

NINE LIVES: A SERVANT OF ANUBIS

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Chapter 1: The Last Job

I don't bother turning on the lights when I enter my office. The neon from the bail bonds place across the street spills enough red through the blinds to navigate by, and the shadows suit my mood. The bourbon bottle sits exactly where I left it last night, a finger's worth remaining. Just enough to dull the edge.

The stack of bills doesn't disappear in the darkness, though. Neither does the eviction notice. Funny how some things refuse to fade no matter how much shadow you throw on them.

I settle into my chair, the leather creaking a protest that matches the one in my knees. Three years since I left the force, and the only thing I've managed to build is a reputation for finding people who don't want to be found. That and a tab at O'Malley's that's reaching legendary status.

The phone hasn't rung in three days. I'm starting to think it never will again when the knock comes at the door.

“It’s open,” I call out, not bothering to move. Probably the landlord. Let him see the state of things. Maybe he’ll feel bad enough to give me another week.

But it’s not the landlord. The woman who steps through my door brings with her the scent of something foreign and expensive—cardamom and jasmine, notes of a perfume that costs more than my monthly rent. She’s mid-to-late twenties, with olive skin and dark hair pulled back in a practical bun that does nothing to diminish her looks. Her clothes are academic casual—dark slacks, sensible shoes, and a blue blouse under a light jacket. What catches my eye, though, is the gold scarab pendant at her throat, catching the neon light and throwing it back crimson.

“Mr. Harlow?” Her voice carries the slightest accent I can’t immediately place. “I’m Dr. Nadia Farouk from Boston University’s archaeology department.” She looks around the office, trying to hide her dismay at the state of it. “I was told you’re the man to see about finding things that are lost.”

I consider the bourbon, decide against it. “That’s what it says on the door. Have a seat, Dr. Farouk.”

She hesitates, then crosses to the chair opposite my desk, sitting with perfect posture that makes my slouch feel even more pronounced. She places a slim file folder on the desk between us.

“Four days ago,” she begins, “several artifacts were stolen from our Egyptian antiquities collection. Valuable pieces, but not the ones that typically attract thieves. No gold, no gemstones. Just...” She pauses, her fingers unconsciously touching the scarab at her throat. “Just historically significant ritual items.”

I reach for the file, flipping it open. Photos of the artifacts—a curved knife with hieroglyphics along the blade, several small alabaster jars, what looks like a mummified cat wrapped in bandages threaded with gold, and various amulets and stone tablets.

“Police report?” I ask.

She shakes her head, frustration evident. “Filed immediately. But they don’t understand the significance. To them, it’s just property theft.”

“And to you?”

Her eyes meet mine, dark and intense. “These artifacts form a specific ritual set, Mr. Harlow. They were intended to be used together, and in the wrong hands...” She stops herself. “They’re irreplaceable academic resources.”

I’ve been a cop long enough to recognize when someone isn’t telling the whole truth. She’s holding something back, something that has her spooked. I should say no. My instincts are screaming that this case has trouble written all over it.

But the eviction notice on my desk screams louder.

“My fee is five hundred a day plus expenses,” I say, the words coming out before I can reconsider. “Three-day minimum.”

She doesn’t even blink at the price, reaching into her bag and producing an envelope. “Here’s a thousand to start. I can provide more as needed.”

Too easy. Another red flag. I take the envelope anyway.

“When was the last time you saw the artifacts?” I ask, already resigned to taking the case.

“I was working with them Tuesday evening. Wednesday morning, they were gone.” She leans forward slightly. “The strange thing is, nothing else was taken. The gold funerary mask worth ten times as much was untouched. Our security system showed no breaches. It’s as if someone knew exactly what they wanted and how to get it.”

“Inside job?”

She frowns. “I’ve considered that possibility. There are only a few people with access to that collection.”

I flip through the rest of the file. Inventory lists, security logs, photos of the display cases. Pretty thorough for someone who just walked in off the street.

“You came prepared, Dr. Farouk.”

A slight smile touches her lips. “I believe in efficiency, Mr. Harlow.”

“Call me Jake. Mr. Harlow was my father.” I close the file. “I’ll need to see the crime scene, talk to the security staff, and get a list of everyone with access to those artifacts.”

“Of course.” She stands, smoother than I could manage after three whiskeys. “When would you like to start?”

I glance at the eviction notice again. “No time like the present.”

Outside, autumn has painted Boston in amber and crimson, but there’s a chill in the air that cuts through my jacket. Dr. Farouk—Nadia, she insists as we walk—doesn’t seem bothered by it. We take her car, a modest Honda that smells faintly of old books and coffee. The drive to Boston University is filled with her explaining the artifacts’ historical significance. I only half-listen, watching the way her hands move when she talks about ancient Egypt, the animation in her face a stark contrast to the controlled academic I first met.

“These particular items,” she’s saying as we pull into the university parking lot, “were associated with a minor death cult. Not Osiris, as you might expect, but a sect dedicated to Anubis in his less common form.”

“The jackal guy, right?” I ask, vaguely remembering high school history class.

She gives me a look that makes me feel like I've just failed a pop quiz. "Typically, yes. But this particular cult worshipped a variant aspect—Anubis in feline form."

"A cat god of death?" I follow her toward a large stone building with columns that scream 'important academic stuff happens here.'

"It's more complicated than that. The cat form represented Anubis's aspect as a guardian of gateways between worlds, not just his funerary role." She stops at the bottom of the steps, turning to face me. "Mr. Harlow—Jake—there's something else you should know."

Here it comes. The complication she's been holding back.

"Three days ago, after the theft, I received this." She pulls a folded paper from her pocket and hands it to me.

It's a note, printed on plain computer paper: "THE DOOR OPENS AT ECLIPSE. THE CAT WALKS BETWEEN."

"Mean anything to you?" I ask.

She nods, her expression grave. "The lunar eclipse is in two weeks. And 'the cat walks between' is a reference to that specific Anubis cult's belief that their god could traverse the boundary between life and death in feline form."

A religion professor getting cryptic notes referencing obscure mythology after a theft of ritual items. This case just keeps getting better.

"You think whoever sent this is planning to use the artifacts in some kind of ritual during the eclipse."

It's not a question, but she answers anyway. "Yes. And if they believe these artifacts have genuine power..." She trails off.

"Great. Amateur Satanists with Egyptian flair." I fold the note and hand it back. "Any idea who'd be into this kind of thing?"

She hesitates. "There are... collectors. People who believe in the power of ancient artifacts. Most are harmless enthusiasts, but some take it very seriously." She starts up the steps again. "I've compiled a list of possibilities. It's in my office."

I follow her into the building, past students lounging on benches and hurrying to classes. The smell of floor polish and old books fills the air, bringing back uncomfortable memories of my brief college career before I joined the force. Nadia leads me through a maze of corridors to the archaeology department.

As we approach her office, a man steps out of a door ahead of us. Tall, distinguished, with silver at his temples. He spots Nadia and smiles, though it doesn't reach his eyes.

"Dr. Farouk. I was just looking for you." His gaze shifts to me, assessing. "And you are?"

“Jake Harlow,” I say before Nadia can answer. “Private investigator.”

His eyebrows rise. “I see. I wasn’t aware we were bringing in outside help, Dr. Farouk. The university has procedures for these situations.”

“Jake is helping me with a personal research project, Professor Hassan,” she says smoothly. “Tracking down some obscure references.”

Hassan doesn’t believe her for a second, but he nods anyway. “Don’t let me keep you, then.” He steps aside, his expensive cologne lingering in the air as we pass.

“Department head?” I ask once we’re out of earshot.

“Yes. And one of the few people with access to the restricted collection.” Her tone is neutral, but there’s something there—not accusation, but caution.

Her office is what you’d expect from a young professor—shelves overflowing with books, walls covered in maps and photographs of archaeological digs. Papers are stacked in organized chaos on every surface, and a potted plant that’s seen better days sits by the window. What I don’t expect are the protection symbols subtly worked into the décor—a hamsa hand by the door, an eye of Horus paperweight, and what I recognize as ankh symbols incorporated into the frame of an Egyptian art print.

Nadia catches me looking. “Family tradition,” she says simply.

She moves to her desk, shifting papers until she finds what she’s looking for. “Here’s the list of everyone with access to the collection, along with my notes on who might have both means and motive.”

I scan the list. University staff, visiting researchers, donors with special privileges. One name jumps out: Maxwell Blackwood, CEO of Blackwood International and major university benefactor.

“Blackwood? The guy who’s always in the society pages donating millions to museums?”

Nadia nods. “He has a particular interest in Egyptian artifacts. His private collection is rumored to be extensive.”

“And you think a billionaire is breaking into his own funded university to steal some cat mummy?”

“I think it’s worth considering all possibilities.” She sits at her desk, suddenly looking tired. “There’s something else. Two years ago, similar artifacts went missing from a collection in Alexandria. The theft was never solved.”

I tuck the list into my pocket. “I’ll need to see where they were taken from.”

She rises. “Of course. The restricted collection is in the basement.”

As we head back into the hallway, I notice a bulletin board with a flyer announcing an upcoming lecture series. The featured speaker: Maxwell Black-

wood, discussing “Ancient Egyptian Concepts of Afterlife and Transformation.” Scheduled for the night before the eclipse.

Another coincidence I don’t believe in.

The basement level is cooler, the air dry and carefully controlled. Nadia uses her key card to access a heavy door marked “Authorized Personnel Only.” Inside, the room is sterile and modern, despite the ancient treasures it contains. Glass cases line the walls, each with its own climate control system and security sensors.

She leads me to an empty case near the back wall. “This is where they were.”

I examine the case. No signs of forced entry. The security system logs show no alarms during the night in question.

“Who was the last person in here before you discovered the theft?”

She consults a clipboard hanging nearby. “Professor Hassan, according to the sign-in sheet.”

I make a mental note to look into the professor. “How valuable would you say these artifacts are? Financially speaking.”

“The cat mummy alone would fetch perhaps fifty thousand on the black market. The entire set, to the right buyer, maybe two hundred thousand.” She shakes her head. “But their academic value is immeasurable.”

“And their value to someone who believes in their power?”

Her eyes meet mine, serious and dark. “If someone truly believes these artifacts can open a doorway between worlds? They might consider them priceless.”

I circle the display case, looking for anything the police might have missed. In the corner, barely visible against the white floor, is a small dark smudge. I crouch down for a closer look.

“Do you have a pen light?”

Nadia produces one from her pocket. Under the focused beam, the smudge resolves into what looks like ash, but with an unusual bluish tint. I take an evidence bag from my pocket—old habits die hard—and scrape some of it inside.

“What is it?” she asks.

“Not sure. But it doesn’t belong in a sterile environment like this.”

As I stand, something else catches my eye—a small symbol drawn in the corner of the display case, almost invisible unless you’re looking for it. An ankh with what appears to be a cat silhouette inside the loop.

“That wasn’t there before,” Nadia says, her voice tight. “I would have noticed.”

“Our thief left a calling card.” I take a photo with my phone. “Or a message.”

We spend another hour examining the scene and questioning the security staff, but learn little more. As we leave the building, the sunset paints the sky in shades of fire, and I can't shake the feeling that I've just stepped into something much bigger than a simple theft.

"I'll start running down these leads tomorrow," I tell Nadia as we reach her car. "Check Blackwood's recent activities, look into similar thefts, see if I can identify that ash substance."

She nods, her face shadowed in the fading light. "Thank you, Jake. I know this might seem... unusual."

"Lady, unusual pays my rent." I open the car door. "Just one question before we call it a day. Why me? Boston's full of PI's with better offices and fewer drinking problems."

For a moment, she looks almost caught out, but recovers quickly. "Your reputation. They say you can find anyone, no matter how they try to hide." She starts the car. "And sometimes, Mr. Harlow, what we're looking for is hiding in plain sight."

As she drives me back to my office, I watch the city lights come on, illuminating a Boston most people never see—the hidden corners and secret places where people like me operate. I should feel better about having work, about the cash advance in my pocket that will keep the landlord at bay.

Instead, I feel like I've just accepted payment to walk into quicksand.

Chapter 2: Stolen History

The morning light does my hangover no favors as I shuffle around my apartment, desperately searching for aspirin. Last night's bourbon sits heavy in my system—a poor decision after Nadia dropped me off, but an inevitable one. Something about this case makes me uneasy, like standing on thin ice and hearing the first crack.

I down two pills with lukewarm coffee and study the list of names Nadia provided. Twenty-three people with access to the restricted collection. I've already circled the obvious suspects: Professor Hassan with his convenient timing and obvious discomfort at my presence; Maxwell Blackwood, the billionaire collector whose lecture just happens to coincide with the eclipse; and a visiting researcher from Cairo who returned home the day after the theft.

My phone buzzes. Nadia.

"Found something," she says without preamble. "The ash substance you collected—I had a colleague in the chemistry department analyze it. It's a mixture of burnt papyrus, myrrh, and something they couldn't identify. Traditional ingredients for certain Egyptian rituals."

“So our thief isn’t just a thief,” I say, watching a water stain on my ceiling that vaguely resembles the state of Florida. “They performed some kind of ritual before taking the artifacts.”

“Or during. The substances would have been burned to ‘awaken’ the artifacts before transport.” Her voice drops lower. “Jake, this isn’t good. These aren’t collectors—they’re practitioners.”

I resist the urge to pour whiskey into my coffee. “I’m heading to Blackwood International this morning. Rich guy collecting Egyptian artifacts seems like a good place to start.”

“He won’t meet with you without an appointment,” she warns.

“I’m not planning to use the front door.” I hang up before she can object.

Blackwood International occupies the top fifteen floors of a gleaming glass tower in downtown Boston. Security is tight at the main entrance, but loading docks are always the weak point in building security. I time my approach to coincide with a catering delivery—some executive function happening on the top floor, according to the manifest I glimpse on the delivery guy’s clipboard.

My suit isn’t expensive, but it’s clean and paired with a confident walk, it gets me past the loading dock security. I badge in with a counterfeit ID card—something left over from my BPD days that I probably shouldn’t still have. The magnetic strip won’t scan, but most security guards just check the photo and wave you through.

The service elevator takes me to the 45th floor, where according to public records, Blackwood keeps his private office. I step into a corridor of gleaming marble and subtle lighting designed to make everything look more expensive than it already is.

A receptionist looks up as I approach her desk. “Can I help you?” Her tone suggests she very much doubts she can.

“Jake Harlow to see Mr. Blackwood.” I flash a business card. “Boston University sent me to discuss his upcoming lecture series.”

She checks her computer screen. “I don’t see an appointment.”

“Dr. Farouk assured me it was arranged.” I manage to look appropriately confused and inconvenienced. “Perhaps there was a miscommunication?”

The name-drop works. Her expression shifts. “Let me call his assistant.” She picks up her phone and speaks quietly, then gestures to a seating area that probably costs more than my apartment. “Someone will be with you shortly.”

I settle into a chair and take the opportunity to survey my surroundings. The walls are decorated with framed photographs of Blackwood at various archaeological sites, always positioned centrally in the frame, always wearing immacu-

late white despite the dusty surroundings. A glass case near the receptionist's desk displays a collection of small Egyptian artifacts—nothing as significant as what was stolen, but enough to confirm Blackwood's interest in the field.

More interesting is the subtle security. Cameras cover every angle, and I count three different magnetic card readers controlling access to different sections of the floor. Whatever Blackwood is protecting, he takes it seriously.

After fifteen minutes, a door opens and a woman in her forties emerges. Her gray suit is crisp enough to cut paper, and her smile doesn't reach her eyes.

"Mr. Harlow? I'm Patricia Weiss, Mr. Blackwood's executive assistant." She extends a manicured hand. "I understand there's been some confusion about an appointment?"

"Apparently so." I shake her hand. "I was sent to discuss the artifacts Mr. Blackwood plans to display during his lecture series."

"I see." She studies me with a look that says she doesn't believe me for a second. "Unfortunately, Mr. Blackwood is in meetings all day. However, I'd be happy to show you our Egyptian collection and make notes of any questions for him."

It's not what I'd hoped for, but it's better than being escorted out. "That would be very helpful, thank you."

She leads me through a secured door into what appears to be a small private museum. Glass cases line the walls, each containing perfectly displayed artifacts with small, tasteful placards. The lighting is calibrated to highlight gold and limestone equally well.

"Mr. Blackwood has been collecting Egyptian artifacts for over twenty years," Patricia explains, slipping into tour guide mode. "He developed a particular interest after his first visit to the Valley of the Kings in 1998."

"Impressive collection," I murmur, examining a case containing several amulets similar to the ones in Nadia's file. "Does he focus on any particular dynasty or theme?"

"His interests are... varied." She watches me carefully. "Though he has recently developed a fascination with funerary practices and transformation rituals."

"Transformation?"

"The ancient Egyptian concept of transformation after death." She gestures to a papyrus fragment in a nearby case. "The belief that the soul could take different forms in the afterlife."

I move slowly around the room, cataloging everything while trying to appear casual. Nothing matches the stolen artifacts, but the collection definitely confirms Blackwood's interest in the same period and theme.

"That's an unusual piece," I comment, pausing at a small statuette of what appears to be a cross between a cat and a jackal, with distinctly human eyes.

Patricia tenses almost imperceptibly. “Yes, it’s quite rare. A regional variation of Anubis not commonly represented in museum collections.”

I take out my phone. “Mind if I take a photo? Dr. Farouk would be interested.”

“I’m afraid photography isn’t permitted in the private collection.” She steps between me and the case. “Security concerns, you understand.”

“Of course.” I pocket my phone. “When did Mr. Blackwood acquire that piece?”

“Approximately three weeks ago. A private auction in Cairo.” Her tone suggests the conversation about that particular artifact is over. “Now, about the lecture series—what specifics was Dr. Farouk interested in?”

Before I can answer, the door we entered through opens. A security guard steps in, followed by a man I recognize immediately from newspaper photos. Maxwell Blackwood is shorter in person than he appears in carefully staged media images, but he carries himself with the absolute confidence of someone who never hears the word “no.” His tailored suit is the color of wet sand, his tie a deep blue that matches his eyes. At first glance, he looks like any other wealthy executive in his late fifties, but there’s something off about him I can’t immediately place.

“Patricia, the Tokyo call is in five minutes.” His voice is smooth, cultured, with the faintest traces of a Boston accent he’s worked hard to eliminate. His gaze shifts to me, assessing and dismissive in the same moment. “I don’t believe we’ve met.”

“Jake Harlow.” I extend my hand. “Boston University sent me regarding your lecture series.”

He doesn’t take my hand. “Did they? How peculiar, since I finalized all arrangements with the dean yesterday.” His smile doesn’t reach his eyes. “And I specifically recall requesting Dr. Farouk as my liaison, not an... external consultant.”

Busted. I lower my hand. “Must have been a miscommunication.”

“Must have.” Blackwood tilts his head slightly. “Though I find myself curious why a private investigator would be so interested in my lecture. That is your actual profession, isn’t it, Mr. Harlow?”

So he knows who I am. Interesting. “News travels fast.”

“Information is valuable.” He steps closer, and I notice what seemed off about him earlier—there’s a subtle tremor in his left hand that he tries to conceal by keeping it in his pocket. “What is it you’re really looking for in my collection, Mr. Harlow?”

“Just background research. Dr. Farouk mentioned your expertise in Egyptian transformation rituals.”

Something flickers in his eyes—recognition, and perhaps something else. “Did she? How flattering.” He checks his watch. “Unfortunately, I have an interna-

tional call waiting. Patricia will show you out.” He turns to leave, then pauses. “Give my regards to Dr. Farouk. Tell her I’m looking forward to our discussion about Anubis’s... less conventional aspects... during the eclipse lecture.”

The specificity of the message sends a chill down my spine. As Patricia escorts me to the elevator, I notice the security guard following at a discreet distance.

“Mr. Blackwood values his privacy,” Patricia says as the elevator doors open. “In the future, please use proper channels to request meetings.”

“Of course.” I step into the elevator. “One last question—how long has Mr. Blackwood been interested in cat-form depictions of Anubis?”

The doors are already closing when I ask, but I don’t miss the flash of alarm in her eyes.

Back on the street, I duck into a coffee shop and call Nadia.

“Blackwood definitely knows something,” I tell her when she answers. “He has a cat-jackal hybrid statue he acquired three weeks ago, and he specifically mentioned discussing Anubis’s ‘less conventional aspects’ with you during the eclipse lecture.”

“That’s... concerning.” She sounds distracted. “Jake, I need you to come to the university. Now.”

“What happened?”

“Someone broke into my office last night. They didn’t take anything, but they left something behind.” Her voice drops to barely above a whisper. “Another note. And blood. A lot of blood.”

I’m already hailing a cab. “Don’t touch anything. I’m on my way.”

The police are already at Nadia’s office when I arrive. Two uniformed officers and a detective I recognize from my BPD days—Eliza Cortez, a sharp investigator who always played by the rules. She narrows her eyes when she sees me.

“Harlow. Should have known you’d be involved somehow.” Her tone is professionally cool, but not hostile. We worked together occasionally before I left the force, and she was one of the few who didn’t treat me like a pariah afterward. “What’s your connection here?”

“Consulting on a related matter for Dr. Farouk,” I say, keeping it vague. “She called me.”

Cortez gestures for me to follow her into the office. The room has been thoroughly ransacked—books scattered, papers strewn across the floor, desk drawers pulled out and emptied. But what dominates the scene is the message painted on the wall in what the coppery smell confirms is blood:

“THE CAT WALKS BETWEEN WORLDS. THE UNWORTHY WILL BE CONSUMED.”

Below the message is the same symbol I noticed on the display case—an ankh with a cat silhouette. Beside it lies a small bundle wrapped in linen. One corner of the fabric has come loose, revealing what appears to be a desiccated animal paw.

Nadia stands near the window, arms wrapped around herself. She looks smaller somehow, her academic confidence shaken.

“Any idea what this is about?” Cortez asks her.

“It’s connected to the stolen artifacts,” Nadia replies. “The symbolism refers to an obscure aspect of Anubis worship—a cat form believed to be able to travel between worlds.”

“And the blood? Animal or human?”

“Lab will tell us,” says one of the uniformed officers, carefully collecting samples.

“It’s ritual blood,” Nadia says quietly. “If they’re following traditional practices, it would be a mixture of animal blood and other substances.”

Cortez raises an eyebrow. “You seem to know a lot about this.”

“It’s my field of expertise.” Nadia’s tone is defensive. “Ancient Egyptian rituals and funerary practices.”

I move closer to the bundle on the floor, careful not to contaminate the scene. “What about this?”

“Don’t touch it,” Cortez warns.

“Wasn’t planning to.” I crouch for a better look. “Looks like some kind of mummified animal part.”

Nadia steps forward. “It’s a cat’s paw. Ceremonially preserved.”

“Is it from your missing artifacts?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “No. This is different—newer. And the preservation technique is... wrong. Amateur.”

Cortez sighs. “Great. So we’ve got some kind of cult activity involving Egyptian artifacts, ritual blood, and dead animal parts.” She turns to me. “Harlow, a word outside?”

I follow her into the hallway, where she fixes me with a penetrating stare.

“What’s your real involvement here? And don’t give me any consultant bullshit.”

“Dr. Farouk hired me to recover stolen artifacts from the university collection. That was before this.” I gesture toward the office. “Now it’s escalated.”

“Artifacts that she didn’t report stolen to us?”

“She filed a report. Said it wasn’t being taken seriously.”

Cortez rubs her forehead. “We’re stretched thin, but I would have remembered something like this. When was the report filed?”

“According to her, right after the theft. Four days ago.”

“I’ll check.” She looks at me skeptically. “You think this is connected to the Blackwood lecture series?”

News really does travel fast in Boston. “How’d you know about that?”

“It’s all over campus. Major donor, prestigious lecture, big security concerns. And now this.” She lowers her voice. “Listen, Jake, whatever you’re into here, be careful. This has that same weird vibe as the Krane case.”

The mention of that case—the one that cost me my partner and my career—hits like a physical blow. “What do you mean?”

“Strange symbolism, ritualistic elements, wealthy people behaving oddly. Just... watch yourself.” She hands me her card. “And call me if you find anything concrete.”

After Cortez and her team finish processing the scene, Nadia and I are left alone in her vandalized office.

“I should have told you everything from the beginning,” she says, picking up a fallen photograph of what must be her family—an older man with her eyes standing beside a woman who looks like an older version of Nadia.

“Now would be a good time to start,” I reply, helping her right an overturned chair.

She takes a deep breath. “The artifacts that were stolen... they’re not just valuable or historically significant. According to certain texts, they can be used in a ritual to open a doorway between worlds—specifically, between our world and the realm of the dead.”

“You actually believe that?”

Her eyes meet mine, deadly serious. “What I believe doesn’t matter. What matters is that whoever took them believes it—enough to kill for it, apparently.” She nods toward the blood on the wall.

“And Blackwood? Where does he fit in?”

“Maxwell Blackwood lost his wife and daughter in a car accident seven years ago. Since then, he’s become obsessed with Egyptian concepts of the afterlife and transformation.” She begins sorting through the scattered papers on her desk. “I believe he’s connected to a group that calls themselves the Order of Eternal Dusk.”

“Pretentious name.”

“They started as an academic society studying Egyptian religion, but over time, they’ve evolved into something more... practical.” She retrieves a folder from beneath a pile of books and hands it to me. “This is what they’re really after.”

Inside is a photocopy of an ancient papyrus with hieroglyphics I can’t read and a rough English translation:

“When the moon devours the sun and night conquers day, the gateway between worlds thins. With the sacred items aligned and the blood of the worthy spilled, Anubis in his cat aspect may walk between worlds, bringing forth that which was lost.”

“They think they can resurrect the dead,” I say, understanding dawning. “Blackwood wants to bring back his family.”

Nadia nods. “The lunar eclipse in two weeks is the first to fall on the ancient Egyptian date of Wep Renpet—their New Year—in over a century. According to the texts, it’s the only time the ritual might work.”

“Might? You don’t sound convinced.”

She hesitates. “The texts are... incomplete. There’s more to the ritual than what’s recorded here. My grandfather spent years researching it, trying to understand the full ceremony.”

“Your grandfather?” I glance at the photo she was holding earlier.

“Ibrahim Farouk. He was a respected Egyptologist who became obsessed with Anubis cults late in his career.” A shadow crosses her face. “He died under mysterious circumstances when I was twelve. His research disappeared the same night.”

The pieces are starting to fit together. “And now you think the Order of Eternal Dusk has resurfaced to complete what they started back then.”

“Yes. The theft, the message, the timing—it all points to them preparing for the eclipse ritual.” She picks up the cat amulet from her desk—one of the few items the intruder didn’t disturb. “They left this as a warning. They know I’m looking for them.”

“Or as an invitation,” I suggest, remembering Blackwood’s message. “He specifically mentioned discussing Anubis with you.”

Her eyes widen slightly. “You think they want me involved?”

“I think they know more about your connection to this than you’ve told me.” I fix her with a hard stare. “What are you not saying, Dr. Farouk?”

She looks away, shoulders sagging slightly. “My grandfather wasn’t just researching the cult. He was part of it, in the beginning. Before it became dangerous. He left when he realized what they were really planning, and he took key artifacts with him—artifacts that would prevent the ritual from being completed correctly.”

“And now they think you have those artifacts.”

“Or at least knowledge of where they are.” She meets my gaze again. “But I don’t. All I have are fragments of his research that I’ve pieced together over the years.”

I consider this new information, trying to see angles and connections. “We need to identify the cult members. Blackwood is obviously involved, but he can’t be working alone.”

“The Order is traditionally composed of nine members, representing the nine aspects of the soul according to certain obscure texts.” She begins writing names on a notepad. “Blackwood, certainly. Based on my research, possibly Professor Hassan as well. I’ve suspected him for some time—he was unusually interested in my grandfather’s work.”

“Who else has access to the restricted collection who might be involved?”

She lists several names, including the security director for the archaeology department and a visiting scholar who arrived just before the theft.

“And what about you?” I ask. “Where do you fit into all this?”

Her pen pauses. “What do you mean?”

“Nine Lives was the name of my old bar when I was a beat cop. Now I’m investigating stolen artifacts related to a cat-form death god right before a once-in-a-century eclipse. That’s a hell of a coincidence.”

She puts down her pen. “There are no coincidences in this, Jake. I sought you out specifically.”

“Why?”

“Because you have a reputation for finding things that don’t want to be found. And because...” She hesitates. “Because my grandfather’s journals mentioned a Boston police detective who nearly discovered the Order in 1990. A detective named James Harlow.”

The name hits me like a punch to the gut. “My father.”

She nods. “Your father was investigating a series of unusual deaths connected to the university. According to my grandfather’s notes, he came close to exposing the Order before he was killed in the line of duty.”

The official story was that my father died in a routine traffic stop gone wrong. I was seventeen. It shattered my world and set me on the path to becoming a cop myself.

“You’re saying his death wasn’t random.”

“I’m saying there might be more to it than you know.” Her eyes are sympathetic but determined. “I didn’t tell you because I needed you to take this case, and I wasn’t sure how you’d react.”

Anger flares hot and bright. “You used me. Used my father’s death to manipulate me into helping you.”

“I gave you information you deserved to have,” she counters. “Information that might help us both.”

Before I can respond, my phone buzzes. Unknown number.

“Harlow,” I answer, voice tight with suppressed emotion.

“Mr. Harlow.” The voice belongs to Maxwell Blackwood. “I believe we have mutual interests to discuss. Tonight. Eight o’clock. The Harbor Grand Hotel, penthouse suite.” He pauses. “Come alone. Dr. Farouk’s presence would be... premature.”

The line goes dead before I can respond.

“What is it?” Nadia asks, seeing my expression.

“Blackwood. He wants to meet.” I tuck the phone away. “Alone.”

“It could be a trap.”

“Almost certainly is.” I pick up my jacket. “But it’s also our best lead.”

“Jake.” She catches my arm. “There’s something else you should know. About the ritual, about what they’re trying to do.”

“Save it.” I pull away, still processing the revelation about my father. “You’ve kept enough from me already. I’ll go see what Blackwood wants, and then we’ll talk—about everything.”

As I leave her standing amid the wreckage of her office, surrounded by ancient symbols painted in blood, I can’t shake the feeling that I’ve already stepped across a threshold—one that leads somewhere far darker than I’m prepared to go.

Chapter 3: Midnight Ritual

The Harbor Grand Hotel lives up to its name with marble floors, crystal chandeliers, and staff who’ve perfected the art of not seeing people they’re paid to ignore. I bypass the front desk, heading straight for the private elevators that service the penthouse suites. A security guard blocks my path, built like he bench presses luxury cars for fun.

“I’m expected,” I tell him. “Blackwood. Eight o’clock.”

He checks an iPad, then nods once, stepping aside without a word. The elevator requires a keycard, which he provides, swiping it before retreating to his post. Subtle security, but effective.

As I ascend forty floors, I check my weapon—a .38 revolver that’s seen better days but never failed me. Not that I’m planning to shoot a billionaire in his own penthouse, but the weight of it against my ribs is reassuring. Especially after what Nadia told me about my father.

The elevator opens directly into a foyer larger than my entire apartment. Floor-to-ceiling windows frame Boston Harbor, the city lights reflecting off dark water. A man I recognize as Blackwood’s personal assistant greets me and leads me through to a study that would make old-money Bostonians weep with envy. Mahogany shelves lined with leather-bound books, Persian rugs in deep blues and crimsons, and display cases holding Egyptian artifacts that probably belong in museums.

“Mr. Blackwood will join you shortly,” the assistant says, then vanishes through a hidden door that blends perfectly with the wood paneling.

I move to the windows, scanning the harbor below. From this height, you can see the abandoned industrial section where shipping containers and old warehouses collect like forgotten toys. My attention catches on a particular warehouse near the water’s edge—something about it feels familiar, though I’m certain I’ve never been there.

“Beautiful view, isn’t it?” Blackwood’s voice comes from behind me. “I find water calming. The boundary between elements—not quite solid, not quite air. A liminal space.”

I turn to face him. Tonight, he’s dressed more casually in charcoal slacks and a slate-blue sweater that probably costs more than my monthly rent. The tremor in his left hand seems more pronounced as he gestures toward a seating area.

“Drink?” he offers, moving to a well-stocked bar cart.

“I’ll pass.”

He smiles thinly. “Wise. Keeping your faculties sharp.” He pours himself what looks like scotch, neat. “I appreciate you coming, Mr. Harlow. I believe we can help each other.”

“I’m listening.”

He settles into a leather chair that’s positioned to keep the harbor view behind him, a power move straight from Intimidation 101. “You’re looking for stolen artifacts. I’m looking for stolen knowledge. Our interests converge.”

“You’re not a suspect, then?”

He chuckles. “If I wanted those artifacts, Mr. Harlow, I wouldn’t need to steal them. The university would practically gift them to me with my next donation.” He sips his scotch. “No, what interests me is who took them, and why now.”

“You know why,” I say flatly. “The eclipse. The ritual.”

Something flickers across his face—surprise, maybe, that I know as much as I do. “Dr. Farouk has been forthcoming, I see.”

“Enough to know that the Order of Eternal Dusk is planning something during the eclipse. Something involving Anubis and doorways between worlds.”

Blackwood sets down his glass. “The Order is a scholarly society studying Egyptian religious practices. Nothing more.”

“Save it for the charity galas. Blood was used to paint threats in Dr. Farouk’s office today. That’s a bit beyond ‘scholarly.’”

His expression hardens. “Extremists. Splinter elements who’ve corrupted the Order’s original purpose.” He leans forward. “That’s why I contacted you. I want to find these people before they do something terrible in the Order’s name.”

“And I’m supposed to believe you’re not involved?”

“Believe what you like. But consider this.” He withdraws a phone from his pocket, taps the screen, and passes it to me. “This was sent to me three days ago.”

The screen shows a photo of what appears to be a ritual circle drawn on a concrete floor. In the center sits the golden cat mummy from the stolen artifacts. Around it, dark stains that could only be blood.

“Those artifacts were never meant to be used,” Blackwood continues. “They’re dangerous in the wrong hands. The ritual they’re designed for...its purpose has been misunderstood.”

“Enlighten me.”

“The original texts don’t describe resurrection, despite what some believe. They describe transformation. The ritual doesn’t bring back the dead—it transforms the living.” He retrieves his phone. “The splinter group believes they can use it to resurrect loved ones. They’re wrong, and their mistake could have catastrophic consequences.”

“Why tell me this? Why not the police?”

“The police wouldn’t understand. And they have no capacity to recover the artifacts before the eclipse.” His gaze is steady, calculating. “You, on the other hand, have unique motivation. James Harlow’s son, following his footsteps straight to the Order.”

The mention of my father tightens something in my chest. “What exactly do you know about my father’s death?”

“Only that he was getting close to certain truths. And that the official story of his death never satisfied his colleagues.” Blackwood stands, moving to a desk where he removes an envelope. “I believe these people—the same ones who took the artifacts—know what really happened to him.”

He holds out the envelope. Inside is a check with more zeros than I'm comfortable looking at, along with a slip of paper with an address.

"What's this?"

"The location where I believe the artifacts are being held. And compensation for your trouble."

"I already have a client."

"Dr. Farouk is pursuing her own agenda, Mr. Harlow. One that may not align with finding the truth about your father." He returns to the window, looking out at the harbor. "The warehouse I've indicated was recently purchased through a shell corporation. Deliveries of unusual chemicals and equipment have been arriving for weeks. And most interestingly, it's where your father was last seen alive before his 'traffic stop.'"

I pocket the address but leave the check on the desk. "If you're playing me, Blackwood—"

"We're all playing parts, Mr. Harlow." The reflection of his face in the glass looks suddenly older, more haunted. "Some of us just have more to lose."

As I leave, the sense that I'm missing something crucial gnaws at me. Blackwood is lying—that much is obvious—but not about everything. And that makes him more dangerous than a straightforward villain.

I don't call Nadia. Not yet. Whatever game Blackwood is playing, I need to see this warehouse for myself before I decide my next move.

The address takes me to a neglected corner of Boston Harbor, where the city's shipping industry slowly crumbles into rust and memory. The warehouse sits apart from others, a looming structure of corroded metal and grimy windows. A chain-link fence surrounds it, topped with fresh razor wire that gleams incongruously against the decay.

I park two blocks away and approach on foot, sticking to shadows. The night is unusually warm for autumn, with a mist rolling in from the harbor that smudges lights and muffles sounds. Perfect conditions for someone who doesn't want to be seen.

A single guard stands at the gate, looking bored. Beyond him, the warehouse shows signs of recent activity—fresh tire tracks in the mud, new padlocks on the doors, a generator humming somewhere inside. Through binoculars, I spot cameras mounted at strategic points. Not standard equipment for an abandoned building.

I circle around, looking for weaknesses in the perimeter. The harbor side offers the best approach—the fence ends at a retaining wall, with about a twenty-foot

drop to dark water below. A rusty maintenance ladder provides access to a second-story loading platform.

As I prepare to make my move, a convoy of black SUVs approaches the main gate. I duck behind a stack of shipping pallets, watching as the vehicles enter. Men and women emerge, all dressed in civilian clothes, nothing to mark them as anything but late-night workers. But their movements are too coordinated, too precise. They have the bearing of people used to following orders.

I count fifteen of them entering the warehouse. No sign of Blackwood among them, but I spot Professor Hassan's distinctive silver-streaked hair. So much for his innocent academic act.

Once they're inside, I make my move, scaling the fence where it meets the retaining wall and dropping onto the maintenance ladder. It groans under my weight but holds. The platform door is locked, but the window beside it is cracked. A tight squeeze, but I manage to slip through.

Inside, the warehouse is a cavernous space of shadows and rust, with catwalks crisscrossing overhead. The center has been cleared, concrete floor scrubbed clean in a large circle. I position myself on a catwalk above, hidden in shadow but with a clear view of the proceedings below.

The warehouse air hangs thick with incense—not the hippie headshop variety, something older. It clogs my nostrils with notes of myrrh and something metallic beneath. Blood, maybe. I press myself deeper into the shadows behind a stack of abandoned shipping pallets.

Below, on the warehouse floor, eight figures in dark robes stand in a circle around a makeshift altar. Their hoods are up, faces invisible, but their posture screams money—these aren't street thugs playing dress-up. The missing artifacts from the university are arranged in a pattern I don't recognize, but something about their positioning makes my eyes hurt if I look too long.

At the center, catching what little moonlight filters through the broken skylights, sits the strangest piece: a cat mummy wrapped in bandages threaded with actual gold. Even from here, I can see the craftsmanship is exquisite, ancient. Worth a fortune, but these people aren't here to sell it.

They're chanting now, voices overlapping in what sounds like Ancient Egyptian. I activate the voice recorder on my phone, careful to keep it shielded. The language sounds wrong in this abandoned corner of Boston Harbor, like history folding in on itself.

That's when I see it—the knife. Ceremonial, curved, with hieroglyphs catching the light along its blade. And I notice for the first time the ninth robed figure, bound at the wrists and ankles, being led toward the altar.

This just went from theft to something much worse.

The ninth figure struggles as they're forced to kneel before the altar. One of the robed leaders steps forward, lowering his hood. Blackwood. Of course.

"The gateway approaches," he intones, voice carrying in the open space. "The old boundaries weaken. Tonight we prepare the vessel for what is to come."

He takes the knife, raising it overhead as the chanting intensifies. The bound figure's hood is removed, revealing a young man, maybe early twenties, eyes wide with terror.

I've seen enough. I draw my weapon, preparing to intervene, legal consequences be damned. But before I can move, one of the robed figures looks up, straight at my hiding place.

"We have an intruder," a woman's voice announces, oddly calm. "The detective has found us."

All heads turn upward. Blackwood's expression isn't surprised but satisfied, like I've fulfilled some expectation.

"Mr. Harlow," he calls out. "I wondered if you'd join us. Please, come down. You're just in time for the most important part."

I aim my weapon at Blackwood. "Let the kid go, and everyone put your hands where I can see them."

Laughter ripples through the group—not nervous or mocking, but genuinely amused, as if I've told a charming joke at a dinner party.

"You still don't understand what's happening here," Blackwood says. "This isn't a kidnapping. It's a summoning. And you, Mr. Harlow, are the guest of honor."

Two robed figures are already moving up metal stairs to my position. I fire a warning shot that echoes deafeningly in the metal structure, but they don't even flinch. Something is very wrong with these people.

I turn to run, heading for the window I entered through. Behind me, the chanting rises in volume and intensity. The air feels suddenly thick, hard to move through, like running in a dream. As I reach the window, a figure steps out of the shadows—Professor Hassan.

"You can't flee destiny, Mr. Harlow," he says, face calm but eyes gleaming with fanatical intensity. "Your bloodline has been chosen. A great honor."

I don't bother arguing with crazy. I shove past him, feeling his fingernails scrape across my arm as he attempts to grab me. I squeeze through the window and onto the loading platform, sprinting toward the ladder.

Footsteps thunder behind me as more cultists pour onto the platform. The ladder is my only escape route, but as I reach it, I see figures emerging on the ground below. I'm trapped.

The roof. It's my only option. I race along the platform to where it connects with a rusted external staircase that leads upward. The metal creaks ominously beneath my feet, chunks of rust flaking away with each step.

I reach the rooftop, a flat expanse of corrugated metal and ancient tar paper. The harbor stretches out on one side, a thirty-foot drop to dark water. The other sides offer no escape, cultists now emerging from every access point.

Blackwood steps forward, still holding the ceremonial knife. His left hand's tremor has vanished completely.

"The boundary thins, Mr. Harlow. Can you feel it?" He gestures to the sky, where clouds have parted to reveal a moon that seems unnaturally large and bright. "The gateway seeks a guardian. Your father understood this, in the end."

"My father was a cop who got killed during a traffic stop," I spit out, though even to my ears, the official story sounds hollow now.

"Is that what they told you?" Blackwood approaches slowly, the knife catching moonlight. "He died here, Jake. Right where you're standing. He refused his destiny, and the gateway remained vulnerable. But blood calls to blood. Your bloodline was chosen centuries ago."

The cultists form a circle around us, their chanting now so low it feels more like vibration than sound. The air shimmers strangely, like heat waves on summer asphalt.

"You're insane," I tell him, though something deep in my bones responds to his words, a resonance I don't want to acknowledge. "All of you."

"Sanity is a matter of perspective." Blackwood is only a few feet away now. "The eclipse comes soon. The vessel must be prepared. Your father denied his purpose. Will you do the same?"

My back is to the harbor's edge now. Nowhere left to retreat. I raise my gun again. "Stay back."

"You won't shoot me, Jake. Deep down, you feel the pull. The connection to something greater. Why do you think you've always been drawn to the lost? To those who exist between worlds? It's in your blood."

For a moment, just a fraction of a second, I hesitate—because he's right. There has always been something, a knowing I couldn't explain, that led me to the missing when all trails had gone cold. A sense that I could see what others couldn't.

That moment of hesitation costs me everything.

The knife enters just below my ribs, sliding between them with a precision that feels almost professional. Cold metal, then fire spreading outward. I've been

shot before, but this—this is different. The cult leader twists the blade once before yanking it free.

“You should not have come here, detective,” he says, voice muffled behind his mask. “But perhaps it’s fitting. A witness becomes a participant.”

I try to speak, but my mouth fills with copper. My feet are backing up instinctively, away from the blade. I don’t realize how close to the roof’s edge I am until there’s nothing beneath my right foot but thirty feet of night air.

As I fall, time stretches. The pain recedes behind a wall of adrenaline. The harbor water below looks black as ink in the moonlight. I think about Mike, about how I failed him three years ago, and wonder if this is cosmic payback.

The last thing I see before I hit the water is a black cat perched on the warehouse ledge, watching me with eyes that glow like twin eclipses. Then darkness. Cold. Nothing.

Until the desert.

Chapter 4: The Desert Between

I’m standing on sand that stretches to infinity. The night sky above holds stars in patterns I don’t recognize, too bright, too close. There’s no moon, yet everything is visible in a twilight that has no source.

Death should hurt more than this.

My last memories flood back in disjointed flashes: Blackwood’s knife sliding between my ribs, the sensation of falling, the harbor water rushing up to meet me. I touch my side where the blade entered, finding no wound, no blood—only smooth skin beneath the fabric of a shirt that should be soaked but feels desert-dry.

“You are between,” says a voice that doesn’t disturb the air yet reverberates through my bones.

I turn to find a creature that my mind first registers as a massive black cat. But that’s not quite right. Its proportions shift as I look at it, sometimes suggesting a jackal’s muzzle, sometimes a man’s shoulders beneath the midnight fur. Only the eyes remain constant—golden irises surrounding pupils like solar eclipses.

“Between what?” My voice sounds wrong here, too solid for this place.

“Between death and life. Between worlds. Between what you were and what you might become.” The creature paces around me, leaving no prints in the sand. “Your kind calls me Anubis, though that name is... incomplete.”

“I’m dead.” Not a question. I remember the knife, the fall.

“The death of your body was meant to be a vessel’s preparation. The Order of Eternal Dusk sought to bind me to their will through ritual sacrifice and sympathetic magic.” The being’s tail—or is it a cloak?—twitches with what might be amusement. “Instead, you intercepted the binding by dying within the active ritual circle.”

I notice now the knife wound is gone, though phantom pain ghosts across my ribs. “So what happens now?”

The entity that calls itself Anubis sits on its haunches, head tilting in a disturbingly feline gesture. “Now, Jake Harlow, you decide. Serve as my avatar in the mortal world, help me stop this cult from completing their ritual cycle, and I will grant you life once our bargain concludes. Refuse, and your soul dissolves back into the cosmic current, as all unmoored souls eventually must.”

“That’s not much of a choice.”

“Death rarely offers choices at all,” Anubis says, eyes narrowing to twin solar flares. “Consider yourself privileged.”

I look around at the endless desert, searching for something familiar, something real. There’s nothing but sand and stars, sand and stars. “What exactly does being your ‘avatar’ entail?”

Anubis rises, its form rippling like heat haze. “You would be my eyes, my hands, my will in the physical realm. You would retain your consciousness, your memories, but gain certain... abilities.”

“What kinds of abilities?”

“The sight to perceive death’s signature. The form to move between spaces. The senses to detect that which remains hidden.” Anubis’s voice has taken on a rhythmic quality, almost hypnotic. “You would walk in shadow and light both, neither fully human nor fully other.”

A memory surfaces—the black cat I saw watching from the ledge as I fell. “You’d turn me into a cat?”

Something like a chuckle emanates from the creature. “Not entirely. You would share my aspect, able to take feline form when needed. The ancients knew me in many forms—jackal, cat, man—all are facets of what I truly am.”

“And if I help you stop the cult, then what? I go back to normal? Back to being just Jake Harlow, private detective with bad knees and worse credit?”

Anubis moves closer, its scent a strange mix of embalming spices and desert air. “If our contract is fulfilled, the binding dissolves. Your life would be your own again.”

I’m being offered a supernatural deal with a death god in an impossible desert. The rational part of my brain—the part trained at the police academy, the part that still submits receipts with expense reports—screams that this is a

hallucination, the final firing of neurons as my drowned body sinks to the harbor floor.

But another part, something older and deeper, recognizes truth when it's staring me in the face with eclipse eyes.

"Tell me about the cult. What are they really trying to do?"

Anubis's form grows more distinct, more solid, as if my question somehow anchors it. "The Order of Eternal Dusk believes they seek resurrection, the power to defy death. What they would actually accomplish is far worse. They would tear open the gateway between ordered reality and the chaos realm beyond."

"Chaos realm?"

"A place of entities that once sought to invade your reality, entities I was tasked with guarding against. The gateway was sealed millennia ago, but it requires... maintenance. The eclipse approaches, when the boundaries naturally thin. If they complete their ritual cycle during this alignment, the gateway will rupture beyond repair."

"And these chaos entities would come through."

"They hunger for physical form, for sensation. They would wear your world like ill-fitting clothes until it tears apart at the seams." Anubis's tail lashes once. "Your world would not end, precisely. It would transform into something your mind cannot comprehend without breaking."

Great. Cosmic horror on top of everything else. "And Blackwood? What's his angle in all this?"

"Maxwell Blackwood lost his family. His grief made him susceptible to whispers from beyond the gateway. He believes the chaos entities will restore his wife and daughter to him." A sound like desert wind through ancient tombs—Anubis sighing. "They will not. They cannot. They will only create hollow simulacra to torment him before discarding his usefulness."

I think of Blackwood's trembling left hand, his haunted reflection in the penthouse window. A man willing to destroy the world for the chance to see his family again. Under different circumstances, I might almost sympathize.

"What about my father? Blackwood said he died at the warehouse, that he was chosen like me."

Anubis's gaze turns penetrating, seeing through flesh to something beneath. "James Harlow carried the potential in his blood, as you do. A genetic echo of my ancient priesthood. He discovered the Order's activities, but too late. They killed him when he refused to cooperate, failed to complete the binding properly. His death created... complications."

"What complications?"

“Death has patterns, Jake Harlow. Your father’s death, your partner’s death three years ago, and now your own—all connected to the same forces. Cycles within cycles.” Anubis begins pacing again, a predator’s restless movement. “The cult has been preparing for generations, collecting artifacts, cultivating bloodlines. Your family has been under their observation since your great-grandmother’s adoption from Cairo.”

My head spins with implications. My entire life tilting on its axis, revelations that recontextualize everything I thought I knew. My father’s mysterious death during what was reported as a routine traffic stop. My uncanny ability to find missing persons when other investigators failed. My recurring dreams of desert landscapes since childhood.

“Let me understand,” I say, pacing across sand that leaves no footprints. “I died, but not completely.”

“Death is rarely absolute,” Anubis replies, tail flicking. “More a transition than an ending.”

“And because I died during their ritual, I intercepted some kind of... binding spell?”

“Precisely. They sought to bind my essence to a prepared vessel they could control. You, however, were an unexpected variable. Unprepared, but surprisingly compatible.”

“Because of my bloodline. Which you knew about.”

Anubis’s eyes narrow slightly. “I notice promising vessels. A coincidence that you were investigating this particular case.”

“I don’t believe in coincidences.”

“A wise position for a detective.” Anubis rises, stretching in a disturbingly feline manner. “Nevertheless, here we are. Bound, but incompletely. Your body has been retrieved from the harbor, preserved by our partial connection. I can restore you fully, with certain... enhancements.”

“In exchange for being your servant.”

“My avatar,” Anubis corrects. “My eyes and hands in the physical world. Help me stop the Order of Eternal Dusk from completing their ritual cycle, and once the threat is neutralized, I will release you from service.”

“And if I refuse?”

“Then what remains of your soul joins the cosmic river, as all unbound souls eventually must. A natural death, merely... accelerated.”

I stare across the impossible desert. “Not much of a choice.”

“More than most get,” Anubis counters. “Choose quickly, detective. Your body can only remain in stasis so long.”

I think about Nadia, about how she'll blame herself when my body washes up on shore. About the artifacts still missing, the cult still operating. About my father and the truth of his death, buried for decades. About Mike, my partner, whose death three years ago might not have been the random tragedy I'd accepted.

And I think about Blackwood's true believers, preparing to tear reality apart in pursuit of impossible resurrection.

"If I agree, what's our first move?"

Anubis's eyes glow brighter, like twin suns. "You will awaken in your body. The cult believes you drowned; this gives us advantage. You will need to find the Egyptologist, explain what has happened. She has knowledge we require."

"Nadia won't believe me. Hell, I barely believe me."

"She will when she sees what you've become." Anubis moves closer, its form growing larger, encompassing my field of vision until there is nothing but ancient eyes and midnight fur. "But first, you must taste death to claim the life beyond it."

The desert dissolves around me. In its place, cold rushes in—the freezing embrace of harbor water filling my lungs. Pain returns, a white-hot explosion in my side where the knife entered. I'm drowning, dying all over again, but this time with the certainty that it's not the end.

Distant, as if heard through water, Anubis's voice reaches me one last time:

"Find the artifacts. Stop the ritual. Protect the gateway. Do this, and your ninth life will be your own again."

Then darkness. Pressure. The burning need for air.

I open my eyes to blinding fluorescent lights and the smell of industrial disinfectant. A metal table cold against my back. Voices nearby, professional and detached.

"Male, Caucasian, approximately thirty to thirty-five. Cause of death: penetrating trauma to the intercostal space between ribs four and five, right side, followed by drowning. Time of death estimated between 11 PM and—"

I gasp, sucking air into lungs that feel newborn and ancient simultaneously. The medical examiner's clipboard clatters to the floor as she stumbles backward, face draining of color.

"That's impossible," she whispers. "You were dead. I checked. You were dead."

I sit up on the autopsy table, water streaming from my hair, the phantom memory of sand still between my toes. The sheet covering me falls away, revealing the knife wound—no longer bleeding, but an angry red line that pulses with golden light beneath the skin.

“Not anymore,” I tell her, my voice rough as if scraped raw by desert winds. “Now I’m something else entirely.”

Chapter 5: Nine Lives

“That’s impossible,” the medical examiner repeats, pressing herself against the wall like she’s trying to melt through it. “I pronounced you. I checked for pulse, pupillary response, breathing. Nothing. You were dead for at least six hours.”

I look down at my naked body, at the angry red line between my ribs that pulses with a light that shouldn’t exist. Golden, like Anubis’s eyes in the desert. Not blood, not quite, but something else entirely.

“I got better,” I say, because what else can you say in this situation?

My voice sounds wrong to my ears—deeper somehow, with a resonant quality I don’t recognize. And my ears... everything sounds different. The hum of the fluorescent lights above is a distinct electrical buzz, not the ambient background noise it should be. The drip of water from my hair hitting the metal table rings like a bell. And the woman’s heartbeat—I can hear her heartbeat, racing rabbit-fast in her chest.

“Dr. Chen,” I read from her name tag, forcing my tone to soften. “I know this is difficult to understand. I’m still working it out myself.”

She swallows hard, her lab coat rustling with the movement—another sound impossibly clear. “The harbor patrol found your body three hours ago. Water-bloated. No vital signs. Fixed lividity in the lower extremities. You were dead, Mr. Harlow.”

I swing my legs over the edge of the autopsy table, moving carefully. Everything feels both heavier and lighter simultaneously, as if my body can’t quite decide which physical laws to obey.

“I was,” I agree. “But something... intervened.”

Dr. Chen’s scientific curiosity begins to overtake her fear—I can smell the change in her, a subtle shift in body chemistry that registers as clearly as if she’d announced it. This sense data comes pre-interpreted, knowledge I shouldn’t have: fear smells sharp and cold, curiosity warm and earthy.

“Something like what, exactly?” she asks, taking a cautious step forward.

I consider telling her about Anubis, about the desert between, about chaos entities and gateways. But the words tangle in my throat. Not because I don’t want to explain, but because I physically can’t. The knowledge feels locked away, accessible to me but not communicable. A geas, I think, the word appearing in my mind unbidden.

“I can’t explain right now,” I say instead. “But I need clothes, and I need to get out of here before anyone else sees me.”

She hesitates, conflict playing across her features. “Mr. Harlow, you were stabbed and drowned. Even if you’ve somehow... revived... you need medical attention. Tests. Observation.”

“What I need is to not become a lab specimen,” I counter, looking pointedly around the morgue. “Which is exactly what would happen if word got out.”

This strikes home. Dr. Chen is young, early thirties maybe, with the kind of intensity that marks the truly dedicated. She retrieves a folded bundle from a cabinet—paper scrubs, the kind given to people whose clothes are taken as evidence.

“These are the best I can do,” she says, passing them to me without coming too close. “Your personal effects are in that drawer, still drying out.”

I dress quickly, acutely aware of my body’s new responsiveness—muscles coiling with unexpected strength, reflexes hair-trigger sensitive. The fabric feels abrasive against hypersensitive skin, each fiber distinct. When I reach for my personal effects bag, my hand moves faster than I intend, knocking a tray of instruments to the floor with a crash that makes both of us wince.

“Sorry,” I mutter, experimentally flexing my fingers. “Still calibrating.”

Inside the plastic bag, my possessions are a sad, waterlogged collection: wallet, keys, phone (definitely dead in more ways than one), pocket notebook reduced to pulp, loose change, and my detective’s license in its leather case. No gun—that would have been logged separately in evidence, assuming it was recovered from the harbor.

“The police will have questions,” Dr. Chen says, watching me warily. “Harbor Patrol found evidence of violence at the scene. Blood that wasn’t yours.”

One of the cultists, I remember. I managed to land a solid hit during the chase.

“Let me worry about that,” I tell her, pocketing my soggy belongings. “Right now, I need to—”

I stop mid-sentence, distracted by something at the edge of vision. A faint bluish aura surrounds one of the occupied drawers in the wall of refrigerated units. As I focus on it, the glow intensifies, streamers of color reaching out like tendrils before dissipating.

“What is it?” Dr. Chen asks, following my gaze.

“That drawer,” I say, pointing. “Who’s in there?”

She frowns, moving to her computer terminal. “That would be... Jane Doe, brought in yesterday. Apparent overdose, found in Public Garden.”

I walk toward the drawer, drawn by the glow that Dr. Chen clearly can't see. The blue is shot through with threads of darker indigo, forming patterns that somehow communicate information directly to my brain. Not an overdose. Poisoned. The woman drank something she thought was alcohol, but it was laced with something else. I can see it, the signature of death itself, hanging in the air like spectral evidence.

"She was murdered," I say with absolute certainty. "Check for thallium."

Dr. Chen's eyes widen. "How could you possibly—"

"I just know," I interrupt, unable to explain what I'm seeing. "Trust me on this one."

Another drawer pulses with a different color—orange-red, violent and chaotic. Another with pale green, peaceful. Each drawer containing a body emanates its own unique chromatic signature, a visual language of death that I somehow understand instinctively.

"I need to go," I say abruptly, suddenly overwhelmed by the chorus of deaths surrounding me. Their signatures are growing brighter, more insistent, pressing against my consciousness like too many radio stations playing at once.

Dr. Chen steps into my path. She's either very brave or hasn't fully processed what's happening. "Wait. You can't just walk out of here. You're a medical impossibility. I have a professional obligation—"

"To do what?" I ask, hearing an edge creep into my voice. "Section me? Write a paper? Call CNN? None of that helps me, and none of it helps you understand what's actually happening."

Her shoulders sag slightly. "Then help me understand."

I soften, recognizing an ally when I see one. "I will. But not today. Today I need to figure out what I've become and how to stop something very bad from happening. If you truly want to help, just give me a head start."

She studies me, clinical detachment warring with human curiosity. "Twenty-four hours," she finally says. "That's how long it will take for me to process the paperwork on your 'mistaken death diagnosis.' After that, I can't control what happens."

"Fair enough," I concede, already calculating my next moves. Find Nadia. Explain what happened—somehow. Track down the missing artifacts. Stop a cult from tearing open reality. All in a day's work for the formerly deceased.

"One more thing," Dr. Chen adds, reaching into a cabinet and retrieving a business card. She scribbles something on the back. "My personal number. When you figure out what's happening to you... I want to know. Purely scientific interest."

I pocket the card, oddly touched by this small gesture of humanity in the face of the impossible. “I’ll call. Thanks, Dr. Chen.”

“Alice,” she corrects. “Anyone who comes back from the dead in my morgue gets to use my first name.”

I manage a smile that feels almost normal. “Jake, then.”

Slipping out of the morgue proves surprisingly easy. It’s 3 AM, the hospital corridors deserted except for the occasional night shift nurse too tired to look twice at a man in paper scrubs. My senses map the building automatically—I can hear conversations through walls, smell the different antiseptics used on different floors, sense which paths contain fewer people through some new awareness I can’t name.

Outside, the November air hits my damp hair, but I don’t feel cold. If anything, I run hot now, as if something is burning just beneath my skin. Boston at night looks transformed through my new senses—colors more vivid, shadows deeper but somehow more transparent. I can see movement in those shadows that normal eyes would miss, hear the scurrying of rats in alleys half a block away.

I need transportation, clothes, a plan. My apartment is fifteen blocks from here, manageable on foot even in paper scrubs. I stick to side streets and alleys, avoiding the scattered late-night pedestrians. Each person I pass carries their own subtle death signature, a faint halo suggesting potential ends not yet realized. An elderly man tinted with peaceful blue. A strung-out teenager with sickly yellow. A taxi driver with alarming crimson flecks—heart attack waiting to happen.

I try not to look too closely. Some knowledge isn’t meant for the living.

Walking past the all-night diner on Tremont, I catch my reflection in the window and stop cold. My eyes are wrong—pupils elongated vertically, irises ringed with gold. I blink hard, and they shift back to normal. But for that moment, I saw what Dr. Chen saw: something other than human looking out from a human face.

I hurry onward, keeping my head down. The changes aren’t just sensory then. Anubis mentioned transformation abilities—taking “feline form when needed.” The thought both terrifies and intrigues me. What are the limits? The triggers? How much control will I have?

The stairwell to my apartment building smells of mildew and cheap disinfectant, scents amplified tenfold through my enhanced perception. Three flights up, I reach my door and find it ajar, splintered around the lock.

I press myself against the wall beside the door, instinctively moving with a silence and grace I’ve never possessed before. From inside comes the sound of movement—someone methodically going through my belongings, drawers opening and closing, papers shuffling.

I have no weapon, no backup, no real understanding of my new capabilities. But I also have no choice. Whatever Blackwood's people are looking for, I can't let them find it. Especially since I don't know what it might be.

I ease the door open wider, wincing at the slight creak of hinges. The living room is a disaster zone—furniture overturned, bookshelves emptied, floorboards pried up in places. The search is thorough but not random. They're looking for something specific.

A man in dark clothing stands with his back to me, rifling through my desk. I can smell gun oil on him, metal and cordite. Armed, then. I should retreat, call the police, handle this conventionally.

Instead, something primal rises in me—a territorial anger that feels both foreign and deeply familiar. A low growl builds in my throat, inhumanly resonant. My vision sharpens drastically, the room suddenly brighter as my pupils expand to impossible widths.

The intruder spins, hand reaching inside his jacket. Too slow. I've already crossed the room, moving faster than human reflexes should allow. My hand closes around his wrist, applying pressure with strength that doesn't feel like my own. Something cracks. He gasps, his gun clattering to the floor.

"Who sent you?" I demand, my voice carrying harmonics that make him flinch.

His eyes widen with recognition, then stark terror. "You're dead," he whispers. "They said you were dead."

"I got better," I say for the second time tonight, baring teeth that suddenly feel too sharp in my mouth. "Now answer the question."

He struggles, and I twist his arm behind his back with laughable ease. My senses catalog him automatically—expensive aftershave masking body odor, the metallic scent of the blade in his boot, the rapid-fire pattern of his heartbeat. All data points painting a clear picture: professional. Mercenary. Scared.

"Blackwood will kill me," he manages through gritted teeth.

"And what do you think I'll do?" I counter, surprised by the cold menace in my voice. This isn't me. Or it wasn't. I've threatened suspects before, but never like this—never feeling like I could tear out their throat if they gave the wrong answer.

Something in my eyes must convince him, because he stops struggling. "We were told to find anything connected to Egyptian artifacts or research. Notes, books, correspondence. And to leave no trace you were investigating."

"Why? I'm already dead, according to you."

"Insurance," he mutters. "Blackwood doesn't leave loose ends, even dead ones."

I release him with a shove, watching him stumble against the overturned couch. "Tell Blackwood I got his message. And that he should be more careful about

who he stabs. Some of us don't stay dead."

The man's fear-scent spikes sharply. He bolts for the door without looking back, leaving his gun on the floor. Once he's gone, I slump against the wall, adrenaline ebbing as suddenly as it came. With it goes the heightened aggression, the fang-sharp teeth, the territorial rage.

My apartment is destroyed. Books torn apart, clothes scattered, every hiding place exposed. They didn't find what they were looking for because I don't have it—whatever connection they think I made hasn't happened yet.

I need clothes, weapons, resources. Most importantly, I need to find Nadia before Blackwood's people do. She hired me to find those artifacts; now she might be in danger for the same reason.

As I gather essentials from the wreckage—jeans, boots, a black sweater, my backup piece from the hidden compartment they missed—I catch another glimpse of myself in the bathroom mirror. For just a moment, my reflection wavers, showing something else superimposed over my features—a sleek black silhouette with golden eyes. Not fully formed, more suggestion than reality, but unmistakably feline.

Avatar. Servant. Nine lives.

Anubis's words echo in my head: *Find the artifacts. Stop the ritual. Protect the gateway.*

I shoulder a backpack with my hastily gathered supplies and head for the door. The night is still young, and I have a life to reclaim—all nine of them.

Chapter 6: Fur and Fangs

The dawn finds me on a rooftop across from Boston University's archaeology department, watching Nadia Farouk arrive for work. She's earlier than the other faculty—a small, determined figure in a deep blue coat, her breath clouding in the November air. Even from this distance, I can smell the cardamom in her coffee, the subtle notes of jasmine in her perfume. These new senses remain disorienting, but I'm starting to appreciate their utility.

She pauses at the entrance, looking over her shoulder with the wariness of someone who knows they're being watched. Smart woman. If Blackwood's people came for me, they've likely got her under surveillance too.

I need to warn her, but showing up like this—alive when I should be dead, with golden eyes that sometimes aren't quite human—seems like a good way to end up with campus security on my tail. I need to observe first, make sure she's alone when I approach. And I need to better understand what I've become.

The itching starts as I contemplate my next move. It begins beneath my skin, an irritation that quickly intensifies into something more urgent. My heartbeat

accelerates until I can hear nothing else, a war drum in my ears. The morning sunlight suddenly seems too bright, painfully so.

Fight it and it hurts worse, Anubis had said in the dream last night. Easy for him to say.

I scramble behind a ventilation unit as the sensation spreads through my limbs. My fingers curl involuntarily, nails somehow longer, darker. My spine—oh god, my spine is realigning itself, vertebrae popping and shifting. I bite back a scream as pain lances upward from tailbone to neck.

I drop to all fours as my body reconfigures itself with a series of sickening cracks that should be agonizing but instead bring a strange relief. The world warps around me, perspectives shifting, the rooftop growing larger as I shrink. My clothes aren't falling away so much as they're being absorbed, becoming part of whatever magic is rewriting my physical form.

Then comes the sensory assault. Scents I never noticed flood my awareness—the copper roof beneath me, the exhaust from morning traffic, the distinct individual aromas of every human in the building below. Sounds sharpen and categorize themselves by threat level—the rustle of pigeons on a neighboring roof, voices from an open window three floors down, the electrical hum of the city itself.

In seconds, it's over. I shake myself, adjusting to four legs and the sinuous weight of a tail. The world has transformed as much as I have. Colors have muted to a narrower spectrum, but movement is suddenly hyper-apparent—the smallest twitch of a leaf across the street catches my attention. The edge of the roof that seemed a reasonable distance now looks like a cliff.

I need to see. Cautiously, I approach a puddle left by overnight rain and peer into it.

A sleek black cat stares back, its fur catching light with subtle gold flecks like stars in a night sky. Only the eyes remain recognizably mine, though even they've changed—green-gold now instead of brown, the pupils vertical slits adjusting to the light.

Well, that's new, I think, and am startled when my tail twitches in response to the thought.

I pad around the rooftop experimentally, learning this new body. It moves with an effortless grace that makes me, as Jake, feel like I've spent my life stumbling around in comparison. Each muscle responds with precision, balance automatic rather than conscious. I leap to a higher ledge, surprised by the easy power in my haunches, then down again, landing silently.

But I'm still me inside this feline form. My thoughts remain human, my memories intact. When I pass the puddle again, I try to speak, producing only a meow that sounds strange to my newly sensitive ears.

So, communication will be an issue, I think, huffing in frustration.

The door to the roof access opens, and I freeze. A maintenance worker steps out, clipboard in hand, utterly unaware of the existential crisis happening on his rooftop. I retreat to the shadows instinctively, heart rate spiking.

He walks past without a glance, stopping to check an air conditioning unit. I realize with sudden clarity that I'm just a cat to him. A stray on a rooftop—unusual, perhaps, but not worthy of alarm.

This is power of a different sort than the strength and speed I demonstrated in my apartment. This is invisibility. Access. The perfect cover for a detective who's supposed to be dead.

I slip past the maintenance worker while he's distracted with his clipboard, ducking through the door before it closes fully. The stairwell presents a new challenge—stairs designed for human legs are oversized for my current form, but I adjust quickly, leaping down in graceful bounds.

On the third floor, I pause, scenting the air. I can smell Nadia—that distinctive blend of coffee, old books, and jasmine—from here. Following it through the hallways is simple, even with the overlapping scents of dozens of students and faculty members.

Her office door is closed, but a narrow window beside it is cracked open despite the November chill. I leap to the windowsill in one fluid motion, balancing there to peer inside.

Nadia sits at her desk, surrounded by papers and open books. She's been crying—I can smell the salt tracks on her cheeks. On her computer screen is a news article with my name in the headline: PRIVATE DETECTIVE DROWNS IN HARBOR.

Something tightens in my chest, a feeling that translates into a low rumble from my throat. She cared. We'd met exactly once, had a single conversation about a case, yet my death affected her.

She looks up at the sound, eyes widening as she notices me at the window. For a moment, we just stare at each other—the Egyptologist and the black cat with unusual eyes. Something in her gaze shifts from surprise to scholarly interest. She studies me with the same intensity she gave the artifacts in our first meeting.

"Hello there," she says softly, her accent more pronounced than I remember. "Where did you come from?"

I meow in response, unable to help myself. Being acknowledged directly creates an unexpected urge to communicate, even in this limited form.

She rises from her desk and approaches cautiously. I hold my ground on the windowsill, even as every new instinct screams to run from the larger predator.

"Your eyes are... unusual," she murmurs, leaning closer.

I meet her gaze directly, trying to convey intelligence, humanity—anything to create a connection I can build on later. Then I hear voices in the hallway approaching her office. Multiple footsteps. Male voices. One familiar.

Professor Hassan from the archaeology department—the man who had been suspiciously unhelpful during my initial investigation. And someone else, voice lower, words indistinct but tone commanding.

I flatten myself against the windowsill as Nadia turns toward her door. The voices stop directly outside.

“Dr. Farouk?” Hassan calls, knocking sharply. “Do you have a moment?”

Nadia glances back at me, then to the door. “Just a second,” she calls, turning back to quietly shut the window. “Sorry, little one,” she whispers. “University policy about strays.”

The window closes, leaving me outside. But cats have excellent hearing, it turns out.

“Professor Hassan,” Nadia says as she opens her door. “What can I help you with?”

“This is Mr. Reynolds from the insurance company,” Hassan says, the lie apparent even without my enhanced senses. “He has some additional questions about the stolen artifacts.”

“Insurance company?” Nadia sounds puzzled. “I thought the university’s legal department was handling all that.”

“Standard procedure with high-value losses,” the stranger—Reynolds—responds smoothly. His voice carries the confident authority of someone used to being believed. “We just need to verify a few details about your interactions with the private investigator you hired.”

I freeze on the windowsill. They’re fishing for information about me. About what I might have discovered before my “death.”

“I’ve already given my statement to the police,” Nadia says, wariness creeping into her tone. “Mr. Harlow was investigating the theft for less than two days before his accident.”

“Yes, tragic,” Reynolds says without a hint of sincerity. “Did he share any theories or findings with you before he died?”

I edge along the exterior of the building, finding a better angle to see through a corner of the window. Reynolds is tall, expensively dressed, with the bland good looks of a corporate lawyer. But the bulge under his jacket suggests he’s carrying a weapon, and the way he positions himself between Nadia and the door feels deliberately intimidating.

“No,” Nadia answers, taking a subtle step backward. “He was still in the preliminary stage of his investigation. Said he was following a lead but didn’t

elaborate.”

Reynolds smiles thinly. “Dr. Farouk, it would be better for everyone if you were completely forthcoming. Harlow may have shared information that could help recover these items.”

“Or help you make sure they’re never found,” Nadia counters, her posture stiffening. “Who did you say you work for again?”

Hassan shifts uncomfortably. “Nadia, please—”

“I’d like to see some identification,” she interrupts, holding out her hand toward Reynolds.

The shift in the room’s energy is immediate and dangerous. Reynolds’ body language changes, becoming predatory in a way I recognize all too well from my years in law enforcement. He’s weighing options, none of them good for Nadia.

Without conscious thought, I throw myself against the window. It doesn’t budge, but the thud is loud enough to startle everyone inside. I do it again, adding a yowl for good measure.

All three humans turn toward the noise. I lock eyes with Reynolds through the glass, letting every ounce of feline aggression surface. My back arches, fur standing on end, teeth bared in a silent hiss. Somehow, I know he can sense the wrongness in me—the not-quite-cat quality that makes ordinary animals uneasy.

The distraction is enough. Nadia uses the moment to step around her desk, putting it between herself and the men.

“I have a faculty meeting I’m late for,” she says firmly. “If you have more questions, you can direct them to the university’s legal department. Professor Hassan knows the contact information.”

Reynolds recovers quickly, slipping back into his corporate persona. “Of course. We’ll continue this another time.” He hands her a business card. “Call me if you remember anything Mr. Harlow might have mentioned.”

They leave, Hassan throwing one last confused glance at the cat still bristling on the windowsill. After they’re gone, Nadia approaches the window again, studying me with renewed interest.

“Thank you, whoever you are,” she murmurs. “That was perfect timing.”

I press a paw against the glass, aching to communicate. She needs to know she’s in danger. Needs to know I’m alive. But how to tell her when I’m trapped in this form?

She takes a photo of me with her phone, then glances at her watch and begins gathering her things. “I really do have a meeting,” she says, as if explaining herself to a cat is perfectly normal. “But I’ll leave some water for you.”

She sets a paper cup of water on the windowsill, then collects her bag and coat. Before leaving, she looks back at me one more time, her expression thoughtful.

“Strange day,” she says softly. “First that fake insurance agent asking about Jake, now a cat that seems to understand English.”

She shakes her head and leaves, locking her office behind her.

I remain on the windowsill, mind racing. Reynolds is Blackwood’s man, obviously. And Hassan is either working with them or being manipulated. Either way, Nadia is in their crosshairs, and I have no way to warn her until I can transform back.

Which brings me to the immediate problem: I have no idea how to reverse this transformation. Anubis wasn’t exactly forthcoming with an instruction manual.

I need to follow Nadia, make sure she’s safe, then figure out how to change back when she’s alone. The campus sprawls below me, and somewhere in that maze of buildings is a woman who thinks I’m dead but might be my only ally in stopping whatever Blackwood has planned.

I find a drain pipe and descend to ground level in a series of careful leaps, still adjusting to the physics of this smaller body. Tracking Nadia proves surprisingly easy—her scent stands out to my feline senses, a distinctive trail leading across the quad toward the humanities building.

I follow at a distance, staying low in the ornamental bushes, acutely aware of my vulnerability. A hawk circles overhead, and I feel an instinctive spike of fear. The cat part of me recognizes predators I would never have noticed as a human.

Nadia enters the humanities building, and I dart through the door behind a group of students, narrowly avoiding being stepped on. The crowded hallway is a nightmare of towering legs and heavy backpacks threatening to crush me. I weave through the forest of humanity, following Nadia’s scent up a staircase and down another hallway to a lecture hall.

She slips inside, the door closing behind her. I sit outside, tail twitching with frustration. I can smell Reynolds nearby—he’s followed her too, though not as closely as I have. He lounges at the far end of the hallway, pretending to read a bulletin board while keeping the lecture hall door in his peripheral vision.

I need to change back. Need to warn her. But how?

Focus on your human form, a voice whispers in my mind—Anubis, speaking across whatever connection binds us now. *The transformation is will and intent, not merely physical.*

I retreat to an empty classroom across the hall, squeezing under the door with some difficulty. Inside, I find a quiet corner behind a trash can and concentrate. I picture my human body, try to feel its dimensions and proportions, the sensation of standing upright, of hands instead of paws.

Nothing happens.

I try again, focusing harder, imagining the transformation in reverse—bones lengthening, fur receding, spine straightening. Still nothing. Panic begins to rise. What if I'm stuck like this? What if—

You are fighting yourself, Anubis's voice comes again. *The cat is not separate from you. It is you. Accept it as part of yourself, then choose to be more.*

I take a mental step back. The cat isn't a costume I'm wearing or a prison I'm trapped in. It's me—another aspect of what I am now. Like water changing states—ice to liquid to vapor—still fundamentally the same substance.

I close my eyes and simply... accept. The sleek body, the heightened senses, the predatory instincts—all part of Jake Harlow now. And once I accept that, I can also accept that the human form is equally mine to claim.

The change begins subtly. A warming sensation spreads through my limbs, a gentle stretching rather than the painful contortion of the first transformation. I feel myself expanding, fur receding into skin, bones and muscles rearranging themselves with bizarre but painless efficiency.

The process takes perhaps thirty seconds, and then I'm crouched naked on the classroom floor, human again. My clothes have returned with me, materializing as my body reformed—another mystery of this transformation I don't have time to question.

I stand carefully, testing my balance. My senses have dulled compared to the cat's razor-sharp awareness, but they're still enhanced beyond my old human baseline. I can hear Nadia's lecture through the walls, smell Reynolds' aftershave lingering in the hallway.

A glance at the clock tells me I've been in cat form for nearly three hours. The lecture should end soon, and I need to intercept Nadia before Reynolds makes another approach.

I slip into the hallway, keeping my head down as students begin emerging from various classrooms. Reynolds is still there, looking impatient as he checks his watch. He hasn't noticed me yet—a dead man walking among the living.

Nadia's lecture lets out, students streaming through the doors. I position myself in an alcove where I can see her exit but remain partially hidden from Reynolds' line of sight. She emerges last, talking with a student, her expression animated as she gestures to emphasize a point.

Reynolds straightens, beginning to move toward her. I step out, timing my approach to intercept him before he reaches her. Our eyes meet across the crowded hallway. His widen in shock, hand instinctively moving toward the weapon under his jacket.

I smile, holding his gaze. "Looking for someone?" I mouth silently.

His face pales. The man who works for Blackwood has just seen a ghost—a complication his boss didn’t anticipate. Fight or flight kicks in, and he chooses flight, backing away and then turning to stride rapidly toward the exit.

Good. That buys me time.

Nadia finishes with her student and turns toward her office, unaware of the silent confrontation that just occurred. I follow her at a distance, waiting until she’s alone in a quieter section of hallway before approaching.

“Dr. Farouk,” I call softly.

She turns, eyes widening as she recognizes me. “Mr. Harlow?” Her voice catches. “But you’re—”

“Dead?” I finish for her, closing the distance between us. “That’s what everyone keeps telling me. We need to talk somewhere private.”

She stares at me, shock giving way to something else—the analytical gaze of a scientist confronted with the impossible. “My office,” she says after a moment, leading the way without further questions.

Once inside, she locks the door and draws the blinds before turning to face me. Her composure is remarkable—hands steady, breathing controlled. Only the rapid pulse visible at her throat betrays her emotional state.

“You should sit down,” I tell her. “What I’m about to say will sound insane.”

“You were pronounced dead,” she states matter-of-factly. “Your body was recovered from the harbor. Now you’re here, apparently unharmed.” She studies me intently. “Your eyes are different.”

I blink, realizing the gold flecks that appeared in my cat form might still be visible. “That’s just the beginning of what’s different,” I say, dropping into the chair across from her desk. “Did you have a black cat visit your window earlier?”

Her breath catches. “That was you?”

I nod. “Reynolds isn’t from any insurance company. He works for Blackwood—the man behind the artifact theft. The same man who had me killed. Or tried to, anyway.”

She sits down abruptly, academic curiosity warring with fear on her face. “How is this possible? You were stabbed. You fell from that warehouse roof. No one could survive that.”

I take a deep breath. “Something intervened when I died. Something connected to those artifacts you hired me to find.” I meet her gaze directly. “What do you know about Anubis—not as a mythological figure, but as an actual entity?”

Her eyes widen. Understanding dawns, followed quickly by disbelief and then—most surprisingly—excitement.

“The transformation rituals,” she whispers. “They were real.” She leans forward intently. “Mr. Harlow, I need you to tell me everything that happened after you fell from that warehouse roof.”

And so I do—about the desert between worlds, about Anubis and his offer, about waking in the morgue with new senses and abilities. About becoming something that’s neither fully human nor fully divine. As I speak, she listens with an intensity that’s almost unnerving, occasionally jotting notes in a small journal.

“You believe me,” I say finally, surprised by her acceptance.

“I’m an Egyptologist specializing in funerary rituals and death cults,” she reminds me with the ghost of a smile. “If anyone would be predisposed to believe your story, it would be me.” She taps her pen against her notebook. “Besides, I just watched you transform from a cat back to a man. That’s rather compelling evidence.”

“You saw that?”

She looks slightly embarrassed. “I was suspicious about the cat. Its behavior was too... deliberate. I doubled back after leaving the lecture hall and saw you change through the classroom window.” She shrugs apologetically. “Academic curiosity.”

I should be angry at being observed during such a vulnerable moment, but honestly, I’m just relieved not to have to convince her.

“Blackwood is going to come after you,” I tell her, leaning forward. “You’re connected to me, and I’m connected to those artifacts. Now that he knows I’m alive—and Reynolds will definitely report back—we’re both in danger.”

“We need a safe place to regroup,” she agrees, immediately practical. “I have a cabin about an hour outside the city. My grandfather left it to me. No one at the university knows about it.”

“Perfect,” I say, standing. “Pack whatever research might help us understand what Blackwood is planning. I’ll meet you there after dark.” I give her a questioning look. “Unless you’d prefer I stay with you?”

She considers this, then shakes her head. “Two people leaving campus together would be noticeable. One person, less so. And you have certain... advantages for traveling unseen now.”

“That’s one way of putting it,” I agree, feeling a sense of relief that I’ll have time to adjust to these changes before prolonged human contact. “I’ll find you by scent.”

She raises an eyebrow, but doesn’t comment on the strangeness of this statement. Instead, she writes an address on a slip of paper and hands it to me. “In case your... scent tracking fails.”

Our fingers brush as I take the paper, and I'm acutely aware of her heartbeat accelerating slightly at the contact. There's something else too—a subtle change in her scent that suggests interest, curiosity, perhaps attraction. These new senses are going to make human interaction complicated.

“What happens now?” she asks, her professional demeanor momentarily slipping to reveal genuine concern. “With you, I mean. Is this transformation permanent?”

I think about Anubis's bargain—serve as his avatar until the threat is neutralized, then receive a second chance at life. But what kind of life? Will I remain part cat, part death-sensing psychopomp? Or return to fully human?

“I don't know,” I answer honestly. “But I intend to find out. Starting with stopping whatever Blackwood has planned for those artifacts.”

She nods, resolve replacing uncertainty. “Then we'd better get to work, Mr. Harlow.”

“Jake,” I correct her. “Anyone who's seen me as a cat gets to use my first name.”

This earns me a genuine smile, transforming her serious academic demeanor into something warmer, more personal. “Nadia, then.”

I move toward the door, then pause. “One more thing. That book on your shelf—the one on transformation rituals in Ancient Egypt. Bring it. I have a feeling we're going to need it.”

Her expression shifts to surprise. “How did you know about that book?”

I tap the side of my nose. “Cat's been out of the bag for a while, it seems.” Before she can respond to the terrible pun, I slip out the door, leaving her staring after me with an expression caught between amusement and astonishment.

In the hallway, I pull the hood of my sweatshirt up to obscure my face. Campus security likely has my photograph as a missing person or possible victim. I need to reach Nadia's cabin without being recognized or, worse, detained.

The sun is setting as I make my way off campus, shadows lengthening across the quad. I can feel the night approaching in a way I never could before—my senses growing sharper as daylight fades, my movements becoming more fluid, more feline even in human form.

I find myself on a rooftop without consciously deciding to climb there, looking out over Boston as lights begin to flicker on across the city. Somewhere out there, Blackwood is planning something that involves Egyptian artifacts and gateways between worlds. Somewhere, the Order of Eternal Dusk is preparing a ritual that Anubis desperately wants to stop.

And here I am, caught between human and divine, life and death, detective and servant. I flex my hands, feeling the potential for claws just beneath the surface. Nine lives, indeed. I just hope they're enough for what's coming.

As darkness falls completely, I surrender to the transformation once more, letting the cat emerge without fighting the process. This time, the change comes easily, painlessly—my humanity folding neatly away like a suit of clothes I can don again when needed.

Sleek and shadow-black, I race across rooftops toward the edge of the city, following the scent of jasmine and old books that will lead me to the only ally I have left in this strange new existence. The night belongs to the cat now, and I have hunting to do.

Chapter 7: Partners

The cabin sits nestled among pine trees, its weathered exterior nearly invisible in the darkness. I arrive ahead of Nadia, having taken a more direct route than the winding forest road. The transformation has become smoother each time—this shift back to human form happening behind a stand of trees near the cabin’s perimeter as naturally as changing clothes.

My senses remain heightened even in human form. I detect no other humans nearby, no vehicles apart from the distant rumble of what must be Nadia’s car making its way up the unpaved road. I circle the cabin, checking entry points, sightlines, potential escape routes—old police habits that seem even more relevant now that I’ve died once already.

The cabin door is locked, but a partially open window on the side provides easy access. I hesitate, aware of crossing a line. Breaking into the home of my client wasn’t covered in our initial agreement.

Former client, I remind myself. Current... what? Ally? Fellow target?

I slide the window open and slip inside, careful not to disturb anything. The cabin’s interior is sparse but comfortable—a main room with a stone fireplace, small kitchen area, and doors leading to what I assume are a bedroom and bathroom. Books line the walls, many in Arabic with a few in hieroglyphics. The place smells of cedar, old paper, and lingering traces of cardamom tea from Nadia’s last visit.

Headlights sweep across the front windows. I position myself where I’ll be visible when she enters but not immediately threatening. No need to trigger any self-defense measures she might have after the day’s events.

The door opens, and Nadia enters cautiously, one hand clutching her bag, the other hidden in her coat pocket. Smart woman.

“It’s just me,” I say, keeping my voice low and steady.

