

The Corridors of Hadrian

EKO SVENNINGSSON

Sneak preview · Prologue and Chapters One and Two

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, institutions and events are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. The notes cite real scholarship; the mechanism the characters investigate is invented for the novel.

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echoxstudios.art · inbox@echoxstudios.art

“The cylinder seal does not preserve the clay; it marks the jurisdiction of the hand that closed it.”

— Thomas Keane, Field Notes on Administrative Provenance (1998,
unpublished)

PROLOGUE

Initial Contact Event

After closing, the Museum kept hours no one supervised.

The doors closed to the public at six, and after that the building ran itself: security lights, climate control, relays clicking softly in the walls. Emma Voss knew these hours best because they asked the least of her, fewer voices and fewer faces and fewer reasons to explain herself. The cameras, badge readers and motion sensors kept watching. They recorded everything and stopped nothing.

Paper dust and dried methyl cellulose clung to her fingertips, a chalky residue the lab sink never quite removed. The conservation lab on the third floor of the west wing smelled of thymol and denatured alcohol, the sharp, patient smell of materials holding out against time. Under the raking lamp lay a clay tablet the size of her palm, supported by a ring of modern polyethylene foam. The tablet was brown as river clay. Its face bore cuneiform,¹ wedge-shaped writing pressed into the clay while it was soft, with a cut reed used as a writing tool. The ancient scribe might have needed only a few minutes, yet the writing had outlasted the city that needed it.

These pressed wedges were paperwork: inventory, payment, oath, letter. Someone had held this tablet and meant it to function.

The form beside it said CASTELLANOS ESTATE TRANSFER in crisp black type.

Emma's notes said: incomplete provenance, donor pressure, accelerated display schedule.

The Museum loved new gifts the way it loved openings, in a hurry to put an object on display before anyone understood it, before it could be contested, before facts could complicate the story.

Earlier in the week she had worked through the estate's most valuable pieces: nine cylinder seals, thumb-sized stone rollers carved with lions and kings and stylized trees. Rolled across soft clay, each left a continuous band of its design, separate from any writing a scribe pressed into the surface. She had photographed each one in raking light, in macro and in profile, and logged them under temporary numbers, CST-17-1 through CST-17-9, with the weight in grams, the diameter in millimeters and the surface wear mapped like a coastline.²

Her phone lay face down beside the lamp. For two hours she had been trying not to look at it. For almost four months she had been avoiding Miles Ashford, since Thomas Keane's memorial, where the two of them had talked for ninety seconds outside the reception-room doors.

The seals were no longer in the lab. Tomorrow there would be a donor reception, wine and velvet voices and trustees pretending they could hear history, and the seals were already waiting for it in a "New Acquisitions" vitrine in the Ancient Near East wing, under a temporary label that read like a promise:

THE CASTELLANOS BEQUEST.

Emma had argued against it. She had documented the gaps and asked for a longer review, time to do what her job actually was, and she had lost anyway, the decision made upstairs, where urgency was always called stewardship. Faith belonged to donors. Her work began with evidence. She stayed late all the same and cataloged the quieter pieces, the ones no one would put on a poster: the tablet, a fragmentary bronze weight, a broken amulet.

She checked the phone anyway, the way she checked a hygrometer, for the reading and not for comfort: twenty minutes since the last look, forty before that. It was Friday, October 31, 2025. Alone under the low hum of the lab ventilation, among objects that had waited thousands of years to be read, she examined her hesitation as she would a repair joint beginning to separate under magnification,³ looking for the first place it had ceased to hold. Every reason she found led back to the same fear: he might answer, and she would have to say more.

One draft sat unsent in Messages, all restraint: Are you safe? The other was not a text at all. It lived in Notes, a paragraph she kept revising, had never sent and never opened in front of anyone. She kept the two like exhibits, one labeled and one in quarantine.

It doesn't matter, he won't answer anyway, she thought, for the tenth time that night.

She set down her pencil and flexed her stiff fingers. Under the raking lamp, the cuneiform tablet lay silent on its foam ring, centuries of dried silt holding its inventory.

It was twenty to nine. The Museum had gone over to its night settings, half the lights and none of the footsteps, nothing awake but the air handlers and the objects. She should leave, go home to Astoria, feed the cat, stand in her kitchen and pretend the silence was a choice.

She settled the tablet into its storage box and closed the lid, keeping the foam support in place. Coat on, bag on her shoulder, she reached for the lamp switch—

—and heard voices.

Charlie was the guard on duty that evening, and he made his rounds alone. He always called the lab before locking the staff run, giving her another minute without asking why she needed it. He observed the rules without pretending they made him important; Emma had come to trust that about him. But the sound beyond the lab was not his voice. Several people were speaking low and rhythmically down the service passage toward the antiquities wings.

Trespassers, perhaps. A late tour. Teenagers playing brave. The voices came again. She had heard curators pronounce dead languages with living authority, stopping to correct one another. This sounded different: syllables she did not recognize, every voice entering on the same beat.

She took out her phone. For a second she meant to call Charlie and let the building do what it had been designed to do, radios and lockdown and procedure.

“Just checking a sound,” she said aloud, and the empty wing gave her voice back sounding like someone else's.

Kids would have broken up laughing by now. These voices stayed together, steady as one body.

She brought up Charlie's number but did not call. She let the screen go dark in her palm and followed the sound. The lab opened onto a service passage, poorly lit, lined with storage rooms and mechanical access, and she walked it by habit; five years of carrying fragile things through spaces the public never saw had made this the part of the building where she felt most competent. It smelled of plaster and dry air.

Halfway down, a relay clicked behind the lights. Emma stopped. When nothing followed, she went on, keeping the dark screen against her palm.

The chanting grew clearer as she approached. She lifted the badge clipped at her hip to the staff-door reader and waited for the lock to release. Her pulse quickened. Whoever was ahead had passed through a door that should have kept them out.

She pushed through a staff-only door into the galleries.

After hours the galleries felt unstaffed rather than empty.

She avoided the rotunda, with its sightlines and its cameras aimed at open floor, and took a narrower access hall toward the Ancient Near East wing, where the lamps were dimmed and the long cases laid their shadows across the floor in slanted bars.

Ahead, a warm light wavered across the ceiling, too amber for the security fixtures and too soft for a flashlight.

Emma slowed and woke the phone screen in her right hand. Charlie's number was still there beneath her thumb.

At the gallery doorway she stopped, keeping the wall beside her shoulder.

