People of the Book

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I

I MIGHT AS WELL SAY, right from the jump: it wasn't my usual kind of job.

I like to work alone, in my own clean, silent, well-lit laboratory, where the climate is controlled and everything I need is right at hand. It's true that I have developed a reputation as someone who can work effectively out of the lab, when I have to, when the museums don't want to pay the travel insurance on a piece, or when private collectors don't want anyone to know exactly what it is that they own. It's also true that I've flown halfway around the world, to do an interesting job. But never to a place like this: the boardroom of a bank in the middle of a city where they just stopped shooting at each other five minutes ago.

For one thing, there are no guards hovering over me at my lab at home. I mean, the museum has a few quiet security professionals cruising around, but none of them would ever dream of intruding on my work space. Not like the crew here. Six of them. Two were bank security guards, two were Bosnian police, here to keep an eye on the bank security, and the other two were United Nations peacekeepers, here to keep an eye on the Bosnian police. All having loud conversations in Bosnian or Danish over their crackly radio handsets. As if that wasn't enough of a crowd, there was also the official UN observer, Hamish Sajjan. My first Scottish Sikh, very dapper in Harris tweed and an indigo turban. Only in the UN. I'd had to ask him to point out to the Bosnians that smoking wasn't going to be happening

in a room that would shortly contain a fifteenth-century manuscript. Since then, they'd been even more fidgety.

I was starting to get fidgety myself. We'd been waiting for almost two hours. I'd filled the time as best I could. The guards had helped me reposition the big conference table nearer to the window, to take advantage of the light. I'd assembled the stereo microscope and laid out my tools: documentation cameras, probes, and scalpels. The beaker of gelatin was softening on its warming pad, and the wheat paste, linen threads, gold leaf were laid out ready, along with some glassine envelopes in case I was lucky enough to find any debris in the binding—it's amazing what you can learn about a book by studying the chemistry of a bread crumb. There were samples of various calfskins, rolls of handmade papers in different tones and textures, and foam forms positioned in a cradle, ready to receive the book. If they ever brought the book.

"Any idea how much longer we're going to have to wait?" I asked Sajjan. He shrugged.

"I think there is a delay with the representative from the National Museum. Since the book is the property of the museum, the bank cannot remove it from the vault unless he is present."

Restless, I walked to the windows. We were on the top floor of the bank, an Austro-Hungarian wedding cake of a building whose stuccoed facade was speckled with mortar pockmarks just like every other structure in the city. When I put my hand on the glass, the cold seeped through. It was supposed to be spring; down in the small garden by the bank's entrance, the crocuses were blooming. But it had snowed earlier that morning, and the bowl of each small flower brimmed with a foam of snowflakes, like tiny cups of cappuccino. At least the snow made the light in the room even and bright. Perfect working light, if only I could get to work.

Simply to be doing something, I unrolled some of my papers—French-milled linen. I ran a metal ruler over each sheet, working it flat. The sound of the metal edge traveling across the large sheet was like the sound of the surf I can hear from my flat at home in Sydney.

I noticed that my hands were shaking. Not a good thing in my line of work.

My hands are not what you'd call one of my better features. Chapped, wattled across the back, they don't look like they belong on my wrists, which I am happy to report are slender and smooth like the rest of me. Charwoman's hands, my mother called them, the last time we argued. After that, when I had to meet her at the Cosmopolitan for coffee—brief, correct, the pair of us brittle as icicles—I wore a pair of gloves from the Salvos as a sort of piss-take. Of course, the Cosmopolitan is probably the only place in Sydney where someone might miss the irony in that gesture. My mother did. She said something about getting me a hat to match.

In the bright snow light, my hands looked even worse than usual, all ruddy and peeling from scouring the fat off cow gut with a pumice stone. When you live in Sydney, it's not the simplest thing in the world to get a meter of calf's intestine. Ever since they moved the abattoir out of Homebush and started to spruce the place up for the 2000 Olympics, you have to drive, basically, to woop woop, and then when you finally get there, there's so much security in place because of the animal libbers you can barely get in the gate. It's not that I blame them for thinking I was a bit sketchy. It's hard to grasp right off the bat why someone might *need* a meter of calf's appendix. But if you are going to work with five-hundred-year-old materials, you have to know how they were made five hundred years ago. That's what my teacher, Werner Heinrich, believed. He said you could read about grinding pigments and mixing gesso all you like, but the only way to understand is to actually do it. If I wanted to know what words like *cutch* and *schoder* really described, I had to make gold leaf myself: beat it and fold it and beat it again, on something it won't stick to, like the soft ground of scoured calf intestine. Eventually, you'll have a little packet of leaves each less than a thousandth of a millimeter thick. And you'll also have horrible-looking hands.

