

Written by James H. Moonly

GREY OWL PRINTING PRESS

SYMBOLOLOGY

PRIMUS LIBER COLLECTIONIS



TRANSLATED & TRANSCRIBED IN ENGLISH

by Penward E. Rhyme



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Professor J. H. Moonly

A Grey Owl Classic

SYMBOLOGY

PRIMUS LIBER COLLECTIONIS

90th Anniversary Edition

by

Professor J. H. Moonly

Restored & translated, with faith, by Penward E. Rhyme

GREY OWL PRINTING PRESS

A FOREWORD

BY
PENWARD E. RHYME

It is said that the winding alleys of East India suffer no shortage of books. Dingy and often poorly-bound, they find themselves peddled by bearded men in black turbans and blood-brown sherwanis, who spy with merchant eyes upon the passing tourists.

Yet less frequent is the chance that along one's own archaeological campaigns, he comes upon a man who by merit of ominous disposition, freely parts with his charge.

On the evening of August 19th, 1993, I brought back to my encampment what appeared to be a kind of journal. The man who had gifted it to me called it an account of a city long forgotten, something that all too conveniently captured my academic interests. In four days, I was bound for West Bengal to look for the remnants of an ancient kingdom. Of course I figured that this literature might inform my studies, or if not, then at the very least entertain me on the journey back.

When I returned from the market to my camp, I set to work deciphering the journal. I discovered that it was written in Khariboli dialect, though judging by its content, it appeared concerned instead with an English region called Grey Owl. There, in the year 1927, a professor by the name of James Hubert Moonly resided. The man sounded almost familiar, though I could with certainty say that I'd never once met him.

I remember flipping through the pages, drawn on by curiosity into the early hours of the morning, as I delved further into the text. From what I gathered, years ago Grey Owl City had been under attack by some sinister force, and it was up to the good professor to stop it. My interest further piqued, I looked for other names—of places and people. That was when I made my fateful discovery.

Evening had approached when my guide, Soma returned from purchasing meats in the city, and I anxiously showed her the book. She assisted me in transcribing a more thorough English version of the first chapter, along with several pages from its middle, which were of particular interest to me. It was on those pages, you see, that I had found my grandfather's name.

~ * ~

My late grandfather, Mortimer Rhyme, had never told me about a place called Grey Owl City, nor of a professor named James Moonly, and so I was reluctant to assume that the boy in the story and my grandfather were one in the same. Still, Mortimer is not a common name, and Rhyme an even rarer surname. Added to that was the fact that the boy mentioned in the account was almost undoubtedly the right age to have been the late man at some point in his life. "What a very odd coincidence," I remember thinking. A very odd coincidence indeed.

But being an academic, I was willing to set aside these personal assumptions until I had learned more about the book. And so, I turned to more concrete and answerable matters. First and foremost: why would an Indian write so emphatically about an Englishman? My first thought was that I had been translating a story and not a journal. If that was the case, then the content of the mysterious book had likely been inspired by some liaison between the

Indians of Imphal and the sojourning Britons. The book itself might have even been a translation, originally written in English. As I considered this, the presence of my grandfather's name troubled me more—to such an effect, in fact, that even after my trip to West Bengal and subsequent return to Oxford, the poorly-bound volume occupied the majority of my attention.

Weeks later I began with a careful investigation into whether any English copies of the book could be found. This search resulted in nothing. Next, I inquired amongst my colleagues as to whether any of them had heard of the city in question, this Grey Owl. Even the most skilled of my friends, masters in the fields of history, literature, and geographies, could provide me no clear answers. Amidst this lack of extra-textual evidence, I decided my only option was to translate the book in full.

Half a year later I was possessed of nothing but a certain kind of certainty. By the time a Christmas mist had decorated the university courtyard, I'd reached the conclusion that this 'account' was indeed little more than a collection of wild imaginings, written by whomever and for whatever reason. The text—titled "Symbology"—contained fond recollections of Professor J. H. Moonly, a man who, as it claimed, had conquered time itself. More impressive was the fact that Grey Owl City had been challenged by an incalculable threat and this man had taken it upon himself to stop it. Had he succeeded? Failed?

I told you that I possessed only a certain kind of certainty—I was certain that the story was false, but its ending offered no easy answer. And this lack of assurance in the latter respect hurt my confidence in the prior. If the professor failed to stop the threat, then this book might very well have been the only remaining artefact to lay claim to the truth of his journey. The question of 'What if?' haunted my mind for days after I had again been forced to beg it.

~ * ~

I admit that on a particular evening, disheartened, I finally put the original volume away on one of my shelves, consuming amounts of alcohol after. Yet there was no drink that could have inspired in me what I witnessed that night. Restless and yearning, half an hour later, I left my room to stretch my legs and ventured out into the courtyard.

I remember the atmosphere with remarkable clarity—flakes of snow brushed across the landscape while gusts of cold air caught the fabric of my jacket. I came to sit at the base of an old, knotted oak and remained there, staring out into the soft darkness for little more than a minute before I realized the existence of a curious, fixed sphere of light.

The sphere is... difficult to describe. For instance, at first it seemed to float about seven feet above the snowy ground. Its size changed often, however, and at times, it appeared to either touch the snow or disappear into nothingness. It emitted as well a low but pronounced sound, almost like a steam whistle, or the breaks of a train.

Amazed, I thought perhaps a groundskeeper or professor might have noticed me outside, though when I rose to meet this person, walking towards what I assumed to be their flashlight, the point in the air exploded into a symphony of fire and commotion. It was as if the gates of hell had yawned widely and I was doomed to witness them.

My heart jumped at the sight of the catastrophe as it grew. Twisting lightning erupted from the epicentre of the blast like long and arching wings, scorching the field and setting its

grass aflame. When I think back to that moment, a truly pure fear engulfs me. My hands tremble now, even as I write the words. But then in that moment, every muscle of mine had frozen, and I looked upon that spectacle of power through which it seemed the universe had unravelled.

Then, it was gone. Without indication as to what had created it or led to its dispersal, that thing I can only quantify as a miracle vanished, most notably leaving clear evidence of its existence in the places where it had burnt the grass.

Having passed cohorts of weary scholars stirred by the noise, I returned to my room dishevelled and disoriented. Upon sealing the door against the hallway commotion, I noticed that my book had been moved from its place on the shelf; it rested again on my work desk, beside my translation of it. In great haste I locked the door behind me and threw both hands down against the table. My eyes pored over each of the books, though nothing in either had been removed or changed. I recall staring at those books for a long while in silence, after which I resolved I could no longer afford to believe in very odd coincidences.

To the present day, I can make neither heads nor tails of the strange journal, though after great effort I have indeed found artefacts suggesting the existence of a Grey Owl and its enigmatic professor: people with vague memories of the man; various British institutions who can't quite recall their benefactor; misty isles where madmen curse the Moonly family name. Whoever Professor J. H. Moonly was, it seems this world remembers only fragments of him and his city.

~ * ~

This is the 89th Anniversary Edition of “Symbology”. It is distributed by the Grey Owl Printing Press, named in honour of the city. I established the press in 1995 to reproduce works of important literary and historical merit—“Symbology” is only the first part of a duology, “Tautology” being its counterpart.

A colleague of mine discovered “Tautology” on a gneiss plateau of the Matterhorn, on the border of Switzerland and Italy. The book, badly damaged, came from the satchel of a deceased man whose body had been crushed by a large piece of ice. Though identification of the man was impossible, my preliminary translations have suggested distinct connections to Professor Moonly’s text. I intend to further pursue these connections through future transcriptions.

Until then, this primary document is to be circulated in full amongst the foremost academic minds so that together we might unveil its incredible secrets.

Penward Emelius Rhyme,

P. Rhyme

September 1st, 2017

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I suppose our story should begin as any other might
—
often odd or fantastical, perhaps with a smidge of humour
or with a bland prefatory note.



No.

This time,
I think,
it will begin with an
EXPLOSION

A Perfectly Prefectural Preface

There was a large and terrible explosion at ‘Tiny Rubber’s Duck Shoppe’, a small-time family-run business on the corner of Pushh and Padd Street, owned of course by none other than Tiny Rubber, who was in fact a rather large fellow.

The business, which centred around the creation of numerous rubber ducks, swans, geese, and the occasional pelican, had graced Grey Owl City for years on end; and in time it might have passed solely to Tiny’s son, Thomas Rubber—a reasonably-sized man, it may as well be noted.

But with the explosion allegedly caused by Tiny’s duller son Biggie Rubber, who was taller than Tommy and smaller than Tiny—and while we’re at it had the brain of a half-oaf—the shoppe was reduced entirely beyond repair.

The explosion itself, as reported by the papers, had apparently resulted from a new process thought up by Tommy to stabilize coloured rubbers, thus creating works and wares whose yellows, blacks, and oranges would not fade over time. Put into practice by him and Biggie—now there was the problem, I say—this process had led to the fiery decimation of half the store, killing the two brothers in turn and, perhaps just as tragically, hurling a letter from the shoppe’s front sign, leaving a partly-scorched ‘Tiny Rubber D ck’ atop the family-run store for all, both young and old, to see.

So what caused this Big Bang and why was it important? Well, the method to stabilize the rubbers involved pressurizing the materials, and to do this, a hulking metal monstrosity—what might be seen as some distant barbarian cousin to the common pressure cooker—was called for.

To make a long story brief, rumour had it that Tommy told Biggie to tighten a shaking bolt. Biggie tripped and hit the big bolt with the wrong end of a wrench, sending that bolt, and then the next, then the next off like popcorn projectiles, blazing through the air with unequivocal ferocity. One minute, Tommy was trying to tuck back the rivets, and the next, the tinker’s toy erupted in a fireball, blowing out the windows and sending the quite unpleasant smell of burnt rubber touring across the cityscape.

As the bursting squeals of a thousand melting ducks followed through the air like some unholy last-will chorus, the foul scent they made blew through carriage windows and over rooftops. From there it travelled far and wide, but most importantly towards a Victorian manor

on the cliffs that lay some distance from the moonlit district. For in this manner that deathly reek caught the affected nostril of Professor James Hubert Moonly.



Chapter One

It was a Monday morning, as Monday as any morning can be, and the professor, eyes itching, sluggishly made his way from the bed. 6:30 am was all-too-early a time to rise at, but, as he supposed it might be said by any of his contemporaries, there were great things to be done today, and great things could only be done by qualified men, of which he was one.

“Santa Barbara and Pet Petunias,” he muttered as he chewed on his morning crumpet. Tea though—aside from the day’s crossword, brought in the usual fashion directly to his doorstep—was what he enjoyed the most... Earl Grey, the black-leafed beverage befitting of a city as quaint as Grey Owl. Quietly, Professor Moonly wondered why any right-minded founding father of a city would choose to name his dearly beloved after a bird—

“—Avis Sententiae. Bird-brained, then,” he interrupted himself, the plucked corner of his left lip rising into a curious smile as he scratched down another word on paper.

If Moriarty were known for his brilliance, cunning, and sheer egotistical pursuit of holding the world in his palm, then the politicians of Grey Owl by comparison were pointy-nosed wannabes, the journalists were day-dreaming die-hards, the dentists were almost there, the dogs and the cats appeared to be considerably good pets, and James Hubert Moonly did not a Moriarty make.

Nonetheless, Professor Moonly adored the fictitious man, and had he ever actually read any of Sir Doyle’s mysterious works, he would have, I am certain, shed a tear at the watery demise of his dearly-imagined friend.

But do not mistake my words, for Professor Moonly had a miraculous display of books—red books and purple books; brown books and black books, blue books and, though some men couldn’t tell the difference, violet books too. An appraiser once entertained by the good professor made count of one million eight hundred and forty-five thousand five hundred and twenty-seven... red books.

I told you not to mistake my words.

Professor Moonly was a smart man—dumb by comparison to what his inner potential might have offered if not for his hubris, and his distraction, and his addiction to creature comforts, and the arrogance fostered by, as Freud would put it, “Eine kleine menge von argument von sein en

kollegen in einer kritischen phase der entwicklung ... Oder vielleicht einem harten schlag auf den kopf.¹

Atop the trifles of his inner demons, Professor Moonly also made a knack of boasting that he had read all the books in his miraculously big library. This was not the case, though for all it mattered, it might as well have been. James Hubert Moonly, simply James as his acquaintances sometimes called him, or Hubert as his parents had *always* called him, was unquestionably unquestionable. He carried himself as such and as such was such. Therefore, no one doubted him when he lectured on the Porridge Postulate which, as far as his claims were concerned, led to the vicious tilt in the Earth. Some physical law dug up by his imagination many years later would directly contravene this statement by purporting that the Earth was in fact flat.

Thus, his mind was littered with lies which filled like mortar the gaps in his knowledge. Indeed, he was a brilliant kind of dumb.

“Excuse me, but I’ve had rather enough of you,” Professor Moonly noted, a flicker of annoyance-turned-anger driven up the left side of his expression like a sudden stroke of initiative. It granted him a two-faced kind of cynical smile. “And that. I’ve had quite enough of that too.”

My, Professor Moonly, whatever do you mean?

“I mean,” he meant, “that I bore the brunt of your jeers and gestures about my library and my love for the greatest villain of perhaps all British literature ever penned during the Industrial Age. I endured pokes and prods by the tip of your tongue, and all the while suffered the stinging reek of rubber so that I could play my part in this little ploy.” He waved eccentrically, almost electrically. “If you could spend a little less time introducing me as a bumbling oaf and a little more introducing yourself and your own predicament, then perhaps our audience might not have such an ill-favoured opinion of me.”

But have I said anything untrue so far?

“You have omitted,” he insisted, “which is just as bad! Now...” he shoed me on with the wave of a hand as we perused the halls of the mansion, “get on with it.”

Very well. I am the worm that lives in Professor Moonly’s head. I rely on him for nutrients. Now that said, I like to think of myself as more of a resident belonging to a region somewhere in between the cavity of his skull and the flesh of his brain—I am, as I would put it, a denizen of the

¹ tr. ‘An insufficient amount of scrutiny from his peers during a critical stage of his development... Else possibly a tough-enough blow to the head.’

bony caverns. I try only to take what I need, so that I mightn't harm the good professor, and for this dietary caution, the professor has allowed me my prosperous life.

How did I come to be inside his head? Well, the story is a long one, and if it were not for the ringing doorbell that had, moments ago, caught the professor's attention, I might very well have told you. But alas, another place, another time.



Why he did not stutter as he uttered those muttered syllables, I chalk up to a calming, almost sensual pleasure that bureaucrats find in bearing, then baring bad news.

“I beg your pardon?” the good professor asked. He loomed a head and a half taller than Mr. Flinch, and though much leaner—lanky, really—the professor, postured with back straight and palms criss-crossed behind him, gave off such an air of authority in the realm of his own residence that it seemed the very essence of the post-secondary community and the Hand of Academia might fall upon Mr. Flinch, smiting him into a smouldering ash pile there on our very doorstep.

Ah, but then it would be left to us to clean up the mess. For neither the post-secondary community nor the Hand of Academia sweeps doorsteps.

“Perhaps you could elaborate on the nature of this claim, Andrew.” For Andrew was Mr. Flinch’s first name, and he hated being called it by others.

“W-W-W-Well...” The stuttering had resumed. “D-D-Due to the rubber-burning incident—a p-part of which I helped c-c-clean up...”

Chances are our slick silver-tongue stuck his hands knee-deep into the rubber remnants of the shoppe to appear to the common people that he’d been doing such charitable works as helping in the efforts to uncover the corpses.

“I doubt you really sullied your hands,” the professor interrupted, smiling pleasedly when he saw the reaction he’d provoked. “Regardless, go on.”

“The city has vested i-in me the authority to revoke your ownership of this house.”

The professor raised a brow.

“Oh—it’s only temporary,” the bureaucrat corrected himself.

“Mister Flinch,” the professor said, raising a finger. “You are testing my patience—explain *why* it is I am being temporarily evicted from my manor.”

“Well,” Mr. Flinch snuffled—yes, I invented that word. It is a kind of cross between being taken aback and choking on one’s own tongue, though I suppose the more I think about it, the more it sounds like the word ‘snuggled’. Very well then. Mr. Flinch snarfed. Twice, by my count, before starting again. “W-Well, the R-Rubber incident is being investigated by the Grey Owl Police Force.”

“And?”

“We do not h-have the sufficient qualified staff in our city to... *explore* the case thoroughly enough.”

“You mean to say the police force is incompetent, an unintended consequence of their being corrupt—please, be straightforward with me, Andrew.”

“W-Well...” Mr. Flinch admitted. “Perhaps they are a tad, corrupt.” He pinched his index and his thumb.

“The police force of a city does not simply become a *tad* corrupt,” the professor pointed out. “Perhaps at one time, it might have been the case, but these things, you must understand, are exponential, and they comply with none other than Lubert’s Law.”

At this, Mr. Flinch’s eyes went glazed, much the same way anyone’s might upon hearing the start of a technical definition.

“George Lubert, Chief of Policing Affairs for Pillager’s Village, a small rural community on the trim of the English Channel, serving the term for the better half of a decade from 1920 to 1929. He stated that a policing force would become corrupt in a compelling fashion, where when once an officer ‘turned his tables’ so to speak, the others around him would quite likely follow suit within a given period of time. Mathematically, he predicted the form of a precinct’s corruption to hold striking similarities to the time-based model of a bacillus anthracis’s incubatory growth. All this, of course, was said before Mister Lubert was stabbed in the back—quite literally—by one of his own officers, who wished to keep this newfound knowledge of police corruption hushed.”

For what it’s worth, the stabbing was done with a steak knife at the village’s annual summer barbeque.

“But anyway,” the professor returned from his tandem, “stop rambling on, Andrew. The point you are trying to make is that our police force is corrupt, and following from this, incompetent. Following from *this*, they are required to bring in additional help to solve the...” he paused for a moment, “is it a possible murder?”

“A-Ah,” Mr. Flinch stuttered, snapping out of his previous stupor. “Nothing’s s-set in stone, b-but from what I hear, t-there are several suspicious c-clues.”

“Then possible murder,” Professor Moonly continued, “of Misters Thomas and Biggie Rubber. But what on Earth does any of this have to do with my house?”

“Well,” Mr. Flinch fidgeted. “The external investigators we’re b-bringing in need a place to stay.” Above us all, the sky was cast a dark, murky grey with the souls of a thousand and fifty-two ducks.

“And other amenities—such as swans, geese, and the occasional pelican,” the professor mentioned.

“Huh?” Mr. Flinch asked.

“Nothing. I wasn’t talking to you. It was for the worm.”

“Oooh,” Mr. Flinch lit up with interest, raising a fat, black-stained finger in a cooing manner. “How’s t-the little guy doing?”

Insufferable fool! I will feast on his blood until the pot-bellied swine is but a withered husk—then we will see who the ‘little guy’ is!

“He is quite fine. Thank you for asking,” the professor answered, putting my response into politer tones. He then paused. “Anyway, you should have been straightforward with me from the start, dear Andrew.” Seldom might, of course, Professor Moonly let slip the opportunity to host—and in turn show off to—unfamiliar guests. Boring, after all, become friends too often entertained by the professor, for once they befriend him, his word is law, and an unquestioned law is an unproductive one. We’d have you know we can be democratic people too. Just like Mr. Flinch, who was voted in.

“Hrm...” the politician puckered his lips, wondering perhaps what dastardly plans we might have for our new houseguests. “Well,” he answered, palms up. Here comes his schizophrenic ‘we the people; I the power’ display. “We trust your knowledge, your pleasantness, and your manners, but know-how, pleasantries, and mannerisms aside,” his eyes narrowed like those of a snake’s, “we do not trust you.”

“Good God, man!” Professor Moonly exclaimed. “Am I a suspect?”

“W-W-Well,” the bureaucrat corrected himself, “no.” He seemed almost as disappointed as we were relieved. “We just do not trust that you w-won’t interrupt the i-investigation. W-We know how y-you like t-to...” He lingered on the final word, “gloat.”

The professor paused. Now it was his turn to snarf. “I do not *gloat*.”

“Of your academic pedigrees, and of your travels, and of your manor—” Mr. Flinch continued, “—It could and it would be an encumbrance to the investigation.”

“Why are you so concerned with having this matter investigated anyway?” the professor switched subjects suddenly. “This wouldn’t be the first time Grey Owl has let questionable affairs slip.”

Mr. Flinch shrugged, his tone shifted. “From what I hear, a very important someone had invested a considerable amount of cash in Mister Rubber’s D-Duck Shoppe; hence the extra measure of bringing in more investigators.”

Though Professor Moonly had to admit he’d once or twice bought a duck from the shoppe, and there certainly were duck aficionados in Grey Owl City, he couldn’t understand why any sound-minded man would invest in not gold, nor silver, but rubber; and a ‘Tiny’ kind of rubber at that.

“It beats m-me too,” Mr. Flinch answered, shrugging, as if he’d been reading our minds all along. “But one way or another, it l-looks as if you will have to evacuate your manor for the time being.”

“Ah,” the good professor began to ponder aloud. It was time for us to win our house back. “But say I was to leave, where would I go?”

“Well, there are shelters—”

“Surely you would not see one of Grey Owl’s best minds stuffed into a shelter! No, I think I will stay at a friend’s house.”

“Ah, t-that’s a v-very good choic—”

“I think it will be yours.”

“M-M-M-M-M-Mine!?” Mr. Flinch went pale.

“Yes, Andrew. Yours,” the professor concluded. “Is there a problem?”

“I—no—well, yes. Not to offend, but don’t you have any other friends..?”

“Why, of course, but out of all of them, I value our friendship the most. On top of that,” he chided, “you took it upon yourself to come all the way to my manor and deliver the bad news, so I presume you’ve also come to extend the courtesy of offering me a place to stay while the investigation—how long was it?”

“It might be s-seven or so w— ”

“Quite right—to stay while the seven or so weeks-long investigation takes place. Or are you simply saying,” the good professor raised a brow, “that you had meant all along to mislead me? That would be rather disingenuous of you, Andrew. And you do know how I feel about disingenuous people.”

“N-N-No! I—now just wait a—I didn’t say it like *that*!” To people like Mr. Flinch, image was everything.

“What did you say then, Andrew? That you would oust me from my residence without providing me a proper substitute?”

The politician mumbled to himself. “Fine, Moonly,” he grimaced. “You win. I’ll speak to the other members of the ministerial committee and tell them to find somewhere else.”

“Nonsense,” Professor Moonly said, waving him back. “Whoever these investigators are, they will stay at my manor—I just won’t be leaving.”

“Now, Moonly—”

“Professor,” the taller of the two gentlemen insisted.

“Professor Moonly, this is quite unorthodox.”

“If you think you know me to be an orthodox man, Andrew,” the good professor said, stepping back into the manor, “then you hardly know me at all.”

Behind us shut the door.



Chapter, Too

Professor Moonly's mansion, more commonly called Moonly Manor, is an estate covering precisely 12,439.72 square feet. It was constructed in 1880 by the famous Grey Owl builder Odaor G'ttili with a small loan from the Queen of England, though shortly after, it was given as a gift to the professor's long-late father, Sir John Herbert Moonly. A rather unflattering portrait of this man hangs in the first-floor dining hall, his black-as-coal eyes looking down from underneath a prickling pair of slate-grey brows; the depths as well of a crooked nose are captured to the pore through apt use of ever-fine dabs of paint, and the creases scrawled over that withered face form a ghastly, permanent scowl, which has never failed to meet the unnerved gazes of those daring enough to look upon the cold gentleman. But old John Herbert was a born-and-bred worker in spite of—or perhaps due to—his uniquely unfriendly disposition. Work, as far as the professor had times ago divulged to me, was for the dearly-despised father all that should be lived for—he left less concern for his own desires, and an even slimmer bit for his family.

Regardless, a dead man needs no property, and so the tall and ominous mansion—along with its surrounding gardens and scenic cliff-side view of Grey Owl City—was after lengthy legal deliberations left to Master Moonly the younger at the tender age of twenty-one. But only eleven years later, the young and tall, fair-skinned man, complete with a full head of lavish, black hair, would flower into a haughty academic, pomp and privilege well-ingested. With the passing of several years more, I suspect he will once again undergo, as Ovid's art would tell, a metamorphosis of sorts, not into a white-armed laurel, but rather a stuffy old man with a receding hairline and all the folded wrinkles of his predecessor.

"Tsch," the good professor clicked his tongue between his teeth at me. "And you will be nothing but a string of dusty gristle."

Alas, it is true. Nature has, in her cynical kindness, granted me but 659 more days, seventeen more hours, forty-two more minutes, and thirty-seven, thirty-six, thirty-five more seconds. How can I know the precise moment of my death, you might consider asking me. A fair question. The professor was kind-enough to calculate my lifespan one night while mulling over a flock of papers he didn't want to entirely get to. Since then, I have taken it upon myself to keep a

running mental note of how much time I have left. Morbid? No, I prefer to think of it as incentive that helps me accomplish all of the things I desire to do before I perish.

“You’re a worm,” the professor scrutinized. “What on Earth could you possibly have to do before you die aside from live?”

Why, I have plenty of things to do!

“Like?” We entered into the professor’s study, draped from wall to wall in dusty wooden shelves, their rungs weighed down by books of all sorts—the odd ones out which found no place in the over-exuberant arch-vault of the library.

There are brain nutrients to be categorized, memories of yours to be filed, witty remarks to be made up—clouds to stare up at, dragonflies to imagine... I can feel you slipping away from me, professor.

Professor Moonly looked up from his desk, back bent from the fabric cushioning of the chair he sat on, caught in the almost-act. “No, no. Not at all. I value your contributions greatly.”



Chapter e

The orange orangutan bashed its breast with a heavy fist, and the iron long-guns of Englishmen in pith helmets fired out a hissing barrage of smoke plumes through the humid jungle air. The giant beast collapsed back, breaking trees beneath it, and the brave men marched forward.

‘All hail glorious Britannia’ read the copper plate at the front of the curious wind-up toy; the professor, overcoat-in-arm and me-in-head, watched it closely.

“A housewarming gift for our new residents,” he suggested.

Utterly ridiculous. Why would they want *that*?

“Perhaps you’re right.”

We’d found ourselves shortly ago at Paire’s Parlour, an odds-and-ends—but more odds than ends—store in the belly of the Main. While urban sprawl recited its choreography on the far side of dust-trimmed windows, we, standing here, glanced back to the metallic ape, along with the little plastic men who hunted made-up monsters.

The good professor confessed his feelings. “There was once a great shopkeep who proposed a certain social philosophy—that we are all, in fact, toys in the impartial pupil of the all-seeing eye. We follow rudimentary patterns, chime the same old melodies. We wear-and-tear and wear our tears like badges.” He fingered a bag of sophisticatedly-decorated marbles, picked up moments ago from next to the prior mechanical trinket. Some within were black as space, while others boasted milky coats like wolf’s fleece; more yet were speckled with rainbow pin-pricks, and a few engulfed leaf-like strips of coloured glass so that they appeared as the eyes of a cat might. “Eventually, we break to the point where we cannot be fixed.”

The clerk, Mr. Paire nodded back in an ooh-and-ah sort of fashion

“Who would have thought,” Professor Moonly continued his silver-lined soliloquy, “that the human body could endure so much, and be broken by so little?” To demonstrate the point, the professor replaced the marbles and bent the left arm of one of the little Englishmen on the automaton.

As the old adage goes, you bend it you buy it. This time though, in the city of Grey Owl, a copper automaton and not a fish-lipped harlot had had to be purchased.

Our next stop was lunch. Our next stop after that was something only a little less devious than street-vendor meat pies.

Rifter's Lane was a long, narrow street, adjoined to the end of Gorgon's Alley and nestled in the anaemic heart of Grey Owl City. Reds and greens flashed brightly in the rain as remnants of pitters and patters slipped back, falling down along rafters and gutters galore from in between cracking shingles. Few knew of or, if they did, dared to visit Rifter's Lane. Of those who did, a whole new sub-civilization was revealed. The good professor, for his part, was one of a braver breed, and though he was by no means a frequenter of the lane, he did at times turn to it when other channels proved insufficient.

"I've enlisted the help of an old acquaintance," Professor Moonly told me as we lingered at the edge of a grubby, black-bricked building, the strong scents of saline and tobacco driven deep into our nostrils. Dangerous citizens—both big and terrifying—rasped, coughed, spat, and quarrelled both on and along the ragged road. "He will aid us in discerning who these investigatorial bloodhounds are."

After all, it is only one of many common preliminaries to dig up as much dirt as humanly possible on one's newly-ordered blue-coat compatriots; should the need to bury unwanted houseguests then arise at a later date, one will already be half-done by the time he starts.

"Five more minutes," the professor said, and but five minutes later, we slunk into a fat flat-of-a-building drawn up in pink ribbons and fresh neon fish, slithering through the crowds like a lanky snake dressed in shadows, a tophat, and a slate-blue bowtie.

We sat down at table 64—the round, plum-painted tables were numbered by square white cards with black writing on them, propped up by rigid, clear, and plastic holsters.

Men who killed had long ago decided to eat their meals in General Wang's classy (for Rifter's Lane) and exotic buffet. Fried squid eyes bounced back and forth from platters to plates; angel trumpets filled with honey touched the palates of door-to-door assassins; clams were slurped by muscles for hire in tight-fitting black overalls. And there we sat in the middle of it all, very inconspicuous.

Which wasn't to say we fit in. Rather, no eyes happened to look our way, or even glimpse—certainly not gander. That was, of course, until a figure draped in a grey raincoat sat down with us.

Hardington Huxley was a well-known mole. He had infiltrated every rung of every government, the tentacles of his pursuits pressing through a frothed and freckled mix of who-knew-whats. Necks were slit and tongues pulled through them like bloody neckties on his word. At the turn of a dime, companies would funnel millions of dollars into dead-end stocks should he tip them off to do so. His rate of return was unheard of amongst the criminal class, though cutthroat as he was, he was also a civilized gentleman. By this I mean he fed men at times to tiger sharks, but kept the sharks fed well enough to not starve them in between human dinners. He loathed, after all, animal cruelty.

And then there was his brother, a children's dentist, who now sat across from us looking like a spectre, one leg folded over the other and a polite but narrow smile set over his lips.

"Hello, Howard," the professor said. He had placed his hat to the side on top of the table in a sign of respect.

"Hello, James," the man answered back. His teeth were well-brushed, shaved to be cosmetically rounded off—the professor recalled a couple of years ago, when the man appeared more like a vampire than a dentist. Still, Professor Moonly supposed as we sat now watching him back, the children mustn't have noticed the difference much. Black eyes rested on us. "I hear you wish to petition my brother's services."

This Huxley, protected by his innocently-appearing day job, often ran resident-receptionist to the other, and any requests for the Mole would first have to go through the Vampire. In fact, recalling the glory days, the Vampire was indeed Howard Huxley's nickname, given to him by the Yakuza when, once upon a time ago, he severed the heads of a rival syndicate, draining the bodies of all their blood for good measure.

What did he do with all that blood?

What does any dentist do with 49.5 litres of blood?

Exactly.

Point being, he was just as dangerous as his brother, a little more warped, and, as of two years ago, retired.

"Quite right, Howard. I'll be having company soon—federal investigators here on business about the explosion at the rubber duck shoppe." The professor rapped the tabletop with the tips of his fingers. "I'd like to find out a little bit about them."

Slowly, the Vampire nodded. "Then it is done. I suppose you, with your academic foresight, have brought some form of payment."

Professor Moonly nodded, removing from his coat the small, copper automaton.

His eyes widening, Howard stared down at the marvellous invention.

“One of the arms has been bent a bit out of shape—I hope you don’t mind.”

The dentist-by-day picked it up between his paired, pink palms. “Not at all, James. Not at all...” Carefully, he twisted a plastic knob at its side, releasing it but a few seconds later. The Englishmen marched on; the orangutan fell.

“All hail Britannia,” he whispered.

“All hail Britannia,” the professor replied.

Nodding slowly, almost unbelieving at his luck, the dentist placed the small toy into the outer pocket of his jacket. “Very well, James.” From the inner pocket, he retrieved a large, brown envelope. “This is what you are looking for.”

The professor smiled pleasedly. “That was quick.”

“Hardington enjoys thinking several steps ahead. Besides, you have good credit with us.” Mr. Huxley scratched his pointed chin. “Unlike my last interaction...”

“Who was he?” Professor Moonly wondered. “Ah, or she.”

“He—a repeat customer. Wanted to rent a lab and an operating theatre for some of his experiments.” The Vampire shrugged. “I obliged, and he gave a down payment like always, but this time he disappeared and left a bloody mess behind. In my humble opinion though, his kind—the unsophisticates—are a dime a dozen. You on the other hand,” his eyes flashed, “you and your requests... always a challenge and always a pleasure.”

Both men nodded simultaneously.

“Very well then. Let’s take a look,” Professor Moonly said, withdrawing three thin portfolios from the envelope. They were attached by staples and decorated with snapshots and columns of descriptions. Ages, birthdates, and so forth met our keen eye.

“There will be three federal investigators staying at your house,” said the Vampire. “You were right to come to us.” He gave a grave look before taking the papers back, shuffling to one of them, and starting. “Commissioner Gerald Tomas, one of a kind I’m inclined to believe. His sense of honour is surpassed only by his eager eye and a wit so sharp it could cut you if you got too close to him.”

We stared down at a grey-bearded man, going on perhaps his mid-fifties. Well-postured and button-nosed; proper and appropriate for what one might expect from a veteran of just over thirty-seven years.

“He has captured 5,040 criminals to date.” The Vampire’s eyes narrowed and his pearly-white smile dimmed. “Do you know what that averages out to per year?”

The professor did the mental math. “One hundred and thirty-six point...” He lingered for a moment. “One?”

“Two.”

Good God.

“Now,” the Vampire lingered no more on the perfectly prefectorial officer, “the second man to arrive at your humble abode will be Sir Enoch L. Foster, a closer-up to the British Crown and one who’s caught clever whiffs of our operations more than once—for that matter, every time, we’ve only just barely slipped away from him. I would burn all relations to any underground syndicates and or organizations I might happen to have if I were you, James—the Mouton Gang, The Philosopher’s Council, Knives of The Shadow-alleys,” Howard warned, eyes rising, “the Grey Owl Girl Scouts. This man is, after all, near-flawless in his execution of the law.”

The professor nodded gravely. “I shall be clearing my office sooner than later—of both papers and cookies.”

“Good, good.” A hand waved. “Do you know exactly when it is they are arriving?”

“No, I have not been privy to the details.”

“That’s quite alright.” Howard enjoyed showing off as much as any man did. “Two weeks from now, they shall be at your doorstep. That means you must burn everything this afternoon.”

Professor Moonly looked around, sights shifting from side to side in the busy, exotic restaurant. From the left, a waitress appearing asked if either of the men would like to order a drink. Howard had half a glass of snake bile, a rather atrocious draught made by extracting the gallbladder from a live-until-then cobra, squeezing out the contents and puréeing them, mixing the remaining product with rice wine, and serving the result chilled. It produces a dark, enchanting sort of green liquid, and as we were, Howard took to swirling the creation round and round within the clear, curved glass he had received it in. Professor Moonly sipped a seltzer with ice. “So who is the third man?”

“General George Campbell, a commandant of Her Majesty’s Royal Artillery. He spent well over two decades in East India, mostly during his military tours, though he did splinter off for years at a time to pursue private work for merchants and sailors. I hear he is quite the head-hunter, has a fleet of lion-skulls mounted at his Cheshire estate, will hoist patriotism up by its

behind for the right—but ultimately highest—amount of money, and is a rather avid patron of tea.”

“Of tea, you say?” the professor asked. “Ah, then he and I should get along quite nicely.”

“Perhaps,” the Vampire, having finished his drink said, rising from the table and sliding the re-sealed portfolio over towards the professor. “Memorize the details and then incinerate this when you are done. We did not have this conversation.” The expected debriefing.

“Of course.” The professor finished his carbonated water.

With that, the Vampire melded back into the crowd and the professor rose from his seat. He left a small tip, but neither man paid for his drink.

Men like them do not need to pay.



The Chapter Tree

The chapter tree, you see, produces chapters, of which this one is one—particularly, you will see, until the chapter's done. We sat within the study, as the good Professor Moonly did so kindly do the kindness of elaborating on his plan.

“They will sleep within the guestrooms—not together, but rather well-apart so that I may question any of them individually without chancing upon the other two.” He nodded, moving a hand away from the hot chocolate held within a porcelain tea cup, itself decorated by the pastel portrait of a painted pug. Truth be told, it was not the professor's favourite cup. Nevertheless, the steam from it rose to linger about the face of a much more likeable thing—a painting hanging just over our desk. “We will then pursue several planned ‘chance encounters’, during which we shall begin with innocent preambles.” A work of Thomas Cole, the canvas above us depicted an illustrious society, filled to its brim with victorious celebration. “Ah, I didn't see you there. Up and about, are we? Lovely weather we are having today—”

But Professor, it's raining.

“You see my point anyway. From there, we will carefully pursue a track towards the details of their investigation.”

I doubt that fully-trained officers would ever divulge the particulars of a case to us though.

“Ah, but between the three of them,” the professor's eyes flashed, “the chances that one of the officers will let slip an important detail magnify greatly. True,” he held up a finger, “we are outnumbered, but there are benefits to skewed ratios, my good worm, and time will tell the brilliance of my plan.”

Beside us sat a copy of Sun Tzu's *Art of War*.

I almost think this life is like a running joke. Men die in their sleep with their throats cut by bandits, imperial officers take interest in the desolation of rubber duck shoppes, and tender cash dictates the cold, hard lives of men. None of this is funny, obviously, but it all does run, and by this I mean the cycle of death and law and rags to riches to rags once more goes on, throwing its mileage around and around like some nauseating amusement park ride, operated by an attendant who has left on break to go smoke a fag. No, not that kind of fag—though I do admit, misplaced love sometimes sears the lungs and yellows the teeth.

I believe the professor is heterosexual. Perhaps asexual. I've never seen him love a woman, or make love to a woman for that matter. He is a composed, astute, boring kind of fellow in that respect—

“—I'll have you know I've had my fair share of women—”

—which was why when the doorbell rang two weeks from when we had met Mr. Huxley and, making our way to the front we answered it, I thought to myself that this must have been one of the largest cogs yet in the great machine that was the joke of life.

“Hello, my name is Viola M. Gooseberry. I am a federal investigator, here on behalf of the 49th Precinct of the British Intelligence Committee, charged with looking into the possible murders of Thomas and Biggie Rubber.” She extended a small, pale hand, dotted with drops of rain. “I take it you are Mister Moonly.”

“Voi... Voila..?” the good professor muttered in confusion, staring down at the extended limb, as if human extremities of the like were entirely alien to him. Five maroon splashes coated its ends. It looked warm, soft, and dry. Behind it was a sleeve, then a cordial black blouse, and below that, a grey wool skirt; the blouse was fully-buttoned and covered halfway by a draping brownish coat, part of it folding back as another hand leaned on the spine of an umbrella.

“*Viola*,” the woman stressed, looking up to reveal a button nose and a pleasantly curved-curved chin. Her hair, like soft obsidian, was drawn up behind her head in a professional-looking bun, and over her emerald pupils, solemn twins of the subtlest expression, there rested a pair of brown-rimmed and ovular spectacles.

The pause was long and awkward.

“Well?” she asked again, lowering her arm. “Are you or are you not Mister Moonly?”

“Professor!” Professor Moonly yapped at once, raising a finger so suddenly I feared it might break right off. “I am a professor!”

“Oh,” this Viola woman said, seemingly unimpressed. “Professor, then. But you are Mister Moonly?”

“No one calls me Mister, though.”

“I just did,” the woman nodded, her mouth flushed with sweeps of crimson lipstick. “Now, will you let me in, or are you bound to make a lady stand out in the cold of this foggy morning forever?”

Professor! Snap out of it—let her in, and then we shall discern why on Earth she is not a prefect, nor a sleuth, nor a head-hunter.

“Very well—you are allowed in,” Professor Moonly recovered, stepping back from the threshold of the entrance and letting the smaller human into our abode.

“By the way,” she added as she entered, “my tourer is parked to the side of your driveway. Is it alright if I leave it there?”

“Tourer..?”

“Yes,” the woman said, eyes wide with expression. “Tourer. A car?”

“Ah, yes. A car...” The professor nodded solemnly. In truth, while the fad of the automobile had piqued interests across all of Europe, Grey Owl City was something of a late bloomer, due in no small part to its superstitions about the evils of combustion machinery. “We don’t often see cars here,” the professor said with as polite a smile as he could manage. “I’ll have it moved around to the back shortly.”

“Very well,” the lady in our doorway acknowledged, her face betraying some concern. Nevertheless, closing the door behind us, we and the... I suppose she was indeed an investigator—so we and the investigator began walking through the halls.

“I’m curious,” the professor began with attempted nonchalance. “Where are Misters Tomas and Foster? I was even under the impression that Mister Campbell would also be in attendance.”

The woman suddenly turned on a pair of high heels, her pointy nose spinning back towards us. “That information wasn’t even in the briefings. How did you know those men were supposed to be coming?”

Professor—perhaps you’ve let too much slip!

“Quite simply,” James Hubert Moonly, the decorated professor and city-renowned quick thinker had already recovered, “my father was a man of the law, a middle higher-up from London.”

“Was? What was his name?”

“He passed away. It was,” the Professor paused only briefly, “erm, Archibald Moonly.”

“I don’t recall any Archibald Moonly being anywhere near the higher-ups in our department, nor do I recall an Archibald Moonly ever being anywhere *in* our department,” the female investigator tilted her head, eyeing us curiously.

“I meant London, Ontario—where he was stationed and ultimately settled,” the professor answered her with a confident gesture as we all turned a corner in the hall.

“Oh,” Viola answered, her spectacular emerald eyes shifting towards the tall academic. “I must admit I don’t know much about Canada or her cities—let alone the other London.”

“Quite alright,” came the well-timed response. “It’s a common mistake and I’ve had to correct others about it before. To be fair though, it’s nowhere near as prestigious a city as London, England.” He smiled, pleasingly. “After my father’s retirement, he enjoyed staying in-the-know with his friends, both near and foreign. I thought I might write to him to have him help discern who my guests would be. With the level of those good officers’s fame, it’s frankly a surprise I even needed him to go looking for me.”

“But he has passed away since?” Viola questioned, a look of the worst kind of scrutiny drenching her expression. With a thin finger, she pressed up the delicate-appearing frame of her glasses.

“Indeed,” the professor answered. “I think it was only two days after he wrote to me that a servant found him choked on a... buffalo brisket.”

“My condolences,” Viola said as we all entered the first of our many guestrooms.

“Thank you,” the professor answered. “Do you yourself have any family, near or far?”

“Of course I do,” the investigator answered, placing a small suitcase—one that she had insisted on carrying herself all the way here—onto the floor beside her bed, “though I prefer not to talk about them.”

“An overbearing father?” the professor wondered aloud. “A mother who thinks to spoil you every time you return for Christmas dinner?”

“Like I said,” Viola answered, looking back towards us from over her shoulder. “I prefer not to talk about them.”

“Yes, of course,” Professor Moonly nodded. “On top of it, we have curtailed the prior issue—what happened to the original investigators who were supposed to arrive here?”

“Well,” Viola answered, licking the top of her bottom lip. “One was hospitalized due to food poisoning from a lobster he was eating—that was Mister Tomas. Then, Mister Foster had the unfortunate business of falling down a flight of stairs and breaking his big toe. The agency offered him paid leave for a few weeks, and so this case was dropped from his desk and onto mine. As for Mister Campbell, well... He was devoured by a lion while in India.” Her eyes fell sombrely to the sight of the carpeted floor. “They say there was little left of him.”

Professor Moonly, you don’t think this could have been...

“No,” the professor answered me. “The Mole is a little too unimaginative for all these happenings. Perhaps the Vampire might have...”

“Pardon me?” Viola asked, her attention caught, slapped, then let back into the ocean by the sudden out-loud ponderings of the professor.

“I mean to say it is not the Mole’s style to—” Professor Moonly gestured, then stopped, staring back at Viola who in turn stared back at him. “I mean...” he slowly started again, “...I have been chasing a mole.”

“A mole..?” Ms. Gooseberry asked, her voice lingering somewhere between distaste and absolute astonishment at the strange route the conversation had taken.

“Quite right. Apologies, but my thoughts strayed for a moment. The critter has taken up residence somewhere in the basement levels. He runs around sometimes,” he made scratching motions with his hands, “claws at the floorboards and such—one barely hears it due to the size of my manor, but nevertheless, I dislike even the occasional interruptions from above.”

“I see,” Viola said, nodding slowly. “And what about the Vampire?”

The professor looked on at her for a moment, hands crossed behind his back. “I believe the mole is vampiric in nature.”

Ms. Gooseberry quietly mouthed an unsurprised ‘Ah’.

“I could, perhaps, show you around the house,” the professor suggested.

“I... I really do have work to get to,” the woman motioned to the briefcase.

“Yes,” Professor Moonly said. “Yes, of course.” He made for the door, taking up the brass knob in his right hand, twisting it, then pulling it back. “Enjoy your investigation.”

“Investigations are not often enjoyed,” Ms. Gooseberry pointed out, and the professor mumbled something even I couldn’t hear before leaving.

Well?

The door closed behind us. The professor and I regrouped in front of it. “I’m thinking...” he mentioned quietly. A moment later, he asked, “What’s your opinion on all of this—her in particular?”

She is astute.

“I was thinking belligerent.”

What shall we do about it, then? I presume you still wish to wedge our way into this investigation.

The professor deliberated for a moment. “We must obviously change up the details of the strategy under which we are currently working if we ever hope to uncover the undercover details of this case.”

What then, shall we ring the details from her by seduction? Perhaps a torture less tender. Or a truth-telling serum. I recall just the recipe—an ambrosia of cow’s milk, powdered honey, and just a touch of hemlock—

“No, no, my dear worm. It will be even easier than that.” Professor Moonly’s eyes narrowed keenly. “We shall spy on her.”

Ah, very well.

We opened the door just a crack, peering back into the room. Decorated tapestries, chestnut trims, a portrait of the Greek god Poseidon, and the occasional thread-like fissure in the wall... Once again and at last, the sight of the lovely-looking Ms. Gooseberry met our eye.

She crouched to the briefcase, rising and placing it carefully on the soft folds of the bed. There, she began her dastardly rituals, those richly-nailed hands outstretched. She proceeded to fondle the leather container’s locks for a short while before, with a satisfied click, it surrendered, spreading wide its casing like a pair of parted, foam-lined lips. With expert precision, Ms. Gooseberry inserted both arms, elbow-deep. It was odd and unprecedented surely, the professor thought as we watched her feel around inside the cavernous kit.

What she withdrew shocked us even more. As if larger on the inside than it was on the out, the black foam womb of the briefcase let loose a flurry of mysterious devices, each drawn meticulously between pairs of manicured fingers. From compasses to ballistics tables to pens that when clicked revealed thin stiletto blades, Ms. Gooseberry, like Mary Poppins’s evil twin sister, demonstrated each to herself—and inadvertently us—to check that every one of them was in proper working order.

Professor, I swear I just heard thunder sound in the distance.

“And I, a glimpse of lightning in my eye have caught,” Professor Moonly whispered back as the federal investigator ogled her ominous collection.

Ms. Gooseberry at last drew the final metal-clad contraption from the now-empty case, placing it on the bed. It was large with many pieces, having gears and steam pipes and gauges and four sets of lenses all jutting out from it—not to mention strings and cables and laces and rulers.

I believe it’s a microscope, professor.

“Indeed,” the good Professor Moonly answered me. “And a powerful one at that.”

Ms. Gooseberry then went on to turn away from the gargantuan metal organ, plastering up to the rose-painted walls the maps and charts she had until then kept wrapped with rubber

bands. She took abacuses and set them all in rows, lined needles and pencils up like alternating twin sisters, and placed a stack of textbooks written on the grim arts of forensics and human anatomy atop her nightstand. Finally, “Professor Moonly,” she said, turning back to the doorway and staring with those lavish, dangerous eyes directly at us. “Could you kindly stop spying on me?”

Professor! We have been discovered!

“How did you know?” Professor Moonly piped up peevedly, stepping out from behind the opening door.

“Are... Are you joking?” Ms. Gooseberry asked, wide-eyed, one hand turned over half-flaccid and the other rested palm-out over her forehead. “You’ve been rambling to yourself the entire time you were out there.”



SPIRA MIRABILIS.

The Spiral of Theodorus is a remarkable example of biology's mathematical manufacturing. Three times since, I have seen the good professor elaborate on its fractal nature when one compatriot or another visited the clever halls of Moonly Manor. Often, he would point out particular examples of it, like the South African horn-tongued centipede. This time, the professor exploited nature to impress the federal investigator.

"Fascinating," Ms. Gooseberry said as she partook in the delicately-cooked escargot. She had changed out of her bulkier clothes and into more inside-appropriate attire—a skirt half an inch shorter than her previous one sat around her waist, clipped just above the knees, while a grey suede vest, which might have instead rested more appropriately on a man, decked her bust.

"Is it not?" Professor Moonly gloated.

"You've skipped off on another one of your tangents to avoid my prior question." A pair of surgeon's gloves had also been tucked into the back of her dress—utilized perhaps in one of the dastardly experiments she performed after we'd left her to her own devices.

Have it noted that I will not stand for such a person enacting devilish magicks and disciplines within our manor!

"A tangent, you say?" Professor Moonly scoffed as he brushed aside a strand of hair from his place at the other end of the long dining table. "Absolute rubbish."

"You have though," Ms. Gooseberry pointed out. "In fact, you seem to be in a continual state of doing so."

"Fine—what was it, then?" the professor waved her off. The sooner he knew what the question was, the sooner he could return to dismissing it.

"On a scale of one to absolutely bedlam, how daft are you?"

The professor licked the salt from his lips. "Only about a seven," he parried, "though in my profession, we call it imagination."

"So you imagine conversations with yourself?"

Professor Moonly stopped his response mid-syllable. Now was not the time to tell the newcomer of my presence. It might very well ruin the experiment.

"Yesssss..." James answered, his voice a hiss.

“Then I’d say you’re closer to bedlam,” Viola taunted with a little smirk. “Or perhaps you’re just an idiot.”

Like bickering siblings, these two had sparred with pointed tongues since Ms. Gooseberry’s arrival. This, however, had been a step too far, and the professor, red with insult, quietly composed himself. “I see...” he finally concluded. Then, he moved on, changing again the direction of the conversation. “How is your investigation coming along?”

“It has only been one evening,” Ms. Gooseberry answered, smiling with unbothered arrogance. “And the first evening I’ve been here. How exactly do you expect it’s coming along?”

But at this, the professor bore his teeth in a triumphant sort of grin. Tomorrow, we would certainly have steak. “Apologies. I only presumed that your investigation might be progressing steadily—as might be expected of a British Intelligence Committee agent. Or, rather, three of them.”

“Pardon me?”

“Jumping to conclusions, though, was my mistake. I forgot that you were only a replacement—and a last-minute one at that.” Professor Moonly shrugged, blue eyes raised to meet our pretty counterpart. “If your superiors waited until the final moment to pick you, then it must have meant that while you were better-considered than the others of your stripes, the decision that brought you to Grey Owl City was a hesitant one.”

At this, the investigator’s cheeks began to turn a blushed red. “Hesitant? I’d expect no smaller accusation from a deranged man. I’ll have you know I’m one of the best in my field.”

“Best or not, the Committee wouldn’t send one person to an investigation that originally required three. No, I rather think that they were running low on man-power, though there are other things that help tell me this story. A... Model T,” the professor began, recalling the words. “Manufactured by the Trafford Park factory in America—a popular purchase amongst car-buyers, I’ve read, though I imagine it might be even more popular with a woman such as yourself.”

“My car makes me a poor investigator?” Ms. Gooseberry, brows lowered, laughed. Then she drew a glass of wine to her lips, sipping from it.

“No, of course not,” the professor countered. “But it speaks volumes about your intentions.” Professor Moonly glanced off to the side of the table, sighing through his nostrils. “You’re young so you couldn’t have been working for the British government for very long. You’re also cynical and quick-witted; those are advantageous qualities. But more than any of that, I’m reminded of

a girl who dares to dream for better things than sewing, or nursing, or even working in a factory. This girl, I think, dreams of serving her country.” A long smile drew over the professor’s face. “Yet despite her successes here and there, she always finds herself usurped by her male coworkers—those crude, less-qualified characters. Well, it stands to reason that this girl might do whatever is required then to prove her worth, her *superiority*—buying a car for instance and taking on an investigation halfway across England.” The salt from our meal pricked upon the professor’s palate. “That Model T of yours... Did you purchase it recently?”

Meanwhile, there was an almost overwhelming silence from across the table, and we could feel that distant pair of emerald eyes set themselves on us. “Perhaps the Committee gave my car to me as a form of transportation,” Viola finally said.

“It would have been easier to give you a train ticket,” Professor Moonly answered. “Moreover, I doubt it; your car is an older model, and the British government prides itself on the novelty of its technologies.”

The investigator, by this point, had finished her wine. Now, she glowered, and the professor found himself quite pleased. “When you discovered you were wanted in grey Owl, you packed every instrument in your collection and followed the whistle of the Law like a good dog. I can’t imagine your parents were very happy about it, seeing as you didn’t care much to discuss them when I asked.” He smiled superiorly at last, looking up again with his flashing, blue eyes. “But then that’s a story for another dinner, I suppose. After all, tonight’s topic is the neophyte’s investigation.”

Silence claimed the room again before Professor Moonly, placing his utensils down on his plate, said, “I happen to study psychology. Though it isn’t my favourite science, like many sciences, it has its rules. Those rules, Miss Gooseberry, leave your life an open book, the appendices of your insecurity hidden behind chapters of blunt bravado.”

The investigator clenched her fists, infuriated that she had lost the upper hand. Yes, the professor was deranged, but she was petty. “I’ll have you know,” began her rebuttal, and we felt the malice in her voice, “that I too have studied psychology for my line of work—”

Sir John Herbert Moonly, from behind the framed confines of his portrait, seemed not to approve of the evening’s dinner-circus. Then again, the late man seemed never to approve of anything, so it was, perhaps, just as well.

“—though for what’s it’s worth, I can make neither heads nor tails of *your* book. It’s as if its author, raised on a steady diet of absinthe, took methamphetamines one day after he’d come

home from the local pub, sat down with paper and pen, and proceeded to hit himself repeatedly over the head with a hammer!”

“How dare you insult my book!” The good professor cried, rising from the table.

“You insulted mine first!” the investigator hissed, getting up as well. Then, she paused suddenly, as if graced by a sudden realization. “Wait... You weren’t dropped on your head as a child, were you?”

“First Freud, now you!?” the poor-tempered professor growled, folding his arms across his chest. But his grimace turned to collected composure a moment later and he sighed briefly. “No, as a matter of fact, I was not.”

The investigator crossed her arms as well. “How unfortunate. It might have gone some ways towards explaining... *you*.”

Old Herbert might have been the third to fold arms if he had ever had the fortune of having arms painted on him in the first place, but for the moment, all he did was scowl from the confines of his portrait. Resultantly, in the name of his father’s bad mood, the younger Moonly turned from the table, muttered ‘excuse me’ and left; Viola M. Gooseberry followed suit, and before long, the dining hall lay empty.

I suppose this means dinner is finished. Very well. I shall feast again tomorrow morning.



Chapter *i*

The most important things in life often tend as well to be the most intangible. Happiness, harmony, philosophy... apologies.

I must admit, Professor, I never took you for the sort of man who apologizes.

“I have most certainly apologized before,” Professor Moonly said with a brief but hot flare of pride. “I once apologized for a typeface error in one of my books, and I promptly corrected that error in the next edition.”

Ms. Gooseberry is not a typeface error. She is a human error.

“Very much so, which is why she will require a human resolution.” The good professor hand-picked a bouquet of purple petunias, paid for it, and left. “Over the course of breakfast, she mentioned going down to the crime scene.”

‘I am going down to the crime scene’—in fact, it was about the only thing she had said as she spooned a cheek-full of hot porridge into her mouth. Overtly angry with the professor, she also insinuated that he was not to follow her there or impede the investigation in any way.

So of course, the good professor and I hurried along, quick as we could, to the scorched remains of Tiny Rubber’s expired shoppe. We had, after all, a knack for showing up at places we weren’t welcome. For the dynamic duo who had crashed the Prime Minister’s nephew’s birthday party, the League of Nations’s address on how world peace was flourishing, and a secret gathering of Freemasons—of which the Prime Minister and several of the League’s chairmen were coincidentally members—happening upon a sectioned-off crime scene was only common practice if not common sense.

A pair of butch and burly police officers greeted us as the rest of their colleagues marched to and fro, hauling charred debris, a couple broken doors, and a small safe away from the wreckage. “Good morning, my good fellows,” the professor tipped his top hat, peering at the yellow caution tape below, “Butch and Burly.”

“Morrnun’ Professor,” the butch and burly Butch and Burly answered in unison.

Professor Moonly stepped up. “How goes the investigation?”

“It goes—er, sorry Professor.” The brass-badged gentlemen, who might have passed for charismatic criminals if dressed just a little differently, pushed us back. “The lady says we can’t let any outside people in.”

“Oh?” Professor Moonly remarked in a surprised sort of manner. “But what exactly do you consider to dictate those boundaries where in and out should meet?”

The officers scratched their heads patriotically.

“I mean,” the professor elaborated, “What is ‘outside’ to you?”

“Er, well,” one said, his suspenders tightening as he stretched the thick, vertebral slabs of his spine. “Anything past 195 Pushh Street.” The other picked up where his partner left off, “An’ anything pushing 228 Padd Street—anything past th’ yelluh tape here.” He pointed down to the flimsy plastic barrier as it fluttered in the light wind of the morning.

“Ah,” the professor nodded. But a moment later, he had ducked below the yellow caution tape and re-emerged on the other side. “And yet here I am, no longer on the outside—”

The officers tensed.

“—but on the in.” Professor Moonly smiled. “I am now an ‘inside person’, and furthermore, I let myself in; you had no part in it. No man is at fault, and everyone is happy.”

“Yeah, I s’ppose, but you came from th’ outside an’ that’s the point,” one of the officers pointed out with a thick, hairy finger.

“As did you, my good man,” the professor countered.

The officers’s faces turned grim, and Burly offered up the next word of protest, cracking his knuckles as he did. “You’re not an official part of th’ investigation, is what we mean.”

“Oh, but I am,” Professor Moonly already had a response. “You see, Ms. Gooseberry—your ‘lady’—has been staying at my manor recently in order to provide herself with a base of operations for her work. As such I am privy to all the details of the case.”

“Oh,” came the coarsely-worded response from Butch. “Why didn’t y’ just say that from the beginning, professor?”

Burly fidgeted, lingering on his own hesitation. “Hold on, Butch. I think we ought t’ ask the lady about this first. She almost chewed m’ ear off for lettin’ the mailboy in this morning.”

What sort of need a burnt-down estate might have for news, I know not. Regardless, let’s press on. “Ah—no, no! Don’t do that!” The professor raised a hand, “I bought her these flowers, you see,” then the other, “and it is supposed to be a surprise.”

Butch looked at Burly, who, shaking his head, looked back at the prettily-blossomed petunias. “Erm, if we can’t confirm it—” He looked to his partner for help, then back again when none could be offered. “You might be tryin’ t’ assassinate th’ lady.”

The professor stared back, affronted. “In all the years you have known me, have I ever attempted to assassinate anyone?”

Burly scratched his head. “There’re a lot o’ unsolved cases in Grey Owl.”

“Have any clues ever pointed to me?”

“Well, no, but you can’t be too careful these days.”

Butch and Burly were usually the epitome of carelessness. Ms. Gooseberry must have whipped them up into right-proper roadblocks.

“Inspect the flowers, then—er, on second thought, no, do not. I will pick them apart and show them to you myself.”

“Can’t have you doin’ that seeing as you might be tryin’ t’ trick us.”

“Well I can’t have your clumsy hands decimating my bouquet either,” the professor noted, and the officers agreed to disagree. As such, we were all on the same page—gripped by an absolute inertia. None would move until a move was made. And when it was made, it was well worth moving over.

“So then,” the professor tutted, handing the paper-wrapped flowers over to Butch to hold. “If you now know my intentions but refuse me entry on the whim of a technicality, then I confess.”

The blue-coats looked properly confused.

“I confess to killing Thomas and Biggie Rubber.” Hands outstretched, he looked out against the two large mortals who, shocked, stared back at him.

“Now professor,” Burly said. “That’s a serious accusation to go making about... er... yourself.”

“I make it nonetheless,” Professor Moonly announced with a smile. “For now, I am your man—or at the very least a suspect. As such, I am now part of the investigation and should be allowed access to the crime scene.”

“I’ve never allowed a criminal access to a crime scene before—come t’ think of it,” Butch pondered, “I’ve never had one ask for it.”

“Ah, but there’s the beauty of the action,” the professor went on, taking back the bouquet and nodding. “I’ve already been to the scene of the crime before when I committed it, and who else would be more qualified to point out those vital clues and help you solve how I did it?”

“Ah,” Burly scratched his clean-shaven chin. “But why would you do that, professor—help us out, I mean?”

“Why, because I’ve already confessed,” the good professor noted. “I have no reason to sabotage anything, nor do I have reason to hinder the investigation if, by all means, the investigation is now nearing its close.”

The officers at last conceded defeat. “You’ve got a point, professor,” one of them said.

“I know I do,” the good professor answered with a smirk, then nodded sharply. “Very well then. I’ll be going inside now.”

“I guess we’ll just take you down to the station after?” the policemen asked simultaneously, as if to remind the professor of his predicament before he departed.

“Indeed we’ll see to it later.” He tipped his hat. “Butch, Burly.”

The officers tipped their caps in return.

My, professor. How do you intend to talk your way out of this one?

“Simple, my dear worm,” Professor Moonly said as we made our way in through the charred remnants of the doorway, carrying a fresh burst of air in with us. We inhaled deeply as the outdoors assaulted that acrid, sulphurous, and almost garlicky smells of the ruins. “Pontiff’s Principle. There exists an almost infinite number of possibilities in any given situation.” He held up a finger. “When Thomas and Biggie Rubber met their ends, I was in my study reading. I noticed the stench of burning rubber, but pursued no further action. If I had instead chosen to act, thereby generating a new possibility, then I might have had a chance to appear at the shoppe in time and save them, no matter how small or improbable that possibility was. I ‘killed’ them—sealed their fate as it were—with my inaction, as did every other citizen of Grey Owl. And the policemen certainly can’t arrest the entire populace, now can they?”

Knowing Butch and Burly, I bet they’d try.

As we pushed our way in farther, we were halted by a surprised Ms. Gooseberry.

“You!” her voice rang through the burnt and otherwise empty halls. Morning light poured in through holes in the ceiling while particles of dusty residue swept across their glaring rays.

“Et tu!” Professor Moonly countered.

“I thought I told you not to come here,” the investigator cried out. “You’re getting your footprints all over my crime scene!”

“*Your* crime scene?” the professor wondered aloud. “I’d have thought only a criminal might call the crime scene theirs—regardless,” he interrupted the investigator’s attempted retort. “I have come here to make amends.” The professor retracted the bouquet, waving it a moment later in front of Ms. Gooseberry. “These are for you.”

But Ms. Gooseberry turned pale. “Are those petunias?”

“Yes,” the professor answered obliviously, smiling. “These particular ones are a rare north-western species that grow in the valleys of the Scottish Highlands.”

Ms. Gooseberry shook her head, plugging her nose. “I’m extremely allergic to petunias.”

One wonders how a woman might be ‘extremely allergic to petunias’. Does but a sniff of them cause death? If so, how could one live long enough to confirm she did indeed have the morbid, allergic affliction?

“I faint around them.”