She flinches slightly but doesn’t look surprised to find me inside. “I assumed you’d beat me here.” She closes and locks the door behind her, then removes her

hand from her pocket, revealing a small canister of pepper spray. “Precaution,” she explains, setting it on a side table within reach.

“I’d have done the same,” I affirm, maintaining my distance. There’s an awkwardness between us now—the professional boundary of detective and client shattered by my transformation in her classroom and subsequent revelation.

She shrugs off her coat and sets down a heavy bag that clinks with what I assume are books and artifacts. Her movements are efficient but betray exhaustion. It’s been a long day for both of us.

“Did anyone follow you?” I ask.

“I took precautions. Switched cars at a colleague’s house, drove a circuitous route.” She runs a hand through her hair, loosening it from its tight bun. “I don’t think I was followed, but...”

“But these people have resources,” I finish for her. “I’ll keep watch tonight.”

She nods, then gestures toward the kitchen area. “You must be hungry. Transforming between forms seems like it would require significant energy expenditure.”

The casual way she references my condition—like discussing the weather rather than a fundamental violation of natural law—catches me off guard. “Starving, actually,” I admit, suddenly aware of a hollow ache in my stomach. “I haven’t eaten since... before.”

“Before you died,” she says directly, moving to the kitchen and opening a small refrigerator. “We should address this directly, Mr. Harlow. Euphemisms will only complicate matters.”

“Jake,” I remind her.

“Jake.” She pulls out containers and begins assembling a simple meal. “And while we’re establishing parameters, I think we should acknowledge that our professional relationship has necessarily evolved.”

I lean against the counter, watching her work. “Into what, exactly?”

“Partners.” She doesn’t look up as she slices bread and cheese. “You need my expertise on Egyptian mythology and ritual practices. I need your... unique abilities and investigative skills. And we both need to stay alive.”

“Partners,” I echo, testing the word. After three years of determined isolation, the concept feels foreign. Not unwelcome, just... forgotten. “I’ve had one partner in my life. It didn’t end well for him.”

Now she does look up, her dark eyes assessing. “I’m aware of Detective Reynolds’ death. It was in the background check I ran before hiring you.”

Of course she researched me. I’d have done the same. Still, hearing Mike’s name from her lips reopens something raw and unhealed inside me.

“That case has nothing to do with this one,” I say sharply.

“Doesn’t it?” She places a plate of food before me—cheese, bread, olives, sliced apples. Simple but exactly what my body craves. “A detective with a traumatic past involving a serial predator, now investigating artifacts connected to death rituals, who then becomes supernaturally transformed through death. Patterns matter in my field, Jake.”

I want to argue but find I don’t have the energy. Instead, I focus on the food, surprised by how the flavors explode across my enhanced senses. The sharp tang of the cheese, the subtle sweetness of the apples—everything is more vivid, more present.

“The missing children case was three years ago,” I say finally. “Completely unrelated to Egyptian artifacts or cults.”

“Perhaps.” Nadia pours two glasses of water and sits across from me. “Or perhaps not. Either way, we need to understand exactly what we’re facing with Blackwood and the Order of Eternal Dusk.”

“You know the name of his organization?” This is new information.

She nods. “It was in my grandfather’s journals. His notes mentioned them as collectors of Egyptian artifacts with particular interest in Anubis-related items. I didn’t make the connection until today.”

“Tell me everything you know,” I say, leaning forward.

“After we eat. And after you tell me more about your transformation. I need details to help contextualize what we’re dealing with.”

Fair enough. We eat in relative silence, the windows of the cabin dark mirrors reflecting our concerned faces. Outside, night creatures move through the forest—I can hear them with my enhanced senses, cataloging each sound for potential threats.

When the meal is finished, Nadia clears the plates and retrieves her bag. She pulls out a worn leather journal, several academic texts, and a laptop.

“My grandfather was Ibrahim Farouk,” she begins, sitting beside me on the small sofa. “He was a renowned Egyptologist who specialized in lesser-known cults and practices. His most controversial work concerned alternative forms of Egyptian deities—specifically the theory that gods like Anubis appeared to different worshippers in different animal forms.”

She opens the journal, revealing pages of meticulous notes in Arabic alongside hand-drawn diagrams. “Traditional archaeology depicts Anubis as jackal-headed, but my grandfather found evidence of a more selective worship involving cat iconography. These references were deliberately obscured in most temple art.”

“Why would they hide that?” I ask.

“Because the cat form represented Anubis’s most dangerous aspect—his role as guardian of the gateway between worlds.” She looks up at me. “The jackal represents his function as guide of souls. The cat represents his function as protector against chaos entities that would breach the gateway.”

“Chaos entities?” The term triggers an instinctive unease, a bristling sensation along my spine that’s distinctly feline.

Nadia flips through the journal to a page with disturbing illustrations—writhing shapes that hurt to look at, like optical illusions designed to induce vertigo. “Beings that exist outside our reality. Ancient Egyptians believed they constantly sought entry to our world to feed on human consciousness and emotion. According to these texts, Anubis was appointed guardian of the boundary between realms.”

I rub my temples, trying to process this information alongside what Anubis told me in the desert. “And you believe this is real? Not just mythology?”

She gives me a pointed look. “You transformed into a cat before my eyes. I think we’re past questioning the reality of Egyptian theology.” She taps the illustration. “My grandfather believed the priesthood of Anubis maintained human vessels—avatars—who could channel the god’s power in emergencies. Special bloodlines compatible with divine essence.”

“Like me,” I mutter, connecting dots. “Anubis said something about intercepting a binding spell meant for a prepared vessel.”

“Precisely.” She pulls out another book, this one in English, opening to a book-marked page. “The ritual you witnessed was likely attempting to bind Anubis to someone the cult controlled. Instead, you intercepted the binding by dying within the active ritual circle.”

“Lucky me,” I say dryly.

“Actually, yes.” Her expression is deadly serious. “If the Order had succeeded in binding Anubis to their chosen vessel, they could potentially control access to the gateway between worlds.”

I lean back, letting this sink in. “Why would they want that?”

“Power. Immortality. Communication with the dead.” She shrugs. “The usual reasons humans seek supernatural power. But more specific to Blackwood...” She hesitates. “I did some research after our meeting today. Maxwell Blackwood lost his wife and daughter in a car accident seven years ago. Their bodies were never fully recovered from the river they crashed into.”

And suddenly, pieces click together in my mind. “He wants to bring them back.”

“Or something like that,” Nadia agrees. “But Anubis doesn’t control resurrection. He guards the gateway. Blackwood must believe that by controlling the gateway, he can somehow retrieve his family from the afterlife.”

“Can he?” I ask.

Her expression darkens. “Not in the way he thinks. According to my grandfather’s research, attempting to force souls back through the gateway creates only shells—reflections of human consciousness that chaos entities can inhabit. Not true resurrection but a dangerous mimicry.”

I stand, needing to move. The cabin suddenly feels too small, too confined. “So Blackwood is trying to open a doorway to some chaotic realm because he can’t accept his family’s death. And now I’m bound to the guardian of that doorway, who needs me to stop the ritual.” I laugh without humor. “And I thought recovering stolen artifacts was going to be straightforward.”

“No case is ever simple, just insufficiently investigated,” Nadia says, her tone suggesting she’s quoting something I should recognize.

“Mike used to say that,” I respond, turning to her with surprise. “My partner.”

She looks briefly embarrassed. “I may have read some of your case files as part of my background check. Detective Reynolds was quoted in several.”

The mention of Mike should trigger the usual avalanche of guilt, but something feels different tonight. Perhaps dying has shifted my perspective on grief.

“You said your grandfather’s research was controversial,” I say, changing the subject. “What happened to him?”

Nadia’s face closes slightly. “He died when I was twelve. Officially, it was ruled an accident—a fall in his home in Alexandria. But I never believed that.” She closes the journal carefully. “He was healthy, careful, and had just written to my mother about a significant discovery regarding the Order of Eternal Dusk.”

“You think they killed him?”

“I think powerful people have been seeking these artifacts for generations.” Her voice remains steady, but I can smell the subtle change in her scent that indicates deep emotion—a bitter note beneath her usual jasmine. “My academic focus wasn’t coincidental, Jake. I’ve been following my grandfather’s work for years.”

This revelation changes the dynamic between us yet again. Nadia isn’t just an Egyptologist who happened to hire me—she’s been hunting these answers for most of her life.

“So when the artifacts were stolen...” I begin.

“I recognized the pattern from my grandfather’s notes.” She nods. “And when I researched private investigators, your name appeared alongside several unusual cases—missing persons found under ‘impossible’ circumstances. Plus, your great-grandmother was adopted from Cairo by American missionaries.”

I stare at her, blindsided. “How did you know about my great-grandmother?”

“Genealogical records. I’ve been tracing certain bloodlines that appeared in my grandfather’s research about potential Anubis avatars.” She meets my eyes directly. “I didn’t know you would become an avatar. I simply thought your family connection might make you more sensitive to the supernatural aspects of the case.”

Anger flares, hot and sudden. “You used me as bait.”

“No!” Her denial is immediate and forceful. “I hired you because you’re good at what you do. The blood connection was secondary—something I intended to discuss after we recovered the artifacts.”

“But you weren’t surprised when I showed up as a cat,” I press, the pieces assembling in my mind. “You recognized what I’d become immediately.”

She looks away. “I’d read theories about transformation abilities in certain bloodlines. I didn’t know if they were true.” When she looks back, her eyes are pleading for understanding. “Jake, I never intended for you to get hurt. I would never willingly put someone in danger.”

I want to stay angry—it would be easier than forgiveness—but I sense no deception in her. Just a researcher who found more than she bargained for.

“We’ve both been manipulated,” I say finally. “By forces that have been playing this game a lot longer than either of us has been alive.”

The tension in her shoulders eases slightly. “Yes. And now we need to determine our next move before the Order realizes what’s happened with you.”

“They’ll know something went wrong with their ritual,” I point out. “A body pulled from the harbor that disappears from the morgue? That’s going to raise flags.”

“Which means they’ll be looking for explanations. And for you.” She stands, crossing to the window to check the darkness outside. “We should assume they know about your connection to me by now, which makes this location temporarily safe but not indefinitely.”

“So what’s our next move?”

“First, you need to learn to control your transformation. Second, we need to locate the remaining artifacts. And third—” she turns back to me, “—you need to communicate with Anubis about exactly what we’re up against.”

As if summoned by his name, fatigue washes over me suddenly—a bone-deep exhaustion unlike anything I’ve experienced. My vision blurs slightly at the edges.

“Jake?” Nadia’s voice sounds distant despite her standing just feet away. “Are you alright?”

“Tired,” I manage, swaying slightly. “Very suddenly.”

She moves quickly to my side, guiding me to sit. “The transformation must drain your energy reserves. And you’ve transformed twice today already.” Her clinical tone barely masks concern. “You need rest.”

I try to protest—there’s too much to discuss, too much to plan—but my body has other ideas. The events of the day crash down around me: death, resurrection, transformation, revelation. Too much for anyone to process in twenty-four hours.

“Just for an hour,” I concede, eyes already closing against my will. “Then we continue planning.”

Nadia’s voice follows me toward unconsciousness. “I’ll keep watch. Sleep, Jake.”

The transition to the dream desert is seamless this time—one moment I’m drifting toward sleep on Nadia’s sofa, the next I’m standing on endless sand beneath alien stars. The twilight that isn’t quite day or night bathes everything in soft, impossible light.

“You begin to master the transformation,” Anubis says from behind me.

I turn to find him sitting on his haunches, massive and midnight-black against the pale sand. His form seems more feline than before, though still not entirely cat—proportions shifting subtly as I look at him, as if my human mind struggles to categorize what I’m seeing.

“Not by choice,” I reply, finding myself strangely unafraid in this impossible place. “Why am I here?”

“The binding between us grows stronger. In sleep, your consciousness naturally seeks this meeting ground.” Anubis paces a circle around me, leaving no footprints in the sand. “And we have matters to discuss.”

“Like the fact that you chose me specifically? That my bloodline makes me compatible as your vessel?” I cross my arms, channeling investigation-room confrontation energy. “Or that Nadia researched me before hiring me because of that same bloodline?”

Anubis’s eyes narrow, solar eclipses focusing on me with uncomfortable intensity. “The Egyptologist is perceptive. Her grandfather was similarly... resourceful.”

“Did you know her grandfather?”

A sound like distant thunder emanates from Anubis—I realize with shock that it’s laughter. “I know all who study death with such dedication. Ibrahim Farouk sought truth beneath layers of myth. A rare quality in scholars.”

“Nadia says he was killed for his research. By the Order of Eternal Dusk.”

The laughter stops. Anubis goes utterly still, only the tip of his tail moving in slow, dangerous arcs. “Yes. He discovered their renewed efforts to locate the gateway artifacts. He hid several key pieces before they reached him.”

“And now his granddaughter is involved in the same fight.” I feel a surge of protectiveness that surprises me with its intensity. “If you knew all this, why not tell me from the start?”

“Would you have believed me? Without experiencing transformation yourself? Without the Egyptologist’s confirmation?” Anubis moves closer, circling me again. “Humans require evidence. Direct experience. Words alone rarely convince.”

He has a point, irritating as it is. I change tack. “Tell me about these chaos entities. What exactly are we preventing the Order from doing?”

The dream desert darkens slightly, stars dimming as if in response to the question. “Imagine beings that exist outside physical laws as you understand them. Entities of pure concept and energy, starving for sensory experience unavailable in their realm.” Anubis sits before me, eyes never leaving mine. “They consider human bodies ideal vessels for experiencing your world.”

“Possession?”

“A crude term for a complex process, but essentially correct. The Order believes they can control which entities come through, can bargain with them for power or knowledge or reunion with lost loved ones.” A growl underlies his words. “They are wrong. The gateway, once fully opened, allows passage to all—and chaos respects no bargains, no boundaries once released.”

“And you’re what? The cosmic bouncer keeping them out of our reality?”

“In simplified terms, yes. Though my original purpose was more... comprehensive.” There’s something melancholy in his tone now. “Once, I was worshipped broadly. My power, substantial. As belief waned, my influence diminished. The gateway guard became my primary function by necessity rather than choice.”

For the first time, I consider how lonely such an existence must be—millennia of thankless duty as humans gradually forgot your very existence. But I push aside this unexpected sympathy.

“So what exactly is my role in all this? How do I help stop the Order?”

Anubis stands, stretching in a movement both feline and oddly human. “You locate the remaining artifacts before they do. You disrupt their rituals. When the time comes, you help seal the gateway properly.” He fixes me with those eclipse eyes. “And in return, when the threat is neutralized, I release you from service.”

“Back to being fully human?” I clarify.

A pause. “Back to life,” Anubis says carefully. “The exact terms can be... negotiated based on your preferences when the time comes.”

That sounds suspiciously non-committal, but I file the concern away for later. “How do I find these artifacts? Nadia mentioned her grandfather hid some pieces,

but we don't know where."

"The Egyptologist possesses more than she realizes. The journals contain coded information—location markers disguised as scholarly annotations." Anubis begins to fade slightly around the edges, his form becoming less substantial. "Our time grows short. Dawn approaches in your world."

"Wait—I have more questions," I protest.

"Learn to control your transformations. The new moon comes in three days, when you will be bound to cat form for its duration. Before then, master the change at will." His voice grows distant. "And Jake Harlow..."

"Yes?"

"Trust the Egyptologist. Her intentions align with ours, even if her methods sometimes diverge."

Before I can respond, the desert dissolves around me, sand swirling upward to obscure my vision. I reach out instinctively—

And wake with a gasp on Nadia's sofa, morning light streaming through cabin windows. I'm covered with a blanket I don't remember having when I fell asleep. Nadia sits in an armchair across from me, her own eyes fluttering open as my movement disturbs her rest.

"You were talking in your sleep," she says, voice rough with exhaustion. "Something about chaos and gateways."

I sit up, surprised to find myself refreshed despite sleeping in an awkward position. "I was with Anubis. In the dream desert."

This wakes her fully. She reaches for a notebook on the side table. "Tell me everything. Exact words if you can remember them."

I recount the conversation as precisely as my memory allows while she takes notes, occasionally interrupting with clarifying questions. When I finish, she reviews her writing with furrowed brows.

"This confirms much of my grandfather's research," she says finally. "And adds new information about the chaos entities that helps contextualize fragmented references in his journals." She looks up at me. "Did Anubis say anything else? Anything about my grandfather specifically?"

I hesitate, then decide on complete honesty. "He said your grandfather hid several key artifacts before the Order could get to him. And that your journals contain coded information about their locations."

Her eyes widen. "Coded information? What kind of code?"

"Location markers disguised as scholarly annotations, according to Anubis."

She jumps up, moving to the table where her grandfather's journals lie open. "Of course! I always wondered why his margin notes were so oddly specific about

certain museum catalog numbers and geographic coordinates.” She flips through pages rapidly. “I assumed they were cross-references to his other research, but if they’re actually location markers...”

I join her at the table, watching as she pulls out her laptop and begins cross-referencing numbers and locations. Her focus is absolute, hands moving rapidly between keyboard and journal pages. I’m content to watch, impressed by the speed at which her mind works.

After several minutes, she looks up with excitement. “Three locations. Boston Museum of Fine Arts, a private collection in Cambridge, and—” her expression falters slightly, “—a university storage facility where some of the recently stolen artifacts were being kept.”

“So Blackwood already has some of what he needs,” I conclude grimly.

“Yes, but not everything. The ritual requires specific components in specific arrangements. If we can secure even one of the remaining pieces, we can prevent completion.” She taps the journal thoughtfully. “The most accessible would be the museum piece—it’s on public display in the Egyptian collection.”

“Accessible but also visible,” I point out. “We’d be exposed.”

“True. But I have academic credentials that would allow me to request a private viewing for research purposes.”

“While I do what? Hide in your purse as a cat?”

Her expression suggests this isn’t the worst idea she’s heard. “Actually, that might work. Museum security doesn’t screen for feline infiltrators.”

Despite everything, I find myself smiling. “Partners in crime now?”

“Partners in preventing cosmic catastrophe,” she corrects, but returns the smile. “I believe that morally outweighs the technicality of artifact borrowing.”

“You’ve given this ethical justification some thought,” I observe.

“My grandfather’s journals describe what happens if the gateway is breached. Ethical flexibility seems appropriate when balanced against that outcome.” She closes the laptop decisively. “If we leave within the hour, we can reach the museum shortly after opening. Fewer visitors, better access.”

I nod, standing to stretch muscles that feel unusually limber despite the night on a too-small sofa. “Before we go, I should practice the transformation. If I’m going to spend the day as your pet, I’d rather it be deliberate than accidental.”

“Logical,” she agrees, though I catch the flash of scientific curiosity in her eyes. “The bathroom might offer privacy, unless you’d prefer the woods?”

“Bathroom’s fine.” I consider the strangeness of this conversation—discussing my transformation into a cat with the same casualness as deciding breakfast options. “This is incredibly bizarre, you know.”

“Bizarre but fascinating,” she counters. “Few people ever experience the supernatural directly. Fewer still survive to study it.”

“Is that what you’re doing? Studying me?” The question emerges sharper than intended.

Her expression sobers. “No, Jake. I’m helping you. And you’re helping me. Research is secondary to survival and stopping the Order.” She meets my gaze directly. “But I won’t pretend scientific curiosity isn’t part of my motivation. Just as I’m sure investigative instinct drives yours.”

Fair enough. We’re both following our training, falling back on familiar frameworks to process the impossible.

“I’ll try to be a cooperative subject,” I say, softening my tone. “As long as you remember I’m a person first, phenomenon second.”

“Of course.” She looks slightly embarrassed. “I apologize if I’ve seemed clinical. This is... outside my experience.”

“Mine too.” I head toward the bathroom, then pause at the door. “For what it’s worth, I think your grandfather would be proud. You’re continuing his work, getting closer to the truth than he could.”

Her eyes brighten with unexpected emotion. “Thank you,” she says softly.

In the bathroom, I stare at my reflection in the small mirror above the sink. My eyes have changed subtly—still my brown, but with golden flecks that catch the light unnaturally. My movements are different too—more fluid, more precise. I’m not just a man who can become a cat; I’m becoming something between both states even in human form.

I close my eyes and focus on the transformation, remembering Anubis’s guidance. The cat is not separate from me. It is me. Last night’s struggle to change back required accepting the cat as part of myself. Now I need to willingly become that other self.

The change begins with that same itching sensation beneath my skin, but I don’t fight it this time. I lean into the feeling, almost directing it. My heart-beat accelerates, but not with the panicked gallop of before—more a controlled quickening. I feel myself shrinking, spine reconfiguring, senses sharpening in cascading waves of new perception.

When I open my eyes, the transformation is complete, and a black cat with gold-flecked eyes stares back from the mirror. The whole process took perhaps fifteen seconds—far quicker than before. Progress.

I jump to the counter, testing this form’s capabilities in the confined space. Each movement comes more naturally now, instinct and intellect working together rather than fighting for control. I can think clearly as Jake while moving with the cat’s innate grace.

A soft knock at the door. “Jake? Are you alright?”

I meow in response, jumping down to scratch lightly at the door’s bottom edge.

Nadia opens it cautiously, then looks down with unveiled fascination. “That was quick,” she comments, crouching to examine me more closely. “The transformation seems more complete than when I observed you yesterday. Your eyes retain human intelligence, but your physical form appears identical to a natural feline.”

I meow again, unsure how to communicate complex thoughts in this form.

“This presents a challenge,” she acknowledges, understanding my limitation. “Perhaps we should establish some basic communication signals? One meow for yes, two for no?”

I meow once, appreciating her practical approach.

“Good.” She stands. “I’ll prepare a small carrier that looks like research materials. It won’t be comfortable, but it should get you past museum security.”

Before she can turn away, I gently catch the hem of her pants with my claws, careful not to pierce the fabric. When she looks down, I walk to where her notebook lies on the floor, placing my paw deliberately on a blank page.

“Ah,” she says, understanding immediately. “You want to write something?”

I meow once.

She retrieves a pencil and watches as I awkwardly manage to scratch out letters with my paw. The result is clumsy but legible: *BACK BY NOON?*

“You’re wondering if you can change back by midday?” she interprets. “Possibly. The museum visit shouldn’t take more than two hours if all goes well. We can find a secluded place afterward for you to transform.”

I scratch out another message: *BLACKWOOD WATCHING?*

She considers this. “Almost certainly. He’ll have people monitoring the museum and likely my movements as well. But he doesn’t know about your... condition. That gives us an advantage.”

One more awkward message: *BE CAREFUL.*

Her expression softens. “We both will be.” She retrieves a small duffel bag from the closet and begins arranging clothes inside to create a comfortable space. “A researcher carrying documents and a small support animal shouldn’t attract much attention.”

I walk back to the bathroom to check my reflection once more, still adjusting to this dual existence. In the mirror, the cat looks back with eyes that somehow manage to convey human concern despite their feline shape.

Partners, I think, testing the concept again. After three years of determined isolation, I've been thrust into not just a partnership but an intimately dependent one. I need Nadia's knowledge and human ability to interact with the world when I'm in this form. She needs my unique access and abilities to stop Blackwood's plans.

Interdependence. Vulnerability. Trust. Everything I've avoided since Mike's death.

I pad back to the main room where Nadia is gathering her research materials and credentials. She moves with efficient purpose, occasionally muttering to herself in Arabic as she works. There's steel beneath her academic exterior—a determination I recognize from the best detectives I've known.

She glances down as I approach. "Ready to stop a supernatural conspiracy?"

I meow once, then deliberately rub against her ankle—a cat's gesture of trust and affiliation that feels right in this moment.

"Partners," she says softly, as if reading my thoughts.

Together, we prepare to hunt artifacts, outsmart cultists, and prevent cosmic catastrophe—just another day in my strange new existence. As Nadia opens the door to the morning light, I slip into the carrier she's prepared, settling among carefully arranged papers and books. The hunt begins.

Chapter 8: History Lessons

The early morning light filtered through the tall windows of Boston Museum of Fine Arts, casting long shadows across the polished floor. Nadia strode purposefully through the Egyptian wing, her credentials displayed prominently, the weight of her modified research bag a constant reminder of its unusual contents. Every few steps, she felt a subtle shift inside the bag—Jake adjusting his position, careful not to make any noise that might betray his presence.

"Dr. Farouk," called Dr. Harrison, the collection's curator, approaching with a warm smile. "Always a pleasure to see a fellow Egyptologist. Your request mentioned the Ptolemaic funerary items?"

"Yes," Nadia replied, summoning her most professional demeanor while acutely aware of Jake's feline form hidden among her papers. "I'm particularly interested in examining the small bronze cat statuette with the unusual hieroglyphic inscriptions. My research suggests it might be connected to a specific regional cult practice."

"Ah, item 45.212. A fascinating piece." Harrison led her toward a glass case in the corner of the gallery. "We've always classified it as a typical Bastet offering, but your paper on provincial ritual variations made me reconsider."

The inscriptions don't quite match the standard Bastet worship formula, do they?"

"No, they don't," Nadia agreed, pleased by the curator's observation. "That's precisely what caught my attention."

Inside her bag, Jake shifted again. Through a small opening in the zipper, she knew he could see everything, his enhanced senses taking in details her human eyes might miss.

"I've arranged a private viewing room for you," Harrison continued, gesturing toward a door marked 'Staff Only.' "I can have the piece brought there, along with any other items you'd like to examine. Will an hour be sufficient?"

"More than generous, thank you." Nadia followed him through the door, keeping her movements smooth and deliberate to avoid jostling her hidden companion.

The viewing room was small but well-equipped: a large table with specialized lighting, microscopes, measuring tools, and a computer terminal for accessing the museum's database. Harrison excused himself to retrieve the artifact, leaving Nadia alone momentarily.

As soon as the door closed, she carefully opened her bag. Jake's black head emerged, eyes scanning the room before he silently slipped out onto the table.

"We have maybe five minutes before he returns," she whispered, pulling out her notebook. "The statuette is the one my grandfather's notes referred to. According to his coding system, there should be something hidden in the base—possibly a microfiche or memory card."

Jake meowed once in acknowledgment, then began systematically examining the room, moving with impossible grace along the edges of tables and shelves.

Nadia quickly accessed the terminal, navigating to the artifact's entry in the database. The official description supported her theory—the inscriptions had never been properly translated because they didn't match standard religious formulae. Instead, they'd been categorized as "decorative pseudo-hieroglyphs," a classification that made her wince with professional indignation. She knew better.

"Here we are, Dr. Farouk," Harrison announced, returning with a wheeled cart. Atop it sat a glass case containing a bronze statuette about eight inches tall—a seated cat with unusually detailed features, its surface darkened with age except for hints of original gilding around the eyes and ears.

Jake immediately retreated to the shadows beneath the table, a fluid movement so quick Nadia herself barely tracked it.

"I've also brought these papyrus fragments that were found in the same tomb complex," Harrison added, indicating several framed items on the lower shelf of the cart. "They've never been fully translated, but given your specialty, I thought they might interest you."

“How thoughtful,” Nadia said, genuine excitement tempering her anxiety. “Would it be possible for me to examine them alone? My methodology involves quite a bit of muttering to myself in multiple languages. Most colleagues find it rather distracting.”

Harrison chuckled. “Say no more. Academic eccentricities are sacred. I’ll be in my office—just down the hall if you need anything. The surveillance camera is active, of course, but only for security purposes. No one monitors the feed unless an alarm is triggered.”

After he left, Nadia carefully locked the door and turned to the table where the statuette waited in its protective case. She felt Jake jump up beside her, his whiskers twitching with interest.

“Let me document everything first,” she murmured, taking out her camera and notebook. “Standard protocol for any examination. It will look suspicious if I don’t follow proper procedures.”

Jake sat patiently as she photographed the statuette from multiple angles, noting its dimensions and distinctive features before carefully opening the climate-controlled case. Her hands, steady from years of handling fragile artifacts, gently lifted the bronze figure.

“The inscriptions are definitely not standard Bastet formulations,” she said softly, speaking both to Jake and to the recording app on her phone—maintaining the appearance of legitimate research while actually conducting it. “The hieroglyphs reference Anubis, but use the determinative glyph for ‘feline’ rather than ‘canine.’ This supports my theory of regional variation in divine representation.”

She turned the statuette over, examining its base. To the untrained eye, it appeared solid, but Nadia detected the nearly invisible seam around the perimeter.

“False bottom,” she whispered. “Clever, grandfather.”

Jake meowed quietly, ears perked forward as he watched her work.

Using specialized tools from her kit, Nadia carefully probed the seam, feeling for the release mechanism she suspected must exist. Minutes passed in tense concentration until she felt a slight give under her fingertips. With a barely audible click, the bottom plate loosened.

“There,” she breathed, gently removing the circular disk to reveal a shallow compartment beneath.

Inside lay not microfilm or modern storage media, but something far older—a small papyrus scroll, carefully preserved and rolled into a cylinder barely larger than her thumb.

“Extraordinary,” she whispered, her academic excitement momentarily overriding their dangerous circumstances. “This preservation technique predates the

Ptolemaic period. The statuette was created as a vessel to protect this document.”

Jake made a sound somewhere between a meow and a chirp, clearly indicating urgency.

“Right,” Nadia agreed, refocusing. With precision born of training, she extracted the tiny scroll without damaging it, immediately placing it in a protective sleeve from her kit. She then replaced the false bottom of the statuette and returned it to its case, arranging it exactly as it had been.

“Now for these papyrus fragments,” she said, turning her attention to the framed items from the cart’s lower shelf. “We shouldn’t waste the opportunity since we’re here.”

The fragments, when examined, proved to be portions of a ritual text—one that made her breath catch. The hieroglyphs described transformation ceremonies associated with Anubis, including specific references to human vessels assuming cat form.

“Jake,” she whispered, switching to Arabic in case someone was monitoring despite Harrison’s assurances, “these describe exactly what’s happening to you. Look at this determinative—it shows a human figure with a cat’s head, followed by a complete cat form. The text refers to ‘the nine transformations of the guardian.’”

Jake stretched up, placing his front paws on the edge of the table to better see the fragments. His pupils dilated with interest.

Nadia quickly photographed each fragment with her research camera, ensuring she captured every hieroglyph clearly for later translation. She then recorded several minutes of legitimate analytical notes—maintaining her cover while actually advancing their understanding of Jake’s condition.

An hour later, they departed the museum without incident. The tiny scroll was secured in a hidden compartment of Nadia’s bag, while Jake remained curled among her papers, occasionally peering out through the partially open zipper. Harrison had been pleased with her conventional observations about the statuette, none of which mentioned the false bottom or its contents.

“A remarkably productive morning,” Nadia said as they reached her car in the parking garage. Once inside with doors locked, she carefully opened her bag, allowing Jake to emerge. “We need to find somewhere private for you to transform back. According to those fragments, the transformation should be controllable with practice, becoming easier each time.”

Jake meowed once in agreement, stretching luxuriously on the passenger seat.

“I know just the place,” she continued, starting the car. “My departmental office has privacy blinds and a locking door. Most faculty will be in classes this afternoon. We can examine the scroll there as well.”

The drive to Boston University passed without incident, though Nadia took several unnecessary turns to ensure they weren't followed. Campus was bustling with midday activity, students moving between classes or lounging on the quad enjoying the mild autumn weather. Nadia parked in the faculty lot and retrieved her bag, arranging it to partially open so Jake could see out while remaining hidden.

"Almost there," she murmured, walking briskly toward the Anthropology building. "My office is on the third floor, far corner. Usually quietest this time of day."

The elevator ride was tense—a chance encounter with any colleague would require explanation for the cat peeking from her bag. Fortunately, they reached the third floor without meeting anyone, and Nadia quickly navigated the empty hallway to her office.

Once inside with the door locked and blinds drawn, Jake jumped from the bag onto her desk, stretching again before sitting expectantly. Nadia moved efficiently around the space, checking that the small bathroom attached to her office was empty and then returning to close the vents—a precaution against curious sounds traveling to neighboring offices.

"All clear," she told him, pulling her desk chair away to create open floor space. "You should have room to transform here."

Jake nodded—a distinctly human gesture from his feline form—and jumped down to the cleared area. Nadia watched with scholarly fascination and personal concern as he closed his eyes in concentration.

The transformation seemed less arduous than before. Jake's form blurred slightly, as if the air around him was distorting, then expanded rapidly. In under thirty seconds, the cat was gone and a crouching man took its place, fully clothed just as he had been before their museum visit.

"That's getting easier," Jake said, his voice slightly rough as if from disuse. He stood, rolling his shoulders. "Still feels bizarre, but less painful each time."

"The papyrus fragments support that observation," Nadia said, retrieving her notebook. "They specifically mention 'nine transformations before mastery'—potentially the origin of the 'nine lives' mythology associated with cats."

Jake leaned against her desk, visibly readjusting to his human proportions. "Did you get what we needed from the statuette?"

"This," Nadia said, carefully removing the protected scroll from her bag. "It's quite extraordinary—much older than the statuette itself. My grandfather must have hidden it there decades ago, knowing it would be safe in plain sight within the museum's collection."

"Can you read it?" Jake asked, moving closer to examine the tiny scroll.

“I’ll need proper tools to open it without damage,” she replied. “Ancient papyrus becomes extremely fragile. But I can see enough of the outside to recognize my grandfather’s handwriting on the protective wrapping—a dated note in academic shorthand.” She peered at the faded pencil marks. “October 1973. That’s shortly before he reported finding evidence of the cat-form Anubis worship.”

Jake frowned. “Almost fifty years ago. The Order has been working on this plan for generations.”

“Some obsessions transcend lifetimes,” Nadia said softly, thinking of her own decades-long quest to understand her grandfather’s work. “My conservation kit is in that cabinet. Let me get set up properly for this.”

While Nadia retrieved specialized tools and laid out acid-free paper on her desk, Jake examined the office with a detective’s methodical attention. His gaze lingered on the framed photographs—archaeological sites in Egypt, her graduation from Cambridge, a family photo with parents and brother. Finally, his attention settled on a bulletin board covered with research notes, newspaper clippings, and a map marked with colored pins.

“You’ve been tracking artifact movements,” he observed, studying the map. “These red pins—they correspond to thefts over the past decade?”

“Yes,” Nadia confirmed, adjusting her desk lamp to provide optimal lighting without damaging the fragile papyrus. “Blue pins are suspicious acquisitions by private collectors associated with Blackwood. Yellow indicates locations where my grandfather documented Order activities in the 1970s.”

“They form a pattern,” Jake said, tracing invisible lines between points. “Concentrated along the eastern seaboard but with tendrils reaching specific international locations—Cairo, Alexandria, Athens, London.”

“All cities with significant Egyptian collections and historical connections to esoteric societies,” Nadia explained. “The Order of Eternal Dusk began as a Victorian occult group, inspired by the fashionable Egyptomania of the late 1800s. Unlike most such societies, they apparently stumbled upon genuine artifacts with actual power.”

Having prepared her workspace, Nadia now turned her full attention to the scroll. With extreme care, she began the delicate process of unrolling it, using specialized tools to avoid stressing the ancient material. Jake watched in silence, respecting the precision required.

“It’s written in hieratic—the cursive form of hieroglyphic writing used for religious texts,” Nadia explained as the first symbols became visible. “And there’s demotic script as well—the everyday writing of later periods. My grandfather added his own notes in academic shorthand along the margins.”

“Can you translate it?” Jake asked softly.

“The hieratic, yes. The demotic will take longer—it’s not my specialty.” Her

fingers hovered over the text, not touching but tracing the air above the symbols. “This is extraordinary. It’s a priest’s account of the First Binding—the original ceremony that connected Anubis to human vessels.”

As she began translating aloud, Nadia felt a familiar academic excitement mingled with something deeper—the thrill of confirming her grandfather’s theories correct after decades of scholarly dismissal.

“‘In the twenty-second year of Pharaoh Khasekhemwy’s reign, when shadow threatened from beyond the western stars, the Jackal-Who-Walks-As-Cat chose the first vessel,’” she read, voice gaining confidence as she continued. “‘Not by force but by covenant was the binding made. Nine transformations to master the crossing between forms. Nine lives granted to the chosen bloodline. Nine gates to seal against the formless ones.’”

Jake moved behind her chair, looking over her shoulder at the ancient text neither of them fully understood yet both recognized as vitally important.

“There’s more,” Nadia continued, carefully unrolling another portion. “Details of the ritual components—specific artifacts arranged in particular patterns. Some we’ve already seen documented in my grandfather’s notes, but this provides missing elements. And here—” her finger hovered over a section of text surrounded by her grandfather’s notations, “—instructions for severing a corrupted binding.”

“If the cult succeeds in binding Anubis to their own vessel,” Jake said, following her logic.

“Exactly.” She looked up at him, their faces unexpectedly close. “This is essentially a failsafe—instructions on how to break a forced binding without destroying the bound entities.”

Their eyes held for a long moment. Nadia became acutely aware of Jake’s proximity, of the subtle changes in his human form since the transformations began—the golden flecks in his brown eyes, the fluidity of his movements, the heightened alertness in his posture. Something both human and not, familiar and alien. Fascinating in ways that transcended academic interest.

Jake seemed equally caught in the moment, his expression shifting subtly from focused attention to something more personal. Then, with visible effort, he stepped back, breaking the connection.

“So this is both confirmation and solution,” he said, voice carefully neutral. “Proof that Anubis originally worked with willing human partners, and instructions for preventing the cult from corrupting that partnership.”

“Yes,” Nadia agreed, returning her attention to the papyrus with a professionalism that masked her momentary discomposure. “According to this text, Anubis specifically chose human vessels from a particular bloodline because of their capacity to maintain consciousness during transformation. The binding was meant to be symbiotic, not parasitic.”

She continued translating sections, occasionally pausing to clarify cultural context or explain linguistic nuances. Jake paced the office as she worked, his movements betraying the restless energy she'd noticed increasing in him—a cat-like inability to remain still for long periods.

“This part discusses the gateway,” she said eventually, reaching a section near the end of the scroll. “It describes it as ‘the veil between ordered existence and unformed chaos.’ According to this account, it’s not a physical location but a conceptual boundary that can be accessed through certain ritualistic focal points.”

“Like Boston Harbor where I died,” Jake suggested.

“Exactly. The death of a potential vessel during an active ritual created a temporary thinning of the boundary.” She frowned, studying a particularly dense passage. “The text warns that such thinnings can become permanent breaches if the proper sealing ritual isn’t performed within a lunar cycle.”

Jake stopped pacing. “How long has it been since I died?”

Nadia checked her calendar. “Eleven days. If a lunar cycle is approximately twenty-eight days...”

“We have just over two weeks before the gateway becomes permanently compromised,” Jake finished. “Assuming this ancient text is accurate.”

“My grandfather believed it was. So did the Order, apparently.” Nadia carefully began rerolling the fragile papyrus. “And this explains their timeline—they need to complete their ritual before the natural sealing occurs. The upcoming eclipse would be their ideal opportunity.”

As she secured the scroll in its protective sleeve, a troubling thought occurred to her. “Jake, if Harrison mentioned this examination to anyone connected to the Order...”

“They might already know we have the scroll,” he concluded grimly.

As if summoned by the thought, the building fire alarm erupted in piercing wails. Nadia jumped, nearly dropping the ancient document.

“That could be coincidence,” she said, though her tone suggested she didn’t believe it.

Jake was already moving to the door, opening it a crack to peer into the hallway. “No smoke, no signs of actual fire,” he reported. “But people are evacuating. Perfect way to flush us out.”

Nadia quickly gathered the scroll, her research notes, and the camera containing photographs of the museum fragments. “We need a different exit. The main stairwell will be crowded with evacuating faculty and students.”

“Options?” Jake asked, closing the door again.

“Service stairs at the end of the wing. Maintenance uses them, but they’re not part of the standard evacuation route.” She gestured toward the small bathroom attached to her office. “There’s a narrow window there that opens onto the fire escape—another possibility if we’re truly desperate.”

Jake nodded, thinking quickly. “Grab only what we absolutely need. I’m going to check the service stairs.”

While Nadia packed essential items into her bag, Jake slipped into the hallway. The alarm continued its deafening screech, covering any sounds of movement. Less than a minute later, he returned, expression tense.

“Two men at the service stairs. Not university security—wearing maintenance uniforms but carrying themselves like professionals. Military or private security background, if I had to guess.”

“And the main stairs?” Nadia asked, slinging her bag across her body.

“Crowded with evacuating people. We could blend in, but we’d be visible and vulnerable.” He glanced toward the bathroom. “How narrow is that window?”

“Too small for you in human form,” she assessed, thinking rapidly. “But as a cat...”

Understanding dawned in his eyes. “I go out as a cat, circle around to create a distraction, while you take the main stairs during the chaos.”

“It could work,” she agreed. “We meet where? The car isn’t safe if they’ve identified me.”

“Coffee shop three blocks south,” Jake decided. “Public, crowded, multiple exits. I’ll find you.”

Decision made, they moved quickly to the bathroom. The window was indeed narrow—barely eighteen inches square—but would accommodate Jake’s cat form easily. As Nadia pushed it open, checking that the fire escape below was clear, Jake prepared to transform.

“Be careful,” she said, meeting his eyes one last time.

“You too,” he replied, then closed his eyes in concentration.

The transformation was even faster this time—a fluid shifting that looked almost natural despite its impossibility. Where Jake had stood, a sleek black cat now crouched, eyes glinting with human intelligence.

“I’ll wait fifteen minutes,” Nadia told him as he prepared to leap through the window. “If you don’t create a distraction by then, I’ll take my chances with the main stairs anyway.”

Jake meowed once in acknowledgment, then slipped through the narrow opening with feline grace. Nadia watched him navigate the metal grating of the

fire escape, then disappear around the corner of the building, swift and nearly invisible against the architecture.

Alone in her office, alarm still blaring, Nadia took a deep breath and continued her preparations. She transferred the precious scroll to a hidden compartment sewn into the lining of her jacket—a modification her grandfather had taught her to create for fieldwork in politically unstable regions. Her notebook and the most critical photographs went into interior pockets, while she left less important items visible in her bag—a calculated misdirection if she was searched.

Exactly twelve minutes after Jake's departure, she heard a commotion from outside—shouts and the distinctive sound of breaking glass. Peering cautiously from behind her blinds, she saw security personnel running toward the east wing of the building, away from the main stairs.

"Good work, Jake," she murmured, gathering her courage.

Joining the last stragglers of evacuating faculty, Nadia kept her expression appropriately concerned but not panicked. She matched her pace to a group of teaching assistants, nodding at their complaints about interrupted seminars as they all descended the main stairwell. At the ground floor, security was checking offices but paying little attention to those leaving the building.

Nadia had just reached the main doors when she felt a firm hand on her elbow.

"Dr. Farouk," said a voice she recognized with dismay. "A moment of your time."

She turned to find Professor Ahmed Hassan—her academic rival and, until this moment, someone she'd considered merely an irritating colleague rather than a threat. His expression was pleasant, but his grip on her arm was unmistakably restraining.

"Ahmed," she replied evenly. "I'd love to chat, but there's a fire alarm, if you hadn't noticed."

"A false alarm, I'm afraid," he said, steering her away from the exit and toward a side corridor with surprising strength. "Set off to locate a particular scholar who's acquired something of great interest to mutual acquaintances."

His emphasis on "mutual acquaintances" confirmed her worst fears. Hassan was connected to the Order—perhaps had been all along, positioned to monitor her research just as Sullivan had been positioned within the police department to monitor potentially threatening investigations.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," she said, attempting to pull away. Around them, the evacuation continued, but they were now moving against the flow, deeper into the emptying building.

"Please don't insult my intelligence, Nadia," Hassan said, voice still conversational though his grip remained firm. "Blackwood was most interested to hear

you'd requested a private viewing of the cat statuette this morning. The same statuette your grandfather examined shortly before his unfortunate accident."

A cold certainty settled in Nadia's stomach. The confirmation of her grandfather's murder, delivered so casually, sparked both grief and anger. She'd suspected for years but never had confirmation until this moment.

Two men in maintenance uniforms appeared ahead—the same ones Jake had spotted at the service stairs, judging by Hassan's nod of recognition. They moved to flank Nadia, creating a human corridor forcing her toward an unmarked door.

"We simply want the scroll, Nadia," Hassan continued, his tone almost regretful. "Cooperate, and this ends pleasantly for everyone."

"What scroll?" she asked, stalling while her mind raced through options. The alarm had stopped, and the building was nearly empty now—no witnesses to whatever they planned.

Hassan sighed. "Must we do this the difficult way? We know you removed something from the statuette. The curator may be oblivious, but our organization has monitored that artifact for decades."

They reached the unmarked door—a storage closet, based on the cleaning supplies visible when one of the men opened it. A makeshift interrogation room, isolated and soundproof.

Nadia made her decision. As Hassan loosened his grip to guide her forward, she dropped suddenly to one knee, throwing off his balance. With the self-defense move her brother had insisted she learn before leaving for England, she twisted sharply, breaking his hold.

The surprise gave her a critical moment's advantage. She bolted sideways, away from the men and back toward the main corridor. Behind her, she heard Hassan's angry shout and the heavy footsteps of pursuit.

The building was now eerily silent, evacuation complete. Her footsteps echoed on the marble floor as she ran toward the emergency exit at the corridor's end. If she could reach it before they caught up—

A blur of black motion streaked from a side hallway, directly into the path of her pursuers. A yowl, followed by startled curses and the sound of someone falling heavily. Jake, in cat form, creating the distraction she desperately needed.

Nadia slammed into the emergency exit bar, setting off a secondary alarm as the door burst open. Fresh air hit her face as she emerged into the side alley, not slowing her pace. Behind her, more shouts and confusion—Jake apparently wreaking havoc among her pursuers.

She ran without looking back, navigating the campus by instinct, avoiding the main quad where evacuated students and faculty gathered. Only when she

reached the relative safety of Massachusetts Avenue did she slow to a brisk walk, blending with pedestrian traffic while catching her breath.

The coffee shop Jake had specified was busy with afternoon customers. Nadia claimed a table near the back with clear sightlines to both the front door and the rear exit. Her hands shook slightly as she ordered a chai latte she didn't want, the adrenaline crash hitting hard.

Twenty-three agonizing minutes passed before she spotted Jake entering—human form, clothes slightly disheveled but otherwise unharmed. Relief washed through her with surprising intensity as he navigated to her table and sat down, expression grim.

"Hassan is Order," she said immediately, keeping her voice low.

"I gathered that when he tried to stuff you in a supply closet," Jake replied dryly. "Did they get anything?"

Nadia shook her head. "The scroll is secure." She placed her hand over the hidden compartment in her jacket. "But this changes everything. If Hassan is compromised, the entire department might be under surveillance."

"We need a new base of operations," Jake agreed. "The cabin won't be safe for long either, once they connect us."

Nadia sipped her cooling chai, mind racing through possibilities. "I have contacts at other universities who might shelter us, but involving them puts them at risk."

"No," Jake said firmly. "No more civilians in the crossfire." His expression softened slightly. "Though technically you were a civilian until I dragged you into this."

"I was never a civilian in this war," Nadia corrected him. "My grandfather's research marked me as a combatant decades ago. I just didn't know we were already fighting."

Their eyes met across the table, a new understanding passing between them. Despite their drastically different backgrounds and approaches, they were united by a shared enemy and complementary skills. And something else—a connection neither was quite ready to name but both increasingly felt.

"We need to translate the rest of the scroll," Nadia said, refocusing on their immediate priorities. "It contains specific instructions for the sealing ritual—our best defense if Blackwood manages to initiate a gateway breach."

"And we need to identify the remaining artifacts before the Order secures them," Jake added. "The clock is ticking—eleven days down, seventeen to go before the gateway becomes permanent."

"There's a motel off Route 2," Nadia suggested after a moment's consideration.

“Anonymous, cash only, the kind of place that asks no questions. Not comfortable, but we’d have privacy to work.”

Jake nodded in agreement. “We’ll need supplies. And to ditch your car—they’ll be looking for it.”

“I can arrange transportation,” Nadia said. “I have an emergency credit card under my mother’s maiden name. Rarely used, harder to track.”

As they formulated their next moves, speaking in the hushed tones of conspiracy, Nadia felt a strange duality in herself—the precise, methodical academic now merged with something more primal and adaptative. Survival instincts she hadn’t known she possessed surfacing alongside scholarly determination.

In this, perhaps, she understood Jake’s transformation more personally than he realized. They were both becoming something other than what they had been—evolving under pressure into forms necessary for the fight ahead.

“You’re staring,” Jake observed softly, interrupting her thoughts.

“Sorry,” she said, looking away. “It’s the academic in me. Observing, analyzing.”

“And what has your analysis concluded?” he asked, a hint of that dry humor she’d come to appreciate flickering across his features.

Nadia considered her answer carefully. “That transformation takes many forms,” she said finally. “And that sometimes we don’t recognize our true nature until circumstances force us to adapt.”

He studied her with those increasingly feline eyes, and she wondered if he could sense the change in her scent that betrayed her growing attraction—an inconvenient but undeniable complication to their alliance.

“We should go,” she said, standing before he could respond. “Hassan will have people searching the area soon.”

Jake nodded, but as they prepared to leave, his hand briefly touched hers—a subtle gesture of reassurance that sent an unexpected warmth through her.

“Partners?” he asked, the word carrying more weight than when they’d first claimed it.

“Partners,” she affirmed, knowing they were committing to far more than either had initially intended when this journey began.

Outside, the afternoon sun cast long shadows across the campus buildings. Somewhere in the city, Blackwood and his Order prepared for a ritual that would tear the fabric between worlds. The scroll hidden against Nadia’s heart carried both confirmation of ancient truths and the key to preventing catastrophe.

And beside her walked a man who was simultaneously more and less than human—a detective, a vessel, a guardian of the gateway. A partner in an

impossible quest that felt increasingly like destiny.

Chapter 9: Night Hunter

The night air carries scents my human nose could never detect—stories written in molecules that dance across my whiskers. Perched on the narrow ledge outside Blackwood’s office building, fifteen stories above Boston’s rain-slicked streets, I process these invisible tales with my new feline senses.

The target exited twenty minutes ago. Harris Coleman, Blackwood’s head of security according to Nadia’s research. The man moves with military precision, his stride economical, eyes constantly scanning for threats. He doesn’t look up. They rarely do.

After three days of practicing transformations at Nadia’s cabin, my control has improved significantly. The change comes almost naturally now—a fluid shift between states that takes mere seconds. More concerning is how comfortable I’m becoming in this feline skin, how the boundary between cat instinct and human thought blurs a little more each time.

Coleman hails a taxi, and I’m forced to make a decision. Following by rooftop would be impossible given the vehicle’s speed. Fortunately, I anticipated this. I leap down to street level using a series of fire escapes and window ledges, landing softly behind a parked car where I’ve stashed what I need.

The transformation back to human form is quick but still disconcerting—bones shifting, perspective changing, senses recalibrating. I retrieve the small backpack I hid earlier containing basic clothes, cash, and a burner phone. Dressed in under a minute, I hail my own taxi and give the driver the address I memorized from Coleman’s overheard phone conversation: the Gardner Museum.

“Special event tonight?” the driver asks, noticing my incomplete attire—no tie, jacket slightly rumpled from being compressed in the backpack.

“Something like that,” I reply, keeping my eyes on the traffic ahead where Coleman’s taxi is still visible. My pupils haven’t fully returned to human round yet, and the last thing I need is questions about unusual eye shapes.

The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum glows against the night sky, its Venetian-inspired architecture transformed by strategic lighting. A steady stream of Boston’s elite flows through the entrance, women in evening wear and men in tuxedos. Coleman’s taxi stops at the main entrance, and he steps out, immediately scanning the arriving crowds with professional vigilance.

My own taxi stops a block away at my request. I pay the driver and wait until he pulls away before assessing the situation. The invitation-only event—a charity gala benefiting the museum’s acquisition fund—is far too exclusive for my current appearance. But the security focus is on the human guests arriving through the front entrance. No one is watching the roof.

In the shadows of a service alley, I transform again, the cat shape becoming more natural with each change. The security guard patrolling the museum's perimeter walks past without noticing the black shape slipping through carefully maintained ivy along the museum's outer wall.

The original Gardner mansion features numerous architectural elements perfect for feline ascent—decorative stonework, window ledges, trellises heavy with climbing plants. I make my way to the roof with relative ease, finding an access point through a partially open skylight in the newer wing added during renovations.

Inside, the museum has been transformed for the evening's event. The famous courtyard garden at the center of the museum serves as the main gathering space, tables draped in white linen surrounding the central fountain. Classical music from a string quartet competes with the gentle splash of water and the murmur of Boston's wealthiest exchanging carefully measured pleasantries.

I navigate between ceiling beams and across light fixtures, staying in shadow as I track Coleman through the crowd from above. He moves with purpose toward a service door, nodding to another security person who allows him through without question. This is my chance.

Dropping silently to the floor in a staff-only corridor, I follow at a discreet distance. The hallway leads away from the party toward the museum's administrative offices. Coleman approaches a door at the end of the corridor, enters a code on a keypad, and slips inside.

I wait thirty seconds before approaching. The door features both electronic security and a traditional lock—challenging for humans but presenting different options for a cat. I position myself below the door handle, listening with enhanced hearing. Two male voices from inside, one unmistakably Coleman's baritone.

"Perimeter is secure, sir. Dr. Farouk's movements are being monitored as requested."

My fur bristles at the mention of Nadia. A different voice responds—cultured, measured, with the subtle confidence of someone accustomed to authority.

"And our mutual friend from the police department? Has he made any progress locating our missing detective?"

"Captain Sullivan reports no body recovered matching Harlow's description since the initial harbor incident. The morgue security footage has been dealt with."

"How very interesting." The second voice—Blackwood, I presume—sounds more intrigued than concerned. "A man dies from a ritual dagger wound, falls thirty feet into freezing harbor water, is pronounced dead at the scene, and then simply walks out of the morgue. Almost as if something intervened."

"Sir, you think it's connected to the binding ritual?"

“I think, Mr. Coleman, that we should accelerate our timeline. Please inform our friends that we’ll be proceeding with the secondary site preparations immediately. If Harlow survived through supernatural intervention, it means our ritual had some effect, just not the one we intended.”

I press closer to the door, straining to hear more details about this “secondary site.” A sudden noise behind me—footsteps approaching from the main gallery. I dart beneath a decorative table just as another security guard rounds the corner.

“Mr. Blackwood?” the guard calls, knocking on the door. “Sorry to interrupt, but Dr. Hassan has arrived and is asking to speak with you urgently.”

The door opens, and I get my first direct look at Maxwell Blackwood—tall, impeccably dressed in a tuxedo that probably costs more than my monthly rent, with silver hair and the lean build of someone who can afford the very best health care. His face might have been handsome once, but there’s a hollowness to his features now, skin drawn too tight over prominent bones. Only his eyes show real life—intense, almost feverish in their focus.

“Send him back,” Blackwood instructs. “And ensure we’re not disturbed again.”

The guard nods and retreats. Moments later, Professor Hassan appears, his academic dishevelment a stark contrast to Blackwood’s polished appearance. The professor looks agitated, glancing nervously over his shoulder as he approaches.

“We have a problem,” Hassan says without preamble as Blackwood ushers him inside.

The door closes, cutting off their conversation. I need to get closer. The ventilation system provides an answer—an air duct near the floor, its grate loose from age and poor maintenance. I squeeze through the narrow opening, navigating the dusty metal pathway until I can hear voices again.

“—took the scroll,” Hassan is saying, voice tight with anxiety. “I’m certain of it. We had her cornered in the building, but she escaped. And there was... something else. An animal of some kind that interfered. A cat, but it moved... wrong. Almost deliberately.”

My whiskers twitch. So much for maintaining a low profile.

“A cat.” Blackwood repeats the word flatly. “You lost a critical artifact and a primary research subject because of a stray animal?”

“Not stray,” Hassan insists. “It was too coordinated, too purposeful. Like it was protecting her.”

Coleman makes a dismissive noise, but Blackwood raises a hand, silencing him. “The texts do mention guardians taking animal form. Particularly feline.”

“You can’t seriously believe—” Coleman begins.

“I believe, Mr. Coleman, that we are dealing with forces beyond conventional understanding. That’s rather the point of our entire enterprise.” Blackwood’s tone carries the slightest edge now. “If Dr. Farouk has indeed secured her grandfather’s hidden scroll, and if some form of supernatural guardian is now involved, we must adapt accordingly.”

I tense at the implicit threat toward Nadia. Through a small opening in the duct, I can see Blackwood moving to a leather briefcase on the desk. He retrieves an object wrapped in black silk.

“The artifacts we’ve already secured should be moved to the secondary location immediately,” he continues, carefully unwrapping the bundle to reveal what appears to be a small golden statuette of a cat. “This piece alone cost three lives to acquire. I won’t risk it remaining in an insecure location.”

“And the university collection?” Hassan asks.

“Proceed as planned. Tomorrow night during the system update. The security overrides are already in place.” Blackwood rewaps the statuette with reverence that borders on obsession. “Now, what progress on translating the partial ritual text?”

Hassan adjusts his glasses nervously. “That’s another concern. The fragment mentions nine transformations before mastery, but doesn’t specify what that means. And there’s a warning about the lunar cycle—something about forced change during the new moon.”

“Which is four days from now,” Blackwood notes. “Interesting timing, considering our planned acquisition schedule.”

A heavy silence falls, broken only by the faint sounds of the gala continuing in the distance. I shift position slightly, trying to see more clearly through the duct opening. The movement dislodges dust that tickles my sensitive nose. I fight against the inevitable sneeze, but feline reflexes override my control.

The sharp sound echoes in the metal ductwork.

“What was that?” Coleman is immediately alert, hand moving inside his jacket where a weapon undoubtedly waits.

“Check the vents,” Blackwood orders, his calm unperturbed. “Our guardian may be closer than we think.”

I retreat immediately, backing through the duct as Coleman approaches with determined steps. The narrow metal passage leaves little room for turning around. I’m forced to back up faster than is comfortable, unable to see where I’m going.

A crash sounds as Coleman rips the vent cover off, peering inside with a flashlight. I’ve barely made it around a corner in the ductwork, pressing myself against the metal as the light sweeps past just inches from my position.

“Something’s definitely in here,” Coleman calls back. “Too small for a person. Could be an animal.”

“Find it,” Blackwood commands. “I want to know exactly what we’re dealing with.”

I continue my awkward retreat until reaching an intersection in the ductwork. A vertical shaft leads upward—my best escape route. Climbing in such a confined space tests even my enhanced feline abilities, claws scrabbling for purchase on smooth metal.

Below, I hear Coleman reporting my trail through the dust as he follows. The vertical shaft opens into the ceiling space above the museum’s second floor. I navigate through insulation and structural supports, oriented by the sounds of the gala below.

Reaching another air vent that opens into an exhibit gallery, I pause to listen. The room appears empty, displays of Renaissance paintings illuminated by soft lighting. I push through the loose grate, dropping silently to the floor just as the door opens.

Captain Frank Sullivan enters, his police uniform replaced by an ill-fitting tuxedo. The sight of my former supervisor—the man who helped destroy my career after Mike’s death—stops me cold. Sullivan on his own would be shock enough, but what truly freezes me in place is the person accompanying him: Sarah Reynolds, Mike’s widow.

Sarah looks uncomfortable in formal wear, her natural warmth constrained by the artificial setting. What is she doing here? And with Sullivan of all people?

“I appreciate you coming, Sarah,” Sullivan is saying, his voice carrying the forced gentleness he uses when manipulating witnesses. “Blackwood’s donation to the children’s scholarship fund is very generous.”

“Frank, you know I’m grateful for the department’s support since Mike died, but this feels... off.” Sarah hugs herself slightly, a protective gesture I recognize from the funeral. “Why is this Maxwell Blackwood so interested in Mike’s old cases? And why bring me here to meet him?”

Sullivan places a hand on her shoulder that she subtly shifts away from. “Max is just a concerned citizen with deep pockets. He’s particularly interested in cold cases involving missing artifacts. Apparently, Mike made notes about some Egyptian piece that was never recovered.”

My mind races, connecting dots between past and present. Three years ago, Mike and I had briefly investigated a break-in at a university storage facility—before being pulled onto the Krane kidnapping case that ultimately cost Mike his life. The university case was minor, reassigned when children’s lives took priority. But if that facility contained gateway artifacts...

"I haven't gone through Mike's personal effects in years," Sarah says, her voice tight. "If there were case notes, they'd be at the station, not at home."

"Just a conversation, Sarah. No pressure." Sullivan's tone contradicts his words. "Blackwood has connections that could fast-track Emma's college applications. Worth a few questions, right?"

The mention of Mike's daughter sends a surge of protective anger through me. Sullivan is using Mike's family to further the cult's goals. Before I can process this revelation fully, the gallery door opens again. Coleman enters, scanning the room with the focused attention of a predator.

"Captain Sullivan," he acknowledges. "Mr. Blackwood is ready whenever you are." His eyes continue moving, searching shadows and corners systematically. When his gaze passes over my position beneath a display pedestal, I hold perfectly still, relying on the darkness to conceal my form.

"We'll be right there," Sullivan replies. "Just giving Mrs. Reynolds a moment to collect herself."

Coleman nods but doesn't leave. "Sir asked me to check all the galleries. Security concern."

"Problem?" Sullivan asks, suddenly alert.

"Just a precaution." Coleman moves deeper into the room, methodically checking behind displays. "There may be an unauthorized visitor on the premises."

I need to move. As Coleman's back turns, I slip from beneath the pedestal, using Sarah and Sullivan as visual cover while making my way toward the door. I'm nearly there when Sarah gasps.

"A cat! How did a cat get in here?"

All eyes turn to me. Sullivan looks merely confused, but Coleman's expression hardens with suspicious recognition. "That's no ordinary cat," he says, moving quickly to intercept my escape route.

I abandon stealth for speed, darting between Coleman's legs and through the partially open door. Behind me, I hear him curse.

"Stop that animal!" Coleman's command echoes through the gallery. "Security breach in the Renaissance wing!"

The hallway outside offers multiple escape routes. The building's central courtyard lies straight ahead, crowded with gala attendees. To the right, a service corridor likely leads to staff areas and potential exits. To the left, the main staircase descends to the first floor and the main entrance.

The courtyard offers the best immediate cover but leaves me without clear escape options. The decision is made for me as security personnel appear at both ends of the hallway, responding to Coleman's alert. I dash into the crowded courtyard, weaving between evening gowns and polished shoes.

Confused exclamations follow my path as Boston's elite react to a cat disrupting their carefully choreographed social performance. I use their confusion as cover, plotting a route toward the museum's Dutch Room where I recall a window installation that might provide exit access.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please remain calm." Blackwood's voice carries over the crowd, smooth and authoritative. He stands near the courtyard's central fountain, commanding attention effortlessly. "We appear to have a small four-legged intruder. Security will handle the situation. Please continue enjoying your evening."

As if to contradict him, the museum's fire alarm suddenly activates, its piercing wail cutting through the elegant atmosphere. Sprinklers remain blessedly inactive—no doubt disabled to protect the priceless artwork—but the alarm itself creates instant chaos. Security's focus shifts to evacuation procedures, temporarily diverting attention from cat-hunting.

I didn't trigger the alarm, which means someone else is interfering. My first thought is Nadia, but she should be safely back at the cabin. Unless...

Through the confusion of evacuating guests, I spot her across the courtyard—Nadia in a server's uniform, calmly directing people toward exits while moving systematically in the opposite direction. Our eyes meet briefly. She gives no obvious sign of recognition, but her path subtly adjusts toward a service door near the back of the courtyard.

I make my way toward her, using potted plants and guests' legs as cover. Coleman appears at the edge of the courtyard, scanning the crowd with a determination that suggests he understands exactly what—who—he's looking for.

Nadia reaches the service door first, holding it open slightly longer than necessary as she ushers an elderly couple through. I dart past her into the corridor beyond, hearing the door click shut behind us. Moments later, Nadia follows, quickly discarding the server's jacket to reveal dark clothing underneath.

"Three minutes until they override the alarm system," she says without preamble, leading the way down the service corridor. "Did you find anything?"

I meow once—our established signal for yes—and increase my pace. Questions about her unexpected presence can wait until we're safely away.

Nadia navigates the staff areas with surprising confidence, suggesting she planned this infiltration meticulously. We pass through kitchens and storage rooms, avoiding the few staff members still completing evacuation procedures. At a fire exit leading to a side alley, she pauses.

"This will trigger a secondary alarm when opened, but it should buy us additional confusion." She glances down at me. "Ready? The car is three blocks north."

I meow once again. She pushes the door open, setting off another alarm, and

we emerge into the cool night air. Rather than taking the direct route to the street, Nadia leads us deeper into the alley network behind the museum, using the buildings' shadows for cover.

"I followed you after you left the cabin," she explains as we move. "You seemed... agitated after your last communication with Anubis. I worried you might do something reckless."

If cats could look indignant, I'd be managing it now. She notices my flattened ears and adds, "Apparently with good reason, since you infiltrated a high-security event crawling with cult members."

We reach the main street without incident, but I can hear sirens approaching—museum security has likely called police about the alarm and "intruder." Nadia leads us to a nondescript sedan parked along a residential street several blocks from the museum.

Once inside the car with doors locked, I transform back to human form in the passenger seat. The process is becoming smoother each time, though the sensory reorientation still leaves me momentarily dizzy.

"They're accelerating their timeline," I say immediately, voice slightly rough as it always is after transformation. "Moving artifacts to a secondary location. Planning another theft at the university tomorrow night during a security system update."

Nadia pulls away from the curb, driving unhurriedly to avoid attention. "Did you see Blackwood?"

"Yes. And something else." I hesitate, organizing my thoughts. "Sullivan was there—my former captain. With Mike's widow."

Her hands tighten on the steering wheel. "Your dead partner's wife? Why?"

"They think Mike had information about one of the artifacts. Notes from an old case we worked briefly before..." I don't need to finish the sentence. Nadia knows how that story ends.

"This connects back to your partner's death somehow," she says softly.

"Looks that way." The implications hit me fully now. "Three years ago, Mike and I caught a break-in at a university storage facility. Minor case, seemingly random theft of catalogued items waiting for research. We were pulled off it when the Krane kidnappings started."

Nadia takes a sharp turn, heading away from the city center. "Was Sullivan the one who reassigned you?"

"Yes." Cold certainty settles in my stomach. "He deliberately pulled us off that case and onto Krane, knowing how dangerous it was. Mike's death wasn't just a tragedy—it was orchestrated. They needed us away from those artifacts."

“And now they’re involving his widow to find something they think he discovered.” Nadia’s expression darkens. “Using his family...”

“I need to warn Sarah.” I reach for my phone before remembering it’s back at the cabin. “She has no idea what she’s being pulled into.”

“First, we need to get somewhere safe.” Nadia checks the rearview mirror frequently. “I think we’re clean, but after tonight, both Blackwood and Sullivan will be connecting dots. They know about my grandfather’s scroll now, and they suspect supernatural involvement.”

“Hassan saw me at the university,” I confirm. “He told Blackwood about a cat that moved ‘wrong’—with purpose.”

“They don’t know exactly what happened to you yet, but they’re getting closer.” She takes another turn, leading us toward the outskirts of the city. “We should assume the cabin is compromised. I’ve booked a motel under a different name where we can regroup.”

As we drive in tense silence, I process everything I’ve learned. The cult’s activities span decades, with tentacles reaching into police, academia, and Boston’s elite social circles. They’ve killed to achieve their goals—my partner, Nadia’s grandfather, others we probably don’t even know about yet. And they’re accelerating toward something culminating with the new moon and eclipse.

“There’s more,” I say finally. “Blackwood has a gold cat statuette he’s particularly protective of. Said it ‘cost three lives’ to acquire. And they mentioned nine transformations before mastery—something about the new moon forcing change.”

Nadia nods grimly. “The scroll mentioned that too. During the new moon, you’ll be bound to cat form for its duration. Approximately 36 hours.”

“Perfect timing,” I mutter. “Next time I see Anubis, we need to discuss his selective information sharing policy.”

We pull into a run-down motel off the highway, the kind of place that asks no questions as long as you pay cash. Nadia handles the check-in while I wait in the car, still processing the evening’s revelations.

In our room—a dingy space with two beds and decade-old furnishings—I pace restlessly while Nadia sets up her laptop and notes.

“So they know about the scroll, they suspect supernatural intervention, and they’re moving their timetable up,” she summarizes, writing rapid notes in a mixture of English and Arabic. “And they’re planning another theft tomorrow night at the university.”

“A security system update,” I confirm. “Hassan said the overrides are already in place.”

“We need to be there,” Nadia says decisively. “Either to stop them or to track them back to this secondary location. If they’ve already secured multiple artifacts, finding their storage site is critical.”

I stop pacing, struck by a particular memory from the overheard conversation. “They mentioned something about the lunar cycle and the gateway becoming permanent if not sealed properly. How much time did Anubis say we have?”

“About two weeks from your death,” Nadia calculates. “Which means around ten days remaining. The eclipse happens two days after that.”

“So their deadline is the eclipse,” I conclude. “They need to complete the ritual before then, or the gateway... what? Closes permanently?”

“According to the scroll, if the gateway isn’t properly sealed within a lunar cycle of being accessed, it becomes increasingly unstable. The eclipse represents both danger and opportunity—a cosmic alignment that amplifies magical workings.” She looks up from her notes. “The proper sealing ritual requires specific artifacts arranged correctly. The corrupted ritual Blackwood plans would instead create a permanent breach.”

I sit heavily on the edge of the bed. “And unleash chaos entities into our world.” The phrase sounds ridiculous spoken aloud, but after everything I’ve experienced, I no longer have the luxury of skepticism. “How do we stop it?”

“We need the remaining artifacts, particularly the binding dagger.” Nadia’s expression is determined despite her obvious exhaustion. “And we need to find their secondary location before the eclipse.”

A thought occurs to me. “Sullivan mentioned Sarah might have something of Mike’s—notes about the case or artifacts. If Mike discovered something important before he died...”

“It could help us locate what we need,” Nadia finishes. “But approaching her directly puts her at risk, especially if Sullivan is watching her.”

“I’ll figure something out.” I rub my face, fatigue finally catching up to me. The multiple transformations today have drained me more than I realized. “Tomorrow we need a plan for the university theft, but first...”

“Rest,” Nadia insists. “You’ve transformed multiple times today. According to the texts, that requires significant energy.”

I don’t have the strength to argue. As I stretch out on the bed, still fully clothed, Nadia continues working at the small desk, the glow of her laptop illuminating her determined profile. My last thought before sleep claims me is how quickly this academic has adapted to life on the run, planning heists and counter-heists with the strategic precision of a seasoned operative.

The dream desert awaits, and with it, more questions for a certain feline deity who owes me some answers about Mike’s death and the true cost of nine transformations.

Chapter 10: Death Signatures

The dream desert stretches before me, sand rippling with impossible patterns that seem to write and rewrite themselves with each shift of the starlight above. I've become more comfortable navigating this place during my brief time as Anubis's servant, but tonight feels different. The air carries a charge, like the moment before lightning strikes.

"You have questions." Anubis's voice emanates from everywhere and nowhere at once. I turn to find him lounging atop a dune that wasn't there seconds ago, his massive feline form silhouetted against stars arranged in constellations no human astronomer has ever catalogued.

"You knew Mike's death was connected to all this." I don't phrase it as a question. "You knew when you selected me for this... partnership."

Anubis's tail flicks once, disturbing sand that flows like liquid. "I knew your partner died investigating matters that brushed against my domain. I did not know the full extent of the connection until you discovered it yourself tonight."

"Convenient," I mutter, climbing the dune to stand eye-to-eye with the entity. "What else aren't you telling me? The cult mentioned nine transformations before mastery. They talked about the new moon forcing change."

"Yes." Anubis rises, stretching in that distinctly feline manner that seems both ordinary and utterly alien coming from a being of his size and power. "The binding requires nine complete transformations to stabilize properly. With each transformation, your ability to change form becomes more fluid, but also more... integrated."

"Integrated how?"

His eclipse-eyes study me with unnerving focus. "The boundary between Jake Harlow and the servant of Anubis thins. Abilities manifest more strongly. Perceptions alter permanently."

"Like the death signatures I've been seeing?"

"Yes, though those will develop far beyond what you've experienced thus far." He begins walking down the opposite side of the dune, clearly expecting me to follow. "Tomorrow, you will need that perception. A fresh death connected to the cult occurred tonight while you were at the museum."

I hurry to catch up, my feet sinking less in the dream-sand than they should. "Who?"

"A museum security guard who saw too much. They will disguise it as suicide, but the death signature will reveal the truth to you now that you know to look for it."

"And the new moon? What happens then?"

Anubis stops before what appears to be a pool of water—impossible in this desert, yet undeniably present. The surface reflects neither of us, showing instead Boston’s skyline under a moonless night.

“During the new moon, when my influence in the physical world naturally wanes, you will be bound to cat form for approximately thirty-six hours.” His tone suggests this is a minor inconvenience rather than a life-altering limitation. “It is... an unavoidable aspect of our arrangement.”

“You might have mentioned that before I agreed to this deal,” I say, anger flaring.

“Would it have changed your decision?” Anubis counters. “Between dissolution and temporary transformation?”

He has me there, and we both know it.

“The captain,” I say, changing tactics. “Sullivan. He was involved in Mike’s death, wasn’t he? He deliberately sent us into that kidnapping case to get us away from the university investigation.”

“The death signatures will confirm what you already suspect.” Anubis gazes into the pool. “You will need to control your emotions when that confirmation comes. Your transformations are still linked to your emotional state. Anger, fear, extreme stress—these can trigger unwanted changes.”

“Is that a warning or a threat?”

Anubis makes a sound that might be a laugh. “Consider it practical advice from one who does not wish to see his avatar exposed prematurely.” His massive paw disturbs the surface of the pool, sending ripples across the reflected cityscape. “I have shown you how to perceive death’s mark. Tonight, I will teach you to read its story.”

He gestures for me to kneel beside the pool. As I do, the reflection shifts from the Boston skyline to what appears to be a morgue examination room.

“Focus on the colors surrounding the deceased. Each hue, each pattern, tells of the manner of death and the emotions present at the moment of passing.”

The image zooms in on a body covered by a sheet. Around it swirl colors I can barely describe—electric blue tendrils mixed with sulfurous yellow and muddy brown.

“What am I seeing?” I ask.

“Death by asphyxiation,” Anubis explains. “The blue speaks of oxygen deprivation. The yellow indicates fear. The brown suggests deception—a death made to look like something it was not.”

“And I can see this on actual victims? At crime scenes?”

“Yes. With practice, you will learn to interpret the signatures instinctively. The colors will show you truth that physical evidence might obscure.”

The image shifts again, showing a different body with very different colors—deep crimson shot through with flashes of orange-gold.

“Violent death,” I guess.

“Correct. Gunshot wound. The victim fought back—see how the orange fragments cluster near the hands? The assailant was known to them—notice the threads of purple connecting the primary signature to the door.”

For what feels like hours, Anubis guides me through a macabre gallery of death signatures, teaching me to recognize the subtle differences between similar deaths—drowning versus strangulation, accident versus planned attack, peaceful passing versus pain-filled end.

“What about Mike?” I finally ask. “Will I be able to see his death signature after all this time?”

Anubis’s expression remains impossible to read. “Death leaves its mark on places as well as people. Where violent or significant death occurs, an echo remains that those with sight can perceive. Your partner’s death site will hold such an echo, yes.”

“And the people responsible? What will I see when I look at them?”

“Those who cause death carry fragments of their victims’ signatures, visible only to those with the sight. The more deaths they’ve caused, the more complex the patterns they carry.”

The water ripples again, and I see Sullivan’s face reflected in the pool, surrounded by a tangled web of color fragments that makes my stomach turn.

“He’s killed before,” I whisper.

“More than once,” Anubis confirms.

Before I can ask more, the dream desert begins to fade around me, sand dissolving into mist.

“Our time grows short,” Anubis says. “Remember what you’ve learned. And remember that control—of your emotions, your transformations, your new perceptions—will determine your success.”

As the dream slips away, his final words echo in my mind: “The binding dagger is key to all. Find it before they use it again.”

I wake suddenly to the harsh intrusion of a phone alarm. Sunlight filters through cheap motel curtains that do little to block the morning glare. Nadia sits cross-legged on the other bed, her laptop open beside a scatter of notes and what

appears to be an ancient scroll partially unrolled and protected by clear archival sheeting.

“You were restless,” she says by way of greeting. “Talking in your sleep. Some of it wasn’t in English.”

I sit up, rubbing my face. “Anubis had a lot to say.”

“Anything useful?” She closes her laptop, giving me her full attention.

“There’s been another death. A security guard from the museum. Made to look like suicide.” I swing my legs over the side of the bed, noting my clothes are wrinkled from sleeping in them. “And Anubis showed me how to read death signatures more clearly.”

Interest sparks in her eyes. “The ancient texts mention the ability to perceive ka-signatures—the specific energy imprint of a death. They were believed to linger around the deceased for several days after passing.”

“Not just the deceased. The killers carry fragments too.” I check my watch—nearly nine in the morning. “We need to find out which security guard died and where they’ve taken the body.”

Nadia is already reaching for her phone. “I’ve been monitoring emergency channels and news sites. There was a report of a body found near the Gardner around 2 AM. Official statement pending, but initial report mentions possible suicide. Name withheld.”

I’m genuinely impressed. “Where did an Egyptologist learn to monitor emergency channels?”

A small smile plays at her lips. “My grandfather wasn’t just an academic. After he left the Order, he became somewhat... paranoid about them tracking his movements. He taught me certain skills.”

“Clearly.” I stand, stretching muscles stiff from tension and poor sleep. “We need to get to that body before it’s processed. If it was murder disguised as suicide, the death signature will confirm it.”

“And how exactly do we get access to a body in the middle of a police investigation?” Nadia asks.

“I still have one friend in the medical examiner’s office.” I head for the bathroom. “Dr. Martin Chen. He witnessed my own resurrection, remember? He’s already neck-deep in the weird. Might as well put that to use.”

Twenty minutes later, showered and wearing clothes Nadia apparently purchased while I slept, I’m on the phone with Dr. Chen. His initial greeting is suspicious, but he warms slightly when he recognizes my voice.

“Harlow? Jesus, man, you disappeared from my morgue like a ghost. I’ve been wondering if I hallucinated the whole thing.”

“Not a hallucination, Doc. I need a favor.”

A pause. “The kind that could cost me my license?”

“The kind that might save lives.” I explain about the security guard without mentioning anything supernatural. “I think it’s connected to my own... incident. I just need ten minutes with the body before the official autopsy.”

Another, longer pause. “Security guard from the Gardner Museum? Geoffrey Torres, 41. They brought him in about three hours ago. I’m scheduled to do the post at eleven.”

“So you have him?”

“Yeah, I have him. Preliminary ruling is suicide by hanging, but...” He lowers his voice. “There are some inconsistencies I was going to note in my report.”

“I need to see him, Martin.”

He sighs heavily. “Back loading dock. Thirty minutes. Ten minutes is all you get, and if anyone asks, you overpowered me and forced your way in.”

“Thanks, Doc. I owe you.”

“You owe me several explanations, actually,” he counters. “Starting with how you walked out of my morgue after being definitively dead.”

“Raincheck on that,” I say, ending the call.

Nadia looks up from her laptop. “We’re in?”

“We’re in. Thirty minutes.”

She powers down her computer and carefully rolls the ancient scroll, securing it in a waterproof document tube. “What’s our approach?”

“You’re my new partner,” I say, surprising myself with how naturally the words come. “Consulting on a connected case. Let me do the talking, and don’t react no matter what you see me do.”

Her eyebrow arches. “Is there something specific I should be prepared not to react to?”

“I’m going to be looking at things that aren’t visible to normal human perception. If I start acting strange, just... cover for me.”

She nods, accepting this with the same adaptability she’s shown to everything else in our increasingly bizarre situation.

The drive to the city morgue takes us through morning traffic, but we arrive with five minutes to spare. As instructed, I park near the loading dock where incoming bodies arrive. Dr. Chen emerges from a service door almost immediately, glancing nervously in both directions before waving us over.

“Ten minutes,” he reminds me as we follow him inside. “The detectives assigned to the case will be here at eleven sharp.”

“This is Dr. Nadia Farouk,” I introduce as we walk briskly through sterile corridors. “She’s consulting with me.”

Martin gives her a distracted nod, leading us to the examination room where Torres’s body awaits. The room is cold and clinical, stark white surfaces and stainless steel reflecting the harsh fluorescent lighting. The body lies on the central table, covered with a sheet, preliminary examination tools arranged nearby.

“I’ll be just outside,” Martin says. “But seriously, Jake—ten minutes.”

As the door closes behind him, I turn to Nadia. “Keep watch. If anyone besides Martin tries to come in, stall them.”

She positions herself near the door while I approach the body. Taking a deep breath, I focus the way Anubis taught me in the dream, allowing my perception to shift. The room darkens slightly as colors begin to manifest around the sheet-covered form—exactly the mixture Anubis showed me: electric blue, sulfurous yellow, and muddy brown swirling together in a pattern that speaks of strangulation and deception.

I pull back the sheet. Torres’s face is discolored, the ligature marks around his neck consistent with hanging. But as I study the death signature more closely, I notice something Anubis didn’t prepare me for—a pattern within the colors, almost like a signature within the signature. A specific curved shape repeated in the yellow portions, reminiscent of a sickle or hook.

“What do you see?” Nadia asks quietly from her position by the door.

“Confirmation it wasn’t suicide,” I murmur, still focused on the unusual pattern. “He was strangled, then positioned to look like he hanged himself. But there’s something else...”

I examine the body more carefully, using both my normal detective skills and this new perception. The abrasions on Torres’s hands suggest he fought back. The death signature shows concentrations of orange-gold—similar to what Anubis showed me as indicators of resistance—around his wrists and fingers.

Then I notice something physical: tiny fragments of gold leaf embedded under his fingernails.

“He scratched his attacker,” I say. “Or something his attacker was carrying.”

Nadia moves closer. “Like what?”

“Like a golden artifact.” I recall Blackwood unwrapping the cat statuette. “Torres must have seen something last night during the gala. Maybe caught a glimpse of Blackwood’s cat statuette or overheard something he shouldn’t have.”

The colors around the body pulse more intensely as I consider this, the sickle-like pattern becoming more pronounced. I reach out instinctively, my fingers passing through the colored energy, and suddenly—

Darkness. The service corridor behind the museum. Torres smoking a cigarette, checking his watch. Footsteps approaching. He turns, expecting a fellow guard, but instead sees—

“Professor Hassan? The museum’s closed now, sir.”

“I know. I forgot something in Mr. Blackwood’s office.” Hassan’s smile doesn’t reach his eyes. “Would you mind letting me in? I have clearance.”

Torres hesitates. “I should call it in first.”

“Of course,” Hassan says agreeably, reaching into his jacket. “Protocol is important.”

As Torres turns slightly to use his radio, Hassan moves with unexpected speed, looping something around the guard’s neck—a cord or wire. Torres struggles, reaching back, his fingers scraping against something hard and metallic in Hassan’s pocket. The pressure increases. Darkness encroaches. His last sight is Hassan’s face, expression clinically detached, as if observing an experiment rather than taking a life.

I jerk back from the body, gasping. The vision—memory?—fades.

“Jake?” Nadia’s hand on my arm steadies me. “What happened?”

“I saw it,” I whisper. “I saw his death. Hassan killed him.”

Her eyes widen. “You experienced his final moments?”

“Not exactly. More like... watching a recording. Hassan strangled him in the service corridor after the gala. Torres scratched something in Hassan’s pocket during the struggle. Something gold.”

I look down at the body again, the death signature now perfectly legible to me. “Hassan killed him to protect Blackwood and the artifacts.”

A knock at the door interrupts us. Martin pokes his head in. “Time’s up. They’re on their way down.”

I nod, pulling the sheet back over Torres. “We’re done. And Martin? Make sure you note the gold fragments under his nails in your report. It’s important.”

He frowns. “How did you—” Then shakes his head. “Never mind. I don’t want to know. Now go, before you get us both fired.”

We exit through the service door, emerging back into the morning sunlight. Once in the car, Nadia turns to me.

“What else did you see?”

I start the engine, pulling away from the morgue. “There was a pattern in the death signature—a curve like a sickle or hook. I think it’s Hassan’s... I don’t know, his death mark? The sign he leaves behind, maybe unintentionally.”

“The Ancient Egyptians believed that the ba—something like a soul—carried impressions of significant actions, especially violent ones,” Nadia says thoughtfully. “If Hassan has killed before...”

“Then I might be able to connect him to other deaths,” I finish. “Including, potentially, Mike’s.”

The implication hangs between us as I navigate toward downtown.

“Where are we going?” Nadia finally asks.

“Police headquarters,” I reply. “I need to see the evidence from Mike’s case. If Hassan was involved, if that sickle shape appears in the death signature...”

“Is that wise? Walking into police headquarters when Sullivan knows you should be dead?”

“No,” I admit. “But I need to know.”

She studies me for a moment, then nods. “Then we’ll find out. But not by walking into a building full of police officers who might recognize you. There must be another way to access those files.”

She’s right, of course. I take a deep breath, fighting back the urgent need to act immediately—a need fueled by anger more than reason.

“I think I know someone who might still have access,” I say, changing direction. “Henderson. He was working the Krane case too, but wasn’t there the night Mike died. He always thought the department buried evidence.”

“Can you trust him?”

“More than anyone else on the force,” I reply. “At least enough to ask some questions.”

I drive to a small café several blocks from headquarters where Henderson takes his lunch most days. It’s just past eleven—if his habits haven’t changed, he should appear soon. We take a table near the back with a clear view of the entrance and order coffee to justify our presence.

“If he shows, let me approach him alone,” I tell Nadia. “We can’t risk someone recognizing you from the museum security footage.”

She nods, angling her chair to keep her face partially hidden from the main entrance.