I made a fist, trying to smooth out the old-lady wattle skin. Also to see if I could stop the trembling. I'd been nervous ever since I

changed planes in Vienna the day before. I travel a lot; you basically have to, if you live in Australia and want a piece of the most interesting projects in my field, which is the conservation of medieval manuscripts. But I don't generally go to places that are datelines in war correspondents' dispatches. I know there are people who go in for that sort of thing and write great books about it, and I suppose they have some kind of "It can't happen to me" optimism that makes it possible for them. Me, I'm a complete pessimist. If there's a sniper somewhere in the country I'm visiting, I fully expect to be the one in his crosshairs.

Even before the plane landed, you could see the war. As we broke through the gray swag of cloud that seems to be the permanent condition of the European sky, the little russet-tiled houses hugging the Adriatic looked familiar at first, just like the view I'm used to, down over the red rooftops of Sydney to the deep blue arc of Bondi Beach. But in this view, half the houses weren't there anymore. They were just jagged bits of masonry, sticking up in ragged rows like rotting teeth.

There was turbulence as we went over the mountains. I couldn't bring myself to look as we crossed into Bosnia so I pulled down the window shade. The young bloke next to me—aid worker, I guessed, from the Cambodian scarf and the gaunt malarial look of him—obviously wanted to look out, but I ignored his body language and tried to distract him with a question.

"So, what brings you here?"

"Mine clearance."

I was tempted to say something really borderline like, "Business booming?" but managed, uncharacteristically, to restrain myself. And then we landed, and he was up, with every single other person in the plane, jostling in the aisle, ferreting around in the overhead bins. He shouldered an immense rucksack and then proceeded to almost break the nose of the man crowding the aisle behind him. The lethal backpacker ninety-degree turn. You see it on the bus at Bondi all the time.

The cabin door finally opened, and the passengers oozed forward as if they were glued together. I was the only one still seated. I felt as if I'd swallowed a stone that was pinning me to my spot.

"Dr. Heath?" The flight attendant was hovering in the emptied aisle.

I was about to say, "No, that's my mother," when I realized she meant me. In Australia only prats flaunt their PhDs. I certainly hadn't checked in as anything other than Ms.

"Your United Nations escort is waiting on the tarmac." That explained it. I'd already noticed, in the run-up to accepting this gig, that the UN liked to give everyone the flashiest possible handle.

"Escort?" I repeated stupidly. "Tarmac?" They'd said I'd be met, but I thought that meant a bored taxi driver holding a sign with my name misspelled. The flight attendant gave me one of those big, perfect, German smiles. She leaned across me and flung up the drawn shade. I looked out. Three huge, amor-plated, tinted-window vans, the kind they drive the American president around in, stood idling by the plane's wingtip. What should have been a reassuring sight only made the stone in my gut a ton heavier. Beyond them, in long grass posted with mine-warning signs in various languages, I could see the rusting hulk of a huge cargo plane that must have missed the runway during some earlier unpleasantness. I looked back at Fräulein Smiley-Face.

"I thought the ceasefire was being observed," I said.

"It is," she said brightly. "Most days. Do you need any assistance with your hand luggage?"

I shook my head, and bent to tug out the heavy case wedged tightly under the seat in front of me. Generally, airlines don't like collections of sharp metal things on board, but the Germans are great respecters of trades, and the check-in clerk understood when I explained how I hate to check my tools in case they end up touring Europe without me while I sit on my rear end unable to do my work.

I love my work. That's the thing. That's why, despite being a

world-class coward, I agreed to take this job. To be honest, it never occurred to me not to take it. You don't say no to the chance to work on one of the rarest and most mysterious volumes in the world.

The call had come at 2:00 a.m., as so many calls do when you live in Sydney. It drives me spare sometimes, the way the smartest people—museum directors who run internationally renowned institutions or CEOs who can tell you to the cent what the Hang Seng was at on any given day—can't retain the simple fact that Sydney is generally nine hours ahead of London and fourteen hours ahead of New York. Amitai Yomtov is a brilliant man. Probably the most brilliant in the field. But could he figure the time difference between Jerusalem and Sydney?

