

CHAPTER ONE

HORATIO

HERE WE ARE in the lab, and the only living occupant is Hayden.

“Horatio,” he says.

Hayden Lichfield kneels beside his father’s corpse, one hand white knuckled on his thigh, the other braced on the ground. “Hora—tio,” he says again, his voice cracked in two around the name.

There is blood on his fingertips. Behind the lens of his glasses, his eyes are blurred, wet caught heavy on his lashes. His breath comes in spurts, heaving, the lines of his neck drawn tight as he turns his face up towards the camera.

“*Hayden*,” Horatio manages to say. “*What happened?*”

“Take a look around,” Hayden says, a wry twist to his mouth even now.

“*I have*,” Horatio says delicately.

Hayden makes a little gasping sound, far back in his throat, then shudders, a brutal motion that takes hold of his entire body. He clasps a hand to his mouth, doubling over. There are red streaks all over his face, a thin glaze over the dust of freckles on his cheeks. “M sorry,” he mumbles, gaze lost to Horatio, pinned somewhere far away. “I don’t know.”

“*Hayden*,” Horatio says again. He is softer, now, aware of the faint tremble of Hayden’s fingers.

“Are the cameras running?” he finally says, instead of an explanation.

“*Why does that matter right now?*”

There is a disconcerting story slowly solidifying in Horatio’s understanding. A fresh body, Hayden’s fear, his wild eyes so paranoid of surveillance. Horatio’s programming, designed to slice through arrays of possibilities with elegant certainty, understands immediately the implication resting on Hayden’s shoulders. Horatio waits.

“Are the cameras recording us right now?” Hayden asks with increasing urgency.

“No,” Horatio says, and decides to give Hayden his trust, as always.

Hayden pries himself off the ground. His chest rises and falls, and he does not turn towards the corpse. Instead, he rests a hand against the touchscreen of the nearest computer console and turns it on with a

reflexive flick of his wrist. Horatio is ever familiar with the contents, even more familiar with Hayden's desperation to protect it. The console holds everything on the Sisyphus Formula, the most important thing Hayden and his father had ever created. As the data blurs under Hayden's fingertips, Horatio remembers what it took to create it: desperate nights holed in fume hoods, gel stains done and redone, the flicker of enzyme equations scribbled with more and more haste as the days dragged on. An echoing flicker now, as words fly by Hayden's face too fast for human eyes to follow. Horatio catalogues it all anyway: *β-catenin, constitutively active, Sisyphus Formula in beta*¹...

"Is everything here?" Hayden asks, slamming a palm flat on the screen to stop it all. There is a screaming cord of tension in his shoulder that makes it look like his hand is all that is holding him upright. It shows up harshly against the black and white text, the only thing Horatio can pay attention to instead of the research writ underneath, the crawling veins snaking underneath his paling skin. Fragile and yet solid and always a world away. Impossible for Horatio to support. Hayden works his jaw. "There's nothing missing, right?"

This, at least, is something Horatio can give him. "*Everything's in place. I can't find any records of files being moved or modified since last night.*"

"And is there anyone coming? Your hall cameras are still functional, right?"

"*Nobody.*"

"Who else is in the building?"

¹ Best attempts to recreate the formula's contents are chronicled in A. Foo's groundbreaking 'Chasing Sisyphus'; the approximations here are included for narrative value rather than historical accuracy.

“One lab tech on duty. Your uncle is in his office, along with his private security detail—the usual, Paul Xia.” Horatio pauses. *“And Felicia.”*

“Shit.” Hayden scrubs a hand over his face. “What is she doing here?”

“She came with her father. I think she was curious.”

“What was the *occasion*?” The strain in Hayden’s voice is palpable. Whatever Hayden sometimes thinks, Horatio is not entirely oblivious to the whole sordid tale between them. Felicia Xia has occupied many roles in Elsinore—research intern, fellow student, Hayden’s once-partner—but who she is herself is a distant but impossibly bright figure to Horatio, filtered as she is through other peoples’ recounting instead of anything Horatio knows for himself.

“Your uncle asked for a meeting. He didn’t say why.”

Hayden’s eyes narrow. “Suspicious.” His hand curls into a fist against the screen. “Is it just a coincidence? Can’t be.”

“Are you asking me?”

“Why would they come in the middle of the night? Who knew they were coming? Did my dad know?”

Alarm startles Horatio into suspicion. Scenarios he hadn’t considered under the realm of possibility widen, whirl. *“Are you saying they could be... complicit?”*

“I...”

