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The Last of Anything

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THE LAST OF ANYTHING

by

Malerie Veronica Lovejoy

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford

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Approved by

Advisor: Tom Franklin

Reader: Dr. Tamara Warhol

Reader: Dr. Debra B. Young, SMBHC Associate Dean, retired

This is a work of fiction.

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To Irwin
you especially
06/29/17

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My research for this thesis began on the Junior Quest trip funded by the SMBHC, and I would like to thank Dr. Rob Painter and Dr. Adam Cooper, both of the Department of Linguistics at Northeastern University, for helping me to create the foundation for my historical and character research through a linguistic lens.

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ABSTRACT

DR. MARCUS HALL BENNETT is lead archaeologist on a site in Northumberland, England dated after the Norman Conquest. The excavation seems standard until the discovery of Artifact XX.46.8.2, a collection of animal skins covered in writing. To translate the writing, Hall calls in DR. QUINN PRESTON, a linguist studying Middle English as a creole. As Quinn begins to analyze the writing, she realizes they have discovered a new pidgin—a perfect storm of changing language during a time of political upheaval. Through months of study, Quinn understands the text as a history of the tribe leading up to their extinction at the hands of a prominent English family.

Together, the two academics publish the findings that will define their careers. Hall sees this discovery as another step toward confronting a history of war and colonization. A relatively young scholar, Quinn knows this research is her big break. She is determined to get every translation right, no matter whom it hurts.

For DAME EVELYN STALLINGSWORTH, this discovery could mean the destruction of her family. Evelyn is now the matriarch of a family under historical scrutiny. Her marriage, her social standing, and her multi-million pound charity are being threatened by this prejudicial connection drawn between her hard-earned status and the events of a past she cannot control. With tensions rising in her family, Evelyn must find a way to save herself before her life dissipates into social ruin and legal discredit.

Back in the States, Hall and Quinn are celebrating their successful research, until word arrives from England. The Stallingsworths claim that the current family has no connection to these killings and that their name should be redacted from the reports. Hall refuses to meet the family's demands, saying that doing so would be revisionist history and the end of his academic career. Seeing no other options, Evelyn sues Hall and Quinn, and as the two sides enter this legal fight, each must decide for themselves—what do modern people owe their ancestors, and what should be done when people are confronted with the truth about a past they never knew?

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INTRODUCTION

The Last of Anything is a story three years in the making, and it isn't even finished. I had an idea for a book about language and taking the theories of linguistics into the realm of fiction, and I had a curly-haired redheaded woman with a passion for language study and a job as a professor at a British institution, despite her young age relative to her fellow professors. It was only after developing an interest in archaeology and anthropology that I was able to merge my love of historical fiction, language study and linguistics, and this passionate, off-the-wall character into one cohesive novel.

This project started from two different focal points that I wanted to mesh together, one more academic and analytical and the other more socially conscious. The first was linguistics-based, with questions like “Why didn't separate regions of England develop their own creoles during early times of isolation and political conquest?”; “If they had, what would one of those languages have looked like?”; and “How would our modern world be different, or what would the modern world have to contend with because of the existence of this language?” The second focus stemmed from the idea that my generation is thinking a lot about history. We're channeling the narratives that we've heard our entire lives and looking to create a different future where women hold equal amounts of power and positions of authority, where sexual harassment is condemned instead of being accepted as a product of the patriarchal world, and where we no longer accept that

Confederate monuments deserve a place of public recognition on college campuses. These are just a few examples of the historical problems that my generation has challenged in the past few years, and we're not stopping any time soon. There have been different strategies and reactions to each of these movements, and I wanted to carve out my own space to question and fictionalize how people contend with the past and how modern academia deals with the implications of history when they are powerless to rewrite the past. We cannot go back and change what has happened, especially when considering genocide and cultural harm, but how do we move forward from that? I wanted to set up a scenario where both of these questions were relevant and where I could explore both sides of the arguments. My main characters, Hall and Quinn, represent the younger generation. They characterize the stirring and the change that's happening in the world, but they also occupy a space in academia and the more technical side of research and history that some activists tend not to have access to. Evelyn and her family are the more rigid testaments to the benefits of the past. They have their ancestors to thank, in a lot of ways, for how they got where they are, and they aren't eager to change that. Hall and Quinn have a passionate recklessness, whereas Evelyn represents the power and the will of people toward self-preservation.

The question that comes out of this is why academia? Why chose this lens to study and to fictionalize the problem? I've always been interested in academia, the power that intellects hold, and the process of making discoveries and changing the world

through learning. Novels like *Timeline* by Michael Crichton, *The School of Night* by Louis Bayard, and *The Seventh Function of Language* by Laurent Binet, translated by Sam Taylor, all have fascinating characters who work in or around academia and go through particular experiences and mindsets because of this defining feature. All of these examples of historical fiction work with modern people, modern theories, and the impact of looking at the past as an academic study. These are the types of characters I wanted to create, people with two feet in the past but with their eyes looking to the future. I think academia and the academic environment is a specific type of experience that has a lot of unspoken rules, competitive tension paired with friendship, and, in some ways, a lot of fluidity of opinions while also sometimes having strict views of right and wrong. To me, an academic setting and academically-minded characters were the groundings I needed in order to stretch this idea of the future being influenced by a new view of the past.

The title, *The Last of Anything*, was the fourth serious title that I considered and encompasses all of these ideas about learning from the past and the way that the past and the present interact with each other in life-changing ways. My runner-up title was *Not Even Past*, inspired by a quote from Faulkner. I liked the idea of the title but wasn't convinced of the connection between Faulkner's ideas and my work. The idea of pulling a title from a quote got me thinking about other quotes that I was inspired by and that connected thematically to the central points of this project. An earlier quote that I'd made use of a lot in my final semester on campus was from Eudora Welty's *The Optimist's Daughter*—"Never think you've seen the last of anything" (10). To me, this quote captures the fear that Hall and Quinn feel throughout the second half of the work. Hall is worried that this group, and by extension his research, will be crushed to the point that

the parchment and the writing will become the last of this group instead being a springboard for their story to continue throughout history and through Hall's study. Quinn embodies the spirit of this quote. She has that spitfire, where this quote could be a bit of a backhanded retort. She doesn't believe in giving up. She is a powerhouse who does have a complex about her age and about making sure that she's making an impact and living up to what she wants to be. She has the grit that I read in Welty's quote, so I feel like this quote has a little bit of everything and captures the themes that I want people to read in this work. The title is a promise that this book will not be the last of history or the last time that the audience has to confront this kind of history and think about how to challenge the historical narratives that we have come to accept in everyday life. In the context of this book, these discovered people will live on; this isn't the last of Hall's research; Quinn is always going to bounce back and keep going. There's also a bit of an ominous tone. Especially with the way the piece ends, it promises that this isn't the last Hall and Quinn have seen of their opposition. I read Evelyn, the antagonist, as fiercely protective, and I think you can see some of her in the title as well, that she will always be back to fight for her family. After a lot of back and forth, I ended up being happy with the title that I chose because instead of it being a little on the nose or just descriptive, I think it sets the tone for the work and introduces tension from the first words.

In terms of the physical setting, choosing where in England to work was both strategic and accidental. The group that Hall and Quinn are working with needed to be close enough to a different language family in order for there to be a question about contact and where the written language was drawing influence from. A group deep in central England or on the southwest coast would not have the potential for language

exposure the way that a group along the border of another country or on the coast of an invading land would. In order to make the story plausible, I decided to situate the site in the north of England in an area where the border between England and Scotland would have been contested at the time of national establishment. Outside of this thesis, I have a fascination with the history of the United Kingdom as a whole, so I felt comfortable situating the story's setting there historically. The issue for me became how to describe the modern setting. I had been to England before but not to the region that would be the focal point of the work. After working with my advisor, I was able to enroll in a summer study abroad program between my junior and senior years in Edinburgh, Scotland, with Dr. Allison Burkette for linguistics. Along with three other students in the program, I was able to travel and hike through England prior to the start of our program in Scotland. One of our mini-trips included a hike through the northern English countryside, about two hours outside of Newcastle-upon-Tyne to the Roman ruins site of Vindolanda, a fort along Hadrian's Wall. This active archaeology site became my real life inspiration for Hall's fictional site. I took pictures and talked to museum workers there who were able to answer questions about the site and some of the processes used in its discovery. The time that I spent in England and Scotland was invaluable to my completion of this work and defining my time period, setting, methodology, and realistic details outside of anthropology classes.

I had started the outline and general framework for the characters earlier in the process, prior to the extensive in-field research. Thanks to the work of the Honors College, Honors Senate, and the Junior Quest trip, I was able to spend a day with Dr. Adam Cooper and Dr. Rob Painter, both historical linguists at Northeastern University,

who talked with me about historical linguistics, the life of being a linguist right out of a PhD program, and common characteristics of linguists in their field. These interviews, along with conversations I'd had with the linguistics professors here on campus, worked to create the basis for Quinn's personality and work experience. Another advantage to the Junior Quest trip was getting to explore Boston, which serves as Hall's home and one of the greatest influences on his life and personality. Family of mine who has lived in Boston for over twenty years provided further information on living in and growing up in the city. I chose to ground these characters in a physical space and build their personalities from there because I wanted each of them to have a critical sense of home and a space where they felt comfortable and at ease. What becomes interesting over the course of the narrative is the way in which these home bases become problematized and become sites of discomfort for both characters in a way that makes them feel metaphorically unstable and ungrounded just like the historical peoples that they are uncovering throughout their work. The fundamental sense of instability throughout the novel creates an added layer of tension between the characters and their environment that I don't think would have existed if the physical location and positions of their homes had been accidental.

I started with these basic sketches of my main characters—their backgrounds, their focuses, and their regional residences. One of the struggles for me throughout the writing of this piece was defining and narrowing their individual motivations. Both Hall and Quinn feel like they have something to prove over the course of the story but in two different ways. Quinn is confident, but she's not sure that other people are confident in her. She loves what she does and is good at it, but she has this idea that she has to work

twice as hard to sell it to other people that she is as good as she knows she is. It's a difficult and interesting balance to strike to write someone who has self-confidence and doesn't gage her self-worth on outside opinions but is also entrenched in a field that does rely on reputation as part of distinguishing merit. For Hall, he's also concerned with reputation through merit because of the niche personality and responsibility he has created for himself in his field as the "fix-it" guy. This position makes him feel unique and valued, which is something he does not often admit that he wants and appreciates. His motivation throughout the piece comes from fear to some extent—fear of losing his uniqueness and not being remembered the way he wants for himself. He tries to cover this up for the most part, shadowing it with the outward appearance of a joking tough guy who doesn't like asking for help and is also very independent. One of the questions that comes up toward the end of the first part and especially in the second half about Hall is why? Why does he keep going at this, and who is he doing it for? In one scene, Hall is convincing himself that he's doing it for the team and that he's trying to protect the team. However, Quinn pulls back the curtains in their fight scene and suggests that he is fighting for the uncovered history of this group for selfish reasons as well. She argues that there's not anything inherently wrong with having a selfish motive, but that Hall's hiding his motives isn't helping either. Hall and Quinn's motivations balance each other, with Hall's dissent and protectionist attitudes much more forceful while his real motivations mostly remain hidden. Quinn's fight is honest, upfront, and brutal, even though some level of interior insecurity motivates her outward fighting. The scenes where Hall and Quinn are able to confront each other and speak plainly in a way that neither permits in a public setting creates a sense of intimacy between them that shapes

their relationship throughout the rest of their work. The book is trying to promote this idea of honesty, looking out for oneself and for others, and championing positive causes for good reasons, all things that Hall and Quinn in one way or another learn from each other.

In terms of the structure of the piece, I decided to break it into two parts because there are two main timelines—the time on site and in the lab and the time of the lawsuit. In original drafts, I tried filling in the time gap between the two parts with filler scenes and decided that the two part structure gave me the space to include a time jump without an obvious disconnect between the important moments in either section. Chapter markings are used to indicate a shift in point of view and do not inherently mark a shift in action. I wanted the scenes to feel linked without the sharp breaks of white space or a new chapter. Everything is connected to the point that the research story, the work of the characters, and the lawsuit feel all-consuming. All of the moments are meant to bleed together into a fluid and connected narrative that never pauses and never backs down, the same way that this work has come to overpower the lives of the characters.

All of the scenes except for one are from either Hall or Quinn's point of view. One of the most exciting parts of this piece for me was getting to write the scene where Quinn explains her work with the discovered language to Hall. This scene is by far the most technical in the book. My inspiration for this scene came from the number of times I've tried to explain my major or my research to my mother or any other non-linguistics major. This scene was my opportunity to embody my character and teach my audience. This scene shows Quinn in the prime of her professorial nature, which I thought was necessary to include in order to validate her character to the audience. This technical

scene also creates another opportunity for the reader to become interested in the topic at hand the same way that these two characters have become enthralled in the work to the point of obsession, to the point that Hall remarks several times that he doesn't remember a time when this work wasn't the only thing he could talk about.

One of the struggles that I encountered while writing this piece was maintaining the pacing and keeping up tension over both a long text and a long internal timeline. Trials and lawsuits take time and can be long, drawn-out processes, so it was tricky deciding what parts of the real-life timeline were relevant to Hall and Quinn. Another big consideration was the believability of the proceedings and making sure the reader could understand what was happening without being bogged down with extra work that would make it harder to sustain tension and intrigue. One of my strategies for cleaning up the timeline was to shorten the proceedings by omitting the discovery period that traditionally happens in libel cases. In my mind, anything that would have come out in discovery in a real-life case would have been things that the audience would have been privy to by having read the first half of the book, which closely follows the main researchers through the steps of their project. A discovery period would have been repetitive, so I decided to replace the discovery with in-court testimony in front of a jury. By shortening the proceedings and throwing off the traditional rhythm for a libel case, the idea was that the lawyers, or barristers to keep with the regional variation, would be thrown to some extent as well and convey to the audience a sense of the severity of the case and the idea that this case is setting precedent and making its own rules. This set up also gave me more control and made me as the author feel like I had more wiggle room in

order to take the story where the characters needed it to as opposed to adhering to a strict form or pattern and risk losing the characters and their motivations in the process.

This work was challenging and by far the most intricate piece I have attempted to write. I think that the themes this work invokes are relevant and important through a non-traditional lens. I've had these themes, these people, and these ideas that I've wanted to explore, but I didn't feel comfortable with the available outlets in order to explore them. This thesis, in my mind, is me carving out my own space in order to question social structures, revisionist history, and the role that language can play in shaping how we think about our society. The academic connection relates to my desire to perpetually live as a student, and I was able to learn a lot through the process of writing this piece. My hope is that people read this work as socially motivating. This novel isn't meant to be depressing or deprecating in any way to modern academics and their potential relation to social issues and historical justice. Hall and Quinn's story is one of promise and potential, perseverance, and powerful education.

THE SITE

1

Hall tipped his shovel into the dirt and began to dig up the past. The spade moved through layers of worm-ridden earth, and Hall pressed his foot on the step of the shovel to push it farther into the ground. He bent toward the new indent and brushed past the top layer, the wet earth burying itself beneath his fingernails. The ground smelled like mushrooms and cow manure, and Hall had a Beatles song stuck in his head. A hundred yards off, he could hear his two graduate assistants bickering in the site tent. Nearly six months overseas hadn't improved their work ethic together, but Hall knew they were good to each other. They would not have lasted on his field team if they weren't. The archaeology site he managed was in northern England, just below the Scottish border and east enough that the autumn breeze carried the scent of the sea. Six months on the coast, away from his home country, away from Brixton University, hadn't improved his work either. He lifted another layer of dirt out from his excavation square and packed it into the wheelbarrow in front of him.

Has it really been six months? He got down on his knees and brushed away enough space to wedge the shovel blade in sideways, twisting the walls of the hole loose. Time went by fast when there wasn't much to find. With no expectation of yielding anything from his current square, Hall swept the crumbling wall away. Sweat dribbled

into his eye, and he brought the back of his hand to his forehead, resisting the urge to push his premature salt-and-pepper hair out of his face.

“Hall,” someone said behind him.

He turned to see Dr. Gates, the site co-director, walking toward him, pushing a wheelbarrow full of light bulbs and extension rods.

“Do you want me to set the lights up for the night?” she said.

Hall rocked back on his heels and stood. The site tent sat on the far edge of the work zone. Knee-high rope barriers divided the valley into four quadrants, each filled with square pockets taken out of the ground like a patchwork quilt. Wheelbarrows full of dirt were scattered around the quadrants, and burlap tarps covered the squares not in use.

“My head says yeah,” Hall said, wiping his hands on his cargo shorts, “but my gut says what’s the point of two more hours if we aren’t getting anywhere?”

Dr. Gates set down the wheelbarrow and pulled her braids back with a rubber band. “I think you and I have different definitions of ‘getting somewhere,’ Dr. Bennett.”

“Must be the language barrier,” Hall said, letting his native Bostonian accent sing through.

“What, you don’t speak the tongue of the aristocracy?” Dr. Gates smiled as she handed Hall the base of a light pole.

“Nah, just the colonizers. Rhetta! Mateo! Give us a hand.”

Within minutes, the site was lit with the harsh glow of pop-up hospital lights that illuminated the broken ground and excavated wilderness.

“In case anyone needs to spot us from space,” Mateo would say.

As best they could tell, the now-abandoned field had once been a small village. Almost a thousand years ago, a tribe of farmers had lived, isolated, in the border territory. Their structures were sound, their pottery sparse. Their life, by all accounts, had been simple.

Simple doesn't sell stories, Hall thought, clipping the last of the light plugs into the generator extension. When Dr. Gates had called and offered him the visiting site work, he had prepared himself for the dig of his life, the oldest site he had ever worked on. Universities usually called him when they had something they couldn't handle. From what he had seen, it didn't seem like the team couldn't handle it—just that they didn't want to. Dr. Gates had been the exception.

She reached around Hall and flipped off one of the surge protectors. “We'll keep the light to Quad 4 for now, if you want to work at your grid some more.”

“I'll let the kids finish it off,” Hall said. “I'm going to do the write-up for the day.”

“Suit yourself.”

Hall instructed Rhetta and Mateo to pick up where he had left off and went searching in his pack for his field notebook. The pages were almost full. He sat down under the branches of one of the towering Scotch elms that lined the edge of the site and flipped past the torn cover to a half-empty page in the book.

“Day 118,” he wrote. “Quad 4, Grid Square 6—middle square of household structure. Square 5 (4?) contains fireplace.” *Still going nowhere*. “Note less essential location, might not have been as connected to community. Single occupancy? Functional building?”

The placement reminded Hall of one of the sites he had worked on in Canada—a small clearing in a forest that had at one point been a fur trade post. That site had a similar outpost building, a security system for the traders in the larger complex. *Maybe this could be the same sort of thing?* Hall looked around at the open grass fields and spaced out trees surrounding them. He couldn't imagine that a group like this would have many natural enemies out here.

Back in Quad 4, Hall saw Mateo's head appear over the edge of the square, his eyes searching like a periscope above water. Mateo waved his arm above his head when he spotted Hall and called out across the site. "Uh...Boss? You might want to see this."

*

Wellsford College was located in downtown Newcastle-upon-Tyne, on the English Channel. The small, liberal arts university was owner of the site after the land had been donated some hundred years ago and had sat unused and unexplored since.

The archaeology lab on loan to Hall's team was on the west campus. Hall walked to the lab from his flat share every morning, his wireless headphones streaming music off his watch, and he cradled a take-away coffee in his numb hands.

The lights were already on when he arrived today. Rhetta popped her head around one of the floor-to-ceiling artifact racks at the sound of the door slamming.

"You're here early," Hall said, pocketing his earbuds.

"Mateo doesn't know how to get up quietly. He went out to the site to do transport this morning."

"You could have gotten your own place," Hall said. He pulled his laptop from his bag and set up his office for the day.

“Cheaper this way,” Rhetta said. “Still got my own room. And Van is flying over next week.”

“You going to bring her out to meet us?” Hall said, burning his tongue on a sip of coffee.

“Do I have a choice?”

“Probably not,” he said. “This is what you get for not bringing your girlfriend to staff parties *before* heading overseas.”

“Mateo’s on his way,” Rhetta said. “He’s driving in that new piece he found in your square the other day. Where do you want it when he gets here?”

“Bag, tag, hand off,” Hall said, watching his computer power up.

“It’ll be nice one day to have the site leader actually do some leg work around here...maybe even lead some day.” Rhetta’s head peeked around the corner of Hall’s doorframe, her wide eyes waiting for a retort.

“What do you think we pay grad students for?” he said, typing in his lock screen password.

“You think you pay me?” Rhetta shook her head, her earrings jingling like wind chimes.

“In life experience,” Hall yelled as she retreated into the lab. He opened his email and scrolled through pages of unanswered messages, three of them new since the night before. He ran his hand over his face. He stared into the flat top of his desk, over notes and site aerials, all of which continued to give him little insight, and the call log on his landline blinked with four messages. Hall scratched his chin. *I need a shave.*

The rumble of the loading dock distracted Hall from his distant stare and his worries across the ocean. He closed the lid on his laptop, the emails still unanswered. *Only way to have something to report is to get back to work.* He pitched himself forward and sorted through the satellite maps again, searching for anything that he could sell to his department chair. He referred to the artifact list buried under his laptop and tried to form a clear image in his head of the lives he was sifting through.

Pottery, house structures, kitchen utensils. So what we have is...fucking boring. Yeah, that's promising. Hey Doug, thanks for the money again; it's going to a good cause. Me, wasting my time in a sheep field. Could probably find more British artifacts in my liver at this point. Except this one thing...

The garage door banged shut, and Hall sprang from behind his desk, catching his shorts on the corner of his desk in his rush for the door.

“Right! Where’s this piece I’ve heard so much about then?” Hall said, rubbing his hands together.

“Bagged and tagged,” Rhetta said. She reached across the table to slide Hall a padded bag with a provenience sticker on the outside. “And now it’s handed off.”

Hall clicked on a tabletop lamp and sat on a stool in front of the bag, studying the sticker as he put on a pair of disposable gloves. He pulled the bag closer and popped the seal.

“Okay...what are we looking at?” he said to himself. The first thing that caught Hall’s attention was the number of items in the bag—multiples, not one like normal. Sheer, protective sheets were stacked as inserts between the frail sheets of animal skin. Each sheet was a different shade of tan, the color faded and changed by dirt, sun

exposure, and the oil markings of use that varied between the pages. The edges on the skins were uneven, the ends frayed. *Someone made an effort to cut the skins to the same size.* Hall ran a finger along the margins of one of the pieces, the catching texture dry where the skin had been scraped clean and years in the dirt had worn down the toughness of the hide.

“Why did these all get bagged together?” Hall said. “They’re separate pages.”

“They’re the only pages of any kind we found,” Rhetta said. “Plus, the handwriting looks the same.”

Hall separated two of the sheets and tilted the skin toward the lamplight. The skins were thick, but the light passed through with ease, highlighting the dense fibers that crisscrossed and melded the piece together. Floating on top of the flaking knit-work, Hall could see the faint glimmer of pale brown ink, letters looped and scrawled in tight-pressed combinations, words separated by nub dots of ink, each start and end scraping into the grit of the parchment. He leaned closer to the text and sniffed the ink.

“What are you doing?” Rhetta said.

“I thought it might still smell like wine,” Hall said.

“Wine?”

“That’s how they thickened ink around this timeframe. Several rounds of wine that got dried out in the sun.”

“I suppose we’d have to test the paper to find the vintage.”

Hall set the page on its protective backing. The longer he stared, he began to recognize some letters—t, d, w, k, a and e pushed together. He passed a gloved hand

across the parchment, hoping that some of the illegibility was caused by caked on dirt posing as ink writing. *No such luck.*

“Can you read this?” he asked Rhetta.

She shook her head. “I tried yesterday.”

“But they’re all the same provenience?”

“They were stacked together.”

“Grid placement?”

“It was your square from yesterday—Quad 4, Square 6. Read the bag.”

Hall craned his neck sideways to read the label again, one of the pages still balanced on his flat palms. “Tell me again what else is there.”

Rhetta consulted a roving whiteboard on the far wall. She pulled her reading glasses from the inside pocket of her jean jacket and angled them on the bridge of her nose. She tilted her head, readjusted the glasses, and backed up three paces.

“Rhetta, just go get a replacement pair,” Hall said. “You’re not much good to this team if you can’t see two feet in front of you.”

“Who knows what my insurance is like in this country. Probably doesn’t even cover this continent, and you have my permission to fire me when that becomes the problem. If I’m the first one on this crew to get canned, then we got a real fucking issue.”

Rhetta paused. “Square 6 is a structure of some kind. Probably a house—fireplace, few home goods, little to no pottery though.”

“Little to no pottery but ten plus sheets of animal skins,” Hall said. “Probably had to sell everything they had to make this.”

“You think they made these themselves?”

“If these were the only pages found on site, they probably didn’t have an Office Depot in town.”

“How would they know how to make them?”

“Trial and error.”

Rhetta looked at the spread out pages, adjusting her glasses on her crooked nose. “They’ve held up remarkably well for trial and error and hundreds of years of dirt. My vote would be for barter with someone outside of town, not arts and crafts.”

“That could work too,” Hall said with a distracted nod. “Do we even have evidence of livestock here?”

“Not much. Pen sizes are small. Few lean-to stables maybe.”

“Nothing with this much skin,” Hall said, holding up one of the pieces.

“Not unless they had a really fat donkey.”

“So where did this even come from?”

“Outside of the town,” Rhetta said again. Hall turned the pages over in his gloved hands.

Small village, not rich—at least no big sign of fortune. Likely not making their own parchment. What was so important that they needed 17 pages? His thought drifted off, and he continued working in silence. Rhetta was sorting kitchen pottery when Hall’s head snapped up.

“Where did Mateo go?” he asked.

“To park the truck and clean some of the equipment before it goes back out.”

In Hall’s office, the phone began to ring. He ignored it and continued to work. *Hang up, hang up, hang up.* By the second call, Hall dropped his head over his work.

“Do me a favor,” Hall said. “Tell my department chair I died.” Hall held his breath until the phone went silent.

“I’m starting to think you won’t have to.”

Before Hall could respond, the door burst open, and a pile of shovels, with sifts and buckets perched on their handles, walked itself in.

“Little help?” the pile said.

Rhetta rounded her table and plucked a bucket off one of the shove handles. The rest of the material crashed to the floor, and Mateo emerged behind the mess, hands on his hips.

“Yeah, thanks,” he said.

“Glad I could help.” Rhetta carried the bucket back to her station.

“Mateo, come here for a second,” Hall said. “Leave that.”

“What’s up, Boss?”

“How’s your Old English?”

Mateo replied with an unintelligible string of breathy sounds, his tongue doing somersaults to pronounce words Hall couldn’t understand. Mateo finished his recitation with a beaming smile.

“I’ll take that as a ‘Fine, Hall.’”

“I’m pretty sure he just called you a neutered pigeon,” Rhetta said.

Mateo sent back a biting reply in Old English while Hall pulled another set of gloves from under the table. Mateo worked the carved, wooden ring off his middle finger before tugging the gloves on and accepting the page from Hall.

“Read that for me,” Hall said. “Get through as many of them as you can by the end of the day and give me a rundown of what you get, or you can work after hours while the rest of us drink without you.”

Mateo snapped to attention, a gloved hand hovered by his eyebrow. “Aye-aye, Cap’ain.”

“Figured that’d get you working,” Hall said, slapping Mateo on the back. He retreated back to his closet of an office, where the voicemail light on his phone was blinking. He didn’t bother opening his email again.

*

Mateo walked into Hall’s office and sat in the empty chair across from him. Mateo shifted in his seat once, twice, passing a legal pad between his hands, and tucked a piece of curly brown hair behind his pierced ear. He and Hall had been working together for the past five years, long enough for Hall to have learned his nervous tics. They had met when Mateo was a scared senior, about to graduate with a four-year degree in history and no plans for the future. Hall had helped get him a job in the historical library on Brixton’s campus before convincing him to apply to the graduate program in archaeology. Mateo began work in Hall’s lab on his first day of classes with Rhetta as his second year mentor.

“How many did you get through?” Hall said, leaning forward in his chair.

“All of them,” Mateo said. His gaze shifted back and forth across the office.

“Then why are you nervous?” Hall said.

“You’ll see,” Mateo said. He handed the notepad across Hall’s messy desktop. The top page was only half-full.

“All of them?” Hall said again. Mateo tucked at the piece of hair already fixed behind his ear, and he looked down at his mud-soaked boots to avoid Hall’s gaze. “Guess your reading isn’t as good as your performance skills.”

“Actually,” Mateo said, “I’m pretty sure...it didn’t look like Old English.”

Hall held up the legal pad. “Then what’s this?”

“Yeah, I mean, a few words of it were—the ones that I could make out—but it wasn’t...like...sentences in the language. Just words, and then a lot of words that didn’t mean anything.”

“Say more.”

“I guess I can’t say that they don’t for sure mean anything. They mean something, just not to me.” He paused. “I don’t think the writing was *all* Old English.”

Hall nodded. He looked over the one-sheet again, lifting the first page and examining the second—blank—as if he expected Mateo to have hidden the rest of his research that didn’t exist. He dropped the pad on his desk.

“Sorry, Boss.”

“I’m not going crazy, right?” Hall said. “We did date this site at the edge of the Old and Middle English timeframes? Fact check me on this.”

“As far as we can tell.” Mateo pushed up the sleeves on his thermal shirt. “Maybe it doesn’t have exact meaning. Maybe it was for ritual use.”

Hall rolled his eyes. “I’ll do you a favor by not sending you back a 101 class just for suggesting that. You know I hate that bullshit, easy answer. It’s an excuse not to do any actual research.” He fished his phone out of one of his pockets. “Dr. Gates is still on site, isn’t she?”

“Yeah.”

“We’ll ask her to come in tomorrow. I want her opinion on this.” Hall made a note in his phone to send her an email. “Thanks for your work today, Mateo. Clean up that mess you made in the front, take it around to the dock, then you’re good for the day. Tell Rhetta she’s good too. I’ll meet up with you guys later tonight.”

“You got it, Boss.” Mateo went to reach for his notes, but Hall stopped him.

“Leave them there. I’ll box them up when I’m done.”

Hall listened as the shovels in the entrance clattered against each other, were dragged across the room, and the loading dock door cranked open. Hall sat in silence while his students cleaned, then the light for the outer room clicked off. He picked up Mateo’s notes and read through them again.

Home/house. Sheep? Man/men. Tree(s)/forest/woods.

How insightful. He rubbed his hand on the back of his neck, along the stress knot that had formed there. In the dark of the lab, against his better judgment, he clicked the blinking light on his phone receiver.

“Dr., Dr. Bennett, this is Deputy Department Chair, Dr. Randt, again. This, well, this must be my third or fourth call, yes, just today. I’m just trying to see if I can catch you in the, in your lab. I would like a status, some kind of report, if you please? I would hope, I hope you have something? We’re very eager to hear, I’m eager to have something to send to the dean. As you know, this is a lot, yes, the largest grant for our department. Nice to have something come out of it for you, for us surely. Yes, yes, we all believe in you, Dr. Bennett, and it’s best, for the better, I hear from you soon.”

Hall let the messages play out, all variations of the same call. Dr. Randt had been a constant, bureaucratic bother ever since he had been promoted to Deputy Department Chair instead of Hall two years ago. Hall had spent the majority of Dr. Randt's tenure off campus and out of the country, communicating only when necessary to keep his funding. The desperate calls told Hall it was one of those times—he needed to call back.

And say what? Hall picked up Mateo's notes. *Hopefully there's something here that can save us.*

*

Hall looked at his assistants, and they averted their eyes. Nobody was getting any work done. They were waiting, alternating between staring at the sheets and staring at the door. Every creak of the building set them on edge, until Dr. Gates appeared in the entrance to the lab.