"Shalom, Channa," he said, his thick sabra accent putting a guttural *ch* sound into my name as usual. "I'm not waking you?"

"No, Amitai," I said. "I'm always up at two a.m.; best part of the day."

"Ah, well, sorry, but I think you might be interested to know that the Sarajevo Haggadah has turned up."

"No!" I said, suddenly wide awake. "That's, um, great news." And it was, but it was great news I could easily have read in an e-mail at a civilized hour. I couldn't imagine why Amitai had felt it necessary to call me.

Amitai, like most *sabras,* was a pretty contained character, but this news had made him ebullient. "I always knew that book was a survivor. I knew it would outlast the bombs."

The Sarajevo Haggadah, created in medieval Spain, was a famous rarity, a lavishly illuminated Hebrew manuscript made at a time when Jewish belief was firmly against illustrations of any kind. It was thought that the commandment in Exodus "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image or likeness of any thing" had suppressed figurative art by medieval Jews. When the book came to light in Sarajevo in 1894, its pages of painted miniatures had turned this idea on its head and caused art history texts to be rewritten.

At the beginning of the Sarajevo siege in 1992, when the museums and libraries became targets in the fighting, the codex had gone missing. The Bosnian Muslim government had sold it to buy arms, one rumor said. No, Mossad agents had smuggled it out through a tunnel under the Sarajevo airport. I never believed either scenario. I thought that the beautiful book had probably been part of the blizzard of burning pages—Ottoman land deeds, ancient Korans, Slavic scrolls— that had fallen in a warm snow upon the city after the flames of phosphorous bombs.

"But, Amitai, where's it been the past four years? How did it turn up?"

"You know it's Pesach, right?"

As a matter of fact I did; I was still nursing the ragged end of a red wine hangover from the raucous and highly unorthodox Passover picnic that one of my mates had hosted on the beach. The name for the ritual meal in Hebrew is *seder,* which means order; this had been one of the more *dis*orderly nights in my recent history.

"Well, last night the Jewish community in Sarajevo had their seder, and in the middle of it— very dramatic—they brought out the Haggadah. The head of the community made a speech saying that the survival of the book was a symbol of the survival of Sarajevo's multiethnic ideal. And do you know who saved it? His name is Ozren Karaman, head of the museum library. Went in under intense shelling." Amatai's voice shook with emotion. "Can you imagine, Channa? A Muslim, risking his neck to save a Jewish book."

It wasn't like Amitai to be impressed by tales of derring-do. An indiscreet colleague had once let drop that Amitai's compulsory army service had been in a commando squad so supersecret that Israelis refer to it only as "the unit." Even though that was long in his past when I first met him, I'd been struck by his physique, and by his manner. He had the dense muscle of a weight lifter and a kind of hypervigilance. He'd look right at you when he was talking to you, but the rest of the time his eyes seemed to be scanning the surroundings, aware of everything. He'd seemed genuinely pissed off when

I'd asked him about the unit. "I never confirmed this to you," he'd snapped. But I thought it was pretty amazing. You certainly don't meet that many ex-commandos in book conservation.

"So what did this old guy do with the book once he had it?" I asked.

"He put it in a safe-deposit box in the vault of the central bank. You can imagine what that's done to the parchment. . . . No one in Sarajevo's had any heat through at least the last two winters . . . and some metal cash box . . . metal, of all things . . . it's back there now. . . . I can't bear to think about it. Anyway, the UN wants someone to inspect its condition. They're going to pay for any necessary stabilization work—they want to exhibit it as soon as possible, to raise the city's morale, you know. So I saw your name on the program for next month's conference at the Tate, and I thought that, while you are coming to this side of the world, maybe you could fit this job in?"

"Me?" My voice actually squeaked. I don't go in for false modesty: I'm great at what I do. But for a job like this, a once-in-a-lifetime career maker, there were at least a dozen people with more years on the clock and better connections in Europe. "Why not you?" I asked.