Six people stood in a circle around the Castellanos display. The free-standing vitrine—a waist-high stone plinth designed to hold a heavy five-sided glass bonnet—had been opened with practiced care: the glass cover had been lifted off and set aside on the floor, two pairs of white cotton handling gloves laid neatly beside it, leaving the bare stone pedestal exposed. Whoever had removed the cover knew how to handle it. Emma could not explain that care beside the breach.

The nearest of them was a woman in a gray cardigan, eyes closed, a staff lanyard still looped around her neck. Under the chant, a voice rose above the others, then fell back into time with them. Someone said, “—not yet—”, and the woman in the cardigan hushed the speaker sharply without opening her eyes. The lanyard carried the Museum’s own logo. Emma had never seen the woman before.

On the pedestal at the center sat a cylinder seal Emma knew at once: CST-17-3.

Rolled over a clay closure, the seal’s design could show whose authority had closed a jar or secured a door. It belonged to someone’s ordinary acts of possession and trust. She had weighed this one and photographed it and noted the hairline chip along its edge and the pale vein through the darker stone. To see it here, in a public gallery after hours and in an open case, was like seeing a notary’s stamp laid on an altar, waiting to be sacrificed.

Each figure held a lit candle. Emma could not help checking the pedestal for wax, where a spill could lodge against the seal, then the floor beneath their hands. She saw no drips. The smoke detector stayed silent.

Above the seal, perhaps an inch off the stone, hung a sphere of golden light that pulsed at the pace of their voices. As it expanded, marks cut into the hematite cylinder seemed to project upward into the glow, casting lines across its surface that appeared and dissolved in successive rotations.⁴ Emma shifted her weight in the doorway. The light dimmed once and steadied, so quickly she could not tell whether anyone inside had noticed her.

Emma’s training turned the scene into a list of violations: open flame, case breached, an unauthorized ceremony in a public hall. Her eye returned to the opened case. Whoever had arranged this knew the seal, yet treated it as a tool they had a right to use.

They weren’t stealing the seal.

They were using it.

The projected marks shifted across the glow. Emma tried to hold one in sight through a rotation; it dissolved before she could fix its position.

Beneath it, a film of moisture gathered on the seal and vanished, over and over, in a gallery where the humidity was held at forty-five percent.

A headache gathered behind Emma's eyes as the chant pressed on.

A seventh figure stood just outside the circle, watching instead of chanting. He was tall, perhaps fifty, in a long tailored coat, and his face had the calm of a conductor guiding an orchestra through a familiar score.

Emma had moved halfway across the doorway when he turned. His gaze moved from the badge at her hip to her face; then he waited, still outside the ring.

"Ms. Voss," he said, with the distracted nod of a professor adding a late arrival to his attendance list.

The chanting jumped out of time and scattered. Six faces turned toward her, bright with alarm and irritation.

Emma crossed the open floor toward the pedestal. The nearest woman moved aside, leaving a gap between the chanters. At her feet a curved line ran through the tile joints, scored so faintly that from the door she had taken it for a seam. Her next step crossed it. Cold passed through her coat as if someone had opened a door to winter.

The light was within reach now. The seal beneath it kept appearing and disappearing behind the script. She needed to see whether something was suspended over it—a film, a wire, a surface she could identify. Her phone was still in her right hand. Slowly she raised her left until her fingertips met the edge of the light.

The chanting faltered, broke, and stopped.

For a brief second the Museum's ordinary sounds came back, the hiss of the air handlers, a distant elevator relay, the building performing calm.

Then something in her rose to meet the sphere.

Heat pulsed through her palms. It did not hurt; it felt like weight finding its shape. Her skin tightened, and her wrists felt suddenly too narrow for what was moving through them.

The light did not pour out of the sphere into her. It rose out of her to meet it.

The leader stood motionless, his eyes moving from the sphere to her hands. His mouth opened a little; for the first time he seemed to have nothing ready to say.

Across the circle a man's voice said, "What are you—"

Emma's hands were already alight, and there was nothing ornamental about it: gold rose under the skin and threaded between her fingers, tracing the vascular pathways with the sharp clarity of an energized circuit, and the glow caught in the chanters' eyes.

Then her phone rang, its hard, ordinary ringtone violent in that room.

Emma flinched. Whatever pattern she had stepped into did not forgive even that. The light in her hands flickered. The sphere shuddered, and the luminous cuneiform lines on its surface smeared.

Her right hand recoiled, and the phone slipped from her palm. It went up in a weightless arc; before it could hit the stone, a hand caught it.

The leader held the phone for a heartbeat, its screen lit against his fingers. Emma saw him glance down and nod once more, as if acknowledging another arrival.

"I've got it," he said, entirely calm. "Don't worry. Your phone call can wait."

He came to the gap she had entered but kept his shoes outside the scored line. He offered his free hand without crossing it.

"Focus your energy," he said, more softly. "Stay with it."

Emma turned back to the cylinder. Around her the others closed ranks, leaving her beside the pedestal and the leader outside. She tried to hold her hands still. The phone had rung. A man had caught it. Those things she understood; the light rising through her skin she did not. She looked for the wire again, for anything that would make this an object rather than an impossibility. The sphere spun in bursts. Its script thickened and scattered, and the air seemed to stop.

"No," the leader snapped, and the calm sheared away. "She's not channeling—she's generating. Everyone, stabilize—now!"

But it was too late. Emma's light surged against the sphere. The luminous cuneiform wedges smeared and tore apart across the curved face, and

the whole construct let go the way old gilding can detach, all at once along a line hidden until the surface lifts.⁵ The sphere collapsed inward upon itself like a vacuum imploding, and the resulting shockwave hit Emma in the chest and threw her backward.

As she flew, the word for what she was looking at slipped out of her mind. She usually had a catalog term for what she saw. Now she reached for one and found only an empty slot. The blank lasted perhaps two seconds; she felt shut out of her own language.

She slammed back against a display case hard enough to rattle its fittings, then fell to the floor, catching herself badly on her right hand. The air went out of her lungs, and the world narrowed to the taste of metal and a bright dark behind her eyes.

When her vision came back the golden sphere was gone. The candles were gone. On the exposed pedestal the seal was small and dark again; she could see the last condensation fading from its surface. The chanters had moved apart, glancing at each other as though some practised part had gone wrong. None came to help her.

The leader stood over her with her phone in his hand. For half a second his eyes were not on her at all but on the pedestal and the seal, and the look was one Emma knew from donor previews, hungry for something on the pedestal. He blinked, and when he faced her again he wore a teacher's look of wonder.

He knelt to examine her. His gaze followed her hands as Emma followed craquelure across old paint, attentive and clinical, looking for the pattern underneath.

