

The Hand That Wrote It

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Chapter 1—Archival Admittance

The form wanted to know what Naila intended to do with the manuscript.

She read the field a third time. *Purpose of consultation*. Two ruled lines, the kind that assumed a sentence would fit. She had filled out worse, grant applications that wanted you to promise a discovery before you'd looked, but there was a particular cruelty in being asked, in pencil, on a request slip at the Beinecke, what she meant to *do* with Beinecke MS 408. As though anyone alive knew.

She wrote: *Statistical examination of letter-position distribution. No transcription required.*

True, and small enough to be true. She did statistics. She did not do miracles. The distinction had cost her two collaborators and one tenure committee, and she guarded it now like a clean rule against a flood.

Beside her, Frik tapped the pencil against the request counter in a rhythm only he could hear, *tk, tk-tk, tk*, and then said, very quietly, to the laminated rules card, "No pens, no pens, no pens." Echolalia, riding the sign's own words back out of him. The reading-room attendant glanced up. Naila put a hand flat on the counter near Frik's, not touching, just there.

"He's reading the rules to himself," she said. "It helps."

"It does," Frik agreed, relieved, and tapped twice more, and stopped.

The Unspoken had already finished her slip. She'd written it in a clean architectural print, signed it, and now stood reading the room itself: the high white columns of the tower visible through the inner glass, the climate readout on the wall, the attendant's face. Naila had worked with her long enough to know that the attendant's face was the most information in the room. The Unspoken caught Naila looking and signed, one-handed, low: *He's nervous. Not of us. Of dropping something*. Then, after a beat, the flat-palm shrug that meant *aren't we all*.

Mara stood apart, near the window, her camera in its bag, the bag zipped, her hands empty and visible, as she kept them in any space that mattered to people who weren't her. She was not photographing anything. She was looking at the tower of glass-walled stacks rising six stories through the building's heart, books in amber light behind glass like a reliquary built by an architect who'd been told the word *forever* and taken it personally.

"They put the books where the people can see them," Mara said, "and the people where the books can't be touched."

"Cube within a cube," said a voice behind them, warm, unhurried. "We like our metaphors load-bearing here."

The conservator's name was Dr. Halloran, and she came toward them with the specific economy of someone who spent her days asking her own body to be very still over things that could not be replaced. She shook hands like she was counting them. She wore no jewelry. Her cardigan had a thread of azurite-blue at the cuff that Naila suspected was paint and not dye.

“You’re the statistics,” Halloran said to Naila. “Bowern sent ahead. She said, and I’m quoting, *they actually understand what the entropy does, which is rarer than you’d think.*”

“That’s generous of her.”

“It’s a warning.” Halloran’s mouth tipped. “She’s seen a lot of people who understand what the entropy *is* and not one thing about what it *does*. Come. The reading room first. Then, if you’re gentle with my pencils, the object.”

They surrendered their bags to lockers. Pens, capped or not, stayed behind. Phones to the cloakroom. The Unspoken kept her hands; Mara kept her empty ones. Frik kept the pencil they gave him and held it like a man who’d been handed a small live bird. Jakobus had said almost nothing since the airport. The Beinecke had admitted him on a visiting-scholar courtesy that took three emails and a phrase Naila didn’t fully follow—he *reads objects*, she’d written, and the registrar had, astonishingly, accepted it. He stood at the back in his sunglasses until Halloran turned and looked at him over her readers, and he took them off and folded them into his shirt pocket without being asked. Foreign ground. He knew the rule of it before it was spoken. He said, low, to Halloran, a word Naila didn’t have, *Sawubona*, and Halloran, who clearly didn’t have it either, understood that she’d just been seen, and nodded back like she’d been thanked.

There was a man in the reading room already.

He sat at the far table with a tablet and a leather folio and the relaxed posture of someone billing by the hour. Pale suit, good shoes, the kind of soft-handed cleanliness that had never lifted anything heavier than a pen it wasn’t allowed to bring in here. He’d brought no books. He had a lanyard that said, in a sans-serif that had cost money, **CODEXA—Digital Heritage & Rights**, and beneath it a name Naila clocked and discarded. The name wasn’t his real function. His real function was to watch them, pleasantly, and he was already doing it.

“That’s the rights broker,” Halloran said, not lowering her voice, because she didn’t have to. “Codexa’s negotiating digitisation and image-license terms. They’ve been very patient. Patient like water.” She set them at the central table, at a long foam cradle, two grey wedges and a snake of beaded weight coiled beside it like something asleep. “Gloves on. Nitrile, not cotton—cotton snags. One hand under, always. You point with a closed pencil, never a finger, never over the page. If you want a leaf turned, you tell me, and I turn it. Questions you ask me. The book you ask nothing.” She looked at each of them. “It will not answer.”

Frik said, “It will not answer,” and meant it as agreement, and it landed in the white room like a verdict.

When she brought it out, she carried it like a sleeping animal that had finally learned to trust you.

Naila had seen the scans. Everyone had seen the scans. The Beinecke had put the whole thing online, every folio, free, in resolution that let you count ink cracks, which was its own quiet joke: the most photographed undeciphered book on Earth, naked in public, and still shut. She had built a career on those pixels. She thought she was ready for the difference between pixels and the thing.

She was not.

It was *small*. The scans gave you no hand to hold it against. It was maybe nine inches by six, a brick of soft brown leaves bound in a limp later cover, and it sat in the cradle and *sagged*, gently, as old paper never does and old skin always does, because it was skin. Halloran opened it to a flyleaf with her fingertips at the very corner, and the leaves moved like cloth.

“Vellum,” Halloran said. “Calfskin. At least fourteen, fifteen whole animals went into it. We can count by the follicle patterns, by how the hair-side and flesh-side meet at a fold. Somebody raised those calves. Somebody scraped and stretched and pumiced fourteen hides flat enough to write on. Before a single word, this book is a herd.”

The Unspoken had come close, hands at her sides, breathing through the wonder of it. She signed, slow, for Naila to voice and didn’t wait to be sure it was voiced: *Is the brown the age, or the use.*

“Both,” Halloran said, reading the question off the shape of it before Naila could relay, because Halloran read hands too, like anyone who’d spent a career with people leaning silently over glass. “Mostly use. Look.” She turned one leaf—*may I?* she asked the room, and turned it—and held a raking lamp low across the surface so the light came in nearly flat. The page lit up like a landscape. Hills. The faintest hills, in the lower outer corner, exactly where a right thumb would land to turn a page. A whole topography of touch.

“Heavily thumbbed,” Halloran said. “Lisa Fagin Davis’s word. This is not a book somebody made and shelved to be mysterious. This is a book somebody *used*. Daily, by the wear. The corners are soft because hands made them soft. Whoever owned this turned these pages until the skin gave.”

Naila looked at the little worn hill of vellum and felt the floor of the whole problem move under her.

Here was the thing the internet forgot, the thing the certainty-merchants in their press kits needed you to forget. You could argue about the words forever. You could not argue about *this*. In 2009 Arizona had taken four slivers from four different bifolios—four, mutually consistent, not one—and the radiocarbon came back fourteen-oh-four to fourteen-thirty-eight. Early fifteenth century. Before Gutenberg. The cheap minerals in the paint, McCrone’s people had found, were exactly the cheap minerals a fifteenth-century hand would reach for: azurite, copper green, red ochre, a white of egg and chalk. No modern anything. No pigment that hadn’t existed before Columbus. The forgery case—Wilfrid Voynich cooked it up in 1912 to sell, the lonely-genius story—died in that lab. You cannot fake the inside of a calf that died before your great-great-grandfather’s great-great-grandfather was born.

“The dating’s the parchment,” Naila said, half to herself, the rule wanting to be said exactly. “Not the ink. The animal, not the writing.”

“Good.” Halloran said it like a teacher catching a student not cheating. “That’s the part people skip. The carbon-fourteen tells us when the *calf* died. It cannot tell us when the ink went down. Could be the same week. Could be—could, in principle, be—fifty years later, on aged skin. We can’t independently date iron-gall ink. The 2009 press release that said the writing went on *immediately*—that overclaimed, and they walked it back. So we say: the skin is genuinely medieval. The writing is on genuinely medieval skin, in genuinely medieval ink, in a hand that flows. We don’t say more than the evidence.”

“You decided what it said,” Frik began, and Naila felt the room flinch, but he wasn’t finished, and what came out of him next came out involuntary and true and aimed at no one in the room—“then you went shopping for a language. *That’s* what they do.” He blinked. He’d surprised himself. “Sorry. Not you. The—the solvers. That’s the trick. That’s always the trick.”

Halloran looked at him for a long moment. Then she set the raking lamp down and nodded, slowly.

“That is exactly what they do,” she said. “Newbold saw microscopic Greek shorthand in the ink-cracks. Cracks. The drying of the ink. Manly took it apart in ’31 and it was pareidolia—he was seeing his own decision in the noise. Then Feely, then Strong, then Brumbaugh. Then Stojko’s vowelless Ukrainian. Then a man who got ten words out and died before he got more. Then an AI that anagrammed it into Hebrew. Then the abbreviated-Latin women’s-health manual—*the Latin doesn’t make sense*, Davis said, plainly. Then proto-Romance, solved in two weeks, the university disavowing it by Friday.” She straightened the cradle a degree. “Every single one started from a picture or a wish, and then went shopping. The honest ones knew it. The dishonest ones sold tickets.”

Across the room, the Codexa man turned a page on his tablet, soundlessly, and smiled at nothing.

“And the part that won’t let you sneer either,” Naila said, because she could not help it, because the symmetry was the most beautiful and most cruel thing she knew, “is that it isn’t gibberish.”

“No,” Halloran said. “It is not.”

“Zipf holds,” Naila heard her own voice find the clean register, the rule-register, the place where she could stand. “The frequency of the words behaves like a real language’s words behave. Bown’s second-order entropy comes out around two—*more* predictable than natural language, but lawful, structured at the level

above the letter, where real text is structured and noise isn't. Montemurro and Zanette found the words clustering by section like real vocabulary clusters by topic. There are two dialects in here—Currier saw it sixty years ago—an A in the herbal pages, a B in the bathing pages, different statistics, same book." She put her gloved fingertips an inch above the leaf, not touching. "This was generated by *something with rules*."

"And then." Halloran turned the leaf to a page dense with the cramped, looping script, and lit it. "Then it breaks every rule you'd use to find the language. Some letters only ever sit at the start of a word. Some only at the end. Some only in the middle, never anywhere else—Rubio's point: there is no Indo-European language, no Hungarian, no Finnish, nothing, where the alphabet sorts itself by *position* like that. Words that differ by one letter repeat far more than any real text. And —" she pointed, with the closed pencil, to a line—"look. Here. The same word. Again. Again. Again. Four times. It will do it five. Show me the language where you write the same word five times in a row and mean it."

Naila looked at the four identical clusters of strokes in their patient ink and felt the flood come up over the rule.

This was the triple bind, and she was the one who could hold it in one hand, and holding it was like holding three magnets that all repelled. Language-like enough that Friedman and his wife, who broke real enemy ciphers in two world wars, who were the best in the world, *failed*—Elizebeth Friedman wrote in 1962 that statistical attacks on it were doomed to utter frustration, and she of all people would know. Language-unlike enough that no language on Earth fit. And not random: the hoax people, Rugg with his Cardan grille, could fake *features*, but his grille came from 1550, a hundred years too late for that calf, and faking a few features wasn't faking the low entropy *and* the five fluent scribes *and* the worn thumb-hills all at once. Both walls real. Both walls standing. Nobody through.

The most eloquent thing in the world, and it would not say one word.

"Five scribes," Naila said, quiet. "Fagin Davis. The letterforms shift by section—different hands. This wasn't one obsessed person in an attic. It was a—a workshop. A community made this. They all knew the system. They all wrote it *fluently*, no hesitation between characters, the way you write something you can read, not something you're laboriously enciphering."

"Five people who understood it," Halloran said, "and took the understanding into the ground. That's the part I can't get past, after twenty years with it. Not the cipher. *Them*. Five fluent hands, all gone. Whatever this is, they could read it, every one of them, and not one of them wrote down the key." She looked at the worn page. "They didn't owe us a key. People keep forgetting that. We act like they hid it from *us*. They never heard of us."

The Unspoken had gone very still.

She was watching the page like a person across a room who is talking, animatedly, fluently, every gesture full and certain and meant, in a language you will never be given. Naila knew that watching. She'd seen the Unspoken do it in a hundred hearing rooms. The book was *communicating*. You could feel it come off the page like heat. And it was shut.

The Unspoken raised one hand, slowly, and signed—for herself, not for voicing, though Naila voiced it anyway, gently, because it deserved to exist out loud:

It knows exactly what it's saying.

Nobody answered that. There was no answer that wasn't a lie.

"You may," Halloran said at last, "put one hand under the leaf. Flat. I'll guide it. You won't turn it; you'll just hold the weight a moment. People should be allowed to hold it. It was made to be held."

She meant Naila. Naila understood she meant Naila.

Naila slid her gloved hand beneath the open leaf like sliding a hand beneath a sleeping infant's head, and Halloran's fingers steadied the corner, and the weight of six hundred years of calfskin settled into her palm.

Soft, impossibly soft, soft as only thousands of turning thumbs could have made it, warm because her own hand warmed it, light as breath and heavy as the whole sealed problem of it.

It was real. That was the bite. A true book, a working book, somebody's *every-day* book, here, in her hand, fluent and full and locked, and she felt the wound she'd carried into the building open clean: that to read this would be the most beautiful pattern of her life, would prove every committee and every walked-away collaborator and every soft *she sees things that aren't there* wrong forever—and that the book did not care, and the five hands did not owe her, and the rule would not close.

She held it for exactly as long as Halloran allowed.

Across the room the Codexa man stood, unhurried, clicked his folio shut, and let himself be seen leaving, which was the whole point of having stayed.

"Tomorrow," Halloran said, settling the leaf back to rest, "you'll want a folio to look at properly. Pick your page tonight." She glanced at Mara, at the empty patient hands, the bag still zipped. "You photograph?"

"Only what I'm allowed to," Mara said. "And only after I'm sure I'm not photographing what I want to see."

The corner of Halloran's mouth moved. "Then you'll last longer than most. There's one in the herbal you should start with. The plant that everybody decides is a sunflower." She drew the cradle gently toward herself, the day done. "It isn't a sunflower. It isn't anything. But God, will it offer to be."

Chapter 2—Composite Leaves

Mara had photographed mass graves with steadier hands than this.

She set the macro lens on the foam, not the table—Halloran’s rule, everything cushioned, everything slow—and let the morning settle into her before she touched anything. The reading room hummed. Climate control, a low constant breath that never quite became silence, holding the glass cube and its single book at sixteen degrees and forty-five percent humidity, the numbers printed on a card by the door like dosages. The light came raking and cold from a fixture Halloran had positioned herself, angled low so it grazed the vellum instead of flattening it. It pulled the page’s hills and valleys up out of the dark, its dried tides of ink, the places a thumb had worn the nap to suede.

The folio lay open in its cradle. The plant Halloran had warned her about.

It had a stalk like a stalk. A flower at the top, broad and rayed, a disc of small marks ringed by petals, and yes—she felt it arrive in her before she could stop it, the word rising hot and certain—*sunflower*. Her eye wanted it. Her eye had wanted things before. In Aleppo her eye had wanted a sleeping child and given her a dead one; in a field outside a town she would not name her eye had wanted scattered laundry and given her something she still saw at three in the morning. The eye is a liar that loves you. It hands you the picture you carried in.

She did not lift the camera.

“It isn’t a sunflower,” she said, mostly to herself.

“No,” said Halloran, who missed nothing. The conservator stood at the far end of the cradle with her pencil. Pencils only, no pens within reach of the book, a discipline that had outlived everyone who’d ever broken it. She did not lean in to correct, only let the fact sit. “Sunflowers came from the Americas. This parchment’s older than the Americas being a thing anyone in Europe drew. People still say sunflower. They want the date to be wrong more than they want their eyes to be.”

“*Helianthus*,” Frik said. He was three chairs down, hands flat on his thighs, the way that cost him, gloves white against dark trousers. “*Helianthus helianthus help*—sorry. *Helianthus annuus*. South American. Spanish brought it back. Sixteenth century, earliest.” His head jerked once, a small clean tic he rode without comment. “So if it’s a sunflower the carbon’s lying. The carbon’s not lying.”

“The carbon’s not lying,” Halloran agreed.

Mara looked at the flower that wasn’t a sunflower. Looked at the leaves, which belonged to no plant she could name and, she was beginning to understand, to no plant anyone could. The leaves were wrong for the stalk. The root, when she let her eye travel down—a fat, lobed, two-pronged thing, faintly obscene, painted a tired blue—was wrong for both. It was a plant assembled out of other plants. Root of one, leaf of another, the crown of a third, fused into a single fluent thing that had never grown anywhere and had been drawn by a hand that knew exactly what it was doing.

That was the part her camera-self respected. Whoever drew this had not hesitated. The line was sure. The pigment sat where it meant to sit.

“Composite,” she said.

“Most of them are.” Halloran turned a page-weight in her fingers, a soft snake of beaded leather she’d lay across a corner if the vellum tried to curl, and never on the writing. “Herbal section. A couple hundred plants if you count the half-pages. People have spent careers trying to ID them. There’s a whole literature. *That one’s a water lily, that one’s a viola*. And maybe. But mostly you get this. A root that argues with its own leaves. It offers to be a hundred real plants and commits to none.”

“Like a face in a cloud,” Mara said.

“Like a face in a cloud that someone painted *very carefully*,” said Halloran.

Frik laughed, a short involuntary bark that startled even him. “That’s the whole game, though,” he said. “That’s how the fakes work. You start with a picture. You decide the picture’s a thing—a sunflower, a galaxy, a volcano—and then you go shopping.” His knee bounced. “Cheshire saw a volcano. There’s a foldout, the rosettes, he looked at it and saw a volcano erupting, Vulcano in the Aeolians, and once you’ve got your volcano you need a language to label your volcano, so you go shopping for one. Proto-Romance. Found it in two weeks. *Two weeks*.” The last two words came out doubled, *two weeks two weeks*, his voice catching on the absurdity of it. “Bristol took his name off it. The university. Disavowed.”

“You decided what it said,” Mara said quietly, “then went shopping for a language.”

Frik’s whole face changed—relief, the specific relief of a thing landing right when his mouth did it for him. “That. Yeah. That.”

She’d meant it kindly and it had come out cruel and true, and she made herself remember the man saying it. She’d looked Cheshire up on the train. A real academic. Real work behind him. He hadn’t woken up a fraud; he’d woken up a person who looked at a picture and saw something, and the seeing felt like *finding*, and finding feels like the best thing a human being can do. She knew that feeling from the inside of a viewfinder. The shot that arrives. The world cohering into meaning through your one good eye. The difference between that and a lie was sometimes only honesty about which one you were having, and she did not always trust herself to know.

Across the table the Unspoken was watching the page. Not hunting it. Not asking it for anything. Niamh had her chin propped, eyes moving over the flower and the wrong leaves and the obscene blue root with an attention that had no grab in it. Mara caught her eye and signed, clumsily, the four signs she had—*what / you / see / ?*—and Niamh’s hands answered slow enough to read.

It’s not hiding, she signed. Then, when Mara’s brow went, she spelled it, patient, a teacher who’d taught a thousand hearing people the alphabet on her fingers. *N-O-T H-I-D-I-N-G*. And again with her face, which said the rest: it is right there, fluent, full, the most articulate thing in the room, and it will not let you in. Not a code being clever at you. A door simply, finally shut, with the light on inside.

Mara nodded. She did not have the sign for *I know exactly what you mean and I will never know it the way you do*.

Naila hadn’t spoken in a quarter of an hour. She sat with a printout—not the book, never the book, she’d drawn that line at the door and held it—covered in her own small dense columns. She was doing the still thing, the thing committees had read as not-listening and that was the most listening a person could do. When she surfaced it was sideways.

“It’s the consistency,” she said. “That’s what I can’t get past about the forgery idea. A forger fakes the look. You make it *look* old, look written, look like a language. But the look is cheap. The look is the easy part.” Her finger tapped the column. “What’s expensive is the statistics underneath the look, and they’re here, and they’re consistent across two hundred and forty pages, and they’re consistent in ways the forger wouldn’t know to fake because the people who *measure* this stuff weren’t born for five hundred years. You can’t fake a Zipf curve you’ve never heard of.”

“English, Naila,” Frik said, fond.

“The word frequencies behave like a real language’s word frequencies. The most common word’s about twice as common as the next, and so on down. That’s a law. It shows up in every natural language and it shows

up here. And the predictability—how much one character tells you about the next—sits in a range a forger drawing pretty squiggles would never land on by accident, and would never land on *the same* across the whole book, in two different statistical dialects, by two different—” She stopped. Started again, narrower, the boundary reasserting itself. “I’m describing the math. I’m not telling you what it means. The math doesn’t quit. That’s all I’m saying.”

“Two dialects,” Halloran said. “You found the dialects.”

“I didn’t find them. Currier found them in the seventies.” Naila said the name like a small offering. “Two systems. One mostly in the herbal and the pharma pages, one mostly in the bathing pages and the star pages. Different statistics, same book. Currier broke real ciphers for the Navy. He couldn’t break this and he was honest enough to say which parts behaved differently instead of forcing them to match.” Her jaw worked. The math holding, the meaning not. “The Friedmans couldn’t. William Friedman ran American codebreaking. His wife Elizebeth ran her own. They put years into this between the wars. She wrote that a statistical attack on it was *doomed to utter frustration*.” A breath. “She was right and it still bothers me that she was right.”

“It bothers everyone,” Halloran said, not unkindly.

Mara had still not lifted her camera. She was aware of it the way you’re aware of a phone you’re not checking. The page wanted to be photographed. It wanted, specifically, to be photographed by her, by the person whose name attached to it, the page that everybody calls a sunflower and isn’t, *the* shot, the cover shot, the one a magazine pays for and a wall hangs. She knew the want and she let it stand there in the room without feeding it.

Halloran moved the light. A degree, no more, and the surface of the page changed entirely.

“Here,” the conservator said. “Since you’re being patient. Come look at what nobody photographs.”

Mara came around to her side, slow, hands clasped behind her so they couldn’t reach. Niamh rose too, soundless, and Frik, and behind them Jakobus, who had been standing the whole while at the room’s edge with his shades pushed up onto his head—the only sunglasses ever permitted in a Beinecke reading room, by some agreement Mara hadn’t witnessed—and his clean folded handkerchief in one hand, doing nothing, holding the place where a thing might need wiping. He had not touched the book. He had been reading it the entire time, she understood, reading everything from the outside, with his whole attention, and he had not said one word.

In the raking light the ink had texture. Not a flat brown line but a ridge, raised and cracked along its spine, the iron-gall biting into the skin as iron-gall does, eating slightly into the vellum as it aged.

“Iron-gall ink,” Halloran said. “Oak galls, iron salts. The most ordinary ink in Europe for a thousand years. The pigments—McCrone tested them in oh-nine—azurite for the blue, that tired root there. A copper green. Red ochre. The white’s chalk and egg white. All cheap. All exactly what you’d grind on a table in fourteen-twenty if you couldn’t afford better and needed to color a working book.” She let the light hold on the blue. “No modern materials. Nothing that hadn’t been invented yet. A modern forger faking the look would reach for something easy and get caught on the chemistry. Whoever made this used the right cheap dirt for the right cheap century, because it *was* that century, and they weren’t faking anything. They were just coloring in their book.”

“No gold,” said Jakobus.

It was the first thing he’d said. His voice was lower than the hum.

Halloran turned. “No gold,” she agreed. “No gold leaf, no silver, no luxury. Books that mattered to rich people got gold. This one mattered to someone who used it.”

Jakobus came one step closer, not to the cradle, to the angle of the light, and he tipped his head, reading the page along its grazing edge. “Show me the corners,” he said.

Halloran, who Mara was fairly sure did not take instruction from visitors, turned the page-weight in her hand and very gently, with the flat of a bone folder, eased the leaf to lift its lower outer corner into the light.

The corner was dark. Soft. The nap of the calfskin worn down to a sheen, a faint cup of grime in exactly the place a right hand's thumb and finger would catch a page to turn it.

"There," Jakobus said. "And the next. And the next. Same place every time."

"Same place every time," Halloran said, and there was a new thing in her voice now, the thing professionals have when another professional sees their object clean. "It's thumbed. Heavily. Lisa Fagin Davis says it—heavily handled. The parchment's gone soft from turning. You can track where the readers' fingers lived. It's a working manual, not a treasure. Someone went to this book *every day*, for something, for years, in the same places, until the skin gave way under their hands."

Mara looked at the worn corner and felt the floor go out from under the forgery idea entirely. She'd loved the forgery idea. It was elegant. A clever person, a grift, a beautiful lie—that was a story she could photograph. This was not that. No forger fakes a thumb-cup in the corner of three hundred pages because no forger thinks anyone will turn a low-grazing light onto the lower outer corner of folio whatever and grieve over it. You fake the look. You don't fake the *love*. The book was more worn and more strange and more *used* than any lie would bother to be.

She lifted the camera then. Slowly. She did not point it at the flower-that-wasn't.

She pointed it at the corner. At the worn place where the hands had been.

"May I?" she asked Halloran. *Ask before you shoot.*

"That," Halloran said, "you can photograph all day."

She made the frame. The thumb-cup, the sheen, the cheap blue root just out of focus above it. The shutter was a whisper the climate control swallowed.

While she shifted to the next corner Halloran had pulled the day's request log toward herself, a flat ledger, paper, this place trusted paper over screens with the book in the room. Her pencil stopped on a line.

"Hm," she said.

"What?" said Naila, instantly, catching the pause in the pattern.

"Nothing. Records." Halloran's pencil tapped a row. "Somebody pulled the provenance files. The Baresch correspondence, the Kircher chain, the acquisition papers. Three weeks back." She frowned at it, mild. "Not the manuscript. Just the trail. Who owned it, when, the whole chain of hands down to Yale." She turned the page over, looking for a name, and found a reader number and an institutional affiliation Mara couldn't see from where she stood.

"Solver?" Frik asked.

"Solvers want the *text*," Halloran said. "They want the pages. This one only wanted to know where it had *been*. The map of the hands, not the writing." She let the ledger fall closed. "Copying a provenance trail. Strange thing to bother with."

Niamh's eyes had gone to the closed ledger, then to Halloran's face, reading what the conservator herself hadn't quite said yet. She signed it to Mara, small: *S-O-M-E-O-N-E here first.*

Mara lowered the camera. Let the page breathe. Let the flower be what it refused to be, the leaves disagree with their own stalk, the worn corner hold its six hundred years of somebody's daily, faithful, untranslatable attention.

"How many hands made it?" she asked, because she wanted to know, and because Naila was already turning toward the question like a plant toward a window.

"That," said Halloran, "is tomorrow. That's the linguist's morning. You'll want to see her count them."

Frik had gone very still, which for Frik meant the counting had already started somewhere behind his eyes.

"More than one," he said. "More than one. *More than one.*"

Chapter 3—The Fifth Hand

The linguist had a name—Dr. Renata Acquaviva—but Frik had stopped using it inside his own head about four minutes in, because the name kept trying to climb out of his mouth at the wrong volume, and he was sitting in a glass cube in the Beinecke Library where the loudest sound was the climate control breathing through the floor and the soft thock of a foam cradle being repositioned by gloved hands. He had named her, privately, *the woman who counts the way I count*. It fit better. She moved through the folios the way Frik moved through a row of bus seats: touching nothing, but visibly placing each thing.

She had three high-resolution prints laid out on the long table. Not the manuscript itself, which lay in its cradle six feet away under Halloran's eye, but blown-up reproductions of folios from different quires. Herbal page. A balneological page, the bathing figures crowded in their green channels. A page of the dense recipe paragraphs near the back, each one tagged with a little inked star in the margin, a checklist somebody had actually run their finger down.

"Watch the *p*," Dr. Acquaviva said. She was not performing. She said it the way you'd say *watch the step*. "EVA transcription calls it *p*, it doesn't matter what it really is. Here." She set a clean fingertip an inch above the herbal print. "Word-initial. Always. You will not find it in the middle of a word. You will not find it at the end. It is a doorway letter. It only ever opens."

Naila, beside him, had gone very still in the specific way that meant she was already three pages ahead. "Position-bound," she said. "Rubio. Unheard of for Indo-European, or Hungarian, or Finnish."

"Rubio," the linguist agreed, pleased and unsurprised. "Some letters live only at the front of the word. Some only at the back. Some only in the belly. No natural language sorts its letters by where they're allowed to *stand*. So already—" she lifted the hand, let it hover over all three prints at once "—already we are somewhere strange. Hold that. We're not there yet. First we count hands."

Count hands, Frik's mouth said, not loud, a low echo into his own collarbone. *Count hands*. Nobody flinched. He loved them a little for not flinching.

The certainty-merchant's man flinched. He was new this morning, introduced as Mr. Vance, a *consulting historian* attached to the digitisation partner, which Halloran had said in a voice flat as a slammed drawer. He wore a soft grey jacket and the clean, expensive hands of someone who had never bled iron-gall into the grain of a calfskin in his life. He sat at the far end with a tablet face-down and a smile he kept charged like a phone.

"Five hands," he said now, smoothly, before the linguist had gotten there. "Forgive me. I've read the Fagin Davis paleography. Roughly five scribes. Which, if I may—doesn't that help the manufactured hypothesis? A workshop. A team producing a luxury curiosity for a credulous buyer. Rudolf the Second, six hundred ducats, the whole—"

"It isn't luxury," Halloran said, not looking up from the cradle. "There's no gold."

Vance opened his clean hands. "A budget hoax, then."

Frik felt the thing wake up behind his sternum. Not the loud thing. The *other* one, the one that watched a sentence go wrong and could not stop itself reaching for the snapped piece. He pressed his thumbnail hard into the pad of his finger under the table, his own private grille, and held.

Dr. Acquaviva did not snap. She slid the herbal print and the recipe print side by side, frowned at them a moment, and nudged the recipe one a half-inch to square the gallows in both. “Look at the same letter in two sections,” she said. “The *gallows*—these tall ones, the loops. In the herbal hand the loops lean a hair to the left. Upright, formal. In this back section—” she tapped the star-marked recipes “—they slope, they hurry, the ascenders are taller and thinner. Different muscle. Different person, almost certainly, or the same person a great many years apart. And in the balneological pages a third habit again.” She straightened. “Section-bound letterform variation. That is the count. Around five hands. And every one of them—” she paused, and this was the only place she let weight into her voice “—every one of them is *fluent*.”

“Fluent how,” said Mara, quiet, from behind the camera she had not yet raised.

“The ductus.” The linguist’s finger traced a word in the air without touching the print. “The flow. How the pen *moves between* characters. When a man enciphers text—when he’s looking something up, letter by letter, picking from a table, writing slowly because he has to *think*—the pen stops. There’s drag. Hesitation soaks into the line. You can see it. Forgers hesitate. Encipherers hesitate. People copying a symbol they don’t understand hesitate hardest of all.” She let that sit. “This doesn’t hesitate. This was *written*. At speed. By a hand that knew where it was going next.”

Naila spoke without being asked, low, fast, a flat recitation, her eyes on the middle distance where the numbers lived. “No measurable inter-character delay. The transition times between glyphs read as native handwriting, not look-up. Five scribes, each internally consistent across hundreds of pages, each fluent, two of them producing statistically distinct text. Currier A in the herbal and pharmaceutical, Currier B in the balneological and astronomical. Different letter frequencies. Different word structures. Two dialects.” She blinked, came back into the room a degree. “Of nothing anyone can read. But two of them. Consistently. By different hands. For their whole lives.”

The cube was very quiet. The air handler breathed.

Frik did the thing he did, then, that he had stopped apologising for around the age of twenty-six. He counted out loud, fast, under his breath, a stutter-flood of arithmetic that wasn’t a tic and wasn’t not a tic, the count and the compulsion married so long ago he couldn’t have unbraided them with a knife.

“Two-forty pages,” he said. “Two-forty. Twenty, twenty-five characters. Five hands. Five hands, one ruleset, every page, every page, no slips—” His breath caught and re-released. “You can’t *do* that. You can’t. Too many ways to slip. *Too many ways to slip.*”

“Mr.—” Vance started.

“Frik,” said Frik, and then, helplessly, in the man’s own clipped vowel, “*Frik. If I may. If I may.*” The echo came out before he could catch it, a perfect little mirror of Vance’s tone, and Frik’s ears went hot and Niamh, across the table, caught his eye and signed something small and quick at the level of her own chest—*here, you’re here, keep going*—and he kept going, because the truth was already in his mouth, and the truth was the only thing he’d ever been allowed to keep.