Amitai knew more about the Sarajevo Haggadah than anybody alive; he'd written monographs on it. I knew he would have loved this chance to handle the actual codex. He gave a deep sigh. "The Serbs have spent the past three years insisting that the Bosnians are fanatical Muslims, and finally, maybe, a few Bosnians have started to believe them. Seems the Saudis are big donors there now, and there was opposition to giving the job to an Israeli."

"Oh, Amitai, I'm sorry . . ."

"It's all right, Channa. I'm in good company. They didn't want a German either. Of course, I suggested Werner first—no offense. . . ." Since Herr Doktor Doktor Werner Maria Heinrich was not only my teacher, but also, after Amitai himself, the leading Hebrew manuscripts specialist in the world, I was hardly likely to take any. But

Amitai explained that the Bosnians were still carrying a grudge against Germany for setting off the war in the first place, by recognizing Slovenia and Croatia. "And the UN doesn't want an American because the U.S. Congress is always bad-mouthing UNESCO. So I thought you would be good, because who has any strong opinions about Australians? Also I told them that your technical skills are not bad."

"Thanks for that ringing endorsement," I said. And then, more sincerely, "Amitai, I'll never forget this. Thank you, really."

"You can repay me by making good documentation of the book, so at least we can print a beautiful facsimile. You'll send me the pictures you make, yes, and a draft of your report, as soon as you can?"

His voice sounded so wistful I felt guilty about my own elation. But there was one question I had to ask him.

"Amitai, are there any issues of authenticity? You know the rumors, during the war . . ."

"No, we have no concerns there. The librarian Karaman and his boss, the director of the museum, have authenticated it beyond doubt. Your job is merely technical at this point."

Technical. We'll see about that, I thought to myself. A lot of what I do *is* technical; science and craftsmanship that anyone with decent intelligence and good fine-motor skills can be taught to do. But there is something else, too. It has to do with an intuition about the past. By linking research and imagination, sometimes I can think myself into the heads of the people who made the book. I can figure out who they were, or how they worked. That's how I add my few grains to the sandbox of human knowledge. It's what I love best about what I do. And there were so many questions about the Sarajevo Haggadah. If I could answer just one of them. . . .

I couldn't get back to sleep, so I threw on my sweats and went out, through the nighttime streets still faintly sour with the mingled stink of spewed beer and deep-fryer fat, down to the beach, where the air blows, clean and briny, over half a planet's worth of uninterrupted ocean. Because it was autumn, and a midweek night, there

was hardly anyone around. Just a few drunks, slumped by the wall of the surf club and a pair of lovers, entwined on a beach towel. No one to notice me. I started walking along the edge of the foam, luminous against the lacquered darkness of the sand. Before I knew it, I was running and skipping, dodging the breakers like a child.

That was a week ago. In the days following, that feeling of exhilaration had been gradually buried under visa applications, reissued airline tickets, UN red tape, and a thick dollop of nerves. As I staggered down the stairs from the plane to the tarmac under the weight of my case, I had to keep reminding myself that this was exactly the kind of assignment I lived for.

I had barely a second to take in the mountains, rising all around us like the rim of a giant bowl, and then a blue-helmeted soldier—tall and Scandinavian looking—leaped from the middle vehicle and seized my bag, hurling it into the rear of the van.

"Steady!" I said. "There's delicate equipment in there!" The soldier's only reply was to grab me by the arm and propel me into the backseat, slamming the door and jumping in front alongside the driver. The automatic locks clicked down with a definitive *thunk,* and the driver gunned the engine.

"Well, this is a first for me," I said, trying for some wan levity. "Book conservators don't usually have much call to travel in armored cars." There was no response from the soldier or the thin, drawn civilian hunched over the wheel of the immense vehicle, his head pulled into his shoulders like a tortoise. Through the tinted glass the devastated city passed in a blur of shrapnel-splashed buildings. The vans drove fast, swerving around cavernous potholes made by mortar shells and bumping over bitumen shredded by the tracks of armored vehicles. There wasn't much traffic. Most people were on foot; gaunt, exhausted-looking people, coats pulled tight against the chill of a spring that hadn't quite arrived. We passed an apartment block that looked like the dollhouse I'd had as a girl, where the entire front wall lifted off to reveal the rooms within. In this block, the wall

had been peeled away by an explosion. But like my doll's house, the exposed rooms were furnished. As we sped by, I realized that people were somehow still living there, their only protection a few sheets of plastic billowing in the wind. But they'd done their laundry. It flapped from lines strung between the twisted spikes of reinforcing bars that protruded from the shattered concrete.