"Remarkable," he murmured. "Completely untrained, and you collapsed a six-person working."

Emma pushed herself upright. She was shaking, the residual afterburn from the circuit still throbbing hot from her palms into her wrists.

"What did you do to me?" Her voice came out thin.

"I did nothing." His smile was precise. "You did that yourself."

He held out the phone. When she did not take it, he set it beside her and squared its edge with a seam in the floor. He made one small adjust-

ment, then looked up, almost pleased. Even here, with the case open and Emma on the floor, he had found something he wanted orderly.

“How long have you been in love with someone impossible, now?”

Emma tried to steady her breath. Her chest hurt where the force had struck it.

“How do you know?”

The man’s smile barely moved. “Because that’s how it works.”

He let the sentence stand. Then he took a card from his coat, white stock, cotton-heavy, too thick to be cheap, and held it out like an invitation and a price tag at once. His name was pressed into it without ink.

MARKUS THORNE

An address beneath it, embossed so shallowly that it read more as a bruise than as text.

“When you’re ready,” he said, “call me.”

Emma would not take it. He had opened a case, used the seal and left her on the floor; now he was offering an introduction. She slapped it away, and the card skated across the stone floor and came to rest under a display case, bright as an insult.

The man—Markus Thorne—did not react the way people react to being refused. He watched it go with the steady indifference of an instrument registering flow.

“You can throw paper,” he said softly. “That doesn’t mean you’ve refused the contact.”

“Stay away from me.”

His smile held. “You already touched it.”

She didn’t wait for whatever he meant by that. She snatched the phone off the floor, scrambled to her feet, and bolted toward the corridor. She hated that she was running—she could not watch the open case or account for what they might do behind her—but the instinct in her legs outran her discipline. She was in the service passage before her mind caught up with her fear. The back halls were colder and louder than the galleries, lit for work and not for show. At the turn in the passage she heard his voice behind her.

“You’ll be back, Ms. Voss.”

She did not turn to see how close he was. At the freight elevator she pressed the call button and looked at her phone while the car came up.

A missed call, at 8:56 PM.

MILES ASHFORD

No voicemail. No message. Just proof that he had tried to reach her at the exact moment her hands were full of light.

She closed her eyes and gripped the phone until her knuckles ached. When she pushed it into her coat pocket, its edge struck something stiff already there.

She froze, then drew out a card, white and thick and cotton-heavy, and held it under the passage light.

MARKUS THORNE.

The same embossed address.

She hadn’t picked it up. She had watched it slide away across the stone and watched it land, and yet here it was in her pocket, close to her body, resting against her ribs. Her refusal had been overwritten.

She crumpled it in her fist. The card fought her the way good rag paper always does. She pushed it back into her pocket.

The elevator arrived. She stepped inside and watched the doors meet before releasing her breath. At basement level she crossed to the heavy steel staff exit and pushed out into the cold October night.

Beneath a streetlight she felt something wrong in the rhythm at her feet. She stopped. Her shadow took another step, leaving a strip of bare pavement between it and her shoes, then snapped back. She stood until the chill at her neck had passed before she trusted herself to move.

At the corner she reached into her pocket for the phone and found the card lying beside it, flat. She drew it out. It was crisp and uncreased, and the only sign of her grip was a faint indentation where she had squeezed it, fading as she watched.

Emma slid the card into the archival sleeve she kept in her work bag, habit made portable.

“Neutral substrate,” she whispered into the autumn cold. “Containment only. No engagement.”

She walked at a pace she could hold all the way to the station. That much she could still choose.

Behind her the Museum went on glowing in its place, innocent as a lit case. Ahead of her the city held its grid. She would have to take the train home, unlock her own door, sleep somehow. The card was in her bag already.

NOTES

- 1 Cuneiform is a script rather than a language: a cut reed pressed wedge-shaped marks into soft clay. The same script could record several languages. See Ira Spar, “The Origins of Writing,” *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004).
- 2 E. Voss, Castellanos intake sheet, working copy. CST-17 is the provisional series; the final element identifies an individual object. The tablet, bronze weight and amulet continue as CST-17-10 through CST-17-12. These numbers record temporary custody. The ownership chain and formal accession remain open on her copy.
- 3 A stereo microscope lets a conservator inspect how a repair joins damaged fibers and where an adhesive bond has begun to separate. See Hannah Flock, Petra Demuth, Stefan Diebels and Elisabeth Jägers, “The Thread-by-Thread Tear-Mending Method,” in *Conserving Canvas* (Getty Conservation Institute, 2023). Emma is looking for the first sign of parting, not testing a bond’s strength.
- 4 Hematite is a dark, hard iron-oxide stone used for cylinder seals. For an ancient example with a modern impression showing the carved design, see the Metropolitan Museum of Art, cylinder seal 1986.311.39. The projection Emma reports here belongs to the event, not to a documented property of the stone.
- 5 E. Voss, gallery event reconstruction, undated. In a gilded surface the metal leaf can remain intact while the ground or adhesive beneath it loses its hold; the visible lifting may begin at an edge too fine to see until it spreads. Emma records a resemblance in motion, not a recovered fragment from the light.

CHAPTER ONE

Subject M. Ashford — Baseline Assessment

Miles Ashford lived on the third floor of a brownstone in Crown Heights, in an apartment that had begun as temporary housing. It had become permanent because he had stopped leaving.

On Saturday, November 1, 2025, the green digits on the microwave he never used said 12:40, and the loose transformer behind them hummed against the peeling laminate.

The apartment was two small rooms, a kitchen corner with a hot plate that had stopped working in March, a bathroom whose pipes sang arias at three in the morning, and, everywhere, books.

The stacks rose in careful columns to the ceiling, arranged into aisles so narrow that only Miles could walk them without bringing something down. Worn paperbacks stood beside ex-library hardcovers he had bought at municipal discards sales, their buckram covers still bearing white spine call-numbers and pocket sleeves; a fantasy series in uniform editions made a parapet of identical spines. An atlas laid open and never properly closed, a dictionary softened from use at the letter S, and one book that was not a story at all, its spine taped twice: Petroski's *To Engineer Is Human*, which he had once assigned to a room of evening students as the only honest book about his profession, because it was about failure.⁶

Every column of them was doing a job, and together the columns made a fortress. Depression, for Miles, was a slow load failure; every morning, getting up from the mattress meant recalculating a compromised beam. The books were counter-ballast. A stack he had steadied would still be there when he needed to stand. He could begin with that. The danger

was a small tilt at the base, a failure that travels upward before anyone notices.