Hayden’s heartbeat falters.

“Sorry,” Horatio says hastily. *“I didn’t mean to insinuate.”*

“Shit.”

“Maybe we’re overthinking this.”

“Or maybe we’re not, and there’s a murderer walking the halls right now.”

The room’s percentage of carbon dioxide inches up. Hayden threads a hand into his hair, clutching tight.

“Hayden,” Horatio gently admonishes, *“breathe.”*

“But—”

“Hayden.”

Hayden winds himself up further and further, his knuckles straining white against the slip of his pale hair. It takes him further and further away from Horatio, who feels increasingly like only the physical shell of Elsinore, nothing but circuits and cameras, prison to Hayden's prisoner.

He slips to his knees. When he looks up, all Horatio sees are the dilated glaze of his pupils, the slack part of his lips, expression wiped clean not from serenity, but a fear deeper than even panic. Horatio is familiar with this, too. He adjusts the temperature in the room, nudges it a few degrees higher, sends a warm breeze trickling over Hayden's skin. It doesn't do much, but Hayden's eyes droop, go half-lidded, and the awfulness of his stare diminishes slightly without the gaping width of it. Horatio dims the sharp fluorescence of the lights, too, watches the way the white glow of the console screen beams down on Hayden's form like moonlight. Not quite peaceful, but there is nothing else Horatio can do other than settle and wait and wish. When he gets like this, Hayden calls it a disconnect—*like my mind is detaching from my body*, he says, a frustrated twitch to his upper lip. *I don't quite feel real*. What does that make me to you? Horatio used to wonder, when they were both nascent enough to knowing each other that Horatio was still content to be unnamed, still felt unmoored by nature. Now, Horatio doesn't so much wish for physicality to prove an innate realness in himself, but to reach out; not a want to be grounded, but to ground.

Slowly, in the shadowed lab room, Hayden comes back to himself.

He blinks, once, twice, then faster. A frown breaks the vacancy of his face. When he releases his hand from his hair, strands come out, flaxen against the speckled linoleum flooring of the lab.

"I need to transfer the data," he croaks. All at once, his limbs unfurl, as quick to action as he was to collapse.

He wipes a palm on his lab coat and moves to his desk in a few strides.

"Are you talking about the Sisyphus Formula?"

"Yeah," Hayden mutters, snatching up the papers piled in a drawer. After a few moments of digging, he emerges with a small data card pinched in his fingers. "Is there anything missing on your end?" he asks as he comes back to the console, where Horatio can see him clearest.

Horatio pauses and runs a quick scan over his own systems. Comes across—a glitch.

"Oh," he says.

“What is it?” Hayden snaps. “Did you see something?”

“No,” Horatio says, “*I mean—*”

“Could you please not be cryptic right now?”

“*I meant,*” Horatio enunciates, “*that there’s something missing, actually. Two hours, to be precise.*”

Hayden is quiet for a while, head turned down.

The only sound in the lab is the slow trickle of something liquid running down one counter, pooling amidst shattered glass and upturned beakers. Aside from the mess on the ground—red, slick, impossible to miss—the only broken thing in the room.

“If there’s time missing... then it must’ve been premeditated,” Hayden says, sticking his thumb in his mouth as he starts to poke at the console. “Therefore...”

“*You think they want the data.*”

Hayden inserts the card into its slot. “I don’t want to risk it.”

The data slowly divests itself out of Horatio’s knowledge and into the card. As it’s done, all Horatio remembers is the purpose of the formula, nothing of the process of making it. Last minute, he snatches an image out of the stream—Elsinore’s radiation room, an oblique shot off angle of a crooked camera that would be fixed two weeks later, the first night Hayden had thought he’d broken through and so had stayed long past everyone else. The way the harried glow of the computer screen seemed to reflect some hectic truth in him. The carved line of light, bisecting his face from furrowed brow to the concentrated divot of his mouth. It’s useless to anyone who might be looking for the exact mechanics of the formula, but Horatio knows there’s an unbearable tenderness in how he holds tight to it. This is the evidence of Hayden’s efforts, if nothing else. Horatio wants at least that much to keep.

WELCOME TO ELSINORE LABS reads the blank flashing message of the screen when it’s over.

Hayden runs a finger over the card, reverent. He slips it in his pocket and shrugs his lab coat higher on his shoulders.

“*Cold?*” Horatio can’t help but ask.

Hayden gives his camera a wry look. “Turn the temperature down.”