“Good afternoon all,” she said, entering into the lab as if it were a lecture. She deposited her satchel beside the door and removed her suit jacket, glancing around before settling it on the back of a chair. “What are we looking at?”

“XX46.8.2,” Rhetta said.

“How specific and unhelpful,” Dr. Gates said. A thin smile took the edge off her words. She reached under the table and pulled out a pair of gloves, the tan rubber the same color as her suit.

“These skins,” Hall said. He flicked on his clip lamp and offered Dr. Gates his stool.

“Multiple? In the same artifact grouping?”

“Yes,” Hall said. “You’ll understand why.”

Dr. Gates adjusted her seat and began to review the parchment. Hall watched as Dr. Gates went through the usual motions. She picked up each skin, one by one, leaning as close as she dared to study the writing under the lamplight. She ran her hand across the surface of the skin, feeling the breaks in the texture and rubbing the edge of the page between two fingers, checking for another sheet stuck to the back.

“Do any of you speak Old English?” she said, not looking up. Mateo passed her his notepad from the previous day.

“Ta.” Dr. Gates picked up the notes and read them as if they were their own artifacts. She rearranged the skins to consult them side-by-side. “This is thorough work.”

Mateo blushed. “Thank you.”

“This is well on the nose, and I am quite honest in saying, I don’t know where you go from here.” Dr. Gates straightened her spine and leaned away from the light.

“How so?” Hall said.

“Well, Mr. Moretti here has already exceeded my knowledge of Old English in terms of what I can glean from the pieces. They are a fascinating find, and I have many questions that come out of their discovery. However, I have a feeling that some cracked parchment won’t be much good to you if you can’t read them.”

“What do you suggest, then?” Hall said, crossing his arms. The sleeves on his plaid button-up were rolled to his elbows, exposing the tattooed roses that wrapped across his right forearm.

“I suspect our team is about to grow again,” Dr. Gates said.

Hall uncrossed his arms, smoothed the hair at the back of his neck, and crossed his arms again. “Who do you suggest?”

“Haven’t the slightest,” Dr. Gates said, peeling off her gloves. “I’m sure that the department would prefer if we asked someone in-house as opposed to bringing in more teams. Goodness knows how much the grant was to bring you lot here in the first place, not my job to say. I’m just here to sign and assist.” Dr. Gates walked over to the whiteboard sketch of the site and picked up a satellite image from the table to hold up for comparison. “This is terribly important work,” she said.

“It could be,” Hall said. *It’s the first thing with promise, that’s for sure.*

“I’d hate to see it stalled or have us miss something because we can’t understand it.”

“So how do we start to translate it?” Mateo said.

Dr. Gates put down the photo. “Let me make a call.” She pulled her mobile and a notepad from the depths of her bag and headed into the hallway. Mateo turned on the box fan in the corner of the lab, the air blowing his shirt out as he stood in front of the blades. Hall sat back down at the table. Rhetta took up Dr. Gates’s place in front of the whiteboard and adjusted a few of the site markings.

Minutes later, Dr. Gates reentered the lab. “I spoke to a colleague over in our philology department, asked her for a recommendation. She’s a syntactician, otherwise I’d just have her pop over. Anyway, she said she has a colleague who might be interested in this sort of thing.”

“What’s her specialty?” Rhetta said.

“Didn’t quite catch all of it, but I think we can say Middle English to be safe. We’ll have her correct us on it when she’s here.”

“When can she be here?” Hall said.

Dr. Gates handed him a slip of paper, the edges torn from a field flipbook.

“Email her and find out.” Hall was slow to accept, but he held up the paper as a means of thanks and folded it in his back pocket.

“I have a meeting with my department head to update her on your progress,” Dr. Gates said. “I’ll let her know you’re bringing in another professor, assuming she has time and interest, but it shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Thank you for your help today, Dr. Gates,” Mateo said, offering his hand.

“Of course,” Dr. Gates said. “I can’t say how much help I might have been to you. I do believe you’ve already covered much of what I would have suggested.” She dropped his hand and spoke a final recited quote in Old English. Mateo laughed and replied, while Hall and Rhetta followed the tennis match of the dead language.

“I’ll see you all in a few days,” Dr. Gates said. She retrieved her bag from inside the door and made her exit.

“I know that look,” Rhetta said as soon as Dr. Gates’s footsteps had retreated out of earshot.

“What look?” Hall was already out of his seat and heading to his office. The single bulb over his desk flickered twice before brightening to fill the room.

“Same look you get when you don’t want to give an undergrad bad news,” Rhetta said.

“Is that the same as the one where he doesn’t want to share or is being stubborn and is about to launch into the lab rule lecture?” Mateo said.

“Really you’ve only got two looks.”

“And one face,” Hall said. He sat down in his chair and propped his legs on the desk. His students crowded the entrance to the office.

“So why the look?” Mateo said.

“He doesn’t want to call in a specialist,” Rhetta said, leaning against the doorframe. “He’d rather deal with it himself. Doesn’t need no outside help. ‘Me big strong man. No help.’”

“You’re lucky I know you’re joking,” Hall said. “That’s not my deal, but I don’t want to involve too many people.” He paused and glanced at the closed window as if looking for an escape route. “I don’t want to deal with outsiders when we don’t know what we’re working with. Makes it harder for me to keep track of my own project.”

“Because you want it all to yourself, you SOB,” Rhetta said. “You’re worried someone else is going to make your big discovery for you, so you’re just hoarding artifacts you can’t read. How’s that working out for you, you golem? You can’t become famous and make this grant worth something if you have no idea what you’re dealing with.”

Hall sighed and wiped a hand over his face. “Which is why we probably need to call the specialist,” he admitted. He shifted his weight in the chair to fish the slip of paper out of his back pocket. “Dr. Quinn Preston, Linguistics and Philology” was looped in cursive across the sheet, an email address on the back.

“Come on, Boss,” Mateo said, his eyes fixed on the paper in Hall’s hand. “We need help. This isn’t the time to be project possessive.”

Hall grumbled under his breath and shoved his legs off the desktop.

“Always drama with this one,” Rhetta said, vacating the office entrance.

Hall opened the lid on his laptop, and the light above the desk blew out, leaving him in the blue light glow of his computer screen, his email open and waiting.

*

“Archeology, Anthropology, and Sociology, how can I direct your call?”

“Dr. Randt’s office please.” Hall shifted the phone between his chin and shoulder so he could peel off his gloves and slingshot them toward the trash. One made it into the bin; the other landed on the tile floor.

“The chair isn’t in at the moment. Can I take a message?” the secretary mumbled from the other end. Hall could picture the undergrad student at his desk, a business textbook spread over the keyboard and a fraternity group-chat open on his phone. Hall had taught the senior’s introductory level anthropology class and had deemed his B-grade sufficient not to outright dismiss his application for the Deputy Department Chair’s desk secretary when it became available later that semester.

“Trevor, tell him that it’s Dr. Bennett.”

Trevor didn’t reply, but there was rustling on the other line. When the receiver clicked, Hall jerked the phone back as someone coughed into his ear.

“Oh, my apologies, Dr. Bennett,” Dr. Randt said, clearing his throat. “Thank you, Dr. Bennett, for the call back. Quite, about time.”

“I don’t understand why you do that every time,” Hall said, “screening your calls through an undergrad who isn’t even majoring your the department.” *Especially when you never actually leave your office.*

“Well, honestly, Dr. Bennett, you must understand, I often cannot be bothered with, phone calls are often too frequent, too unimportant, and you really shouldn’t doubt

the merits of one of your own students. Mr. Payton has done just fine with our staff, really done well, studious worker, with all these phone calls. They're very complicated, and whatnot."

"The reason I called today," Hall interrupted, "was to tell you that we might have found something."

"Well, it's very nice to get this report from you, promising indeed. After going so long without hearing much, without hearing anything by way of, of a report. This is promising news, I hope. What is it you've found?"

"Some form of text. We can't be sure what it is yet." Hall lifted his foot to rest it on the corner of his desk. His shorts sagged at his thigh with the weight of the measuring tape and provenience stickers in his pocket.

"A written text? Yes, yes, that's something we can work with. There wasn't typically much, many texts in that time, that area really?"

"Not that we have record of, no," Hall said. "And the group seems to have been fairly isolated for something like this, but we have reason to believe that they at least traded with outside groups."

"Where on site was it found? It might be significant, very significant. Might it have ritual use, do you think?"

Hall wiped his face and resisted the urge to hang up.

"We can't be sure, Doug. We can't read the thing," Hall said. He inspected a bruise of questionable origin on his kneecap as Dr. Randt processed the new information.

"You can't, yes, you can't read it. Do you not have anyone on site, well surely you must, someone who can read Middle English then? That time period can be very

tricky, very tricky sometimes, much less to go off of than something like paleontology; that can be quite certain. Dinosaurs are much, much older than the Middle Ages.” Dr. Randt chuckled at his quip.

“One of my students can read Old English but can’t make heads or tails of what we’ve got here, ritual or not,” Hall said.

“Well, we best get to figuring this out,” Dr. Randt said. “Yes, yes I think this could be big for us.” He paused to cough again.

“I’m so glad to hear I can be of help.”

“Well, of course, Dr. Bennett, you’ve gone far with this, but now you must, you have a problem to resolve. This is quite different, yes, best to treat it carefully. You have a plan, yes?”

“We’ve had an in-house specialist recommended, works in linguistics here.”

“That’s fantastic, just good work, Dr. Bennett. And when do they arrive?”

“We set up a meeting. I’ll tap her into it tomorrow.”

“This is exciting, isn’t it then? Intriguing, and of course, yes. We’re always pleased to hear of success, or to hear anything at all from you, Dr. Bennett, a call at any time, despite the time change and all,” Dr. Randt said.

“It isn’t success yet, Doug,” Hall said, choosing to ignore the last comment.

“Let’s see what this specialist has to say first.”

*

Hall hiked to the second floor of the Gothic building that overlooked the well-groomed lawn across from the archaeology labs. The grounds were blanketed in a lazy, afternoon fog that seeped into the cool colors and dim lighting of the building. Locked

doors lined the hallway, hiding the academic residences of several professors from the linguistics department, along with a few language offices and a lone history professor at the southernmost end. Across from the historian's office, Dr. Quinn Preston's door was cracked, weak light pushing out into the dim breezeway. Hall knocked before glancing into the room. A pair of cornflower blue eyes popped out from an unruly mass of orange hair, as the woman behind the desk looked up at him.

"Dr. Preston, I presume," Hall said with a smile. "I'm Dr. Bennett. It's a pleasure to meet you in person."

The professor stood and rounded her desk to tower in front of Hall in the open doorway. She wore a pair of denim overalls with a sun stitched sweatshirt rising from the cover-up like a spring dawn. Her pantlegs were cuffed above a pair of high-top sneakers the same bright color as the sun on her chest. Her hair was loosely arranged behind a green stretch headband that Hall recognized as the vogue of fashion during his little sister's teenage years.

"Dr. Bennett," the woman said, extending her hand. Hall's face twitched in surprise, which made the woman laugh.

"They forgot to mention that they were sending you to the American, I take it?"

"They did," Hall said, "though I see now it was the perfect trick. It's a pleasure to meet you, Dr. Preston."

"Quinn is fine."

"Hall."

Quinn nodded and sat back down behind what Hall assumed was a standard issue desk, though he could see no clear surface to prove his guess. From her seat, she lorded

over the stacks of papers, books, essays, and airport snow globes. The back of her computer monitor was angled into the corner, using the wall for support, where an overhead shelf threatened to dump its load of textbooks and coffee cups onto the outdated equipment. The office smelled vaguely of wet coffee grounds and an underlying hint of citrus.

“Shut the door, won’t you?” she said. He obliged then took a seat in a threadbare bergere chair while Quinn finished reading the section of the essay in front of her, drew a strike through the page, and dropped the stack on her desk.

“I apologize for the mess,” Quinn said, glancing around her office, “and the attire. To be honest with you, I wasn’t planning on allowing visitors today, but your email sounded important—albeit not important enough to change—but I’m curious what you want from me.”

“I’m working on a site excavation with the archaeology department here, under Dr. Carter Gates, and we’ve found ourselves in need of a linguist.”

“Well then,” Quinn said, “that’s how you know you’re up shit’s creek.” She reached for one of the mugs on her shelf and looped her fingers around a forest green lizard. She sniffed the contents of the mug before taking a sip. With a nod, she cradled the mug in her lap and continued watching Hall.

“You’ll have to forgive me,” Hall said. “I’m not exactly an expert on the history of the English language, but Dr. Gates has assured me that you’re the person we need—”

“You found something written in Middle English?”

“We believe we have,” Hall said. He reached into his pocket to retrieve his phone. He flipped through the pictures until he found the one he had taken of the artifact and

presented it to Quinn. She traded her mug for the device and shook the phone to rotate the picture. She studied the screen while Hall watched the minute twitches and changes in her expression. Every now and then, she would shake her head, causing her curls to shimmy back and forth before she set the phone down on the edge of a paper stack on her desk.

“How much do you know about Middle English, Hall?”

“It’s the historical language period between Old English and Modern English,” he answered like a test question.

“Middle English is a creole,” Quinn said. “It develops from language contact. If there are multiple languages in close proximity and their speakers need to communicate often, they’ll create a pidgin, one that uses multiple languages and forms together. Once the pidgin gets passed down and becomes a speaker’s first language, it becomes a creole.”

“It sounds like an interesting area of study,” Hall said.

“But why am I telling you all this useless information?” Quinn finished for him. She took another sip from the lizard mug then nodded to the phone between them.

“You have no idea what you have there, do you?” She continued before Hall could rebut. “I don’t say this to be rude, and it really isn’t a question. You don’t know what you have there – you can’t. It isn’t Middle English.”

Hall stared at her then glanced down at his phone and looked back up with a pained expression, confused. “It’s not?”

“Well, I should say,” Quinn said, “it isn’t *solely* Middle English.”

Then what is it? “You sound like one of my grad students,” Hall said, “no offense. He reads Old English and came to a similar conclusion. So there is more here, then?”

“Yes,” Quinn said. “I’ve never seen a piece with so much outside influence. There are varying degrees of influence when it comes to creoles, of course, but I’m usually able to distinguish basic words, even if the spellings are non-standard. Here...” She picked up the picture again. “This is a different story entirely.” She took a second to study the writing. “Most of the word endings match, which suggests that the base language is at least consistent, or if they are using multiple language structures, they all come from the same historical family. One or two of the lexical forms seem to be code-switching into what I’m assuming is an older form of French.” Quinn handed the phone back to Hall. “It’s really fascinating.”

“So it’s not Middle English at all?” Hall shifted in the shopworn chair.

“It still very well could be Middle English,” Quinn said, “but like I said, this is very non-standard. Not like anything I’ve encountered before.” Quinn traced her thumb along her bottom lip before focusing back on Hall. “What you’ve showed me, this is just the first page, right?”

“Yes.”

“Show me the rest.”

*

“We’re having a guest later,” Hall said. “Got to make this place look presentable.”

“Pre-yent-able?” Mateo emerged from behind one of the artifact racks, his mouth stuffed with forbidden crisps. “I ‘on’t know ‘ut ‘at mean-sh.”

“I’m sure you don’t,” Hall said. “But we need to make sure someone else can read this stuff. That’s all I mean.”

“Is that professor coming in?” Rhetta said, slamming the door to the loading dock.

“Yes, and you get that out of here!” Hall pointed at Mateo then waved his hand over his shoulder in the direction of the door. Mateo sulked his way into the hall, munching as he went.

“What do you want me to pull?” Rhetta asked.

“Pull the artifact and its provenience box. Get me a clean satellite view, and I’ll mark it specifically. She doesn’t need all our extra material—just what’s relevant to 46.8.2.” Hall ducked into his office. He tossed a stack of paperback books on the floor beside his chair, blockading himself behind his desk, and revealed his annotated photos of the skins. “And print me another set of photos.”

They continued working late into the afternoon until a knock came at the outer office door.

“Hello?”

“You must be Dr. Preston,” Hall heard Rhetta said. He gathered his materials and jumped over the books on the floor to get into the lab. Quinn had traded her overalls from the day before for slacks and flats. Her hair was still pulled back in a headband.

“I’m Rhetta Edwards,” she said, “one of the graduate students here.”

“Quinn Preston. Are you a Wellsford GA or...?”

“No, I go to Brixton. I came over with Dr. Bennett.”

“That’s amazing,” Quinn said. “I don’t think my MA advisor would have taken me on a project like this.”

“So what I’m hearing,” Hall said, “once again, is all hail your glorious site director.”

“I’m still not getting paid,” Rhetta said.

“Anyway,” Hall said, turning to Quinn, “welcome to our lab. We don’t have much, but make yourself at home.”

“Thanks for letting me come by on short notice,” Quinn said. She walked the perimeter of the room, taking in the research. “Tell me what I’m looking at.”

“We prepared a packet for you, just to get started,” Rhetta said, offering up a small binder.

Quinn accepted the dossier, which contained site photos, pictures of the parchment, and a historical narrative background on the site. Hall had spent over an hour flipping through his field notes, trying to piece together a comprehensive story of what they had discovered, what they were doing. He had been amazed at how little the story had changed from when he accepted the call to work the site to where he was sitting then, with artifacts that hid more history than they told. He was prepared to have the story change again, and Quinn might be the person to do that.

“Can I see the pages?” she said. “Do you have them here?”

Rhetta was already on the move, pulling the provenience box off the artifact rack. Mateo came in and introduced himself while Rhetta set up a viewing station for Quinn.

“Have you ever worked with artifact material before?” Hall said.

“I worked in the archives all through undergrad,” Quinn said. She snapped on the gloves that Rhetta offered her and clicked on the lamp.

Mateo and Rhetta looked on while Quinn handled the parchment with admiration, delicacy, and open curiosity. It wasn't until Hall saw Rhetta standing beside Quinn, eyebrows furrowed as they studied the pages, that Hall realized how young Quinn looked.

"What are you doing?" Mateo said when Quinn leaned in to sniff the skin she was holding.

"Ink used to be made of sun-dried wine."

Rhetta and Hall glanced up at each other, and Rhetta tilted her head toward the visiting professor, as if to say, "Your move."

Before Hall could speak, Quinn began to narrate her analysis.

"Animal skins, high water content in the ink. Evidence of thorn use does solidify its local association with historical English— *Þæt*, *Þæs*. I can't determine the syntax yet, but based on my understanding of modern French, the borrowing element looks to be mostly lexical. The deictic particles are Old English. This is a real study." She stacked the parchment and stood to face Hall. "I'm happy to help, Dr. Bennett. Where can I set up?"

2

She heard the bagpipes before she saw the sign for the archaeology lab. Quinn was starting her first official day on the research team after receiving the project confirmation email from her supervisor late the night before. She wasn't convinced that her supervisor cared what she was doing on any given day, but protocol said to get your supervisor's approval. She had spent the rest of her sleepless hours planning her methods projection. Her 7:30 am arrival to the lab the day after her approval arrived proved how

eager she was to start. She had expected to have at least an hour or two of peace to get her bearings before everyone else arrived.

The rhythmic shrieking grew louder when she opened the lab door. The room seemed smaller than yesterday. The artifact boxes on freestanding metal racks had been displaced to cover the floor, line the walls, and hide the tabletops from view. Wandering through it all were Rhetta and Mateo, each with a catalogue list in hand. Rhetta squatted down to read the label on a box on the bottom row of one of the racks and shouted a series of numbers at Mateo. Quinn was amazed they were able to hear each other, much less think, as the music blared through the speakers.

“Where’s Hall?” Quinn yelled.

Rhetta shook her head. “You really think we’d be listening to this Irish crap if he *weren’t* here? Check the back room.” She tipped her head toward a propped door along the right-hand wall. Quinn skirted around the organized chaos as box numbers and artifact counts volleyed across the room between the grad students.

A flattop table took up the majority of the floor space in the offshoot of the lab. The rest of the space was being occupied as a dance floor as Hall hopped around the table’s edge in time with the accordion that had jumped on to accompany the bagpipes. Quinn glanced back at Rhetta and Mateo, who continued working as if under quotidian conditions. Quinn, on the other hand, was confused.

“What am I looking at?”

“Dr. Preston!” Hall shouted over the music. “I wasn’t expecting you so soon.” He didn’t look embarrassed to be caught in such a state, nor did he move to turn off the

noise. He kicked up his right foot and hopped off his left while his arms fiddled in time to the violin.

“What is this noise?” Quinn said.

“Music!”

“Is that what you call it?”

“Dropkick Murphys. They’re Boston boys, the sounds of my younger days.”

“And you actually get work done like this?” Quinn looked around at the room that was in equal state of disarray as the one she had left. *At least the larger lab has the grads to manage it.*

“Why not? Gets your energy up! Especially when you don’t feel like doing the work.”

“What are you doing that would warrant *this*?”

“Cleaning up,” Hall said, coming to a stop in front of Quinn. “Once I get all this moved back into my office, this will be your workspace. Like I said, I wasn’t expecting you this early.”

“I was eager to get started.”

“It’s a cool project,” Hall said. “Well,” he glanced over his shoulder, his foot still tapping along to the beat, “since you’re here, want to learn more about the site we’re working with?”

“Love to.”

Hall turned down the volume but didn’t shut it off, as he directed Quinn to one of the manifold rolling whiteboards.

“So, we showed you some site maps last time,” he said, “but those can really only do so much for you if you don’t know what you’re looking for—no offense.”

“I’m a big enough person to admit when I have no idea what the hell’s going on,” Quinn said.

“Fair enough,” Hall said. “So this is my rendition of the site map, sans the stuff that doesn’t matter or we haven’t figured out yet. Four squares, four quadrants. Each quadrant is made of squares, six across and six down. You mark the location of something based on its quadrant, its square, the order in which you found it in that square, and then some indicator of who found it. That varies from lab to lab, so don’t quote me to some other team and make me look the king of archaeology that I think my method goes.

“So let’s take our mysterious scripture—it was found in Quadrant 4, Square 6, so that’s provenience. It was the eighth item in the square, and Mateo found the piece. He’s grad student two of two, so the marker ends in a two. And there you have—XX46.8.2.”

“Show me that on the map?” Quinn said, studying the board of basic shapes. Hall tapped a square in the top right-hand corner. “Math quadrant rules. This is four.” He traced the dotted line of a square within the area. “That’s Square 6.”

“What’s the circle?” Quinn pointed to the oval not quite contained by the bounds of Square 6.

“That indicates a structure of some kind. Probably a house.”

“How can you tell?”

“There’s post markings in the ground, remnants of where walls were held in place, and there’s a large pile of charred wood and other natural refuse that indicates burning embers that had been piled on top of each other for years.”

“A fireplace.”

“Exactly,” Hall said.

“So you think this area was someone’s house?” Quinn said. “And that they’re the person who wrote the manuscript?”

“That’s the working theory,” Hall said. “We’re hoping you can tell us more once you get to work. We can’t rule out the possibility of a work house of some kind, menstrual hut, who knows.”

“They wanted to make sure their women were well entertained,” Quinn said. “Something to read while they were in temporary exile.”

Hall laughed. “I’ve seen weirder.”

“Challenge accepted,” Quinn said. “So what about the rest of the site?”

“Several other homes, more so across Quadrants 1 and 2, which is part of the interesting thing about this structure in Quad 4 with the same basic outline as the others but not *grouped* with the others. Part of the reason we can’t rule out the work house theory. There’s a pretty big open space at sort of the intersection of the quadrants where the buried earth is really fertile. We’re thinking some kind of animal enclosure—pigs, chickens, maybe a goat.”

“Is that how they sustained themselves?”

“That and the land behind the site is crop land. No reason to suspect that wasn’t its former purpose as well.”

“Would they have gone to a market to do trade?”

“Yeah,” Hall said, drawing out his vowels. He rubbed a hand at the back of his neck. “That’s where we’re not too sure. We don’t necessarily know that they were near enough to another group that trade would have been regular, but we can’t say ‘never.’ They might have gone on occasion, once a season maybe? But we weren’t counting on that being a reliable source of networking for them.” He paused. “These parchment sheets complicate that though.”

“How so?”

“Well, like I said, they didn’t exactly have many animals, cows or sheep and the like. If they did make the parchment themselves, we don’t know how or with what. The thing that makes the most sense is that they traded for it somehow. Then we get to the question of what they had that was valuable enough to get seventeen pages of parchment—did they get it all at once, over time? Was seventeen just what they could afford, or did they have a specific need for that many number of pages? The ink is a little easier to pass off as something they could theoretically make themselves; though I suspect they would have gotten the recipe from someone or somewhere else, not necessarily someone native to the group.”

“Travelling salesman?”

“At this point, I’ll proffer just about anything,” Hall said. They stood in silence for a minute.

“This is a lot,” Quinn said.

“All in a few months’ work,” Hall said.

A few months to dig up hundreds of years of history and lives that we'll never know, Quinn thought. She shook her head. "This is certainly outside my normal purview, but it's interesting as hell to consider when I start the translation. Working with Middle English isn't like starting from scratch."

This must be what the first Middle English scholars felt like, Quinn thought. *They had a lot of power, didn't they? Now I'm the first scholar of...what?*

"Believe it or not, I'm almost done moving this stuff over," Hall said. He swiped his arm across the desk and dumped the paperwork into the waiting cardboard box. "Maybe reorganizing will give me a fresh perspective." He carried the box out then came back for the whiteboard. "How about I let you get settled in," he said, "and then in a few days, I take you out to visit the site? Ya know, to see what you're really working with? Kinesthetic mindset and all that."

"I would think you'd have to be to work on a dig site like this," Quinn said.

"Eh, you'd be surprised," Hall said. "Right then, I'll get out of your hair, and I'll see you in a few days." Hall packed up the last of his stuff and headed for the exit. Quinn followed behind him to shut herself into the room when he left. Her ears rang with the sudden silence of the room and the dull hum of the dying speakers.

Big breath, she thought. *Time to go to work.*

*

Quinn couldn't stop her leg from shaking on the drive. She had been on the project for a week working in the lab before Hall made good on his word and invited her out to the site. The lab had become stifling faster than she had anticipated, and she was eager for the change of scenery. The further she got into the project, the most interested

she became in the people themselves, which hadn't ever been her focus before. She tracked language evolution and contact and history. Who was speaking didn't matter as much as what was being said. This case was almost the exact opposite.

Hall had picked her up from the lab that morning and driven north. Quinn glanced at her analog watch, her leg still bouncing. *Nearly two hours on the road.* The car rumbled down the clean pavement road that was traveled too infrequently to be damaged by use, and Quinn fought the urge to ask Hall how much farther to the site. Bushes of wildflowers and spiked thistle tumbled past the window. Low-slung lines of barbed wire kept fields of mud-covered sheep at bay, the animal's cries ringing in the open fields. The road reached a T, marked by a towering Scotch elm that slanted toward the road, its trunk bent from years of enduring winds. Hall turned right, and Quinn watched the tree shrink in the side mirror, the side of the trunk that faced away from the main road bare of leaves and broken branches.

The ride through the country brought her back to her doctoral student days, ethnography interviews that could last hours to weeks. Her dissertation had been on dialects of British English and their ranked separation from the last documented form of Middle English. She never got tired of the taste of English country air. She never knew if it was that she had been in the UK too long, but she couldn't remember the air in the States tasting this clean. As the dull, foggy sun peeked into the tinted passenger side window, she tilted into the warmth and smiled. She felt like a student again.

The car slowed, bringing Quinn's attention forward as Hall swerved to avoid a group of hikers, teenagers with patch-covered backpacks and brand name rain boots for

footgear. Wooden fence posts appeared on either side of the road, making it just wide enough for a single car.

Is this still supposed to be a two-way? Her answer came when an off-roader trekked down the road toward them. Quinn glanced at her driver and wrapped her hand around the door handle. The off-roader veered toward the field beside them, spinning his tires before catching on the packed dirt and darting off behind them to pull back on the road.

“Glad that wasn’t an eighteen wheeler I guess,” Hall said. Quinn chuckled with a close-lipped smile, releasing her grip on the door and flexing her fingers. Hall skirted over miles more of gravel road before parking on an off-ramp overlooking a valley. A cargo land rover sat in the same cut-in, its tailgate facing open into the land below.

“We walk from here,” Hall said, killing the engine. Quinn hopped out of the car, a backpack slung over her shoulder, ready for the hike. “Wait one second,” he said before Quinn could take off. “You can actually see a lot from up here first.”

She came to stand beside him, their height disparity evident as they looked over the landscape. Hall pointed down into the valley where they could see the outline of the site.

“So, four quadrants—” Hall pointed as he spoke—“site tent. That’s where we do final clearing and bag everything to go back to the lab.” He pointed off to the west of the site. “Fields and crop land are out that way.”

This is where they lived. Someone in this group was ahead of their time, writing in a community like this, outside of a castle or a monastery. That or they were fucking crazy.

“Let’s go,” she said.

They picked a path down the hillside and ended up at the tip of Quadrant 2. Hall walked Quinn around the edge of the grid and brought her in to see the discovery site of the manuscript. The square was dug deeper than those that surrounded it but was otherwise unassuming. She spent several minutes walking the perimeter of the square and the house structure, staring at the wet dirt, wishing she could read the past in the soil and reveal what the pages had yet to tell her. A cloud passed over the sun, and the wind picked up as though rain was on the horizon.

Once they had walked through the majority of the site, Hall brought Quinn over to the site tent, where Dr. Gates was instructing a student over a table of pottery shards.

“Hall,” she said when they approached. She turned from the student and sent him back to his square. “And you must be Dr. Preston,” she said, offering her hand.

“Pleasure to meet you,” Quinn said.

“Likewise,” Dr. Gates said. “I apologize that it took so long for us to meet. I’m terribly excited to see what you find.”

“Thank you,” Quinn said, tipping her chin up. “I’m excited to be able to work with you.”

Dr. Gates ducked below the fold out table and resurfaced with a fist full of artifact bags. “Well, unless you’re quite well trained with a shovel or micro-managing masters students, I think you can just enjoy your time on site.”

“What are they doing now?” Hall said.

“Marcus!” Mateo yelled from the center of the grid.

Marcus? Quinn thought. She thought she had met all the grad students and continued to stare, confused, as Hall began to trod over to the circle that several of the grad students had formed around the area in question and began arguing with Mateo. Quinn followed.

“Teo wants to dig it out from here,” Rhetta said as Quinn trudged up to the group. “I think we need to extract around first, leave it in to see about placement, find a relative meaning or source reference.”

“In these elements? It’ll be washed out before we get back here for it,” Mateo said.

“It’s survived 900 plus years in the ground,” Hall said. “It can stand a day of rain at the most to get a good provenience of it. That and we’d like to get it out all in once piece if we could, yeah? Set another square off beside it and start sweeping.”

Rhetta reset her headphones, blocking out the onslaught of curses from Mateo as Hall turned to Quinn and motioned for her to follow him back down the hill.

“Another day, another dumbass,” Hall said with a grin. Quinn returned the smile, and they walked in silence before curiosity got the better of her.

“Marcus?” she said.

Hall laughed. “Yes, Marcus Bennett, that’d be me. Mateo likes to call me that mostly because he knows it annoys me, but also he thinks it’s funny—one of those ‘calling your high school teachers by their first name one time for kicks’ type of funnies. He just never let it go, all five years he’s been my student.”

“What is Hall then? A nickname?”

“My middle name and my mother’s maiden name. I never felt much like a Marcus growing up. Hall packed more of a punch.”

“Certainly stands out more.”

“Make it easier for them all to remember my name after I’m gone.”

They squelched through the mud back to the site tent where Dr. Gates stood hunched over the artifact table, sorting through the bags. She studied the clipboard in her hand then tucked it back under her arm, not looking up as Quinn and Hall approached.