The professor raised an eyebrow. “You faint?”

“I faint,” Ms. Gooseberry confirmed, frowning. “Now take those away.” She waved us off.

“Very well,” sighed Professor Moonly, tossing the bouquet through the broken doorway.

“Still,” the federal investigator said with a shrug. “I suppose the sentiment was kind enough, and I’m a mature adult.” We thought we heard her mumble ‘Surely more mature than you’. At last, she shrugged and with some effort managed the words, “I guess I forgive you.”

“Thank you,” the good professor said, bowing halfway. As his eyes lowered, he noticed a partially-singed blue-covered book in the investigator’s hand. “Catching up on your morning reading?”

Ms. Gooseberry glanced down, then back up. “No, not exactly. I found it upstairs in one of the victims’s bedroom.” She held it in front of her, opening the damaged pages.

“Scopes and Tropes of Microchemistry...” the professor muttered as he skimmed past the title and observed the contents. A paperback plethora of shapes and colours, degraded by the fire—though nonetheless both beautiful and complex—met our eyes.

“Thomas Rubber was known to be a tinkerer,” Ms. Gooseberry noted astutely. She closed the textbook with gentle care, revealing the grey-winged silhouette of a swallowtail moth on its cover. “Perhaps this book served some use to his inventions.”

The professor scratched his chin. “Yes, most likely. His father despised the natural sciences, if I recall from the few times I met him.” He surveyed the damage to the first floor for a moment longer. “Frankly though, I’m surprised that anything managed to survive the explosion... How is the rest of your investigation coming along?”

“Poorly,” Ms. Gooseberry frowned, a pair of knuckles propping her chin as she stood only a head shorter than Professor Moonly. Her green eyes narrowing, she glanced up at the lanky

academic. “Everywhere I look, clues seem to evade me. I’ve a wrenching feeling that this is indeed a crime scene, but for the love of all that is good, I cannot prove it!”

The professor looked around. “What makes you suspect foul play?”

“Windows.”

Both professor and investigator stared up towards a line of closed but blown-out windows, just below the rafters.

“If they were working with high explosives and noxious chemicals, do you not think either Thomas or Biggie would open the windows at the top?” Ms. Gooseberry reached to the side, tugging on a long chain that, becoming rigid, yanked in turn at the row of glassless frames, hinging them all open. “In fact, that is specifically what these windows are here for according to the building’s blueprints and to Tiny Rubber himself. Yet police reports said they had been left closed at the time of the explosion.”

“Thomas and Biggie might have simply forgotten,” Professor Moonly said, shrugging. “It’s not an impossibility.”

Ms. Gooseberry nodded, perhaps more to herself than to the professor, before continuing. “There is also a great lack of detail when it comes to the matter of their alibi.”

“*Their* alibi? You mean Thomas and Biggie?” the professor asked curiously, leaning against a half-burnt beam. “Why would dead men need an alibi?”

“Because while dead men tell no tales,” Ms. Gooseberry answered professionally, “they sometimes do tell lies. Thomas and Biggie were here alone on that fateful evening. Their father, Tiny Rubber was not with them—I spoke with him and a member of the Grey Owl Children’s Charity earlier this morning. They both acknowledged that while his sons were in the shoppe, Mister Rubber was at a fundraiser eleven blocks away.” The investigator withdrew a wide brown evidence envelope from a suitcase on the floor. She slipped Thomas Rubber’s textbook, which she had been holding onto until now, into it. “Evidently,” she continued as she sealed the cover, “there weren’t any customers here either. I’ve had the police attempt to seek out any witnesses to the coming and goings around the building.” She pointed through the half-collapsed premises to a small group of citizens who had been rounded up by the officers outside. “However, up to this point, no one seems to have seen anything.” Her eyes narrowed calculatingly. “Do you not think it odd, Professor Moonly, that on the day these two men died, not a single person even passed by a streetside store in the middle of a populated area, at a time when citizens go out to see films or eat dinner at restaurants, sit in parks—”

“And resultantly get eaten alive by mosquitos.”

“But you see my point?”

“I do,” the good professor scratched his chin and the investigator turned back, pacing. “Perhaps,” he contemplated quietly, “perhaps no one is willing to speak.”

Ah, Professor Moonly, I can feel the cogs in your brain turning, rumbling beneath my underbelly. Are you thinking back to what Mr. Flinch said—about a certain someone’s large investment into the rubber duck shoppe?

“Yes, my dear worm,” the professor mumbled, nearly catching the attention of Ms. Gooseberry. “Now say that one wanted to *harm* this certain someone, indeed a very powerful someone who could not be physically touched...” He paused, noticing something. A piece of coloured paper was wedged halfway under the burnt shelf in front of him. “Then...” he went on slowly, “to strike at this someone’s pocketbook would certainly send just as lethal a message.” Speaking of messages—Professor, there’s writing on that paper. Now what does it say? The League of the... Invites you to...

“Have you reached some sort of conclusion?” Ms. Gooseberry asked. Arms crossed, she suddenly stood over us again.

“Ah—erm, yes, I have,” the professor noted, peering down and taking care all the while to steer the conversation back away from his personal musings. “You said you could find no clues to support this theory, or any theory for that matter. No one will talk to you; I presume there are no fingerprints...”

“None,” Ms. Gooseberry noted, turning away to look back around the room. “With the top windows closed, the explosion was fully contained within the building, blasting almost everything away when it went off.”

“Then no dental records to be matched, no profiles to compare...”

“The bodies were too badly burnt.”

“No irises, no follicles...”

“More so small crusted heaps of jelly and carotene.”

“And kerosene?”

“I collected and analyzed a few samples earlier, finding ferric chloride and traces of peroxides... Still, with the amount of compounds involved in Thomas Rubber’s machine, it will be difficult if not impossible to find anything that didn’t belong to the process.” Our counterpart paused, peering around. “It doesn’t help that the schematics were blown to bits too.”

“Indeed—” Professor Moonly said, crouching down at last and teetering on his dress shoes. Whatever was stuck under the shelf had been wedged at least halfway in, but with a bit of effort he managed to pull it loose. “And what about calling cards?”

The investigator leered back at the professor as he stood. “Of course not. What kind of criminal leaves a calling card?”

Expertly, Professor Moonly flicked between his fingers a cobalt-coloured slip, laminated and with bright gold cursive scrawled on both sides. “This was underneath the shelf right here.”

Ms. Gooseberry’s beautiful, green eyes widened. “Underneath the shelf—but how? I’d had this room completely combed!”

The professor peered curiously at the small, elementary thing, turning it diagonally. “Butch made mention of a paper boy he’d accidentally let in this morning. If you truly had examined this entire room, then the only logical conclusion is that the paper boy dropped it off.”

Viola quickly nodded. “I’ll alert the officers.”

“I doubt there’d be any point to it,” Professor Moonly said. “He’s likely already made well off by now.” Here, in the dim and misty light of the morning, both stood at attention.

“I suppose you’re right,” Ms. Gooseberry admitted after half a minute. She then turned her attention back to the card. “What is it exactly?”

The good professor pored over the detailed little thing, and after a moment, his head tilted slightly right. “It appears to be an invitation.”



Chapter *h*

The spider-mite is 1/20th of a millimetre in length, 1/22nd in width, and hasn't a care in the world. It trails across the wild bellies of nature's forest floors, blissfully content with the scope of its perception. Above it, however, looms the gargantuan isopod, the sow bug, whose many legs pound mercilessly down like mechanical clockwork, through and into the tender soil below; from above, its plate-like exoskeleton casts an always-ominous shadow over grit and pebble. But this lumbering creature is also innocent, for though to the mite the sow bug seems a towering beast, it is still remarkably small. The human is larger than these two yet, and by many times more. It sees cities rise and ventures unfurl, and it sits in its study and eats and drinks and turns its mind to philosophy and its telescope to the cold heart of space. And to the stars, which sit in their placental nebulae, the human being as well is infinitely insignificant. For the stars see cities rise and fall and know all ventures age and wither with but an ounce of time. After all, they and their light are children of the darkness, and children know a great many things—like that all things are small when put into perspective.

“Aha! I knew I had it kept somewhere.”

Ms. Gooseberry marvelled at all one hundred and sixty-four storeys of the architecturally miraculous bookshelves. Like the curving walls of some arcane cathedral, all things paper, bound and categorized, spiralled up and up and up, all the way to the rim of a circular glass skylight, the copper-clad frame of which was at its centre worked into the shape of a blossoming rose. Through the high-up dome, a dim and lovely starlight mingled with the glow of electric lamps.

“The League of The Symbol's Vigil. A shadow-organization with its lengthiest roots set in classical antiquity; fostered through its adolescence within the depths of the old, gothic churches, and enduring—as far as we know—to a nearly present date, sinisterly entrenched within the bowels of one empire after the next. Last direct accounting in the cathedral city of Ely, circa 1901.” The professor looked up from the book, smiling proudly. “I knew I had the encyclopaedia with it stuffed away somewhere.”

“I've never heard of such an organization,” Ms. Gooseberry said frankly.

“I'd think not,” Professor Moonly answered. “It is, after all, a *secret* society.”

“What I mean,” Ms. Gooseberry—irritated—insisted, “is that the British Intelligence Committee has never investigated this organization. You should not think too lightly of the federal policing force, Professor Moonly. Our efforts have seen the fall of countless would-be underground syndicates.”

“Of course,” the good professor answered. “But alas, you infiltrate their ranks; they infiltrate yours. Before you know it, your roles are switched and you’re one in the same.” He wagged a finger. “This particular organization seems very good at eluding official authorities, which makes me think that they have friends in high places.”

“Sort of like you and your friends?” Ms. Gooseberry prodded.

For a moment, a silence lingered between the professor and investigator.

“Zealous gusto and religious fanaticism do not suit me, I’m afraid,” Professor Moonly finally corrected. “Nor do they suit my very-much secular friends.”

“Still, if you do not mind it,” the investigator continued, “I’d very much like to search your premises. You seem to know a great deal about this organization, and that combined with your intrusion onto my crime scene, plus your apparently-compulsive need to spy on me,” and now it was her turn to wag, “make you a very suspicious person.”

“Feel free to search my abode,” the professor grinned, arms outstretched.

“Oh.” The investigator acted surprised. “Why, thank you for the offer. That said, I doubt I’d find anything.” Ms. Gooseberry shook her head politely. “I figure with your anticipation of federal investigators arriving at the manor, you’d have already cleared much if not all of your murky business from the grounds.”

The professor’s grin vanished.

“Anyway, I’m tempted to think you’re far too much of a show-off to be part of a secret *anything*,” Ms. Gooseberry went on as the professor grumbled, a subtle smile brokered upon her face by the injury she’d inflicted. Certainly this had been better reconciliation than petunias. “But back to the League. I suppose the next move then should be to gather intelligence.”

“By attending the...” The professor looked down again at the blue card, which he had placed down on the tabletop beside his *Big Book of The Mysterious Unknowns*. “Soirée?”

“Yes,” Ms. Gooseberry answered. “A masquerade, to be specific.”

Professor Moonly made a poor face. “But if someone had intentionally dropped this off at the crime scene, then it would stand to reason that they had expected us to find it.”

Ms. Gooseberry nodded keenly.

“Then,” the professor looked up worriedly. “They know that we suspect something...”

“...And will be expecting me to attend the masquerade,” the investigator concluded.

“You alone..?” the professor muttered under his breath. Admittedly, this mystery piqued his senses and baffled his interest, which mounted precisely with the passing of each quarter-minute.

“Yes, I alone,” Ms. Gooseberry answered. “Why would you want to tag along to a secret society’s potentially life-threatening gathering?”

“Because knowledge knows no bounds, Miss Gooseberry,” the professor retorted. And he was right. True knowledge claimed all territories and thus could be restricted only by ignorance.

And we are not about to be labelled ignorant, are we Professor Moonly?

“Certainly not,” the academic answered with a hearty tone. “And anyway,” he then turned his attention to the federal investigator, “why would you have any need to be so concerned with where I place myself tomorrow evening? If you are worried about my intentions, it’s like you yourself said—I’m too much of a show-off to be part of a secret anything.”

Ms. Gooseberry frowned, pressing her hands to her hips. “You strike me as the kind of person who is used to having his wit get him what he wants. Perhaps it’s even the reason this investigation’s officers were scheduled to stay at your manor.” She drew her hand along the table below us. “Allow me to be the first person, perhaps in your entire life, to deny you something—you will not be coming with me tomorrow night in any way, shape, or form.”

The professor deflated noticeably.

“I will also be placing a call to the British Intelligence Committee this hour, giving them the details of tomorrow night’s events. Once I am inside and have sufficient evidence of wrongdoings, I will signal them to storm the building and make arrests—oh, and if anything should happen to me, they will storm the building anyway and shoot everyone on sight.”

“Isn’t that against the law..?” Professor Moonly wondered.

“I am the law,” the investigator countered.

The professor shut the tome over the tabletop, a narrow layer of dust pluming from within its pages. “Fine. But why tell me this if I won’t be going?”

“Because you’re very bad at following instructions and it’s better to be safe than sorry,” Ms. Gooseberry answered emphatically. “Now, please point me to your telephone.”

“Fine.” Professor Moonly handed her the card.

A couple of turned corners later, we had arrived at one of the seven wooden wall telephones, accordingly placed throughout the rooms of Moonly Manor. Ms. Gooseberry eyed the engraving of an amiable beaver on its side before picking up the receiver.

The professor and I sat in the corner upon a plush guest bed as our companion turned the gold-plated rotary dial.

“Hello? Operator? Yes, please put me on to...”

We glanced at the professor’s nails; he bit at the edge of one to even it out.

Professor, I just recalled that you have some papers to attend to.

“That’s true,” Professor Moonly mentioned. “Some lecture notes for next month’s class that need tidying.” The good professor had a little over half a year ago promised to preside over a course at the University of Grey Owl, a prestigious academy not actually quite near the city of Grey Owl, but rather far off on one of its borders, where all sorts of spectacular human creatures—from pretty politicians, to penmen of satire, to scientists of the highest pedigree—were bred and groomed. Even for such an inconveniently-distanced realm, walled by smooth stone fortifications that were built in turn by the commoners and gazed at metaphysically by the airier echelons of humanity, it only made sense that a man such as Professor Moonly would preside over at least one course there. In truth, he’d have presided over all of the university’s classes, and over, in fact, the university itself—and on two separate occasions, he was made precisely such an offer. He declined, however, for first, the distance from his manor to the grounds was great and second, he knew that there he would have to put up with colleagues. The good professor despised colleagues.

“Pardon me..? What do you—no, you came through clear but why would you want me to..?” Ms. Gooseberry hung up the phone after a minute more of listening, then turned back to us. When we saw her face, it was a grim, pale shade.

Professor—leave your musings for a moment and look up. Ms. Gooseberry has ended her call and looks rather unwell!

“Hm?” Professor Moonly stared up from his crossed legs, the papers and the pedigrees all falling from his thoughts. “Miss Gooseberry, what’s the matter?”

The federal investigator sat down beside us, her bottom pressing down into the soft sheets and the firm spring-mattress below them. “I have been told to end my investigation and drop the case.”

The professor stared back at her, alarmed.

“I spoke to Mister George Rowell at the Intelligence Committee, one of our highest ranking officials, and the minute I mentioned the League of the Symbol’s Vigil, he went very quiet. Finally, he said to me that attending the masquerade was well out of my jurisdiction, as was any case involving the League. He told me...” she paused, attempting to make sense of her superior’s orders, “that there were times when we should leave well enough alone, and that this was, without a doubt, one of them. I am to return to London at my earliest convenience.”

The professor scratched his chin worriedly. “So then this organization is powerful enough to scare even the British Intelligence Committee.”

“So it seems,” Ms. Gooseberry answered.

There was a momentary pause.

“What will you do next?” the good professor asked, and together we watched as Ms. Gooseberry stared back down through sombre, emerald eyes at the cobalt-coloured card with bright blue writing.



Chapter (*R, M, φ*)

Outside, the night was dark, illuminated now and then by strips of bright lightning, which for seconds at a time set grass and benches, trees and streets, all drowned by the downpour, alight with ghostly shades. From behind the study's quivering windows, a symphony of thunder resounded in the whiteless intermissions. And within, the glow of a lamp waxed the silhouettes of Professor James Hubert Moonly and, as she entered, Ms. Viola M. Gooseberry.

"You called me here?"

"I did."

Moonly Manor, despite its impressive size, many rooms, and luxurious décor, had no servants, due in large part to Professor Moonly's required isolation whenever papers needed to be written or documents needed to be read—something that occurred often if not always. As a result, the professor had at dinnertime told the good Ms. Gooseberry from across the dining table to wait half an hour and then meet him in his study.

And so here we were, assembled.

"I've been thinking about tomorrow evening," said the professor as he removed a prettily-labelled bottle from his desk's cabinet. He placed it for a moment beside a thin, paperback book labelled *Science & Hypothesis*. "Care for some brandy?"

"Alright."

The lightning flashed again, but no sound followed. "Please, take a seat."

Ms. Gooseberry made her way to a padded, red recliner beside the little fireplace.

We could taste the warmth of the smoke as it rose, lingering in the newly-stirred air.

As she sat, the outside thunder bellowed. "You're not the only one who has been thinking about it," she spoke once the sound had passed. "This League of the Symbol's Vigil seems to want us at their gathering tomorrow night, and with few to turn to, our only choice seems either to attend and land ourselves directly in their clutches, or..."

"Abandon the case, as suggested by your superior, Mister Rowell," the professor said, his expression unflinching as he handed her one glass, then poured from the bottle into his own.

"Yes," Ms. Gooseberry admitted.

We had taken the time late afternoon to meet again with the Vampire and ask him about the inconvenienced investigators. During this second conversation, he'd denied having had any

part in the matter, though he did admit it seemed a little too incredible to be pure chance. Could we have been wrong in our prior assumption that the League was our mysterious rubber duck investor? Indeed it seemed now more likely that the League of the Symbol's Vigil had sabotaged the Rubbers's machine, in which case it would prove necessary for them to prevent any further snooping by the federal investigators. "Whatever the League's role is in all of this," Professor Moonly finally started, "they're in some way connected to the deaths of Thomas and Biggie Rubber." The professor paused, hesitantly, deciding at last on speaking his mind. "It may yet be in their best interests to tie up any loose ends."

"Meaning me," Ms. Gooseberry calmly concluded, and once again, the professor was subtly offended.

"Well, us," he corrected. "After all, I was with you at the crime scene and I did discover the invitation."

Ms. Gooseberry smiled thinly, one hand propping up her chin, her elbow pressed in against the cushioned chair. "And that, in and of itself, still makes you particularly suspect." She shrugged. "Perhaps your vampiric mole played a part in my colleagues's misfortunes."

"What are you suggesting?" Professor Moonly muttered.

"As an investigator accountable to the British Crown, I do not believe in coincidence—you know too much and are far too nosy to be as ignorant of this case as you pretend to be."

How interesting, the way her thin and elegant limbs stretch out under the white bursts of the storm, don't you think, professor?

"Professor Moonly," she said as the floorboards underneath us groaned. "You have been dishonest with me up until this point. Tell me all that you know about the case."

The professor considered, then nodded finally. "It is as you said: Thomas and Biggie Rubber were likely murdered. From what I've been told by my acquaintances—"

"Which acquaintances?"

"Off limit acquaintances," Professor Moonly frowned before continuing. "Someone had invested a spectacularly large amount of money in the Rubber brothers's lives and work, and it appears their deaths have ruffled the feathers of this mystery investor. As a result, federal investigators—three of the best, in fact—were called in to consult with Grey Owl police and get to the bottom of things." Professor Moonly scratched his chin. "Now it may be that whoever murdered Thomas and Biggie Rubber also had these three investigators inconvenienced; it might just as well have been bad luck for the gentlemen. If, however, we are looking at the first

scenario,” the good Professor’s eyes shifted as he swivelled the liquid in his glass, “it begs the question as to why you were not inconvenienced too.”

Ms. Gooseberry looked on as the professor turned in his chair.

“Ultimately, one thing is for certain. We are playing a game with a powerful entity, the likes of which no amount of knowledge or command could ever hope to stop.”

The rain brokered a rough and uneasy silence. Pitter patter; patterned pitters slowly filled the room.

“You want to know what my plan is, I suppose,” Ms. Gooseberry concluded.

“You needn’t tell me if you do not wish to,” said the professor, turning his palms up. “I realize that neither of us is in a position to fully trust the other.”

Ah, so we are gambling with her response, then.

“I have no plan,” Ms. Gooseberry said.

The professor raised an eyebrow.

“You know,” the sitting investigator continued, “you were right about me when you said I’d set myself towards the goal of besting all of my colleagues. But I’m more concerned with doing my job right, which is why I’ve also followed every case I was assigned through to its end.”

“You seem like a capable and caring investigator,” the professor admitted.

“In my own opinion,” Ms. Gooseberry answered, “I am. Unfortunately, the opinions of others count for more, and others cannot see past the paper sitting on their desks. To them, I’m the name of a woman, and women are, by their definition, incapable investigators.”

“For what it is worth,” Professor Moonly noted, looking back up at her, “I’d trust your expertise over that of any other.”

Ms. Gooseberry chuckled briefly. “This coming from the man who had to find my clue for me?”

The professor shrugged, then smiled subtly. “I doubt you’d let me upstage you so easily...” He glanced towards his drink, “Which is why I think you’re lying when you say you don’t have a plan. In fact, I am of the opinion that, clever as you are, you’ve already come up with some profound solution to the inevitable trap which tomorrow night we trigger.” He crossed his right leg over his left, leaning back as he faced her. “Suffice it to say, I trust you entirely with my life.”

Ms. Gooseberry, affected by the sentiment, drew up her pretty lips into a fuller smile. “It would be pleasant to think we could survive our encounter with this shadow league, wouldn’t it?” The investigator brought up her glass. “Here’s to the thought anyway.”

The professor raised his own in the gnawing darkness as, for the end of the minute, the electricity wavered and the lamp dimmed. “Thought is but a flash in the midst of an untempered night,” the silhouette of his lips expressed as from behind the rain-assaulted windows, a spectacular shine erupted. “Yet that flash...” he added softly, and his blue eyes gleamed in the darkness. “It is everything.”



Chapter 01110100 01100101 01101110

The spores of the ophiocordyceps unilateralis begin their lives being inhaled by the unexpected ant, and when they are, they worm their way into its head, where burrowing deep into the fleshy sinews they drive the creature up to the highest point they can find—a banana leaf, a blade of grass, the last hair on the head of a man. Once there, the spongy fungus grows, driving its soft tail into the ant’s brain and pressing up with all its effort, eventually exploding through the insect’s skull. There, it flowers like a beautiful, grey bulb, drinking the life of its host as if it were a savoured port wine. Oddly enough, I find myself particularly fond of the ophiocordyceps unilateralis. We both, after all, appreciate the subtle and beautiful art of infestation. Furthermore, we both are creatures of the mind and so share a kind of unspoken bond. I think a part of it might also be that as a fellow parasite, I can appreciate its fulfilment of our social contract; as man’s is to be ruled, ours is to be rulers. Maybe still I see in the unilateralis that which I fail to see in myself. I am domesticated by the professor’s rules—the landly laws, as I have come to know them by. Maybe I appreciate its unrelenting appetite. To attach, attack, conquer, flower, and explode again, giving birth to a cloud of offspring. Do I desire to nosh on brain matter as my peers do? Indeed, I and the ophiocordyceps unilateralis are chemically different, but philosophically, we are the same.

“Humans,” Professor Moonly muttered as he and Ms. Viola M. Gooseberry, the federal investigator, peered around the corner at the tall and luxurious banquet hall, a beautifully-painted sign illuminated by bright, dewy lightbulbs on its front reading ‘Boullerolli’s Royal Hall’. “We built the pyramids, discovered gravity, and painted the Mona Lisa.” He shook his head. “Yet who would have imagined we could contemplate the devious, infernal inventions of such dangerous societies?”

In front of us, ladies and gentlemen in animal masks entered the ominous building, their names checked off of a list by a rather unfortunately large fellow. His face was hidden like the others—for him, by a black mask in the shape of a grizzly bear’s head—and his bulging biceps put the thugs from Rifter’s Lane to shame.

“To be fair,” Ms. Gooseberry added to the good professor’s rant, “we also shot Arch-duke Ferdinand, sunk the Titanic, and burnt down the White House.”

“Yes, well, the Americans deserved that last one,” Professor Moonly noted.

“Agreed,” Ms. Gooseberry said. “Now,” she spoke, holding a small umbrella with two holes torn in its skin overhead, “it seems our bear is checking people’s identifications against his list. I suspected such might be the case.” Her clothes this evening were different from the norm. A dirty, baggy blouse the color of animal hide and stained with rum rested over her figure, such so that she might have easily been mistaken for a common vagrant.

The professor by contrast, done up in a very adult pair of black pants, a tidy overcoat, his usual, dark tophat—the one with the slate-coloured stripe wrapped just above its rim—and a blue (not indigo, for indigo is a vile, spite-inducing colour and no one likes it) dress shirt, nodded. “Shame,” he answered jokingly. “I forgot to bring my passport.”

“That’s quite alright,” Ms. Gooseberry whispered as she soaked her hands against the muddy floor of the alleyway. Then she rubbed them on her once-admirable face.

So Minerva soils her skin.

“Here come our passports now.” In front of us, a pair of laughing animals—a crow and sparrow to be specific—approached. “Follow my lead.” Ms. Gooseberry, umbrella swinging in hand, stumbled out onto the street, appearing as if she were drunk. “O’ allo, allo gov’na.” Her grubby appearance caught the eyes of the duo passing through, and when she knew that she had their attention, she curtsied awkwardly, slapping at her thighs, then pinching up the right and left corners of her skirt. “God save the king, biscuits and tea, wot-not an’all. Couple’a lovely songbirds you are; out fer tha eve’nin, eh?” She grinned cheekily. “Care tah spare’a penny?”

After an initial startled pause, the black-feathered crow—the man—grinned from underneath his beak, reaching deep into his left pocket. “Well any good gentleman is a patron to those in need—” He held a single coin out. “But only a penny.”

The woman beside him—the brown-feathered sparrow—giggled.

“We wouldn’t want to encourage you,” the crow clarified, “now would we?”

“Many thanks, sir; many thanks.” Ms. Gooseberry took the lowly coin and bowed, and when she came up swung her umbrella with such force that, smacking into the sparrow’s face, it sent the unsuspecting woman falling back in an instant.

“My God!” cried the man, who reached out in an attempt to stop her, but tophat in hand, the good professor stepped into his way. The crow cocked his head. “Professor Moonly?”

In an instant, the professor swung a fist, knocking the hapless gentleman out cold. As the crow’s body dropped to the pavement with a satisfying thud, the good professor bit his bottom lip, grimacing before he groaned a second later. “Ooooooow! My hand! My bloody hand!”

“Sod your hand,” Ms. Gooseberry hissed, picking up the limp woman by her shoulders. “Help me pull these two into the alley.”

Together, the pseudo-criminals dragged. Then, they switched clothes with the bloodied, newly-appointed unfortunates and re-emerged from the shadows as...

“Missus Molly Graham,” Ms. Gooseberry read from one of the dirty brown passports, “and,” then from the other, “Mister Mallery R. Pennypants Edgesworth Graham.”

The good professor frowned. “Pennypants Edgesworth Gra... Now you’re just making things up.” He snatched the identification, poring over it, then glanced up, shaking his head in shock. “I don’t believe this...”

Ms. Gooseberry bent over with laughter, then corrected herself a moment later. “By the way,” she noted as she rose again, “he said your name before you hit him, didn’t he?”

Professor Moonly nodded, looking down. “I am somewhat of a celebrity here. Frankly, I’d be surprised if someone in Grey Owl City did not know who I was.” He spun back, raising a finger after strapping on the string-bound crow mask. “For the record, however,” came his voice from under the beak, which reeked like gin, “my friends call me James.”

Ms. Gooseberry, fitting her newly-acquired sparrow’s face on, shook her head. “Well James,” she peered again, this time from behind beady little bird eyes, “while we’re at it, you should take off that tophat. You look ridiculous wearing it above your mask.” Fingers stretched into black-lace gloves. “Honestly, I don’t even know how you balance the thing on your head. Isn’t it a bit big for you?”

The good professor, put off, pecked back. “Tsk! It’s tall—though well-proportioned anyway. Besides, tophats are in fashion. If anything, this elevates my social standing.” He laughed. “Watch me climb the ranks while you sit at the side, my rueful little sparrow.”

“Fine,” Ms. Gooseberry sighed. “Look like a fool if you want.” And so that was that.

With the crow and the sparrow bound in the alley, their impostors, satisfied with their appearances, proceeded to the front door of the banquet hall minutes later.

“Names?” asked the bear.

“Molly Graham,” Ms. Gooseberry said, waving her hand eccentrically.

“Mallery Pennypants Edgesworth... Graham,” Professor Moonly continued, clearing his throat.

Both flashed their papers, and the bear looked down, then up to the masked figures. His lips quivered as if they were tectonic plates and his face the rumbling sediment.

“We, uh... We should be on the list,” the professor mentioned.

Suddenly, the oversized doorman burst into horrendous laughter. “Thought you could fool me, eh?” Clipboard dropped, he reached out with a pair of dark-skinned hands and—

Professor, look out!

All ten digits, large and hairy, seized the professor’s and Ms. Gooseberry’s shoulders. With a hard pull, he yanked us all forward, affording the good professor and the investigator only half a moment to trade terrified glances.

“Kitchen staff enter through the *kitchen* door.” He nodded gruffly to an entrance a few feet beside him, then mumbled under his breath, “Everyone wants to be one o’ th’ damn celebrities...”

“Right,” Ms. Gooseberry said, emerald eyes wide under her mask and her voice a tweet compared to the bear’s tougher tongue. “We, erm, forgot.”

“Yes, forgot,” Professor Moonly added as the bear threw the two to the side.

“Don’t forget again,” we were warned. “Now off with ya.”

“Yes sir, sorry sir.”

“Sorry sir, yes sir.”

“An’ by the way,” the bear, eyes squinting, yanked the shocked professor back a notch and nodded upwards. “Nice tophat, Mallery.”

And so we entered through the side door, and all was as well as it could be.

Chefs and pastry boys, waiters and waitresses—may I have your attention please! We have a lovely couple of guest servers tonight. May I present to you Professor James Moonly, world-renowned intellect. Following is Ms. Viola Gooseberry, a federal investigator of seven years. They come to us to find intrigue, mystery, and answers to the circumstances surrounding the deaths of Thomas and Biggie Rubber.

“You two!” someone whined in a thick Parisian accent from behind us. A fat, round fellow—fatter and rounder quite honestly than any other fellows the professor and I knew—had seemingly caught sight of us. He twirled a curling moustache. He scowled with bright white teeth. He wore a tag of sorts, which read ‘Head Chef – Maurice’.

“Well?” His voice was shrill as the sound of sizzling shrimp. As the kitchen scents wafted about, he clapped twice. “Come oehn! Put oehn your waiting costumes.” He grabbed a pair of professional-looking plain white dress shirts with strict, black bowties. Clipped to them were

grey denim pants. The professor and investigator took them, bewildered, as the portly man grabbed a pair of wine glasses that had a golden, shimmering liquid inside. “And while you’re at eet, drink up. Complimentarie; on ze house; all dat nonsense.” These last words were garbled and hurried.

Professor Moonly and Ms. Gooseberry drank as they were shuffled by Head Chef Maurice out of the way to make room for a flurry of servers bearing plates and platters.

Ms. Gooseberry fondled her mask nervously as the crowd passed by.

“And don’t forget,” the Head Chef chided, slapping her wrist. “Masks stay *on* until ze end of ze night. Nobody needs to know oo anybadie is.”

A very fortunate break.

As the Head Chef waddled off and the investigator sighed a quick breath of relief, Professor Moonly turned to her. “So what’s the plan from here on out?”

Ms. Gooseberry shook her head, dark, flowing hair swinging out of the way from behind the sparrow’s mask. “We’ll split up. See what each of us can overhear.” She hushed as a pretty, petite woman with long, blue nails, wearing a colourful peacock mask stepped by, cookie-cutter pants stepping on in a one-two fashion and a plain white bowtied dress shirt crinkling with her movements. “Reconvene in twenty minutes here.”

“Very well,” the good professor answered, picking up a tray of antipasti and departing.

I see—then we are off! How exciting. An incognito investigation of spectacular proportions.

“Indeed, dear worm,” Professor Moonly noted as we swirled the platter back and forth, making our way out into a grand reception hall. Carefully, we watched the men and women who populated it through the round eye-holes of the crow’s mask. “Let’s see what we can gather.”

Listen closely...

“...so you see, the polyether spheroid then becomes a self-contained kind of bubble.”

Closer...

“...less the ones in the coffer, eh? Buy shares at twenty pounds per, then. Feather inflation will have us by the short hairs...”

Closer, and you will hear...

“At which point, the uranium reacts through an induced fission and...”

Something of particular importance.

“I just returned from the Symbol Room, brother. I have to say I found it very enlightening. If it’s answers you seek, it’s there you’ll go.”

Professor Moonly and I listened in from underneath a pair of tall sculptures carved from Parian marble.

“I’m still not a fan of that contraption, though I must admit if ever you feel the need for revelation, the fortune teller should be seen immediately.”

“Is that so?” the good professor whispered to himself. “I think I just acquired the sudden need for revelation.”

He was stopped short of his train of thought by Ms. Gooseberry bumping into him.

“Oh!”

“Excuse me—oh, Professor.”

The professor half-bowed—leaned was more like it. “Ah, Miss Graham,” he said. “I have quite the ounce of information for you.”

“Is it about dancing?” Her eyes were wide with fear.

“Pardon?”

“ALL LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, PLEASE APPROACH THE DANCE FLOOR.”

I suspect this will not end well.

“Whatever you do,” the investigator warned, “you must not dance.”

“What’s the harm in a little dancing?” the professor queried, smiling from behind his mask.

“It’s not that kind of dancing,” Ms. Gooseberry answered.

From far above us, droning down in gentle droves amidst the muffled rain from outside, the first measure of ‘Royal March of The Lion’ descended in a slowly-gathering tempo.

As we looked on, a large group of men and women shaped themselves into a human circle. As dresses twirled and gentlemen spun their wearers, the circle evolved, pairs of partners moving left and right, and it was now like a snowflake, spinning and spiralling in a spectacularly controlled, almost lucid fashion. Eyes watched us with all manners of intent, and smiles flashed like knives when their wearers trotted by. Then, the instrumental overture loudened, and in a moment more, pocket watches slid from the sleeves of the animals, falling taut by their chains and tick-tocking as they clicked open, swinging back and forth, forth and back while dresses still twirled like peacock feathers and the bears and the briskets sung their sapphire melodies. Oh, ode to the Vigil! Joyous is the Symbol!

“Dear worm, are you alright..?” the tip-topped top-hatted crow whispered up to me. For nestled there in his mighty wings, I trusted myself in him entirely.

“Professor Moonly,” Ms. Sparrow B. Ird remarked, nudging the dark-feathered raven as around us, waiters and waitresses, unlike the dancers, swayed and teetered, then like a pack of Haitian zombies, made their way onto the dance floor. Our companion’s movements, meanwhile, were laxer than before. I could now feel the little sparrow falling into a deep, deep sleep. “We should... We should go...”

In front of us, the swathes of Earthly creatures—hairy flourishes of curling, luscious orange and untamed red and tassel-touched brown and ivory—groped and groped at each other like a mesmerising, complicated machine, limbs giving way and backs arched, lips curling to reveal pleased smiles. And they all descended into an orgy of bestial lust.

“Agreed,” cawed the crow, squinting its beady eyes. “We should go. Right this moment!”

Oh, my beautiful cake-face! Fantastic plum pudding!

With that, the good crowfessor took flight, shaking up and down as he moved and, turning a corner at last, we pushed past a side door that led into a long, almost unused hall. This way was decked in roan-coloured carpets like the tongue of an ox, and it reeked of musty cologne. We stumbled past a den of frolicking mice—un-hypnotized it seemed, but partaking nonetheless, then turned again, the great crow spinning on his lanky talons. Then, with a mighty flap of his fortuitous wings, he—

Ouch!

The professor hit his head a couple times more, more severe than the first. “Worm! Snap out of your delusions!”

I am snapped out of it—whatever *it* was. I swear! Quit hitting me!

“Ah, good,” Professor Moonly answered, lowering his hand. “My skull was beginning to get sore.” He paused, then we both looked back, then to the left, then to the right. “Where is Miss Gooseberry?”

Perhaps she has been taken by whatever sort of strange, unholy spell was put on us—Professor, we must do something!

Professor Moonly bit his bottom lip. “On my way here, I began to feel odd—an onset, I think, of what you were experiencing... I cannot risk going back and becoming hypnotized myself.”

Hypnotized..?

“Indeed.”

Yes, I remember now... And if I recall correctly, only the waiters and waitresses were hypnotized. But how in the world did the dancers get away without hypnotizing themselves in the process? So many of them had pocket watches.

The good professor's mind turned beneath my belly as he thought back to...

"The drinks!" His black brows shot up. "There must have been some sort of chemical agent in the champagne we were made to drink inside the kitchen which was... triggered by... hm, swinging watches seems somewhat unlikely. Perhaps..."

The music, Professor!

"Ah, the music," the professor noted, recalling the change in melody. "It's been loosely theorized that music could produce chemical changes in one's brain. Perhaps those changes then interacted with the drug in the drink, instigating the transformation into thoughtless, willing bodies. It would explain why you, lingering in the area just above my brain, were taken by it first, and I suspect that had I stayed but a few seconds more, I too would have been lost to it."

I see now. But then if it is too dangerous to return and look for Ms. Gooseberry, what are we to do?

"Only one option remains," the good professor said, straightening his tophat above the crow's mask as he started to walk. We will have to—"

"Oomph!"

"Pardon me."

"I say—watch where you're going, brother! I almost—" Inquiring eyes fell upon us. "Moonly, is that you?"

The professor and I peered back down at a smaller, pudgy man in a full-faced rat's mask. All he was missing were his grubby hands and exposed, yellowing teeth. "Andrew!" Despite whichever masks they wore, these two men could never mistake one another.

"How did you know it was m-me?" the politician Mr. Flinch asked, pulling up his rat head. "I don't think I even stuttered. And I've been taking classes, you know—for the stuttering."

"It was not your stuttering, Andrew," the good professor tutted, waving a hand. "Regard: short, portly, poor postured and with a certain snort in your voice—"

"—play nice now, James."

"Conversely, how did you know it was me?"

"Weh-heh-hell," the pudgy politician pointed up and down, then shrugged derisively with raised brows. "Tall and lanky, th-that presumptuous posture, and the bloody tophat. T-The

tophat, Moonly—you don't just go wearing a tophat to one of our secret society meetings all willy-nilly! Speaking of which," his eyes narrowed, "erm, why *are* you wearing a tophat to one of our secret society meetings?"

"Well, you see—"

"Which is to say," his tone lowered threateningly, "why are you at one of our secret society meetings?"

"Our," Professor Moonly thought aloud, deflecting the direction of the conversation. "You said *our* meeting. Does that mean you take yourself to be one of the leaders?"

Or is it just your self-importance, Mr. Flinch?

"Well, I'm c-constantly playing ever-important roles—"

Ah, there's that ever-lurking hubris.

"But a leader here you are not," the professor corrected.

"Well, no."

"Ah," the professor, having heard all he'd needed to, went on, "then it makes sense that you wouldn't have heard about my recent inauguration into the society."

"Oh, uh... I see then." Mr. Flinch glanced down at the professor's clothes. "Pardon my asking, James, b-but why are you dressed like a waiter?"

Professor Moonly, realizing the blatant problem, inhaled deeply, then clicked his tongue, then shrugged, then nodded. "Well, you see, I just returned from the... er..."

"Ah," Mr. Flinch said, "the horgy."

"Pardon?"

"The horgy." The politician raised a brow, surprised we had never heard of such a thing. "The hypno-orgy?"

After a pause, Professor Moonly nodded keenly. "Ah, Andrew—correct. The, ehm, horgy."

Mr. Flinch laughed, nudging the good professor. "I never knew you liked things *that* way. Regardless," he cleared his throat, "you ought to get changed back into your proper attire before dinnertime, else you might not get your cut of the Persian White-coat Yeti."

"Of course," the good professor smiled with every inch of sincerity. "I hear it will be quite the treat—but before I return, I was hoping to ascertain some advice," he slid his hand, prostrate, up to the side of his mouth secretively as he continued, "from the fortune teller."

"Oh," Mr. Flinch said, surprised by the remark. "S-So they told you how to use it, then?"

It?

“They did,” Professor Moonly said, scratching his chin, “but I seem to have forgotten how to get to it. It was—now let me see if I can remember—it, hm, it was right down the...” he revolved his left hand whimsically.

“The central corridor,” Mr. Flinch suggested.

“Yes—then past the, um...”

“Fountain—”

“Quite right. Was I to turn left or right from that point..?”

“A-Actually, it was straight forward until you reached the second set of doors. Then, from there, you can go through the right.”

“Ah, yes. That was it. I remember now.” The good professor nodded. “I shall be going then,” he ogled the hallway, “before I miss the yeti.”

“Quite right, James,” Mr. Flinch said, but paused briefly. “Er, y-you know, I don’t exactly have access t-to the machine—w-which means I’ve never had the luxury of using it. I was t-thinking, if you would allow it, that I might... perhaps... watch you.”

The professor pondered, but with so little time already to reach the teller and Ms. Gooseberry lost to the crowd of deviants, he reluctantly conceded. “Fine, I suppose it’s alright.”

Mr. Flinch’s face lit up, as if someone had just mistakenly granted him access to one of the world’s most mysterious and profitable secrets—which was to say that though his cheeks did not physically illuminate, they blushed red with pigmented excitement. “Oh, how I’ve always wanted to have my fortune told!”



Your Fortune: YOU WILL MEET AN ELEVENTH CHAPTER IN A DARK ALLEY.

A painted face looked out at us from beneath the arches of the decorated glass casing. It donned a black moustache, the curling follicles of which bled down into a viper-shaped beard, and the braids about it joined themselves cross-wise in intricate knots. Below, like a twister made of patterned cloths, beige robes licked a metal base. Up again, the brows were bushy, the forehead large, eyes a startling shade of brown, lips twitching up in a lingering, mechanical smile; its nose was crooked like that of a Serbian criminal. A roan turban rested on its head.

But beside the thing, golden strips mingled with mahogany while a dusty glass case protected the inner device from harm. Big and bold words, written in Romanian: ‘OMUL FACE DESTINUL SĂU’ were decked across the dashboard below. Long and narrow, it had a coin slot cut into it, surrounded by etchings that were adorned with slightly-chipped silver.

Professor Moonly regarded it curiously as around us, muffled music, drawn along through the corridors, played from the banquet hall. “Do you know how to use it?” he asked.

“I th-thought you did,” the pudgy Andrew Flinch responded peevishly.

“Of course,” the good professor answered. “I was merely testing you.”

As Mr. Flinch had forewarned us, this invention had been born through years of piecewise composition. From its mid-gears, assembled in the heart of the Mediterranean, to its human ornament, a life-like life-sized man modelled off of the Austrian painter, Professor Edgar Meyer, much care had been placed by the machine’s creators into its making.

“I believe we insert a penny. Into here.”

Mr. Flinch flinched. “You can’t possibly mean to work such a complex creature with only a penny! If things were that easy, a lot more gentlemen would have already done so by now!”

“Oh ye of little faith,” the good professor mumbled, reaching into his pocket. “Sometimes the best answer also happens to be the most obvious. Watch and learn.”

Together the two men waited while the sound of simple money falling rattled through the shafts of the device. A few seconds went by, and for a brief moment, the professor and Mr. Flinch perceived nothing to happen. But then, with an initial snap and click, the gears inside the device began to tumble and turn. Levers and rubber pulleys twisted and stretched, and the bust of the bearded Romanian painter turned in its robes like a brooding, porcelain ballerina. At last,

it faced away from the two men so that its back met their eyes, and with a crack straight down the middle of its skull appearing, the back of its head and torso hinged open, a plume of black smoke jutting out from within then sucked down through the now-exposed vents.

Within the back half of the automaton's body, a small, tinkered landscape could be seen, made of papier-mâché rocks painted a choking blood-red colour and gowned in gravel of the blackest shade. Smears of charcoal ran over seas of glimmering orange—some sort of flammable fluid—which erupted in ghastly bursts every six seconds precisely. Then, the liquid depleted by the fire took six seconds more to refill the crooked ravines.

In the middle of the living scene, what looked like a muddy-coloured float of ice surrounded a furry pair of legs. Tiny wood-worked faces watched from where they were encased within the glaciers's dully glistening surfaces.

On top blew whistling winds in which darkly-coloured cut-outs of little people twisted, and yet below were bubbling marshland waters, spilling from within the infernal device's robes down and through more grates, presumably back up to the gurgling mouth of the quagmire.

Dark toothpicks composed a gloomy forest, a desert of sand and glowing embers sat sizzling, and a towering castle stood ominously in the background, its greying parapets mounted by vile little monsters with human faces but black, disproportionate bodies. Meanwhile, a miniature Minotaur stood guard, a painted tail wrapped around its torso nine times.

In the centre of it all, a small sign printed in decorative gold typeface read 'DEFEAT.'

A disparaging little tune played.

"Defeat..?" the professor protested. "But that's not even a proper fortune!"

Mr. Flinch chuckled at our expense. "Seems the machine's bested you, eh Moonly?"

But the good professor placed his hands on his legs, then crouched down. "There must be something else here."

While we are at it, the message on the contraption's dashboard reads: 'MAN MAKES HIS FUTURE'.

"Ah, very good. Then my suspicions might be right after all."

"Pardon?" Mr. Flinch asked.

"The words on the dashboard up there read: 'Man makes his future'."

"Oh," Mr. Flinch said, peering over the crouched professor's tophat as the painter's back side closed behind the glass and the figure slowly returned to its original facing. "I didn't know you were fluent in... well, whatever that language is."

“Romanian,” the professor answered. “And I am not—rather, the good worm has taken up the study of tongues—currently, he is in command of over seventeen languages.”

“Remarkable,” Mr. Flinch muttered, eyes wondering and wide.

Really, once you know a couple, you know them all.

“Now,” the professor went on, “I take the mentioned statement to mean that man must make his own future. That, of course, would make using this fortune-telling machine in the way it seems to be intended a mistake if one were so inclined to attempt it.”

“As we were,” the politico noted.

“Right. Hence, with this machine, it appears that we must play by a different set of rules.” The professor placed his hand to the side of the contraption, then slid it farther back. “There don’t seem to be any secret buttons.” He paused.

What about a power source?

Professor Moonly glanced around. “It seems there isn’t a wire either—just a clear gap of about an inch between the machine and the wall...”

“A wire?” Mr. Flinch asked.

“For a power source,” said the professor as he glanced at a bit of rust lined along a hairline seam in the metal casing. It was shaped like a long, thin rectangle. He tried at it. Unmoveable. He scratched his chin. “How long has this machine been around for—just the night?”

Mr. Flinch shook his head. “Heavens, no! It’s been here for at least a couple good decades.”

“Decades...” the professor parroted back. “So then we have a machine with no wires, no evident ways of opening it, nor any secret compartments by which a power line might be run; on top of that, it’s been around for decades in this exact same spot.” Then, his brows rose, as if he’d just realized something of great importance. He looked down again, to where the only possible answer could lie. “Andrew, my good fellow,” the professor started, “look here.” He pointed to a pair of parallel grooves—small, but noticeable enough—carved not into the machine, but the floor beneath it. With a slap, he grasped tightly at the edges of the machine. Pulling and twisting, he groaned. “Perhaps we may be able to slide the machine off to the side. Help me, Andrew.”

“You’ve got to be kidding! I don’t think this was intended for the device.” Still, the politician crouched down and, hesitantly, he assisted us.

“We’ll do it in tandem,” said Professor Moonly. “Now push! Pull! Push! Pull! Push! Puuulllllll!”

With a little more effort, the machine began to slide left, then right, then left again, then farther right, and then a greater distance left—

The professor and Mr. Flinch jumped back, horrified at the oscillating painter in the glass-cased machine, sliding left to right upon the floor, entirely now on its own. On its seventh push left, it caught on something and squealed metallically, jutting to a halt well out of the way. From within its glass, the painter began to turn again, this time performing a full 360 degree spin before its wooden mouth fell open in a jaded sort of laugh and, just as its other end did, its forehead split open, swinging to the sides.

And there within the machine, where cotton clouds hovered and pillars made of pink held up pudgy little cherubs, a cut-open copper orb with bright lights from above reflecting in its convex surface held the word: ‘VICTORY.’

An encouraging little melody played, followed by five consecutive snare beats. Then, from the side of the device, the rusted, rectangular incision broke open, swinging down and halting at a 45 degree angle. A long, black cane, its top fashioned eloquently into the shape of a carved dragon’s head fell out along with it and slipped down into its metal holster.

The professor and Mr. Flinch exchanged confused looks.

Hesitantly, Professor Moonly reached down and took the cane. As soon as it left the clasp, a click came from within the machine and the slate wall behind the mysterious and devious device started to rumble, as if the stones within its concrete bowels were shifting. Finally, plaster split in a perfect rectangular perimeter, and a hidden door swung back slowly.

Within the new opening, a gaping darkness awaited while from the banquet hall, the drifting melodies had since changed to the fourth, haunting movement of Berlioz’s masterpiece.

“Andrew,” the stunned Professor Moonly said to the wide-eyed bureaucrat beside him. “I believe this is where we part ways.”

“Q-Q-Q-Quite right, James,” said Mr. Flinch, his hands trembling. “I’ll see you at the dinner, I hope.”

The professor, quiet, muttered back after a moment, “I hope too.”

I have a feeling in the pit of my segments that this will not end well.



Chapter of the Sugarplum

“Hah! I’ll bet you did not expect that!”

Footsteps rang through the cold and murky labyrinths of the Royal Hall’s secret sub-level while the sounds of pleased moaning slowly faded. Together, we delved farther down into the brick corridors, feeling around in the near-darkness. For a moment, the good professor spared the long, black rod a glance.

The dragon’s head grimaced back at us.

“What could it all mean?”

Several minutes had passed before we finally arrived at what appeared to be a very, very, very tall chestnut door with lovely little engravings made on its surface of tarantulas and black widows.

Those cobwebs on the entrance are real enough, however.

“Quiet, dear worm,” Professor Moonly warned. “I hear voices coming from the other side.” And indeed, the good professor did. But before we had a chance to act, someone out of sight acted first, tugging on the foreboding door’s handle and sending it swinging inward with a long groan.

Professor Moonly’s eyes met with those of a stranger he had never seen before. The man bore a thick, prickly moustache, and grey hair tied up in a ponytail hung out from under a grass-green patterned hood. His nose was large and his chin was flat, bearing what looked like a streaking burn mark on it. When he spoke, it was with a Scottish accent.

“S’cuse me.”

As the professor moved out of the way, the Scotsman looked back. “He’s been expectin’ ye.”

Surprised, Professor Moonly cleared his throat and begged the question, “Who?”

“Our lord,” we were answered. Then, as if he’d moved a flurry of leagues with but a pair of steps, the large man had vanished. The sensation—ghostly, almost ethereal—gave both the professor and me a unanimous feeling of vertigo.

“Come in,” called a voice from behind the door, and when Professor Moonly stumbled into the circular-walled room, he looked up to catch the sight of a large-framed man, gowned in a hood and robe the colour of midnight black, embellished with little grey Sierpinski triangles. More embroidery fondled the edges of the lavish cloak, and the ends of it draped against the

floor beneath. Around him were several bright blue eyes, drawn on the chamber walls in a strange, glowing paint. Big ones, little ones, wide and narrow ones. Eyes that pierced the professor as he marvelled back at them.

“James,” the voice said finally, drawing our attention back to the only other pair of human eyes in the room—just as blue and the only feature of the shadow-wrapped man beside his pointed, black beard that could be seen.

“Only my friends call me James,” the good professor answered, eyes shifting about warily. There seems to be only one way out.

“*Good*,” Professor Moonly thought. It meant the hooded man was trapped. Then again, it also meant that we were too.

“You will have to make an exception for me, Professor.”

“And who exactly is this ‘me’ for whom I am to make the exception?” Professor Moonly retorted, brow raised.

The hooded man smiled, his mouth perfectly trimmed to reveal like a thin slice of moonlight the whites of his teeth. “That is a detail less important than why I sent you an invitation to our secret gathering, than why the Rubbers are dead, or...” he paused, “...than why I have taken your sparrow.”

From above us, a human-sized birdcage—golden, decorated bars bent down to touch a circular plate at its base—lowered into view. Suspended by a chain, the trap held none other than the federal investigator, her mask removed; her body passive and quiet.

Our heart pounded. “If you have done anything to her,” the professor roared suddenly, “I swear I’ll—”

“Worry not,” answered the clear, commanding voice. But where was its body? Where had the cloaked man gone?

“As soon as she was hypnotized, I had her collected and brought to me—for that matter, before you had even attempted to unlock the fortune teller.

“*If that’s true*,” I could hear the professor think, “*then it seems there might in fact be a second way into this chamber.*”

And, following from that, a second way out of it!

“I will keep him distracted,” Professor Moonly whispered. “Meanwhile, dear worm, we must search about for where he has gone.”

Very well. The shadows move strangely here, but I will try my best.

“I take it then,” the professor continued, “that by confessing your knowledge of events, you intend to divulge to me your reasons for,” we peered around past the painted eyes, perceiving where the voice was coming from, “your luring me here, your murdering of Thomas and Biggie Rubber, and your capturing of Miss Gooseberry.” We began to walk counter-clockwise, Professor Moonly’s right hand stroking the surface of the concave wall.

“I never said *I* murdered the Rubbers—though incidentally, I do not intend to divulge any of these things to you. No,” a lingering silence fell. “Rather, I only brought you here, to this very room...”

Professor! The voice is fading!

“...because this conversation was a necessary prerequisite.”

A slight click sounded from several steps off, and something slid in the darkness.

“There!” Professor Moonly whispered. Then, his tone rose again. “I take it you intend to escape now.”

“I do,” came an answer, loud again, as if re-interested in us.

“Then it seems that at least for this moment,” the good professor claimed, “I know something you do not.”

“And what would that be?”

In the distance, from behind the muffling stone corridors, cries arose and voices shouted. The sounds of rifles, not dinner bells, filled the air.

And Professor James Hubert Moonly, the valiant protagonist, smiled while the man in the hood, our ominous enemy raised a brow. “I have called in some help, and while we speak, your loyal followers are being unmasked and apprehended.

The hooded figure, amused, waded from the darkness and back out into the single, shining light. “The Grey Owl City Police are all but under the League’s command, and the British Intelligence members know better than to pit themselves against its might.”

“How interesting,” the professor whispered while the man in the hood paused, considering things.

“An out-of-country private army?” the antagonist inquired.

“Out-of-continent, actually,” the good professor specified. “I couldn’t take any chances of course.”

“Of course,” the robed man said back, as if relieved. “Professor Moonly,” he went on, lips parting. “You are truly fascinating. A fascinating man for a fascinating time.” Then his voice

lessened once more as he stepped back, the shadows recapturing his body. “Though I’m afraid our time here is up.”

Footsteps pounded in the corridor and a voice called out, “Professor Moonly!”

“I’m in here!” the good professor answered, then peered back. “Free Miss Gooseberry from her confines!” He turned once more to look around the room, eyes focusing in the darkness. “I’ve got a criminal to catch.”

Footsteps fell away beneath us as the professor pressed through the small escape-way that the hooded man had departed through. Our feeling of vertigo had redoubled, though now it mingled with a rush of adrenaline. Cobwebs and arachnids of varying sizes brushed up against the corners of the crow’s mask, snapping and flailing as they fell and were sometimes crushed under heel. In mere minutes, however, we reached a curling metal staircase, rusted and riveted, which when ascended led up to dark wooden trapdoor. When pushed open, it was as if we had come to a sudden intercession. Muffled rain. The sound of our rushed breaths. We stood halfway up into an unlit room—vacated, cramped, and cold.

Bending metal strips were soldered at barely-fitting angles into its walls, and rattling plywood composed the roof. In front of us sat a small desk with cluttered documents, pens, and a picture of a thinly smiling girl on it. To either side stood two panes of square and parallel glass, leading out into the black of the stormy sky. A third threshold lay adjacent to them, exposing the view of a semi-illuminated, quarter-finished bridge.

“Good God,” the professor muttered as he looked out. A minute later, something—someone—else caught his eye. “My word... He’s trying to cross it!”

And indeed, upon the shrieking metal beams that swayed and groaned in the half-lit darkness, above the mesh of riggings, and past the chains and cobbled, clawing architecture, the hooded man had trudged nearly halfway to the other end of the unfinished project’s frame. His robes flapping violently in the wind, he balanced himself far above what we now realized were the black, frothing waters of a wide channel.

We knew this bridge. Standing nearly 600 feet tall, it was the city’s latest pride, its piece de resistance and what had for the past four years been touted as the greatest tourist attraction that the city of Grey Owl would ever see. It was the Great Grey Bridge.

“But that...”

...is utterly impossible.

Head turning to the right, Professor Moonly realized how the villain had exited onto the bridge. He reached out towards the room's metal door—it was painted blue but had scratched or dented some time ago, and rust now ate away at its design. Feeling a handle, he tightened his grip, turned it, and pushed out into the—

“Gah!” The good professor and I swung forward, turning as we fell, and by just an inch we caught onto the outside edge of the constructioneer's temporary office with the teeth of the black, dragon-headed walking stick, which bit into an exposed pipe.

The rubber soles of the professor's shoes had barely met with a cold, wet surface: that of a grated floor, just beneath and the width of about half a foot. And underneath that...

Moaning darkness swallowed the deluge of the hissing rainstorm, and our hearts beat by the second now, every pulse met with heightened fear.

Take great care, Professor! If we fall from this high up, they'll never find our body—and I very much value our body!

“As do I, dear worm,” Professor Moonly groaned, tugging himself far-enough upwards until he could reach out with his left hand. A moment more from when our hot skin met cold cast-iron, we swung onto the skeletal frame of the unfinished bridge.

As the professor, rising, began to pace carefully along the drenched girders, teetering dangerously whenever the wind blew. I prayed for our safety, rewarded only by the mysterious warping sensation which, though no strange light or power overtook us, seemed to bring the professor all at once within striking distance of the hooded being. We now both stood at the middle of the bridge.

As we approached him, the stranger turned, crystal eyes blazing with ferocity, and he drew from his belt a thin, military sabre, thrusting it and causing the shocked professor to jump back. Our feet slid out from beneath us as we landed with a loud thud that echoed along the bridge.

“Of course... Only you.” shouted the man over the crashing thunder. “Only you would dare to follow me all the way up here.” Behind him a bolt of lightning, thin and rigid, struck with all the purity of its reigning flash, the distant forms of city buildings, inns and factories, houses and pubs all painted white in the face of its power. “I suspect one day you might pursue me to the ends of the Earth!”

“I wouldn't say you interest me that much,” the good professor shot back.

“Oh?” cried the man, his pointed beard soaked with rain. “Then what is it that brings you here—that brought you to such dangerous lengths to capture me?” He wielded a thin, pleased smile. “Justice?”

Again the man struck, but we dodged.

“Revenge?” he lashed out, his blade just missing us again. “No, for Miss Gooseberry is safe. I ensured that much.”

The professor clambered to his feet.

“So I would say I do interest you. For it isn’t justice, nor is it revenge that drives a man so far.” He motioned with his hands. “Look around you, Professor Moonly. Do you belong with me on this bridge? Threats and danger face you here—*you*, the man who should have stayed in the comfort of his study!” He struck the beam below us with his sword and it wobbled violently, shaking us off our balance and sending us down to our knees.

Professor—you’re trembling! It’s imperative that we keep our heads about us!

“I am fine, dear worm,” Professor Moonly whispered. He steadied his hands and rose once more.

And all the while the hooded figure stared, content. “What does drive you, James?” He smirked. “Not justice. Not revenge. It must be... the desire to know. For I do interest you, good professor. I interest you so very vastly.”

Professor Moonly bit his lip nervously.

“Worry not though,” returned the booming voice. “I will make this a quick end. Then you can rest from your tireless pursuit!”

Just as another of the sword’s strikes came down, the good professor drew up all the strength he could in kind to match its biting tip—the smooth, hard handle of his walking stick now cracked back against it. And through narrow eyes and clenched teeth he responded, “You flatter yourself far too much.”

Professor—if you are willing, follow my commands; parry and strike at his left when he is exposed. Good! He’s dodged it—now swing up while he regains his balance.

The professor threw the dragon head up into the shoulder of the hooded man, sending him stumbling back.

In turn, our enemy laughed. “Very good, James. So there is some fight in you after all, but be careful—” He swung at a beam and its shaking sent us lowering again to the metal below our feet. “For one misstep could spell the end.”

“The end shall be spelled soon enough!” the professor hissed, though the sound of the storm drowned out his voice.

Still, from the distance in front of us where he stood, the foreboding, bearded man wore a narrow smile, as if he had heard what was said.

The professor lunged forward and swung, the walking stick catching back against the sword but leaving its grappling villain undeterred.

In turn, the hooded man wrenched both the cane and sword down, throwing the professor’s arm out to the side. With a powerful kick he sent us toppling back. Then, he was on us again, swinging like a madman—

Professor! To your right!

The professor’s black cane broke the attack of the sabre’s wielder. Then, as the hooded man tried a second time to swing, we rolled to the side, falling under one of the bridge’s metal girders and onto the next, lower level.

As we dropped through the web-like network of beams and ropes, the mysterious man laughed loudly from above. In his commanding voice, he spoke. “Are we hiding now, Professor? When *you* are supposed to be pursuing *me*?”

No, not hiding, bearded man.

“Rather,” the good professor whispered to himself from where we crouched, recoiling, ready to spring, “waiting.” With that, we were up, latching onto the beam above us with one hand and swinging the dragon-headed walking stick with the other, throwing such terrible force against the man’s calves that he fell to his knees in pain. As he did we ascended, walking out to his front and stopping, standing over him triumphantly.

From where he knelt, he looked out past the professor and into the unending distance. He gripped his sword loosely at his side.

“It’s over,” the good Professor Moonly huffed, victorious. “Let us put an end to this nonsense.” He waved around incredulously. “I mean, you’re entirely right—who, even in all their lunacy, would be daft enough to duel on one of the largest—and not to mention unfinished—bridges in English history?”

The man, nodding, stood tall and turned. His hood having fallen off, we could yet see only the contours of his jagged face. The rest of it was hidden in the darkness, though a bluish glint lingered in his eyes. “I think you would agree that we are not right-minded gentlemen, Professor.” He held up his sword very straight, to his chest. “I propose this then.” In an instant,

he swung his hand out, flinging the devious blade far over the bridge's side and down through the clouds of the midnight air. A heavy bell tolled from the east side of the city. "I will use no weapon. You may use whatever you find. If you can best me, I will accept defeat." He motioned reassuringly.

"So then all I need to do is bring you to your knees a second time," the professor said with a smirk.

The bearded man laughed. "Don't think it will be so easy, Professor. This time—"

A quick punch to the chest left Professor Moonly gasping for air, and a second hit—a chop to the neck—left him doubling over the side of the girder.

The robed man grinned cruelly. "I will be trying."

We fell together, the professor and I, to a grated floor beneath, landing hard. The professor cried out in pain.

Around us, the windswept bridge groaned, and from above came the robed and bearded man, landing with a boom on the metal walkway. His boots clanked beneath him as he approached.

Professor—what are we to do!?

