relief flooded her. He’d arrived safely. “And is he unaccompanied?”

Mr. Shephard’s eyes widened before he smiled kindly. “Ah, that’s the way of it then? Yes, Mr. Evelyn has arrived alone.”

The way of it? Helen frowned and silently reviewed her words. Oh! “Oh, no,” she said hastily as warmth climbed her neck. “I merely wondered if Mr. Evelyn’s sister has joined him.”

Mr. Shephard frowned and shook his head. “A horrible business, that,”

he said. “But no, Mrs. Foster hasn’t returned, I’m sad to say.”

Helen nodded, swallowing. Her heart twisted for Rhys, and she considered her own siblings. Although Edmund could try her patience at times and she and her sisters didn’t always see eye to eye, she couldn’t imagine a more painful existence than to lose a loved one in such a dreadful manner and be helpless to find them again. To never know their fate. But Rhys was no longer alone in his efforts. The sooner she could appeal to Sir Rupert, the better.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



The back of Rhys's neck itched as he made his way through Cairo's narrow streets back to Shepherd's Hotel. His eyes swept the shadows, searching but finding nothing.

He'd made himself a visible target, hoping someone would approach him about making a trade. No one had, and he'd begun to worry Fiona's captors had lost interest, despite Helen's assurances. Or worse—that they'd lost Fiona. His sister could be imprudent at the best of times, and he'd no doubt she would have tried the patience of even the staunchest of villains.

His questions for the day had been equally unproductive. He'd confirmed what Masri had hinted—the Collector was indeed in Cairo—but he hadn't gained any more insight into the man's identity or his precise whereabouts or those of his henchmen. His jaw and fists were tight with frustration. But then, as he passed through an alley opposite the hotel's entrance, a figure emerged from the shadows to block his path. Finally.

"Evelyn," the man growled.

"Akeem."

"Your tricks in Alexandria were unwelcome. I was surprised to learn you mean to keep the amulet for yourself, no matter the danger to your sister."

"I do not," Rhys assured him. "Alexandria was a misunderstanding, that is all."

"The Collector was not pleased, and your 'misunderstanding' has complicated matters for me."

Rhys wasn't particularly concerned with Akeem's matters, complicated or not, but he had to know: "How does my sister fare?"

The other man hesitated a beat before saying, "She lives still, despite

your failure.”

Relief surged through Rhys. “I still have the amulet. Let’s make an exchange and have done with it,” he said as his heart pounded in rapid, anxious anticipation.

“The time for trading has passed. I will have the amulet now.” A blade flashed in Akeem’s hand and Rhys tensed.

“Wait,” he said, thinking. There was nothing to stop Akeem from trying to seize the amulet. Helen’s book may have been sufficient to hide the artifact from the guards at Cairo’s gate, but it wouldn’t withstand Akeem’s motivated search. And once he had the amulet, there was nothing left to protect Fiona, nothing left to trade. Unless...

“How pleased would the Collector be,” he said slowly, “if you were to present him with more than one piece of the Pharaoh’s Trinity?”

The knife stilled and Akeem straightened. He considered Rhys for a long measure before saying, “You know of the Trinity?”

Rhys nodded.

“And you are in possession of all three pieces?”

Rhys swallowed. He wasn’t a gambler, and certainly not with something so valuable as his sister’s life, but they’d reached an impasse. He needed something to tip the balance in his favor, and the cautious interest on Akeem’s face suggested he might have finally done just that.

“I don’t have the other pieces,” he cautioned before Akeem and his knife could begin a thorough search of his person. “But I have information on where they might be found. Surely, that will be enough to regain whatever favor you’ve lost with the Collector. He might even elevate you to a position of greater authority for bringing him such information. I will tell you what you need to know in exchange for my sister and our safe passage from Egypt.”

Akeem’s eyes narrowed. “I am not a fool. There is nothing to assure the rest of the Trinity will be where you say it is.”

“No,” Rhys agreed. “But you’ve nothing to lose and quite a bit to gain.” The noise of the traffic beyond the alley dimmed beneath the steady pounding of Rhys’s heart as he waited for the other man’s agreement.

“I will give you this chance,” Akeem finally agreed. “Meet me tonight —”

“In two hours,” Rhys countered. When it looked like Akeem might argue, he said, “I would see this matter settled.”

Akeem considered this, and Rhys waited, wondering again at his sister's location. Surely, two hours were sufficient to retrieve her if she were in the city.

His breath resumed when Akeem finally gave a curt nod. "Two hours. I will bring your sister, and you will bring what you've promised. Do not be late." He named a street in Old Cairo before leaving Rhys in the alley's shadows.

Now, he only needed information to trade.

Helen waited while the hotel maid, a pretty Turkish girl named Mina, fastened the last of the buttons on her green poplin gown. It felt glorious to be freshly bathed and coiffed once more, although she gazed at her English silhouette in the mirror with mixed feelings.

While she was a proper English lady who could appreciate the finely tailored gown, she couldn't help feeling regret for the loss of her *jalabiya*. Or more accurately, for the time she'd spent with Rhys while she'd worn the garment.

Their journey from Alexandria, though not without its difficulties, had been the most thrilling experience of her life, and she couldn't attribute all of the excitement to the men who'd shot at them... or her first camel ride... or her first view of the Nile. No, she felt confident that the energy thrumming through her veins for the past days was due to the gentleman himself.

Rhys's smoke-grey eyes instantly came to her mind, crinkled at the corners as he'd tried to hide his amusement at her Levinge. She pressed her lips against her own bubble of laughter and pushed her thoughts aside. This was no time to be thinking such things when the man's sister was still missing. She straightened, pulling her shoulders back as Mina left the room with a soft snick of the door latch.

Collecting reticule, gloves and bonnet, Helen went to find Mrs. Tyndale. The older lady had agreed to accompany her to pay a call on the consul-general. Helen found her completing her toilette, and they made plans to meet up shortly in the hotel's main receiving room. The professor donned his hat and joined Helen as she descended the grand staircase.

"I sent a message round to my contacts with the Egyptian Museum," he said. "I'm going now to see what I can learn of this Collector person."

“Thank you,” Helen said with a press of her hand to his arm. “I’m certain Mr. Evelyn will appreciate any assistance we can provide.”

As they reached the final steps, the entry doors opened to admit the noise from outside and Rhys himself. Helen’s heart jumped into her throat on seeing him again, and she swallowed it back down.

He removed his hat and looked up. His hair was mussed, his shoulders firm beneath the smooth canvas of his coat. Determination deepened the lines at the corners of his eyes, and Helen’s stomach tightened.

When he spied them at the base of the stairs, his face brightened with what she thought might be... relief. Did he have news then?

He strode toward them with determined steps. “Miss Corbyn,” he said with a nod. “Tyndale.”

“Do you have news of your sister?” Helen asked eagerly.

He nodded solemnly, turning his hat in his hands. “I’ve arranged an exchange of sorts. My sister for the amulet—”

“That’s wonderful!” Helen said.

“—and the rest of the Trinity,” he finished. “Or rather, the location of the remaining pieces.”

The noise beyond the hotel faded, and only the soft shushing of water falling in the fountain could be heard. Rhys’s jaw firmed, and Helen, who’d grasped his arm without realizing it, dropped her hand. “But we don’t know where the other pieces are,” she said, “or if they’re even still out there.”

“Indeed,” the professor added, “I’m given to believe one of the wings has recently been unearthed in Lower Nubia.”

“Only one?” Rhys said. “Then there must be another wing out there still.”

Helen nodded as a frown pulled at her brow. “But what if the Collector already has it? That would explain his eagerness for the scarab, and if that’s the case, he’ll certainly know this for a ruse.”

“He doesn’t have the other wing,” Rhys insisted. “I’m certain of it. His henchman was too interested to learn more. And,” he said tightly, “I didn’t have a choice. It may be a risk, but it was the only way to secure his agreement to make a trade.”

The uncertainty of this plan—the danger of it—made Helen uneasy. “I have to say, this doesn’t sound like the most prudent course of action. You’ll be endangering yourself and your sister by meeting with this man. Should we not alert the foreign office to the matter and let them make the exchange on

your behalf?”

Rhys’s jaw tightened, and he laid a hand atop hers, which had found its way to his sleeve once more. His hand was warm through her glove as he said, “Miss Corbyn, I appreciate your concern, but there’s little time, and I’m through with prudence. I must carry through with this plan.”

Helen swallowed her fear. She could hardly blame him for wanting to secure his sister’s safety, but she wished he might do so with less danger to himself.

“If it were your brother or sisters,” he said, “would you not do everything you could to aid them?”

“Of course,” she said readily as there was no need to consider her answer. With a heavy inhale, she said, “How can I help?”

The lines smoothed from Rhys’s forehead. Then, with a glance that included the professor, he said, “I could use your expertise to craft the details. The information must be believable, and it should require some time for the Collector to verify. My sister and I will need time to make our way from Egypt.”

“You can keep the story as close to what Helen has already discerned from the texts,” the professor mused, “to lend it the weight of believability.”

“But the texts only reference one of the wings,” Helen warned. “We’ll have to improvise a bit. How much time do we have?”

“Two hours.”

“Two hours?” Helen squeaked, and Rhys nodded ruefully.

The professor rubbed a hand over his side whiskers, warming to their task. “Do you have the amulet with you?” he asked, looking about to ensure they weren’t overheard.

It was clear his concerns over engaging with the Collector were forgotten, and Helen recognized academic zeal in his gaze. It was the same euphoria she’d felt on seeing the scarab for the first time, but there was no time for scholarly rumination.

“You don’t need the amulet to craft a story for Mr. Evelyn,” she told the professor.

“Nevertheless, I’d like to see the thing. It may inspire a more plausible tale.” He glanced about the room, which had begun filling with guests gathering for the hotel’s afternoon tea. “Perhaps we should secure one of Shepherd’s private parlors.”

Helen frowned. “I thought you were on your way to the Egyptian

Museum,” she reminded him, but the professor had already started for the hotel’s desk to make his request. Turning back to Rhys, she said, “Your sister is fortunate to have you for her champion. I only hope”—she swallowed—“I only hope you’re not injured in this endeavor.”

“Why, Miss Corbyn,” he said as his eyes caught hers and held. “Your lack of faith wounds me. I did defeat the Flowerpot villain, after all.”

Helen frowned. How could he jest at a time like this?

He leaned closer to add, “Or could it be your hope for another kiss that drives your fear for my safety?”

“Oh!” Helen said as she swiftly removed her hand from his arm. He chuckled softly and she said, “Can you not be serious?”

He sobered and said softly, “I assure you, Helen, I am very serious.” He lifted her hand then and kissed her knuckles. The feel of his lips through the silk of her glove left her wanting more, and his words left her wondering exactly what he was serious about: the matter with his sister or the prospect of another kiss. She tugged her hand from his once more as the professor returned.

“Shepherd’s set aside the east parlor for our use,” he said, rubbing his hands together. “Shall we see what sort of tale we can craft?”



In the end, Rhys, with the aid of Helen and Tyndale, had a somewhat plausible report to offer Akeem. It included enough details for believability but not so many that Rhys would fail to remember it all. And with any sort of luck, the locations he gave Akeem would take the Collector far enough from Cairo that Rhys and Fiona could make a swift return to England without further incident.

The thought caused his chest to tighten. England. After so many weeks longing for nothing more than to return home with Fiona, he now found himself strangely reluctant to leave. He glanced toward Helen, whose head angled toward the amulet as she studied it.

Her sunburn had eased, leaving a pleasing flush to grace her cheekbones. She’d abandoned the *jalabiya* to return to her own clothing, and her fitted gown of spring green was well suited to her coloring. He inhaled, pulling in her warm jasmine scent as he watched her mind work.

He’d never been particularly drawn to bluestocking females, but now he

wondered what he'd been missing. Or perhaps it was simply Helen's unique brand of bluestocking-ness that drew him, for like a moth to the proverbial candle, he was helpless to avoid her pull.

He shoved his thoughts aside. They were doing nothing to see Fiona to safety.

"It's a shame such a valuable artifact will be lost to one man's greed," Helen said softly as Tyndale watched the scarab turn in her fingers. The pair of them were as morose as if a favored pet had died, and Rhys felt regret for having dangled such an enticing treat as his sister's amulet before them, only to snatch it from their grasp.

He checked the clock on Shepherd's sideboard. It was time to go. He rose, and Tyndale stood with him. "I'll join you to meet with this fellow," he said and Helen's brows climbed.

"While I appreciate the support," Rhys said, "it's not necessary."

"Nonsense. If there are any difficult questions about the matter of the Trinity, I'm more than qualified to answer them."

Rhys couldn't disagree, but he also didn't think Akeem was astute enough to ask difficult questions. And if Tyndale joined him and something went awry, where would that leave Helen and the rest of her party? No, there was too much risk to the both of them going, and he said as much.

A frown gathered on the older man's face, but he finally agreed with a begrudging nod before collecting his hat.

Helen turned to Rhys after Tyndale had left them. "Please be safe," she said softly. Her anxiety on his behalf both distressed and warmed him. He didn't wish her to worry, but he was pleased to see she cared enough to fret a little.

He nodded, his eyes falling to her lips. Would it be wrong, he wondered, to take another kiss when it was only a matter of time before he left for England? Probably, but—

Helen's lips found his before he could finish the thought. His hands reached for her waist, steadying her in their embrace. This kiss was longer than their first had been, shifting from fierce and urgent to sweet and warm, and he reveled in it. Her lips fit his perfectly, as if she'd been molded especially for him, or he for her. Or the pair of them, he thought dazedly, formed together from one, singular cast.

His hands smoothed the graceful curves of her hip and waist and along the sinuous line of her spine. Her fingers were cool on his cheeks, smooth

against his rough whiskers as she explored him. When their lips reluctantly parted, he nuzzled the tender curve of her neck and held her, eyes closed. "Helen," he murmured. How, he wondered, would he ever find the strength to leave?