Twenty minutes later, my patience is rewarded. Detective Roy Henderson walks in, looking exactly as I remember—heavysset, perpetually rumpled, with the weary eyes of someone who’s seen too much but keeps showing up anyway. He

orders at the counter, then takes his usual corner table, spreading case files beside his sandwich.

“That’s him,” I murmur to Nadia. “Stay here.”

I approach casually, keeping my head down until I reach his table. “Mind if I join you, Roy?”

Henderson looks up, coffee cup halfway to his mouth. His eyes widen, cup freezing in place. “Harlow?” he hisses, glancing around frantically. “What the hell? You’re supposed to be—”

“Dead?” I slide into the chair opposite him. “Yeah, reports of my demise have been greatly exaggerated.”

“Jesus Christ.” He finally sets his cup down, coffee sloshing over the rim. “Where have you been? There’s been a BOLO out for you since you disappeared from the morgue.”

“It’s complicated. I need information, Roy. About Mike’s case.”

His expression shifts from shock to wariness. “That case has been closed for three years.”

“Has it? Or was it just buried?” I lean forward. “I think there was more to it than what made the official report. I think Mike found something during that university break-in case we were pulled off of. Something someone didn’t want found.”

Henderson’s eyes narrow. “Like what?”

“Like a connection to Egyptian artifacts that were stolen. Artifacts that are being stolen again right now.”

He sits back, studying me. “You talking about the Gardner Museum break-in last night? The dead security guard?”

I keep my expression neutral. “What happened?”

“Torres, Geoffrey. Found hanging behind the museum early this morning. Preliminary ruling is suicide, but word is the ME found some inconsistencies.” He tilts his head. “You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?”

“I know Torres was murdered by someone connected to the same people who killed Mike.”

Henderson stares at me for a long moment. Then, incredibly, he chuckles. “You always did cut right to it, Harlow.” He glances at his case files, then back to me. “Mike did find something weird in that university case. Some kind of ritual dagger with hieroglyphics. He photographed it before processing because it reminded him of something his grandfather collected.”

My pulse quickens. “The binding dagger. Do you have access to those photos?”

“Not directly.” Henderson lowers his voice. “But I might know where to look. After Mike died and you left the force, I did some digging. The university break-in evidence was checked out by Sullivan personally three days after Mike’s funeral. Never returned to evidence.”

“Sullivan took it?”

“Officially, it was lost in transit back to storage.” Henderson’s expression is grim. “But I checked the log. Sullivan was the last one to handle it.”

“I need those photos, Roy.”

He hesitates. “What are you mixed up in, Jake? You show up after being declared dead, asking about old cases, connected to fresh murders... This isn’t just about clearing Mike’s name, is it?”

“It’s about finishing what got him killed,” I say truthfully. “And stopping the people responsible from hurting anyone else.”

Something in my tone must convince him. He nods slightly. “Sullivan keeps a private case file in his desk. Third drawer, false bottom. I’ve seen him access it when he thinks no one’s watching. If Mike’s photos exist anywhere, they’ll be there.”

“And how am I supposed to access Sullivan’s desk? I can’t exactly walk into the precinct.”

Henderson checks his watch. “Sullivan has a standing lunch with the Commissioner every Wednesday. Today. He left twenty minutes ago, won’t be back for at least an hour. Cleaning crew comes through at 12:30. The woman who does the offices, Maria, she’s a good sort. Might look the other way if someone she used to know was at Sullivan’s desk for a minute.”

I manage a smile. “You always were good at finding angles, Roy.”

“Yeah, well.” He rewraps half his sandwich and hands it to me. “For old times’ sake. You look like you could use a meal.”

I take it, genuinely touched. “Thanks. For everything.”

“I never believed the official story about that night,” Henderson says quietly. “Mike was too careful to go in without proper backup. Something else happened.”

“I’m going to find out what,” I promise.

“When you do...” He scribbles something on a napkin and slides it across the table. “Call this number. Burner phone. No one knows about it.”

I pocket the napkin and stand. “Watch yourself, Roy. The people involved in this... they’re dangerous.”

“So am I, when pushed.” He returns to his coffee. “Good luck, Harlow.”

I rejoin Nadia, who's been watching the exchange with barely concealed tension.

"Well?" she asks as we exit the café.

"We need to get into police headquarters. Specifically, Sullivan's office. And we have less than an hour to do it."

"That sounds..." She searches for the word. "Incredibly risky."

"It's our best lead on the binding dagger," I counter. "Mike photographed it three years ago. Sullivan has the photos."

Her expression shifts from skepticism to determination. "Then we'll get them. How?"

I explain Henderson's information as we walk toward headquarters, formulating a plan. The cleaning crew gives us our opening, but we'll need a distraction to ensure Sullivan's floor is clear of detectives who might recognize me.

"I could create a commotion at the front desk," Nadia suggests. "Insist on filing a report about stolen Egyptian artifacts, become increasingly agitated when they don't take me seriously."

"Too risky. If they connect you to the museum, we're both compromised." I think for a moment. "I have a better idea. The fire alarm system. A small, contained fire in the trash can outside the service entrance will trigger the alarms without causing real damage. Most officers will evacuate according to protocol."

"And the cleaning crew?"

"They'll evacuate too, but they won't be watched as closely as civilians or officers. I can blend in with them using a maintenance uniform."

Nadia nods slowly. "It could work. How do we get the uniform?"

Fortune favors us. The service alley behind headquarters contains several maintenance vehicles, including one with a jacket left carelessly on the passenger seat. I hate stooping to theft, but our timeline doesn't allow for alternatives.

"Wait here," I tell Nadia, positioning her in a café across the street with a clear view of the building. "If I'm not out in twenty minutes, leave. Get back to the motel and contact Henderson at the number he gave me."

She grips my arm. "Be careful. Remember what Anubis said about controlling your emotions."

The reminder is timely. Already, I can feel anger simmering just below the surface—anger at Sullivan, at the cult, at the whole conspiracy that took Mike's life and irrevocably altered mine.

"I'll be careful," I promise.

The plan works better than anticipated. A small fire in the trash can triggers the alarms, and headquarters begins a controlled evacuation. I slip in through the

service entrance, maintenance jacket making me all but invisible to the officers focused on managing the evacuation.

Sullivan's office is on the third floor. I take the stairs, avoiding the main evacuation routes, and find the detective bullpen mercifully empty. Sullivan's desk sits in the corner, positioned so his back is to the wall—the habit of a man who doesn't trust his colleagues.

Third drawer, false bottom. I work quickly, aware that time is against me. The drawer opens easily—no lock, Sullivan's confidence or arrogance showing through. The false bottom is cleverly constructed but yields to careful pressure at the corners. Beneath it lies a slim file labeled only with a hieroglyph similar to the ankh symbol.

Inside, I find exactly what I'm looking for: Mike's photographs of the ritual dagger, along with handwritten notes in my partner's distinctive scrawl. The dagger itself features a curved blade inscribed with hieroglyphics, its handle inlaid with gold and topped with a small cat figure.

But it's the other contents of the file that send ice through my veins. Photos of me and Mike during our last case together. Surveillance images. A transcript of our final radio communications before entering the building where Mike died. And most damning of all, a small photograph of Sullivan standing beside a younger Blackwood, both wearing academic robes with a symbol embroidered on the breast—the same sickle-shaped curve I saw in Torres's death signature.

Sullivan didn't just know about the cult. He's been a member for decades.

My hands shake as I flip through the documents, anger building. Photos of the Krane children we tried to rescue. Medical reports. Death certificates. It was all orchestrated—the kidnapping, our assignment to the case, the circumstances that led to Mike's death and my disgrace.

And then I see it: a final photograph paperclipped to the back of the file. Mike's body at the crime scene, the image captured before official police photographers arrived. Around the wound that killed him, just barely visible as a discoloration that most would attribute to blood patterns or camera artifacts, is the same distinctive sickle shape I saw in Torres's death signature.

Hassan killed Mike.

The realization hits with physical force. My vision blurs at the edges, turning red. A familiar prickling sensation starts along my spine as rage threatens to trigger transformation.

Control your emotions, Anubis had warned. Too late. I can feel fur beginning to sprout along my forearms, my teeth sharpening painfully. I grasp the edge of Sullivan's desk, trying to force back the change through sheer will.

Focus. Breathe. I need to get out with these files. Transformation now would trap me in the building with no way to transport the evidence. Slowly, painfully,

I push back the physical changes, though my eyes still burn with the sensation that tells me they've shifted to cat-form.

I stuff the file into my jacket and turn to leave—only to find myself face to face with a wide-eyed officer I don't recognize. Young, probably new since my departure from the force. He stares at me, then at my eyes, his hand instinctively moving toward his weapon.

"Hey! What are you doing in here?" he demands. "This area is supposed to be evacuated."

I straighten, fighting to keep my voice normal despite the partial transformation affecting my vocal cords. "Maintenance. Checking for the source of the alarm."

He frowns, unconvinced. "Maintenance doesn't check individual offices. Let me see some ID."

I don't have time for this. Outside, the evacuation must be nearly complete. If I'm still inside when they start letting people return, I'll be trapped.

"Just finishing up," I say, moving toward the door. "No alarm triggers in here."

"Stop right there," he says more firmly, drawing his weapon. "Hands where I can see them. Something's not right with you, buddy."

I raise my hands slowly, mind racing through options. I can't risk further transformation, can't risk capture, can't risk hurting the officer who's just doing his job.

The sprinklers choose that moment to activate, triggered by the smoke that must have finally reached the interior sensors. Water cascades down, startling the young officer. I seize the opportunity, lunging past him into the hallway. He shouts behind me, but I'm already running for the stairs, moving with speed that's just slightly beyond human normal.

Shouts echo through the stairwell as I descend. The building's emergency systems work against me now—the sprinklers making the stairs slippery, alarm lights casting disorienting red flashes that trigger my enhanced vision painfully. I can hear pursuit above, radio calls coordinating to cut me off at the exits.

Second floor. First floor. The main exits will be watched. I divert to the basement level, hoping to find a maintenance or utility exit. The partial transformation has enhanced my night vision, allowing me to navigate the dimly lit basement corridors without difficulty.

I find what I'm looking for—a utility tunnel connecting to the adjacent parking structure. The door requires a key card, but the lock is old and yields to a forceful shoulder strike. The tunnel is narrow and damp, clearly rarely used except for electrical and plumbing access.

Behind me, I hear the basement door slam open, voices calling out search patterns. I push forward, moving as quietly as possible despite my urgency. The

file is secure inside my jacket, protected from the sprinklers' water. I just need to reach the parking garage, then circle back to Nadia.

The tunnel seems endless, but finally terminates at another door. This one opens more easily, depositing me in the lowest level of the parking structure. I navigate between parked cars, staying low, making my way toward the exit.

Fresh air hits my face as I emerge onto the street a block away from headquarters. The area is chaotic with evacuated personnel and emergency vehicles responding to the alarm. Perfect cover for my escape. I remove the maintenance jacket, turning it inside out to hide the police department logo, and walk calmly away from the scene.

Nadia is exactly where I left her, her relief palpable as I slide into the chair across from her.

"You got it?" she asks.

"And more." I keep my head down, aware my eyes haven't fully returned to normal. "We need to leave. Now."

She doesn't waste time with questions, gathering her things and following me out of the café. We walk several blocks before risk hailing a taxi, directing it toward the outskirts of the city.

"Your eyes," Nadia murmurs once we're underway. "They're..."

"I know." I turn toward the window, avoiding the curious glance of the driver in the rearview mirror. "I almost transformed inside. Seeing the evidence... Mike's murder..."

Her hand finds mine, a silent anchor. "We have what we need?"

"We have confirmation," I say quietly. "Sullivan's been part of the cult for decades. Hassan killed Mike, used the same method recently on Torres. And we have photos of the binding dagger."

For the remainder of the ride, we sit in silence. Only when we're safely back in the motel room do I show her the file and its contents.

Nadia studies Mike's photos of the dagger with professional interest despite the circumstances. "These inscriptions... they're from the Book of the Dead, but modified. This section refers to binding divine essence to mortal form. And this—" She points to a symbol near the blade's curve. "This is a gateway hieroglyph, very rare in surviving texts."

"So this is definitely the ritual dagger they used on me? The one Anubis says we need to find?"

"Yes. And based on these modifications, it was specifically created for binding Anubis." She looks up at me. "Where was it when Mike photographed it?"

“University storage facility. Items waiting for cataloguing after an overseas donation.” I flip to the surveillance photos of Mike and me. “Sullivan made sure we were pulled off that case before we could process the evidence properly. Then arranged for us to walk into a trap with Krane.”

“And the dagger is now in Blackwood’s possession,” Nadia concludes. “Probably at this secondary location they mentioned.”

“Which means we need to find that location.” I pace the small room, energy still surging through me from the close call and partial transformation. “They’re planning another theft at the university tonight. If we follow them afterward...”

“We could discover where they’re keeping all the artifacts,” Nadia finishes. “Including the binding dagger.”

“Exactly.” I continue pacing, unable to release the nervous energy coursing through me. “We need a plan. They mentioned a security system update—that gives us a specific timeframe.”

Nadia opens her laptop. “I can access the university’s maintenance schedule through my faculty account. Let’s see what systems are scheduled for updates tonight.”

While she works, I study the photograph of the dagger more carefully. Something about its design nags at me—a familiarity beyond what I should feel for an object I’ve never physically seen.

“Computer system and security update scheduled for midnight to 3 AM,” Nadia announces. “Standard procedure is to shut down all systems temporarily, meaning...”

“No alarms, no cameras, no electronic locks,” I finish. “Perfect time for theft.”

“And the archaeology department storage area is specifically listed as requiring special attention during the update.” She looks up. “That’s not normal protocol.”

“Someone on the inside making sure the path is clear.” I lean against the wall, still struggling to maintain complete control over my partially transformed state. My eyes refuse to return to fully human, and I can feel my canines press uncomfortably against my lower lip when I speak.

Nadia watches me with scientific curiosity mixed with concern. “Are you alright? You seem to be having trouble... changing back completely.”

“Anubis warned me. Strong emotions can trigger transformations I can’t fully control yet.” I take a deep breath, forcing myself to focus. “Seeing the proof that Hassan killed Mike... knowing Sullivan orchestrated it all...”

“Your eyes,” she says softly. “They’re beautiful, actually. Like sunlight through green bottle glass.”

The unexpected compliment catches me off guard, somehow helping to center me. I feel the tension in my jaw ease slightly as my teeth return to normal shape. “Thanks. That helped, somehow.”

“The binding process integrates both forms,” she observes. “Makes sense that emotional turmoil would cause blending rather than complete transformation.”

“Great. So now I get to worry about sprouting whiskers every time someone cuts me off in traffic.”

She smiles. “I don’t think it works quite that way. This was an extreme situation—discovering your partner’s murderer, nearly being caught, running for your life.”

“Just another Wednesday.” The joke falls flat, even to my own ears. I sink onto the edge of the bed. “We need to prepare for tonight. Surveillance equipment, transportation, a plan for following them without being seen.”

“I’ve been thinking about that.” Nadia turns her laptop to show me a map of the university campus. “There are only three viable exit routes from the archaeology building. We can position ourselves to watch all three.”

“And if they split up?”

“I follow on foot, you follow by rooftop.” She says it so matter-of-factly that I’m momentarily taken aback. “Your cat form is perfect for tracking without being noticed, especially at night.”

I find myself smiling despite everything. “You’ve really adapted to all this quickly.”

She shrugs. “My grandfather used to say that when faced with the impossible, the only rational response is to expand your definition of possible.”

“Wise man.”

“He was.” Her expression turns solemn. “And they killed him for it, just like they killed Mike. For knowing too much about their plans for the gateway.”

The reminder of what’s at stake sobers us both. We spend the next several hours planning our approach, studying campus maps, establishing communication protocols using the burner phones Nadia apparently acquired while I slept. Her preparation and foresight continue to impress me.

As evening approaches, we go over the plan one final time. Nadia will position herself near the main entrance with clear sight lines to the loading dock and emergency exit. I’ll maintain cat form on the building’s roof, able to follow by tracking scent if needed. Once we identify who’s involved in the theft and where they’re heading, we’ll follow them to the secondary location.

“We should rest before tonight,” Nadia suggests, noting my continued agitation. “You especially. The transformation takes energy you’ll need later.”

She's right, but sleep seems impossible with my mind racing and body still fighting the residual effects of the partial transformation. As if reading my thoughts, she moves to sit beside me on the bed.

"In Ancient Egypt, priests would undergo purification rituals before major ceremonies," she says, her voice taking on the same calm cadence she uses when discussing her research. "They believed that emotional turbulence disrupted magical workings."

"Not just a belief," I mutter. "Evidence currently staring you in the face."

"Indeed." She hesitates, then places her palm against my chest, over my heart. "They would use focus techniques—breath control, meditation, sometimes physical contact as an anchor."

Her touch is warm, steady. I find myself instinctively matching my breathing to hers.

"That's it," she encourages. "Focus on something constant. Something unchanged by all this chaos."

I close my eyes, concentrating on the weight of her hand, the rhythm of our synchronized breathing. Slowly, the burning sensation behind my eyelids fades. When I open them again, her slight smile tells me they've returned to normal.

"Better," she says, withdrawing her hand. "You should try to sleep. I'll wake you when it's time to leave."

Whether from the calming exercise or simple exhaustion, I manage to fall into dreamless sleep for several hours. When Nadia wakes me, night has fallen. The digital clock shows 10:35 PM—time to move.

We drive separately, an unnecessary precaution perhaps, but one that gives us flexibility if things go wrong. I park several blocks from campus, using the shadows of early November darkness to make my way to our predetermined meeting point—a small courtyard behind the humanities building with a clear view of the archaeology department across the quad.

Nadia arrives moments later, dressed in dark clothing that would look perfectly natural on a graduate student working late. She nods once, indicating her position is secure, then melts back toward the main entrance of the archaeology building.

I find a secluded spot behind a maintenance shed and transform, the process now smooth enough to take only seconds. In cat form, the campus comes alive with new information—the recent passage of students along paths, the nocturnal animals hiding in landscaped areas, the unique scent signatures of different buildings.

Making my way to the roof of the archaeology building is simple with enhanced agility and near-perfect night vision. From my perch, I can observe both the main entrance Nadia is watching and the service area at the rear. Now we wait.

At exactly midnight, the building's external security lights flicker and go dark as the system shuts down for updating. For approximately ninety seconds, the building is completely dark before emergency backup lights activate—standard procedure during system maintenance, but creating the perfect window for unauthorized entry.

My enhanced vision detects movement at the service entrance—two figures approaching with practiced stealth. Even from this distance, I recognize Professor Hassan's distinctive gait. The second figure is unfamiliar, taller and more athletic in build.

They use a key card to enter—no need for forced entry when they have inside access. I watch the door close behind them, then make my way across the roof to a skylight positioning me above the storage areas. The skylight is latched but not locked, allowing me to push it open enough to slip inside and find a perch on a high storage shelf overlooking the main archival room.

Hassan and his companion are already at work, efficiently locating specific artifacts from the collection. They work with the precision of people following a detailed inventory list, ignoring many valuable items in favor of seemingly unremarkable pieces—a small stone tablet, a tarnished metal disc, a clay vessel with faded hieroglyphs.

The accomplice checks his watch. "System comes back online in forty minutes. Hurry it up."

"These catalog numbers have been deliberately misfiled," Hassan complains, searching through a drawer of index cards. "Someone's been interfering with the system."

"Probably that Farouk woman. Blackwood says she's been poking around in the archives."

My whiskers twitch at the mention of Nadia. Hassan's expression darkens.

"That family has been a thorn in our side for generations. Her grandfather nearly exposed everything back in the sixties."

"And now she's working with Harlow. How much do you think he's told her about what he's become?"

Hassan shelves the index cards with a frustrated gesture. "Enough to make her dangerous. But it won't matter after the gateway opens."

They continue their methodical theft, carefully placing each item in specialized transport containers. I memorize every artifact they take, noting the empty spaces left behind for Nadia to analyze later.

With their task complete, they prepare to leave. I slip back through the skylight and race across the roof to signal Nadia. I can see her in her observation position, phone ready. As Hassan and his companion exit the building, she pretends to

be a student taking a late-night call, casually turning to keep them in her line of sight while appearing completely absorbed in her conversation.

The thieves load their containers into a nondescript van parked in a faculty lot. Hassan's companion takes the wheel while Hassan makes a call on his cell phone, too distant for even my enhanced hearing to catch.

The van pulls away, heading toward the campus exit. Nadia walks casually to her car, maintaining visual contact without appearing to follow. I race across rooftops parallel to their route, keeping the van in sight from my elevated position.

Once off campus, the van accelerates. Nadia follows at a discreet distance, occasionally dropping back to avoid detection, using her headlights only when necessary. I keep pace by moving from building to building, an impossible feat in human form but manageable with feline agility.

The van leads us away from the city center, following increasingly industrial routes until reaching the waterfront district. Old warehouses and shipping facilities line the streets here, many abandoned or repurposed. The van slows, turning down a side street that ends at a gated property—some kind of former industrial facility with high security fencing.

I watch as the gate opens automatically, closing behind the van once it enters. Nadia drives past without slowing, continuing to the end of the street before parking in the shadow of a derelict building. I make my way to her location, finding her already studying a satellite map on her phone.

When I leap onto the hood of her car, she startles slightly before recognizing me. "They went into that fenced compound," she whispers, though there's no one around to hear. "According to property records, it's a decommissioned water pumping station owned by a subsidiary of Blackwood International."

I meow once—our signal for confirmation.

"We need to get closer, see what's inside." She peers through the darkness at the facility. "The fence is too high and probably alarmed. Any ideas?"

I jump down and head toward the fence line, expecting her to follow. She does, moving silently in my wake. The perimeter appears formidable—twelve-foot chain link topped with razor wire, likely monitored by security cameras. But my enhanced senses detect something else—a familiar signature that makes my fur stand on end.

The fence isn't just secured by conventional means. There's a subtle energy pattern running through it, visible to my altered perception as a faint golden shimmer—magical protection, similar to what I've seen around certain artifacts. Nadia can't see it, but she notices my reaction, crouching beside me.

"What is it?" she whispers.

I have no way to communicate the complexity of what I'm sensing in cat form. Frustrated, I scan the area for alternatives. About fifty yards down the fence line, a massive oak tree extends branches over the perimeter—branches that would safely clear the razor wire for someone with feline agility.

I race toward it, Nadia following my lead. She understands immediately.

"Smart," she murmurs. "But I can't climb that high."

I look pointedly at a nearby maintenance shed, then back at her. She nods, catching my meaning.

"You go. I'll wait here. Be careful—if they have magical protections on the fence, they might have other measures inside."

I scale the tree easily, navigating along a thick branch that extends well past the fence line. From this vantage point, I can see much of the compound—the main pumping station building, several smaller outbuildings, and what appears to be an entrance to underground facilities. The van is parked near this entrance, Hassan and his companion unloading their stolen artifacts.

A third figure emerges from the underground entrance—Captain Sullivan, his distinctive build unmistakable even from this distance. The sight of him sends a fresh surge of rage through me, threatening to disrupt my concentration. I force myself to remain focused, observing as he helps transport the artifacts below ground.

Once they disappear from view, I make my way further into the compound, moving from shadow to shadow with silent precision. The main building appears largely empty, but light emanates from what must be the underground facility. I locate a ventilation shaft that might provide access, but it's too small even for my cat form.

However, a partially open window on the main level offers an alternative. I slip inside, finding myself in what was once an administrative office, now repurposed as some kind of security monitoring station. Screens display camera feeds from throughout the facility, including several showing underground chambers.

What I see on those monitors sends a chill through me. One chamber contains dozens of artifacts arranged in a pattern I recognize from the warehouse where I died—a ritual circle, partially complete. Another shows Blackwood himself, examining what can only be the binding dagger, its distinctive curve gleaming under artificial light. Yet another monitor shows a room containing what appears to be a human-sized cage—its purpose chillingly clear.

They're preparing for a capture. My capture.

I've seen enough. I need to return to Nadia, transform, and share what I've discovered. As I turn to leave, a movement on one of the monitors catches my attention—a figure entering what appears to be a private office area. The camera angle changes, and I see his face clearly.

Hassan.

Alone.

The opportunity is too perfect to ignore. If I could get closer, use my death perception abilities, I might learn more about his connection to Mike's murder, maybe even find evidence to bring him to conventional justice. It's a dangerous detour, but one I can't pass up.

The facility's layout is visible on a security schematic posted near the monitoring station. I memorize the path to Hassan's location, then slip back into the hallway. Moving silently through the abandoned pumping station, I navigate toward the administrative section where Hassan has sequestered himself.

I find him in what was once a manager's office, now converted to a research space. He sits at a desk covered with papers, photographs, and a laptop. From my position in the shadowed doorway, I can see he's reviewing images of the artifacts they just stole, making notes in both English and what appears to be Ancient Egyptian hieratic script.

I focus, allowing my death perception to activate. The sickle-shaped energy pattern I saw around Torres's body appears around Hassan as well, but more integrated into his aura, suggesting these deaths are not recent isolated incidents but part of a pattern spanning years.

Most disturbing is a cluster of similar signatures surrounding him—multiple deaths, similar methods. One signature in particular pulses more strongly than the others, its pattern unmistakably similar to what I saw in the photograph of Mike's wound.

Confirmation, if I still needed it.

Hassan suddenly stiffens, as if sensing something amiss. He turns toward the doorway where I'm hidden, eyes narrowing.

"Is someone there?" he calls, rising from his chair.

I remain perfectly still, blending with the shadows. He takes a step forward, then reaches inside his jacket—for a weapon, perhaps, or some protective charm.

"I can sense you," he continues, voice dropping to a near whisper. "Living or dead, I can feel your hatred."

He's right—my rage burns so intensely it's almost a physical force. The emotion threatens my control, fur bristling involuntarily. A slight sound escapes me—not quite a hiss, but enough.

Hassan's eyes widen, fixing directly on my hiding place. "The guardian," he breathes. "So it's true. Harlow's transformation is complete."

He pulls something from his pocket—a small golden object that catches the light. I recognize it from Blackwood's collection: the small cat statuette, now glowing with unnatural radiance.

“Come out, servant of Anubis,” Hassan commands, holding the statuette before him like a ward. “Your god has no power here. This ground was consecrated to older forces long before Egypt’s dynasties.”

The statuette pulses with energy I can perceive but not understand. An overwhelming pressure builds in my mind, as if something is trying to force control of my body. My limbs grow heavy, muscles responding sluggishly to my commands.

I need to escape. Now.

Summoning all my willpower, I turn and flee, moving more clumsily than usual but still faster than Hassan can follow. I hear him behind me, shouting for security, but I’m already racing through the hallways, seeking an exit.

Doors begin closing automatically throughout the facility—some security protocol triggered by Hassan’s alarm. I barely slip through a narrowing gap, finding myself back in the monitoring room. The screens now flash with alert symbols, security personnel appearing in various camera feeds, moving with tactical precision to secure the compound.

The window I entered through remains my best escape route. I leap for it, squeezing through just as footsteps pound down the hallway behind me. Outside, floodlights activate, illuminating the grounds with harsh white light. I keep to the shadows, racing along the perimeter of buildings toward the oak tree that offers passage over the fence.

An alarm blares through external speakers. Guards emerge from the underground entrance, some with dogs straining at leashes. The animals catch my scent immediately, barking and pulling toward my position.

No time for stealth now. I sprint across open ground toward the tree, aware of shouts behind me. Something whizzes past—a tranquilizer dart perhaps, or something worse. I push my body to its physical limits, leaping for the lowest branch, claws scrabbling for purchase.

Up and up I climb, staying on the side of the trunk away from the guards. A bullet spinters bark inches from my position. They’re shooting at a cat—evidence of how badly they want to prevent my escape.

I reach the branch extending over the fence, inching out along its length. The guards have positioned themselves below, weapons trained upward. One has some kind of device that emits a high-pitched frequency that pierces my enhanced hearing painfully.

Just a little further. The branch dips under my weight as I approach its thinnest section. Below, I can see Nadia watching from concealment, her expression a mixture of concern and determination.

A bullet strikes the branch near my position. The wood cracks but holds. Another shot, another crack. The branch is failing. I gather myself for one final

leap, knowing I'll clear the fence but will be painfully visible during the jump.

The branch gives way just as I launch myself into open air. For one suspended moment, I hang above the fence, spotlighted by security flood lamps, a perfect target. A shot rings out. Pain blazes along my flank as something grazes my side. Then gravity reclaims me and I'm falling, twisting to land on my feet beyond the fence line.

I hit the ground harder than intended, the wound affecting my balance. But I'm outside the compound. Nadia breaks from her hiding place, rushing toward me. Behind us, gates begin to open as guards prepare to pursue.

"Run," she hisses, already turning toward her car.

I follow, ignoring the pain in my side. Blood matts my fur, but the wound seems superficial—a graze rather than a direct hit. We reach her car moments before the first guards emerge from the compound gates. Nadia peels away from the curb, driving with reckless speed through the industrial district's empty streets.

Only when we're several miles away, having taken a circuitous route to ensure we're not followed, does she pull into an abandoned parking lot to check on me.

"You're hurt," she says, reaching for me as I collapse onto the passenger seat. Her fingers come away bloody from my fur. "We need to get you somewhere safe. Can you transform? It would be easier to treat the wound."

I try, focusing on the shift, but pain and exhaustion interfere with the process. The transformation stalls halfway—a grotesque blend of human and feline that draws a shocked gasp from Nadia. I force myself to reverse the change, returning fully to cat form.

"It's okay," she soothes, recovering quickly. "We'll wait until you're stronger. Let's get back to the motel."

The ride passes in a blur of pain and fatigue. At the motel, Nadia carries me inside wrapped in her jacket, my blood staining the fabric. Once in our room, she gently examines the wound.

"It's not deep," she says with evident relief. "The bullet just grazed you. But even a minor wound can become serious without proper care."

She cleans the injury with supplies from a first aid kit, her touch gentle but precise. I drift between consciousness and a strange half-sleep, aware of her movements but unable to respond normally.

"I don't know if you can understand me completely in this form," she says as she works, "but they were expecting us. Those weren't standard security measures. They've been preparing for you specifically."

I manage a soft sound of acknowledgment. Her fingers pause in their ministrations.

“What did you see in there? Something made you delay your escape.” She studies my face, searching for communication in my feline expressions. “Was it Hassan? Did you find something about Mike?”

I blink slowly, the closest approximation to a nod I can manage. She understands.

“We’ll talk when you can transform again. For now, rest.”

She finishes bandaging the wound, then settles beside me on the bed, her laptop open as she makes notes about what she observed at the facility. I should sleep, recover my strength, but my mind races with implications of what I’ve discovered.

The cult’s secondary location identified. The binding dagger confirmed in Blackwood’s possession. Hassan’s connection to Mike’s murder verified. And most concerning—their awareness of my transformed state and preparations specifically designed to capture me.

Time is running short. The new moon is approaching, when I’ll be trapped in cat form for thirty-six hours. The eclipse follows shortly after. We need to recover the binding dagger and stop the ritual before then, but they’re clearly expecting us to try.

As consciousness finally fades, one image remains fixed in my mind: the cage I saw on the security monitor, sized perfectly for a man—or a significantly larger-than-normal cat. A cage meant for the servant of Anubis.

A cage meant for me.

Chapter 11: Academic Pursuit

The bandage beneath my fingers is stained with blood that looks nearly black in the motel room’s poor lighting. Jake’s breathing has finally stabilized, his feline form curled in unnatural stillness on the bed. I’ve never treated a wounded cat before, let alone one that’s partly human. The bullet graze along his flank could have been so much worse—a few inches difference and I might be sitting here with a dead detective instead of an injured one.

I push myself away from the bed, fighting exhaustion. It’s nearly four in the morning, but sleep feels impossible. Not with what we’ve discovered. Not with what’s at stake.

The security around that pumping station wasn’t standard—it was supernatural. Even without Jake’s enhanced perception, I recognized protective sigils painted on the fence posts, invisible to casual observation but unmistakable to someone with my background. Those weren’t just guards with guns; they were practitioners with knowledge.

My grandfather would have recognized it immediately. The thought sends me back to my laptop, to the files I've been gradually decoding since Jake's transformation. Grandfather's journals have always been partly in code—a habit he developed during his years researching the Order of Eternal Dusk. As a child, I thought it was a game. Now I understand it was survival.

The earliest entries are straightforward, chronicles of archaeological discoveries and academic politics. But in 1968, everything changes. The handwriting becomes erratic, the coding more complex, interspersed with hieratic script that few modern scholars can read fluently.

I pull up the scanned pages from that pivotal year, the summer expedition to Abydos that changed the trajectory of his career—and apparently, his life. The official university reports documented a routine excavation of a minor temple complex. Grandfather's private journals tell a different story.

June 12, 1968 – We've uncovered a chamber unlike any in the documented temple plans. The hieroglyphics reference not Osiris, as expected in this region, but Anubis in an aspect unfamiliar to modern scholarship. The inscriptions describe Him as "Guardian of the Gateway" and "He Who Walks Between Worlds." Most striking is the repeated depiction of Anubis not as a jackal-headed deity but as a massive feline with distinctive solar eyes.

Harrison dismisses my translations as flawed, but Blackwood Sr. shows unusual interest. His questions betray knowledge beyond what his academic credentials would suggest.

I pause, the name jumping out at me. Blackwood Sr.—Maxwell Blackwood's father. The connection isn't new to me, but seeing it spelled out so plainly feels like confirmation of something I've long suspected: the Order's obsession with Anubis spans generations.

Subsequent entries detail my grandfather's gradual realization that certain expedition members had ulterior motives beyond archaeology. Private meetings. Nocturnal rituals at the excavation site. Missing artifacts that never appeared in official inventories.

I scroll further, to pages I haven't fully decoded yet. The text shifts between languages—English, Arabic, hieratic—sometimes mid-sentence, a security measure designed to confuse anyone without my specific training.

July 27, 1968 – Tonight I witnessed something that defies rational explanation. Blackwood and Harrison performed a ritual using the carved tablets we discovered in the western chamber. The hieroglyphics glowed with internal light, and for a moment, the air itself seemed to tear, revealing a glimpse of another place—not our world. Before I could see clearly what lay beyond, Harrison noticed my presence. I fled, but I know they saw me.

The next several entries show increasing paranoia. Grandfather describes being followed in Cairo, strange phone calls to his hotel room, colleagues suddenly

distancing themselves. Then, a pivotal entry:

August 5, 1968 – Blackwood approached me today, all academic cordiality. He spoke of an organization dedicated to preserving ancient knowledge, of power beyond modern understanding. “You’ve seen enough to know we’re right,” he said. “Join us, Ibrahim. Help us recover what was lost.” When I asked what exactly they sought to recover, his answer chilled me: “Control over the transition between life and death itself.”

I rub my eyes, fighting fatigue. Grandfather’s subsequent entries document his reluctant infiltration of the early Order, his recognition that refusing outright would likely mean his death. For nearly two years, he played the role of interested acolyte while secretly documenting their activities and securing key artifacts they sought.

Until something changed.

November 12, 1970 – The Order has located the Binding Dagger. Blackwood believes it can tether divine essence to physical form against its will. What they don’t yet realize is the bloodline requirement—only those with specific genetic markers can serve as vessels. I’ve removed crucial pages from the ritual text and resealed the document. Without them, any binding attempt would be incomplete at best, catastrophic at worst.

I’ve hidden the missing pages where they’ll never think to look—in plain sight among my academic publications, encoded in the appendix illustrations of my Abydos monograph. The key is in the cat’s eyes.

My heart races as I re-read the passage. The Abydos monograph—I have my grandfather’s personal copy in my apartment. The appendix illustrations always struck me as oddly stylized for his usually precise draftsmanship, but I never imagined they contained encoded ritual instructions.

And “the cat’s eyes”—a reference to the unusual multidirectional hieroglyph for Anubis-as-cat that appears throughout the temple documentation. A hieroglyph I’ve studied extensively, that I’ve used in my own publications...including the paper that first brought Jake’s family name to my attention.

I grab my phone, scrolling through photos until I find the image I need—a picture of that specific hieroglyph from the original temple wall. Studying it through the lens of cryptography rather than linguistics, a pattern emerges. The glyph isn’t just representational; it’s a key to a substitution cipher, the multiple directions providing different values depending on reading order.

With trembling fingers, I open my grandfather’s monograph PDF, flipping to the appendix illustrations. They appear to be standard archaeological diagrams—tomb layouts, artifact positions, inscription samples. But applying the cipher from the cat hieroglyph, text begins to emerge from what I previously saw as decorative elements.

The first decoded line steals my breath:

The binding requires nine transformations before stabilization. Each brings the servant closer to permanent union with the divine.

Exactly what Jake and Anubis discussed. This confirms we're on the right track, but there's so much more in these encoded pages—details about the gateway, the binding process, the risks of incomplete transformation.

A knock at the door startles me so badly I nearly drop my laptop. Jake remains motionless on the bed, either deeply asleep or unconscious from his injury.

I approach the door cautiously. "Who is it?" I call, knowing how futile the question is—anyone with ill intent hardly announces themselves.

"Housekeeping." A female voice, heavily accented.

"It's four in the morning," I respond.

Silence. Then: "Sorry. Wrong room."

Footsteps retreat, but something feels wrong. Housekeeping doesn't make rounds at this hour, especially in a motel of this caliber. I peer through the peephole but see only an empty walkway.

My instincts scream danger. I quickly gather my most critical materials—laptop, phone, thumb drive with grandfather's journal scans, and the physical notebook where I've been documenting Jake's transformation. What else can't I afford to lose? My eyes fall on Jake, still in cat form, vulnerable.

I need to wake him, but before I can try, the power cuts out, plunging the room into darkness broken only by my laptop's screen glow. Not a coincidence.

"Jake," I whisper urgently, moving to the bed. "Jake, we need to go. Now."

He stirs slightly, green-gold eyes opening to slits. I'm not sure how much human consciousness remains when he's in this weakened state, but I have to try.

"Someone's here. Can you move?"

His attempt to rise confirms he understands, but his injury and exhaustion make movement labored. He won't be able to transform in this condition.

A soft scratching sound comes from the window—someone testing the lock. We're out of time.

I make a split-second decision, scooping Jake into my arms despite his weak protest. He's heavier than an ordinary cat, but adrenaline gives me strength. I grab my bag with the essential materials and move to the bathroom, the only room with a window large enough to allow escape.

The bathroom window slides open with surprising ease—thank god for poor maintenance in budget motels. I can hear the main room door being worked now, the sounds of someone trying to bypass the chain lock. I push my bag through the window first, then, with whispered apologies, maneuver Jake's feline form through the opening.

He drops to the ground outside with less grace than his usual movements but manages to land upright. I follow quickly, scraping my palms on the rough exterior wall as I lower myself down.

The parking lot lies empty and dark before us, my car conspicuously alone under a flickering light. Too exposed. We need an alternative.

Jake limps toward the shadows behind the motel, apparently thinking the same. I follow, shouldering my bag and watching our backs. The sound of our room door splintering reaches me just as we round the corner of the building.

“They’re inside,” I whisper unnecessarily. Jake’s ears are already swiveled backward, tracking the sounds.

We make our way behind the motel complex, past dumpsters and staff parking. Jake leads despite his injury, navigating with purpose toward a drainage ditch that runs behind the property. The ditch slopes down toward a culvert—dark, malodorous, but an effective path away from pursuers.

I hesitate only briefly before following Jake into the culvert pipe. The space is tight but navigable, the floor slick with unidentifiable moisture. My phone’s flashlight provides minimal illumination as we make our way through the darkness.

The pipe seems endless, but finally opens into a wider storm drainage system. Here Jake pauses, clearly reassessing our situation. He’s favoring his injured side heavily now, and even in the dim light I can see fresh blood staining his bandage.

“We need to find somewhere safe,” I tell him. “Somewhere I can check your wound and continue my research. We can’t go back to my apartment—they probably know about it now. And we can’t risk a hospital or another motel.”

Jake looks up at me, frustration evident in his gaze. The inability to communicate complex thoughts in this form must be maddening for him. Then his ears perk up, an idea visibly forming. He limps forward with renewed purpose, clearly indicating I should follow.

We emerge from the drainage system into the predawn city. Jake leads us through back alleys and side streets, avoiding main roads and security cameras with a precision that speaks to both his detective training and feline instincts. Despite his injury, he moves with determination, stopping occasionally when the pain becomes too much.

After nearly an hour of this careful navigation, we arrive at what appears to be an abandoned shopfront in a neglected commercial district. The building’s windows are boarded up, graffiti marking its facade. Jake approaches a seemingly solid section of wall adjacent to the back door, pawing at a loose brick.

Understanding dawns. I move the brick, revealing a small cavity containing a key.

“One of your safe houses?” I ask.

Jake manages what might be a nod. I use the key on the back door, which opens with surprising silence despite the building’s decrepit appearance. Inside, the dereliction proves to be largely cosmetic. While dusty and spartanly furnished, the space is clean and secure—a studio apartment hidden within what was once storage space for the shop.

“You’re full of surprises, detective,” I murmur as I secure the door behind us.

The space contains basic amenities—a bed, kitchenette, bathroom, and a desk with chair. No windows except a small skylight, currently showing the lightning pre-dawn sky. Jake jumps painfully onto the bed, clearly at the end of his endurance.

I first attend to his wound, using the well-stocked first aid kit I find in the bathroom. The bleeding has slowed, but the injury looks inflamed. Without veterinary antibiotics—and how would I even explain this to a vet?—infection becomes a serious concern.

“I’m going to clean this again,” I tell him, dampening a cloth with antiseptic. “It might sting.”

His stoic endurance as I tend the wound only reinforces how unique his situation is—human consciousness experiencing physical pain through an animal’s nervous system. When I finish re-bandaging, he allows himself to collapse onto the bed, exhaustion finally winning out.

With Jake resting, I turn my attention back to my grandfather’s encoded text. The safe house has no internet connection—security feature or oversight, I’m not sure—but I don’t need online access to continue decoding what I’ve already downloaded.

Hours pass as I work methodically through the hidden text in the monograph appendix. The messages contain detailed information about the binding ritual’s purpose and mechanics:

The binding of divine essence requires three components: the bloodline vessel, the gateway anchor, and the sacrificial catalyst. Without all three in precise alignment, the binding fails or worse—creates an unstable tear in reality that neither contains nor releases divine power properly.

Another passage clarifies terminology:

The bloodline vessel is a human descendant of the original priesthood, carrying genetic markers that allow divine integration without immediate biological rejection. The gateway anchor is a physical location where the boundaries between realms naturally thin. The sacrificial catalyst varies by deity—for Anubis, it must be a death containing specific emotional resonance.

I glance at Jake, understanding dawning. His partner’s death wasn’t just a tragic coincidence or even simple murder—it was ritual preparation, creating the

emotional resonance required for the binding. Sullivan and Hassan manipulated events specifically to position Jake as the vessel, unknowingly preparing him years in advance.

The depth of their planning is chilling. How long have they known about Jake's bloodline? Did they orchestrate his entire career trajectory, ensuring he would be in the right place at the right time?

Another decoded section provides disturbing context:

The Order believes they can control divine essence through physical binding, but they fundamentally misunderstand the nature of divinity. The binding creates partnership, not servitude. A forced binding may succeed temporarily but inevitably corrupts into something unintended—neither fully divine nor fully human, but a hybrid that serves neither realm properly.

This confirms my suspicions about what Blackwood truly intends with the ritual—not merely to access divine power but to enslave it. And according to my grandfather's notes, such perversion of the natural order has catastrophic consequences.

I continue working until sunlight streams through the skylight. Jake still sleeps, his breathing finally evened out to normal rhythms. I should rest too, but one final section of code demands my attention—a portion featuring an unusual concentration of the cat hieroglyph.

When decoded, it reveals information critical to our current situation:

The binding, once initiated, proceeds through nine transformations before stabilization. Each transformation integrates divine and human essence more completely, with the ninth transformation representing the point of no return. After the ninth, separation becomes impossible without spiritual death.

How many transformations has Jake undergone so far? I count mentally: first at his apartment, second to reveal himself to me, third during our research at the university, fourth when tracking at the museum, fifth during the confrontation with Torres's body, then last night at the pumping station... Six. He's undergone six transformations that I've witnessed.

Three more until permanent binding. Three more until whatever Anubis promised—release from service—becomes impossible.

The implication staggers me. Has Anubis been honest with Jake about their arrangement? Does Jake realize he's approaching a point where their bargain's terms might fundamentally change?

I need to tell him, but first, I need confirmation about Hassan. My grandfather's journals contain scattered references to expedition members, including faculty still at the university. If Hassan's connection to the Order extends back decades as Jake suspects, there should be evidence in these records.

I return to the original journal entries from 1968, searching specifically for Hassan's name. Nothing in the expedition records—he would have been too young then—but a footnote in a later entry catches my attention:

April 15, 1972 – Blackwood has recruited a promising young graduate student from Alexandria University, Ahmed Hassan. The boy shows exceptional aptitude for languages and genuine interest in our “special research.” His family background includes distant connection to the old priesthood lines—not enough for vessel compatibility but sufficient for ritual participation. I fear what they plan for him.

Hassan isn't just a recent recruit—he's been part of the Order for decades, groomed specifically for his role. And that family connection to “priesthood lines” suggests something even more disturbing: a distant relationship to the same bloodlines that make Jake compatible as a vessel.

Could Hassan and Jake share some ancient ancestor? The thought sends me back to the genealogical research that first connected Jake's family name to my studies. His maternal grandmother—Amelia Sullivan, adopted from Cairo in the 1920s—represents a genetic mystery. Adoption records from that era in Egypt are sketchy at best, but certain hereditary traits associated with the priesthood bloodlines present distinctively in phenotypical characteristics.

I pull up the police department photo of Jake I'd saved during my initial research. His eyes. Something about their unusual color and shape had caught my attention even before his transformation. A genetic marker visible to those who know what to look for.

Hassan has similar eyes.

The realization clicks other pieces into place. Hassan's aggressive interest in my research on transformation rituals. His pointed questions about my genealogical studies. His convenient presence at the university when artifacts began disappearing.

And something else—a memory surfaces from a faculty gathering last year. Hassan discussing his family history, mentioning an estrangement from his American relatives. “Blood means little without loyalty,” he'd said, raising a glass with an intensity that seemed excessive for casual conversation.

Could he know about Jake's bloodline connection? Has he known all along, watching from the shadows as the Order positioned Jake for sacrifice?

A soft sound pulls me from these disturbing thoughts. Jake is awake, watching me with those same distinctive eyes—now transformed by Anubis's influence but still carrying the genetic markers that made him a perfect vessel.

“How are you feeling?” I ask, moving to check his bandage.

He responds with a sound between purr and growl, stretching cautiously to test his injury. The movement seems less painful than before—either the wound is

improving or he's becoming more accustomed to feline physiological responses to pain.

"I've been decoding my grandfather's journals," I tell him, knowing he understands even if he can't respond. "There's critical information about the binding process, the ritual components, and the Order's true intentions."

I pause, wondering how to explain the most disturbing discovery—that he's approaching the point of no return in his transformation sequence.

"The binding becomes permanent after nine transformations. You've undergone six that I know of. After the ninth, separation from Anubis becomes impossible." I watch his reaction carefully. "Did he tell you this?"

Jake's expression shifts, eyes widening slightly. The answer is clear—Anubis hasn't been forthcoming about this critical detail.

"There's more. Hassan has been with the Order since at least 1972. My grandfather's journals mention him specifically as a recruit with family connections to the priesthood bloodlines." I hesitate. "The same bloodlines that make you compatible as a vessel. I think you may be distantly related."

This revelation produces a more dramatic reaction—fur bristling along his spine, ears flattening against his skull. The implication that his enemy might be family clearly disturbs him deeply.

"I need to get back to my apartment," I continue. "My grandfather's original monograph is there, with annotations he made by hand that aren't in the digital scans. And I have other research materials that might help us understand the binding dagger and how to counter its effects."

Jake shakes his head emphatically, clearly objecting to the risk.

"I know it's dangerous," I acknowledge. "But without that information, we're operating half-blind. The people who came after us at the motel know enough about tracking to find this place eventually. We need to move quickly."

He still looks unconvinced, but less adamantly opposed. I press the advantage.

"We'll be careful. Go during daylight hours when they're less likely to expect movement. I'll grab what we need and nothing else." I glance at his injured form. "You're in no condition to transform yet, so you'll need to stay hidden. I can manage this alone."

The look he gives me communicates exactly what he thinks of that plan.

"I've been taking care of myself for a long time, detective," I remind him. "Before you came along with your nine lives and divine partnership, I was already navigating the academic equivalent of shark-infested waters. Hassan and his colleagues have been circling my research for years."

This gives him pause, whiskers twitching in what I've come to recognize as thoughtful consideration.

“Besides,” I add, “they’re looking for a wounded cat and a woman together. A woman alone attracts less attention.”

After what seems like internal debate, Jake inclines his head in reluctant agreement. His concern is touching, if frustrating. Since revealing himself to me in cat form that night in my office, he’s adopted a distinctly protective stance—part professional obligation, part something more personal neither of us has properly named.

“I’ll go around noon,” I decide. “Campus lunch hour means maximum activity, easier to blend in. My office first, then my apartment.”

Jake manages to convey skepticism with just the angle of his ears.

“Yes, I know Hassan might be watching my office. I’ll be careful.” I check my watch—nearly seven in the morning now. “We both need rest before anything else. You especially.”

I arrange the safe house’s sparse blankets into a more comfortable bed, setting out water and painkillers I’ll need when Jake can transform again. With basic necessities handled, exhaustion hits me like a physical weight. I collapse onto the cot pushed against the wall, not even bothering to remove my shoes.

“Wake me if anything changes,” I murmur, already drifting toward sleep. The last thing I see is Jake settling into a protective position where he can watch both me and the door, guardian even in his injured state.

Campus at midday buzzes with the controlled chaos of academia—students rushing between classes, faculty emerging from offices in search of lunch, delivery personnel navigating labyrinthine buildings with food orders. Perfect camouflage for someone who belongs but doesn’t want to be noticed.

I’ve altered my appearance as much as possible without looking suspicious—hair pulled back under a cap instead of my usual bun, glasses instead of contacts, clothing deliberately different from my typical professional attire. Not a disguise exactly, but enough to prevent immediate recognition at a distance.

The archaeology building looms ahead, its modern architecture incongruous against the campus’s predominantly colonial aesthetic. I enter through the side door using my faculty ID, taking the service stairs rather than the central elevator. My office is on the third floor, at the end of a corridor shared with other junior faculty and post-doctoral researchers.

The hallway appears empty when I emerge from the stairwell, but appearances mean little in a building full of academics who keep irregular hours. I move briskly, projecting purposeful confidence—the best camouflage in an environment where everyone has somewhere important to be.

My office door shows no signs of tampering, the small piece of clear tape I habitually place across the bottom edge still unbroken. Old habits from fieldwork

in politically unstable regions—always know if someone’s been through your things.

Inside, everything looks exactly as I left it days ago—organized chaos of books, papers, and artifact replicas covering every surface. To untrained eyes, the space would appear randomly cluttered, but every item has its place in my personal organizational system.

I move efficiently, gathering only what’s essential—the original Abydos monograph with my grandfather’s handwritten annotations, specific artifact photographs relevant to the binding ritual, and a small locked case containing family heirlooms including a bronze ankh my grandfather claimed had protective properties.

As I collect these items, I notice something out of place—a book on Egyptian funerary texts sitting at an angle different from how I always position it. Someone has been here, careful enough to avoid breaking my tape seal but not attentive enough to replace everything exactly as found.

I continue packing, now moving with greater urgency but careful not to show obvious alarm in case surveillance cameras are watching. The key materials secured in my messenger bag, I gather a few routine items to maintain the impression of a normal office visit—recent student papers, department memos, my everyday tablet.

The hallway remains empty as I exit, locking the door behind me. Instead of returning the way I came, I take the main corridor toward the department office, maintaining the appearance of routine faculty business. Through the office’s glass walls, I can see several colleagues gathered around the reception desk, including—my heart skips—Professor Hassan.

He hasn’t noticed me yet, engaged in conversation with the department secretary. I could turn around, take another route, but sudden course correction would appear more suspicious than continuing forward. I adjust my posture, affecting slight preoccupation with the papers in my hand.

As I pass the office doorway, Hassan looks up. Our eyes meet for a fraction of a second—long enough for recognition to flash across his features. I don’t break stride, nodding the casual acknowledgment typical between colleagues before continuing down the hallway.

“Dr. Farouk!” His voice carries down the corridor behind me.

I pause, turning with carefully modulated surprise. “Professor Hassan. Good afternoon.”

He emerges from the office, moving toward me with the smooth confidence that has always set him apart from more stereotypically awkward academics. “I’ve been trying to reach you. You haven’t been responding to emails.”

"I've been focused on my research," I reply, the half-truth coming easily. "Deadline approaching for the journal submission."

"Of course." He smiles, the expression not reaching his eyes. "I wanted to discuss the recent... security incident at the museum. I understand you were there that evening."

"Briefly," I acknowledge. "I left before anything happened."

"Still, your expertise might be valuable to the investigation. Perhaps we could discuss it over coffee?" He gestures toward the building exit.

"Unfortunately, I'm just here to collect some materials." I pat my messenger bag. "I'm working from home today. Perhaps another time."

His expression hardens almost imperceptibly. "I insist, Dr. Farouk. This matter concerns departmental security. As senior faculty, I need your full cooperation."

The threat beneath the professional veneer is unmistakable. A few days ago, I might have acquiesced, intimidated by his position and authority. But that was before I saw Jake bleeding from a bullet wound inflicted by Hassan's associates, before I decoded my grandfather's warnings about this man's true allegiances.

"I'd be happy to meet officially with campus security if they have questions," I reply evenly. "But right now, I have pressing deadlines. If you'll excuse me, Professor."

I turn before he can respond, walking away with measured steps that betray none of the adrenaline surging through me. I can feel his gaze burning into my back all the way to the stairwell door.

Once in the stairwell, I allow myself to move faster, taking the steps two at a time. Hassan won't follow immediately—too public, too obvious—but my calculated defiance has certainly escalated the situation. I need to reach my apartment and retrieve the remaining materials quickly.

Outside, I take a circuitous route across campus, doubling back several times to ensure I'm not followed. My apartment is a fifteen-minute walk from campus, in a building popular with visiting faculty and graduate students. The location has always been convenient for my work schedule, but now I regret the proximity as I approach, scanning for surveillance or waiting vehicles.

Nothing seems immediately suspicious. I enter using my key fob, taking the elevator to the fourth floor. The hallway stretches empty before me, afternoon sunlight slanting through windows at each end. My apartment is midway down, door unmarked except for the unit number.

Unlike my office, my apartment door shows immediate signs of tampering—scratch marks around the lock, the doorframe slightly splintered near the bolt. Someone has forced entry recently, not bothering to conceal the evidence. A warning, perhaps, or simple carelessness born of confidence.

I should turn around, return to Jake and the relative safety of his safe house. But the materials inside are irreplaceable—family journals, original documents, research compiled over years. I’ve come this far; I won’t leave empty-handed.

Drawing a deep breath, I insert my key and push the door open.

The apartment beyond has been methodically destroyed.

Books torn apart, their pages strewn across the floor. Furniture slashed, stuffing erupting from wounds in cushions and mattress. Electronics smashed, glass and plastic fragments glittering on every surface. My research—years of careful documentation, irreplaceable notes, and photographs—shredded and scattered like confetti.

I step inside, glass crunching beneath my shoes. The destruction is comprehensive but selective. Everyday items like kitchen appliances remain untouched. This wasn’t a robbery; it was a message. And a search.

Moving quickly through the chaos, I head directly to my bedroom closet. Behind the false wall panel—installed years ago following my grandfather’s paranoid but apparently justified example—my most critical research materials should remain secure. The panel appears undisturbed, its edges still sealed with the special tape that changes color when exposed to air.

I remove the panel carefully. The small safe beyond looks intact, its digital lock still active. I key in the combination—my grandfather’s birthdate in the Islamic calendar—and the door swings open to reveal the contents still organized as I left them.

Family journals dating back three generations. Original expedition photographs my grandfather smuggled out of Egypt in 1970. A small wooden box containing artifacts technically too minor to require repatriation but ethically complicated nonetheless. And most importantly, a waterproof document tube containing papyrus fragments my grandfather never submitted to the university collection—fragments describing Anubis’s cat form and the binding ritual’s true purpose.

I transfer everything to my messenger bag, which barely closes around the added bulk. As I seal the safe and replace the panel, a sound from the apartment’s main room freezes me in place—the front door opening.

“Dr. Farouk?” Hassan’s voice, falsely solicitous. “I saw your door was open. Is everything alright?”

He knows perfectly well everything is not alright. He or his associates are responsible for this destruction. His presence now is either to observe my reaction or ensure I don’t leave with anything valuable to our investigation.

I have seconds to decide how to respond. Confrontation seems unwise—he almost certainly isn’t alone, and my decoding of my grandfather’s journals suggests Hassan has abilities beyond academic knowledge. But feigned ignorance might buy precious time.

“Professor Hassan!” I call back, injecting shocked distress into my voice. “Someone’s broken in! Everything’s destroyed!”

I emerge from the bedroom, messenger bag slung across my body, presenting the perfect picture of a distraught colleague facing personal tragedy. “I just came to pick up some books, and found... this.” I gesture at the destruction, letting genuine anger sharpen my performance.

Hassan stands just inside the doorway, immaculately dressed as always, expression arranged into appropriate concern. Behind him, partially visible in the hallway, stands another man—broad-shouldered, with the alert posture of security personnel.

“How terrible,” Hassan says, stepping further inside. His eyes track to my messenger bag, lingering a moment too long. “Have you called the police?”

“Not yet. I just arrived.” I pull out my phone as if to make the call. “I should document some of this for insurance first.”

“Of course.” He moves casually between me and the door. “What was taken?”

“I’m not sure yet. My laptop, obviously.” I gesture to the smashed remains on the desk. “Some research materials, it seems.”

“Your grandfather’s journals, perhaps?” His tone remains conversational, but his eyes have hardened. “I understand he kept quite detailed records of his expeditions. Notes about certain... artifacts he encountered.”

The pretense is thinning, tension rising between us. I need to leave, immediately, but Hassan and his associate block the only exit.

“Most of his journals are in university archives,” I reply carefully. “I only have personal correspondence here.”

“I think we both know that’s not true, Dr. Farouk.” Hassan steps closer, dropping any pretense of collegial concern. “Ibrahim Farouk removed critical documents from university property in 1970. Documents that rightfully belong to our organization.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I back away, calculating distances to windows, analyzing potential weapons among the debris.

“The binding ritual pages,” Hassan says bluntly. “Your grandfather encoded them somewhere. You’ve been decoding his work—we’ve monitored your research queries, your database searches. You know what we seek.”

The man from the hallway enters fully now, closing the apartment door behind him. The soft click of the lock engaging sounds unnaturally loud in the tense silence.

“Professor,” I say, fighting to keep my voice steady, “I think you should leave. I need to call the police about this break-in.”

“The police won’t be necessary.” Hassan smiles thinly. “We can resolve this matter privately. My associate Mr. Reynolds will help ensure our conversation remains uninterrupted.”

Reynolds. The name strikes like a physical blow. This must be a relative of Mike Reynolds—Jake’s dead partner. The family resemblance is subtle but unmistakable now that I know to look for it—something in the set of the jaw, the way he holds himself.

“Don’t look so surprised, Dr. Farouk. The Order has many branches on the family tree.” Hassan extends his hand. “Your bag, please. We have no desire to harm you, but those materials are crucial to our work.”

I clutch the messenger bag tighter. “These are family heirlooms. Personal journals. Nothing of value to anyone else.”

“We both know that’s not true.” Hassan’s patience visibly thins. “The binding ritual is incomplete without the pages Ibrahim removed. The consequences of an incomplete ritual could be catastrophic—not just for our organization but for reality itself.”

“Then perhaps the ritual shouldn’t be attempted,” I counter, stalling while I assess my options. The window behind me drops four stories to the alley below—not a viable escape route.

The bronze ankh in my messenger bag suddenly feels warm against my hip, as if responding to the tension in the room. My grandfather had insisted it held protective properties. I’d always considered it a sentimental exaggeration, but now I wonder if there’s more to it.

“You don’t understand what’s at stake,” Hassan says, taking another step closer. “The gateway must be secured. The chaos beyond would consume everything if released unchecked.”

“And enslaving Anubis is your solution?” I move slightly to my right, putting the desk between us. “My grandfather’s notes suggest that would only make things worse.”

Hassan’s eyes narrow. “Your grandfather was a brilliant man but a coward at heart. He lacked the vision to see the necessity of our work.”

Reynolds moves with professional efficiency, circling to cut off my sidestep. His hand rests inside his jacket—on a weapon, no doubt.

“The binding ritual as designed creates partnership, not servitude,” I say, recalling the decoded passages. “Forcing control corrupts the process.”

“An interpretation,” Hassan dismisses. “One we’ve improved upon over the decades. Now, Dr. Farouk, the materials. Please.”

My options are rapidly diminishing. Two men, one likely armed, blocking the only exit. No feasible escape route. No one knows I’m here except Jake, who’s

in no condition to help.

As if sensing my calculation, Hassan sighs. “You should know your detective friend won’t be coming to the rescue. The injury he sustained was more significant than perhaps you realized. The bullet was treated with a compound that interferes with his... unique metabolism.”

My heart stutters. “What do you mean?”

“He won’t be transforming again without intervention. A precaution we developed after studying previous vessels.” Hassan’s smile is coldly academic. “Quite fascinating, really. The binding creates vulnerability to certain ancient elements—silver being the traditional example, but we’ve found more effective alternatives.”

“You poisoned him,” I say, anger displacing fear.

“Consider it a temporary neutralization. One that can be reversed, provided you cooperate.”

This changes everything. If Jake can’t transform, can’t heal properly—he could be dying while I stand here. I need to escape, not just to preserve my grandfather’s research but to save Jake’s life.

My hand brushes against something solid on the desk behind me—a heavy stone paperweight, a replica of a canopic jar I brought back from my last field season. Not much of a weapon, but better than nothing.

“The journals and artifacts,” I say, as if considering surrender. “Why does the Order need them now, after all these years?”

“The astronomical alignment approaches—the first proper convergence since 1912. The gateway thins, the binding becomes possible.” Hassan’s academic passion momentarily overcomes his caution. “Your grandfather’s pages contain the proper sequence. Without them, our ritual remains dangerously incomplete.”

While he speaks, I slowly ease my messenger bag to the floor, as if preparing to surrender it. The movement draws both men’s attention momentarily downward—the opening I need.

I grab the paperweight and hurl it at the overhead light fixture with all my strength. Glass shatters, plunging the room into relative darkness, the only illumination now coming from the windows.

In the moment of confusion, I lunge for my bag, snatching it from the floor as I dive past Reynolds toward the door. He reacts quickly, arm shooting out to grab me, but his grasp catches only fabric. I hear it tear as I wrench away.

Hassan shouts something—not English, not Arabic, but something older. The air in the apartment seems to thicken, movement becoming strangely resistant, as if I’m suddenly wading through invisible molasses.

The protective ankh in my bag pulses with warmth against my side. Whatever force Hassan is summoning seems partially deflected around me, creating a pocket of normal physics within the distorted space.

Three steps to the door. Reynolds recovers, moving to intercept, drawing something from his jacket—not a gun but something that gleams metallically in the dim light, a small rod or wand. I change direction, feinting left before pivoting right.

The door is still closed, the lock engaged. No time to fumble with mechanisms. I drive my shoulder into it with desperate strength, feeling the already-damaged frame splinter further. The door bursts open, sending me sprawling into the hallway beyond.

I scramble to my feet, not looking back as I sprint toward the stairwell. Behind me, Hassan calls out again in that ancient tongue. The air around me pulses, pressure building in my ears, but the ankh's protective influence holds.

The stairwell door slams open against the wall as I hit it at full speed. I take the stairs three at a time, the risk of falling far less immediate than the danger behind me. Reynolds's footsteps thunder in pursuit, but Hassan's voice grows fainter—his abilities perhaps limited by distance or the ankh's countermeasure.

Ground floor. I burst through the exit into afternoon sunlight, momentarily disoriented by the transition from dim stairwell to bright day. Campus lies to my right, but returning there would be predictable. Instead, I turn left, toward the commercial district where more people and witnesses might deter pursuit.

My lungs burn as I run, messenger bag thumping painfully against my hip. I don't dare look back, focusing only on putting distance between myself and my pursuers. Each cross-street offers new direction choices. I make my path as unpredictable as possible—right, then left, another left, straight through an alley, right again.

Only when I reach a busy shopping area, crowded with afternoon customers, do I slow to a brisk walk. Blending with pedestrian traffic, I finally risk a glance behind me. No sign of immediate pursuit, but that doesn't mean they've given up.

Hassan's revelation about Jake's condition drives me forward. Whatever compound they used on the bullet is preventing his transformation, possibly interfering with his healing. I need to get back to the safe house as quickly as possible, but I can't lead them there directly.

I enter a department store, navigating through cosmetics and clothing departments before exiting through a different door. Back on the street, I hail a passing taxi.

"Boston Public Library," I tell the driver, selecting a busy public location in the opposite direction of the safe house.

During the ride, I try to calm my breathing, to appear normal to the driver who glances occasionally in his rearview mirror. My mind races, processing what I've learned.

The Order needs my grandfather's ritual pages to complete their binding ritual. Without them, whatever they attempt would be flawed. That gives us leverage but also makes me a primary target.

More concerning is Jake's condition. If Hassan spoke truly, the bullet was treated with something specifically designed to interfere with the binding process—knowledge that suggests they've encountered Anubis's vessels before, perhaps even successfully captured one.

I exit at the library but don't enter, instead walking several blocks before taking another taxi, then a public bus, executing a complex route designed to identify or lose any tail. The journey takes over an hour, but when I finally approach the abandoned shopfront housing Jake's safe house, I'm reasonably confident I haven't been followed.

The key turns smoothly in the lock. Inside, the space appears exactly as I left it—sparse, dim, with Jake's feline form still on the bed. But something's wrong. His breathing has become labored, his fur dull and matted with sweat. When I approach, his eyes open, but they're glazed and unfocused.

"Jake," I whisper, dropping my bag and rushing to his side. His body radiates unnatural heat. The bandaged wound on his flank has turned an angry purple, dark lines spreading outward beneath his fur—blood poisoning, or something worse.

Hassan wasn't bluffing. Whatever compound tainted the bullet is spreading through Jake's system, interfering with both his healing and his ability to transform. Without transformation, he can't access Anubis's power to purge the toxin.

I need to know exactly what I'm dealing with. Carefully, I unwrap the bandage to examine the wound directly. The bullet graze itself looks superficial, but the tissue around it appears necrotic, dead or dying, with strange crystalline formations at the edges that catch light in unnatural ways.

This is beyond conventional medicine. I return to my messenger bag, retrieving the papyrus fragments my grandfather preserved. If the Order developed this compound based on ancient knowledge, perhaps the countermeasure also lies in these texts.

Hours pass as I work frantically, translating and cross-referencing. Jake's condition deteriorates visibly, his breathing becoming more shallow, periods of consciousness briefer. The translations reveal mentions of "binding interference" and "vessel poisoning"—apparently, the early Order experimented with methods to capture or control vessels without completing the full binding ritual.

The countermeasure described requires ingredients I don't have—specific herbs, minerals found only in certain Egyptian soils. But there's a simpler, more direct approach mentioned in my grandfather's later notes: forcing transformation through ritual invocation might purge the toxin, provided the vessel's connection to the divine entity remains strong enough.

It's risky. In Jake's weakened state, a forced transformation could kill him outright. But doing nothing will definitely kill him as the toxin continues spreading.

I prepare the space according to the fragmentary instructions, arranging the limited resources available in the safe house to approximate a ritual circle. The bronze ankh, my only genuine artifact, serves as the focal point. The ritual requires spoken invocation in Ancient Egyptian—fortunately within my linguistic capabilities—and blood from someone connected to the vessel.

That last part gives me pause. Connected how? Family would be ideal, but impossible to obtain. The texts suggest "bonds of affection or loyalty" might suffice. My blood, then. Our connection may be recent, but it's undeniably formed over these intense days.

With the makeshift ritual space prepared and Jake positioned at its center, I ready myself for the invocation. The small knife from the safe house's kitchen will serve for the blood offering. I've memorized the necessary words, their pronunciation challenging but manageable for someone with my training.

"I don't know if you can hear me, Jake," I say softly, "but I'm going to try something that might help. It's going to force a transformation, which should help your body fight the toxin. It could be dangerous, but..." I swallow hard. "We're out of alternatives."

His eyes flutter but don't fully open. His breathing has become so shallow it's barely visible.

I position myself at the edge of the circle, the ankh placed at Jake's head. Drawing a deep breath, I begin the invocation, the ancient words feeling strange yet natural on my tongue. The scholarly part of my brain notes the ritual's linguistic similarities to New Kingdom funerary texts, while the rest of me focuses entirely on pronunciation and rhythm.

As the invocation continues, I draw the knife across my palm—not deeply, but enough to draw blood. The sting is sharp but brief. I let several drops fall onto the ankh, which seems to absorb them with unnatural thirst.

The air in the safe house grows heavy, charged with something I can feel but not define. The ankh begins to emit a subtle glow, visible even in the room's dim lighting. Jake's fur ripples as if stirred by an unfelt breeze.

I complete the invocation, the final words echoing in the small space with surprising resonance. For a moment, nothing happens. Then Jake's body convulses, a spasm so violent it lifts him partially off the bed. His form blurs at the edges, seeming to expand and contract simultaneously, caught between states.

“Come on,” I whisper, fear knotting my stomach. “Fight it, Jake.”

Another convulsion, stronger than the first. Jake’s body contorts impossibly, fur receding in patches only to reappear, limbs elongating then shrinking back. The partial transformations appear excruciating, his body unable to settle into either form completely.

I move instinctively to touch him, to offer comfort or assistance, but the energies swirling around him repel my hand with static-like force. All I can do is watch as he fights this internal battle.

The convulsions intensify, becoming almost continuous. The wound on his flank pulses with sickly light, the crystalline formations flaking away as his body repeatedly tries to transform around them. A sound emerges from him—not quite human, not quite feline, a cry of pain that chills me to the bone.

Just when I fear the ritual has gone catastrophically wrong, Jake’s form stabilizes briefly in human shape—naked, sweating, eyes wide with shock and pain. The wound on his side pulses once more, then expels a crystalline mass that shatters on contact with the floor, fragments dissolving into acrid smoke.

“Nadia,” he gasps, his first spoken word in days. His voice sounds raw, unused.

Before I can respond, his form blurs again, reverting to feline shape in one smooth transition—not the violent convulsions of before but a controlled, natural transformation. In cat form, he collapses, body finally relaxing as normal sleep replaces traumatic unconsciousness.

I sink to the floor beside the bed, exhaustion and relief washing over me in equal measure. The ritual worked, at least partially. The toxic compound has been expelled, and Jake can transform again—though apparently not maintain human form yet, his energy too depleted by the ordeal.

My bleeding palm throbs, reminding me of my own need for care. I bandage it clumsily with supplies from the first aid kit, then check Jake’s condition. His breathing has steadied, the unnatural heat fading from his body. The wound on his flank, visible even through his fur, looks cleaner now, the angry purple fading to a more natural healing red.

Recovery will take time, but the immediate crisis has passed. I allow myself to relax slightly, settling on the floor with my back against the bed, unwilling to move farther from Jake than absolutely necessary.

The messenger bag with my grandfather’s materials sits where I dropped it upon entering. Those documents are now our most powerful asset—and our greatest vulnerability. The Order will continue pursuing them, and us, with renewed determination after my confrontation with Hassan.

We need allies, resources beyond what we currently possess. Jake’s police contact Henderson might provide some assistance, but we need more—someone with knowledge of the supernatural aspects we face.

As if responding to my thoughts, Jake stirs beside me, green-gold eyes opening with newfound clarity.

“Welcome back,” I say quietly.

He meets my gaze, comprehension and memory visibly returning. Though he can’t speak in this form, his eyes convey volumes—question, concern, gratitude.

“The bullet was poisoned,” I explain. “Something specifically designed to interfere with your transformation ability. I had to perform a ritual to force the toxin out.” I gesture to the ankh and ritual circle, still arranged around the bed. “It worked, mostly. You transformed briefly to human form, just long enough to expel the compound, then reverted back to cat. Your body’s exhausted.”

He looks down at his feline form with what might be resignation.

“Hassan found me at my apartment,” I continue, knowing he needs to understand what happened. “He and an associate—someone named Reynolds, who I think might be related to your former partner.”

Jake’s ears flatten at this revelation, confirming my suspicion.

“They were after my grandfather’s research, specifically pages he removed from the binding ritual text. Hassan claimed they need them to complete their ritual correctly during an upcoming astronomical alignment.” I indicate my messenger bag. “I managed to escape with everything, but they’ll keep coming after us.”

Jake’s gaze is intense, processing this information with his detective’s mind despite his current limitations.

“There’s something else,” I add hesitantly. “The binding becomes permanent after nine transformations. You’ve undergone six that I know of. After the ninth, separation from Anubis becomes impossible without what my grandfather’s notes call ‘spiritual death.’”

This news produces a visible reaction—tail lashing once, eyes widening. Clearly, Anubis hadn’t shared this critical detail.

“We need to be careful about further transformations,” I continue. “Each one brings you closer to a point of no return—assuming that’s not what you want.”

Jake’s expression is impossible to fully read in feline form, but the tension in his body communicates his concern. A long moment passes as he absorbs this information, then he deliberately relaxes, eyes returning to mine with what appears to be resolve.

He rises unsteadily, moving to the edge of the bed where my messenger bag sits. With one paw, he taps it, then looks back at me questioningly.

“Yes, I got everything we need,” I confirm. “Original documents, ritual descriptions, my grandfather’s journals. Enough to understand what the Order is attempting and possibly how to stop them.”

He nods—such a human gesture from his cat form—then settles back onto the bed, clearly still weak but no longer in immediate danger.

“You should rest,” I tell him. “I’ll continue decoding and translating. When you’re stronger, we can determine our next steps.”

As Jake drifts back to sleep, I retrieve my grandfather’s materials and return to the desk. We’ve survived one crisis, but greater challenges lie ahead. The Order now knows exactly what we possess and will stop at nothing to take it from us. More concerning is the revelation about the transformation limit—each shift brings Jake closer to a permanent binding neither he nor Anubis has fully explained.

Time is against us. The astronomical alignment Hassan mentioned must be approaching soon. We need to understand the full ritual, its purpose, and how to counter it before Jake’s transformations reach that critical ninth threshold.

I open the first journal, its pages filled with my grandfather’s meticulous handwriting. Somewhere in these documents lies the knowledge we need—to save Jake, to stop the Order, perhaps to protect reality itself from whatever lies beyond the gateway.

The work ahead is daunting, but for the first time since this began, I feel equipped to face it. We have the resources, we have direction, and most importantly, we have choices—provided we can stay alive long enough to make them.

Chapter 12: Hunters and Hunted

I wake to the smell of blood and metal. My senses catalog the information automatically: Nadia’s blood, fresh but clotting. Gunpowder residue. The acrid chemical stench of whatever toxin had been coursing through my system.

The transformation back to human form comes easier than expected. One moment I’m a cat lying on a threadbare mattress; the next, I’m naked and shivering on sweat-dampened sheets. The wound on my side throbs, but the poisonous feeling—like ice water in my veins—has vanished.

“Jake!” Nadia startles from where she’s been working at the desk, surrounded by ancient papers. Dark circles shadow her eyes, her normally immaculate appearance disheveled. A white bandage wraps her left palm. “You shouldn’t transform yet. You need to rest.”

“I’m fine,” I lie, pushing myself upright despite the room’s nauseating spin. “How long was I out?”

“Almost twenty hours.” She approaches cautiously, professional assessment warring with personal concern. “The poison is out of your system, but you lost a lot of blood.”

My gaze drops to her bandaged hand. “You did something. A ritual.”

Her eyes widen slightly. “You remember?”

“Fragments. Ancient words. Your blood. Pain.” I flex my fingers, relieved to find them responding normally. “Whatever you did saved my life.”

“It was in my grandfather’s notes.” She gestures to the papers on the desk. “The Order has developed compounds to interfere with the transformation process. They’ve clearly encountered Anubis’s vessels before.”

I absorb this information, adding it to the growing collection of disturbing revelations. “Hassan found you.”

“And someone named Reynolds. Does that name mean anything to you?”

The question hits like a physical blow. “Mike’s cousin. Works private security. I met him at the funeral.” I hadn’t connected him to the cult, but it makes sickening sense—another piece of the puzzle clicking into place. “What happened?”

Nadia recounts her confrontation with Hassan, her escape with the materials, the revelation about the nine transformations. Each detail adds to my understanding of our predicament—and raises the stakes considerably.

“Seven,” I mutter, counting mentally. “That was my seventh transformation just now.”

“You shouldn’t have,” she admonishes. “We need to be careful about when you change now.”

“Needed to talk.” I stand cautiously, testing my balance. Someone—Nadia—has left clothes folded on a nearby chair: jeans, a t-shirt, a hoodie that looks too new to have been stored in this safe house. “These mine?”

“I bought them yesterday while you were recovering. Your others were ruined.” She turns away politely as I dress, though the gesture seems oddly formal given our circumstances. “I also got food, medical supplies, and temporary phones. Prepaid, untraceable.”

The hoodie’s tag still attached confirms my suspicion: while I was unconscious, she ventured out again despite the danger. A wave of conflicted admiration and concern washes over me. Nadia Farouk, academic researcher, is proving far more capable in crisis than I would have predicted.

“So we’re at seven transformations, with two remaining before permanent binding,” I say, pulling the shirt over my head. “And the Order needs your grandfather’s ritual pages for their ceremony during some astronomical alignment.”

“The gateway opens when certain stars align, apparently. My translations indicate it happens rarely—every 113 years or so. The last occurrence was in 1912.”

“That gives us—what, a month? Less?”

“Seventeen days,” she corrects grimly. “The alignment begins at the new moon on the 12th.”

I process this information, detective instincts kicking in despite physical weakness. “They’ll be watching your apartment, the university, my place. They know about this safe house too—it was in my police file, which means Sullivan has access.” The implications stack up, none good. “We need to move. Soon.”

“I’ve been working on that.” Nadia retrieves a map from the desk, spreading it on the bed. “My family has a cabin in the Berkshires, about three hours west. Remote, defensible, and unknown to the university or police records.”

I study the map, noting the isolated location surrounded by state forest. “Your name’s on the deed?”

“My grandfather’s trust owns it under a business name. I haven’t been there in years, but it should be maintained. The caretaker checks it seasonally.”

The plan makes tactical sense, but the timing worries me. “Hassan’s people could be watching this building by now. Getting out of the city will be complicated.”

“I thought of that too.” She taps a point on the map, a town halfway between Boston and the cabin. “I have a colleague in Amherst who owes me a favor. We can take backroads, switch vehicles there, then continue to the cabin.”

The thoroughness of her planning surprises me again. “You’ve given this some thought.”

A flash of irritation crosses her features. “I told you before—I was navigating academic politics and international fieldwork long before you came along with your nine lives, detective.”

I raise my hands in surrender. “Point taken. It’s a solid plan.”

Her expression softens. “How are you feeling? Honestly.”

“Like I was hit by a truck, then the truck backed up for another pass.” I rotate my shoulder, wincing at the stiffness. “But I can move. Function.”

“The wound is healing faster than normal, but you’re still weak from blood loss and toxin exposure.” She hesitates. “We should wait until nightfall to move. Less visibility, and you need more rest.”

As much as I hate delaying, she’s right. My legs still feel like rubber, and the pounding in my head suggests I’m running on fumes. “Nightfall,” I agree reluctantly. “But we should prepare now. Ready to move at a moment’s notice.”

Preparation becomes a methodical process born of necessity rather than natural partnership. Nadia packs her grandfather’s materials, categorizing and

securing them with archaeologist's precision. I check the safe house's meager armaments—a .38 revolver with limited ammunition, a hunting knife, neither ideal but better than nothing.

We work mostly in silence, each lost in private calculations. The gravity of our situation leaves little room for small talk. Two transformations remain before whatever bargain I struck with Anubis becomes irreversible. Seventeen days until the alignment that could potentially tear reality apart. And an unknown number of cult members actively hunting us.

"You should eat something," Nadia says, breaking the silence. She gestures to grocery bags on the kitchenette counter. "The protein will help with the blood loss."

The thought of food turns my stomach, but she's right. I force down an energy bar and some jerky, washing it down with bottled water. As I eat, I watch her organize documents with brisk efficiency.

"You're good at this," I observe. "Crisis management."

She doesn't look up from her work. "Archaeological fieldwork in unstable regions prepares you for certain contingencies. We once had to evacuate a dig site in the middle of the night when local militia decided foreign researchers made convenient scapegoats."

"Egypt?"

"Sudan." She secures a bundle of papers in a waterproof document sleeve. "Politics and archaeology have always been dangerously intertwined. My grandfather taught me to plan for worst-case scenarios."

"Smart man."

"He was." Something in her voice shifts, growing distant. "He tried to warn people about the Order decades ago. No one believed him."

"People rarely want to believe in monsters until they're at the door," I say, thinking of my own encounters with indifferent bureaucracy. "Especially not the kind that wear expensive suits and donate to museums."

"The Blackwood family has been involved for at least three generations," she continues. "My grandfather's journals suggest they were instrumental in bringing certain artifacts out of Egypt during colonial periods—items that should never have left their resting places."

"Like the binding dagger."

"And the mummified cat you saw in the warehouse. Not just any mummified cat—one preserved with specific ritualistic intent." She finally looks up, meeting my eyes. "The cat contains a fragment of Anubis's essence from a previous manifestation. It's how they knew to target you specifically—your bloodline signature matched the residual energy in the artifact."

The revelation sends an uncomfortable shiver down my spine. “They’ve been planning this for years. Before I ever took your case.”

“Generations,” she corrects. “Hassan’s comments about your bloodline suggest they’ve been tracking potential vessels for decades.”

The implications of this long-term manipulation twist in my gut. How much of my life has been engineered to position me for sacrifice? Was my career, my partnership with Mike, even his death—all orchestrated to prepare me?

Before I can pursue this disturbing line of thought, a sound freezes us both—footsteps in the hallway outside, too deliberate to be casual passersby. A subtle change in air pressure suggests the front door to the abandoned storefront has been opened.

Nadia and I lock eyes, no words needed. Someone has found us.

I move silently to the window, keeping to the wall as I peek through a gap in the boards. A black SUV with government plates is parked across the street, two men in tactical gear standing beside it. Not standard police—their equipment is too specialized, their positioning too professional.

“Back door,” I mouth to Nadia, who’s already gathering the most critical documents. She nods, shouldering her messenger bag with practiced ease.

The footsteps above grow more purposeful—multiple sets now, moving with tactical precision. I estimate minutes, perhaps seconds, before they locate the hidden entrance to the safe house.

I retrieve the revolver, checking the cylinder—five rounds, not enough for a prolonged engagement but sufficient for cover fire if needed. The hunting knife goes into my boot, concealed but accessible.

Nadia appears beside me, bag secured, expression resolute. “Ready?”

I nod, leading her toward the back exit—a reinforced door opening onto a narrow service alley I’d scouted when establishing this safe house years ago. The door’s hinges have been recently oiled, Nadia’s handiwork during my unconscious hours. It opens silently to reveal the dim alley beyond.

The sound of splintering wood echoes from above—they’ve found something, perhaps the trapdoor leading to our hidden space. Time’s up.

We slip into the alley, moving quickly but quietly toward the far end where it connects to a secondary street. The maze-like layout of this neighborhood was precisely why I chose this location—multiple escape routes, confusing to navigate without local knowledge.

“My car’s three blocks east,” Nadia whispers as we reach the alley’s end. “We parked it last night after I got supplies.”

Another detail she’s managed while I was incapacitated. I nod acknowledgment, scanning the street before us. Empty for now, but that could change any

moment.

“Stay behind me,” I instruct. “If we get separated, head for Amherst. I’ll find you.”

She gives me a look that says she’s not planning on getting separated, but nods agreement. We emerge onto the street, maintaining a casual pace that won’t attract attention while covering ground efficiently.

One block passes without incident. Then another. The fall evening has brought early darkness, streetlights casting pools of amber illumination at regular intervals. We stick to shadows where possible, moving with purpose but not panic.

The crackle of a radio from behind stops us cold. “Northeast corner clear. Moving to secondary position.”

Not police chatter—something more specialized. I pull Nadia into a recessed doorway, our bodies pressed close as a tactical team member passes the adjacent street, weapon visible beneath his jacket.

“Private contractors,” I whisper once he’s passed. “High-end. Military training.”

“Blackwood’s people?”

I nod. “He has the resources. And they’re moving with too much coordination for a hastily assembled team. They were prepared for this.”

We wait until the operative disappears around a corner, then continue toward Nadia’s car, now changing course to circle behind where we spotted the contractor. The streets grow eerily empty—either coincidence or intentional clearing of the area.

Nadia tenses beside me. “There,” she whispers, nodding toward a sedan with tinted windows parked ahead. Two men sit inside, too still to be casual motorists.

“Alternative route,” I murmur, guiding her down a narrow passage between buildings. This part of Boston is a warren of service alleys and forgotten courtyards, a legacy of colonial planning overlaid with modern development. We navigate by instinct and half-remembered mental maps, changing direction frequently to confound pursuit.

The strategy seems to work until we round a corner and freeze. Twenty yards ahead, a tactical team is deploying from another black SUV, establishing a perimeter with practiced efficiency.

“They’re boxing us in,” I realize, pulling back before we’re spotted. “Coordinated search pattern.”

“How many?”

“At least eight that I’ve seen. Probably more.” I assess our dwindling options. “We need a diversion.”

Nadia glances at me, understanding dawning. “No. You’re still too weak.”