“This is a very complete narrative,” Dr. Gates said.

“For a complete narrative, we really don’t know that much about them though,” Hall said, picking up one of the bags and studying the pottery shard inside.

“This site is much more modern than the ones I’m used to,” Dr. Gates said. “Most of these pieces can’t be dated past the period just after the Norman Invasion.”

“So they were around for the Invasion?” Quinn asked.

“They had to have been,” Dr. Gates said. “This technology is solely based in the single period. Almost like a snapshot of the time. They must have existed on either side of the time period, but everything we’re pulling is entirely based on this singular period.”

“So they *only* existed in this space in the Invasion time,” Quinn said, trying to form the idea in her mind. “So where were they prior to the Invasion?”

“They might have come with the Invasion parties,” Hall said, moving to the other side of the table, his head on a swivel to keep his brown eyes fixed on a bag containing a piece of dried fabric.

“This land probably wouldn’t have been settled by Invasion parties. Too remote,” Dr. Gates said. She glanced up to gaze into the tree line that surrounded them. “A small town or village could have been here prior and scattered to avoid pillaging.”

“The previous settlers could have died out,” Hall said.

“Or the land simply could have been empty,” Dr. Gates said again. “A lot of people were still relying on larger city centers for water and resources. A liminal space between forming and warring countries like this wouldn’t necessarily have been settled and farmed from edge to edge.”

“I wonder where they would have landed in the Domesday Book,” Hall said, coming to stand beside a puzzled Quinn. His statement caused Dr. Gates to look up.

Quinn frowned. “Doomsday?”

“Domesday,” Dr. Gates corrected. “It’s a written record of the landholdings and populations in a given territory created by William the Conqueror and his lackeys. Think sort of like an early version of a census.” She looked at Hall again. “What makes you say Domesday?”

“It’s one of the few human records we have from this time, right? These people might be listed in the Book. It could give us a better idea of who they were and how many people we’re dealing with.”

Dr. Gates smiled. “You’ve overestimated the extent of the record. A group like this probably wouldn’t have even been recorded. Without a lord or some other kind of liege leader, which we don’t have sufficient evidence of being present, and no significant agricultural production, they most likely wouldn’t have been recorded, if they even were found here. Much of this region of Northumbria wasn’t explored at all. It’s too many

‘ifs.’ You’re welcome to check the Book if you like, but I doubt you’d want to be away from the site that long, and I doubt you’ll find it a proper use of your time.”

Hall leaned in toward Quinn as Dr. Gates turned back to the artifacts on the table. “You know it’s got to be a bad idea,” he said, “when even the historian starts bashing the other historians.”

“You act as if that isn’t the point of academia,” Quinn said. She glanced at her watch and took another passing look around the site. “Alright, well thanks for the breather, I’m going to have someone drive me back to the lab. Call me if something comes up.”

*

The parking lot behind The Boar and Bull’s-eye only had two cars in it that didn’t have a university parking tag hanging from the mirror. Inside, flags and football jerseys hung off the exposed beam ceiling, and the high-top tables had been pushed together to accommodate the field crew in the back corner.

“You haven’t been given a proper welcome,” Hall had said when he called earlier to invite her out with the team. “And don’t think yourself too special—Rhetta’s got company in town. We were going out anyway.”

The table was full of familiar faces—Hall, unchanged in his plaid shirt and cargo shorts; Rhetta and Mateo; Carter, her braids piled on her head and her earrings brushing the tops of her shoulders—and an unfamiliar girl with a bleach-blonde bob that was shaved on one side.

“Dr. Preston!” Mateo called over.

“I think we can go with Quinn now, right?” she said, taking the empty seat.

“In that case, what can I get you, Quinn?” Mateo said, hopping up as Quinn sat down. “It’s on the university tab.”

“You wish,” Hall said.

“IPA on tap is fine,” Quinn said.

The girl with the bob nudged Rhetta’s arm, scratching at her head as she looked around the bar. Hall chuckled.

“Dr. Preston, this is my girlfriend, Van,” Rhetta said, taking the hint to make introductions.

“Vanessa Barnes,” she said offering her hand.

“Dr. Quinn Preston.”

“Wow,” Van said, “doctor? You don’t seem that old.”

“Thank you.”

“Dr. P, where did you graduate from?” Mateo said when he came back with Quinn’s drink.

Quinn pursed her lips and began to nod. She studied the knots in the table as she answered. “Oxford.”

“In the year...?” Mateo prompted over the table.

“How old are you?” Rhetta filled in.

“I got my PhD three years ago. I’m 29.”

Mateo started choking on his drink, coughing into his leather plated wrist. “You’re twenty-what? What, did you skip straight from undergrad to teaching?”

Quinn met Hall’s gaze over the top of her beer, and she shrugged. “I get bored easily,” she said. “I like to put in the work.” Hall smiled and took a sip. She cleared her

throat and tilted her head up. “Dr. Gates,” she said, changing the subject, “how long have you been at Wellsford?”

“Coming up on ten years now,” she said. “And I may be old enough to have been your mum in another life, but you can call me Carter.”

Quinn looked down into her drink and nodded. “Sorry about that,” she said. “I’m kind of surprised that we hadn’t met before though. Who did you say you knew in the department?”

“Dr. Burkhead,” Carter said. She took a sip of drink, the foam clouding around her lips. “We started the same term.”

“I’ll have to remember to thank her for the recommendation.”

“As will I,” Carter said, tipping her drink to Quinn.

“I’d say don’t thank me yet,” Quinn said, “but the start seems promising. I think you could easily spend years working with a text like this.”

“Great,” Hall said. “I’ll call Randt. Tell him we’re staying indefinitely. Just send the money—no need to forward my mail.”

Mateo clicked his tongue and picked up his beer. “Could have been you, Boss, sitting in the big chair.”

“Yeah, and what would I have done stuck up in an office all day?” Hall said.

“Go barking mad,” Rhetta said.

“Exactly.” Hall nodded, staring off into the distance of the pub. “I’m gonna grow old out on these sites. One day, you’ll just throw the dig dirt over my body behind the site tent.”

“Wow,” Quinn said. Hall’s students laughed, unbothered. Van hugged her drink to her chest and leaned back against Rhetta, who was still shaking with dry laughter.

“But at least we had some fun, yeah?” Hall said. “Something diverse for your CVs or whatever bullshit excuse they use now.”

“So what other sites have you been on?” Quinn asked. She was curious to hear more about other sites, how they had been the same or different from this one. *In case archaeology becomes a hobby in the future, I guess.*

“A few in rural Canada; worked a couple times with a professor down in Chile; Panama one time.”

“The fix-it guy right here,” Mateo said, patting Hall on the back. “He’s the guy that they send in when a site is having trouble. When they can’t find something or don’t know what they’re looking for. He’s got a bloodhound nose for this kind of shit.”

“Yeah, well we’ll see, won’t we?” Hall smiled, crow’s feet appearing in the corners of his tawny brown eyes. Quinn watched him scan over the patrons of the bar, like he was taking in a site, before he settled his gaze on Quinn. She blinked, and he looked away first. Van excused herself to go to the loo while Carter ordered another round.

“What drew you to it?” Quinn said. “I mean, I get you called him, correct?” Quinn pointed to Carter, who nodded. “But why did you say yes? Why this project?”

Hall went silent for a minute, watching over her head at a football match on the grainy television monitor. A group of uni kids stumbled through the door, and one of them peeled away to slap palms with the bartender in what couldn’t properly be called a

handshake. Van sat back down at the table and tucked her head into Rhetta's shoulder. Rhetta kissed her girlfriend's forehead and watched Hall, waiting for him to reply.

"Simple answer is I've never worked in Europe before, I guess," Hall said. He rubbed the back of his neck before waving his hand down toward the table. "I figured it'd be cool to hit another continent, my family homeland actually. My dad's an immigrant from Ireland."

"Is that the long reason?" Quinn said after a pause.

Rhetta watched her boss with open curiosity now. Mateo pretended to be interested in the football match. Quinn thought she saw him smirk, but he buried his nose in his third round, hiding his face from her.

"I like the idea," Hall started, "that I can come into a space that's been worked for so long and give it a new—another voice and another perspective." He paused and smiled at Carter. "No offense, Carter, but I tend to have a bone to pick with historians over some of their storytelling ways."

"All puns intended," Rhetta said.

"What do you mean?" Carter said.

"There's a lot more to history than the story of the winners," Hall said, "and sometimes we don't always see that. That's why I got into digging in the first place. Everyone gets the same voice when you're just going through their junk in the ground." He paused, running his hand along the back of his neck again. "Like I said, I thought it would be cool to do that in a place with so much studied history already, like England."

Quinn hadn't expected a lie, but she saw the way his eyes continued to twitch across the scene of the bar. She knew that academics could be wary of truths like that

sometimes, ironically enough, not wanting to reveal their real reasons for taking on a project.

Fame is too easy. You always have to have another answer on hand. She nodded and smiled down into her half-drunk beer. Hall had played well.

“Is this your favorite site you’ve worked on?” Van spoke up from the corner.

Hall shook his head and covered a laugh with a cough. “No,” he said, “as much as I’d like to say otherwise, favorite site has a very particular story to it.”

“CHILE!” Mateo and Rhetta said in unison. Hall rolled his eyes and set down his beer. A regular across the room beat on the bar top to coach the football team from a great distance.

“Listen,” Hall said with a knowing smile and a light in his eye, “so we’re scaling down the side of this mountain, right?”

They told stories long into the night, a reunion for old memories and similar experiences, and the rain poured outside the pub while the team settled into their new familiarity.

3

“You’ve been summoned.”

Hall yawned as he pulled himself into a seated position on the edge of the bed. He didn’t check the time, certain it was too early for this type of call.

“What’s up?” he said, stifling a second yawn with the back of his hand.

“Dr. Preston needs you in the lab,” Mateo said. “I’ve been told to tell you to shower, shave, and haul ass. She said she’ll see you in an hour.”

By the time Hall got to the lab, Mateo had made himself scarce. Rhetta sat by herself, hunched over an assortment of digging spades recovered from the site, dividing and sorting the specimens into piles with an equally ancient pair of wired headphones clapped over her ears. She moved the flap off her left ear as Hall entered but didn't look up.

"I thought you were out today," she said, pulling one of the artifacts closer to her.

"Dr. Preston called me in," Hall said as he looked around. "Where's Mateo?"

"Coffee run." Rhetta pointed over her shoulder. "She's in the back room."

Hall nodded and moved past the artifact tables into the back office. He knocked before throwing open the door and was greeted by the sight of a room he no longer recognized. The entire office smelled like spilt milk and burnt black coffee. He counted three different ceramic mugs serving as placeholders and paperweights for the towers of leather-bound books with cracked spines that covered nearly every tabletop. Digital scans of the pages were taped across the blank walls, each page blurred with red ink. A dusty box fan hummed in the corner, ruffling the pages of the books closest by and filling the room further with the decaying scent of stale texts. Low hanging hospital lights cast deep shadows on the dark green floor tiles. Commanding the chaos from the middle of it all with her back to the door was Quinn, wearing jogging pants and a grey-green Wellsford pullover that matched the color of the claustrophobic walls. Her hair was matted down beneath a neon blue headband, and she had wired earbuds jammed in her ears. Hall cleared his throat as he closed the door.

"Fantastic, you're here. Have a seat," Quinn said over her shoulder, not turning around from the rolling whiteboard that had been secured against one of the tables. Hall

started to ask where she expected him to find a seat in the mess, but he didn't have time before Quinn appeared at his side.

“What were you listening to?” he said, pointing to his own ear.

“Oh.” Quinn pulled at the headphones as if she had forgotten they were there. She dropped them on the table, and it was only then that Hall realized that they weren't plugged in to anything. “Nothing. I work best in silence, but oddly enough I've found that more people seem to respect the sanctity of headphones over concentration and hard work. Okay!” She clapped her hands. “So what do you know about creole forms?” She paused long enough to readjust her headband, pushing the mass of curls out of her eyes, which were wide with excitement and expectation.

“Nothing,” he said, “save for the spicy food.”

Quinn dashed to the other side of the lab, back to another whiteboard covered in dry erase marker. Symbols even more incomprehensible than those on the pages littered the board, creating a pattern of thought Hall was sure would only be decipherable by one person in particular.

“So when you realize a creole form, the thing to decide first is the superstrate and substrate of the language. The superstrate is the ‘dominant’ language, so to speak, and is where the language gets most of its lexicon from.” Quinn pointed to a large red circle in the top left hand corner of the board that read “NOE.” “In this case, based on the word choice, other texts we have from this period as reference, and the dates of the other artifacts at the site, we can say that the form of English they're using is actually Old English.”

“So this isn't Middle English?” Hall looked back over one of the scans.

“No, it’s too old to be called Middle English, but it also doesn’t look like an ancient copy of Beowulf, which is why it’s understandable that you thought it was Middle English instead.” Quinn abandoned the whiteboard to rummage through a stack of cracked, cotton paper books on the desk.

“Where did I leave the…” she muttered as she let the books crash on top of each other. “Here!” she said, spinning to face Hall, an open map balanced in the crook of her arm, the weight of the book leaning back against her chest. “So, based on the region, I did a rough estimation of what dialect of Old English they would be using—Northumbrian, obviously—and cross-referenced it with any records I could find of the Northumbrian dialect in Old and Middle English. The Modern English form is denatured now, unfortunately, so modern examples won’t help much. But everything else that I’m finding matches the lexical form, so the theory holds.”

“So…the dominant language, within this language, is Northumbrian Old English,” Hall said.

“Possibly.” Quinn dropped the book on top of the pile and walked back to the whiteboard. “The super-sub distinction might become problematic in this case,” she continued, pointing to the circle below the Old English marking. This circle contained the word “Borders” scribbled in black marker. “A lot of the lexicon reflects a Southern Scottish dialect as well, which, again, makes sense given where this was found. I haven’t had time to do a full diagnostic on the Borders use, but with politics at this time and the amount of contact this region had with Southern Scotland, I’m comfortable assuming some level of Scottish influence, at least until I can spend more time determining where the influence becomes apparent.”

She took a swig of coffee from a novelty mug announcing the drinker to be “The Queen of Fucking Everything.” Hall watched Quinn as she drew an asterisk beside a portion of work in the bottom left corner of the board.

“There’s also minor evidence of Middle French, but it’s *too* minor to be considered language influential. It’s more likely borrowing from the fact that Brother Frank was probably educated to write in French before attempting a creole transcription.”

Hall felt his smile fade. His arms crossed over his chest, and his lips pursed as he squinted at the board. Quinn smiled broadly at his discomfort.

“Questions?” she asked.

“Tons,” Hall laughed in reply, smoothing the hair along the nape of his neck. “Okay, so French? You can tell that the writer was French? And his name was Brother who?”

“Brother Frank,” Quinn smiled, glancing back at the board, “that’s my name for him. It feels a bit more personable, not to mention agentive, to call him that instead of just ‘The Author.’ Helps you remember he was an actual human doing all this stuff.

“And I didn’t say he *was* French,” Quinn continued, “but really the only people who knew how to write at this time were monks. Monks were trained to write in French and Latin. This whole thing—” she gestured in a pin-wheeling motion at the scans— “was experimental at best and a massive undertaking. It makes sense that he would have fallen back on his formal education when the transcription became too complicated.”

“Okay, that’s the second time you’ve used that word—‘transcription.’ What does that mean? Where does that come into play?”

Quinn directed his attention to a line of bracketed symbols under one of the scans on the board.

“Phonologists use IPA to transcribe speech. Not the alcohol—International Phonetic Alphabet,” she said. “It tells you exactly how the person said a word, their inflection, their vowel use. It’s basically like a recording but in written form. If we both said the same sentence, our IPA transcriptions wouldn’t look the same, because I don’t have a Boston accent, and you don’t use Midwestern vowels.” Quinn rubbed her thumb over her bottom lip, staring into the void of the board before she ran up and erased one of the symbols, replacing it with what looked like an upside-down lowercase “e.” She nodded then looked back at Hall.

“So IPA didn’t exist at this time, but it makes sense that the scribe was trying to do something similar by writing down the actual form they were speaking in, instead of translating everything into French or Latin.”

Hall wiped a hand over his face, feeling physically exhausted as he tried to understand. “So you’re telling me that this guy knew about all this sub-dom stuff and knew the difference in grammar forms when he was writing all this down?”

Quinn was already shaking her head before he finished, her carrot orange curls bobbling back and forth. “No,” she said, facing away from him, writing another set of notes. “This guy was a genius, but he couldn’t have been conscious of the divisions and divides and grammar structures within the languages enough to write it all down like this. Linguists wouldn’t learn and label this stuff until hundreds of years later. That’s part of the reason the transcription theory makes sense. We can look back, peek through history, and layer all these terms and ideas onto the writing, saying substrate this, lexicon that, but

it's all arbitrary. At the time the scribe was writing, he was just trying to record exactly what was being said, exactly as it was spoken, through a written medium." She shook her head with a laugh. "This really was an incredible undertaking."

"Brother Frank, you were a crazy one," Hall mumbled. "Oi, alright, so what's the rest of this?"

"So the substrate is where a creole derives its grammar structure from. Again, the terminology can be problematic—we probably have at least two substrates here—but for the sake of a basic explanation, we can go with it." Quinn tapped the board with the back end of her dry erase marker. "I made a list of all of the other languages that would have been present or have moved through the area over a five hundred year period and compared their grammar structures with the overarching forms. Best I can figure, it's probably some kind of combination of Norse and Danish from invading language families, which I figured made sense based on what Dr. Gates said the other day about nothing dating past the Norman Invasion, just meant I could stop guessing at languages past that point in history, but I'll know more once I finish the full translation."

Quinn walked over to the table Hall was propped against and sat down on the tabletop, eye-level with Hall as they stared at the expanse of work before them. Hall turned his head to study her for a minute before he spoke again.

"So...you can read this?"

"Not right now, but soon, yeah." A slow smile reached across her face, lighting a spark in her blue eyes. "Yeah, I'll be able to read it."

Hall nodded, returning her smile. "Just tell us what you need." He sighed, looking at the board again. "Dr. Preston, you're a genius."

“Don’t thank me—thank Brother Frank here.”

“Then we’ll drink to Brother Frank tonight, because after all this,” he paused to wave a shaking hand at the room in disarray with notes, books, and folders of scans, “I think we could both use it.”

Quinn laughed, hopping off the table. “You mean *I* could use it,” she said. “You can drink when you contribute.” Quinn grabbed her bag off the corner table as she headed for the door, patting one of the stacks of texts on her way out. “This is my lab now.”

*

“Dr. Bennett, you might have been on to something,” Carter said by way of introduction when she entered the lab.

“I always am,” Hall said, removing his earbuds. “Which one was it this time?”

“What you said the other week on site—Domesday—I couldn’t get it out of my head. So I did a bit of archive digging instead and traced some records, called in a few favors with some friend who know a bit more about land records than I do. I think we were able to trace the ownership of the land to its first family name.”

“And?”

Carter pulled a stack of printouts from her shoulder bag and handed them to Hall. “Lord and Lady Stallingsworth. Their land deeds go back as far as 1230, and they aren’t listed as traditional firsts of their names. Paper trail suggests that the family could have been one of the first offered power by William the Conqueror.”

“Old, old money,” Hall said, leafing through the pages. Several land deeds in olden script were stapled to family trees and property tariff sheets. “Right, so this still doesn’t tell us what happened to the people living on the land in our timeframe. Just

because this other family owned the land doesn't mean that these people had any interaction with them."

"No, it doesn't help us much, does it," Carter said, "but like I said, just couldn't get it out of my head."

"My words tend to have that effect on people," Hall said with a grin, handing Carter back her research. "Why don't you come join us? Quinn and I are about to get started on some debrief." Hall brought Carter back to Quinn's lab room where one of Rhetta's whiteboards had been erased to allow for another working surface.

"I brought a friend," Hall said when they entered.

Quinn looked up from her perch on top of one of the lab tables, her lap filled with legal pad pages. "Good morning, Carter."

"Good morning. What are we working on?"

"I just wanted to take a minute to do a holistic review," Quinn said. "Really just needed an out-loud sounding board."

"Carter might have brought something to add to that," Hall said.

"Like I said, Hall, I don't know how helpful it will be," Carter said, "but you're welcome to what I have, Quinn." She handed off the records. "It's the land deeds for our site."

"How far back do they go?" Quinn traced along the records with a capped dry erase marker as she read.

"1230."

"But our site is from...?"

"Just north of 1100," Hall said.

“Like I said, not terribly insightful.”

“But it gives us a trajectory,” Hall said. “We know where they ended up, even if it wasn’t these exact people.”

“So,” Quinn said, tapping the marker against her knee, “this band of people—”

“Tribe,” Hall said. “Best indication is that the group is tribe level—no clear stratification—but let’s avoid dodgy terms.” Hall looked over at Carter, who shrugged and nodded her silent agreement. “Just call them the group.”

“You’re going to explain that to me later,” Quinn said. “Okay, so this *group* inhabited the land, then the next record we have is for the people associated with this family. They owned the land—do we have proof they lived on it?”

“No,” Carter said, “but if they owned it, they would have had some interaction with inhabitants, at least as tax collectors, and that could have been the actual family or people who served the family.” Carter pointed back to the stack of work she had brought. “Somewhere in there is a family crest drawing. If the family was rich enough to have a coat of arms at that time, they would more likely than not have people working in their name who would also use that crest.” She rounded the table to stand in front of the blank whiteboard, an open red marker in her hand. Carter fashioned a straight line as she could and began marking out points on the timeline to correspond with the items she had just listed, leaving plenty of room for more points and discussion to come.

“So what happened to the group before this family took over?” Quinn said.

“They could have moved, pushed out by the noble family moving in,” Carter said.

“I don’t think we would have found as many artifacts for them in this area if they had willingly moved their lives like that,” Hall said. “They would have taken all of this

stuff with them. We've found pottery shards and stuff like that, the discard pile or whatever, but we've also found entire fabric garments, pottery and tools in good condition, and wooden religious relics."

"So your theory is that they left too much behind to have moved willingly," Carter said. "Who said it was willing?" She stepped back to look at her handiwork.

"Who's to say they actually moved?" Quinn said. Both of the other professors turned to look at her.

"So what happened to them?" Hall said. "Alien abduction?"

"It seems unlikely that the document you all found would have been left behind," Quinn said. "This document was a living record for them, of their group, their families. I have a hard time coming up with an explanation as to why it would have gotten left behind if the entire group moved when a new family came into town." Quinn shifted the work in her lap and dropped her long legs over the edge of the table, her sneakered feet almost touching the ground.

"Precisely," Carter said, "which supports the theory that the move was not voluntary nor under amiable conditions. They could have been forced out, and the document got left in the rush, just like the rest of our artifacts."

"Hold up," Hall said, "go back to your original question—'Who says they actually moved?' What do you think happened to them then?" Hall leaned his weight against the lab table as he looked at Quinn, his arms over his chest, the red ink roses on his arm fluid and shifting like real roses in the summer air as his muscles tightened and curved.

“The only reason a document like this gets left is because the author dies,” Quinn said.

“Okay, so the scribe died,” Carter said. “That doesn’t mean the rest of the group didn’t move. If the author wasn’t around to advocate for his work, it was probably forgotten in the move.”

“That’s true,” Hall said. “There wasn’t exactly a scribe on every street corner at this time.”

“Or it no longer became necessary to finish this work,” Quinn said.

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning I’ve got a lot of work to do,” Quinn said. She shoved her headphones into her ears and hopped down from the table. She walked in front of the board, blocking Hall and Carter’s views as if they weren’t there.

“As do we,” Carter said, opening the door back into the artifact lab and holding it open for Hall after her.

4

The lab was a timeless void, so it didn’t surprise Quinn when she realized it was past 11:00 pm. The sterile hang lights and quiet drone of the box fan mixed together to create the set of a B-list horror movie. The Wellsford walls were supposed to be forest green, but the longer Quinn stared at them, the more she thought that the forest would have to be really sick or running a fever to look that color.

Quinn’s lips broke with a sigh, her arms dropping against the table, weighted down by the combatting jitters of excessive caffeine and the languidness of dehydration. The bruised, purple bags under her eyes grew heavier too. She leaned her head forward,

stretching the muscles in her neck that were tight like guitar strings as the ridges of her spine bulged from under her freckled skin. She let her curls hang around her overheated cheeks while she breathed into her chest. She savored the relative silence of the room, something she hadn't gotten enough of in a while. She was enjoying the chaos of working with other scholars—of working with Hall. She was a few years removed from the fieldwork of her doctorate program, and she had forgotten how much she missed being out in the world, surrounded by people and their language. She was amazed at how well they worked together, coming from two different disciplines for a project like this. She didn't want to let this feeling go.

She picked up her head to reference her whiteboard notes. She had reached the point of translation and had decided to start with the last page. The twenty lines and their word-for-word translations were scattered across her table and annotated in clean form on two stationary whiteboards. Quinn read the lines out loud again.

This can't be right. I must have messed something up...word order...something. Quinn shuffled her notes and found a clean page to start over. *Verb-object-subject. Past tense, past tense, present. Can this...can this be read with future implications? Old English doesn't have a future tense, so what makes more sense? Past, past, present; or past, past, present-to-future implicative?* She glanced back at her original work. *Does it make a difference in the final meaning? Probably not. Just leaves you stressing about Observer's Paradox in translation—good times.*

Quinn couldn't get around it. Her translation wasn't going to change, and she had nothing left to do but present her work.

“Well, this was fun while it lasted,” she said to the clutter of the lab.

What now? A voice in the back of her head answered. *Don't call Hall.* Not because it was almost midnight now. Something in her said that Hall would not be as numb to this new information as Quinn felt. He would get emotional and rage and ruin her moment. She still needed time to think, and she needed someone else to talk to. Quinn pulled her laptop off the charger by the box fan and opened up her email. She typed out a quick request and sent it off before packing up her bag and shrugging into her pullover. She didn't want to wait until morning, but after almost a thousand years, she figured a few hours wouldn't make much of a difference.

She closed up the lab and hailed a cab to her flat where she tossed her way through a few restless hours of sleep. She dreamed in pastorals and invasion parties, phrases of broken English floating in her head.

*

Quinn opened the lab back up the next morning and took up a station next to the entrance, waiting for Carter. When she arrived, Quinn led her to the back lab with no introduction.

"Thank you for coming," Quinn said once the door was shut.

"Of course," Carter said, "though I don't exactly know why I'm here."

"I have something you need to read." Quinn motioned to a chair behind the desk. Quinn could feel Carter watching her, tracking her motions as she shuffled around the office, displacing books and dragging around whiteboards on locked wheels until the room's two boards were facing Carter. Each board was covered in alternating lines of red and black writing, the red full of the artifact's unfamiliar symbols and the black spelling out American English.

“Were you able to translate it already?” Carter said.

“This is just part of it,” Quinn said, picking up a pile of stray papers. She balanced the papers between her flat palms before flopping the stack on the desk. “That’s the majority of it. Feel free to use any of it as reference.”

Carter leafed through the smattering of papers. The handwriting was almost legible, the words crossing over each other several times and sharp cross-out marks bleeding through both sides of the pages. “What’s the significance of the board writing?”

“This is the last twenty lines,” Quinn said. “I figured if we were looking for a thesis or a purpose in the piece it would either come at the beginning or the end. I decided to work down through the text to try and familiarize myself with the author’s syntax and style so that I could feel more confident in the final translations. Just one translation style, and I’m glad you all had the forethought to label the order that the pages were found in.”

“Order can’t inherently be trusted.”

“Yes, but the page that was listed as the last to be found was also the page that ended in the middle and on a fragmented sentence. It might just be the luck of the draw, but for the purposes of hopefully reaching a conclusion and not just talking ourselves into a circle of what could, might, or wouldn’t be the possibilities for a piece like this, we’ll go with discovery as chronology.”

“So you believe these twenty lines are the thesis of the work as a whole?” Carter said.

“To some extent. I believe these lines are the most significant and are the most...well, I don’t know the right word for it really.” She sighed and waved a finger at the boards. “Just read it for yourself.”

Carter studied the boards. She kept her eye trained on the black writing. Quinn watched her read the twenty lines of text again and again. Quinn recited them to herself, like a mantra, as she waited for Carter's reaction. *"Then came they, the men of red and white with birds on their chests. Came they with horses great (comparative), and came they with steel. Destroyed homes they fire, and destroyed men they steel. They said we work for/with the family now. Take women they and take children they away to make them men of red and white with birds on their chests. The sheep and asses are dead. Close/near state of death/dead am I. Death (comparative) good to life for/with the men of red and white with bird"*

"Why didn't you call Hall first?" Carter said, setting the documents aside.

"I know what he's going to think," Quinn said. "I wanted an unbiased opinion first." She crossed her arms over her chest. Carter glanced at the table. She slid aside a page of transcription to skim over the page underneath. When she was done, she fixed her sharp brown stare back on Quinn.

"I fail to see what there is to have an opinion on," Carter said. "You've done tremendous work, Dr. Preston."

"Thank you," Quinn said. The pressure in her chest loosened hearing Carter say what she had been too cautious to admit.

"What about the rest of the red writing?"

"It's the same. The black is modern English sentences, so some of it is compressed compared to the number of creole words. 'Then came they' is all line one on the parchment, and 'the men of red and white with birds on their chests,' each time it's repeated, it get its own parchment line."

“I wonder what we could read into that,” Carter said. “Can you clean the rest of this up? Make it more like your board work?”

“I can do my best,” Quinn said, coming around to stand behind Carter, looking over her shoulder at the sheet in her hand. “I still need the reference to the original symbols and grammar though. And all the punctuation is implied or added in to some extent. Old English wasn’t big on commas. I know that it isn’t reader-friendly to anyone outside of academia, or even just the linguistic community, but I don’t think that should be the focus right now. As long as *we* know what we’re dealing with.”

Carter nodded. “That makes sense. Then I don’t see a reason not to call him.”

“We’ll just wait until he comes in,” Quinn said.

Carter sighed and grimaced as she rubbed at her left knee. “I’m going to get coffee then, in case this wasn’t enough of a wake up call. Do you need anything?”

“Probably not anything that coffee can fix, but I’ll go with you.”

Carter opened the door back into the main lab, and both were surprised to see the door to Hall’s office open and the lights on.

“Hall?” Quinn said.

“Morning,” he called back and appeared in the office entrance a minute later.

“Carter, I didn’t know you were coming in this morning.”

“Quinn asked me in,” Carter said, “and we have something to show you.”

Hall followed them back into Quinn’s lab as she braced for what he was about to see.

“Is this the translation already?” Hall said, making a bee-line for the whiteboards.

“Part of it,” Quinn said. “I don’t have a side-by-side of the whole thing. This is just the last twenty lines.”

Hall read the translation aloud.

“‘Then came they, the men of red and white with birds on their chests. Came they with horses greater, and came they with steel. Destroyed homes they fire, and destroyed men they steel.’ What is this supposed to mean?”

Quinn underlined the last sentence Hall had read. “‘Fire’ and ‘steel’ here are in the instrumental form. So think of it as ‘destroyed homes they by means of fire, and destroyed men they by means of steel.’”

“So ‘they burnt the homes with fire, and they killed people with steel swords’ right?”

Quinn shook in her head. “The text doesn’t say ‘swords.’”

“Right, but it’s kind of implied?”

“I don’t feel comfortable implying modern meanings over the words or forms. I tried my best to keep as much translator’s bias and analysis out of this as I could. Let’s just stick to words on the page.”

“Fair enough,” Hall said. He kept reading. “‘They said we work for/with the family now.’ What’s this question mark here?” Hall drew an air circle around the marking next to “work” in the sentence on the board.