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



CAIRO, TWO MONTHS EARLIER

Akeem and his companion followed the Collector's man up dark, narrow stairs and down a long hall to the richly upholstered library. Velvet window curtains hung opposite a pair of matching couches. The fabrics matched the blood drying on Akeem's hands and filling his nostrils. He curled his hands into fists and tucked them behind him.

As grand as the library was, it wasn't the drawing room. Akeem and Hossam were not guests to be entertained but servants to be ordered about, and ordering was best done from the library. And the Collector—al-Jabi—would never permit them alongside his precious artifacts, although Akeem had glimpsed the fine display cases as they passed the drawing room.

"He will be displeased," Hossam whispered as they waited. It was true. They should have come sooner. Al-Jabi would not appreciate the delay, but there had been... complications.

Al-Jabi entered and they bowed. "Did you get the amulet?" he asked Hossam.

Akeem was quick to claim ownership of a job well done, but in this instance, he was more than happy to leave the ownership to Hossam. The silence expanded to fill the room until Hossam replied, "The Englishwoman doesn't have it."

"Explain."

And so, Hossam told how they'd questioned the pale lady, although she'd spat on them. And when their inquiries didn't reveal the amulet, they'd searched her person. Again, she'd spat on them and called them names. They

hadn't understood all of the words, but her meaning was well taken. The lady had a vile temper, not unlike Akeem's wife.

Al-Jabi reached into his coat for a fat cigar. Lighting it, he inhaled deeply then turned the cigar to study the glowing foot. "If she doesn't carry the amulet, the brother must have it. He'll exchange it for his sister's life."

Akeem kept his eyes trained on the carpet as he waited for Hossam to deliver the rest of their news.

"She... that is..." Hossam swallowed, and al-Jabi stilled. Then, eyes narrowing, he rose and crossed the thick carpet to stand before them.

"She...?" al-Jabi prompted, waving the glowing cigar with deceptive indifference.

"She escaped." Hossam spoke the words quickly but softly, head bowing low. He didn't mention that the lady had been injured by Hossam's blade and might even now be lying dead somewhere. A dead Englishwoman would not serve al-Jabi's purpose.

"Of course, she's escaped," al-Jabi hissed. "Do you think I don't know *everything* that happens in this city?"

Akeem swallowed. There were things he'd rather al-Jabi not be privy to. Activities undertaken by the Order of Osiris, for example.

"She's found a hole to burrow in," their employer continued, "but we'll use it to our advantage. I have men watching it—more capable men than the pair of you. If she tries to leave, she won't go far."

Akeem's belly twisted at the emptiness in the other man's eyes. Al-Jabi drew long and deep on the cigar. Then, without taking his eyes from Hossam's bowed head, he pressed the glowing end to the back of the man's hand.

Hossam shook, but to Akeem's relief, he did not cry out. Akeem stared ahead as the stench of burning flesh caused his nostrils to flare. Al-Jabi turned his empty gaze on him next.

"Your colleague has failed at retrieving my amulet. See that you do not."

Fiona Foster woke slowly, as if she'd enjoyed too much Madeira the night before. Her body ached everywhere, and a sharp pain burned her side. She blinked to clear her eyes and assessed her surroundings, surprised to find

herself in the little hospital above the convent of St. George. The room was hot, but a breeze came through the windows to stir the air. Through the opening, the great pyramids sat, shimmering in the haze of the desert. Several of the sisters in their white habits tended to patients in the other beds.

One of them noticed Fiona stirring and shuffled to her side with a gentle smile. "Praise God you're awake," she said softly. "You've had quite an ordeal."

Fiona's memory returned with force, and her heart began to race. She recalled being taken from Old Cairo then searched and questioned quite rudely. She'd been stabbed by one of her attackers as she made her escape. A man's scarred face appeared in her mind, close and menacing as he bent toward her. His lips moved in her memory, but she couldn't recall his words, and she shoved the image away.

She tried to speak, but her throat was dry. The nun offered her water in a ceramic cup, which she sipped gratefully. "How did I come to be here?" Her voice was hoarse and didn't sound like her own.

The nun, a young Greek woman, inspected a cut on Fiona's hand as she replied. "We found you on our doorstep, unconscious and bleeding. You had just enough strength, I imagine, to make your way here. With the assistance of one of the priests, we brought you up to the hospital. I'm afraid you've some unattractive stitches, but I expect you'll make a full recovery. I am Sister Galyna, by the way."

More bits of memory flashed through Fiona's mind—the coolness of the convent's stone steps beneath her cheek, strong arms lifting her, a priest's kind gaze. She smiled her gratitude at Sister Galyna. "And I'm Fiona Foster," she said.

"Fiona Foster," Sister Galyna said with a nod. "What a lovely name. Are you an actress by any chance?"

Fiona snorted softly as the young nun began dabbing a bit of salve onto her hand. "Only when the situation requires it."

Some of the other nuns, on seeing that Fiona had awakened, joined them. Fiona recognized the abbess, and she pushed herself up in the bed with a wince.

"Reverend Mother," she said. "I must thank you and the sisters for taking me in."

The abbess inclined her head. "It was God's will that brought you to us again."

“How long have I been here?”

“Four days,” Sister Galyna replied. Four days! Rhys must have been frantic.

“What will you do now?” the abbess asked.

“I must get word to my brother.”

The abbess frowned, and Fiona’s unease increased. Had Rhys been injured as well? Her palms began to sweat, and her stomach twisted. “Is my brother well?” she asked. “Is he here?”

The abbess offered a gentle smile that did nothing to calm Fiona’s nerves. “When you first arrived, we sent for your country’s consul-general to aid us in finding your brother. Of course, he was relieved to know you’re safe, but when he went to your hotel, he learned your brother had already gone.” The abbess’s eyes tugged down at the corners. “I’m sorry, my dear.”

“Gone?” Fiona’s voice was strident, and with effort, she softened it. “Gone where?” She pushed the bedclothes off and swung her legs to the floor, wincing as fire lanced her side. She looked down to see she was dressed in a simple night rail. Where were her things?

“Your consul-general is working to determine that. In the meantime, you’re welcome to remain here while you recover.”

Fiona’s skin pulled as she moved, the stitches tight in her flesh. She wavered as she tried to stand and braced a hand on the wall next to the window. The street below was noisy as people hurried about their day. She looked in the direction of Shepherd’s Hotel, but of course, she couldn’t see it.

Where was Rhys? She knew her brother, often better than she knew herself. They’d argued just before she’d been taken—and over that silly amulet of all things—but Rhys wouldn’t leave her. He was out there, somewhere.

The hair at the back of her neck lifted, and a chill traveled her spine. She studied the street below for the source of her unease. In the ceaseless flow of people and animals, one man stood motionless, gazing directly up at her with hooded eyes. Fiona sucked a sharp inhale through her teeth and sat heavily on the bed.

THE PRESENT

Akeem heard the Englishwoman moments before he saw her. She was loud, not unlike Akeem's wife, and her complaints preceded her as he waited at the back of the coffee house. At least, by the sounds of it, Omar had enjoyed better success holding onto her than Hossam had.

The pair rounded the corner and Akeem pushed away from the wall where he'd been standing. The Englishwoman jerked her arm from Omar's grasp and spun, finally catching sight of Akeem.

"You!" she said, eyeing his scar. He smiled to know she'd not forgotten him. "What is the meaning of this?" she demanded.

Akeem ignored her and glanced at Omar. "Time is short. What took so long?"

"She was surrounded by nuns. It was a simple enough matter to sneak past the priests, but I had to wait until she was alone to take her."

"What do you want?" the lady asked again.

"If you wish to see your brother, you will cease asking questions," Akeem said, and the lady stilled.

"You know where Rhys is?"

"That is another question." She frowned and looked as if she might put up more of a fuss than he wished to endure, so he added, "I will take you to him if you cooperate."

She eyed him with suspicion before darting a glance at Omar and then the door to the coffee house behind Akeem. She was no fool, this one, but she would not escape again. He moved to block her path and nodded at Omar to do the same.

Seeing no exit, she pulled her shoulders back and said as boldly as if she were the one issuing the orders, "Take me to him then."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



It was past calling hours when Helen and Mrs. Tyndale arrived at the consul-general's residence, but not so late to interrupt the man's tea. While Helen had every hope for Rhys's success, it couldn't hurt to secure the consul-general's support. Someone would need to bring Fiona's kidnappers to justice, after all, and no one should be permitted to make off with the Pharaoh's Trinity. The piece belonged in a museum.

Sir Rupert's residence was a grand villa set back from the street behind a tall, wrought-iron fence that afforded both privacy and security. The facade was crafted of pale sandstone, and elaborately carved columns framed an arched entry.

After presenting their cards, a tall, thin man of Moorish descent admitted them to a marbled foyer. They followed him past a sweeping staircase, their slippers clicking softly on the stone floor until they reached an expansive drawing room. The servant pulled the doors closed and left them in silence.

Mrs. Tyndale's eyes widened as she studied the room. "Oh my," she whispered, and Helen couldn't disagree. The space was enough to steal one's breath.

The walls were done in soft cream and adorned with gilded moldings and intricate frescoes depicting scenes from Egyptian mythology. Tall windows overlooked a lush garden while the crystal drops of a chandelier sparkled and winked above. Carefully placed groups of plush velvet settees and embroidered chairs provided seating for tea or conversation, but the most interesting feature, to Helen's way of thinking, was a row of waist-high display cases that bisected the room.

She approached the closest one and studied the items within. One case held the perfectly preserved remains of a mummified cat. The next, several

canopic jars from one of the newly unearthed tombs. The cases had sturdy locks on them, although she didn't think the glass would put off a determined criminal.

"Henry would like to see this," Mrs. Tyndale said breathlessly.

"I heard Sir Rupert dabbled in the field of Egyptian antiquity," Helen murmured, "but I never knew his interest to be so... extensive." Her voice trailed off as her attention was captured by a collection of text fragments carefully arranged beneath the glass. As she knelt to study them, her irritation grew. Like the Pharaoh's Trinity, Sir Rupert's collection belonged in a museum. That these pieces were locked behind the walls of his villa, away from scholars who might learn from them, caused her heart to thump in passionate indignation.

She reached the case at the end of the row where elaborately jeweled cuffs and collars sat atop velvet cushions. The light from a nearby scone played perfectly across the stones in their intricate gold settings, and Helen thought the contents must have been arranged specifically to that advantage.

The specimen in the center caught her eye and she leaned closer. One wing of a scarab beetle sat atop a smooth velvet-covered pedestal. Next to it were two empty places where presumably the body and another wing should be. Frowning, she bent and tried to peer through the glass for any markings on the back of the wing, but the velvet pedestal blocked her view. Still, her heart thumped uneasily.

The drawing room doors opened, and she hurried to stand as Sir Rupert appeared. He was much as she remembered from their brief meeting years before—a thin man with a wiry frame and a prominent mustache that curled at the ends. His face was unlined except for the grooves bracketing his chin, and his eyes dark and deeply set.

"Miss Corbyn," he said, advancing into the room, "welcome to Egypt. It's a pleasure to see you again. I hope Ashford is well." As he moved, she caught the pungent odor of cigar smoke mingled with the expensive scents of cologne and leather.

Helen forced her unease aside and assured him of her grandfather's continued good health. She turned then to introduce Mrs. Tyndale.

"Tyndale," Sir Rupert said with a stroke of his mustache. "Your husband's come to liaise with the Egyptian Museum, I believe. I look forward to making his acquaintance."

Mrs. Tyndale smiled. "You're well informed, Sir Rupert."

“It’s my business to know all that happens in this country. But tell me, what do you think he would make of my collection?”

“I’m sure he’d find it most intriguing,” Mrs. Tyndale said amiably as they took seats on one of the settees. “But our Miss Corbyn is quite the expert herself.”

“Indeed?” Sir Rupert turned his gaze back to Helen as he considered the novelty of a female scholar. “And what do you think of my collection, Miss Corbyn? Does it meet with your approval?”

“It’s quite extensive. It appears you’ve been collecting for some time.”

He nodded. “There are a number of challenges to the study of antiquities, not the least of which are this country’s latest overzealous regulations, but I think you’ll agree the rewards are well worth it. And it doesn’t hurt to have access to less, shall we say, *official* channels for acquiring the most valuable pieces.”

The room was silent as Helen absorbed this. She’d lectured Rhys on the harm of artifact smuggling, but she wasn’t ignorant or naive. She knew collectors engaged in less-than-legal means to obtain their finds far more often than she’d like to believe, but for Britain’s lead diplomat to admit as much left her speechless.

The Moorish gentleman returned with a tea set, and a second manservant took up a position near the doors. Helen waited while the tea was arranged to Sir Rupert’s satisfaction then, swallowing, she said, “I noticed you’ve an exquisite specimen of a scarab’s wing. The amethyst is remarkably clear, and the faience is some of the most stunning I’ve seen—such a vivid shade of blue. Was the rest of the scarab not found with it?”

She watched as Sir Rupert’s jaw tightened. “It was not,” he said tightly, tilting his head to study her. “But that’s a matter I hope to remedy soon.”

Helen forced a smile as her heart raced. She accepted a cup from the servant and said with false brightness, “How fortunate! Do you know where it is then?”

He merely dipped his head in curt acknowledgement. Helen didn’t wish to jump to foolish conclusions, but she couldn’t ignore the fact that the consul-general had one wing of a scarab and clear expectations of obtaining the rest. Perhaps her imagination had gotten away from her, but she wondered suddenly if Rhys’s sister weren’t being held in this very house.

She slowly replaced her cup in its saucer. If her suspicions were correct, appealing to Sir Rupert on Rhys’s behalf would only put him on the alert. But

that was the least of her concerns, because Rhys was about to relay information to Sir Rupert's man about a wing they already possessed. She had to warn him.

She stood. "We thank you for your kind hospitality, Sir Rupert, but I'm afraid we must be going."

"But what about—" Mrs. Tyndale began, and Helen begged her to silence with her eyes.

"But you've only just arrived," Sir Rupert said. "Was there a particular matter on which you needed my counsel?"