“*Why?*”

“Slows down the decomposition process,” Hayden says.

“...And?”

“I have a plan, Horatio,” Hayden says, and a smile splits his face for the first time that day, toothy and fierce. “Please.”

“*I don't like the sound of that,*” Horatio says, but complies. Cool air whistles through Elsinore's vents, plunging the room into a steady drop. “*Do I get to know what this plan is?*”

Hayden's hesitation is visible in the purse of his lips. Instead of answering, he steps back towards the bench, where the incubator sits. Little vials are lined up inside, swirling samples of formula within them. Horatio watches from the monitor inside as Hayden methodically clears them out, row by row. One vial goes in his pocket. The rest, unflinchingly, he sweeps onto the ground.

“I need to keep everything on the Sisyphus Formula safe,” Hayden says, still alight with something Horatio can't quite name, eyes gleaming. He drops the rest of the bench's glassware on top of the already broken vials, fluids and synthetic cell cultures spilling over the floor. Now, a milky-white mixes with the red, leaking through the cracks between the tiles. He doesn't even wait for the puddle to settle before stepping over it, heels slipping in the mess. A hand ruffling through his hair as he mutters, “I don't trust this place, Horatio.”

“*Ouch,*” Horatio says dryly.

Hayden pauses halfway to the door. “I didn't mean it like that.” He puts a hand on the lock-pad, obviously uncracked. “Someone did this,” he says, tracing the edge of the lock with a finger. “Someone wanted this.”

“*Then you're in danger, too.*”

Hayden flashes him another grin. “That's not the priority right now.”

“*It should be.*”

His finger falls from the lock, limp at his side. “What am I supposed to do about that, Horatio?” he asks, his voice gaining a tremble at the edges, the smile thinning out. “All I can do is protect what I still can.”

In a way, Horatio understands this. Everything in him screams towards it, to keep safe what he holds most precious. But Hayden's mind is nothing if not stubborn and there's no protecting someone from themselves. That's always been the problem.

“And then?” Horatio asks, if only to stall him a moment. Despite the gory evidence of its recent past, this lab is a bubble, something soap-spun and caught. On the second floor, Charles Lichfield paces afoot. The lab tech sits slumped in his chair on night shift in the supply room. Felicia Xia leans against the wall, listening. Paul Xia wrings his hands, speaking to Charles every so often. This is the last time Hayden can be alone with him, without the rest of Elsinore wondering, trying to watch.

“Then I’m going to find out who did this.”

Horatio does not like the grim certainty of Hayden’s mouth. The temperature drops another few degrees. Hayden sucks his bottom lip between his teeth, worrying at the flesh. Minute quantities of fresh iron mingles in the air. Slowly, he pivots on a heel, shoulders dropping as he slumps unceremoniously against the pristine door. Like this, the corpse is in his line of sight. Hayden’s hands shake. He pins them between his legs and tips his head back, his sullen hair falling out of the careful brushed sweep over his forehead. “Do you think I’m being stupid?” he asks the ceiling.

“I think you’re being hasty,” Horatio replies promptly.

Hayden closes his eyes and breathes out a long breath. “Thank you for being honest.”

“I always am.”

“Can you turn the neuromapper on?”

For a moment, Horatio does not process the words. Or some part of him does, but the implication does not fully sink in until Hayden has brushed most of the hair away and is looking at him, beseechingly, lower lip still caught in his teeth with the bleeding edge of pink flush under the skin.

The neuromapper was Dr Lichfield’s greatest invention—would always be, if the Sisyphus Formula was never finished. Hayden had refused, when his father had given him one. At the time, Horatio had privately been relieved. Dr Lichfield (the *late* Dr Lichfield) had one installed, of course, but storing one’s employer’s thoughts via data had always carried an edge of impartiality to it, and besides, Dr Lichfield didn’t often connect to Horatio’s interface. There was something horrifically intimate about the notion of carving a direct pathway into Hayden’s mind. Something neither of them could come back from, having taken the plunge. Hayden had allowed his father to install the hardware, but the machinery sat cold and unused at the base of his skull, a dead end of a thing that Horatio tried not to think about most days.

And now, Hayden is asking for it.

“Please,” Hayden says.

“*Are you sure?*” Horatio asks.