“No choice.” The decision crystallizes with tactical clarity. “I transform, create a distraction. You get to the car, drive to the rendezvous point.”

“Jake—”

“Eighth transformation,” I acknowledge. “I know the stakes.”

Her expression tightens with worry and something deeper. “You might not be able to find me afterward. If they’re tracking your transformations somehow—”

“They’re tracking us now.” I press the car keys into her hand. “Wait for my signal, then run. Don’t stop for anything.”

Before she can protest further, I focus on the change, drawing on reserves of strength I’m not sure I possess. The transformation comes with surprising ease—not the usual discomfort but a fluid transition, as if my body has decided this form is now as natural as my human shape.

Nadia watches with scientific fascination momentarily overriding concern. “The binding is progressing,” she whispers. “The transitions are becoming seamless.”

I have no time to contemplate the implications. With a final look at her—memorizing her face, her scent, the determination in her eyes—I slip back onto the street, a shadow among shadows.

My target is the tactical team ahead, their attention focused on methodical building searches. I position myself deliberately in their line of sight, then knock over a stack of empty crates with calculated noise.

Heads turn, weapons raise. A beam of tactical light cuts through darkness, illuminating my feline form. I hold position just long enough to be unmistakable—the black cat with unusual golden flecks in its fur, eyes too intelligent to be natural.

“Target spotted!” someone shouts. “East alley, feline form!”

I run then, not at full speed but deliberately paced to maintain pursuit. Behind me, radio chatter erupts as the team coordinates, exactly as intended. I lead them away from Nadia’s position, threading through narrow spaces where their human forms must slow and adjust.

The pursuit intensifies, more units converging based on radio updates. I weave a complex path through the neighborhood, always keeping them just close enough to maintain interest but never close enough to risk capture. My smaller form allows maneuvers impossible for my pursuers—scaling drainpipes, crossing narrow ledges, slipping through basement window gratings.

One particularly athletic operative nearly catches me, lunging with impressive speed as I cross an open space. I twist mid-air, barely avoiding his grasp, leaving him sprawled on asphalt as I disappear into another service alley.

The chase continues for nearly twenty minutes—long enough to draw significant resources away from where Nadia should now be retrieving her car. My body protests the sustained exertion, the healing wound throbbing with each leap and bound. But the transformation holds, perhaps aided by Anubis’s influence flowing more strongly as the binding progresses.

Finally, when I’m confident Nadia has had sufficient time to escape, I execute the final phase of my plan. A decrepit apartment building scheduled for demolition provides the perfect setting—multiple entry points, complex internal structure, and most importantly, access to the sewer system through a basement utility room.

I allow the tactical team one final glimpse before disappearing inside. They approach with caution, establishing perimeter positions, clearly expecting an ambush rather than escape. Their discipline is impressive but ultimately works against them—while they methodically secure each floor from the ground up, I’m already navigating the building’s bowels.

The basement access to municipal sewers isn’t on standard blueprints, a quirk of Boston’s chaotic underground infrastructure that I learned about during a case years ago. The rusted grate yields to focused pressure from transformed muscles, allowing me to slip into the drainage system below.

The smell is overwhelming to enhanced feline senses, but the labyrinthine network provides unparalleled escape routes. I navigate by memory and instinct, eventually emerging nearly a mile away through a storm drain partially hidden by overgrown vegetation.

Exhausted but satisfied with the diversion’s success, I make my way to the predetermined rendezvous point—an abandoned drive-in theater outside the city limits. The location offers clear sightlines, multiple escape routes, and sufficient isolation to avoid civilian complications.

Hours pass as I wait, concealed in tall grass at the property’s edge. My feline form’s natural patience serves well, though concern for Nadia grows with each passing minute. Did she escape cleanly? Was there another team we didn’t spot? The possibilities multiply in my mind, each worse than the last.

Just as I’m considering returning to the city to search, headlights appear on the access road—a single vehicle approaching cautiously, high beams sweeping the overgrown parking area. The car’s outline matches Nadia’s sedan, moving with the deliberate pace of someone expecting trouble.

I remain hidden until the vehicle stops near the crumbling concession building. The driver’s door opens, and Nadia emerges, posture tense, one hand concealed in her jacket—on the revolver, I realize with grim approval. She’s adapting to our circumstances with remarkable speed.

“Jake?” she calls softly, voice barely carrying in the night air. “Are you here?”

I approach slowly, ensuring she sees me before I'm fully in the open. The relief on her face is palpable as she kneels to my level.

"You made it," she breathes. "I was worried when you didn't arrive sooner."

I meow once, the sound odd in my throat, then pad past her to the car. She understands, opening the passenger door. I jump in, settling on the seat as she returns to the driver's position.

"I had to take an extremely indirect route," she explains as we pull away from the drive-in. "They had vehicles at major intersections throughout the neighborhood. Your diversion worked—I saw them scrambling to converge on your position—but they're clearly well-resourced."

I watch her as she drives, noting the tension in her shoulders, the whitened knuckles on the steering wheel. Despite her composed exterior, the events of the past hours have taken their toll.

"The cabin is still our best option," she continues, eyes fixed on the dark road ahead. "But we need to assume they can track basic movements like credit cards, cell signals, and highway cameras. I've switched off both our phones and withdrew cash yesterday before all this started."

Her foresight continues to impress. In my line of work, paranoia is a professional asset, but Nadia's precautions suggest deeper familiarity with evasion tactics than most academics would possess.

"We'll avoid main highways, stick to secondary roads. It'll take longer but significantly reduce our digital footprint." She glances at me. "Can you transform back? We should discuss the plan in detail."

I consider the question carefully. The transformation represents my eighth shift, leaving only one before the binding becomes permanent according to Nadia's research. Strategic conservation seems wise, yet communication limitations in cat form present significant tactical disadvantages.

Decision made, I focus on the return shift. The process flows with concerning ease, bones and tissue reconfiguring without the usual discomfort. Within moments, I'm human again, hastily adjusting clothing that has reappeared with the transformation—another sign of the binding's progression.

"That's getting smoother," I observe, voice rough from disuse.

"Too smooth," Nadia replies, concern evident. "The binding is accelerating. My grandfather's notes suggest this indicates approaching stabilization."

"Eighth transformation," I confirm grimly. "One remaining before permanence."

She nods, eyes still on the winding road as we leave Boston's outer suburbs behind. "We need to be absolutely certain before using the final transformation. Once it's done..."

“I’m stuck with Anubis forever,” I finish. “Or he’s stuck with me, depending on perspective.”

An uncomfortable silence falls between us. The implications of permanent binding extend beyond my personal situation—what happens to Anubis’s promise of release once our bargain concludes? Was that ever a genuine possibility, or merely manipulation to secure my cooperation?

“The ritual page translations contain references to separation protocols,” Nadia offers after a while. “Incomplete, but suggesting the possibility of safely severing the bond under specific circumstances.”

“Even after nine transformations?”

“Unclear. The text is fragmentary.” She hesitates. “But there are references to previous vessels who successfully separated after full binding.”

This new information shifts my mental calculations. “At what cost?”

“That’s what we need to determine.” Her profile in the dashboard’s dim illumination shows the determination that’s become increasingly familiar. “The cabin contains more of my grandfather’s research. He spent decades studying the binding process, the gateway, the Order’s activities. If answers exist, they’ll be there.”

I absorb this possibility, trying not to invest too heavily in hope. False optimism is as dangerous as despair in our situation.

“Tell me about this cabin,” I say, changing focus to immediate tactical concerns. “Defensibility. Resources. Potential vulnerabilities.”

Nadia seems relieved by the practical question. “Three rooms plus loft space. Stone foundation, timber construction. Solar power with generator backup. Satellite internet connection, though I suggest we use it sparingly if at all. Natural spring for water. Stocked with non-perishable supplies that should still be good.”

“Security features?”

“Limited. Dead bolts, shutters on the windows. It’s remote enough that conventional security wasn’t a priority. The nearest neighbor is five miles away, accessible only by the same private road.”

“That isolation cuts both ways,” I note. “Defensible but potentially trapping if they find us.”

“There’s a hiking trail behind the property that connects to state forest land,” she adds. “Emergency exit if needed. And the caretaker installed motion sensors last year after bear problems—not sophisticated security, but they’ll alert us to approach.”

I nod, mentally mapping possibilities. “What about your colleague in Amherst? Can they be trusted with our actual situation?”

“Dr. Elena Patel. We worked together in Sudan. She doesn’t need to know specifics, just that I’m helping a friend in trouble.” Nadia glances at me. “She owes me for extracting her from a military checkpoint without diplomatic incidents. She won’t ask questions.”

The answer satisfies my immediate concern. “And the vehicle switch?”

“She has a Jeep Cherokee she uses for field research. Four-wheel drive, older model without modern tracking systems. Perfect for forest roads.”

Each detail reinforces my growing appreciation for Nadia’s capabilities. The academic exterior conceals a pragmatic survivor with relevant experience in crisis management—exactly the partner needed in our current circumstances.

Partner. The word surfaces unexpectedly in my thoughts. Since Mike’s death, I’ve operated alone by choice and necessity. The idea of partnership, even temporary, carries uncomfortable weight.

“You should rest,” Nadia suggests, misinterpreting my silence. “We have at least two hours to Amherst, then another hour to the cabin. You’re still recovering.”

Though I want to protest, fatigue pulls at me with undeniable force. The successive transformations, healing wound, and extended exertion have depleted already limited reserves.

“Wake me if anything changes,” I concede, adjusting the seat to a more reclined position. “Or if you need a driving break.”

“I will,” she promises, though we both know she’ll drive the entire route herself if possible.

As I drift toward uneasy sleep, one final thought surfaces—a realization that should disturb me more than it does: I trust Nadia Farouk. Not just with the practical aspects of our escape, but with something I’ve guarded far more carefully since Mike’s death—my wellbeing. Perhaps even my future, whatever strange shape it might take.

Sleep claims me before I can fully examine the implications of this shift. The last thing I register is Nadia’s profile against the darkened landscape beyond, her expression set with quiet determination as she navigates us away from immediate danger toward an uncertain sanctuary.

The transition from Boston suburbs to rural Massachusetts happens gradually, urban density giving way to scattered towns, then increasingly isolated properties. Nadia drives with focused precision, maintaining secondary roads where possible, occasionally doubling back or taking deliberate detours to confound potential pursuit.

I wake as we approach Amherst, the college town’s lights creating a modest glow against the night sky. My watch shows nearly 11 PM—we’ve been driving for

hours, longer than the direct route would require.

“Any signs of pursuit?” I ask, scanning the rearview mirror automatically.

Nadia shakes her head. “Nothing obvious. I’ve been checking regularly.” She looks exhausted, dark circles prominent beneath her eyes. “We’re meeting Elena at her research lab. Less conspicuous than her home.”

The anthropology building sits at the edge of campus, its modern architecture a stark contrast to the surrounding colonial-inspired structures. At this hour, the parking lot stands mostly empty—a few cars belonging to graduate students or faculty working late.

Nadia pulls into a designated spot near a side entrance, then sends a text from a prepaid phone. Within minutes, a woman emerges from the building—mid-forties, South Asian features, practical clothing that suggests field work rather than classroom lectures.

“Dr. Patel,” Nadia confirms as the woman approaches. “I worked with her on three different excavations. She specializes in cultural anthropology with archaeological methodology.”

Elena Patel greets Nadia with the quick embrace of colleagues with shared experiences, her expression conveying concern without invasive questions. They speak briefly, voices too low to hear from my position in the passenger seat.

After a few minutes, Dr. Patel hands Nadia a set of keys and a small duffel bag. More words are exchanged, a flash of cash changing hands—reimbursement for the vehicle, I assume—then Elena departs in Nadia’s sedan while we transfer our essential items to the waiting Jeep.

“She thinks I’m helping you avoid an abusive ex-partner,” Nadia explains as we settle into the new vehicle. “Close enough to the truth to explain our behavior without revealing anything supernatural.”

The Cherokee proves ideal for our purposes—older but well-maintained, with minimal electronics and excellent off-road capability. Nadia handles it with familiar ease, suggesting previous experience with similar vehicles.

“Field research,” she confirms when I comment on this. “You don’t excavate in remote regions without learning to drive anything with wheels. Sometimes without wheels, depending on the terrain.”

We leave Amherst behind, heading west on increasingly rural roads. The night landscape changes character—denser forest, steeper terrain, fewer signs of human habitation. An hour passes in comfortable silence, both of us alert for potential pursuit but gradually allowing tension to ease as distance from Boston grows.

Finally, Nadia turns onto an unmarked gravel road barely visible from the main route. The Jeep’s headlights illuminate dense forest pressing close on either side, branches occasionally scraping against the vehicle’s sides.

“Private access,” she explains. “The cabin’s about three miles in.”

The road winds deeper into forest that seems untouched by modern development. Eventually, the trees thin slightly to reveal a small clearing where a cabin sits against the backdrop of a steep, wooded hillside.

The structure matches Nadia’s description—rustic but solid, built from local timber with a stone foundation. Solar panels gleam dully on the sloped roof, catching ambient moonlight. The surrounding clearing has been maintained, providing both defensive sightlines and a buffer against forest fires.

Nadia parks near the cabin’s front porch, killing the engine but leaving headlights illuminated while we conduct a careful perimeter check. The property appears undisturbed—no fresh tire tracks besides our own, no broken windows or forced entries. Motion sensors mounted at strategic points around the clearing seem intact, their indicator lights glowing steadily.

Only when satisfied with the exterior’s security do we approach the cabin itself. Nadia retrieves a key from beneath a specific stone on the pathway—“Family tradition,” she explains—and unlocks the reinforced front door.

The interior smells of wood smoke and pine, clean despite evident disuse. Basic furnishings occupy the main room—sturdy table, comfortable chairs, a couch that appears newer than the surrounding décor. A stone fireplace dominates one wall, while a kitchenette occupies the opposite corner. Two doors presumably lead to bedrooms, with a ladder providing access to the loft space visible above.

“Generator’s external, behind the woodshed,” Nadia says, moving through the space with practiced familiarity. “Solar should provide basic power, but we’ll want to minimize usage. Water pump runs on the same system.”

She activates several battery-powered lanterns, casting the cabin in warm, localized light that won’t be visible from distance. The strategic consideration impresses me—she’s thinking like someone accustomed to avoiding detection.

“My grandfather was paranoid long before it was fashionable,” she explains, noting my observation. “He designed this place with privacy as the primary concern.”

As Nadia checks the cabin’s systems and supplies, I secure entry points—confirming deadbolts, examining window latches, identifying potential weaknesses in our defensive perimeter. The structure offers reasonable security by civilian standards, though hardly impregnable against determined assault.

“There’s food,” Nadia calls from the pantry. “Canned goods, dried provisions. Enough for at least two weeks without resupply.”

“Water situation?”

“Spring-fed well with hand pump backup if the electric fails. Tested annually for contamination.” She emerges from the kitchen area. “We’re as safe here as we could reasonably expect, given the circumstances.”

I complete my security assessment, noting potential fallback positions and escape routes. The situation isn't ideal, but superior to our previous options. Most importantly, we've broken immediate pursuit patterns and established a position where we control the approaching terrain.

My body reminds me of its lingering injuries with a wave of exhaustion that nearly buckles my knees. Nadia notices immediately, academic detachment giving way to genuine concern.

"You need rest," she states firmly. "Real rest, not vigilant half-sleep. The healing process requires it."

I want to argue, to establish watch rotations and emergency protocols, but physical limitations assert themselves with undeniable authority. "Wake me in four hours," I compromise. "We'll alternate watches."

She nods agreement, though her expression suggests she'll extend my rest period if possible. "There are two bedrooms. The one on the right has better sightlines to the approach road."

Tactical consideration again. I'm continuing to reassess my initial impression of Dr. Nadia Farouk with each interaction.

The bedroom proves simple but comfortable—full-sized bed with clean linens, small dresser, window positioned to observe the clearing while remaining partially concealed behind curtains. I check the revolver once more before placing it on the nightstand within easy reach, then stretch out fully clothed atop the covers.

Sleep arrives with surprising speed, pulling me into darkness before I can complete my usual mental security review. The last conscious sensation is the cabin's profound quiet—a silence unknown in Boston, broken only by natural sounds of forest and the occasional soft movement as Nadia continues organizing our situation.

Dream desert surrounds me instantly, its impossible geography now familiar enough to navigate with confidence. Anubis awaits at the center of a vast emptiness, his massive feline form silhouetted against stars that burn too brightly in an alien sky.

"You approach the threshold," he says without preamble, voice resonating directly in my mind rather than disturbing the desert air. "The eighth transformation completed. Only one remains before our binding becomes permanent."

"You didn't mention that detail in our original bargain," I reply, anger held in check but evident.

"The information would have been meaningless to you then." His form shifts slightly, somehow becoming more substantial in this insubstantial realm. "Humans cannot comprehend divine binding without experiencing its progression."

“Convenient excuse for deception.”

“Not deception. Adaptation to limited understanding.” Anubis paces a circle around me, golden eyes unblinking. “The Egyptologist has translated the texts correctly. Nine transformations complete the binding cycle. The ninth represents the threshold beyond which separation becomes... problematic.”

“Define ‘problematic.’”

“Painful. Potentially fatal to the human component.” He stops, facing me directly. “But not impossible, under specific circumstances.”

This confirmation of Nadia’s translation sends a ripple of cautious hope through me. “What circumstances?”

“The same alignment that strengthens the gateway also creates conditions where bonds may be severed. A willing release from both participants, performed within the gateway’s influence, can achieve separation without destruction.”

I absorb this information, searching for manipulations or half-truths. “Why tell me this now?”

“Because decisions approach that require full knowledge.” Anubis sits on his haunches, tail curling around massive paws. “The Order of Eternal Dusk seeks not partnership with divinity but enslavement. They believe they can bind my essence to their control through corrupted ritual and sacrifice.”

“Using me as the vessel.”

“Using your death as the catalyst,” he corrects. “The binding they attempt would trap a portion of my essence in a construct of their design, leaving the gateway unguarded while chaos entities enter through the weakened barrier.”

The implications stack exponentially. “You said they want to control death itself.”

“They believe they seek control over death. What they would actually achieve is destruction of the boundary between ordered reality and chaotic void.” His eyes narrow to golden slits. “Imagine the most traumatic death you’ve witnessed, detective. Now multiply that experience across all

Chapter 13: Cabin Fever

The sunlight hits me like a slap, streaming through gaps in the cabin’s wooden shutters. I wake with a jolt, momentarily lost. Pine and dust fill my nostrils. The silence feels wrong after Boston’s constant racket.

Then it clicks—the escape from the city, the tactical team hunting us, Nadia’s family cabin. Safe. For now.

My watch reads almost 10 AM. Way longer than the four-hour rest we'd agreed on. I grab the revolver from the nightstand and move to the window, ignoring the twinge from my healing wound. The clearing looks untouched, morning mist still clinging to the trees. No signs of pursuit.

I find Nadia on the back porch, cross-legged with her grandfather's journal open in her lap. Sunlight catches her dark hair, revealing copper strands I hadn't noticed before.

"You were supposed to wake me," I say, leaning against the doorframe.

She doesn't flinch at my approach. Impressive situational awareness for an academic. "You needed rest more than I needed sleep." Her eyes scan me clinically. "The healing accelerated overnight. The binding's progression has its benefits, I suppose."

She's right. The knife wound that should've kept me bedridden for weeks has faded to a puckered scar. I rotate my shoulder experimentally. Sore, but functional.

"Any sign of our friends?"

"Nothing. I've checked the perimeter twice since dawn. Motion sensors are active, and the satellite phone works if we need it."

I drop down beside her, keeping a respectable distance. "What's the plan?"

"Research," she says simply. "This cabin has my grandfather's most comprehensive records on the Order and the rituals. If we're going to stop them and fix your situation, we need information."

"Seventeen days until the alignment," I remind her. "One transformation left before it's permanent."

"I know." Irritation flashes across her face. "The cabin's northwest corner has hidden storage behind a bookcase—my family's tradition of paranoia dates back to Colonial times."

"Your family's been here that long?"

"On my mother's side. American archaeologist who met my father during a dig in Egypt." She stands, brushing dust from her clothes. "It matters because many of the documents we need were collected by ancestors who spotted the Order's activities centuries ago."

Inside, she leads me to a heavy oak bookcase. Some volumes look ancient, spines cracked with age.

"My grandfather wasn't the first to study Egyptian practices or encounter the Order," she explains, fingers tracing the bookcase edge. "We've been watching them since the 1800s, when they first set up shop in Boston."

She triggers a hidden mechanism. The bookcase swings outward on concealed hinges, revealing a small room lined with shelves of document boxes and artifact cases.

“Family archive,” she says, stepping inside. “Too sensitive or controversial for universities. Some contradict accepted theories. Others contain information about the Order that would be dangerous if found.”

The space smells of preservation chemicals and old paper. Nadia moves through it like she’s done this a hundred times, picking specific containers with purpose.

“Three research priorities,” she says, handing me a stack of folders. “First, Blackwood’s history with the Order. Second, the binding process and how to reverse it. Third, the gateway ritual and how to counter it.”

We set up at the cabin’s large table, organizing materials by category. Nadia tackles ancient texts while I focus on recent documents—investigation reports, newspaper clippings, and notes from her grandfather.

Hours pass in silence, broken only by occasional questions. Patterns start to emerge from the scattered information.

“Blackwood’s family has been in this up to their necks for at least four generations,” I say, arranging newspaper clippings in order. “His great-grandfather Thomas picked up significant Egyptian artifacts during an 1891 expedition, right when the Boston chapter of the Order first tried their ritual.”

Nadia nods without looking up. “Family obsession with cheating death goes back even further. Hospital records show unusual cancer rates dating to the 1700s. They’ve been hunting immortality for centuries.”

“Maxwell had his own trigger,” I continue, examining more recent files. “Wife Elizabeth and daughter Sophia died in a car crash seven years ago. Police report suggests the brakes might have been tampered with, though they never proved it.”

This catches her attention. “Murder?”

“Report notes brake line damage ‘consistent with either gradual wear or deliberate tampering.’ Case closed without a solid conclusion.” I spread several photos across the table—Blackwood at public events, his physical decline visible across time. “He went downhill fast after their deaths. Then about three years ago, he stabilized, despite medical records saying he was terminal.”

“Three years ago is when the Order got the binding dagger,” Nadia observes. “They’ve been using artifacts to keep him alive while preparing for the ritual.”

The picture becomes clearer—Blackwood’s tragedy twisted into obsession, his wealth and power channeled toward increasingly desperate measures. A man with nothing to lose and everything to gain from breaking cosmic rules.

As afternoon fades, my body reminds me it's still not one hundred percent. Despite the accelerated healing, fatigue settles deep in my bones alongside a familiar restlessness—the pressure of transformation building under my skin.

Nadia spots my discomfort immediately. “The lunar cycle's approaching new moon. The binding's pull gets stronger accordingly.”

“Three days until forced transformation,” I confirm, rolling tension from my shoulders. “I can feel it building.”

She sets aside her work, fixing me with a look that starts clinical but softens into something more. “You should rest. We've been at this for hours.”

“We don't have time for—”

“Burning yourself out won't help either of us.” Her tone brooks no argument. “Your body's still healing. The binding taxes your system beyond normal human limits. Rest is strategy, not weakness.”

The logic breaks through my stubborn streak. “Fine. Short break, then we continue.”

Nadia's expression suggests she expected nothing less, amusement briefly lifting the worry lines around her eyes. “I'll make something to eat. There should be—”

A sharp electronic tone cuts her off—the motion sensors. We freeze, instantly alert.

“Front perimeter, western approach,” she says, moving swiftly to a control panel disguised as a thermostat. “Single trigger.”

I grab the revolver, checking the cylinder by reflex as I move to the front window. The clearing looks peaceful in the fading daylight.

“Could be an animal,” Nadia suggests, though her stance says she's ready for a fight. “Bears are common here.”

“Motion signature?”

“Consistent with large mammal.” She adjusts settings on the panel. “Too small for a vehicle, too large for most humans.”

We watch in silence for several minutes. When nothing appears, Nadia activates a secondary system—a small monitor showing feed from cameras hidden around the property. The tech feels out of place in the rustic cabin.

“Grandfather's paranoia extended to modern security,” she explains, noting my surprise. “Updated whenever technology advanced. Solar powered, motion activated to save energy.”

The camera reveals our visitor—a black bear ambling along the forest edge, sniffing occasionally before continuing its evening rounds. The tension drains from the room as we watch it lumber away.

“False alarm,” I acknowledge, placing the revolver on the table rather than holstering it. “But the system works.”

“The warning would be the same if it were the Order.” Nadia’s expression remains serious. “We should establish defensive protocols—response patterns, rally points if separated, emergency evacuation plan.”

Her tactical thinking impresses me again. We spend the next hour mapping the cabin and surrounding terrain, identifying defensive positions, escape routes, and potential hazards. The process feels familiar—similar to police tactical planning but with fewer resources and higher stakes.

With security measures established, we finally address basic needs. Nadia puts together a simple meal from the cabin’s supplies while I check and recheck entry points, a habit born from years of professional paranoia and recently reinforced by supernatural stakes.

We eat at the kitchen table, research materials temporarily cleared to make room for plates of beans, preserved meat, and packaged bread. Nothing fancy, but enough to quiet the gnawing in my stomach.

“Your grandfather kept this place well-stocked,” I observe. “Prepared for extended emergencies.”

“He believed they would come for him eventually,” Nadia says, matter-of-fact voice barely hiding sadness. “The Order, I mean. He exposed too many of their activities, recovered too many artifacts they wanted.”

“But they never did?”

“Heart attack. At least, that’s what the death certificate says.” Her expression suggests deeper suspicions. “He was healthy, followed a Mediterranean diet, exercised regularly. No history of heart problems.”

“You think they got to him.”

“I know they did.” She pushes her plate away, appetite apparently gone. “Autopsy was inconclusive, but certain toxins are designed to mimic natural causes. The timing was too convenient—three days after he recovered a specific canopic jar they’d been hunting for decades.”

Her personal connection to this case clicks into place—not just academic interest or professional duty, but family legacy and perhaps personal justice. Another layer of Nadia Farouk revealed.

After eating, we return to the research with renewed focus. Night settles over the forest, the cabin’s interior lit to minimize visibility from outside while giving us enough light to work.

“There’s a pattern to how the Order acquired artifacts,” I note, arranging museum records and private sale documentation chronologically. “They needed specific items in a specific sequence, like assembling puzzle pieces.”

“The ritual requires seventeen components properly aligned,” Nadia confirms, referencing a partially translated papyrus. “Each representing an aspect of the gateway’s structure. Missing or incorrectly placed components destabilize the whole process.”

“How many do they have now?”

“Fifteen confirmed.” Her expression tightens. “The university theft completed their collection except for two items my grandfather successfully hid.”

“Where?”

“One is here, in this cabin.” She gestures toward the hidden room. “The other was entrusted to a colleague who remains unaware of its significance. Security through obscurity.”

Smart thinking. “What stops them from proceeding with fifteen components?”

“They could try, but the gateway would be unstable, temporary.” She meets my gaze directly. “They need all seventeen for a permanent breach.”

“And my essence as catalyst,” I add grimly. “Final transformation creates the energy signature they need.”

“Yes.” She hesitates, uncomfortable. “There’s something else. Your final transformation might be triggered deliberately through specific ritual components they possess. The binding dagger contains sympathetic magic that resonates with Anubis’s essence in your blood.”

This shifts the tactical picture dramatically. “You’re saying they could force my final transformation?”

“Not remotely, but with proximity and proper ritual application.” Her fingers trace ancient symbols on a papyrus fragment. “Range would be limited—perhaps a mile at maximum. They would need to get close.”

Another reason for our isolated position. The cabin’s remote location buffers against such tactics—they would trigger proximity alerts long before reaching effective range.

As midnight approaches, exhaustion returns with a vengeance. Despite afternoon rest, the day’s work has drained my already limited reserves. Nadia looks equally spent, though she hides it behind scholarly focus.

“We should sleep,” I suggest, noting her third suppressed yawn in as many minutes. “Alternate watches, four-hour rotations. I’ll take first.”

She starts to object, then reconsiders. “Wake me at four AM precisely. No extensions.”

“Agreed.” This time, I mean it.

Nadia heads to the second bedroom, leaving me alone with research materials and the quiet sounds of the forest at night. I divide my attention between security monitors and Blackwood's history.

Hours pass in productive solitude. The connection between Blackwood's family tragedy and his current obsession becomes increasingly clear through police reports, medical records, and financial transactions tracked by Nadia's grandfather. The pattern reveals a man systematically channeling enormous resources toward a single-minded goal—reuniting with his dead family by any means necessary.

Shortly before my watch ends, I discover a file containing surveillance photographs taken at Elizabeth and Sophia Blackwood's funeral. Among the mourners stands a familiar figure—Captain Sullivan, my former supervisor, looking far healthier than his current terminal state would suggest. The connection predates my involvement by years, answering long-standing questions about how Mike and I stumbled into this mess.

We were never random casualties. Sullivan deliberately assigned us to investigate disappearances connected to the Order's activities, positioning us as either potential recruits or convenient sacrifices. Mike's death wasn't an unfortunate accident but calculated removal when he discovered too much.

The revelation hits me like ice water in the veins. I've carried guilt for three years, believing my reckless pursuit cost my partner's life. Now evidence suggests we were manipulated from the start—pawns in a game running far longer than I realized.

At 4 AM precisely, I wake Nadia as promised. She transitions from sleep to alertness with practiced efficiency, requiring minimal time to orient herself.

"Security status?" she asks, voice clear despite recent sleep.

"All clear. Motion sensors triggered twice—deer passing eastern perimeter. No approach patterns suggesting human surveillance." I hand her the file containing funeral photographs. "Found connection between Sullivan and Blackwood predating our case by years. My partner's death wasn't accident or my failure—it was deliberate elimination by the Order."

She examines the evidence thoroughly, then meets my gaze with unexpected gentleness. "Does knowing change anything for you?"

The question slips past defenses I hadn't realized I'd maintained. "It should," I admit. "Logically, it redistributes responsibility. But..."

"But emotionally, it still feels like your burden." She completes the thought with surprising insight. "Grief doesn't respond to evidence the way investigations do."

The observation catches me off-guard—too perceptive, too personal from someone I'd initially categorized as academic rather than empathetic. Another element of Nadia Farouk I'd incorrectly assessed.

“Get some rest,” she says, filling the silence left by my unspoken acknowledgment. “I’ll continue the research. We need to understand the binding reversal possibilities before your final transformation.”

I surrender to exhaustion, this time falling into dreamless sleep undisturbed by Anubis’s desert realm. When I wake again, morning light filters through the cabin’s windows, and the smell of coffee permeates the space.

Nadia sits surrounded by documentation, her hair pulled back in practical fashion, eyes shadowed by concentrated study. Multiple journals lie open before her, pages marked with colored tabs in some organizational system meaningful only to her.

“Found something,” she says without preamble as I emerge from the bedroom. “Reference to successful binding reversal during the 1912 alignment. The vessel survived separation.”

I pour coffee from a pot kept warm on the woodstove before joining her. “Details?”

“Fragmentary. My grandfather interviewed the vessel’s daughter in the 1970s.” She indicates a journal filled with handwritten notes. “The separation required specific ritual components, precise timing during alignment, and—” she hesitates, “—intense personal connection between vessel and anchor.”

“Anchor?”

“Human participant who maintains connection to physical realm during separation process.” She meets my gaze directly. “Someone with emotional tether to the vessel strong enough to counterbalance divine binding.”

The implication hangs unspoken between us. Mike is gone. My limited personal connections offer few candidates for such a role. Except, perhaps, the woman sitting across from me—our connection forged through crisis and supernatural circumstance rather than conventional relationship.

Before I can formulate a response, pain lances through my abdomen—sudden, intense, familiar. The binding pulse, stronger than previous episodes. I double over, bracing against the table as my vision blurs.

“Jake?” Nadia’s voice seems distant through the roaring in my ears. “What’s happening?”

“Binding,” I manage through clenched teeth. “Stronger than before.”

She moves swiftly to my side, clinical assessment overriding personal concern. “Premature transformation trigger? The lunar cycle shouldn’t force change for another day at least.”

The pain recedes as quickly as it arrived, leaving cold sweat and trembling muscles in its wake. “Not transformation,” I gasp, straightening gradually. “More like... communication attempt. Anubis trying to reach me outside dream state.”

Understanding dawns in her expression. “The alignment’s approach strengthens connections between realms. The binding responds accordingly.”

I nod, regaining composure as residual discomfort fades. “Something’s changing. The rules are shifting as the date approaches.”

“We need to accelerate research,” she decides, returning to the table with renewed urgency. “If the binding’s progression is increasing exponentially rather than linearly, our timeline may be compressed.”

The morning transitions to focused investigation, our earlier moment of personal connection subsumed beneath practical necessity. We work methodically through dozens of documents, extracting relevant information about binding mechanics, gateway structure, and potential countermeasures against the Order’s ritual.

By mid-afternoon, patterns emerge from seemingly disparate sources. Nadia’s translations combined with my detective’s synthesis create clearer understanding of what we face—and potential strategies for disruption.

“The Order’s ritual requires specific astronomical alignment, correct artifact arrangement, and essence catalyst,” I summarize, arranging key documents in sequence. “Remove any component, ritual fails.”

“Temporary failure,” Nadia corrects. “They would simply wait for next alignment—2025—and try again with replacement components.”

“Unless we destroy the artifacts permanently.”

She shakes her head firmly. “Impossible and inadvisable. These artifacts aren’t merely valuable antiquities—they’re cosmic constants given physical form. Destroying them doesn’t eliminate their essence, just disperses it unpredictably.”

“Creating potentially worse problems,” I conclude, understanding the implication. “So we need more permanent solution.”

“We need to complete the correct ritual before they complete the corrupted version.” Her expression reflects the audacity of this proposition. “Proper gateway reinforcement using authentic methods rather than their perverted approach.”

The scale of this undertaking settles uncomfortably between us—two individuals against an organization with centuries of preparation and resources beyond measure. The odds appear insurmountable from any rational assessment.

As if sensing my thoughts, Nadia reaches across the table, her hand covering mine in rare physical contact. “We have advantages they don’t,” she says with surprising conviction. “Access to authentic texts they’ve never seen. The grandfather’s lifetime of research. And most importantly—” her eyes meet mine directly, “—willing participation of Anubis’s chosen vessel rather than forced compliance.”

Her touch lingers longer than strictly necessary, thumb brushing unconsciously across my knuckles. The contact generates awareness disproportionate to its casual nature—connection beyond tactical alliance or research partnership.

The moment stretches, possibilities unfolding in silent acknowledgment. Then practical necessity reasserts itself as another perimeter alert sounds—different pattern than previous animal triggering.

We separate instantly, moving to defensive positions with practiced coordination. Nadia checks the monitoring system while I retrieve the revolver, positioning myself with clear sightlines to approach vectors.

“Vehicle on the access road,” she reports tersely. “Single signature, approaching slowly.”

“Tactical team would send multiple vehicles,” I observe, though maintaining readiness. “Could be caretaker or random visitor.”

“Caretaker’s not scheduled until next month.” She adjusts camera feeds, trying to capture clear image. “Road gate should be locked. No one has legitimate access without contacting me first.”

The vehicle appears on camera feed—older model pickup truck moving cautiously along the unpaved road. Not tactical equipment or government issue, but ordinary civilian transportation. Still, caution dictates preparation for potential threat.

“Defensive position three,” I direct, referencing our earlier planning. “I’ll take primary engagement point. If compromised, fall back to extraction route through rear trail.”

Nadia nods, retrieving a small go-bag we’d prepared for emergency evacuation. She positions herself as planned—visible from my location but concealed from front approach, ready to provide support or escape as situation demands.

The truck stops at clearing’s edge rather than approaching the cabin directly—behavior suggesting caution rather than confidence. A single occupant remains inside for several moments, then emerges slowly, hands visibly empty.

Middle-aged man, flannel shirt, work boots—appearance consistent with local rural population rather than tactical operative. He surveys the cabin carefully before calling out.

“Hello? Dr. Farouk? Your colleague Dr. Patel asked me to check on the property.”

Nadia tenses beside me, recognition flickering across her features. “Thomas Harding,” she whispers. “Local handyman who helps maintain several faculty properties. Elena must have sent him.”

“Verification?” I ask, maintaining vigilant position.

“He worked on the roof last year. Installed the solar panels.” She hesitates. “But Elena wouldn’t send someone without contacting me first unless she believed phone communication was compromised.”

The implication settles between us—either legitimate precautionary measure by a concerned colleague, or potential security breach using local contact as unwitting infiltration.

“Approach options?” I query, deferring to her knowledge of local conventions.

“Ignoring him would seem suspicious if he’s legitimate,” she reasons. “Limited engagement from defensive position seems most prudent.”

I nod agreement. “I’ll maintain cover. You establish verification through shared knowledge. Any deviation or suspicious behavior, withdraw immediately.”

With practiced calm, Nadia moves to the front window, opening it slightly rather than exposing herself by using the door. “Mr. Harding? This is Nadia Farouk. What brings you out here?”

The man turns toward her voice, relief evident in his posture. “Dr. Farouk! Dr. Patel was worried when you didn’t check in this morning as planned. Asked if I’d drive out since I was heading this way for another job.”

Nadia’s expression reveals this arrangement was never established—either miscommunication or deliberate fabrication. “That’s very thoughtful,” she responds smoothly. “Everything’s fine here. Just catching up on research in privacy. Please thank Elena for her concern.”

Harding nods, but makes no move to leave. “She asked if you needed any supplies brought out. Said you might be staying a while.”

Another potential verification point. Nadia navigates carefully. “We’re well-stocked, thank you. The solar system working properly?”

“Like a charm since installation,” he confirms easily. “Though might want to check the backup generator before winter sets in proper. Need me to take a look while I’m here?”

The offer seems innocuous but would require access to the cabin’s exterior periphery where security systems are positioned. Nadia declines with practiced social grace. “Not necessary today. We’ll be monitoring systems regularly during our stay.”

Something in Harding’s posture shifts subtly—imperceptible to casual observation but triggering professional instincts honed through years of reading potential threats. My grip tightens on the revolver as he takes a half-step toward the cabin.

“Dr. Patel mentioned you had a friend with you,” he says, gaze shifting to scan windows. “Everything okay with them too?”

The question carries weight beyond casual inquiry. Nadia maintains remarkable composure. “Just fine, thank you. Working inside on research materials.”

“Good, good.” He retreats slightly, returning to his vehicle. “Well, I’ll let Dr. Patel know all’s well. You have my number if anything needs fixing.”

We maintain defensive positions until the truck disappears down the access road, then wait additional ten minutes to ensure he doesn’t return. Only then does Nadia release visible tension, shoulders dropping from their alert posture.

“That wasn’t right,” she says quietly. “Elena would never send someone unannounced, especially after arranging vehicle transfer specifically for privacy.”

“And he was too interested in confirming my presence,” I add, holstering the revolver but maintaining tactical awareness. “Could be innocent local curiosity, but combined with other factors...”

“We should contact Elena directly,” Nadia decides. “Verify whether she actually sent him.”

The satellite phone provides secure connection untraceable through conventional means. The conversation is brief but informative—Dr. Patel expresses shock at learning someone claimed she’d sent them, confirming our suspicions of probing surveillance.

“They’re closing in,” I observe after Nadia ends the call. “Testing our defenses, confirming location before committing resources.”

“How did they find us so quickly?” Frustration edges her voice. “We were careful, avoided digital footprint, used roundabout routes.”

I consider possibilities with detective’s methodology. “Limited options. Tracking device on vehicle? Unlikely given transfer from your colleague. Surveillance on Elena Patel? Possible but would require resources dedicated before our arrival. Most probable—they have broader surveillance network than anticipated, including local contacts in rural communities.”

“The Order’s reach extends further than we realized,” she concludes grimly. “If they’ve compromised local residents like Harding...”

“Then this location is temporarily secure but not permanently defensible.” I complete her thought. “We need to extract essential research and develop contingency relocation.”

The task transforms our research approach—no longer comprehensive exploration but targeted extraction of most critical information. Nadia focuses on binding reversal protocols while I compile tactical intelligence on Order operations and gateway mechanics.

As evening approaches, another complication emerges—the binding pulse returns, stronger than previous episode. This time the pain lingers, accompanied

by partial physical manifestation. My hands transform involuntarily, fingers elongating into clawed appendages before returning to human form.

“The lunar cycle is accelerating transition,” Nadia observes with clinical detachment belied by worried eyes. “Combined with alignment approach, the binding’s powers are intensifying.”

“Control is becoming harder,” I acknowledge, flexing fingers returned to normal proportion. “Anubis is... restless. Aware of approaching confrontation.”

“Can you communicate with him? Outside dream desert?”

“Not directly. More like... emotional impressions. Urgency. Preparation.” I struggle to articulate the alien sensations permeating my consciousness. “As if he’s gathering strength for something significant.”

Nadia considers this information thoughtfully. “The alignment affects all connecting points between realms. Anubis would be experiencing increased power alongside increased vulnerability.”

Night falls with oppressive weight, darkness beyond the cabin’s windows seeming somehow more absolute than natural conditions would suggest. We establish watch rotation as before, but both recognize sleep will be intermittent at best given confirmed external threat.

During my watch, I continue examining documents relating to Blackwood’s personal history. Photographs reveal his physical deterioration following family tragedy, then subtle restoration beginning approximately three years ago—coinciding with acquisition of specific artifacts. Medical records obtained through Nadia’s grandfather’s investigation confirm terminal diagnosis contradicted by continued survival.

The pattern suggests Blackwood already utilizes forbidden knowledge to extend his life—temporary measures awaiting permanent solution through gateway ritual. Not merely power-hungry occultist but desperate man preserving himself for reunion with dead family.

Understanding an adversary’s motivation provides tactical advantage, but also unwelcome empathy. Blackwood’s actions, however monstrous, stem from recognizable human grief—love corrupted by inability to accept loss.

Near midnight, Nadia emerges from her bedroom despite being off-watch. She appears troubled, hair loose around shoulders usually maintained with professional precision.

“Couldn’t sleep,” she explains unnecessarily, joining me at the research table. “Too many possibilities cycling through my mind.”

We work in companionable silence for a while, the cabin’s muted lighting casting soft shadows across concentrated features. The atmosphere shifts subtly from tactical partnership toward something more personal—shared purpose transcending professional boundaries.

“My grandfather wrote about the 1912 vessel,” she says eventually, indicating journal entries spread before her. “Richard Colton, Boston dockworker with Egyptian maternal lineage. Became Anubis’s avatar accidentally, similar to your situation.”

“He survived separation?” I ask, focusing on most relevant detail.

“Yes, though not without consequences. Left with partial abilities—enhanced senses, some healing capacity, occasional transformation during specific lunar phases.” She meets my gaze directly. “Not complete restoration to normal humanity, but his own life returned to him.”

The information offers first tangible hope since binding began—concrete evidence that separation remains possible, if imperfect. “What served as his anchor?”

“His wife, Margaret.” Nadia’s expression softens with historian’s appreciation for human connection across time. “Their bond provided sufficient emotional tether to maintain his humanity during separation ritual.”

The implication returns, this time impossible to ignore. Successful separation requires emotional anchor—connection beyond pragmatic alliance or professional respect. My isolation since Mike’s death has left few candidates for such a role.

Except, perhaps, the woman sitting across from me, whose gaze now holds question neither of us has voiced directly.

“Nadia...” I begin, uncertain how to navigate this territory.

“It’s a possibility we should consider,” she says with academic precision undermined by slight flush coloring her cheeks. “Pragmatically speaking, I’m the most viable candidate given circumstances. My knowledge of the ritual, combined with our established connection through these events...”

Her clinical framing barely disguises deeper implications. The air between us thickens with unacknowledged tension—not merely tactical discussion but recognition of shifting relationship beyond professional parameters.

Before I can formulate response, perimeter alert sounds again—different pattern, multiple triggers simultaneously. We snap instantly to defensive readiness, personal moment abandoned before fully acknowledged.

“Multiple approach vectors,” Nadia reports tersely, checking security monitors. “Three... no, four separate triggers at property boundary.”

“Coordinated tactical approach,” I conclude, retrieving weapons and go-bag in single fluid motion. “They’re moving now, not just surveillance.”

Camera feeds confirm assessment—dark figures moving through forest with disciplined precision, tactical equipment visible even in low-light conditions. Professional operators, not local conscripts or private security.

“Full extraction,” I decide immediately. “Research materials priority one, escape route three.”

Nadia nods agreement, already gathering most critical documents with practiced efficiency. We’ve prepared for this contingency—essential research consolidated in waterproof containers, escape route mapped through forest to secondary transportation cache.

As we complete hasty preparations, building pressure beneath my skin signals another complication—the binding pulse returning with unprecedented force. Pain doubles me over momentarily, transformation rippling visibly beneath skin without completing.

“Jake?” Nadia’s concern breaks through professional detachment.

“Something’s wrong,” I gasp, fighting to stabilize against binding’s pull. “They’re using something to trigger transformation prematurely.”

Understanding dawns immediately. “The binding dagger. They’ve brought it within range.”

The tactical implications compound our already precarious situation. Premature transformation would limit combat effectiveness while still counting toward the nine-transformation threshold.

“We need distance,” Nadia concludes, slinging research pack over shoulder. “The effect diminishes with range from the artifact.”

Decision crystallizes with tactical clarity. “You take research materials through escape route as planned. I’ll create diversion, draw pursuit away from your extraction.”

“No.” Her refusal comes without hesitation. “Separation increases vulnerability for both of us. The binding dagger’s influence makes you primary target—they want to trigger final transformation under controlled conditions.”

Her assessment is tactically sound despite emotional undertones neither of us acknowledges. Before further discussion becomes possible, glass shatters in the cabin’s rear bedroom—first breach attempt underway.

“No more time,” I state grimly, fighting another wave of transformation pressure. “Escape route one, now.”

We move with coordinated precision born of planning and shared purpose, exiting through concealed passage in cabin’s stone foundation. The opening leads to narrow tunnel terminating beyond property’s edge—another of grandfather’s paranoid precautions proving tactically prescient.

Night air hits with shocking cold as we emerge from underground passage into dense forest beyond perimeter sensors. Tactical team’s focus on cabin buys precious minutes as we navigate pre-planned route, moving quickly but quietly through undergrowth.

The forest's darkness provides cover while presenting navigation challenges. Nadia leads confidently despite limited visibility, clearly familiar with terrain from childhood experiences. I follow closely, fighting recurring waves of transformation pressure that threaten coordination and stealth.

Behind us, sudden flashes of light illuminate the trees as our pursuers realize the cabin is empty.

Chapter 14: Family Secrets

Light flashes behind us, throwing tree shadows into stark relief. The tactical team has breached the cabin. Their shouts carry through the forest—professional, controlled, reorganizing to hunt us down.

With each step, the transformation pressure builds under my skin like an itch I can't scratch. The binding dagger's influence reaches through darkness like invisible fingers, tugging at something deep inside me. My skin ripples, cat to human and back again, never settling. Each aborted change drains me like I've run a marathon.

"How far to the cache?" I manage through clenched teeth.

"Half mile," Nadia says, voice tight but controlled. "Northwest quadrant near the old stone wall."

We push through dense underbrush. Nadia moves with surprising confidence, following a path I can't see even with enhanced vision. The night should hide us, but it plays tricks instead. The shadows seem deeper than natural darkness, pulsing at the edges of my sight. The supernatural bleeds through as the binding fluctuates, reality becoming as unstable as my form.

Pain flares white-hot through my skull, dropping me to one knee. The transformation pressure spikes beyond anything I've felt before. Something warm trickles down my face—blood.

"Jake!" Nadia whispers, concern mixing with tactical awareness.

"Go," I urge, waving her forward. "Take the research. I'll delay them."

"Not happening." She loops my arm around her shoulders, her slight frame somehow supporting my weight as we stumble forward. "The dagger's effect diminishes with distance. We need another quarter mile at least."

The contact grounds me. Something about human connection anchors me against the supernatural pull. We shuffle forward in awkward tandem, her body warm against mine in the cold night air.

Light flickers ahead—flashlights cutting through trees. A second team positioned to cut us off.

"Down," I hiss, pulling us both into a shallow depression beneath fallen timber.

Twenty yards ahead, tactical operators move in practiced formation. Night vision equipment sits on their helmets. These aren't cult zealots—they're professionals, military-trained mercs who know exactly what they're doing.

"They've anticipated our route," Nadia whispers. I feel tension vibrating through her body where she's pressed against me.

"Standard containment strategy," I confirm. My cop brain still works despite my body's rebellion. "Primary team pushes from behind, secondary team creates forward blockade."

"Options?"

I assess the situation, detective instincts kicking in despite the pain radiating through my bones. "Wait for a gap in their patrol pattern, move perpendicular to their search grid."

We wait in silence, controlling our breathing despite hammering hearts. The patrol moves in sweep pattern, disciplined and thorough. But no force has unlimited personnel—there are always gaps.

"There," I indicate with a slight nod when opportunity presents itself. "Eastern path between search teams. Thirty-second window."

We move like shadows, shifting direction to cut perpendicular to our original escape route. It'll delay reaching the transportation cache, but beats the alternative of being caught.

After several minutes, Nadia halts beside a massive oak with a distinctive split trunk. "Wait," she whispers, kneeling to brush aside years of forest debris.

Beneath lies a small metal hatch, camouflaged to match the surrounding soil. She manipulates a hidden mechanism, revealing a narrow entrance to an underground space.

"Another of grandfather's precautions," she explains, already descending metal rungs embedded in the earthen wall. "Root cellar converted to storage cache. Off all property records."

I follow her into darkness, pulling the hatch closed above us. The space below is tight but functional—eight feet square with a ceiling just high enough for me to stand. When Nadia activates a battery-powered lantern, it reveals shelves of supplies lining three walls.

"Paranoia as tactical advantage," I observe, surveying the well-stocked hideaway.

"He called it reasonable precaution based on historical precedent." A hint of sad pride colors her voice. "The Order tried to eliminate him three times before finally succeeding."

The relative safety gives me a chance to take stock. The transformation pressure has eased significantly—distance from the binding dagger providing relief. I can

still hear the search patterns above, but they're muffled by earth and sound dampening built into the cellar.

"How long can we stay here?" I ask, eyeing the supplies with professional assessment.

"Days if necessary. Water, preserved food, medical supplies." She gestures to communications equipment on one shelf. "And emergency contact system if extraction becomes necessary."

"Your grandfather's contingency planning is impressive."

"He learned through generations of family experience." Nadia begins organizing our hastily gathered research materials. "The Farouk family has opposed the Order since the 1800s, when my ancestor first recognized their activities in Boston."

This catches my interest. "Family tradition of opposition?"

"More than tradition. Legacy." She extracts a leather-bound journal from a waterproof container, handling it with reverent care. "This journal represents five generations of observation, investigation, and direct intervention against the Order's activities."

The book's age shows in cracked leather and yellowed pages, but careful preservation has kept it readable. Nadia opens it carefully, revealing handwritten entries dating back nearly two centuries.

"My great-great-grandfather arrived in Boston Harbor in 1847, fleeing political upheaval in Egypt," she explains, turning brittle pages with practiced hands. "He brought family knowledge of traditional religious practices, immediately recognizing corrupted Egyptian symbolism in certain Boston elite circles."

The context adds a new dimension to our situation—not an isolated supernatural incident but the latest chapter in a generations-long conflict.

"The Order was already established by then?"

"In different form, with different name. They've reinvented themselves repeatedly through centuries, adapting to changing cultural contexts while maintaining core objectives." Her fingers trace a family tree sketched on the journal's inside cover. "My ancestors recognized the pattern and established systematic opposition—academic positions providing access to authentic knowledge, strategic recovery of artifacts, documentation of Order membership across generations."

This family crusade explains a lot—Nadia's preparation, her seemingly instinctive tactical thinking despite her academic background. This isn't merely scholarly interest but birthright responsibility, training begun in childhood.

"Your involvement isn't coincidental," I observe, connecting dots. "You sought this case specifically."

Something flickers across her expression—hesitation, perhaps regret. “Yes and no. The artifact theft demanded response regardless of personal connection. But yes, I recognized the pattern immediately. The timing, the specific items, the method of acquisition—classic Order preparation for major ritual attempt.”

“And me? Was engaging my services part of family tradition as well?”

The question carries more weight than intended, personal dimension beneath professional inquiry. Nadia meets my gaze directly, answering with characteristic straightforwardness.

“I sought you specifically, Jake, but not for reasons you might suspect.” She extracts another document from her pack—genealogical records preserved despite our hasty escape. “Your name appeared in my grandfather’s final research notes, flagged for further investigation he never completed.”

She places the document before me—a family tree extending back generations, with certain names highlighted in different colored inks. My own appears at the bottom of one branch, with a notation in margin written in Arabic script.

“What does this mean?” I ask. A strange tension builds in my gut that has nothing to do with the transformation.

“It means your connection to Anubis isn’t coincidental or random.” Her expression combines academic fascination with personal concern. “Your bloodline traces directly to the ancient Egyptian priesthood that served as Anubis’s human intermediaries.”

The revelation hits me like a physical blow, restructuring everything I thought I knew about myself. Not random victim of supernatural circumstance but predestined participant, genetic heritage preparing me for a role I never asked for.

“That’s impossible,” I object automatically. “My family is Boston Irish going back generations. Police officers and dockworkers, not Egyptian priests.”

“Your paternal lineage, yes.” Nadia indicates a different branch of the family tree. “But your maternal grandmother’s adoption from a Cairo orphanage in 1931 connects to much older lineage—Egyptian priesthood specifically compatible with Anubis’s essence.”

The details align with fragments of family history rarely discussed—my grandmother’s exotic features distinct from typical Irish stock, her occasional strange customs dismissed as personal eccentricity rather than cultural heritage.

“You’re saying Anubis targeted me deliberately? That my involvement in this case was orchestrated?”

“I believe your assignment to this case was influenced beyond coincidence,” she confirms carefully. “Whether by Anubis directly or by remaining threads of authentic priesthood lineage, I cannot say with certainty.”

The implications cascade through my mind—supernatural coincidence revealed as orchestrated destiny. My very existence as preparation for this moment, generations of bloodline maintained for specific purpose.

“My partner’s death,” I connect aloud, pieces falling into place. “Our assignment to the case that led to his murder—was that part of the preparation too? Isolating me, removing connections that might interfere with the binding?”

The question carries raw edge of a recent wound reopened. Nadia’s expression softens with genuine empathy.

“I don’t know,” she admits. “But the timing correlates with increased Order activity and astronomical preparations for the alignment. If they recognized your bloodline significance...”

“Then Mike’s death becomes tactically logical—eliminating influence that grounded me, creating vulnerability Anubis could exploit.” The conclusion carries bitter certainty. My detective’s brain applies cold analysis to personal tragedy.

Nadia lets silence hang between us before continuing. “There’s more in grandfather’s research about your family connection. Materials we didn’t recover from the cabin.”

“What specifically?”

“References to special abilities manifesting in your bloodline even before formal binding—intuitive insights, prophetic dreams, unusual connection to feline animals.” She hesitates before adding, “Your reputation for finding people who don’t want to be found... that may not be entirely due to conventional detective skills.”

The suggestion resonates uncomfortably with a lifetime of unexplained “hunches” that directed my investigations, instinctive knowledge that exceeded logical deduction. Abilities I’d attributed to training and experience suddenly revealed as inherited supernatural sensitivity.

“Anubis has been influencing me my entire life,” I realize with growing certainty. “Guiding me toward this role without direct intervention.”

“Perhaps,” Nadia acknowledges. “Though influence may have been indirect—genetic predisposition rather than active manipulation.”

This distinction offers cold comfort against the revelation of autonomy compromised from birth. Regardless of mechanism, my life’s trajectory appears increasingly predetermined, choices illusory within parameters established by bloodline and divine agenda.

“What else did your grandfather discover about the gateway?” I redirect focus to tactical rather than existential concerns. “The Order’s objective beyond binding Anubis?”

Nadia shifts into academic mode, extracting additional documents from our salvaged research materials. “The gateway isn’t merely metaphorical passage between life and death as commonly interpreted in Egyptian mythology,” she explains. “It’s literal dimensional barrier between ordered reality and chaotic outer realms.”

She spreads several translation fragments across the cellar’s small table. “These texts describe Anubis’s original purpose—not simply psychopomp guiding souls, but guardian preventing chaos entities from entering material world.”

“Chaos entities?”

“Non-physical beings that exist beyond conventional dimensional boundaries. Ancient Egyptians recognized their nature, creating symbolic systems to describe entities beyond human comprehension.” Her expression carries scholar’s fascination tempered by practical concern. “Modern theoretical physics suggests similar concepts—higher-dimensional beings whose full nature cannot be perceived within our limited sensory framework.”

“And the Order wants to breach this gateway,” I connect with growing apprehension. “Allow these entities access to physical world.”

“Yes, though I believe their understanding is fundamentally flawed.” Her finger traces hieroglyphs on a papyrus fragment. “They perceive chaos entities as potential source of power—beings that can bestow immortality, resurrection, godlike abilities.”

“But the reality is different?”

“According to authentic texts, chaos entities desire physical embodiment precisely because they lack it. They don’t grant power so much as consume physical vessels, experiencing material existence through appropriated forms.” Her expression grows grave. “If successfully manifested, they would essentially possess humans rather than empower them.”

The true scope of threat crystallizes—not merely cult seeking supernatural power but unwitting pawns enabling cosmic invasion, catastrophic consequence of humanity’s eternal weakness for promised shortcuts to power and immortality.

“And Blackwood? Does he understand what he’s actually attempting?”

“I believe his grief has blinded him to reality,” Nadia suggests. “The entities can access memories, present themselves as deceased loved ones. Blackwood likely believes he’s working toward reunion with his family when he’s actually creating conditions for their perversion.”

This perspective shifts my understanding of our opponent—not merely power-hungry occultist but tragic figure manipulated through grief, dangerous precisely because his motivations transcend rational self-interest.

“And Anubis’s role in all this?” I press, returning to central question. “If he’s gateway guardian, why the elaborate binding process? Why not simply prevent the breach directly?”

Nadia’s expression reveals uncertainty equal to my own. “Grandfather’s research suggests Anubis’s power diminished as worship declined. Gods require belief to maintain influence in physical realm—not completely dependent on it, but significantly empowered by human recognition.”

“So he needs human vessel to manifest sufficient power for gateway defense,” I conclude. “Hence the binding to my bloodline—genetically compatible host providing physical anchor in material world.”

“Yes, though the binding should be mutual partnership rather than servitude. The corrupted ritual attempted by the Order sought to enslave Anubis’s essence, while authentic binding creates balanced symbiosis—human form enhanced by divine power, divine entity anchored through human connection.”

This distinction resonates with my evolving relationship to Anubis’s presence—initial resentment of forced servitude gradually shifting toward recognition of mutual dependency and shared purpose.

“If the Order completes their ritual—” I begin.

“Global catastrophe,” Nadia finishes grimly. “Not merely supernatural threat but fundamental disruption of reality’s underlying structure. Physics itself would warp in proximity to breach points.”

The stakes reframe our situation entirely—not merely personal survival or supernatural curiosity but existential defense against cosmic threat beyond conventional comprehension. Personal concerns about bloodline manipulation and predetermined fate seem suddenly trivial against backdrop of potential universal calamity.

Above us, sounds of tactical search gradually diminish as teams extend perimeter farther from our hidden location. The immediate threat recedes while larger danger looms with approaching astronomical alignment.

“How much time remains?” I ask, refocusing on practical timeline.

“Sixteen days until eclipse alignment,” Nadia calculates. “But preparations will intensify as date approaches. The Order likely accelerates timeline after losing track of us.”

“They still need me for final catalyst,” I observe. “Without ninth transformation under controlled conditions, ritual remains incomplete.”

“Which makes you their primary objective,” she confirms. “Every resource focused on locating and capturing you before alignment.”

The tactical situation clarifies with detective’s analytical precision—I represent

both essential component and potential saboteur, my very existence simultaneously threat and opportunity to Order's objectives.

As this understanding solidifies, another wave of transformation pressure builds within—different from binding dagger's forced manipulation but equally powerful. The desert calls with unmistakable summons, Anubis demanding communication through dream realm connection.

"It's happening again," I inform Nadia, recognizing approaching transition. "Anubis calls through dream connection. Not physical transformation, but consciousness shift."

She moves immediately to prepare space, clearing small area where I can lie without injury during transitional state. "This might be opportunity," she suggests, helping me to designated position. "Direct communication to confirm what we've learned, assess his true agenda."

"My thoughts exactly," I agree, already feeling consciousness beginning to separate from physical form. "Time for answers beyond cryptic guidance."

"I'll maintain watch," she promises, supporting my head as I settle into position. "Return with what you learn."

The desert rises around me before I can respond—consciousness slipping between worlds with practiced ease, physical discomfort replaced by familiar weightlessness of transition.

Sand stretches to infinity beneath alien stars, the dream realm manifesting with increased clarity and detail compared to previous visits. The landscape appears more solid, boundaries between worlds thinning as alignment approaches and binding strengthens.

Anubis awaits at center of vast ceremonial circle etched in sand—massive feline form more clearly defined than previous manifestations. His form shifts subtly as I approach, sometimes suggesting jackal features, sometimes human proportions beneath midnight fur, eyes alone remaining constant—golden eclipse surrounded by darkness.

"Your understanding grows, Servant of Anubis," he intones, voice resonating directly through consciousness rather than physical sound. "You begin to comprehend true nature of our binding."

"And true nature of your manipulation," I respond, newfound confidence fueled by recent revelations. "My bloodline, my entire existence—preparation for this role without my knowledge or consent."

The great cat's expression remains inscrutable, though subtle shifts in posture suggest something like acknowledgment. "Would understanding have changed outcome? Would foreknowledge of destiny have altered your path?"

"That choice belonged to me," I insist, standing my ground despite intimidating presence. "Not to you or my ancestors or genetic predestination."

“Yet here you stand,” Anubis observes with infuriating calm. “Detective seeking truth, protector serving justice—roles chosen freely that led inevitably to this moment. Destiny is not absence of choice but culmination of choices aligned with deeper nature.”

The philosophical deflection masks evasion of direct responsibility. I press forward with more specific accusation.

“My partner’s death—was that part of your preparation? Isolating me to make me vulnerable to binding?”

Something shifts in the deity’s golden gaze—emotion not immediately identifiable in non-human expression. “I did not cause your partner’s death,” he states with surprising directness. “That tragedy belongs to the Order’s machinations alone. They recognized your bloodline potential before I actively sought you.”

The denial carries ring of truth despite ingrained skepticism. “But you used that tragedy,” I press. “Leveraged my isolation and guilt to ensure I’d accept binding rather than choose dissolution.”

“I presented true choice between existing options,” Anubis counters. “That limited options remained is consequence of mortal fragility, not divine manipulation.”

The semantic distinction does little to dispel sense of cosmic injustice, but tactical priorities supersede existential grievance. I redirect to central concern.

“The gateway—is it truly dimensional barrier preventing chaos entities from entering physical reality?”

“Your Egyptologist explains accurately, if simplistically,” Anubis acknowledges. “The boundary separates ordered existence from primordial chaos that preceded creation and continues beyond its borders.”

“And your role as guardian?”

“My purpose since first consciousness—maintaining separation between realms, ensuring chaos remains unconsummated potential rather than manifest reality.” His form grows momentarily larger, power radiating from midnight fur. “Before human civilization, before worship gave me name and form, this purpose defined my existence.”

“Then why binding with human vessel? Why not defend gateway directly?”

The deity’s posture shifts subtly, suggestion of tension or perhaps reluctance to reveal full truth. “Divine essence requires physical anchor in material realm,” he explains, echoing Nadia’s earlier theory. “As belief waned, direct manifestation became impossible. Human vessel provides necessary connection to physical world.”

“And my bloodline specifically?”

“Genetic compatibility developed through generations of service,” Anubis confirms. “Ancient priesthood modified through ritual and selective continuation. Your existence represents culmination of centuries of preparation.”

The explanation aligns with Nadia’s research while leaving emotional impact unaddressed—the fundamental violation of being born for specific purpose without knowledge or consent, entire genetic lineage manipulated toward predetermined end.

“The Order seeks to bind you as slave rather than partner,” I observe, testing theoretical distinction between authentic and corrupted ritual. “Their gateway breach serves chaos entities rather than humanity.”

“Correct. They believe they will command forces beyond comprehension, receiving immortality and power as reward.” Something like grim amusement flickers in eclipse eyes. “Instead, they would become first vessels consumed by entities hungering for physical experience after eons of formless existence.”

“And Blackwood? Does he understand what he actually pursues?”

“Maxwell Blackwood perceives fragmentary truth through lens of overwhelming grief,” Anubis states with unexpected insight into human emotion. “He seeks reunion with family already beyond mortal reach. Chaos entities exploit this desire, reflecting memories as false promise.”

The assessment matches Nadia’s theory—Blackwood as tragic figure manipulated through grief rather than power-hungry occultist. This perspective offers potential tactical advantage, possible vulnerability in otherwise formidable opponent.

“What happens when binding completes?” I ask, addressing personal fate directly. “After ninth transformation, what becomes of Jake Harlow?”

The question hangs between us, desert wind suddenly still as if reality itself awaits answer. Anubis’s posture shifts again, something almost resembling discomfort rippling through powerful form.

“The binding progresses beyond current conditions,” he states carefully. “Human and divine aspects integrate more completely, creating unified consciousness rather than separate entities sharing single form.”

“Integration or absorption?” I press, detecting deliberate vagueness. “Do I continue as distinct consciousness or become subsumed within your essence?”

“Distinction without meaningful difference,” Anubis deflects again. “Separate consciousness persists but transformed beyond current limitations. Neither fully human nor wholly divine, but new existence transcending previous categories.”

The non-answer carries ominous implications—loss of self disguised as spiritual evolution, individual identity sacrificed for cosmic necessity. Before I can challenge further, the dream realm shifts around us, sand rippling like water disturbed by unseen force.

“Our time grows short,” Anubis announces, gaze shifting to horizon where darkness gathers unnaturally. “The alignment approaches. The barrier thins. Decision points near.”

“What decision? I’ve already accepted binding.”

“Initial acceptance enabled preliminary connection,” the deity clarifies. “Complete integration requires deeper consent—willing surrender rather than reluctant agreement.”

The distinction seems manipulatively convenient—additional commitment required beyond original bargain, moving goalposts once path is already chosen.

“And if I refuse this ‘deeper consent’?”

“Then binding remains incomplete,” Anubis states with candid directness. “Sufficient perhaps to survive, insufficient to properly seal gateway against determined breach.”

The implicit threat hangs between us—cooperate fully or doom world to chaos, choice that offers no real alternative. Before I can respond, darkness at horizon advances with unnatural speed, dream realm destabilizing as connection weakens.

“Consider carefully, Servant of Anubis,” the deity’s voice fades as reality dissolves around us. “Not merely your fate but existence itself hangs in balance. We will speak again when next the moon hides her face.”

The desert vanishes like mist beneath rising sun, consciousness lurching back toward physical form with disorienting suddenness. I awaken to Nadia’s concerned face hovering above mine, her hand cool against my forehead.

“Jake? Are you alright?”

I blink, reorienting to underground shelter’s close confines after desert’s infinite expanse. “Define alright,” I manage, voice rough with transition’s lingering effects.

“What happened? What did you learn?”

I sit up slowly, mind racing to organize revelations alongside implications for immediate tactical situation. “Confirmation mostly. Gateway is dimensional barrier. Chaos entities seek physical manifestation. The Order’s ritual would breach protective boundary.”

“And Anubis’s true agenda?”

The question strikes central uncertainty—trustworthy guardian or manipulative entity pursuing self-preservation at any cost? The dream conversation provided answers that simultaneously clarified and obscured truth.

“Complicated,” I admit, meeting her gaze directly. “He confirms guardian role and necessity of human vessel for physical manifestation. But the binding’s

ultimate nature remains deliberately vague—integration that seems suspiciously like absorption.”

Nadia’s expression reflects scholarly assessment combined with personal concern. “The ancient texts describe various forms of divine-human partnership,” she notes. “Some temporary, others permanent. Some maintaining distinct consciousnesses, others merging entirely.”

“Convenient ambiguity,” I observe dryly. “Did your grandfather’s research indicate which form applies to Anubis specifically?”

“Inconclusive evidence,” she admits reluctantly. “The priesthood texts describe primary binding as ‘union of separate becoming unified whole,’ but interpretation remains disputed among scholars.”

The academic uncertainty offers little comfort against prospect of identity dissolution, self absorbed into divine essence regardless of cosmic necessity. Yet larger threat remains indisputable—gateway breach catastrophic regardless of personal concerns about binding’s nature.

“Sixteen days,” I remind us both, refocusing on immediate timeline. “Regardless of ultimate outcome, we need to prevent the Order’s ritual completion.”

Nadia nods agreement, returning to practical concerns from philosophical uncertainty. “We need secure location to continue research, develop countermeasures. This shelter provides temporary safety but lacks necessary resources for extended preparation.”

“Options?” I query, trusting her knowledge of available alternatives.

“Limited but viable. Colleague in Cambridge maintains private research facility with enhanced security. Owes grandfather significant debt—professional and personal.” Her expression suggests story behind that debt remains significant. “We can contact through emergency system, arrange extraction without digital footprint.”

The plan offers logical next step—continue necessary research while maintaining strategic position against the Order’s pursuit. Yet underlying questions remain about Anubis’s true nature and binding’s ultimate consequence—partnership or absorption, cooperation or cosmic consumption.

Tactical necessity dictates moving forward despite these uncertainties, but resolution must eventually come. The ninth transformation approaches with lunar inevitability, and with it final determination of what truly becomes of Jake Harlow, detective-turned-divine-vessel whose very existence was engineered across generations for cosmic purpose beyond human comprehension.

For now, survival takes precedence. Questions of identity and autonomy must wait while physical threat remains immediate. But understanding grows with each revelation—knowledge as both weapon and burden, illuminating path forward while casting shadows across fundamental assumptions about choice and

destiny.

The dream desert awaits my return, and with it confrontation that cannot indefinitely postpone. Anubis offers protection against cosmic threat while representing existential question about nature of self and soul. Partnership or absorption, cooperation or consumption—the distinction may ultimately prove semantic rather than substantial, but choice remains mine to make.

For now.

Chapter 15: Truth in the Sand

The desert materializes with startling clarity. Not the hazy dreamscape of my previous visits, but something with real physical presence. Each grain of sand beneath my feet has distinct texture. The air carries the scent of mineral dust and ancient stone. Stars crowd an impossible sky in patterns no earthbound astronomer has mapped.

I stand at the edge of a vast ceremonial circle carved into the sand with unnatural precision. At its center waits Anubis, his massive feline form shifting between states—sometimes pure cat, sometimes suggesting jackal features, occasionally hinting at human proportions beneath that midnight fur. Only his eyes remain constant—twin solar eclipses ringed in gold, watching me with intelligence beyond human comprehension.

Our previous conversation ended with a convenient disruption, key questions deliberately unanswered. This time, I approach with new resolve, armed with knowledge from Nadia's research and my own growing understanding.

"No more evasions," I say, my voice carrying across the endless expanse. "No more half-truths or philosophical deflections. I deserve the truth about what you've done to me—what you're still doing."

The great cat's posture shifts slightly, something like resignation rippling through his powerful form. "You have been speaking with the Egyptologist about your bloodline."

"About your centuries of manipulation," I correct sharply. "Genetic engineering through generations, preparing a vessel for your convenience without anyone's knowledge or consent."

"A simplistic view of complex necessity," Anubis responds, his voice resonating directly in my mind. "Would you prefer chaos entities breaching reality because a divine guardian lacked physical anchor in the material world?"

"I'd prefer honesty about your methods," I counter, circling to maintain eye contact as he paces within the ceremonial boundary. "My entire existence engineered toward a predetermined purpose without my knowledge—my partner's

death conveniently removing an emotional anchor that might have prevented me from accepting the binding.”

Anubis stops abruptly, eclipse eyes narrowing. “I have already told you the truth about your partner’s death. That tragedy belongs to the Order alone. They recognized your bloodline potential before I actively sought you.”

“But you didn’t prevent it,” I press, giving voice to the bitter realization that’s been building since Nadia’s revelations. “You could have intervened. You’ve been watching my bloodline for generations—you knew the Order’s plans for me. You let Mike die because his death served your purpose.”

The accusation hangs heavy between us, the desert air suddenly still as if reality itself awaits his response. For the first time since our initial encounter, Anubis’s divine composure cracks slightly, something recognizable as regret flickering across his inhuman features.

“Intervention carries consequences beyond immediate circumstance,” he finally answers, his voice uncharacteristically subdued. “Divine action in the human realm creates ripples through reality’s fabric—unpredictable outcomes, unintended effects. The Order’s machinations were permitted to unfold within certain parameters while maintaining fundamental balance.”

“Balance,” I repeat bitterly. “My partner’s life against your cosmic equations. My autonomy against your need for a physical vessel. Convenient calculus from your perspective.”

“Not convenience. Necessity.” Anubis moves closer, his massive form radiating power that makes the air feel heavier. “You perceive events through a human timeframe, individual perspective. I must consider consequences across centuries, dimensions, realities.”

“And that justifies everything? Manipulating bloodlines, allowing deaths, engineering my entire existence toward servitude?”

“Not servitude,” the deity corrects with sudden intensity. “Partnership. There is a fundamental difference your anger prevents you from seeing.”

“Explain the difference,” I challenge. “Because from where I stand, I’ve been manipulated into a binding that’s consuming my humanity piece by piece. Each transformation leaves less of Jake Harlow behind. How is that partnership rather than progressive possession?”

The question strikes something vital—Anubis’s form briefly flickers like a shadow in uncertain light, suggesting vulnerability beneath his divine presence. When he responds, his tone carries unexpected candor.

“The binding’s nature follows the pattern established by both participants,” he explains. “Resistance creates opposition, fostering separation between human and divine aspects. Willing integration allows balanced coexistence.”

“Integration or absorption?” I press, detecting familiar deflection. “Do I continue as a distinct consciousness or become subsumed within your essence? The ninth transformation approaches—what remains of Jake Harlow afterward?”

Anubis settles into a seated position, a surprisingly domestic gesture for a cosmic entity. “The question contains a false premise,” he states with frustrating calm. “You presume a distinct boundary between Jake Harlow and Anubis that reality does not support.”

“Meaning?”

“Your bloodline carries my essence already—diluted through generations but fundamentally present.” The revelation lands with physical impact, the desert floor seeming to shift beneath my feet. “Your detective instincts, your perception abilities, your affinity for liminal spaces—these were not coincidental talents but expressions of genetic heritage.”

The implication restructures my understanding of my entire existence—not merely groomed for my current role but partially divine from birth, unknowingly expressing supernatural heritage through seemingly natural abilities.

“So I never had a choice,” I conclude bitterly. “Predetermined from conception.”

“Again you misinterpret,” Anubis counters with a trace of frustration. “Genetic potential shaped possibilities but determined nothing. Many with similar bloodlines live entirely conventional lives, divine heritage dormant or expressed in minimal fashion. Your choices—becoming a detective, pursuing justice, sacrificing safety for truth—activated potential that might otherwise have remained latent.”

This perspective offers cold comfort against a lifetime of unknowing preparation, yet carries an undeniable ring of truth. My career path, investigative methods, even personal relationships reflect patterns now recognizable as expressions of a deeper nature rather than coincidental development.

“And the ninth transformation?” I redirect to my central concern. “When the binding completes, what becomes of the individual consciousness I recognize as self?”

The deity’s expression shifts subtly, something almost resembling discomfort rippling through his powerful form. “Neither complete absorption nor perfect preservation,” he admits with unexpected directness. “Transformation creates a new consciousness incorporating elements of both—neither solely Jake Harlow nor purely Anubis, but a unified entity transcending previous limitations.”

“That sounds suspiciously like diplomatic language for my consciousness being consumed,” I observe dryly.

“Human language lacks vocabulary for consciousness transformation without destruction,” Anubis responds, frustration evident in rippling muscles beneath midnight fur. “Consider metaphor—”

“No more metaphors,” I interrupt sharply. “Concrete reality. After the ninth transformation, will the consciousness experiencing existence recognize itself as essentially continuous with Jake Harlow’s current identity?”

The direct question forces an equally direct response. “Yes,” Anubis acknowledges after brief hesitation. “Core identity persists with expanded awareness and capabilities. Memories, values, defining characteristics remain intact though contextualized within broader perspective.”

The answer provides the first genuine reassurance since the binding began—continuity of self preserved despite the transformation’s extent. Not complete dissolution but evolution beyond current limitations, expansion rather than erasure.

“And could this binding be reversed?” I press further. “If the gateway threat is neutralized, could I return to fully human existence?”

Something shifts in Anubis’s posture—tension or perhaps reluctance to address the possibility. “Theoretically possible but practically unprecedented,” he finally admits. “The binding, once completed through ninth transformation, creates permanent change to essence rather than temporary state. Reversal would require—” He pauses, searching for adequate explanation. “Sacrifice of significant portions of both consciousnesses. Neither would emerge intact from separation.”

This confirms what I’ve increasingly suspected—no returning to my previous existence regardless of cosmic outcome. The binding’s progression represents a one-way transformation, options narrowing with each step toward completion.

“Let’s address the Order directly,” I redirect, accepting temporary tactical necessity over existential concerns. “Their ritual during eclipse—what exactly happens if they succeed?”

The deity’s form expands slightly, power radiating from midnight fur as the subject shifts to immediate threat. “The gateway between ordered reality and chaotic realm fractures permanently,” he explains, the desert landscape around us rippling with visualization of consequence. “Initial breach appears localized—perhaps a few city blocks experiencing reality distortion.”

The sand between us shifts, forming a miniature representation of Boston Harbor with the warehouse district highlighted in glowing outline. Within this boundary, tiny structures warp and twist in impossible configurations, suggestion of writhing forms moving between them.

“Chaos entities enter physical world through breach point,” Anubis continues as the miniature scenario plays out before us. “First manifestations occur within human hosts present at ritual site—Order members experiencing what they believe is ascension to godhood.”

The sand figures representing cultists contort in silent agony, forms elongating and reshaping into grotesque approximations of human shape—still recognizable

but fundamentally wrong in proportion and movement.

“Then expansion begins,” Anubis states grimly as the effect spreads beyond the initial boundary, tiny Boston buildings warping outward in concentric waves of distortion. “Reality’s fundamental structure unravels as chaos physics overwrite conventional parameters. Physical laws become suggestion rather than requirement.”

The miniature city writhes now, buildings flowing like liquid while maintaining solid properties, colors visible in sand that shouldn’t exist in natural spectrum. Roads curve upward into impossible loops, water from harbor climbing vertically against gravity.

“How quickly?” I ask, professional detachment maintaining focus despite the horrific visualization.

“Variable progression depending on resistance encountered,” Anubis responds clinically. “Perhaps one human week before continent-scale disruption. One month before global effect. Time itself becomes inconsistent within affected zones—experienced differently depending on proximity to breach points.”

The sand model expands, showing North America with spreading darkness representing reality distortion. Tiny lights wink out in spreading pattern, suggesting population centers going dark as chaos spreads.

“And consciousness? Human minds within affected areas?”

Anubis dispels the sand visualization with a graceful paw movement, returning the desert to its natural state. “Initial exposure produces madness by conventional definition—perception unable to process reality operating on incompatible principles. Extended exposure results in consciousness fragmentation as foundational concepts of existence dissolve.”

“And Blackwood? Does he understand what he’s actually pursuing?” The question carries professional curiosity about our opponent’s true motivation beyond superficial power hunger.

“Maxwell Blackwood perceives the chaotic realm as afterlife,” Anubis explains with surprising insight into human psychology. “His research into ancient Egyptian concepts created a fundamental misunderstanding—he believes the ritual will open a pathway to a field of reeds where his family awaits reunion.”

This motivation transforms my understanding of our opponent—not power-mad occultist but grieving husband and father pursuing desperate hope of reunion regardless of cost. Dangerous precisely because rational self-interest no longer governs his decisions, willing to destroy the world for an illusory chance at restoring his lost family.

“The chaos entities exploit this belief,” Anubis continues. “They access his memories, presenting in dreams as wife and daughter beckoning from beyond the

gateway. He interprets their interest as loving invitation rather than predatory manipulation.”

“Can he be convinced otherwise?” I ask, tactical mind already considering potential approaches to neutralizing the threat through revelation rather than confrontation.

“Uncertain,” Anubis admits. “His perception is filtered through overwhelming grief and progressive mental deterioration from repeated contact with chaos entities. Reality beneath delusion may no longer be accessible to his consciousness.”

The tactical assessment suggests direct confrontation more likely than conversion, yet understanding Blackwood’s true motivation provides potential vulnerability to exploit. A man driven by love rather than power might respond to approaches impossible with a purely self-interested opponent.

“Do the Order members understand what they’re actually doing?” I continue, mapping potential opposition beyond Blackwood himself.

“Varied comprehension across hierarchy,” Anubis explains. “Inner circle believes they achieve immortality through ritual, transcending human limitations. Most remain unaware of chaos entities’ true nature, perceiving them as Egyptian deities in traditional forms offering partnership.”

“And my former captain?” The question carries personal edge beyond tactical consideration.

“Sullivan perceives a portion of truth,” Anubis acknowledges. “Terminal illness creates desperation overriding professional integrity. He recognized potential consequences but convinced himself control mechanisms would prevent worst outcomes.”

This assessment aligns with my experience of the man—pragmatic rationalist who would reject mystical nonsense under normal circumstances. Only facing imminent death would such a mind accept supernatural bargain despite evident risks.

“The binding dagger,” I redirect to practical concerns. “The Order used it during warehouse ritual, causing my death. Nadia’s research indicates it’s central to both their corrupted ritual and authentic binding process.”

“Correct,” Anubis confirms. “The dagger serves as focus point for transformation energy—creation or severance of connections between realms. In proper ritual, it facilitates willing transition. In corrupted form, it forces unwilling submission.”

“And its effect on me now? The binding fluctuates when the dagger is nearby—transformation becomes unstable, control difficult.”

“The dagger recognizes incomplete binding,” Anubis explains. “It seeks to complete process according to holder’s intent. In Order’s possession, it attempts to

sever our connection and redirect my essence to their chosen vessel.”

“Can it succeed?” The question addresses immediate tactical vulnerability.

“Only with ninth transformation incomplete,” Anubis states with reasonable certainty. “After final binding, our connection becomes resistant to external manipulation. Until then, proximity to dagger creates genuine risk.”

The tactical understanding clarifies immediate priorities—avoid the dagger until binding completes while preventing Order from using it to breach gateway. Conflicting necessities creating strategic complexity.

I pace the ceremonial circle’s edge, processing implications for upcoming confrontation. “The eclipse alignment—sixteen days from now. Is timing essential or convenient for ritual completion?”

“Essential,” Anubis confirms. “Celestial alignment thins barrier between realms naturally, reducing energy required for breach. The Order has prepared secondary components but requires specific astronomical configuration for sufficient power.”

“So preventing ritual completion during eclipse window effectively neutralizes immediate threat,” I conclude, professional focus identifying tactical priority beyond philosophical concerns.

“Correct, though materials remain dangerous in improper hands. Future alignments would present subsequent opportunities.”

This timeframe establishes clear mission parameters—prevent ritual completion during coming eclipse, neutralize key components to prevent future attempts, address Blackwood and inner circle to disrupt Order’s operational capability.

As strategic understanding clarifies, the desert landscape around us shimmers slightly, reality rippling as if viewed through heat waves. The manifestation suggests connection between realms thinning as astronomical alignment approaches—dream desert and physical world moving closer together.

“Our time grows short,” Anubis observes, attention shifting toward horizon where darkness gathers with unnatural density. “Your physical form requires attention—the transformation stress taxes physiological resources beyond sustainable limits.”

The reminder triggers sudden awareness of bodily sensations previously suppressed by dream state—exhaustion, hunger, dehydration accumulating in physical form while consciousness communes in desert realm.

“Before I return—concrete answers about the binding’s progression,” I demand, recognizing closing window for direct communication. “The transformation frequency increases as ninth approach. What triggers final change?”

“Willing acceptance during proper celestial alignment,” Anubis states with unusual directness. “The ninth transformation requires conscious choice rather

than circumstantial necessity. Without willing integration, binding remains incomplete—functional but vulnerable.”

“And that choice lies entirely with me?” I press, seeking confirmation of agency within seemingly predetermined process.

“As much as any choice exists within cosmic necessity,” Anubis acknowledges with philosophical qualification that nonetheless confirms fundamental truth—the final step remains mine to take or reject despite consequences either direction.

This understanding provides cold comfort against backdrop of manipulation spanning generations, yet establishes critical boundary between predestination and free will. Bloodline created potential, circumstances created opportunity, but final determination remains personal choice rather than inescapable destiny.

The darkness at horizon advances now with unnatural speed, dream realm destabilizing as connection weakens. Anubis’s form begins losing definition at edges, midnight fur blurring into surrounding shadows.

“Maintain physical well-being,” the deity advises as reality dissolves around us. “The binding taxes resources beyond normal human parameters. Nourishment, rest, preparation essential for coming confrontation.”

“One final question,” I persist as desert fades around me. “Truth without evasion—did you orchestrate events leading to my death at the warehouse? Was my involvement with Nadia’s case your design rather than coincidence?”

The eclipse eyes hold mine as dream realm collapses, final answer carrying crystalline clarity through dissolution: “I influenced circumstances but not outcomes. The case presented itself through natural channels. Your decisions remained your own throughout. The Order’s actions forced adaptation rather than fulfilled predetermined plan.”

The answer neither fully exonerates nor condemns—divine influence without absolute control, guidance without compulsion. Before I can demand further clarification, consciousness snaps back to physical reality with disorienting abruptness.