Wincing, Professor Moonly looked around, settling on a tangled mesh of ropes, nearly invisible in the unbridled dark. His left hand tightened around the dragon-headed walking stick. "Rest assured, dear worm," he groaned, coming to his feet. "I do have a plan." He was interrupted as a hand reached out and wrenched him up by the collar of his garb.

Coattails and robes fluttered behind the pair as each stared into the other's eyes.

"Shame..." the bearded man sighed. "I thought you would have tried to make this harder."

"As you wish," the professor answered, throwing a foot forward and kicking the man in the knee.

"Aargh!" He dropped us.

Professor Moonly followed up by twirling the crafted cane between his fingers, then swinging it against the side of our enemy's head. With a heavy 'thwack', it left him growling and claspng at his temple. The professor, spinning the cane again, stepped forward viciously, throwing it out straight forward, its dragon-faced end smacking into the flesh of our enemy's forehead and knocking him backwards.

In the time the villain had taken to recover, Professor Moonly had turned and made a dash towards the side, jumping out again and vanishing into the night.

Angrily, the now-recovered man dashed towards the edge we had departed from and, like a Bengal tiger, pounced over, thrashing out as he landed on the next girder. But by then, we'd already made it to the level above, taking a thick rope, still harnessed to the lower beam, along with us. "Up here!" We cast the rope to the right, just out of sight.

As we did, our enemy began to climb, anger flashing in his eyes.

"Getting a bit slow, are we?" We'd tightened it around a vertical pipe, stepping back.

The bearded man leapt forth, nearly at us, but we spun back and around.

"Come along now!" the professor dodged one fist and then another. Then he jumped back nearly to the edge where black met bridge. Beneath, his foot caught the last inch of the scaffolding.

"You think to tire me by running around this bridge!?" the mysterious man roared.

"No, not at all," the professor admitted, panting. "You are a tireless pursuer." His hand tightened around the dragon-headed walking stick.

And the robed man stepped closer.

"Which is why..."

Closer.

"In your tireless pursuit, you've overlooked—this!" Reaching out with the cane, Professor Moonly latched onto the collar of the robe around our enemy, and with a hard tug he pulled him forward, well over a tautly-tied rope that was anchored at one end to the vertical pipe and at the other to the professor's hand.

Pull!

The rope caught the bearded man's ankles and he tripped, just as we had hoped. But at once he fell fully over the bridge's edge with a shout of surprise that was eclipsed by the thunder's strike.

The professor turned quickly enough to catch sight of our enemy hanging by a hand. At last we could see his face. He was familiar, almost, but also strangely foreign. Aged wrinkles stretched around a defiant scowl, and thick brows lowered, unaffected by the drenching rain. Below them, his cruel, fearless eyes watched us with some unspoken kind of certainty. Nonetheless, Professor Moonly reached out and called to him. "Grab on!"

But the strange man refused us.

"Take my hand, damn you!" the good professor shouted. "Do you intend to fall!?"

“Everything about this night was intended,” the clarion call returned up. And before we could react, our enemy let go of the side, his long cloak flapping violently as he fell through the next seconds and was swallowed up by the great abyss.

“No!” the professor shouted halfway over the side, and trying to catch the fleeting man slipped himself from the rain-soaked edge. Wet clothes flapped and skidded as we tumbled down.

Professor!

Quickly, Professor Moonly threw his shoulder up as he fell below the girder and we jerked to a sudden stop, the professor’s body stretching taut and briefly bouncing. Looking up, terrified and gasping as his legs dangled beneath us, the professor’s eyes fell upon the lucky dragon’s head, which had bitten almost unbelievably into the base of the metal structure above. Miniscule by comparison, we hung at the end of the gargantuan bridge.

The wind howled.

The seconds slowed.

Below, the black maw yawned.

All about us, the flashing storm cried out, flurries of needle-like rain shattering upon the silhouettes and dripping down the professor’s face; down his neck, down his clothes, down his shoes. As we drowned in the midst of the clouds, hanging from a beam by the end of a thread, the darkness closed in around us.

Goodnight one and all, from the hanging professor’s miraculous worm.



AN ACADEMIC INTERMISSION



Chapter 0.9

Flashing music danced its way around the room, and coins jingled while bets were placed. Dice rolled twos, fours, sixes. Ones to sevens, hells to heavens—though no angels lived here—and sins and decadence mottled the air. Perhaps, I believe, you expecting a different narrator?

Ding ding ding! “Congratulations, Mister Flaxseed. You’re a winner!”

“Miss Rivers, so good to see you again.” Commotion and conversation.

“Oh, Teddy. Get my bags.” And mountains of luggage piled high enough to touch the chandeliered ceilings.

A roulette table, one of many, attracted a minor audience towards the crowd’s outskirts. My lord and I watched it, sitting well-removed from the rabble. There in the corner we were like a spectre, whose grim blue eyes soon rose when at last someone dared to approach us: a bulky and familiar man, with a toothpick pinned between amalgam fillings. Our new counterpart took a seat at the other end of the lovely imitation-Iroquois table, and for a moment he was silent. Then thick brows rose to push up that wrinkled forehead, and the fellow heaved up a heavy suitcase for us to see. We watched it of course, my master and I, aware very well of its lucrative contents—bright and brilliant gold, stolen from a secret cache.

“So what do I do next?” The question, blunt, was put to us.

In return we handed the man an envelope, watching as he opened it and read its contents through. “Redbarbe... Trisfal...” With his tongue he pushed the toothpick to the other side of his mouth, soon reaching the end of the document. “Alright then... Right.” His eyes returned to us. “And you?”

“I’ve other business to attend to,” my lord answered.

For a moment the man across from us tensed in annoyance, though just as soon he had relented. “I’m sure.” He rose from the table, taking the briefcase with him.

But you’ve heard enough from me.



Chapter [xdx; [0,√28]

Smoke fell like a slow, snaking waterfall from the gold-wrapped head of a Moroccan cigarette. “You know, when I fought under Buller in the blazing African heat—whether it was at Natal or one of the smaller, less civilized villages—no amount of military pressure, no matter how great, could take a proper mile of territory.” The herbal insides of the glossy roll ignited in a slow, smouldering burn. To flames, to ash.

“If I recall correctly,” the professor said, “the Unites States were neutral in that conflict.”

The man across from us nodded, and from under an oak-brown beard more words arose. “The good ol’ motherland was. I wasn’t. I was called to serve and, being one of the best at what I do, I chose to answer.”

“I see.” Below us sat a chess board.

The man went on after another drag, smoke escaping through his nostrils as if he were the Zhulong, and strands of silky grey rolled down his coat, pooling where one foot tapped at air, the other left just a little lower to hold up its weight. “Scorched earth policies were attempted; so were internment camps. When Kitchener took over command, I told him neither of those things would work by themselves. The man would’ve had the entire continent uprooted and still not have won. No...” He paused, thoughtful. His right hand moved, shifting a decorated playing piece. “When you’re in another country fighting on their soil and in their villages, home rule don’t apply. The iron hand o’ the empire can only reach so far, and the farther it reaches, the less competence each finger presses down with.” He took another breath, then brushed off the greying cinders from where a small amount had collected on his pant leg. Right crossed over left, his legs stretched underneath the ovular table as he leaned back, continuing. “That’s why, all options exhausted, you become one of them. You have to live like them, learn like them. You have to eat their food and sleep in their beds and show them respect the same way you’d expect to be respected. You fight like them and with their tactics and eventually start to see things the way they do. Cultures, morals, beliefs, strategies. Past the Vaal river, in the city of Pretoria, I lived amongst the enemy for a while—spying on them, collecting information about their plans.” He raised a finger, eyes narrowing smartly. “That war went on for as long as it did because our enemies believed they had a chance. It was the hope that they could free the prisoners of war, and the hope that they could save their lands and their sovereignty that kept them going. We

took the long way to defeating them, and by the end of things, they wouldn't have surrendered at all, the stubborn bastards, if I hadn't convinced their state president to flee the country. The chain of command needed to be collapsed first before any decent dent could be made in their ranks. Now, why do you think when I told President Kruger to run, he ran?"

Professor Moonly wondered as he shifted a slate rook over the chess board. "He must have trusted your word."

The smoking man nodded. "He did, because I told him that I was a spy."

The professor's brow rose in curiosity.

"Kitchener had kept the conditions of the internment camps a secret—both from Britain and the Boers—but I knew better. I told Kruger how his people were being treated and what the cost of an endless war would be." The cigarette had burnt to its end, and the man dropped it down into a decorated glass ashtray beside the board. "He was a close friend of mine. My closest friend, my greatest enemy, and the key to dismantling the Boers." Clear and handsome brown eyes rose. "If you show a people your heart, they will either stab it or show you theirs."

The professor nodded as another piece was moved, taking a minute to move one of his own in return—a bishop, diagonally, to the opposite end of the board. "Fascinating, Mister Gant." He placed a finger on his lip. "I'd imagine then that compared to your past campaigns, rounding up the Vigil's members has been much less of a challenge."

The American shrugged, his wool jacket rising up, then down with his shoulders. He reached out and moved a knight back, taking the black bishop. "Not much strategy to it, if that's what you're asking. At any rate, strategy wouldn't've been needed. I've always found the men in friendly countries much easier to figure out than those in foreign ones. After all, it's either hope or greed that drives the gun, but here at home where money speaks louder, it's my opinion that the latter's the only voice men hear." He rapped a set of knuckles on the table, pausing to think. "An example: take the colonial sailings three hundred years ago—what do you think drove us halfway across the Atlantic, on rickety carracks with no guarantee of success or survival?"

The professor wondered, his hand lowering to the chess board.

"S'only greed could do that. Greed for commission; for the royals, greed for new territories."

"And what about knowledge? The desire and pursuit of it—to see what has not yet been seen, to discover what others could have only dreamed of?"

“Greed for knowledge is greed nonetheless, Professor,” said the hardy American as with his right hand he tried to pick up a piece. He paused a second later. Void move. He tried another, but found he couldn’t slide it without exposing his king.

“Personally,” the good Professor Moonly continued, “I find the pursuit of knowledge to yield a much more rewarding kind of wealth, and while it may be driven by a certain sort of greed, there is both purity and reliability in its outcomes.” He paused, examining the halted game. “Incidentally, checkmate.”

A silence fell between the two as the scent of burnt tobacco permeated the study. The professor nodded assuringly and the American, looking back up from the game, slowly bore a cruel smirk.

“Ah James, sorry to keep you waiting,” a voice rang out through the carpeted room, and a tall and grinning man whose moustache curled above unnaturally white teeth followed it in. His eyes were black, but he wore a yellow kind of robe, foreign and princely. Beneath it stretched skin the shade of Arabia’s evening sands, and his accent was exotic and enticing—West African, if memory served. “I was helping the lovely Miss Gooseberry account for all of her newly-found prisoners.” Mr. Azizi Oyenusi caught the professor’s curious stare and flashed the flank of his proud attire. “What do you think of it?” he asked, his voice a low, experienced tone. “I bought it from the King of Iraq a little under a month ago with the money I sold a certain elephant’s ivory tusk for. You remember the one, don’t you James?”

The professor, standing, raised a brow. “Frankly, I’m surprised you kept it around for so long, especially with the encrusted rubies disappeared from it.

The eccentric tradesman nodded. “You’re right—sentimentality does only go so far. The benefit in being a merchant is that one can decide when to sell his own stock. May I?”

The professor offered him a seat, and so he sat.

“How go the incarcerations anyway?” Professor Moonly asked.

“Dandy,” said the merchant. “They’ve all been moved to Fishknight Prison.”

A prison known to many as the Chinese fingertrap of the iron-clad justice system, Fishknight had a reputation for, to keep things brief, keeping men inside it—guilty or innocent. In all of its 62 years as a maximum security facility, only one escape had ever been successfully made. In 1908, criminal mastermind Paolo San Juavés made it 2.8401 feet past the front of the prison’s gate—and so as a technicality had indeed escaped—before being shot down by Fishknight’s snipers. Oh to think that all the influence in the world wouldn’t count for a thing

when your brains were lying splashed on a gritty walkway, their liberated chunks still so far from freedom...

The guards could not be bribed; some said they weren't even human.

The walls were half as high as the Great Grey Bridge.

Escape was utterly impossible.

"The whole prison's been reserved for our new friends, and Jimmy's men will be stationed in pairs with the regular guards. They'll outnumber the captives two to one—"

The American nodded with a thin, pleased grin.

"—in case," Mr. Oyenuki continued, "this Vigil's influence truly is as great as you say."

The professor sighed, relieved. "Excellent. The guards of Fishknight are certainly capable, but with the League being a force entrenched in the very veins of the city, I'd rather play things safe."

"However far their influence extends, it at the least seems enough to keep its own members's lips shut." The merchant's eyes narrowed like a setting desert sun. "None of them have said a word since being captured."

"And all have been unmasked?"

"All except for the bear. He fought with my men outside the hall and managed to escape onto the Main," the American said flippantly.

"You don't seem very concerned," Professor Moonly noted.

"Headed south for about a quarter of an hour; we caught up to him at the quarry and I put a hole through his heart."

The professor's brow lowered, perturbed. Human lives were not to be snuffed out so whimsically. "What happened to him..?" he asked at last.

"He took a tumble over the side of a cliff and it was too dark to go looking for him."

There was a pause. Then a sigh. Then, the professor turned his mind back to the living.

Mr. Oyenuki meanwhile cradled a narrow smile.

"Consider focusing your interrogations on Andrew Flinch," Professor Moonly started again. "I believe he'll be most likely to talk."

The American nodded, huffing, then standing. "If you two gentlemen'll excuse me then, I've got some bones to go break."

"Don't be so hard on him," the professor added. "He is my friend."

"Bruises then," Mr. Gant corrected himself.

The merchant cleared his throat and so the soldier turned and left, removing another Moroccan cigarette on his way and lighting it with a match.

“So,” Mr. Oyenusi piped up once the man was gone, slapping a pair of dark hands on the high of his thighs. “How’s the worm been?”

The professor, crossing one leg over the other and reclining in his chair, smiled. “Quite fine. Quite fine indeed.”

If a stranger were to ask me what I recalled from my birth to my early childhood, I would have genuinely been able to tell them of little else than the few and distant fragments which, like yolky wisps, I can sometimes recall and sometimes not. I do not know my mother, but she bore spectacularly-valued treasures, of which I was one. A small and fragile egg, I lived within a cluster of my sleeping siblings, and in the heart of Cairo’s smouldering dunes, nestled in the caved-in husk of a camel’s eye, I awaited the scent of a living host’s blood.

“‘Miraculous Egyptian Sunworm!’ said the sign,” said the merchant. “What do you think it means?” But no fool would dare touch the worms, and certainly not for the fortunes they cost.

Yet alas, there came a man with both fortune and curiosity, and out of all the sleeping siblings, I was plucked and sold. There went the worm, to the man in the blue-banded tophat.

At first I was a savage. This I admit. I dined on flesh and blood without a second thought, and for it, I grew fat. But I was always aware of the voice that spoke to me in its strange, alien tongue. Just imagine the man lunatic enough to cradle a life-consuming parasite on the inside of his skull—it would hardly be a stretch of the imagination to think that that same man would have instead thought up other uses. Tricking an undesired rival into drinking the parasite’s egg for example, its shell no larger than a grain of sand, or dropping the biological weapon nonchalantly into an enemy’s spaghetti when one man sprinkled parmesan for another in a sign of good faith. For once I began to eat, the host had but a week’s worth of life left in him. Yet Professor James Hubert Moonly was a different kind of demented. Professor James Hubert Moonly was the kind that would swallow the egg himself.

My first memories of Grey Owl City were of strange vibrations along the length of my underbelly. Professor Moonly, once he had fully civilized me, taught me how to use even the slightest of these trembles to see the world without being able to see. Indeed, just as a bat uses echo-location, I both sense and use sounds to realize the world around me. You would be surprised, but even different colours produce unique vibrations, and if a man talks towards green, green answers back in its own, exceptional voice.

Over the months we spent together, the professor and I became very good friends. Through the course of our platonic-symbiotic relationship, he taught me how to speak, how to do basic arithmetic, how to appreciate quality cinematography, and so forth. From the basics, we then built up. In any other man's hands, I could have become the most dangerous, imperceptible weapon in the world; in Professor Moonly's, I became a something very different.

"It's good to hear it's been keeping well," the dark man, wrapped in his golden robes said.

"Have you sold the others?" the good professor asked.

The merchant bit his lip. It seemed the question conjured up the memory of some terrible financial loss. "A flood took them all."

What? Brothers, sisters... All..? But how?

"You remember the Hurricane of Tampa Bay, yes? A few years back?"

The professor slowly nodded, vaguely recalling it.

"Well I was selling wares in the promising land of America, moving stock from the Florida main to its harbour when the storm hit, sweeping across the coast. I lost half my inventory, and was lucky not to have lost more when two of my caravans were overturned." Mr. Oyenusi looked up, perhaps genuinely sympathetic. I doubted it. "My condolences to the worm."

"Were those the last of their kind?"

The merchant nodded. "As far as anyone knows."

"I see."

But I do not believe.

"Perhaps the topic is putting your worm off."

"He'll be fine," Professor Moonly answered, patting his head. "He is, after all, a strong and resilient specimen."

Thank you, Professor.

"I mean it," Professor Moonly said with a smile and I could not help but smile on the inside too.

"Now, what about our mystery man—the hooded figure?"

Head cocked, the merchant smirked, as if about to boast. "I knew a pair of divers I'd met at a Bermuda ball—renowned along the tropical islands for their talent of locating lost things. I asked them to search the channel this morning as a favour to me and they happily obliged."

"And?" the professor inquired. I could sense the anticipation mounting in his voice.

"Nothing."

Professor Moonly's hint of a smile vanished, and he frowned now instead. "Well it is a big channel."

"Very big, it is. Something else interested me about your story though—you said you chased him for several minutes through the hidden passageway?"

"Yes," the professor answered.

"All the way to the Great Grey Bridge?"

"I realize how impossible that sounds."

"You should," said the merchant. The Great Grey Bridge is more than half the city away from Boullerolli's Royal Hall." He paused, then pondered again. "And it was dark?"

"Of course," the professor said.

"I can't speak to the distance of the tunnel, but perhaps," Mr. Oyenusi suggested, "when you fought your mysterious robed man, you simply thought you saw him fall."

"No, he fell," Professor Moonly answered. "He slipped right through my fingers."

The merchant took up a serious face, lips pursed as he asked a more pointed question. "Did you imagine him?"

"No, of course not."

"Perhaps the worm is taking its toll." He shrugged. His prying was far too obvious now.

And insulting. A moot insinuation at best. I take only what I need from the good professor—nothing more!

"The worm is fine, and I am fine."

"You look a bit skinny."

Eyes narrowed. "I've always been skinny. Are we finished analyzing me?"

"Relatively—like the English say." The merchant grinned, and the professor leaned back in his chair, unconsciously thumbing the black cane at his side.

Mr. Oyenusi's eyes shifted down like a snake's, along its length from tip to base, then back to where the black dragon head stared back at him viciously. "On a related note then, what have you discovered about that peculiar little thing?"



Chapter of the Black Dragon's Secret

The shadows moved differently than before. A silent, brooding army, they crept across the study's furthest crevices, lingering in books, soaking through pages, clinging when they could to the wooden rungs of shelves like a coiling fog. Breathing, they licked at the corners of what was once certain and safe. And out from the books and pages, daring to press in against the curved skylight far above, the shadows waited and watched. For in the darkest hours of the night, Professor Moonly tinkered with the pitch black dragon cane.

"Fascinating," he murmured as he inspected the long, odd device with a pair of tweezers, picking and prodding, tapping and measuring as he went along its surface. To his side, placed in piles over a long, wooden desk were stacks of papers—notes he'd made on the deceptively simple cane—and vials, dishes, and beakers filled with swabs taken from each of its parts.

Chemical compositions yielded even more mysteries. From lead to plutonium, everything about it suggested a great deal of effort had gone into making the item virtually indestructible and, in addition, multi-purposed.

On the outside, the majority of it was, sure enough, a simple design. Its handle appeared to be solid, carved in curling patterns and with no secrets to it but that of how someone had managed to craft it so beautifully.

And yet...

The professor, taking up the stick, swung again, as he had done periodically over the last of the long hours he could afford to spare. It cracked against a metal railing which, fixed to a winding staircase, led up to the second level of the study. He tried to wrench it free, first with a tightened grip, and failed. Crouching down to inspect the cane's head, Professor Moonly noted that the smooth and snarling face of the carved black dragon had indeed changed—its jaw was now shut along the railing, the perfected and un-blunted metal pressing in as the rail's softer composition gave way beneath it. Then, rising up, his left hand squeezed against the narrow handle and he pried once more. The cane and the staircase parted with miraculous ease. "But it only seems to do this with a horizontal motion." Now for a real test: he struck again, this time at a shower rod—excavated from the first-floor bathroom—that he had fixed between the second floor deck and the top of a tall bookshelf on the first floor. The jaw of the dragon-headed walking stick caught it precisely, locking onto the material. The professor lifted up his legs and easily

hung by the end of the cane. “Vertical and jolt-like pressure do nothing to the device.” His calm eyes narrowed with the cooling poise of scientific inquiry. “In other words, the action to release must be an intended one.”

That would explain the odd nature of the cane’s catching on the bridge, Professor.

“Oh, worm,” Professor Moonly mentioned, placing the again-unlatched cane down on a nearby desk and rubbing his tired eyes. “I hadn’t realized you’d awoken.”

Hooking teeth alone, however, cannot possibly hold such a device in place.

“Correct, dear worm.” The good professor looked back down at the walking stick. “There is an incredibly powerful magnet within the mouth of that dragon’s head.”

A magnet, you say?

“Indeed, I do. And here is where things get strange.” His brow lowered as he glanced over towards the petri dishes and vials. “I discovered that the magnet within the device was composed of a charged neodymium shell, shaped around what I can only assume to be some other, smaller cylinder inside. The cylinder must negate the effects of the magnet when one pulls the cane a certain way; I’ve a rough idea as to how such a mechanism might work.” He paused, frowning with concentration. “Whenever I put my ear to the side of the dragon’s head, I can hear a low whirring sound. So whatever is inside appears to be moving or, as I’m strongly tempted to assume, spinning.”

But what does that mean?

“Well,” the professor scratched his chin. A stubble was beginning to grow along his jawline. How long had we been here again? “I think that even within the magnet inside the neodymium shell is, in fact, an amulite coil.

Amulite, you say?

“Indeed, it is the only viable way in which such kinds of triggered magnetic shifts could occur, and while this is quite the curiosity—a spinning coil within the magnet itself—I doubt it was made so as to produce perpetual energy. Ah, but—” and so the rambling that was never fit for late-night conversations inevitably began. “—say there was a set of smaller coils, one inside the other inside the other, and so on until at last we were at our amulite one again. If they were turned by miniature spurving bearings, and powered, I’d think, by a boloid-slotted battery, then it’s quite possible that the build of the mechanism itself might produce an amplified logarithmic field. Those coils would in turn use a slight chemical force to generate spin within the electro-magnet at the centre of the hollow core, and each coil would create outward energy until at last,

that energy was transferred to the—remember now, dear worm—the outer, bigger neodymium magnet.” The professor clapped his hands, then paused and shook his head. “Ah, but then why do the forces of the outer magnet and the inner coils not just simply cancel each other out? Bah!” He scratched his head, then for a moment. Then he stopped, tired eyes widening at last. “Unless... Faraday’s Lost Formula. Yes. Yesssssss.”

My, that’s a rather unnerving hiss.

“No, dear worm—you see, Faraday’s Lost Formula—”

Found, if memory serves, around eight years ago.

“—predicts the behaviour of a coil as electricity moves through it, or, if we change our frame of perspective, *it* moves through the electricity. By not only forcing an amount of energy to run through the core’s coil—thus generating an electro-magnetic field—but spinning the core as well, perhaps through the use of the spurvings, what the cane does is amplify the strength of its magnets at least ten-fold—that must push beyond the tipping point of the magnetic shell used to hold the coils in place. The inner force is greater than the outer one!”

Sorry, Professor Moonly, but somewhere between ‘Well’ and ‘electro-magnetic coiling cores’, you lost me.

“That’s quite alright, dear worm.” The professor looked to the device in much the same way a child would look to a well-wrapped Christmas present. “Put briefly, this miraculous walking stick contains a rare, complex, and powerfully-designed super-magnet.”

A super-magnet. Spectacular.

“No,” the professor answered. “Deadly. In fact, dare I say, if struck correctly, this cane is capable of breaking bones.”

Marvellous.

“But deadly.”

I marvel at its deadliness. What else does it do, aside from being complicated?

“The cane can also breathe fire and release a high-pitched frequency. And all of its internal devices are protected by a casing made of a ply-like mixtures of lead and steel at its top...” he nodded towards the cruel dragon’s end, “...and then brass and titanium at its bottom. All painted with an evidently un-chippable coat of black.”

Fascinating.

“I know, right? Now look at this—here’s proof of what I’ve told you.” The professor took up the stick and pointed to its base, around which three small rings of blue presided. “Watch. I shall

twist one.” He twisted the first. “Now, observe.” The good professor swung the cane out, hand on its end where the blue rings were while, now held out straight at a horizontal angle, the cane bellowed with some strange war cry born of clicking gears and twisting pulleys. And at its other end, the dragon head snapped up so that it too became horizontal. Its mouth opened wide and as the professor pressed a thumb down from where he held it, from the far end of the cane, a spectacular, blue-coloured fire spat out, unlike any sort of regular flame.

Such an odd shade—what on Earth could produce such a thing?

As the demonstration ended and Professor Moonly, still giddy, slipped his hand back up the cane’s shaft, the dragon’s neck flicked back almost instantly, loyally, and the cane was returned to the desk. “Cupric chloride, dear worm—just one portion of its intricate composition.” He smiled, eyeing the device. “I discovered the oddity when testing the ashes left over from an edition of Erasmus’s *Praise of Folly*, which I had accidentally burnt while first tampering with the cane. More so, in my later experiments, I found that the blue fire burnt for twice as long as any normal one, and it ate away at materials nearly four times faster than its orangey, yellow, and even green counterparts. On top of this all—”

On top of all you’ve already said?

“—it burns on water.” The grin on Professor Moonly’s face grew until it touched the furthest corners of his cheeks. “The closest analogy I could imagine would be that of Greek fire.” We both regarded the miraculous walking stick for a long while, vexed, perplexed, but mostly wildly distracted by the uniqueness of its qualities.

Hm... There are three rings on the cane. Does this mean that each ring does one of these things?

“Surprisingly, no.” The professor refocused his thoughts for a moment. “The cane’s design implies it has four functions. Fire and frequency, which both require rings being turned, are two of them.”

Frequency?

“A high-pitched sound, likely a deterrent of some sort against multiple enemies.”

That could come in handy.

“Indeed, it could. Then there is also the automatic ability of the cane that whenever its head hits up against something that it can latch onto, it unlocks the magnetic device inside the dragon’s mouth. This allows it to catch directly onto anything metal. However, the remaining

ring seems to do nothing—I’ve tried turning it but with no result. Perhaps it was meant to do nothing; maybe it’s broken.”

It’s still a remarkable cane.

“Yes, and obviously not hollow.”

We can’t take it apart?

“I tried. It’s virtually impossible without damaging the device.”

Perhaps it is meant to be a mystery.

“But mysteries are meant to be solved,” the professor grumbled, rubbing his eyes again and finally giving way to a long yawn.

What time is it?

Professor Moonly clasped at a golden pocket watch on the corner of the desk, one he’d used to test the blue fire’s rate of consumption. “Twenty-six minutes past four.”

Then I think it is time to let sleeping dragons lie.

“I concur,” said the professor, and taking up the cane, he began to pace from the chamber.

You’re taking it with you?

He nodded. “Something like this is far too valuable a weapon to take one’s eyes off of. In addition,” he continued as we stepped up the stairs leading out of the room, “judging by the circumstances under which I received the cane, I’d dare to venture a guess that this device might yet have many qualities to yield—even, perhaps, some ultimate planned purpose.” Behind us, the library floorboards creaked lullingly.

A final secret.

As we reached the top of the stairs, the good professor flicked the lights to the library off. “And a dangerous one, I’ll wager.”



Chapter, Iris.

Ms. Gooseberry and Mr. Gant, briefcase at one's side and revolver at the other's, stared oddly at the wall. Half an hour ago, the wall had been staring back.

"Th' hell happened to them..?"

"I don't know." Ms. Gooseberry gave him a concerned look.

"Yeah, but you saw them too, right?"

The investigator nodded and the American scratched his head.

The two stood in the circular vault, the Symbol Room, which had two nights ago served as a host to dangerous, philosophical confrontations. A light switch near the black-gowned throne that sat at the room's epicentre turned on four individual spotlights. The shine illuminated only the middle of the room, but Mr. Oyenusi's men had brought in other lamps so that the federal investigator could better see—

"The vanishing eyes, yes?"

Ms. Gooseberry and Mr. Gant turned in unison towards the entering figure, whose black-soled heels clicked as he made his way to where the curved wall was. In his gloved hand swung the lovely, mysterious dragon cane, and upon his head, his trademark tophat was perched.

"How'd you..?" Mr. Gant half-asked before remembering the secret passage. When he did, he huffed and threaded his free hand through his Brunette hair; his other still held the gun at his side.

"I took a stroll here from the Great Grey Bridge." Professor Moonly's eyes turned over almost romantically towards the wall. "Interesting, is it not?"

"It's a wall, Professor Moonly," the general scoffed as he followed his gaze. "Nothin' interesting about it." He looked back, frowning more fully. "Of course then there's the matter of those eyes that were scrawled all over its surface."

"Eyes that have now disappeared," Ms. Gooseberry concluded, placing her hands on her hips perturbedly.

"Quite," the professor noted, nose rising as he angled his head up to where the wall and the ceiling met, then falling back down. When we touched the wall that night in our pursuit of the hooded man, the professor felt something—a slime of sorts that left his fingertips glowing

slightly. More research into the matter yielded that the substance was a unique one, unheard of by any in the regular academic circles. In other words... “Luminol chemiluminescence.”

“A-what now?”

“Glowy stuff,” Professor Moonly’s clear blue eyes narrowed. “Luckily, I had a friend of mine—one Lord Chandross, who was visiting from New Jersey—take a look at it. Using the lab in my upstairs study yesterday, he was able to discover several remarkable qualities of the substance.”

“Wait,” Ms. Gooseberry interrupted. “Was *that* the half-naked man in the Panama hat I saw roaming the halls of the manor yesterday?” The investigator had turned a flustered shade of red as she recalled the horrible oddity, and Mr. Gant gazed at her quietly, his brow raised.

“Technically, he was wearing a bath robe well above the hip,” Professor Moonly held up a finger. “Yet in any case, Lord Chandross has expressed his sincerest regrets. He did not realize that I had other guests staying with me.”

“I take it mentioning our presences to each other somehow managed to skip your mind,” Ms. Gooseberry said sarcastically.

“Quite right,” the professor answered honestly, “and that is precisely why one mustn’t go wandering around the mansion.” He concluded with a clap.

“Duly noted,” the investigator said with a sarcastic nod. “As long as I don’t encounter any other odd lurkers in the halls of the manor, I’ll be more than satisfied.”

“Truly, though,” Professor Moonly went on, “Lord Chandross is a man ahead of his time. His recent studies assisted me in understanding... this.” He then turned his attention back to the wall. “In particular, what we are observing here is glowy stuff that glows only for a certain amount of time, then fades.”

“So our evidence has expired?” Ms. Gooseberry asked, shocked.

“Not exactly.” The good professor removed his tophat, placing it on a nearby wooden table brought in earlier by Gant’s boys and weighed with documents of several sorts. He then lifted the cane at an angle and with his right hand adjusted something at its bottom. “Regard.”

From the dragon’s gaping mouth, snapped suddenly up so that it was parallel to the rest of the cane, a bright blue fire erupted, impacting against the wall with a furious ‘fwoosh’!

Ms. Gooseberry and Mr. Gant both jumped back, one crying out the most excited of exclamations and the other roaring the most ruthless of explicatives.

In front of us all, the jet-fire ceased, but the wall continued to burn.

“Miss Gooseberry, Mister Gant,” Professor Moonly said, turning serious. “I will require that all the lights be turned off. Do it with haste.”

Realizing his intentions, the two followed orders and soon the room was nearly dark again. The only light let in was that from the outside hallway, and with the remaining traces of fire dying, when the professor closed the door all faded to black at once.

And then there was a flicker.

And then a glow.

“Remarkable,” Ms. Gooseberry noted.

“Considerably,” the professor answered. “One of the qualities of this substance is that by introducing it to a heat source, one can cause a chemical reaction that increases the intensity of the liquid’s glow.” The sound of him replacing his top hat echoed almost fully-muffled throughout the room. “However, this does come with a cost...” In front of us now, twenty-four sets of eyes, wide and bulging, all glared inward. “I’ve just limited the remaining lifespan of the eyes to approximately two minutes.”

I can feel our comrades’s senses pricking. Perhaps we should speed things up a bit.

“Indeed,” Professor Moonly answered both them and me. “Let us hurry and make note of whatever patterns we can find.”

Together, we searched the walls for clues, Mr. Gant handing out papers and utensils and Ms. Gooseberry and the professor making as many notes as they could about the sizes and shapes of the eyes.

“Professor,” Ms. Gooseberry said, pointing to one of the particularly bright drawings. “Look at this.”

Professor Moonly, stepping up beside her, regarded the diagram. Within the strands of its iris rested small numerical markings. “Numbers...” the good professor muttered. And in an instant, he had turned to the next image. Nothing was inside this one. He ran to another, pausing and pressing his fingers up against the wall. Carefully, he traced a circle with his fingers. “Aha!” Then, to another he moved just as quickly, remarking, “Miss Gooseberry—write down the number that you found!” After a moment, he started scratching down what he had. “Mister Gant!”

The soldier glanced back, the scruff of his beard twitching in the dark as he asked, “What?”

“Search the irises for numbers—eight digits precisely in each, I believe.”

“Alright.”

“Ah, here’s another.”

“Yeah, I got one too, Prof.”

For the next minute, each added to his or her own collection. The only exception to this was the professor, who on but a single occasion when neither Ms. Gooseberry nor Mr. Gant was looking, committed to memory an iris’s number instead of writing it down.

Eventually, we all reconvened to share our findings.

“Is that it?” In the dimming blue glow, the Professor’s eyes narrowed.

Mr. Gant nodded, bringing back in a lamp. “Yeah, I kept track of where we each were.” He flicked it on and it buzzed pleasantly, illuminating the room just enough to see the papers. “Between the three of us, we should’ve checked every one.” He whistled to a couple other men who began to carry back more lights.

Ms. Gooseberry removed from her jacket pocket one of her own devices—a strange little contraption made of a fibre tube and a glass socket at its end. She twisted it and it flickered on.

“Very well,” answered Professor Moonly, nodding to his compatriots. “Let us examine what we have.”

And so, under the prickling light, examine we did.

“b15030044ce, b02090031ce, 03040033ce, 10100732ce, 09111799ce, 28061914ce, and 24101945ce.”

The three stared at each other, then at the paper again from which Ms. Gooseberry had read. Then back at each other. Then at the paper.

“I... Hm, no,” Mr. Gant mumbled.

“Maybe it’s a...” The professor scratched his chin, then his head with his free hand.

“B... a hundred and fifty... three hundred... or fifteen, three... C... E...” Ms. Gooseberry purred quietly to herself, ideas formulating within the confines of her capable brain. Then, “I’ve got it.”

“You have?” both the professor and Mr. Gant asked in return, each man trying to hide the look of shocked disappointment that hung over his face.

“I’m fairly certain. Observe the first date: b15030044ce.” The investigator thumbed it carefully. “Here at the start, there’s a letter—‘b’—and at the end, the letters ‘c’ and ‘e’.”

“Right,” Mr. Gant said. “So there’re letters and numbers. What about them, Viola?”

Viola? They’re on a first name basis?

“Well, James—”

Both the good professor and Mr. Gant followed her finger.

“—say we put the letters together. What does that spell?”

“Buckeh,” the gruff, handsome soldier answered.

“B.C.E.,” Professor Moonly corrected. “Before the Common Era.”

“Yes,” Ms. Gooseberry answered, her lush, emerald eyes centred on us alone now.

“Then the inside numbers must be dates,” Professor Moonly answered, scanning them over quickly.”

“The first one then would be the fifteenth of March, I suspect, of the year 44 B.C.E.,” our intellectual investigator answered.

The professor tingled. “Ah...” he slowly mouthed. “Beware, beware. The Ides of March are upon us.”

“You don’t mean that these dates are all—what, historical events?” Mr. Gant asked.

“Battles, perhaps. Or maybe others are defining moments—and why did you have your gun out again, Mister Gant?”

The soldier’s handsome brows rose and his mouth hung slightly agape.

“Before, when I came in,” Professor Moonly clarified without looking up from the numbers, “you had your weapon un-holstered. I am curious as to why.”

“He was showing it to me,” Ms. Gooseberry answered dismissively.

Showing her his revolver!?! A dagger to our heart, straight through our back, eh Professor? Professor..?

But the professor was already focused once more. “So the first date is, of course, that of Caesar’s murder. The next is... the battle of Actium. The third is the Crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth—” the professor nodded up, “—theological speculation. Now the fourth is... is... is of the Battle of Tours, one of the great clashes between the religions of Islam and Christianity. Then comes Bonaparte—ah, our old French friend—the 9th of November was when he launched—

“—a coup against the French Directory,” Mr. Gant interrupted, glancing up towards the professor, hands on his hips. “Standard military history.”

“Very good,” Professor Moonly responded. “Then how about these?” He pointed to the others.

Mr. Gant went suddenly pale. “June 28th, 1914. The start of the Great War...”

We slowly began to share in his pallor.

“If we consider the ordering of these dates, then we might suppose that the last of them, 24101945ce, represents an event intended for eighteen years from now, in 1945.” The professor adjusted his hat.

“Could it mean that whoever drew the numbers inside the eyes thinks himself responsible for all of these historical events?” Ms. Gooseberry asked.

The professor frowned. “No, that’s unlikely... But perhaps this is a chronicle of the League of the Symbol’s Vigil’s activity—events they’ve influenced throughout the centuries.”

The soldier slicked back his messy brown hair. “What’re the chances we’re just dealing with a bunch a’ lunatics?”

“That depends,” Professor Moonly answered. “What have your interrogations told you?”

“Nothing so far,” Ms. Gooseberry admitted. “None of the members will talk, even with James’s rather harsh questioning methods.”

The general, shifting his weight from one foot to the other slowly admitted that indeed, nothing had been gained.

“Not even from Mister Flinch?”

“Not even from your Mister Flinch.” He huffed, hinting at frustration.

“The irony abounds,” muttered the professor before turning back to the numbers. “I think it might be best to start taking these dates more seriously. I will schedule a trip to Fishknight tomorrow. Until then, Miss Gooseberry—”

The federal investigator perked up.

“—see if you can get the city precinct to research anything related to festivals, laws, or events that are being planned for around that time. We might be able to narrow things down.”

Professor, do you really think we could be dealing with a shadow organization whose roots rest as far back as 2000 years? And here, in Grey Owl?

“My dear worm,” the professor muttered worriedly, his eyes flicking for one final moment towards a disappearing, blue eye—one of the last ones to vanish—with a number rubbed off from the ring of its iris. “For once in my life, I’m not sure what to make of things.”



A Fishy Chapter

{But a metallic kind of fish!}

The night around us was black, biting. It tore at our coat and paraded in front of our eyes, obscuring all but our immediate surroundings.

“Take my hand!”

From below us, our arch-nemesis hung, his knuckles white against the metal of the bridge’s scaffolding. Wide, fearless eyes pierced us, and even in the face of such malice, still we called to him.

“Take my hand, damn you!” the good professor shouted. There was sweat on his brow, a twitch in his lip as his teeth snapped against each other, gritting. All the insignificant details one failed to notice before had been relived with a desperate, driving intimacy, as if the world itself was clinging to them.

“Do you intend to fall!?” our voice rang out.

“Everything about this night was intended.” The answer was clear, certain. It cut through the sound of the thunder and the hissing rain.

And suddenly, we were looking up, our hand taken in his as he, hunched down and his face towards us, held the professor at the edge of the bridge.

Horrified and struggling, we swung over the unending darkness of the channel below. We knew what would happen next.

“No,” Professor Moonly muttered; he pleaded.

In the passing of the first seconds, the hand from above us loosened its hold, and our own slipped through it. The next moments carried us down, faster and faster as the wind, howling now, plunged its teeth into our body, turning us over in its voracious mouth. We spun and we twirled and we—

“NO!”

The good professor was awake, eyes wide and organic. Terrified. Fingertips pressed over the fabric crust of our bed quilt; hands shook. He was sweating. “Worm...” he whispered.

I am awake also. When you stirred, so did I.

“Did you dream of it too..?”

I did.

There was a long, drawn-out silence. From outside the window, a light breeze rattled the clear panes. The air inside the house was warm, even if the chilly autumn lingered just within arm's reach.

With a long sigh, Professor Moonly closed his eyes again, their lids pressing down intentionally until at last we forced ourselves to sleep.

When the morning came, with bags above our cheeks we made our way out, and in but a few hours we returned to the secret entrance leading to the bridge.

The good professor pushed up the wooden trapdoor, climbing into the rusty office once more. It was different in the light of day. Peaceful.

Several of the bridge's builders had been at the masquerade that night—now four days ago. They had been arrested and held at Fishknight Prison, but none had talked, let alone about the strange, winding maintenance tunnel that led from Boullerolli's Royal Hall to...

"Here." The professor picked a framed picture of a thinly smiling girl in between his fingers. He'd seen it when he came here that night, then again whenever he found himself returning in the days after, lingering in silence on this abandoned, fog-drenched platform. Perhaps we were just putting things off.

Ms. Gooseberry had wanted us to visit Mr. Flinch in prison and talk to him. Part of the professor already knew what the outcome would be.

"He won't say anything. Not to them." We looked together at the little girl in the picture. Dark hair poured over a small forehead. Her eyes were pretty, almost slate. She looked innocent.

Professor, if I might ask... When we were back in the Symbol Room, you withheld one of the numbers you'd found in the glowing eyes. How come?

"Simple, dear worm," Professor Moonly answered, replacing the picture as he'd done in the days before. He nudged it into a bit of an angle once set. "I need something I can hold over my enemies, something I know that they don't—or in this case, something they think I don't know that I actually do." His blue eyes narrowed carefully as he recalled the code. "Our list seemed to purport not only days in the past; it included two days in the future as well. The first date—the one both Viola and Mister Gant saw was the 24th of October, 1945." He rubbed his chin. Left unshaven, stubble had grown on it. "However, the one I discovered and hid suggested an event that would take place much sooner. The date of that event was March 23rd, 1933." He would shave it off tonight.

But why not tell anyone else?

“Because, my kind and faithful companion,” Professor Moonly answered me. “I trust neither Viola Gooseberry nor James Gant; suffice it to say, I’d hardly trust anyone when it came to something as important as this. Now, if I had to venture a guess, I would say that the date seen by Viola and Mister Gant marked some sort of contingency plan should the event bound to occur on the 23rd fail. If that’s so, then it makes the date I hid from them invaluable.”

That is if there’s any truth to this prophetic business of ours. You’re forgetting that all this might just be the work of, as Mr. Gant aptly put it, a bunch a’ lunatics. After all, no one can predict the future.

The Professor was silent for a while, as if teetering between consensus and disagreement. Then, all at once he answered. “It will require more examination.”

We approached the prison just as the sun was setting. The black dragon cane clicked against the cement tiles. Fishknight looked as ominous as ever, which was to say it looked more lethal with each visit. Barbed, black wires circulated the perimeter, and tall and unnaturally-skulking towers them cast a sickly white light from high above. The guards, robed in heavy vests and carrying both dirks and Oberndorf-imported pistols, patrolled up and down. Many were ex-military; some had more ominous histories. None spoke, save for whenever one had to ask, “Name?”

“Professor James Hubert Moonly.”

Glowing, grey eyes, covered by slips of pale skin stared back at us from behind a fabric face-scarf. All other hints of humanity hid underneath a wrap of black cloths, crowned by a silver-decorated pickelhaube. “I didn’t ask for a title.”

“Providing it was a courtesy,” the good professor parried. “Miss Viola M. Gooseberry from the British Intelligence Committee is awaiting me inside. Do you intend to keep her waiting?”

There was a scowl, then a flip through some papers. A telephone call came next. “Mhm... Yes. Alright.” The well-built grunt dropped a metal receiver back into place and stepped out of the gatehouse, approaching us. The professor was often taller than others, and so despite the man’s ferocity and macabre disposition, Professor Moonly stared down at the guard. “Make your way up through corridor A-1,” our unfriendly counterpart rasped. “Go to the end. Turn right. Proceed to corridor A-alpha. A-alpha leads in to the 43rd sub-section, called Secundvalt. Room Marionetta, Secundvalt is where the interrogations are conducted.”

“Marionetta...” the professor thought to himself. “A Spanish vessel. One of four, which set sail mid-eighteenth century from the port of Valencia, if I recall.”

“Yes,” the prison guard answered, eyes entailing an unseen frown below them.

“En el nombre del desconocido,” Professor Moonly chuckled. “Their motto was so well-known that it even made it into several prominent English essays.” He paused, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. “Yet, ‘Marionetta’ seems too colourful a name for a room in this prison, wouldn’t you agree?”

The grim-faced employee showcased the standard-issue Fishknight glower before answering, “Warden likes old ship names.”

An interesting fellow, no doubt.

The good professor nodded, deciding to waste no more of the guard’s time.

As we turned to commence our entrance, our moody gatekeeper mentioned something from behind us. “Don’t lose yourself on the premises, or you’ll be shot on sight.”

Past the aphelion of the courtyard, we delved next into the concrete bowels of the inescapable entity. We turned and twisted and descended all the while lower, memory our guide, as if we traversed the very chambers of hell itself. But if only Fishknight were as lenient as the great inferno and the brick-laden catacombs of Secundvalt were instead somewhat lit—even if only by ignited Italians, then, at least, it could be said that a shred of humanity lingered here.

Two of James Gant’s soldiers met us along the way. “Professor,” they said, tipping their grey and brown bowler hats. We tipped our tophat in return.

“Ah, Professor,” Ms. Gooseberry called to us as we entered the room, a pleasant smile stretched from cheek to cheek. “It’s good to finally meet another human being down here in the dark.”

Professor Moonly couldn’t help but smile.

“Half the bloody people here don’t talk and the other half look like they want to kill me.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” Professor Moonly laughed.

Ms. Gooseberry gave us a disturbed look, prompting a back-track of our response.

“Oh, no, no, I mean, they look as if they’d like to kill just about anyone.”

“I’ll give you that,” the investigator sighed, arms crossed. “Anyway, I’m glad you finally decided to show up.”

The professor smiled apologetically. “I supposed I’d been putting things off for long enough.”

“If I might ask—why *were* you putting things off?” Critical, green eyes rose to us.

“I wanted to return to the bridge first to see if I could find any more clues about that night.”

“And did you?”

The professor shook his head.

“Well if you’re interested in some good news, I discovered that the cage used to trap me was constructed in the Romanian city of Pitești. I’ve sent investigators there to inquire into the matter.” She smiled prettily. “It might lead us to some sort of answer.”

“Hopefully,” the good professor said, clapping his palms together. “But for now, let us focus on the matter at hand. Where is Mister Flinch?”

Ms. Gooseberry called to a couple of armed men who stood at the door—one from Fishknight and the other from General Gant’s army. One of them stayed while the other exited, bringing back a scruffy-looking man in the next minute, who was shorter than all others present. The guard threw him against a table just behind the dark-haired Ms. Gooseberry, and the investigator turned, then stepped back to stand now directly beside the professor. Nodding, she motioned forward. “You’ll have as much time as you wish, James.”

Professor Moonly, pulling up a metal chair, sat down. The scraping sounds echoed and died out, replaced soon after by his voice. “Andrew.”

The raggedy man looked up. “J-James Moonly...” he croaked, much to the surprise of the others in the room.

“Do you want some water?”

The politician shook his head. “No need, James. I don’t think I or any of the others will be here for much longer.” His eyes, sunken, gave off the impression of a defeated man. He looked broken, just as all those imprisoned in Fishknight did.

“Don’t talk like that, Andrew. I’ll see if I can have you moved out of this facility and into another one.”

Mr. Flinch offered up little reaction.

“However,” the good professor went on. “Your transferral will be conditional. You must talk to me first.” He removed his gloves and set the dragon cane to the side. Together, we gauged Mr. Flinch’s reaction, the slow, sluggish switch of his eyes from us to the walking stick.

“So you kept it...” he murmured to us.

“I did,” the professor answered. “Did you ever see it before we discovered it in the machine?”

The politician shook his head. “Why would you think that..?”

“I think a great deal of things,” the good professor answered. “These things, they buzz around inside my head like gnawing little gadflies, and subsequently, in a process of elimination, I swat away one, and then another, and then the next.”

Mr. Flinch nodded.

“Help me swat some more.” Professor Moonly smiled. “How did you become a member of the League?”

The politician’s eyes shifted back and forth, between the Professor and those in the room.

Professor Moonly looked back. “Them? I can have them leave.”

“I’m sorry, professor,” Ms. Gooseberry answered, “but at least one of us will have to stay to confirm that the things he’s telling you are true.”

“Very well,” the professor answered. “Would that be alright with you, Mr. Flinch—if everyone left except for one and myself?”

The politician’s face began to go pale. “I—er...”

“You could pick who it would be, of course.”

“M-Miss Gooseberry, I t-think.” He looked over at Mr. Gant, who chuckled back.

“Guess he doesn’t like me,” said the American, who cracked his knuckles in turn. “Well it’s alright. I can see us spending more time together in the future anyway.”

“Not if Mister Flinch chooses to talk,” the professor added, playing off of the threat.

Mr. Flinch was now staring down at the table, his hands and lips trembling.

As Professor Moonly glanced back, Mr. Gant and the two guards left.

Once they were gone, Ms. Gooseberry took her seat, and the professor and the investigator sat side by side.

“Tell us what you know, Andrew.”

The politician nodded. “I can only say that I joined the League on the first of February, two years ago. But even before that... I remember it was on a rainy evening and I had just left a meeting with the Bavarian Minister of Finance. We’d been touring Grey Owl and I’d lathered him up for a rather large trade deal—ah, um, Lunds Street, you know... Where t-the Olde Feather Pub is.”

“Yes, I know,” the professor said, and Ms. Gooseberry jotted down a note.

“It was after that. I met him in the alley. He looked like a tramp—l-like a vagabond. He had a torn, old cloak and his eyes—*piercing* eyes.”

“The hooded man,” Professor Moonly whispered. “Tell me more about him.”

“W-Well, at the time I thought he was a lunatic.”

“Naturally.” The professor’s eyes narrowed.

“But then I met him again, this time with the face of a wealthy capitalist from Rome.”

“And where was this?”

“At a Grand Galley’s meeting in Cambridge.”

Ms. Gooseberry tilted her head. “I attended that event once with a fellow officer. We were seeking funding for one of our policing projects there.”

“Many people seek funding for projects there,” the professor said, recalling the yearly initiative held by the elites of England. “And many benefactors attend too.” His eyes narrowed. “Tell me, Andrew. Which were you?”

“I think you know, James.” The pudgy politician’s hands pressed down on the top of the desk. “Can you guess which he was?”

“A benefactor.”

“Yes... And his lump sum brought with it a price.”

The professor’s brow lowered.

“He asked me to join his society of deception, where all was not as it seemed.”

So this man is a master of deception.

“This man was a master of deception,” the good professor corrected.

“Yes,” Mr. Flinch said drolly. “I heard you threw him over a bridge, though.”

“He slipped,” Professor Moonly corrected. “Otherwise I’d be locked in here with you.”

“Of course,” the politico went on, rattling his knuckles against his forehead. “And since you’re not, I can also assume that you are not and were never a member of our secret little club.”

“You’ve deduced correctly,” Professor Moonly answered. “I am not one of them. But then Andrew, I suspect that neither are you.” He sighed out through his nostrils. “I do not believe you are a bad man.”

“Oh, but I’ve already gone too far down the rabbit hole to be any more of a man than...” he let his bruised hands out, “...what you see before you.”

“You’ve become too pensive, Andrew,” the good professor rebuked, clicking his tongue. “I never took you for a Calvinist.”

Then Andrew Flinch looked back up at us. And when he did, it was with the look of a dangerous creature, much different from the one we knew. “I am permitted to tell you but one more thing, James.” Suddenly, he reached out, grabbing Professor Moonly by the collar of his dress shirt.

“What are you doing!? Let go!” The professor struggled against the bruised prisoner and Ms. Gooseberry latched on to Professor Moonly’s coat, trying to tug him back—but the man retained his grip until he drew us near. “There’s a safe deposit box atop the front desk of an old, condemned bank on the corner of Pushh and Padd.” Mr. Flinch’s voice was a growl. “In it you will find a letter. Keep that letter close—do not forget it.” Finally, he let go, all parties falling back against their chairs.

“We’ve heard more than enough!” Ms. Gooseberry retorted, exasperated. She stood and motioned to the door from which Mr. Gant and his men reappeared, one of them striking the ex-mayor across his face. “Return him to his cell.” Then, the investigator looked back to us. “James, are you alright?”

Professor Moonly looked up at her, and brows un-pressing themselves, he stood. “I’m fine. Thank you, Viola.”



A Hole in the Ark

Tiny Richard Romelius Rubber. Blue eyes, grey facial hair. Build, large. Height, seven foot six. Predisposition to vocal outbursts and light gambling. Phobia of spiders and taste for Chardonnay. Lived in Worcester for the first twenty years of his life before moving to Grey Owl City and marrying the now-deceased Bertrude Gaffey. Cause of Gaffey's death was indicated to be cancer of the liver, though Mr. Rubber and the duchess had divorced a year prior. Since her expiration, Tiny Rubber has focused all of his efforts on running the duck shoppe, making satisfactory revenue to keep the business expanding at a slow, but steady rate. Copies of Mr. Rubber's financial accounts, extracted from his confiscated safe, can be found on rack 22-D. Sidenote, the shoppe also served as the Rubbers's home. Status of Mr. Tiny R. R. Rubber: living.

Biggert (Biggie) Wyndale Rubber. Brown eyes, trimmed hair—clean-shaven according to last witness account. Build, large. Height, six foot seven. Remedial mental capacities, due likely to mongolism. Intense dislike of morning songbirds. Unverified relation to the 'S.C.' incident several years ago. Relationship issues with Mr. Tiny R. R. Rubber suspected, not likely overcome before death. Jealousy towards his brother? More likely a burning desire to be of use to him, according to those who ever witnessed the pair, along with the records of a psychiatrist in Dover, retrieved via extra-legal duress—originally sanctioned by Mr. Rowell, British Intelligence. See first cabinet on left. Status of Mr. Biggert Rubber: deceased.

Thomas (Tommy) Tilmsey Rubber. Brown eyes, small, black moustache in the style of the regent. Build, thin but athletic. Height, five foot nine. Responsible for marketing the shoppe's products. Has had an appreciation for classical music since the age of twelve and an eye for older women since the age of fourteen. Unverified relation to the S.C.. Attempted to court Mme. de Pomarétte of Fleet Street, London during a trip to the city ten years ago. Since then, has on at least four separate occasions feigned military officership to gain access to blue lamp brothels across Grey Owl. A textbook on advanced microchemistry (cellular restitution, moth metamorphoses, and other complex phenomena) was found half-burnt in his room, along with other documents of little detail or importance. Within the back cover of the manual, however, was a secret pocket in which an old map of Grey Owl City was discovered. Handwritten on the map was the sentence 'Human knowledge compiled', with a small hand-drawn symbol beside it. See drawer 3-A for evidence. Status of Mr. Thomas Rubber: deceased.

The Professor pored over the written notes meticulously, his eyes glancing up afterwards to an overhead corkboard, moving from one end of the big display to its other and following the strings fastened in all directions across its surface. A red line fixed by push pins connected a colour picture of Biggie Rubber to a bank he used to use; it had since gone out of business. A taupe one connected Thomas to a croquet club in the south of the city.

Standing in the middle of Ms. Gooseberry's room, the professor and I looked back down together. It was unnerving to see the lives of these men laid bare before us, as if they had been placed upon an operating table and dissected in full. Nonetheless, eyes pried again towards a stack of blanched papers, birthed from drawer 3-A. Lines of notes were woven into them; we withdrew them together, taking care not to disturb the arrangement they were in.

"It's a transcript..." Professor Moonly whispered while he looked over the small bundle. "A conversation between our federal investigator Viola Gooseberry and Mister Tiny Rubber."

And so it went:

V: I'm glad you found the time to meet with me on such short notice.

T: It wasn't a problem at all. To be honest, when I first heard that the Grey Owl Police were investigating the deaths of my sons, I was mortified. There I was thinking that someone had killed them! Thankfully, er... what's-his-name, the one with the big curly moustache—

V: Ah, Detective Northrop.

T: Yes, Northrop—good man, he cleared things up. Told me it was only a precaution—exploring all avenues of possibility. That's what you're here to do, I suppose.

V: Quite correct, Mr. Rubber.

T: Then I'll be of as much help as I can.

V: You've been a great help to us already, and we're merely working on the finishing details of the case. In fact, I've only a couple more questions for you that weren't covered by our previous officers.

T: Shoot, then.

V: Excellent. If at any time you feel uncomfortable during our interview, we can stop.

T: I understand. Much appreciated, Ms... now, you said it was Gooseberry?

V: Yes, that's correct.

T: Right then, Ms. Gooseberry.

V: If I may begin generally, I'd like to learn a bit more about your sons—Thomas and Biggie.

T: Well, uh, they were both good boys to say the least. Tommy, he was always tinkering away with something or another—he enjoyed inventing things.

V: Were you aware of his nights out?

T: You mean his... frivolities? As aware as any disapproving father could be. He was particularly skilled at hiding things from me, but eventually all secrets get out, don't they?

V: Indeed. And what about Biggert?

T: Biggie was... Well, he wasn't the brightest bulb in the shed. Not exactly a firecracker in my opinion, but... [*Facial Note*, Mr. Rubber fidgets with his fingers and smiles.] Ah well, he had a spark every now and then.

V: I spoke with a member of the Grey Owl Children's Charity this morning. He seemed quite fond of your contributions to the city's philanthropic programmes.

T: Right, right. I went over this with the other officers. For the past four years, I've been donating a small percentage of my revenue to various relief programmes.

V: It's an appreciated effort, I'm sure. To be honest though, I'm surprised that the sale of rubber ducks from a family-run shoppe would produce enough revenue to endeavour on such pursuits. If you don't mind my asking, what did your yearly profits come to after expenses?

T: They... erm, I guess... Sorry I'm tripping over my own words here. I figure they must've averaged about ten thousand feathers. [*Supplementary Note*, Grey Owl's currency differs incredibly from the British pound and is superinflated. Average salary lingers around 25,000£.]

V: That seems like a low amount, even by Grey Owl standards.

T: Well you're right that rubber ducks are a niche market, but I've enjoyed investing in various equities too, which have helped to grow my capital; in addition, I was served a small fortune some time ago by the courts. It was after my divorce with the Duchess Gaffey. Poor woman, she died a year later, of cancer in the liver.

V: My condolences.

T: She was a good person. More than I deserved...

V: Was she the one who inspired you to pursue philanthropy?

T: In a way, yes.

V: This morning I was alerted to the fact that an insurance policy had been taken out on all members of the Rubber family. While it had been done seven years ago by Mrs. Gaffey herself, I learned that you'd in fact been reminded of it recently by your broker, Mr. Thryft.

T: Right. He told me about it last week.

V: It appears you still haven't collected your compensation though.

T: What does it matter whether or not I collect the money? My family is dead, and no amount of cash could ever bring them back.

V: Of course. I only thought that if by some chance you were worried that withdrawing the insurance money would lead the police to suspect your motives, you might be reluctant to try it.

T: If I did, it wouldn't make me look like a very sympathetic person, would it? [*Facial Note*, Mr. Rubber laughs briefly, but seems genuinely unconcerned with compensation.]

V: Quite correct. Nevertheless, it's your right to collect it, and with what I've said, you can rest easy knowing that we've no issue with the withdrawal.

T: I understand. Still, it wouldn't be right to make a profit off of my sons's lost lives.

V: Of course. Perhaps you could donate the money to charity.

T: Yes, I think that should be reasonable.

V: Excellent. I hear that a play is being put on by the children of Pontzer's Orphanage inside Charity Church later this week. Perhaps you could make a donation to them.

T: Ah yes, well—I'll look into it, but with the future of my business up in the air—hell, all I've got left is the deed to the land—and all the legal papers to read, the funerals, the repairs to my home, and so on... As you can tell, I've got a good bit on my hands right now.

V: Yes, certainly. There's no need to rush. [*Supplementary Note*, Mr. Rubber's display of reluctance in withdrawing his insurance capital is interesting to say the least; worthy of pursuit to say the most.]

T: Ah, damn! I have to apologize to you, Ms. Gooseberry. I didn't realize so much time had passed, and I've got a meeting to attend. Was there anything else?

V: Yes, actually—one quick thing. I discovered a burnt book on the remains of the shoppe's second floor. Here.

T: That's... I think this was one of Tommy's textbooks. [*Supplementary Note*, Mr. Rubber pauses at the sight of the book, despite his rush.]

V: Are you certain?

T: Yes, of course. Who else could it have belonged to?

V: Biggie perhaps?

T: Biggie? Hah! He, you know, he could hardly string together a sentence without catching on his own tongue—no, no this is Tommy's. I can guarantee it.

V: Very good. Thank you for your time then, Mr. Rubber.

T: Good day, Ms. Gooseberry.

And so it ended. Professor Moonly slid up the last transcript sheet and replaced it behind the others. Then, glancing over, he took up a small map from the drawer marked '3-A'.

It appeared to be delicate, and so we handled it with care. Professor Moonly frowned slightly, trying to make out the purpose of Thomas's hidden chart. Nothing about it appeared to be extraordinary. Grey Owl was there, drawn on it in all the city's splendour, though a few streets missing from the print had been added by hand. The map, dated, was from 1894, and in big bold print was the city's name. Below it, someone had indeed written 'Human knowledge compiled', inking an image of a moth beside it. For what purpose—who could ever begin to assume? Still, it interested us, and we stored it away in our thoughts for now, replacing the paper.

There were other citizens included in Ms. Gooseberry's notes, of course—none were left without a mark of suspicion. Names upon names, each with distinct details attached to them; from the members of the Grey Owl police force to every individual connected with the League of the Symbol's Vigil, aliases and faces revealed themselves eagerly. The professor looked forth in silence at all the neatly categorized lives.

He had come here by pure coincidence—at least that was what he'd rationalized it as when we first approached the locked room. Instead, Professor Moonly now felt that what drew him to the investigator's work was some immovable worry in the pit of his stomach, an uncertainty of the threats around him that brought the academic to be all the more vigilant of his surroundings—particularly of his surrounding allies.

"And yet..." There was no file on us. Professor Moonly's eyes narrowed as he thumbed through two stacks of papers, then four more after that. James Hubert Moonly was nowhere to be found in the investigator's logs. "Interesting," he murmured. Either he was of no importance to her, or more than likely Viola M. Gooseberry's findings on him had been hidden. Perhaps he was the greatest suspect in the investigator's eye. There was no way to tell.

A small music box stood on a dresser to the left, just by the bed. It rested beside a grey-cover book of human anatomy, decorated with the silver outline of the Vitruvian man. The professor carefully opened the box and it played a short, isolating melody. Within it, a ballerina made of balsawood turned, locked to her mechanical rut. We peered down at its base.

'Dearest Melusina ~ simplicity is salvation.' was inscribed on it. Tilting his head, the professor closed the box and the music ended.