“A forger gets bored,” he said. “Page ten. Page *twelve*. He slips. He invents a new shortcut. He drinks. He has a bad week, his hand changes, he forgets which letter goes word-final this time and not that time. Two hundred and forty pages.” He shook his head, fast, three times, a no that wasn’t aimed at anyone. “Five people. *Same rules*. The whole *manual*. Position-bound letters held perfectly across five hands and a *lifetime* of writing.” A breath. “Nobody is that disciplined while *lying*. You decided what it was first. *Then* you went shopping for a method.”

It landed in the quiet like a dropped pencil in a cathedral.

Vance’s smile recharged. “I appreciate the—energy,” he said. “But the discipline objection is exactly what the Cardan grille answers. Rugg, two thousand three. Two thousand sixteen. You take a grille—a card with windows cut in it—you lay it over a table of syllables, you slide it along, and out come word-like strings with all these statistical *flavours*, the repetition, the near-duplicates, words differing by one letter, the lot. No fluency of *meaning* required. Just a mechanical procedure a bored monk could run all day. Discipline

supplied by the *machine*, not the man.” He spread the clean hands again, conjuror with the empty palms. “So. Not a genius. A gadget.”

It was, Frik had to give him, a good story. It was the kind of story that wanted very badly to be true because true would be *clean*, and Frik knew the pull of clean better than he knew his own surname.

Dr. Acquaviva did not reach for the empty palms. She reached for a folder.

“Gerard Rugg is a serious man,” she said. “He’s a cognitive scientist, and his grille work is real work, and it does something genuine. It shows you can mechanically generate text that *shares features* with the manuscript. That matters. It killed the lazy assumption that you need meaning to get language-like statistics.” She laid two more prints down, side by side, and these were not the manuscript. They were grids. “But.” She let the *but* be small and absolute. “First: the Cardan grille. Cardano describes it around fifteen-fifty. The vellum—” she tilted her head toward the cradle, toward Halloran, toward the calfskin itself “—the animal that became those pages died sometime between fourteen-oh-four and fourteen-thirty-eight. Arizona. Two thousand nine. Four separate bifolios sampled, mutually consistent.” She held Vance’s eye, mild as milk. “The grille is a hundred years too late to make this book. You’d be hiding the future inside the past.”

“The *technique* could predate the—”

“It could. Note that you’ve now retreated from a known method to a hypothetical one.” She did not say it unkindly. She said it the way you note the score. “Second, and this is the part the grille has never answered.” She tapped the grid-print. “Run a grille and you get the surface flavour. You do not get all of it in one consistent system: the low second-order entropy *and* the position-bound letters *and* the two distinct dialects by two distinct hands *and* fluent ductus across five scribes across two hundred and forty pages *and* the wear of daily use. Reproduce one feature, lose three. Tune the grille to nail the repetition and your entropy goes wrong. The grille is a key that opens one window of a building with forty windows and no door anyone’s found.”

“Timm and Schinner,” Vance said, a little less smoothly. “Two thousand nineteen. Self-citation method, auto-copying—”

“Real,” she said. “Serious. Still partial. Gaskell and Bower, twenty-twenty-two. They sat actual humans down and asked them to write meaningless gibberish by hand, and yes, those humans reproduced *some* of the oddities. Some.” She squared the prints with two fingers. “It is a live fight, Mr. Vance. I am not going to pretend the hoax case is dead, because it isn’t, and the people working it are not fools. But you walked in here and told me it was *settled* in your favour. It is not settled in *anyone’s* favour. That’s the whole point. That’s the thing you’re being paid not to say.”

Vance’s tablet stayed face-down. His smile stayed up. But he didn’t pick up the next card.

Frik watched him not pick it up and felt the relief come into his chest like the first water after a desert mouth, and he was the only one who could feel how *physical* it was, the loosening of a thing that had been white-knuckled since the word *hoax* first crossed the threshold. Because a hoax would have meant the book was a *trick*, and a trick was a lie with an answer, and a lie with an answer was a thing you could finally close and walk away from. And he had not wanted to walk away. He had wanted, very badly, for the book to be *real*. He didn’t fully understand why yet. He only knew that *not a hoax* sat in his lungs like good news about a relative.

Across the table, Mara had finally lifted the camera. Not at Vance. At the prints, and then, asking Halloran first with her eyebrows and getting the small nod, at the cradle itself, the actual book, in the actual raking light they’d angled low across its open face.

“The wear,” Mara said, looking through the lens and then deliberately lowering it, witness without consuming. “You don’t fake the wear. Look at the corners.” She didn’t zoom. She just looked. “The lower outer corners are *softer* than the rest of the page. Rounded. That’s a thumb. That’s the same thumb, or five thumbs, turning to the same pages over and over, for years, before any of it was old. You don’t manufacture that for a buyer. Why would you? Who roughs up a fake by *using* it lovingly for a decade?”

“Heavily thumbbed,” said Halloran, and there was a warmth under the flat that Friik hadn’t heard from her before. “Fagin Davis’s word. The parchment’s soft where the working pages are. No gold leaf. No display margins. No presentation hand.” She looked down at the open folio with the particular tenderness of someone who had spent thirty years learning not to touch the thing she loved. “Somebody made this to be *used*. And then somebody used it. A lot.”

Friik felt the count start again, but gentle this time, not the panic-flood, just the arithmetic of it. Five people. A lifetime of writing. A worn corner. A daily, faithful, untranslatable attention. He thought of the woman in the provenance ledger from yesterday, the one who’d only wanted the map of the hands, not the writing. He thought of how strange it was to want only where a thing had *been*.

He did not blurt that. He held it. He was getting better at holding the ones that were only for himself.

At the far end of the table, beyond the prints, in the chair by the wall where the light from the cube’s glass fell sidelong across his face, the big quiet man Naila had taken to calling *the road* had not said a word all morning. He sat with his shades pushed up into his hair and his clean white handkerchief folded into a perfect square on his knee, and he was looking at the book. Not at the letters, not at the prints, not at Vance. At the *binding*, at the soft corner, at how the calfskin had given itself over to twenty thousand turnings. He was looking at it the way Friik’s grandfather used to look at a tool he’d inherited and didn’t fully understand, turning it, weighing it, asking it the only question that man ever asked of a made thing: *not what does it say. What is it for.*

The book did not answer him. Not yet. Friik watched the man let that be all right, for now, and fold the handkerchief one more time into the same square.

“So,” Vance said, gathering himself, voice light, already drafting the next press release behind his face. “Where does that leave us. For the—for the partnership’s purposes.”

“It leaves you,” Naila said, before anyone else could, flat and final and faintly amazed, “with a real book. Made by five real people. Used until it was soft. In a hand that flows like meaning and a system that obeys no language on earth and isn’t random either.” She looked at the print, at the doorway letter that only ever opened. “If it’s a fake, it’s a perfect fake in a world that doesn’t do perfect. So it isn’t one.”

The door on *hoax* swung shut. Friik felt it close all through his body, the relief audible in the long breath he let out into the breathing room. And the door it left them standing in front of was the other one.

Niamh hadn’t been watching the prints for a while now. She’d been watching the book’s *body*, the soft corner, the streak of old grease where a finger had rested ten thousand times on the same square inch, and her hands had gone quiet in her lap in a way that wasn’t stillness. It was the stillness of someone listening to a room she already knew the shape of.

She turned to Mara and signed it, slow, so the whole table could follow if they cared to learn:

Made to be touched. Touched until it gave way. By people who understood it perfectly—

She stopped. Started again.

—and meant for nobody else to.

Chapter 4—Soft Thumbprints

The reading room had a sound to it that Niamh could feel in her teeth.

Not hear—feel. The climate plant under the floor put out a low constant hum that came up through the legs of her chair and the soles of her feet, a flat pressure she'd learned to read like silence. When the door to the cube opened, the pressure changed: a soft fist of air, the hum dipping under the new draft, then settling. She knew when someone entered before she turned. She always had. The hearing world had given her that without ever knowing it had, the gift of the unattended door.

Right now the pressure was steady. Everyone who was going to be here was here.

The book lay open on its foam cradle. She made herself look at it like a face she was about to read: not at the parts, at the whole. Let it tell her what it wanted to before she went hunting.

What it wanted to tell her was that it was *tired*. Not damaged. Loved past the point of resistance, the way a wooden spoon goes pale and soft along its working edge. The lower corners of the pages had been turned so many times that they'd lost their corner-ness. They'd rounded over into a thumb-shaped softness, the vellum gone fibrous and pale at the very tip where ten thousand hands had said *here, this page, again*.

She leaned closer. The conservator, Halloran, the one with the pencil and the patience of a glacier, watched her lean and did not stop her, because she'd asked first, in writing, on the little slip, and because she kept her hands in her lap.

There. A streak across the lower third of one herbal page. A long, faint smudge where the iron-gall had been disturbed and the white ground beneath it had bruised grey, exactly where a right hand would rest while the left turned. A working hand. A hand that had put itself down a hundred times in the same place to steady the body while the eyes did the real work above.

She could see the *resting*. She could see where someone had stopped to think.

Mara was at the far end of the table with the camera on the tripod, and Mara wasn't shooting. Niamh clocked that and approved of it without looking up. Mara had her arms folded and her weight back on her heels, doing the thing Niamh had watched her do at the bench in Newark: standing *off* the picture, refusing it the easy frame. *Document the page*, Mara had said once, *don't fall into it*. The plants on this folio were the kind of thing that ate photographers. A composite bloom, root of one species, leaves of a second, a flower no garden ever grew, the sort of beautiful impossible thing that a lens wanted to declare a *meaning*. Mara kept her hands off it.

Across the table, Vance's people were shooting everything.

Two of them, in soft grey, with a rig that cost more than the cube's annual insurance, sweeping the open book in raking light, capturing the surface relief, the ink topography, the micro-texture, every pore of the dead calf. Clinical. Beautiful, even. They had a sensor that read the height of the ink off the page to fractions of a millimetre, and they were getting it all: the strokes, the flourishes, the position-bound letters that opened words and never closed them, the little doorway glyph Acquaviva had walked them through. They were getting the *data*.

They were getting none of it.

Niamh watched the nearer one—young, efficient, a good operator—pass his light over the soft brown corner without slowing. He logged its dimensions. He did not see what it *was*. He photographed the resting-smudge as a defect in surface continuity and moved on, because a smudge is noise and they were here for signal. They could measure the touch and not feel that it was a touch.

She'd spent her life in rooms like that. Rooms full of people getting all the data and none of it. People who watched her hands move and recorded that a mouth had not opened and filed it as *no comment*, when the comment had been right there, fluent, complete, in the air between them. The book on the cradle had been read by people who understood it perfectly and made it so that nobody else ever could. She knew that feeling from the inside. It was her whole ordinary week.

Jakobus had drifted to the wall.

He stood the way a big rock stands at the edge of a field—present, weathered, not in your way unless you walked into it. The desert shades were folded and hooked in his collar, no call for them under the soft museum lights, but he kept them on him like a watch he never checked. He wasn't looking at the writing. He never looked at the writing. He had his head tipped a few degrees and he was looking at the *spine*, where the quires gathered, where the thread bit, where the gutter of each opening had worn shiny and dark.

She caught his eye across the room and he gave her the smallest tip of his chin. Not a nod. An acknowledgement. *I see you seeing it too.*

He came over, slow, asking permission of the floor before he put his weight on it. He stopped beside her at a careful distance from the cradle and he didn't reach. He never reached. He put his hands behind his back like a man at a graveside, and he looked at the gutter of the open book where the two pages fell away from the binding, and he leaned in a few centimetres.

Most people, when they look at a thing, ask it *what does it mean*. She'd watched a thousand faces ask that question. It made a particular shape: a leaning-in, a hunger, a wanting-to-take. The grey-soft people had that shape now, all of them.

Jakobus's face asked something quieter and harder. She'd seen it the first day and she still didn't have a clean sign for it, so she'd made one up for herself: both hands open, turning a thing over. *What is this for*. What was it *made* to do.

He looked at the worn gutter for a long time. Then he straightened, and he found her eyes, and he lifted one hand and signed—badly, slowly, with the four signs she'd taught him and the one he'd asked for specially—

Many returns.

She felt that land somewhere under her sternum. *Many returns*. Yes. That was exactly it. That was the streak and the soft corner and the dark gutter and the pale fibrous thumb-tip of every lower page: the physical fact of *coming back*. You didn't wear a book like this by reading it once. You wore it like this by needing it. By turning to it on a bad morning with cold hands. By opening it to the same page so often that the corner gave up being a corner. This was a thing made to be *used*, and used, and used, by people who reached for it like the spoon you've had for thirty years.

She signed back, *Working hands. Not rich hands.*

He understood that one without the signs; he'd already read it off the object before she said it. No gold. No leaf. No luxury anywhere on it, two hundred and forty pages of cheap honest period minerals and iron-gall and the kind of vellum a working community could afford, which was the kind that came from fourteen or fifteen entire calves and nothing fancier. A thing this used and this plain was made to do a job.

What job, the book would not say.

Halloran spoke then, low, and Niamh caught it off the lips and the small tilt of the head toward Naila. "The 2009 release," the conservator said, "made a claim it later took back. That the writing went onto the skin immediately. We can't show that. The radiocarbon dates the animal. The death of the calf. It does not date the hand." A pause, gloved fingers resting near, not on, the foam. "What we can show is that nothing on these pages is modern. The pigments are period. The ink is period. The skin is period. The forgery door—"

the smallest dry tightening at the corner of the mouth, a conservator's joke, thirty years dry, "—stays closed. We tend it like a grave."

Niamh watched Naila take that in. Naila had her hands flat on the table on either side of her tablet, very still, in the particular stillness that wasn't calm. Naila was looking at the open book like a door you want to walk through and shouldn't. Niamh knew that look too. Not the same wound, but a cousin of it. Naila wanted the rule to *close*. She wanted the book to be the most beautiful pattern of her life and to prove, by closing, that the world had been wrong about the things it had written off, including her. The wanting sat on Naila's shoulders like weather.

The grey-soft operator at the far end said, to no one, to his rig, "We've got full surface capture on the foldout sequence. The rosettes." His voice had the warm certainty of a man whose machine had just done its job. "Vance'll want the nine-rosette for the trailer. It reads as—" he tilted his head, generous, helpful, deady, "—it reads as a *map*."

Mara's head came up.

Niamh felt the room's pressure shift before Mara spoke, the small intake, the weight coming forward off the heels for the first time in an hour.

"It reads as a map," Mara said, even and flat, "to you."

"Sure." The operator smiled, unbothered. "Circles, connectors. Cities, maybe."

"Newbold read ink-cracks under a microscope as Greek shorthand," Mara said. "Cheshire read a bath as a volcano and built a whole language out from under it. Somebody read a composite plant as a sunflower and put the New World into a fifteenth-century book." She didn't raise her voice. She didn't have to; it had the flat carry of a woman who'd photographed things people very badly wanted to be something other than what they were. "The picture's the first place everybody falls in. You point a good enough camera at a circle long enough, you'll find a city. The circle doesn't know it's a city. *You* brought the city."

The operator's smile thinned. He went back to his rig.

From the wall, near the door, in the low clean voice he used when a thing pushed past where the evidence could hold it, Frik said: "Brought the city."

Not loud. An echo, half under his breath, the words bending out of him sideways, his shoulder jerking once with the effort of letting them. He pressed his lips after, riding the next one down. The crew didn't turn. They'd learned not to turn; turning was the cruelty. The words had landed where they needed to. The grey-soft operator did turn, half-startled, and found nobody looking at him, and the not-looking told him more than a look would have.

Vance, who had been quiet by the glass, drafting his face, decided it was a moment for warmth. "It's a striking image regardless," he said. "Whatever it 'is.' That's the beauty of it, isn't it? The not-knowing is the *product*."

Nobody answered him.

Niamh looked back at the book. At the soft corner. At the resting-smudge where a working hand had steadied a working body over six hundred years ago, in a room she would never see, in a light she would never see, with the specific human gesture of *coming back to the page you need*. The most eloquent thing she had ever sat across from. Fluent. Complete. Made by people who understood it perfectly. Real as her own hands.

And shut to her. Shut to everyone. Not by accident, not by damage, not by the dumb erosion of time, but on *purpose*. She felt the certainty of it before she could prove it, a door-draft. Made to communicate and made not to be understood, in the same fluent gesture, by the same patient hands, page after page after page. A whole book of it. A whole life of it.

She knew that gesture. She'd lived inside it in every hearing room she'd ever walked into. She'd been the fluent, complete, real, shut-out thing on the table while people with good machines got all the data and none

of it. The difference was that she'd never *chosen* it. The book had. The hands that made it had reached, daily, for a thing they understood and meant for nobody else to. And that wasn't a tragedy to her, she understood, sitting there with the hum coming up through her teeth. It was kin. It was the only thing in this glass cube full of grey-soft people that knew what it was to be heard and not understood, and to be, anyway, *exactly itself*.

She put her fingertips on the table near the cradle, not touching, the way Jakobus held his hands. The way Halloran tended a grave.

Sawubona, she thought, for no reason she could have said out loud, the word Jakobus had taught her on the first morning. *I see you*. And the harder half of it, the half the greeting carried underneath that nobody translated for the brochures: *and because I see you, you are*.

They broke at the glass exit when the conservator called the session.

Out past the airlock, in the ordinary lobby light, the crew gathered with the loose gravity of people who'd been somewhere together. Mara had her camera down and capped, the strap slack. Naila was last out, and she came out wrong: too quiet, her hands not knowing where to be, the wanting still on her shoulders.

"So that's the first door," Mara said. Hand toward the cube behind them, not looking back at it. "Forgery. Dead. It's real. Five real hands. Used soft."

"Real," Frik agreed, quiet, clean. "*Real*."

Niamh watched Naila not say anything, which was its own sentence.

It was Jakobus who put the turn into words, last, mild, standing a little apart with the shades back on against the lobby glare he didn't need them for. He looked at none of them and at all of them, and he asked the room the only question he ever asked it, in the small ported English he used for the crew.

"A thing this used," he said. "This kept." A beat, while the climate plant hummed somewhere on the far side of the wall and Niamh felt it die away as the cube sealed behind them. "Made to be touched until it gave. By people who came back, and came back."

He turned his open hands over, once. *What is it for*.

"So," he said. "Now we ask what they were keeping safe."

And the second door stood there in front of all of them and did not open by itself.

Chapter 5—Codebreakers’ Bones

The boxes came up from the lobby on a cart with a wonky wheel, and Frik counted them as the loose noise in his throat counted along—four printer boxes, file-grey, the kind that swallow a small life and don’t apologise—and he said the number out loud before he could stop it. “*Four*.” Then again, quieter, the way you set a thing back on a shelf. “Four.”

They had a side room now. Not the cube—the cube was for the book, for the foam cradle and the raking light and Halloran’s pencil-only law—but a teaching room off the back corridor, long table, glass on one side, the climate plant breathing through the wall so you felt it more than heard it. Frik felt it in his back teeth. Naila had taken the end of the table with the wall behind her and the laptop angled so nobody could read over her shoulder. Less about secrecy than about the particular size of the world she could hold at once.

These weren’t the real archives. The real ones lived at Yale and at the Marshall Library and in the Friedman Collection at the George C. Marshall Foundation in Virginia, and you didn’t carry those around on a cart with a bad wheel. These were the crew’s own thing—Frik’s thing, mostly—printouts and facsimiles and the public record, decades of it, the dead men’s failures bound and scanned and made cheap. He’d spent two nights with a laminator and a despair he hadn’t named. Now he lifted the first lid.

“Friedman,” he said. “*William F.* Both Friedmans, but him on top.”

Mara had her camera down and capped on the table, strap pooled, a hand resting on it the way some people rest a hand on a dog to keep it from getting up. She leaned over the open box. “These the guys who actually broke things. The real ones.”

“The realest,” Frik said. The word came clean. “Bletchley’s cousins. He ran the team that broke Purple—the Japanese diplomatic machine, before Pearl. Before, before. She broke rum-runners’ codes in Prohibition, then Nazi spy rings in South America. Elizebeth. *Elizebeth Smith Friedman*.” He liked her name. It came out three times before he let it go, soft each time, and nobody at the table flinched, because they were the table.

Naila spoke without looking up. “Pull the entropy plate. The one I marked.” Her voice had a flatness today that Frik clocked, the wanting still sitting on her like a coat she hadn’t taken off since the cube. He found the plate and slid it down the table.

“So they had the book,” Mara said. “When?”

“Forties. Friedman ran a study group—First Study Group, evenings, after the war work. Cryptanalysts, classicists. Cleared people, real ones, the ones who’d actually pulled meaning out of enemy machines under deadline, with bodies stacking up if they failed.” Frik pulled a photostat free, careful, gloves he’d worn out of habit and then felt stupid about because these were laminated copies. He left them on. “And they sat with this. For years.”

“And?”

“*And*.” He set the photostat down. It showed a transcription column, Friedman’s group’s own attempt at an alphabet, the careful hand of people who knew exactly how to do this. “Friedman’s guess at the end of his life—not a solve, a guess—was that it was a synthetic language. A constructed one. Made on purpose, an early try at a universal philosophical language, the kind people actually built in the sixteen-hundreds. He

hid the guess in an anagram so he could claim priority and not be wrong out loud, because he was a careful man who'd watched careless men embarrass themselves." He looked at the column. "He never claimed to read it. *Never claimed.*"

"And her?" Mara asked.

Frik found the line. He'd marked it in green because green was the colour he trusted. "Elizbeth, nineteen sixty-two, in print. She said attempts to break it by statistical attack were"—and here his throat caught the words and gave them back exactly, the echo coming up whole, which it did sometimes with sentences that had a shape his body believed—"doomed to utter frustration." *Doomed to utter frustration.*"

The room held it.

"That's the cleanest one we've got," Naila said. "The people who could. Said don't."

Frik had footage too. He'd hunted it down, an old reel, Friedman pacing in front of a board, talking to a room you couldn't see, his hands going. He put it on the wall through the room's beamer and watched it with a focus that pulled his shoulder up toward his ear in a slow tide and let it down.

The old man paced. Three steps one way. Turn. Three steps back. His hand came up, made a shape in the air, a chopping flat-handed shape that wasn't anger. A man trying to push a thought into a place it wouldn't go. Turn. Three steps. The hand again.

Frik's own foot was tapping under the table, the exact tempo, and he didn't fight it. His shoulder rose. Fell. The blink came hard, twice, a clean double, and then the small click in his throat. Three steps. Turn.

Niamh watched the footage and then watched Frik, her eyes going between the screen and him, and she signed something small to Mara, who'd picked up enough to half-catch it and looked at Frik and then back at the screen.

"She says you're keeping his time," Mara said, low.

Frik didn't take his eyes off the old man's hands. "*Three steps.*" His foot tapped it. "He's not stuck. People think stuck. He's circling. He found a wall and he's walking the wall to find the door. That's—" The blink. "That's not stuck. That's the most awake a person gets. *Awake.*"

Three steps. Turn. The old man's hand chopped the air.

"And there's no door," Naila said, quietly, from her end. Not unkind. A reading of the wall, which was her job. "He walks it and walks it. There's no door in the wall."

Frik watched the old man turn one more time before the reel ran out into grey. The room's plant breathed through the wall.

"Maybe the door's somewhere he can't reach," Frik said. "Maybe it's just—" The throat-click. "—just locked." He heard himself not make it a solve, and was glad. "Doesn't mean there's no room behind it."

Through the morning they tried the others, and one by one Naila took them apart, and she did it without cruelty, which was somehow worse for Frik, because cruelty he could have argued with.

Tiltman first. John Tiltman, who'd broken into systems that didn't want to be broken into for a living, who'd looked at the Voynich for the better part of his life off and on, who'd noticed real things. That the words had structure, prefixes and suffixes and middles, that it behaved like it had grammar. He'd written that it was not a simple cipher. Right about the negative, stuck on the positive. "He saw the shape," Frik said, laying the page down. "He just couldn't get inside the shape."

Then Currier. Prescott Currier, Navy man, who in the seventies stood up at a Voynich seminar and said something nobody had clocked before: there are two of these. Two systems. Two hands writing two

statistically different dialects, one in the plant pages and the pharmacy pages, one in the bathing pages and the star pages. Voynich A and Voynich B.

“That one held,” Naila said, and for a second the flatness left her voice and the other thing came up, the thing that lit her, the clean-rule relief. “Currier’s the one that held. A and B are real. You can measure them. The letter frequencies actually differ, section to section, in a way that tracks his split.” She turned the laptop a few degrees so the others could see the plate, two distributions side by side, two coloured ridges that didn’t sit on top of each other. “He found a true seam. Not a meaning. A seam.”

“That’s a win,” Mara said.

“It’s a finding,” Naila corrected. “It’s not a door. It tells you the book is made of more than one consistent system. It tells you the systems are stable enough to measure. It doesn’t tell you they say anything.” Her hand hovered over the trackpad and didn’t land. “Currier knew that. He didn’t claim more than he had.”

That was the thing Friek kept hearing, page after page, box after box. The real ones didn’t claim more than they had. They walked the wall. They named what they’d found and named what they hadn’t and signed their names to the not-knowing, which took a different kind of courage than the other kind.

“Run me the brutal part,” Mara said. “The why-it’s-impossible part. I want it from you, not from a press release.”

Naila looked at her for a second, and Friek watched her decide to do it properly, which for Naila meant doing it gently, building it so it couldn’t be unbuilt. She pulled three things up and laid them like cards.

“One. It’s language-like. Zipf’s law holds—the commonest words swamp the rare ones in the exact proportion real language does. Bower’s group ran second-order entropy and it sits in a band that says this is structured, organised, predictable at the level above the letter. If you wanted to call it gibberish, the gibberish would have to be cleverer than gibberish gets. It clusters by section. The plant pages share vocabulary, the star pages share different vocabulary, like a real document about real distinct things.” She tapped the table once, softly. “So it isn’t noise. That door’s shut. We shut it.”

“Two,” Mara said.

“Two. It’s language-unlike, and this is the one nobody fixes. Some letters only ever appear at the start of a word. Some only at the end. Some only in the middle. That doesn’t happen. Not in English, not in Hungarian, not in Finnish, not in anything anybody’s pointed at. And words that differ by one letter repeat next to each other constantly. The same word will appear—” she paused, and Friek felt the number coming and felt his own mouth want it—

“*Five times*,” he said. “Five in a row. *Five*.”

“Five times in a row,” Naila said. “Daiin daiin daiin daiin daiin. No language does that and stays a language.”

“And three,” Mara said, because there was always a three in how Naila stacked it.

“Three. It’s not random either. We just shut that door. So.” She put both hands flat on the table, finally, palms down, the way Jakobus turned his over to ask his question except Naila pressed hers down to hold a thing still. “Language-like. Language-unlike. Not random. All three. At once. In one book.”

The room sat in it. The plant breathed.

“That’s the wall,” Friek said. “*That’s* the wall Friedman walked.” His foot had stopped. “It’s not that nobody’s smart enough. The wall has three sides and they don’t make a room.”

Naila didn’t say anything. Her hands stayed pressed down. Friek watched her watch the triple bind, and he saw the thing in her he’d been seeing since the cube. Not the relief now, the other one. The drowning. A person standing in front of a rule that won’t close, who needs it to close, who has built a self out of rules closing and is now being asked to live in front of one that won’t. He didn’t have a word for what he wanted to say to her, so he didn’t say it.

The press release came in at eleven-forty, and Frik knew it was Codexa before he read the header because the room changed temperature.

Vance's people had a screen up in the corridor for the imaging contractors, and someone had thumbed the volume so it bled under the door. A man's voice, warm, the kind of warm that's been to a coach. *...what the codebreakers of two world wars couldn't do, because they didn't have the tool we have...* A loop of the pages, beautiful scans, the composite plants turning slow and gorgeous on the screen, an interface laid over them with confidence-percentages climbing in a corner like a slot machine deciding to be kind. *...our model has identified candidate readings across more than sixty percent of the corpus...*

Mara went to the door and looked through the slot of glass and didn't open it. "Their expert's on," she said. "The one with the model. He's doing the Friedman line. He's *using* the Friedman line. 'What Bletchley couldn't.'"

"He's standing on their bones to look taller," Frik said, and the words came up sharp and he let them, because they were true and the truth in them was clean. *"Standing on bones."*

"He's got a percentage going up in the corner," Mara said. "Sixty. Sixty-one." She wasn't smiling. The lens in her had gone cold and precise. "You know what that percentage is? That's a picture. He took a number that means nothing without the thing it's measured against and put it on a screen so it'd *look* like the wall came down. It's a sunflower. It's Newbold's galaxy. Somebody projecting a solve onto a page and selling tickets to the projection."

Naila hadn't moved. She was watching her own three cards on the table, the language-like and the language-unlike and the not-random, and through the door the slot-machine number climbed past sixty-three, a model trained to find readings finding readings the way a model trained to find faces finds faces in clouds, and Frik watched the wanting move in her face, because the thing on the screen was offering her the closed rule, the door in the wall, the thing she needed, gift-wrapped and false.

The warm voice through the door said, *...where the human experts simply gave up...*

And it happened the way it happened, up from below, past the place where Frik could have caught it, the echo and the truth fused into one body and out before his consent:

"Even the best—no joy."

It landed in the room like a dropped plate.

Niamh's eyes came to him. Mara turned from the door.

Frik's throat clicked, and he said it again, smaller, because his body needed the second one and because the second one was the real one. "Even the best. The best ones. *No joy.*" His foot found Friedman's tempo again, three-and-turn. "They didn't give up. He says give up. They didn't. They walked the wall their whole lives and they put their names on the not-knowing. That's not giving up. The man with the number—" The blink, hard. "He didn't even walk the wall. He drew a door on it. *Drew a door.*"

Through the glass slot the percentage hit sixty-six and a little cluster of phones went up to catch it.

And quietly, from the corridor, a different thread. Mara caught it first because she read rooms, then Frik heard it in the contractor chatter under the warm voice. Vance's people had filed something with Yale that morning. Not for the book. For the *metadata*. The full digitisation package, the multispectral captures, the provenance files, the conservation notes. The right to hold the record of the record. Halloran had said no, the slow institutional no that comes wrapped in procedure, but the request was a tell, and Frik felt the shape of it as he felt a sentence wanting out: they didn't need to read it. They needed to *own the place where the answer would live if there was one*. Buy the door, in case there was a room.

Naila was still looking at her three cards.

"It could still be code," she said. Very low. Not to the room, to the cards. "Just one nobody's cracked. The Friedmans couldn't, but they didn't have—" and she stopped herself, because she heard where the sentence went, she heard the slot machine in it, she heard the drawn door. Her hands pressed flatter on the table.

The wanting was all over her. And under the want, for the first time, Frik saw her hate the want.

The triple bind sat on the table with its three sides that didn't make a room. The dead men's bones sat in their grey boxes. The number through the door climbed toward a certainty that nothing in the room could verify and nothing in the room could yet disprove, and the question stood up off the table and looked at all of them.

Could it still be a cipher.

Just one they hadn't broken.

The door opened a crack, the bad one, and the cold came through.

Chapter 6—Ductus Flow

The press cluster smelled of warm electronics and somebody's cold-brew, and Niamh read the room before she read a single mouth.

Codexa had not booked the Beinecke. You did not book the Beinecke; Halloran would have laughed her dry institutional laugh and filed the request under *no*. So they had taken a glass-walled function suite three blocks down the hill, the kind hotels rent to law firms, and they had filled it with light. That was the first thing Niamh noticed. The light was *staged*. Two soft boxes, a ring lamp, a backdrop the exact grey-blue of a tech keynote. Vance stood inside it like a man who had rehearsed standing.

She didn't need his words yet. She had the room.

Eleven reporters, three of them only half-attending, two filming on phones held at chest height, one woman near the front leaning in with the specific hunger of someone who needs a headline by four. A young Codexa operator sat at the laptop, grey-soft, unbothered, the kind of calm that costs money to install in a person. And on the big screen behind Vance, slowly, a page of the manuscript resolved out of black.

Niamh's chest pulled the way it had for three days now. Not a flutter. A leaning. The way you lean toward a person across a loud table when you've found, against all odds, the one face in the bar that turns toward you when you sign.

The page was f33r. Herbal. The composite plant with its impossible architecture, a root that belonged to no plant, leaves borrowed from a fourth, a bloom that argued with both. And over it, around it, threaded between the drawn things, the writing. The fluent, indifferent, six-hundred-year-old writing that had never once cared whether anyone understood it.