"Oh, no. We merely wished to make our arrival in the city known to you. I shall be sure to extend your regards to my grandfather," Helen said, "but I've just recalled Mrs. Tyndale and I are promised elsewhere." She forced a laugh as she asked Mrs. Tyndale, "However did we lose track of the time?"

Mrs. Tyndale, who was quicker than she appeared, stood with a smile. "Of course, you're right, dear. How could we have forgotten?" Turning to Sir Rupert, she said, "We've not quite gotten our bearings since our arrival in Cairo."

"But I can't permit you to go so soon," Sir Rupert said, and Helen's heart dropped to her stomach. "You must finish your tea and tell me what you know of the Pharaoh's Trinity."



Rhys waited at the end of the alley in Old Cairo. It was an area Rhys and Fiona had visited before, and he thought they must be near the convent of St. George. Just ahead, past a crooked twist in the lane, was the entrance to the bazaar where Fiona had been taken, and he wondered if she'd been held so close all this time.

He'd arrived ahead of the appointed time, keeping well out of sight as he assessed the agreed-upon meeting place. The alley was narrow and tucked in shadows. By contrast, the street at the end was noisy with pedestrians and donkeys and cart traffic, and the normal sounds provided a small measure of comfort.

Nothing seemed out of the ordinary as Rhys studied the faceless buildings that backed onto the alley. They appeared to be nothing more than they were: a jeweler's shop, a cobbler's establishment and another of the

city's ubiquitous coffee shops. No one lurked on the other side to ambush them as they left, but it was early still.

And yet, Rhys couldn't help thinking something was bound to go wrong. That Akeem wouldn't come or he wouldn't bring Fiona. Or he'd see through their hastily crafted report. If that happened, there was no telling how he might react.

He wondered briefly if he ought to have taken Tyndale up on his offer to come with him. At least then he'd have had another pair of eyes, but he couldn't abide the thought of Helen left alone once more if anything should happen to the professor.

He checked the pocket of his coat again, relieved to feel the smooth edges of the amulet. The minutes ticked by, and he tensed with every shadow that moved. Suddenly, the door to the coffee shop opened and Akeem appeared. Rhys held his breath as he waited for what seemed like hours but couldn't have been more than seconds. Finally, Fiona emerged through the shadowed doorway.

Rhys's heart jumped with relief, nearly choking the breath from him as it leapt into his throat. Dressed in simple peasant garb, she appeared whole and unharmed. Her face lit on seeing him.

"Rhys!" She started toward him, but the man at her back held her arm.

"Our bargain first," Akeem said.

Rhys held the amulet up for Akeem to see. "I have the amulet," he said, his voice echoing off the clay bricks. "Release my sister and it's yours."

Akeem's eyes narrowed as he said, "And the information on the other pieces?"

"Also yours, once I have my sister."

After a long beat, Akeem motioned to the man holding Fiona. He released her, and she raced forward, stumbling once on the uneven cobbles. Rhys clasped her to him briefly before shoving her behind him.

"Evelyn," Akeem growled as he waited impatiently for the amulet. Rhys tossed the scarab, and Akeem snatched it from the air. "And the rest?"

Rhys pulled in a heavy breath. This would either work... or it wouldn't. "You've heard of the curse surrounding the Pharaoh's Trinity," he said. "That a terrible fate awaits those who possess all three pieces. Are you certain you wish to find the others?"

Akeem's eyes narrowed. "The information, Evelyn."

Rhys sighed and placed his hands on his hips as he recalled the details

Helen had pieced together from her texts. “Very well. It’s believed one of the wings may lie beyond the second cataract of the Nile, in the deserts of Lower Nubia. It’s said to be guarded by the fierce nomadic tribes who roam the region, and its precise location is known only to a select few. But the ancient texts suggest”—he paused and Akeem’s brows dipped low—“it will be found deep beneath the southern base of the Grand Temple at Abu Simbel.”

Akeem listened intently, nodding as Rhys spoke. “I know Abu Simbel,” he said. “And the final piece?”

Rhys swallowed. This was the bit that had been heavily embellished. “The final piece is the most well-hidden of all. It’s believed to be in Upper Nubia, deep beneath the sands at Nuri...” Rhys let his words hang.

“And?” Akeem prompted.

“It’s in the forgotten burial chamber of Queen Asata, guarded by powerful spells and traps. It’s said that only those who possess a purity of spirit can hope to find it. *If* you believe in spells and that sort of thing,” he finished with a snort.

Akeem’s eyes narrowed at the mention of spells and traps. Such things were not to be taken lightly. After a long beat, he asked, “Where did you learn this information?”

Rhys crossed his arms. He was *not* bringing Helen into this or sharing anything of Tyndale’s involvement in the tale they’d crafted. “I’ll not reveal my sources,” he said cryptically. “That was not our bargain, but if I were you, I’d be more concerned with where your partner has gone.”

Akeem looked behind him, but his companion had quietly ducked back through the coffee shop, most likely to hie himself off to the Collector with their new information.

Akeem cursed fluently in Arabic before hurrying after his colleague. Rhys stood motionless for a beat, hardly daring to believe that had gone as well as it had. Then, turning on his heel, he gripped Fiona’s hand and strode swiftly toward Shepheard’s Hotel.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



“You’ve been at the convent of St. George all this time?” Rhys asked again, incredulous, and his sister nodded. They sat in the small sitting room of their suite, and tea had been brought up. Two of Shephard’s maids worked in the other rooms, quietly packing their things into trunks. One of the river steamers would leave tomorrow for Alexandria, and he meant for them to be on it.

He was taking his sister home. Finally.

He couldn’t quite believe the exchange with Akeem had gone as planned, without the complications that had plagued him for the last weeks. Whenever he thought it, his chest tightened with dread. Their troubles couldn’t be ended so easily. He also couldn’t believe Fiona sat across from him, loading a scone with clotted cream. She appeared as whole as when she’d been taken, barring her injuries at the end of her kidnapper’s knife. Akeem, he presumed with a fresh scowl.

When Fiona had told him of her injury, he’d risen from his chair to run a hand through his hair in frustrated agitation. He longed to search out the man, to seek revenge for what Fiona had suffered at his hand. She urged him back to his seat, assuring him she’d healed nicely. “I’m fine, Rhys, truly. And I’ve a magnificent story to tell my grandchildren one day about my time as a captive in a foreign land.” She shivered for effect, although she didn’t seem the least bit distraught.

“You don’t have children,” he reminded her, “so I don’t see how you plan to have grandchildren.”

Her eyes grew wistful as she licked her thumb. “Someone very wise once advised me to never say never.” Rhys considered their last days together at the hotel, and he thought that “someone” might have been him. It seemed like a lifetime ago.

“This experience has reminded me that life is not certain,” Fiona continued. “We must take what we can, where we can. Perhaps I shall marry again one day, after all, if the opportunity presents itself.”

Her words lightened Rhys’s heart. Fiona was not meant to spend her days alone, and he told her as much as he took his seat again.

“Nor are you,” she said with a quirk of one brow.

His thoughts immediately flew to Helen. Where was she? Rhys had left a note informing her of his sister’s return. He thought she would have sought them out by now, or at least sent round a reply, but he’d not heard from her since returning to the hotel over an hour ago. He shifted on the chair, forcing aside his disquiet and returning to the questions that had been pouring through his mind since finding his sister.

“Why did you never return to the hotel after you recovered from your injuries? You would have been safe enough until I returned, and surely Shephard would have extended credit.” Lord, but her face was a glorious sight. His heart pounded a fierce tattoo to know he finally had her back. He rubbed an impatient thumb at the sudden moisture in his eyes.

“I tried,” she said softly, and his brows dipped low. “I meant to leave St. George’s a few times, but I was always being watched.”

“Watched? What do you mean?”

Fiona refreshed their tea, and he stirred idly as she spoke. “No matter the time of day, there were always men just beyond the convent’s walls. The sisters said they’d never noticed them before, at least not until I arrived. I tried to leave with Sister Galyna once, but a man stepped from the shadows before we’d ventured beyond the cathedral doors. He came nearer with each step we took, but as soon as I retreated inside, Sister Galyna was allowed to pass. The Reverend Mother took the matter to the authorities, but they weren’t of any use and the men remained. As long as I stayed within the walls of St. George’s, I was left alone, and at least there I had the company and protection of the sisters.”

Rhys frowned. He supposed he ought to be thankful for the laziness of his sister’s captors, to leave her in the care of the convent until she was needed for his exchange with Akeem. He’d imagined the worst over the past weeks, and to know she’d passed her time with *nuns* set his heart at ease.

“These men who watched the convent... Did they include the man from earlier—the one with the scar on the side of his face?”

“I don’t think so,” Fiona said slowly. “I haven’t seen *him* since the day I

was taken, although I could be mistaken. That day and the ones immediately afterward remain a bit of a blur.”

Rhys tried to be grateful that Fiona hadn't been injured more seriously than she was. He'd gotten his sister back, which was all he'd ever wanted, but the Collector and Akeem were still out there. It was a fact that both terrified and angered him. It didn't sit well that they should be permitted to go free after the crimes they'd perpetrated, but his priority must be getting Fiona safely back to England.

“What I don't understand,” she said, “is how you've come to know so much about Egyptian artifacts? Truly Rhys, ‘the forgotten burial chamber of Queen Asana’?”

“Asata,” he corrected.

She quirked a brow at him. “Precisely.” Then her gaze narrowed. “Is it true that my amulet is part of this Pharaoh's Trinity?”

Rhys couldn't help his smile. Swallowing, he said, “There's a lady you should meet. She can tell you everything you need to know about the Trinity and its curse. Did you know it holds a recipe for immortal life?”

A beat passed while Fiona studied him. Setting her spoon down slowly, she said, “A lady? What lady?”

Rhys snorted. “I speak of curses and immortality, and you ask about the lady.”

At the silent lift of his sister's slim brows, he said, “Helen—Miss Corbyn, rather—is a scholar. She's the one who recognized your amulet for what it was. When she returns, I'll introduce you to her, for I know she'll be anxious to make your acquaintance.”

Fiona was silent for a long moment before a grin split her face. “You've fallen in love.”

How could his sister have reached such a weighty conclusion from a mere handful of words? Rhys studied the plate of scone crumbs and wondered how long it would take to order a fresh tray. He shifted in his seat, and Fiona waited in the way she did until he felt compelled to answer. He'd never been able to keep much from her, nor she from him. It had always been the way between them, but he much preferred to be on the inquiring end of their exchanges.

“I suppose I have,” he admitted.

“Rhys,” she said earnestly. “That's wonderful.” He frowned, and she said, “Why is that not wonderful?”

Rhys considered the days ahead and tried to imagine a future that included him and Helen together, on the same continent. The image wouldn't come, no matter how hard he tried. Helen would remain in Egypt for the next months. Years, possibly. While their paths might cross occasionally as he pursued his railway investment, his life was back in England. He had investments there. A small estate in Surrey that needed his attention. Most importantly, a sister who required his escort home.

He felt as if he'd found the perfect lock and lost the only key. As long as he and Helen were set on different paths, the tumblers would never align and the lock would never open. He scrubbed a hand over his face and tried to explain as much to his sister, but she merely scoffed.

"Since when has the lack of a key ever posed a problem?"

He smiled gently. "Some locks shouldn't be cracked."

Fiona watched him with knowing eyes, and he avoided her gaze. Finally, she laid her hand over his and said simply, "I know it will come out right in the end. Just as I knew you'd come for me at St. George's. I told Sir Rupert as much."

Rhys's lips tilted in a slow smile before her words fully penetrated. The import of her statement settled on his brain, and his stomach twisted violently. "Sir Rupert? You spoke with him?"

"He came to St. George's," she said as she lifted her cup. "He's the one who told us you'd returned to England."

"When, Fiona? This is important. *When* was he at St. George's?"

His sister's cup stilled above her saucer as she considered the question. Frowning in recollection, she said, "I didn't speak with him personally. I suffered a fever during the first days of my recovery and don't recall many visitors, but the Reverend Mother said they summoned him when I first arrived. I imagine he must have come that day or the next."

Rhys's heart squeezed in his chest as the pieces slid into place. He recalled Sir Rupert's interest in Fiona's pendant. His men had even searched Old Cairo after Fiona's disappearance. He'd offered apologies for their lack of success but, if Fiona's timing was correct, he already knew she was at St. George's. Sir Rupert's connections afforded him power and consequence, and the Collector was a man of some influence with the Egyptian authorities. The certainty that Sir Rupert and the Collector were the same man slammed into Rhys with force. And Helen was intent on securing the consul-general's assistance.

“Fiona,” he said as sweat beaded his brow. “I must go.”

She looked at him in surprise. “Now? But...” She gazed at him, confused, then her face cleared. “This has something to do with your missing key, does it not?”

“Yes.”

“You must go then.”

He nodded and retrieved his bag, feeling for the weight of his knife and the pistol within.

“And Rhys,” Fiona said. “I’ve not returned only to be separated from you again. Please be careful.”

Rhys strode to the Tyndales’ suite, heart in his throat, and rapped quickly on the door. It was opened much sooner than he expected by the professor himself, hat in hand, prepared to go out.

“Mr. Evelyn,” Tyndale said, a frown tugging at the space between his brows.

Rhys sucked in a heavy breath at the concern on the older man’s face. “Helen—Miss Corbyn—have you seen her?”

“My niece informs me Miss Corbyn and my wife have gone to call on Sir Rupert Daventry. Lydia says they’ve been gone for some time, though, and I was just on my way there to see them home.” Rhys’s pulse thudded in his ears. It was as he feared then. “Why? Do you think something’s happened?”

“I think our consul-general is not who he seems.” Rhys explained then what he’d learned from Fiona and his belief that Sir Rupert was the man known as the Collector. “I’ll go for Miss Corbyn and Mrs. Tyndale. I suggest you remain here in case they return.”

Tyndale scowled. “I may be older, but I’ll not sit on my hands while the ladies in my charge are in danger. And I’ll not let you talk me out of going.”