“I can’t decide if that verb has future implication,” Quinn said, biting at her thumbnail. “Old English doesn’t have a future tense. So, technically, there is no future implication, but sometimes when translating into modern English, you can read a future implication into it. I think this might be one of those cases, but again, I don’t want to

assume anything about the text that isn't expressly there, just to start with as academic of a base as possible.”

“Take women they and take children they away to make them men of red and white with birds on their chests. The sheep and asses are dead. Close/near state of death/dead am I.’ Holy shit...”

They sat in silence while Hall finished reading. He collapsed into a chair and stared, unblinking, at the board. The box fan ticked, and outside, a group of students were yelling on the lawn, rehearsing a play.

“Who are ‘the men of red and white?’” he said after a few minutes. Quinn didn’t reply but searched through a pile of notes and retrieved a color printout. She handed the sheet to Hall. It was a picture of a coat of arms, red and white diagonal stripes covering the shield with the silhouette of an owl, wings outstretched, centered on the crest. The name under the coat of arms was Stallingsworth.

“They’re the ones who owned the land,” Hall said. “We didn’t know how they came in possession of it. This is it.” He hopped up from his chair, still brandishing the coat of arms. “This is how. They must have been gifted the land by the conquering forces or maybe they just took the land, but they killed off the inhabitants. We don’t know if they lived on the land afterwards, but this is it. This is proof! ‘We serve the family of the men of red and white with birds on their chests.’ That’s proof. This is...this is horrifying.”

“It is horrifying,” Quinn said, “but we really don’t know exactly what it is. It feels like a lot of speculation, Hall.”

“What do you mean speculation? It’s your translation.”

“Yes, but the narrator says that he is close to death. He doesn’t say the men of red and white killed him.”

“Right, but he does say that the men of red and white killed men by means of swords and fire.” Hall jabbed a finger at the writing as he spoke, causing the board to teeter on its hinges.

Quinn shook her head again. “That’s a lot of interpretation.”

“She’s right, Hall,” Carter said. “We can’t assume that any of this is causal except for the things that are directly stated as causal in the text. We have to be careful with something like this.”

“Careful? This could be genocide!”

“Why are we the people responsible for deciding that?” Carter asked.

Hall crossed his arms. “Well, who else is going to get justice for these people?”

“Oh, don’t come in here with your white savior bollocks,” Carter said. “These people have been dead for hundreds of years, Hall. Modern justice won’t help them *at all*.”

“She’s right, Hall,” Quinn said. He tilted his gaze up into her eyes. “There’s only so much we can do, and we shouldn’t jump to conclusions. All we can do is report what we have. The translation has to be in their form, in their word order, without modern narrative construction.”

“We’re going to see this through,” Hall said, his arms still crossed. “We owe them the right to have their story heard and recognized. I don’t care how that gets done, but it’s going to happen. It needs to happen in a way that people can understand.”

So much for a "boring site," Quinn thought, watching Hall's eyes dart around, not settling for long before his frantic mind shifted them elsewhere. *He's probably just glad for something to tell the school.* Quinn squinted at the whiteboards and sighed. She changed out a translator note. *My chair will want to see this too.*

"Not at the expense of telling the story correctly," Carter said. "Just because you feel like something wrong has been done doesn't mean you get to change the narrative to justify your feeling."

"So if the story didn't come from the winning side, it doesn't deserve to be heard anymore?" Hall said. The room fell silent, save for the whirl of the fan in the corner. "I don't need to exaggerate the story to be appalled by it, but I'm also not going to let academia get in the way of making their voices heard and making sure people *understand* what happened."

"It's not our job to decide judgment," Carter said. "Whether you like it or not, this is academic. This is research. Our one and only job is to make a discovery and report our findings. That's all we can do."

"Right, and what we've discovered is evidently a devastating injustice against these people."

"Hall," Carter said, putting her hand down on the table in front of him, "you made a discovery. Now just report your facts. That's how you can help these people. Don't let your emotion get in the way of it, that's all I'm saying. The story will become clear, but don't force your ideas on Quinn's work. That doesn't help you, and it doesn't give legitimacy to Quinn's work if you blow it out of proportion by going on a crusade." Carter sat back and crossed her arms, meeting Hall's eye with a calm stare. "What will

help these people is a level-head and an iron will. All three of us have the will down pat. You have to prove you can keep a level-head. Otherwise we're not going to get very far."

He put down the printout that had crinkled in his angry grip and crossed his arms. He reread the work on the board then uncrossed his arms and put a hand out on the table, his pinkie almost touching Quinn's.

"Congratulations, Dr. Preston," he said, his voice tight with frustration. "This is very important work."

Quinn didn't reply right away. She stared at the board, then pulled her eyes away and hung her head. She moved her hand to cover Hall's before pulling it away and wrapping her arms around herself. "Then why does it feel so shitty?"

5

He told the team to pack up their kits and go home—he would take down the tent. It was their final day of fieldwork, and the weather had predicated storms that morning. The field students had spent most of the morning staring at the clouds instead of doing their work, and Hall didn't have the patience for it. Once they left, the silence of the valley felt peaceful. The wind picked up, and it started to drizzle. Hall marked off the corners of the quadrants and wound the rope, from the palm of his hand to his elbow and around again. He paced as he wound, following the path of the site, deliberate steps that sank deeper into the mud as the drizzle turned into steady rain. He walked in the steps of the people that he was dissecting and wondered what they would have wanted.

To live. To have a family. To grow happy and die and never be the wiser. He turned the corner of Quad 1. None the wiser to what? How the world would turn out? How they wouldn't be remembered?

Hall stood still, the rope slick against his skin. The fabric of the tent buckled under the pressure of the stinging wind. The carabineers clanked against the metal poles that held the last of the site work in place. The piles of resettled dirt melted in the rain and ran down into the open crevices of the dig, molten earth that buried the past again. Hall watched the holes fill in and wondered if he should have covered the open digs with the tarps from the truck. He resumed his pacing, collecting the rope border.

We have what we need, he thought. We have the manuscript. I have the power to change their history. I can make the world remember them.

Carter's words came echoing back in his mind, that modern justice wouldn't help them. Hall felt sure that Carter would have raised the question of if they would have even cared about being remembered.

Of course they would. Everyone wants to be remembered.

A length of the rope became twisted. Hall shook the rope, flinging parts of it in and out of the mud in an attempt to straighten the kink. He pulled at the rope and wrapped the mud-drench section around his palm and elbow with the rest of the coil.

The team has put in a lot of work. Dr. Gates and her few students, Rhetta, Mateo, and Quinn especially. This is about them now. They've put in the hours and worked so hard to get this done, to make these people remembered. This is their time in the spotlight.

Hall continued to retrace the perimeter of the site until his arm was immobile from the climber's rope. He tied off the coil and packed it into the plastic tool trunk propped open under the site tent. He emptied the last of the tabletop items into the same tub and locked the lid before scaling the slick hill. The trunk to the land rover was already

open, and rain had collected on the tailgate. Hall loaded the bin and turned down the hill again.

The rain glued his hair to his forehead, but Hall paid it no mind. The rain reminded him of weekends on the harbor in Boston. When it rained and the wind blew across the ocean and the ocean rained salt on the shore. The boats knocked against their anchor chains, the sails clanking against the masts like the tent against its supports. His father would say that the noise scared off the titans of the ocean, warned them that this was protected ground and guarded land. His family had lived along the water his whole life and had bested the ocean through many storms. Hall wondered if the valley was protected too, and the rain began to fall harder from the sky.

Hall ducked under the tent and pulled up the stakes that kept the folding tables in place. He kicked in the legs and stacked the tables on the dry ground before hoisting them onto his shoulder to trek them up into the car. Once the last of the equipment was loaded, he had nothing left to do but roll up the fabric of the site tent and break down the frame of the shelter.

The rain didn't let up as Hall finished, but he still didn't close the trunk. He sat in the lake of the tailgate and looked over the past, marked out by four stakes and a flooding valley. Hundreds of years ago, the land had been a home, and for a while, it had been Hall's home too. He felt a sense of ownership and the sinking feeling that he had let this place down.

You won't be forgotten. Lightning struck a tree in the distance, and Hall slid off the tailgate. He secured the trunk and climbed into the driver's seat, the floorboard pooling with the water that dripped off his clothes. The tires on the rover spun before

catching on the soft earth, and Hall pulled onto the gravel road. He watched the edge of the valley shrink in the mirror as his mounting responsibility loomed like the rolling storm cloud in front of his windscreen.

*

Quinn's office hadn't changed that much since the last time Hall had been inside, but somehow this time, it seemed to make more sense. He sat in the same well-worn fabric chair, and Quinn had to displace an entire stack of research texts onto the floor to make room for the notes Hall had brought from the lab.

In the shuffle and rearranging, a picture frame tipped off the desk and landed face down on the patterned brown carpet. Hall picked it up and turned it over. It was a portrait of Quinn, cheek to cheek with an African woman with natural hair and piercing blue eyes. She had one arm wrapped around Quinn's shoulders and the other leaning against her chest. Quinn wore one of her signature woven headbands and beamed at the camera with a carelessness Hall had never seen her wear in person.

"That's a good picture," he said as he replaced the frame on her desk. Quinn turned to see what he was referring to and grinned.

"Thanks," she said. "That was a good day."

"Who is she, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Lila," Quinn said. Hall looked up from the picture to see her smiling, her eyes distant in a memory he couldn't see. "She was my fiancée at the time. We were engaged while I was a PhD candidate. She was a freelance photographer in town, only really had paying work during matriculation and graduation."

“Were?” Hall said. Quinn adjusted her seat. “I don’t mean to pry,” he said, sensing her discomfort. Quinn shrugged.

“No, there’s not really a story is all. We both had...insecurities. Her family had a hard time with us. There weren’t any hard feelings. It just didn’t work out, called it off a month beforehand.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Me too, at times. We were happy for a while. I keep the picture just for that, honestly. I like to remember being happy.” Quinn pulled back her hair and sighed. She reached over and put the picture face down on the desk. “Ready to get started?”

“This is the part I suck at, honestly,” Hall said.

“Why? Because it makes you feel too much like a historian?”

“Carter wasn’t entirely wrong the other day,” Hall said. “My instinct is to turn everything into a crusade about personal narrative. That doesn’t read very academic. I don’t want to give her credit for it, but I probably needed to hear it. Speaking of whom, why isn’t she contributing to this?” Hall propped his open laptop on his knees and began fiddling with the formatting on their shared document.

“It’s about the balance of the two. Granted, I don’t know what that balance is either, but we’ll figure it out as we go along. Also, this is just the abstract. It doesn’t take three people to write an abstract. Besides, it will be better to have one person with fresh eyes doing the read through afterwards.”

“Right so here we go. ‘Herein lies the last will and testament of the’...do we even have a name for them?” Hall shook his head, already ready to give in and slam the lid of the computer shut for the night.

“Maybe let’s not start there,” Quinn said. “If we write the analytical work, we can write the narrative around it.”

“So do you want a language analysis first or site timeline?” Hall paused. “This is going to be really hard to write without first person.”

“What’s wrong with first person?”

“Isn’t it not very professional?” Hall said. “Does it degrade the academia do you think?”

“I think we should get a draft on paper then worry about things like style,” Quinn said, getting up from her chair to pace the shoebox of an office.

“We should just open with your translation and work backwards from there. ‘Here’s an account of these people’s history, in their own words, and here’s why we believe them.’”

“Then that means starting with the critical language analysis.”

“And we’re against that because...?”

“Well, I think it makes the most sense if we do it in order. Start with how you got to the site, methodology, and what you discovered, which includes the parchment which leads into the translation.” She ticked off her talking points on her fingers as she continued to pace. Hall itched at his forearm, over one of the roses there, then crossed his arms.

“I think some of that is going to feel unnecessary by the time we actually get to the heart of the article.”

“Again,” Quinn said, “we can figure that out afterwards. For right now, it all just needs to go on the page.”

“Then why are we writing something separate? Let’s just publish a collection of field notes.”

“That doesn’t have the narrative explanation that the work needs, though.”

They continued back and forth, volleying ideas across the desk until two hours had passed and the document was still blank.

“This isn’t working,” Hall said, rubbing at the back of his neck. Quinn spun around in her desk chair.

“Change of scenery?”

*

“This is better,” Hall said.

The back corner of The Boar and The Bull’s-eye had been returned to its normal three table set up, and Hall and Quinn sat across from each other at one of the tables, their laptops crowding the space. The shared document was open on both screens.

“Alright, so let’s start,” Quinn said. “Do you think we should name them?”

“*What* would we name them?”

“I think that’s what you get to do. The power of the discoverer.”

“In theory, that makes sense,” Hall said. He scratched the back of his neck. “Lot of pressure though. Are you going to name the language?”

“Probably,” Quinn said. “Probably just use the name of the group or region and put ‘English’ after it. You know, like Southern English in America or British English.”

“So now the pressure’s twofold to not pick something stupid,” Hall said. “They didn’t exactly offer a class on this in grad school.”

“Yeah, I doubt they offered classes on ‘what to do when you uncover mass tragedy’ either, but we’ll make it work.”

Hall gave a hollow chuckle. “I guess this isn’t exactly what you thought you were going to be working with when I first sent you that email, huh?” he said, looking over his laptop to watch the corners of Quinn’s eyes crinkle as she smiled and her cheeks dimpled.

“It...uh.” Quinn laughed. “It sounds terrible if I say it’s better than I expected. It’s horrible, obviously, what happened, but the project is incredible. This once-in-a-lifetime thing...I.” She paused, staring at their blank page before meeting Hall’s gaze. “I had a really hard time in graduate school, figuring out what I wanted my focus or my emphasis to be. I think sometimes I almost stumbled onto the history of the English language on accident. The other students in my program all had these grand schemes and ideas and ways to change the world. I just liked studying and listening to people talk. Dialect studies got me interested in how a base language started to diverge into regional and historical patterns. That got me working backwards through history.” She looked over her shoulder when the door to the pub dinged open and banged shut. “I was always the youngest in the program, the department, and I was the one who didn’t have a big plan to change the world. I just wanted to keep studying. But something like this...makes me feel like maybe I did something right and like maybe I can do some good.” She cleared her throat and readjusted her headband. “I’m going to grab a drink.”

She fumbled in her bag for her wallet and went to the bar. Hall sat in the silence of her absence and thought about what she had said. When she sat back down, beer in hand, Hall shut the lid to his laptop.

“Thank you for telling me your story,” he said. It sounded awkward and formal on his lips, but he knew it was the right thing to say.

Quinn tipped her chin up, almost in pride, and her cheeks got a little redder. “You’re welcome.”

“You know, I didn’t think this site was going to turn out to be anything,” he said. Quinn leaned forward, resting her chin against her fist. “We weren’t really finding anything remarkable, and I felt like this place had been pawned off on me. I’ve made my career on being the guy who can find gold at any site, mostly because for my first few years, I was getting shit fields. I always had to find something to prove myself. It wasn’t an option. I didn’t want this one to tank it for me after all these years.”

“You needed to find gold,” Quinn said.

Hall nodded. “Yeah, but now...I don’t know if it was worth it.”

“You don’t mean that. This is the site of a lifetime.”

“Yeah,” Hall said, “people kept saying that, but it didn’t change how I felt...I’m just worried that I won’t be able to do enough. It’s like...when you know something, and you want to do something about it, but you’re worried that it won’t be enough. Was it worth all the trouble of unearthing all this horror if I really can’t make a change? I’m excited. I want to be excited. I’ve gone months at this point thinking that this was going to be a waste, like I was losing my touch or something and there was someone else I could have been...avenging in the meantime or whatever. It was nothing, then it was normal, then you showed up and said it was really like...powerful.” He scratched at his neck and shrugged. “I don’t know. I just want to make sure that it all makes a difference.”

“It will,” Quinn said. “There’s only one way to make sure of that. We just have to keep fighting for it.”

Hall smiled and decided he didn’t want to look away. Quinn looked down at her screen, then at Hall, and back again.

“So, back to the name...”

*

It took weeks to finish the draft. They spent plenty of nights at The Boar and the Bull’s-eye. Quinn did most of the writing, correcting her thoughts as she went. Hall supplied the history and the chronology of the excavation leading up to the discovery of the parchment. They argued back and forth over relevant facts, satellite pictures, how many language studies to include, and whether or not to mention their findings with the land records. Mateo and Rhetta served as readers and sat in on a few writing sessions until Hall got tired of Rhetta correcting his comma mistakes over his shoulder.

It was just past midnight on a Tuesday when they typed the last word, and the three scholars sat in front of Hall’s computer, staring at the finished project. The television in the bar was uncharacteristically switched off, and the noise of the bar patrons felt like a whisper compared to the ringing in Hall’s ears.

“I’m going to be sick,” Hall said under his breath. “Is this the part where I’m supposed to give some shitty speech?”

“Are we sure about this part here?” Carter said, leaning over to point at the section on the land rights, the name Stallingsworth glaring up at them from the screen. “It almost feels unrelated.”

Hall shrugged and scrolled back to the top. “I don’t see the issue with it.”

“It’s part of the findings, connection or not,” Quinn said.

Carter leaned over to fix a period in the query email, and Quinn squeezed Hall’s hand under the table. He looked down at their hands then back at the computer. *Don’t overthink it.*

Quinn took advantage of Hall being distracted and reached her other hand over to hit send. She shrugged when the other two professors blinked at her in surprise. “No point in dragging it out,” she said. “Nothing left to do now but wait.”

THE AFTERMATH

1

What is that poor fool doing? Evelyn thought. She stood looking out the window of her second floor office, watching the gardener clip another rosebud off the bushes that lined the gate in front of the white brick townhouse. *We'll end up losing all the current buds if he keeps cutting them that closely.*

Pale sunlight pressed against the dreary fog that hung over St. James's Park but wasn't strong enough to disturb the haze. The streets were filled with Sunday walkers, dogs trotting through day-old puddles, lost tourists who had strayed too far from the palace road. Somewhere deep in her house, the dissonant sounds of a piano—the keys being dusted, the lid clattering shut. Charlie had told her the house staff would be cleaning that morning. She had chosen not to leave the city for the weekend as she normally did, though now she couldn't think of why.

She looked back down in time to see a small Audi town car roll past the gardener and park beneath Evelyn's window. *A businessman's vehicle, someone who should know better than to visit on a Sunday.* The outer ledge of the windowsill prevented her from seeing who exited the car. A moment later, the doorbell rang, and the house grew quiet. Moments after that, the town car backed out of the drive as the housework resumed and the sink came on in the downstairs bathroom. The gardener clipped another rosebud.

Evelyn strode across the room to take up position behind her pedestal desk. It was a gift from Arthur—back when they still gave gifts—a piece from his late mother’s collection. She crossed her ankles and adjusted her seat in the refurbished leather chair. The desk was clean and organized, save for her charity account books spread out before her on the over-waxed walnut surface. Evelyn opened the carved drawer at her right knee and glanced into her personal accounts before closing the drawer and adding another zero to the charity total. She began to stack the balanced books when a knock came at her office door, and she reset the line of pearls at her neck.

“Enter,” she said, reaching for a letter from the box aligned perfectly with the corner of the tabletop. The door clicked open, and the butler shuffled in to drop a paper stack bound by thick metal fasteners on the desk.

“And what’s this?” She looked up from the letter in her hand, the wax seal on the envelope crackling under her chiseled nails.

“Lord Conway’s man just delivered it,” her butler, Charlie, said, “the report from Wellsford, Ma’am.”

“Has Arthur been made aware of this?” Evelyn put down the letter and sliced through the envelope on another.

“Of course not, Madame,” Charlie said. “Lord Stallingsworth is to be away at the doctor most of today.”

“For the better.” *Best not to worry him yet.* Her friend’s words echoed in her head, and the stack on her desk looked too big to be nothing.

Charlie bowed his head and retreated from the room. Evelyn abandoned the letter in favor of the thick article as soon as the door clicked shut. She didn’t make it past the

abstract before setting the document down, leaning her elbows against the desk and putting her head in her hands. A nervous pressure crept into her bones, worry that she remembered feeling on the way to Cortland Hall as she had pulled at a seam in her pantyhose and tucked her toes back into her cream colored heels while their family Rover had continued to rumbled down the broken road.

“You can quit with your fussing, Evelyn,” Arthur had said, his breathing still heavy from having loaded himself into the vehicle. His huffing turned into a sharp, wheezing cough. His portly belly heaved over the buttons of his vest as he doubled over hacking. Arthur sniffled, clearing his throat once he had regained his breath and pushed the white wisps of hair back across his patchy scalp.

“And maybe you could benefit to fuss a little more,” Evelyn said, patting his good knee across the middle seat. Arthur waved her hand away.

“I haven’t many people to impress anymore, darling.”

“And I do?”

Arthur chuckled. “You always think you do.”

Evelyn arched her back and turned to watch the city melt into countryside outside the tinted window. They rode the rest of the way in silence until the driver delivered them in front of the wide entrance to Lord Conway’s country home. Evelyn started toward the house, leaving the driver to haul her husband out of the back seat. She waited until Arthur made it to the entrance before ringing the pull bell. One of the housemaids allowed them entrance and led the couple into the dining room.

“Dame Evelyn, Arthur, it’s a pleasure to receive you both,” Lady Nancy Conway said as the housemaid shut the glass doors. The first thing that Evelyn noticed was how

closely Lady Conway's dress pattern matched the runner on the oblong dining table. "We are only too glad that you could both find time to be here tonight."

"Nancy, the pleasure is ours," Evelyn said, leaning in to kiss her host's over-powdered cheeks.

"Arthur!" Lord Henry Conway shouted from across the room, detaching himself from the group of aspiring gentlemen. "Well, it's just fantastic to see you, you old so-and-so."

Arthur gave a hearty smile and stole a glass of champagne from a passing waiter. He toasted his host before turning his glass toward Evelyn.

"To your health and society, Lady Stallingsworth," he said with a grin, raising the drink to his lips. Evelyn moved away from her husband to hide the sad downturn of her crinkled mouth.

"Evelyn, how are the children, dear?" Nancy asked, taking her arm. "I worry that we were not able to contribute significantly this year. There is always so much to be done for them. It's hard to feel as though you've made a difference."

"I assure you, Nancy," Evelyn said, patting the young woman's hand, "we make do with the contributions that we do get."

Nancy was slow to react before letting out a shrill laugh like a songbird, and the sharp noise rattled off the teardrop chandelier. "*Dame* Evelyn, I hardly think anyone in this society can accuse you of doing otherwise."

"I should think," Evelyn said, adjusting her pearls with a sharp look at her husband, who was already reaching for another drink as he let himself be pulled into a gentlemen's conversation in the corner.

Lady Conway slipped away in the matted shine of her dinner guests. Evelyn remained where she was, admiring the tailored discomfort of the crowd. Everyone kept their voices low, eavesdropping while they continued their conversations. Even the youngest among the crowd looked aged beyond their years in pin-tight cuffs, stiff shouldered jackets, and high neck lapels.

Lord Conway met Evelyn's gaze from across the room. He excused himself from his conversation and walked over to her.

"Dame Evelyn," he said, "I apologize for the intrusion." A waiter passed in front of them, his shoes snicking against the wood floor. "Might I have a word?"

"Of course, Henry," Evelyn said. Lord Conway placed a thin hand in the middle of her back, guiding her toward the parlor and away from the rest of the guests.

"Sherry?" he asked, gesturing to a tray on one of the side tables.

"If you please," Evelyn said, letting him slip a glass into her hand. Lord Conway tapped his own glass against hers before taking a sip.

"I invited you tonight to offer you a warning," the lord said.

"And here I thought you genuinely missed our company, Henry," Evelyn said. "It really has been too long. I'm sure Arthur has missed you greatly at the club, and I know travelling so much has taken a toll on Nancy's social endeavors." Lord Conway shifted his weight to his other foot. "A shame she feels she can't give more to the charity this year. I'm not sure if her name will last much longer on the shortlist for our Easter garden party this season."

"It won't be much longer for you and Arthur either, unless you hear what I have to say."

Evelyn took a measured sip of her drink. “Well, go on then,” she said. “I haven’t much time for idle threats, dear.”

“A friend is the dean at Wellsford College. Are you familiar with it?”

Evelyn motioned that she wasn’t. Lady Conway’s laugh echoed from the other room.

“Smaller school, known for attracting larger projects, a rather big school for grants as it turns out. A visiting researcher and a relatively young lecturer at Wellsford have published a paper on their work, and apparently it is causing quite a stir.”

“Well for goodness’ sake, Henry, a stir doesn’t do me much good. Do tell me why I am here.”

“You are named, Evelyn—Arthur’s entire line.” Lord Conway fell quiet for a moment. A breeze swept in from the open window, and the heavy purple drapes rustled. “I quite understand that this should be brought to him first. You are not a Stallingsworth by blood. It should be Arthur’s job to keep the name clear from scandals like this. Even if Alfred were still with us, however...”

“I understand, Henry,” Evelyn said, lowering her voice. “Tell me what I need to know.”

“I’m not sure I can properly explain, Madame,” Lord Conway said. “I’ll have my man send you a copy of the report. It’s quite a bore, I’m afraid, but I think it’s best you see the work yourself, better to understand the situation you’re in now.”

“We are not in any situation, as far as I am concerned, until I have assessed the evidence,” Evelyn said. “You forget my training, Lord Conway. It has not always been my profession to carry just my name and my cheque book.”

“I only tell you this so you can be careful. You forget that you and Arthur are not the only ones who will be impacted if something were to happen to the Stallingsworth line.”

“Trust me, my dear friend,” Evelyn said, “I never forget those who are in my debt.” She swallowed the last of her drink then wiped the corners of her lips with her pinkie. “Thank you for your warning, Henry,” she said, handing him back her glass, “and there is no need to panic. Not until I say so.”

Lord Conway tipped his head. “Madame.”

Evelyn returned to the dull glimmer of the party. She paced the perimeter of the room while the announcement was made for the guests to take their seats. The velvet-lined chairs scraped against the floor, and silverware clattered against the gold painted porcelain as the diners retrieved their napkins. Evelyn found her husband slumped, politely inebriated, in a plush, corner chaise.

“Come, dear,” she had said, looping her arm under his and pulling him from the chair. “Time for dinner.”

Now, Evelyn closed the cover on the report. The afternoon sun reflected off the metal frame of the backless settee pushed under the window. Downstairs, the piano cover crashed again, and a vacuum whirled to life. Her thumb played at the emerald crusted ring on her left forefinger before she reached over and pierced a taupe nail into the electric bell button on her desk. She stared at the door, her fingers tented over the thick file, until Charlie arrived at the edge of her desk.

“Yes, Madame?”

“The roses are being pruned too short this season. Edwin is free to quit his time in the gardens.”

“I’ll see to it, Madame,” Charlie said.

Evelyn nodded. “Thank you.” He turned to leave. “And Charlie?”

He turned back around. “Yes, Ma’am?”

“Call the barrister.” Evelyn tapped her pinkie against the file. “We’ll be needing to have a chat about this.”

2

The parking lot of the Logan International Airport had too many right turns. Once he parked in the surface lot across the bus-lined street from the arrivals terminal, Hall hazarded a glance into the abscess of his backseat. Empty Styrofoam coffee cups covered the floor mats, and the dirt from a pair of mismatched hiking boots was caked onto the cloth seats. Even with the air on full blast, the car clung to its stale smell from having sat unused in his friend Austin’s driveway while he had been overseas. Hall hadn’t had time to clean since he had gotten back to town less than a week ago. He said a silent prayer that the trunk would look better than he remembered it so he would have somewhere to store the luggage.

He got out and followed the steady stream of teary-eyed relatives, briefcase carrying businessmen babbling into the empty air in front of them, and hunch-backed backpackers, stepping up into the line with the rest of the drivers waiting on passengers.

His phone buzzed—another interview request, this time for the local NPR. He typed a hasty reply, accepting the date and time, saying he and Dr. Preston were excited

to speak to them. He added a quick reminder to his calendar and shared it with Quinn before returning his phone to his pocket.

Ten more minutes passed, and Quinn still hadn't appeared. Hall had meandered over to the coffee shop near the entrance of the airport and sat cradling his Americano between his hands, passing the heat back and forth on his palms. A black coffee, one sugar and one shot of peppermint, sat across the table from him, a straw sticking up through the lid opening. The screen suspended from the ceiling in front of Hall's table blinked three times then changed its reading. Flight BA0339 from Heathrow Airport had landed. Hall dropped a tip on the table then scooped up the two coffees and moved back into the formation of waiting chauffeurs. Passengers flooded past the TSA agent that guarded the realm of the traveler from their awaiting destination. Through the horde of bags and bodies, a pair of high-top sneakers side-stepped past people, speeding so that the wheels on the roller bag behind them floated to keep up.

"I feel like I should have brought a sign. 'Driver pick up for Dr. Preston.'" Hall said as Quinn walked over, shaking her head as soon as he came into view.

"Did you learn to teleport in the six days since I've seen you?" she said without introduction.

"If I did, I hardly would have made you use British Airways."

"Then how do you expect us to get from the university's research reception to the Boston NPR station in under five minutes?" Quinn asked, holding her phone up, her color-coded calendar open on screen.

"By not attending the research reception, if we go based on my calendar, not yours."

Quinn dropped her phone into the laptop bag on her shoulder. “Trade,” she said, pulling the handle of her suitcase forward and nodded toward the takeaway cup with the straw in it. Hall handed her the coffee and pulled the suitcase toward him, leaning in, nervous and unsure of his movements. Quinn took charge and wrapped him into a one-arm hug.

“Hi,” she said, pecking him on the cheek before retreated toward the exit. “Where did you park?”

Hall caught up and led her out to his car, popping the trunk to load her bags. As he had feared, his climbing gear was exactly where he had left it—dust and dirt crusted, splayed out against the floor mat that could have been mistaken for carpet once. Quinn lifted her hard-case bag and dumped it on top of the gear as if she always stored her belongings alongside the sweat-drenched mountaineering gear of a relative stranger.

Well, more than strangers I guess, Hall thought. The creeping insecurity in the back of his mind began to bloom again as Quinn climbed into the passenger side. By the time Hall got into the driver’s side, Quinn was coughing into her hand, a poor attempt to cover her smile and snorting laugh.

“What’s wrong?” Hall said.

Quinn turned the full power of her smile toward him. The knot in his throat loosened.

“I’d just,” Quinn said, looking over her shoulder into the coffee cup cemetery of his backseat. “I think this is exactly what I expected from you. I just didn’t know it.”

Hall shrugged his shoulders with a straight-lipped smile. His reaction made Quinn laugh harder. He smiled and wrapped his arm around the back of her seat, looking over

his shoulder and out the rear window to back out of his parking spot and take another right turn toward the highway.

*

Hall had suggested his parents' pub for the interview, knowing it would make him feel at ease. He had missed his corner booth with the frayed hole in the seat and the stuffing ripped out beside the worn dip in the leather where he always sat. He had picked the hole open during his frantic days studying in undergrad. His parents had let him wait tables for petty cash and a mental break when he couldn't cram any more important dates or preservation methods into his head. Quinn had suggested she spend the night at his apartment, since it was closer to the pub by a few blocks compared to her hotel, and they could meet the reporter together.

The drive into Charlestown was quiet, save for the rumble of the road under Hall's bald tires. *Austin should have taken better damn care of this baby.* Hall turned down a lane of tightly packed duplexes, their gray-scale lap siding broken up by glimpses of the docks down side alleys and over the tops of low-slung storefronts. He made another sharp turn up a hill and parallel parked on the street. The car rocked against its brakes as the two stepped out, and Hall led the way down the sidewalk. The hanging plank sign for the pub swung over the street corner, guarding the intersection from eight feet above. Hall stopped in front of the weathered awning of The Corner Saint's and let out a sigh.