I awaken in the underground shelter, discomfort immediate and intense. My muscles are rigid from extended immobility, throat parched to burning dryness, stomach hollow with hunger verging on nausea. Nadia leans over me, concern evident in her expression as she supports my head, helping me sip water from metal canteen.

“Eight hours,” she informs before I can ask, helping me sit upright against shelter wall. “Longest communication period yet. Your vital signs fluctuated erratically throughout—metabolic indicators suggesting extreme physical stress.”

The information confirms Anubis’s warning about physical toll—dream communication consuming resources at accelerated rate despite body’s apparent rest-

fulness. I accept food bar she offers, protein and calories temporarily overriding unappetizing texture and bland taste.

“What did you learn?” she asks, clinical observation balancing personal concern as she monitors my recovery.

I organize revelations into coherent summary while basic needs receive attention—water, food, physical movement restoring circulation to stiffened limbs. “Confirmation mostly, with concerning elaborations,” I begin, sharing technical details first. “Gateway breach would cause progressive reality distortion—physical laws breaking down as chaos entities manifest through human hosts.”

“Consistent with grandfather’s theoretical models,” she confirms, academic precision providing framework for supernatural threat assessment. “Did Anubis confirm eclipse timing as critical component?”

“Essential rather than convenient,” I clarify. “Celestial alignment thins barriers naturally, making breach possible with available resources. Without alignment, power requirements exceed cult capabilities.”

She nods, making notes in journal with practiced efficiency. “That gives us defined prevention window. Their ritual must be disrupted during eclipse itself—before, after, or during process.”

“Preferably before initiating sequence,” I add, professional assessment favoring preemptive neutralization over crisis intervention. “Once begun, chaotic elements may manifest partially regardless of completion.”

“And Blackwood’s motivation? Anubis confirmed grandfather’s theory about grief rather than power?”

“Fully confirmed. He believes ritual creates passage to afterlife realm where family awaits reunion.” I relay Anubis’s psychological assessment, watching her process implications for opposition strategy.

“That presents both vulnerability and danger,” she observes thoughtfully. “Grief-driven obsession creates irrational persistence beyond self-preservation, but also potential pressure point if confronted with reality of what he’s actually contacting.”

“If his perception remains capable of recognizing reality,” I qualify, remembering Anubis’s uncertainty about Blackwood’s mental deterioration. “Extended contact with chaos entities has apparently affected his cognition fundamentally.”

Her expression shifts to personal concern rather than tactical analysis. “And the binding? Did Anubis provide clarity about ninth transformation consequences?”

This question addresses the existential rather than tactical dimension, touching deeper anxieties about identity and autonomy. I choose honesty despite uncertainty, sharing both reassurance and lingering concerns.

“Partial clarity,” I acknowledge. “The final transformation creates consciousness neither purely human nor wholly divine—integration rather than absorption, according to his explanation. Core identity and memories persist, contextualized within expanded awareness.”

“You sound skeptical,” she observes perceptively.

“Healthy skepticism seems appropriate when discussing consciousness transformation with entity who benefits from cooperation,” I respond dryly. “But he provided greater transparency than previous conversations. The binding’s completion requires my willing participation during proper alignment—choice remains mine despite cosmic pressure.”

This confirmation of agency within seemingly predetermined process provides visible relief in her expression. “That’s significant. Grandfather’s research suggested authentic binding required willing participation rather than compulsion—fundamental distinction from the Order’s corrupted version.”

“Willing participation under duress of cosmic necessity,” I qualify, unwilling to completely accept benign interpretation. “Choice between potential identity dissolution and universal catastrophe hardly constitutes free will by normal standards.”

“Yet still choice,” she counters gently. “And confirmation that core identity persists represents significant reassurance compared to alternatives.”

Her perspective offers rational counterweight to emotional resistance, acknowledging manipulation while recognizing practical necessity within current circumstances. The binding proceeds regardless of philosophical objections, ninth transformation approaching with lunar inevitability.

“He confirmed my bloodline carries divine essence already,” I add, sharing revelation that still reverberates through understanding of personal history. “Diluted through generations but fundamentally present in genetic makeup. My detective abilities, perception skills—partial expression of supernatural heritage rather than purely human talent.”

Nadia absorbs this with scholarly interest tempered by personal connection. “That aligns with grandfather’s theories about certain bloodlines serving as vessel potentials—not merely compatible with divine essence but already containing trace elements through ancestral connection.”

“Meaning I was never fully human to begin with,” I conclude with complex emotion underlying factual assessment. “The transformation merely amplifies existing supernatural component rather than introducing entirely foreign essence.”

“I wouldn’t interpret it that way,” she objects thoughtfully. “Human encompasses broader spectrum than conventional understanding suggests. Your ancestry doesn’t make you less human—it expands definition of what humanity potentially includes.”

The perspective offers philosophical reframing of troubling revelation, yet existential questions remain unanswered beneath practical concerns. Identity itself becomes uncertain category when fundamental assumptions about self dissolve beneath supernatural reality.

For now, tactical necessities take precedence over metaphysical uncertainties. I force attention back to immediate situation, physical discomfort providing grounding in material reality despite cosmic revelations.

“How long can we remain here safely?” I ask, returning to security assessment.

“Another twelve hours maximum,” she calculates. “The tactical teams will eventually expand search parameters to include this area, despite its absence from property records. We should initiate contact with Cambridge resource within next four hours to arrange extraction.”

The timeline establishes clear parameters for next phase—recovery, planning, communication with outside resource, preparation for relocation. Personal concerns about identity and divine manipulation must temporarily yield to practical survival requirements.

As I move to stand, testing physical recovery, another wave of transformation pressure builds within—not Anubis’s direct summons but internal shift triggered by extended dream communication. My vision blurs slightly, senses sharpening as partial transformation begins without conscious initiation.

“It’s happening again,” I warn Nadia, recognizing symptoms from previous experiences. “Transformation triggering automatically—stress response to extended communication.”

She moves immediately to assist, practical support without fear or hesitation despite supernatural manifestation. “Can you control direction?” she asks, helping me to clear area where transformation can progress without spatial constraints.

“Partial control only,” I manage through teeth clenched against bone-deep sensation of structural realignment. “Cat form seems path of least resistance—requires less energy than maintaining human configuration.”

“Then allow it,” she advises with calm pragmatism. “Conservation of resources takes priority over form maintenance. I can continue preparations while you recover in alternative state.”

The permission releases final resistance, transformation flowing more naturally without conscious opposition. The process still carries discomfort but proceeds with increasing efficiency as experience accumulates—body learning pattern of reconfiguration that once seemed impossible violation of physical law.

Vision shifts spectrum as pupils expand, scents intensifying to overwhelming information flood, sound separating into distinct categories organized by potential relevance. The shelter’s dimensions expand from changed perspective,

human-sized space becoming cavernous environment for feline form.

Nadia's voice reaches me through transformation disorientation, tone conveying calming influence despite altered auditory processing. "Rest while you can," she suggests, moving around shelter with practiced efficiency despite my changed form. "Allow physical recovery before next phase."

The practical advice aligns with both tactical necessity and physical requirement—conservation of resources essential before confronting challenges ahead. I settle into feline form with growing familiarity, conscious mind maintaining human thought patterns while body adapts to alternative configuration.

This dual existence embodies larger truth revealed through desert communication—neither fully human nor wholly divine but something integrating aspects of both, identity expanding beyond conventional categories without complete dissolution of core self. The ninth transformation approaches with cosmic inevitability, but final choice remains mine within parameters established by circumstance and heritage.

For now, I watch through cat's eyes as Nadia prepares for our departure, her movements purposeful and precise despite extraordinary situation. Her acceptance of supernatural reality without surrendering rational assessment provides model for navigating impossible circumstances—adaptation without capitulation, cooperation without surrender.

The binding progresses regardless of philosophical resistance, but understanding grows with each revelation. Knowledge itself becomes both weapon and shield against manipulation, illuminating path forward while establishing boundaries around core identity. Anubis influences circumstances without controlling outcomes, divine guidance without absolute determination.

Within this narrow space between predestination and free will, meaningful choice remains possible despite cosmic pressure. The ninth transformation approaches with lunar certainty, but its nature depends on conscious decision rather than inevitable progression.

That choice, at least, remains mine alone to make.

Chapter 16: Trust Issues

The shift back to human form comes easier this time—a fluid reversal that leaves me dizzy but intact, crouched on the shelter's cold concrete floor. Dawn light filters through narrow ventilation shafts, casting thin golden beams across the dimly lit space. My senses gradually readjust, the overwhelming scent landscape fading to background whispers, vision narrowing to normal range.

Nadia hands me a bundle of clothes without comment. We've developed a routine out of necessity—the awkwardness of post-transformation nakedness

eclipsed by tactical concerns and growing familiarity. Still, something has shifted between us since my return from the desert realm. A subtle tension hangs in the air, unspoken questions forming a barrier where intimacy once grew.

“The Cambridge contact confirmed extraction,” she reports, keeping to practicalities as I dress. “Two hours from now, south access road. We’ll need to time our approach carefully to avoid search teams.”

I nod, pulling on a sweater that smells faintly of cedar and old paper—clothing from her grandfather’s trunk, preserved in this emergency shelter decades before my birth.

“We need to talk about what Anubis told me,” I say, my voice still rough from the transformation.

“The tactical implications are significant,” she agrees, misinterpreting my intent as she packs essential research materials. “If the eclipse truly represents our only prevention window—”

“Not about the gateway,” I interrupt, watching her movements with newly sharpened perception. Small tells I might have missed before—the tension in her shoulders, the deliberate way she avoids eye contact, the calculated precision in her movements masking anxiety. “About my bloodline.”

Her hands pause briefly over the journal she’s wrapping in protective cloth. A heartbeat’s hesitation that reveals everything.

“What specifically?” she asks, resuming her task with forced casualness.

“You knew.” The accusation hangs between us, simple words carrying complex weight. “Before you walked into my office with that case about missing artifacts, you already knew who I was—what I was.”

“Jake—”

“You researched my family tree. You found the connection to Egypt, to Anubis’s priesthood. You knew I was a potential vessel before you ever mentioned stolen artifacts.”

She turns to face me directly, her composure professional but her eyes revealing internal conflict. “It wasn’t that simple.”

“Explain the complexity, then,” I challenge, leaning against the wall, arms crossed. Physical distance mirroring emotional withdrawal. “Because from where I’m standing, it looks like you used me as bait for a supernatural trap.”

“That’s not fair.” Her voice carries genuine hurt beneath scholarly restraint. “Yes, I researched your family history—along with dozens of other Boston lineages with Egyptian connections. My grandfather’s journals contained references to certain bloodlines that maintained compatibility with divine essence across generations.”

“And you just happened to choose the private investigator with secret priest DNA for your missing artifact case?” Skepticism drips from every word.

She sighs, setting down the wrapped journal and giving me her full attention. “I chose the private investigator with the highest success rate for finding missing persons and objects in the city. Your reputation preceded you. The bloodline connection was... an interesting academic footnote at that point.”

“A footnote that conveniently resulted in me dying and becoming bound to an Egyptian god.”

“Do you really think I planned that?” Her academic restraint cracks, genuine emotion breaking through. “That I somehow orchestrated your death as part of some elaborate supernatural scheme? I hired you to find stolen artifacts. That was real. The theft was real. Everything I told you about their importance was true.”

“But not complete,” I press, unwilling to relent despite her evident distress. “You withheld critical information about my personal connection to the case.”

“Because I wasn’t certain it was relevant!” She paces the small space, gesturing with intensity. “My grandfather’s theories about bloodline connections were largely unproven. Fascinating academic speculation backed by genealogical patterns, but nothing concrete enough to justify saying: ‘By the way, Detective Harlow, you might be descended from Egyptian priests with supernatural potential.’”

Put that way, it sounds absurd, yet the omission still feels like betrayal given subsequent events.

“When did you become certain?” I ask, voice calmer but no less intense. “At what point did academic speculation transform into information you chose to withhold?”

She stops pacing, her silence forming an admission before words materialize. “When you showed up in my office as a cat,” she finally acknowledges. “The transformation confirmed theories I’d considered improbable despite the research. No modern documentation existed of actual vessel manifestation—only historical accounts easily dismissed as metaphorical or exaggerated.”

“So you’ve had confirmation for weeks,” I calculate. “Through all our research, all our...” I hesitate, personal connection complicating professional grievance. “Through everything we’ve shared, you knew I was following a script written generations before my birth.”

“That’s not how I see it,” she objects. “The bloodline creates potential, not predestination. Many descendants of those same priestly lines live entirely normal lives without supernatural manifestation. Your specific circumstances—”

“Were manipulated by forces with anterior motives,” I finish flatly. “Including you.”

The accusation lands with visible impact, her expression shifting from defensive to wounded. “Is that what you think of me? That I’m just another force manipulating you toward predetermined outcome?”

“What am I supposed to think? You researched my family without my knowledge, withheld information directly relevant to my situation, and guided my investigation without revealing your prior knowledge.”

“I was trying to help you understand gradually,” she counters, frustration evident in her tightening posture. “These revelations aren’t easily processed all at once. I planned to share everything once you’d accepted the transformation’s basic reality.”

“Convenient timing,” I observe bitterly. “Ensuring I was thoroughly enmeshed in supernatural circumstance before discovering the full context.”

“That’s unfair,” she repeats, color rising in her cheeks. “I was protecting both the research and you while we determined what was happening. Would you really have preferred I dump centuries of occult bloodline theory on you while you were still adjusting to transforming into a cat?”

She has a point—one I’m not ready to concede despite its rational merit. The sense of manipulation runs too deep, exacerbated by Anubis’s revelations about generational engineering.

“I deserved agency in my own life,” I state, core grievance emerging. “Everyone—you, Anubis, the Order—had pieces of a puzzle determining my existence while I stumbled forward in manufactured ignorance.”

“I never intended—” she begins, then stops herself, regrouping. “You’re right,” she acknowledges, surprising me with direct concession. “I should have told you sooner. Once the transformation confirmed the bloodline connection, I should have shared everything I knew about your heritage.”

The admission deflates some of my righteous anger, leaving complicated emotion in its wake. “Why didn’t you?”

She sits on the small cot, composure momentarily abandoned as she runs fingers through hair already escaping its practical ponytail. “Multiple reasons, none entirely defensible in retrospect,” she admits with surprising candor. “Initially, scholarly caution—confirmation bias is a real danger in research this esoteric. Then professional momentum—we were making progress unraveling the Order’s plans, and introducing complex historical tangents risked derailing urgent investigation.”

She looks up, meeting my eyes directly for the first time in this confrontation. “And finally, if I’m being completely honest—fear of losing your trust. With each day that passed without disclosure, the omission grew more significant. I kept waiting for the perfect moment to explain everything, and that moment never materialized.”

Her honesty disarms further accusation even as the underlying breach remains unresolved. I recognize the pattern from countless cases—how small initial omissions compound into significant deceptions through postponement rather than deliberate malice.

“What else haven’t you told me?” I ask, anger receding beneath the need for complete intelligence.

“About your bloodline? Nothing substantive beyond what you’ve already learned through Anubis.” She stands, moving to a small wooden chest in the corner, unlocking it with a key kept around her neck. “Here—my grandfather’s complete genealogical research. All his notes on the Harlow line from its Egyptian origins through Alexandria to colonial Boston.”

She hands me a leather portfolio tied with faded ribbon, the gesture both peace offering and evidence of good faith. “I should have given you this weeks ago. Everything I know about your heritage is documented here.”

I accept the portfolio without opening it, its physical weight symbolic of knowledge burden. “I’ll review it later,” I decide, tucking it into my pack. “Current tactical situation takes priority over historical research.”

She nods, relieved by the return to practical concerns despite unresolved emotional tension. “The extraction team expects us at 0800. We should begin approach within thirty minutes to allow for security sweep before contact.”

“I’m not coming with you,” I inform her, decision crystallizing as words emerge. “We need separation, temporary though it may be.”

“That’s not rational,” she objects immediately, academic precision masking what might be personal concern. “Division of resources during active threat scenario creates unnecessary vulnerability.”

“Emotional compromise creates equal vulnerability,” I counter. “I can’t guarantee objective judgment while processing these revelations. Clean break allows clear perspective for both parties.”

“Where will you go?” she asks, practicality asserting itself despite evident disagreement.

“Better you don’t know,” I answer, gathering essential supplies into my own pack. “The Order has surveillance on all obvious locations. I’ll establish secure contact once positioned.”

“This is a mistake,” she states definitively, frustration evident beneath scholarly composure. “Tactical, practical, and personal mistake driven by emotional reaction rather than strategic assessment.”

“Nevertheless, it’s my decision to make,” I respond, asserting control within chaotic circumstances where choice itself represents precious commodity. “One of the few completely mine since this began.”

Her expression reveals complex response—concern, irritation, comprehension shifting across features that have become familiar territory in short, intense time together. “At least take the emergency phone,” she concedes, retrieving a small burner from equipment cache. “Single-use, untraceable. For genuine emergencies only.”

I accept the device, recognizing peace offering within practical precaution. “Forty-eight hours,” I promise. “I’ll establish contact regardless of circumstances.”

“Twenty-four,” she counters with unexpected firmness. “The eclipse approaches and preparation cannot wait on emotional processing.”

The negotiation feels almost normal—familiar pattern temporarily masking unprecedented circumstance. “Thirty-six,” I compromise. “With interim contact if significant developments emerge.”

She nods once, agreement reached despite evident reservation. “The Cambridge team can transport me to secondary safe house. You have coordinates if needed.”

Final preparations proceed in tense efficiency, necessary communication limited to logistical essentials rather than addressing emotional schism between us. Yet in this practiced coordination lies tacit acknowledgment of connection transcending current conflict—partnership forged through extraordinary circumstance proving resilient despite fracture.

I shoulder my pack, necessities for survival and investigation carefully organized for portability in either form. The transformation potential hovers just beneath conscious thought, feline shape available with decreasing effort as ninth transformation approaches with calendar inevitability.

“Jake,” she says as I reach the shelter’s hidden exit. “Whatever you discover on your own—remember context matters. Facts without proper framework can distort understanding.”

Behind her academic words, I hear genuine concern. I give her a brief nod and slip through the concealed door into the forest. Dawn breaks through the trees, painting gold across stubborn autumn leaves that refuse to surrender to the coming winter. Light and shadow play across the forest floor, creating illusions of movement where nothing stirs.

As I put distance between us, my head clears. Thirty-six hours alone should be enough—time to process my anger without losing sight of what matters. The eclipse is coming, ready or not. A day and a half to sort myself out, then back to work.

My enhanced senses map the forest in ways I’m still getting used to. Scents tell stories of recent movements—deer passed through hours ago, a fox hunted here last night. Sounds sort themselves by importance—the distant highway, birds warning of my presence, a stream I can’t yet see. I spot subtle changes in terrain that would’ve been invisible to me weeks ago.

These abilities aren't just Anubis's additions, but my own heritage waking up. That thought both comforts and disturbs me. I've never been entirely human, even when I thought I was. Something in my blood was waiting all along. Who the hell am I, if what I thought was "me" was just the surface of something deeper?

After putting a few miles between me and the shelter, I consider my options. There's a seasonal road about two miles northwest, where I might "borrow" a vehicle. I could change to cat form and cover ground faster, but I'll need hands and a voice where I'm going.

The harbor pulls at me like a magnet drawing iron filings. It whispers beneath my thoughts, calling me back to where I died. Where I changed. Where everything started. It makes sense as a target—both for practical investigation and because of that supernatural tug I feel. The eclipse ritual will happen there. I know it in my bones.

I secure a ride through methods no former cop should admit to and head into the city. Boston's morning traffic swallows me, one more anonymous face among thousands. I leave a false trail toward the university district—in case anyone's watching—before doubling back toward the harbor.

The waterfront wakes up as morning advances—dock workers, fishermen, and shipping crews bring the commercial sections to life while the tourist areas stay quiet in the off-season chill. I find a perfect vantage point with sight lines to both the harbor and the warehouse district where I died.

Water fascinates me now in a way it never did before. Part of me wants to shy away from it—the cat instinct to avoid getting wet—but I'm also drawn to its movement, the play of light on its surface. Another reminder of how I live between worlds now, neither fully human nor fully cat, but something caught in between.

The warehouse looks abandoned again. The police investigation wrapped weeks ago with a neat little "trespassing accident" explanation for my fall. No mention of rituals or artifacts in the official report. The crime scene tape is long gone, and from the outside, it's just another decaying building on the waterfront.

But my new senses pick up what others would miss. When I look at the warehouse from the corner of my eye, its outline seems to blur and shift. When I focus directly on it, everything snaps back to normal. Shadows creep around its foundation in patterns that have nothing to do with the sun's position. My predator's instincts—the part of me that can track a mouse by the slightest movement—scream that something's wrong.

The water near the building behaves even stranger. Where it should flow in natural patterns, it forms geometric ripples, almost like it's being shaped by invisible hands. No ordinary person would notice, but to my enhanced senses, it's like watching reality itself thin out—the boundary between worlds weakening exactly where I died.

I settle in for a long watch, cataloging every strange detail while keeping an eye out for cult activity. Around mid-afternoon, I hit paydirt—a black sedan with diplomatic plates pulls up behind the warehouse. The driver stays put while two figures slip through a service entrance hidden from street view.

Official diplomatic plates? The Order usually operates in shadows, not government cars. Either their timeline's accelerating and they're getting sloppy, or this is deliberate misdirection. Neither option makes me feel better about our chances.

I circle to a better position, staying hidden while stretching my supernatural senses to their limits. Even from this distance, my nose picks up multiple scent signatures on the visitors—they've been with other people recently, probably at some kind of gathering before coming here.

After about forty minutes, they emerge carrying something wrapped in protective cloth. The careful way they handle the small package tells me it's not paperwork or drugs—it's something old and valuable. Another artifact for their collection, I'd bet my ninth life on it.

My first instinct is to follow them, but I force myself to stay put. I'm just one person—cat?—operative, and the harbor might tell me more than wherever they're going. Besides, diplomatic plates can be traced through official channels if needed.

As afternoon slides toward evening, the water's strange behavior intensifies. The unnatural patterns grow more pronounced as the light fades. The boundary between worlds is thinning, just like Anubis warned me—reality itself seems malleable around the spot where I died.

I feel torn between the detective's discipline to watch and gather intel, and a newer, more primal urge to confront whatever's happening inside that building. The cat in me—or maybe the god—wants to pounce, while the cop wants to wait and plan.

My mental debate gets cut short when a small boat approaches, heading straight for the warehouse dock. It's not random—the pilot navigates with purpose, like someone who knows exactly where they're going. Even from this distance, I recognize one of the figures on board. Blackwood. The cult leader himself.

This changes everything. I shift position for a better view, feeling the potential transformation simmering just below my skin. Becoming the cat would make infiltration a lot easier, even if I'd lose the ability to use tech or communicate.

The boat docks with the smooth precision of practice. Blackwood and his companion—carrying what looks like military-grade equipment cases—head straight for a side entrance. They move with the confidence of people who've been here before, unlocking a simple padlock that might keep out teens but wouldn't slow down anyone with basic tools or skills.

I weigh my options—confront them now without backup or planning, or maintain surveillance? The cop in me wins out over the predator. Better to gather intel than rush in half-cocked.

When the warehouse door closes behind them, my decision makes itself. The dock stands empty—perfect chance to slip inside without being seen. I can observe without confronting, gather intelligence without committing to a fight.

The transformation comes easier each time. My body flows from human to feline with fluid efficiency. The world still kaleidoscopes around me as my senses recalibrate, but the disorientation passes faster now, like my body is learning to navigate between forms through practice.

My clothes and gear melt away during the change—one of those convenient supernatural perks Anubis never bothered to explain. They'll reappear when I transform back, another mystery that defies physics but helps me avoid awkward naked situations.

As a cat, I'm instantly smaller, faster, quieter. My senses sharpen to supernatural levels, but I lose the ability to use technology or talk. A fair trade for what I need to do right now.

I slip along the harbor's edge, sticking to shadows and using every piece of cover. Even in mid-afternoon, a black cat can vanish if it knows how to move. The warehouse offers several ways in—a ventilation opening near the foundation, a broken window on the mezzanine level, and a gap in the siding just big enough for a cat to squeeze through.

I choose the vent—partially blocked with debris but nothing that can stop a determined cat. As I squeeze through, I feel it immediately. Something's wrong with reality inside this place. Straight lines bend when they shouldn't. Right angles aren't quite ninety degrees. The air feels too thick in my lungs, and scents don't spread normally—they twist and fold in impossible patterns.

I find the perfect hiding spot on a structural beam high above the warehouse floor. From here, I can see everything while remaining invisible in the shadows. The warehouse interior has changed dramatically since I was last here—since I died here.

The floor now features an elaborate geometric pattern painted in what looks like metallic material that catches light in ways normal paint shouldn't. Egyptian symbols intertwine with mathematical formulas—not just ceremonial mumbo-jumbo, but precisely engineered occult technology.

Blackwood's companion is Professor Hassan. So much for my uncertainty about his cult involvement. They move with the synchronization of people who've worked together before, setting up equipment around the pattern. My cat ears pick up their conversation with perfect clarity.

"The alignment calculations confirm accelerated thinning," Hassan says, checking readings on instruments that look more NASA than ancient Egypt. "Bound-

ary permeability is increasing logarithmically rather than linearly. We might not even need to wait for the eclipse if this progression continues.”

“Opportunity rather than necessity,” Blackwood replies, his voice carrying a strange harmonic quality that wasn’t there before—like two voices speaking in unison. “The harbingers said the celestial alignment could be flexible. Their generosity exceeds what we initially expected.”

“That generosity comes with a price,” Hassan says, scientific tone barely masking his concern. “Your physical readings show significant deviation from baseline. Whatever connection you’ve established is taking a toll on you.”

“A necessary investment,” Blackwood dismisses the concern, focusing on the equipment instead of his own deteriorating condition. “Transcendence requires sacrifice—every spiritual tradition agrees on that much.”

I’m struck by how clinical they sound—like scientists discussing an experiment rather than cultists preparing to tear a hole in reality. It’s the scariest kind of delusion—brilliant minds who’ve convinced themselves they’re in control of forces they can’t possibly understand. They’ve wrapped the supernatural in scientific methodology like that somehow makes it safe.

They finish arranging their equipment, completing a circuit within the larger pattern. Hassan activates a power source—ordinary batteries powering something far from ordinary—sending current through the conductive material in the floor design. The effect is immediate. The air warps and bends more noticeably, the boundary distortion intensifying throughout the warehouse.

Through the broken windows, I watch the harbor water respond to whatever they’ve activated. The surface tension shifts from subtle strangeness to blatant impossibility—water rising upward against gravity in a perfect column before collapsing back down in patterns too precise to be natural. Like something on the other side is playing with it.

“Perfect resonance established,” Hassan confirms, eyes glued to his instruments. “The gateway anchor responds to minimum stimulus threshold—exactly as our theoretical models predicted.”

“They’re pleased,” Blackwood says, tilting his head like he’s listening to voices I can’t hear. His certainty disturbs me more than any shouting or raving could. “The offering demonstrated commitment beyond symbolic gesture. Personal sacrifice carries more weight than material contributions.”

Hassan’s expression flickers with discomfort before he masks it with professionalism. “The blood ritual wasn’t explicitly required in the translated texts. There are alternative binding mechanisms documented in the framework.”

“Different levels of commitment yield different results,” Blackwood responds with chilling detachment. “Minor sacrifices of convenience produce minor results. Ultimate transformation requires ultimate investment.”

This isn't just theoretical anymore—they're moving from preparation to activation. Real effects are manifesting in physical reality, not just in some metaphysical realm. The boundary is weakening faster than expected, which means they might attempt the full ritual before the eclipse even arrives.

The water column rises again, higher and more stable this time, holding its impossible shape for nearly a minute before smoothly dissipating. They're not trying to break through yet—just running tests, dialing in their parameters before the main event.

"Primary resonance confirmed," Hassan says, carefully shutting down the power source with the caution of someone who knows he's playing with fire. "The anchor point shows enhanced receptivity compared to our last test. Integrity breach threshold reduced by approximately twenty-two percent."

"Excellent," Blackwood says, studying the water's behavior with analytical focus that contrasts sharply with his physical deterioration. Deep shadows ring his eyes, and his hands tremble with fine tremors he can't quite control. "Document the configuration parameters for the implementation team. The ceremony requires precise replication even with the simplified activation sequence."

They start shutting everything down, their conversation shifting to logistics—personnel deployment, security measures, and preparations for the eclipse ceremony. What they describe is far bigger than I imagined—multiple teams handling different ritual components, security details to prevent interference, support staff managing technical aspects without knowing the full picture of what they're enabling.

This isn't just Blackwood's pet project anymore. The scale suggests institutional backing—connections to conventional power structures that could include government or corporate entities. Any plan to stop them just got exponentially more complicated. We might face legitimate security forces who have no idea what they're really protecting.

As they finish securing the equipment, Blackwood drifts to a harbor window, staring at the water that still ripples in strange patterns despite the machinery being off. "They're closer now," he says with the intimacy of someone speaking about loved ones. "The boundary thins even without our help. The self-sustaining degradation means we've achieved initial penetration."

"The measurements support the controlled breach hypothesis," Hassan confirms, his scientific jargon barely disguising the terrifying implication—reality's barrier is failing progressively without any help, the breakdown feeding on itself.

"Elizabeth sees more clearly now," Blackwood says, jumping to an entirely different subject. The non-sequitur reveals the cracks in his composure. "The distortion between us diminishes with each communication. I can hear her voice more clearly despite the distance."

Hassan's response is smooth, practiced—he's clearly dealt with these episodes

before. “The artifact transport arrangements are confirmed for tomorrow. We’ll have all remaining components on site forty-eight hours before alignment.”

The mention of Elizabeth—his dead wife—confirms what Anubis told me. Blackwood’s motivation isn’t power or chaos worship—it’s grief. He genuinely believes he’s communicating with his dead family. That blind spot might be our only advantage against his brilliant mind and considerable resources.

They finish packing with methodical efficiency—securing equipment, disconnecting power, and reactivating the building’s meager security measures. Nothing remains of their work except the painted pattern and the lingering wrongness in the air.

I stay hidden until they’re long gone, making sure they’re not coming back before I make my move. Changing back to human form takes more effort than usual—something about the boundary distortion resists the transformation, like swimming against a current.

Once I’m human again, I quickly document everything—sketching the geometric pattern, noting equipment configurations, and photographing structural changes with my phone. This intelligence is gold for developing countermeasures. Theoretical opposition is one thing; hard evidence is another.

Even with the equipment off, the harbor water keeps shifting in those unnatural patterns. The boundary is degrading on its own now, without human help. Our timeline just got a lot shorter than we thought.

I pull out the emergency phone, professional necessity winning over my bruised feelings. Some information can’t wait, not even for my pride.

Nadia answers on the second ring. “Secured line,” she says, no other identification needed.

“I’m at the harbor,” I tell her without bothering with hello. “Blackwood and Hassan were here running tests. They’ve established a functional gateway anchor, and the boundary is degrading even without their help. Everything’s happening faster than we thought.”

I hear her sharp intake of breath before her academic training kicks in. “What specific manifestations did you observe?”

“Water moving against gravity. Reality distortion inside the warehouse—straight lines bending, angles wrong. They’re using equipment to measure effects, not implement the full ritual yet, but their tech is fully operational.”

“This confirms my grandfather’s theory about anchor points,” she says, her scholar’s mind already fitting pieces together. “Once established, the degradation becomes self-reinforcing without additional energy. The eclipse might just accelerate a process that’s already underway.”

“They’re tracking the degradation rate against some predictive model,” I add, remembering their conversation. “Hassan said it’s increasing logarithmically,

not linearly. They might try before the eclipse if the deterioration keeps speeding up.”

“We need to consolidate what we know immediately,” she says, urgency overriding our agreement to separate. “The Cambridge team has set up a secure research location. I can send you the coordinates.”

She’s right, and we both know it. My hurt feelings don’t mean much compared to reality unraveling. Our reconciliation will have to wait, but the work can’t.

“Send me the location,” I agree, checking the time against sunset. The moon’s cycle is progressing, making my control over transformations more tenuous as the ninth change approaches. “I’ll keep watching the harbor until I confirm extraction is in place. I’ll check in periodically on approach.”

“Confirmed,” she says, all business despite whatever she might be feeling about my unexpected call.

The call ends with practiced brevity. Despite our personal issues, we still work together like a well-oiled machine. Some partnerships run deeper than hurt feelings.

I keep watching the harbor as sunset turns to twilight. The boundary distortions intensify with the changing light, as if responding to the electromagnetic shift that comes with dusk. Strangely, as full darkness settles in, the water patterns become less pronounced—suggesting the degradation fluctuates rather than remaining constant.

As night fully claims the harbor, I prepare to leave, taking one last sweep of the area. To normal eyes, the warehouse would look abandoned and unremarkable. To mine, subtle ripples in reality persist around its edges, even with the equipment gone and its occupants departed.

The boundary between worlds is thinning whether we like it or not. The chaos entities push against the membrane between dimensions with increasing strength, with or without human help. The eclipse won’t create the breach—it’ll just accelerate what’s already happening.

I turn away reluctantly. As much as I want to keep watching, getting this intelligence to the team takes priority. My thirty-six hours of emotional processing will have to wait. Some things are more important than my hurt feelings or damaged trust.

The ninth transformation is coming, as certain as the moon’s cycle. Soon I’ll have to make my final choice about the binding, regardless of whether I’ve made peace with my identity or autonomy. At least I still have that choice—my willing participation remains necessary for complete integration, even as the parameters narrow.

Behind me, water ripples in geometric patterns that no natural force could create. The boundary effects continue without human intervention, reality bending

on its own.

Tomorrow will bring planning, strategy sessions, and collaborative efforts—personal issues pushed aside for the greater crisis.

For tonight, I leave the harbor to darkness and its weakening barrier, knowing that beyond it, something watches and waits.

Whether Nadia and I can rebuild our trust remains an open question, but we'll work together regardless. We have to. The binding moves toward completion as reality degrades toward breach—parallel processes racing toward their conclusions.

My ninth life approaches—neither human nor divine but something new, an integration that transcends my previous limitations. Whatever I become in that final transformation will face the chaos breach with combined strength, my willing participation creating something more powerful than either Jake or Anubis alone could be.

That choice, at least, remains mine alone to make.

Chapter 17: Reconciliation

The Cambridge safe house feels hollow despite its impeccable amenities. Nadia arranges her research materials across the polished dining table, trying to focus on eclipse calculations rather than the empty chair beside her. The extraction team had been efficient—university contacts with security clearance and no questions—but everything felt mechanical without Jake's sardonic observations punctuating each step.

She traces her finger along the lunar chart, mapping the eclipse path against historical gateway openings. The points align with disturbing precision, confirming her grandfather's theories about celestial events affecting the doorway between worlds. Professional satisfaction mingles with dread as the pattern emerges from her scattered notes.

"Making progress?" Dr. Eliza Chen asks, entering with two steaming mugs of cardamom tea.

Nadia accepts the offering with a grateful nod. In the thirty-six hours since their arrival, the astrophysicist has proven both brilliant and discreet—a rare combination in academic circles where ego typically outpaces ethics.

"The sky patterns match what we're seeing in the harbor," Nadia confirms, gesturing toward the monitoring equipment. "The disturbances are getting stronger at regular intervals."

"And your detective friend?" Eliza asks, curiosity barely masking concern. "Any word?"

“He’s not—” Nadia begins automatically, then reconsiders the reflexive denial. What exactly is Jake to her now? Colleague seems inadequate, partner too professional, friend too casual for what they’ve shared. “He’ll check in when he has something concrete,” she finishes instead.

Eliza’s expression suggests she recognizes evasion but respects boundaries enough not to press. “The preparations for tomorrow’s monitoring deployment are complete. My team can establish the perimeter sensors without drawing attention.”

“Thank you.” Nadia appreciates both the update and the subject change. “The boundary thin spots are clustering near the original warehouse site. We’ll need focused monitoring in that quadrant.”

As Eliza leaves to coordinate with her team, Nadia returns to her grandfather’s journals, seeking practical applications amid theoretical frameworks. The familiar handwriting grounds her, connecting present crisis to family legacy. Ibrahim Farouk’s meticulous documentation provides structure when everything else feels precarious.

Alone again, she acknowledges what she’s been suppressing: worry about Jake, guilt over her omissions, and fear that their partnership—whatever its nature—may be permanently damaged. Their connection had developed so rapidly, forged in supernatural circumstances that defied normal relationship progression. Perhaps it was inevitable that trust would fracture under such pressure.

Her phone chimes—not the emergency line but her regular device. The university administration, undoubtedly seeking updates on her “research sabbatical.” Academic politics continue unabated while reality itself threatens to unravel. The absurdity would be amusing if the stakes weren’t so catastrophic.

She silences the device without responding. Her reputation can recover later, assuming there is a later.

The scent of old paper and cardamom grounds her as she returns to the research. If she cannot repair what’s broken with Jake immediately, she can at least ensure they have the knowledge needed to face what’s coming. The work provides structure amid emotional chaos—a familiar refuge when personal matters become too complex.

Hours pass in productive focus, translation and analysis progressing steadily despite the persistent ache of Jake’s absence. When the emergency phone finally buzzes around sunset, she answers before the second ring completes.

“Secured line.” Her voice remains steady despite her racing pulse.

Jake’s report hits like a tactical assessment—concise, urgent, devoid of personal content yet carrying enormous implications. Blackwood and Hassan at the harbor. Gateway anchor established. Boundary already degrading without intervention. Everything accelerating beyond projections.

The gap between “thirty-six hours” and “send me the location” speaks volumes about Jake’s character. Personal grievance subordinated to greater crisis despite legitimate hurt. It’s typical of the man she’s come to know—stubborn in principle but pragmatic in practice.

After arranging his extraction to the safe house, she turns back to her research with renewed urgency. If the boundary degradation is self-sustaining, traditional timeline projections become meaningless. Their window for intervention narrows with each passing hour.

She pulls her grandfather’s ritual documentation from the archive case, unfolding diagrams that mirror what Jake described at the warehouse. The painted patterns aren’t just decoration but tools—symbols designed to open and close the doorway between worlds.

“Of course,” she whispers, recognition dawning as she overlays the ritual configuration with harbor topography maps. “It’s not just the warehouse—it’s the entire harbor basin.”

The realization quickens her pulse. Boston’s harbor geography itself forms a massive version of the ritual pattern when viewed from above, with certain landmarks corresponding to key nodes in the dimensional geometry. The warehouse serves as merely one activation point in a much larger system.

She quickly texts the extraction team with updated urgency codes, then reexamines her grandfather’s ritual countermeasures with fresh insight. If the harbor itself is the ritual space, localized interventions won’t be sufficient. They need a comprehensive approach that addresses the entire geographical pattern.

The sound of vehicles arriving outside pulls her attention briefly from the research. The extraction team returning with Jake, most likely. Her stomach tightens with anticipation and apprehension. Their last conversation remains unresolved, professional necessity temporarily overriding personal breach but resolving nothing.

She forces herself to continue working rather than waiting at the door like an anxious spouse. Whatever reconciliation might be possible needs to happen organically, not through manufactured scenarios. Besides, the research breakthrough demands immediate documentation before its implications fully crystallize.

Footsteps approach—familiar cadence despite deliberate lightness, the unconscious predator’s gait Jake has developed since his transformation. She doesn’t look up immediately, allowing him space to establish his presence on his own terms.

“You’ve found something,” he observes, voice carefully neutral as he surveys her expanded research array.

“The harbor pattern,” she confirms, maintaining the professional dynamic he’s established. “It’s not contained within the warehouse. The entire harbor geog-

raphy forms the macro-ritual space, with the warehouse serving as merely one activation point.”

He moves closer, examining the overlaid maps with the focused intensity that first attracted her to him—analytical mind engaging fully with presented evidence regardless of personal context.

“That explains the water behavior extending beyond the immediate area,” he says, pointing to anomaly reports from locations throughout the harbor. “The pattern uses existing geographical features as amplifiers.”

“Precisely.” She indicates the historical construction dates of key harbor structures. “Certain buildings and piers were intentionally positioned to enhance natural energy convergence points. Some dating back to colonial times, suggesting the Order’s influence extends further into Boston’s development than we realized.”

Working together feels natural despite lingering tension—professional synergy operating independently from personal complications. They fall into established patterns of collaborative analysis, building on each other’s observations with practiced efficiency.

“The eclipse trajectory,” Jake notes, studying the astronomical charts. “It perfectly aligns with the harbor’s central axis at maximum coverage.”

“Creating optimal energy transfer conditions,” she agrees. “But the degradation is accelerating independently now. They might not wait for perfect alignment if the boundary becomes sufficiently permeable beforehand.”

Jake’s expression darkens. “They won’t wait. Hassan’s instruments showed logarithmic progression, not linear. At that rate of acceleration, we might be looking at viable breach conditions within forty-eight hours, eclipse or not.”

This confirms her worst fears. “We need to implement countermeasures immediately, not wait for the eclipse.”

“What countermeasures?” His question carries no skepticism, only tactical focus. “Conventional methods won’t affect something operating at this scale.”

She hesitates, then retrieves her grandfather’s most protected journal—the one containing his final research before death. “Ibrahim believed the ritual could be reversed rather than simply disrupted. The same pattern that opens the gateway can seal it permanently if activated with different intentionality and energy signatures.”

Jake processes this with characteristic quickness. “You’re suggesting we use their own ritual against them.”

“With important modifications,” she clarifies. “The pattern stays the same whether opening or closing. It’s how you direct the energy that changes the outcome.”

Their discussion continues with increasing technical detail, ritual mechanics interwoven with tactical planning. The familiarity of collaboration gradually eases some tension between them, professional respect creating a bridge across personal divide.

As their planning session stretches into its third hour, Eliza returns with monitoring reports that confirm their theoretical projections. Harbor anomalies are increasing in both frequency and intensity, with gravitational micro-fluctuations detected at multiple locations beyond the warehouse.

“I’ll coordinate with the sensor team,” Eliza says after reviewing their findings. “We’ll need complete harbor coverage rather than focused deployment.”

When she leaves, silence settles between them—the comfortable rhythm of their work suddenly interrupted without external buffer. The personal issues they’ve temporarily set aside resurface in the quiet.

Jake moves to the window, staring out at the darkened grounds surrounding the safe house. His posture carries the subtle tension that precedes transformation—not imminent change but potential simmering beneath the surface.

“You should have told me,” he says finally, words measured but sentiment unambiguous. “About my bloodline. About your research into my family. About all of it.”

“Yes,” she agrees simply, abandoning the academic impulse to qualify or contextualize. “I should have.”

Her direct acknowledgment seems to surprise him. He turns, studying her with eyes that reveal traces of feline perception even in human form.

“Why didn’t you?” The question holds genuine curiosity beneath lingering hurt.

“Initially, scholarly caution,” she begins, choosing honesty over self-protection. “The bloodline connections were theoretical—fascinating patterns suggesting ancient continuity but lacking definitive proof. Sharing unconfirmed research with a reluctant private investigator seemed unnecessary.”

She moves away from the research table, creating physical distance from academic territory as conversation shifts to personal terrain.

“After your transformation confirmed the theories?” Jake presses, tracking the exact moment her justifications weakened.

“Various rationalizations, none particularly admirable in retrospect,” she admits. “Professional momentum—we were making progress unraveling immediate threats, and adding historical complexities risked derailing urgent investigation. Academic territoriality—the research represented my grandfather’s legacy and my own scholarly investment.”

She meets his gaze directly, offering the most difficult truth without softening. “And ultimately, fear that revealing the delayed disclosure would damage what

was developing between us. Each day that passed made the omission more significant, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of postponement.”

“You researched me before ever walking into my office,” he observes, not accusation but confirmation of established fact.

“Yes. Your specific bloodline appeared in my grandfather’s documentation of potential vessel lineages. But I hired you primarily for your investigative reputation. The ancestry connection was secondary—a potentially useful coincidence rather than primary motivation.”

“And after my transformation? When coincidence became confirmation?”

“I should have told you immediately,” she acknowledges. “The moment your cat form materialized in my office, I recognized the bloodline activation. Withholding that knowledge once it became certainty rather than theory was a genuine breach of trust. Not malicious, but a breach nonetheless.”

Her unadorned admission seems to disarm his prepared arguments. He’d clearly expected defensive justification rather than straightforward accountability.

“I’m sorry,” she adds simply. “For both the original omission and each subsequent opportunity to correct it that I failed to take.”

Jake’s expression shifts through complex emotions before settling into something close to resignation. “We’ve both been manipulated in this from the beginning,” he says. “You by your grandfather’s incomplete legacy, me by Anubis’s selective revelations. Neither of us had the complete picture.”

“That doesn’t excuse my choice to withhold what I did know,” she counters, refusing to dilute responsibility even as he offers partial absolution.

“No, it doesn’t,” he agrees, no malice in the confirmation. “But understanding context doesn’t require forgetting facts. We can acknowledge the breach while recognizing the circumstances that created it.”

It’s a characteristically balanced assessment—neither dismissing the violation nor allowing it to overshadow everything else they’ve built. The detective’s pragmatism applied to emotional territory.

“The question,” he continues after a thoughtful pause, “is whether we can rebuild effective trust moving forward. Not because the past doesn’t matter, but because the present crisis demands functional partnership regardless of historical complications.”

“Can we?” she asks, scientific certainty abandoned for genuine inquiry.

He considers this with the careful deliberation she’s come to respect—no quick reassurance but genuine evaluation. “I think so,” he finally concludes. “Not instantly, and not without effort from both sides. But the foundation remains sound despite the cracks.”

The assessment offers neither complete absolution nor permanent condemnation—a realistic middle ground that acknowledges damage without declaring the structure beyond repair. It’s characteristically Jake in its pragmatic clarity.

“Transparent information sharing moving forward,” she suggests. “No strategic omissions regardless of protective intent.”

“Agreed.” He nods, the negotiation feeling simultaneously formal and deeply personal. “And genuine acknowledgment when either of us feels misled or manipulated, before resentment builds.”

“That seems reasonable.” The scholarly understatement draws a slight smile from both of them, breaking tension with shared recognition of her academic tendency toward measured language.

A comfortable silence settles between them—not complete resolution but workable accommodation. The fundamental connection that drew them together remains intact beneath the strain, resilient despite genuine damage.

“I need to show you something,” she says after a moment, retrieving her laptop. “Harbor surveillance captured this an hour before you arrived.”

The video reveals unusual wave patterns throughout the harbor, concentric ripples converging toward central points that correspond with their ritual pattern mapping. Nothing dramatic enough to alarm ordinary observers, but unmistakable to informed analysis.

“It’s responding to lunar position,” Jake notes, tracking timestamp against astronomical data. “Even without their equipment actively running.”

“Exactly. The activation threshold has been crossed—the process sustains itself now with minimal external energy. The eclipse will dramatically accelerate what’s already underway, but isn’t strictly necessary anymore.”

He absorbs this with the focused calculation she’s come to recognize as his planning expression. “What about your grandfather’s reversal theory? Could we implement it before the eclipse?”

“Potentially,” she admits, “but with significant complications. The reversal requires precise timing relative to boundary permeability metrics. Too early, insufficient effect. Too late, catastrophic acceleration.”

“And we need to be on site,” he concludes, following the implications to their logical conclusion. “Not observing remotely.”

“Unfortunately, yes. Direct intervention at the warehouse anchor point, precisely when permeability reaches critical threshold but before breach manifestation begins.”

Jake considers this, weighing tactical implications against supernatural constraints. “How would we monitor permeability accurately enough to time the intervention?”

She hesitates, knowing her answer transitions from theoretical to intensely personal territory. “Your transformation sensitivity would provide the most accurate gauge. The boundary between human and divine forms directly corresponds to broader dimensional permeability.”

Understanding dawns in his expression. “You’re saying my transformation state could serve as measuring device for when to trigger the countermeasure.”

“Essentially, yes. As the ninth transformation approaches completion, your sensitivity to boundary conditions reaches maximum acuity. The moment of perfect balance between forms—when you are simultaneously fully human and fully divine—represents the precise intervention window.”

The implications hang between them—her countermeasure plan requires Jake to embrace rather than resist the very transformation process he’s been fighting since it began. The personal cost settles visibly across his features.

“That’s why Anubis chose me,” he realizes, pieces clicking together with detective’s precision. “Not just compatible bloodline, but specific personal qualities. My resistance to transformation creates the extended transition state needed for accurate boundary calibration.”

“It appears so,” she confirms, professional language barely containing inappropriate wonder at the supernatural engineering involved. “Your particular combination of skepticism and acceptance creates ideal vessel conditions.”

“So I’m not just the messenger or the muscle,” Jake concludes with bitter appreciation. “I’m the measuring instrument.”

“You’re considerably more than that,” she objects, momentarily abandoning scholarly distance. “Your agency remains critical—forced participation would invalidate the calibration precision. The measurement requires willing integration rather than coerced submission.”

He absorbs this with the thousand-yard stare she’s come to recognize as processing profound realizations. “Always a choice that’s not really a choice,” he finally says. “Serve as willing instrument or watch reality tear itself apart. Some option.”

“I’m sorry,” she offers, inadequate but sincere.

“Not your design,” he acknowledges with a shrug that carries more resignation than forgiveness. “Just another layer of manipulation none of us saw coming.”

The emergency phone interrupts further discussion, its urgent tone signaling priority communication. Jake answers with professional efficiency, listening more than speaking before ending the call with crisp acknowledgment.

“Harbor security picked up unusual activity near the warehouse,” he reports. “Multiple vehicles arriving within the past hour. Equipment being unloaded with private security perimeter established.”

“They’re accelerating preparations,” she concludes, already gathering essential research materials. “The boundary degradation must be progressing faster than even their models predicted.”

“We need to move,” Jake agrees, transition to tactical planning smooth despite recent emotional territory. “Eliza’s monitoring team confirms energy buildup consistent with preliminary ritual activation. They’re starting tonight, not waiting for optimal conditions.”

They shift into practiced efficiency, gathering necessary components for the countermeasure while coordinating with Eliza’s team for perimeter intelligence. The conversation about trust and manipulation recedes beneath immediate crisis, not forgotten but temporarily superseded by survival priorities.

As they finalize preparation, Jake pauses, gaze shifting toward the window where moonlight casts silver across the lawn. The lunar cycle approaches critical phase, his transformation sensitivity visibly increasing with each hour.

“Whatever happens,” he says without turning, “we complete the mission. Personal considerations remain secondary to preventing breach.”

“Agreed,” she confirms, understanding the underlying message—their reconciliation, however incomplete, cannot interfere with operational necessities. “But we proceed with complete information sharing, regardless of perceived protection value.”

He nods, partnership parameters established amid crisis progression. “We move in thirty minutes. I need to prepare for potential transformation variables during deployment.”

As he leaves to make personal preparations, Nadia returns to her grandfather’s final journal entries, seeking any overlooked details that might prove crucial. The familiar handwriting provides continuity across generations, Ibrahim’s insights bridging past research to present crisis.

A particular passage catches her attention—not for its ritual mechanics but its philosophical observation:

“The boundary between worlds reflects the boundaries within ourselves. Each weakens or strengthens in synchronicity with the other. True sealing requires integration rather than separation—acceptance of duality rather than forced unification or arbitrary division.”

The words take on new significance in context of Jake’s transformation journey. Perhaps the personal and cosmic aspects of their situation are more directly connected than either realized. The barrier between worlds mirrors the barrier between Jake’s human and divine aspects—both requiring not elimination but proper integration.

She makes a quick note of the passage before completing her preparations. Whether Jake will appreciate the philosophical parallel remains uncertain, but

the information belongs in their shared knowledge pool regardless of reception. No more strategic omissions, regardless of protective intent.

Outside, vehicles arrive—Eliza’s team with final equipment for harbor deployment. Time compression settles around their operation, events accelerating toward inevitable confrontation. Personal reconciliation remains incomplete, but functional partnership has been restored through mutual necessity and cautious recommitment.

Harbor lights shimmer through predawn darkness as they load equipment into nondescript vehicles. Jake moves with the heightened awareness that precedes transformation, senses already shifting toward supernatural acuity despite maintaining human form.

“Ready?” he asks, offering her a protective vest with the matter-of-fact concern that defines their complex relationship.

“As much as possible,” she confirms, accepting both equipment and implicit partnership renewal. “Our timing will need to be perfect.”

“Then we better not waste any,” he responds, a ghost of his old wry humor surfacing briefly. “Cosmic disaster waits for no man. Or cat.”

They depart toward harbor darkness, reconciliation incomplete but functional partnership restored. Whatever personal resolution awaits must develop alongside their response to immediate crisis. The boundary between worlds weakens with each passing moment, professional necessity temporarily outweighing personal complexity.

Yet as they drive toward confrontation, something has fundamentally shifted between them—not complete healing but acknowledgment of damage with mutual commitment to repair. Trust rebuilds slowly through consistent action rather than dramatic declaration, a process begun but far from completed.

The harbor appears on the horizon, water shimmering with subtle irregularities visible even to normal perception. Reality itself thins along Boston’s coastline, the boundary between ordered existence and chaotic potential degrading with increasing speed.

Whatever comes next, they face it with clear-eyed understanding of both cosmic threat and personal complexity. The reconciliation remains partial, the trust still healing, but the partnership functions with renewed commitment to shared purpose despite individual wounds.

Sometimes, Nadia reflects as they approach the weakening boundary between worlds, that’s the best anyone can hope for—not perfect resolution but functional continuation. Moving forward with eyes open to both past mistakes and future possibilities.

The harbor water ripples in geometric patterns no natural force could create, reality bending at quantum levels as they approach the confrontation point.

Partnership forged in supernatural circumstance faces its ultimate test, reconciliation progress measured not in emotional certainty but practical functionality.

That will have to be enough. For now.

Chapter 18: Calm Before

The autumn wind rattles the cabin windows as we get back from the harbor. I'm tired, but it's the good kind of tired—the satisfying fatigue after doing something necessary, not the bone-deep exhaustion that consumed me after Mike's death. Even my anger at Nadia for keeping things from me has softened, dulling from sharp betrayal to a mild ache.

"Eliza's team will keep watch around the perimeter," Nadia says, hanging her coat by the door. We've left the safe house for her grandfather's cabin—somewhere to regroup after discovering the cult is moving faster than we thought. "They'll let us know if they detect any strange energy spikes."

I nod, sinking into the worn armchair that's become unofficially mine. "We have eighteen hours before they start the main ritual. Not a lot of time, but enough to finalize our plan."

The cabin feels different tonight. It's not just that it's changed from a hideout to a planning center—it's something deeper. Maybe it's knowing that after tomorrow, nothing will go back to what passed for normal in my strange new life. Either we stop the ritual, or reality itself falls apart. Neither option leaves room for the comfortable uncertainty I've been living with.

Nadia moves efficiently around the cabin, spreading research materials across the dining table while boiling water for tea. The homey scene creates a weird contrast to our end-of-the-world planning session. Preventing the apocalypse with Earl Grey tea and hand-knit blankets.

"You should get some rest," she suggests, looking toward the bedroom. "You'll need your full strength for what's coming."

"Soon," I agree, though I know sleep is impossible despite how tired I am. My senses are on high alert—partly from my transformation abilities, partly from my detective's instinct that recognizes when we're at a turning point. "Let's go over the intersection points one more time."

She brings me tea without arguing, understanding I need to keep my mind busy when my emotions get too complicated to deal with directly. We've developed these small kindnesses during our weeks of forced proximity, learning each other's habits despite the bizarre circumstances of our relationship.

"The harbor layout emphasizes seven main points," she explains, spreading the marked-up map between us. Her voice shifts into what I now recognize as her teaching tone—clear but not condescending. "Four line up with colonial-era

buildings, three with newer construction. Together they form the ritual pattern when seen from above.”

I study the familiar diagram, seeing beyond just lines and intersections to potential weak points where we could apply our countermeasures. My detective’s instinct for finding vulnerabilities now works alongside my new supernatural awareness.

“Your transformation sensitivity gets stronger near the warehouse,” she continues, pointing to the spot where I died and was resurrected. “That’s the best place for us to perform the reversal ritual.”

This technical talk gives us comfortable territory, neutral ground where our different expertise comes together without reopening recent wounds. We work together professionally despite our personal complications—a partnership that functions even though we haven’t fully reconciled.

After an hour of detailed planning, our conversation naturally runs out of steam. We’ve done all the preparations we can. We’ve considered all possible scenarios based on what we know. All that’s left is to execute the plan when the time comes—and to get through the uncertain hours between now and then.

Silence falls between us, not uncomfortable but heavy with the unspoken awareness of what tomorrow brings. The wind moans around the cabin’s roof, carrying the first hint of the coming winter beneath autumn’s fading presence.

“I should try to get a few hours of sleep,” I finally admit, standing reluctantly from my chair. My body moves with the fluid grace that the transformation has gradually worked into my human form—not completely cat-like but definitely not fully human anymore. Another reminder of what I’ve become.

“Jake.” Nadia’s voice stops me at the bedroom doorway. She’s taken off her glasses and is rubbing the bridge of her nose where they leave those small marks I’ve somehow come to find endearing. “What happens after? If we succeed?”

The question hangs between us—not just practical concerns about what follows the ritual, but the deeper uncertainty about what happens with us personally. With whatever this thing is between us that doesn’t fit into simple categories.

“Assuming the gateway stabilizes?” I walk back to the living area, sitting on the couch instead of returning to my chair—close enough to talk but with enough space for a difficult conversation. “Anubis said the binding continues until the threat is completely neutralized. That could mean anything from being immediately released to continuing to serve him.”

“And what do you want to happen?”

Her direct question catches me off-guard. In all our planning, we’ve focused on what we need to survive, not what we want to happen. Desires seemed pointless when faced with cosmic threats.

“Originally?” I think about how my perspective has changed these past few weeks. “I wanted everything reversed completely. To go back to being a normal human. To forget this whole supernatural detour and return to finding missing persons and cheating spouses.”

“And now?” Her gaze remains steady, neither pushing me nor backing down.

“Now I understand there’s no going back to what I was.” The admission comes easier than I expected, the truth becoming clear as I say it out loud. “Not just because of what’s happened, but because I’m not the same person who died on that warehouse roof.”

I look down at my hands, noticing how even in human form they move differently—with an unconscious grace that the transformation has built into who I am.

“Whatever happens with Anubis, I’ve been changed. Seeing death signatures, having enhanced senses, connecting to something beyond normal existence—they’ve become part of me. Going back to being purely human would be like choosing to be partially blind after experiencing enhanced vision.”

She nods, understanding clear in her expression. “Integration rather than separation.”

“Something like that.” I appreciate that she doesn’t launch into academic analysis or try to classify my psychology. “What about you? After tomorrow, you could go back to normal academic life. Publish groundbreaking papers proving the supernatural exists, become the rockstar of Egyptology.”

My half-joke gets a smile that doesn’t quite reach her eyes. “My idea of ‘normal’ has changed pretty dramatically too.” She gestures toward her grandfather’s journals. “I’ve gone from theoretical research to practical application in ways Ibrahim only dreamed about. The line between academic study and direct experience has completely disappeared.”

“No going back for either of us,” I sum up.

“No,” she agrees. “But maybe moving forward isn’t about returning to what we were, but integrating what we’ve become with what’s left of who we used to be.”

Her observation shows wisdom beyond academic knowledge—the kind that comes from living through something rather than just studying it. It perfectly captures what I’ve been struggling to express even to myself.

“Your grandfather’s journal,” I realize, seeing the connection. “The passage about boundaries reflecting ourselves.”

“Yes.” She seems genuinely surprised I made the connection. “Integration rather than forced unification or arbitrary division.”

We sit with this thought for a moment, the philosophical idea shifting into personal territory without either of us directly saying so. Whatever exists between us follows similar principles—neither completely separate nor artificially forced together, but seeking the right kind of integration.

“When I first transformed,” I say, moving into more emotional territory than I’m usually comfortable with, “I experienced it as an invasion. A foreign presence taking over my body against my will. My identity drowning beneath cat instincts.”

She listens without interrupting, giving me space for this rare moment of opening up.

“Later, it became a tactical advantage—a useful tool for spying or escaping, but still separate from my true self.” I stare at my tea, cooling forgotten in its mug. “Only recently have I realized that this separation was artificial. The cat form isn’t some alien invasion but a manifestation of potential that was always there. Not replacing my identity but expanding it.”

“Personal boundaries reflecting cosmic ones,” she murmurs.

“Exactly. Fighting the transformation was like fighting gravity—exhausting myself resisting a natural force that works regardless of how I feel about it.” I look up from my tea to find her watching me with that careful attention that makes me feel both exposed and understood at the same time. “Accepting integration doesn’t mean giving up my autonomy but recognizing the larger context it exists within.”

Our conversation has drifted far from her original question about what happens after the ritual, yet somehow it addresses it more completely than a direct answer could have. We’re exploring the philosophical foundations of practical decisions we’ll need to make later.

“What about us?” she asks, her directness returning with quiet courage. “After tomorrow. Assuming we succeed with the cosmic stuff and personally survive.”

The question has no hidden agenda or strategic positioning—just genuine curiosity about possibilities neither of us could have imagined when she first walked into my office with stolen artifacts and academic credentials.

“I don’t know,” I admit, matching her honesty with my own. “We started as a professional relationship, evolved through a supernatural partnership, and developed into something more complicated than either of us planned.”

“That doesn’t answer the question.” Her persistence comes without accusation, simply refusing to let me dodge.

“Because I don’t have a clear answer,” I acknowledge. “Only an incomplete understanding of a constantly changing situation. I know whatever exists between us matters enough to work through difficult truths without breaking our connection. Beyond that...” I shrug, uncomfortably aware of emotional limitations

that my transformation hasn't magically fixed.

"That's enough for now," she accepts, neither pushing for a definite answer nor retreating behind professional distance. "We have immediate existential threats to deal with before relationship definitions become our main concern."

Her pragmatism brings an unexpected smile to my face. "Always the practical academic beneath all that theoretical exploration."

"Someone has to maintain research priorities," she replies with her own smile, a moment of lightness cutting through our built-up tension.

The moment stretches between us, comfortable silence replacing urgent planning for the first time in days. Despite all the unresolved complications between us, our fundamental connection remains—a partnership that's grown deeper rather than broken under recent challenges.

When Nadia moves from her chair to join me on the couch, the shift feels important without needing words to acknowledge it. Her closeness communicates what words might complicate—accepting our present uncertainty while committing to our shared journey.

"We should sleep," she says, though making no move to create distance between us. "Tomorrow requires all our mental and physical energy."

"Probably," I agree with the same contradiction between my words and actions, my arm extending along the back of the couch in an unconscious invitation.

She accepts without hesitation, settling against my side with a natural ease that disguises how unconventionally our relationship has developed. Her head fits perfectly against my shoulder, the familiar weight grounding me in the physical present despite the supernatural threats looming on our horizon.

"This isn't how I imagined my research fellowship would go," she murmurs, fatigue softening her precise pronunciation. "Supernatural crisis management wasn't mentioned in the original grant proposal."

"Definitely a deviation from the standard academic path," I agree, finding unexpected comfort in her warmth against me. "Though probably more interesting than faculty meetings."

"Marginally." Her dry tone makes us both laugh quietly, a moment of normality amid our extraordinary circumstances.

We stay like this, our conversation gradually fading into comfortable silence as exhaustion temporarily wins over my hypervigilance. Not quite sleeping, but resting in that in-between space where thoughts flow without sharp edges or urgent demands.

Outside, the wind moves restlessly through autumn trees, carrying the distant scent of harbor water even this far inland. My enhanced senses pick up subtle

shifts in atmospheric pressure, changes too small for normal perception but unmistakable to my transformation-heightened awareness.

“Weather’s changing,” I say softly, not sure if Nadia is still awake to hear me. “Something beyond normal patterns.”

She stirs against me, professional interest temporarily beating her fatigue. “Related to the boundary thinning?”

“Possibly.” I focus on senses that normal people wouldn’t have. “The pressure changes don’t match normal autumn weather. There’s something... electric in the air. Like static before lightning but with nowhere to discharge.”

“The other world is leaking into ours,” she says quietly, her academic mind still working despite our rest. “Changing our weather as the barrier weakens.”

This observation should make me more worried, yet somehow putting it in technical terms actually comforts me rather than increasing my anxiety. Naming the phenomenon places it within an investigative framework instead of leaving it as an unknown threat.

“We should track these changes,” she continues, though making no move to get up. “See how they correlate with the gateway weakening.”

“Tomorrow,” I suggest, unwilling to give up this rare peaceful moment despite knowing it won’t last. “We’ll add it to the monitoring protocols when we rejoin Eliza’s team.”

She considers this briefly before nodding against my shoulder. “That works.”

Her academic phrasing makes me smile again, appreciating how completely she remains herself even with apocalyptic threats looming. Whatever else the transformation and supernatural crisis have changed, our core identities remain—detective and scholar navigating extraordinary circumstances with our fundamental characters intact.

We exist in this suspended moment together—the calm before the inevitable confrontation, neither denying the approaching storm nor letting it steal our present peace. Tomorrow brings either chaos entities breaking through or our ritual reversal, either potential destruction or narrow salvation. But tonight offers a brief rest between crisis points, a chance to acknowledge what matters beyond tactical necessity.

“Thank you,” I say quietly, my words inadequate but necessary.

“For what specifically?” she asks, her academic precision persisting even in her near-sleep state.

“Being here. Pursuing truth regardless of personal risk. Keeping faith that there’s a solution when the problem seems impossible to solve.” I pause, adding what matters most: “Not giving up on our partnership despite all the complications.”

Her hand finds mine in wordless response, our fingers interlacing with natural ease. No dramatic declaration or emotional performance—just simple contact conveying what long explanations would diminish rather than enhance.

We stay like this as night deepens around the cabin. Outside, atmospheric pressure continues its subtle deviation from normal patterns, the weather responding to dimensional boundary breakdown with increasing instability. Wind shifts direction with unnatural suddenness, temperature fluctuations defying seasonal norms.

But inside, different forces establish a temporary balance—trust cautiously rebuilding between two damaged people, connection persisting despite unresolved issues. We create our own momentary stability within the larger instability, our small world reflecting the larger one in reverse.

Tomorrow we face the chaos waiting at Boston Harbor, disrupted dimensional boundaries and cult fanatics pursuing cosmic destruction. But tonight we claim a brief sanctuary in a connection that goes beyond professional partnership without demanding premature labels.

The calm before the cosmic storm, precious not despite its temporary nature but because of it. Understanding its value means embracing its impermanence—a lesson that applies to both philosophical ideas and personal reality.

I listen to Nadia's breathing gradually even out into sleep's rhythm while I remain awake, my transformation sensitivity preventing complete rest despite my physical exhaustion. A protective instinct emerges without conscious thought, keeping watch over her safety while she rests.

Through the cabin windows, stars shimmer with subtle irregularity, cosmic light bending strangely in our atmosphere. The moon moves toward its eclipse position with astronomical certainty, celestial mechanics continuing regardless of human intervention or supernatural manipulation.

Whatever comes tomorrow, we face it having acknowledged what matters beyond mere survival. A partnership that began from professional necessity but evolved into something even my transformation couldn't properly name—a connection that defies easy categories yet is no less real for lacking a simple definition.

I stay watchful through the deepening night, a guardian state settling naturally over my human consciousness. Outside, weather patterns continue their subtle deviation from normal, warning of greater disruption yet to come.

The calm before. Precious because of its temporary nature, not despite it. These moments between preparation and action, when simply existing proves enough without demanding movement or answers.

For now, that's enough.

Chapter 19: Old Friends

Morning light cuts through the fog as we drive back to Boston, leaving behind the safety of the cabin. Nadia steers her sedan along winding country roads while I flip through the medical file Dr. Chen sent overnight. My body feels restless, caught between my two forms, not fully comfortable in either one.

“These blood tests make no sense,” I tell her, examining pages covered in Chen’s red-inked notes. “My cells are breaking down and rebuilding themselves at the same time. The markers contradict each other completely.”

“You’re a medical mystery,” Nadia says, squinting as the fog thickens the closer we get to the harbor. “Chen’s putting his career on the line just by running these tests off the record.”

“Martin never cared much for rules,” I say, closing the file and stuffing it into my worn messenger bag. “That’s why he still talks to me when most of my old colleagues practically run away when they see me coming.”

The irony hits me—I’ve spent months pushing people away, yet here I am, relying on the few friends who refused to let me disappear completely. My change hasn’t just been physical. The lone wolf routine I adopted after Mike’s death doesn’t work anymore, not with the supernatural mess I’m facing.

Boston’s skyline appears as the fog thins, the familiar city looking slightly off through my enhanced senses. Building edges shimmer strangely, solid structures seeming to ripple where reality weakens near the harbor. Most people would never notice, their brains filtering out what doesn’t fit their normal world. But I see it all—the cracks forming where chaos pushes against our reality.

“Drop me at Mass General’s service entrance,” I tell Nadia as we enter the city. “Chen can’t be seen with me in the main lobby, not with hospital brass watching his department like hawks since that audit.”

She nods, weaving through morning traffic with the same concentration she uses when deciphering ancient texts. “I’ll meet Professor Winters at the museum archives while you’re with Chen. His expertise in astronomical alignments might help us pin down the eclipse timing.”

There’s comfort in splitting up tasks like this, finding some normal routine in all this supernatural chaos. Our partnership works despite the complicated personal stuff between us. Neither of us brings up last night’s conversation or the peaceful moment we shared at the cabin. Some things are better left unanalyzed, valuable precisely because they defy explanation.

“Call me when you’re done,” she says, pulling up to the hospital’s service area where delivery trucks idle by unmarked doors. “And Jake—be careful what you tell Chen. Even friends have limits to what they should know.”

Her warning isn’t really needed, but I know it comes from genuine concern. I nod, grabbing my bag and coat as I get out.

“You be careful too,” I tell her. “Winters is connected to the university board. He sits right near Blackwood at those fancy fundraising dinners.”

Her small smile tells me she appreciates my concern too. “I know. I’ll keep it strictly theoretical research.”

We part ways efficiently, splitting up because the job requires it, not because of any emotional tension. That’s progress, given our complicated history.

The morgue’s antiseptic smell hits my enhanced senses like a punch—sharp chemicals barely masking the underlying scent of decay that no cleaning can completely remove. Chen hunches over a microscope at his workstation, his lab coat wrinkled from working through the night.

“Your courier was quick,” I say as I walk in.

Chen doesn’t jump at my voice—one reason I trust him. Nothing startles a man who spends his days talking to the dead.

“Harlow.” He glances up for a second before returning to his specimen. “You look slightly more alive than my usual visitors.”

His dark humor hasn’t changed since our years working cases together—that scientific detachment mixed with dry wit that made gruesome crime scenes somehow bearable. That feels like another lifetime now, before that warehouse rooftop where an Egyptian god hijacked my existence.

“Pretty spry for a dead guy,” I agree, sitting on a metal stool across from him. “Though according to your tests, I’m neither really alive nor properly dead.”

“Medicine doesn’t have words for what you are.” Chen finally looks up from his microscope, turning to face me. New lines crease his face, fatigue deepening around his watchful eyes. “Your cells are dying and regenerating at the same time, breaking all the biological rules. It’s like watching evolution and devolution happening at once under the microscope.”

“Got any theories that don’t involve gods? I’m tired of supernatural explanations.”

Chen takes off his glasses, wiping them with the edge of his lab coat—his usual habit when thinking through something complicated.

“If I have to stick to science, I’d guess your cells have changed at the quantum level—existing in multiple states at once instead of one fixed form.” He puts his glasses back on with a practiced motion. “But regular medicine has no framework for dealing with that.”

“Which is why my file ended up in your secret research drawer instead of a medical journal.” I glance at the locked cabinet where he keeps his weirder investigations. “How bad is it, Martin? Give it to me straight.”

His expression softens from doctor to friend, the professional mask slipping for a moment.

“Your transformation is speeding up, Jake. Every time you shift forms, it leaves marks on your cells. The boundaries between your states are...” he pauses, searching for the right word, “...wearing away. Blending. Cat traits showing up in your human form, human awareness staying present in your cat form.”

“I’ve noticed. My senses are sharper, reflexes faster, sometimes things happen without me meaning them to.” I flex my fingers, thinking of the claws that sometimes emerge when I’m stressed.

“It’s going deeper than surface changes.” Chen’s voice is precise but not unkind. “Your DNA is changing with each transformation. The changes are becoming permanent, Jake. Each shift makes you less human, biologically speaking.”

This should shock me more than it does. Maybe I’ve already suspected it, noticing how my own feelings about transforming have shifted—from fighting it to reluctantly accepting it, and now starting to integrate it into who I am.

“How long?” I ask, my detective mind wanting the practical details instead of the philosophical implications.

“Can’t say exactly given how unprecedented this is. But at the current rate—complete integration within weeks, maybe days if you transform more frequently.” He watches my face carefully. “You don’t seem very upset by this news.”

I think about his comment, surprised to realize he’s right. Months ago, the idea of permanently changing would have terrified me, seemed like losing my humanity and identity. Now it just feels like an inevitable next step rather than a disaster.

“My perspective has changed,” I explain simply. “Going back to fully human probably isn’t possible anymore. Integration might be the best outcome I can hope for.”

“Philosophy aside, you should know that constantly switching between forms is putting enormous stress on your body.” Chen shows me his tablet with a colorful chart showing declining lines. “Your vital signs show the classic patterns of a system under extreme stress. In simple terms, all this shifting is wearing you out.”

“Figured as much.” The exhaustion I feel goes beyond normal tiredness—a deep weariness that sleep never fully fixes. “Any medical advice, or am I stuck with ancient Egyptian magic for treatment options?”

“Limit transformations when you can to reduce stress on your cells. Stay hydrated and eat well to support healing.” His doctor’s advice gives way to friendly concern. “And Jake—fighting this change might do more harm than accepting it as evolution.”

His advice mirrors what Nadia said about integration versus separation—the same conclusion reached through completely different paths. Science and archaeology pointing to the same answer about my condition.

“No going back to what was,” I murmur, echoing my realization from last night.

“That’s rarely an option with any major life change,” Chen agrees, thinking I’m talking about our friendship. “Speaking of which—someone else wants to see you. I agreed as a professional courtesy, but I checked them out first out of loyalty to you.”

My senses instantly sharpen, cat instincts flaring at potential danger. “Someone knows I’m here?”

“Old colleague.” Chen’s neutral tone hints at caution. “Detective Esposito is waiting upstairs. Says it’s about the Blackwood surveillance.”

Teresa Esposito. One of the few cops who kept in touch after I quit, though mostly through brief texts on Mike’s birthday or when someone retired. Not exactly a friend, but not an enemy either—somewhere in that gray area between work acquaintance and potential ally.

“Can we trust her?” I ask directly, knowing Chen’s good at reading people.

“She’s turned down three promotions that would have required her to play politics,” he answers, his facts telling me what I need to know. “And she brought this to you off the books.”

He pulls a manila folder from his desk drawer, sliding it across the metal surface deliberately. The label simply reads “HARBOR ACTIVITY - UNOFFICIAL.”

“I’ll meet her at the coffee cart by the east entrance,” I decide, putting the folder in my bag without looking inside. “Public enough to be safe, quiet enough to talk.”

Chen nods, approving my strategy. “I’ll tell her.”

I stand to leave, then pause, knowing a simple goodbye isn’t enough for a friend who’s risked his career repeatedly to help me.

“Thank you, Martin. For everything.” The words aren’t enough, but they’re necessary.

“Save the end-of-the-world gratitude until after we actually prevent the end of the world,” he says dryly. “My morgue’s full enough without adding refugees from another dimension.”

His dark humor makes me smile unexpectedly. Some relationships stay the same despite all the supernatural chaos—Chen’s practical science-minded approach a welcome anchor in my shifting reality.

The coffee cart sits between hospital wings—busy enough that no one would try anything, with enough background noise to frustrate any eavesdropping. Perfect neutral ground for a sensitive conversation.

I spot Esposito right away, her small frame positioned with a cop's instinct—back against the wall, clear view of the main entrance, escape route already mapped. Once a detective, always a detective. Some habits stick with you.

She notices me a second after I spot her, her eyes widening briefly—the only sign she's surprised by how I look. I suddenly realize how I must appear to someone who knew me before—thinner, more intense, moving with a fluid grace that no human could quite manage. Different.

"Harlow." She stays seated as I approach, looking casual while missing nothing. "You look..."

"Different," I finish for her, taking the chair across from her. "I hear you've been working the harbor even though it's officially port authority jurisdiction."

No use pretending this is a friendly reunion. We were never that close, and there's no time for small talk now anyway.

"Unofficial cooperation between departments," she confirms, sliding her paper coffee cup back and forth—might be nerves, might be a distraction tactic. "Blackwood's shipping manifests don't add up. His private security blocks standard inspections, with paperwork signed by big shots at city hall."

"Official investigation hit political roadblocks," I say, recognizing the familiar pattern with wealthy suspects.

"Officially, there is no investigation." The way she emphasizes 'officially' tells me everything about her frustration. "Unofficially, several of us have noticed patterns worth looking into."

Her careful words acknowledge both the risk she's taking and her determination to do the right thing—cops working outside the system when bureaucracy blocks justice. I've been there myself.

"Chen said you brought something." No point beating around the bush.

She nods, checking our surroundings casually before leaning in. "Blackwood International's shipping records show a pattern change starting about three months ago. More shipments through specific port areas, expanded private security beyond normal business needs, unusual cargo labels that don't match standard classification codes."

"Art and antiquities," I guess, connecting to the pattern of stolen artifacts.

"Among other things. But here's the weird part." Her professional mask slips, showing genuine concern. "Two dock workers reported strange conditions around certain containers. Equipment failing, unexplained temperature

changes, one guy experienced temporary disorientation bad enough to need medical leave.”

The description matches the effects of chaos entities—reality warping that causes physical and mental disruption in sensitive people.

“These dock workers,” I ask carefully, “anything they have in common?”

Esposito’s expression tells me she’s already spotted the pattern. “Both have family histories of what reports call ‘psychiatric sensitivity’—grandmother who claimed to have second sight, uncle with unexplained perceptual experiences. The kind of family traits people hide from employers but show up in detailed background checks.”

Supernatural sensitivity running in families—the same thing that made me a suitable vessel for Anubis. This realization makes me uncomfortable as I start seeing a bigger pattern forming in what seemed like separate cases.

“You’ve been tracking Blackwood’s movements,” I say, not bothering to phrase it as a question.

She doesn’t deny it. “Surveillance is tough with limited resources and his extensive security. But we’ve seen enough consistent patterns to predict some of his movements.”

Her formal words barely hide the excitement of a detective who’s cracked a tough case. Despite the risk to her career, she’s fully invested in this investigation, both intellectually and morally.

“Everything’s in the folder?” I nod toward my bag where Chen’s manila envelope sits unopened.

“Everything except what happened yesterday.” She pauses, weighing whether sharing more information is worth the risk. Decision made, she continues: “Blackwood’s estate got a large shipment last night, bypassing normal security checks. Private contractors unloaded it, with unusual containment procedures that our surveillance team noticed.”

“What about the estate itself?”

“Security tripled in the past week. New personnel with military backgrounds, not your standard rent-a-cops. New equipment that looks like advanced anti-surveillance tech, way beyond normal privacy measures.” She pauses, adding the key detail: “Strange weather patterns just around the property. Fog with no meteorological explanation, electromagnetic interference that affects our surveillance gear.”

Reality thinning. The pattern shows up everywhere connected to the ritual preparations—harbor, warehouse district, and now Blackwood’s estate. The boundaries between dimensions weakening where chaos entities push against our reality.

“You’re risking your career sharing this information,” I acknowledge, respecting both her choice and its potential cost.

Esposito looks me straight in the eye, dropping her professional mask. “Mike was my friend too, Harlow. Not as close as you two were, but we came up through the academy together. If Blackwood is connected to what happened three years ago, my career is a price I’m willing to pay.”

Mike’s name brings the expected guilt, but something else comes with it—a sense that I’m not alone in this anymore. For three years I’ve carried this burden by myself, thinking isolation was my punishment for my partner’s death. The idea that others might help shoulder this responsibility creates an unexpected shift in my feelings.

“There is a connection,” I confirm, giving her part of the truth without the supernatural complications. “Blackwood’s operation goes beyond normal criminal activity into something that threatens public safety. Your information gives us a crucial advantage for planning our next move.”

She nods, pleased her hunch was right but concerned about the growing threat. “We have resources if you need them. Unofficial channels that can operate outside normal department constraints.”

Her offer means a lot—cops willing to work outside the system to pursue justice despite political pressure. Under normal circumstances, I’d jump at the chance to work with officers I could trust.

But these are anything but normal circumstances.

“Keep your distance with the surveillance,” I warn her, trying to balance my appreciation with concern for their safety. “Blackwood’s operation involves environmental hazards beyond normal threat assessment. Standard containment approaches could make things worse instead of better.”

Professional courtesy requires I warn her without revealing supernatural elements she wouldn’t believe. Esposito’s expression tells me she senses there’s more beneath my cautious words.

“A specialized team is already working on this,” I add, thinking of Nadia’s academic colleagues who surprisingly know about rituals to reinforce reality’s boundaries. “Your intelligence gives us crucial information for planning our approach.”

I deliberately use formal language to create some professional distance, thanking her without encouraging more direct involvement that could expose her to supernatural dangers she’s not prepared for.

“I appreciate the risk you’ve taken, Detective.” The title acknowledges professional respect without presuming personal connection. “The information will be appropriately applied to ongoing investigation.”

Esposito accepts the subtle distancing with professional understanding, rising from her chair in signal of concluded exchange. “Channel seven remains available for emergency communication if required. Surveillance continues under established protocols until directed otherwise.”

We part ways with no personal goodbye, keeping things professional with formal language instead of emotional conversation. Just another balancing act between human connection and necessary distance—the kind of complicated dance my life has become since my transformation started changing who I am.

Nadia texts me right as I leave the hospital, timing so perfect it could be coincidence or some developing intuitive connection between us. Probably just coincidence, but after everything I’ve experienced lately, I’m less quick to dismiss these small synchronicities.

Meeting concluded. Significant developments requiring immediate review. Current location secure for discussion.

The formal academic language hides the urgency underneath—I’ve learned to read Nadia’s linguistic patterns well enough to sense her emotional state. Whatever she found at the museum archives must be important enough to risk texting about it, despite our usual security protocols.

I find her in the museum’s research annex, surrounded by star charts and astronomical calculations spread across the reading room table. When I walk in, her expression shows that intense focus I’ve come to recognize as her breakthrough face—academic excitement temporarily making her forget we’re trying to prevent an apocalypse.

“The eclipse timing matches the location coordinates more precisely than we thought,” she says immediately as I sit across from her. “The ritual site Blackwood picked for tomorrow night isn’t just positioned for the harbor layout—it aligns with a specific astronomical position that only happens once every 247 years.”

“So this is more than just a regular eclipse alignment?” I ask, knowing it’s important but needing her to translate the academic stuff into practical terms.

She points to a complex diagram with intersecting lines across a Boston harbor map, covered in astronomical notations marking specific spots. “The eclipse doesn’t just boost power in general. It creates a specific energy gateway at these exact coordinates—basically a cosmic doorway that lines up perfectly with the ritual site.”

“Making it much easier to break through the boundary,” I conclude, connecting the theory to what it means for us tactically.

“And almost impossible to close once it’s opened during peak alignment.” Her expression shifts from academic excitement to practical worry. “We need to ad-

just our countermeasure rituals for this specific alignment pattern. Our original calculations were based on standard eclipse properties, not this rare conjunction.”

I process this information alongside what Esposito told me about Blackwood’s enhanced estate security and unusual shipments.

“He’s speeding up his final preparations,” I say, mentally adjusting our timeline. “His estate received a major shipment last night with unusual containment procedures. The military-grade security upgrades suggest he’s protecting something extremely valuable.”

Nadia immediately understands, her archaeological training turning my observation into a specific theory. “The artifacts stolen from the university are only part of what he needs for the ritual. He’d need additional items that can’t be stolen from museums.”

“Private collection pieces,” I agree, my detective instincts matching her academic assessment. “Probably stored at his estate until they’re moved to the harbor ritual site.”

We both reach the same conclusion at the same time, our partnership once again showing how in sync our thinking is despite our complicated relationship.

“We need to find out what’s in that shipment,” Nadia says, already efficiently gathering her research materials. “If we can identify the specific artifacts, we can adjust our countermeasure rituals to match.”

“The estate security makes a direct approach difficult,” I warn, mentally reviewing Esposito’s notes about the perimeter enhancements and increased personnel. “Military-grade systems, triple the normal security staff, plus the additional complications from reality thinning around the property.”

“Conventional security is designed to keep humans out,” she reminds me, emphasizing ‘humans’ in a way that makes her meaning clear.

I get her point immediately. Cat form. Transformation would give me infiltration abilities that could bypass standard security measures. A logical way to use my supernatural advantage against conventional security.

But Chen’s medical warning echoes in my head alongside this tactical assessment—each transformation speeds up the integration process, with the physical toll adding up with each shift between forms. Good strategy would suggest saving my transformation ability for critical operations instead of just reconnaissance.

But without accurate information about the specific ritual components, our countermeasure preparations remain dangerously incomplete. Tactical necessity versus medical caution—another impossible choice in an increasingly complex situation.

“Tonight,” I decide, weighing all factors against how critical this mission is. “Security response is at its lowest between midnight and four AM based on previous surveillance patterns. Transformation gives me infiltration abilities with much less chance of detection compared to trying to sneak in as a human.”

Nadia’s expression shows both tactical agreement and personal concern—her professional side acknowledging the necessity while her human side worries about the consequences.

“I’ll coordinate with Eliza’s team for perimeter monitoring,” she agrees, accepting my decision despite her obvious reservations. “Remote support can provide an extra layer of security during your infiltration.”