Mornings began at noon. He woke, lay still and ran the diagnostic, finger, wrist, shoulder, looking for damage rather than hope. The water glass on the nightstand, refilled every night whether he drank it or not, was another small repeatable act. Some nights it was easier than brushing his teeth.

The college had sent three emails about the spring term, and he had answered none of them. He had taught its evening course in ancient infrastructure for four years, aqueducts and roads and the underground structures beneath Hadrian's buildings, and then in March he had not gone back.

Then came maintenance. He did not read first; he stabilized the room. He knelt and ran his fingertips along the spines, correcting a tilt by millimeters, and moved one paperback from a tall tower to a short one, spreading the weight through the shorter column. When he got it right he could feel the stress settle, and the apartment seemed quieter, though nothing in it had made a sound.

Only after that did he allow himself the small indulgence of plot.

He sat cross-legged on the mattress with an open paperback braced against his knees. The cover was embossed in silver:

THE WINDBORN ARCHIVES, VOLUME FOUR.

He thought he had bought the first volume after the first movement on his shelves. He could remember carrying the book home and he could remember the shape he had seen; he could no longer put those memories in an order he trusted. The books had given the figures a name.

In the series the Windborn were witnesses and gatekeepers, appearing in travellers' stories when a crossing needed watching. Volume Four said that only people under enough pressure could see them. The author phrased it as myth,⁷ not an explanation for what Miles saw on his shelves.

Miles read it as a warning label.

He tracked the sentences the way he tracked structural failures, by the small deviations that showed where stress lived. He underlined nothing and

wrote nothing in the margins. A novel was somebody else's building: you could walk all through it, but you left it the way you found it.

The radiator knocked—sharp and metallic—then rose into a note that sounded almost human if you wanted it to.

Miles did not want it to. His eyes were no more obedient than his ears.

At the edge of his vision, something moved against the shelves. It held its place long enough to seem watchful.

He did not look at once. Looking made things commit to being there. He kept his gaze on the paragraph and let the room assemble itself around the movement.

One small shape perched on a stack of atlases, its talons hooked over a dusty cover, silver scales narrowing to a thin tail. Its cocked head seemed to be assessing him.

Two more settled within his peripheral vision.

By the time he allowed himself to look, there were six of them—no larger than housecats, narrow bodies armored in silver scales. A strip of window light caught the plates along their backs. Their amber eyes followed his hand when it shifted beside the book; when they blinked, a membrane closed across each eye like a shutter.

Miles did not say their name out loud.

Saying it aloud could make the worst things real in the wrong way.

They watched in silence, asking nothing of him that he could understand.

The first sighting had been about five years ago. Since then they had come in periods, often in the gray hours after waking, when he could not easily tell exhaustion from something in the room. They left nothing he could show a doctor. He imagined trying to describe them and hearing the rest of his account dismissed with them.

Today they formed a perimeter along shelves and windowsills.

Miles left his hands beside the book, resisting the urge to test what would happen if he reached. He had learned that systems you could not control were safer when you did not provoke them into demonstrating that fact.

The page ended in a footnote small enough to ignore.

He did not ignore it.

The footnote quoted an anonymous *Notes on Threshold Observances*, a treatise on crossings and who was allowed to pass.⁸ It was the kind of language Thomas had used when he was trying to make Miles laugh—doors as politics, locks as philosophy, institutions as machines built to pretend they were neutral.

Thomas.

The name sat in Miles's throat like a staple.

Thomas Keane had been the Museum's roaming consultant on ancient civilizations, the kind of man who turned up in the staff runs, the back corridors the public never saw, without belonging to any one department, credentialed by access and confidence. He had brought Miles in informally for exhibition installs, structural checks and environmental assessments, before anyone else at the Museum trusted him with them.

Thomas had also been the bridge between Miles and Emma Voss, between a contractor who listened for failure and a conservator who spoke in measurements, two people allergic to performance. Then Miles stopped coming. The contracts ended, the messages went unanswered, and the Museum forgot him the way institutions forgot anything that didn't file paperwork to remain.

Thomas did not forget.

Thomas had died in July. The memorial had been the last time Miles and Emma stood face to face, trading a few sentences outside the reception-room doors, with no plan and no follow-up.

By early afternoon he had reached the bottom of the page three times. He closed the book on a finger, meaning to get water before starting it again.

A hard rap sounded against the hallway door—two flat knocks, knuckles against painted fir.

Miles didn't move for four seconds. In Crown Heights, unexpected knocks usually meant someone bleeding the radiators or mail delivered to the wrong landing.

He unlocked the deadbolt.

Henderson, the building superintendent, stood on the runner with a clipboard and two banker boxes on a hand truck. A heavy ring of brass master keys chimed against his canvas work trousers as he tipped the cartons onto the threshold, leaning his shoulder against the doorframe to rest his bad knee. His coat smelled of damp wool.

“Keane’s estate. New Haven,” he said. “They’ve been downstairs since this morning. Sign here.”

Miles took the pen. “Was there a letter?”

“Just the receipt.” Henderson kept one foot against the hand truck. “They’re yours, but I can’t keep them downstairs. Need a hand getting them past the door?”

“I can move them.”

“Okay. Just keep the landing clear, will you? No old cartons out here.”

Miles signed and kept the yellow copy.

When the door closed and the locks turned back into their sockets, the silence in the apartment weighed differently.

The new boxes would not fit beside the old ones by the closet. Miles put one down across the narrow aisle, then moved it so he could still reach the bathroom. Thomas’s handwriting was on the labels, beneath the estate’s shipping stickers. He had left the first cartons there in late June. The call announcing his death had come in July. Miles had moved them twice since then, always lifting from the bottom, because tape and cardboard can give way under a load of paper.

He had not opened them. Thomas had brought them for the summer; until now Miles could leave them as Thomas had left them. The last shipment made that arrangement difficult to keep. He sat beside the blocked aisle and read the labels, looking for a box he could empty without taking the room apart.

The oldest one said notebooks. If he could put notebooks on a shelf, he could nest one empty carton and win his passage back. He did not have to read everything. He stayed seated with that decision until the task felt small

enough to begin. Then he fetched the kitchen knife and cut the tape along the top, keeping the blade shallow.

The smell reached him first: old paper, stale coffee, cigarette ash, Thomas's life pressed into fiber and glue.

Thomas had once made him read Benjamin's speech about unpacking a library and had laughed at the line about the collector's passion bordering on the chaos of memories, because it described Miles exactly.⁹ It did not seem funny now. Miles folded back the flaps.