Hello, she thought, as she always did. Not woo. A courtesy. You greeted a thing that was talking to you.

Mara stood at her left shoulder, camera down, strap doubled in her fist so the lens hung against her sternum and not at her eye. She'd promised Niamh that. *Ask before I shoot*. In here she wasn't shooting anything. She was only watching Vance's light and hating it with the specific contempt of a person who knew exactly how a lie was lit.

Vance was talking. Niamh caught the shape of it off his lips, off the soft-box's gift of even shadow, off the tipping of the reporters' heads.

—what generations of cryptographers couldn't—

—our model doesn't guess, it learns—

—a living language, recovered—

She felt Mara go rigid beside her at *recovered*. Niamh put two fingers lightly against Mara's wrist. *Not yet. Watch.*

On screen the demo began. Codexa's tool laid a transparent overlay across f33r, and where the manuscript's glyphs sat, soft Latin letters bloomed up under them, like the page had finally agreed to be read. A sentence assembled itself in clean modern type at the bottom. The hunger-reporter actually inhaled. Vance let the silence sit; he had been coached to let silence sit.

Niamh watched the room believe it for a second and a half. She watched belief move across eleven faces like wind across grass. She knew that exact second-and-a-half. She had spent her life inside it, the moment a hearing room decided it understood her, decided what she'd meant, smoothed her into a shape that fit them and moved on, satisfied, before she'd finished. Understanding that arrives too fast and too clean is a man turning down your subtitles because he's sure he's got the gist.

She looked away from the screen. She'd come to read the custodians, and the custodians weren't watching the screen either.

Halloran stood at the very back by the doors, arms folded, in the dark beyond the staged light, which was the correct place for her to be. And beside her, unexpectedly, Acquaviva, the linguist, in a cardigan that had seen real winters, holding a paper cup he wasn't drinking from. He was not bored and he was not angry. He had the patient face of a man watching someone do a magic trick whose secret he has known since he was nine.

Across the room, near a pillar, Jakobus. Shades off in here, folded into his shirt pocket; he obeyed indoor rules completely and without comment, as he obeyed all small rules. He wasn't watching Vance. He was watching the screen as he watched everything, not *what does it say* but *what is this made to do*, and his stillness had a quality the staged light couldn't touch.

Niamh got out the grid.

The crew's translation grid was Naila's, laminated now, dog-eared at one corner, twenty-odd EVA characters down the side and their positional habits worked out beside each in Naila's tight column-discipline. *This one only word-initial. This one only at the end. This one loves to sit between two of itself.* It wasn't a key. Naila had been brutally clear about that; it was a census. A record of where the glyphs *liked to live*. Niamh had borrowed it for a reason she hadn't fully said out loud, because the reason lived in her hands and not in any language she could hand to the others without losing it.

She held the grid up against the screen, at arm's length, lining the real f33r behind it. And she did the thing she did, the thing that was her whole self.

She read the *hand*.

Not the meaning. She would never have the meaning; she'd made her peace with that the first hour. She read the *body* of the writing as she'd read every face that ever talked at her too fast. The pen's speed lived in the strokes. You could see it. The down-curve of a glyph that finished with a flick because the hand was already moving to the next one. The ligatures where two characters had grown into each other from being written ten thousand times in a row, like her own name in BSL worn smooth from a lifetime of making it. The baseline ran level and confident, never crabbed, never stalled.

She knew this hand. Not whose. *How*. This was the hand of someone who was not deciding. Someone whose pen knew where it was going before the mind told it. Fast. Fluid. Uninterrupted.

She turned and signed it to Mara, low and fast, between their two bodies where no reporter would catch it.

This wasn't written slow.

Mara's eyes flicked from the screen to Niamh's hands. Mara's BSL was rough, more catching-the-gist than fluent, but Niamh slowed for her, gave her the load-bearing words clean.

Slow how, Mara signed back, clumsy.

Niamh tapped the screen-glow on the laminate where a string of glyphs ran. *A code hides. A code stops and starts. The hand goes pick-the-glyph, pick-the-glyph, check-the-key.* She mimed it, a stutter of the wrist, a hesitation, a glance-aside-to-check. *Enciphering is slow. The pen waits while the head works.* Then she ran her finger smooth along the manuscript line, no stops, one breath. *This pen never waited.*

Mara looked at the screen a long beat. Then at the back of the room, at Acquaviva, who was already looking at *them*, at the two of them passing the grid between their hands like contraband, with an expression that had warmed by exactly one degree.

He set his undrunk coffee on a side table and came over, unhurried, around the bright edge of the staged light, into the dark with them.

“You see it,” he said. He said it to Niamh, facing her square, hands still, which meant Halloran had told him, which meant he’d remembered. He spoke and he didn’t gesture and he kept his face open and frontal so she had all of it. A man who’d thought about how to be understood. She could have kissed him for it. “The ductus.”

Niamh nodded once.

“Say it back to me,” Acquaviva said, “so I know we mean the same thing. What does the hand tell you?”

Niamh signed; Mara voiced it, careful, only where she was sure. “She says it’s fast. Fluid. The pen doesn’t stop. There’s no—” Mara hunted, found it, “—no hesitation built into it. No gap where someone’s looking up the next symbol.”

“No inter-character delay,” Acquaviva said, and Niamh felt the warmth of being met on her own ground, exactly, no rounding-off. “Yes. That’s the whole quarrel in one stroke of a pen, and most people walk straight past it to argue about *meaning*.” He glanced back toward the screen, where Vance’s tool was now confidently subtitling f34v, and his patient face changed, the jaw tightening on something closer to grief than contempt. “May I borrow your hands a moment?”

Niamh handed him the grid.

He held it like a tool he respected. “Currier saw it in the sixties. Two hands, two systems, your A and your B.” He looked at Naila’s positional census and made a small approving sound. “And the Friedmans sat with this for *years*. Elizebeth said the statistical attacks were doomed to utter frustration. They weren’t stupid and they weren’t lazy and they had every tool of the trade.” He set the grid down flat on the side table and smoothed it with one finger. “So why didn’t they get in. Watch.”

He took a pen from his cardigan, a stub of a pencil, actually, the conservator’s instinct in him too, and a paper napkin from under the abandoned coffee.

“Suppose I want to encipher. Suppose I have a real message and I’m hiding it. The simplest serious method anyone in fourteen-something might reach for is a Cardan grille.” He glanced sideways, dry. “Which, by the way, postdates the vellum by a century, but leave that. Suppose. I lay a card with holes cut in it over my page. I write a letter through hole one. I move my hand to hole two. I write. I shift the card.” He mimed it on the napkin, his pencil dabbing in stops, lift, dab, lift, the whole motion broken into a stutter of decisions. The napkin filled with letters that sat in their separate moments, each one a little island, the baseline jittering where his hand had relocated.

He held the napkin up beside the screen.

Niamh didn’t need it. She’d already read it. But she watched Mara read it. Watched Mara’s photographer’s eye snap the comparison fast and merciless, as it snapped everything: the napkin’s broken islands of letters, each one *placed*, against the manuscript line behind the screen-glare, running level and easy, ligatures grown together, the pen never lifting to think.

“A grille leaves seams,” Acquaviva said. “Every method of *hiding* leaves seams. The hand pauses to consult. The spacing goes wrong because you’re working letter by letter against a constraint, not writing word by word with a tongue. You can fake some of the *statistics*—Rugg did, and it was real work, serious work, and you must respect it—you can manufacture word-repetition and a low entropy with a clever enough table. But you cannot fake the *fluency*. You cannot make a stuttering process leave a running line.” He set the napkin down beside the laminate. “Five scribes. A working hand. A pen that knew where it was going. Whatever this is—and I will not tell you what it is, because I do not know, and the people who tell you they know are *selling something*—” his eyes went, briefly, level, to the staged light, “—whatever it is, it was *written*. As language is written. Not assembled. Not hidden one painful letter at a time.”

Niamh felt the door move under her hands. Not open. *Shut*. The good kind of shutting, a door closed honestly, with the wall behind it left standing.

She signed, and Mara voiced: “Then it isn’t a cipher.”

Acquaviva did the thing the good ones did. He didn’t take the gift she was offering him. “It is not a cipher *that works the way a person hiding a message would have to work*,” he said. “Which is most of them. Keep your *probably*. The manuscript has eaten a hundred years of certainty. Don’t feed it yours.” But the corner of his mouth had gone soft when he said it.

Behind them, the demo crescendoed. Vance had reached the part of the talk where he stopped explaining the tool and started explaining the *opportunity*. Niamh caught *rights*, caught *exclusive access*, caught *the question, finally, answered*, and the hunger-reporter’s pen was moving, and that was the second-and-a-half stretching out into a headline.

Frik had drifted in late, hands in his pockets, reading the napkin and the screen the way he read everything, both at once, the comparison flaring in him. Niamh watched it build in his throat. She always knew before it came; the whole of him gathered, the breath cocked.

The tool laid its clean Latin subtitle across f34v. Vance said, off her read of his mouth, *and what it says, for the first time in six hundred years, is—*

“— **you decided what it said, then went shopping for a language.**”

It came out of Frik flat and clear and far too loud, pitched to carry, involuntary as a sneeze and twice as true, and it crossed the staged light like a thrown stone. Eleven heads turned. The young operator at the laptop didn’t even look up; Vance’s pause-coaching held his face smooth for a full second before the smile reset.

Frik’s hand was already at his own mouth, and the apology was already in his eyes. It wasn’t shame for the *content*—the content was the truest sentence said in that room all day—it was the old weariness of having no say over the timing. Niamh caught his sleeve, squeezed once. *Right. You were right.* Mara was failing not to grin.

It was Acquaviva who saved him, gently, by simply agreeing. The linguist tipped his paper cup an inch toward Frik in a small toast and said, to nobody, to all of them, “That’s the whole history of solving this book. Decide first. Shop after.” He looked back at the screen one more time, at the confident Latin glowing under glyphs that had outlasted every confident reader who ever leaned over them. “Every one of them was a good person. That’s the part nobody tells you. Lonely and brilliant and *good*, and they wanted so badly to be the one who finally heard it.” His voice dropped under the room’s hum, near enough that only the four of them got it. “This one doesn’t even want to hear it. He just wants to own the *silence* before anyone proves there’s nothing in it. Different animal.”

At the back, in the dark by the doors, Halloran had not moved. She was watching Jakobus, who was watching the screen, who had not said one word the whole time. As the demo’s final slide came up—*CODEXA: THE ANSWER, DECODED* in the grey-blue keynote font—Jakobus took his shades out of his shirt pocket, turned them once in his fingers, and put them back. Not for the light. Some private metronome of his, marking a beat only he heard.

Niamh looked from him to the screen to the small filled napkin on the side table, the broken islands of stuttered letters that would never lie level as the real hand lay level.

The cipher door was shut. She’d felt it close under her own palms, the one door she could read with her body and not her ears, the door that opened onto *was this hidden, or was this said*.

It had been *said*.

Which only made the next question worse, and she watched it rise in the room like a tide nobody could stop: if it wasn’t hidden, if the pen ran free and fluent and fast as any tongue, then what *language* runs like that, and matches none we know?

Chapter 7—Statistics of Failure

The day after the press event, Codexa rented the small conference room off the Beinecke's reading suite. Not the glass cube where the real book lived: a beige box with a screen and a coffee urn and a window that looked at the parking structure. Vance had asked for "a working session," which meant he wanted the crew on record disagreeing in private so he could quote the parts that suited him later. Naila knew the move. She'd watched it done to people her whole life. The thing where they invited you to the table so they could say afterward that you'd been at the table.

She came anyway. She brought the grid.

The grid was the only thing that calmed her in a room like this. Not the people, not the urn-coffee, not the apologetic recessed lighting. The grid: her own census, twenty-five thousand transcribed words of EVA, every glyph sorted by where it was allowed to stand. She'd printed it small and dense, columns so tight they read as texture from across the table. She set it down beside her laptop and put one finger on the corner of it, lightly, the way you'd keep a hand on a dog you trusted in a strange place.

Vance's expert was already seated. He had a lanyard with his own name on it, which Naila could not stop noticing, the small vanity of a man who'd printed himself a credential for a room of four. Call him the decipherer. He had a kind face. That was the part the stories always missed; they were never the villains they should have been. He had a kind face and a laptop covered in stickers from conferences, and when he smiled at her it was the open, slightly desperate smile of a man who had found something and could not understand why the world hadn't carried him on its shoulders for it yet.

"Naibbe," he said, before anyone had sat. "You'll have read the Naibbe paper."

"I read it." She had. It was real work, an honest proof-of-concept, the kind of thing she respected even when it didn't hold. "Verbose substitution. One plaintext letter becoming several Voynich glyphs, modelled by a network. It reproduces some statistics."

"It reproduces the *entropy*." He said it like some people said a saint's name. "The low h2. The repetition. Bown's numbers. We *hit* them."

"You modelled toward them," Naila said. "That's not the same verb."

Across the table Mara had her camera in her lap, lens cap on, both hands resting on it like it was a cat that might bolt. She wasn't shooting. She'd told Naila that in the hall: *I'm not going to make a picture of him failing. He doesn't know yet.* Niamh sat at the head where she could see every face, where the light fell flat and even and gave her the mouths and the brows, her interpreter beside her with hands already moving low and economical. Frikk stood. Frikk always stood near doors. He was rolling a pen between two fingers and his shoulder jerked, once, a clean involuntary hitch, and nobody in the crew so much as glanced, because nobody in the crew ever did.

"Walk me through it," Vance said to Naila, settling, lacing his fingers. Clean hands. "Why are you so sure it isn't a cipher? Friedman thought it might be."

"Friedman thought it might be a constructed language," Naila said. "That's different. And the Friedmans, both of them, *broke real ciphers*. They broke things that kept armies alive. William and Elizebeth Friedman, John Tiltman, Prescott Currier. People who'd cracked Purple, who'd read German naval traffic, who could

feel a substitution like a draft under a door. They came at this book for years. Elizebeth Friedman went on the record in '62. She said statistical attacks on it were —" Naila let it sit a half-beat, because she'd loved the phrase since she was nineteen, had said it to herself in the bath, on buses, the one sentence that had ever made her feel *seen* by a dead stranger—"doomed to utter frustration."

"And you think she was right."

"I think she earned the right to say it." Naila turned the grid so it faced the room. "Here's what we know it *does*. Zipf's law holds. Word frequencies fall off as they do in every natural language anyone's ever measured: a few words everywhere, a long tail of rare ones. So it's not random. Gibberish doesn't Zipf clean. That's wall one. This is not noise."

"Agreed. So —"

"So now h2. Second-order entropy. How predictable the next character is, given the last one. Bown's group put it around two." She tapped the number where she'd written it in the margin in her own small block hand. "Lower than English. *Lower than Latin*. Way more predictable than any natural language at that scale, and yet —" she moved her finger up the column—"at the higher organisation, the sentence level, the semantic-network level, Montemurro and Zanette found it *clusters by section*. Herbal words living with herbal words. Astronomical with astronomical. Topic structure. That's wall two. It behaves like meaning."

The decipherer was nodding hard, the way you nod when the argument is walking toward your house. "Right, and my model —"

"Naila," Niamh signed, and her interpreter voiced it low and dry, "give him the third wall before he builds on the first two."

The corner of Naila's mouth moved. "She's right. Here's wall three. The one nobody gets past." She pulled a single folio scan up on her laptop and turned the screen, a column of the herbal hand, the loops and gallows-glyphs marching along clean and confident. "Position-binding. Some of these characters *only ever* appear at the start of a word. Some only at the end. Some only in the middle. They have *jobs* and they never leave them." She looked at the decipherer, not unkindly. "You know what does that?"

"Some scripts —"

"Nothing does that. Not like this does it. A linguist named Rubio put it plainly: it's unheard of for any Indo-European language, or Hungarian, or Finnish. Letters don't get *assigned territory* like that and stay in it. And then the repetition." She scrolled. "Words that differ by a single glyph, sitting next to each other, over and over. The same word printed *five times in a row*. Five. Read that as Latin. Read that as anything. *Apple apple apple apple apple*." She let the absurdity hang in the beige room. "A natural language doesn't stutter like that. A cipher of a natural language really doesn't, because the cipher would smear the repetition, not preserve it."

"Which is why it's verbose substitution," the decipherer said, leaning in now, and there it was, the reach, gentle and total, the same reach in every one of them across a hundred years. "If one letter becomes a *cluster* of glyphs, then 'the the the' would look like exactly that—repeated clusters, low entropy, position-bound parts —"

"Show me the transposition," Naila said.

He stopped.

"Every real period verbose cipher I know leaves fingerprints. Nulls. Letters that mean nothing, sprinkled in to throw counts off. Variable spelling, the same word enciphered two ways so frequency analysis fails. Some transposition, some shuffling. The whole *point* of a cipher is to be hard, and you make it hard by making it irregular." She turned the grid back toward him and put her finger flat on its dense columns. "This is the most *regular* thing I've ever measured. The habits are too clean. The glyphs sit where they sit *every single time*. A cipher built to defeat people like the Friedmans would be messier than this, not tidier. Codes hide. This —" she heard her own voice change, and hated that it did, the thing in her chest that wanted it

so badly to be solvable, that had wanted it since nineteen—“this isn’t *hiding*. It’s just doing something we don’t have a name for. Out in the open. At speed.”

She thought of the napkin from yesterday, the broken islands of stuttered letters that wouldn’t lie level, and of Niamh’s hands telling them, after, that the real hand ran *fluent*. No hesitation, no encode-pause, no pick-and-check. You don’t write a hard cipher fast and smooth. You sweat over it. Whoever made this didn’t sweat. They *flowed*.

The decipherer’s laptop was open to his output. He turned it now, the way a man turns the one card he’s sure of. Columns of English. *Plant. Water. Bind. The root in spring. The woman in the bath.* It was eerie. It read like sense. It read, Naila had to admit, *beautifully*, and for half a second the thing in her chest leaned toward it like a plant toward a window, because God, wouldn’t it be lovely, wouldn’t it be the most beautiful pattern of her entire stupid written-off life if it just *closed* —

“Run it on a page you haven’t trained on,” she said.

“It’s a proof of —”

“Run it forward. New folio. Cold.” She kept her voice level, which cost her. “If the model decodes a *language*, it’ll decode the next page too. That’s what a language is. It generalises.”

He didn’t move to do it. That was the whole answer, and everyone in the room understood it at the same moment, including, she suspected, the decipherer, in some cellar of himself he kept the lights off in.

“The thing is,” Naila said, softer now, because she could see his kind face starting to do the thing kind faces did when the floor went, “your model’s gorgeous. The architecture’s smart. But you fed it a target. You told it *land near these entropy numbers, land near this output shape*, and it’s an excellent student, so it did. It learned to *imitate the residue*. That’s not reading. You can train a net to produce text that scores like the Voynich without that text *meaning* anything. That’s almost the *easiest* way to hit those numbers. You’ve reproduced the symptoms. You haven’t found the patient.”

Silence. The climate control hummed. Out the window a car alarm started and stopped.

Frik had gone very still by the door, and Naila knew that stillness, knew it was pressure building behind a held breath, and she thought, *please, not now, give him a second*, and then it came out of him sideways, involuntary, true.

“You decided what it said,” Frik said, to the wall, to the urn, to no one, his voice cracking off the consonants, “then you went shopping for a language.”

It landed in the beige room like a dropped glass.

Nobody laughed. That was the crew’s whole discipline, the thing that made them a family. Nobody ever laughed at the blurt, because the blurt was just the truth with the politeness filter taken off, and the truth wasn’t funny. It was only *exact*. The decipherer flinched as if touched. He looked at Frik, and Frik looked at the floor, and his shoulder jerked again, and his face was full of a misery that had nothing to do with cruelty, because he hadn’t meant to say it and he’d meant every word of it.

“That’s—” the decipherer started.

“He’s not wrong,” Naila said, gentle as she had it in her. “It’s the oldest mistake in the file. Newbold did it: saw tiny Greek shorthand in the ink-cracks, decoded his own pareidolia, and a man named Manly took him apart in ’31. Gibbs did it, found a women’s-health manual in abbreviated Latin, except the conservator here will tell you it doesn’t make Latin that makes *sense*. Cheshire did it in two weeks, proto-Romance, the university disavowed it in a day. Stojko found vowelless Ukrainian. Every one of them started by *deciding*, then dressing the decision in a language. They were all clever. Most of them were good people. They just —” she opened her hand, palm up, empty—“they brought an answer to the mirror, and the mirror gave it back.”

She didn’t say: *and so would I*. But she felt it, cold and clean, felt the temptation every time she stared at the grid too long. That if she just shifted *this* assumption, allowed *that* glyph two values, the whole thing

might fall open and she would be the one, the unhearable would be heard and it would be *her ears* that heard it, and everyone who'd ever said *she's not going to be able to* would have to swallow it forever. The grid would close. The rule would shut. She wanted it the way you want air.

That was exactly why she didn't do it.

She kept her finger on the corner of the grid.

At the back of the room, where she'd slipped in unannounced, Acquaviva spoke for the first time, dry and unhurried, the patience of someone who had watched this collapse a dozen times and would watch it a dozen more without contempt. "Mr. Vance asked me to verify the Naibbe output before he flew his man in," she said. "I did. It's a clean piece of computer science. It tells you something real and narrow: that the Voynich's statistical surface is *reproducible*, which actually makes the hoax case stronger, not the language case." A pause. "It tells you nothing about what the manuscript says. Those are different rooms. People keep walking into the second one looking for furniture from the first."

Vance had not stopped smiling, but the smile had migrated into something more honest, disappointment, recalculation. He didn't need the book read. He'd told them that yesterday without saying it. He needed *certainty*, and certainty was the one thing this room would not manufacture for him. Naila watched him understand that these four would not be useful to him in the way he'd hoped, and adjust, smoothly, to making them useful in some other way she couldn't see yet.

"Then we're agreed it's not a cipher," he said, light as anything, already turning the loss into an asset. "Marvellous. That narrows the field for the documentary considerably."

By the doors, Jakobus had been standing with his shades in his hand the whole time, turning them, that private metronome. He hadn't followed a word of the statistics. It wasn't his ground and he knew it and he'd deferred to it as he deferred to everything that wasn't a *made thing* you could hold. But he'd watched the decipherer's face, and when Vance said *narrows the field*, Jakobus put the shades in his pocket and said, to the room, in his accent like warm gravel:

"You all keep asking what it says." Sawubona-quiet, the courtesy of a man who'd greet a stranger before he questioned him. "Nobody's asked what it's *for*."

Halloran, who'd been silent in the corner with her conservator's stillness, looked up at that. Just looked. The look of someone who had an answer and was not going to give it to a press junket.

Naila gathered the grid. The cipher door was shut now, and she'd been the one to shut it, with her own dense little census and a dead woman's perfect sentence, and she should have felt the relief of a clean rule. She did, a little. She also felt the worse thing, the drowning at the edge of the relief, because shutting the cipher door didn't open onto an answer.

It opened onto a fluent hand, running fast as any tongue, in a language that matched none on earth, that wasn't hiding anything, that was just *saying* something nobody alive could hear.

Mara, beside her, finally took the lens cap off. Not to shoot the room. She tilted the camera up toward the screen Vance's man was already packing away, where the overlay still glowed: AI vocabularies laid over a real page like a hand pressing words it wanted into a mouth that had never made them.

"Watch what they do with the pictures," Mara said, very quietly, only for Naila. "They couldn't make the letters lie. So now they'll go to work on the images."

Chapter 8—Projection Loops

The lawyers came in before the conservators did, and that told Mara everything about the order of operations.

She had photographed three wars and a famine, and she knew the choreography of arrival—who walks first, who waits, who carries the thing that matters and who carries the thing that decides. The two from Codexa’s rights team came first into the Beinecke’s small reading annex, soft-grey suits, soft-grey shoes, and between them a leather folder that nobody offered to anyone and nobody set down. They were pleasant. They were the kind of pleasant that has a contract in it.

She lifted the camera and asked, with a tilt of the lens, and the younger of the two smiled and said sure, of course, it’s a public institution, which was a sentence doing a lot of work. She shot the folder. Closed. A closed folder in a room full of open boxes.

“Memorandum of understanding,” Naila said, low, beside her. She wasn’t looking at the lawyers. She was looking at the long table where Halloran’s people had set out the cradle and the snake-weights and the soft brushes, all the patient apparatus of a thing that gets touched twice a year by gloved hands. “I read the line they leaked. *Codexa to undertake high-resolution re-imaging at no cost to the institution.*”

“At no cost,” Mara repeated.

“At no cost,” Naila said. “And in exchange, a window. Exclusivity on the new images for a term. Five years, the draft said. Renewable.”

Five years was nothing and five years was forever. The Yale scans were already free, every fibre of them, sitting on a server for any obsessive on earth to download at three in the morning. You couldn’t put those back in a box. But you could make a *better* box. A new capture, higher than high, multispectral, the under-drawing pulled up out of the calfskin, and own it. The manuscript stayed Yale’s, stayed in the vault, stayed exactly itself. What Codexa wanted was the *seeing* of it. The right to be the lens.

That was a thing Mara understood in her teeth.

Halloran arrived with the manuscript, which meant Halloran arrived after the people negotiating for it. Mara watched her clock that, the way she clocked everything: a small recalibration behind the eyes, the codicologist taking the measure of a room she’d thought was hers.

She had the book in its grey archival tray, and she set it down with both hands, and the two grey suits leaned in by reflex, and Halloran did a thing Mara photographed without thinking. She put her body between the suits and the tray. Not theatrically. Just a quarter-turn of the shoulder, the oldest gesture there is, the one that means *mine to mind, not yours to have*. The leather folder stayed closed on the far side of her hip.

“We won’t be opening it today,” Halloran said. “I want to be clear about that before we begin. Whatever’s been agreed at the level above me, the physical object isn’t on the table this morning. We’re here to talk about imaging.”

“That’s all we’ve ever wanted to talk about,” the elder grey suit said warmly. “We’re not interested in the artifact. We’re interested in *access* to the artifact. For everyone.”

“Access,” Halloran said.

“Universal,” he said. “Permanent. We’d build the platform. Yale wouldn’t pay a cent.”

Frik was by the door. He had taken the door the moment they came in, like he always took the wall and the exit in a crowded room, his hands going through their small private business at his sides. He’d been quiet a long time, the quiet that was a held thing rather than an empty one.

“*Permanent*,” Frik said, the echo first, the word handed back. And then, flat, with no varnish on it: “Permanent for them. Five years’ exclusive for you.”

The younger suit’s smile didn’t drop, but it stopped meaning anything. “The term protects the investment. The infrastructure isn’t free to build, even if it’s free to use.”

“Free to use,” Naila said, “after a gate. A gate’s not free. A gate’s the most expensive thing in the room. You just charge for it later.”

Mara watched the elder one absorb this without heat. He was good. He was very good, like Vance was good. He undersold, he agreed with the smaller points, he honoured the institution and the scholarship and the great long failure of everyone who’d ever tried, and all of it was the runway. “We can talk about the term,” he said. “We’re flexible on the term. What we’re not flexible on is the *quality*. That book is fragile. Yale’s own conservators will tell you”—a small bow toward Halloran, who did not return it—“that it can’t keep being handled. Re-imaging it properly, multispectral, microns of resolution, means it never has to be touched again. We’re offering to *protect* it. The exclusivity is just how protection gets paid for.”

There it was. *We’ll protect it*. Mara had heard that exact verb in a dozen ministries, over a dozen archives, in the mouths of a dozen men who arrived with folders and left with keys. *Protect* was a beautiful word. It pointed at the thing you loved and meant the thing you’d own.

She lifted the camera. She framed the elder suit’s hands, folded on the table near but not on the closed folder, and watched through the glass for the photograph that would tell the truth, and found instead the one that would lie. The cruel frame composed itself unbidden: shoot from low, let the cradle and the snake-weights loom in the foreground, blur the man into a grey predator behind the helpless little tray. Vulture-at-the-deathbed. It would run everywhere. It would be a *great* picture, and a false one, because nobody in this room was going to lay a finger on the calfskin, and the danger wasn’t to the body of the book at all. The danger had no body. The danger was a clause.

She lowered the camera. You can’t photograph a clause. That was the whole problem, and she’d come up against it before, in cleaner-handed wars than the ones with rifles.

Acquaviva had been in the corner the whole time, in the chair by the window, with the patient stillness of someone who out-read every loud person in any room she sat in. She hadn’t said a word about rights. She wasn’t a rights person. She was the one who’d spent years measuring exactly what the text did and did not do, who could tell you the entropy and the Zipf slope and the position-bound glyphs sitting at the ends and fronts of words, who’d already, yesterday, helped shut the cipher door so thoroughly it stayed shut. Mara expected her to stay out of this. It wasn’t her fight.

“What happens,” Acquaviva said, mildly, to the room, “to the old scans, once yours exist?”

The younger suit turned. “Nothing happens to them. They stay up. We’ve said—universal access. We’re not taking anything down.”

“No,” Acquaviva said. “I believe you. They stay up.” She crossed one ankle over the other. “But the moment there’s a *better* image, the old one is the worse image. Every paper after that cites yours, because yours is the one that shows the under-drawing, the one that pulls the faded glyph up out of the gall. Within three years no serious scholar works from Yale’s open scans, because to work from them is to admit you couldn’t get the good ones. And the good ones are behind your gate.” She let that sit. “You won’t have removed a thing. You’ll just have made the free version the amateur version. A new road doesn’t close the old one. It empties it.”

The room was quiet. The confidence of the rights pitch had nowhere to land against that flat arithmetic.

“That’s a very cynical reading,” the elder suit said, finally, and to his credit it came out more tired than angry.

“It’s a *forecast*,” Acquaviva said. “I do those for a living.”

Frik, by the door: “She does.”

Vance came in for the close, because of course there was a close, and of course it was Vance who did it. He’d let the grey-soft people do the work that grey-soft people do, and now he arrived to be the human being in the room, clean hands, no tie, the costume of a man who is just curious too. He didn’t go near the leather folder. He went to Halloran.

“Dr. Halloran,” he said, and his warmth was real, which was the most dangerous thing about it. “I read your folio-collation work. The thirteen lost leaves. The argument about the original quire structure.” He shook his head, a man genuinely moved. “Nobody alive knows this object’s *body* like you do. That’s exactly why I’m here. We don’t want to put a machine between you and it. We want to put the best machine on earth *in your hands*.”

Halloran looked at him with her conservator’s stillness, the look she’d given the screen yesterday, the look of someone who has an answer and won’t spend it on a junket.

“You want my name on the platform,” she said.

“I want your *standards* on the platform. Your name comes with them, sure. You’d lead the imaging programme. Full credit. Full control of the conservation protocols.” He spread the clean hands. “We’re not the enemy of the book, Doctor. We’re its only friend with a budget.”

And that, Mara thought, watching through the glass without lifting it, was the move. Not the lawyers, not the term sheet. This. The offer to the one person in the building who genuinely loved the object: the offer to fund her love. To give the custodian the tools she’d lain awake wanting, the multispectral rig Yale would never buy her in a decade of grant cycles, and ask in exchange only the one thing she’d never sell and might not even see herself selling. The gate. Make the custodian the gatekeeper. Let her think the keys are hers.

Mara raised the camera then, and asked Halloran with a look, and Halloran gave the smallest nod. She framed it carefully. Not Vance—Vance would only ever photograph as charming, the lens loved him, that was the trap. She framed Halloran’s hands. The hands that knew the thumbing of every soft margin, resting flat and unmoving on the closed grey tray, with Vance’s clean offered hand just at the edge of the frame, not yet taken. The undecided hands of the one person whose decision actually mattered. A scholar, a tray, a hand at the edge. The second before it happened, with the verdict still open.

Halloran did not take the offered hand. She also did not refuse it. She put both her own flat on the tray and said, “Send the protocols to my office. The conservation protocols. In writing. Separate from anything the lawyers touch.”

“Of course,” Vance said, delighted, because to him a yes-to-the-protocols sounded like a yes. Mara watched Naila’s jaw tighten, because Naila had heard the same thing she had: Halloran buying time, asking to see the leash before she let them clip it, and not at all sure she had the standing to refuse it once it came on Yale letterhead from the level above her.

The grey suits packed the closed folder away and went out the way they’d come in, first.

“They’re not even pretending to read it now,” Naila said quietly, by the door, while the room broke up around them. “Yesterday they wanted to *convince* us. Sit a decipherer in a scarf in front of a screen and prove it talks. Today they didn’t bring the decipherer at all. They brought a lease.”

“Because they lost the argument and it didn’t matter,” Mara said. She was capping the lens. “You don’t have to read the book if you own the only good picture of it. You don’t have to be right. You just have to be the gate everyone walks through to try.”

