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Thea sat at a desk in the centre of the Archive, leaning towards the screen and frowning, ignoring the ache at the base of her spine. She had chewed her pencil to a nub, and she pulled it from her mouth, dug a soft splinter of wood from between her teeth and rolled it on her tongue before spitting it away. She squinted harder, spinning the pencil in her fingertips. The man staring back from the screen looked listless. He was older than Thea, but not by more than a few years. Late twenties, probably. Thirty at most. He had thick, dark brows that met in the middle, and his eyes, dull and distant, were set deep beneath them. His nose was long and crooked, like it had once been broken, and there were freckles across the bridge of it. Did the man she want have freckles? A snarl escaped her. His lips were two stubby grey slugs, fat and shapeless, not at all like they should have been. Disgusted, she bit her own lip and swiped him sideways. No. Not him. The next face appeared.

Outside, a cloud shifted, and Thea raised her gaze to the vast, domed ceiling. The August sun was arrowing through the high windows, laying scorching yellow ribbons across

the floor and illuminating the rows of silent figures where they sat shoulder to shoulder along benches that fanned like bicycles spokes from the middle of the circular hall. Heat struck hard with the light, and she wiped her face on her fraying sleeve then tapped her watch, waking it. Her stomach twisted. Already, she'd been three hours. She rubbed her thumb over the smudged glass and dismissed the messages that had stacked up. She was damned if she was giving Springer a second of thought today.

Her eyes slipped back to the benches and the people absorbed in their miserable tasks. They were raking through the faces of the missing and the dead, the condemned and the condemners, all dumped together and decaying into one. The Archive was no different from the graves that pocked the landscape. From Newcastle to Norfolk, Cardiff to Cornwall, excavation of the communal pits was finally complete – leaving gaping cavities in the dry months and mud-brown lakes in winter – and the world's largest ever DNA identification programme was underway. Almost every UK citizen who survived the FEB era – those four catastrophic years of Free and Equal Britain that followed the election – had submitted their genetic profile in the hope of finding answers about the people they loved most, but the painstaking task of making matches was still decades from being done. Now, fifteen years after FEB's demise, those too old, sick or desperate to wait for official results came, like Thea, to the British Museum's old Reading Room to trawl the photographs, prison logs and scans of scrappy, hand-scrawled confessions. So many people had wanted to enter on the day it first opened that the riot spread through half of London. The UN was forced to use

the cannons, and images of raging, water-soaked survivors facing off with black-clad soldiers were beamed around the globe. *Is Britain Relapsing?* the headlines read. The Archive still always had a line at the door. New information was added almost daily – every fresh DNA result listed, every newly surfacing FEB-era photograph or snippet of data logged. It drew back wave after wave of the grief-stricken.

Except these people weren't like Thea. Not really. Thea knew what had happened to her parents. She wanted to know *who* did it. She pressed the balls of her hands into her tired eyes, listening to the collective hiss of whispered voices and the scribble of pens on paper. Beneath the Archive's church-like canopy, she felt the weight of unsaid prayers. When she finally found his face, she would remember. She knew she would. When she looked into his eyes, there wouldn't be doubt.

'Thea?'

Jemima's hand on her shoulder made Thea start. She looked up and flashed a mechanical smile, twitching her fingers and slipping her notebook underneath a sheet of blank paper before the old woman could see. For a while, when Thea had been pregnant, she'd been able to draw all sorts of things; the sycamore by the underpass that led to the Roundhouse, or the birds darting and dipping above the towers, or the skyline from her window. They were just scraps of the whole – leaves and gliding wings and streaks of cloud behind the concrete – but they were there. They were something. Now she was back to scribbling little more than the same face that she strained to remember, unsure whether each sketch honed his details or blunted them, whether her pencil took her closer or further away.

‘Hi, Mima,’ she said, letting her friend kiss her cheek.

Jemima dropped into the chair at Thea’s side and placed a book on the desk. *The Infinite Horizons of Space* by S.F. Leckie. She rubbed a wrinkled paw on Thea’s thigh. ‘Perhaps this one will be your passion, sweet pea? Perhaps you’ll be the first person from the Gritstone Estate in space, eh?’

Despite herself, Thea let her smile settle in. She knew Jemima’s game. *You need to find something that you love, Theodora. What makes your heart sing? Let it lead you to the future. Away from London.* Away from the past was what she meant. Thea had tried to explain that she couldn’t – she wasn’t ready – but Jemima persisted. *One day, sweet pea. One day, it’ll be time.* Thea picked up the book and slipped it into her rucksack. Jemima had given her a pamphlet about veterinary nursing last week and a biography of famous female journalists the week before. Once, she’d brought a book on how to build racing cars. Another day, it was *The Easy Way to Learn Mandarin*. Thea knitted her fingers over Jemima’s, linking into them. ‘Maybe, Mima,’ she said, and squeezed. ‘You never know.’

A grin stretched across Jemima’s face, and she pulled a bar of chocolate from her pocket, peeling back the wrapper and bending the soft brown oblong until it broke in two. ‘Have you eaten today?’ She passed Thea the bigger chunk.