Her practical response masks deeper concern that I’ve learned to recognize from her emotional patterns—her language becomes more academic and precise the more she’s suppressing emotional response. The professional language gives her necessary distance from the personal implications.

“Standard communication protocols,” I confirm, matching her professional tone even though I’m aware of the emotional undercurrent. “Minimum exposure time with predetermined extraction plans if anything goes wrong.”

We continue discussing tactics with appropriate focus, both aware of the emotional undercurrent but keeping it properly subordinate to operational necessities. The partnership we’ve developed allows us to process multiple dimensions of our relationship simultaneously without compromising the mission—maintaining professional coordination alongside personal connection without letting them interfere with each other.

This is another evolution in our complicated relationship—neither purely professional nor conventionally personal, but an integration of multiple aspects into a functioning whole. Yet another boundary becoming blurred in my transforming existence.

As we finish planning, having established all the practical details with appropriate precision, a brief pause allows our unspoken concerns a moment of acknowledgment.

“What did Chen say about your medical condition?” she asks, her question bridging professional considerations with personal interest.

“The transformation is creating permanent changes at the cellular level,” I confirm, giving her the relevant tactical information without going into unnecessary detail. “The integration process accelerates with each shift between forms.”

Her expression shows she understands the implications beyond the medical terminology—recognizing that my existence is steadily moving toward a permanent hybrid state rather than a temporary condition that could be reversed.

“Tonight’s operation will speed up the process further,” she observes, her statement carrying neither judgment nor any attempt to talk me out of it—simply

acknowledging the reality of the situation.

“It’s an acceptable risk given what we need to find out,” I respond, my professional phrasing hiding my personal acceptance of the inevitable progression. “The tactical necessity outweighs medical caution in our current situation.”

She nods, respecting my decision without challenging my reasoning. Another example of how our partnership has evolved—supporting my autonomy without abandoning her concern, balancing tactical necessity against personal implications without creating counterproductive conflict.

“Midnight, then,” she confirms, gathering her final research materials as museum closing announcements echo through the adjacent gallery spaces. “I’ll set up communication protocols with the support team before your deployment window.”

We part ways with professional efficiency, our partnership temporarily splitting up due to tactical necessity as the afternoon moves toward evening preparation. The infiltration plan comes together with precise operational details—time window, approach paths, communication protocols, backup extraction plans.

Another milestone approaches in my ongoing transformation, another threshold to cross between what I was and what I’m becoming. Each shift between forms moves me further from purely human existence toward something that’s neither fully mortal nor completely divine—integration instead of separation, adaptation instead of resistance.

Tonight’s mission is more than just gathering intelligence—it’s another step in accepting my inevitable evolution, embracing the transformation rather than fighting against the unstoppable tide.

No going back to what I was. Only forward into what I’m becoming.

Chapter 20: The Collector

Midnight turns Blackwood’s estate into a different world. I crouch behind a decorative hedge, studying the sprawling mansion from the shadows. Security lights cast sharp geometric patterns across manicured lawns, while infrared sensors create invisible trip wires between ornamental statues. Three guards patrol the perimeter, their movements precise and professional—nothing like the rent-a-cops most wealthy Bostonians hire to protect their valuables.

These men move like soldiers, hyperaware of their surroundings. Military training, just as Esposito reported. The kind of security you’d expect for a government installation, not a private residence. Whatever Blackwood’s protecting, he’s serious about keeping it safe.

I check my watch. Twenty minutes before Nadia initiates the distraction at the rear gate—just enough time to prepare for transformation. The process still

hurts, but now familiarity makes the pain almost a comfort, a known quantity in this increasingly chaotic reality.

“You ready for this?” I mutter, feeling Anubis’s presence stir within my consciousness.

The transformation grows easier as you resist less, his voice responds, carrying that strange dual quality—both inside my mind and somehow outside it simultaneously. *Your cells remember their alternate configuration more readily now.*

“That’s what worries me,” I reply, thinking of Chen’s warning about permanent cellular changes. Each transformation brings me closer to something that isn’t fully human anymore.

Fear of change is a uniquely human trait, Anubis observes with that detached curiosity I’ve come to recognize. *Yet your species constantly seeks transformation through your brief lives.*

Philosophical debates with ancient Egyptian deities—just another Tuesday in my new existence. I push the conversation aside, focusing on the task at hand as I check my phone. A text from Nadia confirms her team is in position.

Ready when you are. Distraction in 18 min. E-team monitoring security channels.

I take a deep breath, center myself, and let the change begin.

The transformation feels different this time—smoother, almost fluid. My bones reshape with minimal grinding, muscles sliding into new configurations without the usual tearing sensation. Maybe Chen was right about my body adapting, my cells learning the path between forms.

My senses sharpen as the transformation completes, the darkness around me revealing layers of detail invisible to human eyes. The night air carries information that floods my awareness—the guards’ aftershave, rodents hiding beneath the garden shed, residual exhaust from Blackwood’s car returning three hours ago.

And something else. Something wrong.

A subtle scent hangs around the property—the distinctive combination of myrrh, natron, and something metallic that I’ve come to associate with ritual magic. But underlying it is another smell, acrid and alien, like reality itself burning around the edges. The chaos entities, pressing against the thinning barrier between dimensions.

I slip through the darkness in cat form, my movements silent as I approach the first gap in the security perimeter. The guard checks his watch, then turns to begin his circuit around the eastern wall—exactly as predicted by Esposito’s surveillance notes. Fifteen seconds of vulnerability, just enough time for

a shadow darker than the others to dart across the lawn and underneath the ornamental shrubs lining the main building.

The scent grows stronger as I approach the house. Something pulses against my whiskers—not air current, but reality itself fluctuating slightly, like a heartbeat from another dimension. The wrongness makes my fur stand on end, every instinct warning me to flee.

Instead, I press forward.

The rear service entrance offers my best infiltration point—a small delivery door where staff bring in groceries and supplies. I’ve timed my approach to coincide with the kitchen staff’s departure, the last employees leaving after preparing for tomorrow’s events. The catering manager exits precisely on schedule, locking the door behind him.

His keys jingle, the sound painfully loud to my enhanced hearing. I hold perfectly still in the shadow of a stone planter, becoming just another piece of darkness. He glances around once, something making him uneasy though he doesn’t know why. Then he shrugs and walks to his car.

I wait until his taillights disappear down the long driveway before approaching the door. Human security systems have weaknesses they don’t even realize—like the small pet door installed for Blackwood’s previous cat, now deceased according to Nadia’s research but never removed from the service entrance.

A tight squeeze, but my feline form slips through the opening with only minor discomfort. The kitchen beyond is immaculate, stainless steel surfaces gleaming under low security lighting. The space feels sterile, unlivable—a place for servants to work, not for people to gather. Nothing like the warm, slightly chaotic kitchen at Nadia’s cabin that’s become our informal headquarters.

I follow my nose, tracking the strange scent deeper into the mansion. The opulence of Blackwood’s home reveals itself as I pad silently through corridors lined with museum-quality art. Renaissance masters hang alongside ancient artifacts, all perfectly lit by recessed lighting, as if the entire house is a gallery designed to impress invisible visitors. No photos of family members, no personal touches—just objects of immense value displayed like trophies.

The weird smell grows stronger as I approach the mansion’s eastern wing. According to the building plans Nadia obtained, this section was recently renovated, with contractors working under unusually strict confidentiality agreements.

A soft electronic hum catches my attention. I follow it to an unassuming door nestled between two Greek statues. Unlike the other doors in the mansion with their ornate hardware, this one features a sleek electronic lock with a keypad and biometric scanner. Security inconsistent with interior decoration—the first real sign this door hides something important.

My cat-eyes catch what human vision would miss—tiny scratches on the marble floor where the door swings inward, revealing much more frequent use than the rest of this seemingly unused wing. A minuscule speck of something golden clings to the bottom edge of the doorframe. I sniff it cautiously.

Gold leaf. Egyptian.

Based on the building plans, this doorway should open to a simple storage closet. The advanced security and trace evidence suggest otherwise.

A soft buzzing from my collar interrupts my investigation. The miniaturized communicator Nadia's tech friend designed pulses once, signaling that the distraction is about to begin. I back away from the door, finding a shadowed alcove behind a large Chinese vase. Within thirty seconds, muffled voices and hurried footsteps announce security responding to some commotion at the property's edge.

The door I've been examining suddenly opens, light spilling into the darkened hallway. A security officer emerges, speaking urgently into his radio.

"Perimeter alert in Sector Four. I'm checking the collection now while Thompson responds to the alarm."

Collection. The casual word choice suggests regular protection duty rather than new security brought in for a special event. This man knows what's behind the door.

He leaves the door ajar in his hurry—a critical mistake and my perfect opportunity. I dart forward as he rushes toward the main security office, slipping through the gap before the door can swing closed. I'm inside what should be a storage closet but is clearly something else entirely.

The space beyond leaves me momentarily frozen, my cat-instincts overwhelmed by what I'm seeing. A vast chamber stretches before me, far larger than the exterior architecture suggests possible. Later, Nadia will explain theories about pocket dimensions and space-bending properties of certain artifacts, but in this moment, all I know is that I'm seeing the impossible.

Glass cases line the walls, each containing Egyptian artifacts that would make museum curators weep with envy. Statues, scrolls, weaponry, and jewelry spanning dynasties stand displayed with perfect climate control and lighting. But unlike a museum collection organized by historical period or function, these items appear grouped by some other logic—ritual purpose, perhaps, or magical properties.

At the chamber's center sits the most disturbing display. A complete ritual circle has been laid out on the floor, golden inlay forming hieroglyphic patterns that seem to shift slightly when viewed peripherally. The stolen university artifacts occupy specific points around this circle, each positioned with precision on dedicated pedestals.

But the circle remains incomplete. Several pedestals stand empty, awaiting the final components that will activate the full ritual.

The alien smell is overwhelming here—reality stretched tissue-thin by whatever forces these artifacts channel. My whiskers tingle painfully, the air itself seeming to resist my presence.

A voice suddenly breaks the silence, coming from a room adjacent to the main chamber. I freeze, then slink toward the partially open door, keeping to the shadows cast by the display cases.

“—preparations are nearly complete.” Blackwood’s cultured voice drifts through the opening. “The astronomical alignment reaches perfection at exactly 10:17 tomorrow night.”

I position myself to peer through the crack between door and frame. The room beyond appears to be a private study, walls lined with ancient texts and scrolls. Blackwood stands before an antique desk, his back to me as he arranges items in a precise pattern. But the disturbing part isn’t what he’s doing—it’s who he appears to be talking to.

No one. The room is empty except for him.

“Yes, I understand the risks,” he continues, responding to a voice only he can hear. “The sacrificial elements have been prepared according to your specifications.”

He turns slightly, offering me a partial view of his face. The change in him since I last saw him at the museum benefit is shocking. Deep hollows shadow his eyes, his skin carrying an unhealthy grayish tinge. Blood vessels stand out prominently on his temples—not the normal signs of aging but something more sinister, as if something is consuming him from within.

“My family’s return is guaranteed once the gateway opens? That was our agreement.” His voice carries an edge of desperate hope that contradicts his otherwise controlled demeanor.

He pauses, listening to something beyond normal hearing. Then he nods. “The Harlow situation concerns me. His interference has already disrupted timetables twice. The avatar status was... unexpected.”

My ears prick forward. He’s talking about me.

“No, I understand he must be contained, not killed. The essence transfer requires his specific bloodline properties.” Blackwood’s hand shakes slightly as he lifts a small golden object from the desk—the cat amulet mentioned in Nadia’s grandfather’s notes. “The binding collar is prepared for capture during the eclipse phase.”

A binding collar designed specifically to trap me. This infiltration has provided crucial intelligence—not just about the artifacts, but about Blackwood’s plans for me specifically.

“Of course the Egyptologist must be taken alive as well. Her knowledge of counter-ritual procedures makes her both valuable and dangerous. She’ll be collected tonight.”

My blood runs cold despite my feline form. Tonight. They’re moving against Nadia immediately. I need to warn her, get out of here now.

As if sensing my urgency, Blackwood suddenly stiffens, turning toward the door.

“Something’s here,” he says, voice dropping to a whisper. “Something’s watching.”

I back away quietly, moving toward the main chamber’s exit. Too late. The security door bursts open as the guard returns, accompanied by a second officer.

“Sir! The perimeter breach was a diversion. We found equipment suggesting surveillance and—”

He stops mid-sentence, eyes locking onto my feline form crouched between display cases. For one heartbeat, he seems merely confused by a cat in the secure room. Then recognition dawns in his eyes.

“The black cat! It’s the one from the briefing—the avatar!”

I don’t wait for more. I bolt toward the door, using my smaller size and agility to dart between their legs. The guard’s hands grab at empty air as I twist past him, claws finding purchase on the polished floor as I accelerate into the hallway.

Alarms blare throughout the mansion, lights flashing as the security system activates to full alert. I hear Blackwood’s voice shouting behind me.

“Don’t kill it! Containment only! We need it alive!”

Small comfort as I race through the suddenly chaos-filled mansion. Guards appear from side rooms, their professional training evident in how quickly they respond to the alert. I use every advantage of my cat form—squeezing through small spaces, scaling furniture, changing direction in mid-leap to confuse pursuit.

The kitchen door that provided my entrance is now blocked by security personnel. I skid to a halt, sensing guards approaching from behind as well. Trapped.

A quick survey reveals my only option—a narrow bathroom window left slightly ajar on the ground floor. I sprint toward it, hearing footsteps converging from multiple directions. The gap is almost too small even for my cat form, but desperation adds strength to my leap.

I wriggle through the opening, feeling something tear along my side as a guard’s hand grasps at my back leg. Pain flares, but momentum carries me through to the garden beyond. I land awkwardly, stumbling before finding my balance again.

No time to assess the injury. I streak across the moonlit grounds, using every shadow and ornamental bush for momentary cover. Behind me, guards pour

from the mansion, flashlight beams cutting through darkness as they organize a search pattern.

I focus on reaching the perimeter, pushing my burning muscles beyond normal endurance. The fence looms ahead—three meters of wrought iron with security sensors. In human form, it would be impossible. As a cat, with the right angle and desperation...

I gather myself and leap, claws catching the decorative scrollwork halfway up. Pain shoots through my injured side, but I pull myself higher, reaching the top just as flashlight beams converge on my position.

“There! On the fence!”

Something whistles past my ear—a tranquilizer dart missing by centimeters. I drop to the ground outside the fence, landing hard but forcing myself back to my feet. The woods beyond offer safety if I can reach them.

I run, each breath burning in my lungs, blood seeping from the wound in my side. The communication device on my collar vibrates urgently—Nadia, trying to make contact. I can’t respond, can only keep moving as shouts and the crash of pursuit fade behind me.

The trees swallow me into sheltering darkness. Still, I run until my legs finally give out, collapsing beneath a fallen log as the woods spin around me. The injury is worse than I thought, blood matting my fur.

I need to transform back, to warn Nadia. But my body refuses, strength depleted by the escape and blood loss. The best I can manage is to activate the emergency beacon on my collar, sending my GPS coordinates to Nadia’s team.

As consciousness wavers, I process what I’ve learned. Blackwood speaking to empty air. The artifacts arranged for a ritual still missing key components. The binding collar designed specifically for me.

Most urgently: they’re moving against Nadia tonight.

I fight to stay conscious, to transform and reach her. But darkness closes in, and the last thing I feel is Anubis’s presence strengthening within me, working to keep my feline heart beating as blood continues to seep into the forest floor.

Chapter 21: The Widow

I wake to the scent of antiseptic and coffee. My eyes open to find Nadia’s worried face hovering above me, her fingers gently stroking behind my ears. I’m still in cat form, stretched out on what appears to be an examination table in Dr. Chen’s back room. The wound in my side throbs dully, now cleaned and stitched.

“There you are,” Nadia says, relief washing across her features. “You had us worried.”

I try to transform, focusing on my human shape, but pain flares along my side and exhaustion pulls me back down. Anubis’s voice whispers through my consciousness: *Rest. The body must heal before changing forms.*

Chen appears beside Nadia, checking the bandages wrapped around my midsection. “Your tracking beacon was a godsend. We found you just in time—another hour out there and blood loss would have become critical.”

I manage to lift my head, looking around at the makeshift treatment area. Chen has converted his office into a secure location, blackout curtains drawn and security cameras monitoring the approaches. Smart. If Blackwood’s people are hunting for me, hospitals would be watched.

“Blackwood,” I try to say, but it emerges as a distressed meow.

“We know,” Nadia says, somehow intuiting my meaning. “Your collar camera captured most of it before transmission cut out. They were planning to come after me.”

“Were?” I think, ears perking up.

“We’ve moved operations twice since then,” Chen explains, seemingly able to read my feline expressions after months of practice. “Esposito’s team confirmed surveillance units at both the university and the cabin. We’re staying mobile.”

Relief washes through me. Nadia is safe, at least for now. I take better stock of my situation—the wound is painful but already feels like it’s healing with unnatural speed. Anubis’s influence, accelerating the process.

“You need at least twelve hours before attempting transformation,” Chen says, reading data from a tablet displaying what appears to be my vital signs. He’s cobbled together medical monitoring equipment modified to work with my unique physiology. “The good news is that your healing rate is approximately triple normal. The bad news is that you’re still vulnerable until then.”

I let my head drop back to the table, frustration and urgency warring with the physical reality of my condition. Twelve hours. The eclipse ritual Blackwood mentioned is approaching rapidly, and we’re running out of time to stop it.

“We’ve been analyzing what your camera captured,” Nadia says, pulling up images on her laptop. “The ritual circle in Blackwood’s collection chamber is missing three components, based on the empty pedestals. We’ve identified two of them.”

She turns the screen so I can see. One image shows a ceremonial dagger similar to the one that killed me at the warehouse. The second is an amulet shaped like a scarab beetle.

“The third is what concerns me most,” she continues, zooming in on architectural plans of Blackwood’s secret chamber. “Based on the positioning and the texts visible in your footage, I believe it’s a heart scarab—a specific funerary amulet placed over the heart of the deceased to prevent negative judgment in the afterlife.”

Chen makes a thoughtful noise. “Wouldn’t that be locked in a museum somewhere? These aren’t exactly common artifacts.”

Nadia’s expression darkens. “That’s what’s been bothering me. The positioning in the ritual circle suggests it needs to be a heart scarab with specific properties—one that’s witnessed death and absorbed its energy.” She hesitates, glancing at me. “Jake, I think it might be connected to your partner’s death.”

The words hit like a physical blow. Mike. His death has hovered at the periphery of this case from the beginning—the guilt and grief that drove me to leave the force, the nightmares that still wake me. But I hadn’t considered a direct connection to the artifacts.

A memory surfaces—Mike mentioning a strange Egyptian piece recovered during a raid three days before his death. Something he’d planned to log into evidence but wanted to research first because it “felt wrong” in his hand.

I need to transform, to speak, to explain this connection. I focus again, pushing through the pain, feeling fur begin to recede slightly before my strength gives out.

“Don’t push it,” Chen warns. “Your systems are still stabilizing.”

Nadia places a hand gently on my head. “I understand. Mike had something, didn’t he?”

I manage a small nod, impressed yet again by her intuition.

“His wife might know,” Nadia suggests carefully. “Sarah, right?”

Another nod, more hesitant this time. Sarah Reynolds. Mike’s widow. The woman who holds me at least partially responsible for her husband’s death. We haven’t spoken in nearly a year, not since she told me to stop checking on her and the kids, that my presence only reopened wounds.

“I’ll go,” Nadia offers, but I shake my head firmly. No. This is my responsibility. My past to face.

“But you can’t transform yet,” Chen protests.

I look meaningfully at the clock on the wall, then hold up a paw.

“Six hours,” Nadia translates correctly. “You’ll try again in six hours, not twelve.”

Chen shakes his head. “Medically inadvisable, but...” He shrugs, familiar enough with my stubbornness by now to know argument is pointless.

The next six hours pass in agonizing slowness. I drift between sleep and wakefulness as my body repairs itself with supernatural efficiency. Nadia stays nearby, alternating between research and gently stroking my fur. The contact soothes us both—her anxiety about the coming confrontation, my frustration at physical weakness.

Chen monitors my healing, making notes on what he calls my “accelerated regenerative capacity” with the clinical detachment that makes him both an excellent doctor and one of the few people capable of handling the strangeness my existence has introduced to his life.

Precisely six hours later, I focus again on transformation. This time, the change flows through me—painful still, but manageable. Fur recedes, limbs elongate, perspective shifts as I regain human form. The bandages around my midsection stretch but hold, Chen’s preparations accounting for the change.

“Impressive,” he murmurs, checking the wound which now appears as a partially healed laceration rather than the deep gash it was hours ago.

I sit up carefully, accepting clothes from Nadia. “Mike mentioned an artifact,” I say, voice rough from disuse. “Three days before he died. Said he found it during the warehouse raid on the Harborside smuggling case.”

Nadia’s eyes widen. “That timing fits with the early stages of cult activity in our timeline.”

“He was keeping it out of evidence temporarily. Said it felt... wrong. Wanted to research it first.” I pull a shirt over my head, wincing as the movement pulls at my healing side. “If anyone knows what happened to it after his death, it would be Sarah.”

“You really should rest longer,” Chen advises, though his tone indicates he knows it’s futile.

“Blackwood is moving forward with the ritual tomorrow night,” I reply, checking the weapons Nadia has assembled on a nearby table. I select a small pistol, checking its load before tucking it into an ankle holster. “We’re out of time for caution.”

“At least take these,” Chen hands me a bottle of pills. “Modified pain management that won’t interfere with your enhanced metabolism. And this,” he adds, pressing an autoinjector into my palm. “Emergency stimulant if you crash. One dose only, and the aftermath won’t be pleasant.”

I pocket both, nodding thanks. Chen’s adaptability continues to impress me—from city medical examiner to supernatural crisis physician without missing a beat.

“Sarah’s teaching night classes at the community college this semester,” I say, recalling information from my occasional digital check-ins on Mike’s family. “She should be home now.”

“I’ll drive,” Nadia insists, and I don’t argue. The transformation has left me drained despite the healing, and her practical approach to crisis management has become our team’s backbone.

We take surface streets, avoiding major thoroughfares where traffic cameras might track our movements. The city feels different tonight—shadows deeper, lights harsher, as if reality itself is becoming more extreme as the ritual approaches. Maybe it’s just my perception, altered by pain and urgency, or maybe the dimensional barriers are already thinning.

Sarah’s house sits on a quiet street in Dorchester, a modest two-story with a small front yard and cheerful yellow door that Mike painted the summer before he died. As Nadia parks across the street, memories wash over me—cookouts in the backyard, helping Mike build the treehouse for the kids, Sarah’s laughter as she brought out beers after we finished.

A life I was adjacent to but never quite achieved for myself. A normal life that shattered the night Mike died protecting a child I had put in danger with my reckless pursuit of a suspect.

“Want me to come with you?” Nadia asks softly.

I shake my head. “Some ghosts you have to face alone.”

The walk to the front door feels longer than it should. Each step surfaces another memory, another regret. By the time I ring the doorbell, my heart is pounding in a way that has nothing to do with my injury.

Light footsteps approach. The door opens, and Sarah Reynolds stands before me, momentarily frozen in shock. She looks both exactly the same and completely different—the same warm brown eyes and gentle features, but new lines around her mouth, a streak of premature gray in her dark hair that wasn’t there a year ago.

“Jake.” My name falls from her lips like something dropped accidentally. Not welcoming, but not immediately hostile either.

“I’m sorry to show up like this,” I begin, the carefully rehearsed speech disintegrating under her direct gaze. “I wouldn’t if it wasn’t important.”

She studies me with the evaluating look that made her a formidable English professor, taking in the bandage visible at my collar, the exhaustion I can’t hide. Something in her expression shifts subtly.

“The kids are at my mother’s,” she says finally, stepping back from the door. Not quite an invitation, but an opening.

I step inside, hit immediately by the familiar scent of the house—cinnamon and books and furniture polish. Mike’s presence lingers in the built-ins he crafted, the family photos on the wall, though I notice his service portrait has been moved from its prominent position in the living room.

"You look terrible," Sarah observes, arms crossed as she leans against the kitchen doorway.

"Been a rough year," I reply, attempting a smile that probably looks more like a grimace.

"For all of us." Her tone remains neutral, carefully modulated. The English professor managing difficult emotions with practiced control. "Why are you here, Jake?"

Direct approach. Always her way. "I need to ask about something Mike might have had shortly before he died. An artifact he found during the Harborside case."

Something flickers across her face—recognition, then wariness. "Why now, after three years?"

How to answer that? I can't exactly explain that I died, made a pact with an Egyptian god, and now transform into a cat while hunting a cult. Even in my new reality of impossible things, there are limits to what people can accept.

"It's connected to a case I'm working," I say instead. "Something dangerous that... that might explain aspects of what happened to Mike."

She stiffens, anger flashing across her face. "Don't. Don't you dare use his death for whatever mess you're involved in now."

"Sarah—"

"No." She cuts me off sharply. "You don't get to come here after all this time and dig up the past. It took everything I had to rebuild after what happened. The kids are finally sleeping through the night again. Emma doesn't cry when she sees police uniforms anymore."

The words land like physical blows. I knew it was bad, but hearing the specific impacts hammers home the ripple effects of that night. Of my decisions.

"I'm not here to cause more pain," I say quietly. "But people are in danger—the same kind of danger that Mike stumbled into. I'm trying to stop it before anyone else gets hurt."

Sarah's eyes narrow. "What aren't you telling me?"

Always perceptive. It was something Mike loved about her—how she could see past surfaces to what people were hiding, even when they didn't recognize it themselves.

"More than I can explain," I admit. "But I swear to you, this is about making things right. About finishing what Mike started without even knowing it."

She studies me for a long moment, anger gradually giving way to something more complex. "You're different," she says finally. "Not just thinner, not just the injury. Something fundamental has changed."

If she only knew how accurate that observation is. “The last few months have been... transformative.”

A ghost of a smile touches her lips at my word choice. “That’s one way to put it.” She sighs, then gestures to the living room. “Sit before you fall down. I’ll get coffee.”

I sink onto the couch gratefully, the pain in my side flaring as adrenaline ebbs. Sarah returns with two mugs, placing one before me on the coffee table. The routine feels achingly normal, a glimpse of a reality I no longer inhabit.

“He did have something,” she says abruptly, cradling her mug. “An Egyptian scarab thing. About this big.” She indicates with her fingers a space roughly the size of a credit card. “He brought it home instead of logging it as evidence. Said it made him uneasy.”

My heart rate picks up. “Did he say why?”

“Just that it felt cold to the touch, even when it should have warmed up in his hand. He was researching it online, said the markings weren’t standard hieroglyphics.” She takes a sip of coffee, her gaze distant with memory. “He was going to take it to a professor friend at the university the next day. Then...” Her voice falters slightly. “Then the call came about the missing children, and everything else happened.”

The familiar weight of guilt presses down. If I had waited for backup that night instead of charging ahead... if I had listened to Mike’s more cautious approach...

Sarah seems to read my thoughts. “I blamed you for a long time,” she says quietly. “It was easier than accepting the randomness of it. Easier than telling the kids that sometimes terrible things just happen for no reason.”

I stare into my untouched coffee. “I blamed me too.”

“I know.” The simple acknowledgment hangs between us. “Mike wouldn’t have, though. He always said your impulsiveness was both your worst quality and your best. That night... he made his own choices too.”

Her words crack something open inside me—not absolution exactly, but a sharing of the burden I’ve carried alone for three years.

“After,” she continues, “the department returned his personal effects. The scarab thing wasn’t among them. I assumed it was logged into evidence with everything else from the case.”

“It wasn’t,” I reply. “I checked the evidence logs thoroughly after... afterward. Looking for answers.”

Sarah frowns, setting her mug down. “That’s odd. He definitely had it with him that night. I remember him putting it in his pocket before leaving.”

A chill runs through me despite the house's warmth. If the scarab wasn't in evidence and wasn't returned with his effects, that means it disappeared somewhere between Mike's death and the processing of the scene.

"Unless..." Sarah's expression shifts to something I can't quite read. She rises suddenly. "Wait here."

She disappears upstairs. I hear movement overhead, the sound of something heavy being moved. When she returns, she's carrying a plain wooden box I recognize immediately—Mike's personal keepsake box, where he stored meaningful odds and ends from cases throughout his career.

"The department sent this separately," she explains, setting it on the coffee table. "Said these items were in his desk rather than on him. I could never bring myself to go through it completely." She opens the lid, revealing a collection of mementos—challenge coins, photographs, handwritten thank-you notes from people he'd helped.

She reaches beneath these, pulling out a folded handkerchief from the bottom of the box. "This was underneath everything else. I saw it once but..." She unfolds the fabric carefully, revealing a scarab-shaped object about two inches long, carved from what appears to be obsidian or extremely dark stone.

The moment it's exposed, I feel it—a cold pulse of wrongness emanating from the object. My scar from the ritual dagger throbs in response, and I sense Anubis stirring within my consciousness, suddenly alert.

The heart scarab, his voice whispers through my mind. Corrupted by death energy.

"This is it," I breathe, fighting the urge to recoil from the object. Even without touching it, I can sense the death signature clinging to it—not just any death, but Mike's specifically. Somehow the artifact absorbed the energy of his passing.

Sarah watches my reaction with growing concern. "What is it really, Jake? What was Mike involved in?"

"Nothing he understood," I answer truthfully. "He stumbled onto something bigger and darker than either of us realized at the time." I look up from the scarab to meet her eyes. "But now I have a chance to finish it. To make it right."

She studies me for a long moment, then carefully rewraps the scarab. "Three years ago, I would have demanded full explanations. Now I've learned sometimes it's better not to know everything." She holds the wrapped object out to me. "Take it. Do whatever needs doing. But Jake—" Her voice hardens slightly. "—come back after. Tell me it mattered. That his death ultimately meant something."

I accept the scarab, feeling its cold energy even through the fabric. "I will," I promise, knowing it might be one I can't keep, given what we're facing.

As I tuck the wrapped artifact into my jacket pocket, Sarah's expression softens. "The kids ask about you sometimes. Emma remembers you teaching her to throw a spiral in the backyard."

The memory catches me off guard—a sunny afternoon, Mike at the grill, laughter as the football wobbled through the air. A normal moment from a past life.

"They're doing okay?" I ask, the question inadequate for all I want to know.

"Getting there." A small, hard-won smile. "Kids are resilient. More than we give them credit for."

We walk to the door together, the tension between us not gone but transformed into something more complex. At the threshold, Sarah hesitates, then does something that stuns me—she reaches out and hugs me briefly, careful of my injured side.

"Don't be a stranger," she says as she pulls away. "Whatever's happened to you, whatever you're involved in now... Mike would want me to say that."

I nod, unable to speak past the sudden tightness in my throat. The possibility of reconnection—of healing multiple wounds at once—hangs in the air between us.

"Be careful, Jake," she adds, her professor's perception catching something in my demeanor. "You look like a man walking into fire."

"Sometimes that's the only way out," I reply, the words coming from some deeper part of me, perhaps Anubis's influence on my thoughts.

She gives me one last searching look before closing the door. I stand on the porch for a moment, the scarab a cold weight in my pocket, the encounter with Sarah both healing and reopening old wounds simultaneously.

As I walk back to where Nadia waits in the car, the night air carries a strange electric quality, like the atmosphere before a storm. The neighborhood feels too quiet, the shadows between streetlights too deep. My enhanced senses pick up something that wasn't there when we arrived—a subtle wrongness in the air, a watching presence.

I scan the street carefully, eyes finding nothing unusual, but the sensation persists. Not just paranoia or hypervigilance; something is tracking us. I quicken my pace slightly, hand drifting toward the concealed weapon at my ankle.

Nadia sees my expression as I slide into the passenger seat. "Problem?"

"We're being watched," I say quietly, not looking directly toward the areas where I sense surveillance. "Drive normally. Don't head straight back to Chen's."

She pulls away from the curb without questioning me, her movements casual despite the tension I can see in her shoulders. "The scarab?"

I pat my pocket. “Got it. Sarah kept it all this time without knowing what it was.”

“And it’s definitely what we’re looking for?”

“Oh yeah.” The artifact pulses with cold energy, making my skin crawl even through its wrapping. “Anubis recognized it immediately. It’s been corrupted somehow, absorbing the energy of Mike’s death.”

Nadia takes a circuitous route through residential streets, making random turns to shake potential pursuit. “That matches what I suspected. Heart scarabs were meant to protect the deceased during judgment. But this one seems to have been modified to capture death energy instead.” She glances at the rearview mirror. “Black sedan, two cars back. Been with us since we left Sarah’s.”

I check the side mirror casually. The car maintains a precise distance, professional surveillance technique rather than ordinary following. “Cult security, not police,” I observe. “Too careful, too persistent.”

“Options?”

I consider our situation. The scarab is too important to risk in a confrontation, but leading cultists back to our safe house isn’t an option either.

“Head downtown,” I decide. “The financial district will be mostly empty this time of night. We’ll find somewhere to force their hand on our terms.”

Nadia nods, taking the next turn toward downtown Boston. As skyscrapers loom ahead, the sedan maintains its position, joined now by a second vehicle approaching from a side street.

“They’re herding us,” Nadia says tightly.

“Let them think it’s working,” I reply, checking the pistol at my ankle. “Get ready to drop me off near International Place. You continue on with the scarab, get it to Chen. I’ll handle our followers.”

“Jake, you’re injured—”

“Which is why we’re not both staying to fight,” I interrupt. “The scarab is the priority. If Blackwood gets all three components before the eclipse...”

She doesn’t argue further, knowing I’m right. As we approach the towering buildings of the financial district, streets nearly empty at this hour, she pulls over smoothly.

“Forty-eight hours,” I tell her, gripping her hand briefly. “If I don’t make contact by then, proceed with the contingency plan we discussed.”

“I don’t like this,” she says, but her eyes show understanding.

“Neither do I.” I offer a grim smile. “But separation gives us better odds than being caught together.”

I exit the car in one quick motion, ducking into the shadows between buildings as Nadia accelerates away. The pursuing vehicles hesitate momentarily at this unexpected development, then the first sedan continues after Nadia while the second pulls over near my position.

Good. Split the pursuit, improve her chances of escape. I move deeper into the concrete canyon between office towers, drawing them away from the street.

Behind me, car doors open and close quietly. Footsteps follow—two sets, maybe three. Professional, cautious movements. Not street thugs but trained personnel. Blackwood’s private security force.

The wound in my side throbs as adrenaline floods my system. I’m in no condition for extended combat, but I don’t need to win—just create enough delay and confusion for Nadia to get clear.

As I prepare to confront my pursuers, I feel Anubis’s presence strengthen within me, lending additional awareness of the shadows surrounding us. His voice whispers through my consciousness: *They seek the scarab, not you specifically. Use their assumptions against them.*

Understanding blooms. They think I still have the artifact. I can use that.

I duck behind a concrete planter, listening as footsteps spread out in search formation. Three distinct sets of movement—manageable odds if I’m smart about this.

“Target is injured,” a voice murmurs into a communications device. “Approach with caution. Non-lethal takedown only.”

I smile grimly in the darkness. At least they don’t want to kill me. Small comforts.

The night deepens around me as I prepare to confront my pursuers, the moon disappearing behind clouds as if acknowledging the coming conflict. In my pocket, my phone vibrates once—Nadia’s signal that she’s clear of immediate pursuit.

I breathe deeply, centering myself as Mike taught me years ago before tactical operations. The irony isn’t lost on me—using techniques he showed me while carrying the artifact that absorbed his death energy. Life and death, past and present, all circling back on themselves as I move silently through shadows that seem almost to bend toward me, responding to Anubis’s influence.

Whatever happens next, the scarab is safe with Nadia. One step closer to stopping Blackwood’s ritual. One step closer to making Mike’s death mean something beyond tragedy.

I step out to face my pursuers, ready for whatever comes next.

Chapter 22: Pieces of the Puzzle

The scarab felt unnaturally cold through its handkerchief wrapping as Nadia sped through Boston's streets, constantly checking her rearview mirror for signs of pursuit. The black sedan had stayed with her for nearly fifteen minutes before she'd managed to lose it by cutting through a hotel parking garage and emerging on the opposite side.

Even now, she remained hypervigilant, taking random turns and doubling back occasionally to ensure she wasn't being followed. Jake's decision to split up had been tactically sound, but worry for him gnawed at her. His injury was serious, his strength not fully recovered despite Anubis's accelerated healing.

"He'll be fine," she told herself firmly, gripping the steering wheel tighter. "He has to be."

The scarab pulsed with negative energy in the passenger seat beside her, a malevolent presence even through its wrapping. Its corrupted state both fascinated and repulsed her professional sensibilities. In all her years of studying Egyptian artifacts, she'd never encountered one that radiated such palpable wrongness. That it had been connected to Mike's death, absorbing that tragic energy, made it all the more disturbing.

Instead of returning directly to Dr. Chen's makeshift clinic, Nadia headed for the university. At this late hour, the archaeology department would be nearly deserted—perfect for what she needed to do. The security guard at the faculty parking lot nodded in recognition as she pulled in, accustomed to professors keeping odd hours.

"Working late again, Dr. Farouk?" he asked, barely glancing up from his crossword puzzle.

"Grant deadline," she lied smoothly, forcing a tired smile. "You know how it is."

He waved her through with a sympathetic nod. The academic excuse was universal and rarely questioned.

Nadia made her way to her office through dimly lit corridors, checking corners and listening for any unusual sounds. The scarab seemed to grow colder in her hand as she unlocked her office door, as if responding to the proximity of other Egyptian artifacts in the department collection.

Once inside, she sent a brief encrypted text to Chen—a prearranged all-clear signal letting him know she'd arrived safely at an alternate location. Then she secured the door and pulled the blinds before turning on only her desk lamp rather than the overhead lights. If anyone was watching the building, she wanted to appear as just another academic working late.

She carefully placed the wrapped scarab on her desk, keeping it isolated from her other materials. From a hidden compartment behind a row of books, she retrieved her grandfather's journal—the real one, not the decoy she kept in plain

sight. This volume contained his most controversial findings, the ones that had ultimately led to his death, though she hadn't understood that connection until recent months.

The journal's leather binding felt warm and familiar beneath her fingers, a stark contrast to the scarab's unnatural chill. She'd been working through its coded entries gradually, the complex cipher requiring both her linguistic skills and specific artifact references to decrypt fully.

With the discovery of the corrupted heart scarab, she now had the key to unlock the final sections.

"Let's see what you were hiding, Grandfather," she murmured, opening the journal to her latest decryption point.

The pages were filled with her grandfather's precise handwriting, alternating between conventional Arabic, Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics, and a personal shorthand he'd developed to obscure his most sensitive discoveries. Small diagrams and sketches populated the margins—ritual configurations, artifact arrangements, astronomical alignments.

Nadia had spent weeks decoding the sections about Anubis's dual nature and the gateway between worlds. But the final pages, dealing specifically with the ritual mechanics, had remained stubbornly opaque without the reference point of the heart scarab.

Carefully, she unwrapped the artifact, steeling herself against its aura of wrongness. The scarab was carved from obsidian so dark it seemed to absorb light, with fine gold inlay creating hieroglyphic patterns across its surface. But these weren't standard funeral texts—the symbols had been subtly altered in ways that perverted their original protective purpose.

She positioned her grandfather's journal beside it and began the methodical process of decryption, using the scarab's unique markings as the key to the cipher. The cold sensation from the artifact intensified as she worked, as if it resented being used this way, but she pressed on, driven by urgency.

Hours passed as she translated, cross-referenced, and annotated. The building grew quieter around her as even the most dedicated night owls departed. Occasionally, she paused to text updates to Chen, receiving brief acknowledgments in return but nothing from Jake—a silence that worried her increasingly as time passed.

Near midnight, the final pieces clicked into place, and Nadia sat back, stunned by what she'd uncovered.

"That's why it didn't make sense before," she whispered to the empty office.

Her grandfather's notes revealed that the Order of Eternal Dusk had fundamentally misunderstood the ritual's purpose. What they interpreted as a gateway-opening ceremony was actually a corrupted version of a much older ritual de-

signed to strengthen the barrier between worlds. By inverting certain elements and altering the artifacts' positions, they'd transformed a protective measure into a destructive one.

But more importantly, the journal contained precise diagrams showing the correct configuration—how the artifacts should be arranged to repair rather than rupture the gateway.

Nadia quickly photographed these pages with her phone, sending the encrypted images to both Chen and their secure cloud storage. If anything happened to her or the journal, the information would survive.

As she worked, a new entry caught her attention—a passage about the heart scarab specifically:

“The heart scarab is the lynchpin of the configuration, absorbing and redirecting energy. In its corrupted state, it channels death energy to weaken the barrier. But if purified through the correct ritual phrases and returned to its proper position, it can be transformed from key to lock, sealing rather than opening.”

Below this was a series of Ancient Egyptian phrases—a purification ritual her grandfather had reconstructed from fragments of much older texts.

Nadia copied these carefully, adding her own modern transliteration to ensure precise pronunciation. This was the missing element they needed—not just the artifacts and their arrangement, but the specific ritual words to transform the scarab's corrupted energy.

The office door opened quietly behind her.

“Fascinating work, Dr. Farouk,” said a familiar voice. “Though I believe you’ve been keeping secrets from your colleagues.”

Nadia whirled around to find Professor Ahmed Hassan standing in the doorway, his familiar academic demeanor at odds with the pistol he held casually at his side.

“Ahmed,” she said carefully, fighting to keep her voice steady as she subtly shifted to block view of her desk. “Working late as well?”

“You could say that.” He stepped fully into the office, closing the door behind him. “Though my work has taken a rather different direction than what appears in our department publications.”

Nadia's mind raced, cataloging options. The office window was sealed shut—no escape there. Her phone lay on the desk behind her, but calling for help wasn't viable with Hassan standing ten feet away with a gun.

“The Order of Eternal Dusk,” she said, deciding directness was her best strategy. “How long have you been involved?”

Hassan smiled thinly, seemingly pleased she'd made the connection. “Since graduate school, though more actively in recent years. Mr. Blackwood recognized

my expertise could be valuable.” He gestured with the gun toward her desk. “I see you’ve found the heart scarab. We’ve been looking for that particular piece for quite some time.”

“It was never in the university collection,” Nadia replied, mind working furiously. If she could keep him talking, perhaps an opportunity would present itself. “It was with Mike Reynolds’s personal effects all along.”

“Ah, yes. Detective Reynolds. An unfortunate casualty.” Hassan took another step forward. “He interrupted a preliminary ritual, much as your detective friend did later. History repeating itself, though Harlow proved more... resilient.”

Anger flashed through Nadia at his casual dismissal of lives destroyed. “You know what you’re attempting is insanity. The gateway isn’t meant to be opened. The entities beyond—”

“Will grant power and knowledge beyond human understanding,” Hassan interrupted. “Your grandfather never understood the true opportunity. He saw only danger where visionaries like Blackwood see potential.”

“My grandfather understood perfectly,” Nadia countered, edging slightly to position herself better between Hassan and the desk where both the scarab and journal lay. “He infiltrated the Order to stop exactly what you’re planning.”

Hassan’s expression hardened. “And died for his interference, just as you might if you don’t cooperate.” He held out his free hand. “The scarab, Dr. Farouk. And your grandfather’s journal. Mr. Blackwood would be most interested in both.”

Nadia assessed her options rapidly. The window behind her was sealed, but her desk lamp was heavy brass—a potential weapon if she could reach it. The distance between them gave her perhaps a second or two to act before Hassan could react.

“Why help them, Ahmed?” she asked, stalling while she inched her hand back toward the desk. “You’re a scientist, an academic. The chaos entities aren’t sources of knowledge—they’re fundamentally destructive.”

A flicker of something—doubt, perhaps—crossed Hassan’s face. “You haven’t seen what I’ve seen. The glimpses beyond... they offer understanding of reality’s true nature.”

“Those glimpses are designed to seduce and corrupt,” Nadia pressed, recognizing the opening. “The entities can’t physically manifest without hosts. That’s what Blackwood is offering them—vessels. Himself, the other cult members... you.”

Hassan hesitated, his conviction wavering visibly. “The benefits outweigh—”

The building’s fire alarm suddenly blared, the piercing sound causing both of them to startle. In that moment of distraction, Nadia lunged for the desk lamp, swinging it toward Hassan in a desperate arc.

He recovered quickly, dodging sideways, but the lamp's base caught his arm, sending the gun clattering across the floor. Nadia dived for it, but Hassan recovered faster than she anticipated, tackling her before she could reach the weapon.

They struggled briefly, Hassan's larger frame giving him the advantage despite Nadia's determined resistance. He pinned her against the bookshelf, breathing heavily.

"Don't make this harder than it needs to be," he gasped, blood trickling from where the lamp had grazed his temple. "Blackwood wants you alive—your knowledge is valuable—but I'm authorized to use whatever force necessary to secure the artifacts."

The fire alarm continued wailing, and distant shouts suggested the building was being evacuated. Hassan glanced nervously toward the door.

"Campus security will be checking each room," Nadia said, hoping to unnerve him further. "How will you explain this situation, Professor?"

His grip tightened painfully on her arms. "We won't be here when they arrive." He pulled a zip tie from his pocket, clearly intending to restrain her.

In that moment, Nadia saw her chance. She went limp suddenly, as if surrendering, then as Hassan adjusted his grip, she drove her knee upward with all her strength.

He doubled over with a pained gasp, loosening his hold enough for her to break free. She lunged for her desk, grabbing both the scarab and the journal before making for the door.

Hassan recovered with surprising quickness, catching her ankle as she passed. Nadia crashed to the floor, the journal flying from her grasp but the scarab still clutched tightly in her hand.

"Enough!" Hassan snarled, dragging her backward as she kicked frantically to free herself.

The office door burst open, revealing two security guards responding to the alarm. Their expressions shifted from routine concern to shock at the scene before them—the disheveled office, Nadia on the floor, Hassan bleeding from the head wound.

"Help!" Nadia shouted. "He's attacking me!"

Hassan released her immediately, his academic persona sliding back into place with disturbing ease. "There's been a misunderstanding," he said smoothly, rising to his feet and straightening his clothing. "Dr. Farouk was having some kind of episode—"

"He has a gun," Nadia interrupted, pointing to where the weapon had slid beneath a cabinet. "And he threatened to kidnap me."

The security guards exchanged glances, clearly uncertain which professor to believe. Hassan used their hesitation to edge toward the scattered journal pages.

“Check under that cabinet,” Nadia insisted. “You’ll find a pistol that belongs to him.”

The younger guard moved cautiously toward the cabinet while the senior officer kept his attention divided between the two professors. Seeing his plan unraveling, Hassan made a sudden dash for the window.

“Stop him!” Nadia shouted, but Hassan had already pulled a small object from his pocket—some kind of remote trigger. He pressed it, and an explosion rocked the far end of the building, instantly drawing the guards’ attention.

In the ensuing chaos, Hassan snatched up the journal from the floor and sprinted past the disoriented guards into the hallway.

Nadia scrambled to her feet, the scarab still secured in her grip. The priority was clear—protect the artifact at all costs. She tucked it into her jacket’s inner pocket and rushed into the corridor after Hassan, but he had already disappeared.

The hallway was filling with smoke from the distant explosion, and evacuation protocols were in full effect. Alarms blared as security shepherded confused late-night students and faculty toward exits. Nadia allowed herself to be guided outside with the others, knowing pursuit of Hassan was impossible now.

In the courtyard outside, emergency vehicles were already arriving, lights flashing across the historic façade of the archaeology building. Nadia slipped away from the gathering crowd, the scarab a cold presence against her chest, her phone already in hand as she dialed Chen’s secure number.

“Hassan is Order of Eternal Dusk,” she said the moment he answered. “He has my grandfather’s journal, but I still have the scarab. I’ve documented the correct ritual configuration, but we need to move immediately. Hassan will lead them straight to the cabin.”

“Understood,” Chen replied calmly. “The emergency extraction protocol is active. Jake made contact ten minutes ago—he’s injured but mobile, heading to rendezvous point three.”

Relief flooded through her at the news that Jake was alive. “I’ll meet you at the fallback location,” she said, already moving toward the faculty parking lot where campus security would be too busy with the explosion to monitor departures.

“Be careful,” Chen warned. “If Hassan has the journal—”

“He has information but not understanding,” Nadia interrupted, reaching her car. “The journal’s most crucial sections use a cipher he won’t be able to crack quickly. We still have time, but not much.”

She ended the call and started the engine, pulling away from the university campus as more emergency vehicles arrived. The scarab pulsed with cold energy against her chest, a constant reminder of what was at stake.

The drive to the fallback location took nearly an hour, requiring several detours and careful surveillance checks to ensure she wasn't followed. The location Chen had selected was a small hunting cabin owned by a former patient, isolated enough for security but accessible by vehicle.

As she navigated the final stretch of dirt road, Nadia's mind raced through the implications of what she'd learned. The correct ritual configuration, the purification process for the scarab, Hassan's betrayal, the journal now in enemy hands—pieces of the puzzle that created a clearer but more urgent picture.

The cabin came into view, a small structure nearly invisible among the pines. No lights showed from within, but Chen's nondescript sedan was parked alongside a vehicle she didn't recognize—presumably their emergency transportation if needed.

Nadia parked and approached cautiously, using the recognition pattern they'd established—three knocks, pause, two knocks. The door opened to reveal Chen, his medical bag ready beside him.

"Jake?" she asked immediately, stepping inside.

Chen's expression tightened. "Not here yet. I received a message that he was delayed but moving toward the location. That was forty minutes ago."

Nadia's stomach clenched with worry, but she forced herself to focus on the immediate priorities. Pulling out her phone, she showed Chen the photographs of the journal's crucial pages.

"The ritual they're planning is a corruption of the original purpose," she explained, pointing to key diagrams. "The artifacts aren't meant to open the gateway but to seal it. By inverting their positions and altering the incantations, the Order has transformed a protective ritual into a destructive one."

Chen studied the images with his characteristic intensity. "And the scarab? It's definitely the missing component?"

Nadia nodded, removing the wrapped artifact from her jacket. Even through its covering, the malevolent energy seemed stronger now, as if proximity to the ritual date was increasing its power.

"It's been corrupted to channel death energy," she explained. "Mike Reynolds's death, specifically. But my grandfather discovered a purification ritual that can reverse its function—transform it from key to lock."

"Timing?" Chen asked, his terse question reflecting the urgency they both felt.

"The eclipse begins tomorrow night at 11:23 PM. The ritual must be completed before totality at 11:47. If Blackwood succeeds in opening the gateway..." She let

the sentence hang unfinished, the consequences too horrific to articulate fully.

Chen nodded grimly. “We need Jake. If the scarab absorbed death energy from his partner, the connection might be crucial for the purification ritual.”

Nadia had reached the same conclusion based on her grandfather’s notes. Jake’s unique status as Anubis’s avatar, combined with his personal connection to the death energy the scarab contained, made him the ideal conduit for the purification process.

“We’ll give him until dawn,” Chen decided, checking his watch. “If he hasn’t arrived by then, we implement contingency protocols.”

Nadia nodded, though the thought of proceeding without Jake filled her with dread. Despite her academic knowledge and her grandfather’s research, Jake’s connection to Anubis provided an essential supernatural element they couldn’t replicate.

The hours passed with excruciating slowness. Chen dozed fitfully in a chair while Nadia continued studying the ritual diagrams, committing every detail to memory in case the phone images were lost or compromised. Outside, the night remained quiet except for normal forest sounds—no indication of pursuit or approach.

Sometime after 3 AM, Nadia’s exhaustion finally overcame her. She drifted into uneasy sleep at the cabin’s small table, her head resting on her arms, the wrapped scarab secure beside her.

Dreams came immediately—not normal dreams but something more significant. She found herself walking in a vast desert beneath impossible stars, the sand beneath her feet shifting from normal coloration to deep blue as she moved. In the distance, a massive black cat sat watching her, its eyes like twin eclipses.

“Anubis,” she whispered, understanding immediately where her consciousness had been drawn.

The cat inclined its head slightly but remained silent. Behind it, a human figure approached through the desert—Jake, moving with the careful gait of someone managing pain.

“He’s hurt,” Nadia said, starting forward, but found herself unable to move closer.

“He comes,” Anubis’s voice resonated directly in her mind rather than in the air. “But hunters follow. The gateway thins. Time shortens.”

“The ritual—we know how to correct it,” she told the deity, hoping this dream communication might somehow help. “But we need Jake for the purification process.”

The massive cat’s tail twitched in what might have been agreement. “The servant and I are one, increasingly so. What he knows, I know. What I know,

he learns.”

The desert around them shimmered, revealing glimpses of another place—Boston streets, shadowy figures moving with purpose, Jake navigating carefully between them.

“Guide him to us,” Nadia pleaded.

“The path is not direct,” Anubis replied cryptically. “Some journeys require circuitous routes to avoid greater dangers.”

The dream began dissolving around her, the desert fading into mist. The last thing Nadia saw was Jake looking directly at her across the impossible distance, his eyes briefly flashing with the same eclipse-like quality as Anubis’s before everything disappeared.

She woke with a gasp, disoriented momentarily by the cabin’s unfamiliar shadows. Chen was instantly alert, hand moving toward his concealed weapon before recognizing her movement as non-threatening.

“You were communicating with them,” he said, not a question but an observation.

Nadia nodded, rubbing her eyes. “Dream desert. Anubis says Jake is coming but being pursued. The gateway is already thinning—that’s why the communication was possible.”

Chen checked his watch. “Nearly dawn. We need to make a decision soon.”

Before Nadia could respond, her phone vibrated with an incoming message—a single code word that made her heart skip: “Compromised.”

She showed the screen to Chen, whose expression tightened with concern. “Jake’s warning us that his location or communication has been discovered.”

“We need to move,” Chen decided immediately, already gathering his medical supplies. “The secondary fallback has been prepared.”

Nadia carefully rewrapped the scarab and secured it in an interior pocket of her jacket. Outside, the eastern sky was beginning to lighten with pre-dawn glow as they quickly loaded essential supplies into Chen’s sedan.

“What about Jake?” Nadia asked, glancing back at the cabin as they prepared to depart.

“He knows all the fallback locations,” Chen assured her. “And he has Anubis’s guidance. If anyone can find us while evading pursuit, it’s him.”

They pulled away from the cabin just as the first true light of dawn broke through the trees. Nadia cast one last glance back, hoping to see Jake’s familiar figure emerging from the forest, but the clearing remained empty.

As Chen navigated the narrow dirt road leading back to the highway, Nadia’s thoughts returned to her grandfather’s journal, now in Hassan’s possession.

While the most crucial information had been photographed, she couldn't help worrying about what other secrets the journal might reveal to the Order.

"We have less than eighteen hours until the eclipse begins," she said, checking the time. "Even if Hassan can't immediately decode everything in the journal, Blackwood has enough information to proceed with his version of the ritual."

Chen nodded grimly, eyes scanning the road ahead with professional vigilance. "We'll need to approach the ritual site regardless—either to stop theirs or conduct the correct version."

"The harbor warehouse," Nadia confirmed, recalling the location details from both her research and Jake's firsthand account. "Where Jake died the first time. The barrier is already thin there because of that event."

As they reached the main road, Nadia's phone buzzed again—another coded message, this one from one of Jake's informants in the police department: "Blackwood convoy moving east. Harbor prep underway."

The pieces were falling into place, the endgame approaching rapidly. Blackwood was already positioning his people at the ritual site, preparing for the eclipse that would enable his misguided attempt to breach the gateway.

All their preparation, research, and sacrifice would come down to the next eighteen hours—and they still didn't know if Jake would make it to them in time.

"He'll be there," Chen said, seeming to read her thoughts. "He's survived worse than this."

Nadia nodded, trying to share his confidence. The scarab pulsed with cold energy against her chest, a reminder of both the danger they faced and the possible solution they carried. Everything now depended on reaching the harbor warehouse with both the artifact and the knowledge to use it correctly—and on Jake fulfilling his role as Anubis's avatar when the moment came.

As they drove toward the secondary fallback location, Nadia found herself whispering a prayer that was part ancient Egyptian invocation, part personal plea: "Guide him safely to us. Let us mend what has been broken."

The scarab seemed to pulse in response, its malevolent cold briefly giving way to something different—a resonance that felt like acknowledgment from something beyond normal perception. Whether Anubis, the artifact itself, or merely her imagination, Nadia couldn't be sure.

But for the first time since discovering Hassan's betrayal, she felt a small, fragile spark of hope.

Chapter 23: The Captain's Table

Blood trickles between my fingers as I press against the knife wound in my side. Not deep enough to kill, but enough to slow me down when speed matters most. The convenience store bathroom's fluorescent lights make my skin look like a corpse's, which feels appropriate given how close I've been to that state recently.

My burner phone shows three missed calls from Chen. I should call back, let him know I'm alive, but the risk is too high. If they're tracking cell signals—and they are—any contact could compromise Nadia and Chen's location too. The coded text I sent earlier will have to suffice.

I tear open another packet of gauze with my teeth and press it against the wound. The bleeding has slowed, Anubis's unnatural healing already at work, but it still hurts like hell. My reflection in the cracked mirror shows eyes rimmed with exhaustion, pupils briefly flashing gold when the overhead light flickers.

You require rest to heal properly, Anubis's voice echoes in my thoughts, no longer an alien intrusion but something familiar, almost expected.

"Not an option," I mutter, taping the fresh gauze in place and pulling my shirt down. "They're moving tonight. The eclipse."

There are other paths to the information you seek.

I pause, understanding what he means before he elaborates. "Sullivan."

My former captain. Once mentor, now traitor. The man who sent Mike and me into a trap three years ago. The man whose signature approved the operation that got my partner killed. The man who now stands revealed as a member of the Order of Eternal Dusk.

His connection to the Order is strong, but fractured. His faith... wavers.

I pull on my jacket, wincing as the movement stretches my side. "You can sense that?"

Death approaches him. It changes perspective.

That's new information. Sullivan, dying? It fits with what we know about the cult's appeal—immortality for those with limited time. I check my watch. Nearly 4 AM. Dawn approaching. The eclipse will begin tonight at 11:23. Whatever I'm going to do, it needs to happen quickly.

I exit through the back of the convenience store, scanning the empty parking lot before moving to the stolen car I left behind the dumpsters. Not my preferred method of transportation, but they'd recognized my vehicle earlier. The cult has eyes everywhere—police scanners, traffic cameras, hospital admissions. The resources of the wealthy combined with the desperation of the damned.

Sullivan lives in Jamaica Plain, a colonial-style house that always seemed too modest for a police captain's salary. Now I wonder if that modesty was by

design—drawing less attention to his extracurricular activities. The night is fading as I approach, the pre-dawn gray lending the quiet residential street an appropriate gloom.

I park three blocks away and move on foot, checking for surveillance. The neighborhood sleeps, windows dark except for the occasional porch light. Sullivan's house stands isolated on a corner lot, partially obscured by overgrown hedges that he used to keep meticulously trimmed. Another sign something's changed.

There's a light on in what I remember is his study. Still awake, or up early? It doesn't matter. Our conversation isn't one that benefits from witnesses.

I approach from the rear, old habits from police work guiding my movements. The back door's lock is surprisingly simple for a cop's house. Either Sullivan is overconfident or he's become careless. Neither bodes well for his current state of mind.

The kitchen is immaculate but smells of neglect—clean surfaces but empty refrigerator, visible through its glass door. No food containers, just rows of prescription bottles on the counter. I recognize some labels from my mother's final days. Cancer medications. Heavy-duty pain management.

Anubis was right. Death is approaching him.

I move silently through the house, toward the light spilling from the study doorway. The floor creaks slightly beneath my weight, but I don't bother trying to disguise my presence now. Sullivan's instincts are too good for surprise to work in my favor.

"Took you long enough, Harlow." His voice drifts from the study, hoarse but steady. "I expected you three days ago."

I step into the doorway, taking in the scene with a detective's automatic assessment. Sullivan sits behind his desk, a glass of amber liquid in one hand, a service pistol in the other. Not pointed at me, but resting on the desk within easy reach. The bookshelves behind him are half-emptied, cardboard boxes on the floor suggesting either preparation for moving or the kind of organization a dying man undertakes.

Sullivan himself looks hollowed out, his once-imposing frame diminished. The captain who towered over the precinct now seems smaller, skin hanging on bones that show through at wrists and neck. But his eyes are clear and alert, taking me in with professional assessment—lingering briefly on the slight stiffness in my posture from the wound.

"You're bleeding," he observes, sipping his drink. "On my rug now, actually."

I glance down at the small dark droplets I've tracked in. "Send me the cleaning bill."

He laughs, a sound that turns into a cough he can't quite suppress. When he recovers, he gestures to the chair across from him. "Might as well sit. I imagine

this conversation will take some time.”

I remain standing. “Where is she?”

“The Egyptologist?” He sets his glass down, studying me with the same evaluating gaze he used on suspects in interrogation rooms. “Not here, obviously.”

“Cut the crap, Sullivan. I know you’re Order of Eternal Dusk. I know you sabotaged the Krane case.” My hands clench involuntarily, nails briefly sharpening before I force them back. “I know you got Mike killed.”

Something flickers across his face—regret, maybe, or just tactical calculation. “You don’t understand what’s at stake.”

“Then explain it to me,” I growl, stepping inside and closing the door. “Explain why my partner had to die. Why Nadia had to be taken.”

Sullivan moves to his living room window, pulling back the curtain to reveal the night sky. “Terminal pancreatic cancer, stage four. Diagnosed two months before the Krane case.” He lets the curtain fall. “Six months to live, they said. That was three years ago.”

I notice now the pill bottles on the side table, the medical equipment partially hidden behind a divider. “The cult promised you a cure.”

“Not a cure. Transcendence.” He turns to face me, pulling down his collar to reveal a tattoo—an ankh surrounded by hieroglyphs. “These marks hold back the cancer, contain it. A temporary measure until the gateway opens.”

“And Mike? Was his death part of your transcendence?”

Sullivan’s face hardens. “Reynolds wasn’t supposed to be there that night. Neither were you. Just Krane. We needed his particular... energy signature for a preliminary ritual.”

“You son of a bitch.” I move faster than humanly possible, crossing the room and slamming him against the wall, forearm against his throat. “You used us. Used children as bait.”

To his credit, Sullivan doesn’t struggle. “Yes.” His eyes meet mine without flinching. “And I’d do it again. You think I’m a monster? Fine. But you’ve seen what’s on the other side now, Harlow. You know death isn’t the end.”

“Doesn’t justify murder.”

“When you’re drowning, you’ll grab any hand extended—even if it belongs to the devil.” He coughs as I ease the pressure slightly. “You want Nadia? Blackwood has her at the secondary site. Old pumping station at North Point. But you won’t make it in time—the ritual starts at moonrise.”

I release him, watching him slide down the wall. “Why tell me this?”

He touches his tattoo, wincing. “Because whatever they promised, I’ve seen what’s really waiting on the other side. In my dreams. And I’m not sure the price is worth paying anymore.”

Sullivan staggers to his feet, making his way to the desk where he collapses into his chair. He looks suddenly older, his brief defiance replaced by exhaustion.

“They don’t show you everything, you know,” he continues, reaching for his glass with trembling fingers. “Not at first. It’s a gradual revelation. Small favors, minor healings, glimpses of power. By the time you understand what they actually want, you’re in too deep to walk away.”

“What do they want?” I ask, though I already know the answer from Anubis.

“Vessels.” Sullivan downs the rest of his drink in one swallow. “Physical forms. The entities beyond the gateway—they can’t manifest here without bodies to occupy. Blackwood thinks he’s going to be reunited with his dead family. What he doesn’t understand is that whatever comes through wearing their faces won’t be them. Not really.”

I take the seat across from him, careful of my injured side. “How long have you known this?”

“Suspected for months. Knew for certain after the last dream.” He opens a drawer and pulls out a file folder, sliding it across to me. “The ritual site blueprints. Security rotations. Everything I have on tonight’s ceremony.” His laugh is bitter. “My final act of rebellion, I suppose.”

I leaf through the papers, recognizing the value of what he’s offering. “This doesn’t erase what you did.”

“Of course not.” Sullivan refills his glass, hand steadier now that he’s made his decision. “Nothing erases what we do, Harlow. I’ve accepted that. I thought I was choosing more time, but all I did was make death more terrifying when it finally comes.”

He speaks truth, Anubis comments in my mind. *His death approaches within days, regardless of tonight’s outcome.*

“How many people died because of the Order?” I ask, continuing to scan the documents. “The full count.”

Sullivan meets my gaze with surprising steadiness. “Twenty-seven over the last decade. Mostly willing sacrifices who believed they were achieving immortality. Some... not.” He looks away finally. “I kept records. Names, dates. That’s all in there too.”

I find the list, each name meticulously documented with details that will help build cases against surviving cult members—assuming any of us live through tonight.

“Why now, Sullivan? Why help after all this time?”

He gestures vaguely toward the window, where dawn is breaking. “Maybe I want to balance the scales before I face whatever’s waiting. Maybe I’m just tired of being afraid.” He leans forward. “Or maybe I’ve seen what happens when the barrier thins, Harlow. I’ve seen what’s waiting on the other side. And letting those things into our world is worse than any cancer.”

A memory surfaces—Mike’s voice from the night he died: *Something’s not right about this case, Jake. The captain’s too invested.* I’d dismissed it then, attributed it to Mike’s tendency toward conspiracy theories. Now the truth lands like a blow.

“You were there,” I say suddenly, the realization taking shape. “The night Mike died. Not just authorizing the operation—you were physically present.”

Sullivan doesn’t deny it. “Overseeing. Making sure things went according to plan.” His expression hardens. “Which they did, until Reynolds went off-script. He wasn’t supposed to follow you into that building.”

The rage rises hot and immediate, my vision briefly tinting with gold as Anubis’s influence surges in response to my anger. My hands transform partially, nails extending to claws that dig into the armrests of my chair.

“You could have warned him,” I spit through teeth that feel too sharp in my mouth. “You could have called it off.”

“Yes.” Sullivan meets my altered gaze without flinching. “And I chose not to. The ritual needed a death at that location. Krane was meant to be the sacrifice, but when things went wrong... adjustments were made.”

I’m across the desk before I realize I’ve moved, one transformed hand around Sullivan’s throat, lifting him from his chair with strength beyond human capability. His feet dangle above the floor, his eyes widening with fear as he stares into what I know are no longer fully human eyes.

“Jake,” he gasps, using my first name for the first time in years. “Do what you need to.”

The simple surrender defuses something in me. I see him clearly now—a dying man who took a terrible path out of fear, who betrayed everything he once stood for. Killing him would be easy. Justified, even. But it wouldn’t bring Mike back. Wouldn’t help Nadia. Wouldn’t stop Blackwood.

I release him, stepping back as my hands return to human form. Sullivan collapses into his chair, rubbing his throat.

“You don’t have long,” I say, gathering the folder of information. “Days, according to Anubis.”

Sullivan nods, unsurprised. “The tattoo’s magic fades when faith does. Once I started questioning, the cancer accelerated.” He gestures to the medical equipment. “Hospice was supposed to start tomorrow. Irony timing.”

I move toward the door, the folder secured inside my jacket. At the threshold, I pause, looking back at the man who was once someone I respected. “Was any of it real, Captain? The mentor thing. The belief in justice.”

The question seems to catch him off guard. For a moment, I glimpse the man I once knew—the tough but fair captain who pushed me to be a better detective, who stood beside me at my mother’s funeral, who recommended me for promotion ahead of schedule.

“That was real,” he says quietly. “Before the diagnosis. Before fear took over.” He picks up his service weapon, setting it on the desk between us. “You should finish this, Harlow. I’m a loose end. Blackwood will send someone when he realizes I’ve betrayed them.”

I consider the gun, the man, the situation. “You’ve got days left, Sullivan. Make them count.” I nod toward the folder. “Call Hernandez at the DA’s office. Tell her everything. Make a formal statement. Give the families of those twenty-seven some closure.”

Something like surprise crosses his face. “After everything I’ve done...”

“Justice isn’t just punishment,” I say, echoing words he once spoke to me. “Sometimes it’s truth. The families deserve that, at least.”

I leave him sitting there, gun untouched on the desk, dawn light spilling across his diminished form. Outside, the neighborhood is waking up, early commuters emerging from houses, the ordinary world continuing in ignorance of how close it stands to catastrophe.

In the car, I examine the documents more carefully. The pumping station information appears legitimate—detailed enough to be credible, specific enough to be actionable. But Sullivan’s last act could be one final deception, a way to lure me away from the true ritual site.

He spoke truth, Anubis confirms in my mind. Fear of what comes after death has stripped away his capacity for further deception.

“Convenient timing,” I mutter, starting the car. “Three years too late for Mike.”

Mortals often require proximity to their own ending to see clearly.

I pull away from the curb, heading toward the safehouse Chen established as our emergency rendezvous. The wound in my side protests with each movement, but the bleeding has stopped. I have maybe fourteen hours until the eclipse begins. Fourteen hours to find Nadia, devise a plan, and somehow stop a ritual centuries in the making.

As I drive, I realize I’m no longer shaking with rage. The confrontation with Sullivan should have fueled my anger, but instead, it’s left me with an unexpected calm. Not forgiveness—never that—but a clarity about what matters now. Mike is gone. Sullivan is dying. The past can’t be changed. But Nadia can still be saved. The gateway can still be closed. The future isn’t written yet.

The sun breaks fully over the horizon, and I feel the familiar pull of the transformation. After tonight's eclipse, according to Anubis, the lunar cycle's control over my shifts will be permanently altered one way or another. Either I'll be free of this dual existence, or it will become an even more fundamental part of me.

But those are concerns for after. Right now, I have a promising lead on Nadia's location, detailed information about the cult's plans, and just enough time to formulate a counter-strategy.

I press the accelerator harder, racing the rising sun toward whatever remains of my ninth life.

Chapter 24: Lunar Pull

Chen's makeshift safe house is a foreclosed property his cousin bought at auction—a small ranch-style home in Dorchester with boarded windows and utilities connected under a false name. Smart setup. Off the books, off the grid, and surrounded by similar properties where neighbors mind their business. Perfect for a dead man planning to stop an ancient Egyptian cult.

I pull the stolen car into the overgrown driveway, parking it behind Chen's Subaru. My side throbs as I climb out, the wound healing but still tender. The sun has fully cleared the horizon now, casting long shadows across the cracked walkway. I feel the familiar tension under my skin, the pull of the approaching transformation. Not yet, but soon. The eclipse's proximity is messing with my cycle.

The boundary between forms thins as the gateway ritual approaches, Anubis comments, his voice unusually strained. Our connection experiences... interference.

"Fantastic timing," I mutter, checking my surroundings before approaching the back door. Three knocks, pause, two knocks—the signal Chen and I arranged.

The door opens immediately, Chen's usually composed face tight with worry. "You're alive. Good. I was about to break protocol and start looking."

"Wouldn't recommend it. Cult's got eyes everywhere." I step inside, handing him Sullivan's folder as I pass. "But I've got a location on Nadia. And intel on tonight's ritual."

The small kitchen has been converted into an operations center of sorts—laptops, maps spread across the table, medical supplies in open cases. Chen has always been thorough, but this level of preparation impresses even me.

"Sullivan gave you this?" Chen asks, leafing through the blueprints. "And you trust it?"

"Anubis says he was telling the truth." I grimace as I ease myself into a chair. "Plus, Sullivan's dying. Cancer. Been using cult magic to hold it off, but that's

failing now that he's having second thoughts."

Chen's expression shifts to the clinical detachment I recognize from his morgue work. "Terminal patients make unpredictable informants. Fear of death can motivate honesty or more elaborate deceptions."

"Not much choice but to trust it. Clock's ticking."

Chen nods, returning to the blueprints. "Old North Point pumping station. It's been decommissioned for decades. City keeps talking about redevelopment, but it never happens." He looks up sharply. "Probably because Blackwood owns the surrounding properties through shell companies."

"Makes sense. Isolated, underground portions, historical significance."

"And direct water access to the harbor," Chen adds, pointing to a section of the blueprint. "Where you died."

The reminder sends a phantom pain through my chest where the ceremonial dagger entered. "Perfect spot to continue what they started."

Chen hesitates, then pushes a small mirror across the table. "You should see this."

I look at my reflection, startled by the changes since I last checked. My pupils have elongated slightly, more oval than round. The wound on my face that I received during yesterday's fight has completely healed, not even a scar remaining. Most concerning, there's a faint golden sheen visible just beneath my skin, as though I've been dusted with metallic powder.

"It's progressing," Chen says quietly. "The transformation is becoming more... integrated. Your cellular samples show increasing stability in the hybrid state."

I push the mirror away. "Meaning?"

"Meaning the changes are becoming permanent. The distinction between your human and cat form is blurring." Chen pulls up a file on his laptop, turning it so I can see a series of microscopic images. "Your DNA is rewriting itself with each transformation. The eclipse will likely accelerate the process."

"How long until I can't change back?"

Chen shrugs. "Impossible to say precisely. But based on the progression rate, if the pattern continues..." He hesitates. "Hours rather than days."

The news should terrify me, but I feel strangely calm. Maybe I've accepted on some level that my old life ended the moment I fell from that warehouse roof. Whatever I am now, whatever I'm becoming, it's not temporary.

"Let's focus on what we can control," I say, turning back to the blueprints. "Pumping station layout. Entry points. Security."

Chen follows my lead, professional as always. "According to these, there are four main entrances, plus maintenance access tunnels connecting to the harbor."

Security rotation shows heaviest coverage here and here—" he points to the main entrance and service road "—but minimal presence at the waterfront access."

"That's our way in, then. I can move through the water as the cat without being detected."

"About that." Chen looks uncomfortable. "With the eclipse approaching, your transformation timing may become unpredictable. You could get trapped in either form at a critical moment."

"I'll manage," I say, though the concern has already occurred to me. "What about backup? Anyone we can trust?"

Chen shakes his head. "After Sullivan, I'm hesitant to involve anyone else from the department. I've called in some markers with private security contacts—people who owe me favors and don't ask questions. They can create a distraction if needed, but they know nothing about the supernatural elements."

"Keep them as a last resort. Blackwood's people won't hesitate to kill civilians."

We spend the next hour formulating a plan, marking approach routes and potential extraction paths. Chen's medical background proves unexpectedly useful for understanding the ritual components Sullivan documented—the specific arrangement of artifacts, the timing coordinated with astronomical alignment, the blood requirements for each phase.

"This isn't just about opening a door," Chen observes, studying the ritual notes. "Blackwood is attempting to create controlled thinning of reality. The cult believes with enough preparation and the right vessel—"

"Nadia," I interject.

"—they can selective allow entities through while maintaining the barrier against full invasion."

I shake my head. "They're delusional. Anubis says once the gateway opens even slightly, it's like a dam breaking. There's no controlling what comes through."

Chen removes his glasses, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "People believe what they need to believe, especially when facing death. Blackwood lost his family. Sullivan has cancer. The others probably have similar motivations—terminal illness, grief, fear of mortality."

"Doesn't excuse what they're doing."

"No," Chen agrees, replacing his glasses. "But it explains the fanaticism. They're not just cult members; they're desperate people who think they've found the only solution to the ultimate problem."

I feel a sudden shift inside, like internal tectonic plates realigning. The sensation is familiar now—transformation approaching. But it's happening too early, hours before the usual time. I grip the edge of the table, knuckles whitening as I try to suppress the change.

“Jake?” Chen notices immediately, medical instincts kicking in.

“It’s starting,” I manage through clenched teeth. “Too soon.”

“The eclipse’s proximity,” Chen says, quickly clearing space in the center of the room. “The lunar alignment is already affecting your connection to Anubis.”

I stumble away from the table, barely making it to the open area before the first wave of transformation hits fully. It’s more painful than usual, bones and tissue protesting the accelerated change. I fall to my hands and knees as my spine reconfigures, clothes feeling suddenly constricting as my perspective shifts.

Unlike previous transformations, where the process flows from beginning to end, this one comes in waves—partial change, retreat, another surge forward. I’m caught between forms, neither fully human nor fully cat. I can feel my jaw elongating slightly, teeth sharpening, while my skin prickles with the beginning of fur that then recedes.

“Fight it,” Chen urges, keeping his distance as he’s learned to do during these episodes. “Focus on maintaining human form until we complete the plan.”

I try, concentrating on my humanity, on the mission, on Nadia waiting to be rescued. For a moment, the transformation pauses, hovering in this unsettling middle state. Then a fresh wave of pain crashes through me, stronger than before.

The eclipse strengthens chaos influence, Anubis’s voice comes strained, as though reaching me through interference. The boundary between our forms... weakens prematurely.

The transformation completes with startling suddenness, leaving me fully in cat form, my clothing pooled around me on the floor. The disorientation that usually accompanies the change is worse this time, senses overwhelmed by competing inputs. Every sound in the house amplifies—Chen’s heartbeat, water moving through pipes, mice in the walls. Smells assault me with their intensity—chemical cleaner, Chen’s aftershave, mold in the basement.

Chen kneels cautiously nearby, respecting my space as I adjust. “Can you understand me? Blink once for yes.”

I blink deliberately, regaining my bearings. The transformation may have been unplanned, but it doesn’t change the immediate goal—find Nadia, stop the ritual.

“This complicates timing,” Chen says, gathering my clothes and setting them aside. “How long until you can change back?”

I have no way to answer in this form, but the truth is I don’t know. The usual rules are breaking down as the eclipse approaches. I could be stuck like this for hours—possibly until after the ritual begins.

Communication remains possible through me, Anubis says, his voice clearer now that I've completed the transformation. *Though maintaining the connection drains our shared energy.*

I focus on projecting my thoughts toward Chen, Anubis acting as conduit. The medical examiner startles slightly as the dual-toned voice—mine layered with Anubis's deeper register—seems to emanate from nowhere.

"The transformation is uncontrolled now," my voice says without my mouth moving. "The lunar cycle and eclipse are disrupting the pattern. I may remain in this form until after tonight's alignment."

Chen recovers quickly from his surprise. "Then we adapt the plan. Cat form gives you infiltration advantages, especially through the water access tunnels." He returns to the blueprints. "But communication becomes an issue, and you can't exactly drive yourself to North Point."

I pad over to the table, jumping up to examine the maps from this new perspective. Cat vision processes information differently—less focus on color, heightened sensitivity to movement and edges. The blueprints look strange, but I can still follow the layout.

"I'll drive you there," Chen continues, thinking aloud. "Drop you near the water access point here—" he indicates a spot on the blueprint "—and create a distraction at the main entrance while you infiltrate."

The supernatural voice speaks again as I project my thoughts: "Too dangerous. They'll kill you without hesitation."

"They'll try," Chen says with unexpected steel in his voice. He opens a drawer, revealing a pistol I didn't know he carried. "I may be a medical examiner now, but I served in combat before medicine. I can handle myself."

I'd forgotten that detail about Chen's background—former military, though he rarely speaks of it. The reminder shifts my assessment of his capabilities.

"We need to move soon," Chen says, checking his watch. "Sunset is at 6:47 PM. The eclipse begins at 11:23. That gives us limited daylight for reconnaissance."

As Chen gathers equipment, I jump down from the table and move to the window, looking out at the brightening day. In cat form, my thoughts have a different quality—more immediate, less abstract. Human concerns about identity and existence fade against more primal imperatives: find Nadia, eliminate threats, protect territory.

Yet beneath these simpler drivers, the core of who I am remains. My memories, my attachments, my sense of justice. If Chen is right about the transformations becoming permanent, I wonder which aspect will dominate eventually—the human detective or the supernatural hunter.

Both and neither, Anubis comments, sensing my thoughts. *You become a third thing entirely. As all true avatars must.*

The voice speaking through me asks Chen: “If I can’t change back after tonight, if this becomes permanent, what happens to Jake Harlow?”

Chen pauses in his preparations, considering me thoughtfully. “From a medical perspective? Your human DNA is integrating with whatever supernatural genetic material Anubis provides. The result isn’t loss but evolution.” He kneels to meet my gaze directly. “But I suspect you’re asking a philosophical question, not a medical one.”

I blink slowly in acknowledgment.

“Then I’d say Jake Harlow is more than a physical form. Whatever shape you wear, you’re still the stubborn detective who refuses to let a case go, who fights for justice even after death.” Chen smiles slightly. “The cat suit is just a new uniform.”

His matter-of-fact acceptance settles something in me. Chen has witnessed my death, resurrection, and transformation without ever treating me as anything other than a colleague who happens to have unusual circumstances. If someone as rational as Chen can accept this new reality, perhaps I can too.

Your friend sees clearly, Anubis observes. *Form is merely vessel. Essence remains.*

We finish preparations swiftly after that. Chen packs medical supplies, weapons, and surveillance equipment into an unobtrusive backpack. He transfers Sullivan’s documents to a waterproof pouch that he fastens around my neck—tight enough to stay secure, loose enough not to choke. The arrangement feels strangely dignified, as though I’m being outfitted for a mission rather than treated as a pet.

“Ready?” Chen asks, picking up his keys.

I nod my feline head, following him to the door. As we exit into the growing daylight, I feel a strange sense of peace despite the danger ahead. The dual nature that’s been a burden since my resurrection now feels like an asset. In this form, I can move unseen, slip through spaces no human could navigate, track Nadia by scent alone.

The car ride to North Point passes in tense silence. Chen drives cautiously, taking indirect routes to avoid potential surveillance. I curl on the passenger seat, conserving energy while mentally reviewing the blueprints. The pumping station’s underground sections connect directly to the harbor—the same body of water where I died months ago. There’s a symmetry to returning there that feels significant.

The location strengthens our connection, Anubis confirms. *Water that witnessed your death now witnesses your return as my avatar.*

We park several blocks from the pumping station, in an industrial area where Chen’s modest car won’t attract attention. The station itself rises in the

distance—a brick and concrete structure from the early 1900s, imposing despite its abandoned state. No obvious security visible from this distance, but the hairs along my spine rise instinctively. There are watchers hidden from ordinary sight.

Chen opens the passenger door, and I leap out, stretching my legs after the confinement. The plan is simple: Chen will conduct visible reconnaissance from publicly accessible areas, gathering information on external security while I approach via the water tunnels. We'll reconnect at moonrise if possible, though both of us know circumstances may prevent it.

"This might be the last time I see the human version of Jake Harlow," Chen says quietly, crouching to my level. "It's been an honor working with you, detective—in all your forms."

The supernatural voice speaks once more: "Likewise, doc. Don't take unnecessary risks. Nadia and I need you alive for the after-party."

Chen smiles briefly, then stands, resuming his professional demeanor. "Move out in five minutes. I'll create a distraction at the east entrance in thirty. Good hunting."

He walks away without looking back, just another pedestrian going about his business. I wait until he's out of sight before making my way toward the harbor, staying low and using parked cars and dumpsters as cover. Cat form excels at urban stealth—small enough to be overlooked, agile enough to navigate obstacles, common enough that even if spotted, I raise no alarm.

The harbor water looks uninviting—dark, oily, carrying the detritus of a major port city. But my enhanced senses detect something beyond the pollution. There's a wrongness to the water near the pumping station, a subtle distortion in how light reflects off its surface. The ritual preparations are already affecting the physical world.

I follow the shoreline until I locate the maintenance tunnel indicated on Sullivan's blueprints. The entrance is partially submerged, rusted grating covering an opening just large enough for my cat form to slip through. The metal is corroded enough that several bars have weakened; a few determined pushes with my head and shoulders create sufficient space to enter.

The tunnel beyond is dark and dank, water covering the lower portion while a narrow maintenance ledge offers dry passage. As my eyes adjust to the darkness, I notice strange markings on the walls—Egyptian hieroglyphs painted in a substance that glimmers faintly in the dim light. Blood mixed with gold, according to my supernatural senses.

Warding symbols, Anubis identifies. They seek to control which entities may pass through the gateway.

I follow the tunnel deeper, the markings becoming more frequent and elaborate. The air grows heavier, charged with an energy that makes my fur stand on

end. My whiskers detect subtle air currents, leading me toward larger chambers ahead. The pumping station's massive underground infrastructure—meant to control water flow for a growing city a century ago—now serves a darker purpose.

After navigating a complex network of tunnels, I emerge onto a ledge overlooking a vast underground chamber. What was once a massive pump room has been transformed into a ritual space. The immense machines remain, but they've been incorporated into the ceremonial layout—wrapped in hieroglyph-covered cloths, positioned to align with certain astronomical coordinates, modified to channel water from specific harbor locations.

In the center of the chamber, a ritual circle has been established, intricate patterns laid out in gold dust, precious stones, and dried herbs. The stolen artifacts from the university are arranged at key points around the circle's perimeter. And in the center, secured to an improvised altar constructed from pump machinery, lies Nadia.

She's conscious but restrained, dressed in what appears to be ceremonial garb—white linen wrapped in the ancient Egyptian style, with gold bands at her wrists and neck. From my position, I can see no obvious injuries, but her face is set in a mask of defiance. They haven't broken her spirit.

Around the chamber, perhaps a dozen cultists work with practiced efficiency, making final adjustments to the ritual space. Some wear the hooded robes I saw at the warehouse months ago, while others are dressed in modern clothes—a reminder that these are people with ordinary lives outside their apocalyptic activities.

I spot Blackwood overseeing everything from a raised platform—gaunt and intense, gesturing as he issues instructions. Around his neck hangs an amulet matching the description Nadia gave of the controlling talisman—the one that can supposedly command Anubis's power directly.

The perversion of the binding amulet, Anubis confirms with palpable anger. Created to subjugate rather than partner.

I need to get closer, to understand the full layout and identify weaknesses in their security. Moving silently along the ledge, I descend via pipes and structural supports until I'm concealed behind machinery just meters from the ritual circle. From here, I can hear their conversations, observe their preparations, and—most importantly—make eye contact with Nadia.

The moment she notices me, her eyes widen slightly before she masterfully controls her expression. She gives no outward sign of recognition that might alert her captors, but I see the slight relaxation in her posture. She knows help has arrived.