Niamh had come to stand with them, arms folded, watching the door the grey people had gone through. She’d read the whole room without a word reaching her clean—caught the lawyers off lips and the interpreter Codexa had thoughtfully posted in the corner, but mostly she’d watched the bodies, the orchestra of them, like only she could. She signed, slow enough for Mara to take and pass to Naila.

The lawyers never looked at it once. The whole hour. Not one of them looked at the book. Her hands paused. He did. Vance. He looked at it like he loved it. That’s the one to watch.

Mara passed it along. Naila nodded slowly.

Frik, still at his door, watching the empty corridor where the folder had gone: “They couldn’t make it talk.” A beat, the held thing surfacing clean. “So they’re buying the room it talks in.”

Acquaviva rose from the window chair, unhurried, and gathered her bag, and on her way out she stopped by Halloran, who was standing over the grey tray with her hands still on it, and said something too low for the lips to give Niamh. Mara caught the shape of Halloran’s answer, the small, grim downturn of a mouth that knew the protocols would arrive beautifully written and entirely sincere, and that the sincerity was exactly the gate’s hinge.

Naila looked at the tray, the snake-weights, the soft brushes laid out for a book nobody would open today. The cipher door was shut and stayed shut. That fight was over, and it had never been the real one. This was the real one, and it had no glyphs in it at all.

“Watch the protocols,” she said. To Mara. To the room. To the next door already swinging. “Photograph the letter when it comes. The one on the letterhead. That’s the page that says what they actually want.”

Chapter 9—The Double Bind

The cipher folder was still on the floor where Frik had dropped it, splayed, the printouts of failed key-schemes fanning out under the radiator. Naila stepped over it twice that morning. The third time she crouched and gathered the pages and squared them and put them in the bin by the door, and that felt less like tidying than like closing a coffin you'd helped carry.

The cipher was dead. She'd known it for days. Knowing and burying were different jobs.

Acquaviva had come up to the room because the reading room didn't open till ten and she preferred, she said, to talk where she could put her feet on a chair. She had taken the chair by the window, the one Mara usually held, and Mara had given it up without a word and was now on the floor with her back against the bed, camera in her lap, cap on. The kettle was going. Frik was supervising it.

"Say it cleanly," Acquaviva said. "For the recording in your own head, since you'll need it later. The cipher's gone. Why."

"Because nothing keys it." Naila said it plainly. "Substitution doesn't. Polyalphabetic doesn't. The verbose schemes, two glyphs for one letter, they get you a Zipf curve for free, which is why people love them, but they break on the position rules. The grilles, Rugg's grille, you can manufacture text that looks like this, but you can't manufacture *this* text. After eighty years of the best people alive nobody has produced a key that reads two consecutive lines and survives the third." She shrugged, and the shrug cost her. "There's no encrypted message under there. Or if there is, it's encrypted in a way that leaves no trace of encryption, which is the same as saying there isn't, for anyone who has to publish."

"Good." Acquaviva laced her hands behind her head. "So that door's shut. There are only three doors in this building, you know. Cipher. Hoax. Language. We've shut one. We're not going to shut the other two this week, but we owe ourselves the third one open and walked through, honestly, before anyone outside this room walks through it for us."

"Hoax we haven't —"

"Hoax I've parked," Acquaviva said. "Not because it's wrong. Because it's not where the live work is, and because Halloran's parchment fights it harder than I can. The skins are 1404 to 1438 and they were thumbled for centuries by people who believed there was something to thumb. We can come back to it. Today I want the language."

Frik poured the water. The smell of cheap coffee bloomed in the over-warm room. He brought Acquaviva a cup without being asked and she took it like it was owed.

"All right," Naila said. "The honest frame. If it isn't cipher, and we hold off on hoax, then the simplest remaining thing it can be is the thing it looks like. A language. Just one nobody has."

"One nobody has," Acquaviva repeated, tasting it. "Say what that buys us and what it costs us. It buys us everything we already established, the Zipf, the fluency, the five hands all obeying the same grammar. A community that could *write* it. That's all consistent with a natural human language we simply haven't matched yet. It costs us the comfort of a name. There's no dictionary. No cognates we can lean on. We're trying to identify a tongue from its statistics and its skeleton, with no living speaker and no Rosetta."

“People have tried to name it,” Mara said from the floor. “Half the famous attempts are someone naming it.”

“Most of them,” Acquaviva agreed. “And we’re going to do exactly what they did, on purpose, because doing it badly in public is how it’s been done, and doing it carefully in private is how you learn why it’s hard. So.” She set the cup down on the sill. “Pick a tongue. A real claim, a serious one, not the cranks. We test it like you’d test it if you actually wanted it to be true and were too good a scientist to let it.”

Naila felt the shift in her own chest, and she didn’t trust it. The cipher had been arithmetic; it had kept her safe behind a curve. This was different. This had names in it, real human languages with real human mouths, and somewhere underneath the method she felt the old want lift its head and look around for a new room to want in.

I am doing linguistics. Linguistics is what I am doing.

“Old Turkic,” she said.

Acquaviva’s eyebrow went up half a degree, approving. “Why that first.”

“Because someone serious meant it.” Naila pulled the EVA transcription onto the screen, the whole word-list, and beside it she opened the notes she’d built on the train, the ones she hadn’t shown anyone. “There’s a reading that takes the script as a vowel-poor consonantal frame and runs it as a Turkic family. The agglutinating logic, suffixes stacking on a stem. And the thing is, it isn’t stupid, because Turkic *does* a version of what this text does. It builds long words out of a small kit of pieces in a fixed order. Position-bound morphology. Suffixes that only ever come at the end, in sequence.”

“Which is exactly your caged letters from a distance,” Acquaviva said softly.

“From a distance.” Naila pulled up a folio. “Look. The glyph people call EVA *daiin*, that family of words. They behave like inflected forms of one stem. *Daiin*, *dain*, *aiin*. If those are stem-plus-suffix, and the suffixes are the gallows characters that love the line-start and the line-end —”

“Then the cages aren’t a defect,” Acquaviva said. “They’re grammar. Case-marking, or number, or aspect, hanging in their proper slots.”

For a second the two of them just looked at the screen together, and Naila felt the lovely cold click of a hypothesis that *wanted* to live.

“Run it,” Acquaviva said. “Pick your stem. Map a suffix. Show me it carries.”

She started with the word she liked best, a four-twin cluster in the star folios, and gave it ten minutes before she saw the tail glyphs there were too irregular to anchor anything and dropped it. The cleaner candidate was on a herbal page: high-frequency, three near-twins differing only by their last glyph. She wrote the mapping out longhand on the laminated sheet, in pencil, because the reading room had infected her with pencils. *If this tail is a plural. If this one is a locative.* She walked it through the herbal section first, where it was born, and it held. Three folios of it held, the suffixes sitting in their slots like good children, and her pulse went up and she let it, just a little, because letting it was part of the test.

Then she carried the same mapping to the balneological pages. The bathing-women section. Currier’s other dialect.

It bent.

Not catastrophically. That was the trouble. It bent the way a stick bends in water—looked broken, wasn’t quite, you could argue it back to straight if you wanted to badly enough. The suffix she’d called a plural showed up where a plural made no sense, attached to words that on the herbal folios had refused suffixes altogether. To make Turkic read the second section she had to grant the language two extra rules it hadn’t needed in the first, and the rules were exactly the kind you grant yourself when you’ve already decided.

“It needs help,” she said. The honest thing.

“How much help.”

“A vowel that isn’t written. A few suffixes that mean different things in different sections. A stem that loses a glyph here and keeps it there for no reason I can see.” Naila sat back. “Each one is allowable. Real languages do every one of those. But I’m spending them. I started with the glyphs as they are and within twenty minutes I’m asking the script to bend a little so the language can stand up.”

Acquaviva nodded slowly. She didn’t look disappointed. She looked like a woman watching a student arrive, on her own feet, at the edge of a thing.

“Try another,” she said. “Don’t fix the Turkic. Don’t argue it back. Set it down with its little debt of bends and pick up a different one cold, and watch whether the new one walks in for free or whether *it* needs the glyphs bent too. That’s the experiment. Not whether one language fits. Whether they *all* arrive owing the same coin.”

Frik had come off the kettle and was leaning in the bathroom doorway, arms folded, reading the screen sideways. “Hebrew,” he said. “Do Hebrew.” A small jerk of his chin. “*Hebrew*. Abjad. No vowels. People love the no-vowels for this. Fits the vowel-poor thing.”

“It does fit the vowel-poor thing,” Acquaviva said. “There’s been serious work treating the text as a Semitic consonantal frame. Strip the vowels, read the skeleton, supply the breath yourself. There was a paper not long ago that ran it through translation models as vowel-stripped Hebrew and got the press to print *we’ve decoded it*, and got, when you actually read past the abstract, a handful of words and a great deal of supplying-the-breath-yourself.”

“But the abjad logic is real,” Naila said, already pulling it up, already feeling the second want stir behind the first. “If the gallowes glyphs are the consonantal frame and the short connectors are something else—matres lectionis, the vowel-hint letters —”

She tried it. And the maddening thing, the thing that made her hands go cold, was that *it also almost worked*, and it almost worked in a completely different place. The Turkic mapping had loved the herbal stems; the Hebrew skeleton-reading found its footing in the repetitions, those impossible chains, *qokeedy qokedy qokeey*, the words that marched against each other differing by a letter. Read as a consonantal abjad with the vowels withheld, the chains stopped looking like chanting and started looking like a paradigm, a verb conjugated down a wall, *he binds, you bind, they bind*, like a grammar table.

And then she carried it back to the herbal stems Turkic had loved, and it bent. Different rules, different debt, a vowel asked to appear here that had been forbidden there.

“It needs the glyphs bent,” she said. “Same as the other one. A different bend. Its own bend. But it walks in owing.”

“Two for two,” Acquaviva said, and there was no triumph in it and no defeat, just the patient pressure of a person who has watched many smart people meet this exact corridor.

“Proto-Romance,” Naila said, before Acquaviva could ask. She wanted to be the one to reach for the third. There was a hunger in it now she recognised and did not love in herself, the reach for the next key, the next named tongue, as if naming were nearly having.

“Bristol’s man,” Frik said. “*Cheshire*. Pulled it. University took the article down. Fagin Davis—circular. Aspirational.” He delivered it without malice, the public record laid out flat. “But.”

“But it isn’t crazy that someone reached for it,” Acquaviva said. “Italy, early fifteenth century, the parchment’s right for it. A vernacular below the Latin, a folk register that never got written down properly anywhere else. If the text is anything human it’s plausibly something *here*, something local to the hands that made it. That’s the dignified version of the claim, and it’s the one that’s hardest to walk away from, because it puts a real person in a real place at the end of it.”

“The picture helps it too,” Mara said, quiet. “The bathing women. The plants. It looks Mediterranean. It looks like a place.” She turned the camera over in her hands without raising it. “When I shot the Balkans I could make anything look like the war I’d come to find. You frame what you brought.”

Naila ran the Romance reading. She built it carefully, vowel-rich this time, the opposite of the Hebrew, the connectors as vowels and the gallows as consonants, an early Italic skeleton. She let it loose on the star section, the labelled circles, where the words sat in rings around the diagrams and you could almost believe each one named the thing it pointed at.

And it found its corner. It loved the labels, the single words floating beside images, the topic-clusters holding, herbal words keeping herbal company, star words keeping to the stars. Read as a folk Romance with savage abbreviation, the labels resolved into things you could almost taste, plant-names, month-names, the shape of a vocabulary that touched the world.

Then it bent. To carry from the labels into the running text it asked for abbreviation conventions she had to invent, a vowel-reduction so aggressive it could turn any string into anything, and the moment a system can turn anything into anything it has stopped reading and started wishing.

She set the pencil down.

“Three,” she said. “Old Turkic loves the herbal stems and needs the bath pages bent. Hebrew loves the repetition-chains and needs the herbal stems bent. Romance loves the labels and needs the running text bent. Every one of them gets a real foothold somewhere. None of them walks the whole book. And every single one of them, to get from its good corner to the rest, has to ask the glyphs to behave a little differently than they do.”

She looked at the three readings laid side by side on the screen, three honest attempts by serious people, each holding a true piece of the thing and none holding the thing.

“That’s not nothing,” Acquaviva said. “Hear me. That is not a wall.” She leaned forward, elbows on knees, the coffee gone cold beside her. “A wall is when the door’s shut. This door is open. We just walked through it. What we’ve found in the first hour is that the room behind it is bigger and stranger than the people who’ve stood in the doorway shouting a single language ever let themselves see. They each grabbed one corner because they fell in love with one corner. We’ve got three corners in an hour because we refused to fall in love.”

“We haven’t refused,” Naila said, and it came out more honest than she meant. “I wanted the Turkic. I wanted it badly, for about three folios.”

“Good,” Acquaviva said again. “Want it. Want all of them. Want is the engine. You just don’t let it steer.” She stood, gathered her bag, the day’s first real work behind her. “Here’s where we are, and write it down, because you’ll need the exact shape of it next week when the noise starts. The cipher’s dead. Hoax is parked. The language door is open and the news from the other side is *promising and hard*—promising because the text behaves like a language in every gross statistical way, hard because no named tongue we try will carry from its good corner to the bad without us bending the script under it. Which means one of two things, and we don’t get to choose between them yet.” She held up a finger. “Either it’s a real language so foreign that every match we make is partial because our maps are all the wrong shape.” A second finger. “Or it’s something that’s been *built* to behave like a language and to invite exactly this. Every reader finding a corner that fits and none finding the room.”

“And we can’t tell those apart from in here,” Naila said.

“Not yet. That’s why there’s a third week.” Acquaviva paused at the door, and looked at the bin where the cipher pages lay buried, and didn’t comment on it. “Spend tomorrow on Turkic. Properly. Don’t try to make it win. Try to make it *fail honestly*—find the place it breaks worst and measure how it breaks. Then Hebrew the same way. Then the Romance. We’re going to walk all the way into this room before we ask whether it has a far wall.”

She left. The door clicked. The climate control resumed its small white sound.

Naila sat with the three readings glowing in front of her and felt the new want sitting up bright-eyed in her chest, worse than the cipher’s want had ever been. The cipher had only promised a *message* and this promised a *people*—a mouth, a place, a hand that knew what it meant. Old Turkic. Hebrew. A folk

Romance no one had written down. Each one was a person she could almost have. Each one was a key cut close enough to the lock to turn a quarter-turn before it stuck.

She didn't close the laptop this time. She pulled the Turkic notes back to the centre of the screen and squared the laminated sheet beside it and picked the pencil up again, and she felt Niamh's absence in the room. Niamh had gone down early to the reading room to wait for the doors, and she found she wanted her there, wanted the face-reader's slow not-clever recognition to tell her whether what she was feeling was fluency or fluent wishing.

Frik watched her from the doorway. "You're going to do Turkic tonight," he said. Not a question. "Even though she said tomorrow."

"I'm going to do Turkic tonight," Naila said.

He nodded, ticked, nodded again. "Find where it breaks," he said. "Not where it works. *Where it breaks.*" And then, gentler, the thing landing one beat ahead of where she'd have let it: "You want it to be a mouth. So watch yourself, when it gives you one."

She didn't answer. She was already writing.

Behind her, Mara had finally lifted the camera, and was looking through it at the three readings on the lit screen, the lens cap off now, not shooting, just framing—three languages, three corners, one book that kept being itself—and after a while she lowered it again, the frame held but not taken, and reached for her bag.

"I'm going down," she said. "Niamh's holding us a desk. If we're going through this door, somebody should ask Halloran what it does to the actual pages when we start staring this hard."

Naila looked up from the Turkic stem she'd half-mapped, the suffix sitting almost-right in its almost-slot, the quarter-turn live under her hand.

"Tell her we'll need the recipe folios," she said. "And the starred paragraphs. The places the words touch the world." She bent back to the page. "That's where every one of these readings is going to lie to me best. So that's where I want to be standing when it does."

Chapter 10—Star Paragraphs

The request slip wanted her to be a different kind of person.

Mara held the pencil. The reading room ran on pencils; pens were a thing that happened to other people's libraries. She stared at the box that said PURPOSE OF VISIT. Above her the Beinecke's glass cube held its impossible stacks in their amber light, and below her, in the underground reading room, the climate control breathed its single endless vowel, keeping every page in the building exactly as old as it had been an hour ago and no older.

She wrote: *Documentation*.

Then she looked at it. Then she added: *Recipes section. Photography per agreement*. Because *documentation* was the word she had hidden behind in nineteen countries, and she had learned the hard way what it covered for.

Halloran came through the inner door already pulling on cotton gloves, which was funny, because the gloves were for Mara's benefit and Halloran wore them like a person who'd long since decided the ritual mattered more than the cotton. The conservator was small and unhurried, with the specific calm of someone who had spent a career being the most patient object in any room. Acquaviva trailed a step behind with a laptop and the air of a man who had brought receipts to a fistfight.

"You wanted the quire with the stars," Halloran said. Not a question. "Quire nineteen. The pharmaceutical's behind us, the recipes are what's left." She set the foam cradle on the table and then, gently, the book.

Mara had seen it on screens for weeks. The screens were perfect. Yale had scanned every folio at a resolution that let you count the cracks in the iron-gall ink, and the scans were free, and that was the whole vertiginous joke of the thing. The most unread book on the planet was also one of the most completely photographed, and neither fact moved the other an inch.

The screens had not prepared her for the *softness*.

"It's been handled," she said.

"It's been *loved*," Halloran said, and opened it with two fingers and a foam wedge to hold the spine off its own weight. "People say used. Used is a wallet. This—" She turned a leaf and the vellum gave with a give Mara felt in her own hands from three feet away, the limp obedient drape of calfskin that thousands of thumbs had worked past stiffness. "Somebody came back to this. Day after day. You don't wear a book like this reading it once."

Niamh had come up on Mara's right where she could see Halloran's mouth and read the cradle and the gloves and the page all in one frame. She put her flat hand near the vellum, not touching, palm down, like a hand over a candle to see if it's still warm. Mara watched her watch the thumbing. Niamh's face went very still and very busy at once, and Mara understood without a word that the Unspoken had clocked, instantly, what Halloran was saying. *Somebody needed this and couldn't put it down*. A book that mattered daily to a hand that left no name.

"The stars," Mara said.

Halloran turned to the recipes and there they were: short paragraphs, dozens of them, each one prefaced by a little inked star in the margin like a checklist someone had ticked through six hundred years ago. Flowers in some margins. The words ran tight and quick and certain across the lines.

Mara lifted the camera.

And put it down again.

“Can I?” she said.

Halloran’s mouth did something that wasn’t quite a smile. “You already asked, on the slip. And the agreement.” She nodded at Acquaviva’s folder, where the digitisation rights and the photography rider lived in their dull careful language. “But you asked again. Out loud. Good.” She moved the raking light to a low angle so the ink threw the faintest shadow and the vellum’s nap came up like skin in winter. “Yes. You can.”

So Mara photographed the stars.

She shot them as she had taught herself to shoot the things that mattered too much: flat, true, the page filling the frame, no clever angle, nothing of *her* in it. A document is a promise that you got out of the way. She’d broken that promise once, in a place she didn’t name even to herself, and a man had paid for the photograph that made her famous, and she had not picked up a camera for fourteen months afterward. So now she shot like a clerk and called it discipline.

Star. Paragraph. Star. Paragraph. The alien words crowded the lines, *qokeedy* and its cousins, the same shapes turning up and turning up, a word and then almost the same word and then the first word again.

“They cluster,” Acquaviva said, because Naila had asked him the question down the table without quite asking it. Naila was hunched over the census sheet with her transcription, the EVA letters in her own neat hand, and she had the look she got when a rule was forming. The lit, leaning look, the one Mara had learned to half-dread because of where it could go.

“The recipes section uses words the herbal doesn’t,” Acquaviva went on. “Montemurro and Zanette mapped it years ago. The vocabulary clusters by section, the way *topics* cluster in a real text. You’d expect the plant pages and the bathing pages to talk about different things, and the word-networks behave exactly as if they do.”

“So it means,” Naila said. Quietly. Carefully. The wound under the carefulness.

“So it *clusters*,” Acquaviva said, and he said it kindly, which was worse. “Watch.” He turned the laptop. “Give me a generator. Give me thirty meaningless tokens with realistic frequencies, and a rule that says page A draws from this end of the bag and page B draws from that end. Run it long enough.” A graph. Two lobes, separating, beautiful and clean. “It clusters. Topic structure falls out of *repetition with bias*. It does not require meaning. It only requires a habit.”

Mara watched Naila’s face go through the thing it went through.

“Then how do you tell them apart,” Naila said. “Habit and topic.”

“That,” said Acquaviva, “is the whole field. That is everyone’s life’s work in one sentence. The honest answer is: from the *outside*, with the statistics alone, sometimes you can’t.” He let that sit. “Bowern will tell you the same. The footprint is language-like. Zipf holds. The conditional entropy is *low*. It’s more predictable than your speech, which a real language usually isn’t, and yet the higher-order structure looks linguistic. It does almost everything.” He closed the laptop with the soft click of a man putting away a knife. “And then it does the things no language does, and you remember you never opened the book at all. You only measured its shadow.”

Star. Paragraph. Mara kept shooting.

She’d done her reading on the way in. The crew had a folder, Naila’s folder, fanatically tidy, of every hand that had ever announced it had this thing by the throat, and Mara had read it like she read briefings before a deployment, looking for where the danger lived. The danger lived, always, in the pictures.

Newbold, in the twenties, had put the manuscript under a microscope and found tiny marks in the strokes of the ink. A whole shorthand, he said, Roger Bacon's secret Greek, and he read pages of it, and he died believing. After he died Manly took the same microscope to the same strokes and found that the tiny marks were the ink *cracking* as it dried. Six hundred years of parchment shrinking under iron-gall. Newbold had read the craquelure. He'd seen a galaxy on one folio—a real, named, microscopic galaxy—and it was the place where the pigment had fissured.

That was the one that stayed with Mara. Not because he was a fool. Because he wasn't. Because he was a brilliant man who'd wanted so badly to be the one who read it that his own eye had handed him the answer he came in carrying, dressed up as discovery. The crack in the ink became the swirl of stars because he needed stars.

She lowered her eye to the viewfinder and there, on the page, was a little starred flourish that could be a flower or a sun or a wheel or the place a scribe's nib had skipped, and she felt the pull of it, the hunger to *resolve* it, to let it be a thing. She breathed out and let it be ink on skin.

"Bax got six words," Naila was saying, low, to no one. "Maybe ten. Plant names. He matched a few labels to known herbals and built outward and he was careful, he was so much more careful than the others, he never claimed the whole thing—"

"And he died before it closed," Acquaviva said. "Stephen Bax did real philology. He proposed a method and a handful of identifications and he was explicit that it was a beginning, not a solution, and he died, and it never grew like a true key grows. A real key opens *more*. You turn it and the next page reads, and the next. None of these keys open the next page." He looked at the book, not unkindly. "They open one. And then the hand that holds them gets tired, or sick, or dead."

Niamh had been reading all of it off their faces. Mara could see her doing it, the rapid clean traffic of a person who lived by faces because the room would not give her the words. Now she signed something fast to Friki, who'd been very quiet by the wall, jiggling one heel, holding himself the way he held himself when there was a lot of input and a long stillness demanded of him.

Friki translated it half to himself. "She says—" His head ticked sideways, twice. "She says they're all looking at it like a hearing room looks at her. Deciding it *must* be saying the thing they already think. And getting cross when it won't say it back." A blink. "*Won't say it back,*" he repeated, the echo coming out flat and true. "Yeah."

Mara stopped shooting.

Niamh wasn't looking at any of them now. She was looking at the page, at the soft-thumbed corner of it, at the stars marching down the margin of a thing that had been touched a thousand times by hands that knew exactly what it meant and never once needed to tell anyone, and her hand was over it again, palm down, not touching, the candle-gesture, and her whole body had gone into the particular quiet that Mara had learned was not absence. It was the loudest she got.

It communicated. It absolutely communicated. You could feel it wanting to be read, the certainty in the ductus, the confidence of a hand that never hesitated. And it would not be understood. It sat there fluent and shut, eloquent and sealed, and the only person in the room who had spent her entire life inside that exact condition—communicating in a full true language to rooms that decided she was empty because they couldn't be bothered to learn it—was the one not trying to crack it.

She was just keeping it company.

Mara raised the camera, slowly, and turned it ninety degrees from where she'd been working. Not at the page now. Past it. She framed the book at the edge of the cradle, the foam, the gloved hand, the raking light falling off into the dark of the room beyond. She composed it so the eye went *toward* the open page and didn't arrive, so the words sat just out of focus at the frame's far edge, present and unreachable, and the foreground was all the apparatus of approach. Light. Hands. The careful machine of looking.

A picture of *reaching toward*. Not a picture of *having*.

She knew the second she had it that it was the best frame she'd shot in years, and that it worked precisely because it refused to deliver the thing the eye came for. The page was in it and the page was withheld. The manuscript stared back at the lens and did not blink and did not speak, and Mara, for once, did not try to make it.

"That's the one," she said softly, and didn't take another.

That was when the door at the far end of the reading room opened and Codexa walked in.

Not Vance. Mara had met Vance once, the soft handshake, the clean nails, how he said *heritage* like it had a price tag stapled to it. But Vance's people, the grey-soft ones, two of them, and with them a third she didn't know: a tidy man in a good jacket carrying a flat black portfolio case, and he had the bright assured face of someone about to do you an enormous favour.

"Dr. Halloran." One of the grey-soft ones, all warmth. "We won't be a moment. We're shooting some comparative material for the documentary, with the Beinecke's blessing—" a folder, produced, the dull careful language of an agreement Mara hadn't been shown "—and we'd love a moment alongside the original. For scale. For the audience."

Halloran's face did nothing at all, which was its own answer, but she stepped back from the cradle because the folder was real and the rights were real and the institution had signed what it had signed.

The tidy man opened his portfolio.

He drew out a print. High-resolution, gorgeous, the recipes folio at near life-size on heavy stock—Yale's own scan, almost certainly, the free perfect public scan that anyone could have, blown up and lacquered until it gleamed. He held it up beside the real book, at exactly the angle a camera would want, the print bright and even and *legible-looking* under the gallery-grade lamination, the real thing beside it small and dim and soft and six hundred years tired.

"You see," the tidy man said, to the room, to the grey-soft ones, to the small phone one of them had lifted, "this is the page where it all comes clear. Once you have the key, the recipes simply *read*. We'll be releasing the full—"

Frik made a sound.

Not a word yet. The sound that came before the words, the pressure-build, and his hand went up to grip the back of a chair, and Mara saw the effort in him, the holding, the not-yet.

The tidy man kept the print up. He'd angled it now so the laminate caught the light and threw it, and the real folio behind it went almost to shadow, the actual ink, the actual thumb-softened skin, eclipsed by its own glossy enlargement. The phone framed both. *We solved it*, the frame said. *Here's proof. Here's the book agreeing with us.*

Mara had the shot. She knew she had the shot. The print and the original and the eclipse, the whole lie of the thing in one composition—the manufactured certainty literally held up to blot out the genuine unreadable object, and her name on it, and it would run everywhere, and it would be the truest photograph she'd taken since the one that ended a man.

She thought about Newbold reading the cracks. She thought about the page that wanted so badly to be read that everyone who loved it hard enough went blind. A photograph of the lie would still be a photograph *that fed the lie*. It would put the glossy print and the gleam and the *it simply reads* into the world at the resolution that made things real.

Niamh was watching her. Just her. Not the print, not the men. Mara.

Mara lowered the camera.

She let it hang on its strap and put her hand flat over the lens, capping a thing she was done with, and she did not take the picture that would have made her name and would have cost the makers theirs. The tidy man held his print up to the dark and nobody recorded it but Codexa's own phone, and a phone is not a witness. A phone is a salesman.

“Put it down,” Halloran said. Quietly. Not to the print. To all of it. “You’re casting a shadow on the original.”

Behind the laminate, the real page sat in its eclipse, the little stars marching down the margin, the words running tight and certain and shut, fluent and silent and going nowhere any of them could follow. The print gleamed. The book did not. One of them was bright and easy and read like a dream. One of them was true.

Frik let his breath out. The word he’d been holding came. Not the blurt yet, not the one that would land tomorrow when the announcement dropped, just the front edge of it, low, almost gentle, into the hum of the climate control.

“That’s not it,” he said. “That’s not it. That’s a picture of wanting it to be.”

The tidy man smiled and did not lower his print, and Mara understood that the real fight had not started yet. This was the brochure. The bill was still to come.

Chapter 11—Bent Tongues

The announcement dropped at 6:14 a.m. Eastern, which meant Frik watched it land standing in his socks in the rented apartment's kitchen, holding a mug of tea he had made and forgotten. His hands did things and asked permission afterward.

CODEXA SOLVES THE WORLD'S MOST MYSTERIOUS BOOK, the banner said. The hero shot was the nine-rosette foldout, recoloured till it glowed like a stained-glass window in a church that charged admission. Under it: *A 600-year silence ends today*. Under that, a countdown clock, because of course there was a countdown clock, because certainty is a product and a product needs a launch.

"It's Nahuatl," he said out loud to the empty kitchen, before he'd read the word, and then he read the word and there it was. *Nahuatl*. He'd known it would be a word like that. A real language with a real grammar and real speakers and real dignity, dragooned into a press release. The blurt had arrived three sentences ahead of his eyes again. It did that. He'd stopped being surprised by it around the time he stopped being surprised by anything his body decided to do without him.

"Nahuatl," he told the tea.

The reading room smelled the same as it had every morning that week. Old vellum and the faint petrol-ghost of someone's hand sanitiser and the cold breath of the climate control, holding the whole glass cube at a temperature kind to calfskin and unkind to people. Frik had taken Acquaviva's place at the table. Acquaviva had ceded it without comment, the way a man cedes a chair to someone who needs to sit with his hands working. Frik had said sorry twice on the way in, to no one, and Halloran had said *don't be* the second time, gently, eyes on the foam cradle, and that had helped more than she could know.

The book lay open in its cradle. Folio 75-something, recipes, the star-paragraphs marching down the margin like a column on a long road. Naila had three transcription sheets fanned out. Niamh sat beside her, not reading, watching. Mara was not photographing. She had her camera in her lap with her hand over the lens, capping it as she'd capped it last night, a habit she'd grown in a single evening.

On the table, because the Beinecke ran on paper and protocol, request slips and pencil-only and a librarian who logged what came out of the vault, sat a printout of the Codexa landing page. Mara had brought it in so they could look at the thing properly, in the room, beside the real one. The screen-glow plant on the printout. The dim true plant in the cradle. One bright, one honest.

"Walk me through it," Halloran said. She was a conservator, not a linguist, but she had the conservator's instinct, which is the instinct of someone who has spent her life learning what objects will and won't tolerate being made to say. "Their man. The expert."

"Fictional, basically," Mara said. "I mean, he's real, he's got a real CV, but the version of him on the site is fictional. *Renowned epigrapher*. They built him a halo."

"Two weeks," Frik said.

"What?"

“He says he did it in two weeks.” Frik’s finger tapped the printout, off-beat, twice, four times. “Cheshire said proto-Romance in two weeks too. It’s always two weeks. Two weeks is the number that means *I am a genius* and *I am not lying about how long* at the same time.”

Acquaviva, who had drifted to the far end of the table with a stack of his own pages, made a small sound that wasn’t quite a laugh. “Bax took years,” he said. “And got ten words. Unfinished when he died. That’s what honest looks like. It looks like ten words and a man dying mid-sentence.”

The room held that for a beat. Frik felt his shoulder hitch and let it. Nobody watched him do it. That was the kindness of these people. They let his body be a weather system, present and unremarked.

“So how does Nahuatl work,” Naila said. Her voice was flat and careful, the voice she used when she was holding the wound very still. “Show me how it works.”

It worked like they all worked. That was the thing Frik kept arriving at, lap after lap. They were all the same machine wearing different hats.

Acquaviva laid it out without heat, which was the only way to lay it out. He pulled the Codexa “translation” up on Mara’s printout, a balneological folio, the bathing women in their green pools, and beside it a block of confident English. *The womb is cleansed in the third month by the bitter herb gathered under the sign of the goat.*

“Lovely,” Acquaviva said. “Reads beautifully. Now.” He set a transcription of the actual page beside it, the EVA letters, the *daiin daiin* and the *qokeedy* repeating like a stuck record. “Where, on this line, does it say *womb*.”