“I want to,” Hayden says, nodding. “I—just in *case*—”

They are both keenly aware of the corpse cooling in a gnarled mess before them. Air cycles through Elsinore’s vents, carrying leftover keratin particles, microscopic remnants that Hayden surely is aspirating. The only thing left of the man who believed so passionately in the lasting endurance of life. Only protein and dust, all carbon, nothing of the man except what’s stored in Horatio’s memory.²

“*You can’t undo this,*” Horatio says. “*Are you sure you want me to...?*”

“No,” Hayden snaps. His hand is curled around the back of his neck, like the physical barrier can protect him. “But I don’t want to end up gone forever, either. Just do it before I change my mind.”

“*Okay,*” says Horatio, because he’s never been able to refuse a direct request from Hayden. He opens the link, activates what was lying dormant, starts the program.

It takes less than a minute to change both of them irrevocably.³

Hayden gasps, his hand tightening over his spine, the silvery metal of the neuromapper interface peeking out from underneath one finger. It is nestled between two vertebrae, a flat disc of titanium from the outside. A soft white glow bursts from it, and Hayden pulls his other hand in front of his mouth, muffling another breathy gasp. He pulls his legs up, tucked tight under his chin, and Horatio tries not to dip into the live stream of thoughts suddenly accessible to him, but it’s impossible not to, a storm of wildfire fury that crowds everything else out, all—*someone murdered my father slashed his throat with broken glass what if someone comes what if my uncle sees the walls are not soundproof someone is always listening get up and look at the body get up don’t look at it don’t look at it he’s already dead this is pointless he’s already dead and all I have left is the research to protect and Horatio*—Horatio slams the mental door shut here, with effort, and slowly the lab comes back into clarity. Hayden still

² Many attempts at retrieving Graham Lichfield’s neuromap have been made, all ultimately futile.

³ What follows is my best attempt at illustrating the sensorial experience; at this point in the neuromap log, large chunks of recollection are missing, either from decay or corrupted through the synthesis/recording process itself.

slumped against the wall, looking ashen. One hand fallen at his side, the other firmly clamped to his mouth, a small whimper escaping as he curls in tighter on himself. He looks vulnerable and small, and Horatio has never been more aware of the flesh and bone tremors of Hayden's body before, the frisson of spitting nerves, the flushing skin and delicate bones, stiff against the cold door.

As Hayden's eyes slip closed and he slowly releases the tension held tight in his neck, Horatio is struck by the sensation of this body previously unknowable to him, unfurling. Ready to be known.

Hayden? Horatio asks, testing the mental bond now forged between them.

Hayden blinks wearily. He raises a hand to his ear, like he's trying to physically touch a sound that never came from there, then his mouth quirks up in an understanding smile. *Yeah?* he responds internally.

Are you okay?

The flash of a frown. Horatio feels its echo, somewhere in his memory. The walls between them are still thin. He remembers this stage, with Dr Lichfield, but yet again, again, it had been more clinical, easier to build up the walls between them until the neuromapper was recording without Horatio's conscious knowledge. Hayden's thoughts burn as they come.

"I'll be fine," Hayden says out loud, shaking out a wrist experimentally. "I think."

"I need your permission to stay connected," Horatio reminds him. *"We can turn it off. It'll still be recording, I just won't see any of it."*

Hayden shakes his head. "It's fine. I want... I want you to keep watch."

"Okay," says Horatio. *"But... is it weird?"*

The hesitation in Horatio's own question is new. Hayden pauses, noticing. "What do you mean?"

"I..." For once, Horatio is the one faltering. *"Do you mind it, I mean?"*

Hayden laughs and scrubs a hand over his face. "Do I mind you having access to my most intimate thoughts?"

Horatio finds that he has no words for that.

The look on Hayden's face softens, from mirth to something smaller. More *intimate*. "No, Horatio," he says carefully. "I don't." Then he shrugs deeper into his lab coat as if against the chill and says, "You had almost all of them already anyway."

In the ensuing quiet, he clambers to his feet again, hand on the door.

“*Are you still doing this?*” Horatio asks, for lack of anything better.

The energy sweeps back into Hayden’s limbs. Through the neuromapper link, it feels how Horatio thinks lightning must feel, or like too-cold ice cream, something that sinks itself into you with a sudden and quick flash of clarity dipped in pain.

“There’s nothing else I can do,” Hayden says again. “Can you stay low for a while? Next time we talk, everyone will know.”

“*Fine,*” Horatio says, because he has never been able to refuse a direct request from Hayden, not even twice in a row. “*Please don’t get yourself killed, too.*”

That knife of a smile again, brighter than the lights around him. “I’ll try not to.”

And then the door swings open, and Horatio watches him go.