Our black shoes slowly turned on the fabric of the carpet and rose one after the other; it was time to go. She would be back at the manor shortly, and there was no sense in searching any longer.

We locked the door behind us.



Tea Time

The Black Forest clock cooed lovingly. 4 pm struck. “How delicious!” Ms. Gooseberry expressed her pleasure as she indulged in a jam-filled Joseph Street scone.

“Quite,” the professor answered. “Glad I recommended them?” Viola had gone out to the city in the morning, furthering her case work. On her way back, she’d picked up the treats from Brittle’s Bakery.

“Yes, I am,” she answered us.

A four-time winner of the Prikston Pastry Championship, there was no better baker than Robert Brittle save maybe his wife, and the professor made mention of the trivia while we ate.

Ms. Gooseberry nodded, listening with interest. Then she said, “You should show me around the city, Professor.” From across the table, the curious woman smiled as she wiped her scarlet lips with a pearl-white napkin. “Whenever you have the chance, of course.”

Professor Moonly shrugged, raising an eyebrow. “What about Mister Gant?”

“What about Mister Gant?” the lovely Viola repeated.

The professor sipped his tea, formulating a reply. As he placed the cup down, he cleared his throat. “Well, I just thought that you and he were getting along reasonably well.”

The investigator nodded, smirking shrewdly. “Reasonably, yes. Why, jealous?”

“Tsch! Of course not.”

“Of course not,” Ms. Gooseberry parroted. “Anyway, while he is a man of many talents, James’s talents all unfortunately revolve around war.”

“I suppose,” the professor answered, “but I was under the impression that that was the type of man the average woman would be attracted to.”

Ms. Gooseberry, glancing down at her plate, stifled a laugh. “Professor Moonly,” she said, looking back up at us. “If you think you know me to be an average woman, then it seems you hardly know me at all.”

The professor wondered where he’d heard that before. “Well anyway, I suppose some... sightseeing might be able to find its way into my busy schedule.”

“Of course,” Ms. Gooseberry said, her emerald eyes resting back on the tray of baked goods. “You must indeed have a very busy schedule.”

“I do,” the professor answered, frowning.

“I know,” she said sensitively. Her face was like that of a viper toying with its prey. A tight smile had again imposed itself upon her lips.

“Good,” the professor answered, pertrubed. “So,” he then switched the subject, “how are you finding the guestroom?”

“Roomy,” came the answer. “I’ve set up my desk with all the necessary documents and hung a bulletin board from the wall where that portrait of Poseidon used to be.”

“Oh?”

“Don’t worry—I put it in another room, the third one just down the hall.”

The Professor scratched his chin. “I see.”

We should be careful. Having a professional investigator prying around the manor is quite risky, even if all evidence of our questionable associations has been aptly removed.

Ms. Gooseberry went on a moment later. “I sometimes perform experiments and procedures which involve a great deal of dust and dirt. I did not want the air of the guestroom to affect the quality of the painting.” She shrugged. “I hope that’s alright.”

“Yes, of course,” the professor answered. “And thank you. It’s one of my favourites.”

“I can see why,” she returned with a smile. “Its composition is exquisite.”

Few rarely appreciate the subtleties of art; but Viola Melusina Gooseberry is very obviously of a higher pedigree.

“Cut that out,” the good professor muttered, scratching at me.

“Hm?” Ms. Gooseberry sounded with her pleasantly perked mouth.

“I said cut that one,” Professor Moonly insisted, pointing to one of the last two scones. “I think it has blueberry filling.” His eyes rose, pleading innocence. “As opposed to strawberry..?”

The investigator sliced it open and a bold, blue blood poured from its crust. “So it does. Care to share?” she asked, offering up one of the pieces.

“Thank you,” the professor said, taking it from her politely before changing the subject once more. “I imagine you’ve had the chance to follow up on the letter Mr. Flinch told us about.”

“I’m playing it with precaution,” Ms. Gooseberry answered, “and for now you’ll have to forgive me if I remain tight-lipped about the matter.”

The professor nodded understandingly.

“Still,” she went on, frowning from under her round glasses. “It’s a curious thing, that we’d find Mr. Flinch’s letter on the corner of Pushh and Padd, just across from the burnt-down duck shoppe.”

“Speaking of which, is that case still open or have we gone off on a bit of a tangent?”

The investigator scratched her smooth chin. “As far as the Intelligence Committee knows, I’ve taken a leave of absence to vacation in Grey Owl City. I had a friend of mine who works in administration file the paperwork, making it official.” Her voice lowered into a whisper. “Unofficially, however, I’m still very interested in both the cases of the Symbol’s Vigil and the Rubbers’s deaths, especially after what you told me about your hooded man.”

“That he denied murdering the Rubbers?” Professor Moonly asked back, recalling a conversation we’d had earlier in the morning with Viola.

She nodded. “Hopefully the letter from the bank, plus anything I find out about the bird cage’s makers will lead me to more clues. Until then there’s not much else to do but wait.”

Hence, the vacation.

“Well good luck with it,” said Professor Moonly, eyes closed for a longer blink than usual.

“Oh?” the investigator said, almost disappointedly. “Usually our conversations end in some sort of request to accompany me on these mad adventures.”

It was the professor’s turn to smile. “I’m going to start teaching at the University of Grey Owl in a couple of days—right at the start of the new month, when the current professor substituting for me resigns. Anyway, I fear I’d only be an encumbrance to your investigations.”

“That’s a shame,” Ms. Gooseberry replied, thinking about something for a moment. “By the way, I never did thank you for saving me back at the banquet hall.”

“You don’t need to thank me,” the professor answered, his cheeks reddening a bit. “Anyone would have done it.”

“But you were the one who did.” The investigator finished her half of the scone, and after a brief interlude, spoke on. “I was too weak to move while I was trapped inside the cage, but I did hear some of the conversation you had with the hooded man.” Ms. Gooseberry, standing from her seat, paced over to the professor. We stood in turn and, much to our surprise, she kissed us on the cheek. “Thank you.”

“Erm...” The good professor was now full-fledged red. “Y-You’re welcome, Voila.”

And just like that, the moment was ruined.



Chapter 0.8

When we came to the ground, the winds dying around us and at last giving way to the smell of soaked soil, I was amazed at the ferocity with which we hit the layered concrete. Black air rested all around us, stirred by the sparkling light of our passageway and the energy that radiated from us like twisting hairs.

My lord gave off a raspy cough, climbing with some effort to his feet. The curling mechanical apparatuses wrapped around his legs bent back into shape with low creaks after having absorbed most of the impact. Then, cloak brushing across the floor, he tested his heels, pacing towards a set of tall, tooth-like bars. Behind them, curled up in his daylight-deprived cell, a figure peered up with waiting eyes.

“The time has come, brother Flinch,” called the clarion voice, and a pair of large, ruthless hands clasped suddenly against the prison cell, tightening around its iron rods. Where his palms met metal, a whispering hiss could be made out, and soon, it had enveloped the entire cell like a chorus of otherworldly spirits. As the walls around us groaned with the impact we’d had on them, a wave of dream-like surrealism washed throughout Fishknight, sinking each chamber in its warping swell. Below the Earth, in a darkness buried by the moonless night, we set one hundred men free.



Chapter 101—Introduction to Symbology

And so we walked; the scenery moved with us. It touched our heart to see the Ivory City once more, and in the almost untelling blue of the professor's eyes, I caught a sense of long-awaited fulfilment.

The grassy grounds were encircled by tall, familiar, and white-bricked walls, splendidly lit by the last campaigns of autumn and loyal protectorates to the hierarchical yolk that lay within them.

At the heart of the courtyard stood a pair of decorated chapels. Their stain-glass windows, often dewed in April with rainy perspiration, were now found frosted over on this particularly chilly day, and the lingering ice set upon their edges gleamed with reflecting sunlight. Twin doors like looming giants welcomed any on either side whose interest was piqued by the mysteries they hid. Over the years, we recalled, few had ever used them though, and of those who did, fewer, the professor suspected, had found genuine solace when they stepped through to peruse the scriptures of since-surmounted generations, or sit within in the rows of abandoned pews.

We turned our attention away and the professor adjusted his scarf, which was a lovely shade of blue. His overcoat flapped behind him as he continued.

In the middle of the buildings which were more for show and less for service, there stood at last to meet our eyes the prestigious man-made centrepiece—a tall tower, born of timber bones and cased in silvery skin that attracted with its brilliance almost every eye.

Follow along now, first towards its stony roots, then up the pleasant curve of its figure; pry for a moment, and you may be privy to more. Hung upon the winding insides of its walls, ranks of copper lanterns produced a tender, fleeting light. Crossed by passers-by, they shone on from behind intricately-carved glass windows, the thresholds of which were gowned in a subtle frost. But the lanterns flickered otherwise contented in the warmer halls, so far up above us that the eye could barely meet their glow.

We turned through the courtyard awash with walking students. Their footsteps left skids in the mashed patches of wet and trampled snow. Ah, the younger, secular sages who unwittingly bore the virtues of human knowledge: of philosophy, of science, and of art. We dallied a moment before we again pursued the path, our eyes falling across the pristine waves of a marble-carved

fountain. It itself was a flourishing structure, though its once-mysterious day had long since descended.

Onward, the sounds of our touring footsteps greeted the brisk morning air as underneath an unbent English oak, there sat a student clothed in a fleece of dyed cotton. With deliberate enunciation, she recited lines from a borrowed book, its pages worn and binding frayed but its content nonetheless treasured.

Her vernacular was rustic. No, rusty.

And now, dear reader, consider how Professor Moonly felt when those foreboding words, ill-pronounced and maimed, came to his ears! In some odd sense, he wished never to see the common world again, so that instead he might with every ounce of his spirit set right the fallacies of those dewy-eyed youths. *“Io dico, seguitando, che...”*

This territory of the soul in the midst of a Monday morning sighed out unto the flocks that inhabited its borders those same and old, always-nourishing whispers of knowledge. And I, in droll amusement, skimmed what they proposed.

“Eyes up, dear worm,” the Professor said in a brief address. “Focus is essential.”

The tall and heavy gates, now only a few more paces away, were for us all at once opened, and his face like that of a well-loved lord, the prodigal professor James Hubert Moonly was welcomed within with all the excitement and respect that smaller men passing through gates of greater secret could have only ever hoped to receive.

His coming was canon, and this city was his.

May I return to the vernacular, dear Professor?

“You may, good worm,” Professor Moonly at last ceded once we were within the halls.

It strains my tongue to talk like you academics.

“But the pomp and ceremony is wholly necessary.”

Says who?

“The academics,” Professor Moonly smiled, turning a corner and starting down a stretch of brightly-lit hallway. If the wavering snowstorm, which had appeared almost out of nowhere, decided to part in the next two hours, we’d have a much nicer ride home. If not, we might be forced to remain here.

“Oh, come now. That wouldn’t be so bad,” the professor noted.

With your colleagues.

“Ehrm...” he corrected himself, mumbling afterwards. “Perhaps it would in fact be best if this storm passed us.” There was only one colleague the professor wished to see, and he was likely busy somewhere up in the Observatory.

Moments later, we pushed open a door. Ah, here it was, and there they were—the students! Row after row, they sat satisfied with their gossip.

“Very well,” the good professor spoke, pacing up to a tall and decorated lectern behind which stood fixed four sets of sterile blackboards. All at once, all ears fell upon his bold and energetic voice. “Apologies for my late arrival. Due to a delay in Grey Owl City, I am here a month behind schedule.” He clapped his hands and the remnants of noise quieted. “We shall begin with something simple: dynamical activities—specifically, bifurcations. Now,” he twisted a piece of chalk, freshly removed from his pocket, in between his fingertips. “The essence of bifurcational behaviour stems from the fact that families of mathematical functions can come to generate fixed points seemingly out of nowhere when the parameter used for those very functions changes. Take, for example, the family of F_λ ...” Professor Moonly drew a fancy ‘F’ on the blackboard, the chalk dispersing elegantly at the weight of his press. Next came a small ‘ λ ’ below the larger letter, “...equals $x^2 + \lambda$. Now, say we take an infinite number of iterations of this function—that is to say F of F of F of, et cetera, of x. Eventually, depending on the graph’s intersection with the line $G(x)$ equals x, we could have no fixed points—when λ is, for this particular function, greater than $1/4$ —one fixed point—for when λ equals $1/4$ exactly—or two fixed points—when λ is less than $1/4$. As λ lowers past $1/4$, we obtain what is called a saddle node bifurc—”

“Uh, excuse me Sir,” a cracking voice questioned from within the rows of paralyzed pupils.

How dare someone interrupt your glorious explanation, Professor! You should drain him of his blood and feed him to the great winged chimera you keep chained in our cellar!

“Now, now, good worm,” Professor Moonly warned, “we’ve been over this. Do not speak of the beast in public.” He cleared his throat, then brought his attention, partially, to the student. “Yes, young man. Was there a question?”

“Well,” the juvenile began, wavering. “This is a political science class, not a... *science* science class.”

“Mathematics, actually,” the good professor corrected without turning.

“He’s right,” someone else interjected. “I’ve never even heard of a bifocalation, or whatever that was.”

Several other voices began to rise in retort, but the good professor only smiled in turn, the thin, pleased grin making its way over his lips.

“Professor Moonly’s supposed to be here teaching us,” the student went on. “You haven’t even written your name down anywhere—are you or aren’t you Professor Moonly, and if so, why are you instructing us in... this?”

The good professor nodded. “Very good. Very good indeed. Now,” he motioned with his free hand. “Would you care to stand so I can see my accuser?”

The student stood warily. He regarded us with maroon eyes from underneath a pair of bushed brows and a crown of hair that was both messy and dark. A raggedy complexion affected his expression, afflicted with freckles here and there. His nose was a bit bent, and a bit too big for his face. He was tall, too, but his back was hunched a bit, perhaps from the weight of his books. He was not ugly, but not necessarily good-looking either.

“Indeed, my boy. I am Professor Moonly.”

There was a silence.

“Right,” the student continued, egged on, the professor suspected, by his peers’s conspiratorial whispers. “Then why are you teaching us this instead of political science?”

And so the game begins.

“Why not?”

“What..?” the student wondered aloud.

“Why should I not teach you this instead of political science?”

“Well, because this isn’t a math class. You’re supposed to be teaching us about politics—that’s what you’re paid for and that’s what we *expect* to learn.” Low cheers came from behind him, still wary of the tall man in the unforgivingly-handsome tophat.

“So you expect me to tell you things about politics?” the professor laughed. “Very well—but you, dear boy,” he pointed outward, “must tell me something first: isn’t political science the science of understanding how politics works?”

“Of course it is,” answered the student.

“And you would agree that the ultimate aim of this understanding is to forge the perfect civic citizen, wouldn’t you?”

“Obviously.”

“But tell me, is the perfect civic citizen born by the opinions of some other man? What could I teach you that you do not already know or have no capacity to understand without my help?”

“Terminology—”

“Read a book!”

The student’s eyes narrowed, glowering. “Examples of politi—”

“Political situations, eh? Why do you need cherry-picked examples? Are you not surrounded by the politics of everyday life?”

“I meant past examples—”

“Then take a history course!” Professor Moonly smiled grandly, causing several female members of the student body to giggle and whisper amongst themselves.

“Fine,” the youthful lad continued. “Teach us what you think about the different political platforms.”

“Ah,” the good professor said, lowering his chalk and stepping down from the lectern, “but my dear boy, would you truly want that?” He walked over to the bushy-browed student, then extended a hand. “You stand on the edge of great folly in asking for this. Why do you think?”

“Something tells me the answer involves mathematics,” the boy frowned cynically.

“Another expectation on your part—but no,” the professor answered. “In fact it involves only human nature.” His hand remained outward. “Consider this: say a man of great influence has an idea—not only an idea, but an ideal. Of Conservatism, of Totalitarianism,” the students began to talk amongst themselves, wondering what the point of his ramble might be, “of Liberalism, of Communism.” The voices hushed and the professor’s elegant, blue eyes looked back to the student’s brazen brown ones. “Of structure or anarchy, harmony or hatred—all at any cost. Now say this man is put in front of a classroom full of unwitting students, their minds a clay ready to be moulded by whatever sermon he gives. And say they willingly, for some strange reason, grant him their trust.” The professor, from staring up towards the crowd of students, looked back down at his accuser. “What is your name?”

“Mortimer Rhyme, Sir,” the brown-eyed pupil answered.

“Very well, Mortimer.” Professor Moonly loomed over him like some summoned fiend who, contract in hand, smiled with devious pleasure. “Will you then take up this mantle and on behalf of all your fellow students relinquish their freedom of thought to me? Will you so boldly declare

to the heavens your unfeigned loyalty to my voice, to know only what I know and see only what I see?”

At this, the student hesitated. Finally, he answered, “I can’t speak for everyone here. This is a democracy.”

The professor nodded, then shrugged. “So you’ve been told.” He looked around to the others who sat in the lecture hall. “I shall extend my question to all who are present. Would any of you wish to make this deal?”

The room remained silent.

“I see. And to think, if I were anyone else who for my own nefarious purposes failed to present you with this disclaimer, you would have happily signed the contract, the details drowned by whispers promising you...” He pretended to weigh invisible things in his palms, “knowledge, or power, perhaps fame or fortune if ever you sought to pursue a place in parliament.” Finally, Professor Moonly let down his hands. “So Mortimer, you see, for any reasonable man, the class sitting there and I standing here must be the strangest of scenarios.” The professor played with his piece of chalk, twirling it in between his fingers before looking to the students again. “Each and every one of you all must ask yourselves why such a scenario is allowed to play itself out time and again, and why you sit complacently through it every class, your inhibitions, hesitations, insecurities all aroused only when you are taught something you did not expect.” Turning back, he retreated to the shallow podium and the lectern where his class notes waited. “Expectation, my young friends, is like fire—never let it consume you.”

Despite his disclaimer, complacency campaigned across the remaining hour, and each student listened without protest. When the lecture was over, streams of bodies stood as they always would and exited through the corridors. The good professor remained by the chalkboard.

“Professor Moonly,” a voice called out from behind, and we turned to face its owner.

“Ah, Mortimer, was it?”

Sombre eyes looked back at us from under those bushy brows. “Yes, Sir.” He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “I wanted to apologize about speaking out of turn.”

The professor looked back, intrigued. “Oh?”

“I should have shown you more respect instead of jumping to conclusions.”

But the good professor chuckled. “While you may have jumped to a conclusion,” he said as he replaced the piece of chalk, gritted down after the hour to little less than a stub, “I think that ‘respect’ is a tricky word.”

Brown eyes watched with a very human sort of curiosity.

“My dear boy...” Professor Moonly said, taking his top hat from the lectern and setting it on his head. He couldn’t remember at which point in the lesson he’d removed it. “You should show respect to no man who has not yet earned it. I think you’ll agree that I had not yet earned your respect.”

“I still shouldn’t have questioned your methods.”

The professor laughed. “If you truly believe that, then you haven’t learned your lesson.”

The student, frowning, scratched the back of his scruffy-haired head. “What do you mean?”

“One must learn from someone he can trust,” the good professor said as he reached for his walking stick, then stepped down from the shallow podium. A smile had settled on his face. “*And* question.”

As the two stepped out from the classroom and parted, the professor’s blue eyes fell back to the sight of the boy, who left off into the crowd.

Is that affection I sense in you?

“Perhaps reminiscence. He almost reminds me of myself when I was that age,” Professor Moonly admitted. “Anyway...” The good professor began to walk, but was stopped by one of the female students.

“Professor,” she said in a beautiful Florentine accent as a pair of blushed red lips parted beneath the curve of a cloche hat. Her eyes, striking, left some familiar sensation in us, though I could tell Professor Moonly was in no mood to linger. “I enjoyed your lecture very much.”

“Ah, that’s good,” the professor returned, tipping his top hat and starting to walk away.

“I mean, the way you reflected on the dichotomous relationship between the learner and the instructor as a contractual ploy was nothing short of stellar analysis into the very heart of the human condition.”

“Indeed,” Professor Moonly muttered as he ascended the winding stone stairs. “Though if you truly prescribed to it, you wouldn’t have sat through the remainder of my lecture.”

This is why I don’t like students.

“Well anyway, I was wondering,” the girl went on in a dreamy voice as we made our way to the professor’s office, “how the universal application of critiquing one’s surroundings with both

political and social scrutiny might carry over into the field of—do you mind if I step in?” Before we knew it, the frisky student had slipped past us and into the office.

“Now, I really don’t think—” Professor Moonly began to argue, but the student threw herself into his arms, sending us all knocking back against the door and slamming it shut. “Oh, take me, Professor!”

“Gah! Get off me, woman!” Professor Moonly grabbed at the girl’s shoulders, but she only moaned pleasantly in return, at which the professor’s face flashed red as a tomato. And then, she went in for the ki—

“Mmmphwwmph...” Her lips pressed against Professor Moonly’s, and the two stood awkwardly in their respective positions: him, pressed up against the door; her pinning him to it. When they released, we all stood silently, nearly motionless.

“Professor,” the student whispered with a certain and sombre voice. Cunning eyes glanced back at us, emerald whirlpools draped by the slick black hair that had fallen out of place from under her hat. Now there were hands on our shoulders. “You must be very, very quiet.”

Professor Moonly poured a cup of hot tea, the water heated by a small electrical coil that was mounted on the top of a nearby desk. “I can’t believe it’s been an entire two years, Gilia,” he said loudly, with a feigned grin. “How have you been?”

“Oh, you know,” the federal investigator giggled in turn, shrugging. Her cute, thin fingers rested around the fold of her cap, which was set neatly on the wooden table. “I’ve been here and there—by the way, I visited Russia last summer and finally got to try stroganoff!”

In between the exchanges, the two whispered quietly to each other.

“How long do we have to keep this up?” Professor Moonly asked.

“I’m not certain,” Ms. Gooseberry answered. “It’s like I told you. I don’t know how long they’ve been following you for.” Her glasses removed and hair let down, she appeared a completely different person.

The professor, scratching his chin, then raised a finger, silently mouthing an ‘Aha’. He paced back over to the table, setting down the kettle. “Let’s put a song on, shall we?” He turned towards a shiny bronze-trimmed phonograph, placing a flat record inside of it and dropping the needle. After an initial scratch, a lingering melody—something halfway between the sound of a cat drowning and a vengeful spirit trying to thrust its demonic entity into the realm of the living carried through the room. Professor Moonly and I made our way back, and then we sat.

Ms. Gooseberry stared at us curiously as the scratching tone went on. “What is that?”

“Au Clair De La Lune, the first song ever recorded, done on something called a phonautograph.”

“Is that like a phonograph?” Ms. Gooseberry asked.

“Indeed,” the professor answered, “only the phonautograph could not play back sounds.”

“Ah,” Ms. Gooseberry said, then cringed. “Well this sound sounds like a fossil. Don’t you have anything better?”

But the good professor took offense. “This is the genesis of the recording era! For the first time in history, man was able to technologically capture and preserve the sounds he made.” He huffed, straightening out his shirt collar. “It is a remarkably beautiful melody—and on top of that, you have no idea of the scientific complications I encountered in trying to render the sound playable. You see, the phonautograph utilized a cylindrical capsule for its recordings, originally composed of—”

“Nightmares,” Ms. Gooseberry interrupted, smiling jokingly as the horrid sound went on.

“No, not nightmares. You don’t understand.” Professor Moonly frowned, then sighed sadly, putting his elbows on the table and resting his head in his hands. There was no point in pursuing the matter. “Anyway, whoever’s watching us won’t be able to hear what we’re saying with the music in the background.”

“Good,” Ms. Gooseberry answered. “Then listen closely.” Her eyes narrowed as she spoke the words. “All one hundred prisoners of Fishknight Prison have vanished.”

The professor’s back straightened and he stared at the investigator, shocked. “What do you mean vanished?”

Ms. Gooseberry went on. “One night they were there, and the next they were not.” Her voice was grave. “None of the guards know anything, and neither do any of James’s men.”

Professor Moonly was still. Underneath the table, his hands, which had fallen to his lap, had begun to tremble. Only slightly, for Professor Moonly was a calm and composed man. Nonetheless, he instinctively glanced towards the dragon cane that lay by his side.

“When I discovered what had happened, I assumed that somehow, no matter how implausible, Fishknight’s defences had been compromised.” Ms. Gooseberry stood from the table and the record drew to an end. She walked over and reset the ungodly thing. When the sound came back on, she spoke in a low voice. “I put on a disguise in case anyone had been following me and made my way to the university. But when I trailed you into the classroom and

took a seat amongst the crowd, I noticed several suspicious gentlemen.” She looked back to her olive-coloured hat, then at us. “You gave the class a ten-minute break midway through the lecture. Of all the students who stopped their work, three kept their eyes on you the entire time.”

The professor scratched his chin. But there were well over a hundred students in the lecture hall. How did you..?”

“I have keen eyes,” Ms. Gooseberry answered with a smile. “It’s not necessarily to say you’re being watched, but when something this big happens, we must consider all possibilities.”

“Agreed,” Professor Moonly said, standing from his place at the table and tossing Ms. Gooseberry her hat. He rummaged through an old cardboard box, pulling out a fake beard. A braided thing, its rough, grey tassels carried strands of black or brown—it was hard to tell.

Ms. Gooseberry stared at the raggedy device. “Do you, um... often keep spare facial hair lying around?”

The professor shrugged. “It was from a course in drama I took long ago.” He smiled, nodding. “Authentic African gorilla hair—from Rwanda... It has sentimental value to me.”

“You really do outdo yourself professor,” Ms. Gooseberry said, shaking her head as she replaced her hat.

Behind us, the phonograph cut out, the second cycle of its song concluding.



Professor J. H. Moonly

*Happy nightmares one and all,
-April 9th, 1860*

AN ORIENTAL INTERMISSION



Bockwurst & Company

The Manor was at war. Was the city being bombarded? Attacked? No. It was a very different kind of danger that slunk throughout the streets of Grey Owl.

“Man in a grey great-coat, at your six,” Ms. Gooseberry whispered.

Two pairs of binoculars rose as we all peered from behind the blinds of the south-east window, far up on the second floor. “That’s a whole twenty minutes he’s been sitting there—very suspicious stuff.”

The doorbell rang.

“Oh,” one pair diverted downward. “James must be back.”

“I’ll let him in,” Professor Moonly said, yawning as he stood from behind a rice-brown sofa, his patterned Guatemalan poncho falling from his shoulders. “I could use a stretch.”

“Mister Gant,” came the voice as the professor pulled open the door. “Welcome back.”

“I brought some meats and potatoes for a stew,” the general said, hoisting up a pair of brown bags with his bulky forearms, the folds of his dress shirt rolled up past his elbows. As he passed us, we could see the thin suspenders he wore. Dark green, they coiled over and down his shoulders like a pair of ironed snakes.

“Excellent. Bring them in.”

As the professor and the general paced through the hall, one asked the other, “So, where’s Viola?”

“She’s still upstairs.” Professor Moonly’s blue eyes glinted for a moment. “We saw a suspicious person outside just a little while ago, sitting on the bench and reading the day’s paper. A man in a—”

“Grey great-coat,” the general concluded, and the professor gave him a curious stare. “Didn’t you see me talking to him?” Mr. Gant asked, brow raised as he thumbed back down the long stretch of hallway. “He’s the groundskeeper.”

The good professor stopped suddenly. “A likely lie. He’s here watching us, and Miss Gooseberry and I were considering capturing the man in order to interrogate him. In fact, now that I think about it, perhaps we could use your expertise on that front.”

“He really is the groundskeeper though,” the American went on, an odd look sitting over his face. “You introduced me to him a few days back.”

“Did I?” the professor asked, then scratched his chin. “No wait, I did.”

“Christ, I even know the poor bastard’s name,” the general mentioned with a thin smirk. “Clive Olson.”

“Yes well... better safe than sorry,” the professor hissed. “We should keep an eye on him anyway. Nothing good can come of a man named Clive.” Mr. Gant sighed as we entered the kitchen. This particular room was always a homely sight—smaller than most of the others and with a wooden door leading out into the lush backyard gardens. When the oven fire was lit, it began slowly to warm the entire manor. “You really are a piece of work, Prof,” Mr. Gant said as he lowered the grocery bags to the table.

The professor, meanwhile, had already begun sifting through the bags. “Ox liver, beef tenders, ah there’s the bockwurst—asparagus and onions... Rosemary, parsley, paprika... I once had a very strange dream about paprika. Anyway,” the good professor went on, “potatoes, good, tomatoes, better, carrots, perfect. That’s everything on the list. Or was there anything else?”

“I don’t reckon so,” Mr. Gant said, removing a wrinkled grocery list from his pocket. As he did, an envelope fell out too. “Damn, right—a member of the Grey Owl city police gave me this as I was coming back to the estate.” He handed the professor the paper piece, then motioned with his hands. “Big guy, real butch-like.”

The professor raised an eyebrow. “Was his name Butch?”

“No, I think it was Burly.” The general smirked. “No joke. Told me to give this to Viola.”

“I see,” Professor Moonly said as he started to open the letter.

“Uh, he said to give it to *Viola*,” Mr. Gant repeated.

“I know,” the good professor answered, removing the note from inside. “And I will, as soon as I’m finished reading it.”

The general frowned. “So you’re in the business of pinching other people’s mail now?”

The professor pored over the contents, answering as he did. “The fiasco at Fishknight has proven that even those we think we can trust may yet be working against us.” His eyes drew down to the end of the page. “If we start keeping secrets from each other, it will only hinder our work. After all, paranoia parts, and once parted, we can be easily conquered.” Finished, the professor returned the letter to Mr. Gant. “My response is this: we keep each other at arm’s length, but share all information we receive, no matter what it is.”

Slowly, the general nodded. “And by share I’m guessing you mean we share with you.” Then he frowned. “You’re assuming that one of us is working with the League of the Symbol’s Vigil.”

“It’s not that, Mister Gant.” Professor Moonly tried his best to sound reassuring. “I just don’t wish to take any unnecessary chances.”

The general sighed, shaking his head. “Honestly, with a prison break as inexplicable as Fishknight’s, I can’t say I blame you... but sharing works both ways. So next time you think the gardener’s a spy, do me a favour and make sure you run things by me before you decide to bind his hands and feet.” He then went on to read the note himself. “Anyway, so this is about that letter Mr. Flinch told you and Viola about.”

On September 9th in the year of 1927, the Grey Owl city police proceeded to the building on the south-east, not north-west corner of Pushh and Padd. There, they discovered in the Old Grey Bank, which had been condemned and slated for—though never brought to—demolition, a wall of broken safe deposit boxes. And in front of that wall, just as Mr. Flinch had said, one box in particular was found atop the dusty front desk.

“But the letter says the contents of the box should already be in your possession.”

The professor frowned back at the general. “Which they are not, I can assure you. The question then remains... Where are they?”

We were interrupted by a knock at the back door.

“That’s strange,” the professor said. “Nobody ever uses that door.”

Nonetheless, Mr. Gant and Professor Moonly paced over to the pleasant, small entrance that sat at the end of the kitchen. Then, hand reaching out, the good professor opened it.

“G’d a’ernoon, Professor. Mister Gant.” The burly officer nodded, a dark blue helmet slumped over his bony, thick-skinned head. His jaw extended outward whenever he spoke, almost like a mule’s, and when he then flicked up small, brown letter, his muscles bulged and sent all its hairs trembling in ripples.

“Oh. Why thank you, Butch.”

“Yer welcome, Professor,” said the man. “That goes to the lady.”

“Got it,” Professor Moonly answered, looking down at what he’d been given. “Mister Gant came across Burly earlier too. He gave us an envelope, which I assume pertains to the one you’re giving me now.”

“Uh, yup,” Butch said, stretching out his suspenders as he shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “I think that’s about right.”

“Very good then,” the professor answered. “You’ve both performed admirably in the task you were given.”

“A quite important task, was it not, Professor?” Ms. Gooseberry concluded from behind us. Startled, both the professor and Mr. Gant spun around to look at her. “Butch,” she then said, and the officer straightened up behind us, saluting.

“Yes, ma’am?”

“Thank you for your hard work. You may go home now.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

We closed the door behind him.

“Now that I think about it,” Professor Moonly said once Butch had left, “it seems somewhat odd to have police officers, who may very well be under the League’s influence, delivering our evidence to us.”

“Only this piece of evidence,” Ms. Gooseberry answered. “And it was not without reason.” She withdrew the package from the professor’s hands, and for half a moment her soft skin met ours. “We still do not know the full motivations of the League, nor can we risk discounting their hostility towards us. We might have very well walked into another trap if we’d tried to retrieve this letter ourselves.” Ms. Gooseberry leaned back on her heels, then flicked her eyes around the room. She lived, it appeared, for games of intellect. “I had Butch and Burly—perhaps underlings of the League—deliver our message to us. This, in combination with a two-part delivery, was the perfect way to, firstly, ensure that we ourselves avoided a trap and, secondly, prevent anyone from interfering with our receipt of the evidence.”

“Interfere?” Mr. Gant asked. “Who would interfere with us getting the evidence? And why’d Burly give us a notice while Butch gave us the actual letter? Getting it all at once would’ve been easier.”

“Whoever was following us at Grey Owl University,” Viola’s emerald eyes shifted to Professor Moonly from underneath her slim, round spectacles, “may or may not have been associated with the League of the Symbol’s Vigil. In any case, there’s no way to know—but remember professor that your hooded man told you he hadn’t killed the Rubbers. This at the very least brings forth the possibility of another group, separate from the League and perhaps even working against it. They too might have been interested in the contents of our letter. Either

way, being unable to tell who exactly our tails were, it was safer to have the message delivered in this manner. If anyone intercepted Burly, they'd have only found the first message, which insinuated that we had already retrieved the letter from the bank. They'd have assumed that they were too late, while Butch, unwatched, could slip by and bring us our evidence."

A silence followed and all members of the company nodded.

"So what can we conclude from the week we've spent in hiding?" Ms. Gooseberry asked the two standing gentlemen as if they were school children.

"From what it seems, the League, as of now, means us no harm," Professor Moonly began. "Of course, for an all-powerful entity, it seems if they'd wished to capture or kill us, they have had ample opportunity for it." He placed a thumb upon the bottom of his chin, "Also, whoever was following us at the university could not or would not interfere with the delivery of the letter. Thus, there remain two possible conclusions—it's the League that is keeping a close eye on us, or someone other than the League who may be related to the destruction of Tiny Rubber's Duck Shoppe. Either way, the only thing left for us to do is..." The good professor glanced down towards the hand-held parchment.

"Yes, it seems so," Ms. Gooseberry concluded. There was a flicker of something in her eye, though the good professor could not discern its nature.

"Alright then, let's open the letter," Mr. Gant said offhandedly.

"One more thing before we do," Ms. Gooseberry said. "This morning, I received information that the maker of the bird cage used to trap me had been killed when his shop burnt down over three months ago."

"What?" both the professor and Mr. Gant asked.

"I know," Ms. Gooseberry noted. "There wasn't much left of him or the crime scene."

"So a crime was committed," Professor Moonly said, eyes narrowing.

"Officially, no. It was said to have been an accident, but taking into account that the circumstances under which he died were similar to the ones under which Misters Thomas and Biggie Rubber met their end, I'd say whoever killed the Rubbers might have also killed him."

"So where does all of this put the League?" Mr. Gant wondered aloud.

"I believe I can answer that as well," Ms. Gooseberry returned. "An inspector I knew from Land's End caught a youth last week who matched the description of the paper boy on Pushh and Padd."

"The one who left the invitation," the good professor muttered, astounded.

“Indeed. After a brief interrogation, the boy surprisingly admitted to my friend that from what he knew, the League had left Grey Owl after their escape from Fishknight, dispersing throughout Europe. I suspected that due to the loss of their leader they would do something like this until they could properly reassemble, likely just before the date mentioned on the iris.”

Professor Moonly slowly nodded. “So you were merely waiting, collecting each piece of information until the right time came to assemble them.”

“Yes,” the federal investigator answered. “And now I have a working theory. Whatever is contained within this letter, the League wants us to read it. Weaker now without its leader, there are only so many things it might wish to talk about.” Carefully, she took the letter and placed it down on the table. “It could be meant to warn us off... However, Flinch’s mannerism suggested that it was more likely a way for the League to communicate.” The investigator grew serious. “One way or the next, we’ll at least have a closer look into the League’s intentions and can plan out our course of action from here.” Finally, she unsealed it with a butter knife and withdrew a small and yellowed piece of paper. “With any luck, this note may lead us to the location of the League’s remaining leaders—those next in line to take the place of the man you killed.”

The professor, frowning, answered defensively, “I didn’t kill him.”

Ms. Gooseberry paused in turn, then looked back up at us. “I’m sorry, James. I didn’t mean—”

“Pay it no mind...” Professor Moonly said softly. Then, he cleared his throat. “Let us examine the note.”

Three pairs of eyes pressed in against the paper, taking in the unhindered, rugged beauty of three very... minimalistic drawings.

There was an uneasy silence. Finally, Mr. Gant broke it. “Anyone else thinkin’ what I’m thinkin’ or am I just not keen-eyed enough to get this?”

Professor Moonly grumbled for a moment before shaking his head. “No, Mister Gant. I can’t make much sense of it either.”

“It’s... It’s just three stickmen—two of them crossed out like they were mistakes and the third one here drawn smaller,” Ms. Gooseberry at last concluded. “It looks as if whoever made this took only a few seconds to do so.”

The American scoffed, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a black-skinned cigarette. “Lot of good that did us.” He glanced down, then frowned. “Hm..?”

We followed his gaze as the general then bent his knees, reaching to the floor near the good professor's feet and picking up a flower.

"What is it?" Professor Moonly asked.

Mr. Gant inspected the blossom resting in his warm, dry palm. "I don't know. Must've fallen out of the letter." He gave it over and Ms. Gooseberry handled it, picking its leaves apart gently with her thin, fair fingers.

The investigator watched it with cool eyes, and the soft folds of her lips parted. "I can't imagine where this came from. I've never seen a flower like it." At last, she handed it over to the professor who, his own blue pupils locked on the tender bloom, pursed his lips in foreboding silence. "Professor Moonly?" Viola asked.

Professor, are you alright?

Suddenly, the good professor spoke up. "Hand me that letter again."

Ms. Gooseberry did so.

Keenly, Professor Moonly scanned its surface. "I see now. It all makes sense..."

"Care to enlighten us?" Mr. Gant asked, lighting up his cigarette.

"Of course, of course." The good professor pointed to the parchment while the room filled with the scent of exotic smoke. "Two stickmen are crossed out—we can assume that they are meant to be neglected. The third is smaller than his predecessors."

"Smaller..." Ms. Gooseberry wondered. "Like a child?"

"Like a boy," the good professor answered.

"On paper," Mr. Gant concluded, eyes widening.

"Precisely." The professor put the paper down on the table beside the bockwurst. "Viola, you said a youth matching the description of our paper boy was found at Land's End, correct?"

The investigator nodded.

"Land's End... So we must take to the sea." At length, the professor sighed. "Then I know where we must go."

The general, meanwhile, had taken a long drag from his cigarette. He now exhaled a stream of smoke from his nostrils, sending it floating down to the wood of the table. There it pooled and lingered until his hand pressed down into the middle of it. "What's to say we're not just jumping to conclusions here, Prof? I mean when you think about it, it all seems a little convenient, and more ridiculously complicated than any man with his wits about him'd think to try his hand at." He raised a brow. "I'm a little sceptical is all."

“I would have been too,” Professor Moonly answered, “if not for this.” He held up the pretty flower. “To any other man, it would be meaningless, but to me...” He shook his head sombrely. “To me, it makes the letter’s purpose all too clear.”

That night, lit by the cozy glow of the dining hall’s fireplace, the good professor explained our destination over a plate of sausage and liver, roasted tenders, and seasoned vegetables.



Voyage of the *Bauhinia Blakeana*

A howling wind fell along the metal deck of the S.S. Takliwa. Apart from the others, the Professor stood quietly, leaning against the side-rail. In his left hand he held the flower from the letter. It had begun to wrinkle.

A majestic shade of purple, this flower, snipped from a Hong Kong orchid tree, was tinted with a hazy white that ran in veins across its tissue-like surface. “My dear worm,” the professor said. “I’d never have thought our adventure would lead us here.”

To the entrepôt colony.

“To where I last saw my father.”

Professor Moonly had told Viola and Mr. Gant two nights ago that their journey would take them to the land of Hong Kong—specifically, to a Chinese outpost that rested in its harbour’s cold tides. There they would meet a man the professor had known since he was a boy, one with whom he had stayed after his father, the hard-working John Herbert Moonly, abandoned him.

“James.”

The professor looked up, following the sound of a lovely voice.

Ms. Gooseberry stood beside us. “May I speak with you for a moment?”

A curious urge pulled at Professor Moonly’s heart, calling him to remain here alone and stand without company, to look out into the night for more minutes than he or I dared. Still, we couldn’t help but stray a little closer to our friend, for a different feeling drew us to her.

“At the dinner, you said this colony was a place you had not been to for twenty years.” Viola tugged at the sides of a lengthy, brown coat, drawing its collar up along her neck. You also said that we would need to take every precaution necessary when travelling there and that it was perhaps one of the most dangerous places we would ever visit, particularly because of who resided there—the man we are now going to see.” She frowned. “And yet you’ve told us little about the man, less about the dangers of the colony, and nothing at all about the specifics of our precautions.”

“Now, now,” the professor said, raising a finger. “That is not entirely true—I told you the most important precaution that would need to be taken.”

“Learning to play a game?” Viola asked, holding up a small, white tile. Its smooth, rectangular shell was made of carved bone backed by a solid pad of bamboo. On its front was a beautiful, painted bird.

“Yes,” Professor Moonly answered. “It will be quite important that we win.”

At this I must interject, for it is also important that we do our part in way of an explanation. In Cantonese Mahjong, there are three regular families of tiles: the bamboo tiles, which have a number of bamboo sticks from 1 to 9 engraved in their surfaces, the circle tiles, which have the same done, only with circles, and the character tiles, which have the Cantonese numbers from 1 to 9 written on them. The Cantonese numbers are yat or 1, yi or 2, sam or 3, sei or 4, ng or 5, luk or 6, tsat or 7, bat or 8, and gau or 9. Then, there are three types of dragon tiles—tiles of the white, of the red, and of the green dragons—along with tiles of the four winds, North, West, South, and East. The goal of Mahjong is to create a hand of fourteen tiles through the use of pungs (which are triplets of the same tile), kungs (which are quadruplets of the same tile) or chows (which are three tiles of the same family in consecutive order), along with exactly one pair. Of course, there are special kinds of winning hands which use certain kinds of pungs and kungs—for example, the hand of the ruby dragon contains only pungs or kungs from the family of characters, along with red dragon tiles.

Very well, our little lesson is at an end. Let us carry on.

The investigator frowned, shaking her head. “No, James. There’s something else—something you’re not telling me.”

The professor looked out into the black of the night. The lingering harbour lights were only now starting to come into view. “You’re concerned about our safety. It’s only reasonable.” He paused. “I told you both that you didn’t have to come.”

“We’re all consenting adults,” Ms. Gooseberry answered, waving her right hand as with her left she replaced the intricate game piece into her pocket. “If it takes risk to solve the mystery of the Symbol’s Vigil, then I will happily pursue risk.” She smirked offhandedly. “It’s fun, almost.”

“Certainly,” the professor answered.

“I also worry about you,” Viola added, and between the two silent adults, there was a long, drawn wind from the harbour that brushed between their legs, coiling like a cold, invisible serpent.

“And why is that, Viola?”

The investigator gave us a scrutinizing look before a moment later her lips parted. “Professor Moonly, you lied when you said that your father was a London police officer.”

A sharp tingle ran through the good professor’s skin, one which from my position I could feel reverberate against my underbelly. He stared back, paler than before.

“I’m a federal investigator, James,” Viola answered, as if she’d read our thoughts. “Honestly, what did you expect—that I wouldn’t find out?” Her lovely eyes narrowed with disappointment.

“How long have you known for?”

But she ignored the question, instead posing one of her own. “How did you know the names of the three investigators who were supposed to show up at your house before I took their place?”

At this, the professor hesitated. There was no way he could tell Ms. Gooseberry about the Vampire or his methods. No, something else needed to be done. He would have to lie. He would certainly—

“Be honest with me,” Ms. Gooseberry said, interrupting our thoughts. “That’s all I’m asking.” Her eyes were distant, almost as if we had hurt her by this bending of the truth and redacting of a name.

“Viola...” Professor Moonly began, shifting his weight from one foot to the next. He paused.

Now, Professor, do not give in to pity. Letting the truth out could only hurt us. This isn’t a game anymore. This is serious. Your actions here could have grave implications.

But in return he sighed and thought, *“That is precisely why I must tell her the truth.”*

No, but Professor—

“I learned about them through an associate of mine called the Vampire. He is a precarious character whose forte lies in... well, less-than-legal espionage.” He crossed his arms over the metal bars. “I wanted to learn more about the investigation, and the means by which I could do so were available to me. Hence, I used them.”

Slowly, Viola nodded. “I see. Is that all you have to say?”

“No,” the professor answered back, turning to face her, his blue eyes resting on her green ones. “I’m sorry I lied to you.” In front of us now, dim, yellow lights cut through the haze of Tolo Harbour. Soon, the ship would dock.

“I’m glad you chose that answer,” Ms. Gooseberry said, and the professor raised a brow.

“If you had lied to me, I would have arrested you here.”

“I... suppose I’d half-deserve it anyway,” the good professor commented, “but how did you know what the correct answer to your question would be?”

Viola stepped backwards, onto the hard deck, shaking her head. “Aside from my escapades with you, Professor Moonly, I do attend to other business. I am familiar with the Vampire, his brother, and the kinds of operations they run—as is my department. They, and by extension you, were very much part of my investigation.”

“So then why tell me this now?” the professor wondered aloud after biting his bottom lip. Teeth unclenching farther, he went on. “In fact, why even set sail for Hong Kong with me in the first place? You could have simply confronted me beforehand.”

“Could I?” The investigator placed her hands on her hips. “Supposing you had something to do with the League’s activities, or at the very least supposing you associated with ‘precarious characters’, an arrest on-land might have yielded complications. Perhaps, it might have yielded dangers. This way, I could arrest you on-board and still be able to bring you to British authorities when the Takliwa reached Hong Kong.”

Quietly, the professor mouthed an ‘Ah’. And now, more gears began to turn.

“Then also...” Carefully, Professor Moonly thought back to the past days. “Those men you saw at the university, the ones we believed were chasing us—they never really existed, did they? You had me confined to my house on purpose.”

Ms. Gooseberry nodded. “After the impossible prison break at Fishknight, I reached the conclusion that there were only a set number of people who could have helped coordinate it. In addition, throughout the majority of my investigation, the one constant factor had always been your presence.” She pointed with a painted nail. Mahogany, beautiful. “You, Professor Moonly, attended each event; you were present for every step undertaken.”

And the professor, taken aback, frowned seriously. “So then the reason you kept me inside my house was...”

“To study you.” Her expression turned a collected flavour of investigatorial inquiry. She spoke with scientific precision. “And to isolate you. To regard your habits, your routines, your temperaments; to separate you from anyone else you might have been in conversation with about Fishknight. I’d already searched most of the mansion for other types of clues and found nothing, so what remained was to observe the man himself.” Viola’s voice carried past the sounds that the waves made against the side of the ship. Beneath our feet, the vessel slowed. “If you had attempted to leave the manor, it would have been easy to gauge your motives—but you

weren't adamant on it. In fact, you appeared to wholeheartedly believe me when I told you that we were being watched. And so perhaps then you were not with the League but rather working against them. Fine. Still no guarantee you weren't working against me—thus, I set up the two-part delivery of the letter to ensure that even if you prevented me from receiving one part of it, the other would likely reach my hands.”

“I see,” Professor Moonly answered, inhaling gradually, his chest rising, then falling but a moment after. “I never prevented you from reading the letter though.”

“But you did open the first part of it, which was addressed to me and me alone.”

“Curiosity isn't my most flattering quality,” the professor admitted.

“I believe that.” The investigator nodded, reaching into her pocket for a pair of black mittens that she'd brought along for the trip. Quietly, she slipped them on.

“So then...” Professor Moonly at last said, taking in a long breath through his nostrils. As he exhaled, he begged the question, “What have you concluded about me?”

And the investigator rendered unto us her decision. “You are an insatiably inquisitive man, James, but certainly not an evil one. Unadjusted to the nuances of personal space and privacy, almost apathetic to the postulates of common courtesy perhaps—but unlikely sinister.”

“Well it's not the worst anyone's ever said about me.”

“I believe that too.” Ms. Gooseberry smiled, waited a little as the wind brushed through her hair, then at last explained her conclusion. “Finally, you chose not to lie to me now, realizing that I could have arrested you for your confession. Spying on a federal agency is, after all, a criminal offence.”

The professor stared down at his shoes, like a scolded child. “I know.”

Our scolder then looked back at us once more, her thin arms crossed. “Very well. I'll absolve you this time, but you must promise never to lie to me again.” She drew closer to us and extended a hand. “Agreed?”

In return, the professor offered his own. “Agreed.”

“Perfect,” a voice puffed from nearby, and the footsteps of heavy laced boots drew out over the deck. “Now if you two are done making up, I reckon we can get off this ship.” Mr. Gant motioned towards a lowered grate ramp by which crewmen and merchants were already leaving. “We've been docked for a few minutes now, and I'd been all over the ship lookin' for you two.”

“I hadn't realized we'd docked,” the Professor admitted.

“Me neither,” Ms. Gooseberry noted as well, eyebrows raised as she looked back at the professor. Together, they shared an equal flash of embarrassment.

‘We, the wonderful, oblivious academics’ ought to perhaps be our motto.

“Well I noticed it,” Mr. Gant said, peeved. He looked a smidge green in the face as well.

“Are you alright?” Ms. Gooseberry inquired. “You seem slightly...”

“Edgy,” the professor concluded.

“I just don’t like the sea is all,” James Gant said, storming over towards the side-rail of the vessel. There, he lingered, hunched over with his eyes looking down into the murky blackness of the bay. “Anyway, let’s get off’a this thing.”

There is a land mass centred currently in Tolo Harbour that goes by the name of the Disappearing Isle. Every so many years, the isle vanishes, or more accurately, relocates. Its first appearance was noticed by sailors in 1878, when it spontaneously rose from the breaking oceans in front of their very vessel. Faithfully, they marked it down on their maps, but by 1891, it had gone again, this time re-emerging near the crown of the world, in the cold crusts of the Arctic. Again, it appeared in 1912, this time in Hong Kong’s busy harbours, and that...

“...was when General Xu Chen Fowle took up residence there.” Together, the professor, Ms. Gooseberry, and Mr. Gant walked along the cement docks, our colleagues listening as Professor Moonly elaborated on the isle’s strange history. Passing a number of warehouses and shops, we came towards a large walled estate at the centre of the island. Thereupon it was an odd structure like a long, stony spine rising erect from the ash-coloured foundations below. The tower, as it appeared, grew high into the heavens, eventually disappearing.

“Fowle, huh?” Mr. Gant asked. “That’s an English last name.”

“Indeed,” the professor mentioned. “Anglo-Saxon, to be precise. General Chen left this island briefly to fight in the Great War alongside the British.” Around us, merchants and shippers in wide straw hats who bore their dirty garbs—from fur coats to mud-splashed rain-boots—occasionally glanced our way. Each watcher held something unique about him. One man, for example, was incredibly tall, and his chin was pointed and pierced with rivets. Another, pale and clammy, was covered in soil, as if he’d been risen from the earth. Slim, Asiatic eyes regarded us with a lifeless sense of some distant cruelty.

“During a naval battle in the North Sea,” Professor Moonly continued, “the general’s ship capsized. While the other vessels retreated, one under the command of Sir Lawrence Fowle

remained, holding the Germans off until all the men from Chen's failing ship were pulled aboard. They escaped with heavy damage, but not a single life was lost. As a way of showing thanks, General Chen took up the captain's last name beside his own."

A newly emerging man tried all at once to sell us something, but the professor waved him off and Mr. Gant calmly flashed his revolver. Bowing and speaking in a rushed tongue, the would-be seller departed.

"Heart-warming," Mr. Gant scoffed when his attention returned to the story.

"Don't be so quick to judge—General Chen killed the captain six months later, ending his bloodline." To console his colleagues's shocked expressions, the professor added, "Complications and so forth." As if that explained anything. Still, it would be the only explanation outsiders here received. General Xu Chen was a good man, though nonetheless, he was also a product of his circumstances, and both he and the professor knew it. It was what made him dangerous; it was what made him powerful.

"Within a year of the isle's emergence, General Chen, under executive orders from the Qing Dynasty, had established a stronghold here. His purpose was to remain on this isle until its next disappearance in order to better understand how such a thing occurred."

Ms. Gooseberry, craning her head every now and then to observe baskets of fish and sacks of vegetables spoke quickly. She pinched her nostrils with a pair of fingers as we passed two particularly foul-smelling stands. "And what happens if the island should disappear with us on it?"

Beside her, Mr. Gant, distracted, dodged the baskets full of imported pitahaya. His mood worsened progressively.

"I doubt such a thing would happen," Professor Moonly answered as he paced up a short stack of greyish cobble stairs. "General Chen does not know this, but I was able to determine the exact date that the island will relocate next."

"A relocating island's strange enough, Prof, but how the hell'd you manage to figure out *when* it'd do it?" Mr. Gant wondered, huffing out a short breath into the damp, cool air.

"Simplicity lies in commonality," the good professor mentioned. "I discovered that the all the dates on which the island disappeared and then reappeared somewhere else followed a portion of the pattern known as the Fibonacci sequence."

"Oh, I remember that," Ms. Gooseberry pointed out. "I believe I learned it when I was younger. The sequence starts at one, then the next number is also one. The next number after

that is two; the next is three, and after that is five. Each time, the new number is created by adding the last two numbers that came before it.”

The professor applauded. “Correct. In particular, during my travels two years ago to North Africa, I discovered manuscripts which suggested the island had appeared at least twice before the assumed date of its first appearance. With more dates available to me, I was able to unravel the mystery.”

We had entered through two sets of tall, black gates, pointed and foreboding, which led into a wide courtyard. There, on the outskirts of the city, stood a strange and impossible building most odd and unreasonable to describe. At its base, a large vestibule was encompassed by red-bricked walls on either side which, like gallant wings, spanned to the outer, taller walls surrounding the garden. At least ten storeys stood before us but broke away eventually into folds of gloomy clouds. But every now and then we caught sight of a thin, unending cylinder far beyond, like a castle’s turret too big for its shaft, that soared along the sky. And whatever lay perched upon it could not be seen from below.

Ten pairs of well-armed guards, decked in Chinese high collars and peaked grey caps, bowed to the travelling troupe of Westerners. “Now recall,” the good professor went on, “that the island, as seen by the mariners, rose from the sea in 1878. Its next sighting was in 1891. The time in between those two periods was thirteen years. The next time gap spanned a total of twenty-one years. So the island would be due to disappear thirteen plus twenty-one—thirty-four—years from 1912. That means we have about another nineteen years to go.”

Mr. Gant rapped at the side of his skull with his fingers. “Right. As long as we don’t vanish here and now, I’m reasonably happy.”

“I am certain we will not be vanishing any time soon,” Professor Moonly said with a smile. But his smile vanished once we were brought to the entrance of the building—not a door, but rather an archway.

The tall and magnificent thing stopped the trio in their path, and I could feel the professor call up a mental note from the recesses of his memory.

What is it, exactly?

“*It’s an arch, dear worm,*” the professor elaborated. “*One designed to give pause to those who pass it.*”

Tall it stood, of foreboding gothic design. On each inner side of its curve, cursive letters were beautifully engraved, forming two sentences—the left one filled with carved sapphire and the other, on the right, with magnificent onyx.

“From my pass do men progress to where their fates may lie; bare I thus my hallowed edge to break upon the tides,” Mr. Gant read the left side aloud.

“From my pass must men endure the trials of endless search; bare I thus my cursed edge to gaze upon the dirt,” Professor Moonly followed, reading the right.

“So it’s a paradox,” Mr. Gant said.

Ms. Gooseberry pondered the strange words quietly.

“Indeed,” the professor answered. “On one hand, those who enter from the pass meet with their fates, whatever those fates may be; yet how could they, if they must also search endlessly for them?”

“Maybe their fates *are* to search endlessly,” suggested the American.

“Yes, but then why would the first half of the gate say fates, as in plural? What you said suggests only one kind of fate,” the professor pondered, “and so then the gate would not need to render such multiplicity evident.”

The general looked back, scratching his brown beard. “Depends what your definition of fate is, I reckon. If everyone has different ways of searching, then it’d make sense for the arch to use fates, plural.”

“So then the fates are the ends *and* the means,” the professor said with a smile. “But then why do endless searches belong only to those who pass through this arch? And what of the tides, or the dirt?”

The general shook his head. “Iunno.”

“This,” the professor admitted, “is where careful literary scrutiny comes into play, and it is of the most—Miss Gooseberry, wait!”

The professor and the general stood in awe as the investigator stepped under and through the pass, entering into the long stretch of interior brick corridor. She turned back incredulously. “Well? Come on.”

“But you can’t just *pass* like that!” the professor argued, and the general, scowling, agreed. “This is a matter of academic importance! Just look at the sapphire lettering. Sapphire!”

“I did,” Ms. Gooseberry retorted. “The lettering said nothing about women.” She smirked primly, but when the men refused to follow added, “the passage also notes that from it men will

endure these things; ‘from’ never entailed that those fates awaited the men who passed through it. Men who stood there all day, trying to extract philosophic meaning from it on the other hand...” She shrugged. “Now let’s go.” She waved the professor and general over. “If you two are done reading things a little too closely, I’d like to move on and maybe learn something relevant to our case.”

At last, with subtle sighs, the professor and Mr. Gant stepped through the gorgeous arches.

Three fragments: a labyrinth, a tower, and a citadel. Levels that made up Chen’s miraculous cloud castle. We began at the bottom; composed of various, maze-like corridors, each path led to precisely five more after it—the passages themselves coiled like the hollow stomachs of grey snakes. To make matters worse, every now and then, there were large rumbling sounds, as if granite had been shifted against granite. The screeches bore against our party’s ears while the floors, shockingly, moved beneath us.

“How do you know where we’re going?” Mr. Gant asked the good professor after we’d wandered, seemingly without aim or purpose, for over an hour.

“The ground floor of this castle is a peculiar thing,” Professor Moonly admitted. “Known to those here as the Three Body Labyrinth, great gears beneath the earth move segments of its walls so that they rotate at ten-minute intervals. When this occurs, the walls reconnect to each other in new variations. Moreover, as the maze’s name implies, its halls are grouped into three cylindrical clusters—these clusters are known as ‘bodies’ and remain isolated from each other save for at three periodic points of connection. Doors, between them.” The professor motioned with his hands. “The points, of course, also rotate whenever the bodies do, and so as one might imagine, this makes it spectacularly difficult, if not impossible to reach where we are going.”

“And where would that be?” Mr. Gant asked.

“The epicentre.” The good professor paused, then went on with a lower voice. “Thousands have lost themselves in these halls, yet so many halls exist that newer trespassers seldom stumble across the skeletons of their predecessors.” A look of subtle admiration had slowly carved its way along the academic’s face. “Only an expert such as Chen could have created so beautiful a deathtrap.”

“Your words inspire in me such great confidence,” Ms. Gooseberry huffed, exasperated. Her green eyes had taken to flashing from wall to wall as yet another pang of grinding slabs caught our ears and we felt ourselves move. This time a door appeared, and we stepped through.

“Oh, it’s not all hopeless,” the good professor laughed, pointing up. “Markings on the ceiling give clues as to how one must navigate these passages.” Professor Moonly aimed his finger expertly at a white dragon that had been inscribed upon the base of a decorated chandelier. “I have been careful to follow them in the order of snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster, dog, pig, rat, ox, tiger, and rabbit.”

“Why are those animals so important?” Ms. Gooseberry asked.

“They act as pictorial representatives of the Chinese Zodiac—discounting the inner, true, and secret animals.” The professor’s blue eyes blinked. “In the castle’s particular ordering, we begin with the snake and end with the dragon.” Soon, we traversed a second door.

“And General Chen made all of this..?” Mr. Gant asked. His usual growl of a voice had been smothered by awe.

“In a sense,” the professor nodded, but said no more about it. “Anyway,” he added, “you should count yourselves lucky.” He smirked, then stepped forward. “Not many leave these halls with the knowledge you now have.” We walked in silence for a while before the professor finally stopped. He then looked on, raising a hand to his brow. “Ah, our moment has come at last.”

Ms. Gooseberry and Mr. Gant stopped shortly behind us, peering up as well.

In front of us, the hallway creaked, cracked, and began to shift again, this time sliding to the side as dust fell from its edges in streams. Wide-eyed, the investigator and the American watched the spectacular scene.

“Th’ hell..?” Mr. Gant exclaimed, taking a step back.

Ms. Gooseberry did the same. “I hope you know what you’re doing, James.”

“Worry not,” the good professor answered once the hallways had ceased their movement, motioning upwards with a pleased smile. “Here, friends, lies the path to our ascension.” In front of us stood a great, curling staircase. It had appeared with the new hall, coming at last to a hard halt. “This stairway leads up through the centre of the Three Body Labyrinth.”

As Thoreau once said, if you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is, after all, where castles should be.

Thus began our travels from the foundations to the clouds.



Chapter 0.7

Apologies. I take it I must have interrupted something important. But reel your mind back past a time and a continent; I'll show you mankind's apex in its making. And you wouldn't want to miss that, now would you?

Flames met his eye as he lingered at the side of the road. He was told to wait at the end of it, to keep himself safe. They said they'd handle this. His creation. His destruction. The burning rubble crackled awfully, usurped periodically by the cries and shouts of men with buckets. The sounds reminded him of what he'd been promised and of what he'd finally become.

His hands were scorched—a result of a momentary weakness when he'd tried to push past the inferno. Still, there was no way to save the two corpses—yes, certainly corpses now—from the catastrophe.

“Mistah Rubber,” a man in suspenders called out as he stepped up across the cobble street and towards the businessman. He was from the bucket brigade that had helped to put out the fire.

We watched the two of them carefully, as the genetic novelty stared back up.

“We found yer boys in the wreckage.” The firefighter's tightened eyes, olive-pupiled and black with soot, watched the sad sight at his feet; a father of two knelt before him. “Neither survived.”

“And so it has begun,” my lord whispered.

This would be the beginning of the end.



Euclosis

Together, we ascend the spinning stairs and transcend the blackness of the night. On and on the stepping stones go, forever unending, it seems. Stranger is the air here. It's lighter and surreal, as if by breaking from the ground we've broken from our reality.

"It's almost like a dream..." Mr. Gant mumbles.

Something is unique, here in this place.

The professor turns back, regarding the sweat on the American's forehead.

Realizing it himself, the general wipes at it with the white sleeve of his dress shirt, wetting the cotton cuff.

Ms. Gooseberry walks behind Professor Moonly. He holds her hand, or she holds his, only so that neither gets left behind. Only, though? "*James*," she thinks, but interrupts herself when she realizes someone else is listening in on her thoughts. And is she listening in on mine? Or yours? These are, after all, your thoughts, prompted by my words. Disperse with it, then—something from the left calls out to you, to me, to her from where the professor now points, the ends of his fingers drabbed in dull and distant port lights.

"Follow for a moment," Professor Moonly says as he steps through a small corridor leading temporarily away from the stairs. There is still a great distance to go before we reach the top, but here, a smaller path with a beautiful and round glass window aims out into the night. "We must stop and take in the sights, else we'll lose ourselves to the tower." With gentle fingers, his hand slips from Ms. Gooseberry's and her heart sinks; she hardly knows why. After all, trust is still absent to some extent.