"It's been a while," he said. "I haven't had time to run by since I've been back. Randt's kept me in the office all day." He turned his mindless smile onto Quinn, who

wasn't listening as her cornflower eyes fixated on the hand-painted sign swinging over their heads.

"The corner saint's what?"

"This." Hall waved his hand toward the entrance to the pub. "This is The Corner Saint's. Everything you see here. The old man doesn't have much of a grip on grammar, but he thought it'd be fun naming a place the church wouldn't much approve of after some kind of saint. We all belong to the Corner Saint here."

"I'm still not sure the possessive makes sense," Quinn said.

"After a few drinks, most people don't give it much thought," Hall said. "Come on in."

A brass hand bell clanked above the door. The pub was shaped in a large V that began at the entrance. The bar took up the right half, three legged stools tittering on knotted wood floorboards. Dockworkers in plastic coveralls and sweat soaked undershirts crowded the bar, their hunched backs turned to the entrance and their salty, wind-burnt faces reflected in the cloudy mirror behind the liquor. An older man with a scraggly beard and a flannel jacket sat by himself in the back booth, scribbling across a legal pad and hiding a lit cigarette under the table. Hall's father stood behind the bar, clearing plates when the two walked in.

"Oi!" his father, CJ, yelled in a deep Irish accent. "We don't serve you scholar type here. 'Specially not those studying the type of things us common folk can't be pronouncing." A few of the patrons laughed, turning side-eyes toward the newcomers before going back to commiserating over their meals of grease burgers and vinegar fries served in plastic baskets lined with newspaper.

“You’re getting worse with old age, man,” Hall said. “I didn’t realize we were getting rid of three syllable words in your vocabulary too.”

CJ mumbled under his breath as he counted off his fingers. “Lad, sooner or later I’ll be down to four letter words, and that’ll be the end of me and your mum.”

“I’m sure of it,” Hall said. “Dr. Preston, if I may introduce the proprietor of this fine establishment, Mr. CJ Bennett—my father. CJ, this is Dr. Quinn Preston of Wellsford College.”

“Ignore the backtalk, lass,” CJ said with a dimpled smile. “It’s an honor to meet you, Doctor, and a pleasure to meet such a great writer, much less a scientist.” CJ offered a damp hand to shake over the bar top.

“It’s great to meet you too,” Quinn said, accepting his hand. “You read the paper?”

“O’course!” CJ said. “Damned if I understood the half of it, but I know for sure as the sun shines that this one here didn’t write all that research bit.” He flicked his thumb in Hall’s direction. “Really, you don’t need an old Irish like me to tell you this, but you’ve all done incredible work. Well done, lass.”

Her chin tilted up, and she tucked a stray hair behind her ear. “Thank you.”

“Right then, I think you’re waiting on some people, but no reason not to have a drink, yeah?” CJ rubbed his hands together. A snort sounded from the other end of the bar as the double doors to the kitchen swung open.

“And who’s gonna make them? You?” Hall’s mother said. The stout woman adjusted the tie at her waist on her half-apron as she shuffled over to stand beside CJ. She wore her silver gray hair in a loose bun on the crown of her head, bangs hovering around

her eyes, making her look younger than her hair color suggested. She squinted at CJ and gave him a quick shove in the shoulder, moving him out from behind the bar to stand beside Hall.

“Unless you’re waiting on whiskey in a wine glass, let your father get back to what he knows. Cook’s got a tray of food getting cold.” His mother nodded back toward the entrance to the kitchen when CJ didn’t move.

“Liquor sounds fine,” Quinn said.

“I like this one.” CJ laughed as he threw his towel on the bar. He walked around the crowd to bust through the doors into the steamy kitchen. ““Right then, Cook! What’ll it be today?””

“Imogen Bennett, Dr. Quinn Preston,” Hall said. Imogen took her husband’s spot behind the bar and gave Quinn a tight grin.

“What’ll it be, Dr. Preston?” she asked, pulling glasses from underneath the bar.

“IPA on tap, and call me Quinn.”

Imogen flipped a whiskey bottle, sloshing the thin liquid into a crystalized glass and passing it down the bar to Hall. Hall nodded his thanks to his mother as he picked up the drink.

“I’m almost upset that I get the joke now. Linguists and their IPA.”

“Only thing we can drink or read,” Quinn said, flashing an oversized grin.

Liar, he thought as he watched Quinn out of the corner of his eye and took a sip of his drink.

Imogen ignored her son’s comment. “You aren’t from around here,” she said, passing Quinn her pint.

“Cincinnati, originally.”

“But you met in England,” Imogen said, turning her attention to Hall. He wiped a hand over his smile and tilted his head toward Quinn. *You aren't getting me that easy. I couldn't explain her story if I tried.*

“I work at Wellsford, outside of Newcastle-upon-Tyne.”

“Not one for sticking around the same place much then?” Imogen said. The doors to the kitchen clattered open as CJ burst back in and dropped a plate of fish in front of the man at the back booth.

“Not any longer than I can be useful,” Quinn said.

“Mhmm.” Imogen propped her elbow on the bar and turned her sharp gaze on her son. “I think I've heard that one before a time or two.”

“Don't let the old bird scare ya,” CJ said, coming up to put a hand on Quinn's shoulder. “She'd get bored with only this sorry crowd to pick at all the days. New blood and a sharp wit—we might just have an even match for once.”

“Certainly a better fight than you've been putting up lately,” a dockworker at the bar said. CJ shoved the man in the shoulder with a hearty laugh and stole the empty plate in front of him. Imogen shook her head and gave her husband a wink.

Hall nursed his drink and watched Quinn wander the edge of the bar. The popcorn ceiling was painted a pale, sunrise orange that matched the color of the walls behind the faded pictures, framed news clippings, and local sports memorabilia. She stopped every few feet to lean in and examine one of the headlines.

“Are they based on a particular date?” Quinn asked.

“Some of them,” Hall said, detaching from his corner. He pointed at a clipping announcing the opening of a new cupcake shop. “That was a local header from the day after my eighteenth birthday. The old man hung it up to show everyone how proud he was it wasn’t my mug shot.” He walked past Quinn to stand in front of an Irish flag that hung on the back wall, beside it a picture of a fishing boat with a shark lying hooked across the deck. “That’s McCoy’s boat. He’s a regular. He’s proud of that catch, even though it wasn’t his. He broke out in hives that morning, and his wife wouldn’t let him out with the boys. They took his boat and caught this guy anyway.” Hall stepped back from the wall, looking across all the pictures that hung in the dull glow of the green swing lamps. “Most of these are old friends really.”

Hall turned back to look at Quinn leaning against the back of a booth, one hand in the pocket of her slacks, the other hugging her pint to her chest. She smiled when he met her eyes. He winked before she moved back toward the bar.

“Imogen, how long have you all owned this place?” Quinn said.

“Coming up on twenty-five years now,” Imogen said, wiping her hand against the stained bar top.

“My first job ever was restocking toilet paper in the bathroom,” Hall said. “Couldn’t really do much with a ten year old in a bar, but I made myself worth keeping around and feeding all right.”

“Like we ever had a problem feeding you,” Imogen said. “If we could get you to stop, it’d have been a miracle then.”

“Lots of good family dinners in this place, though,” CJ said, emerging from the kitchen. “Sat us all down right there and said, ‘Guess we must be doing okay, yeah?’”

Quinn walked down the line of booths, stopping at the middle seat along the wall that CJ had pointed out. The burgundy leather glinted in the dim overhead light, lacking the same worn-weather patchwork of the rest of the bar seating. She turned to catch the light against the inlaid gold placard in the seatback and read the engraving aloud.

“‘*The Maeve Marie.*’ Sounds like a ship.”

“‘Maeve’ is a great joy, and ‘Marie’ is a bitter sea of sorrow,” Hall said, his voice softer and disheartened. He came to stand behind Quinn and wrapped his hand over hers, his thumb brushing against the cold, metal engraving. His breath shook as it slipped through his cracked lips. Quinn leaned back onto his chest, their hands still pressed against the metal that grew clammy under their touch.

“Who was she?” Quinn asked.

Hall shook his head, his mind closed against the flood of memories and his eyes felt as distant as the sea. Hall lifted Quinn’s hand from the booth, linking their fingers, and walked her back to the first table by the door. He slid into the seat first, pulling Quinn in behind. He positioned himself into his normal spot, the gleam of the plaque just visible over the tops of the seats. He sighed and leaned back in the booth, still not letting go of Quinn’s hand. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d had someone sit there with him, and he brushed his thumb along the rope bracelet on Quinn’s wrist. Imogen stepped out from behind the bar and set down another shot of whiskey that her son hadn’t asked for.

“*Sláinte,*” Hall said, shooting back the liquor and rolling the empty glass in his hand. Imogen snorted and shot an appraising look at Quinn before walking back to the bar.

“Alright, back to the docks, the lot of you,” Imogen said to the remaining patrons. “Cook’ll have nothing to feed the families come Sunday if you won’t do nothing but sit around here all day.”

The floor creaked in protest along with the bar patrons who shuffled toward the exit, their work boots dragging as they mumbled their thanks and complaints.

“Good to see you back around, Hall,” a forklift driver named Jim said as he passed. “You might not be able to see it, but Gennie sure is in a better mood when you’re in town.”

“Thanks, it’s good seeing you too.”

Jim tipped his hat to Quinn before following his co-workers out, the green tinted glass on the door rattling in its frame as it slammed shut on the day’s crowd.

As silence fell over the bar, Hall’s leg began to shake. He pulled at his tie and undid the first button on his faded shirt. He knew plaid and a black tie didn’t look professional, but he didn’t have much else to work with. He had hoped he would have been done with the majority of the interviews now that he was back in the States, but he had been proven wrong early on. He let go of Quinn’s hand and ran his sweaty palms along his pantleg.

“Maybe this wasn’t the best idea,” he said, leaning in to smell the citrus shampoo Quinn always used. Today, she smelled like Suave for Men.

“Hall, I know this isn’t your thing,” Quinn replied. He knew she was trying to be sympathetic, but her leg was bouncing as well. “We made a major historical discovery, and the world wants to know about it.”

“We?”

“Yes, we,” Quinn said. “You would have been left swearing up and down the English Channel with your ass in your hands if I hadn’t been there to help, and you know it.”

Hall didn’t have time to make a sarcastic reply before the bell above the door jingled again. A young woman in a silk blouse and an angled pencil skirt took a tentative step into the pub, her heels echoing against the hollow floor. Her bangs were pulled back from her face with bobby pins that didn’t match the dishwater color of her hair. She paused and glanced at the leather watch around her wrist. Hall chuckled to himself and took pity on her.

“Ms. Hayes, I believe,” he said, pulling himself into a standing squat and extending his hand. The reporter’s shoulders settled as she shook Hall’s hand and let out an audible sigh.

“Dr. Bennett, it’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”

“Hall, please,” he said. “This is Dr. Preston.”

“A pleasure.” Quinn shook the reporter’s hand.

Surprise registered in Ms. Hayes’s narrow, gray eyes before her lips parted into a terse smile. She kept her hand wrapped around Quinn’s for a second too long before replying. “Likewise.”

CJ walked over from the table he was clearing as the reporter squirmed into the booth, tugging at either side of her skirt to adjust her position.

“A drink for you, lass?” CJ asked.

“Just water, please.” CJ nodded and turned back to the bar. “Do you mind if I record this?”

“Whatever you need,” Hall said. He rubbed his palms against his thighs, the sweat having built up again as his head continued to hammer and his leg started shaking again.

“Good luck, you two,” CJ said when he returned with the water. He arranged a paper napkin in front of Ms. Hayes. “And uh, I guess you’ll have to be bringing this one with you if you’ll be coming to dinner tonight, yeah?” he said to Quinn. He winked at his son and patted Quinn’s shoulder.

“We’ll see you then, old man,” Hall said. His father chuckled and left them to their work.

“Your dad?” Ms. Hayes asked, pulling a notepad and a phone out of her purse.

Hall nodded. Ms. Hayes set the phone between them on the table and clicked the “Record” button.

“Well, like I said, it’s a pleasure to meet you, both, in person,” Ms. Hayes said in a stiff, chipper voice. She straightened her spine as she sat forward, as if someone would have been able to infer her bad posture from the audio. “So, tell me a little bit about your discovery.”

“It’s been about a year now since we’ve been out on the site,” Hall said. “My team and I were called over to England for the dig last year. It was a standard assist, where an outside researcher takes lead on a larger project.”

“Yes, I know,” Ms. Hayes cut in. “I believe this is the same story you told BBC Radio at the beginning of this year.” Hall’s hand dug into the seat beside his leg, his thumb picking at the hole in the leather. She flipped through the pages of her notepad.

“Tell me what drew you to the artifact the first time you saw it.”

“The artifact was uncovered by my grad students. What caught their attention, and what drew us into researching it more, was the writing itself.” Hall settled into the familiar story and rolled his empty glass between his hands as he spoke. “A site from that time period, in that region, wasn’t known to have written language, so we figured that the artifact’s presence represented some kind of contact with other groups. This language told us that the group may have been isolated but that their origins were diverse, bringing together multiple speakers of different languages who had to figure out how to communicate with each other, hence the pidgin.”

“And how were you able to identify that what you were looking at was in fact a language? What stopped you from classifying it as just another artifact with unusual markings?”

“Well, the indicators on the piece weren’t actually unusual,” Quinn said. “The language used Romantic characters.”

“The Romantic characters were a tipoff for my team,” Hall said, “and we had Dr. Preston come out to consult.”

“Interesting.” Ms. Hayes made a mark in her notepad. “So, to the average person, the artifact might have looked almost...faked. Like someone with the modern alphabet just kind of jumbled it up to confuse someone.”

“I suppose,” Hall said.

“Except for the fact that we can date it relative to the other artifacts it was discovered with,” Quinn said, pushing a tendril of orange curls out of her line of sight. Ms. Hayes ignored the comment, flipping through her notes. *She’s playing her part well,*

Hall thought, as she feigned the type of distance and innocence that he had grown tired of in young journalists.

“What can you tell me about the rumors about the Stallingsworth family preparing to sue for defamation?”

Hall’s leg stopped shaking. “What did you just say?” Ms. Hayes fell silent, and Hall could hear Quinn’s breathing get heavy as the weight of the words hit them both. He looked past the reporter to the glint of the gold two booths down. Ms. Hayes passed her pen between her fingers and cleared her throat twice before she spoke again.

“I apologize, Hall,” she said. “I didn’t realize that my intentions had not been made clear to you.”

“What do you mean ‘intentions?’ What are you talking about?” Quinn said, her breathing returning to normal and her face turning red.

“Our department has it on reasonable suspicion that you are about to be sued. A colleague overseas said campus was already talking about it there.”

“I was there less than a week ago,” Quinn said. She shook her head. “No. There wasn’t anything. Someone would have told me.”

“Not if they weren’t sure,” Ms. Hayes said.

“And you are?” Hall said. His head felt too heavy to support, and he pressed a hand against his pounding head. “You’re sure?”

“Reasonably so. They’re calling it an unwarranted personal attack.”

Hall let go of his head and slammed his palm on the table. “Oi, this wasn’t an attack. I’m not here to have an opinion on what happens to some family with half of Parliament in their pocket. Defamation case or not, I’m not going to be intimidated by

someone's *feelings* when it comes to my research. I'm here to do the work and write the reports." The pressure behind his eye continued to build, and Hall dug his fingers into his eyebrow, trying to relieve the tension headache. "What else do you want from us?"

Ms. Hayes looked down at her notebook, turning through a few pages. "The university that you were assisting on the dig, Wellsford College, receives regular donations from the Browning line, also Lords, and infamous for their opposition to Stallingsworth-backed members of Parliament." Ms. Hayes paused. She didn't meet Hall's gaze, her cheeks red, like she already felt guilty for what she was about to say. "You don't find it suspicious that your discovery just happens to incriminate the well-established enemy of a university donor?"

"I think no one in British politics would go that far to secure a few MPs," Hall said.

"Even if the rumors aren't true, your team seems to be creating a lot of buzz on their own," Ms. Hayes said.

"Meaning what?"

"Well, since the discovery was made public, your team has appeared on numerous news networks, academic talk shows, and there are rumors that you're writing a history of the tribe based on Dr. Preston's translation of their language. Can you confirm this?"

"No comment," Hall said. He reached to smooth the hair at his neck as he tried to think of a way to regain control of the conversation. A pot crashed in the kitchen, and his father yelled at the cook.

"So what are you suggesting?" Quinn asked. "That this was all a publicity stunt?" Her pint glass sat empty before her. The door to the pub opened, and a group of burly

men in janitor scrubs came in, bumping against Quinn in their shuffle toward the bar. She scooted closer to Hall.

“This has been an extremely unique and extraordinary situation for our entire team,” Hall said, cutting off Ms. Hayes’s reply. He spoke to the beat of the driving pulse that pounded in his temples, the pain stoking his irritability. “There was no precedent for dealing with situations like this. No matter how we reacted to what we found, we would’ve ended up having this same conversation, where no one wants to take responsibility for what happened. If blaming us is the best way for you to process, then go ahead. Blame us if that’s easier for you, but we aren’t to blame for making a discovery. We didn’t create the situation, and we won’t be the last people to draw this same conclusion. There is a connection here.” Ms. Hayes didn’t move to interrupt, the corner of her eye twitching, shifting a clump of mascara caught there. “Dr. Preston’s work will be duplicated and corroborated,” Hall continued. “A history will be written—I’m not saying by me—detailing exactly what happened to these people. Their story will not be forgotten again, and whatever family or name is involved is not our concern.”

“Just one last question, if you would,” Ms. Hayes said.

“Certainly.”

“What would you say to the Stallingsworth family if they were here right now?”

Hall smiled as he let the silence hang in the air between them. The numbers continued to spin upward on the recording. The lamp that hung over the table flickered, the colors from the shade twinkling off their empty glasses.

“I’d say they can’t get rid of us that easy.”

Ms. Hayes tapped her phone and stopped the recording. Her shoulders slouched forward, and her jaw relaxed. “Thank you so much for your time, Hall,” she said, returning the phone to her bag and snapping her notepad closed. “You as well, Dr. Preston. It was...enlightening.” She settled her oversized purse on her shoulder, scooted toward the end of the table, and paused. “I apologize if any of this caught you off guard. Honestly, I’d be very surprised if you told me I’m the first person who’s asked you these kinds of questions.”

“You are, actually,” Hall said.

“Interesting.” She nodded to herself. “Well, I would brace for more then. It appears I just got here earlier than the rest. You won’t be getting off that easy.”

She hauled herself from the booth then offered her hand to Hall. He stayed seated. Ms. Hayes let her hand drop to her side. “A pleasure to meet you both.” She gave another close-lipped smile before leaving.

The pub fell silent after the bell rang and the door slammed. The day workers who still lingered inside watched Imogen walk toward her son. Hall’s mind was blank as he reached for his drink. He brought the empty glass to his lips and went through the motion of throwing back the last sip. He balanced the glass on a knot in the rough tabletop before his mother flopped down across from him and replaced his empty glass with a full one. No one spoke while Hall finished the third whiskey.

“What the hell was that?” Quinn said to break the silence.

Hall shook his head. “We should have known this was going to come up eventually.”

“Maybe,” Quinn said, “eventually. Not this early. The university should be protecting our work, not spreading rumors and selling us out to journalists.” Hall didn’t reply. Quinn dropped his hand to gather her hair into a bun. She put hand on the table across from Hall’s mother. “Imogen, it was lovely to meet you.”

Imogen crossed her arms and smiled with a tilt of her head. “You too, Dr. Preston.” She looked back at her son and raised her eyebrows. *Her sign of approval.*

Quinn slid out of the booth. “Come on,” she said, waving her hand at Hall.

“What are you doing?” Hall said, not moving to follow her. Quinn tucked her phone against her shoulder and reached for the door.

“You’re going to drive,” she said. “I’m calling your chair. We need to talk about—Hi, Dr. Randt’s office, please.” She paused to listen. “Well, when he gets out, you can tell him Dr. Preston and Dr. Bennett will be there in twenty minutes, and he’s got a lot of explaining to do.”

*

Hall’s head was pounding, and a lack of sleep weighed on the muscles in his neck and shoulders. He wasn’t sure how much sleep he had gotten, but he knew that it hadn’t been enough to make up for yesterday, sleeping sideways in the bed, a pair of frayed plaid sweats twisted around his legs. Hall and Quinn had ended up back at The Corner Saint’s after their meeting with Dr. Randt. Randt, as Hall had expected, had not had any good answers.

“Well, Dr. Bennett,” Dr. Randt had said. “Dr. Preston—lovely again to meet you, so glad to have you here. Wonderful work you’ve done, really, quite a fan. But, but Dr.

Preston, you must understand, how was I to know that this would turn as it did, turn out this way?”

“You didn’t ask questions?” Quinn said. “No ‘Who are you? What do you want?’”

“Dr., Dr. Preston, the reporter, Ms. Hayes yes, she had the, well, she had the credentials. This is hardly the first call I’ve gotten for one of, for one of our professors here. I had no reason, well really not a good reason to assume ill intention. If they know about the project and they have the credentials, as Ms. Hayes did, I have no reason not to assume, to assume interest.”

“Oh, she had interest, all right,” Quinn said.

“Look, at the end of the day, the problem is this woman can publish what she wants and how,” Hall said, “and we gave our two cents. Not that she didn’t have some points, mind you.”

“What, well I can’t be sure what you mean. What is it you mean?”

“I want the university to release a joint statement,” Hall said. “Both universities saying that we did nothing wrong and will not be intimidated.”

“I’ll reach out to Dr. Gates and see if we can pull something together with Wellsford,” Quinn said.

“I’m afraid that, well see, I don’t believe that, that might not be as possible, just not possible on our end, per se,” Dr. Randt said. Outside the office, a student slammed the department door shut, and Dr. Randt jumped.

“How so, per se?” Hall said. An ant crawled on his leg, and Hall slapped it away, not wanting to look to see how many others were crowding the dirty carpet.

“Well, until, well I’m afraid until we have something for sure, something concrete. You know us, have to have the research, have to have that concrete evidence, before we can respond to something.”

“What did we just go through?” Quinn said. “Was that not ‘something’ enough?”

“We have to wait and see,” Dr. Randt said. He reached a sympathetic hand across the desk, and Quinn sat back in her chair, crossing her legs. “We won’t know how to respond until the article is written, you see? Yes, that’s what we must do.” The microwave dinged in the main office. The room started to smell like popcorn.

“So respond *after* we’ve been accused, waiting until we look like we’re trying to deny or cover something up.”

“Dr. Bennett, Hall, please, if we really do have nothing, really nothing to hide then we don’t, well we don’t need to respond. If we really did nothing, then there’s nothing to fear, nothing at all.”

“Well that many ‘ifs’ makes me feel good about where the department stands on this,” Hall said.

“This isn’t a, Dr. Bennett, this isn’t a stance. It’s a policy. It’s not starting hysteria. It’s not creating, just creating more problems, or as much hysteria can be mustered by a few old archaeologists.” Dr. Randt gave a wheezing laugh that died with a sigh. “I am sorry, Dr. Preston, and, and Dr. Bennett, that you’re here, that you’re in this position.”

Quinn looked over to Hall as if Dr. Randt hadn’t spoken. “I’m calling Wellsford anyway. We’ll be grateful someone was forward thinking when all this adds up.” She shouldered her bag and stood. Dr. Randt stood as well, buttoning his coat, his coffee-

stained tie hanging crooked from the jacket. Quinn turned a foot toward the door, then paused and angled her broad shoulders back. She offered Dr. Randt her hand. He shook it two handed.

“Thank you for your insight,” Quinn said, jerking her hand free from his vice. “This isn’t over.”

Hall and Quinn didn’t speak the entire drive back across town, past the Commons, onto the highway, past Quinn’s hotel, and back to the pub. Imogen hadn’t looked surprised to see them. She had just pulled two glasses out and had set them up at the bar.

Hours later, Hall tiptoed through the living room where a pile of blankets with flame fire hair snored into the couch armrest. Hall clicked on the standing lamp in the corner of the kitchen and plugged in the coffee pot. He pulled the handle on his medicine drawer and fished around for something to ease the pounding in his head. He waited until the coffee pot had brewed enough to pour into an espresso cup and swallowed three pills. The inside of his head felt like someone was taking a jackhammer to each brain cell. The knocking came at his front door next, though it took him a minute to notice. The person on the other side knocked again.

Keep it down. I’m right here. Hall flipped back the plate covering the peephole. A black man in a grey suit stood on the other side, looking in the peephole. Hall swung the door open, a hand pressed against his temple as if the pressure might keep his head from breaking open.

“Yes?”

“Dr. Marcus Bennett?” the man asked in a thick British accent.

“Yes,” Hall said again.

The man produced a manila folder from his patent leather briefcase and presented it to Hall. “You have been served.” The man turned back to the elevator without another word.

Hall let go of the door and let it clap closed behind him. He saw Quinn jolt awake out of the corner of his eye. The file felt heavy in his hands, almost the exact weight of their article, he imagined. He didn’t want to look in the file to confirm. The front was labeled in thin ink writing, his “Dr.” prefix more pronounced and swirled next to the scratching of his name. He wondered if the man was on his way to Quinn’s hotel next, if he knew where she was supposed to be staying, or if a similar file with similar script had been slipped under the door of Quinn’s apartment back in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, or shoved into her pigeon hole in the office of the soaring building covered in stain glass that he had visited a lifetime ago—months ago—when he had recruited Quinn for the project that neither of them could have seen coming.

“Who the hell was that?” Quinn said. He itched at the back of his neck where his hair had grown out and irritated the skin there. He walked back into the living room and dropped the file on the couch beside Quinn before continuing into the kitchen. The coffee pot was full and steaming.

“International libel law?” she called. Ceramic clinked as Hall pulled two mugs from the cabinet. “You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me?”

“No,” Hall said, coming from the kitchen and setting one of the mugs down on the knee-high coffee table. “Quick turn around on that warning.”

“Especially for 8:30 am on a Friday,” Quinn said, flipping through the rest of the paperwork. Hall had been right—their article stared up at him from the bottom of the stack. He burned his throat on a sip of coffee.

“I don’t suppose you know what the fuck we do now?” he said.

Quinn looked over at him, not meeting his eyes, looking around him, through him maybe, as though she could sense his nervous energy. His eyes darted across the room, feeling out of place in his own home. The faux leather couch that didn’t match the wood of the coffee table, the television teetering on a slide buffet cabinet, the stale green dog bed for the rare occasion when his parents’ German Shepard stayed with him, and the full pocket bookshelf that perpetually leaned to the left. It didn’t feel safe anymore.

“Our jobs.” Quinn traded the paperwork for her cup of coffee, letting the file smack against the cloudy wood stain. “That’s what we do now.”

“Is it too much to suggest cancelling your hotel for the rest of the trip?” Hall asked.

“Not at all,” Quinn said. She shrugged her body down to crane her neck and rest her head on Hall’s shoulder. Hall sputtered, using one hand to defend himself from the mass of curls blocking his ability to breathe. Quinn slapped the back of her hand against his arm, not moving as she sipped her coffee and declared it wasn’t brewed dark enough.

*

Brixton University owned nine academic buildings across the southern end of the city, with a lab complex across town. The building they were walking towards was not one of those nine, Hall was sure of it. This building was one story, squat and long,

surrounded by houses and businesses that towered at three or four stories. The brick didn't match the area, and rust streaked through the Brixton sign above the entrance.

"*This* is where the school attorney lives?" Hall said.

"You say that like this isn't your university," Quinn said. A student with a backpack and an e-cigarette stepped out of the building, watching Hall and Quinn as they watched the building. After the student walked off, Hall shook his head.

"I just don't..."

Quinn grabbed his hand to stop his sentence. "Let's just get this over with." She led him into the building, and they walked into the unimpressive tile entryway. There was no lobby, just a marquee sign pointing to the attorney's office to the right and Human Resources to the left. The lobby of the attorney's office was just as stale and archaic.

"Hello?" Hall said into the empty office.

"Just one second," someone called back. An older woman popped her head around the corner of the gray scale walls. "Can I help you?" she said, leaning over the desktop computer to consult the calendar on the wall of the vacant receptionist's desk.

"Hall Bennett and Dr. Preston. We have an appointment with the university attorney. We emailed in a few days ago."

"Ah, yes, that you did," the woman said. "We've been very busy around here thanks to you two." *What do you want, an apology? It's your job.*

"Maria, is that them?" another voice said from the back.

"Yeah, it is," the woman at the desk said, straightening her crooked spine and inspecting Hall and Quinn over the top of her chained spectacles. They stood there in that judging silence until a younger woman in a power-suit turned the corner.

“Dr. Bennett,” she said, offering her hand. “My apologies for the delay. Dr. Preston, come on back, please.” She glanced over her shoulder at the older woman. “Thank you, Maria. You can take lunch.”

Hall could hear Maria grumbling and shuffling about as he let himself be led back through a winding path of cubicles to one of the two offices.

“Please,” the younger woman said, “have a seat. I apologize for Maria’s comment. I’m Kim Gershwin. I’ll be the school attorney for this case.”

“Let me start you with a question,” Hall said before the attorney was fully seated.

“Please.”

“Not to jump the gun, but you’re the ‘school attorney.’ So are you representing us on behalf of the school, or are you just representing the school?” Ms. Gershwin looked down to her desk, playing with the pen on her blotter. “Because, you know,” Hall continued, “I’d hate to get too far in this process not knowing what side my attorney is on.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Hall saw Quinn shift in her seat and set her mouth in a pinched line. *What’s she annoyed about? I’m trying to protect us, our work.* Quinn looked over at him with a sharp eye. He could almost hear her voice in his head. *“Give her a chance to explain. Not everyone is against you here.”*

“I’m sorry,” Hall said. He cleared his throat and met Quinn’s gaze again before turning to Ms. Gershwin. “As you can imagine, we’ve been under a bit of stress lately about this.”

Ms. Gershwin gave a sympathetic nod and put down her pen. “I can only imagine, Dr. Bennett. You are right to ask, though, and I want to make something clear. I don’t see

the university's interests as being separate from yours. A win for a university professor is a win for the university, and something that we can support. Unfortunately, in this case, I can only offer my advice and support—that's part of what today's meeting was going to be about."

"What do you mean?"

"Since this is an international libel suit, the complainant has moved to have the case tried in the United Kingdom, which is where the family resides, where the site was, and where the article was initially written."

Hall wiped his hand over his face. He reached over to take Quinn's hand, and they sat there, watching the attorney.

We look like a set of worried parents, Hall thought. Tell us how bad it is. Is the kid terminal?

"So what do we do?" he said.

"I have made a few calls," Ms. Gershwin said. "I was actually able to talk directly with the solicitor, and he has assured me that the complainant in this case has the status and the means to make this go quickly. They've asked you to England for a preliminary meeting next week."

"Next week?"

"Yes, Doctor."

Hall shook his head. "Don't call me Doctor," he said. "I'm not an MD. I'm an archaeologist who didn't want to pay off loans."

“Hall, knock it off,” Quinn said. Ms. Gershwin blinked in the silence and shifted in her creaking chair. “So if you aren’t going to be able to represent us, who will? Are we hiring private defense?”

Ms. Gershwin opened her desk drawer and rifled through her files before extracting an email print out from one of the folders and handing it to Quinn. “I’ve taken the liberty of calling ahead to the Wellsford College attorney to let her know you’re coming. As you can imagine, your colleagues over there are just as eager for a proper turnout of this case as we are here. Mrs. Gloria Wyndham—that’s her contact information—she’ll be waiting for you when you get there, and she’ll take up the case from there.”

“So we have to go back,” Hall said. *So much for unpacking for a bit.*

“Yes, it seems so,” Ms. Gershwin said.

“Why?” he said.