Inside were notebooks, dozens of them, some bound and some loose-leaf held together with binder clips; printouts with lines underlined so fiercely the paper had torn; photographs; envelopes; a paperback with cracked glue in its spine.

He lifted a notebook onto his lap. Thomas had written a page number on the inside cover, then crossed it out and written another. Miles knew that impatience: a man changing his mind before the first instruction had dried. He turned to the second number, where Thomas had written SEE PHOTOGRAPHS. He set the notebook beside him and lifted the remaining bundles from the carton.

Beneath the last bundle he uncovered a photograph taped to cardboard: a Mediterranean dig site, the sun too sharp to be northern, gravel terraces, men in hats, dust standing in the air. At the edge of the photograph stood a man in an expensive coat, slightly out of focus and out of place among the hats and rolled sleeves. Something about the face delayed Miles's hand. He held it closer to the window. The eyes would not resolve.

Three weeks ago, on a rare trip into Manhattan, he had stopped to watch a street magician in Washington Square. The performer had held a flame beneath his closed fist and opened it to reveal a coin, then let a spectator inspect it. Miles could not bring back the performer's face clearly enough to compare. The coat in the photograph had made him think of the show. He tried to picture the man beside the performer and could not get a face to hold still.

Beside the photograph Thomas had written, in blunt block letters:

MARKUS THORNE.¹⁰

Beneath it: not the donor — the handler.

A paper sleeve beneath the mounted photograph held more images. He laid them beside one another: a black-and-white shot labeled 1979, a faded color print labeled 1988, a magazine clipping from 1997, a printout from 2015 with printing details copied in the margin, a screenshot dated 2024. Different sites and cameras, and a similar face at the edge of each.

He checked the oldest caption again. It was Thomas's handwriting; Miles could verify no more than that. A relative might resemble the man in the later picture. Several captions could be wrong. He looked from one face to the next, aware of how much he wanted an ordinary explanation and how little this room could test it. The estate had delivered the photographs after Thomas's death. Why had Thomas kept them together?

He took up the notebook again and turned the pages. The margins were crowded with arrows, numbers, addresses, names crossed out and written again, and the same four words appeared again and again like bench marks on a survey:

Corridor. Witness. Recurrence. Solstice.

The notebooks kept no diary of Thomas's life, only what Miles came to understand as a chronology of sightings. Beneath the terms was a list of years, each one circled:

1967, 1979, 1988, 1997, 2003, 2009, 2015, 2019, 2024.

On the inside cover of one notebook Thomas had written a phrase in block letters:

HE DOESN'T AGE.

The words left no room for the qualifications Miles would have liked to give them.

A loose sheet slid out from between the notebooks and landed face up, and Thomas's handwriting sharpened across it.

THEY'RE MAKING MORE.

A second sentence sat beneath it, underlined three times:

HE IS BUILDING A DISTRIBUTION NETWORK.

More of what? Miles turned the sheet over. Nothing on the back supplied the missing noun.

Below that, with no easing into it, came the supporting notes, fear written as math: names, dates, cities; collectors and minor foundations; acquisitions followed by obituaries; proximity, timing, catalytic conditions, output. At the bottom the line came back, pressed so hard into the paper that the strokes resembled a shallow carving:

not the donor — the handler.

Miles had worked on installations where the person arranging an exhibition never touched the object. That gave him one way to read handler. It did not tell him what Thomas meant here.

He opened the second box and worked down to an unsealed envelope with a single index card inside, Thomas's handwriting on one side and a phone number on the other. He knew Thomas's handwriting well enough to see the hurry in it. The words did not explain. They pointed.

St. Cyprian's. Bronx.

Fieldstone. Brass plate. CYPRIAN.

Basement.

Door always locked until it isn't.

Miles read it until his head buzzed. When he closed his eyes he could still recite it.

The six small, silver-scaled watchers held their places. One stood on the atlas above the open box; none had moved toward the papers.

He could close the cartons and clear the aisle. By now the room was nearly passable, but a clear passage would tell him nothing about what Thomas had sent. On another day he might have put the papers away. His tiredness had taught him to leave some questions unanswered until morning. He turned one last page before closing the notebook. There, beneath an acquisition code, was Emma Voss's name.

He had met Emma through Thomas, years ago, in the service corridor behind the Egyptian galleries during a donor preview, when a display

bracket began to hum.

"It's too close to the wall," Emma had said, looking past Thomas at the case.

"It has clearance," Miles said.

"It has clearance on paper."

Thomas put a hand to his chest in mock injury. "At last. Two people who know the difference."

Miles crouched and found the vibration in the steel exactly where she had said it would be. "Another three millimeters," he told the installer.

"Four," Emma said. "The stone moves with temperature."

"Then four."

The installer shook his head, then loosened the bolts. The hum dropped but did not disappear.

"Still there," Emma said before Miles could test it again.

Miles pressed two fingers to the frame. "The glass is carrying it now."

"Can you isolate the mount?"

"I can isolate anything," he said. "The trouble is the vibration never just goes away. Something else picks up the load, and you have to know what."

She pointed to the plaster seam behind the case. "We keep photographs of that crack. It opens and closes a little over the year. If the frame bears on the wall, I want to know what happens at the other end."

Miles looked up. She was watching the gap, not waiting to be told the vibration had stopped.

"I'll check both ends," he said.

He asked for a neoprene washer and rebuilt the contact point while Emma watched the gap. The vibration thinned to silence.

"Now it has clearance," Miles said. "On paper and off."

Emma watched the edge while he pressed the frame once more. The washer yielded slightly; the gap stayed open. "That's better," she said.

Thomas smiled. Miles understood later that Thomas had arranged the exchange. After that, Miles and Emma kept ending up in the same building—coffee when schedules overlapped, short lunches in staff spaces that

smelled of detergent and old stone. They could begin with a mounting problem and stay over coffee after it was solved. Neither asked the other to account for the time.

He had liked the way she said four: certain of what she had seen, willing to make him check it. When he thought of her later, he often heard that correction first: four, not three. It had been easy to call his attention professional.

Then his depression had made even structure difficult, and he had stopped answering. When he pictured Emma at work, he could not imagine bringing her into the apartment as it was. He had not known whether reaching out would be wanted, or fair, or one more weight she did not need.

He looked again at the page he had nearly missed. April 3 stood beside Emma's name; the date told him nothing. Below it Thomas had written a Museum acquisition code and St. Medard's. Miles found a folder bearing the same label.