Nobody could point to it, because the translation had not come from the line. It had come from the picture. A woman, a pool, ergo women’s health, ergo womb. Then the man had gone to Nahuatl, a real and beautiful language, and gone shopping. Picked syllables. Bent them. Found a word that could be a word for *bitter* if you squinted and allowed a vowel you weren’t owed.

“He chose the plaintext first,” Acquaviva said. “He decided it was a gynaecological manual—which, fine, the pictures invite it, half the room thinks balneological, fine—and then he found a language flexible enough to be bent to the meaning he’d already chosen. That’s not decipherment. That’s casting.”

Frik’s mouth opened. He felt it coming like a sneeze, no veto, only the long second of knowing. He tried to make it land soft. He managed soft.

“You decided what it said,” he said, “then went shopping for a language.”

It was not aimed at the man on the screen. The man on the screen couldn’t hear it. It hung in the cube and it was true about Codexa’s expert and true about Cheshire and it was, Frik knew, with the awful evenness of a thing his body said because his mind wouldn’t, true about the danger sitting at the table with them. He didn’t look at Naila. He looked at the plant in the cradle. That was easier.

Naila looked at the printout for a long time.

“It’s such a clean rule, though,” she said quietly. To herself, almost. “Nahuatl. It has the agglutination. You could build the repetition out of agglutination, the same root taking prefix after prefix—that could be why words repeat, that could be why one letter changes and it repeats—”

“It could,” Acquaviva said. He didn’t squash it. He never squashed her; he was the only one in the room who could meet her on the numbers and he treated the meeting like a courtesy. “It’s a real hypothesis. So let’s test it the way Stojko’s didn’t get tested, the way Cheshire’s didn’t, the way this man’s won’t. They all skipped the only step that matters.”

He turned a sheet around.

“You make the rule,” he said. “Then you apply it to a page you haven’t seen, blind, with no picture to lean on, and the rule has to produce text that another speaker of the same language can read. Generative.

That's the bar. Newbold failed it. Brumbaugh failed it. Gibbs failed it—Fagin Davis read his abbreviated Latin and it didn't make Latin that made sense. Every one of them produced a key that unlocks the one door they built it for and not the next door. They get a token. They never get a language."

Naila's jaw worked. Frik watched her hold the clean rule in her open hand and watched it not close. He knew that look. He wore it himself: the look of wanting the body to obey, the world to obey, the pattern to *close* and let you finally rest inside a thing that made sense. It was the most human face he knew. It was on every solver in the dossier and it was on his lead and he loved her too much to name it twice in one morning.

They did the others, because doing the others was the work, and the work was a kind of funeral.

Stojko first. Mara found his pages—vowelless Ukrainian, the idea that the Voynich script dropped its vowels as some Semitic scripts do, and you put them back. Acquaviva read a line of Stojko's restored text aloud and it was a soup, a beautiful nonsensical soup, words that were technically Ukrainian floating in no sentence.

"He put the vowels back wherever he liked," Acquaviva said. "Free vowels. Infinite freedom. With infinite freedom you can make any string say anything. That's not a key. That's a Ouija board with a dictionary."

Frik echoed it before he could stop. "Ouija board with a dictionary." He winced. Acquaviva tipped his head—*yes, keep it, it's good*—and Frik let his shoulders come down.

Cheshire next, and here Halloran spoke, because the Cheshire story had a body in it and Halloran was the one who knew what it cost a place. "His university put the press release out," she said. "Bristol. Then the field came down on it, and Bristol pulled the release. Disavowed their own academic." She wasn't gloating. She looked tired in the specific way of someone who works in an institution and has watched its name get used as a hood ornament. "Fagin Davis called it circular and aspirational. *Aspirational*. That's the kindest knife I've ever seen anybody use."

Kondrak and the AI-Hebrew. Frik liked this one least, because it was the closest to Codexa's actual flag—the machine, the algorithm, the *we ran it through the model and the model never lies*. Acquaviva explained it carefully and without contempt: an algorithm had guessed the letters were anagrammed Hebrew, alphagram-scrambled, and proposed a first line. The first line, translated, came out as something a human then smoothed into a sentence that sounded vaguely biblical.

"The machine found a hypothesis," Acquaviva said. "That's all a machine can do. It can't tell you if the hypothesis is *true*. It produces a candidate and a human falls in love with the candidate and the falling-in-love does the rest. The machine isn't the danger. We're the danger. We always were. The machine just gives us a faster horse to ride into the same wall."

Naila had gone very still over the transcription sheets.

"Show me the frequencies," she said. "The real ones. I want to look at the real ones again."

This was the part Frik had been waiting for without knowing he was waiting, because it was the part that didn't bend. Acquaviva and Halloran together pulled out the wordlists, the raw counts, the inventory of what the book actually *did* with its twenty-odd characters across two hundred and forty pages.

It made no sense. That was the holy thing about it. It made *no* sense in a way no amount of casting could fix.

"Look at the top words," Acquaviva said. "Look how *common* the commonest word is. Far more frequent than *the* in English. A natural text doesn't lean that hard on one token." He moved his finger down. "Now. Words that differ by a single character. They cluster, absurdly. *qokeedy*, *qokedy*, *qokeey*, *qokedy*—whole families one letter apart, repeating far past anything a real lexicon does. And the killer—" He set down a folio facsimile and Frik leaned in and saw it himself, no statistics needed, just his own eyes: a word, and then the same word, and then the same word *again*, three in a row, four, and on another line the books recorded *five*—the same word five times running.

“Name a language,” Acquaviva said, “where you write the same word five times in a row and it’s a sentence.”

Nobody named one.

“And the letters keep their stations,” he went on, quiet now, near the centre of a thing. “Some characters only ever start a word. Some only ever end one. Some live only in the middle. Rubio said it—unheard of for any Indo-European language, or Hungarian, or Finnish. The letters know their place and never leave it.” He looked at the page like a man looking at weather. “That’s not how Nahuatl behaves. Or Ukrainian. Or Hebrew. It’s not how *anything* behaves.”

“But it’s not random either,” Naila said. Almost a plea. She needed it to come open. “Zipf holds. The entropy—Bowern’s second-order entropy, it’s low, it’s *more* predictable than language but it’s structured, it organises at the higher level, the topics cluster—”

“Yes,” Acquaviva said. “Yes. All of that. It’s language-like and it matches no language and it isn’t noise. All three at once.” He didn’t soften it and he didn’t sharpen it into a solve. He just held it where she could see it. “The Friedmans couldn’t close it. Tiltman couldn’t. Currier couldn’t. People who broke real machines that real armies were dying behind. Elizebeth Friedman said the statistical attack was doomed to utter frustration, and she was the best in the world, and she meant it as a confession, not a boast.”

Naila’s hand, on the table, had curled. Friik watched the clean rule slip out of it. She let her hand stay open and empty, which was the hardest thing he’d ever seen anyone do that wasn’t him in the bathroom at 6:14 a.m. with a mug of tea and a body full of *Nahuatl*.

Stojko, done. Cheshire, done. Kondrak, done. The man on the printout, the moment he opened his mouth two weeks after he started. Friik kept the tally without wanting to. The bodies. All the brilliant, lonely, reaching bodies who’d needed it to be a yes.

He didn’t sneer at a single one of them. He couldn’t. They were him.

The countdown clock on the printout said nineteen hours.

Naila was breathing wrong, fast and shallow, and Niamh had moved—not dramatically, just shifted her chair the four inches it took to put her shoulder against Naila’s shoulder, and put one hand flat on the table near Naila’s open hand, not taking it, just near. Watching her face. Reading what the room could not hear Naila saying, because Naila wasn’t saying it.

Friik felt his next blurt loading and he made a choice his body let him make, this once, the rare clean cooperation: he aimed it kind.

“It’s a beautiful pattern,” he said. To Naila. Only to her. “It’s the most beautiful pattern any of us are ever going to see. That’s why it hurts.” His shoulder hitched. He let it. “It’s allowed to stay a question. A question you hold honest is worth more than—” the rest came out his own way, sideways, true “—than an answer you went shopping for.”

Naila looked at him. Her eyes were wet and her jaw was working and she did not cry and she did not close her fist.

“Okay,” she said. Just that. “Okay.”

Acquaviva began, very gently, to gather the wordlists. Halloran reached for the cradle to ease a folio flat where the worked vellum had cupped, her gloved fingers reverent on six hundred years of someone’s daily thumbing. The book lay open. The stars marched down the margin to nowhere any of them could follow.

And Niamh was no longer watching Naila.

She was watching the page. Her finger had come up, not touching, hovering a centimetre above the laminate cover, and it was moving along a line, slow, certain, tracking something. Not reading. Tracing. Where one glyph sat at the head of every word it lived in and never anywhere else, where another sat only at the tail,

the letters keeping their stations like people who had learned, very young, exactly where in the room they were allowed to stand.

She wasn't trying to crack it. She had stopped trying to crack it before she sat down. She was doing something else, something the hearing room had taught her to do her whole life, and her finger moved, and her face changed, and she had not said a word.

Chapter 12—Unheard Words

The reading room had a sound Niamh could not hear and had learned, over the days, to feel: the climate plant ran a low note through the floor and into the legs of the long table and up through the heels of her hands when she rested them flat. It steadied her like a wall in a room full of mouths you can't catch. She kept one palm down on the table now, by the foam cradle, and read the page with the other.

Not the page. The page didn't read. Everyone in the line that had ever loved this book knew that, and it hadn't stopped a single one of them, and it wasn't going to stop her. That wasn't what she was doing anyway. She was tracing.

Her finger floated a centimetre above the laminate the Beinecke laid over the open bifolio. Halloran's rule, no skin on the vellum, pencil only at the table, request slips for every quire. The light came down raking and cool from the cube's bank of LEDs, and under it the iron-gall ink had gone the colour of weak tea, brown going to gold where six hundred years of somebody's thumb had worn at the lower outer corner. Heavily thumbbed. Fagin Davis's phrase, and she could see it. She could see the place a hand had returned to, page after page after page, a path worn across a lawn by walking it.

She moved her finger left to right along a line of the running text and let the shapes come to her body before they came to her head.

There. That one. The little gallows letter with its two loops, the one the transcribers called by a letter she didn't bother to keep in mind, because she wasn't reading, she was watching where it lived. It sat at the front of words. Only at the front. She ran her finger down the column and it was there at the head of one word and the head of the next and never, not once, in the middle, never at the tail, like a man who would only ever stand in a doorway and never come into the room.

Another only ever finished a word. Came at the end and stayed there, a hand raised at the back of a hall, present, never crossing to the front.

And another lived only in the middle, never the edges, like some people who only speak when they're buried safely inside a sentence somebody else has started.

She knew that. She knew that in her arms.

She had spent her whole life in rooms where the meaning ran past her at a speed her eyes could only chase, where the words had positions she'd had to learn the hard way: who you could interrupt, who you waited out, which face meant *go on* and which meant *stop, you've said too much*. The body has grammar. She had read the body's grammar in every hearing room she'd ever been shut out of, the placements and the turns and the small allowed and forbidden moves, and here it was, on calfskin, in brown ink, by a hand four hundred years cold, and it was doing the same thing.

These letters knew where they were allowed to stand.

Naila had told her the word for it, fingers slow and patient at the wordlist as they were always slow and patient with her, no impatience in them, never that. *Position-bound*. Rubio's word, Naila had spelled, R-U-B-I-O, and then signed the meaning in the air with her hands cupped like she was holding something that wouldn't sit still. *Unheard of*, she'd signed, and grinned at the word as it left her hands, because of course she had. *No Indo-European language does it. Not Hungarian. Not Finnish. The letters stay in their places.*

Niamh had nodded and not said the thing in her chest. The thing in her chest didn't have a sign and didn't have a sound and she didn't trust it yet.

Across the table, Mara had her camera down. Not raised. Down on the strap, her hand flat over the body of it like another person folding their hands to keep from fidgeting. She'd photographed the foldout yesterday, the great nine-circle thing they unfolded out of the book like a paper map of nowhere, and Niamh had watched her do it, watched her shoot the page and not the thing she might have wanted the page to be. Mara shot the ink. She never shot the meaning. She'd told them, low, hands moving where Niamh could catch them: *the second you frame it as a sunflower, it's a sunflower forever. Newbold saw a galaxy through a microscope and it was a crack in the ink. Cheshire saw a volcano. You see what you brought.* She lowered the lens like a man putting down a weapon he'd carried too long.

Now Mara was watching Niamh's finger move, and she signed—clumsy, she always apologised for it, she was still learning, but she tried, which mattered more than smooth—*what is it.*

Niamh didn't answer right away. She moved her finger down to where a word sat, and then the same word sat under it, and then again, the same word three times stacked like a stutter that wouldn't release. She'd read in Naila's notes that it went up to five. The same word, five times in a row. No language she'd ever inhabited let you do that and mean five different things. You could say *no no no no no* but it was one word said five times, not five words.

Frik was at the end of the table with his knee going under it, a soft regular knock she could feel coming through the wood, his metronome, his own kind of climate plant. He'd been quiet a while. When he spoke she didn't catch it from his lips at that angle, but she felt the table register the syllables, and Naila's head came up, and Naila signed it across for her without being asked: *Frik says the repeats make his teeth itch.*

That made Niamh smile. She knocked her knuckle twice on the table, *yes*, and Frik knocked back, and for a second the three of them had a little weather going under the surface of the table that the manuscript would never know about.

Then Mara again, both hands, careful: *Niamh. What are you reading.*

And Naila set down her pencil and turned in her chair, all the way, to watch Niamh's hands, because the question was hers too.

Niamh let her finger come down off the page and rest on the table where the laminate ended, on the table's own dumb honest wood. She gathered the words. The signs she had came faster than the English she'd have had to wrestle for, and even the signs were slow tonight, like wading.

Not reading, she signed first, because she would not be the one in this room who reached past the evidence, not after the week they'd had, not after Frik had named it out of Naila and out of the dead solvers both. *I am not reading it.* She tapped her own eyes, then her chest. *I am—recognising it.*

Naila's brow.

The rules, Niamh signed. *Where the letters stand. The doorway ones, the back-of-the-room ones, the buried ones.* She placed her hands in the air, giving the three their stations, as she'd just been tracing them. *I know those rules. I have lived in those rules. Not these ones—mine were faces, and turns, and when you're allowed to speak in a hearing room.* She let her hands drop a beat, then brought them back. *But it's the same shape. It's a grammar of where you're allowed to be. Not what you mean. Where you're allowed to stand while you mean it.*

Naila had gone very still, and Niamh knew that stillness. It was Naila holding a thing in one hand without flinching, the thing she could do that none of the rest of them could, as she'd held the triple bind all week—language-like, and language-unlike, and not random, all three at once, in one hand, no closing of the fist.

Bowern, Naila signed, and then finger-spelled it, the linguist's name, careful, *the second-order entropy. The text is more predictable than a real language. You can guess the next letter too easily. Like it's running on*

rules tighter than meaning needs. She turned her hand. That's the wall I've been hitting. A real language is messier than this. This is—too lawful.

Yes, Niamh signed, and the thing in her chest moved, and she let it. *Too lawful. Like someone who learned exactly where to stand and then never, ever broke the rule. Not once in two hundred pages. She pressed her lips. Because they couldn't afford to.*

The room held that.

Halloran, at the cradle, had been resettling a folio where the worked vellum had cupped, easing it flat with the long bone of her gloved thumb, reverent, and she'd been pretending not to follow the hands because that was her courtesy, she let them have their room. But she looked up now, and she didn't sign, she spoke, and Naila's hands went after her words like a runner after a thrown ball, catching them for Niamh half a breath behind.

"It's the most beautiful argument for the language people, that," Halloran said, and Naila's hands gave it to Niamh, *"and it's the wall the language people break their hearts on. The Friedmans, both of them—they broke real ciphers, Axis ciphers, they had the best machine of their day in their own heads—and Elizebeth wrote in '62 that the statistical attacks were doomed to utter frustration. Doomed. From the woman who broke rum-runners' codes for the Coast Guard."* Halloran straightened, one hand at the small of her back. *"William thought it might be a constructed language. An invented universal tongue. He could never close it. Tiltman couldn't. Carrier sorted it into two hands and two—he called them dialects—and stopped there, honestly, at the wall, and that's the most honest thing anybody's ever done with this book. He named what it did and didn't pretend to know what it meant."*

Naila's hands slowed on the word *honest*, and Niamh watched her face, and saw the cost of it land softly. *Stopping at the wall.* That was the thing Naila was learning to do this week and it was breaking her gently to do it.

Acquaviva spoke from the far table without looking up, and Naila caught it sideways and relayed: *the position-bound letters defeat every natural language anybody's tried, and the repeats defeat them again, and the smooth ductus—the flow of the pen, no hesitation between characters—defeats the idea that someone was laboriously enciphering it letter by letter. It reads as written, not as encoded. Five scribes. A fluent hand. A pause. And the low entropy defeats the people who say it's pure gibberish, because gibberish doesn't organise like this at higher levels. Everything that kills one camp arms the other.*

Niamh felt the table take the words and lose them; she had the gist, she had the shape. Everything that killed one camp armed the other. The triple bind. Naila's bind. Hers too, now, in a different organ.

She put her finger back over the page. Over the doorway letter that would only ever stand at the front. And she felt the thing in her chest finally find its shape, and it had no sign and no sound and she made it anyway, badly, with her whole face and her hands, because that was the only honest way she had ever had to make anything.

I can feel it talking, she signed. *I can feel it talking and I cannot hear it.*

And she stopped, because that was the centre of it, and there wasn't more.

Mara had her hand over her mouth. Not the camera. Her mouth.

Naila didn't relay it. She didn't need to. She'd watched it leave Niamh's hands and she put her own hand flat over Niamh's on the table, over the table's dumb wood, and pressed once, and that was the relay, that was the only one needed.

It was comfort and it was the worst thing in the world at once, and Niamh would not have given up either half. She had spent her life as the most present thing in a room nobody could reach. Eloquent and shut out. Fluent and unheard. And here on the table was a thing that had been thumbed daily by people who loved it, used it, returned to it, a working book worn soft at one corner by a living hand—communicating, plainly, by every measure communicating, and not one soul alive could enter it. Her own condition rendered in iron-gall ink. The most articulate silence she had ever sat beside.

A word she could trace the position of and never voice.

She didn't cry. Mara nearly did and didn't either, and Frik's knee went still under the table, and the climate plant hummed its one unheard note up through all their hands.

It was Mara who broke it, finally, signing slow and then giving up and just speaking it, soft, so Naila could pass it: *"What if it's not for us."*

Naila's hands stilled.

"All of them," Mara said, *"every solver, all of us—we keep asking what it says* to me. What it says now. To a reader who came along five, six hundred years after. Cheshire decided it said proto-Romance and went and got a language to fit. Newbold decided it was Bacon's secret science and saw shorthand in the ink cracks. We sit here and we want it to open to us."* She set her hand flat on the camera and didn't lift it. *"What if it was never for us. What if it was for five people in one room and it did exactly what it was supposed to do, for them, and the doing of it is over, and the only thing it owes us is to keep being what it is."**

Naila's hands were slow giving it to Niamh and her face was doing something complicated.

Frik's knee started again under the table. He said something, and at his angle Niamh missed it off his lips, but she felt Naila go rigid relaying it, and the relay came careful, like Naila was handling it with the bone of her thumb the way Halloran handled the vellum:

Frik says—a book that keeps its meaning safe from the people who'd sell it isn't broken. It's working.

And then Frik again, the rest of it coming his own way, sideways, the way the true things came out of him: *Naila says he said—"it's the only thing in the room that can't be bought."*

Halloran had gone very still at the cradle. She looked at Frik a long moment, and then she looked down at the open book, at the corner worn soft by a hand that had loved it, and she didn't say anything. Her not-saying-anything was the most a custodian had said all week.

Niamh put her palm back flat on the table to feel the hum, and traced one more line with the other, the doorway letters standing in their doorways, the back-of-the-room letters at the backs of their words, the buried ones buried, all of them keeping their stations, fluent and shut and loud and silent, and she let the door of the language room swing nearly closed in her chest. Language couldn't hold this. Not hers, not Naila's numbers, not the Friedmans' machines. The thing in front of them was talking, and there wasn't a tongue alive that could be made to be its ear, and the breaking of that against you was, in the end, just recognition. The unheard looking at the unheard across six hundred years and knowing each other and not getting a single word across.

In the corner of the cube, the reading-room phone lit. Halloran looked at it. Looked at it again. Crossed to it, gloves still on, and listened, and her face did a thing none of them had seen it do—a small flattening, the conservator's professional calm closing over something it didn't want to show.

She set the phone down. She didn't sign and she didn't speak, not at first. Then she looked at the four of them at the long table, at Acquaviva already half-risen at the far one.

"That was the provost's office," she said, and Naila's hands chased it. *"Codexa has filed for an exclusive digitisation and rights contract. The whole manuscript. Every folio, every scan."* Her gloved hand came to rest on the edge of the cradle, near the worn corner, protective without touching. *"They want to own what we're allowed to see."*

Niamh looked down at the open page, at the hand raised at the back of every hall, present, never crossing to the front, and felt the table go cold under her palm.

Chapter 13—The Wall

The reading room emptied around nine. Mara went for food and didn't come back, which meant she'd found a wall outside to put her back against and a doorway to frame in the dark, and that was fine, that was Mara metabolising. Frik had gone with Niamh to the residence, the two of them already deep in a conversation that was half ASL and half Frik's hands doing the shapes wrong and Niamh correcting them, patient, both of them laughing. Acquaviva had said goodnight with a small bow, almost European, almost a joke about being almost European, and left her his transcription files and a sticky note that said *the answer is in the question you stop asking*—A. which Naila had read four times and decided to be annoyed by later.

Halloran let her stay. Pencil only. No food, no drink, the facsimile not the original. The original had gone back into its climate-controlled dark hours ago, and Naila had watched the conservator settle it like a sleeping animal, gloved, two-handed, no sudden moves. *The thing's older than every country in this building*, Halloran had said, not to Naila exactly, and Naila had heard the love in it and understood that the love was the rule. You didn't touch the calfskin because the calfskin had earned six hundred years of not being touched by people like them.

So: the facsimile. The high-resolution prints. Acquaviva's spreadsheets glowing on her laptop in the dimmed cube, the climate control breathing its even thirty-year breath, and Naila alone with the numbers and the want.

She let the numbers fall.

This was the thing she could do that nobody had ever decided was worth doing until she did it: she could hold a distribution in her hand like other people held a face. Zipf first, because Zipf was the floor and the floor held. Plot the word-frequencies against rank on a log-log and you got the line, the clean diagonal, the most-common word doing the most-common-word amount of work and the long tail trailing off exactly as it did in English and Latin and Mandarin and Hopi and every tongue humans had ever bent their mouths around. The text obeyed Zipf. It was language-shaped at the level of how often you say the things you say. That wall she'd hit a hundred times. It never moved. *Gibberish doesn't do this*, she signed to herself, fingers small in the dark, *random doesn't do this, a monkey at a keyboard doesn't do this*. The Friedmans had stood at this wall. William Friedman, who broke the Japanese diplomatic cipher, the actual PURPLE machine, in a war. He'd looked at this and guessed *constructed language*, synthetic, an early try at a universal tongue, because the man who'd cracked the unbreakable couldn't make this read and needed somewhere for it to live.

Then the second-order entropy, Bower's number, h_2 hovering around two. That was the betrayal in it. Natural language was messier than that. Given a letter, the next letter in English was a fairly open question, surprise built into the system, the engine of meaning being partly the engine of surprise. Voynichese was tidier. More predictable. *Too* predictable. Knowing one character told you too much about the next one, like a corridor where every door opened onto the same three doors. Language was a city. This was a corridor pretending to be a city.

And the position-binding. She pulled up the page Acquaviva had marked, the EVA transcription, and ran her finger down the column though there was nothing to feel through the screen. *Gallows* characters at word-start, only at word-start, a glyph that lived in the doorway and never anywhere else. Other characters chained at the back of the word, like a Latin word might end but never begin. The benched characters that

only ever sat in the middle, the buried ones, furniture that could only exist in a room you were already in. Rubio had said it plain and the plainness was a wall: this didn't happen in Indo-European, didn't happen in Hungarian or Finnish, didn't happen anywhere a human grammar had been written down. Letters in real languages were promiscuous. They went where they liked. These ones knew their station and kept it, century after century, scribe after scribe. Five hands, Fagin Davis had counted, five separate people, and all five of them obeyed the same impossible rule about where a letter was allowed to stand.

She sat with that. The climate control breathed.

And then the stacking. She loved this one and it frightened her, the way the most beautiful patterns frightened her, because the love and the fright were the same nerve. *qokeedy qokeedy qokeedy*. The same word, three times, five times, words that differed by a single character repeating down a line like a stutter that meant to stutter, the text with a refrain built into its bones. No language did this. You did not say the same word five times running and mean five things. The picture refused. And the entropy refused. And the Zipf line held. And the five scribes obeyed.

That was the wall. Not one wall. Three walls meeting at a corner with no door, and her standing in the corner.

Language-like. Language-unlike. Not random.

Pick any two and you had a discovery. Hold all three and you had this. A book that talked and would not be read, that obeyed laws stricter than any language while wearing the statistics of language like a coat, that no monkey and no machine and no fevered single mind could have produced by accident and that no living tongue could be made into the ear for.

She wanted it to break.

She could feel the wanting come up in her like water under a door, the slow cold push of it, and she knew the shape of it because it was the oldest shape she had. *If I could find the rule*. If she could find the one constraint that generated all three behaviours at once, the predictability and the position-binding and the stacking, then it wasn't three walls, it was one mechanism, and a mechanism could be reversed, and if she could reverse it she would be the one. The first. After the Friedmans and Tiltman and Currier and seventy years of the best machines and the best minds, it would be her hand on the latch. Her name. *Naila, no surname, who held the triple bind in one hand and turned it*. And underneath that, the thing the wanting was actually made of, the thing she would never sign to anyone: that a solve would mean the school counsellor was wrong, and the aptitude algorithm was wrong, and the kid who'd called her a calculator that didn't work was wrong, and the whole sorting machine that had looked at her and decided *can't* was wrong, in one beautiful provable line. She would be the proof. The written-off who read the unreadable.

Her hands were moving. She caught them. They'd been building a hypothesis in the air, a constraint grammar, a generative rule. *What if every word is a position in a table and the stacking is enumeration and the entropy is the table's own redundancy*. And it was good, it was elegant, it had the clean cold pleasure of a rule that closed, and she stopped them because she had felt the pleasure arrive before the evidence and that was the tell. That was always the tell. You feel the click of the lock before you've checked the lock fits the door. Newbold felt it, saw a whole galaxy of microscopic Greek in the cracks of the ink, not in the writing, in the *cracks*, where the iron-gall had aged and split, and he believed it so hard he died believing it, and Manly pulled the cracks apart in 1931 and there was no Greek, there was just an old book breaking down like old books break down. Cheshire felt it, proto-Romance in two weeks, and Bristol took its university's name off it and Fagin Davis said the word *circular* and the word *aspirational*, and those two words were a tombstone. They had all felt the click. The click was not the truth. The click was the sound your own want made fitting the lock it had built.

She put her pencil down. Her chest was doing the thing, the tight high thing, the drowning that came when a rule she loved would not close. She made herself breathe on the climate control's count, in, hold, out, the room's own metronome, and she thought about Niamh's hands at the page that afternoon, Niamh who didn't need the book to read because the book was *her*, the loud silent fluent shut-out thing she'd lived inside every hearing room of her life, and Naila envied her that with a clean envy because Niamh wasn't

trying to win. Niamh was trying to recognise. Different verb entirely.

Her phone buzzed on the table, screen-up, and she nearly didn't look.

It was Mara, from outside, a single line and a link. *don't read the comments. read the comments.*

She read the comments.

Codexa had launched.

Not the rights filing. That was lawyers, that was the slow grey thing Halloran had taken the call about. This was the other barrel of the gun. The promo dropped at—she checked—eight minutes ago, timed for the East Coast morning that hadn't happened yet, timed for someone's marketing calendar, and it was the kind of beautiful that is engineered. Drone footage of nothing relevant. A voice like warm gravel. *For six hundred years, the world's most mysterious book has kept its secret.* The pages floating in a digital void, glyphs lifting off the vellum and rearranging in the air, and then the credentialed face, the analyst, a real CV scrolling underneath, degrees, a chair somewhere, the texture of expertise, saying with the calm of a man reading a weather report: *we have completed the decipherment.*

A constructed devotional language. A women's medical-spiritual community, fifteenth-century, the herbal and the balneological sections a hidden pharmacopoeia, the bathing nymphs a liturgy of the body, the stars a calendar of observances. It was good. That was the obscene part. It had a shape that fit the pictures, it explained the women in the water and the composite plants and the section that looked like recipes because in the analyst's telling it *was* recipes, sacred ones. There was an app. There was a model. Train it on our reading, it'll read you any folio, ask it anything. There were the page-tokens, the digital editions, limited, numbered, *own a piece of the solution.* There was a documentary, three parts, festival circuit. There was a book with the analyst's name large on the cover and the word DECIPHERED larger.

The comments loved it. The comments wept with relief. *Finally. I always knew it was women. This makes me cry, six hundred years and someone finally listened.* And Naila sat in the dark cube with the real book sleeping in its dark behind the wall, the real book that obeyed three impossible laws at once, and the second water came up, hotter than the first, because the analyst had done the exact thing she'd just caught her own hands doing. Felt the click, loved the shape, then gone shopping for a language to fit it. The only difference between the analyst and her was that the analyst hadn't stopped his hands. Hadn't put the pencil down. Had felt the lock click on a door of his own building and called a press conference and printed the tokens.

And the worse thing, the thing that made her put her face in her hands: she couldn't fully hate him. Because she knew the want. She had it in her own chest right now, the same want, minus the cameras. The reach was the reach. He just hadn't been alone in a quiet room with someone who taught him the difference between recognising and winning.

She didn't hear the door. She never did, after hours, when Halloran propped it for the air.

She felt the floor change. A weight crossing it, even and unhurried, the gait of a person who'd learned to walk on ground that might bite. She lifted her face and Jakobus Swart was standing a respectful distance off, just inside the dimmed light, the shades pushed up onto his head because there was no sun to keep out of a basement and a rule was a rule but you bent it for the dark. He'd come back. From wherever the silence had been, he'd come back, and he was looking not at her and not at the screen but at the place behind the wall where the book slept, the made thing, with the face of a man trying to ask it the only question he had.

He didn't ask it. He looked at her instead, and saw the screen-light on her wet face, and read whatever there was to read, which with Jakobus was probably all of it.

He didn't tell her it would be all right. He didn't tell her the analyst was a fraud, which would have been a lie of certainty in the wrong direction, the smug coin's other face. He didn't reach for the laptop or the prints. He pulled out the chair across the table, the small distance kept, and sat, and took from somewhere on him the always-clean hanky, folded, and set it on the table within her reach and not in her hand. Then he was still. Not the stillness of waiting for her to be done. The stillness of a man who would sit in the not-knowing as long as it needed sitting in, who had sat in worse not-knowings and knew their weight and did not insult this one by trying to lift it off her.

Sawubona, he said, low, the courtesy word, *I see you*, and that was all, and it wasn't comfort. It was witness, and she found it was the only thing that didn't make it worse.

She took the hanky. She wiped her face. She turned the phone screen-down so the warm gravel and the floating glyphs and the comments full of relief went dark, and the relief was the part that gutted her, the false answer feeding a real hunger, people having wanted to be *let in* so badly that they'd buy a key that opened a lock that wasn't there.

She picked the pencil back up.

In the margin of her own notebook, under the three walls she'd drawn meeting at their cornered, doorless corner, she wrote it. The clean line. The one she'd been not-writing all night because writing it would mean the wall was real and the door behind it didn't exist:

What if the wound is that there's no closure to find.

She read it back. It didn't click. It was the first true thing she'd written all night and it gave her none of the pleasure of the click, none of the cold clean lock-fit, and she understood—no, she didn't understand, understanding was a click too. She *let* it. She let the line be true without it rewarding her. A question honestly held, sitting there refusing to pay out, worth more than any of the analyst's numbered tokens, worth more than her name on a latch.

Across the table Jakobus had not moved. The climate control breathed its thirty-year breath over the sleeping calfskin and the five dead fluent hands and the rule no language kept.

The language door swung shut. She heard it like a door in a dream, soundless and final. *Not a natural tongue we can name. Not a cipher the best machines can crack. Not random.* She'd spent the night proving the room had no exit through the wall she'd come at it from, and that was a result, that was real, the Friedmans would have shaken her hand.