Ms. Gershwin’s eyebrows knitted themselves together in tight confusion. She looked over to Quinn, as if for an explanation, then back to Hall. “I don’t think I understand the question.”

“Why do we have to go running back at this family’s beck and call? Why do they get to control the situation like this?”

“Well, she’s the one who filed the paperwork.”

“She?” Quinn said.

“Yes, Dame Evelyn Stallingsworth. She’s the main complainant on behalf of her family line.” The desktop computer dinged, and Ms. Gershwin glanced at it out of the corner of her eye before apologizing, clearing her throat. “I have to tell you though,” she

continued. “Many people will be inclined to see her as the victim in this instance. I wouldn’t be surprised if the power of control is shifted in her favor. I have no doubt this will be a fair proceeding, if only to save station and formality, but I do not think it will be easy.”

“Is that it?” Hall said. “We just go back over there and hope for the best?”

“Mrs. Wyndham is incredibly qualified to help, and I will be in touch as well to relay questions or concerns on the Brixton end of things. I’ll be here through the entire process if you need to reach out, but unfortunately, for right now, yes, that’s all I have for you.” She shut the drawer on her desk and picked up her pen again, twiddling it between her fingers. “I’m sorry that you’ve been put in this position, truly. I know it will be tough, but I have full faith that both universities will help you all through this. You have our full support.”

“Yes, I’m sure,” Hall said, on his feet and ready to be done with the conversation.

“Thank you, Ms. Gershwin. I’m sure we’ll be in touch.”

“I would strongly advise you, Dr. Bennett,” Ms. Gershwin said as the two prepared to leave. “Don’t miss this first meeting. It won’t garner favor with the judge, which will only make the case harder. Don’t give the complainant any more fuel than she already has.”

“If she’s that concerned about it,” Hall said, “tell her to send a jet.”

*

They cancelled the rest of their scheduled interviews, though the number of requests had tripled by the end of the week, and decided instead to spend their last night

in Boston at The Corner Saint's. Hall texted Rhetta and Mateo the address to invite them both to join.

"'Bout time we got an invitation to this place," Rhetta said when she arrived. She ordered a drink at the bar and introduced herself to Imogen before sitting down across from Hall and Quinn in Hall's booth. "So I heard you guys are like wanted or some shit now."

Hall snorted into his drink. "Yeah right. Nothing has been that pressing in historical work since the last Nicholas Cage movie."

"But we are in some shit," Quinn said.

"When do you guys leave?" Rhetta said.

"Tomorrow night."

The bell above the door jangled, and Mateo walked in and joined the group. "Tell us what's going on, Boss," he said as he sat down. "How can we help?"

"You can stay here and make sure they don't start auctioning off my lab space."

"Should we be offended that no one cared enough to drag our names through the mud in all this?" Rhetta said.

"Want to trade?" Hall said.

"In a heartbeat, Boss," Mateo said. "They've got us in classrooms this semester. I might end up going just as bat shit as you."

"You guys could use the break," Hall said. "Bigger than that is probably that they need the pair of you in there with the kiddos. You two have more site experience than most people in that department at this rate."

"And that's my fault now?" Mateo said.

“Tough life, Teo.”

“Yeah, yeah, tough life.” He picked Hall’s empty glass and pointed toward the bar. “I assume she knows what you drink.” He got up to order and get Hall’s refill. Rhetta pulled out her phone, and her fingers flew over the keys. Quinn took another sip of her drink and set it back down. She had only drunk half of hers in the time it took Hall to finish his.

“You’re quiet,” Hall said to her. They were sitting closer than the last time, Hall realized. She was leaning her shoulder into his, and he could see the questions swimming through her silence.

“Just trying to figure out what we’re heading into,” Quinn said. “Trying to think of another way we can prepare.”

“What happened to just doing our jobs, huh?”

“You can do your job and still prepare for the worst. That’s the key to a long career. My dissertation advisor told me that once.”

“We couldn’t have prepared for this,” Hall said, trying to put her mind at ease. He moved his shoulder to wrap his arm around her before he could second-guess it. His chest felt tight as Quinn twisted her body to lean in towards him.

“I feel like we could have,” she said. “We could have known that someone wouldn’t like getting their family name besmirched and would try to stop it or fix it or ‘revisionist’ it.”

Hall paused and looked out across the bar, the place that had always felt more like a home than a business. It felt safe and familiar and smelled like the fish being fried in the kitchen and the fresh fish stink on the dock patrons. His sight of the space he knew by

heart was marbled by frizzy strands of orange hair that he made no motion to move. This felt just as natural now.

“Would you have changed any of it though, if you had known?” he said.

Quinn said up straight, looking back at Hall. Her blue eyes were deep and clear.

“No.”

The tightness in his chest loosened. “I think we did the right thing.”

“Now we just have to prove it in court.”

“And do our jobs.”

Quinn quirked the corner of her mouth into a dry smile. Hall watched her eyes travel over his face and land on his lips. She closed the gap between them and kissed him. She tasted like vanilla ChapStick and the half-drunk lager in her right hand.

“About time,” Mateo said, setting another drink down in front of Hall and sliding in to sit beside Rhetta. “You owe me a drink,” he said to her.

“I don’t even want to know,” Quinn said with a laugh. She settled herself back against Hall’s chest, and he felt her shoulders relax as she gave a heavy sigh. He smiled and took a drink.

They talked past the time when Imogen shooed the rest of the regulars away and locked the doors for the night. CJ came over to join the conversation after the tables had been cleared. They avoided the looming topic of what would happen when they all woke up tomorrow and the day after, when they had to confront the fight that lay ahead of them. For now, they were just having a good night.

Hall and Quinn said their goodbyes to Imogen and CJ the next day and headed to the airport to board the eight-hour economy class flight across the ocean. Hall tossed and

turned in his regulation-sized sleep as they flew, his anxiety too high as he worried about next steps for when they landed to let him truly rest.

Hall felt just as sick when they landed as when they had left. They collected their bags and headed for the exit, where Carter was waiting in her car outside the terminal.

“Good to see you all again,” Carter said in greeting, helping them load their bags into the trunk. “I do wish it could have been under better circumstances, but I’m here to help as I can.”

“Thank you Carter,” Quinn said. “We appreciate it.”

They loaded themselves into the car last, and Carter pulled away from the regional airport. “Where am I taking you then?”

“My apartment is off Manor House, by the cemetery. You can drop us there.”

Carter turned left and drove in silence until they were on the motorway. “What did the Brixton solicitor say then?”

“More or less that she couldn’t help,” Quinn said. Hall closed his eyes as the car shook down the road. “She’s punting it over to the Wellsford lawyer instead, mostly for proximity purposes and to avoid any miscommunication of translating the legal proceedings across international waters, I guess.”

“Seems unfortunate, but fair. Have you spoken with the solicitor’s office here?”

“We haven’t, not personally. The woman at Brixton called her for us and set up a meeting for this afternoon.”

“Well, not to rub noses of it, but it seems like my contribution has been lesser noted in all these proceedings thus far. I’m sure it will come up at some point, but until then, if the pair of you need anything, I can be here to help.”

“You can go to the meeting for me,” Hall said from the backseat. He felt like he was in a time loop, reliving the same conversation to no end until his academic career was irreparable. “The trial too probably.”

Carter looked at him in the mirror, her eyebrow arched in sarcasm and surprise. “Something tells me once they get you in a courtroom, we wouldn’t be able to stop you soapboxing no matter how much you pretend to hate this beforehand.”

Hall nodded and stared out the window for the rest of the drive. He didn’t want to admit that he had missed England, based on the circumstances that had brought him back. Despite the mess they were getting themselves into, this had been one of his favorite sites, with many unexpected rewards. Quinn and Carter chattered away in the front seat, passing the time on the motorway.

These are the moments to focus on, Hall thought. *This wasn’t all bad. We’ve done impressive and important work.* He peeled his gaze away from the window and watched Quinn answering an email on her phone in the front seat. *This couldn’t have been all bad. It’s about our stories now.*

Carter pulled off the motorway, and they passed the city cemetery. Quinn gave directions before they came to a stop in a short brick driveway. The cottage house was two stories, and a knee-high iron fence bordered the lawn.

“Mine is the whole second floor. The door’s around the side,” Quinn said as they began to unload the luggage. She led them through the door and up the stairs into the single hallway. The landing was cluttered with a metallic bar cart topped with a ceramic bowl shaped like an elephant, where Quinn deposited her keys. The hallway that emptied out in the sitting area was lined with framed black and white photographs that had been

detailed and painted over in bright colored acrylics. The sitting area was as cluttered as Quinn's office, with a haphazard wall of picture frames and canvas quotes, two store-bought bookshelves of two different colors holding more pottery. The couch was worn black leather and covered in textured pillows. Hall remembered Quinn's reaction to seeing the coffee dumpster in the back of his car and found her words fitting now too—he expected nothing less from her apartment.

Once the bags had been dropped in the bedroom, Quinn put on the kettle and made tea. They settled down in the sitting room, Carter and Hall on the couch and Quinn folding herself into a fuzzy, bright red bucket chair by the window. They sipped their tea in silence.

“Was everything all right back in Boston then, Hall?” Carter said.

Hall shrugged. “Right as can be. Rhetta and Mateo have been assigned as TAs for the semester, which they're none too happy about, but I won't have a site for now it seems. They might as well be put to use instead of just hanging around waiting.”

“Probably for the better then, yeah,” Carter said. They sat in silence again, nursing their mugs. Hall laughed after a minute, rubbing at the back of his neck and letting his distracted gaze wander across the cacophony of sights in the small sitting room.

“I think that's what I'm ready to be over with already,” he said. “Feeling like this is the only thing we can talk about.”

“Well, you did want to get people talking,” Carter said. “I guess you accomplished your mission then.”

“No,” Hall and Quinn both said, overlapping in snapping tones. They met each other’s gaze, and Hall looked away first.

“People are focused on the wrong thing,” Quinn said. “The victims aren’t alive—that’s the point—they’re dead. We should be listening to the dead.”

“Very prophetic,” Carter said, “but people do tend to listen to the ones that can file lawsuits, yeah?”

“Not if we can help it,” Quinn said. She pulled herself from the chair and returned her empty mug to the kitchen. “Carter, stay as long as you like,” she said, popping her head back into the sitting room while she pulled her hair back into a bun, “but I’m going to shower. We’re meeting with the lawyer in a few hours.”

*

Hall looked at his watch and crossed his arms again. Quinn bit at her thumbnail, and Mrs. Wyndham restacked her meeting notes for the fourth time. Their little movements echoed in the rented conference room. They had travelled five hours the day before to get into London in time of the meeting. Hall still didn’t understand why they had to make the trip, instead of the complaining group. *If they have the problem, they can do the travelling. We already had to come all the way back over here.* Hall looked at his watch and sat back in his chair.

“So they make a big deal about not missing the meeting,” Hall said, leaning closer to Quinn as if it would prevent their attorney from hearing him in the empty conference room. “And then the person with the problem is fifteen minutes late?”

As if on cue, the door to the room creaked open, and Quinn did not have time to reply before the complainant party walked in. Mrs. Wyndham stood in silence, and Hall

and Quinn followed suit. Two men of similar age, stature, and complexion led the group in and stood behind their chairs. Neither could have been more than five years older than Hall, he noted, as the man who had delivered the lawsuit paperwork nearly a month ago now walked in and stood beside the one of the men. They stood in an imperfect line, with one open seat between them.

After a moment of standing silence, a woman appeared in the doorway. She was older, a step away from a retirement home, but Hall could tell with one look that she worked hard to hide it. Her hair was perfect silver, set in pin curls and tucked under a peach, wire-rimmed hat, like Hall's grandmother would wear to weddings. Her outfit was plain but tailored to modesty and wealth.

The solicitor lifted his briefcase onto the table and clicked the locks open. He rifled through the pile inside and retrieved a single page.

"Mrs. Wyndham?" the solicitor said, looking across at Quinn.

"Yes," their lawyer said. The other solicitor was slow to draw his attention away, turning his head from Quinn to Mrs. Wyndham before he spoke.

"William Davenshire IV. We spoke on the phone."

"Yes, I'm familiar."

"Mrs. Wyndham," Mr. Davenshire said as he sat, "let's cut to the chase then, shall we? This really is a simple case that can be settled before we even make it to discovery. Redact my client's name—because they have done nothing wrong—from the record and release a corrected version of the paper in question. Plain and simple."

“I understand that you think so,” Mrs. Wyndham said, “because it isn’t that simple for my clients. This is their livelihood, and they also have done nothing wrong. These are academics, Mr. Davenshire.”

“Academics, Mrs. Wyndham, who have reported inaccurate information. That makes them rather unacademic, I would argue.”

“Just because you don’t like how it sounds doesn’t make it inaccurate.”

“Objection!”

“This isn’t the trial floor, Mr. Davenshire.”

The lawyers continued to argue over formality, but Hall lost interest. He looked around at the gray walls and the generic abstract art that hung on the back wall. He cracked his knuckles and crossed his arms. With nothing better to do, he turned to studying the party across the table. The woman had not moved since her entrance, her eyes trained on Mrs. Wyndham as the two solicitors continued arguing. The man to her left alternated between looking at her, the table, and his solicitor every few sentences.

He’s gaging her reactions, not that there’s much to work with.

The more Hall stared, the less he understood about their relationship. The man looked too young to be her husband, but Hall didn’t presume to know the norm for those type of people.

Her son maybe? They didn’t look alike—his eyes dark, hers light. Her white hair did nothing to tell Hall if it had once been the same dirty blonde color of the man beside her, but they had different face shapes. Although neither had spoken, they seemed not to have an immense familiarity between them. The man shifted his eyes to look at the stiff woman again.

Unless he's scared of her. If he isn't her son, what the hell is he doing here?

Neither seemed to be adding much to the argument. He looked over at Quinn only to realize that they hadn't contributed since the proceedings had started either.

"I'm sorry," Hall said. The opposing solicitor looked over in surprise and annoyance at being interrupted. "Why are we doing this like this?" Hall looked down the line at Mrs. Wyndham, who was shaking her head, begging him to keep his mouth shut. He ignored the cue and turned to the woman across the table. "Why can't we just talk about this? I'm Hall Bennett, and you are?"

For the first time, the woman looked over at the man beside her. He tilted his head toward her, and if they hadn't been seated, Hall had a funny idea that the man would have bowed.

"My name," the woman said, "is Dame Evelyn Stallingsworth. My husband is Lord Arthur Stallingsworth, and we are doing this like this, as you say, because my family has been victimized. You have committed libel and spread lies detrimental to my family's well-being. This is the way to handle such things because I doubt anything would have changed if I merely said please."

"Would have been worth a try," Hall said. He leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. He didn't like where this was going. Evelyn studied his movement as Hall smoothed the hair against the back of his neck. He stopped the nervous motion and put his hand back in his lap when Evelyn's gaze didn't waver.

"If you insist, Dr. Bennett, then would you kindly re-release your research and keep my family name out of your smear campaign?" Her lips were so thin that they

almost disappeared when she pressed them together to grimace at the end of her sentence. *She probably hasn't had to ask for anything she wanted in the past few decades.*

Hall leaned forward and put his arms on the table. "No."

"You see, Dr. Bennett, there is no use in playing a moral high ground if this is how I am going to be treated. We are good people and will not stand idly by like this."

"Imagine how the people your ancestor killed must have felt, about how they were being treated."

Both solicitors began speaking at once, objecting and denying over each other, but Evelyn Stallingsworth remained unmoved. An ambulance whirled past the window outside, and the siren added to the chaos of the room.

"What was that supposed to accomplish?" Quinn said, the arguing barristers giving some privacy to her whispers.

"I wanted to see if I could get her to react...to anything."

"Yeah, let me know when that turns out."

"Dr. Bennett," Mr. Davenshire said, pulling Hall back into the conversation. "You will not continue to disrespect my client, who is the victim in this case."

"She is the complainant," Hall's solicitor corrected. "Victims in cases like this aren't decided until the outcome."

"Not as far as we're concerned." Mr. Davenshire's face was tomato red, his cheeks puffed and flabby, padded from an upper class lifestyle.

"I'm not concerned with your opinion on the matter."

“Mrs. Wyndham, for the last time, if you and your clients continue to treat both myself and my client in this matter, I will move to have all depositions in open court, with a judge present for final ruling.”

“You cannot threaten me with something that I would advise in favor of.” Mr. Davenshire leaned back in his chair with a look of poorly hidden surprise. Hall didn’t know what an open court deposition meant, but Mrs. Wyndham’s comment had caught their opposition off guard, which Hall considered a win. Mr. Davenshire opened and closed his mouth a few times before his face brightened red again and he replied.

“Mrs. Wyndham, I don’t understand why you’ve wasted our time then. If you never intended to work through these proceedings with an open mind, we could have started all of this with a judge present.”

“I am open minded,” Mrs. Wyndham said, her voice even. She looked at the other solicitor over the tops of her round wire-rimmed glasses, like an angry librarian scolding a child. “That’s why we agreed to this sit down in the first place. Let me remind you, Mr. Davenshire, we didn’t have to come all this way to speak with you and be dismissed like this.”

Mr. Davenshire’s jaw flapped again, but nothing came out. His client turned her head to glare at him directly. “Yes,” he said, nodding to Evelyn as if she had spoken, “quite right...right. I will request the judge and set the date for deposition then. One month for discovery.”

“A month is fine,” Mrs. Wyndham said with a nod, “but *I* will request the judge. By the end of the week.”

Mr. Davenshire angled his body, shielding himself from Evelyn's pressing stare.
Is everyone around her afraid? Where does she find these people?

"By the end of the week," Mr. Davenshire agreed. "You both will be hearing from me," he said, looking back and forth between Hall and Quinn. "Good day, I suppose."

That could have been an email.

Mrs. Wyndham stood and extended her hand across the table, balancing against the table's edge to do so. "Good day, Mr. Davenshire." He shook her hand and leaned to mumble to Evelyn, who did not acknowledge his words. She pushed out the wheeled conference chair and gripped the edge of the fake-wood table to lift herself up.

"Dr. Bennett," she said. Her solicitor was still in her ear, and Evelyn waved a hand to dismiss him. "If I may." She walked to the end of the table, the other man following to stand at her elbow. Mr. Davenshire left the room, and Mrs. Wyndham sat at the table filing her notes. "I take it you won't believe me," Evelyn said once Hall and Quinn were standing in front of her, "but it is rather nice to meet you." She extended her veiny hand for Hall to shake, the skin sunken between her joints. "It is better to know one's enemy face to face."

Hall accepted the backhanded comment with a curt handshake. He did not tilt his head or bow the way he imagined the man at Evelyn's elbow would have wanted.

"May I introduce my associate, Mr. Jason Walker."

What the hell is an associate?

The man extended his hand to Hall. "Doctor."

An American associate? "Mr. Walker," Hall said, dropping his hand quickly. Mr. Walker gave the same terse greeting to Quinn. She showed no outward sign of surprise at

the man's accent, but Hall could almost hear the gears in her head turning, tracing regional sounds and accents, or something along those lines.

"Well, I do have to say, I'm rather disappointed," Evelyn said after the introductions had been made.

"In us?" Hall said. *I'm shocked.*

"I was hoping to finish this quickly. William usually makes short work of these cases."

As in you've been here before? Suing for libel because you didn't get your way?

"We were told this could take months," Quinn said.

Evelyn smirked with a twitchy upturned corner of her mouth and exhaled through her nose, shaking her shoulders, in what Hall guessed was supposed to be a polite laugh. Mr. Walker watched her response but did not intervene.

"My dear," she said, returning her face to its tailored blank stare. "You may have months to waste, but I do not. I have business to attend to and a charity to run."

As if on cue, Mr. Walker's phone rang in his pocket. He answered, "Stallingsworth Charitable Foundation LLC, this is Walker," then stepped away from the conversation.

"I told you, Dr. Bennett," Evelyn continued. "We can be good people. A stumble in the past cannot hold the actions of the present hostage."

"This is a lot more than a stumble, Mrs. Stallingsworth."

"You will address me as Dame," Evelyn said. "Just like you, Doctor, I have earned my title."

“How feudal,” Hall said. “Did you learn that from those your family killed as well?”

Evelyn’s face remained calm, though her eyebrow twitched. *Did I hit a nerve? Or is twitchy one of the perks of being old?*

“You think yourself a savior, Dr. Bennett,” Evelyn said, sounding uninterested, as if observing the weather outside. “You think you are unassailable.” Hall didn’t respond. “Yes, you’re quite right, I was disappointed in you both. You’re not quite what I expected when I read about you.”

“Read about us?”

“I may not be a supposed academic,” Evelyn said, “but I do have a fair grasp of the Internet. Marcus Hall Bennett, PhD from Harvard, tenure track at Brixton in downtown Boston, parents own a cheeky pub of some kind, and brother of Maeve Marie Bennett, dead at age 16, year 2003.”

Shit. Hall felt his heart stop, a pause between beats, before he could feel it beating out of his chest. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, tilting his head up in the silence of a reply.

“I can’t imagine how hard that must have been for you,” Evelyn said. “To lose someone like that, not to be able to control the situation you were in.”

Hall flinched, feeling the slap of her statement. *How much does she know?*

“Dr. Preston, your search is much less interesting unfortunately. PhD from Oxford, a young lecturer at Wellsford, and a brief engagement announcement. Sad really, that a woman can only be remembered by whom she decides to settle with. I think people often underestimate that we quite do well on our own.” Evelyn looked Quinn up and

down, seeming unimpressed with Quinn's business casual slacks and untucked blouse. "I won't make the mistake of underestimating you."

"Enough," Hall said.

"Yes, Marcus, this is quite enough." Evelyn stroked the strand of pearls entwined around her neck. Mr. Walker reappeared at Evelyn's elbow.

"Madame, Lady Conway on the telephone. She has a question about her Easter donation."

"Or lack thereof," Evelyn said. "Thank you, Mr. Walker." She nodded at Hall and Quinn. "A pleasure to meet you both." Mr. Walker followed in her shadow as turned to leave. It was only after she was out of earshot and the doors to the conference tapped closed again that Hall recovered his senses.

"Hall," he said to the empty space where Evelyn had been. "Not Marcus."

*

That following Saturday was their first day off in what felt like months. Their collective anxiety had both heightened and abated now that the trial had started. They laid in Quinn's bed most of the day, neither of them able to sleep, so they alternated between reading, flicking through the channels on Quinn's basic cable, and just talking into the quiet darkness of the early morning room.

"Did you ever actually think we would get here?" Hall said after Quinn clicked the TV off for the third time that morning. "I mean, did you think this was going to happen?"

"Of course not. Academia can be controversial, sure, but I guess I never knew to what extent. Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if she had never found our

paper in the first place. How did she get it, that's the next question, which probably isn't as sinister as it sounds. These types of people are always looking out for each other, but how would all this be different if they had just minded their own business?"

Hall nodded, his head crushing into the purple velvet body pillow behind him. "That's true...also not really what I meant."

Quinn shifted off his chest to look up at him. Her hair was piled into a loose bun on the crown of her head, and she was wearing an old Penn State shirt with a hole in the armpit he had discovered sometime in the middle of the night. His leg was wrapped over hers under the fleece blanket. She smiled and ran her foot up the length of his calf and back again. "Not what you meant?"

"Yeah, that, exactly," Hall said with a nervous laugh. "Did you think that was going to happen?"

Quinn shrugged. "It's not like I came into the project on a man-hunt."

"Or a woman-hunt."

Quinn's smile faded, and she tilted her head. Her foot stopped moving against his leg. She studied his face the same way he had seen her study a sentence diagram on a whiteboard. "Is that what you're asking?" She paused to gage his response. Hall didn't look away. "Does it bother you?"

"Does what?"

"Me being queer," Quinn said without missing a beat.

First time she's said it like that. Hall pushed himself against the pillows to sit up farther. He paused a moment like he was thinking, but he already knew the honest answer. "Frankly, I don't know how you think, or what you're looking for, which is fine,

so I guess I never really had a thought about it.” He smiled and looked away to a black-and-white line painting on the wall that he had first thought was an abstract zebra print but had later been proven how it actually resembled a naked woman lying in her bed. “Okay not that I didn’t think about it. It doesn’t bother me. I don’t know any more than you want me to, I don’t think, so as long as you still want to stay at my place instead of getting a hotel, and I can still stay here, and you want to go drinking at the Boar and the Bull’s-eye, or The Corner Saint’s, and maybe I can kiss you, when we’re not on campus I mean, then I don’t have anything to worry about, yeah? I mean, that sounds okay to me, but you make the rules here.”

The smile that broke over Quinn’s face was slow and sincere, pushing her red cheeks up and crinkling the corners of her sea blue eyes. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you like this before.”

“Like what?”

Quinn reached across him to plant her hand on the other side of the bed and lay across his bare chest to kiss him. “Nervous,” she said when she pulled away, their noses still touching.

“I think that’s the only way you’ve seen me, actually. By the time you joined the project, I was already hopped up and looking for a way through.”

Quinn shook her head. “Not like this,” she said. “I think I’m done hunting for a while.”

Hall laughed from deep in his chest and kissed her again. “Wow, never mind, I’m out. That was terrible.”

“I accept that.” Quinn laughed, sitting up. “Can you imagine how I would do if I actually tried hunting? Like bow and arrow style or something?”

“You’d talk an animal to death first. ‘Excuse me, do you have a different accent than that other deer over there? How long are your vowels? What region is this?’”

Quinn pinched her lips together to keep from laughing or admitting that he was right. A weak beam of sunlight cut through a crack in the shades and landed down Hall’s cheek, peeking up into his left eye. He squinted and leaned in closer to Quinn to avoid the light. “It’s easier for some people than others,” she said to change the subject. “I didn’t grow up hunting.”

“And you think I did?”

“You must have gone fishing at least. Being on the water and all.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Okay well, fresh wilderness wasn’t exactly widespread in urban, construction zone Ohio.”

Hall lay down flat, letting one arm dangle off the narrow bedframe. “What was your favorite thing to do as a kid?”

“Watercolor.”

“Like the painting?”

Quinn nodded, her head rested against her bent knee. “Mostly pictures of the flowers my mom grew in her little window box. I liked that they were pretty and that their petals were the same color as my hair. What was yours?”

Hall let a minute lapse before he responded. “Playing with Maeve. Her favorite game was always pirates. We would pretend the slats on the railing was the porthole to talk between boats.”

“That’s sweet that you would play with her even though you were older.”

Hall shook his head. “I never felt older when we were little, probably not even when we were teenagers. My dad used to say that we were actually supposed to be twins—the Maeve Marie was just running late, like always.”

Quinn shuffled against the silver cotton sheets to lay her head beside his. They breathed in the shadowy comfort of the room, listening to a bird warble outside the half-closed window and the TV was still whining quietly as it cooled off from its last use. Hall saw Quinn watching him out of the corner of her eye. He knew what was coming next.

“What happened to her,” Quinn said, “that Evelyn has something over you about this?”

Hall shook his head, and he pressed his eyes closed against the tears he could feel welling up. “I just don’t like to talk about it,” he whispered.

“I figured, based on your reaction back at your parents’ place.”

“How did you know who she was?”

“I asked your mom, when you were in the bathroom one time. Just who the booth was named after. I didn’t think it was going to be that personal, just a regular or somebody.”

Hall nodded. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you.”

Quinn propped herself up to look at him. She wiped a stray tear from his cheek. “That’s not what this is about. You didn’t have to tell me.”

“She was sixteen. Christmas break of my sophomore year. Drunk driver hit an ice patch, spun out and hit us in an intersection.”

“Us?”

His throat felt like it was sealing shut. It took too much effort to lift his chest, to suck air into his lungs. His breathing was shallow, and he sputtered when he tried to talk. Quinn lay back down against his shoulder, hugging his hips to pull him closer.

“I was driving. The light was yellow. It was still the other guy’s fault, but I should have just...stopped.” Quinn pressed her lips together, and her blue eyes tightened. “I got a concussion and a broken arm. Maeve took the brunt of it.” Hall snorted. “Yeah, literally, she took the brunt of it because she died from it, and I got a scratch and a headache.”

“Hall, that’s not—”

“Yeah, I know,” he said to cut her off. “It happened. Sixteen years ago now.” He lifted his right arm, shifting Quinn onto his chest, and held up his forearm. From elbow to wrist, his skin was covered in red and white roses, the thorns and leaves wrapping over each other, like someone had put a camera in the middle of a briar patch and taken a picture. The flowers were bright and in full bloom, and the light from the window shone over the outlines.

“I used to have her name right here. I got it done as soon as I was out of the cast. It looked like crap honestly, and then I kept getting questions, having to explain it and stuff, which wasn’t the point. I got it covered up five years ago.”

“She liked roses?” Quinn said, craning her head over her shoulder to get a closer look.

Hall smiled, wiping at his face with his other hand. “Honestly,” he laughed, “I have no idea. But her favorite band was that band you heard me listening to in the lab. Half Irish, all Boston, bagpipes, something my dad would have liked. She really was his kid for sure. I don’t know. The kid was weird. She loved them. They came out with a song a few years ago, about a rose tattoo. She never got to hear it, but I think she would have liked it. So I did this instead.” He laughed again, letting his arm fall. “It doesn’t make a whole lot of sense, but I guess it felt right. I listened to them for years on end after she was gone.”

“Stuff like that doesn’t have to make sense.”

The TV fizzled out, and the room felt eerie quiet, filled with just the sound of their breathing. Hall’s chest felt a little bit lighter.

“I know it wasn’t my fault,” Hall said, “but I don’t like people to know, or to talk about it. Like...whatever their memory is of her, or whatever they read on the Internet in some police report, that wasn’t really her. And it wasn’t really that guy’s fault. It was my fault. I was supposed to protect her.” Hall wiped at his face. “Sometimes it feels like forever ago. Sometimes it’s like yesterday. I’m nineteen again, in the hospital, then like trying to buy a suit in a cast afterwards. I transferred to community college for that semester, lived with my parents while we were trying to figure out what normal was like now. I helped CJ redo her booth and put the plate in.” He shook his head. “Yeah, years ago. I was a freaking kid. You would have been, what, ten, when that happened?”

“Thirteen,” Quinn said.

“Still, younger than she would be.”

Quinn didn't reply right away, tilting her head up to look at him, confused. "And...that makes me...what?"

"I just think you guys would have got along, that's all. I honestly keep forgetting how much younger you are."

Quinn pushed at his bare stomach, where there wasn't much give. "It's six years, not sixty. We're still adults, and I've got a solid four inches on you in height. Knock it off."

Hall let the subject drop. He could see from her distant gaze into the pale brown paisley of the wallpaper and her now bitten down thumbnail that he had hit an unspoken nerve. He wiped at his face and went back to remembering his sister, snippets of forgotten stories suddenly at the forefront of his mind.

The time she thought she ran over a frog with her training bike. She cried for an hour straight until I went back down the street to look through the grass and prove the frog was okay.

She liked to take naps in the clean laundry basket, when she still fit in there, because she saw the neighbor's cat Russell do it.

She tried to sew her own dress for her eighth grade formal but got frustrated the night before and asked me if she could just borrow a button up shirt instead. She must have worn jeans, I can't remember.

"I am sorry," Quinn said, breaking through Hall's silent memories, "about what happened to her. That it's all coming back to you like this." The room got quiet for a minute. "I do wish I had gotten to meet her."

Hall turned his head away from Quinn, drawing in a shaky breath and pinching his eyes shut. He ran his hand over his face then turned back and kissed Quinn on her forehead. “Yeah, me too.”

Neither of them spoke as the birds outside continued to sing into midday. They lay like that in silence, and within the hour, both had managed to fall asleep.

*

Hall didn’t know what he had expected when they showed up for the trial, but this wasn’t it. Court wasn’t supposed to feel like a business meeting with an audience of interns.