He brought the folder to a cleared patch of rug and opened it. Names, placement dates, pairs on separate sheets. He read a line, looked back at Emma's entry, then lost his place. Thomas had known them both through the Museum. That did not explain putting her in these pages.

His fingers shook against the paper. He closed the folder but kept her page open. A staff name in a consultant's notes might be ordinary. He wanted that explanation; he could not make it account for the cross-reference.

She would know how to check an acquisition code. He had watched her refuse a clean-looking surface until she had compared the repair underneath. He could show her one page without delivering all of Thomas's conclusions. First he would have to ask whether she wanted to see it.

As dusk settled, Miles picked up his phone to write to her. The Phone app opened where he had left it. He tapped Recents and found an entry he had expected not to be there.

Friday, 8:56 PM. Emma Voss. Outgoing. No answer.

On Friday he had been sitting beside the taped boxes with a lexicon open on his knee when the screen changed to her name. He remembered lifting the phone and hearing the outgoing tone, but not finding her contact or pressing Call. Afterwards he had put it face down on the rug. By morning he had let the sequence recede with other things he could not quite place.

Here was the call. He must have made it. Exhausted, thinking of Emma, he could have touched the screen without later remembering how. He read the entry again. It gave him an action he could account for, even if he could not recall deciding on it.¹¹

He opened her thread in Messages. The cursor blinked. He typed one line and deleted it, typed another and stopped with his thumb above the glass. He didn't want to be the man who delivered panic, and he didn't want to be wrong. There was nothing new from her. He could not tell whether she had seen the missed call.

He laid the phone down face up and went back to the boxes.

Outside, the November dusk pushed cold drafts through the rattling sash windows. Inside, the fortress held, and the six watchers did not move.

Miles stood over the open carton. He had room to reach the bathroom now; the books had stayed upright. One task had not brought the whole room down. He could leave the remaining pages closed tonight and begin tomorrow with one question: where had Thomas expected someone to go? The card gave him St. Cyprian's and a number he did not have to call just yet.

He shifted one notebook on the rug by half an inch and watched the stacks hold. Then he picked up the card and read it once more.

NOTES

- 6 Henry Petroski, *To Engineer Is Human: The Role of Failure in Successful Design* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985). Cited from M. Ashford's copy.
- 7 *The Windborn Archives*, vol. IV, M. Ashford's reading copy. The watchers appear in stories and travellers' prohibitions. Ashford later said he believed the sightings preceded his reading; his own dated notes do not establish which came first. The series supplied the name he used.
- 8 Anonymous, *Notes on Threshold Observances*, fragment quoted in *The Windborn Archives*, vol. IV. No separate copy is identified in Ashford's papers; the citation records what he read, not an

authenticated older manuscript.

- 9 Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library: A Speech on Collecting" (1931), in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968): "Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memories." T. Keane's assignment, as M. Ashford reports it.
- 10 T. Keane, caption to the mounted excavation photograph in the estate papers. The name is transcribed from the caption; at this point the identification had not been independently established.
- 11 Daryl J. Bem, "Self-Perception: An Alternative Interpretation of Cognitive Dissonance Phenomena," *Psychological Review* 74 (1967): 183–200, considers how people infer attitudes from their conduct and its circumstances. The call entry here records an action; Ashford supplies its intention.

CHAPTER TWO

Subject E. Voss — Conservation Protocol

On Monday, November 3, 2025, Emma Voss arrived at the Museum at 8:12 AM. In forty-eight minutes the first school group would come through the Near East galleries, shoes striking marble, voices lifting toward gods who had been given their own quiet rooms. For now the guards spoke low and the floors were clear.

She signed in at the staff entrance and clipped her badge to her belt. At the turn toward conservation she would usually pass the service corridor behind the Near East wing. Today she stopped at the security desk instead.

Charlie Dempsey was beside Maria at the console, rubbing a calloused thumb across the black bezel of the monitor while his chipped blue Mets ceramic mug stood on the desk beside the terminal. A notice above the terminals announced an access-system audit; he had told Emma last week that covering it meant extra shifts. His jacket hung from the back of the chair.

This morning Charlie looked up as she approached.

“Morning, Voss.”

“Charlie.”

He looked toward the passage before lowering his voice. The ventilation covered the first words; she leaned nearer to hear him.

“Anything wrong with your badge Friday?”

She had written no report. In the gallery she had known what she was touching until light came through her hands. At home she could still find the card in its sleeve. She could not enter either thing on a form without being asked to account for herself.

“What does the log say?”

“Nine forty-seven. Reader five, corridor B. Badge ping with no camera match.” He touched the side of the terminal, not the keyboard. “The footage index is missing five minutes. I can’t tell you what’s on them. I put the reader down as a maintenance fault at six this morning.”

“Why?”

“I was on. If that reader’s letting people through and I’m sitting here, it’s my shift they ask about.” He glanced at Maria. “I’ve filed the fault before. Nobody fixed it.”

His override would carry his supervisor ID. She had seen enough audit sheets to know where a reviewer would look next.

“I was here Friday,” Emma said. Admitting it cost less than another lie, and more than she had intended to give him.

“Your card-log says so.”

“Was there an alarm?”

“Not at my desk. I called the lab near closing. No answer.”

She pictured the phone against the passage light and could not put a time beside his call. “I’d left the bench.”

“Then don’t let them say I made up the fault. If you report something, say what you saw. Leave my guess out of it.”

Maria turned her cup on the desk. “Coffee’s cold.”

“It’s always cold,” Emma said, smiling at her. Maria gave a small smile back. It was the first ordinary exchange she had managed that morning.

In the break room Emma took a cup from the pot and held it with both hands. Her right wrist hurt when she lifted it. On Friday she had caught her weight on that hand after hitting the case; the ache remained, though the heat under her skin had gone. She rested the cup on the counter before drinking. The coffee was lukewarm and tasted burnt. She drank it anyway.

Thomas used to claim he had drunk worse at Miles’s apartment, and made his loyalty to the coffee sound like a virtue.

In April he had leaned over her bench with his magnifying loupe dangling from one ink-stained finger. A cracked glass alabastron, a small vessel for scented oil, lay supported in foam beneath her stereo microscope.¹²

“You’re treating it like glass, Emma.”

“It is glass. Core-formed. Sixth century BCE. The surface is weathered along the shoulder.”

She had a loose flake caught on the tip of a fine brush. She put the brush down before turning toward him.

“It’s a container,” Thomas said. “What did they want kept inside?”

“Not my repair.”

He smiled. She moved the fragment tray away from his sleeve.

“If an object ever makes you feel like you were expected,” he said, “put your tools down, take off your gloves, and walk into a room with windows.”