And the window, swinging open, gave way to a burst of fresh night time air. Cold, damp, it smacked upon our cheeks. "Lovely," said the American, raising an arm to his cooling face. "Why'd you have to go and do that?"

"I told you this place was dangerous," the professor answered in kind, glancing back with his narrow, blue eyes. "Part of the castle's danger comes from its very atmosphere."

Chen's Castle could only be ascended by those who Chen had guided through it before. The guards at its front let all persons in, though those who knew better either came by invitation or did not come at all. For the hapless companies who dared to risk the unending hallways of the first floor, defeat was of course likely whenever it was not inevitable. Yet for those who managed

to find the staircase leading up from it, the ascension next of the spiralling tower ensured that fewer would make it alive to the top, where the great-hall waited.

Now we looked out into the distance beyond. There lay a world past the tower, where mountains draped in bluish fog broke upon the bow of a metal vessel.

“Is that a naval ship?” Ms. Gooseberry asked.

“Indeed, it is,” Professor Moonly answered.

“But how could it appear so far inland? There’s no way it would have run aground in such a manner.”

“Quite true,” the professor offered, but made no other remark. There would be a time when all was explained, and that time was not yet here. He closed the window, and we continue up the stairs.



天命

The light lingered for hours, taunting us like a brilliant, white pin-prick as we climbed the staircase, but at last we had finally made it to the top. Here, much was different. An almost endless realm of halls and windows; the night-crowned realm of the Disappearing Isle had been forsaken for a spectacular symposium of lights.

“The uppermost plateau of Chen’s Castle casts so great a shadow over the island that it leaves it in a state of perpetual darkness,” the professor elaborated as he stroked one of the many glass panes. His finger smudged against the moisture on it, revealing engravings of fireflies and, out beyond them, an encircling legion of stone turrets.

We found our faces lit by both natural light and that of the thin, glowing chandeliers above us, linked by chains to the Isabelline ceiling. Golden trims lined the high corners while the floor beneath it was patterned in black marble tiles. Over this there rested a lovely rouge carpet, embedded with the visage of some long-lost city. From around us, bamboo flutes and ghuzengs whistled, strummed, and their serene music spilled through the walls.

While the professor and I observed, Mr. Gant had, out of surprise, slapped a hand to the wall, holding himself in place as his brows lowered to complete a grimace. “The damn floor’s moving!”

“Yes,” Professor Moonly answered. “The winds at this level cause the castle’s summit to sway.”

“But how could such an impossible kind of architecture exist?” Ms. Gooseberry asked, gazing around, her bright green pupils lit by the sunny skyscape when at last she turned to it.

“It is a great mystery,” an odd, foreign voice bellowed from behind us all.

Our party revolved as one to face a tall, fat man, whose long beard clawed out at the air in front of him. His eyes were slanted in the oriental fashion and his nose was crooked though largely flat. Lips breathed his words with emphasized pronunciation, and a long, grey moustache flew from his lips to either side, its follicles flowing like long waterfalls. Behind his head, the rest of his hair was tied in a formal bun, held in its place by a hard, silver band. Through his nostrils he breathed both in and out; to this, there was no exception, and his thick and great forearms always remained lax, their fingers twitching only once or twice. The man’s skin was wrinkled,

but even in those folds there showed no assault of age; rather, they told the story that this one had grown old gracefully. The newcomer impressed upon us all an image of cool pleasance, though the professor, eyes falling down for a moment to the twin butterfly swords sheathed at his waist, knew the man much better than that.

The vestments he wore were no less impressive than his form. Thick iron chains bound a rounded metal plate to his belly, the insignia of the Qing Dynasty carved into its polished surface. Trims of soldered gold and red metals danced around its outsides and along the outskirts of thick fabric shoulder pads. Underneath, the man donned traditional wear, and a long, flowing changshan, decorated with embroidered apricot leaves, brushed its lovely roan end against the marble floor. “You have come with no invitation, James Moonly,” said the great man, black pupils centering at last on the professor.

There was a worried silence as Viola and Mr. Gant looked to us.

But the professor answered in kind, lifting the dragon cane as he bowed his head. “The invitation was offered long ago; I would not have dishonoured you by appearing any time sooner.”

After a pause, the Chinaman nodded, then smiling, bowed back.

Together, the two men rose, then embraced one another.

“Welcome, James,” said the honourable General Chen.

“Thank you,” said the renowned Professor Moonly. “It is good to see you again.”

Minutes later, acquaintances made, we had left the halls and entered a lavish room which sat... well, *within* the castle—that much was certain. As to where, it was difficult to tell, for many turns and twists had been made to come here. At the end of the room was a door. Behind the door, as far as any of us knew, might have been a staircase. And while we walked, from far beyond, we heard the winds as they lapped the walls. Near or distant, I do not know.

“This island is a special place,” said General Chen as the five of us waited. “When I came to it, the historical writings and charts showed no account of this place—this castle which we now all occupy.”

Before we followed the armoured man farther into the room, Professor Moonly held out his cane, tapping it against Mr. Gant’s chest. With his other hand, he reached out and prevented Ms. Gooseberry from moving farther. “Shoes off,” he whispered, nodding down as he removed his own.

“Yet when I marched inland with my men,” General Chen continued, “there it appeared, as if it had emerged from the shadows of the fog.” His voice relaxed. “It seemed then to me that the island had expected my arrival and encouraged my stay.”

“However,” Ms. Gooseberry said, “you left to fight in the war.”

The Chinese general nodded. “Yes, that is true. And when I departed, the castle collapsed. Yet when I returned, it at once reanimated itself. Isn’t that right, Mohad?”

To the right of the general, a tall and muscular Indian fellow in a dark red turban and dreary blue uniform answered, “Yes.” Along his chest we drew our eyes, down to where at his stomach, a line of sewed white thread curved around elaborate British buttons. Below that, a lush roan belt with a golden buckle rested.

So he is from the Hong Kong constabulary.

“Indeed, dear worm,” Professor Moonly whispered, and he recalled the memory of this man for me. The professor had known him only vaguely all those years ago, though from what he recalled, he had gone then by a different name.

The Indian turned to face us and a large scar drawn over his right eye twitched. Gold-coloured pupils narrowed. “When General Chen left the island, the castle began to fall apart, as if the general himself had been the only thing holding it together. Several soldiers died when the castle collapsed, and many more were injured. I was on this top floor,” he motioned around, “when it fell.”

Ms. Gooseberry tilted her head. “How did you survive a fall from this high?”

“I was saved,” the Indian acknowledged, but the bushy black moustache over his lips fell still and he said no more.

“And what about that ship in the mountains?” Mr. Gant asked, and the foreign general was pleased to grant him an answer.

“Many things on this island appear for particular reasons. Some seem to come from memory; others stem from intentions. In any case,” he mused, “the island creates what one needs, whether or not he realizes it.” General Chen looked calmly to the group as he spoke. “The ship appeared after I killed Sir Lawrence Fowle. I imagine that Professor Moonly has told you about the incident.”

In turn, the professor nodded.

“Yes, it was inevitable,” General Chen finally added, though it was uncertain as to whether he meant Sir Lawrence’s death or Mr. Gant and Ms. Gooseberry being told of it.

Professor, this game we have decided to play here today—will there be implications?

Subtly, Professor Moonly nodded.

Large ones, I presume.

He nodded again, then spoke, this time to all. “General Chen, we have come here seeking answers about a man’s death in the city of Grey Owl and the creation of a secret organization.”

And the Chinaman’s ears perked. “James,” he cautioned. “When last you were here, my answers came at no cost. Now, though, you are like any of the others. Please realize this,” his brows lowered, “and reconsider.”

But the professor only smiled in return, explaining to our companions in an undaunted voice, “General Chen knows a great many things, and a great many men come seeking answers from him.” With this, he undid the top button of his overcoat. “But answers are not freely given to men.”

Frowning as if he were sorry, the general at last clasped his hands together. “For every man must earn his answers.” He stepped forward, standing nearly as tall as the professor. “Do you have a token to trade in exchange for yours?”

“Yes,” the professor said. “I do.” From the folds of his coat he withdrew a thick tome, the binding of which had nearly disintegrated. Such a strange thing, the others must have thought, that a book could be allowed to diminish so greatly; yet between Professor Moonly and General Chen, the true value of this artefact, left untouched by the ages, was quietly assessed.

At last, the armoured general spoke, his words strung along a drawn-out sigh. “Professor Moonly,” he asked. The tone of his voice had turned grave. “Where did you find this?”

“An old friend of mine gave it to me. As for how it came to him,” the good professor shrugged, “I do not know.”

“I see,” General Chen whispered. Then, his voice grew loud once again. “I will return it to its rightful place.”

They left their discussion at this, and the mysterious tome disappeared into the hands of Mohad, the general’s assistant.

“With such a token, I imagine it is meant to allow three people, and not merely one, to play,” General Chen said, raising a brow, and the good professor nodded, turning then to his colleagues.

“Miss Gooseberry, Mister Gant—General Chen shall give us the answers we seek, but his answers are conditional.” He removed his long coat, which was taken by one of the many

servants now streaming into the room. Blushing robes touched the swaying floors as the figures all closed in.

“And what’s the condition?” Mr. Gant asked nervously, his hand hanging near to where his revolver rested.

But the professor held out a hand, and in it was a bamboo tile. “The condition is that we must beat him in a game of Mahjong.”



Chapter of the Eastern Dragon

Four winds sat for a simple, quiet round. To the East, the great General Chen bolstered his hand. Opposite of him sat the esteemed Professor Moonly, blue eyes counting his lines of tiles. Ms. Viola M. Gooseberry took up residence in the North, and General James Gant lingered with his forces to the South. All held their hands, attentions at last raised to the Great Wall.

“Very well,” said Chen, and the wall was broken. “Remember, you may not openly speak your hands to each other, nor may you leave the game until it is finished. Only one of you need win for me to lose, and only I need win for all of you to lose.”

“Agreed,” Professor Moonly noted.

“Then we shall begin.”

As black night marked the Earth, far above the Disappearing Isle, a small playing board rested at the centre of a grove that was bound by four chains to the rest of the floor.

This new room was painted a homely, dark red colour, lit barely by the long candles that burnt in hanging lanterns. Copper-clad tapestry flowed down from the walls, which, concave as if they were the inside of a bubble, left curved gaps behind the knitted images of priestesses and temples. It was there that shadow-gowned servants whisked vases to and through, back and away, passing about in all directions. Yet all described rested only on a ring of floor near the ends of the room, far from the grove where we now sat.

Incense of *Dracaena* burnt and wafted throughout the room, swirling around as it caught in cusps, trapped between four distant, circular windows, through which the bright outer halls could be seen. All who could breathe breathed it in.

And at last to the grove—for it was indeed an odd, peculiar, and frightening sight. As I told you before, four chains tethered it at the cardinal directions. Curved metal plates with the letters ‘N’, ‘W’, ‘S’, and ‘E’ engraved on them respectively decorated the tops of the links in a clockwise fashion. Our terrace meanwhile was carpeted with a trimmed black grass and smooth stone walkways that drew out to each of four perpendicular red slate steps. These steps in turn, thin and long as they were, led up and back onto the room’s faraway edges, though to be clear, the steps were not connected to our terrace. At about a metre away, they were broken off, leaving a gaping darkness below, and in fact below the entirety of the chain-held dais, a vast, unending

corridor like a howling cylinder led down and down and down. To where..? Of that, we were uncertain, for the abyss had always devoured its meals without trace.

“We are in the centre of your castle, are we not?” Ms. Gooseberry asked as the general drew the first tile from the wall. Together, we all sat on cushions, cradled by columns of smooth, carved stone.

“Very perceptive of you, Miss Gooseberry.” The general laughed. “Most of my guests are often disoriented by the halls.”

“I made my best effort to keep mental notes of where we were,” she answered, her calm, emerald eyes resting on the general, narrowing from behind her spectacles. “I take it then that the passageway beneath us leads directly down to the bottom of the tower.” She clasped her hands against the side of the table. “The hollow column is what holds up the great-hall, and the stairs we ascended to arrive here wind around it.”

Smiling pleasantly in the first of the great hall’s twenty-eight chambers, the general nodded. “Yes, you are correct. Truly you have been led in a circle, back to where you entered, and still you may return even further...” He stood from his cushion, and paced to the edge of the grass, staring down. “Those who fail to defeat me fall into the darkness and are lost forever.”

Mr. Gant and Ms. Gooseberry stood from where they were, shocked, but the professor motioned for them to sit back down, granting them a stern look.

“He will not have you thrown over the edge,” Professor Moonly noted as the Chinese general continued to gaze into the abyss. The walls leading into it were covered in scale-like engravings that continued down until all their patterns were swallowed by the blackness. “The descent is one of the soul and not of the body.”

At last, the honourable general returned to the table and sat. “Much must be waged, for much to be given.” All eyes returned to the game.

Mr. Gant scrutinized his hand for all of five seconds. On the sixth, he picked a tile up and threw it to the centre of the table. On its surface, a red and black Chinese character—luk, or the number six—was inscribed.

“You are trying to draw the other players out,” General Chen suggested.

“How?” the American growled, frowning.

“By playing tiles of the characters, you would have us believe that you do not need these. In turn, we would feel that it is safer to play those kinds of tiles.”

After a brief pause, Mr. Gant let out a puff of air through his nostrils. “Guess I’ll need someone else t’ get it back for me.” He flicked his calculating eyes up towards Professor Moonly, and when he saw that we had caught the look he’d given us, he kicked at the floor, leaning back. “Mind if I smoke in here?”

“Not at all,” the experienced Chinaman answered, and the game continued.

“General Chen is known by many in his country as the Dragon of the East. He is not only a skilled military veteran, but a veteran of this game as well.” It was now the professor’s turn. “He is unlikely to lose, but when he wins, it is only with hands containing pungs—or triplets—of all three dragons—the red, the green, and the white—along with a pair of east tiles and a chow...” He paused, motioning while he explained, “A run of three consecutive tiles, like the one circle, two circle, and three circle.” The professor tidied his hand, then smiled narrowly.

“James gives me too much credit,” said General Chen, waving his fingers dismissively as he chuckled. “I haven’t won with a hand like that in years now. No, it’s much easier to win with one of the dragons, a chow or two, and then the east tiles—well, when one gets rusty anyway.” His face unknotted as he smiled back, lifting wrinkles from their resting places. “You make me sound more glorious than I am.”

Tea arrived, brought by a servant.

“Please, drink,” the general said before taking his own jade cup up and sipping from it.

We all drank together, drawing in the earthy taste, and the game continued.

Tiles were taken, then placed down. Strategies were thought up and just as easily discarded. “I will call this tile,” said the professor when his turn came for the third time, and he set it aside, face-up with three others like it. As he reached to discard an extra piece from his hand, he noticed that the room had begun to swirl.

Professor, might I ask what’s happening?

The professor looked down at his cup, nearly empty, then watched as Viola did the same.

Mr. Gant had finished his drink fully, and was teetering in his own chair.

Below us, the darkness yawned.

“The tea,” Ms. Gooseberry said. She tilted her cup towards us. Inside was a black, tarry residue that lay awash with what little liquid was left. “He’s spiked it with opium.”

From the opposite end of the table, the Chinese general looked back. "I have." He rapped his knuckles on the dark board. "But in fairness, I spiked mine as well—with three times the amount."

From where he sat, Mr. Gant blew a puff of smoke. "S'nothin' when a man's built up a tolerance to it. Tell me—you an addict, General Chen?"

The professor shook his head at the American. "Mister Gant, remember your manners. We are guests here."

"Guests of a man who'd resort to cheating to win," the brown-haired, muscular American pointed out. He chewed on one of his Moroccan cigarettes.

From the other end of the table, the easterner smiled narrowly. "From my perspective, I am at a disadvantage. If any of you three win, then I have lost; I am facing three competitors," he placed down a tile, "and not just one." Then, the easterner paused. "Do you know why Professor Moonly had you two sit for our game as well?"

Mr. Gant and Ms. Gooseberry glared at the foreign general as he smiled. There was something unnatural about his appearance, though it may easily have been the effect of the drug. From below the table, something slithered, winding around the general's metal armour and climbing up his silk changshan until there appeared from behind his back a long and scaly head, with eyes like glowing yellow fire. Sharp, white teeth burst from its mouth as it hissed, and wisps of smoke drained through them to mingle with the air's incense.

Ms. Gooseberry's eyes widened and Mr. Gant lowered the cigarette from his mouth.

"I-Is this some sort of hallucination..?" the investigator asked, her voice shaking.

"No, not at all," Professor Moonly said, and his brows lowered in turn.

In front of us, a terrifying dragon bounded from the Chinaman's back, breaking into the air with wide wings spreading. It was the size of a man—small, I suppose, when compared to the mythical dragons of Eastern legends, but it was nonetheless a marvellous sight. Spinning and flashing its beautiful ruby scales, it soared around the room in a constant circle like a child's kite, chirping as if it were an exotic bird.

"I collect many things," said the Chinaman. "In fact, everything on my island is unique."

From one of the four long stairways, Mohad paced down. His eyes shone with their beautiful golden colour as, dancing above, the dragon leapt through the air and dove down suddenly, landing without a sound on his outstretched arm. Composed, the Indian whispered to Chen's dragon in a smooth and hissing voice while the beast, listening, twittered in return.

“Professor Moonly was once a visitor here,” said General Chen, breaking our attention to return to what he’d brought up before. “A young boy, scared and alone, who faced me in a game upon this terrace and lost...” His dark eyes rose to ours, scrutinizing. “I took pity on him then, but this time is different. He has returned to seek out new answers, though I suspect he feared the loss that might have befallen if he’d played again by himself. It is a selfish notion, to risk the lives of friends for one’s own benefit, and without even telling those friends the details of their sacrifice.” He paused. “But perhaps I mistook your relationship to them, James. *Are* they your friends?”

The professor glowered at his tiles, eyes fearing to meet with those of the others in case they confirmed Chen’s claim.

At last, the Chinaman shrugged, his grey beard twitching as he picked up one tile and placed another in exchange onto the centre of the board. “The number of tiles left in the wall is shrinking quickly, and I am very close to fulfilling my hand. I suspect that when my turn comes again, I will have won.”

The professor gritted his teeth subtly. I could hear jawlines tighten from inside his mouth.

“Call,” Mr. Gant said, interrupting the general’s speech, and he took the tile that General Chen had placed down. He tossed out another tile and drew a new one, then tossed that one out too. “Viola. Go.”

The investigator made her move next, glancing over at the American before placing down a six character.

“Call.”

“Again?” the general asked, and the American picked up another tile, shifting three more to his side face-up. He’d nearly finished his hand from what it seemed.

And now the turn came to us. Mr. Gant glanced over, his brows lowered.

And Professor Moonly stared back, then down to his face-up tiles. Three of the number five characters; three more of the number six characters, then three red dragons. “Ng, tsat, gau...” he mouthed quietly. “Could it be?” The good professor’s eyes then shifted over to a six character in his hand. If he was wrong, General Chen would win, and it would cost us all dearly. One more assessment showed the professor that his own hand held no hope of winning.

Professor Moonly, perhaps it is time to start trusting in others.

“Be silent, worm,” the professor whispered dismissively. A sweat had broken out over his left temple.

No, professor, I cannot be. Not when our friends's lives—and mind you, our own too—are on the line! If we think about this, have we not already asked for as much trust from them as they could muster? They followed us to the East; they agreed to join this game for our sake. And yet we ourselves have had the largest share of lies. We've withheld what we found in the final iris, we've hidden the truth about your childhood, and for the greater part of our adventures we've blocked out your friends. *Our* friends. Now we all sit here, on the verge of defeat, and victory might come only at the cost of learning to place faith in those closest to us.

Professor Moonly bit his lip. "*Wholeheartedly I trusted someone before, and he only let me down.*" The thought echoed in him as he looked across the table towards Mr. Gant and Ms. Gooseberry, then at last to General Chen. "I have always been used to keeping secrets. They have grown up with me, lingering quietly in the shadows of my life." His voice threw itself throughout the cavernous chamber as he drew the six character tile. "As such, I suppose I've forgotten how to trust others."

The Chinese general's eyes lowered to the tile in his hand.

"And I have forgotten that others trust me." Slowly, he nodded, looking towards Ms. Gooseberry.

She stared back at us with her beautiful, green eyes, curiosity swirling in them. "I think it is time I repaid that trust." From the professor's hand fell the tile to the top of the dark board, clashing like thunder against its surface. And the sound sung throughout the quiet hall where by chains we all hung far above the Earth. "Mister Gant," Professor Moonly said, his brow lowering when he looked at him. "I believe there is something you wish to say."

The general stared back at us, then at the tile, and slowly, a relieved smile grew over his face.

"Call."



Dream of the Red Chamber

In front of Mr. Gant, the hand of the ruby dragon lay set across the table. General Chen fell silent, and he stared at him for a strange, long moment. The Moroccan cigarette had burnt nearly to its tip, and when it reached it, the American, who had not been paying attention, winced surprisedly, spitting it out to the side and cursing.

At last, with a long sigh, the Asian general began to clap. “Mister Gant, I thought you would have changed your strategy after I brought your tactics into question. And yet you continued collecting characters.” He stopped, then slowly brushed his beard to the left. “I under-estimated your stubbornness.”

The American nodded. “Shame you did.”

The Chinaman spared him little longer of a look before turning to all. “Very well, my honoured guests. You have earned your answers.”

Ms. Gooseberry was the first to speak. “We came to this place to see if you would know anything about the deaths of Thomas and Biggie rubber, and secondly, about the League of the Symbol’s Vigil.”

“I happen to know of both these things, in addition to a more recent fact that the League has been dissolved.” General Chen’s black eyes narrowed. “Yet, I wish to know what made you come to me. Why would you think that I would have knowledge about these things?” The general shifted in his seat as another cup of tea was brought to him, this time by Mohad.

“We found a flower—the baubinia blakeana. It was inside an envelope, along with a letter that implied the League of the Symbol’s Vigil had gone abroad to recollect themselves.” The professor removed the violet bud, now limp and wrinkled, from his coat, handing it to the general when the easterner had finished sipping from his cup.

As it dropped into the creased skin of his hand, General Chen stared at it quietly while Professor Moonly continued.

“When I was a child, you gave one to me. I remembered it from that time...”

“I wish you had not,” said the general, and with a sorrowful look, he rose from the table. Pacing over again to the edge of the earthy terrace, he let the flower-head fall from his hand, and it floated down into the shadows of the column. “The League of the Symbol’s Vigil knows a great many things about you, Professor Moonly. By now, they will have studied your life in full.”

At this, the good professor's eyes widened. "But why? To what end?"

"The League is an ancient regime, born from the ashes of history. Whenever a nation fell, they were at the dawn of whatever rose to take its place. They have built up their power with painstaking care." He turned back, hands crossed behind the folds of his red changshan. "In over seven hundred years, you have been the only man to strike at their core. They must believe you are a threat."

The professor pondered, thinking back. "When I first confronted their leader, he seemed to have already known of me—quite well, in fact."

General Chen frowned, then stopped to cough briefly. The metal plate upon his stomach rose and fell as at last, he breathed out through his nostrils. "I never said their study of you had been a recent undertaking."

"How long then?" the perturbed professor dared to ask.

"Some whispers are beyond even my ears," the general answered, looking back sombrely. "I knew you would come here, and I knew that when I granted you my knowledge, you would wonder about these things. However..." He shook his head. "I know little more than this. For what worth it may carry, the League's leader lives on." A burning silence permeated the room as below us, murmurs of a deep, rumbling ambience rose from the yawning cylinder. "And, James, I believe he intends the worst for you."

"Hold on," Mr. Gant said, extending a hand. "How th' hell do you even know any of this?"

"I am an esteemed general of the Republic of China," the mysterious easterner said, smirking. "I am paid to know as much as I can about this world and its goings on."

"Through spies, I take it," Ms. Gooseberry added.

"Yes," General Chen replied, pleased. "Many spies."

"But how could the Vigil's leader have survived his fall off of the Great Grey Bridge?" Professor Moonly asked, the shock in his voice apparent from the revelation.

But the general sighed. "That I do not know. Only you and he were on the bridge that night. Whatever his secret, I believe it is not of this world."

At this, the professor bit his lip worriedly. Finally, he muttered, "I see."

"And what of the Rubbers's deaths?" Viola asked. "You said you knew about them." She crossed her arms, thinking. "It might be reasonable to assume you'd be keeping an eye on Professor Moonly and the League, but if the Rubbers's deaths were merely an accident..."

“Then I would have no need to watch them.” The foreign general nodded. He rubbed his shoulder, as if it were aching. “Your presumption is a wise one.” Then, he reached into his robe and withdrew a folded newspaper, handing it to Ms. Gooseberry.

The federal investigator took it, examining its title. “Why, this is from the *Chronicler*, Grey Owl’s newspaper.”

The professor and Mr. Gant peered over at it.

“That it is,” Mr. Gant noted. He placed a thick finger on the print, pressing it against the dry, black ink. “And it’s yesterday’s morning edition.” He frowned briefly, then turned to the general. “How on Earth did you get it here so fast?”

“My agents make great haste.” General Chen’s eyes narrowed and his smile grew. “Often, we know of other cities’s news before even their own citizens do.”

Ms. Gooseberry’s lovely green eyes meanwhile read down and along, pausing on a printed picture. She read aloud the caption below. “Deep pockets are in town: mystery buyer snaps up chunks of city real estate all within a week.” She cocked her head. “How odd...”

“Redbarbe Park, four city blocks,” Mr. Gant squinted, “and a fireworks factory on the Tiris, er, Trist...”

“The Trisfal,” Professor Moonly corrected, his expression serious.

“Right. That’s the waterfall, ain’t it?” the American continued, shrugging. “They seem like pretty strange land grabs to all be done by one person.” The American put his hands on his hips and shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

“Careful,” Ms. Gooseberry whispered, tugging at his sleeve. “You were leaning towards the edge.” She nodded down towards the darkness beyond the grassy terrace.

“I’m fine, Viola,” the general huffed. “Anyway, it’s probably just a bunch of politicians playing territory games.”

The Chinese general reached out with a gentle hand, and Ms. Gooseberry gave him back the paper. As she glanced down, she noticed his palm trembling slightly. “I would have believed so too, if not for the songbirds,” General Chen went on, doing his best to stifle another cough.

Around us, the room began to sway, as if in anticipation of something horrible.

“What songbirds?” Professor Moonly asked.

“Songbirds are always the first to sing whenever the spring approaches,” General Chen smiled. “The League’s songbirds are no different. Loyal though they may be, their excitement is a very human quality; this makes it useful, predictable.”

“So the land buys got the League talking,” Mr. Gant noted. “Why?”

General Chen appeared to wonder the same thing himself. “Because the first piece of land that the unknown buyer purchased belonged to what once was a rubber duck shoppe...”

Professor Moonly, Ms. Gooseberry, and Mr. Gant all shared surprised looks.

“...on the corner of Pushh and Padd.”

As we deliberated, the rumbling from below us grew louder. Now, we could afford to ignore it no longer. “Say, what’s that noise?” Mr. Gant asked, and the professor and Ms. Gooseberry were snapped out of their discussions by the American’s rigid question. Professor Moonly looked down. “Hm, I’m not sure. General Chen, do you hear—” he turned to the general but found him collapsed, clutching at his chest. “Chen!”

The general pushed us back as we tried to help him up. “James,” he rasped. He convulsed with bodily trembles, and his face had turned a bright red. “You must flee.”

“I’m afraid that will be impossible.” We turned back to face Mohad, who was descending once more along the north-most of the marble stairs. He held in his hands a pair of British revolvers.

Ms. Gooseberry stepped back towards the board, subtly analyzing the situation while Mr. Gant made a slow reach for his own gun.

“Mohad,” General Chen called out, coughing painfully. Blood broke from between his lips, trickling down their sides. “What have you done?”

“I gave you powdered cyanide,” came the answer. “Slipped into your pretty opium tea.”

The infuriated Professor Moonly took a step forward, facing our new enemy. A surge of realization had struck us suddenly, and it writhed in our gut. “How long have you been a member of the Symbol’s Vigil?”

The Indian constable met us with a cruel grin. “Member? No, no... You mistake me. I am not a member; to be associated with them in such a way takes more—” His golden eyes fell upon us, then Ms. Gooseberry, Mr. Gant, and at last General Chen, “—integrity, perhaps.” He flashed his left revolver. “Still, the League has promised me a great reward on the condition that I bring them back the great Professor James Moonly. As for the others...” He fired off a shot to the left, and it struck against the game table, scattering its pieces. A harsh metal ring sounded throughout the chamber and the platform shook.

The tremors grew greater as General Chen collapsed to the ground, and now the entire platform had begun to swing from side to side.

“Prof,” Mr. Gant whispered under his breath. We glanced over at him while Mohad approached down the long stairs. “I can buy us some time, but it’ll be risky.”

“Very well,” Professor Moonly answered back.

“Make sure you have something to grab onto,” the American warned, and Professor Moonly braced himself.

“Do you know what rests at the bottom of this pit?” the Indian went on as he neared the terrace. “Terrible things. Bodies vanquished to the darkness.” He sniffed at the air. “The incense here masks the corpses’s odours, but it’s always been of little consolation to me.” He shrugged, recalling a number. “One thousand, five-hundred, and ninety-seven men have thrown themselves down into the hole you stand above. It’s an odd thing, to watch a man lose his spirit to Chen. His hopes, his dreams—all ended in a simple game. I keep track of the dead. I watch and I wait, imagining the day their stink might rise and overcome the fragrance. But it never does... It never may.”

As Mohad made the final step onto the earth of the terrace, Mr. Gant drew his revolver and aimed up towards him.

The Indian was quick and jumped to the side, believing the bullet was meant for him, but as its impact rang out, the spinning shot cleaved one of the four chains attached to our terrace, sending the floor beneath us into a violent wobble.

The professor jumped towards Ms. Gooseberry, who had already taken cover behind the Mahjong table. As the platform tilted, she reached out and took the professor’s hand, and with his other, Professor Moonly grasped at the stone base of one of the table seats.

Mr. Gant meanwhile had regained his footing on the now-sloped terrace. He fired again, missing Mohad.

The Indian returned fire, sending several shots into the faraway side of the chamber, but he failed to get a steady shot in.

From above us, parts of the ceiling began to come crumbling down, and Mr. Gant threw himself behind the Mahjong table too to avoid them. He came back up every few seconds afterwards to fire off another shot. “Prof!” he shouted as the sound from his revolver dissipated. “You and Viola need to get out of this place! I’ll stay and hold the bastard off!”

Quickly, the professor nodded, and started towards the stairs, but General Chen, who had crawled towards us, grasped at his pant leg, and the good professor fell back to the ground.

“No!” he said in a raspy voice as Ms. Gooseberry tried desperately to pry his grip from the Professor.

“We have to take Chen with us,” Professor Moonly said, but again, the general shook his head.

“No, James...” he answered, his narrow eyes blinking blindly. “You will not make it if you run.” He raised a weak hand and whistled. The piercing sound cut out across the room, then throughout the entirety of the great hall. And in response, a shadow quickly drew over us.

Its eyes flashing like yellow streams, the white-toothed dragon leapt to the platform, red scales bristling as its muscles tensed.

“Take Tianlong to escape this castle. My dragon is fast and loyal.” The general motioned for the beast to lower itself, and in return, the man-sized creature fell to its belly.

“But your dragon isn’t nearly large enough for us to fit on,” Ms. Gooseberry answered as more fire was exchanged between the American and the Indian.

At this, however, the general offered a command, and with its tail curling, the dragon’s back rose. Its scales cracked against the incense-mixed air and the soft, rich grass. Muscles bulged as wings outstretched, folding over the edges of the terrace. As its body grew, its red scales turned black, and its torso puffed out magnificently. Jaws, clenched at first, burst open but a moment later, setting loose a deafening howl like that of a Bengal tiger.

And turning back, amidst the gales it kicked up whenever it moved, tears fell from the terrified Ms. Gooseberry’s eyes, Mr. Gant’s hands trembled—though the American’s expression stood bravely astute—Professor Moonly for once had no comment, and, looking up at it now, even I felt a terrible chill sweep across my belly. Together we all stared up in awe at the great, divine creature.

The professor, his voice shaking, reached out to Viola. “Come along. Hurry!” Then he turned to the fallen general as Ms. Gooseberry nervously mounted the beast. “Chen, take my hand.”

But the Chinese general, bringing himself up to his knees, waved away the professor so that at last, the hero with the dragon-headed cane ascended Tianlong’s side too. “My destiny awaits me here,” the general said to us. And for a moment, he glanced up sadly towards the good professor. Then, his eyes narrowed. “Now go!” He clapped once, his thick, aged hands sending a loud snap through the air.

At this, pointed ears perked, and the dragon's tusks parted so that long teeth tasted the perfumed atmosphere. In another second, we were off, launched through the air and soaring towards the ceiling.

Ms. Gooseberry screamed and the professor braced himself as from its throat, a fireball of bright flames pushed forth, blazing against the concrete of the room's boundaries. Like a narrow, white jet it blasted a hole in our direction, and breaking through the smouldering remains, the celestial dragon and its riders met with the marvellous morning sky.

As the professor looked out over the side of the dragon's scaly hide, we could see below us the large and disk-like surface of the great hall crumble, parts of it collapsing and crashing down through the clouds.

"Chen's castle—it's disintegrating!" Ms. Gooseberry remarked in shock.

"This castle was tied to Chen, both spiritually and mentally," the professor answered, his voice carrying over the gushing sounds of the air currents. "If he dies, then I suspect it will collapse in turn!" And yet, there was something more.

Professor, look down! What is that?

The professor followed my cue to where, through the broken portions of the magnificent castle, the shadow-cast land below pulsed with a strange, sparkling light. Blue in hue, it rose on wisps of fog; from what we could tell, it had already encased the island's inhabitants far below.

"No..." Professor Moonly muttered, awed by the spectacle. "It can't be."

"Professor Moonly!" Ms. Gooseberry shouted as she held on tightly. "Where's that glow coming from?"

The professor turned back to her as the dragon circled in the air. On two accounts of the Disappearing Isle's relocation—the only times anyone had actually seen it disappear—a mystical blue light was said to have accompanied it.

"The Island is disappearing!" the good professor shouted with fear.

But professor, that's impossible! You said so yourself—it would be another two decades before this island would budge.

"I realize that, my dear worm," the professor admitted, "but no other explanation fits." Worriedly, he looked back towards the falling castle. "We have to go back for Mister Gant!"

The federal investigator looked to us with an expression of sheer terror but nodded shortly after. "Tianlong!" Professor Moonly shouted, grasping at the dragon's neck. "We must return for the other man!"

In answer, the dragon spun sharply and like a hissing viper struck at the hole through which we had ascended. As it thrashed back into the room, wings opening again, we saw Mr. Gant, his hands in the air and Mohad stepping towards him.

Professor, he must have run out of bullets!

“Down!” the professor cried, and the dragon dropped sharply, slamming its claws into the soil of the terrace. As it came down in all its wrath, it broke upon the platform.

We saw the Indian jump aside to one of the marble staircases, just quick enough to avoid the isolated terrace’s collapse; Mr. Gant, meanwhile leapt towards the dragon, claspng onto Ms. Gooseberry’s outstretched hand. All around us, the metal chains snapped, and the middle of the room fell into the column’s cloven mouth.

“Where’s General Chen!?” Professor Moonly shouted as he lent a hand and helped pull the American up.

Mr. Gant, breathing heavily and cursing, stopped just long enough to shout he had fallen. “Mohad shot him—he fell into the damn pit!” He shook his head, cringing as a film of hot sweat lined his forehead and collar. “I tried to help him—but he was too far away.”

When the dragon broke from the castle once more, we saw behind us the ruin to which Chen’s death had given rise. Cracks and breaks in the once-beautiful castle brought their final toll as with a heavy sigh, the immense, otherworldly castle collapsed, sending crowds of debris—pieces of windows, hallways, rooms, and entire turrets—down through the sky. As the remnants of Chen’s realm drowned in the fleeting night below, the blue light had let rise a high-pitched ringing. Now, even the air shook with the force of what was happening.

With a heavy heart, the professor gave his next command. “Tianlong, go!”

And the dragon soared forward, approaching the boundaries of the island. Below us, citizens and the port had vanished. Ships sunk in torrents of thrashing waves and rocks and cliffs evaporated, giving way to rushing floods of seawater. Geography was being drastically rewritten, and it sent a terrible shiver through the professor’s spine—undoubtedly, as well, through those of our companions.

“The light’s getting brighter!” Mr. Gant shouted, his dress shirt flapping violently in the wind. “What’ll happen if we’re caught in it?” A storm of air had engulfed the sunny morning above, and now brightness from the blue below and the yellow above grew to a seemingly endless white, clashing with the very expanse of the distant horizon.

“I don’t know,” Professor Moonly answered. “It depends on where the island relocates to next!”

As we neared the border, Ms. Gooseberry called back to us. “Then wouldn’t it be safer to stay within the island’s boundaries for now and attempt to escape after!?”

But Professor Moonly shook his head. Horrifically, during at least one of its re-appearances, the island had materialized underwater—no relation to noble Atlantis. It would be a grave mistake to risk tempting the isle’s whims.

The Great Tianlong soared a moment more just as the island gave its final groan and with a powerful tremble disappeared. From in front of us, the dragon’s eyes widened and a cry of agony flew from its jaws. Air rushed up around us as we began to fall.

“What’s going on!?” Ms. Gooseberry’s voice could barely be made out amidst the ripping gales.

The professor managed to crane his head back to where half of the flying beast had been caught within the island’s boundaries and in turn disappeared along with it. Now, only a bloody cut made through the mighty dragon’s body remained. “No!” the good professor shouted, and we lost our grip on the black-scale hide.

Falling through the air, we could tell neither up from down, but in the next few seconds, a wash of seawater met us.



Windfall

What, would you say, is the measure of a memory? Of a thought, of the past. Do our histories define us or do we define them? The city in which the good Professor Moonly grew up was founded on the 1st of January in 1812. Five months later and half the world away, America would declare war on the British colony of Canada. In 1919, a conflict closer to home would leave an unstable German Reich, founded in the city of Weimar, to oversee an impoverished and volatile nation. Yesterday, there were several marriages, and the day before that several deaths. In the grand, cosmic scheme of things, human history must all seem so meaningless. But to the people involved, those who either cried or laughed, who gritted their teeth and held the front lines or were broken, despite their courage, by the enemy's horrible advance, these moments are everything. They will always be everything. For the measurement of a memory lies most in its reminder of who we are.

The evening air was cool, and when it met with our skin, the Professor almost felt his pores closing. It was winter now in the city of Grey Owl, and snowflakes danced down from the evening skies above. From our left, an agitated voice arose. "Th' hell are you a professor of anyway..?" It was coarse from those days we'd spent on the sea after the collapse of Chen's castle and the isle's subsequent disappearance.

The good Professor Moonly stared back at Mr. Gant, whose lack of shaving had led to the growth of an untamed beard. Its ends licked along at the general's lips, folding entirely over his mouth in certain places. In truth, even the professor had begun to manifest a bristling wash of black hairs on his chin. "Why, the question's irrelevant," he answered and continued to walk up the cobbled path. From above, the clustered leaves of trees groped softly at the rural atmosphere surrounding us. We passed a sophisticated set of black iron gates.

"I'm serious," Mr. Gant continued.

Ms. Gooseberry chimed in, tired but interested. "He has a point. What degrees do you have?"

"The degrees themselves should not matter as much as the knowledge they impart," Professor Moonly at last chided.

"But that does not mean they shouldn't matter," Viola said, an edge in her voice.

The good professor was cornered. “Yes, but—”

“Oh for God’s sake, just tell us what degrees you have,” Ms. Gooseberry sighed, “or I’ll start an official investigation into your credentials.”

“I understand we’re all a bit weary—”

“Tell us or I’ll shoot you,” Mr. Gant said with a look that could only be interpreted as the vilest of scowls.

Muscles burning, we were all exhausted. We had been picked up by a skipper and his crew to whom we had sold half the dead dragon’s body for a ride home. The deal itself was unfair, though it was the only one he would take; from it, that scheming wolf of a man must have made a miraculous profit. And from there, bathed in the smell of fish, we’d made it back to Grey Owl City in a matter of weeks. The return voyage would have been briefer if the crew had not made several stops at different ports to pawn the bloody, salt-stained parts.

“I have degrees in fine arts—from the Italian Renaissance to the Canadian Group of Seven—music, including all of Mozart, to Bach, to Saint-Saëns; history—particularly, the history of Great Britain and of her colonies, but also the surrounding histories of the African and Near to Middle Eastern regions—”

Ms. Gooseberry attempted to interject, but the professor went on.

“And English, composed of all the marvellous works of Dante Alighieri, Giovanni Boccaccio, Chaucer and Spenser and Pope and Sir More, Wyatt and Shakespeare and John Donne—ah, and certainly Milton and Swift, though I didn’t care much for Wordsworth—and Byron and Dickens.”

“You done..?” Mr. Gant asked.

“Divinity with respect to the theologies of the Abrahamic religions—Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. Philosophies: Aristotelian and Kantian, Eastern and Western, French, German, and British, along with the specifically-political philosophies of Hobbes, Locke, Voltaire, and Montesquieu; the great branches of tragic, comedic, and historical drama, along with farces and musicals; governance from the pre-Socratic to the contemporary era; market, command, and mixed economics, pure mathematics—by which I mean studies of Euclid and Pythagoras, Euler, Leibniz and Newton, Hilbert, and Cantor—human anatomy and animal and plant biology; chemistries both organic and inorganic in nature, and applied and theoretical physics.”

The trio continued walking. Their footsteps hit against the cool cobble.

“Honestly thought there would’ve been more than that,” Mr. Gant mumbled, and he paced up ahead of the other two.

Left together, a certain sort of silence parted the professor and the investigator. It was a tired silence, the kind that might have normally followed a long adventure and marked the beginning of a necessary hiatus.

We noticed to our right Ms. Gooseberry’s dark and flowing hair; let down in uncombed waves, the light wind tossed against its segments, throwing them up whenever she stepped forward. Perhaps it had fallen out of its bun when we were on the dragon. Yes—the professor remembered now. It had slipped out of its tidy, methodical shape when she’d climbed up onto the back of the creature. Such a long time ago, and she hadn’t touched it since.

Our friend returned a glance for a moment while we walked, as if she’d noticed the observation. “Hm?” she said in her soft, familiar voice.

“Pardon?” Professor Moonly answered.

“You were looking at me curiously.”

“The human mind is naturally curious.” The good professor fell quiet for a little longer. Then, his voice climbed again, slow and poised, but with reminiscent certainty in the words it divulged. “There is a city in China’s mountainous Szechuan Province known as Gongxian.” His voice picked up further. “The people there used to practice a death ritual of encasing their dead in coffins made from hollowed-out tree trunks, capped with bronze covers.”

“Many people place the dead in coffins,” Miss Gooseberry answered pragmatically.

“The coffins were then lifted onto the sides of the nearby cliffs, fixed horizontally by pairs of long planks that were embedded deep in the rock. They are known now to the denizens of that place as the hanging coffins.” A shallow burst of cool air rushed against our coats then quickly dissipated as we made our way up the path. The air was acrid with the taste of the wintery month. “The higher the deceased, the better disposed they were to the guarantee of eternal blessings in the afterlife.” He nodded gently. “All at once, they were spared from being ravaged by animals and left lying closer to the great folds of heaven.” He paused, musingly. “My father took me to see them once when I was a boy.”

“You must have enjoyed such morbid recreations with your father,” Ms. Gooseberry answered dryly.

“No, not recreation,” the professor answered in return. “He was a busy man, but sometimes John Moonly saw fit to take me with him on his ventures. I had always wanted to attend his trips

to China. I begged him often, and one time, he gave in. He was a gentleman of the world, and I was only a boy grasping at the coattails of his shadow. Nonetheless,” Professor Moonly’s blue eyes shifted to the treetops, swaying against the sight of the cloudy evening, “I did learn certain things from him.”

“Is your father dead?” Ms. Gooseberry asked.

“I don’t know,” Professor Moonly answered. “The city of Grey Owl believes so—it was how I was awarded the manor. Still, he disappeared when we travelled to Hong Kong, and in my mind, disappearance always warrants a glimpse of doubt.”

A glimpse at the notion of death forsaken only for abandonment? Apologies, Professor, but I need to speak my mind. Your father is hardly worth the concern.

“I see,” the investigator answered understandingly. “I am sorry for whatever his fate may have been.”

“No, there’s no need to apologize, Viola.” Professor Moonly forced a smile. “General Chen was more of a father to me than my own ever was. After his disappearance, the general took me in. I spent a great deal of time with Chen and learned a great many things. Once, I challenged him for the answer to where my father was—he proposed the same game we played with him. I lost, but the general spared my life.” He paused, pensively. The topic was over anyway, and I could sense that the professor would make no further mention of either the general or his father.

At last, the good professor sniffed at the air as several snowflakes landed on the lapel of his jacket. When next he spoke, his words were slow and prepared, aimed again at his prior thought. “The Bo people of Gongxian never explained how they pierced their wooden planks so far into the rock, though whatever the process it must have been a dangerous and painstaking one. It’s believed that they spent over two millennia practicing their intricate death ritual. Yet here in Britain, we’re content to simply bury our dead in the ground, say a prayer or two, visit every anniversary after...”

Ms. Gooseberry only nodded in turn, unsure of the professor’s point.

“The Bo people were massacred over three hundred years ago by the Ming dynasty, and the secrets of their traditions were lost in the annals of history. Now, the only remaining testaments to their existence are the cliffsides full of hanging coffins.” Philosophically, the professor scratched his chin. “Nothing lasts forever, Viola. How, then, could the League of the Symbol’s Vigil?”

A white breath of condensed air streamed from in between Ms. Gooseberry's lips, and for a while she was silent. "It's almost Christmas," she finally said, looking back, "and you've grown a terrible scruff of a beard during our adventures in China." She reached out and brushed Professor Moonly's chin with a black mitten.

The professor recoiled, frowning. "What?"

"You should shave that off. It's unbecoming of a gentleman."

Despite his guarded disposition, the professor had hardly realized the tightening of his left hand around the handle of his cane. Minor scuff marks lined its precious, cylindrical body.

As we made our way up to the mansion's door, we met with Mr. Gant, who had walked up ahead of us but now returned down the veranda's stairs, a disconcerted look set on his face. He lifted a hand and raised a finger to his lips. "Shh," he whispered, his expression grim, and at once we fell silent.

Turning back, we approached the main door, and the American, who had now drawn his gun, nodded towards a broken lock.

"No..." Professor Moonly muttered; Viola stepped past us and placed her ear close to the small opening. "I don't hear anything."

Mr. Gant raised a leg, then kicked the door open. It flew back with a wooden snap that was surmounted a moment later by the roar of his voice. "Anybody in here—you come out now or I'll blow your damn head off!"

Ms. Gooseberry slipped in next, followed by the professor, all ears pricked.

Together, we looked around, poring past the remnants of overturned tables, scratched walls, broken glass. "The League..." Ms. Gooseberry turned to Professor Moonly, who, eyes wide at the sight, was shocked and silent. "Professor," the investigator continued, clearing her throat. "There are two possibilities: first, this is an act of violence, intended to scare us away from the case, or second," she looked down towards a book that lay near her feet, crouching down and picking it up by its cover, "they were searching for something." Black, leathery—the gilded lettering 'COLLECTION' was drawn across its midriff.

"Maybe we pissed them off when we followed the Chen lead," Mr. Gant suggested. He lowered his gun for a moment and looked back at us. "What do you think, Prof..?"

"Pardon?" the professor answered, snapped out of his daze.

“I mean, looks like whoever did this meant to rough the place up on purpose. If they were lookin’ for something, why leave any hint that they were searching?”

“Violence then.” Ms. Gooseberry handed us the black book and stepped forward, examining the crime scene.

The professor looked down at the tome’s contents. It was one of the newer books in his collection, one he’d had imported from America a year ago; someone had evidently taken it from the library and thrown it down here. “Violence could have been achieved at any time. And why anyway,” he whispered, “should the League leave a flower in the letter?”

Indeed, professor. If I recall, Mr. Flinch in fact said he was ‘permitted’ to tell you about the letter. It seems the purpose then was to lead you to Chen; and without this clue, little progress would have been made in the case.

“No, this was not pure violence—but why make it so obvious that the mansion had been searched?” Professor Moonly pondered as our companions went on ahead. Slowly, he looked towards the book in his hand. Something curious caught his eye—a page had been folded. Carefully, the professor flipped through it and his eyes fell next upon that page’s centre, where a long strike in ink had been made just at the start of the third paragraph. “Unless there was something they wanted me to find.”

The book dropped a moment later from his hand, its inside exposed and a paragraph’s trail of letters facing the tall ceiling: ‘For while the analyst is necessarily ingenious, the ingenious man is often remarkably incapable of analysis’.

Footsteps grew beneath us while we pushed forward, pacing at first, then breaking into a run. As we flew down the corridors, the good professor’s head spun from side to side. Every door he came across he opened, wasted but a brief moment to see the destroyed contents that lay behind it, then hurried on. The piano-room was in shambles—once a lovely pantheon of great composers’s portraits, it now consisted of rows of torn-up canvases, the piano itself caved in and broken by either hammer or bat. The botanical greenhouse suffered as well, and a chill fell in from where glass had been shattered; plants and florae were no better, and stems and branches had been frozen to death.

Angrily, the professor turned back towards the only room we hadn’t checked.

Professor, what exactly are we looking for?

“I do not know, worm,” he answered back, “but whatever it is, I suspect it will have sentimental meaning, just as the orchid flower in the envelope did.”

But would a criminal truly have the foresight to leave a clue like that? Perhaps we are purely the victims of circumstance—what’s to prevent this from being a simple robbery, or even mindless vandalism?

At last we came to the dining hall, where a long oak table sat undisturbed, save for the fact that cutlery, plates, half-filled glasses, and serviettes had all been laid out.

Why, the dining hall’s been left untouched.

“Indeed,” Professor Moonly said, and looking to the table, he walked to its left side where then the academic pulled back a seat and placed himself in it. “It has been left untouched, because it is a theatre for analysis.” In front of us was the only glass filled not with water, but with a deep, red wine instead. Beside it stood a sculpted chess piece—the white king—and behind that, far up on the decorated wall hung the large portrait of Sir John Herbert Moonly. Below his black-as-coal eyes, a tall, gruesome tear had been made along the aged gentleman’s cheek.

For years, the professor had kept that portrait. Sometimes, he believed the grim and scrutinizing scowl it bore spurred him on in his work; at other times, it played upon his loneliness, here and there from the hollow shadows of his father’s world. Now though, with marching legions of creases drawn over his familiar, withered face, the great man’s expression stood like that of one whose secret had at last been discovered and who, in turn, had adopted an angry and insulted gaze.

And for our part, we gazed back, witnessing the peculiarity. Suddenly, Professor Moonly rose, climbing over the table. The dirt from his shoes left gritty marks on its smooth top. “Look.”

Upon closer examination, the tear in the painting revealed a large, unlit space, occupied in part by dust-drenched coils and rusty gears. Deep into that darkness the professor’s eyes pried, and doubtless, they were rewarded with the remnants of a frightful dream one mortal man had long ago dared to entertain.



A DANGEROUS INTERMISSION



Nor'easter

A winter fog had settled over the emptying markets of Grey Owl City. Snow blossomed from the hoary ends of high-above clouds while we spent the morning winding through familiar streets, devoid of an immediate aim or purpose. At one point, someone had knocked a line of haddock off a stand—unintentionally, of course—and we thought for a moment we might make fish and chips for dinner. Now though, all traces of food had vanished from our forethought as we stared out into the frigid white.

Together, the professor and I sat upon a bench on one side of a brick street, where thin veins of ice filled gaps between the pieces of road. Professor Moonly's slush-stained shoe, still a clean, tidy black on top, tapped against the ground at intervals of half a second. His hand scratched at his chin—clean-shaven—while his blue eyes watched a leafless willow tree. Festive lights coiled through its frosted leaves, and colourful glass ornaments hung from the wilted branches. And so it sat, the curious thing, an unimposing sight in the middle of Vanisher's Median.

"How'd they do it..?" Professor Moonly wondered out loud, his question converted to a puff of white condensation, its broken echo half-muffled by the light wind.

Pardon, professor?

"How the bloody hell did they manage to put up a Christmas tree in the middle of Vanisher's Median if everyone who enters the median vanishes..?" Frustrated, he held out a hand, motioning towards the otherwise vacant field.

Ah, yes. Vanisher's Median was best known for the fact that a lingering, permanent mist always enveloped it, and if ever any citizen of Grey Owl was unfortunate enough to stumble past its boundaries, they'd vanished without a trace, never to be seen or heard from again. In fact, for a period of five years during the 1860s, the median had been sealed off to keep schoolchildren from D. Pook's Elementary from wandering in. Pook's Spook, the story went, would steal away any who dared enter through the threshold of the median; this of course led curious children to tempt the hypothetical spirit's curse. Two years after the quarantine, the old school was demolished and a new one rebuilt in the much safer north-eastern quarter of the city.

Perhaps whoever put up our tree vanished right after.

“And while we’re at it, who was this whoever? City workers? Samaritans? And a willow tree... Why a willow instead of a pine?”

Maybe they ran out of pines.

As we pondered the question, someone approached us. We’d barely attended to the woman’s presence until a plush, taupe waistcoat lowered onto the bench beside us and she sat down to our left.

The professor looked up from his thoughts, eyes flashing just barely with a brief and unattached curiosity.

“Good morning,” said the woman.

“Good morning,” Professor Moonly replied, reaching up with a hand and tipping his snow-burdened tophat. A plume of white fell from its end as he raised it back up. “Lovely weather, isn’t it?”

The woman looked to her side, eyes staring widely at us. “But... there’s a snowstorm coming. The city’s alive with talk about it.”

“Oh?” the good professor asked. “I hadn’t noticed. I’d been lost in considerations of other sorts for the past hour or so...”

“I’d suspected something like that,” she said with a smile. “You had a very long face on, and you were staring out into the median,” she pointed, “over there. That’s why when I saw you sitting on this bench I thought I’d check if you were alright.”

“I am,” the professor noted. “Thank you for asking, Miss...”

“My first name will have to do,” the woman giggled. “Maria.”

She had long eyelashes, beautiful and dark. Underneath them, amber eyes looked out at us. Her skin was pale, but it was the sort of pale a northern climate might inflict upon a more exotic body. Her dark brown hair was neck-length and wavy, curled at her ears, and her accent was that of a Spaniard. She had thin, painted lips.

“How odd,” the professor noted. “Often, people give me their last names. Mister so and so, Missus so and so...”

“Oh,” the woman’s brows rose. “I don’t have one though.”

“A last name?”

“Yes. When I was born, there was a legal dispute between my mother and father. Somewhere among all the paperwork, I ended up without one.”

“I see.” The professor was prone to sympathizing with victims of paperwork. Thoughtfully, he looked back to the median. “My name is James. I am a professor at the University of Grey Owl.”

“Only James?”

The professor smiled. “James Moonly.”

“Well it’s a pleasure to meet you, Professor James Moonly.”

The two sat quietly together. For the duration of the brief pause, both were silent, and only the flushing winds carried through the moment until at last we made our move.

“I discovered a machine in my house that I had not previously been aware of,” the professor suddenly started, “hidden behind a portrait of my father. The device seems to be capable of genetic cloning.”

The woman looked over with her unique eyes, curiosity struck up in their swirling amber.

“A collection of pages—torn I think from one of my father’s journals—was left on a small desk beside the machine.” He went on, “Those notes detailed the theoretical premises behind it.” We measured the expression of our newfound companion.

First, incomprehension. Then, vocalization. “I don’t understand,” she answered.

“I realize how farfetched it sounds, though after a great deal of work I did indeed manage to get the device running; all that remains is to put it to a test.”

The woman licked the corner of her lip. “Excuse my asking, but... why are you telling me this?”

“I’d imagine the League would like to keep tabs on what it is that I am doing,” Professor Moonly answered offhandedly. He returned his gaze towards the median. “Else they would not have sent you to spy on me.”

“I don’t know what you mean by that,” Maria, the woman, said, her expression a bit offended when next we caught it.

“Come now,” the good professor started, uncrossing his legs and placing two gloved hands upon his knees, the words that followed flowing like water from a fall. “At seven in the morning, I endeavoured to take a walk, leaving my mansion. I noticed the groundskeeper and engaged in light conversation but was otherwise left to myself as I made my way into the city. Once I approached the streets, however, I was met by a flurry of citizens—shopping, I’d imagine, in preparation for the approaching nor’easter. Wading through the marketplace provided the perfect opportunity for the League to put a spy on me. In a rural region, it would be too difficult;

you would easily stand out. But here, muddled in the chaos of daily life, whoever it was that enlisted you would be able to know if I was meeting someone, or discovering some secret thing.” Professor Moonly rattled his knuckles on the stiff fabric of his pant legs, then sighed through his nostrils. “Having set up my mansion so that I would inevitably find the machine, it became apparent then that your intention now was to see if I had learned how to fix it.”

“How to fix it?” the woman parroted, seeming genuinely confused.

“Indeed, how to fix it. You see, the machine had several flaws, ones which prevented it from running. Thankfully, I am more experienced in the sciences than my father was, and while to amend these errors was admittedly difficult, it was not an impossible task.”

“Not for a professor such as yourself...” the woman added coyly, a polite smirk growing over her thin lips.

“You followed me for forty minutes, and when the crowds began to disperse due to the increasing snow, you were forced to keep your distance. Towards the end of it, I even circled several side streets. You might have noticed, yes?”

“Yes,” the woman admitted.

“Side streets—too narrow for carriages, and as such the people are more prone to walking right down their middles. I myself kept at all times to the far side of each road, circling back minutes later and almost always noticing a single, fresh set of footsteps that, like my own, kept to one side of the path. Regardless, as time went by, the snow picked up.” The professor clapped with his gloves. “This made it more difficult for you to watch me, and on at least one occasion when I’d re-entered onto Starker’s Main—one of the city’s busiest streets—you believed you had lost sight of my slate-banded tophat.”

He nudged back the accessory on his head, which had tilted with the weight of the snow accumulating on its rim.

“In truth, I’d only removed it to brush it off. But it was this sudden distraction that left you colliding by mistake into a fish stand. I noticed the commotion then, and as we speak there’s still in fact a whiff of haddock about you.” We looked to the woman, who looked back at us, her expression tellingly surprised. “Of course, it was never my aim to let you lose me, and so I waited until you had returned. This confirmed many of my suspicions; all that remained was to put you to a test. It was at this point that I made my way to the bench we are sitting on now, in the middle of Joseph Street, and remained here for...” The good professor drew a pocket watch from his coat, peering at its hands. “Precisely three hours and twelve minutes. You waited in the

bakery behind me, though as time went by, you grew understandably impatient. That was when you left by the side door so as not to alert me to your presence—I imagine you had been forewarned of my cognitive abilities, else you simply realized that with so few people out on the streets, your leaving the bakery would have been made blatantly obvious by the small bell on the entrance that jingles whenever someone opens it.”

“But how did you know there was a side door?” the woman asked. Her eyes had narrowed now, and any lingering presumption of innocence was shed from her.

“I enjoy frequent trips to the bakery behind us. In fact, it is one of my favourite places to go to. Having been away for roughly two months, I wouldn’t have given anyone spying on me the time to fully realize my habits anyway, so I had no fear of leading you to this spot and allowing myself the geographical advantage—one, it seems, that’s led you right into my hands.” He reached out with a glove, his left palm up. “May I?”

Hesitantly, the woman placed her hand in his.

“Your gloves are Peruvian-made—alpaca fibre is relatively unique in its qualities; yet these are cheap gloves, fraying already without the dirt marks which might otherwise suggest years of use. If your gloves were of a better quality, I’d have allowed you the benefit of the doubt and called you a tourist to that place, but I think not. I believe you are a true-born Peruvian, and there are only several or so notable Peruvians recognized this side of Britain for their dabbling in the niches of criminal underworlds.” The professor leaned back, releasing her hand. “And there are only twelve who have no last names.”

“I’m impressed,” Maria admitted. “But you’ve made an important mistake. I am not employed by the League.” She readjusted herself on the bench. “I was in the service of General Chen.”

“Ah, truly?” Professor Moonly asked, straightening himself out in his seat. “Then you would know that no person lives in service to General Chen. Every member of the castle is there according to his or her own will. Incidentally, I never saw you at the castle before, and General Chen made it a point to never hire Peruvians.”

The woman’s smile dropped, and she stared coldly at the professor. When she spoke, her voice was slower, nearly venomous. “Why did he never hire Peruvians?”

“Something about them being untrustworthy,” the professor answered.

At last, the woman nodded. “I suppose I underestimated you.”

“I’d suppose that too if our places were exchanged,” Professor Moonly answered. He crossed his legs again. “What is the League’s interest in me?”

“You really think I’d give you that answer?”

“You assaulted us in Hong Kong and murdered a long-time friend of mine.” His blue eyes narrowed. “An answer is the least you can provide.”

But the pretty Peruvian only smiled back.

“Go on, I’ll wait,” Professor Moonly pressed. “Perhaps we’ll start with something easier, like why portions of land in Grey Owl are being anonymously purchased.”

The Peruvian turned to the professor, a brow raised. “We believed that was your doing, especially since the first land grab made was...”

“Tiny Rubber’s Duck Shoppe,” the professor finished, his eyes locked on her.

Professor, I believe we’ve unknowingly let important information slip.

“The shoppe wasn’t as important as the money we’d been storing through it,” our counterpart admitted. Then, her eyes fixed on us and she asked, likely to clarify, “Yet you were not behind this purchase..? And what about the others?”

“Some of them; not all,” the good professor corrected himself to add obscurity to the mix.

“Why buy land?” the woman asked, pointedly.

The professor made up his answer as he went along. “Each place had several significant resources I coveted, so I appointed proxies to act on my behalf; hence the anonymous buying.”

“You’re lying to me,” the spy’s retort struck at us, and she eyed us carefully. “What’s the real reason you bought that land, or did you even buy it at all?”

“I’m supposed to be the one asking questions here,” Professor Moonly, blunt, responded.

“I’ll trade then,” said the woman. “One answer for another.”

The professor pondered for a minute, then made a suggestion. “The secret of the land grabs for why the League has an interest in me.”

“We have a deal.”

“You were quite quick to turn around on that matter. Could you be looking for a piece of information to take back to your employer?” The professor’s eyes narrowed and he chewed the bottom of his lip gently, examining the woman’s expression. “Do you wish to please him simply out of loyalty, or is your wellbeing contingent on the answers you can provide?”

“Enough mind games,” the Peruvian insisted, waving us off. “Tell me what you know and I’ll tell you what I do.”

“You first,” the professor said. “As a show of good faith.”

The woman shook her head slowly, then began to speak. “You’re a murderer, Professor Moonly—of the Rubbers—are you not?”

The professor, astounded, asked, “Why would suspicion fall on me? Why not on one of the many criminals in this city? Or perhaps a treacherous member of the Grey Owl Police Force? Or even Tiny Rubber himself?”

“You’re the man who single-handedly disassembled our society that night in Boullerolli’s Royal Hall; a man who dared to both challenge and defeat our leader. But you should know he has returned, and our loyalty for him burns brighter than before. You are a unique kind of man, Professor Moonly, vastly intelligent and not nearly as oblivious as you let on. Still, this will not protect you from us.”

“Won’t it now..?” Professor Moonly asked darkly.

The woman paused, then shook her head lightly. Then she turned back and sighed out a stream of white air, talking as she did. “I heard your manor was vandalized.”

The professor stiffened in his seat. “Indeed. I didn’t appreciate that.”