While Rhys’s mind protested Tyndale’s company, he couldn’t deny the fierce concern on the man’s face. He thought it might mirror his own. He relented with a short nod then stepped back from the door as Tyndale came through. “Let us go then.”

They retrieved mounts from the hotel’s stables, and the bustling noise of Cairo soon yielded to a hushed tree-lined avenue in the Ezbekiya district.

Twilight cast heavy shadows across the face of Sir Rupert's grand villa behind its tall fence.

When Tyndale would have ridden to the gate straightaway, Rhys stayed him with a soft word, motioning to where two guards watched the street from behind the fence. While Rhys supposed they were meant to be vigilant, they seemed especially alert and tense with hands held fast to the hilts of their swords. Surprise was the only advantage they'd have in this encounter.

They tied their mounts in the shadows of a nearby stable before creeping closer. As they waited and watched, two more men joined the guards from the villa's interior.

"At least four guards," Rhys whispered.

"And well-armed," Tyndale agreed.

One of the newly arrived guards spoke to the others, and Rhys and Tyndale strained to hear. The guard's voice carried on the still air, and Rhys's blood grew cold to hear him say, "The problem has been addressed." There was little doubt as to what—or who—the problem was.

He and Tyndale studied the villa's perimeter from their vantage point. The back appeared to have the advantage of a thick row of trees shielding the villa from its neighbors. It would afford them the secrecy they needed.

"If there's a back gate," Tyndale said, "it's a fair bet it's locked." The older man eyed the height of the iron fence as if he might attempt to scale it, and Rhys silently applauded his optimism.

"I can get us through a locked gate," Rhys assured him.

Moving from shadow to shadow, they picked their way toward the rear of the large property. More than once they stopped, breath held as Sir Rupert's guards passed before them on their rounds. Suddenly, a loud crack sounded behind Rhys and he turned. Tyndale had stepped on a twig, and the sound echoed in the still night. They both waited motionless, and when no guards came to investigate, Rhys finally released a slow, heavy breath.

They continued around a corner to find a tall and imposing gate some twenty feet ahead, centered in the back fence and secured, as expected, with a heavy iron lock. Rhys's jaw tightened in grim satisfaction, but before they could reach the gate, a shadow emerged from the trees next to them.

The figure paused, and the light of the rising moon caught a sickle-shaped scar on the man's cheek. Akeem. And judging by the man's furtive movements and dark clothing, he hadn't come to lend his services to Sir Rupert. He was lurking about, much as they were.

“Akeem Effendi?” Tyndale said in surprise, and Rhys’s brows climbed at the honorific. *Effendi?*

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



After hushed greetings were exchanged by Tyndale and Akeem, during which Rhys gathered the two had previously met in London, he bit out, “Why are you here, Akeem?”

“He’s come for the Pharaoh’s Trinity, I imagine,” Tyndale said, to which Akeem nodded gravely.

“He *has* the Pharaoh’s Trinity,” Rhys said tightly. “Or at least part of it. This is the man who had my sister.”

Tyndale’s frown was immediate, and Rhys was relieved to know that although the older man was acquainted with Akeem, he’d not known of the man’s involvement in Fiona’s kidnapping.

“Your consul-general has stolen one of the wings from us, and I mean to take it back,” Akeem said. “Although,” he added with a smirk, “I appreciated your story, Evelyn. The tomb of Queen Asata was a nice touch, though a bit overdone, I should think.”

Rhys’s jaw tightened until he thought his teeth might crack. Akeem’s accent, which Rhys had known to be heavy and uneducated, had taken on a distinct, learned quality. The man almost sounded intelligent, but that didn’t erase the fact that he’d *kidnapped* Rhys’s sister.

“Us?” Rhys said. “For whom, precisely, do you work?”

“I work for no man,” Akeem replied in whispered affront. “I serve only Egypt.”

Tyndale’s frown eased enough for him to explain, “Akeem Effendi belongs to the Order of Osiris. The governor has tasked the Order with the noble aim of—”

“—of preserving Egypt’s heritage,” Rhys finished. “I’ve heard.” Noble aims or not, his fist itched to land in the man’s face for the trouble he’d

caused, for the ordeal Fiona had suffered.

Akeem must have intuited his thoughts for he took a step back. “I was not at liberty to reveal my association with the Order. There is much more at stake here than a stolen artifact or two. The Order has been seeking a means to stop the Collector for some time now.” At Rhys’s deepening scowl, he added, “And your sister came out well in the end. Er, mostly unharmed, that is.”

“Despite your efforts,” Rhys hissed. He would have said more, but he pressed his ire down as two guards appeared ahead. The three of them ducked deeper into the shadows.

“You’re mistaken,” Akeem said when the guards had passed. “How do you think your sister found her way to the convent at St. George’s? She’s more pleasant when she’s unconscious, by the by.”

Rhys stared at the other man, frowning. He’d have the full story from him, but first he had to get inside Sir Rupert’s villa. Seeing Helen safely away from the consul-general was paramount. Although it nearly choked him to do so, he asked Akeem, “Do you know a way inside?”

Akeem’s expression turned wary. “Why have *you* come, Evelyn? You have your sister, unless you think to steal the wing as well?”

“I don’t care about the bloody wing,” Rhys bit out. “We believe Sir Rupert has Tyndale’s wife and another lady inside.”

Akeem frowned. “This other lady—she has hair the color of dried chilies?” Rhys nodded, and Akeem snorted a soft laugh. “You have trouble keeping up with your women, Evelyn, but they’re here. I saw them through the drawing room window earlier. And yes,” he said, “I know a way inside once we’re over the gate. Come with me.”



Helen mentally reviewed the contents of her reticule for anything she might use for a weapon. She’d given Wilkinson’s book to Rhys, otherwise, she might have launched it at Sir Rupert’s head or hidden a dagger within its pages. But alas, she wasn’t in the habit of carrying weaponry about. It was a miscalculation she would rectify as soon as she and Mrs. Tyndale were safe once more.

They’d remained well past the social hour, but every time they moved to take their leave, Sir Rupert protested. And whenever Sir Rupert protested, his

men would stand straighter at the door—there were two of them now, effectively blocking the exit.

Sir Rupert's Moorish servant had come to light the gas lamps, and several branches of candelabra also burned to dispel the growing shadows in the drawing room. Nothing, though, could dispel Helen's unease.

Sir Rupert had repeatedly asked her about the Pharaoh's Trinity. With each stroke of his mustache, he wished to know what she had heard of the legend or where she thought the pieces might be found. She felt like a mouse with its tail trapped beneath the cat's paw, and she'd had enough.

"Sir Rupert, we really must be going now." He'd just requested the tea things be refreshed, and Helen meant to leave before they were forced to endure another round of biscuits with their interrogation. As expected, Sir Rupert's men straightened, intimidating with their height and fierce expressions. As Helen and Mrs. Tyndale neared the exit, the men moved together, obstructing their way.

"Stand aside, please," Helen said in her best granddaughter-of-an-earl voice.

The nearest man looked to Sir Rupert, who shook his head.

"I'm afraid I can't let you leave just now," the consul-general said. "Not until you tell me more of the Pharaoh's Trinity. I wouldn't have thought a female—and an English female at that—would be so learned on the matter, but I suspect you're not the typical English female, are you?"

"I assure you, Sir Rupert, I don't know anything more than what I've already told you," Helen protested. When he merely lifted a disbelieving brow, she added, "You can't simply keep us here."

"Can't I? I'm the consul-general."

"And I'm the granddaughter of an earl," Helen reminded him. "It will be remarked upon if I disappear, and Mrs. Tyndale's absence won't stand either. Her husband is quite established in academic circles."

"My dear, people disappear in this country all the time. Bandits, don't you know."

Helen swallowed. He didn't intend for them to leave. Ever. She glanced toward Mrs. Tyndale, who twisted her hands. The professor would come for them, Helen was certain. Or rather, he would if Lydia bothered to tell him where they'd gone.

Barring that, surely Rhys would come for them, assuming he'd not walked into a trap of his own. The thought caused a painful twist in her belly.

She forced herself to face the truth: their odds of an heroic rescue were looking grim. She might as well make the most of the situation and see what she might learn.

“People disappear... Do you mean people like Fiona Foster?”

Sir Rupert’s gaze narrowed, and he motioned them back to the settee. Helen retook her seat reluctantly, and Mrs. Tyndale settled next to her.

“What do you know of Fiona Foster?”

“I know enough,” Helen said, deciding that if she couldn’t leave Sir Rupert with grace, she would at least show a bit of boldness. “I know you kidnapped her for the Pharaoh’s Trinity.”

Sir Rupert’s jaw ticked in agitation.

“And I know she must be held somewhere in this house.”

Sir Rupert snorted a laugh. “You think I would be so stupid?”

He hadn’t protested her kidnapping accusation, but when she voiced her suspicions about Fiona being in the house, his derision had the ring of truth. All right, then. Fiona was not in the house.

Another guard appeared in the doorway and leaned close to whisper something to his colleagues. Sir Rupert frowned at their conference. With a nod toward the tea things, he said to Helen, “You may pour,” before joining his men. Their voices were too hushed, the distance too great for Helen to hear.

“What do you think has occurred?” Mrs. Tyndale whispered.

“I can’t imagine,” Helen said, but Sir Rupert had left them alone for the moment. She glanced around the room, searching for something—anything—to use as a weapon. There were the candelabra, but she wasn’t sure she had the stomach to strike a man on the head, and she didn’t think she could subdue Sir Rupert *and* his men anyway. Then inspiration struck. “Mrs. Tyndale, do you have your laudanum?”

The lady stared at her in confusion—certainly, now was not the time to worry over a megrim—but then her eyes widened in understanding. She nodded and quickly retrieved the small bottle from her reticule and passed it to Helen.

Helen tucked the vial into the palm of her hand and bent to pour the tea. As she did so, she dropped a generous dose into one of the cups before adding an oversized lump of sugar. If Sir Rupert were incapacitated, perhaps she and Mrs. Tyndale could talk their way past the guards.

Sir Rupert returned to them with a fierce frown, and to Helen’s surprise,

two of the men left the doorway, leaving only one guard behind. Helen curled her hand around the bottle in her lap. “Has something happened?” she asked, forcing a firmness to her voice she was far from feeling. Adventure, she decided, was a tad overrated.

“It seems I’m to have more unexpected guests. And at such a late hour, too.”

Someone had come for them! Helen didn’t bother to hide her smile of relief, and a measure of tension eased from Mrs. Tyndale’s shoulders.

Sir Rupert took his seat across the tea table and reached for his cup. “It’s no matter, though. My men will see that they’re dispatched without delay.”

Helen’s smile slipped as she lifted her cup.



Rhys frowned as Akeem assessed the fence. It must have been ten feet tall, with intricately wrought scrolls and arabesques. Pointed finials topped it to form a nearly impenetrable barrier between Sir Rupert and the rest of the world. Only a fool would attempt to scale it.

“You can’t mean to scale it,” Rhys said. “You’ll be too visible if the guards return, and all it requires is one slip to be speared like a pickled radish.”

“You’ve a better suggestion?” Akeem said as he flexed his hands and prepared to climb.

“There’s a perfectly serviceable gate—”

“Which is locked—”

“Which I can unlock,” Rhys bit out. There was no time for arguing, and the stakes were much too high for errors. Leaving Akeem to his foolish endeavor, he strode to the gate. He bent and reached through the fence, feeling his way around the lock with his fingers before taking out his pen prototype.

Tyndale, he was gratified to see, had cast his lot on the side of good sense. The older man kneeled at his side while Rhys dismantled the pen. Reaching through the fence once more, he carefully inserted the slender ink cylinder into the lock, feeling for the tumblers inside and applying just the right amount of pressure. He held his breath as sweat dampened his temples, but he needn’t have worried. His fingers worked the lock deftly, and in a matter of moments, the tumblers clicked.

Rhys glanced to either side. Assured that the guards hadn't returned, he rose and held the gate for Tyndale to pass through before closing it softly behind them. Akeem was nearly to the top of the fence, and Rhys was tempted to leave him. He would have done so if he trusted the man not to betray them. But he didn't trust him, so he waited, arms crossed, until Akeem finally dropped to the ground.

"Nicely done, Evelyn," he said as he dusted himself. "You may have some talents after all."

Rhys uncrossed his arms and moved in silence toward the villa's back terrace, keeping to the shadows of a thick stand of trees. A broad lawn lay between them and the house, smooth and well-lit by the moon's glow. They'd have to time their crossing of it if they hoped to avoid the guards' notice.

To his surprise, Akeem darted away from the lawn. "This way," he whispered. After some hesitation, Rhys and Tyndale followed more slowly. Akeem used the cover of the trees to skirt the lawn until he came to a small servants' entrance tucked down a short flight of stone steps.

Rhys hung back and turned to Tyndale. "Do you trust him?"

The older man frowned. "I don't know him all that well, to be truthful, but he seemed an honorable enough sort in London. A little overzealous perhaps, but I believe his intentions are good."

"If we trust him and he leads us into a trap—" Rhys swallowed, unable to think past the fear churning his gut. If anything happened to Helen, he would never forgive himself.

"If anything happens to Dorothea or Miss Corbyn, I shall never forgive myself," Tyndale said in a perfect echo of Rhys's thoughts. Measured footsteps crunched the path beyond the fence as a pair of guards returned. They were met by another guard who walked with steady purpose. The third man spoke in urgent tones, alerting his colleagues to a pair of riderless horses found tethered near the stables.

"I think we can trust Akeem," Tyndale said with more urgency, "but we haven't much choice now."

Anything else he might have said was lost as Akeem hissed, "Are you coming?"

With a short nod, Rhys followed him into the house.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



Akeem led them on silent feet up a dark service stairway and along the villa's dimly lit back corridors. At each turn, Rhys peered down the wide galleries to the formal spaces of Sir Rupert's residence, where wall sconces cast shadows to dance along thick rugs and elaborate moldings. Tall doors marked the entrances to what he imagined must be salons and music rooms, libraries and receiving rooms for foreign dignitaries. Tasteful *objets d'art* were carefully arranged on carved pedestals alongside paintings set in massive frames. It was clear Sir Rupert enjoyed his collections.