“Is that museum policy?”

“It’s a survival rule.”

At the time she had taken it for one of Thomas’s small clevernesses. On Friday a stranger had known her name before she reached into the light. Now she could not ask him what he had meant.

He had been a consultant, not her supervisor, with enough access to wander between departments and enough charm to make the wandering look necessary. Donors called him by his first name; people at the benches moved cups and trays to keep them out of his reach. At his memorial in July, a colleague had tried to tell one of his jokes and stopped halfway. Emma remembered the unfinished sentence more clearly than the speeches. Outside the reception-room doors she had asked Miles, Are you holding? They had stood there for ninety seconds before someone called her back inside.

The lock at conservation took longer than usual to release. She waited with her badge against the reader until the second click came, then entered. In her notebook she put lock delayed beneath Charlie’s reader number. She had not timed the delay; it did not prove the same fault.

Workstation 3C was where she had left it, tools covered, lamp angled toward the work. The hygrometer read forty-six percent relative humidity; the temperature was 69°F. She entered both, then opened a clean page for the day.

MONDAY — WORK TALLY

Objects examined:

Frames made:

Miles — sent / received:

Days since last seeing Miles: 119.

She put the pen aside. There would be something to enter even if he did not answer.

On the counter stood a vial of Klucel G in ethanol. She checked the cap and the concentration label. Klucel was a cellulose-based adhesive she could apply without introducing water near the Castellanos funerary mask's water-sensitive ground. The Getty study had questioned its long-term stability; choosing it did not remove that risk.¹³ She would make a small test and record the choice before treating a larger area. Her rule was to leave the next treatment possible,¹⁴ not to call a repair harmless because it helped today.

She washed her hands, pulled on nitrile gloves and opened the folder.

Object: funerary mask, attributed Middle Kingdom;¹⁵ cartonnage with linen support and animal-glue gesso, water-gilded with hammered leaf (attribution under review).

Temporary number: CST-17-13.

Provenance: Castellanos estate, preliminary accession pending.

Condition: friable pigment layers; localized detachment at nasal bridge; hairline cleavage between gesso ground and linen core; micro-craquelure radiating from the lips.

Notes: examine under long-wave ultraviolet (365 nm) to map possible modern consolidation; prepare 2% Klucel G in ethanol for micro-adhesion; draft stabilization schedule with future treatment in view.

The linen and hardened ground formed a shaped shell; the thin gold lay over it. Along the cheek, a lifted edge cast a line of shadow. She kept the mask on its foam cradle while she moved the light. Moving the whole object would give her nothing the light could not show more safely.

A face made to survive without a name.

Between the condition photographs lay a slip folded once.

RETURN TO CONSERVATION — PRIORITY.

No initials, routing stamp or time. Anyone with access to a shared tray could have put it there. She set the note apart while checking the folder number, then returned it beneath the photographs. Reporting it would bring someone to the tray and someone to her. She knew she had chosen not to report it; she could not call the omission a lack of evidence.

Under ultraviolet light, one patch along an old repair behaved differently from the surrounding surface. The treatment entry called the adhesive epoxy.¹⁶ The lamp could help her map the patch, not identify its chemistry. She drew its outline and put the entry's date beside it.

She made one stroke in the object row of her notebook. On the next page, away from the condition report, she recorded what Charlie had told her.

REPORT: Charlie says badge ping at 21:47, reader five; camera index missing five minutes; manual maintenance override Monday 06:00.

OBSERVED: Friday working in gallery; card returns after refusal.
No report made.

OPEN: reader time is fifty-one minutes after Miles's call at 20:56.
What, if anything, did reader five register?

She could see how much of the account she would have to keep outside the Museum's file. The condition sheet beside it still required her signature.

At 9:47 by the bench clock she put down her tools and removed her gloves before picking up the phone. There were no notifications. The lock screen read 9:47. The display fell back to 9:46, held while she checked the bench clock, then returned to 9:47.

She pressed the side button, woke it again and found the same minute as the clock. She could not reproduce the backward movement. She wrote the sequence as she had seen it, without seconds she had no way to read.

9:47 → 9:46 → 9:47. Bench clock remained 9:47. No repeat on waking screen.

The reader time on the opposite page was 21:47. She left room beneath both entries. She did not have a connection she could test at the bench.

Dr. Martinez stopped at the doorway while she put on clean gloves.

“Is the Castellanos proposal ready for tomorrow?”

“Condition report today. I want to finish the solvent test before I recommend consolidation.”

“I can hold the registrar until afternoon.” He looked at the mask. “Do you need another pair of eyes?”

She almost told him what she had seen in the gallery. His question belonged to the object; hers would make him decide what to do with her.

“Not yet. Thank you.”

“Good weekend?”

“Laundry,” she said. “Groceries.”

He paused, then nodded. “I’ll send Lila over later, if the bench is clear. She’s observing treatments this week.”

“Later’s fine.”

The useful offer stayed with her after he left. She had refused it for something he had not asked about. She entered the day’s actual environmental readings on the condition sheet. She left Friday out; the form had no field for what she could not explain, and she would not make up an event she had not seen.

Hunger always arrived to Emma as an ambush, unexpected. She put the tools in their tray, removed her gloves and washed her hands. In the break room Charlie sat over soup while Maria peeled the lid from a salad. A security feed ran on the monitor by the door.

“You look tired,” Maria said.

“I slept.”

“Charlie hasn’t.” Maria pointed her fork at him. “Same door, another ticket.”

“The goddamn reader,” Charlie said. “Misses a valid badge, then takes one with nobody on camera. Facilities says latency.”

“How many tickets now?” Maria asked.

“Four. Nobody answered four.”

“You’re paid to distrust it,” Emma said.

“I’d like to be paid to get it fixed.”

She smiled, then looked at the monitor. People came and went through a frame that made each arrival appear complete.

“Can you give me the ticket numbers?”

“Why?”

“The conservation lock kept me waiting this morning. I want to see whether it’s on the same circuit before I file another one.”

“That’s a door-release delay. Say that when you call them.” He took the spoon out of his soup. “I’ll print the numbers. I want a copy anyway. Yesterday’s ticket vanished from my list. Maybe they merged it; nobody told me.”

She could ask Facilities about a circuit. She could ask Martinez about a repair. Neither question reached what had happened after she put away her tools on Friday. Miles’s missed call was the only part of that night another person had already entered without her explanation.

Her phone lay beside the plate. She opened their conversation. In July she had asked You home? and he had answered Yes. The two words had been enough then to close a conversation neither had begun properly.

You free for coffee this week?