I thought they'd take me straight to see the book. Instead, the day was consumed by endless, tedious meetings, first with every UN official who'd ever had a thought about a cultural matter, then with the director of the Bosnian museum, then with a bunch of government officials. I doubt I'd have gotten much sleep anyway, given the anticipation of starting work, but the dozen or so cups of strong Turkish coffee I'd been served in the course of the day hadn't helped. Maybe that's why my hands were still shaking.

There was a burst of static from the police radios. Suddenly all the people were up on their feet: the police, the guards, Sajjan. The bank official shot the door bolts and a whole lot more guards entered in a sort of flying wedge. At the center was a thin young man in faded blue jeans. The slacker from the museum, probably, who'd kept us all waiting. But I didn't have time to be irritated with him, because he was cradling a metal box. When he set it down on the bench I saw it was sealed in several places with stamped wax and adhesive papers. I passed him my scalpel. He broke the seals and eased open the lid. He unwrapped several sheets of silk paper. And then he handed me the book.

II

AS MANY TIMES as I've worked on rare, beautiful things, that first touch is always a strange and powerful sensation. It's a combination between brushing a live wire and stroking the back of a newborn baby's head.

No conservator had handled this manuscript for a century. I had

the forms positioned, ready. I hesitated for just a second—a Hebrew book, therefore spine to the right—and laid it in the cradling foam.

Until you opened it, the book was nothing that an untrained eye would look twice at. It was small, for one thing, convenient for use at the Passover dinner table. Its binding was of an ordinary nineteenth-century style, soiled and scuffed. A codex as gorgeously illustrated as this one would originally have had an elaborate binding. You don't make filet mignon then serve it on a paper plate. The binder might have used gold leaf or silver tooling, maybe inlays of ivory or pearl shell. But this book had probably been rebound many times in its long life. The only one we knew about for sure, because it had been documented, was the last time, in Vienna in the 1890s. Unfortunately, the book had been terribly mishandled in that instance. The Austrian binder had cropped the parchment heavily and discarded the old binding—something no one, especially not a professional working for a major museum— would ever do anymore. It was impossible to say what information might have been lost at that time. He had rebound the parchments in simple cardboard covers with an inappropriate Turkish printed floral paper decoration, now faded and discolored. Only the corners and spine were calfskin, and this was dark brown and flaking away, exposing the edge of the gray board beneath.

I ran my middle finger lightly along the cracked corners. These I would consolidate over the coming days. As my finger followed the edges of the board, I noticed something unexpected. The binder had made a pair of channels and a set of small holes in the board edge to accept a pair of clasps. It was usual for books of parchment to have clasps, to hold the pages flat. Yet there were no clasps on this binding. I made a note to myself to investigate this.

Moving the forms to support the spine, I opened the cover and leaned close to examine the torn endpapers. I would mend these with wheat paste and shreds of matching linen paper. I could see at once that the linen cords the Viennese binder had used were frayed, barely holding. That meant I would have to take the quires apart and

restitch them. Then I breathed deeply and turned the page to the parchment of the manuscript itself. This was what mattered; this was what would disclose what four hard years had done to a survivor of five centuries.

The snow light flared on brightness. Blue: intense as a midsummer sky, obtained from grinding precious lapis lazuli carried by camel caravan all the way from the mountains of Afghanistan. White: pure, creamy, opaque. Less glamorous, more complicated than the blue. At that time it would still have been made according to the method discovered by ancient Egyptians. You cover lead bars with the dregs of old wine and seal them up in a shed full of animal dung. I'd done it once, in my mother's greenhouse in Bellevue Hill. She'd had a load of manure delivered, and I couldn't resist. The acid in the vinegary wine converts lead to its acetate, which in turn combines with the carbon dioxide released by the dung to make basic white lead carbonate, $PbCO_3$. My mother pitched a fit about it, of course. Said she couldn't stand to go near her bloody prize orchids for weeks.