Rhys committed his steps to memory, careful to note his surroundings in case a hasty exit was required. They finally reached a broad hall in what must have been the south wing. It was lined with elaborately carved columns, and Akeem motioned with one hand for them to slow their steps.

The tension in the air thickened as they neared the drawing room. A lone guard stood just inside the room's entrance. His back was to the hall as he faced the room—clearly intent on keeping others *in* the drawing room rather than out of it.

The man was tall and dressed in dark linen, his waist cinched by a wide leather belt which held his sword. A coil of rope and an elaborate sheath with a curved dagger hung from his other side. Rhys suspected he carried a pistol elsewhere on his person. Possibly two. The Collector wouldn't wish his guards to be at a disadvantage.

Hushed voices sounded from inside the drawing room, and Rhys and Tyndale edged closer, careful to remain out of sight in the shadows of the columns. Rhys strained to hear, to assess the situation within. As he listened, one voice became clear above the others, and his breath left his chest in a rush. Helen.

“Truly, Sir Rupert, your collection really ought to be in a museum. Imagine what greater understanding we might gain if scholars had access to all the artifacts coming out of Egypt.”

Despite the gravity of the situation, Rhys smiled. She was *lecturing* Sir Rupert.

“Nonsense,” Sir Rupert said slowly. “These artifacts... they’re mine and shall remain so.”

Rhys couldn’t see the consul-general from his vantage point, but his words were slow. Slurred even. Rhys glanced at Tyndale and Akeem, a frown tugging his brow. The other men’s gazes were equally puzzled.

Mrs. Tyndale spoke next, her voice soft and tremulous. “Are you feeling quite the thing, Sir Rupert? You seem... unwell.”

Helen added, “Perhaps you need a restorative. It’s a shame I don’t have my medicine box. Would you like for me to send for one of your maids?”

Her voice grew louder as she spoke, and Rhys pictured her walking toward the bell pull.

“No... no,” Sir Rupert said, his words slow. Rhys understood then. He pressed a fist to his mouth as he recalled his own experience with Helen’s doctoring. Somehow, she’d managed to dose Britain’s consul-general.

He turned to his companions, but before they could determine their course, Akeem stepped from the shadows to stride boldly toward the drawing room. Tyndale’s eyes widened, and Rhys muttered a low curse. He could see now, quite clearly, how his own autocratic ways might have been a touch irksome.

The guard turned at Akeem’s entrance, surprise lifting his brows, but he let his colleague pass with only a nod. Rhys’s stomach twisted as he watched and waited to see if Akeem would betray them.

“Sir,” Akeem called as he advanced into the room. “I have the amulet you seek.” His voice had returned to that of toadying henchman, and Rhys couldn’t believe he’d been so easily fooled. The man had a talent fit for the boards of Drury Lane.

Sir Rupert appeared in Rhys’s line of sight then, his legs unsteady beneath him. “Bring it,” he commanded. Even from a distance, Rhys could see there was a feverish intensity to the man’s eyes as Akeem held up the scarab.

While the guard’s attention remained fixed on the pair, Rhys edged around the columns. He and Tyndale crept forward to gain their first full

view of the drawing room, and Rhys's heart skipped to see Helen seated demurely next to the professor's wife.

The scene appeared eerily normal with the remains of a tea tray before them, but Mrs. Tyndale's tightly clutched hands betrayed the seriousness of the situation. Helen glanced away from the men and spied Rhys behind the guard. Without a flicker to betray him, her eyes locked with his. The corner of her lips tipped up with the merest bit of a tremble, and warmth flooded his chest for his brave lady.

Sir Rupert carried a candelabra toward the display cases at the center of the room, splashing wax onto the polished floor as he set the heavy branch atop one of the cabinets. He fumbled to retrieve a key from his pocket then cursed as he tried to open one of the cases. Akeem's eyes narrowed on the glass, so Rhys could only assume the cabinet must contain his precious wing.

Rhys quickly assessed the room as his mind sought a path forward. There were no more doors beyond the one guarded by Sir Rupert's man, no additional exits other than the wall of windows framed with heavy velvet curtains. But Akeem still held Sir Rupert's attention. If Rhys moved quickly, he might subdue the guard before Sir Rupert could enter the fray.

The weight of the pistol in his pocket was poor comfort—with three more guards patrolling the grounds, Rhys couldn't afford to alert them with the sound of a gunshot. He turned to Tyndale and motioned to the guard. When Tyndale indicated his understanding, Rhys gave a sigh for his poor bruised hand then entered the room.

The guard spun at the motion, hand on his dagger. Rhys delivered a punch before the man could draw his weapon, wincing as his hand throbbed anew. The guard stumbled back but quickly righted himself and swung. Rhys ducked. The man dodged his next strike, but Helen placed a well-timed foot in his path, and he fell with a heavy thud, hitting his head on the tea table as he landed. He lay motionless but breathing, and Tyndale quickly pulled the rope from the guard's belt.

It was over in a matter of seconds and throughout it all, Sir Rupert remained fixed on opening his cabinet with the intensity of focus shared only by the insane or heavily drugged.

Helen hurried to Rhys's side, and he gripped her hand. The feel of her cool fingers in his set his heart to racing more than the brief encounter with the guard had.

"Sir Rupert took your sister," she said, "but I don't think she's being

held here.”

“I know. Fiona’s safe at the hotel.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful news,” Helen said on an exhale. She beamed a wide smile at him. “It’s a shame you don’t have your splint,” she whispered, eyeing the guard at their feet. “You might have beaten him about the head with it.”

Rhys couldn’t help his grin as he bent to assist Tyndale, but he knew the matter couldn’t be finished so easily. Indeed, Sir Rupert finally roused to the commotion around him.

“Here now,” he said with a slow blink. He’d finally mastered the lock on his case, but he paused to wave an imperious hand at Akeem. “Dispatch the intruders.”

Akeem stood with his feet firmly planted and arms crossed. His voice returned to that of Akeem Effendi as he said, “On behalf of Mohammed Ali Pasha and the Order of Osiris, I am arresting you for violations of the governor’s ordinance on antiquities.”

Sir Rupert snorted. “What’s this? *You’re* arresting *me*? You kidnapped this man’s sister,” he said, motioning to Rhys. “If you were in England”—he paused overlong, thinking. “If you were in England, you’d hang for such an offense.”

“That was Hossam who took Mrs. Foster,” Akeem said. “And on your orders, I would add.”

Sir Rupert blinked again, but still he persisted. “You can’t arrest me on the governor’s edict. It controls the removal of artifacts from Egypt, but as you can see, my collection is still here.” He waved his arms expansively to indicate the cabinets as he dismissed Akeem’s charge.

“Still here, yes, but I believe you’re mistaken that it remains in Egypt,” Rhys said. At the consul-general’s dazed look, he reminded him, “I believe you once told me your residence is as good as English soil.”

Akeem tipped his head at Rhys and confirmed his statement. “You are correct.” To Sir Rupert, he added, “Your ambassador’s residence has English sovereignty. Strictly speaking, your collection of artifacts has left Egypt without the proper clearance.” He moved forward to take Sir Rupert’s arm, but the man staggered to collide with the display case at his back. The candelabra teetered, dropping more wax onto the glass as Sir Rupert produced a small pistol from beneath his coat.

Rhys inhaled sharply. Tyndale saw the gun as well and hurried to tuck

his wife behind him.

“Helen,” Rhys said urgently, “go with Professor Tyndale.” He reached out to take her hand, but Sir Rupert stopped them with a shout.

“No one leaves!” he declared, waving the pistol.

“Permit the ladies to go,” Rhys said, his voice surprisingly clear despite his heart having climbed into his throat. “Don’t compound your crimes.”

As he spoke, Akeem moved toward Sir Rupert and the display case. Rhys wasn’t certain which he aimed to secure—the man or the scarab’s wing. Sir Rupert noticed Akeem’s movement as well and turned.

“Stop,” he ordered, swinging the gun toward Akeem.

Taking advantage of the distraction, Rhys turned to Helen. “Go!” he whispered, urging her toward Tyndale. To his surprise, she went without the requirement for further discussion.

Sir Rupert spun then, the pistol shaking in his grip as he pointed it at Helen. Rhys didn’t think but simply jumped, taking Sir Rupert to the floor as the gun discharged with a burst of light and sound. The display case crashed with them, and the candelabra caught one of the velvet curtains with an ominous whoosh.

Sir Rupert twisted and fought Rhys’s hold, his hands bleeding as he scabbled among the broken glass. “The wing,” he mumbled, uncaring that flames greedily ate at his curtains.

Akeem shoved Sir Rupert aside to sift through the broken glass himself, and Rhys pushed himself up on shaky legs. “We have to go,” he said. The flames climbed higher, leaping from curtain to curtain. Wooden furniture popped as the fire licked at it. The room would be engulfed in a matter of moments. Already, black smoke filled the air and Rhys coughed.

The guard had awakened and fled in the chaos, wisely choosing his own safety over that of his employer. Rhys searched for Helen and saw her waiting for him in the doorway, resisting when Tyndale would have ushered her through. He thought she might have called to him, but he couldn’t hear above the now roaring flames.

Paint bubbled and peeled from the frescoes nearest the blaze, and a pair of curtains fell heavily to the floor in a shower of sparks. And still, Akeem and Sir Rupert searched for their precious wing.

“Leave it,” Rhys commanded, pulling Akeem to his feet. As if just noticing the jumping flames around them, Akeem straightened. “Go,” he urged Rhys with a nod toward Helen in the doorway. Akeem hoisted Sir

Rupert to his feet and cast one more longing look at the glass littering the floor.

Rhys led the way through the drawing room, his eyes on Helen. A heavy curl had come down from its pins to fall over her shoulder. Threads of gold and amber caught the firelight to guide him through the smoke. He nearly laughed at the notion of her hair as a beacon, but the situation was too grave for levity.

He finally reached her side and, taking her hand, he led them through the house. Once or twice, he paused to recall the villa's winding corridors. His brain must have been fogged with smoke because it took him longer than it should have to reach the entrance.

When they finally emerged onto the lawn, Rhys stopped and clasped Helen to him, assuring himself she was unharmed and uncaring who witnessed their embrace. This was not a night for honoring the proprieties. She was of the same mind, and she gripped him tightly, fisting his coat in her small hands as she held fast to him.

They were safe.

The fire burned hotly at his back while the cool night air bathed them. Her hair smelled of smoke rather than night jasmine, and Rhys's jaw tightened to think of all the ways he might have lost her.

"You're safe," she said, echoing his own thoughts. "When you jumped in front of Sir Rupert, I thought—" Her words caught, and she started again. "I only wish I'd given him more laudanum."

Rhys pressed her to him more firmly.

"The guards have all fled," Tyndale informed them. Akeem came next with Sir Rupert, who'd finally succumbed to Helen's dose to be half-carried, half-dragged down the villa's steps by his former henchman. When the pair reached the lawn, Akeem dropped the man to the ground without ceremony and turned back to the house.

"You can't go back inside," Tyndale urged, staying him with a hand on his sleeve. "It's too dangerous." No sooner had he spoken than the south wing collapsed in a tremendous shower of sparks, ash and fire. The sound of it must have been deafening, but Rhys only heard his own pulse beating in his ears.

He lowered himself to the ground and landed somewhat more heavily than he'd intended. Dimly, he thought he must have caught fire as well, as heat seared his side.

Helen bent over him, and her loose curl tumbled forward to land on his chest. He wondered how soft it would be if only he could lift his hand to touch it. She pulled his coat aside, her brow puckering. Her lips moved, and he frowned in confusion because he thought she might have said, “You’re a flowerpot.”

Or, quite possibly, “You’ve been shot.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



THREE DAYS LATER

Rhys swallowed, but it felt like his throat had been filled with sand. He tried again.

“You’re awake,” a soft voice said to his left. He tried to open his eyes, but someone had glued them shut. “Would you like tea?”

“Or broth?” Another voice, this one to his right.

“I think tea would be better for a man in his condition.”

His condition? What condition would that be? He tried to wiggle his fingers and toes, just to assure himself that he could. Satisfied with the success of that endeavor, he thought perhaps a bit more sleep might be in order.

“Rhys has always enjoyed tea when he’s feeling peaky.”

“I think getting oneself shot earns a better adjective than ‘peaky.’” That voice... so prim and proper, not unlike that of a schoolteacher. Or a governess. Did she say he’d been shot?

He forced his eyes open and when they focused, he saw bed curtains above him. A face appeared on his right to block the blue silk. Fiona.

Another face appeared on his left. Helen. His ladies were safe. He smiled and closed his eyes.

“I’ll speak with Mr. Shephard about sending up a man to shave him. I’m certain Rhys would be appalled to see how his whiskers have grown.”

“I don’t think he would mind so much,” Helen said, recalling the shadow of Rhys’s whiskers as they’d traveled through the delta. “They lend him a bit of dash.”

“Hmm... He’s been asleep a long time. I wonder if we should wake him,” Fiona said.

Helen eyed Rhys’s sister, who could be a bit of an opinionated termagant. She frowned and said, “I do not think we should wake him. I’m certain he needs his rest.”

Fiona ignored her opinion to whisper, quite loudly, “Rhys.”

His lashes fluttered on his cheeks, and he opened his eyes. They were clear and silvery and much more focused than they’d been the previous day. A smile tipped his lips as he eyed them, and Helen wondered how long, precisely, he’d been awake.

Her suspicion was confirmed when he lifted a hand to rub it along his bristly jaw. “Dash?”

She crossed her arms. “It’s not polite to eavesdrop.”

“Ah, but how can it be eavesdropping when the words are spoken over a man in his own bed?”