"The alignment approaches," Blackwood announces, his cultured voice echoing in the chamber. "Three hours until the first phase begins. Ensure the water channels are cleared as the harbor level rises. When the eclipse reaches totality,

the gateway must be in contact with both water that witnessed death and sky that harbors moon-shadow.”

One of the robed figures approaches him. “The avatar has not been located, Master Blackwood. Our sources report Detective Harlow has gone to ground.”

Blackwood seems unconcerned. “He will come to us. The binding draws him here, especially on this night.” He gestures toward Nadia. “And we have sufficient motivation for him.”

“And if he comes in cat form?” the cultist asks.

Blackwood touches the amulet at his neck. “All the better. The primal form is more connected to Anubis’s essence, easier to separate and harness.” He smiles thinly. “Either way, when the eclipse reaches totality, we will have our key to open the gateway.”

I’ve heard enough to understand their intention. They plan to use me—either in human or cat form—as the final component in their ritual, extracting Anubis’s essence to power their gateway. Nadia’s role appears to be both bait and secondary sacrifice, her connection to ancient Egyptian knowledge making her a suitable vessel for whatever entities they hope to welcome through.

As I prepare to retreat and report back to Chen, a sudden spasm runs through my body. The transformation is trying to reverse itself—an automatic response to the approaching sunset. But something is wrong. Instead of the smooth transition I’ve grown accustomed to, this feels jagged and incomplete. Fur recedes in patches then returns. Bones begin to elongate then snap back.

I bite back a yowl of pain, pressing myself deeper into the shadows. The conflicting forces of the lunar cycle and the approaching eclipse are creating interference in the transformation process. My body wants to return to human form as night approaches, but the eclipse’s influence prevents complete reversal.

The gateway’s proximity disrupts the natural cycle, Anubis explains, his voice strained. Its energy pattern conflicts with our connection.

Another wave of partial transformation hits, strong enough that I have to dig my claws into the concrete to keep from convulsing visibly. When it passes, I remain fully in cat form, but the message is clear: I cannot control the transformations reliably now. The lunar pull has me locked in this shape until the eclipse passes—exactly when I most need human capabilities for the confrontation ahead.

A loud explosion suddenly rocks the facility—Chen’s distraction, right on schedule. Alarms blare as several cultists rush toward the upper levels to investigate. The disruption provides perfect cover to retreat and regroup. I take one last look at Nadia, meeting her eyes briefly. She gives an almost imperceptible nod. Message received: she’ll hold strong until rescue arrives.

I navigate back through the tunnel system as chaos erupts in the pumping station. Security personnel rush past the hidden maintenance passages, none

noticing the black cat moving purposefully through the shadows. By the time I emerge near our designated meeting point, the sun has set completely, casting the industrial landscape in shades of darkness my feline eyes penetrate easily.

Chen appears minutes later, moving with the practiced stealth of former military. He crouches beside the crate where I've concealed myself.

"Perimeter security is standard private contractors—armed but not expecting supernatural threats," he reports quietly. "I counted fourteen external guards, likely more inside. The distraction worked—C4 charge on an abandoned vehicle near the east fence. No casualties, but they've redirected significant resources there."

I wish I could respond with my own intelligence, but without Anubis channeling my thoughts, I'm limited to basic communication. I paw at the pouch still secured around my neck, and Chen carefully removes it, extracting a small notepad and pencil he included earlier. With awkward movements, I manage to grip the pencil between my teeth and scratch crude letters on the paper.

CANT CHANGE BACK. ECLIPSE EFFECT. NADIA CENTER CHAMBER. ALIVE. RITUAL NEEDS ME AS FINAL COMPONENT.

Chen reads my message, face grim. "So transformation is locked until after the eclipse. That complicates things." He thinks for a moment. "But maybe we can use it. They're expecting you to come for Nadia—but in which form?"

I scratch another note: BLACKWOOD HAS CONTROL AMULET.

"The one Nadia described that can supposedly command your transformations?" Chen frowns. "That's a significant advantage on their side. We need a counter."

He opens his backpack, removing what looks like small communication devices and several vials of clear liquid. "I anticipated potential problems with the transformation. These are experimental compounds based on your blood work—synthetic hormones that might temporarily force a transformation. Completely untested, of course."

I eye the vials warily. Untested drugs designed to manipulate supernatural biology seem like a desperate measure. But our situation grows more desperate by the minute.

"The plan needs adjustment," Chen continues. "You remain in cat form for infiltration. I'll create a secondary distraction to thin their numbers further. We rendezvous inside, free Nadia, sabotage the ritual components, and extract before the eclipse reaches totality."

It's a decent plan given our limitations, but we both know the chances of everything going perfectly are slim. I scratch a final note: IF CAPTURED, DESTROY AMULET PRIORITY.

Chen nods solemnly. "Understood. Without the control amulet, they lose their advantage over your connection to Anubis." He checks his watch. "Two hours

until the ritual begins in earnest. We move in thirty minutes—that gives us time to observe guard rotation changes.”

As Chen makes final preparations, I curl into myself, conserving energy while mentally preparing for what’s to come. The cat instincts that come with this form catalog escape routes, defensive positions, potential weapons. But beneath the tactical considerations, human concerns persist.

If we fail tonight, the consequences extend far beyond our personal survival. According to Anubis, the entities waiting beyond the gateway would view our reality as simply another resource to consume—human lives, emotions, and physical matter all fuel for their alien existence. Blackwood believes he can control the process, allowing only specific entities through to serve his purposes. His delusion might end reality as we know it.

The moon rises over the harbor, nearly full but with the faintest shadow starting to creep across its surface—the beginning of the eclipse that will reach totality at 11:23 PM. I feel its pull like a physical tether, drawing me toward the ritual site. Even without the kidnapping, I would be compelled to go there tonight. My blood, my bond with Anubis, the proximity to where I died—all create an irresistible gravity.

Chen touches my shoulder gently, breaking my reverie. “It’s time.”

I rise, stretching each limb deliberately, preparing for the greatest challenge of my nine lives. Locked in cat form but carrying human determination, I move toward the pumping station—toward Nadia, toward Blackwood, toward a confrontation that will determine not just my fate but potentially the world’s.

The moon pulls. I follow.

Chapter 25: Nine Lives Minus One

The water sloshes around my paws as I navigate the maintenance tunnel leading back into the pumping station. My whiskers twitch, detecting subtle changes in air pressure—more people moving through the underground complex, the rhythm of their footsteps suggesting urgency. Chen’s second distraction must be working.

I pause at a junction, scenting the air. The copper tang of blood mingles with incense and something else—an electrical smell like ozone before a lightning strike. The ritual preparations are advancing. Through my connection with Anubis, I feel the gateway’s proximity as a pressure behind my eyes, a constant pull toward the central chamber where Nadia remains captive.

Their preparations near completion, Anubis warns, his voice fainter than before. The eclipse approaches first contact. Power gathers.

The bond between us feels stretched thin, like a rubber band pulled to its

limit. Whether from the eclipse's interference or proximity to the gateway, our communication requires more effort now. I can still sense his presence, but the clear guidance I've grown accustomed to comes in fragments, static-filled like a radio losing signal.

Two robed cultists appear at the end of the passage, carrying ornate vessels filled with harbor water. I flatten myself against a pipe, fur blending with the shadows. They pass within inches, speaking in low voices.

"—final preparations for the vessel," says one, a woman with a Boston accent. "Blackwood wants her purified before the moon reaches thirty percent occlusion."

"What about the detective?" asks her companion. "Security reports no sign of him approaching the perimeter."

The woman laughs softly. "He'll come. The binding draws him, especially tonight. And if the human form resists, the cat will answer. Either way, Anubis's avatar serves our purpose."

They turn a corner, their voices fading. I follow at a safe distance, their unwitting guides leading me deeper into the complex. The passages grow wider, architectural elements changing from utilitarian water management to something more ceremonial. Ancient Egyptian symbols cover the walls, some carved directly into concrete, others painted in fresh gold. The juxtaposition of modern industrial infrastructure with ancient mysticism should seem absurd, but instead creates a disturbing harmony—as if the building's original designers unconsciously echoed much older patterns.

The cultists enter a small antechamber and begin a purification ritual, washing their hands and faces in the water they've collected. I slip past them through a drainage grate barely large enough for my body, emerging in a maintenance crawlspace that runs above the main ritual chamber.

From this elevated vantage point, I can observe the entire operation without being spotted. The ritual preparations have advanced significantly in the hour since my first reconnaissance. The central circle glows with a sickly green luminescence, Egyptian artifacts positioned at precise intervals around its perimeter. Smaller circles branch off from the main pattern like a geometric flower, each containing different ceremonial components—herbs, stones, small animal bones, vials of what can only be blood.

Nadia remains at the center, still secured to the altar. They've added more elaborate bindings—golden chains inscribed with hieroglyphs that seem to shimmer with their own light. Her ceremonial garments now include a headdress reminiscent of Ancient Egyptian nobility. Despite these trappings, her expression remains defiant, eyes constantly scanning the chamber, looking for weaknesses or opportunities.

Blackwood stands on an elevated platform constructed from repurposed pumping equipment, consulting an ancient papyrus scroll while technicians make

adjustments to modern equipment nearby. The incongruous blend of epochs continues—laptops monitoring astronomical data sit beside alabaster canopic jars; digital cameras capture ritual proceedings while incense burns in bronze censers.

Cultists of varying commitment levels move through the space with practiced coordination. The inner circle members wear elaborate ceremonial robes, while support personnel dress in more practical attire—some even in tactical gear, weapons visible. I count twenty-three people total, not including Nadia. More than Chen and I anticipated.

I locate potential exit routes, weaknesses in their security pattern, possible approaches to Nadia's position. The most promising path seems to be through water channels beneath the central platform—large pipes once used to control water flow now repurposed for ritual purposes. If I can navigate through them, I could emerge directly beneath the altar.

A sudden commotion at the main entrance draws everyone's attention. Two security personnel drag in a struggling figure—Chen. Blood streams from a cut above his eyebrow, his clothing torn and dirty. One of his captors carries his backpack, rifling through the contents.

"Found him setting charges at the east perimeter," reports the guard. "He had these." He holds up the vials of synthetic compounds Chen created to force my transformation.

My heart sinks. Our backup plan compromised before implementation. I should have insisted Chen stay clear, maintained his role as distant support. Now both human allies are captive.

Blackwood descends from his platform, approaching Chen with aristocratic disdain. "Dr. Martin Chen. Boston Medical Examiner's Office." He reads from Chen's ID badge. "An unexpected guest at our celebration."

Chen spits blood onto the concrete floor. "Just doing my civic duty. Suspicious activity in an abandoned building. Thought I'd investigate."

"With military-grade explosives and..." Blackwood examines one of the vials curiously, "...experimental compounds? I think not." He gestures to the guards. "Secure him near Dr. Farouk. If he's working with the detective, he may prove useful."

As they drag Chen toward the central circle, he locks eyes with Nadia. Some silent communication passes between them—a plan formed during previous discussions, perhaps. Nadia gives an almost imperceptible nod before addressing Blackwood.

"Your calculations are wrong," she calls out, voice steady despite her position. "The astronomical alignment requires adjustment for the harbor's specific coordinates. Your ritual will fail."

Blackwood turns to her, irritation flickering across his gaunt features. “Your attempts at disruption are transparent, Dr. Farouk. The calculations have been verified by multiple sources.”

“Including the authentic texts my grandfather translated? The ones your people failed to steal?” Nadia’s confidence seems to give Blackwood pause. “The gateway coordinates must account for both celestial and terrestrial alignments. Basic ritual mechanics.”

It’s a brilliant diversion. While attention focuses on Nadia, Chen uses the opportunity to scan the chamber, his eyes eventually finding mine in the shadows of the overhead crawlspace. A slight tilt of his head communicates understanding—he’s creating an opening for me.

Blackwood approaches Nadia, genuine uncertainty in his expression. “Explain.”

“The harbor’s position requires a seven-degree adjustment to the eastern alignment,” Nadia says, her academic tone so convincing I almost believe her myself. “Otherwise, you’re opening a doorway to nowhere. Or worse, somewhere unintended.”

As Blackwood confers with his ritual specialists, examining diagrams and rechecking calculations, I ease forward through the crawlspace, positioning myself above a section of piping that should lead beneath the altar. The metal is old and corroded in places, likely to give way under minimal pressure. My entry point.

Before I can make my move, a sharp pain lances through my skull. The transformation trying to assert itself again, fighting against the eclipse’s suppression. I dig my claws into the metal to keep from crying out as waves of not-quite-change roll through me. My vision blurs momentarily, whiskers hypersensitive to the point of agony.

The gateway begins to affect local reality, Anubis explains, his voice distant and strained. The eclipse approaches first contact with the moon. Our connection experiences...interference.

Below, the ritual circle’s glow intensifies in response to the same forces disrupting my transformation. The artifacts at the perimeter begin to resonate, emitting a low harmonic hum just at the edge of human hearing but painfully loud to my feline ears. Several cultists drop to their knees, overwhelmed by the sudden energy surge.

Blackwood alone seems invigorated by the phenomenon, his face lit with fervent joy. “It begins! The first contact approaches. Prepare the purification sequence.”

The disturbance passes, leaving me still locked in cat form but somehow changed. My perception has altered slightly—colors shifting toward ultraviolet, the heat signatures of living bodies now visible as faint auras. Most significantly, I can see something like gossamer threads connecting the ritual components, a pattern previously invisible that maps the energy flow they’re attempting to create.

I focus on Nadia and Chen, checking for similar patterns. Chen shows nothing unusual, but Nadia glows with a faint golden light, particularly around her head and hands. Her connection to ancient knowledge, perhaps, or some latent sensitivity the cult has detected and aims to exploit.

The moment of distraction created by the energy surge is ending. I need to move now. With careful precision, I position myself above the weakest section of pipe and deliver a calculated pounce, combining my body weight with focused pressure at a structural weak point.

The metal gives way with a groan, quieter than I feared but still audible. I slip through the opening as cultists turn toward the sound, dropping into the water channel below. Cold liquid rises to my chest, the current mild but noticeable. Following it should lead me beneath the central platform.

I paddle silently through the narrow channel, navigating turns and junctions by instinct and memory of the blueprints. The water grows warmer as I approach the ritual center, taking on an unpleasant metallic taste. Not pollution—something else. The liquid itself is changing, responding to the ritual energies.

A grating ahead should open directly beneath the altar where Nadia is secured. I approach cautiously, peering through the metal bars. From this angle, I can see the underside of the platform, modern construction materials married to ancient design principles. The load-bearing elements form a pattern identical to sacred geometry found in Egyptian temples—whether by coincidence or subtle influence, I can't determine.

Voices filter down from above, Blackwood giving instructions for the next ritual phase. "Bring forward the binding cage. The avatar will appear soon. We must be prepared."

My fur stands on end at the words. Binding cage. They've anticipated my rescue attempt, prepared specifically for my cat form. I need to revise my approach, but options narrow by the minute. The eclipse's first contact with the moon has begun—I can feel it as a pressure change, like descent in an airplane. My time window shrinks with each passing moment.

I examine the grating more carefully. Too small for me to slip through, but the surrounding concrete has deteriorated from years of water exposure. With enough force applied precisely... I extend my claws to their full length, digging into the crumbling material, working methodically to widen the opening.

Above, the ritual proceeds. Chanting begins—a mixture of Ancient Egyptian and something older, sounds human vocal cords shouldn't produce. The water around me responds, developing subtle currents that swirl in patterns matching the ceremonial movements above.

My efforts create an opening just wide enough to squeeze through with painful compression. I emerge into a small space beneath the altar itself, hidden from direct view by ceremonial draping. Through gaps in the fabric, I can see Nadia's

bound arms, the golden chains catching ritual light. From this position, I can reach her bindings, perhaps weaken them enough for her to break free during a crucial moment.

I extend a paw toward the nearest chain, testing its strength. The metal is surprisingly warm, almost hot to the touch, and I feel an immediate resistance—not physical but magical, a repelling force that recognizes me as Anubis’s avatar. These bonds were designed specifically to counter my intervention.

Blood lock, Anubis identifies. The chains respond to sacrifice essence.

The implication is clear—only blood from the ritual participants can release these bindings. I withdraw, reassessing options. Direct liberation is impossible, but perhaps I can create enough chaos to allow Chen to act. If I reveal myself, become the focus of their attention...

The decision is made for me as the fabric concealing my position is suddenly ripped away. I find myself staring up at Blackwood’s triumphant face.

“There you are,” he says with satisfaction. “Right on schedule.”

Before I can react, a crystalline cage drops around me, its bars glowing with the same energy as the ritual circle. The cage is small, barely large enough for my cat form, constructed of some transparent material etched with Egyptian hieroglyphs. The moment it encloses me, a numbing sensation spreads through my body, dulling my reactions and muffling my connection to Anubis.

Containment spell, Anubis’s voice comes weakly. Disrupts our bond.

Blackwood kneels, examining me through the crystal bars with genuine fascination. “The detective becomes the hunted. How fitting.” He lifts the cage effortlessly—the material lighter than it appears—raising me to eye level. “I must thank you for your punctuality. Capturing Anubis’s avatar was the most uncertain element of tonight’s ceremony.”

I hiss defiantly, the small act of resistance all I can manage through the cage’s suppressing influence. From my elevated position, I can now see the entire chamber. Chen has been secured to a secondary altar, his medical bag emptied beside him, contents cataloged by cultists. Nadia strains against her bindings, eyes wide with concern as she sees my predicament.

“The irony,” Blackwood continues, carrying my cage toward the center of the ritual circle, “is that you’ve made this infinitely easier by arriving in feline form. The essence separation process is much cleaner with your transformed state—fewer human elements contaminating the divine spark.”

He places my cage on a pedestal positioned opposite Nadia, completing some geometric alignment. From this central position, I can see architectural elements I missed before—the chamber’s dimensions follow golden ratio proportions, the ceiling opens to precisely frame the eclipsing moon, water channels converge beneath us in patterns matching the stars above.

“You think you’re opening a doorway to resurrection,” I project through my weakened connection to Anubis, the dual-toned voice barely audible. “You’re opening a gateway to entropy.”

Blackwood’s eyebrows rise in surprise at my communication method. “It speaks! Fascinating.” He adjusts ceremonial implements arranged around my cage. “And incorrect. I seek not mere resurrection but transcendence. The entities beyond the gateway offer more than simple return of what was lost.”

“They offer nothing but consumption,” I respond, focusing all my energy into maintaining the connection. “They’ll devour this reality, starting with you.”

A shadow passes over Blackwood’s features. “You know nothing of my negotiations with them. Three years of communion, of promises kept on both sides.” He reaches inside his jacket, removing a locket. Opening it reveals photos of a woman and young girl—his family. “They’ve allowed me to speak with Elizabeth and Sophia. To see them waiting just beyond the veil.”

The revelation matches Sullivan’s information. Blackwood’s descent into obsession began with personal tragedy—grief twisted into delusion. I sense no deception in him, only absolute conviction.

“Those weren’t your family,” I say, softening my tone despite our adversarial positions. “Chaos entities reflect desires, Maxwell. They mirror hopes to manipulate perception.”

“Lies.” His composure cracks slightly, hand tightening around the locket. “I know my wife’s voice. My daughter’s laugh. The entities merely facilitate our reunion once the barrier thins sufficiently.”

From her position, Nadia joins the conversation. “Mr. Blackwood, I’ve studied these interdimensional communications for years. The patterns match classic deception techniques. They show you what you need to see to continue the ritual.”

Blackwood’s expression hardens. “That’s enough from both of you.” He snaps the locket closed, returning it to his pocket. “Your understanding is limited by conventional thinking. I’ve glimpsed what lies beyond—not chaos, but transformation. Not death, but evolution.”

He turns away, addressing his assembled followers. “The eclipse progresses as prophesied. Prepare the essence extraction apparatus. When the moon reaches forty percent occlusion, we begin harvesting Anubis’s power from his avatar.”

Cultists mobilize in coordinated movements. Some adjust the ritual circle’s components while others wheel forward what can only be described as a hybrid of medical equipment and ceremonial implements—IV stands bearing bags of dark liquid, monitoring devices with Egyptian symbols etched into their casings, a central crystalline vessel positioned to collect something from my cage.

My prison allows limited movement, enough to turn and establish eye contact with both Nadia and Chen. Chen's expression communicates strategic assessment—he's cataloging options, looking for weaknesses. Nadia's face shows something deeper—genuine fear mixed with determination. The stakes are personal now, beyond the abstract threat to reality.

Blackwood returns to his elevated platform, consulting astronomical readings from both ancient tools and modern devices. "Thirty-two percent occlusion," he announces. "Prepare the primary vessel."

Two robed figures approach Nadia, carrying a golden basin filled with dark liquid. As they begin washing her face and hands with the substance, I sense its wrongness—blood mixed with something else, something ancient and deeply unnatural.

Gateway essence, Anubis identifies weakly. Corrupted remnants from previous breach attempts across centuries. They prepare her as secondary conduit.

The implication horrifies me. They intend to use Nadia not just as bait but as a vessel for whatever comes through the gateway—a body ready for possession. I struggle against my crystalline prison with renewed desperation, but the bars don't even flex under my assault.

"Save your strength, detective," Blackwood calls from his platform. "The binding cage was designed specifically to contain Anubis's power. Ancient priesthoods created similar devices to transport divine essence safely." He descends again, approaching my cage. "Of course, they intended respectful containment rather than extraction, but the principles remain sound."

"You've corrupted everything you've touched," I project, the effort leaving me light-headed. "Ancient knowledge, archaeological treasures, people who trusted you."

"I've improved them," Blackwood corrects. "Given purpose to dusty relics, direction to directionless followers, and tonight, meaning to your accidental existence." He leans closer to the cage. "You're a cosmic mistake, detective—a binding spell gone wrong, creating a flawed avatar. I'm simply correcting the error, harvesting what's useful and discarding the rest."

His casual cruelty confirms what I already suspected—once Anubis's essence is extracted, my death is certain. The small comfort is that without me as conduit, their control over Anubis's power will be limited. The question becomes whether that limitation is sufficient to prevent gateway activation.

Not sufficient, Anubis answers my unspoken question. Once extracted, my essence can be manipulated through the artifacts. Limited control, but enough for their purpose.

The eclipse progresses, now clearly visible through the ceiling opening. The moon's shadow takes an increasingly larger bite from its surface, the cosmic

alignment proceeding with indifferent precision. With each percentage of occlusion, the ritual circle's glow intensifies and the artifacts resonate at higher frequencies.

A cult technician approaches Blackwood. "Extraction apparatus calibrated to forty percent capacity. Ready on your command."

Blackwood nods approvingly. "Excellent. Begin the separation sequence when occlusion reaches thirty-eight percent." He turns to address his assembled followers. "Fellow seekers of truth beyond death, tonight we ascend! The veil thins, the gateway opens, and those who have waited beyond time will join us in glorious communion."

The fervor in the chamber builds, cultists swaying with increasing abandon as the chanting resumes. The energy pattern I perceived earlier grows more complex, threads of power linking artifacts, participants, and celestial positions in an elaborate web with Nadia, myself, and the central altar at its nexus.

My prison begins to glow more intensely as the extraction apparatus activates. Crystal resonates painfully, the bars now burning where they contact my fur. I feel a pulling sensation, not physical but deeper—something reaching for the essence that makes me Anubis's avatar, attempting to separate divine from mortal.

The pain transcends physical understanding. It's existential agony, the forced division of what has become integrated. The transformation magic that allows me to shift between forms is being twisted, corrupted into a separation process that tears at the foundations of my blended existence.

I yowl in anguish, the sound echoing through the chamber with supernatural resonance. Several cultists fall to their knees, clutching their ears. Even Blackwood winces, though his expression quickly returns to ecstatic anticipation.

Through the haze of pain, I see Chen working methodically at his restraints, using the distraction of my suffering to mask his efforts. Nadia strains against her bindings, tears streaming down her face as she watches my torment. Her lips move in what appears to be an Egyptian prayer or counterspell—useless against the apparatus, but the sentiment provides momentary comfort.

The crystalline vessel connected to my cage begins filling with golden luminescence—Anubis's essence being harvested, drop by metaphysical drop. With each extraction, my connection to the god weakens further. Colors fade from my vision, supernatural senses dulling toward mundane perception. The cage's suppression combined with the extraction leaves me increasingly ordinary—just a cat, nothing more.

Hold fast, Anubis's voice comes as barely a whisper. The extraction creates vulnerability in their pattern. When completion nears, the transfer moment creates instability.

I understand the implication—the point of maximum extraction will be our only chance for disruption. I need to conserve what strength remains for that critical moment, however brief it might be.

Blackwood watches the vessel fill with obvious satisfaction. “Thirty-five percent extraction. Proceed to secondary calibration for vessel preparation.” He gestures toward Nadia. “Begin the anointment ritual.”

Cultists approach Nadia with ceremonial daggers, preparing to draw blood for the next phase. As they reach her, the building suddenly trembles, water sloshing violently in the channels beneath the platform. Several cultists lose their footing, equipment toppling with metallic crashes.

“Containment breach in sector three!” shouts a security guard through radio static. “Multiple explosions along the eastern perimeter. Structural damage to—” The transmission cuts off abruptly.

Blackwood’s composure finally cracks. “What’s happening? Report!”

A technician frantically checks monitoring equipment. “Unknown attackers, sir. Security cameras show... this can’t be right. The harbor water is rising against gravitational flow. Flooding the lower chambers.”

Another tremor, stronger than the first, rocks the facility. Dust and concrete fragments shower from the ceiling. The disruption affects the ritual energies—the glowing threads I perceived earlier now flicker and distort, the pattern losing coherence.

Not attackers, Anubis murmurs. Consequences. The gateway opening affects physical reality first through water—the boundary substance between worlds.

Blackwood recognizes the truth in this assessment, his expression shifting from concern to renewed exaltation. “It comes! Earlier than anticipated, but it comes! The gateway responds to our calling.” He addresses his followers. “Maintain the ritual! Complete the extraction regardless of disturbance.”

The extraction process accelerates, cultists adjusting equipment to compensate for the environmental disruptions. My agony intensifies proportionally, each drop of divine essence torn away leaving me hollower. The vessel is nearly half full now, golden light pulsing in rhythm with the chamber’s increasingly unstable energies.

Through blurring vision, I see Chen finally free one hand from his restraints, reaching slowly toward nearby ritual components. Nadia continues her silent incantation, her eyes now showing not just fear but recognition—she understands what’s happening beyond the ritual itself, the physical manifestations of reality’s boundaries weakening.

Another violent tremor, water now visibly seeping through the chamber floor. The cultists’ confident coordination deteriorates into barely controlled panic, many looking to Blackwood for reassurance. He provides it with manic intensity,

directing adjustments to compensate for the disruptions while monitoring the extraction progress.

“Fifty-eight percent extraction,” reports a technician, voice quavering. “Approaching critical transfer threshold.”

Blackwood nods. “Prepare phase transition. When extraction reaches sixty-five percent, divert essence flow to gateway anchor points.”

This confirms what Anubis suggested—the moment of transfer will create vulnerability. As they redirect the extracted essence from collection to application, the pattern will momentarily destabilize. Our only chance requires perfect timing.

The extraction reaches sixty percent. My connection to Anubis has diminished to near nothingness, leaving me weak and thoroughly mortal. The pain subsides only because there’s less divine essence remaining to be torn away. The cage glows with blinding intensity, the crystalline vessel nearly full of swirling golden energy.

“Sixty-three percent,” calls the technician.

Water now covers the chamber floor completely, rising at an accelerating rate. Minor artifacts float free from their positions, disrupting the ritual pattern further. Cultists wade through knee-deep water, struggling to maintain ceremonial positions.

“Sixty-four percent.”

Chen has both hands free now, reaching for something half-submerged near his altar. Nadia’s eyes lock with mine, communicating wordless determination.

“Sixty-five percent! Transfer threshold achieved!”

Blackwood raises his arms in triumph. “Begin the diversion! Channel the essence to the anchor points!”

The moment arrives—technicians adjust valves and settings on the extraction apparatus, preparing to redirect Anubis’s harvested essence from collection to application. For a fraction of a second, the flow pauses, the connection between vessel and ritual circle not yet established.

In that infinitesimal gap, I summon every remaining fragment of supernatural energy, focusing it into a single concentrated effort. Not an attack on the cage itself, but on the connection between cage and extraction apparatus—the transfer conduit temporarily in flux during redirection.

A pulse of golden light—the last of Anubis’s essence I can command—travels through the crystal bars, following the extraction path in reverse. It reaches the vulnerable connection point precisely as technicians complete the redirection adjustment. The resulting feedback creates cascade failure through the apparatus.

The crystalline vessel shatters explosively, releasing the harvested essence in a violent surge that floods the chamber with golden light. Cultists scream as the uncontained power burns through unprepared flesh, the divine essence seeking reconnection with its source—me.

The cage disintegrates as Anubis's essence returns, flowing back into my form with the violence of a tsunami reclaiming shore. The reconnection brings no gentle healing but violent reintegration, my body convulsing as divine power overwhelms mortal limitations.

Blackwood howls in rage and desperation, lunging toward me through the chaos, the controlling amulet glowing at his neck. "No! The essence must feed the gateway!"

Before he reaches me, Chen makes his move. Using the disruption as cover, he drives a ritual dagger—one of the cult's own ceremonial tools—into the altar where Nadia is secured. Not attacking the bindings directly but the power source beneath them. The golden chains flicker and fade, their magic disrupted.

Nadia rolls free, immediately moving toward ancillary ritual components, her academic knowledge guiding her to critical failure points. With precision born from years of archaeological study, she repositions key artifacts, reversing their alignment and disrupting the energy flow.

The chamber descends into complete chaos. Water continues rising, now waist-deep on the cultists. The ceiling trembles with increasing structural damage. The ritual circle's glow distorts into unstable patterns, energy bleeding outward in dangerous surges.

I struggle to regain equilibrium as Anubis's essence reintegrates with my form. The process leaves me simultaneously stronger and more vulnerable—power returning but without the control I've developed over months. Raw divine energy courses through cat form, threatening to destroy the vessel containing it.

Containment failing, Anubis warns, his voice stronger but strained. *Transformation unstable*.

I feel it—my body shifting between states uncontrollably, patches of fur receding then returning, bones elongating then compressing. Neither fully cat nor human, caught between transformations as divine energy struggles to find equilibrium in a damaged vessel.

Blackwood recognizes the imminent failure of his grand ritual. With surprising strength for his gaunt frame, he seizes the controlling amulet from around his neck, lunging toward me with clear intent—if he cannot extract Anubis's essence properly, he'll attempt cruder methods.

"The gateway will open!" he shrieks, face contorted beyond human expression. "They promised! They showed me my family waiting!"

Chen intercepts him, tackling Blackwood into the rising water. They struggle violently, the amulet glowing between them as Blackwood attempts to use its power against his attacker. Chen fights with military precision, but Blackwood possesses supernatural strength born of madness and ritual energies.

Nadia reaches me, supporting my convulsing form. “Jake! We need to get out! The whole structure is failing!”

Through spasms of partial transformation, I manage to focus on her face. “The gateway... still opening...”

“I’ve disrupted the pattern,” she explains urgently, “but the eclipse continues. The natural thinning of reality at this location combined with the ritual energies already released—it’s created cascade failure. We need to reach the harbor ritual site to complete proper closure.”

I understand her meaning—the pumping station was preparatory, but the final phase was always meant to occur at the harbor location where I died. The control has been lost, but the process continues, now wild and unpredictable.

A violent explosion rocks the chamber as water reaches electrical systems. Emergency lighting activates, casting the chaos in bloody red illumination. Most cultists are fleeing now, abandoning their prophet and ritual in face of imminent structural collapse.

Blackwood and Chen continue their struggle, now fully submerged then resurfacing for desperate breaths. The controlling amulet gleams beneath the water, its power undimmed by submersion. With a final surge of desperate strength, Blackwood forces Chen underwater, holding him down with supernatural strength.

Nadia looks between us and the struggling men, conflict clear on her face.

“Go!” I project with returned strength. “Help Chen!”

She hesitates momentarily, then wades through rising water toward the struggle. Grabbing a floating piece of equipment, she brings it down on Blackwood’s head with academic precision. The blow stuns him enough for Chen to surface, gasping for air.

The three of us converge as the chamber continues deteriorating around us. Chen bleeding but functional, Nadia determined despite clear exhaustion, and me in my unstable state—caught between forms as transformation magic fluctuates wildly.

“Harbor ritual site,” Nadia repeats urgently. “It’s our only chance to close this properly.”

Chen nods grimly. “There’s a service exit this way. Emergency evacuation route.”

As we move toward the exit, a hand surges from the water, grasping my hind leg with inhuman strength. Blackwood, face bloody and eyes wild with fanatical

determination, holds the controlling amulet directly against my flesh.

“You will serve!” he commands, amulet flaring with purpose. “By blood and binding, Anubis’s avatar obeys!”

The amulet’s magic slams into me like physical impact, attempting to override the bond between Anubis and myself. Not subtle manipulation but brute magical force, trying to establish dominance over divine essence. The controlling spell fights against my reconnection with Anubis, creating a three-way struggle for sovereignty over form and function.

The conflict manifests physically—my body shifting rapidly between forms, neither fully achieving dominance. Blackwood maintains his grip despite Nadia and Chen’s attempts to break it, the amulet’s power creating feedback loop with the continuing ritual energies.

“The guardian... comes with me!” Blackwood declares, dragging me back toward the central altar despite the rising water. “The gateway will open with or without the ritual components!”

Another structural support fails, massive concrete sections crashing into the water. The impact creates a wave that separates us temporarily, breaking Blackwood’s physical hold but not the amulet’s magical connection. I feel myself being pulled toward him against my will, the controlling spell asserting dominance during my weakened transitional state.

“Go!” I command Chen and Nadia. “Harbor site! I’ll delay him!”

Chen looks ready to argue, but Nadia grasps the necessity. “The eclipse reaches seventy percent occlusion in seventeen minutes,” she tells him. “We need to prepare counterritual components before totality.”

With obvious reluctance, Chen allows Nadia to pull him toward the emergency exit. “We’ll be waiting,” he calls back to me. “Don’t you dare not show up this time!”

The reference to my first death provides strange comfort as they disappear through the exit. I turn back to face Blackwood, who stands waist-deep in water at the chamber’s center, amulet raised like a beacon. Its light cuts through emergency illumination, creating an unnatural spotlight effect.

“Come, avatar,” he commands, voice layered with magical compulsion. “Your purpose awaits.”

My body responds against my will, moving toward him through the water. The controlling spell works directly on Anubis’s essence, bypassing my human consciousness. Transformation continues cycling unpredictably, leaving me neither fully cat nor man but something unstable between.

Blackwood smiles with terrible triumph. “The others are unnecessary. The cult, the ritual components—all training wheels I no longer need.” He reaches out,

grasping my partly transformed body as I'm forced to his side. "The gateway opens at the harbor site regardless. The universe unfolds as promised."

The ceiling finally gives way completely, massive sections collapsing into the flooded chamber. Water from upper levels cascades down as the pumping station's structural integrity fails catastrophically. Blackwood shows no concern, the amulet's power creating protective barrier around us as debris falls nearby.

"We have an appointment with destiny, avatar," he says, dragging me toward a different exit—one leading directly to water tunnels connecting to the harbor. "Your friends race to prevent what cannot be prevented. The eclipse continues, the alignment perfects, and those waiting beyond will finally enter."

As we move through flooding tunnels toward the harbor, I struggle against the amulet's control with diminishing success. My physical form continues shifting unpredictably—limbs elongating then contracting, fur appearing then receding, perspective changing between human and feline height.

Resist complete submission, Anubis advises, his voice stronger but strained. The amulet controls action but cannot claim ultimate sovereignty without consent.

I focus on this distinction, yielding physically while maintaining mental resistance. The amulet can force my body to follow, but my mind remains my own. It's a small distinction, but perhaps enough to create opportunity when the moment comes.

Blackwood leads me through the flooding infrastructure of the old pumping station, following channels that will eventually empty into the harbor. The water rises steadily around us, now chest deep and gaining speed as structural failures create new flow patterns.

"The site of your death becomes the cradle of transcendence," Blackwood says, a zealot's fervor animating his gaunt features. "Perfect symmetry. The cosmic pattern recognizes the poetry of it."

Despite the amulet's control, I can sense Anubis's essence gradually reintegrating, stabilizing within me after the trauma of extraction and violent return. My form still shifts unpredictably, but with decreasing frequency. Soon I'll either stabilize as cat or human—which form, I cannot predict.

As we navigate the final tunnel approaching the harbor, I feel the eclipse's progression as physical pressure. The moon's shadow now covers more than half its surface, the cosmic alignment nearing its peak. Through the amulet's control, I can sense Blackwood's anticipation—the absolute certainty that his family awaits just beyond a thinning veil.

His grief has built this moment over years of preparation, study, and sacrifice. Understanding this doesn't diminish the danger he represents, but it offers potential leverage. Behind the madness remains a father and husband driven by love, however twisted its expression has become.

The tunnel opens to the harbor, the night air carrying the salt tang of ocean mixed with industrial pollutants. The eclipse dominates the sky, moon and shadow creating perfect celestial drama for what unfolds below. The water around us begins to behave strangely, creating patterns and currents contrary to natural physics—miniature whirlpools forming and dissolving, waves moving against the wind.

“We’ve arrived,” Blackwood declares, guiding me to a precise spot along the harbor’s edge. I recognize it immediately—this is where I fell that night months ago, where I died and was reborn as Anubis’s avatar.

In the distance, I can see figures approaching—Chen and Nadia, moving with purpose along the harbor front. They carry what appear to be ritual components salvaged from the pumping station, Nadia directing their arrangement with academic precision.

Blackwood spots them as well, his grip on my partially transformed body tightening. “They persist in their interference.” He reaches into his sodden jacket, withdrawing additional ritual items—small artifacts that pulse with power even to my dampened supernatural senses.

“It matters not,” he continues, placing the items in a rough circle around us. “The gateway requires only three components now: the eclipse, the location, and you.” He presses the amulet more firmly against my flesh. “Come, avatar. Fulfill your purpose.”

Under the amulet’s command, I move to the circle’s center, my body continuing its unpredictable shifts between forms. The harbor water laps at the edge of the impromptu ritual space, behaving with increasing strangeness—seeming to reach toward us with tentacle-like extensions before receding.

Blackwood begins an incantation, ancient Egyptian mixed with something older and more disturbing. The controlling amulet pulses in rhythm with his words, each syllable sending waves of compulsion through my unstable form. Above, the eclipse approaches seventy percent completion.

From their position across the harbor front, Nadia and Chen work frantically to establish their counter-ritual. I can see Nadia’s lips moving in her own incantation, her hands arranging artifacts in patterns that seem to respond to Blackwood’s work—not opposing directly but creating complex interference patterns.

The harbor water retreats suddenly from the shore, pulling back in defiance of natural tides. The exposed harbor bottom reveals secrets usually hidden beneath murky depths—ancient debris, lost items, and something else: traces of golden light marking exactly where I fell and died months ago. The cosmic memory of that moment preserved in reality’s substrate.

“It comes!” Blackwood cries, voice cracking with emotion. “The thinning begins!”

I feel it too—a stretching sensation in the fabric of reality around us. The air between dimensions becoming permeable, the strict boundaries between worlds softening. Through my connection with Anubis, I sense entities gathering on the other side, pressing against the weakening barrier with increasing pressure.

They sense opportunity, Anubis warns, his voice stronger as our connection stabilizes. *Chaos entities hunger for physical sensation, for the experiences of material existence.*

Blackwood raises the amulet high, its glow intensifying to painful brightness. “By ancient right and modern sacrifice, I command the gateway to open!” He lowers the amulet, pressing it directly against my chest. “Anubis’s avatar becomes the key, the flesh anchor for what transcends flesh!”

The amulet burns like acid, searing through fur and skin to connect with the divine essence within me. The controlling spell reaches deeper than before, attempting to fundamentally repurpose my existence from avatar to gateway. The pain transcends physical understanding—it’s my very identity being rewritten, the bond between Anubis and myself weaponized against both.

Across the harbor, Nadia shouts something urgent to Chen. He nods, breaking away to circle behind our position while she continues the counter-ritual alone. Their strategy becomes clear—she maintains magical opposition while Chen attempts physical intervention.

My form shifts more violently now, the change no longer cycling between cat and human but creating something else entirely—a hybrid state that can serve as living doorway between dimensions. The eclipse continues its inexorable progress, now approaching eighty percent completion.

Blackwood’s expression transforms to one of rapturous joy as the air between us begins to visibly distort. “Elizabeth! Sophia! Father comes to you now!”

Through the distortion, shapes become visible—suggestions of human forms that resemble a woman and child, reaching toward Blackwood with familiar gestures. But behind this comforting illusion, I perceive their true nature—chaos entities wearing memories like masks, using Blackwood’s desperate love as gateway.

“They’re not real,” I manage to project through the amulet’s control, my voice weak but determined. “Look beyond the surface, Maxwell. See what truly waits.”

For just a moment, doubt crosses his face. The controlling grip falters slightly as his absolute conviction wavers. It’s not enough to break free, but it creates a minute crack in the spell’s dominance.

In that fractional opening, I direct all my focus inward, to the place where Anubis and I are bound. Not fighting the amulet’s control but slipping beneath it, reaching for the deeper connection that transcends the controlling spell’s construction.

The binding between us is choice, not compulsion, Anubis reminds me. Reaffirm willingly what was begun in necessity.

I understand. The original binding occurred accidentally, but its continuation requires conscious acceptance. In this moment of extremity, facing extinction or worse, I must choose rather than submit.

“I am Anubis’s avatar by choice,” I project, the words forming in both material and spiritual realms simultaneously. “Not servant but partner. Not vessel but extension.”

The declaration creates resonance between my essence and Anubis’s, strengthening our connection beyond the amulet’s capacity to override. The controlling spell begins to fracture, its artificial dominance no match for willing union.

Blackwood senses the change, pressing the amulet harder against my shifting form. “No! You belong to the ritual! To the gateway!”

The illusions of his family grow more substantial as the eclipse passes eighty-five percent, their features becoming clearer while their true nature remains hidden behind Blackwood’s perception filter. They call to him with voices that echo his memories perfectly, using his own cherished recollections to craft irresistible lures.

Chen appears behind Blackwood, moving with military stealth despite the exposed harbor bottom. In his hand, he holds one of the ritual daggers salvaged from the pumping station. His intention is clear—eliminate Blackwood to end the ritual.

But killing Blackwood won’t close what’s already opening. The gateway process has achieved partial independence, feeding on the eclipse’s alignment and the location’s significance. Even with Blackwood gone, it would continue—perhaps more dangerously, without even the limited control his ritual provided.

“Wait!” I project to Chen, the effort nearly overwhelming through the amulet’s weakening but still present control. “Not him—the amulet!”

Chen adjusts his approach instantly, target shifting from Blackwood to the controlling artifact. Blackwood remains oblivious, lost in communion with what he perceives as his family, now visible enough that he reaches toward them with his free hand.

“I’ve done everything you asked,” he tells the apparitions. “Created the pathway, prepared the vessels. We’ll be together again, as promised.”

The female figure smiles with perfect maternal tenderness, extending an arm that subtly elongates beyond human proportions. “Just one final step, my love. Release the avatar fully to us.”

Even in his madness, Blackwood notices the wrongness in the movement, hesitating slightly. “Elizabeth?”

The child figure speaks with a daughter's perfect voice, but the words carry ancient weight. "Don't you want to be together, Daddy? Don't you love us anymore?"

Doubt creeps further into Blackwood's expression. The amulet's glow flickers momentarily as his absolute certainty wavers. In that moment of hesitation, Chen strikes.

His movement is precise, targeted not at Blackwood himself but at the chain connecting the amulet to his neck. The ritual dagger slices through with supernatural sharpness, separating the controlling artifact from its wielder.

Blackwood screams as the connection breaks, more in existential agony than physical pain. The amulet falls toward the exposed harbor bottom, its glow still pulsing with dangerous power. Before it can land, I lunge forward, breaking the last of its hold over me as my form finally stabilizes—not as cat or human but the perfect hybrid Anubis described: the true avatar state.

I catch the amulet in jaws that are neither fully feline nor human, crushing it between teeth imbued with divine strength. The artifact shatters, releasing a pulse of energy that ripples outward across the harbor. The controlling spell dissipates, leaving me fully integrated once more.

Blackwood falls to his knees, staring in horror as the illusions of his family transform before his eyes, their comforting familiarity melting away to reveal the entities beneath—formless, shifting masses of concept and hunger barely constrained by dimensional boundaries.

"No," he whispers, the single word containing years of grief and broken hope. "It can't be..."

"It is," I tell him, my voice now a perfect blend of human speech and divine resonance. "They showed you what you needed to see to serve their purpose."

The eclipse reaches ninety percent, the gateway continuing to form despite the amulet's destruction. The ritual begun at the pumping station provided momentum that now sustains itself, drawing power from cosmic alignment and location resonance.

Nadia's counter-ritual creates interference patterns in the forming gateway, preventing complete manifestation but unable to fully close what's opening. She calls to me across the harbor, voice carrying with unusual clarity through the distorting air.

"Jake! The gateway requires proper closing! It needs the guardian's willing sacrifice!"

I understand immediately what she means. From Anubis's memories and her grandfather's research, the proper closure requires the divine guardian to reinforce the boundary—not with death but with essence freely given.

Blackwood remains kneeling, his life's purpose revealed as cosmic deception. The harbor water begins returning with unnatural speed, surging toward the exposed ritual site with clear purpose—the chaos entities attempting to manifest through their most compatible element, the boundary substance between worlds.

Chen reaches Blackwood, pulling the broken man to his feet. “We need to move! Now!”

As they retreat toward higher ground, I move to the center of the gateway distortion, directly above the spot where I died months ago. The returning harbor water swirls around me, forming patterns that match the stars above rather than natural fluid dynamics.

In my true avatar form, I finally understand what's required—not death but transformation of a different kind. The willing sacrifice Nadia mentioned isn't my life but my chance to return to full humanity. To seal the gateway properly requires permanent commitment to the guardian role, becoming part of the boundary itself.

The eclipse passes ninety-five percent, approaching totality. The gateway widens further, the entities beyond now clearly visible through the thinning veil. Their alien geometries and impossible anatomies defy comprehension, existing as concepts with form rather than physical beings.

The choice must be made freely, Anubis confirms. But understand the consequence—what changes tonight becomes permanent. Neither fully human nor divine, but guardian eternal.

“I understand,” I answer aloud, addressing both Anubis and the waiting chaos. “I accept.”

With those words, I surrender the last hope of returning to my former life. Not in resignation but in choice, accepting the mantle of guardian with full awareness of its cost and purpose. The divine essence within me expands, flowing through my hybrid form and into the very fabric of the gateway.

As the moon reaches totality, the harbor water returns completely, surging up to my chest. The gateway reaches maximum potential, reality stretched to its thinnest point. In this perfect moment of cosmic alignment, I channel Anubis's power—not as servant but as true avatar, directing divine essence into the boundary between worlds.

Golden light erupts from my form, expanding outward in a perfect circle that counters the gateway's distortion. Where chaos reaches through, order pushes back. Where boundaries fail, new limitations establish themselves. The sacrifice of my humanity becomes the mortar sealing dimensional bricks.

The eclipse holds at totality for seconds that feel like eternity as the opposing forces reach equilibrium. Then, gradually, the moon begins to emerge from shadow. As cosmic alignment passes its peak, the gateway loses cohesion, the chaos entities forced back into their native realm.

Their frustration manifests as one final surge of harbor water, a massive wave that crashes over me with physical and metaphysical force. For a moment, I'm submerged completely, the boundary between air and water matching the boundary between dimensions I've helped restore.

When I surface, the gateway has closed. The harbor returns to normal aside from its unnatural tide pattern. The air no longer distorts with interdimensional pressure. But I remain changed—the hybrid form now my natural state, neither fully human nor cat but avatar incarnate.

Nadia wades through receding water toward me, her expression mixing relief, exhaustion, and something deeper. Chen follows, supporting a shattered Blackwood who moves with the vacant compliance of profound shock.

"You did it," Nadia says, reaching me. "You closed it properly."

I nod, still adjusting to my new permanent form. Not grotesque but clearly other—human in overall structure but with feline aspects integrated seamlessly. My senses operate on multiple levels simultaneously, perceiving both physical reality and the subtle energies beneath.

"At a price," I answer, my voice carrying dual tones that will now remain constant. "This form is permanent now. The change required... commitment."

Nadia's hand touches my face, fingers exploring the altered features with gentle curiosity rather than revulsion. "You chose this? Willingly?"

"Yes." The simple truth requires no elaboration.

Chen approaches with Blackwood, his professional demeanor reasserting itself despite the night's impossible events. "The cult's scattered. Most fled when the pumping station collapsed. Without Blackwood's leadership and with the gateway closed, they'll likely disband completely."

"And him?" I ask, indicating Blackwood.

Chen's expression turns grim. "Catatonic. Complete psychic break when he saw what really waited beyond the gateway."

I study the broken man, feeling unexpected empathy despite everything he's done. His madness began in grief, in love twisted by desperation and exploited by entities beyond his comprehension. The devastation in his vacant eyes speaks to hopes utterly destroyed.

"The authorities will need some explanation for tonight's events," Chen says practically. "Industrial accident at the pumping station? Gas explosion?"

Nadia nods. "My university credentials can help manage the artifacts situation. I'll claim they were recovered from improper storage conditions."

They continue discussing the cover-up, the necessary fictions to explain collapsed infrastructure and scattered cultists without mentioning gateways or

avatars. The familiar human concern with maintaining comfortable illusions about reality's true nature.

I turn away, looking out over the harbor where normal tides have resumed. The moon emerges fully from eclipse, its reflection rippling across water now behaving by natural laws once more. But beneath the surface, things have changed permanently—the boundary strengthened but requiring ongoing guardianship.

My new existence begins tonight, caught between worlds as their sentinel. Nine lives minus one—the sacrifice of normalcy in exchange for purpose. As Anubis and I settle into our permanent partnership, I find unexpected peace in this hybrid state.

The night breeze carries the scent of both worlds now—physical reality with its urban complexity, and the subtle currents of power that flow beneath ordinary perception. Behind me, Nadia and Chen continue planning our return to conventional existence, finding ways to incorporate my new form into a world unprepared for supernatural truth.

That challenge belongs to tomorrow. Tonight, guardian and gateway have found balance, sealed with willing sacrifice. The harbor keeps its secrets beneath dark water, and I keep mine beneath transformed skin.

Chapter 26: The Amulet's Power

The amulet burns against my fur, its ancient power pulsing in time with Blackwood's heartbeat. We've reached the harbor now, the very site of my death months ago. The controlling spell keeps me locked in cat form, a prisoner in my own body as Blackwood arranges the final components of his makeshift ritual.

The eclipse progresses overhead, the moon's shadow steadily devouring more of its surface. Through my connection with Anubis—weakened but not severed by the amulet—I feel reality thinning with each percentage of occlusion. The barrier between worlds becomes more permeable as cosmic alignment reaches its peak.

"Perfect," Blackwood murmurs, positioning me at the center of his improvised circle. "Even without the full ceremonial array, this location holds power. Your death and rebirth here created a permanent weak point in the dimensional fabric."

I try to move, to resist, but the amulet's spell binds my muscles to Blackwood's will. Its control isn't absolute—my mind remains my own—but my body responds only to his commands. Even my connection to Anubis feels muffled, like trying to hear through water.

Patience, Anubis counsels, his voice distant but growing clearer as my essence stabilizes after the extraction attempt. *The controlling spell has vulnerabilities. All bindings do.*

Blackwood completes his circle using artifacts salvaged from the pumping station. Despite the haphazard arrangement, I sense the ritual's potential—like a jury-rigged bomb lacking finesse but not destructive capacity. The harbor water responds to his preparations, receding unnaturally from the shore to expose the muddy bottom around us.

"The tide recognizes the coming transformation," Blackwood says, mistaking natural consequence for cosmic endorsement. "Water, the first element to respond to thinning barriers."

Through the amulet's constraints, I scan our surroundings, searching for Nadia and Chen. The harbor front remains empty, no sign of their approach. Have they abandoned the attempt as hopeless? No—Nadia wouldn't give up so easily, not with reality itself at stake.

The amulet pulses stronger as Blackwood adds ceremonial elements to his circle—small bowls of harbor water positioned at cardinal points, Egyptian symbols drawn in the exposed mud with a ritual dagger. Despite the crude implementation, the symbols resonate with power, glowing faintly with greenish light as the eclipse approaches seventy percent completion.

"The controlling spell could not have been created without insight from beyond," Blackwood explains, seemingly compelled to narrate his work like a villain from a lesser novel. "They showed me how to bind even divine essence to human will. A temporary measure until full extraction and gateway manifestation."

The "they" requires no elaboration—the chaos entities pressing against thinning dimensional barriers, eager for access to physical reality. I wonder if Blackwood truly believes they'll reunite him with his family, or if some part of him recognizes the deception but proceeds anyway, too committed to admit the horrifying truth.

His delusion serves their purpose, Anubis confirms. Such entities feed on desperation and grief. Powerful emotional currents create access points through otherwise impermeable boundaries.

A flicker of movement along the harbor's edge catches my attention—Chen, moving with tactical precision between shipping containers, approaching our position. Nadia follows some distance behind, carrying what appears to be ritual components. They haven't abandoned the effort after all.

Blackwood remains oblivious to their approach, focused entirely on his communion with what lies beyond the thinning veil. The amulet glows brighter as eclipse approaches seventy-five percent, its controlling power strengthening with cosmic alignment.

"I can feel them now," Blackwood whispers, eyes fixed on the darkening sky. "Elizabeth... Sophia... just beyond the veil. Waiting as promised."

The amulet's increased power sends fresh waves of controlling magic through my body. My cat form feels increasingly alien, as if my consciousness is being pushed

further from control, making room for something else to occupy the vessel. Not just constraint but displacement—the amulet preparing me for possession.

Resist the separation, Anubis warns with sudden urgency. *The amulet attempts to create distance between your consciousness and your form, preparing the vessel for gateway function.*

I focus inward, concentrating on the physicality of my existence—the feeling of mud beneath my paws, the harbor breeze ruffling my fur, the rhythmic pulse of my heartbeat. Small anchors to keep my consciousness tethered to my form despite the amulet’s increasingly powerful compulsion.

Blackwood kneels beside me, pressing the amulet more firmly against my body. “They speak more clearly now. The family reunion approaches, but first the doorway must open.” He fixes me with a zealot’s stare. “You should be honored, detective. Your unique condition makes you the perfect gateway between worlds.”

A gateway. Not just a vessel for Anubis’s power but a living doorway between dimensions. The concept sends ice through my veins despite the amulet’s burning heat. The controlling spell isn’t merely keeping me docile—it’s reconfiguring my very existence for a more horrific purpose.

As if responding to this realization, the air above our ritual circle begins to distort subtly, light bending around an invisible axis centered on my position. The dimensional thinning accelerates, reality stretching like fabric under tension. Through my connection with Anubis, I perceive what human senses cannot—the entities gathering on the other side, pressing against weakening barriers with increasing force.

They cannot manifest physically without a proper gateway, Anubis explains. *Your unique state—neither fully mortal nor divine but balanced between—creates the perfect transitional medium.*

The implications are terrifying. My hybrid existence, once my greatest asset, now makes me the ideal bridge between dimensions. The very qualities that make me an effective avatar also make me the perfect doorway for chaos entities.

Blackwood stands, addressing the distorted air with reverent anticipation. “The vessel is prepared as instructed. The alignment approaches optimal position.” The amulet in his hand pulses in response, sending fresh waves of controlling magic through my immobilized form.

In this moment of intensified control, something unexpected happens—Anubis’s presence within me seems to recede, not weakened but withdrawn, creating internal space I don’t immediately understand the purpose of. The sensation resembles the desert training exercises where Anubis taught me to compartmentalize consciousness during transformation.

Creating sanctuary within, Anubis explains cryptically. *The amulet controls the vessel but cannot reach where we now shelter.*

The strategy becomes clear—we cannot break the amulet’s physical control yet, but we can create a protected space within my consciousness, a stronghold the controlling spell cannot penetrate. From this sanctuary, we might find opportunity when the moment comes.

Movement catches my eye again—Chen has worked his way around to approach from behind Blackwood, while Nadia has established a position directly opposite our ritual circle across the harbor. She kneels at the water’s edge, arranging artifacts in patterns that seem to respond to Blackwood’s work—not opposing directly but creating complex interference patterns.

Blackwood raises his hands toward the eclipsing moon, now eighty percent obscured. “The threshold approaches! The veil thins as prophesied!”

The distortion above our circle intensifies, reality warping visibly now. Colors shift toward spectrum extremes, ultraviolet and infrared becoming perceptible even to normal vision. The air develops texture, becoming almost viscous around the forming gateway.

Through this thickening atmosphere, I catch glimpses of what waits beyond—shapes that defy Euclidean geometry, entities composed of concept rather than matter, ancient intelligences hungry for sensory experience unavailable in their native realm. They press against the thinning barrier with increasing urgency, creating ripple effects in physical reality.

Blackwood sees them too, but through the filter of his desperate delusion. Where I perceive cosmic horror, he sees his lost family. His expression transforms to one of rapturous joy as he reaches toward the distortion.

“Elizabeth! Sophia!” he calls, voice breaking with emotion. “Just as you promised—you’ve waited for me!”

Within the distortion, shapes respond to his address, formless entities adopting human silhouettes that approximate a woman and child. The mimicry is deeply unsettling—like watching mannequins pretend to be human, capturing physical form without the essence beneath. Yet Blackwood perceives only what his grief-stricken heart demands, the perfect simulacra of his dead family.

The harbor water recedes further, exposing more muddy bottom in defiance of natural tides. The exposed harbor floor reveals unexpected details—ancient debris partially buried in silt, lost items claimed by waters decades ago, and most significantly, a faint golden glow marking exactly where I fell and died months ago.

Blackwood positions me directly above this cosmic scar tissue, the amulet’s control forcing me to stand precisely where reality already bears the wound of my previous transition between life and death. The perfect focal point for a new breach.

“The gateway requires activation,” Blackwood announces, consulting a small leather-bound notebook retrieved from his pocket—a grimoire of sorts, its pages

covered with a mixture of hieroglyphics and mathematical formulas. “The avatar must be prepared for final transition.”

He places the amulet directly between my shoulder blades, the controlling spell’s grip intensifying to near-paralysis. Even breathing becomes a conscious effort as the amulet’s magic penetrates deeper, reaching for the divine essence at my core.

Maintain the sanctuary, Anubis counsels as his presence seems to contract further within me. *What comes requires complete surrender of a different kind.*

The eclipse reaches eighty-five percent completion, the cosmic alignment enhancing the amulet’s power while simultaneously weakening dimensional barriers. Through our diminished connection, I sense Anubis gathering his strength, preparing for something beyond my understanding.

Across the harbor, Nadia has completed her counter-ritual arrangement. She locks eyes with me briefly, communicating determination despite the distance. Whatever she’s planning requires precise timing—the right moment in the eclipse progression, the perfect point of vulnerability in Blackwood’s ritual.

Chen continues his stealthy approach, now within striking distance of Blackwood’s position. He carries something that gleams faintly in the strange half-light of the eclipse—one of the ritual daggers from the pumping station, its blade inscribed with hieroglyphics that seem to absorb rather than reflect the limited illumination.

Blackwood begins an incantation, ancient Egyptian mixed with something older and more disturbing—syllables that human vocal cords should struggle to produce flowing effortlessly from his lips. The amulet responds to each phrase, its glow intensifying with the cadence of ritual language.

As he chants, the eclipse passes ninety percent. The harbor darkens beyond normal night, a preternatural shadow falling across water and land alike. In this deepening darkness, the gateway manifestation accelerates—the air above our ritual circle now resembling a heat mirage that has somehow frozen in place, a permanent distortion in visual reality.

The controlling spell reaches deeper still, the amulet’s magic now directly manipulating the connection between Anubis and myself. I feel its intrusion as violation, an artificial wedge being driven into what had become an integrated partnership. Not severing but repurposing, attempting to transform avatar bond into gateway function.

Surrender approaches, Anubis says, his voice stronger now despite our compromised connection. *Not to the amulet but to true partnership. Are you prepared for what comes?*

The question carries weight beyond words, implications I can feel rather than fully comprehend. Whatever Anubis proposes requires deeper integration than

anything we've experienced—not master and servant, not god and avatar, but something new. Something transformative.

Before I can formulate response, the eclipse reaches ninety-five percent. The gateway distortion expands suddenly, reality stretching to transparency around its circumference. Through this thinning membrane, the chaos entities press with increasing force, their approximations of Blackwood's family becoming more substantial while their true nature remains hidden behind perception filters.

"Almost time, my loves," Blackwood tells these apparitions, tears streaming down his gaunt face. "The doorway opens as promised. We'll be together again."

The female figure extends an arm that subtly elongates beyond human proportions, reaching toward Blackwood with expressions of perfect maternal tenderness. "Just one final step, my love. Complete the binding of the avatar."

Even in his delusion, Blackwood notices something wrong in the movement, hesitating slightly. "Elizabeth?"

The child figure speaks with a daughter's perfect voice, but the words carry ancient weight. "Don't you want to be together, Daddy? Don't you love us anymore?"

The emotional manipulation is masterful, precisely targeted to exploit Blackwood's vulnerability. His momentary doubt vanishes beneath renewed determination, the amulet pulsing brighter as his conviction strengthens.

"Of course, my darling," he answers, turning back to me. "The final binding. The perfect gateway."

He kneels beside my immobilized form, retrieving a ceremonial knife from within his jacket—the twin to the one Chen carries. With practiced precision, he cuts his own palm, allowing blood to drip onto the amulet. The controlling artifact absorbs the offering, its glow shifting from gold to crimson.

"Blood of the suppliant willingly given," Blackwood intones, completing the ritual component. "The binding transcends control, becoming transformation."

The amulet's magic changes character, no longer simply controlling my form but actively reshaping it. I feel the transformation begin at cellular level—not the familiar shift between cat and human but something altogether different. Neither form but something between and beyond both, a physical configuration designed specifically for gateway function.

Now, Anubis says with sudden urgency. Complete surrender or complete destruction. There is no middle path remaining.

I understand the choice before me—resistance means being torn apart by competing transformative forces, while surrender to Anubis offers unknown but

possibly survivable alternative. In this moment of extremity, facing oblivion or worse, the decision requires no deliberation.

I consent, I answer, dropping the last barriers between us. *Not servant but partner. Not vessel but extension.*

The effect is immediate and overwhelming. Anubis's presence expands from our sanctuary, no longer receding but rushing outward to meet the amulet's invasive magic. Divine essence collides with controlling spell in cataclysmic energetic reaction. The sanctuary strategy becomes clear—Anubis withdrew not in weakness but in tactical preparation, gathering strength for this precise counterattack.

The power struggle manifests physically—my body convulsing as opposing magical forces contest for dominance. Blackwood steps back in alarm, the amulet in his hand now burning with painful intensity as it struggles to maintain control against Anubis's resurgence.

"No!" Blackwood shouts, pressing the amulet against me with renewed determination. "Complete the binding! Complete the transformation!"

The eclipse reaches totality, the moon fully obscured, cosmic alignment at perfect completion. The gateway distortion expands to its maximum potential, reality stretched to crystalline thinness. Through this diaphanous barrier, the chaos entities reach with increasing substantiality, their approximation of human forms becoming more perfect even as their true nature becomes more apparent to those with eyes to see.

In this moment of perfect cosmic convergence, our internal struggle reaches crisis point. The amulet's controlling spell collides with my willing surrender to Anubis, creating unexpected alchemical reaction. The transformation continues but changes character—not the gateway configuration Blackwood intended but something else entirely.

My body shifts, bones realigning and tissues reconfiguring with excruciating precision. Not cat, not human, but true avatar form—the perfect integration of mortal and divine. The hybrid state emerges not as grotesque chimera but harmonious synthesis, each aspect enhancing rather than compromising the other.

Blackwood witnesses the transformation with dawning horror, recognizing his ritual has been subverted from within. "No! This is wrong! You're supposed to become the gateway, not—" He struggles to comprehend what stands before him. "—not this."

The amulet flares with desperate intensity, channeling all its remaining power in attempt to reassert control. But the controlling spell finds no purchase against our perfect integration. What was designed to manipulate division cannot affect unity.

"Stop this!" Blackwood commands, pressing the amulet directly against my transforming flesh. "By ancient right and sacred blood, I command obedience!"

The amulet burns at the contact but accomplishes nothing, its magic sliding off our unified essence like water from oiled surface. The controlling spell's fundamental premise—that divine and mortal can be separated and dominated—no longer applies to what we've become.

With the eclipse at totality and the gateway at maximum potential, Nadia completes her counter-ritual across the harbor. The artifacts she's arranged begin to glow with golden light that contrasts the gateway's sickly green luminescence. The opposing energies create interaction patterns across the harbor surface, water responding with unnatural wave formations that move counter to both wind and tide.

"Now, Jake!" she calls, her voice carrying with unusual clarity through the distorted air. "The gateway requires proper closing! It needs the guardian's willing sacrifice!"

The words carry meaning beyond their literal translation—not death but transformation of a different kind. The willing sacrifice mentioned isn't my life but my chance to return to full humanity. To seal the gateway properly requires permanent commitment to the guardian role, becoming part of the boundary itself.

Blackwood recognizes the threat to his plans, lunging toward me with desperate intensity. "No! The gateway must open! They promised! My family waits!"

Chen chooses this moment to strike, emerging from concealment with military precision. His target is not Blackwood himself but the amulet, the ritual dagger in his hand arcing toward the controlling artifact with calculated force.

Blackwood senses the attack at the last moment, twisting away with surprising agility. The dagger misses the amulet but severs its chain, separating the controlling artifact from its wielder. The amulet falls toward the exposed harbor bottom, its glow pulsing with dangerous residual power.

Before it can land, I lunge forward in my new hybrid form, catching the amulet in jaws that are neither fully feline nor human. Divine strength flows through transformed muscles as I crush the artifact between teeth imbued with supernatural power. The controlling spell shatters along with its physical anchor, releasing a final pulse of energy that ripples outward across the harbor.

Blackwood screams as the connection breaks, more existential agony than physical pain. Without the amulet's influence, his perception filters dissolve, revealing the true nature of what waits beyond the gateway. The comforting illusions of his family transform before his eyes, their human appearances melting away to reveal the entities beneath—formless, shifting masses of concept and hunger barely constrained by dimensional boundaries.

"No," he whispers, the single word containing years of grief and shattered hope. "It can't be..."

“It is,” I tell him, my voice now a perfect blend of human speech and divine resonance. “They showed you what you needed to see to serve their purpose.”

Despite the amulet’s destruction, the gateway continues to form. The ritual begun at the pumping station provided momentum that now sustains itself, drawing power from cosmic alignment and location resonance. The chaos entities press against the thinning barrier with increased urgency, sensing their opportunity slipping away as the eclipse approaches its end.

Nadia’s counter-ritual creates interference patterns in the forming gateway, preventing complete manifestation but unable to fully close what’s opening. The eclipse holds at totality for seconds that stretch like eternity, reality balanced on knife-edge between integrity and invasion.

In this moment of perfect cosmic equilibrium, I understand what must be done. Moving to the center of the gateway distortion, I channel Anubis’s power—not as servant but as true avatar, directing divine essence into the boundary between worlds. The willing sacrifice transforms my existence permanently, my humanity and divinity becoming the mortar sealing dimensional bricks.

Golden light erupts from my hybrid form, expanding outward in perfect circle that counters the gateway’s distortion. Where chaos reaches through, order pushes back. Where boundaries fail, new limitations establish themselves.

The eclipse begins to wane, the moon slowly emerging from shadow. As cosmic alignment passes its peak, the gateway loses cohesion, the chaos entities forced back into their native realm. Their frustration manifests as one final surge of harbor water, a massive wave that crashes over our ritual site with physical and metaphysical force.

When the waters recede, the gateway has closed. The harbor returns to normal aside from its unnatural tide pattern. The air no longer distorts with interdimensional pressure. But I remain changed—the hybrid form now my permanent state, neither fully human nor cat but avatar incarnate.

Nadia wades through receding water toward me, her expression mixing relief, exhaustion, and something deeper. Chen follows, supporting a shattered Blackwood who moves with the vacant compliance of profound shock.

“You did it,” Nadia says, reaching me. “You closed it properly.”

I nod, still adjusting to my new permanent form. Not grotesque but clearly other—human in overall structure but with feline aspects integrated seamlessly. My senses operate on multiple levels simultaneously, perceiving both physical reality and the subtle energies beneath.

“At a price,” I answer, my voice carrying dual tones that will now remain constant. “This form is permanent now. The change required... commitment.”

Nadia’s hand touches my face, fingers exploring the altered features with gentle curiosity rather than revulsion. “You chose this? Willingly?”

“Yes.” The simple truth requires no elaboration.

Chen approaches with Blackwood, his professional demeanor reasserting itself despite the night’s impossible events. “The cult’s scattered. Most fled when the pumping station collapsed. Without Blackwood’s leadership and with the gateway closed, they’ll likely disband completely.”

“And him?” I ask, indicating Blackwood.

Chen’s expression turns grim. “Catatonic. Complete psychic break when he saw what really waited beyond the gateway.”

I study the broken man, feeling unexpected empathy despite everything he’s done. His madness began in grief, in love twisted by desperation and exploited by entities beyond his comprehension. The devastation in his vacant eyes speaks to hopes utterly destroyed.

“The authorities will need some explanation for tonight’s events,” Chen says practically. “Industrial accident at the pumping station? Gas explosion?”

Nadia nods. “My university credentials can help manage the artifacts situation. I’ll claim they were recovered from improper storage conditions.”

As they discuss the necessary fictions to explain collapsed infrastructure and scattered cultists, I turn toward the harbor where normal tides have resumed. The moon emerges fully from eclipse, its reflection rippling across water now behaving by natural laws once more. But beneath the surface, things have changed permanently—the boundary strengthened but requiring ongoing guardianship.

My new existence begins tonight, caught between worlds as their sentinel. Nine lives minus one—the sacrifice of normalcy in exchange for purpose. As Anubis and I settle into our permanent partnership, I find unexpected peace in this hybrid state.

The night breeze carries the scent of both worlds now—physical reality with its urban complexity, and the subtle currents of power that flow beneath ordinary perception. Behind me, Nadia and Chen continue planning our return to conventional existence, finding ways to incorporate my new form into a world unprepared for supernatural truth.

That challenge belongs to tomorrow. Tonight, guardian and gateway have found balance, sealed with willing sacrifice. The harbor keeps its secrets beneath dark water, and I keep mine beneath transformed skin.

Chapter 27: Avatar Rising

The harbor water swirls around my feet, unnaturally warm against my transformed skin. Moonlight streams down as the eclipse wanes, illuminating what I’ve become. Neither human nor cat, but something new—the true form of Anubis’s avatar, alive in this world.

My reflection in the dark water shows a stranger who is still somehow me. My body keeps its human shape but with unmistakable feline touches—sleek black fur covering skin that shifts and changes, eyes burning with golden light, my face a blend of human and cat that looks right instead of monstrous. Claws extend from fingers that can still grip and feel. I move with a fluid grace that belongs to neither world but combines the best of both.

This is our true form, Anubis's voice flows through my mind, no longer distant but woven into my own thoughts. *Where mortal and divine become one.*

"What have you done?" Blackwood whispers, his voice breaking with horror as he stares at me. The broken amulet lies in pieces between us, its power gone but the gateway ritual still unfolding. Even with the amulet destroyed, reality bends and warps around the harbor, the forces Blackwood unleashed too powerful to simply stop.

"I've chosen," I answer, my voice carrying two tones at once, human and something older, deeper. "Not what you forced on me, but what I accepted freely."

Across the harbor, Nadia works her own ritual, golden light pulsing against the sickly green glow from Blackwood's circle. Where the lights meet, the water's surface twists into ripples that move in ways water shouldn't.

A scream tears through the night as cultists emerge from behind shipping containers. Five robed figures rush forward, daggers raised, moving not like religious fanatics but like trained killers. Blackwood's inner circle—professionals he'd brought into his mad cause.

"Chen, get Nadia!" I shout, turning to face them.

My new body answers with a grace I've never known. My old human reflexes were decent but nothing special, and as a cat I had speed but little power. Now I have both. I move faster than seems possible, sidestepping the first attacker's lunge with time to spare, my claws extending by instinct as I counter.

I pull back at the last second, retracting my claws to knock the cultist unconscious instead of tearing through flesh. My new instincts scream for the kill, for the predator's finish. Holding back takes real effort.

"The avatar rises!" another cultist shouts, his voice wild with religious awe. "Capture him! We can still finish the ritual!"

Two cultists circle me while the others pull small stone scarabs from their robes. The beetles pulse with the same sickly green light as the gateway. As they activate the scarabs, the air around me thickens like honey, slowing my movements.

They're bending the rules of reality around you, Anubis notes through our joined mind. *Old magic with new tricks. Simple but clever.*

The scarabs create pockets where time and space move differently, like swimming through thick mud. The cultists work together to keep me trapped in these zones, staying back while their magic does the work.

Smart plan against someone stronger and faster—but they don’t understand what I’ve become. This new form isn’t just about sharper claws and quicker reflexes.

Following Anubis’s whispered guidance, I reach for something beyond muscle and bone—the shadows themselves. The darkness answers, becoming almost solid at my call. Tendril-like shadows coil around the nearest scarab, crushing it between ribbons of pure darkness. The strange resistance around me vanishes instantly.

The cultists freeze, shocked by power they didn’t expect. I seize the moment, sending shadows racing from my body like living extensions of myself. I don’t attack the robed figures directly but instead wrap darkness around their remaining scarabs, destroying their magic.

Across the harbor, Chen reaches Nadia safely. Together they strengthen their counter-spell, artifacts glowing brighter as they rearrange them. The water between us draws back unnaturally, exposing more of the harbor floor than any tide could explain.

The cultists shake off their fear quickly—professionals, not just believers. They spread out, coming at me from different directions. One throws a vial that breaks at my feet, releasing golden powder that burns where it touches my skin.

Blessed natron, Anubis tells me. *The salt they used to preserve the dead, turned into a weapon against gods.*

The stuff burns like acid wherever it lands, disrupting the blend of human and divine in my new form. Not enough to cause real damage, but it stings viciously. I back away, calling shadows to form a shield against more attacks.

While I handle his followers, Blackwood hasn’t given up. His ritual had backup plans built in. Even with the amulet destroyed, the fading eclipse still gives him power. He kneels at the center of his circle, slicing his palm with a ceremonial dagger. His blood drips into the harbor water in a careful pattern.

“I will not fail you,” he whispers to something I can’t see. “The gateway will open. We will be together again.”

His blood begins to glow with sickly light, creating a new focus for his spell. The water around each drop swirls into tiny whirlpools. The tear in reality, which had started to heal after I broke the amulet, widens again with renewed force.

I need to end this fast. Two cultists come at me from opposite sides. This time, I surrender to my new instincts, letting the predator guide my movements but keeping my human control.

I move in a blur even I can barely track, taking down both attackers with precise blows—just enough strength to knock them out without causing permanent damage. The last cultist scrambles back toward Blackwood, desperately cranking up his scarab’s power.

The harbor water pulls back faster now, more of the bottom appearing. But the mud and silt melt away like desert mirages, revealing golden sand underneath. The dream desert—Anubis’s realm—bleeds into Boston Harbor as the walls between worlds grow dangerously thin.

“Jake!” Nadia calls across the impossible desert spreading through the harbor. “The gateway’s coming apart faster! We need to seal it now!”

She and Chen fight their way toward us across the shifting sand, carrying artifacts arranged in a careful pattern. The ground beneath them changes with each step—sometimes solid sand, sometimes insubstantial as smoke. Reality flickers like a bad TV signal, two worlds occupying the same space.

Blackwood’s blood magic has done something unexpected. What should have been a doorway is becoming a flood, a breaking dam. The eclipse continues to fade, but his ritual has taken on a life of its own. Even as the moon emerges from shadow, the tear between worlds grows wider.

This is worse than I feared, Anubis says, true alarm in his voice. The boundary isn’t just opening—it’s dissolving. If it collapses completely, what waits outside will pour in without restraint.

Through our joined senses, I see what gathers on the other side—things that aren’t really things at all. Ancient hungers pretending to be intelligences, concepts masquerading as creatures. They press against reality’s thinning skin, no longer bothering with the human masks they showed Blackwood.

Shadow-things that only look like arms or tentacles because our minds desperately need them to be something we can understand push through hairline cracks in reality. Where they touch our world, impossible things happen—water both freezes and boils at once, metal sprouts like plants, living flesh crystallizes into perfect geometric shapes. The rules that hold our world together stop working wherever these things reach through.

Blackwood sees it all, his delusion finally shattering as reality breaks around him. The perfect images of his dead family that these things showed him melt away, revealing their true alien nature. His face transforms from religious certainty to raw terror.

“No,” he whispers, stumbling back from his own blood ritual. “This isn’t—they promised—”

“They showed you what you needed to see,” I tell him, moving closer through reality that shifts with each step. One moment my feet touch desert sand, the next harbor mud, then nothing at all as worlds blend together. “They told you what you needed to hear. They found your grief and used it like a crowbar to pry open this world.”

“My family,” he says, voice empty with terrible understanding. “They were never—”

“No,” I confirm, reaching his side. “They were never there.”

His face crumples with such raw grief that I feel an unexpected flash of pity. This man killed me, threatened to tear reality apart, but now stands revealed as the greatest victim of his own desperate love. Creatures beyond human understanding found his deepest wound and infected it, turning his hope of reunion into a weapon against everything.

The moment of understanding shatters as reality itself convulses around us. The barrier between worlds, stretched too far by competing magics, begins to tear like wet paper. Through these widening rips, the things outside reach with growing strength, done with patience, rushing toward full breakthrough.

Nadia and Chen finally reach us, their artifacts arranged in a pattern that pulses with warm golden light against the sickly green of the gateway’s glow. Nadia’s face shows determination mixed with wonder as she sees my transformed shape up close for the first time.

“We need to complete the binding,” she says, all business despite the impossibility around us. “We have to fix the gateway before reality completely falls apart.”

Chen holds off the last cultist, artifact in one hand and makeshift weapon in the other. “Whatever you’re planning, hurry,” he shouts, nodding toward the harbor’s edge where reality melts into patterns that hurt to look at. “I don’t think our world has much time left.”

The ritual Nadia’s prepared isn’t meant to open anything—it’s designed to reinforce the boundary, to heal the tear. The artifacts need perfect arrangement, the right words, and something else—a willing sacrifice from me, Anubis’s chosen.

While Nadia positions the final pieces, the world continues coming apart around us. The eclipse is ending, moonlight returning, but the damage has taken on a life of its own. Near the worst tears, gravity shifts direction without warning, time runs fast then slow, then backwards within steps of each other.

Blackwood watches with empty eyes as we work to undo everything he’s spent years creating. His life’s obsession, his mission born from grief, all exposed as cosmic deception. “I just wanted them back,” he whispers, his words nearly lost in the sounds of reality tearing apart. “I just wanted my family.”

“I know,” I tell him, my doubled voice gentler now, honestly sympathetic. Then I turn to the ritual, to salvaging what remains of our world.

Nadia finishes arranging the artifacts, golden light pulsing in patterns that clash with the sick green energy pouring from the breach. The effect shows instantly—the worst distortions settling, reality steadying around our counter-ritual.

“It’s working,” she says, “but it won’t last. The gateway needs to be sealed from both sides.”

I understand what she means. Becoming Anubis's avatar was just the first step. To finish this, I need to do more than stand here in my new form. As the guardian, I have to reach through the tear, anchor the broken edges from both sides at once.

The binding demands sacrifice, Anubis confirms. Not your death, but a deeper change. To seal this properly, we must become the boundary itself.

What this means hits me fully—I won't lose my life, but my last chance at normal human existence. To fix the gateway permanently means binding part of myself to this in-between space forever. I'd survive but exist in both worlds at once, never fully in either one, never completely human again.

Nadia reads my face, understanding what I'm about to do. "There must be another way," she says, but without real hope. She understands these rituals better than anyone—she knows what they demand.

"There isn't," I tell her. "But I'm willing to pay it."

The things beyond sense what we're planning. Their efforts to break through redouble with frantic urgency. Not-quite-limbs stretch farther through the widening tears, reaching for our ritual pieces with terrible purpose. Where they touch our world, corruption spreads—living things twist into impossible shapes, reality itself warps and buckles.

Blackwood, seeing these horrors with new clarity, makes a desperate choice. He lunges toward the breach, ceremonial dagger raised not as a weapon but as an offering. "Take me instead!" he shouts into the widening tear. "I'm the one who called you! I opened the door!"

Before I can stop him, he drives the dagger into his own chest—not deep enough to kill, but a blood sacrifice to the entities he now sees as deceivers rather than saviors. "Take what you want from me," he gasps, "but let them close it. Save what's left."

The things beyond respond instantly, their shadow-limbs wrapping around Blackwood with terrifying speed. Not simple possession or death, but something far worse—transformation starting at his cells, his very being rewritten by rules that don't belong in our reality. His body twists in ways that should break every bone, but his skin doesn't tear, just reshapes around the impossible changes within.

"Now!" Nadia cries, activating the final piece. "While they're focused on him! Seal it!"

With Blackwood's sacrifice buying precious seconds, I step to the ritual's center, right above the weak spot where I died and came back months ago. The wound in reality recognizes me, responds to the touch of someone who's crossed over before.

Following Anubis's guidance flowing through our joined minds, I reach beyond

what should be possible. My awareness stretches, splits—I'm standing in Boston Harbor and simultaneously walking the endless desert of Anubis's realm. I can't find words for how it feels—being in two worlds at once while belonging completely to neither, my mind stretched across the boundary like skin over a drum.

From this impossible viewpoint, I finally see the gateway for what it truly is—not just a door or window but something like a living filter, designed to keep our orderly reality separate from the chaos beyond. The damage from Blackwood's ritual shows clearly now—cracks spreading through the very fabric that holds our universe together.

Moving on instinct and Anubis's ancient knowledge, I push my transformed self into these cracks. Not just patching them but becoming part of the structure, my divine and human sides perfectly balanced to create living cement between worlds. Parts of my consciousness transform, becoming permanent anchors in this in-between space, neither fully here nor there.

Golden light bursts from my body, expanding in a perfect sphere that covers the entire ritual site. Where the outside things reach through reality's tears, pieces of my sacrificed self form walls they can't break through. The bleeding between worlds slows, then stops, the cracks closing as my consciousness fills the gaps.

Reality shudders one last time as the boundary heals itself. The desert sinks back into memory, harbor water rushing in to cover the exposed bottom. The entities, seeing their doorway closing, make one final desperate push to stay in our world. Their grip on Blackwood tightens, his transformation speeding up as they try to use his willing sacrifice as their foothold in reality.

I can't save him without undoing everything. His choice, made in his last moment of clarity and redemption, gave me the chance I needed to fix the gateway. As the boundary between worlds stabilizes, Blackwood's body continues to change, looking less human with every heartbeat.

"I'm sorry," he manages to say through a face that barely looks human anymore, his voice strange and wrong as his throat reshapes itself. "Tell them I'm sorry."

Those are his last human words before the transformation finishes, one of the chaos things successfully anchoring a piece of itself in our world through his willing sacrifice. What's left looks human at first glance but moves all wrong, joints bending backwards, features shifting slightly whenever you look away.

The entity-that-was-Blackwood regards us with expression resembling confusion, as if experiencing physical sensations for first time. It opens Blackwood's mouth but produces only sounds that human vocal cords shouldn't generate. Then, with sudden purposefulness, it turns and flees toward the harbor's edge, movements accelerating beyond human capability.

Chen raises his weapon, but I gesture for restraint. "Let it go," I say, the dual tones of my voice reflecting exhaustion of dimensional binding. "It's contained

now, limited to Blackwood's form. We'll track it later."

The harbor settles as reality stabilizes completely. The eclipse has passed, normal moonlight returning to illuminate scene of profound strangeness—unconscious cultists scattered across mud and sand, ritual artifacts glowing with diminishing power, and at the center, my permanently transformed self.

Nadia approaches cautiously, studying my altered form with combination of academic fascination and personal concern. "Jake?" she asks, uncertain despite having witnessed the entire transformation. "Are you still...you?"

The question contains more complexity than its simple wording suggests. Am I still human? Am I still the detective she knew? Am I still capable of human connection despite divine integration?

"Yes," I answer, finding truth in the simple affirmation. "Different, but still me. Both of us, in perfect balance."

She reaches out hesitantly, fingers stopping just short of my transformed skin. I close the final distance, her human warmth connecting with my hybrid form. The contact grounds me in physical reality even as portions of my consciousness remain stretched across dimensional boundary.

"You're warm," she says with surprise, as if expecting something alien or corpse-cold. "And your heart's still beating."

"Faster than human normal," I confirm, "slower than cat's. Perfect average between worlds."

Chen approaches, practical concerns reasserting themselves as immediate crisis fades. "Police response time to harbor disturbance will be under ten minutes," he reports. "We need to clear non-explainable elements before they arrive."

The aftermath requires immediate attention—unconscious cultists to be repositioned with plausible explanation, ritual artifacts to be secured, evidence of supernatural events minimized. Despite profound metaphysical changes, practical concerns remain unchanged.

As Nadia and Chen begin this cleanup process, I take moment to assess what I've become. The physical transformation is complete—hybrid form that blends human and feline aspects in harmonious rather than monstrous fashion. But the deeper changes exist beyond physical appearance.

My consciousness now extends permanently across dimensional boundary, anchored simultaneously in physical reality and Anubis's realm. I perceive both worlds simultaneously, existing in each partially but neither completely. The sacrifice has transformed me into living component of the gateway itself—not merely guardian but structural element.