“Where are the cameras and the hecklers?” Hall said as they stood in the entryway.

“You’ve been watching way too much Judge Judy for your own good,” Quinn said. She walked past Hall and took a seat on the side of the table where Mrs. Wyndham already sat. Their opposition sat on the other side of the table, with an open chair at the foot of the table for the rotating list of witnesses. Hall and Quinn had been notified that they would be asked to testify, both by Mrs. Wyndham and Mr. Davenshire. Carter had called to say that Mr. Davenshire had been in contact but had told her that she did not have to appear in court. The judge would sit at the desk behind the head of the table. The line of chairs behind the table were already filled with a jury, a mismatched panel of grandmothers in knitted cardigans, self-important day workers in borrowed blazers, minimum wage millennials with food service stains on their jeans. *This crack team—they’re my deciding factor.*

They sat in relative silence until the judge arrived. He was an older man, greeted with the respect of standing, and he began itching at his white curly wig almost as soon as he sat down.

“Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen,” the judge said in a gruff voice. “We’re here today to try suit for the libel of the defendant, the party of Wellsford College, via Dr. Marcus Bennett and Dr. Quinn Preston, against the complainant, the family Stallingsworth. Solicitor parties present?”

“Gloria Wyndham, Wellsford College. Defendant barrister.”

“William Davenshire IV from Davensire, Conroy, Grantley, and Falls. Complainant solicitor.”

“So that everyone is aware of our proceedings today—we’ll have brief opening statements from either solicitor, then deposition of questioning witnesses and relevant speakers on either side as well. I reserve the right to recess the proceedings at any point. Jury, your role here will be to listen to testimony and decide if you all collectively believe that libel has been committed in this case. I will pass all final rulings. Please respond ‘I do’ if you understand your role in today’s proceedings.”

The jury members responded in turn.

“Thank you jury,” the judge said when they had finished sounding off. “Then we will begin with opening statements. Complainant first, Mr. Davenshire.”

“Thank you sir. My lord and members of the jury, thank you for being here today, and I would like to start by saying that the facts of this case are simple. My client, Dame Evelyn Stallingsworth, has received undue slander and smearing against her family name at the hands of Dr. Bennett and Dr. Preston and their work.” *No*. “Both doctors have

readily admitted that they do not believe Dame Stallingsworth to be directly connected to their contended crime, as I will prove in due course.” *Because she wasn’t alive 950 years ago. This isn’t her, specifically.* “Dr. Bennett and Dr. Preston are not in a position to decide how much their work hurts other people, and the presence of this case indicates the extent to which their work has negatively impacted the Stallingsworth family. Dame Evelyn Stallingsworth has been honored with a title by Her Majesty for charitable work through her family foundation, which promotes education for girls in underdeveloped communities, delivers holiday presents and supplies to the poorer neighbourhoods of London, and has opened several battered women’s shelters across the country. Dame Stallingsworth is a good woman, and as a result of these slanderous accusations, donations have decreased. The Stallingsworth name has come into question in polite society, making it much harder for Dame Stallingsworth to effect critical change within our country.” *Hard to do when you’re in court half your life, charging the government to pay out for judge and jury.* “Therefore, the complainant has clearly indicated terms for settling this misconduct. All that we ask is that the family name simply be removed from the aforementioned research and that her name be cleared in the court of public opinion. Those are the facts, as the complainant knows them, and our terms for settlement. If it pleases the court, I will strive to prove that these are important and reasonable measures to be taken to right the wrong against this historic family.” *Strive all you want. You won’t get anywhere.*

Mr. Davenshire sat down. Hall watched the reactions of the jury out of the corner of his eye. There wasn’t much to look at, which almost gave him hope. The noise from the hallway increased as another case let out.

“For the defense?” the judge said.

Mrs. Wyndham rose. “My lord, members of the jury, today is not emotion driven. This is about fact and historical discovery. My clients and their respective institutions stand by the information published in their article some nine months ago. This article is factual, based on the artifacts and the site in question. Their use of the Stallingsworth name is not malicious slander but historical reporting. We regret that the Stallingsworths have taken this academic reporting out of context, but Wellsford College, Brixton University, and the defendants here will not stand for revisionism. Make no mistake. That is what the complainant is suggesting—a revision of the current findings in favor of a more socially acceptable, tainted, and washed over reading that does not reflect historical fact.”

Mrs. Wyndham sat, and the judge scratched the back of his wig. The jury shifted in their seats. The Dame did not shift her gaze from Mrs. Wyndham’s face. The judge cleared his throat.

“Thank you then, I suppose. Mrs. Wyndham, we’ll start with the calling of your witnesses first.”

3

“You are going to be my first speaker,” Mrs. Wyndham had told Quinn days before the trial. Hall had decided to drive back out to the site that morning, and Quinn had received a summons from Mrs. Wyndham shortly after.

“Why?” Quinn had said. “This is Hall’s site. If someone has to defend the validity of it, it should be him.”

“I’m well aware of that, Dr. Preston; however, I can think I can say rather openly and politely that we both have an understanding of Dr. Bennett’s attitude toward this case, correct.”

“He hasn’t exactly kept quiet about it.”

“I’m sure,” Mrs. Wyndham said with a nod and tasteful disinterest. “I don’t want to start in front of a judge like that, on such a hot-tempered note let’s say. Your information will be the deciding factor in this case. It’s your translation. Mr. Davenshire will try to question Dr. Bennett’s motive, establish a case that he hated the Stallingsworths and was looking for a way to take down the family even before *you* found the evidence. Frankly, I don’t know what he’ll try to do with your testimony or what he’ll ask you, but I know that your academic defense and your translation will be the key to winning our case.”

“So you want me to start the trial by talking about my translation and potentially answering some questions from the other lawyer that you don’t know what they are that may or may not pull our entire case apart?” *God, I sound like Hall.*

“To put it roughly,” Mrs. Wyndham said. Quinn had been surprised that her lawyer hadn’t tried to temper her realism. “Like I said, I will have a specific list of questions for you, but I do want to get right to the heart of your translation as quickly as possible. That is the baseline we need to establish—the victims’ own words.”

Quinn’s stomach had churned, and she had felt the bile creeping up the back of her throat. “What an awful way to put that.” Mrs. Wyndham had quickly gone on the defensive, trying to correct her wording, but Quinn had waved her off. “You’re not wrong is the issue.”

“I understand, Dr. Preston,” Mrs. Wyndham said, backing down.

Quinn gave a dry laugh. “No, I’m not sure you do,” Quinn had said with a shake of her head. *There’s no fucking way you know what this feels like. I am responsible of their story.* “But I can make people understand with this testimony.”

She didn’t watch Hall’s reaction when she was called to testify first. She sat at the end of the table and faced down the judge. *I’ve dealt with worse than old white men.*

“Name and relevance please.”

“Dr. Quinn Preston, lecturer at Wellsford College, assisting researcher for the site, co-author of the paper in question.”

“You are the primary translator as well, correct?”

“Yes.” *The only translator.*

“Walk us through your history with the site, ending with the publication of your article.” Hall nodded at her across the table. *Don’t do that, stupid. It’ll look like we rehearsed something.*

“I received an email from Dr. Bennett about six months prior to the first draft of the paper. He asked if I was available to consult on some research he had and said that he would bring it to my office to show me. We met for the first time a few days later, and he showed me a picture of some animal parchment on his phone.”

“Tell us a little bit about the parchment if you would.”

“The parchment appeared to have been written on in what he had thought was Middle English, which is one of my specialty areas. After examining the picture, I concluded that the writing was not Middle English.”

“What made you certain that it was not Middle English?” Mrs. Wyndham said looking up from her notes.

“The verb forms, the endings I mean, were Old English, not Middle English. Based on the time period of the site, Middle English would have been in transition and still recognized as Old English, perhaps just with dialect forms. One of Hall’s—Dr. Bennett’s—grad students was able to translate some of the words, nouns mostly, from Old English, but not all of it, so there was evidence of other languages within the same sentences.”

“Was there anything else?”

“Mainly that and the fact that Mateo, the grad student, and I couldn’t read the whole thing. Again, this was an initial read through. Later research traced the lexicon to Border Scots and borrowing from Old French with Old English inflexion and Norse syntax and word order.”

Mrs. Wyndham nodded and added a mark to her notes. Quinn looked over at the jury. *Wonder how much of this they’re absorbing. Might have made more sense to just bring in Faculty Council or some other stuff academic board. We’d have a better chance of making sense.*

“Let’s go back to the timeline,” Mrs. Wyndham said, bringing Quinn back to her statement.

“I told Dr. Bennett that I wanted to see all of what they found, not just a picture. I went to their lab and got to look at all seventeen pages that had been discovered. I was intrigued and said I wanted to help. I began working with Dr. Bennett and Dr. Gates, tracing the history of the parts of the language and trying to reach a point of translation.”

“And how long did that take you?”

“Roughly four months for an initial work up, then I did more fine tuning as we were writing the paper and sent certain parts of the work out to specialists that I was familiar with in the particular historical languages. We didn’t send the paper for final review until we had heard from all of the language readers.”

“That seems like a relatively short amount of time for such a large chunk of work.”

“Not really.” *Because I was invested—time flies when you’re having fun.* “The first month or two was a lot of historical work, as I said, but once I was able to narrow down the languages being used, the rest was relatively straight forward.” She tucked a piece of hair behind her ear, wishing she had brought a headband with her, no matter how unprofessional it might have looked.

Mrs. Wyndham cracked an assuaging smile. “For some more than others I imagine.” A few of the jury members chuckled.

“Pardon?” *What the hell is she doing? Is this how you’re supposed to garner favor with a jury? Making fun of your witness’s academics?* Quinn tilted her chin up and narrowed her eyes at her own solicitor. *Now would be a good time to clue me in and start coaching.*

“Were you involved in any other projects at the time?”

“No, I was waiting on a peer review to come back for an unrelated work, and I was planning my lectures for the next term, which were eventually handed off to a colleague when the project became serious.”

“So, once you have the translation done to a relative degree, you and Dr. Bennett co-write this article.”

“Yes.”

“Which included the Stallingsworth family name.”

Here we go. Hall pitched forward in his seat and clasped his hands on the table. His leg was bouncing. The afternoon sun glinted through the slit windows high on the outer wall, and Quinn watched the dust that hung above their heads dance in the light. One of the jury members coughed, and Quinn cleared her throat before she spoke. “Yes.”

“Why did you choose to include their name?”

“Because their family is mentioned in the parchment.” The jury began to mumble and whisper to themselves. Quinn laughed in her head. Maybe this whole thing was going to turn out to be a little closer to Judge Judy than she had thought.

“How so?” Mrs. Wyndham asked. She held up a stack of documents. “I’ve read through these scans your team provided, and I didn’t see anything that spelled out ‘Stallingsworth.’”

“The author describes the shields and the heraldic crest of the men who took their land. He calls them ‘men of red and white with birds on their chests.’” She saw Evelyn look down at her lap. Mr. Walker’s eyes slid over to watch Evelyn, who avoided the eyes of the jury.

“And how do you know that those men are related to the Stallingsworths?”

“The crest matches exactly, and Dr. Gates had gone through the history of the land deeds for the area prior to reading my translation and found that the first family name associated with the land after the Norman Conquest in 1066 was Stallingsworth. To

us, as historians or translators, that was significant enough to warrant a place in our final analysis.” *I argued it was relevant. This was my decision.*

“Because you wanted someone to blame?”

“No, because we had relevant information that drew a connection between two pieces of research and to not report it would have made for a weaker argument and violated the purposes of drawing a conclusion from all the sets of data we had.” Quinn could have argued further about the pragmatic necessity for Grice’s Maxims of Quantity and Relevance when it came to disclosure in academic work, but she took another look at her tired audience and decided against it.

“So to you, this is about integrity?” Mrs. Wyndham said to summarize.

“Yes, the integrity of our work.” A few of the jury members nodded. *Maybe this is getting through to them.*

“What about something like the translator’s bias? You mentioned that in your paper.”

“What about it?”

“Do you have it?”

Quinn snorted, and Evelyn looked back up at the unladylike noise. Her flimsy khaki colored hat wobbled on her head before settling and blending back in with the color of the high-backed chair. “Every translator does,” Quinn said. “By the inherent fact of taking words in one language and transposing their meaning into another language, you make decisions. Words can shift meaning or grammatical structure during translation, but the translator’s bias isn’t intentionally negative or positive. It’s just a fact of translation and one that we did address in the paper.”

“Do you believe you used your bias negatively?”

“No, I think I avoided intentional opinion based decisions and explained all of my choices in the analysis portion of the paper, which was peer reviewed and approved. If I had misused any translation techniques in favor of my conclusion, one of the reviewers would have pointed it out. They aren’t exactly paid to be nice.”

“Do you feel that you’ve acted with integrity in this work and throughout your research?”

“Yes. We all did. We have a personal stake in this case too. This is my life and my reputation. I, as an academic, testify that this work is accurate and unbiased to the best of my ability. I would not be here today if I did not believe that. This work has quickly become all-consuming—” she nodded at Hall— “for all of us. We believe in what we’re doing, and it isn’t out of malice. In the most selfish way possible, we’re doing this for us and for the people that we now represent, because we found their story. We’re just trying to tell it the best way that we know how, by using their words and using all of the modern resources that are available to us.”

Mrs. Wyndham nodded and gave her a reassuring smile. “Thank you, Dr. Preston.” Hall, who had been watching Evelyn through the majority of Quinn’s testimony, looked over at her and winked.

“Dr. Preston, just to be clear,” Mr. Davenshire said, “you are saying that the name Stallingsworth does not appear in writing on any of the recovered artifacts?”

Quinn didn’t reply right away. *Tricky question.* “Technically yes.”

“No further questions,” Mr. Davenshire said before she could get another word in.

“Thank you, Dr. Preston,” the judge said. “You may return to your seat.”

Quinn thanked the judge and moved around the table back to her original seat. Hall squeezed her hand when she sat down. She gave him an unsure smile and a little nod then looked back across the table. Evelyn was watching her, the old woman's eyes squinted and scheming. Evelyn waved a finger at Mr. Walker, who leaned in so that she could speak to him in a hushed tone that Quinn couldn't quite make out. She let go of Hall's hand under the table.

"Let's keep this moving," the judge said. "Your next witness, Mrs. Wyndham."

"Dr. Bennett," Mrs. Wyndham said, nodding toward the chair Quinn had vacated. Hall moved two chairs over. "Please state your name and relevance for the court."

"Dr. Marcus Hall Bennett, associate professor of archaeology, Brixton University. Site director and co-author." He smoothed the hair at the back of his neck and pulled at the collar of his button down.

Does this man own anything that isn't plaid? Quinn thought as she watched him squirm. *Sit still—they'll think you're hiding something.*

"Let's start with the same question, Dr. Bennett," Mrs. Wyndham said. "Tell us your timeline."

"Two, two and a half, years ago, I got a call from Dr. Gates that they had a site here that was in early stages, wasn't yielding much. Wellsford was running out of resources to handle it, so Dr. Gates asked if I would be interested in applying for a grant and coming to take over the site."

"Why you?"

“Dr. Gates and I had met at a conference a few months before where I had accepted an award. My field specialty is the stuff nobody else wants.” Hall smirked to himself. No one else was laughing.

“Had you ever worked with anyone from Wellsford before?”

Hall shook his head. “Not to my knowledge. Like I said, I met Dr. Gates beforehand and worked with her when I got there. Then Dr. Preston and I met during the site work.”

“Had you ever been to the United Kingdom before?” *Why is that relevant?*

“Yes,” Hall said, “but not for work. My father is an Irish immigrant to America, so his family is still outside of Dublin, and my maternal great-grandparents lived in England when they were alive. We visited a couple times.”

“Had you ever heard of the Stallingsworth family prior to the research that Dr. Preston mentioned in her testimony?”

“No.” The dull roar of rain hitting the roof above them absorbed the echo of Hall’s word.

“So you had never met or interacted with a member of the family before?”

Establish lack of motive. Quinn looked over at Mr. Davenshire, who was buried in his notes. Mr. Walker watched Hall with an unblinking stare.

“No.”

“Tell me about your decision to include the Stallingsworth name in your final reports from the site.”

“There were a couple things that were weird about the site, mostly the fact that the pieces we were finding were all from the same time period, like a history snapshot, like

the people up and left only a few decades after the Invasion. A lot of the pieces on site were broken as well. More than the normal wear and tear you find at older sites—broken tools, broken pottery, torn cloth.”

“And this led you to believe what?”

“That these people had fled the land quickly and potentially not under friendly circumstances.” The jury began shuffling amongst themselves again. Outside, it began raining harder.

“And that’s enough to make you say murder?” Mrs. Wyndham leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms as though she was waiting for Hall to convince her of his stance. *I guess if you can sell it to your own lawyer, you should be able to sell it anywhere.*

“Unfortunately, war and pillaging were pretty common at the time, and that makes it the most applicable deduction. Again, that combined with Dr. Gates’s land deeds work and Dr. Preston’s account from the people themselves, it was a matter of historical justice.” *Don’t start on this again.*

“Justice?”

“Or integrity, I guess. These people can no longer speak for themselves, and we had all the information to tell their stories. They even wrote some of it themselves.”

“Thank you, Dr. Bennett.”

Quinn let out the breath she didn’t realize she had been holding. She tensed up again when Mr. Davenshire stood to speak.

“Dr. Bennett, what do you think the effect would be if you had decided not to put the family name in your research?” the red-faced man asked.

“Objection, this is speculation.”

“Yes, Mrs. Wyndham, that would be the point of the question, but since I’m asking the witness to speculate and *not* speculating myself...?”

“You may answer,” the judge said to Hall. Quinn leaned forward to put her elbows on the table and look down at Hall head on.

“Can you restate the question?” he said. He didn’t adjust his collar or pull at his hair. *Good, you got this.*

“How do you think your final work would have been different, overall, if you had not used the name Stallingsworth in your actual paper.”

“I think someone still would have drawn the connection eventually,” Hall said, leaning his elbows on the table and folding his hands, “and then my team would come under question as to why we didn’t take the necessary steps to further our research. I’m sure at some point someone would have figured out that we did actually have the information at the time, which isn’t academic transparency, which would have just hurt us more—our careers and our research.”

“So, essentially, you threw this family into the world to be judged in order to save yourself.”

“Objection!”

“Not appropriate, Mr. Davenshire,” the judge cut in.

“It’s not throwing someone under the bus if we have the research to prove it,” Hall said.

“Dr. Bennett, you will ignore the barrister’s question,” the judge said. He pointed at Hall with his pen. “Do not reply further. We’ll move on.”

“We’re just supposed to take you at your word then?” Mr. Davenshire said. “At your integrity?” Sweat dripped off his close-clipped moustache, and Quinn looked away when he licked his lips.

“No,” Hall said, his jaw tight. “You’re supposed to read the research that we’ve been talking about for the last half hour.”

“Careful, Dr. Bennett,” the judge said.

“And why does your research get to decide how my client gets to live?” Mr. Davenshire said, not missing a beat. His breathing was getting heavy as he got worked up in his defense.

“It doesn’t, because I’m also not the one directly impacting her because—”

“Yes, you are!”

“—this would have been a very different case if I had come in and sued her for damages her ancestors did hundreds of years ago, but that’s not what I’m doing. I’ve been put on the defensive, and I’m just stating facts.”

“It’s safe to say you’ve caused a lot more damage than just facts, Dr. Bennett.” The judge started to chastise him, but Mr. Davenshire cut him off. “No further questions. Thank you for your time, Dr. Bennett.”

Hall slid back into his original seat, arms crossed. Quinn reached over to grab hold of his forearm, anchoring him in the moment to hear the proceedings. She could almost see the smoke coming out of his ears.

“No more witnesses then, Mrs. Wyndham?” the judge said, already stacking up his paperwork.

“No, sir.”

“Then we’ll call it off for today.”

“Time for a drink,” Hall said as soon as the gavel hit. He didn’t check with Mrs. Wyndham about the process for the next day before he started for the door.

“You all are good for now,” she said when Quinn asked if there was anything she needed before they left. “You both did a good job today.”

Doesn’t feel like it. Quinn shouldered her bag and went to leave the stifling room. *Day one and I already need a break from this place.* She didn’t get far before Evelyn cut her off.

“Dr. Preston,” Evelyn said. “If I could have a word.”

Quinn paused, one foot in the hallway. “Do I need to have my lawyer here for this?” she said. She saw Mr. Walker looming over Evelyn’s shoulder at a respectable distance, watching their conversation, unblinking. *What is he, her hitman?*

“Hardly. I would hate to think the day a young scholar like yourself would be scared of a simple conversation.”

Quinn snorted. “You’ve given me little reason to believe that you really believe that.”

Evelyn’s lips pursed, and she reached to adjust the chain of pearls strangling her second chin. “As I was saying, I’d like to invite you and your Dr. Bennett for dinner tonight.”

Quinn let go of her grip on the door. “Why would you want to do that?”

“It’s a matter of manners.” One of the jury members scuttled between them, muttering apologies in an effort to get through the crowd and to the bathroom. “I don’t see a reason we can’t sit down and have a meal and a conversation,” Evelyn continued.

“Apparently that is what Dr. Bennett has been after since the first day, yes? And believe it or not, I do tire of all of the barristers and legal jargon. A strategic social engagement is much more to my liking.”

“I can imagine,” Quinn said. She glanced out to where Hall was pacing the hallway, still fuming from what she was sure she would hear about later as some imagined way that he failed the questioning. *Maybe it is time to step out from behind the curtain of lawyers.*

“I suppose you could feel free to bring your lawyer if necessary,” Evelyn said. “A hostess always manages to find an extra seat for those whose presence was not requested but inevitably expected.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Quinn said from over her shoulder. She turned back to face her adversary. “We’d be happy to join you for dinner.”

Evelyn cracked a small smile. Her teeth were the first thing Quinn had seen that truly showed her age—they were yellowed and crooked, a misplaced gap between two of the teeth on the right-hand side.

“I knew you’d be the first one to come around, girl.”

“Hardly.”

4

“Why in the name of the bloody bucket are we doing this fucking thing again?”

Their cab made a left hand turn, and Quinn doubled over her seat belt laughing, rocking with the motion of the car, her freckled cheeks turning red. “In the *what?* I’m supposed to take you seriously when you talk like that?”

“I am serious!” The driver looked at his passengers in the mirror before shaking his head and pulling into a traffic circle.

“I know you are,” Quinn said, “but your reversion to acquired dialect phrases from your father for emphasis is not.” A motorbike zipped past her window, and another car on the road honked at the biker as they passed.

“Don’t analyze me,” Hall said. “This isn’t the time.” He slumped back in his seat, the tie he had added to his outfit at Quinn’s request crumpling against the folds of his shirt.

“Well maybe analyzing language-in-use is my coping mechanism,” Quinn said. “At least it doesn’t sound as bloody stupid.”

“You don’t need a coping mechanism,” Hall said. He waved his hands around to gesture at the cab. “This was your idea.”

“The hell it was. It was the Stallingsworth lady’s idea. I was just the one she approached about it.”

“Because she knew if she had tried to breathe too close to me, I would have caused an injunction, much less dealing with a stupid dinner invite.”

“Can’t imagine why she wouldn’t want to broach the subject with you then.”

“Why are we doing this again?” Hall said, reiterating his original question. The doors to cab rattled as the hackney idled at a stoplight. The rain from earlier had stopped, and the weak sunlight reflected off puddle water on the sidewalks.

“I think that she thinks she’s trying to be civil,” Quinn said, looking out at the neighborhood around them, though she knew it was probably far off from their final destination.

“If she wants to be civil, tell her to stop trying to revise history in her favor and drop the lawsuit. That’s courtly, isn’t it?” The cab sputtered back into motion and turned down a one-way lane.

Quinn rolled her eyes. “You don’t see me making excuses for her, do you? I’m not exactly championing her cause here.”

“No, but you did accept the invitation.”

“Maybe she’s afraid,” Quinn said. “You know, maybe if we can step out from behind all the lawyers and whatnot, for real this time, not your stupid first attempt. If we could just sit down and talk through this whole thing, we could sort it out ourselves instead of sitting in court for another several months. This is a chance for us to explain the research, explain the paper. Maybe she just didn’t understand it.”

“Oh, so now you’re thinking she’s an idiot?”

Quinn shrugged. “We can hope.”

“The number 17,” the driver said, bringing the cab to a sharp stop. “Off St. James Park.”

Hall looked out the window and gave a hollow laugh. “Of course it is.”

Quinn paid the driver, and they stepped out of the hackney and onto the cleanest public street Hall had ever seen. White brick townhouses melted into swept-clean white concrete driveway and sidewalks. Rose bushes were pruned to bloom in perfect shapes pressed against wrought-iron fences that did little by way of protection and showed no evidence of rust or age.

Hall pulled the ineffective gate lock from the inside and opened the door for Quinn. “Let’s get this over with.” They walked up the front path and pulled the bell.

Of course they still have a pull bell, like some Victorian gentlemen's club.

The man who opened the door did little to alter Hall's image of the place. He was middle-aged, white, and wearing tailcoats.

"Dr. Bennett and Dr. Preston?" the man said in a creaky British accent.

"Yes."

"Madame Evelyn is expecting you. You may come in." *Madame Evelyn, not Dame Evelyn.* They crossed into the foyer with its white marble and gold-framed painting, and the butler shut the door.

"May I take any jackets, purses, anything you won't need through dinner?" Hall felt the man inspecting his wardrobe with a critical eye. *Nope, no dinner jackets today. I left my pocket watch chain in my leisure suit.*

Quinn thanked the man and handed over her purse. Hall looked at her in confusion, with a silent look that asked what the hell she was doing. Quinn shrugged as the butler hung her purse on a hook in the tiny built-in closet.

"There's nothing in there that anyone in this house would want to steal," she said.

"This way if you please," the butler said, leading them down a narrow hallway. They passed a sitting room, glass French doors closing off the section, and passed into the dining room where the enormous table was already set. Everything was spotless clean, and the air felt dirty with old money. Hall had to remind himself that this woman ran a charity. He probably could have started his own non-profit just with the silverware on the table.

Enough for my parents to retire, he thought, watching his reflection in the empty plate. *Not that they'd give up the Corner Saint's, crumbling hole that it is.* In the muted

opulence, Hall felt sentimental for the greasy smell of fish and piss whiskey. A pop in the corner of the room drew his attention away. The butler poured white wine from the fresh bottle and offered them each a glass.

“Madame will be in shortly,” the butler said before leaving the room.

“Thank you, Jeeves,” Hall said once they were alone. “He forgot to tell me to make myself at home.” He wasn’t sure how anyone could feel at home in such a large and lifeless room. The ceilings were tall, with ornate medallions carved to look like vines holding the room’s two candle chandeliers in place. The drapes were a heavy green-gold, braided gold ropes hanging on the sides. A Persian rug protected the table and its curved-spine chairs from the hard wood floor. The corner bar cart was the only other accessory in the room, and the walls were painted stark white.

“Because they don’t want you to get used to living like this,” Quinn said. “It’s back to microwave pasties and bottom barrel coffee after this.”

“Happily,” Hall said, swallowing a gulp of wine. It didn’t taste terrible.

“We’re here to play nice though,” Quinn reminded him. “My mom used to tell me this thing all the time—‘You can’t appear to be the one who’s got the problem.’”

“We’ve all got problems at this point.” Hall finished his glass and headed for the ice bucket in the corner. “I’ll be good.”

The distant tapping of Evelyn’s short heels alerted them to her approach. She and Mr. Walker appeared from the hallway moments later. Mr. Walker was wearing a dinner jacket, and Evelyn was not in the same dress as she had been in court that morning. She was also was not wearing a hat.

“Dr. Bennett, Dr. Preston,” Evelyn said, holding her position in entrance to the room, trapping them both in, “thank you for joining us.”

Hall didn’t reply but looked to Quinn for direction. *Your move. Better that you can’t get mad if I just copy you.*

“Thank you for the invitation,” Quinn said.

“Of course,” Evelyn said. “Please, let’s sit.”

They took up their places at the table where four plates had been set, despite the surplus of chairs. Hall and Quinn sat across from each other, and Hall followed Quinn’s movements as she unfolded the cloth napkin into her lap.

“Will your husband be joining us?” Hall said once they were settled. He had yet to meet the other half of the complaining party and was curious to see what kind of man Evelyn would have decided to put up with. He couldn’t imagine that she would have picked someone she couldn’t control.

“It’s a poorly kept secret that my husband is rather ill and choosey about making public appearances. I’m afraid a dinner engagement is rather low on his list.” Evelyn reached across her place setting to ring a small hand bell that had melted into the coloring of the tablecloth. The butler reappeared with a silver-domed tray. Hall looked across at Quinn with wide eyes. *Seriously? What the fuck is this?*

The butler served them each their salad plates in silence, save for the delicate clatter of silver and china against each other.

“Thank you, Charlie,” Evelyn said before the butler left. “An American menu tonight, for our guests. Arugula with pear, gorgonzola, walnut, and an edible flower vinaigrette. Enjoy.”

Hall waited until Quinn picked up her outer fork to begin eating before he did the same. They ate in silence most of the course. The silence made Hall uneasy as he strained to hear any noise or sign of life outside of the room. *Just us and the ghosts.*

“Well, we’ve all had a rather taxing day, haven’t we?” Evelyn said. She used her knife to cut the slivers of pear left on her plate.

“Some more than others,” Hall said to himself.

“Mrs. Wyndham, isn’t it?” Evelyn continued as if Hall hadn’t spoken. “Your barrister? She is quite sharp. Your university is lucky to have her.”

“Yes, we try not to need her often,” Quinn said.

Hall smirked down into his empty plate. *Yeah, here to play nice, right?*

“I understand. Barristers can be tiresome. William is only a tad less insufferable as compared to his late father. Arthur had been consulting with Mr. Davenshire III since very early in our marriage.”

“How long have you been married?” Quinn said after finishing her wine.

“Almost fifty years.”

Hall couldn’t imagine what he’d be doing in another fifty years. He looked across the table and hoped Quinn would be there in his fifty-year future.

“The house is lovely,” she said, glancing around to the room, looking for a conversation piece.

“Yes, thank you,” Evelyn said. She rang her bell again, and Charlie reappeared. “This house was given to Arthur by his father after we were married. We also have a cottage in the country.”

Somewhere around Newcastle maybe? Hall could feel himself getting frustrated again. He slumped back in his chair as he watched Charlie make his rounds replacing plates at the table. *All this money built on the backs of dead villagers in a part of the country they probably never visited.*

His entree plate held a small rack of lamb covered in green slime. Charlie poured red wine and water while Evelyn announced the meal. The green slime was mint paste, and Hall was mildly impressed that he had guessed rack of lamb right.

Quinn and Evelyn continued to trade niceties, and Hall's taste buds turned every bite into sand in his mouth. He felt like he was committing a betrayal, sitting there, eating their food. Hall could almost picture Brother Frank in the corner of the spacious room, judging every moment. Hall shook his head and took a sip of his wine. From across the table, Mr. Walker was studying Hall's steady actions. They made eye contact, and neither looked away.

"And what's your story?" Hall said to the silent stranger. "You're not English. Are you Lord-somebody too?"

"No," Mr. Walker said. "I am not titled. You may call me Mr. Walker, though I suppose Jason works just as well."

"So where are you from then?" Hall skewered another piece of his lamb.

"Here now."

"And how did you come to work with the Stallingsworth family?" Quinn said. Hall expected her to pull a notebook and a voice recorder out from her purse. Instead, she took another bite of the spinach bed. Jason looked across the table at Evelyn, who

twitched her head in a subtle gesture of permission before reaching to take a shaky sip of water.

“I knew the late Alfred Stallingsworth, Madame Evelyn’s son. We were close, and he recommended me to his mother’s service,” Jason said.