Warmth filled Helen’s cheeks, and she uncrossed her arms to touch the back of one hand to his brow. His skin was cool, and relief surged through her. He reached a hand up to take hers. His palm was large, and she relished the solid, vital strength of it. He’d been foolish to jump in front of Sir Rupert’s gun, and she had a mind to tell him so, but she only twined her fingers with his. “How do you feel?”

“Like I’ve been kicked by Fiona then dragged through the desert.”

His sister had moved to the far end of the room, ostensibly to sort Rhys’s shaving things. The room wasn’t that large, however, and Helen suspected Fiona could hear everything.

“It’s true your sister can be a bit... strong-willed,” she said without lowering her voice, “but I don’t think she’d ever do anything so cruel.”

Rhys laughed then winced, and she knew a moment of regret for her jest. “My camel,” he said. “Not my sister.”

Fiona frowned at that and returned to the bed. “You named your *camel* after me?”

Rhys shifted as Fiona plumped his pillow. “Are you in much pain?” Helen asked. Concern tugged her brow low. “The physician left some laudanum, and I’ve still some opium powder left in my box.”

“I’m fine,” he assured her with a bright smile, although the skin over his ribs pulled and burned whenever he moved.

She nodded, but he could tell she didn’t believe him. Before she could slip something into his tea, he distracted her with a question. “What’s to become of our consul-general? Tell me what I’ve missed.”

Helen settled on the chair next to the bed and arranged her skirts as his sister fussed with the water pitcher. “The governor’s men have personally escorted Sir Rupert to Alexandria, where I understand he’s to be placed on a ship bound for the embassy in Constantinople. There will be a trial and, needless to say, he’s been relieved of his post.”

“That’s good,” Rhys said. A trial could take some time, but he hoped the wheels of justice moved strong and swift.

She told him next that there’d been no saving Sir Rupert’s manor once the drawing room collapsed. “It’s a shame his collection was lost in the fire,” Helen said. “I’ve no doubt we would have learned a lot from studying his artifacts.”

“Akeem wasn’t able to recover the wing then?” Rhys asked.

Fiona tensed ever so slightly, and he regretted bringing the man’s name into the conversation. He’d told her of Akeem’s claim that he’d been protecting Fiona by leaving her at St. George’s, but she remained skeptical of the man’s character. He couldn’t say he blamed her, after the ordeal she’d suffered.

Helen shook her head at his question. “No one’s found anything thus far. The Order of Osiris has been guarding the site, but since Sir Rupert’s villa smoldered for some time, searching the remains has been nearly impossible.”

Fiona returned to the other side of his bed to say, “What I don’t understand is why Akeem met you in Alexandria, when you had agreed to return to Cairo with the amulet.”

Rhys had considered the same question. “I presume he meant to secure the scarab before the Collector could get to it.”

Helen nodded. “Although he claimed to be working on behalf of the Collector, we now know that was a fiction. He’s told me he was suspicious of your motives,” she said to Rhys, “and when I interrupted the exchange in Alexandria, he directed members of the Order to retrieve the scarab. The

amulet would have fetched a good price, and he thought you meant to sell it.”

“At my sister’s expense?” Rhys said incredulously.

“Yes, well, the ladies in Akeem’s life don’t inspire the same degree of affection, it would seem.”

Rhys rubbed a hand over his brow, glad to have the whole business behind them. When Helen had gone, Fiona stepped closer to his bed.

“You may keep her,” she said after a long pause. “Although, she seems a trifle opinionated to me.”

Rhys smiled. He couldn’t disagree with her assessment, but whenever he thought of the past days and how close he’d come to losing Helen, his heart nearly stopped. He didn’t know how he could have borne such a thing, if Helen had been erased from this world before she had a chance to enjoy all of her adventures. The notion tightened his throat and brought an unfamiliar sting to his eyes.

At his silence, Fiona settled on the edge of his bed, a sure sign she wished to *talk*. Casting her eyes down to her hands, she said softly, “As a widow, my opinion has some merit when I say you will come to regret every moment spent without her.”

His sister’s grief filled him like it was his own, and Rhys covered her hand. “You may be surprised to know I’ve reached the same conclusion. I just need to determine if Miss Corbyn feels the same. It’s very possible she does not.”

Fiona considered him for a moment before replying, “At the risk of making this too easy for you, I am confident she does.”

Rhys’s heart thumped at her assurance, but he couldn’t stop his doubts from showing. “She’s a good person,” he said.

“Is that an argument for or against her?”

He twisted his lips in annoyance, and she gave him a pitying smile as if his thick head defied belief.

“She’s certainly too good for a former lock-pick,” he argued.

“You didn’t work as hard as you did to leave that life behind, only to use it as an excuse now. And besides...” Her voice trailed off. His sister’s plain-speaking wasn’t unexpected, but her sudden shift in demeanor was. She made an intense study of the counterpane, and his unease grew.

“Besides...?” he prompted.

“She might be aware of your past.”

“I haven’t told her. How is she aware?”

“It might have come up.”

“How does something like that ‘come up’?”

Fiona drew a long breath and his worry edged up a notch. “I simply told her you’re a good man,” she said. “And then *she* replied that she knows you’ve not lived a saint’s life, but she believes you’re good in the ways that count. And she’s guessed, from your facility with locks, that your past may have involved some unsavory bits. I merely confirmed what she already knew.” Rhys pushed himself higher in the bed and Fiona rushed to add, “But don’t worry, brother. I left plenty of details for you to share in your years together.”

Rhys rubbed his jaw. “Unsavory?”

“I believe the word she used was ‘adventurous,’ but it amounts to the same thing.”

Rhys snorted a soft laugh. With Helen, it probably did. But regardless of his uncertainty about her feelings, the clock ticked ahead. Soon, he and Fiona would be bound for England. He imagined it would take some time to see his sister settled. Could Helen be persuaded to wait for his return?

Then he eyed his sister and realized he’d begun arranging their departure from Egypt without apprising her of his plans. He could well imagine Helen’s tight-lipped displeasure at such high-handedness.

“Fiona,” he said slowly, “shall we discuss our plans for returning to England?”

Helen opened the door of her hotel suite but before she could enter, she was hailed softly from the hall.

“Miss Corbyn.”

She looked up to see Lydia Tyndale approaching. The lady’s sunburn had eased, and the bites covering her face and arms were healing. If only a person’s character could be mended so easily. “Miss Tyndale.”

“I—I’m pleased to know you and my aunt weren’t harmed during your encounter with our consul-general,” Lydia said tentatively.

Helen’s brow dipped in suspicion, but she forced her expression to clear. “Thank you.”

“And is—is Mr. Evelyn improving?”

Helen studied the other lady, wondering what scheme she played at now,

but Lydia's head was bowed, her tone unobjectionable. Gone was the cunning gleam from her eye, and it finally came to Helen: Lydia was making an *overture*, hesitant though it was. "Mr. Evelyn is improving," she confirmed.

Relief crossed the other woman's face. "That is good to hear," she said, and Helen thought she might have meant the words as nothing more than they sounded.

An uncomfortable silence passed between them, but when Helen would have taken her leave, Lydia spoke again. Her words came in a rush as she said, "Why were you kind to me earlier, when we encountered Lord Thorsby in the entry? I have been absolutely horrid to you, and yet you encouraged him in my direction."

Helen considered the other lady. That she attempted to clear the air between them—and with no apparent motive—suggested her heart might not be as cold as her actions indicated. Though Helen didn't expect she and Lydia Tyndale would ever be bosom companions, there was no reason not to be civil acquaintances. Swallowing, she said, "Miss Tyndale, I wonder if we might forget what's passed between us and begin again?"

Lydia's relief was evident in her tremulous smile. "I should like that."

Helen searched her mind for something conversational, but all she could summon was, "You've an interest in Lord Thorsby then?"

Lydia smiled. "He is handsome, is he not?"

"He is," Helen agreed.

"But I think perhaps he's a bit too Egypt-mad for my taste."

Helen's brow hitched upward. This was unexpected, though promising. It seemed Lydia, who'd previously shown little discernment, had developed preferences that went beyond a gentleman's title or the size of his bank book. That Lydia should decide she and Lord Thorsby didn't suit suggested a growing confidence in the younger woman, and Helen was glad for it. Though many women of their society dreamed of a love match, it was a luxury few could afford.

"Marriage is for a lifetime," she said. "You should find one who shares your heart if you've the opportunity to do so. It's a rare advantage not to be wasted."

As she spoke of shared hearts, her stomach twisted. She'd not come to Egypt seeking love, but in her heart, she knew she'd found it. Although Rhys had said nothing of courtship—much less matrimony—she'd gladly return to

England if he asked it of her. The realization was at once alarming and sobering. What sort of scholar was she, that she could so easily abandon her work? But then, how could she not in the face of something as rare as true love?

“I made the acquaintance of a Mr. Northcott aboard the *Tamarisk*,” Lydia continued. “He’s not a lord, of course, but he’s quite handsome, and he’s already spoken for one of my waltzes at Mr. Shepheard’s next ball.”

Helen nodded. “Then I wish you a very enjoyable dance with the gentleman.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



The next evening, Rhys was determined to leave the sick room. He had matters of import to discuss with Helen, and he didn't wish to do so from his bed. He bathed, moving more slowly than he wished, but it was a relief to lose the acrid stench of smoke from his hair. Sir Rupert's bullet hadn't struck anything too important, but it had left him with a wide gash on his left side. The physician, in his turn, had left him with a long, puckered sample of his stitching that itched like the very devil.

Ugly stitching aside, he wondered what Helen would make of the scar—would she find it dashing? The notion caused his neck to heat, and he hurried through his bath with anticipation of seeing her.

Shepherd's man, Buraq, assisted him to change the bandage, then he held a fresh shirt while Rhys gingerly pulled it on. When the valet began arranging his shaving things, Rhys rubbed a hand along his jaw, surveying the shadow of his whiskers.

"I'll dispense with the shave for today," he said.

"As you wish, sir."

After Buraq had gone, Rhys opened Helen's guidebook and emptied the hollowed-out space into his hand as two quick raps sounded at the door. He recognized Fiona's knock and wondered if Helen was with her.

"Enter," he called.

Fiona strode into the room, and he was disappointed to see she came alone.

"It's good to see you upright, Brother," she said as she pecked his cheek. Pulling back, she eyed his unshaven jaw with a wry twist of her lips, but she held her tongue on the matter of his new beard. "Are you ready to go down?"

He nodded, giving a final, nervous tweak to his neckcloth. "Let us go,"

he said.

They walked slowly through the hotel's corridors and down the stairs. He leaned a bit more heavily on Fiona than he would have liked, but she allowed the fiction that he was supporting her, and not the other way around.

His hairline had grown damp by the time they reached the veranda. He blamed it on the Cairo heat, although the sun had surrendered the sky to a luminous pearl moon that hung low on the horizon. Helen sat with the Tyndales at a comfortable table where an evening breeze fluttered the potted palms. A nearby lantern cast a soft glow that outlined the curve of her cheek, and Rhys swallowed at the sight.

Professor Tyndale stood as they approached, and Rhys noticed a new gentleman he didn't recognize.

"Lord Thorsby," Tyndale said. "Please allow me to present Mr. Rhys Evelyn and his sister, Mrs. Foster."

Thorsby. Who had invited him? Rhys checked his frown and stole a glance at Helen. Her gaze was on Rhys, her eyes shining, and he relaxed. A servant brought more tea, and Rhys and Fiona took the seats next to Helen.

"Evelyn," Thorsby said, "I understand you had part of the Pharaoh's Trinity in your grasp for a time."

"So I'm told."

"It's a shame such a wondrous piece couldn't be saved."

Rhys's jaw tightened. "There were more pressing matters to address at the time."

"Yes, yes, of course! We have you and Tyndale to thank for rescuing our dear Miss Corbyn from Sir Rupert's villainy. I'm certain I speak for her family when I extend our sincerest gratitude."

Helen's brow pinched at this presumption, and her displeasure warmed Rhys.

"I think our dear Miss Corbyn and Mrs. Tyndale were well on their way to rescuing themselves," Rhys said with a wink toward the older lady. "And with a bit more grace, I might add."

Helen's frown turned to a smile. Rhys was wondering how soon he could get her alone when Akeem made an unexpected appearance.

Fiona's eyes narrowed as he reached their table. Akeem bowed, his gaze darting briefly to her before he dropped something onto the marble tabletop. After a long beat, everyone leaned forward to study his offering. It was a shapeless lump of material, charred and distorted. Tiny bits of purple and

blue peeked through the blackened residue. Helen touched a fingertip to the lump, and a bit of charred gold flaked onto the table.

“Is this—?” she began.

“The wing,” Akeem spat.

“But it’s paste!” Thorsby said in disgust.

“It is,” Akeem confirmed. “We were concerned about its authenticity when we first acquired it—it’s one of the reasons we wished to consult with Professor Tyndale—but now we have clear proof that it’s nothing but an imitation. Not unlike the counterfeit scarab’s body *you* gave me,” he said to Rhys. He made no attempt to hide his scowling irritation as he tossed the amulet Rhys had traded for Fiona onto the table. It bounced to land next to the charred wing.

Helen’s eyes widened and she turned to Rhys in surprised inquiry. He swallowed, wondering what she must be thinking. Would she conclude the more “unsavory bits” of his past were coming to the fore? That he’d kept the real amulet for himself? His heart slowed until he thought the blood would stop altogether, but then her expression cleared.

“How clever,” she said with a smile that started his heart again. “You traded the false amulet to maintain an advantage until you knew your sister was safe. Nicely done, Mr. Evelyn.”

Rhys closed his eyes and cleared the lump from his throat. Then, reaching into his pocket, he set the original amulet next to its paste mate. “At the time, I believed Akeem was working for the Collector. It’s true, I was concerned for my sister’s safety, and it would have been a shame to lose such a valuable artifact to one man’s greed.”

Helen beamed her approval, and he nearly kissed her right there. When Thorsby reached a hand toward the artifact, Akeem swiftly scooped it up. He studied the amulet, the scar on his cheek pale against his olive skin as his jaw tightened. His dark eyes grew suspiciously bright as he turned the piece over in nimble fingers. With a nod toward Rhys, he said, “I will see that this reaches the proper authorities. You have my gratitude on behalf of Egypt.”