“You weren’t meant to,” came the answer, and amber eyes flicked towards us.

A cold wind swept by. The storm had fully arrived.

And so our counterpart threw a hood over her head. It was puffy, taupe, with animal fur lining its loose circumference. “You know, you have a great deal in common with the man I work for.” She then stood and brushed off the snow from her coat, looking back momentarily.

“Allow me to correct you,” the good professor answered her when she did, adjusting his top hat, for the wind this time had left it askew. “That man and I are nothing alike.”

But at this, Maria turned away, and as she did, her sparkling amber eyes caught the professor’s blue ones. “You’re more alike than you may ever know.” Lifting her right foot up, she shook her leg, and a cloud of white slipped off from it. “I’ll be sure to update him on your progress with the... cloning machine, yes? Perhaps he’ll take an interest.”

“Hold on,” Professor Moonly said, reaching out. “I’ve yet to fulfil my end of the deal.”

“Is that so?” Maria asked rhetorically as she shook off her left leg too. “You haven’t purchased any sort of property in Grey Owl.” She began to pace off towards the median. “Anything else you tell me will only be a lie to cover that fact up.” She smiled and half-curtseyed. Then the woman walked onwards to the border of the median, and the professor, curious, rose, following at a distance.

When she stopped, Professor Moonly, hands in his thick pockets, spoke out above the building winds. “You shouldn’t step too close. They call it Vanisher’s Median for a reason.”

“I know,” the woman answered. She looked back and motioned for the professor to come closer. “People do come here to vanish; it does not mean they are destroyed. Today, I think I’ll use this place to leave without you following me.”

Hesitantly, the professor stepped up beside the woman and looked into the median’s depths. A thick mire of foggy air lurked around the out-of-place Christmas tree. “If the median simply relocates people, why then wouldn’t anyone come back to report about it?” He raised a hand to his chin, wondering. “Unless it made it difficult for them to return.”

“The median takes people where they need to go,” said Maria in return. “I’d imagine that the location is different for every person.” She too lifted a hand, though hers reached out towards the endless white. “I can’t speak for the others, but I always turn up at G. E. Clarke Station.” She nodded to her right. “Up in the north of the city.”

“I see,” Professor Moonly said.

“No, you don’t. Not until you’ve vanished like I have.” The woman smiled and lowered her arm. “See where the median takes you. Then you can ask yourself if you would tell others about it.” She threw a foot past the boundary. “Goodbye, professor.”

And into the fog she vanished, leaving Professor Moonly staring after her. Slowly, he took a step towards the boundary too.

Professor, I strongly recommend against this. It seems like an entirely dangerous matter.

“Perhaps,” the good professor said, hesitating. Then, all at once, he leaned forward and passed through the threshold.

And here we were. Standing in line at Brittle’s Bakery, the gaudy roan décor reflecting conversations had by cheery patrons.

“And so I said—Oh, Professor!” A pair of dark eyes spaced above a puffy nose and a pudgy smile looked back at us as someone spun around.

“You said ‘Oh, Professor?’” another voice rose with anger. Then, when a set of brown eyes peered out behind the curly greying locks of the baker’s wife, the voice jumped in parallel. “Oh, Professor! How’d you get in here? Didn’t even hear the bell chime.”

“Apologies,” Professor Moonly said. “I...” he removed his top hat. Streams of white flew from its edges as he shook it, “I didn’t quite mean to intrude.”

“Not quite, eh?” Bob Brittle, or Robert Brittle as he was more formally called, said. “Anyway, we haven’t seen you for a while.”

“I was on an extended vacation,” Professor Moonly answered.

“Ahhhh,” Bob answered in a long, drawn-out tone, wondering if perhaps there was more the good academic would let slip.

“I was in China.”

“China, you say?” the baker asked as he clapped loudly, calling a man with a moustache over and giving him a bag of crumpets. He looked back in a flash. “How was it? Did y’get to see any komodo dragons?”

The Professor shrugged. “Well yes, there was a dragon. Not a komodo, though. And sorry—technically, it was Hong Kong.”

“All the same, all the same,” Bob said, flapping a hand. “But China and dragons, haha! It’s, erm, fascinating, as you like to say—by the way,” he motioned towards the sweet-smelling baked goods, “were you here for something?”

“O’course he’s here for something,” the baker’s wife scolded. “Otherwise he wouldn’t be here at all.”

“Wouldn’t I?” Professor Moonly wondered.

“O’course not,” the wife went on.

“O’course,” Mr. Brittle half-corrected himself. “But I meant by it, Martha, that Mister Moonly best get whatever it is he came here to get before the storm itself gets to overtaking the city, y’know.”

“*Professor Moonly*,” the professor corrected politely amidst the rabble.

“Well you should’ve been clearer, Bob—and welcome back, Professor.” Mrs. Brittle smiled, nodding. When she did, her curly locks bounced pleasantly.

The professor smiled warmly in return. “Thank you.”

“Now, Bob,” she went on. “You have a good point. If a man’s come here to get something done, especially in the middle of a storm such as this—”

“A once in a lifetime kind o’ storm, I’d dare to venture.”

“—he ought to get done the thing he’s come to do. It’d be a once in a lifetime kind of purchase—I’d argue that.”

“You’d argue anything,” Mr. Brittle said offhandedly.

“After all,” the baker’s wife wagged a finger, first at Bob who she’d heard, then at the poor professor himself, “Professor Moonly’s got a long way to go to get back to his manor.”

“Right,” said Mr. Brittle.

“Right,” said his wife.

“So,” said Mr. Brittle. “I imagine you’d like some nice, warm food t’keep you ‘til you get back. What’ll it be, Professor?”

“I for one,” said his wife, “suggest the honey crullers—they just came out of the oven.”

The professor stuttered. The pair must have taken the two months they’d had away from us to perfect their sales pitches. “I-I think I will have a honey crueller.”

“Only one?” Mrs. Brittle asked. “My, no wonder you’re so skinny.”

“Now Martha,” said the baker, shaking his head. “Don’t belittle the man.”

“Nonsense,” the pudgy woman responded. “Professor Moonly can’t be belittled. Look how tall he is! Nowhere near little, except horizontally.”

“The Missus has a point,” the Mister pointed out, shrugging pseudo-apologetically. “You’ll need to fill yourself up if you’re t’make it back to your manor in this storm.” He slapped the professor’s jacket, then, laughing briefly, reached down past the glass showcase and grabbed a pair of crullers. “Bit’a dough in the gut keeps a man from freezing to the bone.” He wrapped them up. “Half price, today—it’s our nor’easter special.”

The professor, coaxed into it, took a couple of coins from his pocket, counted them, and then paid for the goods. “Thank you.”

Voices carried on farther off and we saw two patrons, then a third make their way out of the bakery through the front.

“Has much happened while I was away?” the professor asked, looking back at the baker and his wife.

“Mmm, same old, same old. We had a couple of teenage gangs from the Lane causing trouble in the docks—brandishing blades and banners and all; with Mister Flinch gone, the politicians were all out on the streets in a big confusion.” The baker’s wife laughed.

“Running around like chickens with their heads cut off,” Mr. Brittle noted, nodding in a chastising way. “That’s no way for a city such as this to be running, I’ll tell y’that.”

“Then we had a giant spider they unearthed in the quarries,” the pudgy woman added, clapping a hand over her mouth. “Oh, I remember how terrible they were saying the beast looked. It had two great big clusters of... of... now, how would I describe them?”

“Many-windowed,” Bob Brittle answered astutely, wagging a finger.

“Many... windowed eyes, black and beady like dark bubbles—some of them were scratched or gauged out, and others apparently were infected and covered with fungus. And there were scars too—its face was so full of terrible scars, or at least that was what the city militia mentioned when they had come back from killing the thing.”

“Still all hearsay and hubbub from the lot of ‘em if you ask me,” Mr. Brittle scoffed. “We ourselves never actually saw the whole monster—only pieces of its limbs the boys carried out o’ the tunnels.”

“Tunnels that went through the whole country, well under the English Channel and all the way to the Austrian border, like some sort of grand labyrinth—and don’t tell me you thought the limbs were fake! Why on Earth’d anyone make fake spider limbs?”

“People in th’ films do it all the time,” Bob mentioned, arms crossed.

“So they took pieces of the beast out of its tunnels?” Professor Moonly inquired.

“Quite right,” Mrs. Brittle said. “Straight from the dark and dangerous depths.”

“And it was the militia who did it? Why not the city police?”

“Police couldn’t be damn-well dared t’go near the thing!” the baker laughed. “Too terrified of it, I’d imagine.”

“Oh and don’t tell me you’d be any braver, Robert Brittle,” the baker’s wife scolded. Then, she turned back to the professor. “It’d have been enough to scare me well into a coma. Big and terrifying, you know, and its skin was all calloused, but its back was very hairy—and it even had a curved stinger!”

“You oughtta be a novelist, Martha—anyway, what else was there that went on while the professor here was away?” Mr. Brittle wondered aloud, scratching his chin and hopping topics. “Ah, we had an earthquake too. A while back.”

“Really?” the good professor asked.

“Mhm...” the Brittles nodded simultaneously.

“Come to think of it,” the missus said. “That was probably one of the least interesting things that’s happened here in the city. Went on for a few minutes if I remember, then stopped.” She shrugged. “By the way...” Suddenly, the course of the conversation had turned. “I haven’t heard anything much about the Rubber boys’s investigation. How’s that coming along?”

“Ah well, I can’t exactly speak about it,” Professor Moonly said, “but it’s... erm... progressing. Mildly.”

“Oh, I see,” said Mrs. Brittle, waving a hand apologetically. “Don’t get me wrong—I’m not usually the kind to pry int’a such melancholic matters, but I was just concerned with how Tiny was holding up. No one’s seen him around for a while now. Rumour was that he’d become a bit of a recluse.”

“Well who’d blame the man,” Mr. Brittle added emphatically. “His wife and boys are all gone, and his shoppe’s in ruins.”

“Poor fellow,” said the pudgy woman in a genuinely sympathetic voice. “And to think we knew him too, back when there was always that grand smile on his face.”

“Work and family—that’s what went into that smile o’ his,” Mr. Brittle pointed out. “His boys never stopped lookin’ up’tah him, I’ll tell ya that, though he was always fairly secretive about his business work. I remember him telling me once that he didn’t let Tommy touch the finances until he was twenty; Biggie on th’ other hand never even got to see how much a duck sold for.”

“Poor lad. Not that the knowledge would’ve done him much good anyway.” Mrs. Brittle sighed. “He was a simpleton too, always locked away in his room, left to his own hobbies.”

“Boy was probably happier that way anyhow,” Mr. Brittle snorted, his arms crossed.

“Oh you’ve no soul, Bob!” Martha scolded, but her husband spoke on anyway.

“I don’t think there’s much more than that—gossip around Grey Owl, I mean,” Mr. Brittle admitted, and as he finished his thought, a howling wind groaned against the door.

“Well, I suppose I had better get going then,” Professor Moonly said, turning back. “Thank you for the doughnuts. It was a pleasure catching up.”

The Brittles nodded.

“Good day t’you, Professor,” said the baker.

“Good day t’you,” said his wife.



A Bioethical Chapter

“I always hated people,” Professor Moonly mentioned as he held up the thick, dry bone, cracks and creases engraved within the surface of its rough calcium. “But relics.... Ah, yes. Relics are eternal. And at some point perhaps, the ideal transcends the element.”

Around us, a haunting chorus of violins left Wagner’s Tannhäuser Overture touring through the air.

If anything, this relic, piety removed, was of a Darwinian disposition; its original bearer had been a lumbering, secular beast of natural tendencies.

“Dinosaur bones,” the good professor breathed with intense excitement. He put the bone back down on a nearby table and stretched his fingers under a pair of medical gloves. “I had a friend of mine, an archaeologist from Gressenheller, send me this sample from his collection. He is somewhat of a prehistory enthusiast, you see.”

How fascinating—but what do you intend to do with the bone, Professor?

“Quite simply,” the good Professor Moonly went on, walking over towards the machine made of pipes, tubes, gears and sparkers, arching sheets of brushed metal, corkscrews and widgets, a glass case, transistors, two small reactors of unknown quantity or content, and a myriad of coils in front of us. “I intend to clone a dinosaur.”

You intend to clone a fully operational, and mind you colossal, beast of the past? Mass, muscles, teeth and all?

“Oh come now, dear worm,” the professor laughed. “I thought you’d know my methods by now.”

This is precisely why I worry.

“No, no. I mean,” Professor Moonly meant, “that I have foreseen this problem and I have solved its error.” He frowned. “Originally, the machine did in fact produce fully-developed clones. In short, it was capable of perusing the matter-sample placed within its chamber, then duplicating the genetic material of the sample and growing cells from it at a highly-accelerated rate. In other words,” he continued with a keen smirk, “if I took a hair from a man and placed it in the machine, the machine’s miraculous process would create an exact replica, not of just the hair but of the entire man. You see, the machine takes genetic code and brings it to the fullest of its fruition.” He scratched his chin momentarily, smirking at the unbelievable concept.

But professor, the way you describe the process, it makes it seem as though cloning objects produces something from nothing. How is this possible? There must be some source of spare matter that the machine uses to build the actual duplicate.

“Quite right, my dear worm,” answered the professor, “and this is a question I’ve set myself to answering in the past hours.” He paced over, hands crossed behind his back. “Much to my dissatisfaction, my attempts at understanding the machine have for the most part come up fruitless. I still don’t know where the excess matter comes from, though one kernel of knowledge I’ve managed to uncover is a method of cutting short the fruition of the genetic blueprints in a sample. This I believe addresses your first concern, good worm. Effectively, I can set the age of my cloned creature, so long as I monitor the process closely from start to finish and trigger a shortage in the machine’s binary current loop at just the right time. So far, I’ve only tested this technique on smaller things, but now I set my mind to a greater trial.” The professor eyed the bone. “My most recent success was the cloning of a dormouse I’d found; as intended when I initiated the process, I was left with a juvenile copy of it. I will attempt to do the same with our bone here, leaving us with nothing but a harmless hatchling.”

Hold on a moment. You found a dormouse? From where?

“Should that really matter?” Professor Moonly asked, a hint of offense in his voice. “The benefits of the science involving it are much more important.”

Where was the dormouse from?

“...It may have come from Mister Petyr Pettridge’s children.”

The twins—Delilah and Jannie, yes?

“Yes,” the professor grudgingly admitted.

Do they know that their pet dormouse is missing?

“No,” the professor grudgingly admitted again. “Anyway,” he continued, turning back to the machine. “I tire of trivial discussion. Let’s put this to the test.” He took the bone from a counter on which he’d left it, then placed it inside the machine, closing its front.

The hulking metalwork monstrosity had a thick, clear piece of cylindrical glass bulging at its front. Inside, bolted carbon frames and four square vents lined its ceiling while a checkered grate sufficed for its floor. All in all, it stood about the width of two men and the height of one; in the centre was a thin pedestal upon which the bone now rested.

“Well,” Professor Moonly breathed with a slight shrug as he closed the glass door. His hand hovered over the start button beside it. “Carpe diem, eh worm?”

He pressed the cube-like button, and its shiny black shell disappeared into the skin of the machine, sounding a click. We released, and the button came back up. Slowly, a muffled sucking began from the inside of the machine. Then, motors started to turn, and a crackling noise could be heard.

How long will the cloning process take?

“The dormouse took a total of two minutes and fifty-six seconds. If the calculations I’ve made are reasonable, the dinosaur juvenile might take anywhere from five to ten minutes.

As we discussed these things, Ms. Gooseberry pushed through the large wooden doors leading into the library. She paused for a moment, looking up to the professor and myself on the second floor; we stared back down at her.

“James...” she said in a voice almost so quiet we could not hear it. Then, she cleared her throat and began to make her way up the stairs to where we were.

“Hello, Miss Gooseberry,” Professor Moonly said. “You’re just in time to witness a genuine—”

“I want Mister Gant out of this manor,” the investigator interrupted, grabbing the professor by his vest.

“Pardon?” Professor Moonly asked.

“I want him removed.”

“Why?”

“Because he is a *brute!*” the investigator answered, flustered, the last word lingering.

The professor’s expression grew serious. “What did he do?”

“He...” Ms. Gooseberry hesitated, and in her eyes, something curious stayed. When she spoke next, her lips pursed. “He’s shooting plates in the back yard.”

“Plates..?” Professor Moonly asked.

“Yes,” the investigator said, and her tone cooled to simple frustration. “He’s strung some of your porcelain plates up from trees and other bushes, and is using them as target practice. I warned him against it, but he said he’d forgotten to bring targets along when he first arrived with the merchant, Mister Oyenusi.” She made a motion with her hands, mimicking the American general. “I saw him throw two of the plates up—like this—then shoot them out of the air.” Her hands fell back down to her hips. “It’s a mess anyway—you should put an end to it.”

The professor nodded. “I thought Mister Gant would have a bit more courtesy than that. I’ll have a discussion with him shortly.”

There was a brief silence between us and the investigator.

Then, Ms. Gooseberry glanced up at the hulking machine. Behind us, it groaned metallically.

“That thing... It was in the dining hall yesterday.”

“Oh? Ah, yes—it was. I called in several men from the city to help me with it.”

“I’m surprised they made it here in the storm. I hope you at least offered them bedding for the night.”

“Er, yes,” the professor answered, clearing his throat. “Of course I did that. What kind of person do you think I am? The kind that would just send people out into the cold in the middle of the night?”

“Especially during a nor’easter such as this,” Ms. Gooseberry noted, crossing her arms.

“Especially during a nor’easter such as this.” A coil of guilt slithered for an instant through the professor’s chest.

“Oh, by the way,” Professor Moonly said, raising a finger.

Behind us, the machine growled.

“The League of the Symbol’s Vigil has not been purchasing property in Grey Owl. In fact, they’d thought I was the one doing the buying—on top of this, they believed I had killed Thomas and Biggie Rubber.”

The federal investigator’s brows rose in surprise. “What? Where’d you learn this from?”

“Well I spoke with one of the League’s spies yesterday. She’d been following me through the city, so I lured her out into the open and we had ourselves a lengthy chat.”

“And you didn’t think to tell me this yesterday?” Ms. Gooseberry asked. No, growled. Then, grabbed—most violently! “We sat together for dinner, and you didn’t even tell me!”

“Now in my defence,” the professor said, waving his hands and laughing light-heartedly, “I was deep in thought about the machine—and, and at least I brought it up now! Please, I just had these clothes ironed.”

The investigator let us go, throwing us back. We stumbled a bit before the professor patted down his shirt and grinned. “I also needed time to think about what the spy had said.”

The investigator glowered. “Go on, then...”

“A day after the explosion at Tiny Rubber’s Duck Shoppe, Andrew Flinch came to visit me,” the professor recalled aloud. “That was when he told me federal investigators would be coming to Grey Owl. But federal investigators would only be called in if the Grey Owl Police Force could

not be trusted with solving the matter. After all, many murders go unsolved by our police force, so when there is something more at stake, one has no reason to trust the common, loose-lipped, and often unreliable blue-coat.”

“But what would be at stake?” Ms. Gooseberry asked.

“Money,” Professor Moonly answered, eyes narrowing. “Do you remember a while ago when I’d said to you that there were large sums of money at play with regards to the shoppe? Mister Flinch was the one who had told me that someone had lost a large amount of capital when the rubber duck shoppe burnt down. Based on my conversation yesterday, it appears that the League was in fact our mysterious investor. What can this lead us to assume then?”

“That someone has struck at the League financially,” Ms. Gooseberry answered. “And in turn, the League suspected... you?”

“Right,” Professor Moonly answered. “In part it has to do with our defeating them at the royal hall, though there’s something more... I’m still not entirely sure as to why, but the League of the Symbol’s Vigil seems to think very highly of me.”

Ms. Gooseberry smiled softly, but when we looked back at her, her smile died quite intentionally. “Is there anything else you’d care not to omit, James?”

“Despite admitting to vandalizing my manor, the spy I met seemed surprised when I mentioned my father’s cloning machine. Perhaps the League’s ruffians weren’t the only ones to visit my house—but that would leave few suspects, save for perhaps the Rubbers’s mysterious murderer.”

Ms. Gooseberry nodded slowly, considering the possibility. “I see. So say it was this murderer who tore open the dining room portrait and exposed the cloning machine. Did he intend for you to find it?”

“Yes, it seems that way.”

“Perhaps he wanted you to fix it,” Ms. Gooseberry suggested.

“I believe so too.”

“Then..?” the federal investigator asked. “Why do it? You’re playing into his hands.”

“Or he into mine,” Professor Moonly said with a smile. “After all, once the machine is perfected, it will only be a matter of time before our mystery person attempts to use it.”

“You believe he intends to clone himself?”

“I can’t speculate, but if he does want the fixed machine and it is fixed, he will have to come here to get it.”

Speaking of the cloning machine, Professor, it's making some rather worrying noises.

"By the way," Ms. Gooseberry spoke on, stepping back and away from the noisy metal contraption.

We stepped along with her, and the professor cupped a hand to his ear.

"I have a little information of my own. I did some research on the paperwork from the Grey Owl land grabs—everything was indeed conducted anonymously, but I had several colleagues at the Intelligence Committee look a little closer into paper trails between the different purchases. All their results seemed to lead to a false name, which had been used to conduct the business. I used that name to track down a number of sparse banking accounts, through which the money for buying the land was laundered, and after some lengthy work, it eventually led me to the identity of our mysterious purchaser... Tiny Richard Romelius Rubber."

Professor Moonly stared back at Viola, shocked. "Thomas's and Biggie's father."

"Yes," Ms. Gooseberry answered. "An insurance amount was made available to him when the shop burnt down, but he never collected on it. I also interviewed him after I arrived in Grey Owl City, and he seemed genuinely appalled by his sons's deaths."

"Have you spoken with him recently?"

"No," Ms. Gooseberry answered. "In fact, he's become somewhat harder to pin down as of late."

"Under the given circumstances, that's not remarkably surprising," the professor muttered. "So then it looks like he's our man." He paused. "The first land purchase might have been a way of throwing us off his scent; after all, it would have been easy enough to buy the remains of the Rubber Ducke Shoppe—he already had the deed in his possession. As for the other land grabs, perhaps Mister Rubber used the money that the League was funnelling into his business. In that case, he wouldn't have needed to collect the insurance amount. Such an approach would also help keep your suspicion off of him."

The investigator nodded. "But what would the League fund Tiny for?"

"I haven't the faintest clue," Professor Moonly said. He now had to shout over the horrid sounds that the device behind us was making. "But I find it odd that Mister Rubber would not be one of the first people the League questioned when the shoppe burnt down and their investment disappeared." He glanced over the investigator's shoulder. "Oh and on an unrelated note, I think my dinosaur is done." He turned back, smiling.

“Your dinosaur?” Ms. Gooseberry asked, following his gaze. Nervousness flared up in her voice.

“Worry not, Viola,” the professor said, wagging his finger. “I’ve adjusted the dichrometers and heteromatrixes on the device in order to reduce linear chronological propulsion—in essence, I’ve only cloned a baby dinosaur. Possibly even just an embryo.”

“Just an embryo...” Ms. Gooseberry parroted, her voice low and concerned.

We looked back to the contraption, and I could feel a terrible chill sweep through the professor’s body.

There in front of us, the machine groaned and stretched. As the floor below it quivered, the glass at its front finally shattered and the head of a Tyrannosaurus Rex burst through, rows of teeth parting like long, white needles. Saliva flew from the creature’s mouth while a horrible, booming roar sounded from its throat.

“GAH!” the Professor shouted, falling back along the coiling stairs.

Professor, get up!

The frightened academic yanked us back to a straight posture along the stair rail. “Miss Gooseberry!” Professor Moonly shouted, looking back. “We need to—”

But the federal investigator was gone.

We snapped our attention back to the giant creature emerging from the tender metal machine. Screeching steel birthed black and brown skin; a yellow reptilian eye flicked in several directions, taking in the scenery of the library.

What will we do!?

“I have an idea,” Professor Moonly said, reaching for his dragon cane. He swung it against the rail and its metal mouth bit down hard.

What’s our plan then, Professor?

“We bloody run!” Professor Moonly threw himself over the stair rail, swinging back down by the cane. He twisted his hands on the shaft of the stick and it released, sending us falling to the ground. The professor’s shoes slammed against the floor and when he rose, we started towards the door.

Hurry!

Behind us, the dinosaur thrashed violently, more of its body emerging from the machine.

We were almost at the library’s exit.

At last, the full, black-backed beast emerged, rising to complete height so that its skull nearly touched the top of the library. Its enormous head swung towards us and it snarled, then flew from the second level of the archives, crashing down upon the first and crying out angrily. Its voice deafened us like thunder.

We arrived at the door with seconds to spare. It had been closed—perhaps by Viola. We reached for the handle, but the carved, wooden frame swung out suddenly, slamming into the good professor's face.

“Out of my way!” Ms. Gooseberry shouted, wielding a long and heavy Vickers-Berthier light machinegun. She fell to her stomach, directing the powerful weapon, and peering through the scope that was mounted on its side she opened fire.

Clutching his nose, which had begun to bleed, Professor Moonly stumbled back. And when he opened his eyes amidst the blaring pain, he winced once more at the sudden rattling of bullets. A compact magazine fed ammunition from above the gun, while below a black bipod held up the barrel. Both shook as the weapon's violent assault began.

Lines of air were brushed aside as a flurry of projectiles tore through the library and into the dinosaur's thick hide. The creature bellowed in turn and stormed towards us.

Then, Ms. Gooseberry fired the fateful shots, and two rounds made contact with the soft film of the creature's yellow eye. Seconds later, the T. rex swirled back, then spinning, it fell suddenly to the ground with a massive boom, shattering tiles and wood beams below. A magnificent plume of dirt rose wildly from the debris as the monster thrashed against the cracked floor and died.

Side by side, Professor Moonly and Ms. Gooseberry panted, their faces sweaty.

Our saviour turned to us after a moment, clear beads dripping from her forehead. “James,” she panted. “Do me a favour.”

Is it ‘Never experiment with cloning rabid monstrosities again?’

“Never experiment... with cloning these damned, bloody beasts again or I swear, James... I swear to whatever mad gods you follow that I'll be using this,” she hoisted up the heavy firearm, “on you!”

Close enough, and certainly seconded.

The professor held up one of his hands and placed the other over his heart. “I solemnly promise never to do this again.”

Ms. Gooseberry sighed, exasperated. “No... no, who am I kidding? You’re like a delinquent child—of course you’ll do it again.”

Professor Moonly bowed guiltily.

Then the investigator fell silent for a moment, and for another, she bit her bottom lip. At last, she spoke up. “The Trisfal.”

“Pardon..?” Professor Moonly coughed, clearing his throat.

“It was one of the... the land grabs Mister Rubber made. I had the groundskeeper of the Trisfal ask that Tiny Rubber visit the fireworks factory he had built on the falls... at his earliest convenience.” A moment more and Ms. Gooseberry had caught her breath. “They will be discussing the vandalism occurring on the property’s rural lots.”

“Vandalism?” the professor queried.

“Indeed. I didn’t want to raise any suspicion when luring Mister Rubber out into the open, so I paid some local hooligans who’ve been causing trouble down by the docks to expand their territory a little northward. I had them vandalize the property, breaking a few windows and scrawling gang symbols here and there—The Chaps of 6th Street, Quarrymen and the like, you know. Then, I sent the groundskeeper a letter in which I posed as a city administrator, telling him that I and my colleagues would have to audit the factory’s stock of fireworks to ensure the gangs hadn’t gotten their hands on any of it.” She flicked the machinegun’s safety back on, huffing with finality. “Of course an audit by nosy city workers is the last thing Mr. Rubber would want, and sure enough I received a letter back from him today stating he’d like to meet next week in person to ensure us that the fireworks stores are safe.” Her emerald eyes flashed from underneath cracked glasses. “So... tinker with your demented science as much as you wish James Moonly, but come this time next week, first,” she pointed to the sighing carcass of the dinosaur, “have *that* cleaned up, and second, be ready to go out.”

The professor, humbled to a degree, nodded in return.



Chapter 0.6

In the back of his mind, I could hear the draw of violins, soft and rolling. Each played a separate, simultaneous measure of Pachelbel's Canon, folding as if to breathe and sigh in unison, their sounds harmonic, like the winding chords of time. How many were there? A hundred? A thousand. A white emptiness surrounded us, its brightness philosophical. He'd never quite grown accustomed to the Canon in D minor.

At once I could hear the sounds of washing waves, and a cold wind met my lord's scalp. Pores tightened and a heartbeat from below us slowed. We lingered on the edge of a shore, half-frozen in strains of glimmering white.

"There are two," said a voice from beside us, "and they alone live in this world." Only two, divided by one question.

My lord turned his head slowly, clear blue eyes rising against the sight of a tall man in a black overcoat and tophat. His eyes were blue as well.

"It's cold here."

"It is," my lord nodded, and the man in the tophat looked back at him.

"Shall we?"

It is inevitable.

Together, we stepped forward, our shoes sinking in through the frigid tides. Our ankles disappeared next, then our pant legs, sending a shudder sweeping through our bodies. The Canon continued behind us, but now its violins, unsynchronized, had descended into chaos.

My lord.

The waters reached his chest and arms tingled with the engulfing flood drawing them down farther into the pristine, endless depths.

My lord.

Next went our eyes, and at last our crown. We floated just beneath the surface for a moment, the light from the white sun above dancing against our body, its illuminating strands brushing past our soaked coat. The sounds grew louder, dangerous. And eyes open, we saw the violent, twisting shadows of the universe.

My lord!

Lids lifted and the music stopped all at once. “Hm!” the professor’s voice groaned. A moment later, he quietly cleared his throat. “Did I fall asleep..?”

I believe so.

“Apologies, then,” he rasped. Together we looked out into the midnight’s gentle light. The sun had long since vanished from the sky, and risen in its place was a pale and distant moon, its sharp edge set against the clouds. There, up in those gowning veils of air, we saw its quality—an image of an age long lost, it strode in all its ancient dignity across the stars.

As we watched it, from a distance there came the voices we had expected. “Why are we out here, James?”

A pair of legs stepped into view from behind the corner of the manor. Bodies soon followed them. “Because, Viola, it is a lovely night.”

We saw the federal investigator smile. A new pair of glasses shimmered in the cold light. “But how will we be able to count down the New Year?”

That other professor... Moonly, withdrew a pocket watch from his coat and smirked. “I have it taken care of.” He paused, then looked up towards the sky. “It’s almost like a painting...”

“It is,” Viola said. “You should hang it on your wall.” She removed her spectacles and put them in her pocket, then crouched down and packed a handful of snow together.

“Hm?” Professor Moonly turned back as Viola tossed the snowball, sending it bursting against his face. “Paf!” The man waved a pair of mittens, sweeping his cheeks, then his hair with the soft fabric.

The investigator laughed until the other professor retaliated, sending her running back across the field, both of their boots falling through its snow-laced surface. She jumped to avoid a throw, but a snowball struck her anyway and broke over her coat. She laughed, falling on her stomach.

We were silent.

Professor Moonly jogged up to her, reaching out with a hand.

She took it and he lifted her up.

“So what do you think of it, anyway?” Viola asked as panting, she brushed herself off.

“Of what?”

“Of what I asked you about before.” She reached out a moment later and cleaned Professor Moonly’s coat too.

He shrugged, passively, against the push of her palm. “I think it’s difficult to say.”

Less than a quarter-hour ago, they'd stood within the manor, facing the curious metallic project. The radiance of its small lights and shimmering panels hung strangely in the air; bathed in it, the investigator had begged the question of what might happen if a man used it to clone himself. Then, the other professor had given the only reasonable response—an exact replica would be formed. But his companion had meant to wonder about the philosophical implications.

“What need have we really for the philosophy of it?” Professor Moonly now asked of her. “If a man is made, the details are irrelevant—factually, he exists.”

“But who is he?” Ms. Gooseberry wondered. Together they tasted the night's air, their tongues tensing at its coolness. One of them made a sour face. “Is he you, or is he more like a mirror's image?”

The other professor pondered for a moment. “He must be me.”

“Would he have your memories?”

“If the brain patterns were to remain the same, then yes, I suspect so.”

“Yet he would never have accomplished the things you had. He never would have studied or worked,” she staggered back through the breaking white. “He never would have gone out on summer days.”

“Or winter nights,” the other professor answered.

“He never would have suckled at his mother's breast, or looked into her eyes.” There was a distant sort of sadness in the woman's voice. “He would have no self; no soul.”

“Ah,” Professor Moonly noted, and from where we were, my lord, lips pursing, mimicked the words that followed. “So that is what you truly meant to ask.” The man a distance away, under the bleak glow of the sky, pressed his hands into the pockets at either side of him. “I think that there isn't any one true self. The self is what we and others make of it.” He exhaled a plume towards the sky, and it rose to meet the others far above. “For example, I exist in my own perception, and that sort of existence—the existence of the soul—comes from my awareness. But others are aware of me too. I exist as perceived by you, even though your perception of me is limited in certain ways. The citizens of Grey Owl too have other ideas of who I am, as do the professors at Grey Owl University, and the students, and so forth.” He shrugged. “Each view is unique, but who am I if not an amalgamation of your thought and my thought and the thoughts of all others who know or know of me? We think, therefore we are. In thought alone the soul persists.”

“I disagree,” Viola answered, leaning against the trunk of a large, fruitless tree. A white reed-wood, its branches stretched well above the two like fractal fingertips, groping at the atmosphere of the conversation.

“Good,” Professor Moonly answered, smiling.

“Thought alone isn’t enough. Any living thing can think, but a human can love and hate, envy or cherish. I can say good morning, or goodbye, and feel differently each time.”

“Fair enough,” the manor’s gentleman crossed his arms. “But what of it?”

“Well, the thoughts of you that others have are no longer relevant to the argument of a soul once emotion is added to its criteria.”

“And here we return to my duplicate. Can he not experience emotion?”

“Emotion is learned,” said Viola with her scrutinizing, emerald eyes. Under the moonlight, her lips parted again, “But I suppose you would counter by saying that he has your memories and so has remembered learning his emotions.”

“Indeed.”

“Then memory must also be added to our list of what makes a soul.”

“Ah,” Professor Moonly noted, stepping close to Viola. “Are we in the business of making souls now?”

Their breaths intertwined, the two drew together, and the other professor placed a gloved hand on the coarse bark of the tree behind the investigator. “Thought, emotion, memory. Is there anything else?”

From in front of him, her gentle voice persevered. “Time.”

“Indeed, people change with it. The man cloned might have my thoughts, my memories, and my emotions, but he has only now come into existence. Would we truly be so insensitive as to leave out his opinion on his sudden birth?” Professor Moonly shook his head slowly. “No, it would be a terrible thing for a man to realise all that he is and all that he is not at once—to know that despite what he remembers, he has no past. To think his soul a false or faulty one.”

“Would you argue that your clone’s soul was false or faulty?” We saw the arch of Viola’s back as she posed the question.

“I only argue that this is what he might think.” Professor Moonly leaned forward with a slim smile.

“Then you haven’t answered my question,” said his companion, frowning slowly.

And the other professor smiled. There was lenience now in his expression. His eyes were curious and entertained. “I have. All you’ve said—thought, emotion, memory, time—and furthermore, all physicality—sickness, health, pain, pleasure—are encompassed by how one perceives them. As I said when we began this conversation, all things are given meaning by human thought.”

“Then when human thought ends, so too does the soul.”

“Yes, it should.”

“You don’t believe in a heaven?”

“I believe that writers built heaven and poets populated it.” Professor Moonly shrugged. “If it’s any consolation, I don’t believe in a god either, or mad gods for that matter.”

Viola reached out and touched the gentleman’s cheek. “I think thought is your god.”

“If thought could live for an eternity, then it very well might be.”

My lord was silent, grim.

Do you envy them?

“Ah!” From where they stood, the investigator piped up, patting the tall gentleman’s jacket. “Take out your watch.”

He did, regarding the ticking hands. “Oh, there’s not much time left. Less than a minute.” The pair’s expressions were lit with pleasance as the dawn of the New Year impended.

“Let’s count down together.”

“I don’t suppose there’s anything wrong with that...” Both the man and the woman cleared their throats and began the endearing tradition, their voices ringing in a happy unison. “Twenty-nine, twenty-eight, twenty-seven...”

“I don’t envy them,” my lord said from where we watched, shrouded in the shadows of the night-cast trees.

“Ten, nine, eight...”

He blinked slowly, sighing through pricking nostrils. “I envy this moment, and even then, only because of what must come after.”

Three, two, one.



A Confrontational Chapter

The Trisfal loomed over the great, grey cityscape. Though often its rushing waters moved too quickly to freeze, the nor'easter had left flotillas of ice encrusting the sides of its waterfall. From the lip-like overhang, frigid waves burst out from the edge and into the evening air. They misted the forests far below with a spray of dew that lost itself in the shrouding English evergreens.

As we passed beneath the olive tips of those coniferous legions, the professor adjusted his tophat. At our feet, the butt of the black dragon cane impressed upon the uneven earth. We all breathed in the soggy atmosphere through ready nostrils.

Ms. Gooseberry led us up the path and Mr. Gant tagged along behind; the two had not spoken the entire way. Finally, the American broke the silence. "Tell me again why we have to do this at night?"

"If you had been listening the first time, you'd have realized that the facility is guarded more carefully during the day."

"The facility?"

Amidst them, the professor straightened his fake beard, made from the hair of an African gorilla. It had begun to itch over the course of the journey, due in part perhaps to the moisture.

"Honestly," the investigator said, frowning. She glanced back with narrow, green eyes. "Did you pay attention to anything I said along the way? Immediately after purchasing the Trisfal's lot, Mister Rubber had begun transforming the old fireworks factory into a munitions warehouse. In addition, his other sites—notably Redbarbe Park near Granitier's Quarry and the four city-blocks to the south of the Aphostos Theatre—are now being converted into metal refineries and private military depots. In the daytime, each building has roughly ten patrols on duty. In the nighttime, there are half that number in most of the buildings."

"How many patrols are there tonight at the fireworks factory?" asked the American.

"None," Ms. Gooseberry answered. "There were originally two scheduled, but one took the night off to tend to a distant engagement in Wales and the other was called to care for his wife, who had contracted a case of some fictitious, but dangerous-sounding disease."

"I take it you had a hand in their inconvenience," Professor Moonly asserted.

Ms. Gooseberry smiled.

For the record, two of the six private military academies and four of the seven metal refineries had already been completed. The other buildings, including the fireworks factory atop the Trisfal—soon to become a munitions storehouse—were still under renovation. Whatever Mr. Rubber’s plans were, they were by no stretch of the imagination well-intended. Still, if something like an audit threatened to inconvenience them, then Mr. Rubber would have to stick his neck out long enough for us to catch it. Such would be the case tonight, as far as we hoped.

“Couldn’t you just arrest him or somethin’?” Mr. Gant asked, running a thick hand over the bristle-like hairs of his beard as we made our way up the long and winding path. “Sounds to me like he’s trying t’build up a private army.”

“Purchasing and outfitting properties isn’t illegal under Grey Owl law.” The investigator frowned, though from behind her, the professor only caught a glimpse of it. “If I were to attempt an arrest without tying him back to the case of the rubber duck shoppe, it would fall outside of my mandate as defined by Grey Owl City’s administration and my authority as a member of the British Intelligence Committee.” At last, she shrugged and in doing so, dismissed the idea.

“We could always just sabotage the building,” Mr. Gant suggested. “If we preferred.”

“We will only be going tonight to speak with Mister Rubber,” the investigator insisted.

“That why you need a soldier t’tag along with you?” The general scoffed. “And why you’re carrying a sidearm?” The professor caught the man’s eyes, turned down towards Viola’s hip.

Unphased, the investigator spoke on. “Mister Rubber has already lied to the police; he’s also potentially connected to the League of the Symbol’s Vigil. I believe we should exercise precaution.”

“Don’t worry,” Mr. Gant said with a relieved smile, knowing there was use for him. “I’m pretty good at diplomacy.”

“If you were twice as good at diplomacy as you were at paying attention, we’d still be in trouble,” the investigator answered as she climbed past a series of jagged rocks, straying from the path for a moment. She crouched behind the lowest wings of leaves, which drooped from a nearby tree and pointed then towards a large, foreboding building some distance off. Within the black-bricked walls and past thin, square-shaped windows, orange lights glowed, flickering whenever a shadow passed them by. “The groundskeeper’s name is Hildred Evans. He has been a citizen of Grey Owl for twenty years, held a low-paying job as groundskeeper of Pontiff’s Park, and was recently hired to oversee factory operations at the Trisfal. He will meet us at the doors and see us in to speak with Mister Rubber. Oh, and—ah, here.” She reached into her long,

venetian-brown jacket, pulling from its woolly pockets a pair of badges. Their shiny surfaces were laced in black leather. “You are Doctor Jonathan Lilly and City Agent Balthazar... Briggs.” She glanced down awkwardly, then handed them both off.

Mr. Gant gazed down at his. “Balthazar. Th’ hell kind of name’s that?”

“These were the only identifications I could find on such short notice.” The investigator shrugged, and Professor Moonly couldn’t help but smirk, pleased at the fact that someone else would know the pain of being associated with an uncommonly ridiculous alias. “For tonight you’ll have to put up with them; also, if anyone asks, my name is Mrs. Melissa Hoover.”

Mr. Gant grumbled, flicking the piece of identification in between his fingers for a minute. “And how come we’re roleplaying municipal pencil-pushers now?”

“Municipal administrators,” Ms. Gooseberry corrected. “Because you need a reason to be here, and it’s better to be authentic.”

“Pseudo-authentic,” the Professor corrected.

“But not obviously so,” Viola finalized.

It certainly explained why the investigator had asked the professor to wear his infamous and itchy disguise. Reflexively, Professor Moonly scratched at its coiled follicles.

And so we made our way up, through the bushes and into the lot, across an arched, wooden bridge that led over the falls, and past a series of wire fences until twenty minutes later, we arrived at the factory. Tall it stood with its scarlet-bricked walls drawn up like unending shale curtains. Their rugged surfaces were stained in black patches by the unholy productions that went on inside—ah, but how, you ask? From two tall columns at the crown of the block-like building, there sighed spiralling fumes in an imperfect imitation of descending, natural mists. Waves of dark capitalism washed over us, blotting out the evening stars.

Pinching our shirts and pulling them up to our noses, Viola, Mr. Gant, and the Professor paced over towards the building’s small side door. It was cast iron with engravings of leaves and lilies on it, not yet rusted, but dented twice at its lower-left corner. Someone must have been carrying something large and heavy through.

Viola knocked, then waited.

Mr. Gant and the professor exchanged worried looks.

A moment later, the door threw itself inward, opening to reveal a man only slightly shorter than the good professor; he was thinner certainly, and wore a black dress shirt with tyrian purple stripes, dusty on the outside, worn, and if we’d been able to see them, likely torn at the

elbows. Over that was a brownish-to-greyish coat with a hood made of sheep's fleece. His eyes would be like dark and cultivated olives, rich and inquiring, if not for their lack of saturation, which left them a cooler shade. They lingered on us a moment, looking like a pair of dusty orbs overlapped by curtains of creased skin. His beard—shaved down to a minor stub but partially returned from a long day's labour—was a pure white, only a few shades brighter than the bloodless skin from which it grew. He seemed the kind of man used to rainy days and the drudgery of hard work, like lumberjacking perhaps in some cold north-eastern forest. To discover him, the exemplar of such an unacclimated breed here of all places, in a factory of fire where chemicals lashed the lungs... It seemed wholeheartedly inappropriate. Or was it exotic? There was a pair of old leather goggles strapped around his forehead. He coughed at length.

“How fascinating,” the professor whispered from under his own, faux beard.

In the tired-looking man's left hand there was an axe; in his right, a tinderbox. “Ah,” he said with a phlegmy voice. He cleared his throat, bringing the tinderbox up to his mouth and lowering it a moment after. “Missus Hoover,” the groundskeeper went on. From his mouth there danced broken flickers of condensed air. “I was just on my way out to fix a broken light bulb in one of our strontium-salt portables.” He stopped for a moment to realize we weren't versed in his terminology. “Ah, erm, strontium-salt—we use it in our fireworks. Keep it in chilled, sealed tubs that're placed inside the portables.” He nodded to us, then pointed off to somewhere out of sight. “It's, uh, like I said by telephone, Missus Hoover. While the factory's undergoing the early stages of renovations, we're working on eliminating our chemical supplies and selling the leftover fireworks to turn a profit.” He smiled, then nodded. “I'll try to be a bit clearer, miss; misters. It's been a long day.”

“Not miss, nor misters—*administrators*,” Ms. Gooseberry corrected, and the two other men flashed their identifications. “Mister Balthazar Briggs and Doctor Jonathan Lilly. They'll only have a couple questions for Mister Rubber, and if things are up to snuff, we'll be on our way.”

“Oh,” the man mumbled, awed a bit by the men's presence. “And a doctor too, or, er, forensics expert, as they say. Well thanks to you for taking the time to look into this. I didn't think a bit of graffiti and a few broken windows could cause so much trouble.” He motioned with the axe into the hallway. “Erm anyway, I'll lead you in then and go on out after.”

The three nodded correspondingly.

Our path through the hallway led us along a twisting maze of machinery and steam. At several points, the halls opened up into large, bubble-like rooms which boasted rows of conveyor belts and columns of swaying vats. “Fireworks?” Ms. Gooseberry asked as she glanced up towards the ceiling. Waves of heat warmed our legs from grates below, though open windows overhead sent sheets of cold air down to suppress the atmosphere before it met the vats.

“No, not yet,” Mr. Evans answered. “We use heated moulds to produce the aluminum casing for the rockets in a room below, but here...” He pointed to three large tanks and named their contents in turn. “Charcoal, potassium nitrate, and sulphur. We mix these elements together to form the explosive for the fireworks.”

“Gunpowder,” Mr. Gant pointed out.

“Yes, that’s right. Afterwards, we combine them with different metals like strontium or calcium, sodium or copper. That creates different kinds of colours when they go off. See,” he nodded emphatically, “the metals are ground nice and finely and then packed into the aluminum cylinders. When they go off in the sky, the heat ignites them and each one burns a different colour. Of course, too much heat while we’re making them, and it just might set them off in the process.”

“Hence, the windows,” the investigator answered, and the groundskeeper nodded.

The chat was interesting, but the professor’s thoughts returned to our meeting with Tiny Rubber once we’d left the factory floor.

“Here we are,” said the groundskeeper as several minutes later, he opened one last door. This time, the entrance led into a smaller, cubic room. There were two boilers at its far corners; pipes, like mechanical spider legs, extended from them and into the walls, though overall, the temperature was far more balanced, due in part to a large, soundless vent hanging over it all.

“Please, have a seat,” Mr. Evans said, motioning to a thin gold-trimmed table set in the middle of the mess, red-cushioned chairs pulled up halfway around it. On one end was a small plate, its white surface glimmering under the light from a roan wax candle. In front of it rested a small basket of buttered French bread; it looked as if pepper had been sprinkled over the slices, which were lightly toasted. On the porcelain dish, two grilled mackerels sat silent, lashed with ginger and garlic, lemon juice, parsley, and oregano. A slow steam rose from them; it seemed they’d only been recently set out.

“You’ll have to excuse the dish,” said the groundskeeper, scratching at his goggles. “I meant to eat that when I got back in—didn’t think you’d be here so early. Mister Rubber himself is on

his way I think, so if you'd like, please sit down." He motioned around with an unintentional inaccuracy, caused in part perhaps by his uneasiness at our premature arrival and subsequent intrusion upon his dinner. "Have some fish if, uh, well if you're hungry." With that, the man disappeared through the door and pulled it closed behind him, stifling the piercing mechanical groans from outside.

Within the room, the low hums of the boilers gently shook the floor, and the three of us looked back and forth towards each other.

The Professor and Mr. Gant locked eyes, then both pairs fell down to the plate of food. Professor Moonly chuckled briefly, then nodded up from it towards the general. "Mister Gant," he said.

"No thanks..." The general retained his stare against the fish. He looked visibly disgusted. "Already ate."

"You don't like fish?" Ms. Gooseberry asked, smirking.

"Look, I said I ate already," the general's irked voice rose.

Several minutes had passed before footsteps could be heard amongst the clamour. Shortly after, the only entrance to the room swung open.

And all bets were off.

He stood tall and impressive, with a Western-bourgeois air about him; perhaps it was because of his bone-white dress shirt, its sleeves rolled up past a pair of hairy, muscular forearms and its circumference stretched well over a broad belly. His face was pudgy but block-like, beads of sweat rolling down along its temples, and his eyes, like cold and calculating slate marbles, rolled around towards each of us briefly, barely bothering to take in the details of our faces. Rested on his hips, a black belt with the golden emblem of a dragon sculpted on its front held up a pair of light pants, and farther below, two loafers tapped against the warm, dusty floor.

"Sorry for the wait!" he launched off on an introductory tirade, his voice like that of an eccentric high roller. When he smiled a broad, Broadway kind of smile, amalgam fillings glittered in the room's dim light. "How can I help you administrators on this fine evening?"

"First, I believe you'll need to sit down," Ms. Gooseberry said in a comparatively tame tone.

Professor Moonly stared with curiosity at Tiny Rubber. He hadn't met him many times, but of the couple occasions he could recall, Mr. Rubber had seemed taller, and, at least in disposition, more reserved.

Instead, this man's ears perked, and he stared out again, now more carefully at the face of the female investigator. "You..." he said after a moment. His eyes narrowed as sudden realization struck him. "You!"

"Indeed," the investigator answered.

"You're one of those officers who were looking into—well, why're you—"

His eyes shot over, brows furrowed now, next towards the good professor. "Wait, I know you too. You're that Moonly fellow! You're the mad professor who lives up on the cliff!"

"I take offense to that," Professor Moonly retorted, prying off the bestial clump of fake chin hair.

"And you—" Mr. Rubber turned at last to the American. "Well, I don't damn well know who you are, but I'll bet you're with them!"

"Good guess," said Mr. Gant as he drew his gun and placed it sideways on the table. "Now I think the lady said 'sit'."

Hesitantly, Tiny Rubber took his seat. "You wouldn't fire that thing in here." He motioned to the weapon with his right hand. "One wrong spark and you'd very well set off an explosion in the whole place."

"Similar to the explosion set off in your rubber duck shoppe?" Ms. Gooseberry asked.

Mr. Rubber fell silent. When his voice rose again, it was more conserved than before. "Th' hell do you people want..?"

"An explanation," the investigator elaborated, motioning around. "You currently own several building in Grey Owl City, all purchased within the last few months."

"What, is it a crime to buy up prime real estate?" Mr. Rubber scoffed.

"It might be when you start using your new properties to train and arm a private militia." Ms. Gooseberry's green eyes flashed and her lips became rigid.

"Oh ye of little proof!" the large man shot back.

"I'd say the proof is irrefutable," the investigator retorted, motioning around.

For a moment, something glimmered in the large man's eyes. The professor, noticing it, squinted carefully.

"What is this factory for?"

"Fireworks."

"And the facilities south of the Aphostos?"

“Charitable recreation centres for the poor,” Mr. Rubber raised a pudgy finger, “and metal refineries for the sake of producing pots, cans, frying pans...”

“...bullets, ammunition, machines of war—” Ms. Gooseberry added.

“—have no place in my business model, I can assure you.” The businessman laughed, likely certain we had no chance of catching him on any of the technicalities.

“Very good,” the investigator said with a quick and clean nod. “And from where did you receive the capital to fund such endeavours? You never collected any insurance money from the deaths of your children, and your shoppe’s profits wouldn’t have provided you with enough disposable income. Believe me,” she smiled. “I’ve done the math.”

At this, Tiny Rubber’s voice caught in his throat, and a second later, the pale skin, folded over it, rippled with the croak of a confession. “My old Aunt Agnes happened to pass away a few months back.” His face contorted sarcastically. “In her will, she happened to leave me a lump sum. She said ‘Tiny, you do right by me,’ and so it’s in her memory that I’ve bought up these properties.”

The professor frowned. Something was off... about his... face.

“I see,” Ms. Gooseberry noted. “And do you have a record of the financial transactions or the will that placed said monies into your care?”

Mr. Rubber scoffed, folding his well-dressed arms. “What, did they promote you to the city’s revenue agency? The police’ve got no right looking into a man’s private transactions.”

“Even better than that Mister Rubber,” Viola answered, removing her true documents. “I am a federal investigator.” She smirked cruelly. “And our powers far exceed those of our municipal counterparts, revenue agencies and all. I could hold you indefinitely in fact until we received the information we were looking for, or perhaps for just long enough to delay whatever it is you’re planning here. Either way, I’m sure it would be of great inconvenience to you.”

The businessman scowled, the edge of his lip perked just enough to bare teeth.

Suddenly, a cold chill shot through us. “Mister Rubber,” Professor Moonly interrupted.

The smug capitalist looked over at him.

“You would agree that Grey Owl City is a diverse and unique place to live in.”

“One of the best in its class,” the pudgy man said, curious of the statement.

“With many citizens and many perspectives, many things to know and devise and achieve...” The good professor paused, lingering on his last words. “Human knowledge compiled, one might say.”

At this, the man's eyes widened in front of us and his brows bent into perplexity.

And in that moment, the full force of our realization struck us. Professor Moonly, in stark clarity, pointed a finger at the pudgy gentleman. "This man's not Tiny Rubber!"

Ms. Gooseberry looked back at the good professor, shocked; Mr. Gant did the same. Simultaneously, they asked, "What?"

Jumping from his seat, Mr. Rubber made a break for the door.

"Hey!" the American shouted, raising his gun, but there was little need.

As the businessman pulled on the metal handle, the door threw itself open, slamming into his face. Not-Tiny Rubber stumbled back and collapsed onto his stomach, cursing in pain. "Bloody hell!"

In the entrance stood a giant sort of citizen, his head cocked by vague disgust—aimed at either the common criminal sprawled on the floor below him or, just as likely, the lingering smell of fish. On his face he wore the mask of a dark, dead grizzly bear. Its grey snout shook as a pair of black-shoed feet carried him farther into the room, close enough now to peer down at the curled-up businessman. When he looked back up at us, he snarled—and shocked, we recognized him as the bouncer from Boullerolli's royal Hall. "Caught in the act! I knew it."

Two other men stepped past him into the now-crowded boiler room.

"Grab the co-conspirators. I've got this one." He reached down and hauled up Mr. Rubber.

"Right, you heard the man," said one of the smaller intruders. He was a lean sort of gentlemen in a snake's mask, who held a revolver up to the group. "No need for this to break out into a gunfight, eh?" The man nodded to the general, who glanced back at us.

"Holster your weapon then, Mister Gant," Professor Moonly sighed, speaking loudly enough so that all in the room could hear him. "Besides, it's just as Mister Rubber told us. Shooting a bullet in this factory might very well ignite the halls in an inferno."

The man in the snake mask lowered his gun a bit as the American put his own away. "Er... right—all of you, out in front." He nodded towards the doorway that the bear-masked man and a struggling Mr. Rubber were already leaving through.



An Unsuitable Chapter for a Professor

“I shot that bastard,” Mr. Gant growled under his breath as we walked through the winding mechanical halls. Orange and green lights flared overhead, jumping from where warm glass lamps held their sources. They scattered throughout the iron rafters.

“I don’t doubt it,” Professor Moonly said. He had noticed a trio of red spots on the strongman’s chest, clustered around the left lung. Presumably, it was from where blood had leaked through the bandaging underneath his cotton vest and hammer-tail coat. “More importantly... Pardon,” the professor’s voice jumped and the large man turned back to us. “What’s your name?”

“Mine?” the gruff gentleman asked, frowning from underneath his mask. “Urschel, John.”

“*The* John Urschel?” Professor Moonly wondered. “Tied for the Keith Medal in 1907, Associate-Representative of the Royal Society, and notable American tinkerer in Quantum Eigenfields?” Professor Moonly asked, brows raised.

“I play sports too if it’s of any interest t’ya,” the gargantuan bear answered back.

“You don’t say...” Ms. Gooseberry muttered, staring up at our captor’s towering back as he led us on. “This day keeps getting stranger and stranger.”

Strange is a common occurrence here in Grey Owl. But Professor, what did you mean by saying back in the boiler room that the man the bear’s now dragging by his collar was not Tiny Rubber?

“Simple, my dear worm,” Professor Moonly answered, his eyes narrowing carefully to confirm what he had said earlier. “I meant that the man in front of us is none other than Tiny Rubber’s son, Biggie.”

Upon hearing the last bit of his sentence, both Mr. Gant and Ms. Gooseberry glanced over at us. Curiosity had been struck up in them, and even one of our captors, a man in an armadillo mask, looked back. “Eh?”

“Rubber—” growled John Urschel meanwhile, “let me get a better look at you.” He wrenched the businessman forward and held him squarely by the shoulders. “Well I’ll be...”

Ah, so that’s it! The secret’s in his eyes.

“Yes, the colour of his pupils was the giveaway—an unnatural shade of blue, far too dark to be like his father’s,” the professor said, recalling the photographs in Ms. Gooseberry’s dossier. “Though originally difficult to tell in the dim lighting, it’s undeniable now.”

So then through some mighty fine makeup work and... perhaps the use of contacts?

“Yes, I think so.”

Through this, Biggie Rubber’s made himself to look like Tiny, his father. Remarkable!

“Son of a bitch,” sneered John Urschel. Then he turned Biggie back around and forced him forward. “You’ve caused us a whole lot of trouble for us, y’know?” He gritted his teeth, then for better or for worse, went on. “Well you’ll pay for it soon enough—you and your pals.”

“Pals?” Mr. Rubber scowled. “We’re about as buddy-buddy as gin and good decisions.” For his troubles, Biggie Rubber received a terrible blow to the head that dishevelled his hair and left a line of blood dripping down his temple.

“You must think we’re pretty stupid, eh playboy?” the bear said as he lowered his fist. “But no... *no*, I know how it all unfolded.” With a glint in his eyes, our large adversary began his stunning deductions. “You kicked this whole rigmarole off when you blew the rubber duck shoppe sky high. Forced the League to convene and discuss that awful little mess of yours. Yet as it were, we found ourselves—for the most part—ambushed and imprisoned by the daring professor over there.” He thumbed back to us rudely. “Good thing the big man in charge cut our brothers’s prison stay short. After that, we were forced to keep an eye on both of you—tedious as it was—especially since you, Biggie, had a face you could slip right in and out of. Makes sense now why we had such a hard time tracking you down, though you still had to lay low, which meant you couldn’t make any others moves. That was when your cavalry came in handy a second time—and what a merry chase they led us on, all the way to Hong Kong.”

Our blood nearly ran cold at the tone in his voice.

“We should’ve had Mohad kill them all then and there, but they were still too valuable, and there was a chance they’d lead us back to you. *You...* While the League’s attention was spent on that little surprise expedition and getting Moonly back here, you started snapping up property in the Owl, to raise your own little private army.” Finally, he snorted out from under his bear mask in what almost seemed like a laugh. “I’ll give you this much: you’re smart sneaks, the lot of you.”

And we all looked on in awe at how utterly incorrect the bear was. Together we walked a little farther, until we entered into the chamber we’d passed on the way in, where chemicals of different sorts hung in big vats.

There was silence for a while before Viola's voice rose, addressing the bloodied businessman. "Biggie," she started, "if you assumed the identity of your father, then the two men we found in the burnt-down duck shoppe must have been Thomas and Tiny Rubber." The investigator shook her head. "Why murder your own family..?"

"Murder..?" the only remaining Mr. Rubber managed a glance back at us, but we saw his eyes were wild with anger. "A man can't murder the damned!" His answer echoed through the massive chamber, and a row of creases bore trenches in his forehead. "They did it to themselves..! They did it when..."

"When they assembled that explosive contraption," the Professor concluded for him. His voice both subtle and patient, it betrayed interest in this new topic.

And Mr. Rubber smirked wryly at us. "Yes, a machine able to transmute rubber microstructures, producing photo-resistant materials that wouldn't—couldn't—fade over time." The description, fluent, made him appear well-versed in the matter.

And so, the Professor pried. "Who came up with the plans for it? Was it Thomas, or was it you?"

"Hmph," Biggie Rubber started with something of a sigh. "Tommy was always the slick-tongued talker. Everyone, especially the old man, was convinced he was the brains behind it."

"The old man... Your father?" Professor Moonly asked. "The one who had partnered with the League of the Symbol's Vigil in order to launder their money?"

The ears of every person on the factory floor pricked.

"Partnered? Don't make me laugh," Biggie answered as the bear pushed him from where he had stopped. As he started to walk again, more words left his lips. "He was more of a tool to them than a partner—wasn't he?"

John Urschel and his henchmen remained silent on the matter.

But thick brows lowered and Biggie's mouth drew down into a greater frown. "Tommy and the old man didn't have half a brain between them. I'd dream of kingdoms while they'd whittle away their days overcharging wide-eyed tourists for rubber ducks." He smirked. "And for your information, it wasn't laundering. It was storage. Different from the League's interests and investments, it was a passive way to decentralize the fortune the members sat on—to keep small, offhand caches of it secret from police, from spies, business partners, you name 'em, in case of an emergency." His eyes flashed keenly. "So just like that, money disappeared into invisible coffer, and no one ever went looking for it until it was needed."

Mr. Urschel seemed interested in Biggie's story. Had he truly believed we were in on this—whatever *this* was—together? Or perhaps he was trying now to better gauge our motivations. And so he kept quiet, affording us not only the opportunity to pry further but to glance around as well at the large room we'd crossed halfway into. Conveyor belts rumbled, carrying powders back and forth, and the glow from dull bulbs drew strange shadows over our faces. Shortly to our left, there was a window that led out into a now entirely black night; peering over, we caught Mr. Gant watching it too. Very well, the window would serve as our escape.

“How long had your father been holding the League's money for?” Viola asked during the pause. She eyed the window, then us, then nodded.

“Since the Old Grey Bank, on the opposite side of the street from our shoppe closed down... Five years. He kept the money in its safe deposit boxes.” Dark blue eyes narrowed. “On the night of the explosion, I broke into each box and stole their contents. After all, once the League learned that the shoppe had been attacked, the first thing they'd do was send for their cash.”

The professor nodded. “And then you were sitting on a large amount of capital. I presume it would have been too dangerous to use public banks to store it, and so with nowhere left for the money to go, your only option was to invest it in properties.”

The pudgy man snorted, his voice lowering to a ruminating growl. “Of course. Not that having other options would've changed anything. To build a kingdom out of fire and fortune was my destiny. Everything about it, you see, was intended.”

“Everything was intended...” the professor whispered back.

Biggie Rubber's words are beginning to sound rather familiar. Professor, I don't like this.

“And so it was that one day I showed my father the plans for a rubberizing machine.” Biggie's fists suddenly clenched. “*My* plans, design schematics that would create the most beautiful colours of rubber any man had ever seen. But he credited them to Tommy.”

“To your brother?” Professor Moonly asked curiously.

Biggie glowered, then at last spoke. “My father never did and never would believe what I was capable of. But Tommy knew—oh he knew, and my brother was more than happy to take credit for what dear old dad lauded as the greatest masterpiece to ever bless the Rubber family.”

Our footsteps echoed softly amidst the hum and hiss of the factory.

“From that point on, we were set, the three of us, on an unchangeable path. I knew the consequence of using that machine, and I knew that before the end I would hold in my hands both the money and the kingdom I had dreamed of for so long.”

“That’s a stellar confession,” the bear pointed out, breaking into Mr. Rubber’s confessional rant.

“We both know I’m a dead man anyway, and the League’s particularly good at extracting confessions.” The businessman sighed through thick nostrils. “I only saved you the time.”

“And what of us?” There was little time left now. We were approaching yet another corridor and would be out of the window’s range. After the next hall was the exit, and after the exit... “If Biggie Rubber is to die, then what is our fate?”