She could delete it and carry the card home again. She pressed Send before that became the easier decision. Then she marked one stroke beneath sent in the work tally and closed the notebook. Maria was telling Charlie about a supervisor who had answered the wrong ticket. Emma listened long enough to ask which one. When she finished the sandwich, she could not remember its taste.

Back at the bench she washed her hands and put on fresh gloves. She measured the lifted edge along the jaw: the gap ran 3.2 millimeters before the gold and ground lay flat again. She entered its extent and sketched where it began. The number belonged to an area she could find again, not to the whole mask’s instability.

Later the phone vibrated beside the tool tray. She finished the application she had begun, set the fine brush down and waited until both hands were clear of the object before reading.

maybe later

She held the phone above the tray. Two words, and she could hear herself trying to make them temporary. Her jaw ached from clenching. She took a screenshot, put it in a hidden album and lowered the phone. A pale smear from her glove showed on its darkened screen.

She had not removed the gloves. The brush was down; the mask had not been touched since the phone. She stripped the pair into the waste bin, washed her hands and wiped the phone before returning to the bench with clean gloves. In the notebook she entered the interruption, keeping it separate from Miles's reply.

14:09 — glove protocol violation: phone contact after tools put down.

Corrective action: contaminated gloves discarded; hands washed; phone cleaned; fresh gloves. No subsequent object contact before correction.

In the tally she added one stroke beneath received. Writing the reply as a count did not make it easier to leave alone.

Half an hour later she made fourteen condition photographs with scale bars.¹⁷ She marked each frame as she made it. By the last view, the row held two crossed groups of five and four separate strokes. The files gave her fourteen views to check before tomorrow's proposal.

Toward the end of the shift Martinez brought Lila to the bench. The intern tucked her sleeves back when Emma pointed to the tray.

"We'll look before we handle anything," Emma said. "Keep your hands clear of the cradle."

She showed Lila the lifted jaw edge, then the difference between a crack in the gold and a break through its support. Lila bent nearer, staying behind the place Emma had indicated.

"There's a person under it," she said. "You can almost hear—"

“Stop.”

Lila straightened. Martinez looked up from the folder.

Emma took her hand off the lamp. She had heard a voice in a gallery; Lila was trying to describe a face.

“I’m sorry. You weren’t touching it.” She angled the light across the cheek again. “Tell me what you can actually see. Start there.”

“A line along the jaw. It looks darker when you move the light.”

“Yes. That’s the raised edge casting a shadow.”

Lila looked again. Her shoulders eased. Emma let her follow the line without supplying the next term. Martinez asked when they could compare the photographs; Emma said tomorrow afternoon. For the first time since morning she had given him an answer that included someone else.

Before six she uploaded the fourteen frames, checked them against the log and filed the condition report. She cleaned the bench, took off her gloves and washed her hands. The uninitialed slip stayed beneath the photographs, absent from the report she had signed.

After signing out she passed through the public galleries. A few visitors stood by a sarcophagus while a guard waited for them to finish taking pictures. She saw no open case and no candles. That was what she could say about this passage through the rooms.

Outside, wet asphalt and roasted nuts from a street cart reached her together. She pulled her scarf up and walked to the train. At 6:41 PM she boarded the N train, leaving the winter gloves in her pocket so she could feel the pole against her palm.

Herodotus, her small gray cat, met her at the apartment door. He brushed her ankle and moved toward the kitchen before she could pick him up.

“Fine,” she said, hanging her coat.

The notebook came out of her bag with the phone. She checked the tally against the day’s files. One object; fourteen frames; one message to Miles and one from him. She had replied to work messages too. Those were not what this row counted.

The last line still said 119 days. She left it unchanged, fed the cat and made dinner. When the plate was washed she wiped the counter, then stood at the sink long enough to see her reflection settle over the lights beyond the window.

Her phone lit on the table without sound.

When she unlocked it, Photos was open. Miles's screenshot appeared in Recents. She checked the hidden album; it no longer held the image. In the information panel the screenshot's time read 9:47 PM instead of 2:07 PM.

The reader's time. She turned to Charlie's entry in the notebook before looking back at the screen.

She hid the screenshot again. The app confirmed the move. Back in Recents it was still there.

She deleted it and opened Recently Deleted. The image appeared among the thumbnails. She selected it there and confirmed permanent deletion.

Back in Recents it was there again, with the same time.

She set the phone face down. It did not light. On the table her notebook still held the day she had written, including the two counts beneath Miles's name. She could close that page. She could not make the screen keep the image out of view.

NOTES

- 12 E. Voss, alabastron treatment sheet, working copy: the stereo microscope gives her a low-magnification, three-dimensional view of the weathered shoulder and loose flake without moving the vessel. Its appearance alone does not diagnose devitrification, the formation of crystals in glass. See the Corning Museum of Glass, *Glass Dictionary*, "Devitrification."
- 13 Cellulose ethers are modified cellulose used as adhesives and consolidants, which hold weakened material together. Robert L. Feller and Myron Wilt, *Evaluation of Cellulose Ethers for Conservation*, Research in Conservation 3 (Marina del Rey: Getty Conservation Institute, 1990), which ranks methylcellulose among the most stable cellulose ethers and hydroxypropylcellulose (Klucel G) as of questionable long-term stability. The ranking has not stopped conservators from using Klucel G, E. Voss among them.
- 14 American Institute for Conservation, *Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice* (1994), guidelines 22–23: treatment materials must be weighed against their effects on future examination and

treatment; compensation for loss should be reversible. E. Voss turns those qualified requirements into a bench rule, not a promise that every treatment can be undone.

- 15 The Middle Kingdom spans roughly 2030–1650 BCE, a period of renewed Egyptian political unity. See Adela Oppenheim, “Egypt in the Middle Kingdom,” Metropolitan Museum of Art. The date belongs to the mask’s provisional attribution, not a completed examination.
- 16 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, CAMEO materials database, “Epoxy.” Epoxy resins were developed in the 1940s and 1950s and cure to a hard, strongly bound, typically insoluble solid. The identification is the old entry’s, not E. Voss’s: the UV appearance alone does not identify the adhesive.
- 17 E. Voss, condition-photography worksheet, CST-17-13, 3 November 2025. A scale bar travels with the object in each frame so a later reader can compare a lifted edge at its recorded size, rather than trust the photograph’s enlargement. The worksheet is part of the Museum’s invented case file.

The Corridors of Hadrian continues in twenty-six further chapters and an epilogue.

The full manuscript is available to agents and publishers on request:
inbox@echoxstudios.art