Thea slipped the sticky sweetness into her mouth and nodded as it melted on her tongue. Jemima stared for longer than she needed to, and Thea’s eyes dipped as she felt her lie exposed. There wasn’t anyone in her life – perhaps not anyone anywhere – more giving of their time and kindness than Jemima Earl. When Thea had first staggered through

the Archive's doors as a teenager, overawed and afraid but utterly desperate, Jemima had plucked her from her knees and helped her through. She had taught Thea to read beyond her basic, stunted schooling and gifted her book after beautiful book. Jemima always checked she'd eaten, bringing her iced buns and apples and packets of papery crumbed ham. For year after year, she made Thea cups of tea, and sat and listened. She told Thea gently when it was time to turn her screen off, and she let her sit in silent, simmering fury until she'd calmed enough to face the long walk home. There wasn't anyone else to whom Thea had been able to tell the story of what happened – she didn't know anyone who had not been at the Roundhouse that day to see it, and that was entirely, unbearably different – but Jemima had teased the thorns of it out of her. Slowly and tenderly, she'd done her best to dress the wounds. She was one of those rare, precious people with the ability to always find the positives, and to give more than she took. Thea never fully understood why Jemima had chosen her to give to, but after years of no one else caring, she felt so glad to have a friend.

Nobody knew the Archive better than Jemima, either. Before FEB, she had worked as a school librarian, and when the moment came, she'd been swift and shrewd in snapping up a safer job. She'd worked in Whitehall for the full four years, organising the incarceration records. She once told Thea that she'd known eventually the world would come for justice, and she kept those records as clean, clear and detailed as she could, so that one day there would be evidence of who had blood on their hands. Thea swallowed the melted chocolate and dragged her knuckles

across her mouth. On the far side of the room, she could see the guard at the Archive's security desk skipping through the rolling news bulletins on her own screen. Every page was an image of the courthouse, the plush light-wood interiors or the grand stone facade. The guard paused on a page and took a bite of her sandwich. The video was soundless, but the pictures were unmistakable. They were the same ones that beamed from practically every screen in the city. There was a lone man in the dock with his arms folded, defiant. He looked down through the bottom of his spectacles. A lump lodged in Thea's windpipe. One man and one trial was better than nothing, apparently, but was there anyone who didn't have blood on their hands? The trial was nearing completion, the verdict due in just a few days, and the defendant and the decision of the stern, glossy-haired female judge that presided over him was all anyone could talk about.

Jemima followed the line of Thea's stare. She drew a thin breath. 'You've been here a lot this week, Thea,' she said quietly. 'Even for you.'

Thea's eyes sunk to her lap. She flicked her head.

'I don't know whether to worry more when I see you or when I don't.'

'I'm doing OK.'

'You sure?'

She nodded. She wasn't sure. She rarely felt sure. It had always soothed her to come here, or at least she could pretend that it did for a short while – for the seconds, minutes and hours when she felt that she was moving forward, working through options, making progress and inching closer. Recently she found herself having to stay

longer and longer and work harder and harder to feel any relief. But what else could she do? She couldn't bear to stay at home and hear the sounds of families through the Roundhouse's walls: the laughs and disagreements of everyday supper times, the toddler upstairs with his flat-footed scampering, Nina Farrell's newborn as his squall rang down the hall. She sniffed, and her hand slid to her belly. It was still bigger than it should have been, soft like dough and with puckered skin. This morning, the wound had been weeping again.

Jemima knew Thea's thoughts. Her frown thickened. 'How's the pain?'

Thea shrugged. Another lie would not get through, she knew. 'About the same. It comes and goes.'

'Still bleeding?'

'A little.'

'You need to see a doctor. Get yourself another lasering.'

Thea picked at her chewed, stumpy pencil. They both knew she didn't have the credits for that. Loss gnawed at her. She had called the baby Laurel, even before the girl was born. There were not many memories Thea had of her parents, fewer still where they were happy, but she remembered the one holiday that the three of them took to Devon the year before the election, when things like that could still be done. They caught a coach with tokens they'd saved from the newspaper, and she'd beat her father in a running race along the beach at Dawlish when he'd pretended to trip in the warm, coarse-grained sand. She'd saved a photograph from that day to her Archive homepage. Andreas and Rose Baxter and five-year-old Thea, beaming. She could see the edge of it peeping

from behind the parade of faces, a sliver of green grass and blue sky, her mother's shoulder, tanned and smooth. When they'd returned to the caravan that day, her mother made a wreath with leaves from the laurel hedges that grew around the campsite and placed it on Thea's head for victory. She'd not known the leaves were laurel then – she wasn't even sure they were now – but she'd collected up the scraps of that precious memory, pieced them together as best she could and embellished them, to give her something bigger to clutch. She missed her parents more than ever since Laurel. She wished they were here to tell her things would be OK.

Jemima placed her hand on the back of Thea's head and scratched behind her ear as you would a cat, like Thea's mother used to do. 'You're seeing her today, aren't you?'

Thea nodded, and sadness backed up inside her. 'At four,' she said. 'They've given me an hour this time.'

'Come for supper tonight, will you? I'd like to hear how she's doing.'

Thea dragged up a weak smile, and Jemima nudged closer, wrapping her arms around her. Her scent was sweet like the chocolate, and warm and musty.

'Don't worry,' she whispered into Thea's hair, holding her. 'You're doing so well. You'll get her back, sweet pea. Your parents would be proud.'