Chapter 0.5

Are you listening..? Good. How closely?

“I had a dream once. Of a kingdom set upon a twilit mountain. Magnificent, it crowned the dark horizon, and legions of black-feathered birds circled its great towers. In its halls I remember seeing a race of perfect people, some utopian civilization born from the heavens... I went to sleep the next night and tried to find it again, but by the time I returned, it had already gone.” The large man faced us sullenly. “I never forgot that dream, you know.”

“Which do you prefer then?” the professor asked. “Dream?” He held out a blueprint, tied in a clean white string. “Or reality?”

“That’s...” Biggie Rubber stared back down at the sheet. “Where’d you get that?”

“You shouldn’t sell your best ideas,” came the response, “and certainly not to street merchants for such a measly sum.”

Finally, the larger man sighed. “I was angry. I meant that design for rubber transmutation as a way to show my father what I could accomplish... When he saw it, he thought it belonged to Tommy. No, in his mind, I couldn’t have ever made something so worthy.” His voice was concise, repulsed. When we remained silent, Biggie Rubber looked back, shaking his head and shrugging at last. “All I ever wanted was to be known for my achievements—for my intelligence, my *will*—but I guess it’s in man’s nature to want the things he can’t have. To dream a dream he’ll never find again.”

“There are many things that man may never find, but achievement, intelligence... will,” returned the answer. “These are simpler matters.” Matched only by a hesitant silence, my lord’s voice went on; now it was Mr. Rubber’s turn to listen. “There is a way to cause a malfunction in your machine. If one were to replace the feed of carbon dioxide,” he unfolded the blueprint, “with one of acetylene...”

“Acetylene?” Biggie asked. “But that’s...” The man in front of us looked up grimly. “Under the right conditions, it’s an explosive.”

And the cruel professor smirked. “When the third bolt on the machine’s main valve is tightened, building pressure will force the resulting gas into the periphery chambers, here and here.” A pale finger pointed to the locations on the diagram. “Once within them, a reaction will

occur in the rubber microstructures, causing in turn a violent ignition. The tightening can be done by the one building the machine, and so it's not necessary to supervise that step—still, the shoppe's windows should be shut beforehand, since the detonation will have its best effect in an enclosed area." He waited as the large man's eyes pored over the document. "Do you see it?"

"I see it," Biggie Rubber said at last, "but I don't understand why you'd be telling me this." The large man frowned as he ran his fingers over the paper.

"Your father doesn't love you," my lord answered back, and the big man found himself caught off guard by the accusation. "The shoppe, perhaps. Your brother, certainly." Blue eyes narrowed. "But you, just a simpleton in his eyes..."

"Say another word and I'll break your face in," the grown man snarled.

"You know who I am." The shadows obscured the rest of my lord's aspects as he stared with cold, piercing eyes.

"I do..." Biggie said hesitating, then slowly unclenching his fists.

"Returning to the point then, Tiny Rubber is handling a portion of money for the League of the Symbol's Vigil. An extremely important portion."

Biggie sighed out through his thick nostrils. "So what? Are you trying to rub in the fact that my father's a greedy fool or just that he's richer than I am?"

"Neither. He bartered his life away the moment he decided to hold their gold for them. Whether one hand or the other commits him to his end is irrelevant—he's perishable property to the League."

Biggie's eyes stared back up at us. "And what about to you? What's he to you?"

"A piece on a chess board, and the time has come to remove him from play. Soon I shall set in motion the workings of a grand scheme, and he must play this integral part." The professor smiled with surety.

"I don't understand," Biggie Rubber said, scratching at his short hair. "Why attack the League when the League follows you wholeheartedly?"

"The League is an imperfect instrument of my will. As loyal as its members are, they are nonetheless fallible. If one strikes at them, they recoil and, like a wounded animal, strike back. The search for your family's murderer will result in a chain of events, which, though beyond the scope of either their or your ability to perceive, shall be crucial nonetheless to my own designs. Act in faith, and you will be rewarded justly."

Biggie Rubber paused, staring back. "Act in faith? What is it exactly you want me to do?"

“Bring about the destruction of your family.”

“My father...” Biggie’s teeth had clenched. “And Tommy?”

“Yes, Thomas too.”

At this, the Rubber’s blood boiled and he threw his hand out, hoisting up the great professor by the cusp of his coat. “And what if I just snap your neck here and now?”

“You would try,” the cruel professor said from behind his grip, “but you forget I work with others close to me and to my designs. They would execute my will in my stead; though I’d much rather the both of us survive our encounter here tonight.”

“Why me?” the young Mr. Rubber demanded, his grip loosening, then falling away at last. “Why am I so important to you?”

“Because,” came the answer, “your participation serves to benefit us both.” My lord held out a hand. “Your family will die one way or the next, and the League will leave no stone unturned in searching for the only Rubber left alive. You know what this entails, don’t you?” Together we measured the worry on our counterpart’s face, as thoughts of the torture they would put him through began to cross his mind. “I won’t halt the League’s inevitable manhunt, but I will help you avoid it.”

“And the money from the cache..?”

“Yours if you wish, though I know there’s yet more that motivates you...”

“What do you mean?” the large man asked us.

The pair’s voices echoed throughout the alleyway. A distance above, moonlight skimmed the rust-red bricks. “The rubber-transmuting machine was merely a trinket, a way to prove yourself to your father. But I’ve seen the better kinds of things you’ve aspired to. It’s rare to find a man of your talent, a true polymath, caging his aptitudes and having to sink to the lows of renting out laboratories in Rifter’s Lane.” At this my lord smiled and the other man grew pale. Of course we knew about his secret deeds. “It’s not some dark fantasy in my opinion, but rather a thing most attainable. I’ve studied the process, you see, and with my help you shall achieve your life’s work.”

“A human transmutation...” Biggie Rubber muttered.

“After the explosion, it should make escaping from the League a simple matter.”

“Escape? To where?”

“You’ll never have to leave Grey Owl.”

Biggie's brows lowered, and understanding creeping over him, he posed a different question. "Whose shape would I take on?"

"Whomever's you wanted. Your father and brother will die in the explosion generated by your machine. Give them the instructions I gave you and you won't have to be anywhere near the fireball. After, you will take the money and disappear into the bowels of the city. Even if the League suspects you, Biggie Rubber will be no more."

"And I would be able to take any face?" we were asked by the still-disbelieving man. Biggie's lip perked. "No... no, if you know me as well as you think you do, you'll realize I attempted the process before on animals and insects. It never once succeeded then. What makes you think this time will be any different?"

Blue eyes widened unnaturally as my lord spoke the next words. "This time you have me. I've added my own notes to yours, and with my amendments, the operation will be more than a success." He paused, then smiled oddly, as if some dark thought lay at the tip of his tongue. A second later, that thought dripped from it. "You've always wanted to be the kind of man your father would take pride in." His dastardly smile turned bitter-sweet. "Once you undergo your change, I will have several tasks for you. Complete these, and you will be free to act as you please—Tiny Rubber, for instance, might easily retake the city."

"Impossible. Even with the change, the League would see me coming a ways off."

"Indeed they would. I will arrange a number of distractions, which should present you with ample opportunity to fulfil my commands. Yet eventually, a time will come when they find and try to take you." The professor handed him the blueprints, then turned to walk away. "And the benefit in knowing *when* this will happen is absolutely..."



Paradise's Requiem

"Invaluable." Professor Moonly had barely heard the last word of the sentence escape Biggie Rubber's mouth. Urschel, being closer, must have heard it too.

"Hm?" said the bear as he walked the businessman forward.

"I saw the fires and debris when the shoppe burnt to its foundations, you know." Mr. Rubber laughed abruptly. "I watched as my childhood burnt down in front of me." The larger man pushed him on into the upcoming hall, though his voice rang on. "But like a phoenix, you see, my destiny has risen from the ash."

Suddenly, we watched the bear struggle against something, and an expression of sheer horror broke from under his mask.

"I knew you were coming," Biggie's voice boomed back from within the hall.

In an instant, the bear was thrown back into the room by a large, dark hand.

The professor and Ms. Gooseberry dodged the mighty man as he crashed along the concrete and metal floor-vents.

Taking advantage of the opportunity, Mr. Gant elbowed the snake in his face, spinning round and drawing his revolver from our enemy's belt. "Now!?" the general shouted.

"It's as good a time as any!" Professor Moonly answered him, and our group made a break for the glass.

As we did, the armadillo whipped his arm up, and we caught sight of a gleaming barrel; thinking quickly, the professor shouted to our companions, "Cover your ears!" He then twisted the second-last ring on the shaft of his dragon cane, and from it broke forth a vile noise, like the sudden boom of thunder spliced with magnified feedback from a microphone.

Struck by the screeching noise, the three masked men all cringed in unison, and our ill-intentioned armadillo dropped his gun to cover his ears.

As our auditory assault died out, the dashing American made it to the window, smashing through it with the handle of his weapon. Iridescent, its cracked shards fell through the tangle of branches below. We looked down to the faraway grass that lay forty or so feet beneath our brick cusp. "Hurry!"

As the good professor darted to the newly-made opening, he glanced back to find the bear locked in hand-to-hand combat with an astounding replica of himself. The snake tried to intercede, but John Urschel's clone threw him easily aside.

One giant punched the other, who minus the mask and clothing bore both the bear's face and bulk, and when he disappeared behind a large iron cylinder, a copy of the snake instead re-emerged, maskless, his hands poised in a form of martial arts.

"What the bloody hell!?" the real viper-masked henchman shouted, defending himself hastily from a flurry of blows. "Th' bastard looks like me—how's he doing that?"

"My God," Ms. Gooseberry said as she stumbled up by us. "That's Biggie Rubber. He's changing into them."

"He's shape-shifting," the professor muttered, astounded. Never before in our academic career had we seen something like this.

Noticing us, the real bear looked back, wide-eyed, and grimacing villainously he altered his colleagues. "Stop them!" he roared, and launching himself at us, his mighty feet pressed off against the floor.

Behind him, Mr. Rubber took the shape of the third man—the one who'd worn an armadillo face to cover his own. The real armadillo, caught off guard by the change in appearance, hopped back, tripping over a pipe.

And the next seconds flew by like a dream. Mr. Gant raised his weapon and shot at the bear, who took two bullets to the chest and kept on like an unstoppable juggernaut. Thinking quickly, the general then aimed away from him and at one of the three large tanks—potassium nitrate if I recall Mr. Evans's words.

When the bullet struck, the sound of shrieking metal burst across the factory. It was followed by a sudden and jolting boom as the tall, bolted canisters flourished in a glorious, technicoloured explosion. Sparks and heat incinerated the air as we flew back through the foliage, followed by the general who leaped after us. As we all descended through the whipping branches, we caught sight of Mr. Rubber as he metamorphosed into an image of Ms. Gooseberry, along with the screaming snake and armadillo who, behind him by a few feet too many, were set simultaneously aflame and devoured by the blast.

The bear was thrown farther out the window, slamming hard against the trunk of a broad spruce tree before crashing down to his doom. Meanwhile, the imitation Ms. Gooseberry leapt

after him, catching a higher branch and swinging up from it, disappearing seconds later into the night.

Our vision was hazy, and slowly the professor teetered to his feet. “Mister Gant... Viola,” he called out in a coarse voice. I could feel the jutting pain in his neck.

As he did, a boom from above shook the ground. Seconds later, it was followed by a spectacular blast of colours that paralleled the horrible beauty of the initial explosion. This second detonation sent bricks and mortar whirring through the air, and fireballs leapt from where the walls of the factory had broken open, igniting the canopies overhead. Mr. Gant redoubled from where he’d fallen to and grabbed us by the shoulder. “We need to leave! Now!”

Professor Moonly nodded quickly as a loud crack snapped through the air. Spirals of glittering light—fireworks that must have still been stored on the factory floor—shot out from the windows above, their wild embers dancing on the night’s current.

Ms. Gooseberry was the last to rise. When she did, she quickly passed us from behind, leaping over the bear’s lifeless body. Her delicate arms had been scratched and her face was splashed with soil and snow, though otherwise, she appeared to be alright. “We’ll take the path down this way,” she shouted back, turning to us. We caught sight of her flashing green eyes as the fire from the factory reflected in them; an instant later, they were gone and the three of us started back towards the path leading away from the building.

“Hold on a second—” Mr. Gant said, shaking his head. “Damn it. Other way! We’re on the wrong side of the factory.” He pointed off towards where the sound of crackling fire met with that of the rushing waters.

“He’s right,” Ms. Gooseberry admitted after a moment. “This side leads down to a steep cliff. We’ll need to cross back over, close to the blaze.” Her voice strained over the commotion, and we thought it shook too with anticipation of the dangerous trek.

In unison, we all started off the other way.

Sweltering and with strained limbs, we had come at last to the great and roaring Trisfal, which broke a distance off from over a steep drop. Its waters churned violently, glimmering red as they refracted the factory fire. For behind us lay that burning structure, its death knells pierced by brief chemical squeals and coloured clouds whenever fireworks went off.

Sweat and the stench of troubled breath met the now-frigid air, and black mud stained our pant legs, our coats, our gloves.

“We’ve made it,” Ms. Gooseberry called out, waving us over to a long, wooden bridge on which she’d stopped to catch her breath. Below it rushed the freezing waters. The professor and Mr. Gant followed quickly, their heels clattering against the planks below as the two of them overtook her by a few steps, stopping only when they realized that someone was waiting for them at the other end.

Not the bear, nor his henchmen. Instead, the groundskeeper, Mr. Hildred Evans stood in his tyrian-striped shirt and fleece coat, a long rifle aimed forward. Before we had time to consider our options, the man opened fire, sending a shot through Mr. Gant’s chest.

The general, shocked, collapsed over the side of the bridge and plunged into the water, and the investigator stumbled over our quivering wooden footing.

The professor, left alone, stood facing our new enemy as he approached. Professor Moonly’s eyes flicked over to where Mr. Gant’s body had disappeared down the rushing river, then over to Ms. Gooseberry. With few other options, he shouted back to her. “Viola—run!”

The investigator, stepping forth instead, reached for the gun at her hip and drew. The moment she did, the groundskeeper had reloaded and, raising his own weapon, he let off another round, blasting the firearm from her with incredible accuracy.

As Ms. Gooseberry cried out, clasping her right palm and gritting her teeth in pain, the man began to cross the bridge, making his way up to us. Amidst the sound of fireworks, Mr. Evans, his face set aglow, grinned cruelly. More expression left his eyes now than ever it would have been possible to imagine. He was a different person than who we’d met before. Indeed, a vastly more dangerous person.

“Who are you..?” Professor Moonly asked, horrified by the violent newcomer.

Still its startling shade of white, though unkempt now, the man’s hair hung loose over his scalp. With a free hand, he ran his fingers through it, throwing it to one side. Better-revealed, his olive green eyes were wild with a kind of madness the professor had seldom seen before. “Forgotten already, haff ve?” the groundskeeper said, his accent slipping into what was decisively German. “Zen for ze sake off ein proper introduction, guten Abend. Mein name ist VVyngfield Evans, provessional murtterer unt proud member of ze Freikorps. I am here to bring you to ze League, since ze ousers haffe obffiously...” he glanced up towards the combusting fireworks factory, “*mizerably* failed.”

“I won’t go with you,” Professor Moonly said. I could feel his hand tighten around the black dragon cane.

Laughing, the German paced up briskly towards us. He lowered his gun and, now within arm's reach, placed a hand on the professor's shoulder. "You truly haff no choice, mein friend."

With sudden momentum, the good professor pushed forward, swinging with the blunt end of his walking stick.

The German, laughing, pulled away, narrowly avoiding it and knocking the cane back with the butt of his gun. He swung the rifle in turn with both hands, smashing it against the professor's wrist and sending the dragon-headed device spinning onto the wooden footing of the bridge. It landed with a clatter.

Ms. Gooseberry meanwhile struck at the man from behind, but though she managed to disarm him, the German bent low and poised himself. In an instant, he threw his hand up in a closed fist and broke it with full force against Professor Moonly's chin, then torquing back, he landed a powerful hit on Ms. Gooseberry's nose. We all reeled backward, though the German quickly resumed his posture, drawing a dagger from his belt.

The good professor, stunned and struggling, dropped against the bridge's railing, his ribs catching against it and sending a sharp sting through us.

Professor, watch out!

With Ms. Gooseberry on the ground, clasping at her bleeding nose, the German stabbed ferociously at us, puncturing Professor Moonly's left shoulder twice with the thin steel dagger.

"Gah!" The professor, wincing, reached out and grabbed Mr. Evans by his throat, but overpowering us, the older man brought a severe hand up against our temple, and within the second, our limbs fell loose, bringing us halfway to unconsciousness.

We fell to the bridge, our muddy knees quivering.

"Are you ready to reconsider, Professor?" the German, VVyngfield huffed. He had taken up the rifle again, flinging it over his shoulder as he crouched down to our level. "Or vill I have to shoot zuh lovely federal investigator in zuh forehead to get you to start moving?"

Professor Moonly grimaced. A stream of watery red dripped down his left coat sleeve and our knuckles tightened against the cold wood below us. The dragon cane was less than a foot away. "No..! No—don't harm her. I'll go with you." Professor Moonly's blue eyes rose to meet with those of our captor. "I'll... go with you..."

"Good," the German said, nodding approvingly. He grabbed the professor by his shoulder and started to pull him up. "Let's get a move on, then."

As he tugged on us, the professor reached out and clasped at the dragon cane, and with his remaining strength swung it in an arc, forcing the angered German back.

He swore at us in his foreign language, and we twisted a dial on the cane, returning the sentiment. The dragon head snapped up with unlocking jaws, and bright blue flames shot from it, igniting the handles and floor of the bridge.

“Scheiße!” the man cursed as fire lashed around the railing. He lifted his gun and fired a shot, sending the wood near our feet exploding into the air.

In the confusion, the professor dropped the dragon cane and, bolting to his left, grabbed Ms. Gooseberry.

“What are you doing!?” she screamed as the daring Professor James Hubert Moonly, with all the force left in his good arm, threw her over the side of the bridge, jumping after her in the following seconds.

With a cold and dire splash, we were consumed by the churning waters of the Trisfal. They thrashed against our clothes, pushing through the fabric and biting at our skin. The professor gasped for air as he came up, disoriented.

From behind, the German paced across the bridge, bending down to clasp the dragon-headed walking stick. He then called, “Here!” through the frigid night. Moments later, he flung the device far over the bridge, towards where we were desperately trying to stay afloat. It landed with a splash and we barely managed to grab onto it. “You may be needing zis!” With that, the German turned and made his way off the bridge, hopping off the end of it and onto solid land. He looked back and through the biting flashes of water, we watched him wave a brief goodbye.

With this injury and the temperature of the water, I suspect there’s little time left before we go unconscious. We have to think of a way to save ourselves!

“Agreed!” the professor coughed, spurring out a mouthful of ice-water. We hastily peered around for Ms. Gooseberry and found her a short distance away.

Her hands thrown out, she was struggling to swim towards the side of the treacherous river.

“Viola!” Professor Moonly shouted, reaching out with his cane. “Grab on!”

She looked back, wide-eyed and with hair plastered all over her face. To see her so dishevelled—

“Now’s not the time, worm!” the professor gasped.

Ms. Gooseberry caught the end of the walking stick, and now together we floated towards the large, foreboding falls, their growing clamour signalling the approach of a deathly drop.

As the churning waters dragged us farther, we next tried to reach out for the jagged, speeding sides wherever muddy land passed us by. Our hand clasped twice against the thawed terra firma, tightening each time but sliding ultimately once and again. A futile, desperate effort as the end approached. Suddenly, a current dragged us down and we were lost to it.

Professor Moonly knew not what happened to Ms. Gooseberry, but the air was drowned out from our lungs, and the world vanished. The sounds dulled to a muffled chorus, and we felt a long jolt—downwards or upwards, for we were too disoriented to tell.

At last, there was a rush and a sudden, painful break against hard death.



Glaucus Atlanticus

Or so we assumed. Instead, after some time, Professor Moonly's eyes opened to the sight of a wheezing American, his left eye drooped and his right one centred on us. Blood leaked from several small holes in his coat. "Get... us... b... ck... manor..."

Dazed, we tried to sit up but were rattled by a harsh cough. Water sprang from our throat, searing the good professor's teeth and splashing down his chin. We could hardly breathe.

"Professor!" The general gritted his teeth in what appeared to be agony. He'd been shot, we recalled.

"Mister... Mister Gant. I'd assumed you were dead."

"Good to see you too..." the American parried in his gruff tone. "Can you... can you get us back to the manor? I don't..." He winced, holding off the pain. "Don't know my way around these damn forests."

"I—yes," the professor answered. "Where is Miss Gooseberry?"

"I'm here!" we heard a woman's cracking voice, coming from a short distance off. It loudened as the investigator stumbled closer. "I'm here."

The walk to the factory—down the long end of the cliff on which Professor Moonly's manor stood, through several kilometres of woods, and up again to the top of the Trisfal—had taken roughly an hour and a half. Our return journey, commenced with the greatest of haste, was achieved in just over an hour.

Hypothermic, exhausted, and on the verge of death, when we returned to the warm halls of our abode, the grimacing black of the early morning hours was clawing at its windows. Professor Moonly threw open the large twin doors leading to the suture room, engravings of golden chickadees swinging to either side as we limped by, licking our wounds.

"Get him on here," the bleeding professor shouted. "Hurry!"

Ms. Gooseberry, straining with us, tossed the American onto a padded examination table. More red drew from his injuries. "There's so much blood..." the investigator said, stained knuckles clenching around the rips in her coat. Her face was pale and her body, underneath, trembling.

“Viola...” the professor answered, struck by the sight. His voice grew gentle. “You should sit down.”

“I will,” the investigator said. Then, she looked down at Professor Moonly’s arm. “Do you need anything?” Her makeup had washed down her face and was half-frozen to her cheeks in a dark, indistinguishable mess. “You’re still hurt.”

“No,” Professor Moonly said. “Mister Gant’s injuries are worse. I’ll tend to him first.”

Professor, do you recall how to extract shrapnel from Palmsy’s *Guide to Medical Triage*?

“It’s difficult to think clearly.”

It’s alright. I’ll guide you through it.

We withdrew a bottle of rubbing alcohol and a long pair of forceps. With the pads of our fingers, the professor and I peeled back the jacket, noticing half a minute later that the investigator was still standing nearby, blankly watching us.

For several seconds then, we left the bleeding general to bring Viola to a slim velvet lounge chair. Returning after, we resumed our work.

Those sounds, almost familiar, came before anything else. A hushed roll of waves washing over the grit of the shore; a distant choir of songbirds. Blue pupils constricted as eyelids lifted over them, revealing to us the image of a pure white sky.

A beach surrounded us, half-frozen by the winter’s descent. When we rose from our knees, our feet broke past the pristine flesh of the banks. We looked around tiredly in the hope of discovering someone else, but instead we found ourselves alone, like pioneers trapped in a distant dream.

Without consensus, we stepped forward, towards the shallows of the ocean beyond the island. Concern churned inside my stomach once we had waded past the ebbing threshold, for lower and lower we descended until at last, the chilly grasp of water had consumed us.

These were the villainous tides of the Trisfal. They battered our body and immediately we remembered a piercing pain in our left shoulder. Then, there was light again. Blood leaked into the clear, beautiful blueness and rushing water sloshed in our lungs. When we looked up we saw silhouettes of large, gliding creatures. Intentionless, they danced along the water’s surface like angels or dragons.

With a sudden gasp, we appeared inside an engraved metal birdcage. Unlit, its golden rails reached up towards some distant point where we could only assume they converged. Beyond the

dim metal, a cloud of uncreated night lay interspersed with a thousand blinking eyes. While we watched them, waves of strobing sets began to shut, and in a matter of seconds, only one pair remained, centred on us. There in the midst of the darkness, we heard rain and wind.

Then, those last irises vanished, and a green, glowing machine at once replaced them. Its dust-drenched coils and rusty gears turned slowly, pumping out vapours in eased intervals. It was as if the invention, intricate beyond human capacity, was breathing. From the inside of its foggy glass chamber, a pair of hands pressed out and smeared against the moisture. The professor reached towards them, concerned for whoever was inside, and at last we brought ourselves closer. A body struggled against the casing, prying fruitlessly as from within, a face pleaded with us.

I could not imagine her with all her intricacies and human complications—not the pores of her skin nor the hair on her brows, the touch of her lips, the curve of her back. And yet I did not deny that it was Viola who stood inside the confines of the machine. Naked, her palms pressed again against its surface, and she watched us with those yearning emerald eyes. Her glasses were gone and instead we saw her shallow cheek bones, her breasts, her stomach, her thighs. Her natural whole revealed itself to us, though in a moment more, it was enveloped by dark grey wings.

Bushes of hair rushed up against the inside of the mechanism; cracking glass violently shattered in the next seconds, and the limbs of a strange monster burst forth, diffusing in their wide, unending arc.

Ourapteryx Sambucaria, the swallow-tailed moth. Different from its predecessors in both colour and size. A new evolutionary branch, perhaps.

We grasped at a portion of the beast's wings, squeezing and pulling at it. Wherever we tore, its cells regenerated and made it whole again. And so instead, looking back towards the machine, the professor noticed a dial that had not been there before.

On the outside of its circumference were dates, changing periodically. Our hand reached out towards the dial, stopping its next turn and forcing it in the other direction, towards the present moment. And when it landed there, the dial clicked.

We looked through the glowing vapour to where someone new occupied the inside of the machine. In that moment of realization, the walls of our cage collapsed around us.

“Professor!” we heard Ms. Gooseberry shout as she shook our right shoulder. Half her body knelt over us; her free hand lifted two fingers our jugular, desperately feeling for a pulse.

Professor Moonly’s eyes eased open and we stared up for a very long moment, aimlessly. Our sights unconsciously turned towards the blurred visage of someone we presumed to be the investigator, her face, perhaps, graver than it had ever been before. Her lips had parted halfway, bringing short, stressed breaths, and we felt the accompanying thrusts—two palms forced down against our chest in an attempt to restart our heart. Our heart..? Were we dead?

No. We jolted; sputtered.

The investigator looked back down, then withdrew. “Viola,” the good professor coughed.

Shocked, she stared at us with her wide, green eyes before leaning down and squeezing the professor in her arms. “You’re awake.” She drew herself back up and relayed a similar remark to Mr. Gant, who limped hurriedly towards the chair that Professor Moonly had collapsed onto.

The general’s chest was bandaged, though patches of red were still apparent on the dressings. In his hands, he held cotton pads and a bottle of rubbing alcohol.

Looking down to where cloths had been pressed up against his left shoulder, the professor at once realized they must have been for him.

“We thought you were gone,” the American said. Tired lines and dark bags marked his cheeks and eyes respectively. His beard was dirty and his blood-drained face had seemed to be scratched by tree branches.

“Mister Gant,” Professor Moonly croaked. “You look... anaemic. You should drink... some fluids.”

The American laughed, a harsh cough interrupting him. He ran a thick sleeve over his mouth, lips parting. “You first.”

“After your operation on Mister Gant, you collapsed,” Ms. Gooseberry explained from beside us, staring back sympathetically. “You had no pulse either.” She looked back to the general, who nodded in confirmation.

The professor, uncharacteristically quiet, brought his eyes up at last towards the investigator. Her cheeks were wet though we saw no tears, and her right hand bore a bluish bruise from where Mr. Evans had shot the weapon out of it. Still, they were only details. At least she was safe.

Ms. Gooseberry, catching our careless gaze, turned towards us shortly after Mr. Gant walked off to retrieve something from the side of the room. Reaching out, her fingers grazed the

professor's cheek, and in the brief moment before they left us, we watched her, a slight frown drawn over Professor Moonly's lips.

Then the moment ended, and Professor Moonly glanced down to where a stream of dried red and muddy grit was dashed over his jacket. It had spilled onto the cushions of the chaise lounge chair. "Well... This was all a rather unexpected turn of events," he said after a long pause.

"Unexpected's a damn understatement," Mr. Gant retorted, returning with a reddened facial tissue pressed to his nose. He collapsed briefly after onto a chair beside us. "An award-winning giant and his pals in masks come to capture us right when we meet up with Biggie Rubber, who's posing as dear ol' dad. Plus Mister Rubber can apparently shape-shift into other people, and, by the way, the groundskeeper's some kind of German mercenary." He glanced over, shaking his head. "Viola filled me in."

"Freikorps," Professor Moonly noted. "I believe VVyngfield said he belonged to the Freikorps." He pushed himself up a little in his seat, ignoring the ache in his arm.

The American meanwhile sputtered, taking a cloth to his mouth and wiping away smudges of red. "I don't care what he is. You could write a damn novel with all this nonsense."

"I don't understand how Biggie Rubber could have transformed the way he did though," Ms. Gooseberry said grimly. "In fact I've never seen anything like it."

"It's got me stumped too," the American admitted.

But the professor remained silent. For something in our dream had sparked a thought. And perhaps, we thought, that thought might spark an answer.



A MULTIVERSAL INTERMISSION



The Curious Case of Dr. Quantum

“Once more, then.”

Very well.

Summary: A sample of matter was placed into Machine 1. The machine’s chamber was closed, and the containing area became airtight. The switch labelled “U₀ Feedback” was set to the “on” position and a black initializing button was pressed. Now activated, four vents labelled “vacuum inductors” initiated particle distortions within the chamber. These distortions led to a continuous increase in the vibration speed of matter within the chamber until that matter had reached terminal velocity. This matter excitation was measured via the machine’s built-in prismic interferometer.

A unique and unidentifiable compound was added via Machine 1’s secondary faucets, which generated a fractal rupturing of molecular bonds and, shockingly, an increase beyond terminal velocity—super-terminal pieces of matter then accelerated, according to conducted calculations, to meet light speed, and in a sudden and defined moment of physical chaos, all matter collided with itself.

This process appeared to break down the initial elements inside the chamber, such to the point that even at the presumed atomic level, neutrons, protons, and electrons were scattered from each other. This occurred in an immeasurably small period of time, the span of which no instrument to date is capable of measuring. After the period, matter reappeared at an elementary level. Machine 1 then reassembled the numerous free-floating particles in specific permutations, producing a biological clone of the original sample.

Note: at some point during this process, new matter would have had to have been introduced to create the clone, but as previously noted the chamber was perfectly sealed. If we are to hold certain natural laws true, then this means that any new matter or energy could not have come from this physical realm.

Secondary note: during each trial, there was always a sudden generation of gravity within Machine 1, but components of the machine appeared to be dampening its effects outside of a localized area. I have constructed a replica, Machine 2, which has produced similar gravity wells in its own test runs. However, these new waves have been demonstrably greater and have

led to a critical failure of the cloning process. Sample-wise, it seems that biological matter that is placed inside Machine 2 is always destroyed, or at the very least dematerialized. This also occurs for non-biological matter—yet another key difference between it and Machine 1, which does not affect non-biological entities whatsoever.

Tertiary Note: I suspect Machine 2's anomaly to be a by-product of the change in chemicals used, though it might also be caused by a built-in failsafe meant to counter or dispose of excess radiation produced when the super-terminal matter collides with itself. If that is the case, however, it leads me to wonder why Machine 2 destroys material whereas Machine 1 clones it. Have I replicated the design incorrectly..?

Conclusion: As noted, Machine 2 can accept non-biological matter so long as it isn't a part of the machine to begin with. That said, anything one wants gone is worth throwing in. While Machine 1 creates, Machine 2 destroys. And indeed, while I think I understand them both better now, there are still portions of both the original device and my duplicate which remain incomprehensible to me.

Professor Moonly, sleeves rolled up past his forearms, stared down at the last of his lengthy notes, then back up at two separate, though eerily similar contraptions. Rutherford had been stumped, and Lewis had never written back. Perhaps the questions of how one of these machines could create entirely new objects while the other could obliterate them in an instant had led the latter chemist to the worst kinds of introspection. Perhaps it would also lead the first to them in time. What then would such questions do to us?

“That’s enough superstition,” the good professor tutted, holding up his papers. These were our conclusions on the process of the cloning machine, along with reverse-engineered blueprints for the construction of a second, similar one. All calculations accounted for, the process laid out in front of us was the only feasible way in which either device could function. “We haven’t missed anything on the second version, have we?”

All fuel cells are charged, the arrays have been bolted, and the, er... what did we call them again—singularity chords? They’ve been spliced at their midsections. Professor, may I clarify our results?

“Certainly,” Professor Moonly said as he walked over to a bench on the library’s first floor. There he set down the diagrams and written explanations.

So we place some insignificant object inside Machine 1, which is our original machine.

“Yes, and it must be a biological object.”

Because the machine only affects biological things.

“Quite right,” Professor Moonly said before clarifying, “First, it identifies the largest concentration of biological matter. Otherwise, any kind of contamination such as bacteria or flakes of dead skin would also be cloned en masse.” The good professor glanced far up for a moment, towards where scaffolding and tarps had been crudely erected. Reconstruction efforts were underway after the incident with the dinosaur had destroyed nearly half of the room. Though its corpse was removed, the Jurassic titan had left our once-beautiful library scarred and tender.

So let’s say we put a human hair inside of it. Then, when we turn it on, the device excites the matter within the hair, breaking it apart.

“Indeed. Machine 1 seems to dematerialize it entirely before analyzing its sub-atomic information.”

Now in order to disintegrate the object, an unknown chemical is first added.

“Correct. Although the nature of the chemical we found in Machine 1’s auxiliary canisters still remains a mystery, I did manage to research other substances that matched the majority of its properties. The most likely candidate was a rare sap extracted from the root of the *Rosacea Karlsbadensis rugo*, known commonly by those who study it as thiotimoline. According to my estimates, yes, using this sap in Machine 2 as a substitute for the trace chemical currently belonging to Machine 1 would succeed in speeding up the matter. However, it would also cause a phase shift in each individual particle, pushing them all through some kind of temporal filter.” Professor Moonly turned to his left, pacing past a shelf against which his dragon-headed cane rested. “In other words, in a very small fraction of a second, the matter would transition to points outside of time before disappearing entirely.”

And yet, Machine 2 was meant to be an exact replica of Machine 1—a *cloning* device, not a matter-destroying one. Why the difference?

The professor nodded back. “Well let’s start at the beginning. Originally, I figured there was no sense in tampering with Machine 1, which I’d found to be quite finicky, breaking down with even the slightest of adjustments. Therefore, I reverse-engineered it bolt for bolt with the best of care, and was left with a new machine I could tinker with, worry-free. Now the physical parts were easy enough, but as I said, Machine 2 did not possess the prior’s unique chemical reserves.

Hence my substitution of thiotimoline. This, I assume, is what's causing the problem. Of course, there's something more to it..."

Oh?

"Yes, but please," the professor motioned. "Continue with your analysis."

Very well. The matter next accelerates into itself, colliding and creating...

"What should be tantamount to an incredible explosion of force." Professor Moonly fell to one knee, taking up a wrench and aiming for a bolt at the base of the contraption.

How incredible exactly?

"By my calculations, Machine 2's energy output would be enough to destroy virtually all of Grey Owl."

And yet despite this, the process is trapped entirely inside the machine... Hm. Well, in your secondary note, you pointed out an extreme increase in gravity.

"And?"

It might be that gravity is generated by the machine as a sort of emergency counteraction to the large amount of energy produced. A kind of gravity shell would work to bind that energy within the chamber, hence preventing it from escaping and wreaking havoc.

"However..." the professor prompted once more.

However, a contest of two such forces—extreme energy and extreme gravity—would end up leading to, well, I'm not exactly sure what to call it.

"A collapse of matter, time, and light into a single point. Some sort of..." Professor Moonly scratched his chin, then returned to tightening the metal knob, "hole in space-time, I suppose."

Like a vacuum where all the excess energy could disappear into.

"Precisely," the professor answered, rising. "I think this sudden burst of gravity is what ultimately stabilizes the process. Somehow, either the machine itself or an impurity in the thiotimoline prevents the newly-made matter from being absorbed, while allowing the excess energy to dissipate completely."

And what are we left with?

"In Machine 1, we would be left with the original and its genetic replica—the hair and the man to whom it belonged. However," Professor Moonly murmured. "Machine 2 completely destroys the hair. No original, nor any clone of it is left."

And this is due to the failure of either the machine or its thiotimoline.

"Yes, evidently."

It does, however, bring up another interesting question. Taking into account the space-time distortion that occurs within Machine 2, along with the molecular disintegration, what's to say that the hair hasn't simply been removed from its place in time?

"Ah... Go on," the professor coaxed me, smiling briefly.

Perhaps it has merely been destroyed, yes. Or perhaps the displaced hair has been moved to another point in time.

"And so you mean to say that instead of Machine 2 engaging in a failed cloning process, some form of time transferral is actually occurring?" Professor Moonly asked.

With the explosion of power and increase in gravity, it seems logical to assume that we might very well be bending Minkowski space.

"A manifold of space and time, yes." The good professor's eyes flashed. "Distorted first by the explosion of power, and then again in the opposite direction by the gravity shell, a 'black hole' so to speak—like a pebble being dropped through the surface of a pond. First we see that where the pebble pushes through, a long well follows in its wake. But after the ripple in the water dies, the well is filled again and anything in it disappears back under the pond's surface."

So in this case what we have is a ripple in the universe, made whenever matter disappears through Machine 2?

"Precisely," the professor suddenly nodded, "and that is what I've been mulling over for these past few days." He raised a pointed finger, the wrench flinging from his hand carelessly. "What if our replica of the cloning machine is in fact a time machine?"

One that tears open our dimension and catapults things from it into another?

"Indeed."

But how would we prove such a farfetched thing?

The Professor nodded slowly. "That's the question." He looked down to a small knob he'd installed on the device—our Machine 2.

What is it, exactly?

"You'll recall that to some extent I was able to tamper with the original machine during our trials with the dinosaur bone. I discovered a rudimentary pattern in the way the machinery established its cloning periods. As one of my tests with Machine 1, I attached a means by which we could control the stage of development our clone appeared at within the chamber. To put it shortly," he patted the glass casing of the original device, "we could make a one-year old clone, or a thirty-second year old clone, or a four-hundred year old clone."

But what does this have to do with Machine 2?

“Once I had completed a few more calibrations, I grafted the same system to Machine 2, suspecting that I might be able to control where—or when—items inside it were sent to if indeed a controlled time distortion was occurring. However, there was no exact way to do this, as ultimately all of my attempts resulted in the mere disappearance of the items. So far, I’ve tried calibrating the settings to send things into the future and past, as far forward as the year 2000 and as far back as the Mesozoic Era.”

What sorts of items have you sent?

“What was there now?” the professor scratched his chin. “There was a small toy I picked up at Paire’s Parlour—a figurine of a man holding up two hats, which I mistakenly sent to 2000. I dialled back the controls and sent a checker bowl full of hot porridge to tomorrow morning. Then, I attempted to relocate an old closet broom to ten minutes ago, though I still haven’t found it.” He paused, then sighed. “If only we had a better way of discerning how these machines work.”

The only other ways would be to ask either the machine’s creator or its subject.

“And we’ve no clue about the creator.”

Which leaves only...

“The subject.”

The professor and I shared a humble moment of silence, standing in front of the twin contraptions and wondering just what their subjects underwent.

“I’m genuinely surprised you’ve found the time to tinker with that thing—especially considering your situation.” The voice was familiar. Ms. Gooseberry stood behind us.

The professor turned to her, eyes skimming the investigator’s thin, attractive figure and coming to rest on the familiar lines of her expression. Something resounded in our chest, and the professor’s first words caught in his cheek for a moment. Then, with a smile he shrugged and his right shoulder rose a little higher than his left. “What situation would that be?”

The investigator frowned grimly. “Being hunted by the League, of course!”

“I’m not being hunted by the League.” The professor shook his head. “Hunts imply that the hunted must necessarily die.”

Ms. Gooseberry sighed, anticipating a tangent.

But there was no tangent. Only sound reasoning. “The men who pursued us to the fireworks factory held us at gunpoint, yes, but they did not shoot, nor imply that they would.”

“They didn’t shoot because you told them the air was combustible.” Viola crossed her arms.

“I only told them that well after they’d entered the room.” Professor Moonly put down his wrench. “Even when that fiend of a man, VVyngfield, threatened you and shot Mr. Gant, he insisted on keeping me alive.” He rattled the glass casing of Machine 1 with his knuckles. “Because of this, I can safely assume that... well, I’m safe.” Then, his brows lowered from their presumptuous posture. “You and Mister Gant on the other hand face increasing danger with each second you spend near to me.”

A silence lingered between the two for half a moment.

“I said it last night and I’ll say it again now. It’s best if you leave Grey Owl City.”

“Mister Gant can hardly move,” the investigator answered, “and I’m not going anywhere.”

“I know medical professionals who owe me favours,” the good professor countered. “They will happily help transport him. As for you...” His blue eyes narrowed. “Why stay?”

“Because whatever is going on here,” Ms. Gooseberry answered us, “I could never allow you to face it alone.” She smirked subtly. “Besides, I’m an investigator. Naturally, when I begin a case, I like to see it through to its end.” Carefully, Viola removed an old chart from the pocket of her dress, holding it up to us. “Now, do you remember the textbook I discovered at the Rubbers’s shoppe?”

The professor nodded, his eyes narrowing on the familiar piece of paper.

“There was a map placed inside a secret pocket within it.” She showed us. “I’d originally thought it belonged to Thomas Rubber, but as recent events suggest, its true owner was more likely his brother, Biggie.”

Professor Moonly nodded complacently, watching as Viola tapped the sentence written just below the words ‘Grey Owl City’. “I’d like to know how you figured out that ‘Human knowledge compiled’ would elicit a reaction from Biggie Rubber.” Her eyes, like those of an inquisitor, pried us open.

“To be fair,” Professor Moonly held his hands up defensively, “I went through the notes in your room long before we had our conversation aboard the S.S. Takliwa.”

Ms. Gooseberry frowned, then shook her head. “I suspected as much.” Then, her green eyes narrowed. “How did you manage to tie it to Biggie Rubber?”

“Well,” Professor Moonly pondered, his arms lowering to either side, “it was more of a guess than anything, though an educated one nonetheless. The textbook we discovered in the shoppe—the one with the map inside—it was the first and foremost curiosity.” The good

professor then thought back. “I began all assumptions there. Tiny Rubber was no fan of the natural sciences, so ownership was left to either Tommy or Biggie. Tommy was a tinkerer, yes, but he was also a wholehearted entrepreneur, one who had little time for tasks other than helping run the shoppe and his rather ‘liberal’ escapades.”

The investigator nodded in turn. “Alright, but that’s not enough to say that the book belonged to Biggie.”

“Correct. However, it did inspire some thought into the subject. When I discovered the transcript between you and Tiny Rubber, I actually entertained the idea that the textbook might have belonged to him instead.”

Ms. Gooseberry frowned with curiosity. “To Tiny? What made you think that?”

“Two things—first, Mister Rubber seemed to immediately deny that his second son, Biggie, could have ever owned the book, but more so, he pointed its ownership to Tommy. This appeared to be fairly reasonable if one believed that Biggie Rubber was in fact a simpleton, but it had the added benefit of masking another possibility with an overwhelmingly common-sense answer. If Tommy, a dead man, owned the textbook, then Tiny, if the book in fact belonged to him, would have at once removed any suspicion from himself. Then, neither you nor the police would have been able to tie him to whatever else was discovered inside that textbook.”

“Particularly, the map of Grey Owl City,” Ms. Gooseberry said.

“Correct,” Professor Moonly answered. “The contents of the textbook were of importance too, but I’ll get to that later. For now, the only other piece of evidence I gleaned from your transcript was Tiny Rubber’s reluctance to withdraw the insurance monies he’d legally been granted. It made me wonder why even after your quelling his fears of police prosecution, he’d still choose to skirt the issue. Perhaps, I thought, it was because he couldn’t touch the money.”

“And this led you to suspect that this Tiny Rubber was an impostor?”

“Not at all. From what I read, this man had all the behaviours and mannerisms of Tiny. However, at a later date, I visited Brittle’s Bakery and spoke with Mister and Missus Brittle, who told me a little more about Tiny’s relationship with his sons. Thomas had nearly complete access to his father’s financial records, but his brother, Biggie, never did. It wouldn’t have been a stretch to think that Tommy could have leaked some of that information through mere conversation with his brother, but the more direct details—particularly figures of profits and funds, lists of documents, and signatures—things any insurance provider would ask for before paying out...”

“Were kept in a safe.”

“Which after the explosion went directly to the Grey Owl Police.”

The investigator nodded. “And since Biggie Rubber likely didn’t know his father’s business signature, it would have made it next to impossible to withdraw insurance. Biggie Rubber would have no way of forging a signature, no way of confirming revenues for his father’s business, and no way of accessing his money.”

“Not that he needed it, Professor Moonly went on, placing a palm on the table beside us and leaning on it. “He knew where his father kept the monies he’d been holding for the League. And from there, it was only a matter of stealing them—”

“From the Old Grey Bank.”

“And replacing them with a letter.”

“The letter in the safe deposit box?”

“Indeed.” Professor Moonly nodded wholeheartedly. “This part is a little less obvious, though if true, it cements Biggie’s position in this whole conundrum.” He raised a finger. “The League would have never let us know about its own weaknesses after the night at Boullerolli’s—what logic would there be in telling us that we had scattered its forces and left it vulnerable? But Biggie apparently knew, and furthermore he knew that because of our disruption at the masquerade, the League would have its eye on us. Hence the trip to Hong Kong had the potential to serve as a distraction. While the League was busy chasing us, he took the chance to begin his land purchases.”

“But Mister Flinch was the one who told us about the safe deposit box with the letter in it,” the investigator pointed out.

“I know.” Professor Moonly nodded. “Recall what Biggie told us back in the fireworks factory, about his meeting with the tall, hooded man who helped him sabotage his device, a man who said he had ‘others’ willing to carry out his will.”

“I see...” Viola’s green eyes rose. “And the hooded man—perhaps the leader of the League?”

“My thoughts exactly. Mr. Flinch pointing us to that letter corroborates Biggie’s story entirely, since it suggests that the League’s leader used Andrew to bait us into discovering, and then pursuing, the letter’s contents. Perhaps there were others involved in the plot, but in any case the clique would have had to have been fairly small—the rest of the League, after all, was meant to suspect nothing.”

“Right,” said Viola, “and because the leader of the League was the one who wanted the shoppe destroyed in the first place, if his own organization ever discovered his plans, it would likely ruin him.”

Professor Moonly, pushing himself off from the table, moved on to Machine 2, fiddling with the switches grafted to its casing. “When Biggie Rubber began speaking about the night he met that man, I couldn’t help but occupy myself almost entirely with the question of ‘why’. Why would the League’s leader want to strike at his own people? What purpose would it serve?”

“It’s impossible to tell,” Ms. Gooseberry said finally. “But what does the map I found inside the textbook have to do with any of it?”

“Oh right,” Professor Moonly answered. “I said I’d get to that, didn’t I? Take a look at this.” He removed a book from beneath a nearby desk.

“The New Evolution of The Ourapteryx Sambucaria,” Ms. Gooseberry read aloud. “What is it exactly?”

“A bit of reading I’ve been catching up on.” The professor offered a spirited smirk. “Ourapteryx Sambucaria is the binomial nomenclature for the common swallowtail moth,” he explained. “In essence, this is a guide to the spontaneous genetic shifts and cellular regeneration of the swallowtail moth.”

“And in layman’s terms?” Ms. Gooseberry asked.

“It explains the process by which caterpillars become either butterflies or a moths—particularly, how once the cocoon is formed, the insect digests itself, transforming into a soup of enzymes and proteins, then generates imaginal discs from which it constructs its new body.”

“So in essence, how it evolves,” Ms. Gooseberry reasoned.

“Indeed.” Professor Moonly handed her the book. “Of particular interest is the fact that the swallowtail moth carries in it a recessive gene that allows for not only the evolution, but near-instantaneous regeneration of its body.”

“Regeneration?”

“Specifically a rebirth of itself, unhindered by genetic blueprints. If it wanted to, the moth could generate a straight line of cells, or the wing of a butterfly, or the eye of a frog. These same traits were discussed in depth within Biggie Rubber’s textbook, *Scopes and Tropes of Microchemistry*.”

“So then this was the process by which Biggie Rubber was able to... what, exactly, remake new bodies for himself?”

“Yes,” Professor Moonly responded, unnerved by his own answer. “I don’t exactly know how...” the good professor’s eyes shifted over briefly towards the twin machines, “but the hooded man must have found a way to refine a process that Biggie Rubber was already working on. This process, in turn, would allow him to take on the appearance of other human beings by rearranging his own molecular bio-structures.”

Ms. Gooseberry nodded slowly. “I see... And the map?”

Our attentions shifted once more. “Under its title was written ‘Human knowledge compiled; beside that, if I remember correctly, was a diagram of a moth. It appears that Biggie almost zealously pursued his science, though I admit I’ve no clue as to what the map itself might symbolize.”

“Perhaps it didn’t symbolize anything,” Ms. Gooseberry suggested. “It might have just been a family heirloom.”

“That could be,” Professor Moonly said, placing a hand on his cheek and wiping the sweat off of it, “though the penned-in streets are a curiosity.”

“Agreed,” the investigator said. “Perhaps they are—”

Before she could continue, the lights in the manor flashed brightly, then in a single, sudden moment, gave out. Around us, the library descended into darkness.

Only Viola and the professor, along with the nearby scenery, remained lit by the greenish glow of the twin machines.

“The power’s gone out,” Ms. Gooseberry said, concern caught in her voice.

The professor looked towards the library door. “Viola, we should go. Once we’re outside in the hall, head to the left and take the third door down. We can escape through its window.”

“Escape?” The investigator asked as she began to move. “You think the League is here?”

The professor nodded. “I do. We need to hurry.”

Ms. Gooseberry made her way towards the door, her footsteps echoing against the unlit walls of the library. One after the other, they drew on like long, unabashed blows.

The professor, meanwhile, lingered a moment, reaching out for the dragon-headed walking stick. He felt along the side of the bookshelf in front of him with haste until his knuckles caught the device’s hard surface. As he held it up, we finally realized the odd feeling that had washed over us. “Do you feel that..?” the good professor asked curiously.

I do.

Nearly imperceptible before, now it was as if a sort of gripping vertigo had overcome us, leaving a pounding in our head and the walls of the library warping. Professor Moonly lowered his cane, and when he did, the movement felt slow and forced.

I think we should catch up to Viola, quickly!

“Agreed,” the good professor said, turning back at last to the door.

But when he did, his eyes met with another pair—those of a tall, powerful man draped in a dark cloak, his face partially obscured by the hood he wore, which was patterned with small Sierpinski triangles.

“You—” Professor Moonly began to shout, but a thick hand moved to cover his mouth, burying its fingertips into his cheeks. He swung his cane up, but another hand checked it, clasp around his wrist and tightening until, in brutal pain, we were forced to release our weapon. All at once, events sped up again.

Without word or relent, the hooded man pushed us backwards past the shelves and towards Machines 1 and 2. With a sudden shove, he threw us into the open chamber of the first machine, slamming its glass door shut. We heard a solid clank as steel locks fell into place. Constricted now within it, the professor gasped in terror, slamming his fists against the hardened threshold. “Release me!”

From the outside, our enemy ignored us, tampering instead with the device’s panel, pressing buttons and twisting knobs. Professor Moonly strained to see what he was doing, but with little room to turn, all seemed hopeless. “You don’t understand!” he tried calling out again, but no answer came. Instead, in finality, the hooded figure pressed a cube-like black button. Rigid, it slid into the metal rind of the machine, and a familiar whir began to sound.

What are we going to do!?

“I’m thinking, worm,” Professor Moonly answered, anxious eyes darting back and forth. He slid a finger quickly along the edge of the glass. Useless. He crouched down to what little degree he could afford and slammed his fist against one of the panels. Nothing came loose.

“James,” said the man from behind a pointed beard.

With desperate eyes, Professor Moonly looked up.

“You will meet me here in three days’s time.” He held up a note with a location written on it, then walked back to a desk where he placed it down. “No harm will come to you before then. I’ve guaranteed your safety...” He lingered, his attention caught by something, and bending over he picked up our dragon cane, appraising it with his cold eyes. “I’m glad you kept this gift, James.”

But the professor was barely listening. “Let me out, you madman!”

“It’s impossible,” the hooded figure answered back. He drew close again and placed a palm against the glass, the glowing light from the machine illuminating his dastardly expression. “Once started, this machine’s process cannot be stopped.”

Upon hearing his words, Professor Moonly ceased his struggle. He knew the hooded man was correct; in all of our trials, we had never once been able to halt the cloning process. Still, the professor gathered some of his former composure, enough to ask amidst the now blatant buzzing, “You wish for me... for me to meet you... You’re implying I’ll survive this?”

The hooded man smirked. “Perhaps.”

“And how did you survive *your* demise?”

At this, he grinned, and turning away, spoke the words, “Mi pare rinascere.” His footsteps echoing throughout the library, our mysterious enemy soon disappeared into the shadows, leaving us to our fate.

The professor could feel his skin beginning to tingle. Seconds later, it was stinging. Sweat streamed from his face, drawn out from his pores by the force of the machine. “I... suspect it will only be a short while before... we’re wholly atomized,” Professor Moonly said, cringing at the strain on his body. He collapsed to one knee and the air left his lungs.

Isn’t there anything we can do!?

Eyes shut tight, the professor shook his head. The sound grew and grew, turning into a monstrous roar. I could feel it now too, the horrible, tearing agony.

“Professor!” A voice broke through the commotion of the machine. It was Ms. Gooseberry’s. Had she returned for us? “Tell me how to stop it!”

Fists crashed against the glass.

Professor Moonly tried at once to open his eyes, but our choroids were already beginning to dissolve. The room in front of us was blurry, and the last sight that met us was of our bleeding palms. From then, all that was left was the horrible pain and the distorting sounds of fracturing bones, bursting organs, a ceasing heart. Molecule by molecule, we were devoured by death.



Chapter 0.4

To call upon those mythic muses might seem heretical if by the hand of science we had so boldly sought our answers. Therefore I will take the fair-haired creatures's place and navigate the wondrous things we saw.

A bright light greeted us, but there was no completing sound. We rose from where we sat, but no floor met our soles. We existed now in a pure white abstraction of—could this even be called reality anymore? Perhaps as long as we perceived it, it might as well have been real. Factually, however, there could be no precise answer.

The professor patted his longcoat, feeling its soft fabric waver against his palms. It was torn in several places where the bullets had passed through, but there were no discernable injuries on his body. He shrugged the coat off and it fell away, disappearing into the whiteness.

Where are we anyway, and what happened to the others?

“I don't know what happened to them...” my colleague paused, picking up the cane he had dropped. “If we're lucky, they're dead. As for us, it seems we've made it to the end of time and space.” He slid the black dragon cane through a loop in his belt, then reached back and drew up a dark, patterned hood over his head. Blue eyes narrowed at the emptiness around us in their usual, cruel fashion. It was unnerving, this vast wasteland of a universe.

“Oververse,” the excellent professor corrected. There was a strange, primordial burning in his heart; we would feel it throughout the rest of our journey. “This is the original universe, parent to our own.” He lingered on his words, taking a careful step forward. “Remain vigilant. No measure of science could account for what we might discover here.”

And so we walked. For minutes or eons; impossible to tell, our thoughts strayed and returned a thousand times over, as if they'd been long, living dreams. Then, at last, we arrived at a place where the blankness gave way to a snowy terrace, pierced by a sea of trees. They were tall and leafless, fractal, stretching like pale spines into the air. Past these things we saw a dimming landscape over which the twilight climbed. Mountains meanwhile towered to such ends that their distant peaks kissed the clouds, and flocks of black swallows circled them from afar.

We moved forward, the professor and I, spurred on by our fascination at it all. But as my colleague lifted his foot, his shoe knocked against a small object, and we were forced to look

back, then down towards the frigid ground where that curious thing lay. Halfway buried in the snow, there was a small marble. Slowly, we bent over, picking it up, and to our surprise we found encased in its boundaries a white castle—little, of course, no larger than the professor's nail, though made with incredible detail. Placing a finger at the top of the glass, just over one of the castle's parapets, we glanced farther in and saw a multitude of creatures, small and scattered throughout its halls. Alas, they moved—churning within the glass of the toy marble, like speckles of bright dust!

What should we do?

The great and calculating professor rose again, this time with the marble clasped in his left hand. He looked once more towards the snowy landscape, eyes rising to the copper silhouette of one mountain, much larger than the others. With certainty, he then addressed my question. "We will take them to heaven."

The ascent up the highlands was incredible at first. Storms battered us from an impossibly clear sky, their frigid assaults gripping the professor's clothes and skin. Blood red, our knuckles clashed with gnashing ice, and many times we lost our footing in the sleet. Over and again, we slipped kilometres down into the bottoms of valleys and tooth-like crags.

Falls that should have killed us left us broken but alive, while now above, the sun, exposed in its entirety, rose like a lion, its mane of fire protracting the day.

Our lives escaped us over and again as we furthered our climb, those familiar emotions of hopelessness and fear, of hatred and desire all eventually relenting to the brutal passage. Shades flittered by, shadows lost in the light, and through the visions they inflicted on us, we lived a thousand times over.

In intervals, we stopped to rest, listening to the sounds of singing in the distance. But whenever we rose again, the professor's parched tongue twisted in the cavity of his mouth, and his muscles restricted as fingernails scraped at the base of our yielding neck.

Our minds were haunted too by a certain agony; for whatever the worth of our struggle up the mountain, it seemed we'd spent an eternity toiling against this natural titan. And so it was that a pestilence of insomnia pursued us throughout the nightless world, and in our most desperate moments, it was not a great heave that took us by the heart. Instead, those tears that married the air were made without blinking, brought on by a sad, middling hollowness in our heart.

In that final moment, when at last we reached the summit, whatever traces of arrogance we'd worn before had at last been stripped from us. Our spirit had been stripped from us.

Yet some spark of life dallied in the professor who, like a brave theologian, let his hands drift down and gazed a distance off, captured by the crux of meeting eve and morn. For in the art of the arching sky danced vivid constellations, and from our place at the mountain's zenith, it was as if in them, all of history could be seen.

Where we'd traversed to, the atmosphere was warm enough to call comfortable. Here in some archaic moment beyond all memory, an ashen grove had sprung forth. We stood now among it, far atop the crying tundra, and under our heels, roots grew carelessly in the pulsing light. In intervals, there were canopied trees as well, each with grim, grey feathers for leaves, while puddles of a gem-white water reflected my colleague's image.

The professor, turning to one of them, regarded himself in droll admiration. A frayed beard now hung from his face, grey and pointed at its end. Lines wrought themselves across his cheeks, and his eyes—once a cold, deep blue—had finally glazed with age.

At last, that great man drew the marble with the castle set in it. Putting it down, he eyed it intently. Blinked once. Then, everything had changed.

The grove and the day-night and the mountain had gone. Now, we stood in a grand chamber. In front of us, a flowering throne sat cast in silver and gowned in flowing sapphire. Beyond it, long drapes ran down like waterfalls from the circumference of a towering ceiling, and between us and the throne, a well in the floor showcased the entirety of our knowable universe.

The roars of suns and nebulae—sounds of an impending chaos—struck our senses. Frightened, my colleague instinctively reached for his cane, drawing it a moment later.

Where are we?

The excellent professor shook his head. "I do not know."

"The sum of human knowledge lives within this man," a voice bellowed. It was as if it had been born from thousands of twisting whispers. "And despite it, he does not know where he is."

The professor and I glanced around, alarmed by our new company. Yet the throne room was empty. "Who's there?" the great professor asked. His lips perked, revealing a disapproving grimace. "Show yourself," he commanded.

And as commanded, It did.

A flash of sudden fire erupted like nothing we had ever seen before, singeing the chamber and igniting the warping drapes. We heard a cry like that of a feral animal, then felt a deep, terrifying gale. As if the gates of the Inferno itself had drawn themselves ajar, shadows lashed out like bursting whips, striking the floor and leaving it horribly scarred. The stench of ash fluttered on the ripping winds, then through the professor's nostrils. Simultaneously the tiles below us shattered, piercing through my colleague's worn shoes and cutting his already calloused feet. From the epicentre of the blast, a pair of large, arching wings broke out, exalted by the fiery air.

And we saw our God.



Paperball

Would you look at that? Now isn't it beautiful..? A bone-white sun higher up than even our imaginations could take us. How far away do you think it is from here? I'm sure there's a book buried somewhere in the professor's library that has the answer. I myself don't know...

You seem almost perturbed, frowning passively like that. I could take us away from this place if it's too dry for your liking. After all, I suppose deserts aren't the best places to be having a conversation like this.

There. Better? A field of marigolds, their yellow bulbs blossomed under an August sky. On top of it, we still have the luxury of seeing the sun—something, I think, taken too often for granted. For instance, how often do you lose yourself inside a maze of pages, its warmth left searching for you? How long have you forsaken the shadows that such a pretty sphere could cast for the black of ink instead? You bury yourself in the books you read.

Perspectives though can change with time, and you might even find amusement in the fact that the sun reminds me more than anything of a finely-smoothed paper ball. Immaculate and free from flaw, it stands thus the forebear of vital philosophies. And though some of the children who watch it too long turn to blindness and set their good works awry, do not mistake my words, for it is utterly invaluable. The sun, after all, lightens many aspects of our lives. Without it, we as we are would die. The leaves of trees would wither, the waves of oceans freeze, and the yellow of our pretty marigolds grow pale. In the absence of its art, we would instead find only desolation.

So herein lies a plea for paper—particularly, this one. *Humphrey Lamaray's Studies of the Knowable Universe*. Here's the answer in question: the distance between Earth and Sol oscillates between 147 and 152 million kilometres. Missing the flowers, are we? Standing in the middle of the good professor's library, I'd have thought you more elated. After all, in this cathedral of words, we find ourselves surrounded by the blueprints for whatever it is we want to see. This is our paper palace, and on its crumpled pages we find our deserts and our marigolds and even ourselves.

We live within these walls where lambs and wolves cross seas together, where hydras mark the beginnings and angels the ends. Words given chance are wielded by tyrants while from the eldest cave there climbs a truer lineage of kings. From the earth, to the rye, to the everlasting plains, we sing through the eras of spirits set sale for Ithaca, arrived in Dublin centuries after; of sabatons pressed through soil and the burning windmills left in their wake. We sing of lonely decades and the harlequin lights that brighten them, of orphans of war and wonderlands dreamed by young girls, and all of it forever washed away by time's careful tides. For better or for worse, our history is told in stories, and somewhere in the midst of it all, a professor returns from the cusp of death.

Professor Moonly's eyes rose, still stinging, to meet with Viola's sad and lovely face. The library lights had returned to a fickle glow, and as the blurriness wore away, the old, familiar bookshelves towered around us, pressing inward as if to look down on our condition. Shadows danced across their surfaces while the investigator's body pressed in over ours. We noticed the tears on her cheeks; ours were wet too.

"It doesn't suit you," Professor Moonly croaked, surprised by the weakness in his own voice. The professor sat up, then attempted to scratch his head. "The crying, I mean—" He winced a moment later, lowering his injured arm.

"It's impossible..." the investigator answered, disbelievingly. "I saw you die." She brought her hands up from us and they were covered in our blood.

Neither the professor nor I could remember what had happened after our disintegration. There was only the searing pain that came over us, then the horrifying sight of our fingertips shattering, a shirt breaking open to reveal our crumpling chest, our tongue slipping back into our throat... The mere memory of it makes me recoil with uneasiness.