This new existence brings profound sensory changes. I perceive death signatures more clearly than ever, the unique energetic patterns of souls departing physical forms visible as colored auras that contain entire life stories. The harbor itself

reveals centuries of drownings, each death leaving distinctive trace visible to my enhanced perception.

More significantly, I sense the souls themselves—not merely their departures but their continued journeys. Some move naturally toward appropriate afterlife realms, while others linger due to unfinished business or traumatic departures. My role as psychopomp becomes apparent—not merely gateway guardian but guide for lost souls caught between worlds.

This expanded awareness should be overwhelming, yet the perfect integration of human consciousness and divine perception creates natural filtering system. I remain grounded in physical reality despite connection to metaphysical realms, capable of navigating both simultaneously without losing coherence.

Distant sirens announce approaching authorities, reality's normal patterns reasserting themselves in aftermath of supernatural crisis. The harbor water behaves according to natural tides once more, dimensional breach sealed through willing sacrifice. Only scattered ritual components and unconscious cultists remain as evidence of night's events.

As we prepare to meet conventional authorities with carefully constructed explanations, I catch glimpse of figure watching from harbor's edge—the entity-that-was-Blackwood observing from distance, its not-quite-human movements betraying its true nature. Our confrontation is merely postponed, not concluded.

The entity turns away, disappearing into darkness with unnatural speed. The first manifestation of chaos in physical world, contained but not eliminated. First challenge of my new existence as avatar and guardian.

Nadia returns to my side, her hand finding mine despite my transformed appearance. “Ready?” she asks, the question encompassing far more than immediate situation.

I nod, accepting both immediate challenges and profound changes to my existence. “As ready as anyone can be,” I answer, the dual tones of my voice settling into new normal. “One adventure ends, another begins.”

Above us, the moon shines with ordinary light, cosmic alignment returned to standard configuration. But reality itself has changed permanently, thin places between worlds now guarded by being who exists in both simultaneously. The willing sacrifice has transformed guardian and gateway alike, creating new configuration neither Blackwood nor chaos entities anticipated.

As police lights approach through harbor fog, I retract the more obvious inhuman aspects of my form—not complete transformation but sufficient moderation to pass casual inspection in poor lighting. The deeper changes remain permanent, a sacrifice willingly given to maintain boundary between worlds.

The night's battle concludes, but larger war continues with new parameters. The avatar has risen, the guardian assumed true form, the gateway secured

through willing sacrifice. Nine lives transformed into new existence caught between worlds, neither fully human nor divine but perfect balance of both.

Chapter 28: Between Worlds

The harbor continues its impossible transformation beneath my feet. With each passing second, more water pulls back, revealing not the expected mud and silt but golden desert sand that shouldn't exist in Boston. The city skyline remains visible above us, skyscrapers and colonial buildings now casting their reflections on sand instead of water—a modern cityscape mirrored in an ancient desert.

“The boundary is collapsing,” I explain, my voice still carrying the dual tones of human and divine. “Not just opening as Blackwood planned, but falling apart completely.”

Around us, reality flickers like a faulty lightbulb, showing glimpses of both worlds layered over each other—harbor structures blending with ancient Egyptian ruins, modern boats half-buried in sand dunes. The sight alone is disorienting to my enhanced senses; to fully human eyes, it must be maddening.

Nadia's face confirms this as she struggles toward us across the unstable ground, leading Chen who carries artifacts in a makeshift bag. Her skin has gone pale, but her eyes remain focused, professional determination winning out over terror.

“The worlds are bleeding into each other,” she calls, her voice warping as it travels through patches of conflicting reality. “We have to reach the center before everything falls apart.”

She points toward the middle of the harbor where the transformation is strongest. A perfect circle of desert has fully formed there, its edges marking the boundary between receding harbor water and encroaching sand. Within this circle, I can see shapes taking form—stone structures rising from the sand like memories becoming solid. Not ruins but pristine temple columns arranged in a familiar pattern.

“The gateway's true form,” I whisper, recognizing it from Anubis's memories now flowing through me.

The stone structures rise higher as we approach, black columns inscribed with gold hieroglyphs. Not a complete temple but components arranged in a precise pattern—a ritualistic architecture designed specifically for maintaining the boundary between worlds. The heart of the gateway, normally hidden between realities but now physically appearing as worlds collide.

It shows itself when threatened, Anubis explains through our shared mind. *The physical form of something normally hidden between worlds.*

As we get closer to the temple stones, I notice movement at their center. The thing-that-was-Blackwood has returned, its not-quite-human form moving with

disturbing fluidity between the columns. Its presence alone seems to speed up the reality distortion around it.

“We’re running out of time,” Chen says, his professional calm cracking as he stares upward.

I follow his gaze to the sky above the harbor, where the most disturbing evidence of the breakdown is visible. The night sky itself has begun to crack, thin fissures appearing between stars like a windshield hit with a rock. Through these cracks, something else is visible—not just darkness or another sky, but things that hurt to look at. Shapes that change when observed, colors that seem to make sounds, patterns that rearrange themselves according to rules that make no sense to human minds.

“The outer realm,” Nadia whispers, looking up despite the obvious pain the sight causes her. “Just as the texts described. The place where form has no fixed meaning.”

Where these cracks widen, reality beneath them begins to transform in alarming ways. Harbor water near the fissures flows upward against gravity. Metal equipment twists into organic shapes. The air itself becomes visible as crystal-like structures that shatter and reform continuously. The basic rules of our world becoming optional rather than mandatory.

The entity-that-was-Blackwood watches these changes with what seems like satisfaction, its features subtly shifting beneath the skin like something testing a new costume. It makes no move to attack us directly but continues manipulating something at the temple’s center—artifacts arranged in a pattern opposite to what Nadia carries.

“It’s creating an anchor point,” Nadia explains, watching the entity with horrified fascination. “Using Blackwood’s sacrifice to maintain a connection between worlds.”

We need to act now. Chen hands Nadia the satchel of artifacts and takes up a defensive position, makeshift weapon ready, though what good conventional tools might do against something made of pure concept is anyone’s guess.

I step forward, my transformed body adapting to the unstable reality better than my companions can. Where they struggle against changing physical laws, I move between their effects, my hybrid nature allowing me to navigate both worlds at once. With each step closer to the temple center, more of Anubis’s knowledge flows through our shared consciousness, revealing the gateway’s true purpose.

This was never meant to be a door or portal—those words are too simple for what it actually is. The gateway is more like a filter, allowing controlled interaction between worlds while maintaining their essential separation. Like a cell membrane allowing specific exchanges while keeping the cell intact.

The cult's ritual, guided by the chaos entities, wasn't meant to simply open this boundary but to fundamentally change its filtering properties. To corrupt its function from separation to integration, allowing unrestricted flow between ordered reality and chaotic outer realms. Blackwood believed this would let him reunite with his family; the entities knew it would allow them to reshape our universe according to their impossible desires.

"Jake!" Nadia calls, snapping me from these revelations. "The entity is completing its configuration!"

The entity-that-was-Blackwood has arranged its artifacts in a pattern that pulses with sickly green energy. Where this energy touches the temple stones, corruption spreads—hieroglyphs twisting into new shapes, stone surfaces developing textures that pulse like breathing lungs.

I sprint forward, crossing the remaining distance in a blur of hybrid speed. The entity turns toward me, Blackwood's face stretching into a smile too wide for a human mouth. When it speaks, the voice remains recognizably Blackwood's but layered with tones that hurt my sensitive ears.

"Avatar," it says, the word carrying notes of amusement, recognition, and ancient hatred all at once. "You're too late. The boundary already falls. My kin come."

It gestures toward the sky where cracks have widened further, the chaos realm visible through gaps that grow with alarming speed. Through these openings, shapes begin to emerge—not physically crossing over but extending sensory tendrils into our reality. Experiences without clear form: colors that feel like textures, sounds with taste, shapes that change when viewed from different angles.

I throw myself at the entity, claws extending from my hybrid hands. The attack connects, raking across what should be vulnerable human flesh. But Blackwood's body no longer responds to damage as it should. Where my claws tear skin, the wounds reveal not blood and tissue but glimpses of elsewhere—fractal patterns shifting in hypnotic complexity.

The entity laughs, the sound splitting into multiple tracks that seem to come from different points in space all at once.

"You cannot hurt concept with physical attack," it says with something like pity. "I am no longer flesh, and you are too late."

I back away, realizing direct confrontation won't work. "Nadia?" I call over my shoulder, not taking my eyes off the entity.

"Almost ready," she answers, working frantically with the artifacts. "But Jake—the configuration is different from what we expected. The damage is worse."

The entity continues its work, the green glow intensifying around its arrangement. The temple stones begin to crack under the strain of conflicting energies. Above us, the sky fissures widen further, revealing more of the chaos realm.

What comes through isn't just energy or light but concepts themselves—ideas taking partial physical form in our reality.

One such concept-made-manifest slithers across the sand toward Nadia. Not a snake or worm but something that brain interprets as snake-like because the alternative is madness. It leaves a trail not of slime but of altered reality—the sand behind it transformed into tiny glass sculptures that somehow depict moments from Nadia's life, memories pulled into physical form.

Chen intercepts it, slashing with his makeshift weapon. The blade passes through the concept-snake, causing no apparent damage, but the creature recoils nonetheless—not from pain but from the pure assertion of human will and belief that Chen's attack represents.

"They respond to intention," Chen calls out, continuing to drive the concept back. "Not physical force but the idea behind it!"

Understanding floods through me, Anubis's ancient knowledge merging with my detective's insight. These beings aren't physical—they're conceptual. They don't operate by our universe's rules but by belief, intention, and meaning.

I turn back to the entity-that-was-Blackwood, focusing not on physical attack but on the underlying purpose. My transformed body responds, shadows extending from my form not as tendrils this time but as symbols—hieroglyphs of protection and boundary made solid. The shadow-symbols interpose themselves between the entity's artifacts, disrupting their pattern.

The entity screeches, a sound that vibrates at frequencies beyond human hearing. It lunges not at me but at its disrupted configuration, trying to restore the pattern. I press the advantage, more shadow-symbols flowing from my hybrid form to surround its artifacts.

"Nadia, now!" I shout. "Whatever you're going to do, do it now!"

She rushes forward, placing her own artifacts in precise positions around the temple columns. Golden light pulses from her arrangement, clashing with the sickly green glow of the entity's pattern. Where the energies meet, sparks of pure white light erupt—neither gold nor green but something more fundamental.

The entity howls, abandoning its artifacts to lunge at Nadia. I intercept it, no longer trying to wound but to contain. Shadow-symbols flow from my hands, wrapping around the entity in chains of meaning rather than matter. It fights against bonds it can't simply break through physical strength.

"Hurry!" I call to Nadia, my voice strained as I maintain focus on the shadow-bindings.

The sky continues to crack above us, the fissures now wide enough that whole portions of the chaos realm become visible. Boston Harbor stands at the center of a widening tear in reality itself. Through these gaps, I catch glimpses of what lies beyond—not just strange shapes and colors but entire systems of reality

operating under fundamentally different principles. Places where time moves sideways, where cause follows effect, where consciousness precedes matter.

The concept-entities push through these gaps with increasing substance. Not fully crossing over, but extending further into our world. Where they touch, reality transforms—not just physical changes but alterations to the underlying rules. One touches a nearby shipping crate, and suddenly the crate exists in all possible states simultaneously—whole and broken, new and aged, filled and empty.

“Something’s wrong,” Nadia calls, her voice thick with frustration. “The pattern isn’t stabilizing. The boundary is too damaged!” Her hands move frantically among the artifacts, shifting their positions slightly, recalibrating the counter-ritual. Golden light pulses with each change, briefly pushing back the chaos incursions before fading again.

The temple stones begin to crack under the strain, hairline fractures spreading across their surfaces. The hieroglyphs glow with increasing intensity, as if the gateway itself is straining to maintain its integrity against forces pulling it apart.

“It needs an anchor,” she says finally, looking up at me with dread understanding. “A willing bridge between worlds—something with a foot in both realities to hold the pattern.”

I know immediately what she means. My sacrifice in the previous ritual had bound a portion of my consciousness to the boundary, but this new damage requires more. Not just part of me stretched between worlds, but a complete binding—a permanent anchoring of my entire being as a living cornerstone of the gateway.

The entity-that-was-Blackwood laughs within its symbolic chains. “Yes,” it hisses. “Become the boundary, avatar. Sacrifice your existence to delay the inevitable. My kind will find another way, in time.”

Nadia’s face is pale but determined. “There has to be another option,” she insists, though I can see in her eyes she doesn’t believe it.

Before I can respond, the harbor shudders beneath us. The temple stones sink slightly into the sand, then rise again. The boundary between desert and harbor water blurs further, sand and water intermixing in impossible ways—neither fully liquid nor solid but something between.

Then I see it—the true pattern reveals itself as reality fluctuates. Not just in Nadia’s arrangement or the entity’s corrupted version, but in the temple stones themselves. Ancient wisdom encoded in architecture, the original blueprint for the boundary designed by gods who understood the fundamental nature of reality separation.

“There is another way,” I say, the dual tones of my voice deepening with revelation. “Not sacrifice but transformation. Not an anchor but a living gate.”

I step into the center of the temple arrangement, placing myself where the patterns of both worlds intersect. The green glow of the entity's configuration and the gold light of Nadia's counter-ritual both wash over me, neither dominating.

"What are you doing?" Nadia asks, fear in her voice.

"Becoming what I was always meant to be," I answer, certainty flowing through me as Anubis's knowledge merges fully with my own. "Not servant, not avatar, but gateway incarnate."

I reach out, calling shadow-symbols from both hands. With my right, I manipulate Nadia's golden configuration, shifting pieces infinitesimally into perfect alignment. With my left, I don't destroy the entity's green-glowing artifacts but reposition them, corrupting the corruption, subverting their purpose.

The entity struggles harder against its bonds, sensing my intention. "You cannot!" it cries. "The pattern was broken millennia ago! The knowledge lost!"

"Not lost," I reply calmly. "Just waiting for the right vessel."

The temple stones respond to my adjustments, the hieroglyphs glowing brighter, their cracks sealing as I align both configurations into a new pattern—neither opening nor closing but stabilizing. The true form of the boundary, not as barrier but as regulated interface between worlds.

Pain lances through me as my body begins to change again. Not just the hybrid form of cat and human, but something more fundamental. My physical form becoming less solid, more conceptual—not flesh and blood but living symbol, the embodiment of transition and regulation between states of being.

"Jake!" Nadia cries, reaching for me.

"Stay back," I warn, my voice no longer simply dual-toned but harmonic, resonating at multiple frequencies simultaneously. "The transformation must complete."

The entity howls in rage and desperation, throwing itself against its symbolic chains. Several break, and it lunges not at me but at its own artifacts, trying to disrupt my reconfiguration. I don't try to stop it directly—instead, I incorporate its motion into the pattern, its very resistance becoming part of the new configuration.

The sky cracks widen further, but now rather than chaotic incursion, they begin to show structure—the fissures arranging themselves into a complex geometric pattern centered above the temple stones. The concept-entities trying to push through find themselves caught in this emerging pattern, their formless nature confined within symbolic boundaries.

I feel myself stretching not just between worlds but becoming the definition of their separation and connection. Not boundary as barrier but boundary as relationship—the fundamental principle that allows different realities to exist distinct yet connected.

The sand beneath us shifts again, but now with purpose rather than chaos. It rises in precise formations, creating interlocking circles around the temple stones. Harbor water flows back, not erasing the desert but interacting with it, creating a shore that is neither fully water nor fully land but the living definition of shoreline itself.

The entity makes one final, desperate lunge, breaking free of its remaining bonds. It throws itself not at me but at Nadia, recognizing her as the vulnerable element in the emerging pattern. Chen intercepts it, his weapon passing harmlessly through its form but his intention creating temporary disruption.

“Nadia!” I call. “The final piece!”

She understands immediately, reaching for the central artifact in her configuration—a small ankh that pulses with golden light. She presses it into the exact center of the pattern I’ve created, where green and gold energies swirl together without mixing.

The moment the ankh touches the center point, everything changes. The competing energies don’t just balance—they transform into something new. Neither green nor gold but pure white light erupts from the central point, expanding outward in perfect concentric rings.

The entity screams as this light washes over it, not destroying but binding—forcing its conceptual nature into fixed form. Blackwood’s body convulses as the chaos being inside is compelled to choose a single stable configuration rather than constant flux.

The sky fissures respond to the expanding rings of white light, their edges no longer ragged tears but clean lines forming a vast geometric pattern above Boston Harbor. The concept-entities caught halfway through find themselves neither expelled nor admitted but held in perfect suspension—becoming part of the boundary itself, their chaotic nature harnessed as part of the new structure.

I feel the final transformation take hold within me. Not avatar or servant but incarnation—the living embodiment of the gateway itself. My consciousness expands beyond physical limitations, encompassing the entire structure of reality-relationship between worlds. I perceive not just our world and the chaos realm, but countless others beyond—infinite realities separated by the thinnest of membranes, all connected through the principle I now embody.

The pain is extraordinary but transcendent, like being unmade and remade in the same moment. I am still Jake Harlow—detective, former human, cat-shifter—but now I am also something for which human language has no adequate term. Guardian and passage, lock and key, the living definition of “between.”

As the transformation completes, the white light coalesces, drawing back into the temple stones and into my transformed body. The harbor water returns to its natural state, the desert sand sinking beneath it but not vanishing—merely

relocating to the conceptual layer that has always existed beneath physical reality.

The entity-that-was-Blackwood lies crumpled at the edge of the temple arrangement, its form now locked into a single stable configuration. Not fully human but no longer pure chaos—something in between, bound by the same principles that now define my existence.

Nadia approaches cautiously, her face reflecting wonder and sorrow in equal measure. “Jake?” she whispers. “Are you still...?”

I turn to her, seeing her through new senses that perceive not just her physical form but the pattern of her soul, the trajectory of her possible futures, the entire tapestry of her existence across multiple layers of reality.

“Yes,” I answer, my voice carrying harmonics that make the air around us vibrate. “I am still myself. Just...more.”

“The gateway?” she asks, looking around at the harbor now returned to apparent normalcy, though I can see the invisible structure now underlying it—the temple stones and desert sand still present but shifted into conceptual rather than physical reality.

“Stabilized,” I tell her. “Not closed or opened, but brought into proper balance. The boundaries remain, but as relationship rather than barrier.”

Chen approaches, keeping a wary eye on the entity-that-was-Blackwood. “Is it over?” he asks.

“This part,” I say. “But there will be others. The pattern has been restored, but there are still entities that slipped through before we completed the binding. They’ll need to be found. Contained.”

I look at the entity-that-was-Blackwood, seeing clearly now what it truly is—a fragment of chaos clothed in human form, bound by the new rules I’ve established but not destroyed. It stares back at me with eyes that hold galaxies, its expression unreadable.

“What about that one?” Chen asks, gesturing toward it.

“A beginning,” I answer. “The first of many tasks ahead.”

The entity rises unsteadily to its feet, Blackwood’s body moving with jerky precision as if its new pilot is still learning the controls. It opens its mouth as if to speak, but only a cascade of musical tones emerges—chaos attempting to communicate through physical means not designed for its language.

Then it turns and flees, moving with inhuman speed across the harbor water—not running on its surface but somehow sliding between the physical water and its conceptual underpinning.

“Should we pursue it?” Chen asks, already knowing the answer.

“Not tonight,” I say, feeling the exhaustion of transformation and binding catching up even to my enhanced form. “It can’t break the rules now—just bend them. And we’ll find it again.”

Nadia steps closer, her hand reaching out but stopping just short of touching me. I see her hesitation, her fear that I’ve become something beyond human connection. With deliberate gentleness, I reach out and take her hand in mine.

“I’m still here,” I tell her, the harmonics in my voice softening. “Different, but still me.”

Her fingers tighten around mine. “What happens now?” she asks.

I look out across Boston Harbor, seeing it through multiple layers of perception simultaneously—the physical harbor with its ships and docks, the conceptual underpinning of desert and temple stones, and the network of boundaries between realities that now center on this location. And through it all, I see the paths of possible futures branching outward, countless potential trajectories spiraling from this moment of transformation.

“Now,” I say, “we learn to live between worlds.”

Above us, the night sky has healed, the stars once again fixed in their familiar patterns. But to my new perception, I can see the subtle geometry connecting them—the same pattern now engraved into the fabric of reality around Boston Harbor. The pattern I now embody.

In the distance, sirens wail—the human world responding to the night’s disturbances in the only way it knows how. Chen is already planning our cover story, his practical mind sifting through plausible explanations for unconscious cultists and damaged property.

Nadia begins gathering the artifacts, her hands moving with reverent care. “These will need to be secured,” she says. “They’re part of the pattern now, connected to the gateway...connected to you.”

I nod, feeling the resonance between the artifacts and my transformed self. No longer separate magical objects but components of a larger system—the physical anchor points for the metaphysical structure I now embody.

The first light of dawn appears on the horizon, sending golden reflections across the harbor water. With it comes a sense of demarcation—the end of one existence, the beginning of another. I stand at the threshold between them, no longer merely crossing from one side to the other but becoming the threshold itself.

“I’m going to need coffee,” Chen mutters, ever practical even in the face of cosmic transformation. “Lots of it.”

The simple, human comment grounds me, drawing my expanded awareness back to the immediate moment. To the harbor returning to normal around us, to Nadia’s hand still in mine, to the work that remains to be done.

“Coffee sounds good,” I agree, the harmonic resonance in my voice fading to something closer to my original tone. “And then we hunt.”

Nadia’s expression shifts from wonder to determination. “The entity-that-was-Blackwood?”

“That,” I confirm, “and the others that slipped through before we sealed the breach. The ones already hidden in the city, making nests for themselves in the cracks of reality.”

Chen sighs heavily. “So much for retirement.”

Despite everything, I find myself smiling—my face shifting back toward human configuration though not completely returning to my original features. “Consider it a career change,” I tell him. “From death investigator to reality maintenance.”

As the first proper rays of sunrise touch the harbor water, I feel the new rhythm of existence settling into place. The boundaries between worlds, once threatened with dissolution, now pulse with renewed strength—not as walls but as membranes, allowing controlled exchange while maintaining essential separation. And at their center, serving as both keeper and key, stands a being who was once just a detective with a drinking problem and too many regrets.

The gateway has found its guardian, and the guardian has become the gate. Between worlds, I stand. Between worlds, I will remain.

Chapter 29: The Choice

Dawn breaks over Boston Harbor like a fragile thing, light spilling across water that hours ago was desert sand. The city wakes, oblivious to how close it came to unraveling. Sirens fade in the distance as emergency services respond to what they’ll interpret as a gas explosion or electrical fire—human explanations for events beyond human understanding.

I stand at the edge of the pier, my body still adjusting to its new configuration. Not just the hybrid form of human and cat I’d grown accustomed to, but something more fundamental. My flesh feels both more substantial and less real, as if I’m simultaneously more anchored in physical reality and partially existing outside it.

“We should go,” Chen says, his pragmatic tone unchanged despite witnessing reality tear itself apart. “BPD will cordon off this area soon, and we’ll have questions we can’t answer.”

Nadia approaches carefully, her eyes studying my altered form. The changes aren’t dramatic to mundane perception—my features slightly more angular, eyes now permanently gold-flecked, skin occasionally shifting with subtle hieroglyphic

patterns beneath the surface. But I can feel her seeing beyond physical appearance to the fundamental change in my nature.

“Can you move?” she asks. “Are you... tethered here now?”

An insightful question. I extend my awareness, feeling for constraints or limitations, and discover a peculiar truth.

“I’m connected to this place,” I explain, “but not bound to it. The gateway exists at all points where worlds touch, just... concentrated here.”

I take an experimental step away from the harbor’s edge. There’s resistance, like walking through honey, but no prohibition. With each step, I sense the invisible threads connecting me to the harbor stretching, not breaking. Not physical tethers but metaphysical ones—the conceptual temple and desert flowing beneath reality, with me as its living extension.

“It follows me,” I realize aloud. “Or I carry it. Both, maybe.”

Chen is already arranging transportation, making calls to trusted contacts who owe him favors. Nadia gathers the artifacts into her bag with practiced care, her archaeological training evident in her precise movements. Despite the cosmic significance of these objects, her approach remains scientific, methodical. It grounds me, pulls my awareness back from the expanding universe of perception that threatens to overwhelm my human consciousness.

You are adjusting well, considering.

Anubis’s voice in my mind is different now—not separate from my thoughts but integrated within them, like another cognitive process running in parallel. Not intrusion but synthesis.

Is this what you intended? I direct the thought inward, still learning how this new relationship functions.

Not precisely. Adaptation was necessary. The traditional binding was impossible with the boundary so severely damaged. This solution was... improvised.

I laugh, drawing curious glances from Chen and Nadia. “Sorry,” I say aloud. “Still figuring out the new mental roommate situation.”

Nadia’s expression softens with understanding, but I see the lingering fear beneath it. Not fear of me, but for me. For what I might have lost in becoming something new.

“We found a ride,” Chen announces, gesturing toward an approaching boat—a small fishing vessel captained by a weathered man I recognize as one of Chen’s morgue assistants’ relatives. “Low profile, no questions.”

As we board, I feel a subtle shift in my perception—the temple stones in their conceptual layer aligning with the boat’s movement across the harbor. The gateway adjusts with me, its anchor point moving as I move, though I sense a stronger connection remaining at the original location. Not limitation but

preference, like the way a cat can wander freely but always knows the way home.

Chen's apartment is small but meticulously organized, medical journals and forensic textbooks arranged with precise attention to category and frequency of use. He doesn't comment on the irony of a medical examiner harboring the technically deceased.

"Spare bedroom's there," he says, pointing down a narrow hallway. "Bathroom's functional but the hot water's temperamental. I'll get coffee."

He disappears into the kitchen, the normalcy of his actions striking in their mundanity. The world almost ended, reality itself nearly unraveled, and Chen makes coffee. There's wisdom in that I hadn't appreciated before.

Nadia sets her bag of artifacts on the dining table, carefully removing each piece and arranging them in the same configuration we used at the harbor. Even away from the gateway's physical anchor point, they resonate with power—though now I perceive it differently, not as external energy but as extensions of myself.

"How does it feel?" she asks quietly, watching me study the artifacts.

I consider the question, sorting through the cascade of new sensations. "Like being stretched across multiple points in space simultaneously. Like suddenly understanding a language you didn't know you spoke." I pause, searching for words adequate to the experience. "Like being both more and less than human."

"Do you regret it?"

The question hangs between us, heavy with implication. Behind it lies another, unspoken: *Could you have chosen differently?*

The decision crystallized in that moment at the harbor, reality fragmenting around us, the chaos realm pressing against the thinning boundary. I stood at the center of Nadia's reconfigured artifacts, feeling the competing energies of order and chaos washing over me. The entity-that-was-Blackwood struggled against my shadow-symbols, its rage and desperation palpable.

There must be another way, I argued silently with Anubis, our consciousness still partially separate then.

The gateway requires an anchor, he replied. *A willing bridge between worlds.*

I knew what that meant. Sacrifice. Not just part of myself as before, but all of me—my humanity, my future, my chance at a normal life. Everything I'd fought to protect and return to.

There has to be another option. The desperation in my thoughts matched Blackwood's physical struggle.

Anubis's response came not as words but as knowledge, ancient and profound—the true nature of the gateway revealed not as barrier but as relationship between worlds. Not separation but controlled connection.

Not sacrifice, I realized. Transformation.

Understanding flooded through me like desert sunlight, illuminating possibilities hidden within my unique dual nature. Neither fully human nor divine, neither completely mortal nor immortal—I existed in the space between, just as the gateway did.

“Becoming what I was always meant to be,” I whispered, the words carrying both resignation and revelation.

Around me, reality continued unraveling, the temple stones cracking under the strain of competing forces. Above, the sky itself fractured, letting glimpses of the chaos realm leak through like poison into a wound.

The choice must be freely made, Anubis warned. And it cannot be unmade.

Memories flashed through my mind with preternatural clarity:

My first transformation, pain and panic giving way to exhilaration as I experienced the world through new senses.

Nadia's face when I revealed myself to her, terror transforming into wonder and determination.

The desert between worlds, no longer alien but increasingly familiar, a landscape that responded to my will and imagination.

Mike's grave, unvisited for so long, waiting for a closure I hadn't been ready to give.

My old office, whiskey bottle still on the desk, emblematic of a life spent hiding from pain rather than transforming it.

What guarantee do I have that I won't lose myself completely? I asked.

None, came the honest answer. This has never been done before. You may remain yourself with expanded awareness, or your consciousness may disperse across the boundary structure. The risk is substantial.

Outside our internal dialogue, Nadia worked frantically with the artifacts, her hands steady despite the chaos erupting around us. Chen held off concept-entities with nothing but determination and makeshift weapons. Both fully human, both refusing to yield despite facing forces beyond comprehension.

Their courage decided me.

I choose transformation, I told Anubis. Not sacrifice, not surrender, but evolution.

The moment I made the choice, the pain began—not the familiar discomfort of shifting between human and cat forms, but something more fundamental. My very essence reconfiguring, stretching across dimensions I hadn't known existed before this moment. My consciousness expanding beyond its previous limitations while simultaneously anchoring itself more firmly in physical reality.

I became both more and less than I had been—less confined to single form or perspective, more deeply connected to the underlying structure of reality itself. Neither human nor god nor cat, but something new: the living embodiment of transition and boundary.

As my transformation completed, the gateway responded, its structure no longer fracturing but reorganizing around my new nature. The chaos incursion halted, not through barrier but through regulation—my transformed self establishing the rules by which interaction between realms could safely occur.

Not closing the door, but becoming its keeper.

“No,” I tell Nadia finally. “I don’t regret it.”

Her relief is palpable, though questions still shadow her eyes. “But you’ve lost something substantial, haven’t you? The chance to return to normal life?”

I laugh softly. “Normal was never really an option for me, even before all this. I died on that warehouse roof, Nadia. Everything since has been borrowed time.”

“Not borrowed,” she corrects me. “Transformed. Like you.”

Chen returns with coffee—strong, black, medicinal—and settles at the table across from us. His clinical gaze assesses me with professional interest.

“Your physical form appears stable,” he observes. “Though there are... fluctuations at certain wavelengths.” He doesn’t explain how he perceives these fluctuations, and I don’t ask. Chen has always seen more than most.

“I’m still adjusting,” I explain. “Figuring out the parameters of this new existence.”

“What exactly are you now?” Chen asks bluntly. “Medically speaking.”

I consider the question. “Alive, by most definitions. My heart beats, I breathe, I bleed if cut—though the blood has changed composition.” I flex my fingers, watching the subtle shift of hieroglyphs beneath the skin. “But I’m also something else. The physical manifestation of a metaphysical concept.”

“The gateway,” Nadia supplies.

“Yes, but not just a doorway. A regulatory system. A relationship between worlds expressed in living form.” I struggle to articulate concepts that human language wasn’t designed to convey. “I am boundary as process rather than barrier.”

Chen sips his coffee, absorbing this. “And Anubis? Is he still... present?”

“Not as separate entity anymore. We’ve merged into something new that contains elements of both.” I gesture vaguely at my head. “His knowledge, memories, and purpose integrated with my personality, experience, and perspective.”

“Like a divine version of multiple personality disorder?” Chen suggests, ever the medical professional seeking familiar frameworks.

“More like symbiosis evolved to its logical conclusion,” I counter. “Not two beings sharing space but a new being incorporating aspects of both progenitors.”

Nadia touches one of the artifacts—the small ankh that served as central conduit during the ritual. It glows subtly at her touch, responding to her intent. “And these? Are they still necessary?”

“They’re part of the system now. Physical anchor points for the metaphysical structure.” I feel their resonance with my transformed self, like extensions of my nervous system. “They need to be protected, but they’re no longer the only components maintaining the boundary.”

“Because you’re the living boundary,” she concludes.

“Part of it, yes.”

Chen drains his coffee and stands. “I need to check in at the morgue, establish alibis, manage the inevitable questions about last night’s incidents.” His pragmatism remains refreshing. “Will you be... stable here? No reality fluctuations or interdimensional breaches while I’m gone?”

I smile. “I’ll keep the cosmic disruptions to a minimum.”

After Chen leaves, silence settles between Nadia and me. The morning light filters through blinds, creating patterns on the hardwood floor that my enhanced perception reads as meaningful symbols—reality constantly communicating in languages few can perceive.

“What does this mean for us?” Nadia finally asks, the question I’ve been expecting since harbor.

“I don’t know,” I answer honestly. “I’m still learning what I am, what I can do, what limitations I have.”

“Can you still transform? Between human and cat?”

In response, I focus inward, finding the familiar pathway that once led to feline form. It’s still there, but altered—a tributary now connected to a much larger river of transformation possibilities. I follow it, feeling the shift begin.

The change flows more smoothly than ever before, my body reconfiguring without the pain or disorientation of previous transformations. In moments, I sit before her as the black cat with gold-flecked fur, though even this form feels different now—more an expression of concept than simple physical change.

Nadia's smile is genuine, relieved. "That's... comforting, somehow."

I shift back to human form with equal ease, the transition feeling more like changing perspective than altering physical reality. "Apparently some things remain constant."

She reaches across the table, her hand hesitating before making contact with mine. The touch sends cascades of sensation through my altered nervous system—not just physical feedback but emotional resonance, the metaphysical weight of connection between beings.

"I was afraid I'd lost you," she admits. "When the white light engulfed everything, when reality itself seemed to bend around you... I thought you might become something completely beyond human connection."

"I considered that possibility," I tell her. "When making the choice."

The memory rises again, more immediate than before. Standing at the center of the temple stones as reality unraveled around us. The moment of choice expanding into what felt like eternity as I weighed possibilities and consequences.

Is there a way to maintain my humanity through this? I asked Anubis as our consciousness began merging.

Humanity is not simply physical form or limited perception, came the response. It is connection, compassion, choice. These need not be sacrificed.

But relationships, normal life—

Will change, Anubis acknowledged. *But change is the only constant in any existence. The question is not whether you can avoid transformation, but whether you can direct it.*

Around us, chaos entities pushed further into our reality, the boundary weakening with each passing second. Nadia worked frantically with the artifacts, her determination evident in every precise movement. Chen fought against concept-intrusions with nothing but will and crude weapons.

In that moment, I understood. My humanity wasn't defined by normalcy or limitation, but by choice and connection. By the willingness to sacrifice for others, to evolve rather than remain static, to embrace change while maintaining core values.

I choose to become gateway, I declared, *but I refuse to surrender my capacity for human connection.*

The transformation began instantly, power surging through my hybrid form. Pain beyond description as my essence stretched across dimensions, my consciousness expanding to encompass perspectives beyond human comprehension. For terrifying moments, I feared dissolution—my sense of self scattering across infinite boundary-space, identity lost in cosmic purpose.

Then I found the anchor: Nadia's face, watching with fear and hope. Chen's stubborn defense against impossible odds. Mike's memory, giving meaning to my continued existence. My own name, repeated like mantra: Jake Harlow, detective, guardian, friend.

Not rejection of new purpose, but integration with existing identity. Not loss of humanity, but expansion of its definition.

As white light erupted from the center of the temple configuration, I made my final choice: to carry humanity with me into transcendence, to maintain connection even as I became something beyond conventional understanding.

To be boundary not just between worlds, but between human and divine.

"I almost did," I tell Nadia, returning to the present moment. "Become something beyond connection. There was a point during the transformation where everything I was seemed to be dissolving, scattering across the boundary structure."

"What happened?" She squeezes my hand tighter, as if to physically anchor me in this reality.

"I thought of you," I say simply. "Of Chen. Of Mike. Of all the connections that define me beyond physical form or function. And I refused to let them go."

Her eyes glisten with unshed tears. "So what happens now?"

"Now we adapt. Figure out what this new existence means practically." I manage a smile that feels almost normal. "I'm still me, Nadia. Just with... expanded job responsibilities."

"Gateway maintenance?"

"And entity containment, apparently." I think of the chaos fragment that fled in Blackwood's body, and the others that slipped through before we sealed the breach. "I can sense them, you know. The ones that got through. Like disturbances in a pattern I'm now part of."

"We'll find them," she says with quiet determination. "Together."

The simple declaration warms something in me that transcends physical form—the human need for partnership, for shared purpose. Despite everything I've become, this fundamental desire remains unchanged.

Outside, the day brightens as morning advances. My new senses perceive the city awakening around us—not just physical activity but the conceptual underpinnings that give it meaning. The invisible temple stones and desert sand that now exist beneath Boston Harbor pulse gently in my awareness, their rhythm synchronizing with my heartbeat.

The eclipse has fully passed, the astronomical alignment that enabled the boundary breach now dissolved. But its effects remain—in the transformed entity wearing Blackwood’s form, in the chaos fragments hiding throughout the city, in my own fundamentally altered existence.

I am no longer just Jake Harlow, cynical detective given second chance at life. No longer simply Anubis’s reluctant servant or willing avatar. I have become something without precedent—the living embodiment of transition and boundary, the keeper of the gateway between worlds.

Not through sacrifice or surrender, but through choice and transformation.

Nadia rises, moving around the table to stand before me. I stand to meet her, uncertain of her intention.

“May I?” she asks, hands raised toward my face.

I nod, and she gently traces the subtle hieroglyphs that now occasionally ripple beneath my skin. Her touch grounds me, pulls my expanded awareness back to this moment, this connection.

“Still you,” she murmurs. “Different, but still you.”

“Still me,” I agree. “And something more.”

Outside, Boston continues its ordinary rhythm, oblivious to how close it came to unraveling. Ships cross the harbor where hours ago desert sand replaced water and temple stones rose from hidden depths. The boundary between worlds pulses, stable once more—not as barrier but as regulated interface, with a former detective as its living guardian.

The choice has been made. The transformation completed. What remains is adaptation—learning to exist between worlds while maintaining connections to both.

I am boundary incarnate. And somehow, improbably, still human enough to hope.

Chapter 30: Aftermath

The university lab feels like sanctuary after the chaos of the harbor ritual. I’ve converted the small archaeology preservation room into a makeshift command center—artifacts arranged on acid-free paper across steel tables, reference books stacked in precarious towers, and three whiteboards covered in my increasingly frantic notes.

Jake lies unconscious on a cot in the corner, his breathing so shallow I find myself checking his pulse every few minutes. Three days since the harbor, and still no sign of waking. His skin occasionally ripples with golden hieroglyphs that seem to follow some pattern I can’t quite decipher despite my expertise.

I've photographed every sequence, filling a notebook with potential translations, but the symbols shift too quickly, morphing from recognizable Ancient Egyptian to something older, something that predates written language itself.

"Any change?" Dr. Chen asks, entering with two cups of coffee—mine with cardamom, his black and bitter.

"Nothing obvious." I accept the coffee gratefully, the scent momentarily grounding me in normalcy. "The pattern of symbols has shifted, though. More references to thresholds and boundaries, fewer to transformation."

Chen studies Jake from a clinical distance that I find both reassuring and maddening. His ability to maintain scientific detachment while his friend exists in some unprecedented state between humanity and divinity strikes me as both admirable and slightly inhuman itself.

"His vital signs remain stable," Chen notes, checking the medical equipment he somehow procured without questions or paperwork. "Brain activity is... unusual, but consistent. Whatever internal process is happening, it appears to be proceeding in an orderly fashion."

"That's something, I suppose." I sink into my chair, exhaustion settling into my bones. Sleep has been elusive, my dreams haunted by glimpses of the chaos realm and the entities that briefly pressed against our reality.

Chen places a newspaper on the table beside me. The headline reads: "Gas Main Explosion at Harbor Under Investigation." The article below mentions "unexplained damage" and "possible terrorist concerns" but nothing about reality tearing itself apart or ancient Egyptian gods.

"The official narrative is taking shape," Chen observes. "Blackwood Industries has already issued a statement expressing concern and offering resources for the investigation."

I scan the article, finding the expected quote from Maxwell Blackwood's company spokesperson. The real Blackwood remains in protective custody at Boston General's psychiatric ward, his body intact but his mind shattered by what glimpsed through the gateway. The entity that fled in his form, however, has wasted no time establishing control over his corporate infrastructure.

"They're very efficiently covering their tracks," I note, unsurprised but still dismayed. "Any word from your contact in the police department?"

"Detective Henderson reports that evidence is mysteriously disappearing or being corrupted. Witness statements contradicting each other. The usual signs of powerful influence at work." Chen sips his coffee. "The cult's political and financial connections remain intact, even with their ritual failed."

"Not failed," I correct him, glancing at Jake. "Interrupted and redirected. That's very different."

I return to my translation work, fingers tracing hieroglyphs I've studied my entire academic career but now see with new understanding. The artifacts we recovered from the harbor site pulse with subtle energy that resonates with the symbols occasionally appearing on Jake's skin. Connection, not coincidence.

My phone buzzes—Professor Watkins from the Antiquities Department. I've been avoiding his calls since our return, unsure how to explain my extended absence or the artifacts now hidden in the preservation lab.

"You should answer," Chen advises. "Maintaining appearances is crucial now."

He's right, of course. I accept the call, summoning the practiced professional tone I've perfected over years of academic politics.

"Dr. Farouk speaking."

"Nadia! Thank goodness. We've been worried sick." Watkins's voice carries genuine concern beneath his typical British reserve. "Campus security reported a break-in at your office, and then you disappeared completely. Are you alright?"

I glance at Jake's unconscious form, at the ancient artifacts arranged in ritual configuration, at my notes documenting the near-collapse of reality itself.

"I'm fine, just caught up in urgent research." The lie comes easily, protected by the absolute unbelievability of the truth. "Family emergency combined with a breakthrough on the Anubis transformation iconography. I should have called."

"Well, as long as you're safe. Though you should know, the police have been asking questions about those missing artifacts. Quite insistent, actually."

My grip tightens on the phone. "What kind of questions?"

"Oddly specific ones. About Egyptian ritual objects and their practical applications, if you can believe it. Not the usual theft investigation queries at all."

I meet Chen's eyes across the room. He nods slightly, having anticipated this development.

"I'll come by tomorrow to speak with them," I promise. "I've actually made significant progress on that front."

After ending the call, I slump back in my chair. "The police asking about ritual applications of Egyptian artifacts. Not exactly standard procedure."

"Remaining cult members in law enforcement," Chen confirms. "Using official channels to locate what they lost."

"They won't stop, will they?"

"Their gateway attempt failed. Their leader is effectively gone. But the promise of power remains." Chen gestures toward Jake. "And now they have a new target."

The implications settle heavily between us. Jake isn't just a detective who interrupted a ritual anymore. He's become something unprecedented—the living embodiment of the gateway they sought to control. The ultimate prize for those who hunted divine power.

"We need to move him," I decide. "This location isn't secure enough."

"Agreed. I have a cabin in the Berkshires. Remote, defensible, and off official records." Chen begins gathering medical equipment. "But we should wait until he's stable enough for transport."

As if responding to our conversation, the hieroglyphs on Jake's skin flare brighter, pulsing in complex patterns that draw my attention immediately. I grab my notebook, scribbling translations as quickly as the symbols appear and change.

"Boundary... walker... between... awakening," I translate, the words forming an incomplete message. "Something about consolidation of essence."

Chen moves to Jake's side, checking vital signs. "Heart rate increasing. Brain activity spiking across all measured wavelengths."

The air in the lab grows heavy, charged with unseen energy that makes the artifacts vibrate slightly against the steel tables. Papers rustle without wind, and the overhead lights flicker in patterns matching the symbols on Jake's skin.

"I think he's waking up," I whisper, both hopeful and terrified.

Jake's body arches suddenly, golden light emanating from beneath his skin. The hieroglyphs spread, covering every visible inch before merging into continuous illumination that forces me to shield my eyes. The artifacts respond, glowing in synchronous pulses.

Then, as abruptly as it began, the light recedes. The symbols fade back beneath the surface of Jake's skin, visible now only as occasional ripples, like fish moving just below the surface of a pond.

His eyes open.

Not human eyes—not entirely. The irises shine with the same golden light that had enveloped his body, pupils vertical like a cat's before slowly rounding to more human shape.

"Jake?" I approach cautiously, uncertain which aspect of him has awakened—the detective I've come to care for or the divine entity he's merged with.

He blinks, focus returning gradually. His gaze finds mine, recognition warming his expression.

"Nadia." His voice carries new harmonics, subtle undertones that suggest vastly expanded vocal capabilities. "How long was I out?"

Relief floods through me. Whatever he's become, Jake himself remains present. "Three days. We've been monitoring you here at the university lab."

He sits up slowly, movements fluid but careful, like someone testing the balance of a new body. “Three days,” he repeats, glancing around the lab. “The gateway is stable?”

“Yes,” I confirm. “Whatever you did at the harbor sealed the breach. Reality has settled back into normal patterns, at least as far as we can detect.”

Jake nods, then looks down at his hands, studying them with intense focus. The skin appears normal until he flexes his fingers, causing momentary ripples of hieroglyphs to surface and fade.

“The integration is still completing,” he observes. “Reconciling human physiology with gateway function.”

Chen approaches, doctor’s instincts overriding any supernatural concerns. “How do you feel? Any pain or disorientation?”

Jake considers the question with unnerving stillness. “No pain. Substantial disorientation, but manageable. My perception has... expanded considerably.” He gestures toward the artifacts arranged on the table. “I can feel their resonance, their connection to the gateway structure. To me.”

I move closer, scientific curiosity temporarily overcoming caution. “You can sense the artifacts specifically? Even from across the room?”

“Yes. They’re like... extensions of myself now. Components in a larger system.” He pauses, head tilting slightly as if listening to something beyond human hearing. “There are others, scattered throughout the city. I can feel their absence, like phantom limbs.”

“The remaining ritual objects the cult still possesses,” I realize. “They’re still connected to the gateway. To you.”

Jake nods, eyes distant. “They’re trying to use them to locate me. To establish control.” He refocuses on me with unsettling intensity. “They won’t stop, Nadia. What I’ve become is exactly what they sought to create, just not under their control.”

“We’ve already discussed moving you to a more secure location,” Chen interjects. “My cabin in the Berkshires.”

“No.” Jake stands, his movements carrying new grace despite days of unconsciousness. “Hiding won’t solve this. The connection works both ways—I can sense them through the artifacts just as they attempt to sense me.”

A shiver runs through me as I grasp his meaning. “You want to hunt them instead.”

“Not want. Need.” The overhead lights dim slightly, responding to some unseen energy emanating from Jake. “The gateway transformation is complete, but my role as its guardian is just beginning.”

Chen and I exchange concerned glances. Despite my intimate involvement with the supernatural events leading to this moment, witnessing Jake's transformation from cynical detective to divine guardian remains profoundly unsettling.

"The police are asking questions," I tell him. "About the artifacts, their ritual applications. Cult members using official channels."

"Expected." Jake moves to the window, gazing out at the campus with eyes that seem to see far beyond the physical landscape. "They've also been to my apartment, my office. Searching for anything connected to me."

"How do you know that?" Chen asks.

Jake touches the glass, hieroglyphs briefly appearing where his fingers make contact. "I can sense disturbances in spaces I've inhabited. Echoes of intent."

His casual demonstration of seemingly impossible awareness sends another chill through me. The Jake I knew was extraordinary in human terms—a gifted detective with unusual insight. This being before me operates on principles that transcend conventional understanding.

"Jake," I say carefully, "how much of you is still... you?"

He turns from the window, expression softening as he meets my gaze. In that moment, I glimpse the man beneath the transformation—the detective seeking justice, the wounded soul finding purpose, the human reaching for connection despite supernatural complications.

"More than you might think," he answers. "Less than I sometimes wish." He approaches slowly, giving me time to retreat if his proximity becomes too overwhelming. "The integration isn't just physical, Nadia. It's cognitive, emotional. Anubis's knowledge and purpose merged with my experiences and values."

"And which is dominant?" I can't help asking.

A smile tugs at his lips—familiar, authentically Jake despite everything. "Neither. Both. It's not competition but synthesis." He gestures toward the artifacts. "Like these objects form a system greater than their individual components."

Before I can respond, my phone buzzes again—this time with a text from an unknown number: *Authorities at main entrance. Multiple vehicles. Not standard campus police.*

"We have company," I announce, showing Jake and Chen the message.

"Henderson," Chen explains. "Warning us."

Jake moves with sudden purpose, gathering the artifacts with efficient precision. "They're tracking the gateway resonance. We need to move now." He glances at the medical equipment. "Can you handle that?"

Chen nods, already disconnecting monitors and packing essential supplies.

I begin collecting my notes and translation materials, prioritizing the most irreplaceable research. “Where are we going?”

“The harbor first,” Jake decides. “I need to strengthen the anchor point, make it less detectable without my physical presence.”

“And then?” Chen asks, professional calm belied by the speed of his movements.

Jake’s expression shifts to something older, more timeless—a glimpse of the divine entity now sharing his consciousness. “Then we begin the counteroffensive. The cult sought to open the gateway for their purposes. Instead, they created its guardian.”

The transformation in his demeanor from patient to protector happens in an instant, reminding me forcefully that whatever human elements remain in Jake, he has become something fundamentally different—a being of liminality and transition, the living boundary between worlds.

“There’s a service elevator at the back of the building,” I suggest. “Less likely to be watched.”

Jake nods, then pauses, tilting his head in that unsettling listening posture again. “Three vehicles at the main entrance. Eight individuals approaching the building.” His eyes refocus. “Two more circling around back.”

Chen finishes packing medical supplies into a duffel bag. “Options?”

Jake moves to the center of the room, placing the artifacts in a small circle around him. “Stay close,” he instructs us. “Very close.”

I step into the circle beside him, Chen following suit. The artifacts begin to glow softly, responding to Jake’s proximity.

“What are you doing?” I whisper.

“Something I’m not entirely sure will work,” Jake admits, a flash of his old self showing through the divine presence. “Theoretical, based on my new awareness of gateway mechanics.”

He places one hand on my shoulder, the other on Chen’s, forming a physical connection between us. The hieroglyphs beneath his skin flare brighter, extending along his arms toward the points of contact. I feel a strange tingling where his hand touches me, as if my own skin is becoming permeable.

“Close your eyes,” Jake suggests. “The transition can be disorienting the first time.”

Before I can ask what transition he means, the world shifts around us. The solid floor beneath my feet suddenly feels insubstantial, gravity itself becoming negotiable. My stomach lurches as sensations flood my awareness—wind against my face despite being indoors, the scent of water and stone replacing the laboratory’s clinical smell, sound compressing then expanding like a wave passing through me.

When the vertigo subsides, I open my eyes to find we're standing at Boston Harbor, the exact spot where the ritual took place three days ago. The artifacts still surround us in perfect circle, but everything else has changed.

"Did we just—" Chen begins.

"Yes," Jake confirms, steadying us both as we adjust to the sudden translocation. "Gateway passage. The boundary doesn't just separate worlds; it connects points within them."

I stare at him in astonishment, academic understanding giving way to visceral appreciation of what Jake has become. Not just guardian or gatekeeper but the living embodiment of the gateway itself, with all its properties of connection and transition.

"That's..." Words fail me momentarily. "That's not in any text about Anubis I've ever studied."

Jake smiles, the expression carrying both warmth and ancient knowledge. "There's much about the true nature of gods that never made it into human records, Dr. Farouk."

In the distance, sirens wail—the authorities discovering our absence, perhaps. But here at the harbor, in the afternoon sunlight reflecting off water that once transformed to desert sand, I finally accept the full reality of our situation. Jake has awakened not just to consciousness but to power beyond human comprehension, becoming something unprecedented in religious history: not avatar or vessel but synthesis, the living boundary between worlds.

And somehow, despite everything, still the man whose complex humanity first drew me to him.

"What happens now?" I ask, watching him arrange the artifacts in a new configuration along the harbor's edge.

Jake looks up, golden flecks dancing in his eyes as the sunlight catches them. "Now we adapt. Learn the new rules. Prepare for what comes next." He turns his gaze back to the water, where invisible to ordinary perception, the gateway's anchor point pulses beneath the surface. "Because this isn't over, Nadia. It's just beginning."

The water ripples, briefly revealing ghosted images of temple stones and desert sand beneath—reality's memory of what transpired here, or perhaps a glimpse of what always exists just beyond human perception. Jake extends his hand toward the harbor, and the water responds, patterns forming on its surface that mirror the hieroglyphs occasionally visible beneath his skin.

"Just beginning," I echo, watching the transformation of Jake Harlow—cynical detective, reluctant avatar, and now guardian of reality itself—continue to unfold before my eyes. Whatever comes next, nothing will be the same again.

And despite everything we've lost, everything we've risked, I find I wouldn't have it any other way.

Chapter 31: New Normal

The first snow of winter falls on Boston like absolution, covering the scars of the harbor ritual beneath a pristine blanket of white. I watch it from Chen's apartment window, feeling each unique crystalline pattern as it forms in the atmosphere, each flake a miniature universe of structure and meaning. My perception has expanded in ways I'm still discovering, still learning to filter and control.

Two weeks since I awakened in the university lab. Two weeks of adaptation, of testing boundaries—both mine and reality's. The snow feels appropriate somehow, a physical manifestation of the transition I've undergone. Everything familiar made new, transformed but still recognizable beneath.

"Still brooding by windows, I see," Nadia says, entering with two mugs of coffee. "Some things never change."

I accept the coffee with a smile. "Professional habit. Windows are thresholds—neither fully inside nor outside. Good vantage points."

"And now you're literally the embodiment of thresholds," she observes, joining me at the window. "On brand, at least."

Her attempt at normalcy through humor warms something in me that remains fundamentally human despite everything. Nadia has been my anchor throughout this transition, her scientific curiosity and emotional steadiness providing framework as I integrate my new existence.

"The translation is going well," she continues, gesturing toward her workstation where artifacts and journals surround her laptop. "The symbols that appear on your skin match patterns in my grandfather's later journals. He was closer to understanding gateway mechanics than I realized."

"He had help," I note, remembering knowledge that isn't mine but now resides in my consciousness. "Brief contact with Anubis during a previous boundary instability. Not unlike my experience, though less... comprehensive."

Nadia studies me with the careful observation I've come to recognize—part scientific assessment, part personal concern. "You're speaking with more formal sentence structure today. Is that...?"

"The Anubis aspect becoming more prominent? Somewhat." I set down the coffee mug, watching ripples form perfect concentric circles on the surface. Even the simplest physical phenomena now reveal complex underlying patterns. "The integration ebbs and flows. Sometimes I'm more Jake, sometimes more Anubis, mostly something between."

She nods, accepting this as she has accepted each new revelation about my condition. Her capacity to absorb the impossible has been remarkable, though not without cost. The dark circles beneath her eyes speak to nights spent translating ancient texts instead of sleeping, seeking understanding through scholarship.

“Chen called,” she says, changing the subject. “He’s finished creating your new documentation. Birth certificate, driver’s license, social security number—everything needed for Jake Harlow to exist officially again, despite being technically deceased.”

“Useful,” I acknowledge. “Though I’m not sure how much of conventional human society I’ll be navigating going forward.”

Her expression tightens slightly. We’ve been avoiding this conversation, focusing instead on immediate practical concerns—securing artifacts, establishing safe locations, monitoring cult activities through my connection to the gateway matrix. But the fundamental question of what I am now—and what that means for any kind of normal life—can’t be postponed indefinitely.

“We should discuss that,” she says, setting down her own mug with deliberate care. “What exactly you see for yourself. For us. Moving forward.”

Before I can respond, my awareness shifts—attention pulled toward one of the guardian artifacts placed strategically around Chen’s apartment. The small ankh pendant on the bookshelf pulses with energy, responding to my heightened alertness.

“What is it?” Nadia asks, recognizing my expression.

“Disturbance at the harbor anchor point.” I extend my perception outward, following connections that exist beyond physical space. “Someone attempting to access gateway energy. Crude but determined.”

I move to the center of the living room, already preparing for transition. Nadia follows, familiar now with the procedure.

“Should I call Chen?” she asks, practical as always.

“No time. I need to address this immediately.” I hold out my hand to her. “Coming?”

She takes my hand without hesitation, her trust still humbling despite everything we’ve experienced together. I draw the boundary threshold around us, feeling reality flex as I manipulate the conceptual structure underlying physical existence. The transition is smooth now, practiced—the world folding around us like origami until we stand at the harbor’s edge, snow falling into water that remembers being desert.

A hooded figure kneels at the precise spot where the ritual occurred, surrounded by makeshift versions of the artifacts we secured. The copies lack the authentic power of the originals but contain enough symbolic resonance to create weak

connection to the gateway matrix. Crude chalk symbols surround the figure—incorrect translations of ancient binding spells.

I recognize him immediately through gateway-sense—Officer Sullivan, former patrol cop and mid-level cult member. Not a major threat, but persistent.

“Amateur hour,” Nadia murmurs beside me, her expert eye assessing the ritual arrangement. “Those symbols are completely mistranslated. That one actually means ‘breakfast food,’ not ‘boundary opening.’”

Despite the situation, I smile. Some things indeed never change—including Nadia’s professional disdain for sloppy scholarship.

Sullivan looks up, startled by our sudden appearance. His hand moves toward his service weapon, but freezes as I step forward, allowing the boundary symbols beneath my skin to surface visibly.

“That’s not going to work,” I tell him mildly. “On multiple levels.”

His eyes widen as he recognizes me. “Harlow? They said you were—” He stops, reassessing as he takes in my altered appearance, the hieroglyphs moving beneath my skin like living text. “What are you?”

“I’m what you were trying to contact,” I answer, gesturing toward his ritual arrangement. “Though your methodology leaves much to be desired.”

Fear and awe battle across his features—the typical human response to direct encounter with the divine. I feel a flicker of sympathy from the Jake aspect of my consciousness. This man isn’t inherently malicious, just desperate and misled.

“The Order promised answers,” he says, voice cracking slightly. “Power. Purpose. After what I saw at the warehouse that night—”

“You glimpsed something beyond human understanding and couldn’t go back to normal life,” I finish for him. “I know the feeling.”

Nadia steps forward, her academic authority somehow undiminished beside my supernatural presence. “The Order of Eternal Dusk doesn’t have answers, Officer Sullivan. They have manipulations and half-truths designed to use people like you to access power they don’t understand and can’t control.”

Sullivan looks between us, confusion evident. “But you’re working with it,” he gestures toward me. “Controlling it.”

“Not controlling,” Nadia corrects. “Collaborating. There’s a difference.”

I study the man, seeing beyond physical appearance to the spiritual essence beneath—the potential futures branching from this moment. One path leads to continued service to the cult, eventual sacrifice when his usefulness ends. Another path offers possibility of redemption, purpose realigned.

“You have a choice to make, Officer Sullivan,” I tell him. “Continue serving those who will ultimately discard you, or help us prevent the chaos they’re attempting to unleash.”

“Why would I trust you?” he asks, though I can sense his wavering resolve.

I approach slowly, maintaining careful human mannerisms despite the power flowing beneath my skin. “Because unlike the Order, I can show you the truth. Not filtered through ritual or secondhand accounts. Direct perception.”

Before he can react, I place my hand on his forehead. The boundary symbols extend from my skin to his, creating temporary connection between his consciousness and the gateway awareness. Not complete access—that would shatter his mind—but a carefully controlled glimpse of reality’s true structure, the chaos entities waiting beyond, and the genuine purpose of the gateway system.

When I remove my hand, he gasps, falling to his knees in the snow. Not in worship but in shock, his perception fundamentally altered by even that brief contact with greater reality.

“My God,” he whispers. “They’re lying. About everything.”

“Not everything,” I correct. “Just the parts that would prevent you from serving their purpose.”

Sullivan looks up at me with new understanding. “What do you want from me?”

“Information. Names. Locations.” I gesture toward his ritual implements. “And perhaps occasionally, misdirection among your fellow officers when necessary.”

He nods slowly, the decision crystallizing. “I can do that. But they’ll know if I just disappear.”

“You won’t disappear,” Nadia says. “You’ll continue exactly as you have been, just with... adjusted loyalties.”

As Sullivan gathers his materials, making arrangements to meet us later with information, I sense Nadia watching me with mixed emotions. This recruitment wasn’t planned—another instance of my new existence requiring adaptation from all of us.

“That was new,” she observes once Sullivan has departed, brushing snow from her coat. “The symbol transfer. The truth-showing.”

“Improvisation,” I admit. “The capabilities continue to manifest as needed.”

She studies me thoughtfully. “You’re getting more comfortable with it. The divine aspect.”

“Integration progresses,” I agree, turning my attention to clearing all traces of Sullivan’s ritual attempt. “Though certain aspects remain challenging.”

“Such as?”

I pause in my work, considering how to articulate the strangest aspects of my new existence. “Time perception, for one. I experience it both linearly as humans do and... differently, as divine entities do. Simultaneously. Past, present, and potential futures all accessible, though not with equal clarity.”

“That sounds overwhelming,” she says softly.

“It would be, without my human consciousness providing framework.” I finish erasing the chalk symbols, reinforcing the harbor’s protective camouflage with a gesture that ripples across the water’s surface. “The synthesis creates balance—human perception keeping divine awareness manageable, divine understanding enhancing human cognition.”

We stand together at the harbor’s edge, snow falling around us in perfect crystalline patterns, each unique, each following mathematical principles beyond conventional understanding. The harbor water reflects fractured light, memory of desert heat lingering beneath winter’s approach.

“You never answered my question,” Nadia says finally. “About what you see moving forward. For yourself. For us.”

I turn to face her, allowing my most human aspects prominence. This conversation demands Jake Harlow’s emotional honesty, not Anubis’s cosmic perspective.

“I can’t go back to what I was,” I begin carefully. “The transformation is permanent, and my responsibilities as gateway guardian are real. The cult remains active, chaos entities that slipped through before sealing still hide throughout Boston, and the anchor points require regular maintenance.”

Her expression remains neutral, giving nothing away. “That’s what you can’t do. What about what you can?”

“I can exist in this world, most of the time. Function within human society, though with limitations and necessary precautions.” I take her hand, the contact sending ripples of awareness through my expanded senses. “I can maintain connections that matter. Build something new around what I’ve become rather than clinging to what I was.”

“Such as?”

“An agency,” I suggest, the idea crystallizing as I speak. “Specializing in cases other investigators can’t handle—missing persons who’ve vanished through supernatural means, artifacts with genuine power that need protection, entities that escaped during the gateway breach.”

Hope flickers across her face. “Using your abilities for practical purpose.”

“And your expertise,” I add. “Your academic knowledge of ancient cultures and ritual practices. Chen’s medical and forensic skills. Maybe even reformed cult members like Sullivan who’ve glimpsed the truth.”

The snow falls harder around us, individual flakes brilliant in my enhanced perception—each one a microcosm of order imposed on chaos, structure emerging from formlessness. Not unlike what I’ve become.

“It wouldn’t be normal,” I caution. “Not by any conventional definition.”

Nadia’s laugh carries genuine amusement. “Jake, I’ve helped an Egyptian cat god seal a dimensional breach, translated hieroglyphs that appear spontaneously on your skin, and just watched you teleport us to the harbor to recruit a cult member. ‘Normal’ left the building a long time ago.”

Her humor breaks the tension, allows something warm and essentially human to flow between us despite everything that’s changed. I touch her face gently, hieroglyphs briefly surfacing beneath my fingertips before fading again.

“There are complications I haven’t fully explained,” I say. “Aspects of my new existence that affect any relationship.”

“Such as?”

“The lunar cycle still influences me, though less drastically. During new moons, my physical form becomes less stable, more... boundary-state. My connection to the gateway matrix intensifies, requiring attention that pulls me away from physical reality.”

She nods, processing this. “So three days a month you’re essentially on call for cosmic maintenance.”

“Essentially, yes.” Her pragmatic framing surprises a laugh from me. “There’s also the matter of lifespan. The merger with Anubis has altered my physical existence in ways Chen is still documenting. I may age differently—slower, or perhaps not at all.”

This gives her pause, the implications settling between us. “You might outlive me. Significantly.”

“It’s possible,” I acknowledge. “Though there are considerable dangers in gateway guardianship that might render the point moot.”

“Romantic,” she says dryly.

“Honest,” I counter. “Which seems important for whatever we’re considering building.”

Nadia gazes out at the harbor, snow collecting on her dark hair like stars against night sky. I see her not just with human eyes but with divine perception—the complex pattern of her existence, threads connecting to past and future, the brilliant energy of her consciousness.

“I’ve spent my entire academic career studying ancient Egyptian beliefs about death and transformation,” she says finally. “Dedicated my life to understanding rituals and artifacts that everyone else considered merely historical curiosities. Now I know they’re real—all of it, real in ways I couldn’t have imagined.”

She turns back to me, decision evident in her posture. “I’m not walking away from that knowledge. Or from you. Whatever complications that entails.”

Relief flows through me—the human part of me that feared rejection, feared that my transformation would cost me this connection that has become vital. The divine aspect recognizes the pattern completing, human and supernatural elements aligning as they have throughout history, ancient cycles continuing in new forms.

“Then we build something new,” I say, taking her hand. “Starting now.”

Chen’s apartment becomes our planning center over the following days. Maps of Boston cover one wall, marked with known cult locations and suspected chaos entity activity. Artifacts are arranged in protective configurations around the perimeter. Whiteboards fill with case notes, supernatural phenomena reports, and lists of potential allies.

“Blackwood Industries continues normal operations,” Chen reports, pinning another news article to our evidence board. “The entity controlling Blackwood’s identity has maintained perfect cover—board meetings, public appearances, even medical appointments.”

“Maintaining the infrastructure the cult built while pursuing its own agenda,” I observe, studying the pattern emerging from multiple reports. “Using human resources without being bound by human limitations.”

“The question is what agenda,” Nadia adds, looking up from her translation work. “Chaos entities want to experience physical reality, but to what end?”

I probe the gateway matrix, sensing disturbances and connections. “Chaos isn’t malevolent in the human sense—it’s simply incompatible with ordered reality. Like introducing wildfire to a library. The destruction isn’t purposeful, just inevitable when incompatible forms interact without regulation.”

“Hence the gateway system,” Chen notes. “Controlled interaction rather than complete separation.”

“Exactly.” I move to the window, my customary thinking position. “The entity in Blackwood’s form is learning, adapting to human society. Using corporate resources to locate remaining artifacts and potentially other gateway access points.”

“Other access points exist?” Nadia asks sharply.

I nod. “Weaker ones. The Boston harbor location is primary in this region, but secondary thresholds exist—places where boundaries naturally thin. Certain ancient burial grounds, astronomical alignment points, locations where significant transitions have occurred.”

“So we’re not just securing artifacts, but locations as well,” Chen concludes. “The scope expands.”

“Yes.” I turn back to our planning board. “Which is why we need infrastructure, resources, a functioning operation.”

“Speaking of which,” Chen produces a folder of documents, “your new identity is complete. Jake Harlow is officially alive again, with a background modified just enough to explain any... unusual characteristics that might be observed.”

I examine the documents—birth certificate showing different parents, medical records suggesting rare genetic condition, military service providing cover for missing years. Thorough and believable, leveraging Chen’s considerable connections.

“And I’ve located potential office space,” Nadia adds, spreading out real estate listings. “Three options that meet our criteria—proximity to harbor anchor point, minimal neighboring occupancy, historical significance that might provide natural boundary resonance.”

I study the listings, sensing potential even through the photographs. “This one,” I indicate a converted warehouse near the harbor. “It has existing threshold energy. Previous occupant was an antiquities dealer specializing in Egyptian artifacts.”

“How could you possibly know that from a photo?” Chen asks.

I smile slightly. “I can read the building’s history through its connection to the boundary matrix. Like viewing rings in a tree trunk.”

Chen shakes his head, still adjusting to casual demonstrations of perception beyond human capability. “I’ll make inquiries tomorrow. Lease terms, security considerations.”

Nadia completes notes on her translation project, then stretches, fatigue evident. “If we’re doing this—creating an actual investigation agency—we need to define our operational parameters. What cases we take, how we present ourselves to clients, boundaries on using supernatural abilities in the human world.”

“Boundaries,” I repeat, the word carrying multiple meanings given what I’ve become. “Yes, those will be essential.”

Later, after Chen retires to his room, Nadia and I remain in the living room, conversation shifting from practical matters to philosophical ones. The snow continues outside, Boston growing quieter beneath its blanket of white.

“Does it bother you?” she asks suddenly. “Being permanently changed? Never returning to normal human existence?”

I consider the question carefully, weighing both human emotions and divine perspective. “Sometimes. Particularly when I encounter boundaries between what I was and what I am now. Simple things—food tastes different, sleep is

optional rather than necessary, human concerns that once seemed urgent now appear transitory.”

“But?” she prompts, sensing my unspoken qualification.

“But transformation was always occurring, even before the ritual. Every experience changes us. Every choice creates new patterns, new possibilities.” I gesture toward the window, where individual snowflakes carry cosmic patterns. “Human existence is change experienced linearly. My current state simply allows me to perceive the process more directly.”

Nadia absorbs this, her scientist’s mind grappling with concepts that transcend conventional understanding. “And us? Where do we fit in this philosophical framework of perpetual transformation?”

I move to sit beside her, close enough to feel the human warmth of her presence—a sensation that remains precious despite my altered perception.

“What exists between us is a pattern I choose to maintain, to strengthen,” I tell her, finding words for concepts that span human and divine understanding. “Not despite my transformation but partially because of it. I see connections more clearly now—which ones matter, which ones endure.”

“And ours matters,” she says, statement rather than question.

“Yes. Through all possible futures I can perceive, that remains constant.”

She touches my face, fingers tracing the path where hieroglyphs occasionally surface. “Show me,” she whispers. “Like you showed Sullivan, but more. I want to understand what you perceive.”

I hesitate, concerned. “His glimpse was carefully limited. More direct connection could be overwhelming.”

“I’m not Sullivan,” she reminds me. “I’ve been studying these concepts my entire academic career. Let me see, Jake. Let me understand.”

Her determination decides me. I place my hand gently against her temple, allowing boundary symbols to flow from my skin to hers—creating controlled connection between her consciousness and gateway awareness.

Unlike Sullivan’s brief, limited glimpse, I open a more substantial window for Nadia—showing her reality’s true structure, the pattern of connections underlying physical existence, the purpose and function of the gateway system. I let her sense the chaos beyond, feel the weight of maintaining boundary and balance, experience momentarily how it feels to exist in multiple states simultaneously.

When I withdraw the connection, her eyes remain closed, tears tracking silently down her cheeks. I wait, giving her time to process the experience.

“That’s...” she finally whispers, opening eyes that seem to see differently now. “That’s what you perceive constantly?”

“In varying degrees of clarity,” I confirm. “The human aspect of my consciousness provides framework, preventing overwhelm.”

She wipes away tears, the scientist in her already analyzing, categorizing. “The patterns, the connections—they’re beautiful. Terrifying but beautiful.”

“Yes,” I agree simply. “Both.”

“And you maintain all of that? The boundary, the balance?”

“That’s my function now. What I’ve become.”

She’s quiet for a long moment, integrating this direct experience with her academic understanding. When she finally meets my eyes again, her gaze carries new depth.

“We’re going to need a bigger office,” she says.

The unexpected response startles a laugh from me—genuine, human amusement breaking through divine perspective. This capacity to surprise me, to pull me back to human connection despite cosmic awareness, is perhaps her greatest gift.

“Probably,” I agree. “And a substantial reference library. And secure artifact storage.”

“And coffee. Lots of coffee.” She leans against me, exhaustion finally claiming her. “Interdimensional guardian work apparently requires significant caffeine.”

I hold her as she drifts toward sleep, my perception expanding to monitor the harbor anchor point, the artifacts arranged around the apartment, the chaos entities moving through Boston like shadows within shadows. I maintain boundaries between worlds, between realities, while simultaneously cherishing this very human connection that anchors me to the person I once was and remain, in essential ways.

Tomorrow we will secure office space, establish formal structure for our new agency, continue tracking cult activities and chaos incursions. The work of boundary maintenance never truly ends. But tonight, in this quiet moment with snow falling beyond the window and Nadia sleeping against my shoulder, I find balance between human and divine, between guardian and man.

A new normal, perhaps. But normal nonetheless, in all the ways that matter.

Chapter 32: Ninth Life

Three months after the harbor ritual, Boston exists in perfect winter stillness. I park Nadia’s car outside the cemetery gates, snow crunching beneath my boots as I make the long-delayed pilgrimage to Mike’s grave. The cold doesn’t affect me as it once would have—my altered physiology running at a different frequency than purely human bodies—but I welcome the sharp bite of January

air. It grounds me in the physical world, a counterbalance to the expanded awareness that now forms my baseline consciousness.

I follow the path through rows of headstones, each one radiating its own subtle energy signature—lives condensed to dates and epitaphs, yet still resonating in the boundary matrix that underlies all existence. Death marks one of the most significant thresholds in human experience, and now, as boundary incarnate, I perceive its echoes everywhere.

Mike's grave sits beneath a maple tree, currently bare but vibrating with dormant life waiting for spring's return. The headstone is simple granite, name and dates cleanly carved, with "Devoted Husband, Father, and Guardian" beneath. The word "guardian" catches my attention now in ways it wouldn't have before my transformation.

I brush away accumulated snow, revealing the stone fully. Three years since his death, three months since my own death and rebirth, and only now am I facing this moment properly.

"Hey, Mike," I say aloud, voice carrying in the cemetery quiet. "Sorry it took so long."

No response comes, of course—not audible ones—but my enhanced perception detects subtle shifts in the boundary layer around the grave. Not a ghost in the traditional sense, but memory imprinted on reality's structure, echoes of a life lived with purpose and concluded with sacrifice.

I place the whiskey bottle I've brought beside the headstone. Not to drink—alcohol affects me differently now, more as information than intoxicant—but as symbol and offering.

"A lot's happened," I continue, settling onto a nearby bench. "More than I could possibly explain. But I think... I think you'd approve of where I've ended up. Still helping people, just with a significantly expanded toolkit."

The winter light shifts as clouds move across the sun, casting the cemetery in alternating brightness and shadow. To my perception, these light changes create ripples across the boundary matrix, subtle pulses of energy like a heartbeat beneath reality's surface.

"I've started a new agency with Nadia—Dr. Farouk, you'd have liked her—and Chen. Specializing in cases that fall outside conventional investigation parameters." I smile slightly. "Turns out there's surprisingly high demand for detectives who understand the supernatural. We've already handled four major cases—missing persons who slipped through dimensional cracks, artifacts with genuine power that needed containment, a chaos entity masquerading as a corporate executive."

The air around the grave seems to lighten slightly, an almost imperceptible shift that might be wishful thinking or might be something more. Since becoming

boundary incarnate, I've learned how thin the membrane between imagination and reality often is—how thought itself creates patterns in the matrix.

“The drinking stopped,” I add more quietly. “Not by choice initially—being mostly dead will do that to your habits—but I've maintained sobriety since. Turns out whiskey and divine consciousness don't mix well.”

I fall silent for a moment, gathering thoughts that range across multiple planes of existence. Since the transformation, linear conversation sometimes challenges me—my mind tracking dozens of potential conversation branches simultaneously, perceiving past and potential futures alongside the present moment.

“I never told you enough,” I finally continue. “How much I valued your partnership. Your friendship. How much it meant that you believed in me when nobody else did.” I trace patterns in the snow with one foot, hieroglyphs briefly appearing where I disturb the surface. “I carried the guilt of your death for years. Still do, in some ways.”

I look up at the winter sky, where patterns of cloud movement follow mathematical principles invisible to ordinary perception but clear to my enhanced senses. “But I'm learning that guilt without purpose is just another form of selfishness. You died protecting others—the exact reason you became a cop in the first place. Disrespecting that choice by drowning in guilt dishonors your sacrifice.”

The boundary matrix around the grave pulses once, distinctly—not imagination this time, but acknowledgment from whatever fragment of Mike's essence remains imprinted on this place. The confirmation warms something deep within me, a human response that coexists alongside divine awareness.

“I check on Sarah and the kids regularly, though from a distance mostly. They're doing well. Emma's starting to look at colleges—scary smart, just like her mother. Danny made varsity basketball, finally grew into those feet.” I smile at memories of family gatherings, cookouts where Mike's son would trip over himself while showing off new moves.

The cemetery remains quiet around me, but not the silence of emptiness. Rather, the rich quiet of a library—information and memories stored in headstones and earth, in trees that have witnessed generations come and pass, in boundary layers that remember everything.

“I'm not the same person you knew,” I acknowledge. “Transformation changes you. Merging with a divine entity definitely changes you. But the core remains—the part that wants justice, that needs to protect, that values connection above power.” I glance down at my hands, where hieroglyphs occasionally ripple beneath the skin like fish moving beneath water's surface. “I think that's why the binding worked, why I survived when others wouldn't have. Something in me aligned with Anubis's purpose all along.”

The light shifts again, sunbeams breaking through clouds to illuminate the head-

stone. The timing feels significant—coincidence and meaning often indistinguishable at the level of reality I now perceive.

“I should have come sooner,” I say. “But in some ways, I needed to become this to truly understand what happened. To see the pattern clearly enough to accept it.”

I stand, brushing snow from my coat. A few feet away, at the boundary of human perception but clear to my enhanced senses, a translucent outline shimmers briefly into existence—Mike, not as he appeared in my guilt-ridden nightmares, but as he was in life: steady, kind, resolute. The image isn’t a ghost in the traditional sense, but a boundary echo, a moment where memory presses against the threshold between past and present.

He doesn’t speak, but he doesn’t need to. His presence conveys everything—acknowledgment, acceptance, release. A granting of permission to continue forward without the weight I’ve carried since his death.

The image fades as quickly as it appeared, but its impact remains—a burden lifted, a circle completed. I touch the headstone once more in farewell, then walk back toward the cemetery gates, each step feeling somehow lighter.

Nadia waits in the car, respecting my need for privacy in this moment but providing silent support through her presence. She looks up from her tablet as I approach, research notes visible on the screen—work continuing even in these brief interludes.

“Okay?” she asks simply as I slide into the passenger seat.

“Yes,” I answer, surprised to find it true. “Better than I expected.”

She studies my face with the careful attention she brings to everything—part scientist, part partner, increasingly both. “The boundary matrix was active around you. I could see it, somewhat, from here.”

Her perception has sharpened since I shared gateway awareness with her. Not supernatural exactly, but enhanced—her natural academic insight amplified by glimpses beyond conventional reality. Chen theorizes that prolonged proximity to the gateway matrix subtly alters human consciousness, especially in those predisposed to perceiving patterns.

“Mike was there,” I explain. “Not consciously, not fully, but... something of him remains imprinted on that place. Enough to communicate, in a way.”

She accepts this without question, the scholar who once required empirical evidence for everything now comfortable with realities that transcend conventional verification. Her flexibility in adapting to the impossible remains one of her most remarkable qualities.

“We should get back,” she says, checking the time. “The Kestrel meeting is at four, and we need to prepare the artifacts.”

The Kestrel case—our newest client, a museum curator experiencing time slip-page around a particular exhibit of funerary objects. Simple enough on the surface, but my gateway sense detected chaos entity influence attempting to establish another access point.

“The temporal displacement is increasing,” I note, already extending my awareness toward the museum. “The boundary thinning has accelerated since yesterday.”

Nadia nods, making notes on her tablet. “I’ve translated the markings on the canopic jars. They’re not standard funerary texts—they reference Khonsu rather than Anubis, suggesting lunar rather than threshold magic.”

“Complicating factors,” I observe. “Lunar cycles interact with gateway matrices in unpredictable ways.”

“Which is why we bring the stabilization artifacts,” she concludes, practical as always.

As we drive back toward the city, I maintain awareness across multiple levels simultaneously—the immediate physical reality of the car and traffic, the boundary matrix underlying Boston’s geography, the specific disturbance at the museum growing like pressure behind a dam, and half a dozen other anchor points I monitor continuously as part of my guardian function.

Three months into this new existence, and the multitasking has become almost natural—human consciousness providing framework for divine awareness, keeping me anchored in the immediate while maintaining necessary oversight of the threshold between worlds.

Our office comes into view as we turn onto the harbor street—a converted warehouse with large windows overlooking the water, the primary anchor point of the gateway system. The sign simply reads “Harlow & Farouk Investigations” with “Specialized Consultants” beneath in smaller lettering. Understated, professional, revealing nothing of the supernatural nature of most cases we handle.

Inside, Chen has already prepared the equipment for today’s museum investigation—medical bag containing both standard and highly unstandard instruments, artifact containment cases lined with protective materials, monitoring devices calibrated to detect boundary fluctuations. In the three months since establishing the agency, we’ve developed increasingly sophisticated tools for navigating the intersection of scientific inquiry and supernatural manifestation.

“Sullivan called,” Chen informs us as we enter. “The police investigation at the Franklin building has been officially closed. Ruled as structural failure despite the obvious dimensional breach traces.”

“Expected,” I note, sensing the subtle manipulation of evidence and perception—chaos entity influence redirecting official attention. “The entity that possessed Blackwood’s form has considerable resources.”

“Speaking of resources,” Nadia says, opening her laptop, “our client list has grown again. Three new inquiries this morning—two potential hauntings that are probably actual boundary echoes, and one missing person case with temporal displacement markers.”

I nod, pleased by the agency’s growth but mindful of our limitations. “We’ll need to expand soon. Three operatives can’t handle the increasing caseload.”

“I’ve been considering potential recruits,” Chen says, displaying a list of names on the main screen. “Individuals with either relevant expertise or natural sensitivity to boundary phenomena.”

I scan the list, my gateway sense immediately highlighting two names—individuals whose personal histories contain moments of contact with threshold energies. “Those two have potential. We should approach them carefully.”

The office hums with activity around us—sanctuary and command center combined. The main room houses our investigation planning area, with monitors displaying boundary activity across Boston, maps marked with known threshold points, and case files organized by supernatural classification. A separate secured room contains artifacts arranged in protective configurations, each one a component in the larger system of boundary maintenance I now oversee.

The space reflects our evolving purpose—professional detective agency on the surface, gateway guardians underneath. The duality feels appropriate given what I’ve become—existing between worlds, between identities, between human and divine.

“Ten minutes until the client meeting,” Nadia reminds us, gathering necessary materials. “Jake, you’ll need to dampen your boundary resonance during the initial consultation. Ms. Kestrel was notably sensitive to supernatural energy during the phone screening.”

I nod, already adjusting my emanations, pulling the divine aspect deeper beneath the human surface—a skill I’ve refined over months of practice. “Limited manifestation, primarily Jake Harlow, minimized Anubis presence.”

“And try to avoid the formal speech patterns,” Chen adds with a hint of humor. “They tend to unnerve new clients.”

“I’ll do my best,” I reply, consciously relaxing my language. “Though some habits are harder to break than others.”

As Nadia and Chen make final preparations, I move to the office’s front window—my customary thinking position, overlooking the harbor where my transformation began. The water reflects winter sunlight in patterns that reveal deeper

structures to my enhanced perception—currents and tides following mathematical principles that echo the boundary flows between worlds.

Three months since awakening in the university lab. Three months of learning what I've become, what responsibilities now define my existence. Guardian of the gateway, protector of the threshold between ordered reality and chaos beyond. A duty that would be overwhelming without the human connections that anchor me—Nadia's brilliant mind and evolving understanding, Chen's practical wisdom and steady friendship, even Sullivan's reformed perspective providing bridge to conventional authorities.

I spread my fingers against the glass, allowing boundary symbols to surface briefly beneath my skin. The hieroglyphs pulse in patterns matching harbor currents, visible reminder of my dual nature—detective and deity, human and divine, part of both worlds yet fully belonging to neither.

The weight of this responsibility should feel crushing. Sometimes, in quiet moments, it nearly does—the knowledge of what waits beyond the threshold, the constant vigilance required to maintain balance, the awareness that failure means catastrophe beyond human comprehension. But more often, it feels right—alignment of purpose and capability, a role I was somehow always moving toward even before I understood its existence.

Nadia approaches, standing beside me at the window. "Penny for your thoughts? Though given the expanded nature of your consciousness, that seems like an incredible bargain."

Her humor grounds me, pulls me back from cosmic awareness to human connection. "Just reflecting on how much has changed. How much remains the same."

She follows my gaze toward the harbor. "Regrets?"

"No," I answer truthfully. "Adjustments, challenges, moments of disorientation—but not regrets."

"Good." She brushes her hand against mine, a gesture that sends ripples through my expanded senses—human connection vibrating along the boundary matrix, creating patterns of possibility and connection. "Because I think our next client just arrived, and we need Detective Harlow more than Gateway Guardian Anubis for this initial meeting."

I smile, shifting my presence further toward the human aspect of my consciousness. "Detective Harlow, reporting for duty."

We turn together toward the office entrance as the bell chimes, announcing our newest case. I adjust my perception, my stance, my energy signature—the daily balancing act between what I was and what I've become, between human detective and divine guardian, between past and future.

Outside, a raven lands on the warehouse roof across the street—too deliberate

in its movements to be ordinary bird, too aware in its observation. I sense divine attention focused through its form, another entity taking notice of the transformed boundary system, the new guardian at its center.

Potential ally? Future adversary? Both possibilities exist simultaneously in the matrix of potential futures I perceive stretching from this moment.

But that's tomorrow's concern. Today, there's a case to solve, a boundary incursion to contain, a client who needs help navigating supernatural waters they never knew existed until they found themselves drowning in them.

"Shall we?" Nadia asks, gesture indicating the waiting client.

I nod, stepping away from the window—away from cosmic awareness and back into the immediate human moment where my journey began: a detective taking a case, seeking to bring order from chaos, protection to the vulnerable, justice where it's lacking.

The transformation has changed almost everything about my existence. But in the ways that matter most—purpose, connection, meaning—I remain recognizably myself. Nine lives condensed into one continuous journey, death and rebirth leading not to erasure but to evolution.

Whatever comes next—chaos incursions, divine interventions, or simply the daily work of maintaining boundaries between worlds—I face it not alone but connected. Not as servant but as partner. Not as victim of circumstance but as agent of choice.

The ninth life may not be what I expected, but it is, undeniably, mine.