“Close?” Hall asked, while Quinn cut in with, “Late?”

“Dead five years now,” Jason said. “I started work at the Foundation prior to his death and had no intentions of abandoning the family after he was gone.”

“How perfectly antiquated of you.”

“Hall,” Quinn said. He took another drink. Hall was sure that if the dining table hadn’t been a twelve seater—wide enough to fit too many serving trays and a funeral style flower arrangement that dripped over the silk tablecloth—Quinn would have kicked him square in the shin.

“The last thing I would be seeking is your approval, Doctor,” Jason said, setting down his silverware. “You have your loyalties, I’m sure, and I have mine.”

“There doesn’t seem to be much that you approve about us, Marcus,” Evelyn said. She held her wine glass stem between her fingers, the bowl balanced in her upturned palm. Her silverware hadn’t moved, and her plate was still full.

“I don’t go by Marcus. It’s Hall.”

Evelyn chortled again, air whistling through her nose. “Hall? I imagine your mother gave you a first name for a reason.”

“She’s been calling me Hall for the past 30 years with no complaints.”

“A mother never truly complains,” Evelyn said.

“I must have had a great fake mother then,” Hall said.

“I imagine that child rearing is different across the countries as well, with more or less the same result.”

Hall balled his fists around his silverware. *Get me out of here. Why are we here?* “Yeah, there are a lot of things that are different. Like in America, this entire situation would be forced and awkward.”

Silence settled over the room. Jason crooked a smile and sipped at his wine, his body turned to watch Hall’s discomfort.

“I can imagine, Marcus,” Evelyn said. “Ulterior motives are often the easiest discovered.”

“What do you want?” he said through gritted teeth. Quinn sat back in her chair and folded her arms, her diplomatic mission shot to hell.

“To show you quite plainly that we are well-meaning people. Good people, that you are hurting.”

“Hurting how?” Hall felt like he was going to explode. He swung his arms around to gesture to the plain riches of the room. “This doesn’t look like people who are hurting socially. You get one less invitation to tea, and you suddenly decide you’re being oppressed. You are so busy living in your bubble moment that you don’t care how you’re affecting others.”

“And you, sir, are trapped in the past.” Evelyn’s words were simple and stung. “You have made a career out of digging through history’s trash that you’ve decided everyone deserves a grand epic in their name. That simply isn’t the case, Marcus. Some people get forgotten, and you are making the present very difficult on yourself. It doesn’t have to be this way.”

“Yes, it does if—”

“If you’ll let me finish,” Evelyn snapped. She set down her wine glass once Hall fell silent. “In your pestering line of questions, you failed to ask what position Mr. Walker holds at my foundation. Mr. Walker is our Associate Head and serves as Chief Financial Advisor.”

“Fascinating.”

“We would like to make you a deal, Dr. Bennett,” Jason said from across the table. Quinn sat up straight in her chair.

“A deal?” she said. “Like a buy out.”

“The Stallingsworth Charitable Foundation is willing to make a substantial donation to your research efforts,” Jason said, “double your yearly salary for as long as you remain without tenure, with the promise that you will remove the Stallingsworth family name from your initial report and agree not to pursue any further defamation, libel, or use of the family name in future research. Should you be unsuccessful in obtaining a secure position, the Foundation can work with the university of your choosing to come to an agreement.”

Hall let the words sink in for a minute. He blinked at Quinn, watching the shock break over her face, and she hid her face behind her hand, watching Hall from around her fingers. Evelyn and Jason sat on edge, staring as well, waiting for his reaction. *Are they serious?* he thought before he burst out laughing, the rumbling air coming from deep within his chest as his eyes began to pool with tears and confused emotions. “You think you can buy me out of this? What good does that do me?”

“Perhaps you weren’t listening,” Evelyn said.

“No,” Hall said, his laugh fading. “No, I was.” He shook his head and glared into Evelyn’s pale brown eyes. She was squinting, angry, ready to argue his answer, but she didn’t know him. *Google doesn’t tell you about conviction, or stubbornness, or a willingness to fight like hell. You aren’t the only one who isn’t willing to back down here.* He looked around the room at the excess of money that hung from every spotless surface, from the heavy green-gold drapes, from the crown molding, from the top-shelf liquor balanced carefully in the bar cart. This money was her life and made her think that everything in life could be, for the right price. Hall tuned to look Quinn again. *This isn’t the type of person I want to become. This isn’t what we set out to do.* In an instant, he remembered the first email he had sent her, asking for her help. She had been eager and insightful, and now, she looked beaten down. *We both do.* Quinn leaned in to the table, still waiting on his answer. Hall shook his head. “I don’t accept.”

“Marcus,” Evelyn said, “I urge you to think clearly. This is a generous offer, in every sense. We’re not asking you to stop your work. The money will be put to a good cause. That is the best that you can hope for. The trial won’t work in your favor in the end, regardless of what the jury says. We can make sure of that as well. We are trying to make amends. We are not responsible for what happened, but this whole mess doesn’t have to be your fault either.”

“It is if I roll over,” Hall said, “and that’s exactly what you want.” Hall balled up his cloth napkin and burst from his chair. “My work will continue, and these people won’t be lost, no matter how many threats you make or how much money you offer. This whole trial isn’t the last of anything, and for once in your life, you don’t get to win this one.”

*

Hall didn't get the chance to shut the door on their hotel room before Quinn began yelling.

"What the hell was that?"

Hall shook his head. "I don't want to deal with this."

"Well I sure fucking do, because I have no idea what's going on. We are winning the case. This was a good opportunity for us, and instead you're storming out."

"The hell do you mean, 'good opportunity?' They were trying to blackmail us for our silence or some shit. And how would you know that we're winning the case?" He took off his button down and dropped it on the floor beside his overnight bag.

"She is scared!" Quinn said, throwing her hand out back toward the door. "Why else would she invite us over? She doesn't have anything to prove to us, but she wanted us to know that she's 'good people' so that we let her off easy instead of fighting to the end and winning. The money was a good offer."

"She owes us a lot, actually. An apology for one." Hall walked over to the window, looking out on the bleak parking lot behind the building. "I still don't understand why we went. We accomplished nothing."

"*You* accomplished nothing. I could have gotten somewhere."

Hall turned back around to face Quinn. Her cheeks were red, but she hadn't been laughing. The blue in her eyes was cloudy, rolling like an angry sea. "You think this is my fault? You think this is my problem? You're the one who keeps fighting this. You keep opening your mouth." Hall laughed, throwing his hands up and letting them land on his head, pulling at his hair. "Everyone gets on to me about my fucking ego, but it's you."

It's yours. Yours is even worse. You're the one who keeps egging this shit on. And now we've got what? Some geriatric aristocrat and her money-grubbing pseudo-son threatening us? Can't imagine how we got in that situation."

Quinn crossed her arms, refusing to engage. "Are you done?"

"God, you're so desperate to prove yourself! You just *have* to make a name for yourself to prove that you deserve to be here, is that it? Instead of everyone looking at you like you're just a kid—just another grad student who wants to change the world."

"That's not fucking fa—"

"Fair? Not fucking fair?"

"My work is just as valid as anyone else's. I saved this project. I turned it around from your wasted money pit. You had *nothing* before I got here. I deserve to see this through to the end."

"You think you deserve to see your name on a fucking billboard is what you mean."

"No, it's not, dipshit, because not once in the entire time you've known me have the words 'fucking billboard' come out of my mouth. Because that's not what I want. Stop projecting your problems onto me."

"Really? Is that your professional opinion, Doctor?"

"Yes! Meanwhile you're just office hopping, being a raging dick to every professional we meet like some uni frat boy who never learned manners, you power hungry prick. Projecting *your* problems and your *obsession* with 'being remembered' that you're literally forcing it on dead people. They're dead, Hall. They don't give a damn if they're remembered. Focus on the right now. Right now, someone's trying to stop our

work, and it doesn't matter what that work is—they shouldn't be winning. I want a career after this. That money is a good deal and makes sure we would get to keep going. We still get our research. You could have a stable job, for once, instead of bouncing from site to site, waiting for someone to come give you permission to run around their space. You're not going to get a better offer somewhere else."

"What, you think I won't get tenure on my own?"

"I'm saying do you know the number of fucking people who work tirelessly and grovel for the opportunity to be considered for tenure. Most of them are twice as qualified and shape up better in front of the admin. She's offering you stability to continue your work, whatever work you want, not what you're offered."

"Great, so you've got something to prove, and I'm just an asshole that needs an attitude check to lead a successful career, in your opinion. Glad we got that cleared up."

"Hall, I'm not going to do this with you. We're both fucking frustrated, but being frustrated at everyone isn't getting shit done. I don't know what you expected that you're not getting, but this is what we have to do. So get over it if you want your happy ending."

Hall fell down on the bed, wiping his hands over his face and breathing through his fingers. "Why do we deserve the happy ending?"

Quinn gave an exasperated sigh. "What?"

"What do you mean 'what?' It's what I said. Why do we get to be the last men standing?"

"You'd rather let the Stallingsworths win?"

"Taking their money *is* letting them win."

“It doesn’t have to be,” Quinn said. “Make sure their money goes to good use. You could do more for your field than you ever dreamed with that type of money.”

Hall shook his head. “We’re spinning our wheels, sitting through trials, and I feel like we’ve forgotten the real purpose for all this. This isn’t the way to remember people, to help the world understand them.”

“Maybe you’ve forgotten the purpose, but I haven’t.” Her words weren’t harsh, but honest. She sat beside him on the bed and put a hand on his back. “I don’t care about the trial. Whether you want to admit it or not, we both have something to prove here. We have to defend our work, and I’ll defend it to the end of my career, however short it was. We did good work, and we will keep going after this. It doesn’t matter where the money comes from. People are going to remember this story.”

“I care,” Hall said down to the carpet. “I care where the money comes from.”

“I’m just saying...that could have made this easier, but I’m not giving up either. We just have to make sure we win. We have to win more than the offer.”

“It just feels selfish. Thinking about the money instead of the people.”

Quinn gave a frustrated grunt. “Why are you so hung up on the physical money? It’s a means to an end. Think about the opportunity it creates. We need money in order to keep thinking about the people and everything else you want to do with this.” She sighed and shook her head. “Look, it’s not easy, and it’s confusing, and it is selfish to want a better world and to stop people from being terrible. It’s good stories and good studies. So we have to be a little selfish, but no one ever said that selfish was inherently all bad. Anything ‘I want’ is selfish, even if you want world peace. So yeah, it’s selfish. But we

have to be, or everything falls to nothing. I'm not saying it's easy or straightforward, but I want this shit to matter, whatever the cost."

Hall wiped his face again and sniffled. He felt more conflicted than he had at Evelyn's, but he didn't want to fight. He just wanted to be done. He wanted a time machine to go back and avoid the mess in the first place, but he knew that couldn't happen. His pride would have won out in every scenario, and he would have ended up in the same position, disheartened and sulking in a hotel room, Quinn by his side, trying to talk him out of his own head.

"Yeah, me too," he said. "I'm sorry I yelled."

"You should be," Quinn said, trailing her hand up his back to play her fingers through his hair. "I'm sorry too."

Hall nodded. "So what do we do now?"

Quinn leaned forward to look into his eyes. "I think I've answered this before, yeah?" She smiled. In the artificial light of the hotel room, she was glowing with sweat, wine stains on her lips, and the drive of hellfire in her eyes. "We do our fucking jobs."

*

"Please state your name and relevance for the court."

"Dame Evelyn Stallingsworth, complainant, Head of House at Stallingsworth Charitable Foundation, LLC."

Hall and Quinn sat in silence, watching the testimony play out. They were back in the plain, prison cell courtroom, and their only job that day was to listen. They had done their parts, Mrs. Wyndham had assured them that morning. They were to leave the rest up to her. When they had sat down, Hall reached for Quinn's hand, squeezing it under the

table. He had apologized again that morning for his outburst the night before. Quinn had nodded and accepted, but her silence and the pained face she wore watching Evelyn's questioning worried him.

"Dame Stallingsworth, can you tell us how you came into possession of Dr. Bennett and Dr. Preston's work?" Mr. Davenshire asked.

"I was warned," Evelyn said, a hand on her pearls and her eyes on the jury, "by a friend of the family. He had been in touch with a dean at Wellsford."

"So he told you that the dean had told him about the work," Mr. Davenshire said.

"Correct."

"Did your friend tell you in what context they were discussing the work?"

"Namely...?"

The silence hung in the air for a minute while Mr. Davenshire pretended to collect his thoughts, pacing behind his seat. "Was the dean bragging about the work, for example, and just happened to mention that your family was named? Or was the dean warning your friend, and by extension, warning you?"

"I believe the dean sent it to him as a notice."

"A notice. To put him on guard?"

Hall looked down the table to Mrs. Wyndham, who looked unfazed by the solicitor's question. *Why isn't she objecting?*

"To do as he saw fit, I imagine. He took the initiative to issue it to me as a warning."

Mr. Davenshire nodded and paced to the front of the table. “Do you get the sense...that the dean sent this warning because he maybe doesn’t approve of the actions of his researchers?”

“Objection, leading and speculating.”

“Sustained.” *Now we’re getting somewhere.* A lawn mower engine roared to life outside, and the room began to fill with the smell of the cut grass.

Mr. Davenshire started again. “Why do you think a dean at Wellsford saw fit to hand off an academic work to someone outside the college as, as you’ve put it, a notice?”

“So that he wasn’t caught off guard if he heard about it later. The dean wanted to make sure he had covered himself, which meant reaching out to my friend directly.” Evelyn paused and looked down at her lap, feigning modesty. “Many people in our community have some kind of stake in my Foundation, regular donors and such. I’m not quite sure that the dean ever meant for the information to end up in my hands, but I do have dear and close friends who look out for my interests.”

“I’m still wondering what the dean thought your friend had to be scared of.”

Evelyn looked back at the jury again. “We’ll see shortly I suppose.”

Hall shifted in his seat. *Can’t we ban her from addressing the jury like that?* Mr. Davenshire gave a curt bend-at-the-waist bow. *Like a Russian comrade.*

“Thank you for your time, my lady.”

“Dame Stallingsworth,” Mrs. Wyndham said. “In your filing, you cite ‘malignant harm caused by libel’ as your motion for filing.”

“Correct.”

Mrs. Wyndham took off her reading glasses and folded them closed on the table.

“Can you show me?”

Evelyn looked back and forth between the solicitors. “Show you?”

“Yes,” Mrs. Wyndham said with a nod, “show me malignant harm. Do you have a bruise? Do you have receipts of corporate funders pulling donations? Do you have death threats?”

Evelyn looked at Mr. Davenshire, her eyes burning a hole in his forehead under the purple tulle of her fascinator. “I do not have documentation of any of the things you have listed.”

“Then what’s malignant harm?” Mrs. Wyndham said. “What is so damaged that you have no court mandated proof of said harm?”

“Social harm cannot be quantified.”

Mrs. Wyndham nodded, leaning back in her chair. “But if we had to guess,” she said, gesturing with her glasses, “it probably only takes about one trial before no one takes your work seriously.”

“Mrs. Wyndham, be plain and tell me what you’re implying.”

“That you faked irreparable harm in order to bring this case to trial and damage the reputations of my clients, even if you didn’t win, so that it was impossible for their work to get the attention that it deserved, and you wouldn’t actually have to go on the offense in this game.”

“I steadfastly reject this idea.”

“I know.” Mrs. Wyndham smiled. “Thank you for your time, Dame Stallingsworth.”

“You may return to your seat,” the judge said. “Next, Mr. Davenshire.”

“Mr. Jason Walker.”

The jury squirmed and prepared themselves for another round of sitting and listening as Jason walked to the end of the table. Hall looked down at Mrs. Wyndham then shook his head, confused, at Quinn. *Jason? What’s he going to add? A character reference?*

“Please state your name and relevance.”

“Jason Walker, Associate Head of Stallingsworth Charitable Foundation LLC.”

That has to count as nepotism somehow.

“Mr. Walker, how long have you known Dame Stallingsworth?”

“Nine years. I’ve been working for her for six.”

“Have you noticed any change in character from Dame Stallingsworth since this case started?”

Hall tapped the table, waiting for Mrs. Wyndham to object again. He couldn’t figure out why this line of questioning was relevant. Quinn pulled his hand back toward her lap to keep him from jumping up and causing a scene.

“Nervousness, mostly,” Jason said. “Some social anxiety she won’t admit to.”

“Have these changes affected her ability to serve at SCF?”

“It has made it a bit more difficult, yes. She’s been very worried about the response of the doctors.”

“That they wouldn’t change their work?”

“That and the lengths they would go to make sure she got blamed. Dame Stallingsworth had them both over for dinner just last night, and Dr. Bennett assured her that this case ‘wasn’t the last of anything.’”

“I can see where that would be troubling.”

“Agreed,” Jason said with a nod. “She’s just trying to protect herself and the Foundation.”

“Thank you, Mr. Walker.”

“Thank you.”

Mrs. Wyndham dropped the pen she had been scribbling in her notes with and looked up at the witness, bored and frustrated.

“Mr. Walker, so the same way that the jury is supposed to trust my clients’ integrity, they’re also supposed to trust your character perception, both of Dame Stallingsworth and my client’s alleged statement.”

Jason sat silent on the stand. He wasn’t looking at his barrister but at Evelyn, waiting for his next coaching cue.

“An answer, please, Mr. Walker.”

“Yes,” Jason said, his voice unsteady, as if he knew he was giving the wrong answer.

“Thank you, Mr. Walker. That will be all.” Mrs. Wyndham went back to her notes, and the jury mumbled amongst themselves.

The judge turned to Mr. Davenshire. “Anyone else?”

“No, my lord, and I motion to forfeit closing remarks. Complainant has made their argument in testimony.”

“I’ll concur for the defense.”

“Very well,” the judge said. He scratched under his wig, causing the fake hair to shake like a bobble head. “Both sides have given the jury a lot to think about. We’ll dismiss the proceedings for the day, and the court office will be back in touch when a decision has been ruled. Thank you all for your participation.”

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The judge granted Hall and Quinn permission to return to Newcastle-upon-Tyne, bearing in mind that they had to be back in London when the ruling was announced. They travelled back to Wellsford for lack of anything better to do. The distance helped with the sinking fear in Hall’s stomach. He felt out of reach, to some extent, heading back into his now familiar space. The Stallingsworths would really have to mean it to get to him all the way up here. The five hours into the northern air put a cushion of miles between Hall and the end of his career.

“I wish they had given us something to do at least,” Quinn said on the train ride. Hall nodded, his head rattling against the plastic car frame while he watched the city shrink and the hills of the countryside grew.

“Court homework or something,” he said.

“I mean, we can’t exactly go back to work while we wait. I don’t even know what I would work on...”

“We’ll find new projects, I guess.”

Quinn watched out the window and rolled her bottle of water between her palms.

“You’ll find a new site then?”

Hall shrugged. "I guess you're right. We can't really go back to work. I don't know what I'll do. Eventually I'll have to do something though."

"Idle hands and all that."

Hall smiled. "I think we've seen what boredom, money, and idle hands will do to the stir the pot in the past few months."

Quinn shook her head like she was disappointed in his humor, but she was smiling out of the corner of her mouth, watching the rolling fields to avoid his stare. "Too soon."

"I don't know, maybe we should take a page from her book then. Maybe idle is exactly what we need."

They stayed bored and unproductive for the next four weeks waiting on the jury's decision. Hall's parents came over to visit them in the aftermath, catching up on all the stories they had missed during the trial. Hall even took them out to see the site one afternoon.

He got a call from Mrs. Wyndham when he got back from taking his parents to the airport.

"The jury is supposed to rule this week."

"Do we need to head down there then?" Hall said, parking Quinn's car on the street. He killed the engine and sat in the dying heat of the car to finish his conversation.

"We'll be given 48 hours notice. You guys can come down then. No need in your spending the time coming down here just to wait around some more."

Because we're doing so much waiting around up here. "Right then, thanks for the warning."

“You should be optimistic, Dr. Bennett,” Mrs. Wyndham said in parting. “You’ve done good work.”

Hall didn’t reply as he hung up. He would apologize later, but he wasn’t in the mood for niceties from his barrister. He just wanted results.

Hall let himself into Quinn’s apartment and up the stairs. He dropped his keys on the bar cart and walked to the sitting room. Quinn was sprawled out on the couch, her laptop balanced on her bent knees.

“So tell me this, four months and you can’t arrange a short lecture series, nothing major, just something to do, but you *can* manage to assign my ass to an entire scholarship committee? Where’s the logic in that? I am so tired of reading personal statements. I was these kids, like a few years ago really. It doesn’t get any more interesting reading them than it was to write them.”

“University logic,” Hall said, flopping down on the opposite end of the couch. Quinn extended her legs and planted her feet in Hall’s lap. “I got a call from Wyndham.”

Quinn tilted her head around her computer screen to study his face. “And?”

“Jury is supposed to rule this week.”

“Well that’s not helpful,” Quinn said, going back to her reading. “Call us when the decision is made.”

“Yeah, that’s what you can’t say over the phone.”

“You’re learning!”

Hall snorted. “That tends to happen after a decade or two of school.”

“You’d be surprised. Read this bullshit.” Quinn handed Hall her laptop to have him read the offending paper. Hall was in tears laughing by the end of his reading. “No lecture series! No, no, not for you. Read this *fascinating* piece instead.”

“I’m sorry for your struggle.”

Quinn grumbled to herself. “I liked it better when we were being boring.”

Boring didn’t last for very much longer. Two days later, Mrs. Wyndham called again, and Hall and Quinn boarded a train for London. They were back in the courtroom by the end of the week, as promised. Evelyn and Jason remained unchanged, and the tightness in Hall’s chest when he saw them hadn’t changed either. Hall’s leg began to bounce in nervous anticipation as the six key players sat in the silent room. The jury chairs had been removed—no audience this time—and without them there, the room felt startlingly plain. This was any other conference room, with the stale smell of coffee and the office fridge hanging in the air, even with the screened window opened a whole six inches. In the quiet of the room, they could hear the toilets flush in the washroom down the hall, water rushing through the pipes in the ceiling above them. Hall jumped when the door finally creaked open and the judge came in. He wasn’t wearing his wig, and Hall almost laughed out loud when he saw that the man was bald. The judge took up his seat at the head of the table. He tented his fingers over the edge of the table and gave a heavy sigh, looking back and forth between the two parties.

“The jury argued for three weeks,” he said. Quinn put her hand on Hall’s leg to calm it under the table. “And they couldn’t move past a split decision.”

Nobody reacted to the news. *What does that mean? We didn’t convince them? Or some of them?*

“Now in cases like this,” the judge said, “the ruling falls to the judge. Not ruling at all is a decision in of itself. It’s the same as ruling with the defense.”

So don’t do it. Rule with the defense. We’ve defended for these people’s lives here. The judge scratched his head and leaned back in his chair

“If...if I may, just for a moment, I want to make something clear about this case.” He leaned forward again, putting his hands flat against the table. “We are not responsible for what those before us have done, but we are responsible for how we react to their actions. Condemning the actions of an ancestor does not sever the family connection. It brings you no shame to say that they were wrong. Time changes the way we look at things. It is perfectly acceptable to use your advantage, your distance from them on the timeline, to condemn their actions. You only harm yourself by siding with them. We possess a great power, the ability to send ourselves back in time if we choose to align our views with those of our predecessors who would more than likely change their own minds if they had the advantage to peek through time and see what the world looks like now.”

Hall hadn’t expected a sermon from the judge, but his words sank heavy in Hall’s stomach. He was waiting for the “but.”

“All that being said,” the judge went on, “I’ve made a ruling for both sides. The defendants will revise their current research, saying that more research needs to be done in order to ascertain the role of the Stallingsworth family and associates in their site. I am not mandating that the name be removed entirely.”

Mr. Davenshire looked to Evelyn, who gave a curt nod.

“And to assure that this research gets done,” the judge said, “the Stallingsworth Charitable Foundation will fund Dr. Bennett and Dr. Preston’s continued research. They will create an endowed chair for the purposes of continuing the research. This funding will be overseen by both solicitors, relative authorities at Wellsford College, and Mr. Jason Walker. The court has ruled this an equitable settlement. Thank you all for your testimony and your work in this case.”

Hall’s heart shattered with the crack of the gavel.

“Congratulations, Dr. Bennett,” Mrs. Wyndham said with a half smile. “You should be proud of your work here. Not many people would have the commitment to do what you’ve done these past few months.” She turned back around to shuffle her papers together, loading them into her knock off leather briefcase. She extended her hand to Quinn.

“Dr. Preston, it’s been a pleasure. Thank you so much for your contributions.”

Quinn shook Mrs. Wyndham’s hand with a weak hand then let hers fall limply into her lap. Hall flexed his own hand, letting the blood rush back into his extremities. He could feel his pulse in the tips of fingers, one of the few signals he had left that he was living real life, not a dream, not a fabricated scene he had thought through dozens of times, imagining exactly what this moment would feel like. The reality didn’t feel the same.

“Thank you for your work as well,” Quinn said. “I’m sure we’ll be hearing from you and your people again.”

“Certainly,” Mrs. Wyndham said. “There will be paperwork to finish this up.” She extended her hand to Hall next. He stood to thank the lawyer and wish her a cold farewell. With her work done, Mrs. Wyndham left the courtroom.

Hall fell back into his seat. His leg started to bounce again.

“Hall...” Quinn said. “I’m sorry. I know this isn’t what you wanted.” She paused and bit her lip. “Let’s just go for now. Let’s get out of here. We’ve got plenty of time to figure things out.” She reached down to lift her bag into her lap, the contents nearly spilling over the canvas edge. “Let’s go get a drink,” she said.

Hall shook his head. “I can’t believe they won,” he said through gritted teeth.

“They didn’t win,” Quinn said. “We got something out of it too.” He could hear that her heart wasn’t in it.

“Not enough,” he said. His words echoed around the now empty courtroom. The Stallingsworth party had made a silent retreat. *For the better*, Hall thought. He couldn’t deal with facing down with Evelyn right now. He tugged the knot in his university tie loose, unbuttoning the first two slits on his suit shirt. His leg continued to shake.

“This is just what we have to deal with now,” Quinn said, “but they’re off your back. We can go back to our research.”

“Until they get their hands on that too,” Hall said.

“That’s not going to happen.”

Hall threw his hands up in the air, gesturing to the stifling room around them.

“This wasn’t supposed to happen either!”

“Hall...” Quinn said, agitation rising in her own voice.

“Let’s just go,” he said, exploding from his seat and stumbling towards the exit without her. The doors slammed against the back wall as he threw his weight against them. “I can’t fucking believe it.” He pounded his way toward the stairs with the sound of Quinn’s flats against the tile following as his fanfare.

Hall held the hackney downstairs until Quinn climbed in. The car took off into traffic, and the backseat remained silent.

“We didn’t lose completely,” Quinn said again after they were a few miles from the courthouse, heading back to their hotel it seemed. “She didn’t get everything she wanted, and we get to go back to work. The paper will still be in circulation. Their history will still get out there.”

Thanks for the summary. Hall didn’t reply out loud.

“It sucks right now,” Quinn said, “but once we’re back in the thick of it, back to work and never having to worry about funding again, we’ll learn to live with it. We can talk through everything and make it work...for the both of us.”

Hall took a shaky breath and looked out the window. The city was a perfect mix of the past and the present, white brick buildings with towering spires that bent past the window mixed with the metallic tang of the industrial world. People walked through the buildings and sidewalks and the history, and it all worked together.

Hall reached over to take Quinn’s hand. He turned away from the city and gave a small nod. *We’ll learn to live with it. How damn long is that going to take?*

*

The lab looked different from the last time he had been inside. A thin layer of dust seemed to cover every surface. *Guess they really weren't using this space before I got here.*

Hall walked through the empty racks and clean lab tables. He meandered into the back room and found it clean as well. He hoped he would never see it that way again. The past two months had been hectic, trying to rebuild their day-to-day after living in the bubble of the trial for what seemed like years. He had signed his name on more paperwork than he had hoped to sign for the rest of his life. Mrs. Wyndham and Mr. Davenshire had drawn up the final terms of the judge's settlement and had it approved by the courts. With it, Hall and Quinn submitted a revision of their paper, which was set to be published within the next few weeks. Neither of them had heard from Evelyn since she fled the courtroom that day, sending all her forms and signatures through her barrister. Hall thought it was for the better, but part of him still wanted to see her lose. He wanted her to see her money being spent on the campaign she had railed against instead of the anonymous checks and pointed emails from Jason Walker.

The loading dock door rumbled open, and the glow from the truck's taillights crawled along the floor as the door clicked upward. Mateo climbed out of the driver's seat and swung himself into the tailgate piled high with artifact boxes.

"Hey, Marcus! Come help me with this, yeah?"

"Don't ever call me that again," Hall snapped before walking across the lab to help Mateo restack the artifact boxes into their racks. Mateo chattered as they worked, happy to be back in the familiar space, mostly glad to not be stuck as a TA anymore.

Someone knocked on the entrance to the lab as they finished order the last of the boxes.

“Look what I got,” Quinn said as she walked in, kicking the door shut behind her. She dropped the stack of work she was carrying onto one of the tables and began fishing in the abyss of the bag on her shoulder.

“More legal papers?” Hall said. He didn’t remember having to do that much work for the last job offer he had accepted, but visa paperwork was always a hassle.

“Nope, but something that makes it all worth it, yeah?” Quinn said. “There it is.” She pulled out a metal plate with a white strip of sticky tape on the back. She walked over to the office door and slapped the metal square in the middle. She stepped back to admire her handy work. The office door read “Dr. Quinn Preston, Chair of Stallingsworth Site Studies.”

“Great, just another souvenir of selling out,” Hall said, coming to stand, arms crossed, beside Quinn. It had taken Hall and Quinn weeks to argue through the logistics of who would become the chair, but in the end, Hall wanted to keep a sliver of his selfish pride and couldn’t accept the position. Quinn had no such qualms and was named the first Stallingsworth endowed chair. Her first appointed act that been to give Hall an offer to Wellsford as her archaeology consultant. The site was his again, and the sting of their defeat had begun to fade. *Whatever gets the job done*, he reminded himself. *Big picture*. He scratched at the bare nape of his neck. He had finally gotten a decent haircut.

“Yeah sure we sold out,” Quinn said, “but it was court ordered, and now we get to spend their money. Make sure it doesn’t go to waste...or does. Who cares, they’ll make more, and they’ll keep giving us more too.”

Hall shook his head. “You stuck it on crooked.”

“Eh, fuck it.”

Hall smiled and hooked his arm around her waist and pushed up on his toes to kiss her cheek.

“Is that what I gotta work with now?” Mateo said, popping his head through a hole in the row of racked boxes.

“Yes, yes it is,” Hall said, turning back to help. “Us foreigners got to stick together.”

“Not like that, Boss.”

The door to the lab busted open again, and Rhetta dragged in two whiteboards on locked wheels.

“Found these down the hall,” she said, parking the boards on the right-hand wall. “They don’t look like they were important, right?” The board’s surfaces were covered in dried, half-erased writing.

“Is that still my translation?” Quinn said.

“Probably.” Rhetta shrugged. “We basically own this building now though, right?”

“Don’t tell the fellows that,” Quinn said.

“That’s the last of them,” Mateo said, closing the tailgate on the truck and dropping the loading dock door.

“Right then,” Hall said, clapping his hands together. He looked out across the lab, across the artifact boxes, the half-cleaned whiteboards, the history that lay before him—a work and a people that wouldn’t be forgotten. This was his new normal again.

Carter might have been right, Hall thought. *Modern justice won't help these people*. But he knew one thing that would. Quinn looked up from her stack of papers in the office, a coffee mug already sitting on the clean desktop, and Hall winked at her.

“Let's get back to work.”

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