I turned a page. More dazzle. The illuminations were beautiful, but I didn't allow myself to look at them as art. Not yet. First I had to understand them as chemicals. There was yellow, made of saffron. That beautiful autumn flower, *Crocus sativus Linnaeus,* each with just three tiny precious stigmas, had been a prized luxury then and remained one, still. Even if we now know that the rich color comes from a carotene, crocin, with a molecular structure of 44 carbon, 64 hydrogen, and 24 oxygen, we still haven't synthesized a substitute as complex and as beautiful. There was malachite green, and red; the intense red known as worm scarlet—*tola'at shani* in Hebrew—extracted from tree-dwelling insects, crushed up and boiled in lye. Later, when alchemists learned how to make a similar red from sulfur and mercury, they still named the color "little worm"—vermiculum. Some things don't change: we call it vermilion even today.

Change. That's the enemy. Books do best when temperature, humidity, the whole environment, stay the same. You could hardly get more dramatic changes than this book had been through: moved un-

der extreme difficulties and without preparation or precaution, exposed to wild swings of temperature. I'd been worried that the parchment might have shrunk, the pigments cracked and lifted. But the colors had held fast, as pure and as vivid as the day the paint was applied. Unlike the leaf on the spine, which had flaked away, the burnished gold of the illuminations was fresh and blazing. The gilder of five hundred years ago had definitely had a better grasp of his trade than the more modern Viennese bookbinder. There was silver leaf also. This had oxidized and turned dark gray, as you would expect.

"Will you be replacing that?" It was the thin young man from the museum. He was pointing at a distinct area of tarnish. He was standing too close. Because parchment is flesh, human bacteria can degrade it. I moved my shoulder so that he had to withdraw his hand and take a step backward.

"No," I said. "Absolutely not." I did not look up.

"But you're a restorer; I thought . . ."

"Conservator," I corrected. The last thing I wanted right then was a long discussion on the philosophy of book conservation. "Look," I said, "you're here; I'm instructed that you have to be here, but I'd appreciate it if you didn't interrupt my work."

"I understand," he said, his voice gentle after my abrasiveness. "But you must also understand: I am the *kustos,* the book is in my care."

Kustos. It took a minute to sink in. I turned then, and stared at him. "*You* can't be Ozren Karaman? The one who saved the book?"

The UN rep, Sajjan, sprang up, all apologies. "I am sorry, I should have made the introduction. But you were so anxious to get to work. I—Dr. Hanna Heath, please may I present Dr. Ozren Karaman, chief librarian of the National Museum and professor of librarianship at the National University of Bosnia."

"I— Sorry, that was rude of me," I said. "I expected that you'd be much older, to be chief curator of such a major collection." I also didn't expect a person in that position to look quite so disheveled. He was wearing a scuffed leather jacket over a crumpled white T-shirt.

His jeans were frayed. His hair— wild, curly, neither combed nor cut—flopped over a pair of glasses that were mended in the middle with a bit of duct tape.

He raised an eyebrow. 'You yourself, of course, being so very advanced in years, would have every reason to think that." He kept a perfectly straight face as he said this. I guessed he was about thirty, like me. "But I would be very pleased, Dr. Heath, if you could spare a moment to say what you have in mind to do." He shot Sajjan a glance as he said this, and in it I could read a volume. The UN thought it was doing Bosnia a favor, funding the work so that the Haggadah could be properly displayed. But when it comes to national treasures, no one wants outsiders calling the shots. Ozren Karaman clearly felt he'd been sidelined. The last thing I wanted was to get involved in any of that. I was here to care for a book, not some librarian's bruised ego. Still, he had a right to know why the UN had chosen someone like me.

"I can't say exactly the extent of my work till I've thoroughly inspected the manuscript, but here's the thing: no one hires me looking for chemical cleanups or heavy restorations. I've written too many papers knocking that approach. To restore a book to the way it was when it was made is to lack respect for its history. I think you have to accept a book as you receive it from past generations, and to a certain extent damage and wear reflect that history. The way I see it, my job is to make it stable enough to allow safe handling and study, repairing only where absolutely necessary. This, here," I said, pointing to a page where a russet stain bloomed over the fiery Hebrew calligraphy, "I can take a microscopic sample of those fibers, and we can analyze them, and maybe learn what made that stain—wine would be my first guess. But a full analysis might provide clues as to where the book was at the time it happened. And if we can't tell now, then in fifty, a hundred years, when lab techniques have advanced, my counterpart in the future will be able to. But if I chemically erased that stain—that so-called damage—we'd lose the chance at that knowledge forever." I took a deep breath.