But a closed door in a corridor only means you turn around. And turning around, she saw what she'd had her back to all night. The other case, the one nobody had closed either, the one that frightened her more because if it were true it took even the dignity of the unread away. The hoax door. Rugg's grille. The accusation that all of it, the Zipf and the entropy and the five obedient hands, was a machine for making *nothing* look like *something*, run by a clever man with a card with holes in it, six hundred years ago, for money.

Halloran's footsteps in the outer dark. Frik's voice somewhere, echoing a fragment of the Codexa narrator—*for six hundred years, for six hundred years*—and then his own voice cutting under it, lower, blurted, true: *grille's too late, the grille's a hundred years too late for the cow.*

Naila looked up. Down the corridor, toward the rare-books basement where they kept the facsimiles and the demonstration tools, a light had come on.

Chapter 14—The Grille

The basement light was the wrong kind. Up in the reading room they used a warm, raking thing, a museum amber that loved old skin and forgave it. Down here Codexa had brought their own, a flat dental white that came up cold off the steel benches and turned everybody's hands into evidence. Frik stood in the doorway and let it find him. *Cold light, cold light, count the light*, his brain said, and he counted: four panels, two flickering at the edge of the eye where the eye couldn't hold them.

The grille was already on the bench.

It sat in the middle of a felt-lined tray. A square of stiff card, maybe the size of a hand, machined with little windows cut in a regular lattice. Holes where the holes should be, blanks where the blanks. It looked harmless. It looked like the thing a substitute teacher uses to mark a multiple-choice test. Beside it a facsimile page of the Herbal lay open under glass, one of the composite plants reaching its impossible root toward an impossible flower, and Frik felt the old vertigo bloom in his chest, the page that wanted to be read and wouldn't open the door.

"You came," said the analyst. Codexa's man. Vance had a roomful of grey-soft operators, but this one wore a cardigan and good glasses and the patient face of somebody who actually loved the problem. That was the trouble with him. He wasn't a liar in the cheap way. He was a believer who'd taken the money.

"Naila's coming," Frik said. "Halloran. Niamh and Mara. We came." He'd echoed *came* twice; he heard it and let it go.

Naila arrived first, eyes wrecked from the night upstairs, holding herself like a woman with a rule that wouldn't close. Then Niamh, hair flat from the pillow, reading every face in the room in the first half-second the way she always did. Mara last, the camera dark on its strap and her hand resting over the lens cap. Behind them, in the dim of the corridor, Halloran's pale shape, not coming in, just present. And further back, half-shadow on the stair, a stillness wearing dark glasses indoors at six in the morning that could only be one man, who had said nothing and would say nothing and was simply there, reading the room the way he read everything.

"Show them," Vance said, from a screen on the wall. He wasn't in the building. He was a face in a square, very calm, very groomed. "Walter, show them the demonstration."

Walter, the analyst, laid the grille over a grid of letter-fragments printed on a card. He shifted it one notch right, one notch down, and read off what showed through the windows. Syllables. *Qokeedy. Qokedy. Otedy. Daiin.* Voynich-flavoured. Word-shaped nonsense, stacked and repeated, with the little prefixes leading and the little suffixes trailing, and when he slid the grille and read again it came out almost-the-same-but-not, like the real text did, *daiin daiin* with the tiny mutation, the breath of difference.

"This is Gordon Rugg's method," Walter said, and his respect was real; Frik gave him that. "2003. Refined 2016. A Cardan grille—sixteenth-century technology—moved across a table of meaningless syllables. It reproduces Zipf's law. It reproduces the repetition. It reproduces the look of language without any language underneath." He slid it again. *Chedy. Shedy.* "It's beautiful, actually. A clever man with a card with holes in it could have made the whole thing. For money. Sphinxes that obey no one but their master." He smiled, kindly, at the page under glass. "There may be no master. There may be no secret. Just the grille."

It was a good demonstration. Frik felt it land in the room, felt the cold light close in around the little card, and felt his own body start to argue before his mouth did, a roll forward of the shoulders, a hard blink, the want to *move*.

“It’s fake,” Frik said. The flat thing came out first, the involuntary frame. Then his own voice underneath it, lower, dragging the rest up by the collar. “It’s fake but it’s not.”

“Frik,” Naila said, not a correction, an invitation.

He paced two steps and came back. The pacing was the metronome. “Rugg fakes *features*.” He pointed without touching the glass. “Zipf—fake-able. He faked it. Repetition—fake-able, he faked that too. The look—yeah. Grille gets you the look.” He blinked. “The look’s the easy part. Mara, tell them the look’s the easy part.”

Mara hadn’t lifted the camera. She was watching the grille like a scene she didn’t trust. “The look’s the easy part,” she said. “Everybody starts from the look. That’s the whole disease. Somebody sees a sunflower and decides the manuscript came back from the New World. Somebody sees a galaxy in the ink cracks and reads it with a microscope until it confesses. The picture invites you and you bring your own answer to it and you call your answer a reading.” She tipped her chin at the card. “He’s showing you a thing that *looks* like the manuscript. That’s the trap, not the proof.”

“Right,” said Walter, unbothered, because he was a good-faith man and good-faith men love to be argued with. “But it’s not only the look. Schinner, 2007—random-walk model, the text behaves statistically like a stochastic process, not like a meaningful message. Timm and Schinner, 2019—a self-citation mechanism, scribes copying and slightly mutating words they’d already written, which generates exactly the *daiin daiin daiin* you keep flinching at.” He slid the grille; the syllables marched. “And Gaskell and Bower, 2022—they sat human beings down and asked them to *write nonsense*, freehand, no machine, and the humans reproduced some of the oddities all by themselves. The strangeness you love so much, Frik—people make it without trying. It falls out of a tired hand.”

Naila came off the wall.

“Say the second half,” she said.

Walter blinked. “I’m sorry?”

“Gaskell and Bower. Say the second half of the result.” Her voice had gone level and exact, the voice she used when the numbers were the only thing she could stand on. “They reproduced *some* of the oddities. Some. Not the loop. You said it yourself, it’s beautiful—but you stopped reading the abstract where it stops being convenient.” She stepped to the bench, did not touch anything, pencil-only, gloves-or-nothing, the rules already in her body from upstairs. “Rugg’s grille is from around 1550. The vellum is 1404 to 1438. Arizona, four bifolios, mutually consistent. The cow died a hundred years before the card existed. You can fake the look with the grille. You cannot fake the page with the grille, because the page is older than the grille.”

“The vellum’s older,” Walter said. “Not the writing. C-14 dates the animal, not the ink.”

It was the honest objection and Naila honoured it by not flinching. “True. The ink can’t be independently dated, and the press release in 2009 that said the writing went on immediately was wrong, and they retracted it, and I’ll say that out loud because it’s true. So fine. Imagine your grille-man in 1550 buying up a stack of genuine hundred-year-old calfskin to do his hoax on.” The corner of her mouth moved, and there was no cruelty in it. “Fourteen, fifteen entire calves’ worth. Aged a century. To fake a book nobody could read, in a fluent hand, in *five* hands —”

“One man, five disguised hands,” Vance offered from the wall, smooth.

“Five hands that hold their letterforms section by section across two hundred and forty pages and never tire, never break character, never once forget which prefix lives only at the start of a word and which suffix lives only at the end —” Naila stopped. Her own hands had come up, shaping it in the air. She frowned at them, dropped them. Started over slower. “No. Run the math forward. Run your grille for two hundred and

forty pages and keep the second-order entropy at two. Keep it *more* predictable than natural language and still language-like at the higher order.” She turned a hand over, checking herself against the count. “Keep the position-binding clean. Letters that only ever go word-initial, only ever word-final, never wander, across hundreds of pages, by hand, with a card, by candlelight, for *no reader*, and don’t slip once.” A breath. “Show me that and I’ll carry your bags. The grille gives you a hundred words of plausible. It doesn’t give you the book. Nobody’s ever run it to the book. They run it to the demo and they stop at the demo because the demo is where it still works.”

The room was quiet. The climate control somewhere overhead breathed its long mechanical breath. Walter looked at his grille, and for a moment—Frik saw it, Frik always saw it—for a moment Walter looked like a man who had once stayed up all night with this exact problem because he loved it, before anyone offered to buy the love off him.

“It’s not decisive,” Walter said, quietly, to Naila, and it was the most honest thing anyone from Codexa had said. “The hoax case isn’t closed. You know that. Rugg’s serious. Timm and Schinner are serious.”

“It’s not closed,” Naila agreed. “Neither’s the other one. That’s the *fact*.” She said it like setting down something heavy. “Language-like and matching no language and not random, all three, in one object that’s real. The hoax door’s a live fight. I’m not standing here telling you it’s a message. I’m telling you your card postdates the cow and reproduces the wallpaper, not the house.”

“For six hundred years,” Vance said from the wall, and the warmth in his voice had gone slightly metallic, slightly toward the promo. “For six hundred years it’s resisted everyone. The Friedmans. Tiltman. Currier. The best codebreakers of two world wars. And Codexa is going to be the operation that finally —”

“For six hundred years,” Frik said.

He hadn’t meant to. It came up out of him on the back of Vance’s own cadence, *for six hundred years*, echolalia, the phrase Codexa kept stamping over their footage like a watermark, and Frik heard himself say it in Vance’s exact lilt and it made him want to peel his own skin off. He pressed his thumbnail hard into the pad of his finger. The light flickered at the edge of his eye. *Cold light. Count it. Four panels, two bad.*

And then the other voice, the under-voice, the one that didn’t ask permission.

“You decided what it said,” Frik told the screen, “then went shopping for a hoax to say it didn’t.”

It dropped into the cold light and lay there.

Vance’s groomed face did not change much. A small reset around the mouth. “I’m not sure I follow.”

“You do.” Frik’s shoulder jerked; he let it. “Rugg starts from *it’s nonsense*. Then he goes shopping for a machine that makes nonsense look like that. Newbold started from *it’s Roger Bacon’s genius* and went shopping in the ink cracks. Cheshire started from *it’s proto-Romance* and read it in two weeks and his own university said no thank you. Gibbs started from *abbreviated Latin women’s-health* and Fagin Davis said it doesn’t make Latin that makes sense. Bax got ten words and died.” The names came out of him fast and flat, the documented record, and there was no scorn in it, only the terrible even pressure of a man saying true things he couldn’t stop. “Everybody. Everybody. They bring the answer and they shop for the road to it. You’re the same. You just don’t love it.” His breath caught. “They were lonely. You’re *for sale*. That’s the only —” his throat clicked, “— that’s the only difference. Same reach. You took the innocence out.”

Niamh moved.

She crossed to Frik and put two fingers flat against his sternum, not to stop him, to ground him, the pressure he liked, the weight that told the body where it ended. He took it. His shoulders came down a half-inch. The light still flickered but he stopped having to count it.

Then Niamh turned to the room and signed, and Mara—who had the most of the three of them, the rough working dialect they’d built between the four of them over a year of benches and stakeouts—said it aloud for the room, watching Niamh’s hands and her face, careful, carrying someone else’s words without spilling them.

“She says —” Mara watched. “She says you keep arguing about whether it *means* anything.” A beat; Niamh’s hands, the set of her mouth. “She says that’s the hearing question. She says her whole life there were rooms full of people communicating and she couldn’t get in, and the rooms were never *nonsense*. The rooms were full. She just wasn’t given the door.” Mara’s voice thinned and held. “She says this—” a gesture at the page under glass, the reaching plant, the fluent line—“she says she knows what it feels like from the inside. A thing that’s *saying*. Real. Patterned. Shut. She says nonsense doesn’t feel like that and you all know it doesn’t, you’re just scared of the other thing.”

Niamh signed one more, short, and Mara’s mouth did a small wreck of a smile relaying it.

“She says: don’t tell her it’s empty. She’s spent her life having people decide for her that what she couldn’t deliver was the same as nothing in there.”

The grille sat on its felt and said nothing.

On the wall, Vance let the silence run three seconds, the practised pause of a man who’d learned the silence sold too. “It’s a moving testimonial,” he said, and meant it as a closing line. “Truly. And here’s the beautiful part—none of this needs to be settled. Walter’s model, the generative grille—we file it as a process. Synthetic Voynich. A generative engine that produces unlimited Voynich-pattern text and imagery. Heritage product, scholarly tool, a model you license, prints, the page-tiles, the whole —”

“Patent the nonsense,” Frik said.

He laughed. It surprised him; it came up clean, not a stim, a real laugh, short and astonished. “You want to *patent* the nonsense.” He wiped his eye with the back of his glove. “Nonsense doesn’t —” he hunted the word and it came, “— nonsense doesn’t *bind* people. Five hundred years. Baresch writing to Kircher. Marci sending it. Rudolf maybe paying six hundred ducats—maybe, hearsay, fine—but somebody *paid*. The Friedmans giving up *years*. All of us, here, in a basement, at dawn, with a fish-tank light.” The laugh went thin. “You don’t burn five centuries of the smartest people you’ve got on a card trick. Something kept them. Something keeps *us*. You can fake the wallpaper. You can’t fake the thing that makes people stay in the room.”

“What is it for, then,” said a voice from the doorway.

Halloran. Pale, unhurried, gloved hands folded. The conservator had said almost nothing all night, and now she came two steps into the cold light and looked, not at the grille, not at the screen, but at the facsimile page—at the soft suggestion in the printed reproduction of how soft the real leaf was, the thumbled corner, the working wear of a thing turned and turned and turned.

“You’re all standing here asking is it a message or is it noise,” Halloran said. “That’s not the only question the object answers.” She touched the rim of the glass, not the page. “It was *used*. Heavily. Thumbled soft. No gold, no luxury, no display. Somebody—five somebodies—made a reference book and somebody else wore it out turning the pages. People don’t wear out a hoax. You don’t thumb a card trick to rags.” She looked at Naila, gently, custodian to seeker. “Whatever it’s for, it was for keeping something. Working, daily, for someone. The keeping’s the part we can still touch.”

From the stair, in the dark beyond the cold light, the still shape in the dark glasses inclined its head, very slightly, like a man does when someone else has said the true thing he’d have had to walk all the way around to reach. He did not come into the room. He let the conservator own her ground.

And up in the corridor, faint, came the sound of a metal cart, and a custodial murmur—a sentence about a recent request slip, the wrong shelf, a digitisation order someone upstairs had filed that hadn’t matched the log—and Mara’s head came around toward the door, the lens cap still under her palm, her face doing the thing it did when a frame she hadn’t meant to see walked into the edge of the shot.

Chapter 15—Missing Quires

The reading room at the Beinecke smelled of nothing, which was the point. Mara had spent enough years in rooms that smelled of cordite and wet plaster and the inside of other people's burning houses to notice when a room had been engineered to smell of *nothing*. Climate-controlled to a hush, the air scrubbed of itself, fifty degrees of constant cold drifting up off the foam cradles. The hum of the system under the floor was the only sound that didn't ask permission.

She'd left the camera in its case and signed for the smaller one. House rules. Pencil only. They'd taken her pens at the desk like contraband, gently, the way you take a lighter off a kid. No flash. Tripod logged. Halloran had walked her through it herself, glove to glove, and then stood back with her hands folded, the way you'd stand near a sleeping animal you loved and did not fully trust.

The facsimile was gone. This was the leaf itself.

"You can photograph the verso of forty-two," Halloran said. "The cradle won't open past one-twenty degrees. Don't fight it."

"I never fight the cradle," Mara said.

"Everyone fights the cradle."

Mara set the small camera on the boom and brought the raking light around to a low angle, almost level with the page, so the leaf threw its own texture in shadow. Every thumb-soft hollow, every place where six hundred years of fingers had worn the nap of the calfskin down to something like suede. That was the trick she'd learned that mattered: don't light the page to read it. Light it to see what it *was*. Light it sideways until the wear stood up off the surface and told you where the hands had been.

The hands had been everywhere. Lower right corner, every page, turned and turned and turned. A reference book. You don't soften vellum to glove-leather by admiring it. You do it by reaching for it again tomorrow, and the day after, because you needed what was on the page and you needed it *now*.

She moved down the quire and that was when she found the first ghost.

"Stub," Halloran said, when Mara waved her over and pointed without touching. "Folio's gone. You're looking at the spine-edge of what's left of it. See, here, where it was once part of the sheet." Her gloved finger traced the air a centimetre above a narrow tongue of vellum bound into the gutter, the amputated root of a page. "Two leaves out of this quire. There were twenty quires once. Two hundred and seventy-two pages, near enough. We have two hundred and forty. Fourteen folios just—gone."

"When?"

"Before Wilfrid Voynich ever saw it. Before Yale, before Kraus, before Kircher had it in Rome." She said the names the way you'd lay out cutlery. "Some are bound out of order. Somebody, somewhere, took the book apart and put it back together and got it wrong. You can tell because the picture programme breaks. A root continues onto a page that isn't there. We renumber and renumber and the gaps stay gaps."

Mara crouched to the boom and brought the light lower still, until the stub stood up in the shadow like a scar she'd photographed on living people, the kind that healed crooked because no one had been there to set it. She didn't shoot it yet. *Ask before you shoot*. The rule she'd broken in three war zones and was learning, late, the slow way.

"Can I."

"You can," Halloran said.

She took the absence. One frame, low and raking, and the missing page printed itself on the sensor as a thing that wasn't there: the shadow of a tongue of skin where a whole leaf used to live, where five fluent hands had once put down their twenty-odd characters in their tireless ductus and somebody, *somebody*, had needed it enough to wear the corner soft, and then it was gone and nobody on Earth would ever know what it had been for.

That was the hole she'd come to photograph. Not the question on the page. The question of the *removed* page.

"You'll want to know," Halloran said, conversational, refiling a request slip into the cardboard tray at her elbow, "we had an order in for high-resolution imagery of the lost-folio stubs. Specifically the stubs. The gutters. The amputations."

Mara kept her eye to the finder. "That's an odd thing to want."

"It is. We get the section requests. Somebody wants all the herbal pages, somebody wants the nine-rosette foldout, the kids who want the bathing figures." A dry beat. "Nobody wants the stubs. The stubs are *nothing*. You can't read nothing." She tapped the tray. "Came through an aggregator. Outfit that buys imaging rights to—it's a particular taste. Anything where the record's incomplete. Disputed manuscripts. The Vinland Map files. The Archaic Mark forgery papers. Things people have argued about being faked." She said it without weight, a custodian remarking on shelf neighbours. "They wanted the gaps."

The word *faked* sat in the cold air a second too long.

Mara lowered the camera. In the corridor beyond the glass, a cart went by with its small castored complaint, and she felt the shape of the thing coming into the edge of the lens before she'd consciously turned her head, the way she'd felt the second mortar a half-second before the dust. The body learning what the mind hadn't been told. Someone wanted the imagery of what *wasn't there*. Someone who collected things people called hoaxes. Someone who wanted the *gaps*—the parts of the book where nobody could prove you wrong, because the evidence had walked off six centuries ago.

You don't manufacture a solution out of a full page. People can check a full page. You manufacture it out of a missing one.

"Who filed it," she said.

"An aggregator," Halloran said again, and this time she met Mara's eye, and there was a flat patience in it that meant *I have answered the question I'm willing to answer*. "We declined. We don't licence the stubs to people who want to find a message in a place we can prove there isn't one." She straightened the tray. "We've had your friend's video calls too. The one in the good suit. Vance." The name like a dropped pin. "Wants the whole corpus under one rights agreement. Wants to *make it accessible*." The conservator's mouth did a thing that wasn't a smile. "Everyone who's ever wanted to lock a thing up has wanted to make it accessible."

Jakobus came in through the far door and the cold light made his glasses two flat coins. He didn't take them off. He never took them off. He crossed the room like a man who suspected the floor of being thinner than it looked, and he stopped a respectful three feet from the cradle and put his hands behind his back so there'd be no question of him reaching.

"They let you in," Mara said.

“They let me look,” he said. “Different thing.” He inclined his head at Halloran, a small grave courtesy, and she returned it, custodian to whatever he was, two people who understood that the object in the room belonged to neither of them. He didn’t ask to touch it. He looked at the soft corner of folio forty-two for a long while, at the place where the nap was worn through to nothing.

“Tell me about the wear,” Mara said, because she wanted it on the record, because the body in her that had spent its life photographing what people did to things and to each other wanted the testimony of the man who read made things.

“It’s a working book,” he said.

“Halloran said that.”

“She’s right.” He didn’t move closer. “A book made to be looked at—a gospel, a psalter for a prince—you don’t wear it like this. You wear *into* it. The owner’s hands stay off the leaves; there are clasps, gold, you turn it by the margins, you keep your fingers clean for God.” His voice had the metronome under it that Mara had clocked in the desert, the steady tap of a man who kept his own time. “This was never that. No gold. No display. The colour’s cheap—period cheap, ground minerals, the green that goes through to the back. You don’t put a treasure in cheap green. You put a *tool* in cheap green, because tools get used up and you don’t weep over a used-up tool.”

“So someone used it.”

“Someone used it to *exhaustion*.” He nodded at the corner. “Love is a single page you go back to. That’s *labour*. Somebody opened this to the same place a thousand times because they needed what was there a thousand times. You don’t wear a corner to suede on a thing you read once for wonder. You wear it down looking something *up*.” He let that sit. “A manual. A reference. Whatever it kept, it kept it for working hands, and the working hands came back, and back, and back.”

“And the missing pages.”

He was quiet. He looked at the stub Mara had photographed, the amputated tongue of skin.

“A working book loses pages,” he said at last. “Always the most-used ones go first. The page you turn to every day is the page that tears, the page that travels in a pocket, the page somebody copies out and never returns, the page that’s worth taking when the rest isn’t worth the carriage.” He didn’t reach, but Mara could see the want to in his shoulders, the master-question loading behind the dark glass. *What is it for*. It found a partial answer in the wear and stopped there, honest, at the edge of what the object would say. “The gaps aren’t where the secret’s hidden. The gaps are where it was *needed most*. That’s why they’re gone.”

Frik had come in behind him without anyone hearing, which was a thing Frik almost never managed, and he stood very still with his fists working at his sides, reading the room for the lie in it. He hadn’t blurted in an hour. The cold and the hush were holding him. But Mara watched his jaw and knew the shape was coming up in him.

“They want the *gaps*,” Frik said. Echoing her, echoing Halloran. Then his neck jerked and the truth came out of him sideways, involuntary, landing at the exact worst-best moment: “— *can’t fake a full page, fake the empty one* —” His breath caught. “Sorry. Sorry. But.” His eyes found Mara’s, miserable and clear. “That’s it though. That’s the whole—they don’t want what’s there. Nobody can argue with what isn’t there.” He pressed the heel of his hand to his sternum. “You don’t go shopping for a missing page unless you’ve already decided what it said.”

The room held that.

Mara turned back to the cradle and made herself look at the actual leaf, the surviving thing, and let the hole open under her properly, the one the nonsense theory couldn’t fill.

Here was the thing about gibberish. She'd watched the demonstration in Vance's basement, watched the grille slide across its template and spit out word-salad that fooled the entropy test for forty lines. She believed the math. She believed Rugg, believed Timm and Schinner, believed the patient grim work of people proving that a determined human could fake *some* of this in *miniature*. She wasn't a romantic. She'd photographed too many manufactured atrocities to be a romantic about the human capacity to make convincing nothing.

But she'd also photographed, that morning, a corner worn to suede.

You could fake forty lines with a grille. Could you fake the *thumbing*? Could you grind a thousand days of someone's worried fingers into the nap of a calfskin and call it a hoax? Nobody thumbs a card trick to rags. Nobody loses the most-used folios out of a book that was never used. The hoax theory could explain the text—maybe, partly, in a strong wind, with caveats Acquaviva would line up like a firing squad—but it had no answer at all for the *hunger*. For someone needing this enough to wear it out. For fourteen pages being worth taking. You don't steal pages from a thing that says nothing. You don't carry a meaningless leaf in your pocket until it falls apart. You don't wear a corner soft on a riddle written to have no answer.

The nonsense couldn't carry the *use*. That was the hole. Not a glyph, not a cipher, not a galaxy somebody saw in an inkblot. The *wear*. The most-handled book in the world that nobody could read, soft as a glove from being needed by people who must have understood every word.

She photographed the worn corner. One frame. Witness, don't consume.

"There's an order on your desk," Vance said, when his face arrived on the wall screen, glossy and warm and clean-handed, the digital-heritage suite behind him lit like a chapel. "To licence the lost-folio reconstructions. We've got a model that can *infer* the stubs—what was on the missing leaves. Probabilistically. We'd be giving the world back the pages history lost." A smile built to inspire. "Imagine reading the part everyone said was unreadable."

"You can't infer a page that's gone," Mara said. "You can only paint your guess on the hole and sign it."

"We'd call it a reconstruction. With confidence intervals."

"You'd call it a *solution*," Frik said, off-screen, and his voice cracked the polish clean down the middle. "You decided what the gone pages said, then you went shopping for a missing page to say it on."

Vance's smile didn't move. That was the tell. A real reacher—Newbold blind in his microscope, Bax ten words into a thing he'd die unfinished, the lonely true obsessives the crew kept finding and kept failing to despise—a real reacher *bled* when you said that. Vance just held the smile. He didn't need it to be true. He needed it sold. The same reach with the innocence cut out. He wanted the gaps because the gaps were the one place left where certainty couldn't be checked.

"We'll send the paperwork," he said, kindly, and was gone.

Halloran refilled the slip into the cardboard tray with a small definitive sound, like a door, and said, to no one, to the cold room, to the worn-soft leaf in its cradle: "We're not licensing the holes."

Mara lowered her camera and looked at the place where folio forty-three should have been and wasn't—the amputated tongue, the most-needed page, gone six hundred years before anyone thought to want it. She felt the door of *The Nonsense* tighten one more notch. Nonsense doesn't get itself worn to suede, and nonsense doesn't get itself carried until it falls apart. The gaps in this book weren't where the secret hid. The gaps were where the hunger had been.

Across the room, Niamh had come in without a sound, and was standing at the next cradle where the open manuscript lay under its own raking light, and her hands were very still at her sides, and her whole body had gone toward the page like a person hearing her name in a room that had always pretended she couldn't.

Chapter 16—Communion

The reading room kept its own kind of quiet, and Niamh liked it as she liked deep water: not because it was empty but because it was full of things hearing people couldn't notice. The climate control breathed at a fixed pitch she felt in her sternum more than understood. The foam cradle held the manuscript open at an angle a person could only reach with care. Halloran had set the raking light low and from the left, the way you light a coin to make the relief jump, and under it the page was not flat. It had hills. It had the memory of a hand pressing.

Mara was at the far cradle still, lowering her camera. Her face had the particular set Niamh had learned to read on her, the look of a woman who had just decided not to take a shot. Jakobus stood near the door in his plain dark and the sunglasses he wore even here, where there was nothing to dim, watching the room as he watched everything, as if every object might be asked one day what it was for and he wanted to be ready. He did not come closer. He had not touched the book once. He read it from across rooms.

Niamh came to the open folio and let her hands go still at her sides.

She did not read as the others read. Naila read the river of letters and the laws inside it, how a word would not put this glyph in the front of itself or that glyph at the back, how the same word could stand five times in a row like a stutter that meant something or meant nothing and refused to say which. Naila held the triple bind in one hand and did not flinch. Niamh had watched her do it, the small terrible steadiness of a person looking straight at the thing that would not close.

Frik read the lie. Mara read the picture and the projection laid over it like a film. Jakobus read the made thing.

Niamh read the body.

And the body of this page was speaking.

She bent, gloved, careful, her breath turned aside as Halloran had shown her, because breath carried moisture and moisture was the slow enemy of vellum. She looked at the place where one of the five hands had written into the margin. Not the careful column-work of the main text. A scrawl. Smaller, faster, tucked into the white at the edge of a plant whose root belonged to one thing and whose flower belonged to another and whose whole self belonged to nobody's garden. A note. An afterthought. A hand reaching past the formal text to say something quick to someone who would come after.

She felt her own pulse go odd.

Because she knew this. Not the words. Nobody knew the words, that was the whole vast architecture of the thing, the cathedral of the unread. But the *gesture*. The lean of it. The strokes crowded tighter at the start, eager, then loosened as the hand found its rhythm, then crowded again at the end where the margin ran out and the writer had more to say than room to say it. The pressure deepening on the downstrokes. A person who knew exactly what they meant and assumed, as everyone assumes, that meaning would carry. That to write a thing clearly was to be understood.

Niamh had spent her life inside that assumption and outside its payoff.

She had sat in classrooms where the teacher faced the board and her words went to the wall and Niamh got

the back of a head and a moving shoulder and was expected to *keep up*. She had stood in kitchens at family dinners while talk crossed the table in a weather she could feel as motion and warmth and laughter-shapes and never once enter, and been told later, kindly, that she'd seemed *distant*. She had communicated her whole life, clearly, fluently, with her hands and her face and the whole front of her body, into rooms built to not receive it. She knew, from the inside, the exact texture of being eloquent and unheard.

This page was eloquent. This page was unheard.

The recognition went through her without words because she did not need words for it, and that, she thought, was the cruel joke and the gift folded into one. The hearing world believed understanding lived in sound and the Voynich believed it lived in these twenty-some characters, and both were so sure, and the book sat here six hundred years deep in its own fluency, *thumbed soft*, carried until it fell apart, mattered-to daily, and nobody alive could enter it.

It was not empty. She did not believe it was empty. She had sat across from too many people who decided she was empty because they couldn't get in.

She straightened. Looked at the margin hand again.

A living person made this. The ductus told you so even if you couldn't read it. Halloran had said the word, *ductus*, the flow of the pen, and had said the experts agreed the flow ran smooth, no stop-and-think between letters, no laboured pause that would betray a person enciphering character by character from a key. It read as *written*. A hand that knew the next stroke before it made it. Fluency.

You could not fake fluency, not really. You could fake a lot. You could not fake the particular ease of a person at home in their own language.

Across the room a chair moved. Niamh didn't hear it; she felt the floor shift and turned, and Mara was beside her now, not lifting the camera, asking with her eyebrows as she always asked first, *may I*, and Niamh nodded, and Mara still didn't shoot. She looked at the margin. Then she signed, slow and a little clumsy, the words the crew had all been learning since the desert because Niamh was crew and crew met you where you stood: *what do you see*.

Niamh signed back, *a person*.

Mara's mouth did something complicated. She set the camera down on its strap and signed, badly, *not a code?*

A code is a person too, Niamh signed, and saw Mara not get it, and reached for the pad of paper Halloran allowed, pencil only, the conservator's iron law, no pen near the vellum ever, and wrote in her clean square hand:

Everyone here wants it to be a CODE. A thing that opens. A code is what you put between you and someone you trust, so you can still reach them and no one else can. It is still a hand reaching. The ones who solved it and the ones who say it's nonsense—they all stopped looking at the reaching.

Mara read it twice. Then she picked the camera back up and pointed it, not at the page, at Niamh's hands resting on the cradle's edge, the gloved stillness of them, and looked the question again, and Niamh shook her head, and Mara lowered it, and that was that. Witness without consuming. They were both learning the same lesson from different doors.

Halloran had drifted near, the custodian always seeming to materialise the moment a hand got within an inch of touching what it shouldn't, except Niamh's hands had not strayed and Halloran was watching her face instead. The conservator read faces less fluently than Niamh did but read *care* unerringly, and Niamh had care all over her.

"You've found a marginal hand," Halloran said, and signed it too, finger-spelled *marginal*, slow, because Halloran had been the first in the room to ask, on day one, whether they should be voicing or signing or

both, and had not made a performance of it. “Folio’s been argued over. Some read the marginalia as a different scribe entirely. Some think it’s the same scribe writing faster, off the clock.”

Niamh wrote: *Did they ever ask why someone writes in a margin?*

Halloran read it and almost smiled. “To remember. To correct. To talk to whoever turns the page next.” A pause. “We do it ourselves. There’s a Beinecke cataloguer from 1969 whose pencil notes are in half these boxes. In forty years someone will study *those* and wonder what kind of mind made them.”

And we’ll be unreadable too, Niamh wrote.

“In the way that matters, probably.” Halloran’s voice went somewhere quieter; Niamh couldn’t hear the tone but she could see the throat work and the eyes drop to the leaf, the whole body leaning toward it. “People keep coming in here thinking the manuscript is a locked door and there’s a treasure behind it. It’s not a door. It’s a *house*. Somebody lived in it. You can see where they wore the floor.”

She touched, not the page, but the air an inch above the worn lower corner where six hundred years of thumbs had turned the leaf and turned it and turned it until the calfskin went to suede.