Fiona straightened at Akeem’s words. “You...” She stopped and stared at the man, and Rhys watched as confusion played across her face. “You spoke the same words to me on the steps of St. George’s. *You have my gratitude on behalf of Egypt.* It was truly you who helped me there?”

After a beat, Akeem nodded. “I thought you would be safest at the convent and well cared for in the infirmary. To my regret, I didn’t appreciate

the full reach of the Collector, or that his spies would have found your location so swiftly. For that, you have my sincerest apologies.”

Fiona frowned, and Rhys imagined she must be struggling to reconcile her memories, not to mention her conflicting emotions. She set her cup gently in its saucer, but her hand trembled slightly. “Fiona, are you well?”

“I’m fine, Rhys,” she said, and he was relieved to hear a firmness in her voice. She straightened, the line of her neck long and elegant above the lace of her gown, and Rhys’s pride for his sister’s resilience swelled. To Akeem, she said simply, “Thank you for seeing me safely to St. George’s.”

Akeem nodded once before taking his leave of them. In time, the conversation about the table shifted from recent events to future ones. The hotel would soon play host to one of Mr. Shephard’s monthly balls, and a Mr. Northcott, who Rhys took to be another guest, had already requested the pleasure of a dance from Miss Tyndale.

“Miss Corbyn,” Lord Thorsby said, “I would be honored if you would save a dance for me. A waltz, perhaps.”

Rhys frowned. “Miss Corbyn’s waltzes are taken,” he said before she could reply, surprising Helen as well as everyone else at the table.

“They are?” Helen asked. The flush across her cheekbones had darkened, and he realized he was being high-handed again by not discussing the matter with her. But she enjoyed a bit of dash, and dash, by definition, didn’t allow for discussion.

“They are.” He held her gaze, although it required some effort, and added, “Each and every one.”

He was encouraged by the brightening of her eyes and the tiniest tilt of her lips. Then he tempered his dash just a bit to say, “Miss Corbyn, would you care to walk with me in the gardens?”

She angled her head, studying him. He held his breath and waited until, finally, she said, “I would.”

He rose and extended his arm to lead her down the steps of the veranda.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



Helen's stomach twisted in a hot blend of dread and anticipation as they crossed to the garden. It wasn't unlike the feeling she had before stepping onto a ship.

The next steamer would leave for Alexandria at week's end. While she expected Rhys and his sister would be eager to return to England, she didn't know how she would bear to see him go. But if he meant to claim a waltz at Shepherd's ball... he certainly couldn't do that from across an ocean, no matter how dashing he might fancy himself. He remained quiet as these thoughts chased one another in her mind, so she broke the silence.

"All of my waltzes, Mr. Evelyn? That seems a bit presumptuous, don't you think?"

"Someone once told me this land demands boldness. Unless you'd prefer boiled-turnip niceties..." He grinned, seeming quite pleased with himself, and she bit her lip.

"Cheekiness is not the same as boldness," she said and his grin grew. "I've just admonished you," she said with some exasperation. "Why does that make you smile?"

He leaned close and said, "Because you did it in your governess voice."

"My what?"

A young boy in light robes and sandals appeared before them, forestalling any response Rhys might have made. His dark eyes gleamed as he said to Rhys in an overloud whisper, "Now?"

"No," Rhys said, waving the boy off.

Helen lifted her brows at Rhys, but he remained cryptically silent, and she allowed him to continue guiding them along the path. He kept them well in sight of the Tyndales on the veranda, and she was grateful for his

consideration. He moved slowly, though, and she wondered if perhaps he was taking on too much after his injury.

“Should we stop to rest?” she suggested. “There’s a bench just ahead.”

He quirked an annoyed brow at her, and she hid her smile. But when his steps grew more measured, she became all too aware that she’d never thanked him for his actions at Sir Rupert’s villa.

“Mr. Evelyn,” she began.

“Rhys,” he said. “I much prefer it when you call me Rhys.”

Warmth filled her at such familiarity, but she relented with a short nod. “Rhys. I never thanked you properly for coming to our aid at Sir Rupert’s. For your courageous and selfless actions. If not for you... Well. I think the Flowerpot villain has much to fear.”

He snorted a soft laugh, his pale eyes shining with amusement. “I am relieved to hear it, but I didn’t invite you to walk with me so you might bolster my ego with your compliments.”

“Then why did you invite me to walk with you?” She was both eager and fearful to hear his reply.

He gave her a slight smile—if she didn’t know him to be confident and capable, she would have thought it the smile of an uncertain man. But instead of answering, he said only, “The view from here—it’s almost surreal in its perfection, don’t you think?”

Helen turned her gaze to the vista stretched before them. She’d not noticed how sublime the night was, so distracted was she by her worries over what Rhys meant to tell her. But now she noted the dense green foliage and colorful flowers that edged the gravel paths as palm fronds rustled overhead. The air was perfumed with the delicate aromas of jasmine and orange, mint and thyme, and the distant silhouettes of the great pyramids rose majestically beneath a heavy moon. Beneath it all lay the earthy scent of the Nile, which flowed lazily below the gardens as feluccas with their white sails glided along its surface. It was a scene to engage the senses and light the imagination, something straight from an exotic Orientalist painting or *One Thousand and One Nights*, perhaps.

“It’s lovely,” she said breathlessly. She turned to see him watching her with a seriousness that caused her stomach to twist once more.

“The next steamer leaves for Alexandria at week’s end,” he said, and the ache in her stomach moved to her chest. She turned to face the river, keeping her gaze on the tallest pyramid jutting proudly from the horizon.

“I heard.”

“I began making arrangements for our return to England. My sister belongs there, and it’s my responsibility to see her returned safely.”

“Of course.” Helen pressed her lips and blinked. She would be fine. Rhys would return to England with his sister, and she would continue her work with the professor, exactly as planned. It was the reason she’d come to Egypt, after all. Perhaps, in a year or so, their paths might cross once more. The thought was but a poor, feeble attempt to soothe the growing fracture in her heart, and she swallowed.

“Shepherd’s maids have begun packing our trunks, but before I could send someone to purchase our tickets, I heard your voice.”

Helen turned to him. “My voice?”

“Yes, your voice, taking me to task for my high-handedness. For not consulting my sister on my plans for the two of us.”

Helen’s frown grew as did her confusion about where his winding path was leading them.

“So, I shared with Fiona my thoughts for our return.”

“And what did your sister say?”

He inhaled deeply through his nose. “She took me to task for my high-handedness.”

Despite the tears that welled just beneath the surface of Helen’s composure, she laughed. “I like your sister.”

“Yes, well, Fiona informed me that she plans to remain in Cairo for a time.”

“Whatever for? I would have thought her eager to leave the experience of Egypt well behind her.”

“That was my thought precisely, and I told her as much. It was the reason I wished to see her safely away from here so quickly. But my sister, it would seem, has developed an interest in the infirmary at St. George’s. She’d like to remain a bit longer to assist the sisters in their work.”

“Your sister has a charitable heart.”

“She does,” he agreed. “But what I’m trying to say, is that I won’t be returning to England straightaway.”

“You won’t?”

He shook his head.

“Because of your sister?”

His jaw tightened. “The devil take it,” he said. “I’m not being very

clear.”

“Perhaps you should try again.” The man was being positively obtuse. Why must she drag his thoughts from him?

“When I thought I was taking my sister back to England, it was my intention to return to Egypt as soon as Fiona was settled.”

“It was?” Helen’s heart lifted, and she pulled on it lest it float away. “But of course, I imagine you must return for your railway venture.”

They’d reached a stand of palm trees, and he pulled her into the shadows. “For *you*. I intended to return for you, if you’ll have me.”

Helen’s heart broke its tether to soar high above the palms.

“Miss Corbyn,” he said, taking her gloved hands. His broad palms engulfed her smaller ones, and she reveled in the feel of his warmth through the thin silk of her gloves.

“Helen,” she corrected. “I like it when you call me Helen.”

“Helen. You’ve captured my heart with your intelligence and beauty, your strength and bravery. You certainly deserve better than me. My past isn’t sterling. I’ve done things I’m not proud of—”

She pulled one hand from his to place two fingers on his lips. “I know about your father,” she said, “and your career as a lock-pick. But I also know the man you are today. You are the man who has my heart.”

“As you have mine,” he whispered.

Helen moved her hand to place it tentatively on his chest near his heart. He covered it with his own as she said, “*This* is proof of a grander plan than any of us can conceive. For how else could I have found you in all the vastness of the world? Why would you have left your bag at the precise moment I left the *Tamarisk*, if not for our hearts to find one another?”

“I’m coming around to this grand plan of yours. To be sure, there was something wonderful at work to bring you to me when I desperately needed hope.” He swallowed and continued. “Miss Helen Corbyn, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?” Rhys’s hand pressed hers a little more tightly as he awaited her reply.

His words squeezed at her heart until she thought it would burst. She could hardly believe her good fortune. She’d set out for adventure and found love along the way in this charming, intelligent, and infuriating man. “Yes,” she replied, laughing. “Yes!”

He grinned, and she was grateful for the shelter of the palms as he took a step closer. He reached a hand up to cup her cheek, his thumb gently stroking

as the silver of his eyes caught the moonlight. He leaned down with excruciating slowness to take her lips with his.

Helen's eyes fluttered closed, and she responded to the pressure of his mouth on hers. She lifted her hands to tangle her fingers in the silky hair at his nape, leaning into his touch, relishing the sensation of his rough whiskers as his lips moved over hers in a kiss that was both sweet and fierce. A kiss that conveyed all the love and tenderness, hopes and desires they held for one another.

He lowered his hand to her waist, searing her with the heat of his palm through the layers of silk and muslin. She inhaled, reveling in the sandalwood scent of him mingled with the intoxicating jasmine that surrounded them.

After a much-too-brief kiss, Rhys pulled away and brushed a gentle thumb across Helen's bottom lip. "My love," he whispered hoarsely, "*Ana lak.*"

Helen beamed at his near-perfect pronunciation. "And I am yours."

"Now, *effendi*?" a small voice whispered from the shelter of the palms. Helen started, pulling back from Rhys's embrace. It was the boy from earlier, eagerly awaiting Rhys's reply.

Rhys grinned, and Helen's stomach somersaulted to know she'd have the rest of their life together to enjoy such a sight. "Now," he said.

The boy spun and ran off, shouting in Arabic. "*Effendi* says to do it now!"

"What was that about?" Helen asked, laughing.

"You shall see." Rhys dipped his head and kissed her jaw where it met her ear, trailing more soft kisses along her temple.

The boy was soon forgotten. Indeed, Helen forgot her name until a thunderous explosion sounded overhead. She jumped and looked up, startled to see a fiery blossom lighting the sky. "Fireworks!" she exclaimed, and similar expressions of awe could be heard from the nearby veranda.

More explosions soon created a fiery kaleidoscope overhead. Crimson, gold and blue cascaded across the night sky, illuminating the exotic Egyptian landscape. With the energy of a thousand fireflies, luminous trails streaked the heavens, and Helen's smile stretched her cheeks.

She turned to Rhys to see the lights reflected in his silver eyes. "Was this your doing?" she asked in disbelief.

"You may be the granddaughter of an earl, but I have a few connections of my own. I wished the occasion of our engagement to be memorable."

Helen couldn't stop smiling. "You were that certain of my answer?"

"Hardly that," he said. "But a wise lady once told me I should not rely on my camel to do all the work."

EPILOGUE



CAIRO, SIX MONTHS LATER

Rhys's hand tightened on Helen's waist as they turned in the waltz, and he relished the feel of her curves beneath his touch. They'd just returned from the gardens, and she stared up at him with the dazed look she often wore after one of their kisses. He barely resisted the urge to press his lips to hers once more, but her father stood not more than twenty feet away, speaking with Professor Tyndale and Mr. Shepherd.

Shepherd had outdone himself this night with a private affair to celebrate the nuptials of Miss Helen Corbyn, daughter of the president of the Royal Astronomical Society, granddaughter of Lord Ashford, to one Mr. Rhys Evelyn. Cascading garlands of flowers draped the ballroom's doorways and columns, and an extravagance of candles filled the crystal chandeliers.

Outside, paper lanterns poured their soft glow over the gardens, and the moon, not to be outdone, reflected brilliantly on the smooth waters of the Nile. But his wife, with her bright eyes, cinnamon tresses and crisp taffeta, was the loveliest sight of all.

Much had occurred in the past months, and Rhys could hardly believe this life was his.

His investment in the railway was showing promise, with construction set to begin in two months. Owing to his ongoing presence in Egypt, he'd taken on the role of adviser to the English investors, a liaison of sorts between them and the local engineers.

Fiona continued her work at St. George's but lately, she'd furthered her acquaintance with a traveling couple—the Bracebridges—and their

companion, Miss Nightingale. Just the previous week, they'd invited Fiona to join them as they traveled on from Egypt to Greece. To Rhys's surprise, she'd accepted their invitation.

He couldn't deny his relief to know his sister would not be alone in Egypt when he and Helen removed to England. As to when that might occur, she'd been eagerly quizzing him on his estate in Surrey, so he thought they might go as soon as her year with Tyndale was up, if his work with the railway permitted it.

He looked up from his wife's gaze to see her father watched them, a frown pinching his brows. Rhys realized his hand had slid lower on Helen's hip than was strictly proper. He allowed it to move another half inch lower and chuckled when Harry Corbyn's jaw tightened. While he respected his new father-in-law, their relationship had not been without its challenges.

Helen had written to her parents six months before to apprise them of her new fiancé and their impending nuptials. Rhys had included his own letter, assuring Harry Corbyn of his intentions, as well as his prospects and ability to care for the man's daughter. Tyndale had sent a nicely worded recommendation as well. Despite these efforts, her father had written to Helen that while he didn't withhold his permission *per se*, he couldn't in good conscience provide it, since he knew nothing of her suitor personally.