That was the part the certainty-merchant could never sell. You couldn’t license a worn corner. You couldn’t put a thumbbed-soft edge on a slide and call it a discovery. The wear was a liturgy, a thing repeated until it became holy by the repeating, and nobody would ever know what the prayer had been.

The trouble arrived, as it kept arriving, dressed in patience.

Two of Vance’s grey-soft operators had set up in the institute’s loaned annex two doors down, and one of them, the analyst, the young one with the good posture and the laptop covered in convention lanyard-stickers, appeared in the reading room’s glass cube wall, visible through it like a fish in a different tank, gesturing at a screen to a colleague Niamh couldn’t see. His face was doing frustration. Niamh read it across thirty feet and two centimetres of glass with no effort at all. The clenched jaw, the hand that kept opening toward the screen and closing again, the head-shake that wasn’t disagreement but refusal. The look of a person whose model had been fed everything and would not give back the thing they’d promised someone it would give.

Vance’s people had built a tool. Everyone knew it. The contract for the high-resolution scans had a clause about “derivative analytical works” that Halloran’s rights lawyer had circled three times. The tool ingested the EVA transcription, every glyph, every word, the whole low-entropy lawful improbable corpus, and it was supposed to *crack*. It was supposed to do in a quarter what the Friedmans couldn’t do in a lifetime, because the Friedmans had only had genius and the tool had genius plus scale, and scale was the modern religion.

And the tool kept producing signal it couldn’t explain.

Niamh had seen the printouts in the annex when she’d walked past. She walked past a lot, slow, because nobody guarded their faces around the deaf woman; they assumed her attention was elsewhere, they always assumed. The model found the structure: the position-bound characters, the words that differed by one letter repeating absurdly often, the two dialects sorted clean as laundry, Voynich A in the herbal pages and Voynich B in the bathing pages. It found all of it. It could *describe* the law with terrible precision.

It could not say what the law was *for*.

And the analyst kept feeding it more, kept tuning it, kept demanding it produce the plaintext that wasn’t there, and his face through the glass was the face of every hearing teacher who had spoken slower and *louder* at her as if the wall were her fault. As if she were the broken receiver and not the room.

You decided what it should say, Niamh thought, watching him. Then you went shopping for a way to make it say that.

She’d lifted the line from Frik, who wasn’t even here today, who’d blurted it at a man in a previous room and meant it gently and been right. The words had stuck to her. They fit this man through the glass. They fit, she made herself admit, the temptation she’d felt rising in Naila lately, the most pattern-loving person Niamh had ever met, holding a pattern that *almost* closed, wanting it to close, needing it to be a yes

because a yes would prove every room that had written off Naila's kind of mind dead wrong. The mirror cut everyone. The model saw what its makers had ordered it to find, and when the book wouldn't oblige, the failure looked, from inside the glass, like the book being difficult.

The book wasn't being difficult. It was being itself, fluently, in a language built for no one in this room.

Mara came back from a circuit of the cube with the camera dark at her hip and wrote on Niamh's pad: *He's losing it in there. Said the word "noise" four times. Their boss wants a press date.*

Niamh wrote: *It isn't noise.*

I know, Mara wrote, fast, and underlined it. Then, slower: *That's the part that scares them. Noise they could spin. A thing that's structured and won't open—that's the one outcome the press release can't survive.*

Niamh looked at her, this woman who had photographed the worst rooms in the world and learned, the hardest way, the difference between documenting a thing and feeding on it. Mara had spent a career on the line between the witness and the vulture. She knew exactly what Vance was. Vance was the vulture who'd convinced himself he was the witness.

A maybe doesn't sell, Niamh wrote.

Mara breathed out through her nose, almost a laugh, the silent kind Niamh could read like print.

The light shifted; Halloran adjusted the raking lamp by a degree, and the margin hand lifted out of the page again, those crowded eager strokes, that downstroke pressure, the run-out at the end where the writer had too much to say and not enough white.

Niamh leaned in one last time.

She would not pretend she read it. That was the lie that had eaten Newbold, who'd seen tiny Greek in the cracks of the ink and built a whole secret science of Roger Bacon out of where the ink had simply *cracked*—pareidolia in a man brilliant enough to deserve better. That was the lie in the two-week proto-Romance and the vowelless Ukrainian and the abbreviated Latin that didn't make Latin. They'd all started here, exactly here, with a real hand on real vellum, and the love had been real, and then the love had bent the glyphs to fit the longing, and the longing had eaten the love.

She was not going to bend this hand to fit her longing, and her longing was vast, because she of all people wanted to be the one who finally received a message the whole hearing world of scholars had failed to receive. She wanted it as Naila wanted her pattern to close. The mirror cut her too. She made herself feel the wanting and not act on it, as she'd learned to feel a room's exclusion and not let it become her verdict on herself.

She did not read the words.

She read the presence. A person had been here. A person had meant something, urgently, in a margin, to someone they trusted would understand. The meaning was real. The reaching was real. And the answer—what it said, what it was, whether the words were words at all—that belonged to the maybe-five hands who'd carried it to the grave, and the grave was their right, and six hundred years was their privacy. Niamh would not break into a dead stranger's house just because she had the longing and the lamp.

A book that communicates and cannot be understood. She had lived inside that sentence every day of her life. She had never once, until now, sat with a thing that lived there too and was not lonely about it. The book was not waiting to be rescued. The book was *complete*. It simply did not open to her, as her hands did not open to a room that refused to look.

The recognition wasn't sad. That was the part she couldn't have written on the pad and made anyone believe. It was company.

She drew her gloved fingers back from the air above the margin. Halloran was watching, and Jakobus from the door, motionless, his face turned toward her and the book both, reading the made thing and reading her reading it, asking his silent question of the room—*what is it for*—and getting, for once, no edge to pry under.

Niamh closed the folio.

Not as you shut a book you're done with. As you draw a sheet up over a sleeper you love and won't wake. Gloved hand to the cool edge, the lift, the slow lay-down of the leaf so no air slammed against the vellum, the soft settle of weight finding its long-known rest. The worn corner met the corner under it as it had ten thousand times. The lamp lost the hills of the page and the page went quiet and full.

The nonsense door stood wide behind her now, blown clean off its hinge, and through it she could see exactly what was on the other side. Not nonsense. Not an answer. A person, mid-sentence, six hundred years gone, still reaching.

Through the glass, the analyst shoved back from his laptop and said something to his unseen colleague that Niamh could read off his furious mouth without trying.

It said: *it's just not converging*.

She almost smiled. *No*, she thought. *It isn't*.

Down the corridor, a door she couldn't hear opened, and Naila came in carrying a folder thick with every solution anyone had ever sworn was the one.

Chapter 17—False Closure

The folder hit the worktable flat and loud, and Naila set both hands on top of it like she could keep the lid on. Halloran flinched. Through the inner glass the manuscript lay two rooms over in its cradle, watched by a guard and a thermostat, and Naila found she'd put herself between it and the laptop without deciding to.

"They sent it to me directly," she said. "Not a press release. To me."

Acquaviva pulled a chair around backward and folded his arms on the rail. Friik stayed by the steel shelving where he could move without being watched. Mara took the far end, camera in her lap, lens cap on. Niamh came in last and stood reading the room, the angles of shoulders, the held breaths.

"To you how," Mara said.

"An email. A man on a video link." Naila opened the laptop. "Dr. Aurelio Banti. And behind him, the whole time, this one." She turned the screen.

Banti had a wall of antique books bought by the metre and a smile that worked. Behind him, off to the side, a man in soft grey sat without speaking, hands loose, watching the call the way the operators down the corridor watched the corridor. The chyron under Banti said *CODEXA—DIGITAL HERITAGE & RIGHTS*. The man in grey had no chyron. Naila had learned, over twelve minutes that morning, that he was Vance, and that he let Banti do all the talking until he didn't.

She played it back from where it mattered.

"— so what I'm authorised to offer you," the recorded Banti said, "is co-author. Not consultant. Not acknowledged. Your name beside the reading. Codexa releases the full decipherment in March—a women's medical compendium, abbreviated Romance vernacular, the model found the convergence across four hundred years of attempts—and your name is on the masthead of the thing the world reads. Your statistical framework, your imprimatur. You're the one who held all three constraints and found the door."

Naila paused it on Banti's open, generous face.

"That's not even true," Friik said. "You didn't find a door. There's no —"

"I know there's no door."

"Then why are we watching it twice?"

She didn't answer. She skipped forward. On screen, Banti gave way, sat back, and the man in grey leaned in for the first time. Vance had a quiet voice; the recording barely caught it.

"Naila. I'll say the part Aurelio won't. We've read your file—the public part, the committee letters, the funding you didn't get. Three reviewers used the word 'temperamentally unsuited.' One used 'difficult.' You know the words. You wrote some of them in the margins of your own copies." A small pause, exactly placed. "We're not asking you to lie. The model produces a reading. People will believe it whether your name is on it or not; that ship is sailing in March regardless. The only open question is whether the most rigorous mind in the field is inside the room when it lands, or outside it, again, saying it can't be done while everyone else moves on without her. I can't make the world fair to you retroactively. I can give you the masthead."

Naila stopped it there. The room held still.

“He did his homework,” Acquaviva said.

“He did.” Naila’s voice came out even-spaced, the bursts she fell into when the floor wasn’t solid. “He knew the committee. He knew the funding. He knew —” She stopped. “He read it off a file. That’s all. It’s a sales technique.”

“It’s a good one,” Mara said quietly.

Naila looked at her. “Meaning.”

“Nothing. Yet.”

Halloran put the reading on the table beside the laptop without being asked, the herbal folio Codexa’s promo had used, a composite plant with a root that belonged to no plant on earth. Beside it, the model’s translation in a clean serif: *take the root, dried in shade, for the womb’s heat.*

“This is what your name would sit on,” Halloran said. “Lisa Fagin Davis put five hands in this book—five scribes, letterforms shifting section to section. The vellum carbon-dates fourteen-oh-four to thirty-eight. There’s no gold leaf and the lower outer corners are soft from thumbs, years of them. Whatever this is, people used it, and more than one person made it.” She didn’t raise her voice. “A model trained on four hundred years of guesses didn’t read it. It averaged the guesses and called the average an answer.”

“I know what it is,” Naila said. “I’ve taken the grille apart and the self-copying apart and the Romance apart. I know the position-bound glyphs—letters that only start a word, letters only at the end. The same word runs five times in a row and no human tongue does that. Zipf holds and Bower’s clustering holds and it behaves like language and then refuses to be one.” Her hands hadn’t moved off the folder. “You don’t have to teach me why it’s false. I built the proof it’s false.”

“Then I don’t understand the problem,” Halloran said.

“The problem is that I want it anyway.”

She said it plainly, and the plainness was worse than heat. Frik went very still by the shelving.

“It would close,” Naila said. “That’s the thing. For the first time in two years, the pattern would shut. Every committee that wrote me down as the difficult one, the one who couldn’t be in a room—they’d have to put my name on the most-cited thing in the field of the century. I’d be the answer to the question I was thrown out of asking.” She looked at the folio with its impossible root. “And it would be a lie. I know it would be a lie. And I’m sitting here doing the arithmetic on it anyway, which tells you something about the arithmetic.”

Mara stood up. She set the camera down on the steel shelf, lens cap on, deliberately, like laying down a tool she’d decided not to use, and crossed to the table.

“Say no,” she said.

“I haven’t said anything.”

“That’s the point.” Mara’s voice had gone flat and low, the register Naila had only heard from her twice. “You played it twice. You played us his pitch about the committees twice. You want us to feel it for you so it’s not just yours.” She put her hand on the table, not gently. “I’ve watched people decide to take the picture they shouldn’t take. There’s a face. You make it when you say ‘I haven’t said anything.’”

“That’s not fair.”

“No. It isn’t.” Mara didn’t back off. “I had a colleague. He filed an image he knew was staged—knew it—because his name on it meant he’d eaten that year. He had every reason. They were all good reasons. And the picture’s still wrong, and it’s still got his name on it, and people still believe the thing it shows. He didn’t lie. He just stood next to a lie and let it borrow his credibility.” She straightened. “That’s the exact

shape of the offer. He doesn't need you to fake a reading. He needs your name to make the fake one true. You're the imprimatur. You said it yourself."

"I said I'm doing arithmetic."

"You're doing the arithmetic where it comes out yes." Mara's jaw was tight. "I came on this because you were the one person in it who wouldn't. If you take it, I'm not—I can't be the lens for that. I won't shoot it. I'll walk."

The room rang with it. Frik had a hand pressed to his mouth. Halloran had gone to the inner glass without seeming to move there.

"You think I'd take it." Naila said it as a measurement, not a question.

"I think a man read your wound off a file and dressed it up as fair, and I've watched braver people than both of us go down to less." Mara's eyes didn't leave her. "Tell me I'm wrong. Not that you haven't decided. Tell me I'm wrong."

Naila opened her mouth. Closed it.

Acquaviva spoke into the gap, very mild. "The day it closes easy," he said, "run."

But he was looking at Naila when he said it, and there was no comfort in his looking, only the patient attention of a man who has watched the field break good people on exactly this stone.

Naila reached out and turned the laptop back to face her. She didn't play it again. She looked at the still frame: Banti's open face, and behind it the grey man who'd done the real work, who'd read her three reviewers and one word *difficult* and laid it on the table like a card he'd been holding her whole career.

"He's right about one thing," she said. The bursts had gone out of her voice. What was left was quiet and exhausted. "It's sailing in March regardless. With my name or without it, that reading goes out and people believe it, because a maybe doesn't sell and an answer does. My saying no doesn't stop the lie. It just keeps me out of the room when it lands. Again."

"So you take the masthead," Frik said, and it came out raw, not an accusation, almost a plea, "and at least there's one honest person inside it?"

"No," Mara said.

"I'm asking *her*," Frik said.

Naila looked at the folio with the womb-heat root, then through the glass at the soft-cornered real thing two rooms over, the thing four-hundred-odd years into a silence it had kept against the Friedmans and Tiltman and Currier and every certainty that had come for it. She put two fingers on the edge of the folder and squared it to the grid of printouts, lining the corner exactly to the corner under it.

"I have until the launch to answer," she said. "He gave me a countdown clock. It's running."

"That's not an answer," Mara said.

"No." Naila kept her hand on the folder, on all of it, the whole contradiction held shut under her palm the way it always was, the way no one else in any room could hold it. "It isn't."

Mara stood there a moment longer. Then she picked her camera back up off the shelf, and Naila saw her not take the cap off, saw the shot stay untaken, and she went to the door and stopped with her hand on it.

"When you decide," Mara said, "I want to hear it from your mouth before I hear it from his."

She went out. The door didn't quite close. Down the corridor, beyond where Niamh could hear it, another door opened.

Naila sat with her hand on the folder and the still frame glowing in front of her, the grey man waiting in good lighting, the clock running. The thing she was good at—holding all three, never picking, never binning,

never letting the contradiction shut—pulled at her now from the wrong direction, asking her to let it close at last and put her name where the floor gave way.

She didn't turn the laptop off. She left it on, facing her, and looked at it, and did not yet decide.

Chapter 18—The Gift Withheld

The reading room had its own weather. Niamh had learned to read it the way she read everything, through the soles of her feet, through the skin of her face, through the small pressures the world made when it forgot she was watching. The climate control breathed a steady cool from the vents above the cradle, a current she felt at her hairline. The light came down in a long, low rake across the open folio, angled so it caught the texture of the vellum without burning into it. Everything in here was kept just below the threshold of harm. Cool enough. Dim enough. The whole room held its breath so the book would last.

She came to stand beside Jakobus and did not touch him.

You learned that, with him. He read bodies too, not the way she did but close enough that the two of them had circled each other across three rooms now like two cats deciding the same windowsill. He stood with his hands clasped loose behind his back, the always-clean hanky a white corner in his breast pocket, his dark glasses pushed up into his hair where the reading-room rule had banished them from his face. Halloran's rule. *Pencils only, no shades over the desk, nothing that hides your hands.* He'd surrendered the glasses without a word, and Niamh had watched the small tax of it on a man who used them to keep some of himself behind glass.

Now he had nothing behind glass. He was looking straight down at the open page and the page was looking back at nothing.

She knew the look on him. She had spent her life cataloguing the moment a face gives up a question. In hearing rooms, mostly. The face that has decided you can't follow, that swaps the work of speaking-to-you for the easier comfort of speaking-near-you. She had ten thousand of those filed in her body. This was rarer. This was the face of a man who had asked a true question of an honest thing and gotten, for the first time, no answer back.

She had watched him in Cape gravel and on some godforsaken shelf of basalt off Yonaguni and once in a museum basement that still smelled of the river it had drowned in, and every time the made thing told him eventually. A hull told him where the water sat. A wall told him which way men carried stone. A toolmark told him the hand that held the tool. He'd put his attention on a thing and the thing would open like a flower under a slow camera, and he would say, quiet, *this is for keeping grain dry* or *this was carried, see, it is worn where a strap would ride*, and he was always, maddeningly, right, because the made thing wants to be understood. That is the whole bargain of making. You make a thing for a use and the use stays in the thing.

This thing would not say.

She watched his jaw. The muscle there had been working in small increments since she'd arrived at his shoulder, a clench and release she felt more than saw, the rhythm of a man humming under his breath to keep time. *Music as metronome*, Mara had named it once, the beat he carried in his body to walk by. The beat was off now. The metronome had nothing to march toward.

Behind them, across the secondary table, Naila had her folder open again. Niamh felt the air shift as pages turned, the particular crispness of Naila handling paper when she was anxious, the same three folios over and over. Frik was by the inner glass with his forehead nearly against it, doing the thing where his shoulder jumped and he let it, twice, three times, his lips moving on a word he was feeding himself to keep the louder

ones down. Mara stood apart with her camera lowered against her thigh, lens cap on. She'd had it capped for an hour. That, too, Niamh read: Mara had decided there was nothing here to take that taking wouldn't ruin.

And Acquaviva sat at the end of the table with their reading glasses pushed down their nose and their hands folded on a printout of entropy curves they no longer needed to look at, watching Jakobus the way the rest of them were, because the man's stillness had become the most legible thing in the room.

Halloran stood in the doorway between the rooms. She always stood on the boundary.

Niamh moved to where Jakobus could see her hands if he wanted them, and signed nothing yet, just made herself present in his peripheral field, an offer he could take or leave. He took it. He glanced at her, those pale eyes that the desert had bleached the patience into, and made the small courtesy he always made, two fingers toward his own eye and then toward her. *Sawubona*. I see you. He had maybe six signs and that was one of them and he spent it like he meant it.

She lifted her chin at the page. *What does it say to you?*

He looked back down. His mouth opened and closed. And then his hands came round from behind his back and he showed her, in the slow pidgin they'd built. Fingers spread above the vellum, not touching, tracing the soft-cornered edge where four centuries of thumbs had worn the calfskin to suede. *Used*, his hand said, the gesture he'd taught her on day one, a thumb riding an invisible edge. *Used, used, used*. Then he turned his palm up and held it empty over the open folio, over the script that flowed across it in its fluent, confident hand, twenty-some characters dancing their lawful impossible dance, and he closed the empty hand into a soft fist and pressed it, once, against his own sternum.

She understood the shape of it without translation.

The thing about a made thing, he'd told them in Newark over instant coffee, was that even when you couldn't read a word of it you could read the wear. You read where the fingers went. You read which corner got turned a thousand times and which page stayed clean because nobody needed it. The book was *heavily thumbed*, Fagin Davis's phrase, and Halloran had shown them the proof of it under the raking light, the vellum gone tender at the lower outer corners where a working hand had turned and turned and turned. Someone had used this daily. Someone had loved it like a tool that does its job, which is the deepest and least sentimental love there is.

And that was exactly the cruelty. The wear told him *that* it was used. The wear could not tell him *for what*.

A hull tells you. A wall tells you. This told him only that it had mattered, urgently, to hands now six centuries into the dark, and then it shut the door on him and kept its meaning behind it.

She felt the cost arrive in him like weather changing. Not a crack. Jakobus didn't crack, that wasn't the register of him. A settling, a great slow lowering of a load he'd been carrying his whole life without ever once setting it down. His shoulders came down a quarter inch. His breath went long. The metronome stopped entirely.

Across the room, Naila's chair scraped. Niamh turned and caught it on Naila's face, the same falling, but younger and wilder, less practised at the bearing of it. Naila had her folder pressed flat now and her hand over her own mouth and her eyes very bright, and Niamh knew that look from inside her own chest: the look of someone who needs the maybe to be a yes more than she has ever needed anything, watching the one person in the room who reads made things for a living come up empty against this one. Because if *he* couldn't, then nobody could, and if nobody could then the most beautiful pattern Naila had ever held in one hand—the triple bind, the language-that-isn't, the lawful impossibility she'd cradled all this way—would stay a question, and a question, however beautiful, could not stand up in a courtroom or a journal or in front of the people who'd written Naila off her whole life and say *see, she read what you couldn't*.

Niamh held Naila's eyes across the cool dim air and didn't soften it and didn't sharpen it. Just held it. *Yes. I know. I know.*

That was when the door down the corridor, the one that had opened in the dark after the screen died and

never closed, gave up the sound that Niamh didn't hear but felt, a footfall vibration through the floor and a change in the room's pressure as a body entered who didn't belong to its weather.

Vance.

She read him before she read his mouth. Clean hands. A jacket that cost more than the climate-control unit. The relaxed stance of a man who has already won and has only come in to collect. He stood in the outer doorway, just behind Halloran's shoulder, looking at Jakobus's lowered shoulders and Naila's hand over her mouth, reading them like a man reads a stock ticker. Niamh watched his face do the math. She watched him decide that this room full of brilliant people setting down a load was a press release.

His mouth moved. Mara, nearer, must have caught the words; Niamh saw them ripple through the others' faces a half-second before she read them off Vance's lips herself.

"Then we agree. It's unreadable." A pause, generous, almost kind. "Which is the story."

He had a phone in his hand. Of course he did. He was already half-turned, already composing it. She could see the shape of the next hour in the angle of his body: the embargoed launch, the countdown clock they'd shown on the dead screen, *Codexa presents the definitive history of the Voynich Manuscript*. Not a decipherment. He'd given up on a decipherment because he didn't need one. He needed the *certainty*, and the certainty he'd just been handed, free, by the best object-reader on the planet, was that it could not be read. *Even Jakobus Swart couldn't crack it*. That sold. The unsolvable was a product. The end of the question was the product.

She felt Frik's shoulder fire across the room, hard, felt the word come up out of him before he could weigh it, and even half-deaf to it she caught the cadence of it landing into the cool quiet like a stone into still water:

"You didn't read it—you *priced* it—"

Vance didn't even look at him. That was the obscenity of it. He smiled the patient smile of a man who has heard the room's emotions and filed them under *colour for the documentary*, and his thumb moved over the phone, and he said something to Halloran that Niamh caught only the end of—*rights*—and Halloran's spine went to a line Niamh had not seen on her before, the spine of a house defending its threshold.

But it was Jakobus the room was waiting on, and Jakobus had not moved.

He was still looking down at the page. He had not turned to Vance at all, had not given him so much as the back of an eye. And Niamh, beside him, felt the cost in him crest, felt the thing he'd never set down begin to slide off his shoulders for good, and understood that what was happening to him in this minute was not defeat, though Vance was selling it as defeat, though it would *photograph* as defeat. There was no word for it in any of the languages she half-had.

He lifted his right hand. Slow. He held it flat, palm-down, an inch above the open folio, above the fluent dancing script that the Friedmans had broken their teeth on, that Tiltman had bent his whole long sharp life against, that Currier had sorted into A and B and then died still not knowing what either dialect *said*. He held his hand over all that working wear and all that lawful impossibility, and he did not bring it down.

He let it hover. Then he drew it back to himself, slow, as you'd draw your hand back from a sleeping child, or from a face you wanted to touch and had no right to. He closed it. And he gave the smallest shake of his head—not to Niamh, not to Vance, not to the room. To the book. To the five hands that had filled it and carried their answer into the ground, which was, she thought, watching him, *their right*. The unheard, keeping their meaning. Keeping it even from the man who could read every other made thing in the world.

His mouth moved. She got it clean off his lips, and the shape of it went into her all the way down:

"It was made for a reason." A breath. "It was not made for us."

He stepped back from the cradle. One step. He bowed his head a fraction toward it, toward the scribes inside it, not toward anyone living, and the bow was the whole of his deferring, the master question handed back unanswered to the makers who had earned the keeping of it. Then he reached up and brought his dark

glasses down off his hair and onto his face, the second the reading-room desk was behind him, putting the glass back between himself and the world now that he'd shown it the one thing he had no armour against.

Vance was still talking. Vance would always be still talking. Halloran stood the threshold and gave him nothing, and Niamh felt the room reorganise itself around the man's noise as a body routes around a numb limb. Present, ignorable, no longer the weather.

Because the weather had changed in the other direction entirely. Niamh turned from Jakobus's retreating shoulders to Naila, and Naila had taken her hand down from her mouth, and her face—God, her beautiful pattern-drowned face—was doing the thing Niamh hadn't dared hope it would do. The brightness was still there. But the falling had reached the bottom of itself and found, instead of the floor everyone feared, something Niamh had no sign for and didn't need one.

Naila looked at the book through the glass and did not need it to be a yes.

You couldn't have proven the moment. There was nothing to photograph. Mara's lens stayed capped, and that was the rightest thing in the room—Mara, who knew that some witnessings are ruined by the taking, standing there witnessing and not taking. The vents breathed. The light raked low across a page no one alive could enter. Five hands had made this and used it and loved it and gone into the dark with what it was for, and the dark had held, against the codebreakers of two world wars and a model with a countdown clock and a clean man with a phone. Held, and would go on holding.

It was the gift of a thing kept safe. Including, Niamh thought—watching Naila breathe, watching Jakobus's glassed-over face find the doorway, watching Halloran turn at last and put her own body fully between Vance and the cradle like a closing hand—safe from us.

Through the glass the manuscript lay soft-cornered and patient and said nothing at all, and for the first time it was enough, and Niamh stood in the cool quiet and felt the whole room agree, without a word, that they would not open it.

What they would do instead was Mara's question, and Mara was already lifting her capped lens toward the inner glass, toward Halloran's gloved hands reaching for the cradle, deciding even now what she would and would not take.

Chapter 19—Kept Meaning

The conservation morning began at eight, and Mara watched it as an outsider to a craft she had no standing in.

Halloran came in with two coffees she set on the far counter, well away from the cradle, and pulled on nitrile gloves. Not the cotton from Codexa's promo film, the soft-focus gloves cupping a glowing folio. Nitrile, thin as skin. She flexed her fingers twice. The climate plant exhaled its long even breath, sixty-five degrees, forty-five percent, the numbers that kept fifteen calfskins from remembering they had been animals.

"Quire eight," Halloran said, to the room and to no one. "We pulled it last week. The gutter's stressed. I want to see whether the new humidity hold has relaxed the cockling."

She didn't narrate for their benefit. She talked to the book.

Mara had her camera capped against her sternum. She'd earned her slip in this room by photographing nothing she shouldn't, and she meant to keep earning it. So she kept her hands still and she paid attention.

The foam cradle was a pale grey saddle cut to the angle the binding could tolerate without strain. No flat ninety degrees, no greedy spread. Halloran lifted the quire from its melinex sleeve with both hands flat under the whole of it, like a sleeping animal, and settled it. She adjusted the snake weights, little beanbag strings in grey cotton, until the leaves lay open with nothing pinning them.

Then she didn't touch it. She looked.

Mara understood looking. She'd built a life on it, part of which she was still apologising to. There was looking that took, and there was this. Halloran's eyes moved over the open folio at a pace Mara couldn't have held with a camera up, slow and patient, the survey of someone reading damage by sight before deciding whether to risk a hand.

"There," Halloran said, and tipped the raking lamp.

The light came in low, almost grazing the surface, and the page changed. Flat light made it an even sheet of cream. The rake made it a terrain: ridges, a shallow valley where something had pressed and pressed, a sheen at the lower outer corner where the vellum had gone smooth.

Niamh had come to stand at Mara's shoulder. She read Halloran's mouth, read the lamp, read the page.

"You see the thumbing." Halloran lifted a bamboo lifter, held it a centimetre clear of the surface, indicated without contact. "Greased by skin. They came back to this section more than anywhere else in the book. The herbal. They worked here, day after day, with their fingers."

They worked here. The sentence stayed in the room.

The object was real and the room ran on that. Four bifolios, the Arizona lab, 1404 to 1438, four results in agreement that would not be argued apart. Iron-gall ink, cheap minerals—azurite, a copper green that had eaten through the page in places, ochre, chalk-and-egg white. No gold. McCrone had found a fifteenth-century workshop, not a forger's bench. The carbon dated the skin and not the script, and Acquaviva had made them all say so until it became a discipline rather than a caveat; but no one serious had ever placed the writing centuries after the animal. You couldn't lie your way out of the object.

You could only lie your way onto it.

“The plants,” Niamh signed, and Frik gave it voice without being asked. “She says—the plants don’t go with each other. Leaf, root, flower. Stuck together from different plants.”

“Composite,” Halloran said. “Every botanist who’s keyed them comes away with a maybe and a headache. There’s a folio people call the sunflower. If it’s a sunflower, the book’s a New World document, which the vellum says it can’t be. So the people who need the sunflower also need a time machine.” A small dry tilt of the mouth. “The plant won’t be the thing you brought it.”

Mara raised the camera then, slowly, cap still in her hand, the gesture a question. She caught Halloran’s eye.

The Beinecke had scanned every folio of MS 408 in high resolution and put it on the open web, free, which was the institution’s quiet pride and the thing that drove Codexa to distraction, since you can’t sell exclusive access to what the whole internet already holds. A photograph of the page wasn’t the issue.

“Of my hands,” Halloran said. “Not the open text. I don’t want a still of an open folio with my gloved fingers in it floating loose for someone to crop.” Her jaw set, not at Mara. “They cropped one of Acquaviva’s slides. Put it under their logo. Made it look as if she’d signed off.”

“I did not sign off,” Acquaviva said, evenly, to her screen.

“Your hands working,” Mara said.

“My hands working.”

So she shot the hands. Nitrile catching the lamp. The bamboo lifter held a hair above the page. The grey cotton of a snake weight against the cream. The cheap green eating through the vellum. Halloran’s pencil—pencil only, the room’s first commandment, no pen in six hundred years and none starting now—making a note about the loss in the margin of a worksheet, never the book. She shot the care. That she could photograph honestly, because it was happening in front of her and wasn’t a meaning she was importing.

She did not shoot the page as a riddle. The riddle-shot was the one that said *here is the secret, lean in*. She’d spent the whole trip learning to feel the difference in her hands, and she could feel it now, a small cold weight, a wrong note felt before she could name it.

The crew had been quiet a while. Naila sat at the end of the bench with Acquaviva’s laptop turned partly toward her, scrolling something Mara couldn’t see. Mara watched her do it and recognised the shape of it, the part of Naila that couldn’t stop running its tongue over a chipped tooth.

“Vance posted again,” Naila said. She turned the screen so the others could see. The Codexa feed bloomed, slick as a fragrance ad. **THE VOYNICH SPEAKS**. Beneath it, a grid of folio scans, the Beinecke’s free scans, each with a hand-lettered line laid over the margin in a font built to look medieval and read modern. *Mint and myrrh for the wandering womb. The third moon governs the bath.*

“NFTs,” Frik said. The word came out twice, a soft echo against his teeth. “NFTs of the pages.”

“Interpretations of the pages,” Acquaviva said, without rancour, reading the fine print to the bottom as she read everything. “It never says *translation*. It says *an interpretive engagement*. The lawyers wrote that. You can’t be wrong about an engagement. You can only be wrong about a translation, and a translation you’d have to stand up and defend.”

Mara kept the camera down. She let it run in her head anyway, as it always ran, what frame she’d build of the four of them around the bright dead grid, and made herself not lift the cap. Vance wasn’t in the room. He couldn’t be; he wasn’t on the slip, and Halloran’s reading room ran on slips. But the grid was the same instinct he had at the threshold: find the frame that already tells the story you’ve decided to sell.

It was her old trade turned inside out, and she watched it without taking from it, and that was its own small discipline.

Then it was time to close the quire, and the morning narrowed to one thing.

Halloran eased the snake weights off, one by one. She slid the bamboo lifter under the gutter to support the rise of the leaves. And as she brought the hinged section of the cradle up, the fold in quire eight began to open—the flap that, swung out, shows more than a single page. A rosette of inked rings and channels and little towers, a structure too big for one leaf, the thing that had made Newbold see a galaxy and someone else a volcano and a man at the door a moon governing a bath.

Mara's hand went to the camera. It went on its own.

Six hundred years of fold opening into raking light. The widest, oldest, most consuming frame in the building. She had the angle before she'd decided she wanted it: low, three-quarter, the lamp doing the work, the whole rosette lifting out of the cream into relief. Her thumb found the cap.

It would have been hers. She knew exactly what it would do once it left her hands. It would run on the same feed under the same logo, or worse, somewhere statelier, in a gallery, in a book of her own, *Mara*, the byline that made the rest of a career, the image people would still be cropping in thirty years. The foldout begged for it. It had been begging for it since 1912.

And it would do to the makers precisely what the grid did. It would lift the page out of the room where it lay used and patient and turn it into a surface to project onto. The shot would become the thing it meant, and the meaning would be hers, and the people who had thumbled this corner smooth would get nothing back but a frame they hadn't sat for.

She held it there, the wanting and the not-taking, breath held at the top of a stair. The cap was loose against her thumb. The light was perfect. Nobody in the room would have stopped her. Halloran had said *not the open text*, but the foldout wasn't text, the foldout was image, and an image had no caption until you gave it one, and the lawyers' own loophole would have covered her too.

She thought about the byline. She let herself think about it honestly, all of it, the part of her that had come back from the field with nothing to show but the worst things she'd ever seen and a name that still meant *the one who got the shot*. She wanted it. She didn't pretend she didn't.

She put the cap back on.

The click was very loud.

Halloran looked up. She caught the lowered camera, the cap home, and the look she gave Mara was the one she'd given the book all morning, recognition and something gentler under it. She didn't say anything. She closed the foldout into its fold, the rosette folding back into the dark it had kept for six centuries, and brought the hinge down, and laid the leaves flat.

Mara lowered the camera fully and let the strap take its weight. The not-taking felt clean, clean as an honest exposure, the rare frame where you didn't have to apologise to anything afterward.

Acquaviva was already pulling the worksheet, the transfer log, the dull paper that ran the room. "We'll need signatures," she said. "Everyone who handled the bench."

Across the room Jakobus stood near the cradle with his back to them, his white hanky folded in one hand and doing nothing, his sunglasses still on under the soft archival light. He'd gone quiet days ago and stayed there. He didn't reach for the worksheet. He stepped back from the cradle to make room, making room around something he'd decided to leave whole.

The pen lay on top of the log where Acquaviva had set it. Mara looked at the closed quire, and the closed laptop, and the page she had decided not to make her name on, and waited to see who would sign first.

Chapter 20—Held and Handed Back

The pen was a Bic, chewed at the cap, and Acquaviva set it on the transfer log without ceremony. “Black,” she said, when Friik looked at it. “It’s the only one I’ve got. Everyone who touched the bench signs.”

Friik signed. His name came out in his own bad hand, the F slewing where his hand decided to slew, and he let it, because fighting his own grip on a four-for-a-dollar biro in a quiet room cost more than it bought. “Friik,” he said, tapping the period twice by accident. “That’s me.”

Niamh slid the log around and printed NIAMH in clean block capitals, the pen steady where his had wandered. Acquaviva took it back and checked the column against the handling record, folio by folio, request slip by request slip: who asked for what, who carried what, who set it down. Unglamorous arithmetic. The spine of the whole three days.

“Cradle’s logged,” she said. “Quire eight’s back in its folder. Dr. Halloran has the seating.”

Across the room Jakobus stood near the empty cradle with his white hanky folded in one hand, doing nothing, sunglasses on under the soft archival light. He’d stepped back to make room and he stayed back. He didn’t reach for the pen. When Acquaviva glanced at him he shook his head once, *I didn’t touch it*, and that was true, he hadn’t, not all morning, and she crossed his line out of the handling record with a single stroke.

The reading room ran cool and even, fifty percent humidity, sixty-five degrees, the climate plant keeping its forever hum so that a calf dead six hundred years could keep being a book.

Acquaviva’s laptop was still open on the side table, and the screen still held what it had held all morning. *Codexa—Digital Heritage & Rights*. The grid of the Beinecke’s own scans with fabricated captions ladled underneath—FOLIO 33V: THE SACRED LOTUS, FIRST DECIPHERED VERSE—and a countdown, and a price, and a button.

The countdown was running down toward a launch that wasn’t going to happen.

Friik watched the number drop and watched something happen under it that he didn’t understand until Acquaviva did. The price field flickered. The MINT button greyed. Then a banner crawled across the top of the grid in the platform’s own dull sans-serif: *Listing under review. Rights claim disputed*. And beneath that, smaller, the line that did the real work: *Image rights: Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University. Open access. Not for resale*.

“There it is,” Acquaviva said, not loudly. “Yale’s counsel filed Tuesday. The scans are a gift to the world. You can look at them all day. You cannot fence them as yours.” She turned the laptop a few degrees so the others could see, then closed the lid. “No exclusive. No certificate to attach the exclusive to. The thing he was selling needed both.”

Mara had her camera capped in her lap. “And the launch?”

“Pulled. The platform won’t host a disputed rights claim, and the partners who put money behind a deciphered-verse drop don’t want their names on a verse that nobody can read out loud.” She slid the worksheet square to the table’s edge, the last folio confirmed against the last slip. “The yes didn’t land. There was nothing under it.”

In the doorway Vance hadn't tried to come in. He'd been told, in the flat voice of a security officer who'd said it before, that the room was for registered readers handling registered material and that filming wasn't permitted, and he'd lowered his phone the regulation half-inch and kept it running anyway, angled at the floor, at their backs. A man already holding the footage he needed.

Now he wasn't filming. He was reading his own phone, thumb moving, and Frik watched the clean face do its small recalculation, the math of a launch that had collapsed under him before the clock ran out. He didn't make a scene. People who manufacture certainty don't make scenes; scenes are uncertain. He pocketed the phone, looked once at the closed laptop and the cradle with no book in it, and turned and went, off to wherever the next sure thing was getting built. The doorway stood empty after him, which was somehow louder than he'd been.

"He'll clip something," Mara said. "Us packing up. Run it under the cover-up."

"Let him." Acquaviva was already capping her own pen. "He's got no door to stand against now. The scans stay open. That was never his to close."

Halloran came over with the folder, two hands under it, the whole weight cradled, and she did not set it on the table. She carried it across the room: past the empty cradle, past Jakobus stepping aside, past Mara's capped camera, past the wet ink of Frik's signature drying on the dull paper. There was no open page for any phone to catch, and no phone left in the doorway to catch one. There was a folder, and a shelf inside the controlled cube, and glass.

She read the quire number aloud. Acquaviva confirmed it off the log. Halloran slid the folder home into its place among its neighbours, the place it had held since Kraus sold it in 1969, since the long Roman century before that, since Wilfrid Voynich carried it out of Italy in a crate in 1912 not knowing what he'd bought and never finding out. She checked the seating with two fingertips and stepped back.

The glass closed with a soft pneumatic sigh, the climate seal taking. Behind it MS 408 sat among the others looking like nothing, brown and modest and small, one item in a stack, scanned to the pixel and free to the whole world, available to anyone who wanted to look and look and not get in.

"That's it back," Halloran said. "Sign-out's logged. You're clear of the material."

Frik realised he was still holding the Bic. He set it on the transfer log beside his bad signature and Niamh's block capitals and Acquaviva's crossed-out line for Jakobus and the empty space in the column where a fourth name should have gone.

The empty space where Naila hadn't signed.

He looked at it. Then at the chair she'd sat in all morning, locked on the grid that was greyed-out now. Then at the glass.

Packing up was the same as packing up anywhere. Mara coiled the strap and zipped the body into its padded case and didn't lift the camera once on the way out, which for her was its own kind of statement and she made it without a word. Niamh stacked the loose worksheets and squared them and handed the pile to Acquaviva, who slid it into a folder marked with a request number that meant nothing to anyone outside the building. Jakobus picked up the two bags by the door, his own and one that wasn't, and stood holding them, ready, deferring on which way to go.

Frik gathered his coat off the back of his chair and his phone off the table and felt the room emptying of the thing it had held for three days. The air still hummed at sixty-five degrees. The shelf still held its modest brown spine behind glass. None of that needed him anymore.

"Reading room's done," Acquaviva said to Halloran, and the two of them shook hands the way professionals do at the end of a thing that worked, brief and dry.

Niamh touched Frik's sleeve. She didn't sign anything. She tipped her head toward the door, then held up four fingers, then folded one down, and looked at him.

He looked at the gap in the log one more time.

"Where's Naila?" he said.

Mara was already on her feet with the case on her shoulder. "She left twenty minutes ago. Didn't sign."

"I know she didn't sign."

"Two doors down," Halloran said, from over by the glass, not turning. "The overflow room. She asked me where the quietest one was."

Frik got his coat the rest of the way on. Niamh was already moving, and he went after her, out of the cube of forever-cool air into the corridor where the building was just a building again, the carrels with their bad chairs, and somewhere two doors down a light buzzing at a frequency none of them but Naila would have to live with.

Chapter 21—A Question Kept Whole

They found her in the small reading room two doors down, the overflow one with the bad chair and the carrel light that buzzed at a frequency Naila had stopped hearing an hour ago. Mara stopped in the doorway. Frik stopped behind her. Niamh came last and looked once at Naila's face and put a hand flat on Mara's shoulder—*wait*—and the three of them stood in the corridor a moment longer than was comfortable and then, by some agreement nobody spoke, went away again. Left the door open. Left her the room.

Naila barely registered them. She had her notebook open on the carrel desk and her own printouts fanned across it, the ones she'd brought from the flat, soft now at the folds, and she was looking at the page on top the way you look at a friend in a hospital bed when you've run out of things to say that aren't lies.

The page was a table. Her own table. Word-length frequencies in Currier B against word-length frequencies in Currier A, two columns of numbers she had computed herself from the EVA transcription on three separate occasions across two years because she had not quite been able to believe, each time, that they came out as they did. They came out as they did. The distributions were too clean. Natural language did not pile its word-lengths up in a smooth little hill like that. Natural language was lumpier, messier, full of *the* and *a* and *to* dragging the short end down and *responsibility* and *nevertheless* trailing off the long end. The Voynich words sat in their tidy binomial mound and did not behave.

She had loved that mound. That was the thing she could not get anyone outside to understand. She had loved it the way you love a clean rule. When she was nine and the world was a wall of faces saying things with their mouths that they unsaid with their eyes, she had found that prime numbers did exactly and only what prime numbers did, and had sat on the floor of the airing cupboard with a torch and a list of them and felt, for the first time, *held*. Numbers kept their promises. The mound was a promise. Zipf's law held in this book. She had plotted it, the long beautiful diagonal, word-frequency against rank, and it sat down on the line as obediently as any page of Latin or Dutch or Arabic, and that was a promise too, that meant *structure*, that meant somebody's mind in here arranging things by some grammar of importance. Bown's second-order entropy: about two. Lower than any natural language. More predictable. As if every glyph half-knew which glyph came next. Montemurro's networks, the words clustering by section, the herbal vocabulary keeping its own company and the balneological keeping its own. Promises, all of them. A book that meant.

And then the other column. The wall on the far side.

She turned a page. Position-bound letters. Some glyphs only ever word-initial. Some only ever word-final. Some living their entire lives in the middles of words and never once at an edge, and Rubio's line, which she had underlined so often the paper had a groove in it: *unheard of for any Indo-European, Hungarian, or Finnish language*. No tongue on Earth did that. And the repeats. Words that differed by one stroke recurring next to each other in a density that no spoken language produced because no mouth wanted to. The same word five times running. *Five*. She had checked the folio. She had checked it like a step she was sure she'd missed, with her finger on the line in the scan, counting, and there it was, a word knocked out five times like a heartbeat that had forgotten how to do anything but the one thing.

Language-like. And like no language. And not random. Rugg's grille made *features*, not the whole tidy entropy, and even then the grille was a century too young for the calfskin, and you couldn't grille your way to that low h2 and the five scribes and the heavy honest thumbing all at once.

Three statements. Each of them true. Each of them checkable. Each of them killing the other two.

She had been holding all three in one hand for two years and the hand had not closed.

That was what nobody understood. Not the band, even. The band understood the most, the band was the only place on the planet where she didn't have to flatten herself to fit the doorway. But even Niamh, who understood more than anyone, understood it as a *feeling*, and it was a fact with a shape, and the shape was a thing that could not exist, and Naila's whole life had been the relief of finding that things had shapes, and here was the one thing that had a shape and the shape was impossible.

She had wanted it to close.

She let herself, finally, in the buzzing little room with the door open behind her, know exactly how much she had wanted it to close.

Because if it closed—if she, *Naila*, no surname, the one whose school reports said *does not engage*, the one who could not hold a job that required her to pretend a meeting was about what people said in it, the one who at twenty-six still flinched when a stranger reached to shake her hand—if she had been the one to find the rule that closed the most beautiful unclosed thing in the world, then it would have been *proof*. Not of the book. Of her. That the thing she did, the only thing she did, the looking-at-the-numbers-until-they-confessed, was a gift the world had been too coarse to use. That the airing cupboard had been right and the playground had been wrong. That the writing-off was the error and she was the correction.

She had brought all of that into this room. Onto these pages.

And the book had taken it from her, gently, as it took everything from everyone, and given her back her own face. Newbold had brought his classical training and the book had shown him a galaxy in the ink-cracks and let him die believing. Cheshire had brought two weeks and a thesis and the book had let him see proto-Romance and Bristol had quietly taken his name down off the wall. Gibbs had brought his Latin abbreviations and the book had given him a women's-health manual that didn't, when you actually pushed on it, resolve into Latin that meant anything. Everyone who stared long enough saw the answer they walked in carrying. The Friedmans had known this. William Friedman, who had broken PURPLE, who had pulled the whole Japanese diplomatic machine out of the air with a pencil and a team and a war's worth of patience, had stared at this for forty years and the best he could offer was a guess: some early constructed universal language. Elizebeth Friedman, who was no one's lesser, had said it plain in 1962. *Doomed to utter frustration*. Not because they weren't good enough. Because the thing did not behave.

And Naila had thought, walking in, every single time she walked in: *but they didn't have the statistics I have*.

She put her hand over the table. Over the tidy mound of word-lengths. Over the diagonal that obeyed.

She had thought she would be the correction.

The grief of it came up through her so cleanly that for a moment she couldn't tell it from the relief, and then she understood that they were the same thing wearing two faces. The grief was *I will not be the one who read it*. The relief was *I do not have to make it say what it will not say*. She had been bending the glyphs, a little, for two years. Not lying. Never lying. She didn't have the equipment to lie to herself about a number; that was the whole point of her. But *leaning*. Choosing which true thing to stand on. Letting the mound mean *language* a little louder than the position-bound letters meant *not*. Going shopping, the smallest amount, in the smallest way, for the answer she'd brought.

Frik had said it three days ago at the bench, to the screen, to no one, in the flat involuntary way the truth came out of him sideways before his mouth had clearance: *you decided what it said, then went shopping for a language*. He'd been talking about the man on the monitor, the smiling one with the press release and the minted pages. But it had gone into Naila like a splinter and she'd carried it three days and only now, here, did she understand he'd been talking to her too. Not cruelly. He couldn't be cruel; the words went around the part of him that aimed. He'd just told the truth at the room and the truth had a wider radius than his eyeline.

She had decided. The smallest amount. And then she'd gone, very quietly, in the privacy of her own spreadsheets, shopping.

There was a sound at the open door. Not the band. She knew the band's sounds: Mara's careful tread, Frik's restless one, the particular silence that travelled with Niamh, who moved through the world as if the world were sleeping and might be woken. This was a stiller sound. A man on the wrong ground, holding himself very correctly, the way you hold yourself in a place whose rules you respect and do not own.

She didn't turn. She knew it was Jakobus by the quality of the stillness. He came no further than the threshold—he never came further than the threshold of a thing that wasn't his—and she felt rather than saw him take in the carrel, the printouts, the table under her hand. He was wearing the dark glasses he didn't take off even in here, even under the buzzing carrel light, and his hands, she knew without looking, would be empty and open and resting where she could see them, where a man's hands rest when he has spent a long life teaching people he is not a threat.

He didn't ask what the numbers said. He never asked that. All book he had been asking the other question, the one she'd thought was simpler than hers until she'd watched it not get answered either: *what is it for*. She'd seen him put it to the binding, to the calfskins, to the soft thumbled corners, to the composite plants that were a root of one thing and a leaf of another and a flower of a third and no plant that ever grew. *What is it for*. He read made things as she read distributions. And the book had done to him what it did to everyone. It had refused to tell him.

She'd heard, secondhand, what that had cost him. Halloran had said it without saying it, that the big quiet man had stood at the glass yesterday for a long time and then put his hand on it, just once, flat, and taken it away, and said nothing, and that the saying-nothing had weight. The master question, gone hungry. The one made thing on Earth that would not hand back what it was for.

And yet here he was at her door. Off his ground. Standing where the custodians ruled and the makers ruled and he ruled nothing.

He looked at her hand over the table. She felt the look as a change in the air, like a window opening in another room.

"It's a good table," he said. His voice was low and unhurried, the desert in it sanded down by a long road. He did not say it the way people said it to her—*very impressive*, the bright flat tone of someone signalling they've decided to find you remarkable so they can stop having to understand you. He said it like a knife was a good knife. A true thing about the made thing. "You made it three times."

"I didn't trust it," she said.

"You were right not to," he said. "And it held."

She looked at the mound. It held. The numbers had kept their promise. The promise just wasn't the one she'd needed it to be. The promise was only *this is what is here*. Not *and here is why*, not *and here is the door*. Only *this, exactly this, and no more, and I will not lie to you and I will not let you in*.

"I wanted to be the one," she said. She had not said it out loud before. The room was small enough and the man at the door was far enough away—a courtesy distance, a Sawubona kind of distance, *I see you and I will not crowd you*—that she could say it into the buzz of the light and have it be almost private. "I wanted to read it. So they'd know I was—" She stopped. The word *correct* was too small and the word *worth* was too large.

He didn't fill the silence. That was the thing about him she had decided, early, that she trusted: he let a silence be the length it needed to be. Most people poured words into a gap like they were stopping a leak.

"The Friedmans wanted to be the ones too," she said, finally, to the table. "Forty years. Newbold died wanting it. There's a man down the corridor right now who's decided he's the one and went and bought a language to fit." She turned a page back over, covering the mound, squaring the printouts into a stack with her two hands, the gesture she made over anything she was finished arguing with. "Everyone who looks at it long enough sees themselves looking back."

“Ja,” he said. Quietly. The way a man agrees who has stood at a glass with his hand flat against it and seen his own master question not answered.

And there, in his *ja*—not approval of a solve, because there was no solve; not comfort, because he didn’t traffic in comfort; only the recognition of one person who’d had a thing taken from them gently by another person who had—Naila felt the last of the leaning go out of her.

She did not close the notebook with a flourish. There was no flourish in her. She slid the printouts back into the cardboard folder she’d carried them in, soft folds and all, and she did not throw them away, because they were true and you did not throw away true things, you only stopped asking them to be more than they were. The mound would still be a mound tomorrow. Zipf would still hold. The letters would still stand at their fixed posts, word-initial and word-final and forever-medial, refusing every language on Earth. The word would still beat five times in a row on that one folio. None of it would close. She was setting it down not because she’d solved it but because she had finally understood that solving it was not the same as honouring it, and that she had been about to trade the second for the first, in the dark, in the privacy of a spreadsheet, the smallest amount, the way everyone did.

She held the folder against her chest. The maybe was still in it. Whole. Uncracked. Hers to carry and no one’s to seize.

“It’s still a question,” she said.

“Ja,” said Jakobus, from the door. “Keep it that way.”

Down the corridor, in the room with the glass cube, the book sat behind its climate-controlled hush, unread and unchanged and exactly as much itself as it had been six hundred years ago in some other room under some other light, in the hands that had thumbed it soft and taken their answer into the ground. And Naila found she could feel its presence from here, two doors away, not as a problem and not as a prize but only as a fact she got to be near. That was the gift. Not the solve. The nearness. The being allowed to sit in the same building as the most eloquent unheard thing in the world and not need it to speak.

She stood up. Her legs had gone to sleep. She had been in the chair a long time.

“They signed the log,” Jakobus said. “There’s a space.”

She thought of the dull holy paper, the transfer record, her name’s worth of empty line.

“Yeah,” she said. “I’ll come sign.”

Chapter 22—The Unread

Niamh felt the climate control before she heard the idea of it. A pressure low in the floor, a steadiness that came up through her boot soles and settled in her sternum like a held note. She'd learned early to live by what came through the bones. The cube room hummed at a frequency she would never name and always know, and she stood in front of the glass with her hands loose at her sides and let it tell her the room was alive.

Behind the glass, on its foam cradle, the book.

It was smaller than she'd carried it in her head all these months. They always were. The things that ate your year shrank to the size of a hand when you finally stood over them. Two hundred and forty leaves of calfskin that had been a herd of animals before they were a question, thumbed soft at the lower corners where six centuries of fingers had turned and turned and turned, and you could see it even through the glass, even in the conservator's careful raking light. The wear was not in the spectacular places. Not the nine-rosette foldout. Not the bathing figures. It was at the corners of the working pages, the herbal, the recipes with their little star-marked paragraphs, the places a hand goes when a hand is *looking something up*.

Used. Not displayed. Used.

She put her palm flat against the cold glass, and Dr. Halloran, two metres off with her own gloved hands folded, did not tell her to stop. The conservator only watched, and after a moment lifted her chin a fraction—*yes, you may, it's only glass*—and that small permission landed in Niamh like warmth.

Mara stood off to the left with the camera down at her hip, strap across her body, lens cap on. She had not raised it. Niamh caught the deliberateness of it. Mara had walked in, registered the page laid open, the light, the one frame sitting there *begging*—the herbal leaf with its impossible plant, root of one thing and leaf of another and a flower that grew in no field on earth—and had decided, with her whole body, to leave the lens cap on.

Niamh signed, small, just for her: *You're not shooting*.

Mara's mouth did the thing it did instead of smiling, the corner that had survived the places that took the rest. She signed back, clumsy, the four signs she'd drilled in airports for six months: *Not this one*.

Why.

Mara looked at the open page a long time. Then she lifted her free hand and did the only sign she'd made her own, the one she used now for the thing she would not do: fingers spread, drawn slowly back from the eye. *I'd take it. They'd lose it*.

Niamh felt it through the bones, without sound.

Acquaviva came in with a laptop he did not open and a folder he did not need. He carried the numbers behind his eyes like other people carried their own phone numbers. He stood beside the cube and looked at the book like a person he'd spent a decade arguing with and grown to love.

Frik signed nothing. Frik did not sign. He stood very still by the door with his hands jammed in his armpits, the stance he took in rooms that mattered, holding the pressure down, and Niamh watched him do it and loved him for the discipline of it, for what he was spending to be quiet here.

Naila came in last, the folder against her chest as she'd carried it out of the overflow room, Jakobus a half-step behind her, off his ground in a way that made him bigger somehow, too large for the foam and the pencils, a desert standing inside a library. He had the shades pushed up into his hair. He had taken them off, indoors, for the book. Niamh clocked that and held it.

Seven of them around the glass cube. The most eloquent unheard thing in the world inside it.

Acquaviva spoke. Niamh read him off the front of his face, the shapes his lips made and the lift of his hands, and Naila stood close and fingerspelled the words that didn't carry, fast and low against her own thigh where only Niamh would see. They had worked out this rhythm months ago without ever discussing it. It was the closest thing Niamh had to being *in* a hearing room instead of pressed against its window, and she was aware, standing here, of how rare that was, and how it was about to end, and how that was all right.

"You want me to tell you what it is," Acquaviva said. Niamh got *want*, *tell*, *is*, and Naila's fingers filled the gaps. "Everyone does. The journalists, the donors, the man with the documentary."

He meant Vance. Niamh had watched Vance through glass too, last week, in a different building. The clean hands, the soft grey people behind him, the glossy deck on the tablet with the AI model and the rights schedule and the words *we've solved it* in a serif font that cost more than a year of Acquaviva's bench work. Vance had wanted certainty. Certainty was the product. A maybe didn't sell tickets.

Vance was not here. The press release had not gone out. Niamh did not fully know why. Jakobus knew, and Halloran knew, and there had been a meeting she'd watched from the corner reading faces, and the long and short of it was that the manufactured solve had needed the manuscript to be *something*, and the manuscript had declined, as it had declined for everyone, and a decipherment you can't actually run on the page falls apart the second a real linguist looks at it for an afternoon. Acquaviva had looked at it for an afternoon. That had been the whole of the war.

"So," Acquaviva said. "Here is what it does." And he laid it out, gently, for the room.

Naila's fingers flew. *Zipf holds*—the word-frequency curve, the one that says language, the one that killed *gibberish* a hundred years ago. *Second-order entropy low—h2 about two—more predictable than any natural language and still language-like higher up*. The two dialects, A in the herbal, B in the baths. The semantic clustering, words gathering by section as real words gather by subject.

And then the other wall, which Acquaviva refused to let anyone climb over.

Position-bound letters—Naila's fingers slowing now, because this was the part that cut—*some glyphs only at the start of a word. Some only at the end. Some only in the middle. Never anywhere else*. Niamh watched Naila spell it and watched Naila's own face while she spelled it, the grief and the cleanness both. *No Indo-European language does this. No Hungarian. No Finnish. Rubio said so. It's unheard of*. Words that differed by a single letter, repeating absurdly. The same word, five times in a row.

Language. And no language. And not random. Three facts that would not sit in the same hand for anyone.

Except Naila, who could hold them. Who had nearly drowned holding them. Who was holding them now and not reaching past them to the place where they resolved, because she had learned this week that the place where they resolved did not exist, and that pretending it did was the small theft everyone committed in the dark—you decide what it says, then you go shopping for a language.

Frik said it. Out loud. The whole sentence, flat and fast and involuntary, into the hush of the cube room: "You decide what it says, then you go shopping for a language."

It landed. Niamh felt it off the faces. Acquaviva did not flinch. He nodded, slow, like a man hearing his own thesis read back better than he'd written it.

“That’s it,” Acquaviva said. “That’s every one of them. Newbold saw Greek shorthand in the cracks of the ink. Wasn’t there—Manly proved it was the ink ageing. Brilliant man, decades of his life, and he found his own eye. Gibbs, the abbreviated Latin, women’s-health manual—Lisa Fagin Davis read it and the Latin doesn’t make sense as Latin. Cheshire, proto-Romance, two weeks, Bristol pulled the press release off its own website inside a fortnight. Bax got ten words before he died and called it unfinished, which was honest of him. Every single one of them,” and here he looked at Naila, not unkindly, with the recognition of one obsessive for another, “started from a picture, or a wish, and built a key that only ever opened the one door they’d already walked through.”

He turned to the glass.

“The Friedmans couldn’t do it. William and Elizebeth. They broke real ciphers, enemy ciphers, the ones with men’s lives in them. Tiltman. Currier. The best of two world wars sat down in front of this and got up again with nothing. Elizebeth Friedman said the statistical attacks were doomed to utter frustration. Nineteen sixty-two. Sixty years ago. We have better computers and the same frustration.” A breath went out of him, close to a laugh. “We just have it faster now.”

Naila stepped forward then and put her own hand on the glass, beside Niamh’s, and the two cold prints sat there together over the open page.

She signed it. To Niamh, only to Niamh, with the folder tucked under her arm—*Thank you*.

Niamh tilted her head. *For what*.

Naila’s hands shaped it slow, like a thing she’d only just managed to say to herself. *For the wound. For leaving it open. I almost closed it. In the spreadsheet. I almost made it say something so it would prove I could read it. So it would prove I wasn’t the thing they wrote me off as.* Her hands stopped. Started again. *And you read it without reading it. You knew what it was the first day.*

Niamh had. She’d known it standing in this room the first time, before the numbers, before Acquaviva, before any of it. She had stood in front of the glass and felt the bones of the building hum, and she had looked at the book that was *fluent*—five hands, smooth, no hesitation in the ductus, no laboured enciphering, just the easy flow of people who knew exactly what they were writing—and she had recognised it like her own face in a stranger.

A thing that communicates. And cannot be understood.

She had lived inside that sentence in every hearing room of her life. The eloquence with no door. The fluent room she stood in and could not enter. She had not needed a single word of it deciphered to know it from the inside, because she *was* the inside of it. The book had not been a metaphor for that. It was the first object in the world that was not lying to her about it.

I didn’t read it, Niamh signed back. *Nobody read it. That’s not the point.*

No, Naila signed. *That’s not the point.*

Halloran moved to the cube and did the conservator’s small choreography. Checked the cradle angle, checked the page tension, the discipline of a person whose love was expressed entirely in not touching. She had told them all, the first hour, the rules: pencil only, no pens past the desk, request slips for everything, the gloves debate she came down on with a shrug—*clean dry hands are kinder to vellum than cotton, actually*, a thing that had delighted Frik so much he’d repeated it for an hour.

She straightened.

“You asked me what it’s for,” she said, and she was looking at Jakobus when she said it, because he was the one who’d asked, of every made thing he’d ever stood in front of—the binding and the thumb-soft corners and the cheap honest period minerals, no gold, no luxury. *What is it for*.

Niamh watched Jakobus. The camera was on him now, her camera, the bones one, the one that read faces. And she watched the master question fail him.

He had read every made thing in front of him for a lifetime. He had stood in this room for days turning the question on the book like a key in a lock he'd never met but always trusted himself to open. And the book had not told him. It was the one made thing in the world that would not say what it was for, and Niamh watched it cost him. The stillness went out of him, the desert stillness, and for a breath he was just a large tired man off his ground in a library, holding a question that had no answer the world would hand him back.

And then she watched him put the shades back down into his hair, and not force it. Watched him let the not-knowing be the thing he carried out, instead of a thing he broke open. He looked at the book, and he did the smallest thing, a slight bow of the head, the kind you give a person, not an object. He was handing it back. Across six hundred years. To the five hands that had written it fluent and taken the answer into the ground, because that was their right, and the keeping was the function, and some things are made to keep a meaning safe, including safe from him.

"It's a working manual," Halloran said. "Used hard, by people who turned to it daily, who knew exactly what it said because they wrote it. It's not a treasure. It's a tool. And the tool is still doing its first job." She let that sit. "It's keeping something. It's been keeping it for six hundred years. It's very good at its job."

Frik laughed, one bark, involuntary, true. "It's *winning*," he said. "It's been winning for six hundred years." And he said it again, softer, echolalia rolling it warm: "It's winning. It's winning."

It was. Niamh felt the room agree through the floor. The most patient object in the world, sitting in its hush, having outlasted the Friedmans and the codebreakers and the cranks and the documentary man with the clean hands and the serif font, having let every one of them walk in and find their own face and walk out, and remaining, intact, fluent, unread, *itself*, exactly as much itself as it had been in some other room under some other light in the hands that loved it.

There was the log to sign.

Halloran brought it on its own cradle, the dull holy transfer paper, and a pencil, and Naila signed her name on the empty line that had been waiting for it. The crew signed under her. Jakobus signed last, the Swart in a hand so square it looked carved.

Niamh did not sign with a pen she didn't have. She put her hand flat on the glass one more time, over the open page, the cold and the hum and the corner worn soft by other hands, and she held it there.

Mara lifted the camera.

For a second Niamh thought she'd break her own rule, the one frame, the page, the thing that makes a career. But Mara turned the lens away from the book entirely and put Niamh's hand on the glass in the frame instead, and the worn corner just behind it, blurred, present, never legible. The page would not survive the photograph. The gesture would.

And then Mara lowered it again without pressing the shutter.

She tapped her own temple. Signed it slow, for Niamh, getting the handshape almost right. *Here. Not on the card.*

No photograph. Niamh felt the shutter that did not fire more than she'd felt anything all day.

Halloran closed the leaf—careful, both hands, the page settling back into the body of the book like a breath let out—and the herbal corner with its impossible composite plant went back into the dark of the binding to be unread by everyone, six hundred years and counting, whole.

"All right," Naila signed, to all of them, to the room. Her hands were steady. The folder was still under her arm, the maybe still in it, uncracked, hers to carry and no one's to seize.

She looked at the closed book behind the glass. She looked at Niamh.

I don't know, she signed—the whole sentence, given like a gift, given like the first honest thing—and *I'm allowed not to*.

Behind the glass the hum held its single unnamed note. The book kept its meaning, the question stayed open, and somewhere out past the climate-controlled hush a contract sat unsigned and a press release stayed unsent and the certainty no one had been able to buy went on not existing. Niamh felt all of it come up through the floor and the bones, and she did not need a single word of it explained.

She turned for the door. There was light outside, ordinary library light, and the rest of it, whatever the rest of it was.