If Harry Corbyn meant to secure his valuables, Rhys had thought in irritation, then he ought not allow them to sail off to Egypt.

Nevertheless, Rhys had taken one look at his betrothed's stricken expression and said, "I'll return to England. I'll apply to him in person, so he can know the man his daughter means to marry."

"You'll do no such thing. He may not know you, but I do, and he knows me. He'll simply have to trust my judgment."

That had been a month ago. The weeks had passed with no further correspondence from her family, and his heart had nearly broken to see her anxious over marrying without their blessing. He'd nearly suggested they postpone their nuptials until they could return to England together, but the Corbyns had surprised them both with their arrival in Cairo two days before.

"Helen," her mother had exclaimed. "We couldn't allow you to marry without us here to wish you well. Your father and I booked the first passage we could, and you know Edmund and Eloise wouldn't be left behind," she said with a wave toward the handsome pair at her side. "Of course, Aster couldn't make the voyage in her condition, but she extends her well wishes

and looks forward to your return.”

Lady Celeste Corbyn was an attractive woman with hair a similar shade to her daughter’s, although it contained the stray bit of silver. She folded Helen into her embrace and eyed Rhys over her daughter’s shoulder.

“And this is your young man, I take it?”

Rhys, who’d just passed his thirty-first birthday, hid a smile. It had been some time since he’d had a parent to make him feel like a lad, and now he would soon gain two.

“Yes, Mama,” Helen said as she performed the introductions.

“A pleasure, Lady Celeste,” Rhys said with a brief bow before turning to Helen’s father. “Mr. Corbyn.”

Helen’s sister Eloise was a younger, quieter version of Helen, with moss-green eyes and a dimple that appeared when she greeted him. He turned next to the brother, who quickly said, “Just Edmund,” before Rhys could address him more formally. “It will be easier that way. I imagine anyone Helly’s managed to trap can’t have much in his brain box.”

Rhys chuckled and shook the other man’s hand, mouthing *Helly?* at his betrothed. She merely shrugged.

Rhys and Edmund had quickly found common ground due to their shared interest in all things mechanical. Edmund, who’d been experimenting with a sleeker camera design, had exclaimed over Rhys’s pen prototype. Harry Corbyn, however, had been a bit more reserved until Rhys had commented on the future of steam travel.

“It’s a good investment now, but I daresay, once we harness the energy of the sun, we’ll see unprecedented innovations.”

And that, it seemed, had been enough to secure the astronomer’s interest, if not his full approval. Until now, at least, when he spied his new son-in-law’s hand traveling low on his daughter’s hip.

The waltz ended, and Rhys reluctantly left his bride chatting with Mrs. Tyndale as he sought one of the footmen for some of Shepherd’s fine champagne. As he lifted two flutes from the tray, Akeem appeared at his side with his usual, intense gaze.

“Akeem,” he greeted. “You still haven’t found the rest of the Pharaoh’s Trinity?” That the man even thought he could in the vast deserts of Egypt was a testament to human optimism.

Akeem waved the question away to say, “The tale you spun for me when I traded your sister for the amulet—the one about the burial chamber of

Queen Asata. Where did you hear it?”

Rhys recalled the afternoon he'd sat with Tyndale and Helen in Shephard's east parlor. They'd pieced together what Helen had read for half of their tale, but the other half had been carefully crafted from nothing but air. “I'm afraid it was fabricated,” he said. “A complete fiction.”

“You didn't hear it somewhere?”

“What is this about?” Rhys asked.

“I would like to know if there's something to it. Where did you hear it?” he repeated.

“Akeem,” Rhys said as he indicated the flutes of champagne, “this is my wedding party.”

“Yes, of course. Congratulations on your lovely bride,” Akeem said automatically. “Now, where did you hear the tale of the Trinity?”

“Ask me another time,” Rhys said as he turned to find his wife. “Next week, perhaps. Or even better, next month. Right now, I plan to enjoy a glass of champagne with my wife.”

Akeem made a noise that sounded like a growl before turning on his heel.

“What was that about?” Helen asked as she watched Akeem stride away.

Rhys handed her one of the flutes. “Akeem is still intent on finding the rest of the Trinity,” he said.

She sipped, humming her pleasure at the taste of the champagne. When she licked a drop from the corner of her mouth, Rhys bent to steal another kiss, savoring the sweetness of the wine on her lips. Then he groaned, cursing Akeem and all of Egypt for distracting him.

“The Trinity,” he said, unable to stop thinking of Akeem's question. “When we devised the tale about the second wing... was that all a fiction, or was there some truth to it?”

“Truth?” she asked, setting her flute aside. “No one knows where the wings are buried.”

“No, but the tale we created... did it come from somewhere?”

She considered the question as her fingers threaded through his. “Well... parts of it were from old stories my father used to tell us when we were children. They're from *One Thousand and One Nights*, I believe. Although,” she added with a frown, “I've since learned he left out the most interesting parts about murders and concubines.”

Rhys smiled. “So, when I relayed our tale to Akeem... I was essentially

telling him a bedtime story?”

“Well, yes,” she said, “in a manner of speaking, I suppose.”

Rhys’s smile erupted into a laugh. “Life with you, my love, will never be dull.”

“I should hope not,” she said as his lips met hers.

THE END



THANK YOU!

Thank you for reading! If Rhys and Helen's tale brought a smile to your face, swept you away or simply provided a welcome escape, please consider leaving a star rating and/or review on your favorite book site. Every star matters!

Helen's parents discovered their happily-ever-after in [The Astronomer's Obsession](#), and sister Aster Corbyn found her heart's match in [Star of Wonder](#).

Be the first to know when new books are released! Subscribe for updates at klynsmithauthor.com and receive a copy of the sweet Regency novella, *Discovering Wynne*, as a free gift!

AUTHOR'S NOTE

OMG... This story was such fun to research! During the 19th century, Egypt captivated the imagination of intrepid explorers and tourists alike. With the opening of the Suez Canal still over two decades away, Helen and Rhys's journey would have been both treacherous and alluring. Below are a few bits that influenced their adventure.

Alexandria to Cairo Railway. Egypt was an important part of the “overland route” to India and the Orient for many years. Mail, supplies, and people left the ships at Alexandria to be carried across the desert to Suez where they could continue on to the Indian Ocean via the Red Sea. It was an arduous journey, often by camel and/or mule train.

In 1851, Egypt engaged British engineer Robert Stephenson to build a railway. Until the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, the railway was the primary link between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, opening new trade routes between Europe and Asia and increasing Egypt's strategic importance.

Berbers. I made brief reference to Rhys's appearance as a Berber warrior. “Berber” was the contemporary term used at the time of this story for a diverse collection of ethnic groups indigenous to North Africa. I opted to use the term for purposes of authenticity, although today, members of this community prefer to be called Amazigh, which means, simply and beautifully, “free people.”

Illegal Trade of Artifacts, the Order of Osiris & the Pharaoh's Trinity. Amidst the 19th century fascination with Egypt's history, a dark undercurrent existed. The illegal trade of Egyptian artifacts thrived during this time, as unscrupulous individuals sought to profit from the demand for ancient relics. Archaeological sites were plundered, and precious artifacts were smuggled out of the country, often finding their way into private collections. This illicit trade not only deprived Egypt of its cultural heritage but also sparked debates on preservation and the ethics of such actions.

Striving to preserve their country's rich heritage, Egyptian officials implemented stricter regulations and increased oversight of archaeological sites. They established laws to protect antiquities, making it illegal to export valuable artifacts without proper permits. Additionally, dedicated teams of inspectors were appointed to monitor excavation sites and prevent the unauthorized removal of precious relics.

The Order of Osiris is a fictional organization for the purposes of this story, "tasked with the noble aim of preserving Egypt's heritage." Similarly, the Pharaoh's Trinity and the pharaoh Anuk are a fictional artifact and figure inspired by the mystique and allure of ancient Egyptian history.

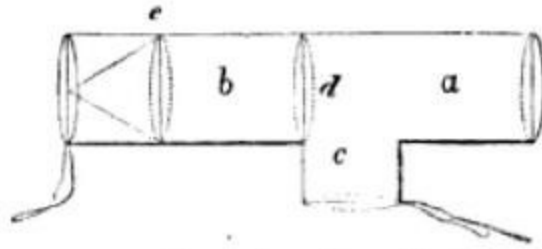
The Levinge & More from Florence Nightingale. Before she founded modern nursing, Florence Nightingale traveled to Egypt with Charles and Selina Bracebridge, who are mentioned oh-so briefly in this story. Florence's *Letters from Egypt: A Journey on the Nile, 1849-1850* are both humorous and strikingly poetic as she describes her search for adventure and purpose. Many of Miss Nightingale's experiences are reflected in this tale, including the orphan girl and her adopted baby (I've fictionalized Amira's name) and Helen's Levinge.

Ah, the Levinge! Helen was less fortunate in her experience with the device than Florence, who enjoyed its protection from the gnats:

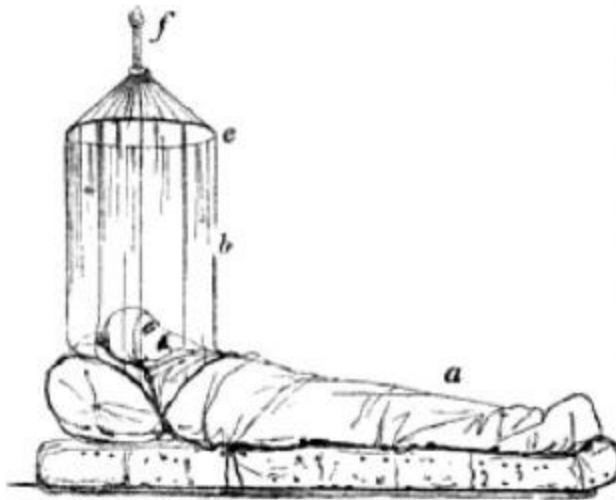
"I... run with all my might at the Levinge, where I insert myself by so small a hole that you would say a camel could get through the eye of a needle; and then I clap my hands... because I have stolen myself from the hands of the gnats.... I won't deny that some do get in by ways unknown to me—they have either subterranean passages or latch-keys."

If you're interested in Florence's *Letters*, you can borrow a free copy on archive.org. Below is a picture of Helen's fiendish Levinge, recommended by Wilkinson and battle-tested by Miss Nightingale... What do you think?

I cannot do better than recommend a contrivance of Mr. Levinge's, which he imagined during his travels in the East, and which is equally adapted to



a boat, a house, or a tent. It consists of a pair of sheets (*a*), about six feet long, sowed together at the bottom and the two sides, except where the piece (*c*) is attached to them, and by which you get in. To the upper end (*d*) is added a thin piece of muslin, serving as a mosquito net (*b*), which is drawn tight at the end by a tape or string, serving to suspend it to a nail (*f*). A short way from the end (at *e*) are fastened loops, through which a cane is threaded to form a circle for distending the net. This cane is in three pieces, about three feet long, fitting into each other by sockets. After getting in by the opening of *c*, you draw the tape tight to close its mouth, and tuck it in under the mattress, and you are secure from intruders, whether sleeping at night, or sitting under it by day. Over the part *a*, the blankets, or coverlid, are put.



other by sockets. After getting in by the opening of *c*, you draw the tape tight to close its mouth, and tuck it in under the mattress, and you are secure from intruders, whether sleeping at night, or sitting under it by day. Over the part *a*, the blankets, or coverlid, are put.

Wilkinson, John Gardner. *Modern Egypt and Thebes: Being a Description of Egypt, Including the Information Required for Travellers in that Country*, Volume 1. 2nd ed., John Murray, 1843.

The Mahmudiyyah Canal, named for Sultan Mahmud II, opened in January of 1820 and was a prominent feature in the landscape of Alexandria during this time. The canal served as a vital waterway linking the Mediterranean Sea to the fertile lands of the Nile Delta. Today, while traces of the canal remain, it's been replaced by newer water management systems.

Travelers making their way around the port city of Alexandria via the canal would have changed boats when they reached the Nile. In order not to over complicate the story, I kept the Tyndales on the *Tamarisk* for their entire journey.

Rhys's Retractable Pen. Rhys shared his genius with American inventor John J. Loud who, in 1888, obtained the first patent for a retractable pen. This innovation eliminated the need for frequent ink dipping or messy inkwells, making writing more efficient and convenient. Loud's patent, though not commercially successful, laid the foundation for subsequent improvements and developments. It would be more than forty years before the first commercially successful ballpoint pen was patented by Hungarian-Argentinian journalist and inventor, Ladislao José Biro.

The Steamship *Oriental*. In the 1840s, the Peninsular and Oriental (P&O) Steam Navigation Company's *Oriental* was one of two steamships making the journey from Southampton to Alexandria each month. Embarking on a journey aboard the *Oriental* would have been an experience of luxury and adventure for anyone fortunate enough to secure cabin passage (versus the deck passengers who traveled forward of the funnel).

Wilkinson's Guide. Sir John Gardner Wilkinson was a 19th century traveler, writer and Egyptologist. His two-volume *Modern Egypt and Thebes*, published in 1843, stands as a pioneering work of 19th century travel literature and historical exploration. It provides vivid and captivating accounts of Wilkinson's firsthand experiences with Egypt's culture, landscapes, and archaeological wonders, and was Helen's don't-leave-home-without-it resource.

Whew! If you made it this far, thank you! I create a mood board of the visual references I use when writing. If you would like to see my inspiration for Helen, Rhys and their environs, be sure to check out my [Pinterest board](#).

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K. Lyn Smith lives in Birmingham, Alabama, where she writes sweet historical romance about ordinary people finding extraordinary love. Her debut novel, *The Astronomer's Obsession*, was a finalist for the National Excellence in Romantic Fiction Award, while many of her other titles have been shortlisted for awards such as the American Writing Award, the Carolyn Reader's Choice Award, the HOLT Medallion and the Maggie Award.

When she's not reading or writing, you can find her with family, traveling and watching period dramas. And space documentaries. Weird, right?

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