"Viola," the good professor answered, standing suddenly. He wobbled a moment before looking at the nearby table. Hurriedly, he stumbled over, reaching out and feeling against its surface for the note with the location, left by our devious enemy. He found it in a matter of seconds and, bringing it to his eyes, muttered something before beginning to search for his dragon cane. "Viola! Guard yourself," Professor Moonly warned. His eyes narrowed angrily and a stressed hiss danced on the edge of his breaths. "He was here—the hooded man!"

A commotion sounded in the direction of the machines, and the investigator stood, suddenly anxious. "Which way did he go?"

“I don’t know,” the professor answered. “He—”

“Viola..?” A voice from behind us left the professor and investigator’s conversation subdued. Together, the two turned back to where Machines 1 and 2 stood lit in their simultaneous glows.

Pulling himself from Machine 1, Professor James Hubert Moonly looked back at us with bloodshot eyes, his face anaemic and his body quivering. This man too was covered in our blood.

“My God...” Ms. Gooseberry whispered. Her beautiful gem-like eyes widened with horror. “It’s you, James.”

Professor Moonly looked back at himself, mouth hung agape. “I don’t believe it...” His grip tightened around the handle of his cane. Then, slowly, he spoke to our replica. “Stay where you are.”

But the man, in a sudden spin of motion, jumped out from where he’d been standing in front of Machine 1, turning to flick the controls on the nearby Machine 2.

“No—stop!” the good professor shouted, dashing with Viola towards our clone. Despite our efforts, we were seconds too late.

The man, hitting a black button, pressed himself into the machine and threw the glass cover shut behind him.

The professor, slamming up against it, grappled with the glass, smashing at its surface with his cane. In spite of his attempts, the superstructure’s bulging frame remained intact.

Meanwhile, Viola’s eyes pored over the console. “Is there any way to stop the process?”

“No...” the professor answered as the man inside peered back out at us, a hand clasped to his temple, his vibrant blue eyes like those of a wild animal’s. As we watched him, a whirring sound arose, and bright spinning particles began to oscillate within the machine. His grim face was set with an incomprehensible emotion. Then, he screamed and we watched the other professor die, strewn apart miraculously, then devoured by a sudden grey burst of energy that shook the manor’s floorboards and left a terrible boom resounding through the library.

In the silence that followed, the investigator and the professor glanced at each other, then down at the controls to where the year setting -145.101928 Ma had been chosen.



The Importance of Being Well-Read

When dawn's rosy fingertips pressed in through amber clouds, we descended to the first floor of the largely uninhabited manor. Light reflected off of dust floating just beyond the window as we paced through the kitchen, led on by the smell of warm strawberries, honey, and brown sugar. Our footsteps echoing, we looked around us, and the professor noticed before I did a checker bowl of hot porridge sitting on the lip of our Hoosier cabinet. He mumbled something briefly to himself, then smiled. Then, he turned on his feet and made his way to where we kept the coats.

The carriage ride was long and silent, and when we arrived from our bumpy path at the university's fairer grounds, we made haste, brushing past the touring winter gusts. Away from the open field and avoiding the main doors, we slipped into the building through its smaller side passage. Finding ourselves within the empty lobby, we next ascended two winding sets of stairs until we came eventually to one of the structure's top floors—dubbed the Observatory by both its visitors and residents alike.

The Observatory had been built into the university's original east wing more than 40 years ago. Hidden behind more comely portions of the campus, the telescopes that protruded from its gargantuan dome were content to peer upon the stars like mechanical voyeurs whenever the night descended. Daytime too brought visitors, whose curiosity was often piqued by the strange architectural bulge appearing behind the ivory parapets. And if it could provoke thought, then the Observatory and all it stood for was a place of the truest scientific philosophy—a quality that inclined it to serve as a nest for the very man we hoped to see.

We pushed open the mahogany-wrought doors with greater effort than anticipated. Heavily, they swung inwards, their own momentum carrying them the rest of the way. Iron carvings and glass panes caught the cold air from within while a white light fell from the slits in the ceiling, drawing snow in with it. The sight of it all granted the impression of some ethereal citadel, half-devoured by winter.

“O tempora, o mores,” announced a voice that echoed throughout the chamber. The words were lifted by the movements of *La Donna è Mobile*. “I feel like a ghost, so light-headed, and...”

We followed the sound to where a grand semi-circular desk stood, its hull stacked with towers of books and documents. A hand protruded, then motioned from behind the great wall of paper.

“...whenever the sunlight comes in through the roof, my skin looks almost spectral. Donnovan—eh? Come here, lad. Tell me, am I spectral?”

They could have passed for part of the scenery if the various bodies of men and women remained standing where they were, but instead like fleeting shades they flickered here and there, delivering newspapers and journals—or other times books with impressive covers. From the swell of scholars, one broke free and cast himself towards the imposing desk. He looked down with tired and determined eyes, determining at last, “No, Professor Huffington. You are not spectral.”

“Very good, very good,” answered the voice, and the free hand waved him away.

While the two conversed, we had waded through the rest of the ghostly frames, their pale, corpse-like skin reflecting the gorgeous glare of the sun. Indeed, the doctoral students had faded so greatly that now in these morning hours, they nearly blended into their surroundings.

“Edward,” Professor Moonly’s voice rose to clash against the mysterious atmosphere of academic undeath.

“That voice... I’d know it anywhere.” From behind the big pile of work, a man in a long decorative bath robe stepped out and into view. “Moonly?”

Together, the professor and I stared down at the tied-up robe. Then, James Moonly cracked a smile, half-reminded of the incident with Lord Chandross.

“By God, it’s been a while!” the Grey Owl professor exclaimed, pacing up towards us. There was a gleam in his brown eyes, and the curving contours of his face drew themselves up into an amiable smile just underneath a beak-shaped nose and a pair of thin Windsor spectacles. He stretched out his arms, fuzzy sleeves and all. “Embrace me, my friend.”

We hugged him back before, releasing us, he looked down at his gown. “Oh—ah, I wasn’t expecting company.” Fingers fiddled with a pair of strings, and a moment later, the robe descended down to his heels, revealing a tidy black suit with a dark grey dress shirt and bowtie made of cream-coloured fabric beneath.

Allow me to introduce to you Professor Edward Huffington, Grey Owl city’s *second* most academically-inclined mind. To be entirely technical, he and professor Moonly were long ago tied for the title of greatest thinker in this good city, though when it came down to a meeting of

the proper academic authorities, Professor Huffington resigned his challenge to our very own professor. In truth, James and Edward's friendship had been forged in the earliest of their undergraduate years and had resultantly outlived many challenges. They were the greatest of comrades, and to both men, titles meant little, for these two were in a class all of their own.

The professor nodded interestedly, his attention straying for half a moment to the large bronze telescope end hanging from the ceiling. A man and a woman stood at it, cataloguing something. "Tell me, what exactly were you doing?"

Edward Huffington inhaled, turning the question over in his head. "Entertaining ages past." He peered up for half a second. "Faraway stars and all that." Professor Moonly's friend then turned his head towards the others in our company, who went about their usual routes. "Look at them. They hardly know we're here... Too busy retrieving or analysing information." The man grimaced. "They're like automatons." Hesitantly, Professor Huffington shrugged. "I have to admit, I don't quite like the new generations. They're not at all what university administration promised me." He cleared his throat, then motioned for us to join him at his desk.

Here, his words regained a kind of familiar composure. "You know, it's not often the halls start ringing with proclamations of a great professor's return." He sat back in his seat, and now, behind the teetering stacks of books and papers, it felt as though the two men were conversing inside a medieval turret. "Of course," he interlocked his fingers atop his lap, "neither is it often that the very same professor disappears for nearly three months straight, leaving the university with only the sudden explanation 'emergency expedition—time off required'." He smiled from behind a thick beard, then parted his hands pleasantly. "So tell me my old friend, what sorts of expeditions have you been partaking in?"

Professor Moonly pulled up a spare chair that rested to the side. When he sat, his under-end was met with its plush cushion—surprisingly luxurious. "I forgot," he answered. "Now that you occupy the Observatory, you trade mainly in hearsay. I take it the tales of my adventures will fetch a rather high price on your markets."

"If only," we were laughed at, and the bags on the man's face lifted momentarily as his eyes rolled. "Then I'd be able to bribe my way out of this place. No, more often I'm making calculations to discover the next white dwarf or track a new comet..." He motioned to the books and then to the telescope a distance away. "Concrete knowledge of celestial things is my currency."

Would that make him a philosopher or an astronomer?

“A Chinese outpost in a British colony surrounded by Chinese land.”

“Fascinating,” the professor’s owl-eyed counterpart went on without skipping a beat of the conversation. “Were you visiting General Xu Chen Fowle?”

“I was,” the professor said. “Though the circumstances of the visit were less favourable than one might be led to imagine.” His blue eyes narrowed on Professor Huffington’s. “Those same circumstances are also why I’ve come to see you today.”

The professor spent until 2:10pm describing the events that had transpired, while Professor Huffington, wide-eyed, listened attentively. When all was said, he at last nodded, scratching his thick beard. “So then what happened to the clone?”

“Presumably, he was sent back to the Mesozoic Era.”

“Dead?”

“I assume so, though...”

“Though no possibility can be excluded.” Professor Huffington scratched with a finger at the side of his head, chuckling. “Still, if a man was sent so far back without any technology, or weapons, or food, he’d be dead before the day was over.”

Still. The professor’s brows lowered. “I wonder why he chose to run.”

“You said that when the hooded man—this League’s leader—shoved you into the machine, it was a nerve-racking experience, yes?”

Professor Moonly nodded. “Yes.”

“Emotional transference,” the bearded scholar offered. “Imagine being born into a state of sudden shock, your last memories—if you should have any at all—being of someone shoving you into a machine that obliterated you...”

“So he ran?” the professor asked, frustrated.

“So he ran,” our companion concluded. After a moment, he pursued a different avenue of conversation. “And what of the note you said your hooded man left you?”

The professor withdrew the paper from his pocket. “Here. Read it over.”

Professor Huffington scanned the piece of paper. “You know, it’s rather remarkable.” His tired eyes rose, and he grinned like a careless child. “Throughout human history, there has always appeared to exist both a necessary saviour and a necessary adversary. Good versus evil if you will—right versus wrong. I myself never prescribed to such a narrow-minded view; rather, I thought, if an unbiased observer were to witness the contests between these so-called absolutes,

he would readily admit that roles weren't so simple." Professor Huffington returned the paper. "Every man carries the capacity for good and evil inside of him; to choose one without the other would be to destroy his own humanity."

"What are you implying?" Professor Moonly asked, curiosity struck up in him.

"You came to me because you wanted to know what to do about this fellow, this hooded evil-doer, you say."

"I did," the good professor answered, his back curving against the seat as he leaned forward in it.

"Well I say talk to him."

"Meet him face to face?"

Our contemporary nodded. "Challenge the adversary so that you both may better understand the good and evil within yourselves."

"Nonsense," Professor Moonly answered. "He's obviously a madman who deserves nothing more than to be arrested!"

"For what?" Professor Huffington asked, running a hand through his wavy, peppered hair.

"For conspiring to control this city with the League of the Symbol's Vigil."

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but General Gant's men arrived too late to apprehend the man, even if they did detain his followers, and this investigator—Miss Gooseberry—was unconscious throughout the encounter. Even if you do manage to arrest your hooded adversary, what would you convict him based on? One witness testimony?"

"No, of course not," the good professor answered, shaking his head. "He also convinced Biggie Rubber to murder his family."

"By use of a contrived device which would leave all implications pointing away from him. Besides, where is Biggie Rubber? From what you've said, he disappeared into the woods and has been unseen and unheard from since."

"His spy murdered Chen!"

"On an island that vanished into thin air—tell me, have you heard any reports of the Disappearing Isle reappearing recently? Anything at all?"

"No," Professor Moonly grudgingly admitted.

"Besides," Professor Huffington continued. "Different jurisdiction; different laws, and even if you could get the man in front of a court, there's nothing specifically tying him to our

mysterious mastermind.” He glanced past us towards a group of graduates, who were discussing something. “Say, has anyone gone down for lunch yet?”

One of the women looked over and shook her head.

“Send Dedrigk to bring us something from the cafeteria. Fair’s fair—the lad hasn’t paid for lunch all week.” He waved away the students and they quietly dispersed. “And bring something back for our guest too!” Professor Huffington added enthusiastically. Then, he turned back to us.

“I think that in trying to arrest the hooded man, you’d only end up establishing that he could never be linked to the crimes you’ve accused him of.”

Professor Moonly sighed. “I was hoping you wouldn’t come to that conclusion.”

“Then you want me to argue for the alternative?” our counterpart academic shrugged. “Fine. Stop him by extra-judicial force—shoot him point blank or strangle him in his sleep or throw him over a bridge again.” He frowned. “It only makes you as bad as him.”

“A justifiable risk considering I’d be stopping the man.”

“Maybe,” Professor Huffington answered, sighing. “But shoot him after you talk to him.” He paused, pondering. “I see something in the actions of this man that makes me wonder whether there’s more to him than either of us might think to allow.”

Slowly, the professor nodded. Then, he glanced down at the note that had been returned to us. He held it up, raising an eyebrow. “And what do you make of his demands..?”

There was a worried silence from our colleague, and it seemed that something lingered on the tip of his tongue, held back by uncertainty.

A few seconds passed before a student bearing a plate of pasta and a paper-wrapped ham sandwich interrupted us. “Sirs,” he said, bending down and delivering our respective meals.

“I think,” Professor Huffington chuckled as the student left us, “his demands are nowhere near as important as lunch.”



Excelsior

She'd been following the man in the short, brown top hat ever since his return. He'd left in the morning by way of a black brougham carriage—likely to the university—for reasons she could only guess at, though when he returned halfway through the day, he'd given her little time before marching straight down into the thick of the city. Professor Moonly had donned new clothing, with a scarf that covered half his face, a pair of off-white, unremarkable gloves, and patched, baggy pants that gave off the appearance of a middle-to-lower class citizen; he'd also disposed of the dragon cane—a mistake that could spell his death if he wasn't kept a close eye on. Still, Maria thought as she passed Letchworth Commemorative Circle, a large and lavishly-decorated roundabout, it was likely part of a plan. Likely too, she believed, it meant he didn't want to be followed.

The professor, assuming the bent back of an elderly or otherwise cretinous man, turned off from the Main, disappearing up and onto Incline Avenue. There and by pure chance, the Peruvian managed to catch sight of him again as he stopped to examine a clothes stand. Moments later, he was moving once more, now towards—

“The Great Grey Bridge,” the spy whispered, perplexed by his motives. Had he discovered something there? Perhaps he was considering suicide. She could afford to leave no possibility unthought of, as her lord had always enjoyed pointing out. Therefore she followed, waiting a few minutes only once, after he slipped past a crew of conversing constructioners. Her eyes keen, she began to move again when she saw him re-emerge from the metalworks, scaling a small ladder that undoubtedly led up to the plateau of the unfinished bridge.

The men and women of the city disappeared behind them. Here there was no hiding, and every ray of daylight that escaped the cloudy threshold and fell through the girders seemed to catch the spy's coat. The professor re-appeared after a quarter-hour of climbing, soon only a few metres ahead of her. If he looked back, she would be caught; then again, Professor Moonly, the evidently-omniscient man, must have known she was pursuing him. She was like his shadow, bound to him, fated to call out as they both reached the apex of the structure.

When at last she did, he looked back, and a pair of green—not blue—eyes met her own. “No...” she answered, shaking her head as the figure removed the short brown hat with her right hand, tearing the scarf from over a pair of smirking lips with her left. “No..!”

“Not quite who you were expecting?” asked the other woman, and when the Peruvian stepped back, ready to escape, the impostor drew a weapon. “I wouldn’t recommend doing that.”

“I’ve seen you before,” Maria said, her amber eyes narrowing. “You’re that federal investigator.”

“Indeed I am,” Ms. Gooseberry answered, “but I don’t believe we’ve been acquainted.”

“Expect it to remain that way,” the Peruvian sneered.

But at this, the black-haired investigator smirked. “I knew you had been following Professor Moonly since he told me of your Nor’Easter meeting. Despite keeping yourself well-hidden, you should know I’ve been able to do some following of my own.”

The spy’s teeth clenched. She’d never have allowed herself to be tracked. Every precaution had been taken, every word of her training adhered to more religiously than law. No, this investigator had to be lying.

Catching her look, the green-eyed woman retorted, “I never said I followed you.” Then she stepped forward. “I know the man you’ve been meeting with.”

The Peruvian’s blood ran cold.

“I know where you’ve had your lunch together.”

The spy shook her head. “You liar.”

“I know where you’ve slept together...”

“Liar!” Maria’s shout bounced around the bridge, echoing back and forth.

“I can tell you his name.” Ms. Gooseberry’s eyes, like those of a cold revenant, fixed themselves upon the woman.

The Peruvian growled back. “Don’t flatter yourself.”

But the eyes continued to stare. Those incriminating, green eyes.

“You don’t know it,” she repeated. “You don’t know *him!*”

The investigator’s lips moved against the dull commotion of the city below, and as they betrayed a name, silence swept over the bridge. Nearby sparrows chirped on against the howling wind; above, the sky, like a glimmering blanket, began to snow.

“I know a great deal about you, Maria,” Ms. Gooseberry spoke again at last. “I know a little less about *why* you do the things you do.” She paused, exhaling through a pair of narrow nostrils. Above them, her glasses jumped as she blinked away a snowflake. “Regardless, you’ll tell me everything.” Slowly, she lowered her gun. “Starting with why James Moonly would be asked to attend a meeting two days from now in a place seven kilometres underground.”

The Peruvian's hands clenched, trembling. Then hesitantly, the woman nodded and at last began her answer. "We deal in impossibilities."

"So essentially, what you're saying is you tracked down the Peruvian—" the professor started, looking back at the investigator who stood with us on the veranda.

"Technically, she tracked me down thinking I was you," Ms. Gooseberry corrected him. "And when she did, I had her tell me how the League's leader intends for us to meet him."

"What did she say?" Professor Moonly wondered, his attention mustered.

"Vanisher's Median," Viola answered back.

A strong wind was blowing from the east, carrying on its cusp a tall mist, whose legions now blanketed the city some ways off. It left an unusual feeling in me, and I couldn't quite put my metaphorical finger on what it might entail. Still, I worried, for it seemed that something strange was in store.

"And what about the man she'd been meeting?" Professor Moonly went on. "You said you got her to reveal what she knew by discovering her relationship with someone." He opened the door to the manor. "Who was he?"

Viola paused, glancing for a while back towards the approaching weather. "A quarry worker," she said at last. "Hardly of any interest. Your Peruvian had been having relations with him, but he was otherwise oblivious to any of her activities. I threatened to have him investigated and fired from his job."

"I see," Professor Moonly answered. "Did Maria say anything else?"

"She confirmed what you'd assumed: that our hooded man likely intends to talk to us, rather than kill us. As for what he has to say..." She shook her head. "I still don't know."

We stepped inside and closed the door behind us. "How has Mister Gant been?"

"He was... able to sit up in the morning," Ms. Gooseberry answered as she removed her shoes. Her voice had lowered, as if something more was on her mind. A moment later she started off in front of us. "I'll check on him again tonight, after I finish some research." In the next moment, she'd disappeared down the hall.



Ornithology

“Sparrow,” the professor suggested.

“Fieldfare,” the American answered as he placed his Winchester Model 1886 down atop the fractured trunk of a tree, keeping an eye to the sight.

Pale light shone down through the clouds, broken by the gangly arms of winter trees—some leafless and others dashed in green and white.

“You barely even looked at it,” the professor retorted, shaking his head. He clasped a pair of binoculars in his hands, raising them to his eyes again.

“Its crown is grey... reddish wash, but a rich brown back and a black-spotted breast with white underfeathers.” Mr. Gant paused, eyes tracing something much lower in the distance. After a moment, he exhaled through widened nostrils, adding, “Sparrows don’t get that big.”

“Very well,” Professor Moonly confessed. “I concede that I know less about the matter than you.” Admittedly, he was struck by the sheer accuracy of the description that the general had given us—and without the aid of binoculars at that. “By the way, what are you looking at out there?”

“Think I spotted a red deer.”

Sure enough, when we followed the general’s gaze, we caught sight of a pair of large antlers pressing through the faraway bushes. “Ah,” Professor Moonly added, “and a hart at that.”

“Stag,” the general answered back.

“Of course,” the professor replied. “Hart is merely the archaic term for the beast.” He cleared his throat awkwardly, then wondered aloud, “Could you make the shot?”

Mr. Gant’s eyes flicked to us for an instant, then back to his prey. His finger lingered over the metal trigger, drawing in and out in an intentional fashion. Finally, he answered, “Yes.” With a sudden huff that broke our languor, he pulled back the weapon, throwing its butt into the ground and turning to face the opposite direction, sitting back against the cut-down tree.

Both the professor and the American kept their eyes on the slick barrel, angled straight up towards the black-branched canopies.

“I need a smoke.”

“That’s not a healthy habit.” Professor Moonly eyed the general as he reached into his jacket pocket and withdrew a decorated pipe.

“No? Says who?”

The professor raised a brow. “I’ve conducted four distinct studies on the nature of the tobacco leaf. Each time, I seemed to discover ten new carcinogenic properties—say, where are your Moroccans?”

“Ran out,” Mr. Gant answered as he crammed several pinches of the shredded herb into the pipe. He struck a match and began to light the end of it. “Mister Oyenusi took the rest with him when he left Grey Owl.”

“That’s a shame,” Professor Moonly noted as we watched him take a puff. “I imagine they were good cigarettes.”

“Remarkable,” Mr. Gant answered as he sighed out flaps of bright grey smoke. Struck by a breeze, they flickered and dispersed into the morning air.

There was a silence between the general and the professor until at last, the latter said, “I spoke with Miss Gooseberry last night.”

The general’s jaw hardened as his eyes, brown and handsome, moved against us.

“She told me that you were making a quick recovery.”

He eased a bit. “She didn’t say anything else..?”

The professor looked back at him. “What else might she have said?”

The American frowned, then shook his head. “Nothing. Nevermind it.”

The Professor nodded. “Tomorrow evening, Viola and I will be meeting with the leader of the League.”

“You and Viola?” Mr. Gant asked, looking at the professor. He lowered the pipe, scratching at his beard with his free hand. “What about me?”

“I’d like for you to stay behind.”

Slowly, the general turned his pipe upside down, tapping out the smouldering ashes. Wordlessly, he rose again, turning and bringing his gun back up. “So that’s what you invited me out here to say?”

“You’ve been of great value to me,” Professor Moonly went on, rising as well. “But because of your injuries, it’s best if you remain here.”

The general looked straight forward to where the deer from before had now fully revealed itself. It was large and robust, and muscles bulged from its fore and hind legs. Black eyes looked out into the natural scenery of the valley; antlers swung one way before the creature turned its head the other. In an instant, Mr. Gant fired a shot.

The beast flinched, struck by the biting force of the bullet, then reared and began to bound towards us.

The professor, jumping up from his place, stumbled back and released a startled yelp. Our boots kicked up snow around us while the American, rising in a focused fashion, stepped forward. As we fell back, he marched on, throwing the metal lever stemming from a fingerguard forward, then wrenching it back, a mechanical snap of his weapon signalling that another cartridge had been drawn into the chamber. As he aimed the rifle a second time, we caught the flash of a copper jacket buzzing through the air. It landed in the snow a few feet away from us.

The beast, meanwhile, careened through the soil, stamping in agony and rage and, like nothing I'd ever seen before, it seemed bigger and more dangerous than either the professor or I could have ever thought it to be.

But that man, that human apex, the American pressed on, firing his second shot, and as a sweltering veil of smoke left the gun, he threw its lever forth and back again, loading another bullet. He fired, and reloaded. Fired, and reloaded. Fired, and reloaded.

Several bullets soared through the air, slicing through it and biting into the animal's hide. Its antlers collapsed first. The rest of it, thrashing, followed seconds later, and a burst of snow erupted from where it landed, dashing the general's boots in sleet and soil.

Mr. Gant loaded the rifle one more time and fired a shot into the creature's trembling skull. The forest resonated with an imposing silence once more.

We watched from a distance, stunned by the event that had unfolded, until the general called out to us.

"Professor," he said, and we could see the streams of his heated breaths. They brushed through his beard and into the frigid air. "Come here."

Shaking ourselves off, we rose to our feet. Adrenaline pulsed through Professor Moonly as he and I approached, coming to stare upon the disturbing sight. Mangled, the creature lay suppressed—dead. The professor counted five holes, but knew there must have been a sixth somewhere. Those we could see were various shades of red, and blood stained the fur around them, dripping down into a trail that darkened the snow behind. As he watched it, the professor couldn't help but think the sight was almost obscenely scenic.

The general for his part nodded quietly, then spat off to the side and sniffed at the cold. "Roughly," Mr. Gant pointed towards the felled animal, moving his hand each time he spoke.

“Spleen, stomach, lungs, heart, shoulder...” His finger fell to his side as some bird I entertained to be the fieldfare began a cautious chirp from far away. “Brain.”

The professor sighed. “I know what you’re implying.”

“Then take me with you,” the general said. He scowled, lip perked. We noticed the weight in his breaths, that dragging heaviness, but said nothing.

At last, the professor made his decision. “Fine, but I cannot guarantee your safety.”

The general, relaxing slightly, nodded in an understanding fashion. He reached for his chest and massaged the front of it, the brunette jacket folding underneath the press of his exposed fingers. “Don’t ask me to guarantee yours either.”

Strange to think of it now, I realize, but we dropped our binoculars back near the tree trunk.



Chapter 0.3

The room's debris lay cast around us, its bricks and cloths collapsed, scorched. But beyond it, halls upon halls lingered—intact, translucent, glimmering.

"I could destroy them as well," said the miraculous Newcomer, this entity of many unified voices. The flames and shadows had dissipated, and now the room seemed empty once more. Still, It was here. Its presence was undeniable.

"Then destroy them," the great professor dared. "Prove your might to me if you are indeed a god."

"You think you are entitled to proof of My might?" The Voices appeared amused. Then, They pondered, "Have you not come to live within this castle?"

I wonder what gave Them... It, that idea.

"Your master," It answered, "brought this castle to the top of My mountain. He had, after all, motivation for doing such a thing."

You... You can hear me?

"Yes. Within and beyond this province, I am omniscient."

The professor's eyes narrowed and despite himself, his next words were carefully poised. "You're wrong. I did not know what would happen when I brought the castle to your mountain." He paused. "I ascended with it on little more than a whim." Then, he shrugged. "Perhaps it was you who brought me here."

"Or perhaps it was a desire for knowledge. To discover things not yet known," the Creature offered. "To know what might occur if you brought the castle to me. A pure motivation, though your own motivation still."

"...I can't remember," my wary colleague finally admitted. He held out his aged hands. "It has been a long time since I began the journey."

But the Creature's next words perplexed us. "You've not even taken your first step."

There was whiteness all around us again. The castle was gone. The feelings of hot and of cold left our skin as quickly as they'd been unleashed upon it; we were back to where we'd begun.

Shocked, the young-again professor touched his right foot down into the familiar nothingness, moving us forward. Then, a smirk grew over his face. “I appreciate your returning me to my former self.”

“There is no difference between selves here,” the Amalgamation of voices answered us, “since there is no time here.” A silence followed before miraculously we saw ourselves a short distance off. Our counterparts still stood in the castle’s chamber, conversing with an invisible God. Then, another version of us appeared as we scaled the treacherous mountain. Hundreds upon hundreds of us took shape instantaneously, their voices audible, their senses shared—some did things we had done; others did things we could not recall. At last, an image of us appeared at our starting point, when we’d first arrived in this realm of impossibilities. Once more, the Voices rose, complementing the human collage. “You were and are the same man, one who will always find what he was destined to become.”

“So if nothing was to change,” the professor of the here and now wondered, at last throwing back his hood, “why bring us to your throne room?” He raised a hand out into the vast eternity. “It would make little sense to lead me there if I was only to end up again where I began.”

“You misunderstood Me,” the Creature answered. “I did not say nothing was to change.” We felt the air around us dance. “Change is essential—it is all.” Then, the sound rebounded, adding, “The place you visited was not My throne room, but merely a room of a castle in my possession. I have many castles, and many more rooms.” The voices lingered periodically, whispering amongst themselves. “I invited you to that particular one so that you might serve as witness.”

“Witness to what?”

“To Me.”

The professor frowned. “How could I witness something without a form?”

Silence engulfed us. Then, It presented us with an answer.

Waves of snow and dust descended from the air, forming a thrashing funnel; the flakes and specks lashed our eyes so that we were forced to shut them halfway. Nevertheless, we saw the entirety of the spectacular metamorphosis. White wings, shimmering like marble, burst through the veil, wrapping around themselves until they became a long and feathered cloak.

Two black eyes emerged farther up, bulging outward at us, while the pale face of a barn owl followed them, stretching down and craning overhead. I couldn’t be sure whether it was an imitation of a ballroom mask or a living, breathing face. Terrifyingly it lingered somewhere

between the two. When the whipping elements diminished, a tall, foreboding Thing was left, with the face of an owl and the body of a human.

“I appear to you as Iriya, or as you know it, Order.” The Entity now spoke with a singular voice—that of a woman.

“Fascinating,” the great professor whispered between sealed teeth. Our muscles had tensed at the appearance of this Deity, and at either side, my colleague’s fingers trembled.

“We are at a crossroads, I believe.” The black, endless eyes now fixed themselves on us.

“Are we?” the professor asked, staring up at the monstrous Beast. “How could our paths cross in a place where no paths can exist?”

But the Creature ignored us. “A man who has come to bring salvation...” It nodded slowly, its long, white-feathered neck bending. “And a God in need of his service.”

At this, the professor forgot all other avenues of conversation and instead grinned cruelly. There was no sense anyway in attempting to lie to this Immortal. “Salvation, you say..?” He scratched his chin enthusiastically, then laughed. “You’ve misjudged me, creature.” Then, the great man threw a hand out towards the Beast. “The pathologically altruistic are destined to die.” Speaking on, he clenched it. “I have come here to conquer, not to redeem!”

“You have come to carry the weight of salvation upon your shoulders,” the Great Owl answered, “whether you appreciate it or not.”

“There’s nothing to appreciate,” my master sneered.

“You will think differently...” It nearly muttered. “Soon, I will show you the things you have wrought.” Then, the great Beast bent fully with sudden ferocity, and its arch left its face lingering closely to ours. “Your mistakes have brought about an unsettling end. I wish for you to correct yourself.” Its pupils widened like abysmal voids, and in those next moments, we saw the horror of what our ignorance had unleashed.



The Lamb's Chapter

The cool evening air rallied around us as from behind, the sun set over Grey Owl. Raindrops dotted Vanisher's Median, breaking up the islands of wet snow.

"Worm," Professor Moonly said to me as we stood alone, together. He loosely gripped the head of the black dragon cane, twisting its base against the hard stone below us.

Yes, professor?

"Do you remember your duty?"

I do, professor. I am the narrator. I am to record your travels for the posterity of future generations.

Slowly, the great man nodded. "I cannot predict what might happen beyond this point."

No man can predict the future.

"Indeed, but a good man should at least have some hand in the direction his life takes." He looked up towards the sky as a pair of thrushes soared overhead. "For a time in my life, I believed I had finally found that luxury. But with all that has transpired, I've been forced to admit there's something bigger at play..." He grasped at the words. "As if... I'm little more than a solitary cog in some immense, uncontrollable machine."

I wouldn't call you solitary, professor. After all, you have your friends—Ms. Gooseberry and Mr. Gant. And you have me.

Professor Moonly lingered on the thought. Then, he laughed lightly. The Englishman wore a soft, sentimental look. "That wasn't what I... ah, I'm not even sure what I meant by it."

As we conversed, our companions stepped up alongside us.

"Alright, I'm ready," Ms. Gooseberry said. "I'm armed, so if anything happens..." She nodded down towards her hip, where a holstered Webley service revolver met our glance.

Mr. Gant, approaching from our right, nodded, unholstering his guns as well. "I am too." His face looked pale; we could tell his injuries from the night at the factory had taken their toll.

"Alright," said the professor. "Then let's go."

The group of three paced over towards the median.

"So, what exactly?" Mr. Gant asked, shrugging. "We supposed to hold hands or something, or will it just take us all to the same place?"

“As long as the intention remains the same, Vanisher’s Median should take us all to the place where we’ll meet the League’s leader,” Professor Moonly answered. Then, he hesitated, and a queer expression drew over his face. “Er, on second thought, I’ve only done this once and by myself.” Then, he nodded quickly. “Right—no—I think we should hold hands. Just to be safe.”

Worriedly, each person grasped the other’s palm.

“Alright, on the count of three.”

Our colleagues’s eyes flashed with anticipation, or anxiety—more likely than anything, both.

“One... two... three!”

Together, we jumped, and as the grass touched our feet, it fell away. The world below us disappeared, and it felt as though we were falling through kilometres of empty air.

Ms. Gooseberry cried out to us, a terrified expression flown over her face as the air escaped her lungs; Mr. Gant, his skin flapping with the force of the wind, had shut his eyes, gritting his teeth against the sheer force of the drop. Professor Moonly could only imagine the look on his own face.

Then, in an instant, we met with cold, hard ground, slamming into it and collapsing immediately. A sudden whirlwind of air exploded around us, sending loose soil spinning off and grass fluttering violently. Though the landing was undoubtedly rough, it was not nearly enough to break bone or kill—something that amazed the professor.

“Is everyone alright?” Professor Moonly gasped. He clambered to his feet in the midst of a dim, nighty atmosphere, attempting to get a look around.

From what we gauged, it appeared as though we hadn’t left the median. In fact, the grass we stood upon seemed to be the very same grass we’d jumped towards. And, yes! There was Brittle’s Bakery, just a few metres from the boundary of the grassway. We glanced to the side and saw the familiar rows of houses, the cobble, the signs and street lamps. Nothing had changed save for evidently the time of day and the fact that no one was out at this hour.

“I... I don’t understand,” Professor Moonly said. “It should have worked.” He looked up again to the sky, and when he did, his blue eyes widening with amazement, he fell utterly silent.

Above us, there was no sky—only a large canopy of glittering rock.

“It did work,” Ms. Gooseberry muttered, astounded. She pointed up towards something a distance off. “Look... That’s...”

“Impossible,” Professor Moonly said.

Several streets beyond the bakery, towering over the docks and ports stood the shadow-draped frame of the Great Grey Bridge, its base awash in the channel's waters.

Mr. Gant, meanwhile, had stepped out of the median and over towards the bakery, placing a hand on its wall.

"How's this even possible?" the investigator asked as she and the professor both followed along.

"This place was built upon a strong and unalterable will," came the answer, and like a heavy overture, its words rebounded again and around from the city's architecture.

The professor, the investigator, and the general all turned to face a man in a long, black robe, and at long last, everything came to fruition.

"It's you, the leader of the League," Professor Moonly answered him grimly.

"This city we stand in now is in fact the Disappearing Isle, moulded by my mind, just as it once was moulded by the mind of General Xu Chen Fowle."

Professor, keep your temper about you. This isn't the time for an emotional retaliation.

Mr. Gant and Ms. Gooseberry both drew their weapons while the professor remained where he stood in between them, glowering.

"I come unarmed," said our ominous host, raising both hands and depicting empty palms, "and to invite you to a more formal setting." At last, he removed his hood, and now we saw the face of an elderly man, his nose pointed and his beard jutting, coarse. His cheeks were withdrawn as well, and those cold, blue eyes watched us with an inhuman gaze that nonetheless seemed nearly familiar. Our host bowed briefly, as if welcoming a trio of ambassadors. "If you'll follow me, I will explain everything."

"The guns remain," Professor Moonly answered and our host nodded in return.

"Yes of course, though you should know that weapons here cannot guarantee your safety." Our host bore a strange, wide grin. "Only I can."

"That's why the weapons are pointed at you," Mr. Gant retorted matter-of-factly, brow lowering as he kept focus.

"Come," said the man, and slowly, we followed him.

Our journey took us up along Incline Avenue, and for a moment, Professor Moonly imagined the man intended a repeat meeting upon the city's prized bridge. It triggered the question in him: "Where are we walking to?"

“None other than the Aphostos Theatre,” the League’s leader answered without looking back.

“Aphostos Theatre is on the intersection of Parch and the Main.” The professor’s eyes narrowed. “That’s in the opposite direction.”

“Is it?” the robed man asked, turning around and walking backwards. He held out his arms, and the street unbelievably began to fold in towards us. As it did, it curved too, breaking and cracking until, peeled up like the skin of a stone-strewn fruit, it revealed in the dust a northward street. “Come.”

The general and the investigator, silent and shocked, walked slowly down the curling road and onto the flatter one while the professor and I followed, mesmerised by such an unthinkable thing.

Professor. If what that man is saying is true, then he must be able to control every element of the Disappearing Isle, like magic. Even with our weapons, we’d have no way of stopping him if he wished to do us harm.

“I agree,” Professor Moonly whispered, biting his lip. “We walked straight into his web. There’s no other choice now but to follow this through until the end.”

With a few more steps, we came to the grand, cylindrical building, the Aphostos Theatre for the Performing Arts. A brow of solid marble jutted out above its vaulted doors, decorated in sculptures of angels, while along sixteen white-stoned buttresses there sat a legion of perched gargoyles.

It was there in front of the doors that the man looked back and standing tall, spoke with a dreaded air of finality. And the truth of his next words hung on us like a noose. “My name is James Hubert Moonly. I have travelled through centuries of history to return to this moment.” The theatre’s lights drew shadows like scars across his expression, and with sombre eyes he watched us all. Then, those familiar, twin shades of blue fell alone upon the professor. “I have returned to save Grey Owl City.”



Allegro

“LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, TO YOUR SEATS. TO YOUR SEATS, GENTLEMEN AND LADIES, PLEASE. THE SHOW IS ABOUT TO COMMENCE.”

Draw curtains.

The professor, amidst the commotion, turned his head to either side. Viola and Mr. Gant were stuck in the same snug state he was. The room was spinning, as if we'd been drugged. Or was this merely brought on by the magic of the Disappearing Isle?

It's like some kind of groggy dream.

“Or nightmare...” the professor mumbled, picking himself up from his slouch. His back pressed against the comfy red cushion of a theatre seat.

“Professor,” Viola said, leaning over. “My gun is gone.”

“Mine too,” Mr. Gant added from the other side of us, blinking hard to clear his haggard eyes. “Bastards must've nicked 'em off'a us when we... when we...”

Funny, he can't seem to remember who attacked us, or how we were brought to this place. For that matter, neither can I.

“Oh, you won't be needing guns here,” a voice called over from beside the general.

We glanced over to find its owner: a short man, stubby in posture. Large bifocals rested on his round nose, and the dimples on his face contorted as he continued to speak. “Welcome, welcome, special guests of Professor Eclipse.” He had nice teeth fixed in two tidy rows, and whenever he spoke, they chattered, clicking again and again against each other.

“Professor Eclipse..?” Ms. Gooseberry asked, her green eyes scanning the immense auditorium.

“Yes indeed! The League's top dog, the man of the hour.” The short fellow chortled, practically vibrating in his seat. “Resident time-traveller proclaimed by all to be the saviour of mankind. This is exciting, monumental stuff.” Then, as if remembering something, the man clicked his tongue and extended a hand. “Charles Bourier, by the way. I invented the Bourier Bubble.”

The... what?

Mr. Gant, closest to him, was the first to awkwardly shake it—not the bubble; Mr. Bourier's hand. Then, the professor. Then, Ms. Gooseberry.

“I don’t understand,” the good Professor Moonly answered Mr. Bourier.

That makes two of us.

“What exactly’s going on here?”

“Well,” the man answered us with a rising chin and brow, “I’ve been told it’s a play, put on with the spectacular magic provided to us by this new Grey Owl.” He waved his hands around excitedly. “Even the Aphostos has been overhauled. It’s ten times as big as I remember it being.”

And Mr. Bourier was in fact correct. The Aphostos, a remarkable theatre on its own, was here in this mirror-city made impossibly large. Row upon row extended high into the... er... ground. Point being, it was immense.

The professor wondered to himself what other parts of the city had been changed.

“Hell, they could’ve done better than putting us up in the gods,” Mr. Gant argued.

“Oh, if you don’t like the balcony seats, you could certainly switch,” said Mr. Bourier. He smiled grandly. “But the seats don’t particularly matter—I mean usually they *do*. But not for this show.” He held up a brochure that curtly noted in fine print on its back that ‘All members will be able to experience the full power of tonight’s event, regardless of seating arrangements’.

The general slumped back in his chair, mesmerised by the absolute strangeness of it all. “Well,” he said. “That’s that, then. I don’t have a damn clue what in the hell’s happening.”

Professor Moonly looked over at Mr. Bourier curiously. “Is all of the League present?”

“Why yes,” said the man, “and with much lighter hearts now that all that nasty Rubber business is behind us.” He raised a finger. “Congratulations by the way on surviving that fireball at the fireworks factory. Who’d have thought Tiny Rubber would go so far as to immolate himself in a great, final explosion eh?”

The professor raised a brow.

“Oh, Urschel told us all about it when he got back, the good fellow—he set the whole record straight and vouched for your having nothing to do with Tiny’s schemes.” Mr. Bourier nodded, then smiled bitter-sweetly. “Still, it’s a shame we lost the others—VVyngfield in particular was one of our best.”

The professor, investigator, and general all exchanged confused glances.

“But in any case,” the round man elbowed Mr. Gant, whose injuries made him wince in pain, “one can’t solve a problem without cracking a few eggs, I suppose. So here we are, the great one-hundred, minus a couple but all otherwise assembled.”

“The great one-hundred... So then you were from the group imprisoned in Fishknight?”
Viola asked in vague recollection.

Mr. Bourrier nodded back, but stopped himself to offer up a contrite expression. Waving both of his hands, he piped up, “Oh, but don’t think I’m one to hold grudges! I know you three were merely doing your jobs.”

“I’m quite at ease knowing we have such sympathetic captors,” our colleague answered sarcastically in her bold, lovely voice. “How did you escape anyway?”

Mr. Bourrier laughed light-heartedly. “I think, Miss Investigator, that’s not a secret I’m qualified to disclose.”

As he spoke, the lights dimmed around us, and row by row, a pure darkness enveloped the theater. Then, from the pit of the stage’s orifice, a flashing light emerged, growing like an unclenching fist until, all ends outstretched, it flourished magnificently. A tornado of white, whipping fire, it lashed at the audience, eliciting screams and cheers. Flames spun, weaving through themselves over and again. And in the flames, a world emerged before us, colours and details burgeoning within it while to my surprise, I discovered that I was losing control of my voice...

Eternities meant nothing to me then, when in those aching moments my consciousness breached the waters of unnatural entropy.

As the cascading grind of cogs drew to a close and Machine 1’s vibrating hum at last died, I grasped with newborn hands at the corner of the portal, pulling myself out past where the glass casing hung agape and into the devouring blackness. Naked and unsteady on my feet, flashes of fragmented recollections assaulted me. I reached beyond the cloud of disorder in search of a name.

“James... Moonly.”

At once, another thought provoked me. “Worm...” came the response from my quivering lips. My call went unanswered. Instead, my eyes lifted to the sight of the abandoned library. When I began to wonder how I had arrived here, a throng of memories returned, rushing back like a wave throughout the crevices of my mind. There was—

“A man...”

Yes, in a patterned hood.

“A leader...”

Of a league.

“The League of the Symbol’s Vigil.” At once, my eyes were open, and I knew the danger I was in.

Stumbling towards Machine 2, something I had created, yes—I fiddled with the controls. My sight was still blurry, and it took me several attempts to find the knob on it. When I did, I began to turn it to the left, trying to focus on the flashing numerals. If I could travel back in time to just a few minutes before I was ambushed, then perhaps—

A voice interrupted my thoughts, and immediately, my body froze.

“No... James!” It was a woman’s. Familiar, pleasant. “Wake up! My God, please wake up!”

Perplexed, I couldn’t help but turn. Like a child led on by the call of his mother, I stumbled through the lightlessness in pursuit, halting only when I heard another speak.

“It doesn’t suit you...” a man murmured. “The crying, I mean—” I noted the weakness in his voice and for those few moments struggled to imagine who this person could have been.

“I saw you die,” the woman continued, and in the low green light emitted by my machines, I at last drew near enough to see the silhouette of two hands, raised from a face below them.

“Viola,” the man answered her, coming quickly to his feet.

At once, I recalled Viola M. Gooseberry.

The man rushed over to a table nearby. His hands ran over its surface and, upon discovering something, he next began to look for his... *my* dragon cane. I watched the surreal scene in awe as the frantic figure told his comrade to guard herself. My hooded enemy, he claimed, was still here.

If that was the case, then there was little time—

“Aagh!” A piercing pain shot through my skull, as if my brain had been cut with a long, serrated knife. I fell back against a metal frame; it appeared now that I had hardly walked any distance at all. I looked again towards the couple, and one of them, with her pristine, emerald eyes, stared back.

In that moment, I felt more terrified than ever before, and in a trembling voice, I called out to her. “Viola..?”

It was then that the second figure, standing beside her like a tall and stalking shadow turned as well to face me, and I saw in the midst of the machines’s pulsing light the contours of his complex expression. I saw, to my greatest disbelief, myself.

“I don’t believe it...” said the man, mirroring my thoughts. His expression grew serious, and he called out to me. “Stay where you are.”

With little time to reason, I spun towards Machine 2, executing the ‘start’ command. I threw myself into the device’s chamber, landing hard against it, and the glass door sealed shut.

The other me tackled the barrier between us, attempting to break it with my cane, and as I clasped my head, I stared back at him in incredulity, realizing that of the two of us, he still wore a set of bloodied clothes. In that moment my surprise vanished, giving way to a slow and uncompromising anger. I knew at last who I was—*what* I was.

But the thought lasted little longer than the next few seconds as, again, the familiar tug began to pull at my skin. My thoughts rushed back to me all at once. Foremost amongst them—the dial on the machine! Had I set it correctly? My eyes rolled over to where a piece of metal jutted out from the side of the hissing contraption, but because of the angle, it was impossible to tell. As the particles in the air began to fall into a synchronized, spinning choreography, my breaths grew heavy in my chest, and a low, consistent squeal, like the sound of a train’s breaks, encompassed me.

When I awoke, I found myself lying in the middle of a soaked highland. I thought to myself it must have rained in the afternoon. Slowly, I sat up and my body ached in response. Above me soared a remarkable, amber sunset, while around, I heard the sounds of birds and saw the rustling forests. The land was overgrown with greenery—strange kinds of vines and foliage I couldn’t place. Where was Grey Owl? Where were the streets? The people?

A cool breeze shook me from my stupor, and I realized all at once that I was alone. I must have set the year on Machine 2’s dial to a time before civilization; else the machine had placed me somewhere humans had not yet explored.

Quietly, I sat there, listening to the yapping sounds of small, mysterious animals. At first, I couldn’t think of anything. Only a cold, unfathomable horror ran through me. I existed in a body that was not my own, wearing the face of another man. I was not the real professor—only an exile trapped in this natural prison. “Still...” I pondered. I had all of his memories. I knew what he knew, recalled what he had experienced. “I possess his knowledge.”

A hooded face too still lingered in my mind. Him...

And yet, how could the original James Hubert Moonly not have been just as responsible for my creation? He had taken up an air of such naïve overconfidence, the likes of which now in

hindsight I so greatly despised. He had told Viola he'd be safe. *He* had wrongly assumed the League would never target him—a man who in all his hubris had led us both to our destinies inside of that machine. Ironic, wasn't it, that only *I* would suffer the consequences?

Left to my thoughts, I recalled in part what I—he—had told Viola on the New Year's Eve. "It would be a... be a terrible thing..." Underneath a tree with weeping, golden leaves, I conceived the horrible words, "...for a man to realise all that he is and all that he is not at once—to... know..." I glowered. "To know that despite what he remembers, he has no past."

A howl sounded from the base of a valley.

"To think his soul a false or faulty one."

Trembling, I brought myself to my feet. I felt tired, drained. Irresolute. Sweat bathed my forehead, and the wind licked it, leaving me cold. Almost absently, I stared out over the grassy plateau I'd appeared upon, looking down across the raven valleys. I was a man of the twentieth century, trapped in a time perhaps even before mankind existence. Such a person could not be blamed if he faltered, engulfed by the gravity of his situation. "No... There must be something I can do," I whispered to myself. And so I thought over and again, but my thoughts did little good. At last, I reached the grim conclusion that ultimately, I was to die here in this era—

From a great distance, some massive beast roared; yet when it did, I collapsed to my knees. My splitting headache had returned, worse now than it had been in the library.

"Aaagh!" I crumpled on the grass, spit draining from my mouth as I gritted my teeth. What was causing this!? My arms reached out, grasping at the long blades of grass. I clenched and pulled, agony rendering my body contorted. Then suddenly, I remembered a time when I'd felt like this before. It couldn't be, I thought. And yet...

A tortured smile grew over my face. "It's you, isn't it? It's you..." The smile broke open, into a laugh, and shaking, I pushed myself up to my knees. There was yet liberation, even in a hopeless place like this. My lips parted, and I attempted to call out to the worm inside my skull.

My word! I'm back. I'd lost complete control there for a moment.

The professor shook his head, then rubbed his eyes at the sight of an empty auditorium. Nearly all of its lights were out, and much of the room was gowned in darkness.

In front of us stood Professor Eclipse; wordless, we watched each other for half a minute before he spoke. "I'm sorry, James," he began, extending an arm to either side of him. "The only way for you to understand what I'd been through was to have you experience it." He nodded

slowly. “Worm, you’ll find that you have complete control of your narrative. As for our surroundings,” he waved to the empty seats. “I’d prefer to keep us separate from the others for a while, if you’ll indulge my request.”

“I suppose I don’t have much of a choice,” Professor Moonly answered, glaring.

“The man whose eyes you saw the world through was indeed your genetic equivalent—a clone who possessed all of your memories, your experiences, your habits.”

“But evidently, not my temperament,” the good professor answered.

The professor in front of us nodded. “He despised you greatly throughout the entirety of his existence.”

“You talk as if you’re a different person from him,” Professor Moonly pointed out.

“In many ways I am.” Within each of the auditorium’s lamps, a bright blue fire ignited, enveloping the innards of the theatre in a ghostly light. “His name was James Hubert Sunley, and for as long as he lived, he saw himself as your antithesis. While at first trapped within the Mesozoic Era, with great effort Professor Sunley escaped by constructing a version of your time machine. In 1894, he then improved upon the original design and was left with a new creation, one much more dangerous, which allowed him to transcend time altogether. He followed through with this miraculous goal of his, and in doing so he misplaced many of his... *our* former dispositions.” Those blue eyes pierced us. “I was the result.”

“So Professor Sunley built a version of my Machine 2,” the professor marvelled.

“Rebuilt,” Professor Eclipse corrected. “The schematics had been preserved in the mind of his worm.”

A worm? Does that mean that right now, there is another—like me—inside this man’s head? Professor, please ask him!

“Professor Eclipse,” Professor Moonly started. “Do you have an Egyptian Sunworm inside you?”

“I do,” the bearded man answered, his eyes narrowing on us. “Octavius was the one who originally persuaded me into giving your father the instructions for a modified version of the time machine, one that merely duplicated matter instead of time phasing it—I believe you referred to this as Machine 1.”

Did he say Octavius? Eugh... I can’t imagine any self-respecting worm would take up such a pompous, arrogant name—

“My father?” Professor Moonly asked, and the bearded man remained silent, frowning.

“I know what you’re thinking,” he said, then shook his head slowly. “I’m sorry, but I can’t tell you more about him. My duty lies in warning you of what is to come.”

“But you know,” Professor Moonly pressed him. “You know what happened to my father!” He took a step towards the taller, more muscular man.

“I will tell you only what I must—all else must stem from your own experiences.” In this, our counterpart seemed resolute.

The professor glared back. “I don’t understand.”

Professor Eclipse nodded in return. “That is why there’s something else I must show you first.” He waved his hand and a flurry of sparks burst from beneath the stage, sending jagged splits through its wooden frame. Snapping and twisting, the floor gave way to incredible pillars and winding tapestries.

We marvelled at the sight of a newly-created room.

“Turn around,” the League’s leader ordered, and we followed his command.

In front of us stood a gargantuan engine. Arching strips of metal surrounded a complex centre, which like the kernel of a hollow gyroscope, we recognized to be a more monstrous version of our time machine. Wires and piping wound like golden blood vessels around the structure, and a massive chamber of searing liquid rumbled above it, connected by pairs of black, corrugated tubes.

“This is the machine Professor Sunley used to leap beyond the threshold of physical space-time,” said our host.

“But why?” the good, original professor asked.

“His escape from the Mesozoic Era left him with a new kind of hope. Imagine you were a man with no past, and time was at your command.” The other professor stepped forward, placing a hand upon the large device’s hull. “History became his kingdom, and he its alchemist.”

We watched as his hand slipped down, then off. Where it had been, it left a trail of grey rust. “Of the dates you discovered in the Chamber of Eyes, many were accounts of his attempts to change the past.”

The professor’s brows lowered with concern. “He changed the past..?”

“Often,” Professor Eclipse answered us, “though not without great effort. Manipulating the universe to serve one’s own purposes carries with it a degree of uncertainty. Professor Sunley discovered that during his first few attempts at manipulation. Sometimes, it almost appeared as though events transpired to correct themselves. If he murdered Achilles, for example, Patroclus

would rise to take his place; if he ambushed the Crusaders in the Forest of Arsuf, they would yet overcome his armies. However, as his efforts became more refined, Professor Sunley discovered that particular changes could leave even those stubborn moments malleable; as such, complicated groundwork preceded even the smallest of changes.”

“But to what end?” Professor Moonly asked. “Why would he change history without any meaningful purpose?”

“His purpose was domination—complete and absolute control over the world. And if he could tilt points of the past just enough to ensure himself a few more degrees of power, he would repeat the process until he made himself into an undeniable authority. He became known and feared—though never by name—and his successes did much to secure him his seat of influence over humanity’s evolution.”

“Influence over all of humanity...” the professor muttered. It was impossible to believe that someone who had come from us could be capable of desiring such a kind of tyranny.

“As I told you, Professor Sunley spent several years using his prototype to jump through time.” The bearded man turned back to us, as if anticipating our concern. “Throughout his travels, he came to not only learn of, but live through the annals of human history.” The tall man slowly sighed. “You can only imagine the things he saw. Terrible wars, murder for the sake of political gain, famine and drought and misdirected hatred.” He paused, searching for the words. “Human ignorance.”

Around us, the machine and the room began to crumble, chaffing away like rotting bark.

“Professor Sunley began to wonder how mankind had ever achieved the things it did, especially when so many of us actively fought against the greater good.” In a matter of minutes, the incredible sight had sunk into the floor, vanishing entirely.

“The nature of any greater good changes depending on who its champions are,” Professor Moonly answered, chidingly.

“Only this time, its champion was a prophet,” Professor Eclipse spoke back, his voice heavy with an unmistakable zeal. “Professor Sunley knew how history would unfold, and he knew where he could correct it. It seemed so simple to us then.”

“Us...” the good professor reacted. “And yet you claim to be different from him.” His eyes narrowed scrutinizingly.

The man in the robe nodded. “Professor Sunley would stop at nothing to reshape the world in his image, and once it seemed his dream was achieved, he set his sights farther.”

“Farther..?” Professor Moonly wondered aloud.

“Beyond the scope of humanity. Professor Sunley looked to the heavens.”

Above us, sparkling lights enveloped the auditorium ceiling. Comets soared overhead and nebulae gave birth to constellations as below we continued our discussion.

“He discovered a way to weave his consciousness into a higher dimension—one beyond the confines of the physical world. Put simply, he would be able to exist outside of time. He could sculpt a star that was light-years away and have dinner in Paris simultaneously. A romantic notion, I realize, but nonetheless one he managed to develop the theoretical groundwork for.”

The good Professor Moonly stepped back towards the auditorium’s empty chairs. At last, he looked coldly over the entire theatre. “Then he aimed to become a god.”

“Yes, he aimed.” the robed man stepped up beside us, and for a minute, we stood together. “Instead, his endeavours resulted in something else entirely. I became a warning as to what would happen when man dared to look out beyond the bars of his cage.”

“What did you see..?” Professor Moonly asked.

Professor Eclipse closed his eyes, as if recalling something terrible. “A miraculous battle of Order and Chaos, like two primal tides clashing throughout a boundless expanse.” Above, the stars gave way to legions of wings as spectacular creatures of shadow and light struck at each other mesmerizingly in the distance. Surging plasmas washed over the ceiling, shattering the smaller soldiers and reaching out with unending fingertips in every direction. And screams like unparalleled symphonies graced our ears.

Professor Moonly, struck by their power, fell to his knees, clasping his hands over his head. “Stop!” he shouted, but the beautiful horror of it all went on.

Universes collapsed, crushed under the footsteps of the shapeless behemoths while their armies soared closer. There were, from what we could make out, two opposing forces, aloft and arranged like pieces on a chess board. In a startled appreciation of the first, we found that all of them were identical. Each possessed seven sets of vaulted wings, extending like mountains of light; brilliantly-carved armour hung over their chests, and blue eyes were set alight with a brilliant burning fire.

Their enemies, of the second celestial militia, were a dark and twisting multitude, markedly different from each other. Every individual had a unique number of eyes, though all had been gouged out, leaving them blind. Their bodies, carried by fourteen bent shadows, were like

emberous clouds of blackened smoke, visible in whole whenever they passed in front of the revealing starlight.

“These were the things I saw,” Professor Eclipse said in a comforting voice as he lowered himself down beside us. He observed our suffering and so raised a hand towards the image. When he did, our senses softened and we were distanced from the experience.

Breathing heavily, Professor Moonly straightened his back, staring in shock at the man to our left. “What is all of this..?”

“A war very far beyond our scope,” our clone answered back. “In this realm, time does not exist—the forces of Order and Chaos clash throughout eternity, their conquests leaving ripples in the temporal universe.” He pointed towards a large, bright sphere in the middle of it all, set against the backdrop of twisting blue clouds and glittering discs. We had hardly noticed that it provided much of the light for this place. The armies seemed to be oblivious to it as well.

“That,” Professor Eclipse began, “is Sharum. Consider it a waygate through which things pass into the knowable universe—our universe. It would take too much time to tell you of its history; instead, I shall describe its most important moment.”

“But how could history exist in a place without time?”

Our companion smirked knowledgeably. “For the beings of this realm—this oververse—history is but a spectrum. The past, instead of being composed of a certain number of events, is like a pool where those events are in constant conflict.”

While he spoke, our eye was caught by a distant thing, a dimly-glowing ring of dark red fire. It was oddly ominous, lingering so very far away, watching almost as the titanic war that raged on in front of us.

“Here, nothing is preordained,” Professor Eclipse said, drawing our attention back, “but knowledge—of the past, present, and future—is always absolute. Always necessary.” Our counterpart professor pointed up towards the bright and shifting sphere that gave the realm its light. “One of these necessary events was Sharum’s destruction.”

In a spectacular instant, the brilliant structure collapsed, exploding briefly after and scattering like a roaring wave amongst the skies.

Professor Eclipse held his hand in the same position as he had before, apparently struggling against the force of the blast. Despite his efforts, the creatures above us all turned to the explosion and, like a dream, seemed to flee in impossible directions. Like spirits, they whipped through space, and their voices pierced our ears once more. Below us, the stage rumbled

powerfully, and as at last a bubble of white light approached us from the epicentre of the blast, our companion rose to his feet, lifting both hands and dropping them suddenly. As if it were a dragged curtain, the events in front of us crumbled and flew against the seats, smashing into the floor and bursting into a cloud of pitch-coloured feathers.

Professor Eclipse stared out at the settling commotion, smiling with relief. “Of all the forces on the Earth, the isle’s magic is the only one capable of connecting dimensions. It’s a spectacular anomaly, though it makes it nearly impossible to guarantee the safety of those who use it.”

“Would we have been killed if the blast hit us?” the professor asked, trembling.

“Killed? No. Such a thing is impossible in a place like that.” He paused, pensively. “There are worse things than death, however.” Quietly, he stroked the bottom of his beard, pinching it for a second between his index and his thumb. “I imagine you saw it—the burning ring.”

“Yes,” the professor said after a pause. “What was it?”

“A waygate, much like Sharum, but one that instead leads into an unfettered abyss, an endless and uncreated territory.”

“Nothingness,” Professor Moonly muttered.

“Indeed,” said our host. “An all-consuming monstrosity, it is a singular will bent on the eradication of existence.”

“You speak of it as if it were alive,” the good professor said, unnerved.

“In some sense it is,” the robed man answered. “Imagine it, intelligent destruction—desiring only the undoing of all creation. Sharum and the burning ring both acted like one-way doors. This meant that the effects of the oververse could spread out into both our universe and the nothingness, though no effects could ever spill back. The oververse consistently generated creation, and as such, it became the bane of the uncreated territory, as well as the parent of infinite temporal universes—ours included.” His blue eyes narrowed. “When Professor Sunley activated his improved time machine, he tore open a pathway through all three dimensions, binding our universe to the oververse, and the oververse to the nothing. This meant that the nothing could seep into both the oververse and our universe.”

“And you know this because you,” the professor hesitated, “transcended time..?”

“Yes. When I first left the machine, I was, in essence, obliterated. Every atom of me, it seemed, had been scattered throughout eternity. But soon, my thoughts began to find each other. I... reassembled myself in a sense, remaking my identity and realizing that I had come to a strange, new place. That place was the oververse.” He held out in his hand a long, white feather.

It was unlike anything the professor and I had ever seen—like snow or cotton, its translucent spines were vivid in the darkness of the auditorium. “It was there that I met Iriya, a personification of pure and absolute order. This God showed me what my actions had wrought, and upon realizing my error, I knew I had to return and fix it.”

“Supposing I believe you about your... God of Order,” the Professor said, his brow crinkling. “Am I to think you had a sudden change of heart? That a man dedicated to the subjugation of humanity would settle instead for its—”

“Salvation?” Our counterpart’s eyes widened. “Yes... That is precisely why I have returned.”

“Why should I believe you?” Professor Moonly asked, shaking his head briefly. “You attacked me on the Great Grey Bridge, you threatened my friends, you could have *killed* me!”

“Do you remember what I said to you before I fell that night?” the robed man answered us. “Before I disappeared into the darkness?”

“You said that everything about the night was intended.”

“Precisely.” The man paced up and off the stage, passing along the unlit theatre seats. “I can no longer affect the course of time—only serve as witness to it. I see all that may transpire, though I cannot interact with it outside of my role.” He turned around, now a distance away and looked back at us. “James, I never came back from the oververse. Parts of me slip in through the cracks in time that my machine has caused, and within this context, they can interact with you. But there are places I cannot go. One of those places is the very moment of my transcendence.”

And at last, we understood. The professor advanced to the tip of the stage, his footsteps echoing. “You want me to go back in time and stop you from ever entering your machine.”

Slowly, Professor Eclipse nodded, and the lights in the theatre began to come back on. Once more, we were illuminated by the bright and flashing power of the New Aphostos Theatre for the Performing Arts.

A roaring surge of claps and whistles surrounded us, and as Professor Moonly and I looked up from the stage, a full house of men and women peered back.

“They’ve just finished watching the première of a German burlesque Operette called *Schwergewicht*.” Professor Eclipse stepped up to us and took Professor Moonly by his hand. “Truly, Mister Krenek’s work is a spectacle on its own, but to witness it in combination with the isle’s magic has been exhilarating for them, to say the least.”

He sounds as if he’s been sitting in on the play instead of speaking with us.

From where we stood we caught sight of Ms. Gooseberry and Mr. Gant, far above and still with Mr. Bourier. They stared down at us, and Mr. Gant pointed in surprise, shouting something.

Awkwardly, the professor glanced back up and waved, unable to hear whatever he'd said.



Limiting Factor

“I imagine you have more questions.” Professor Eclipse stared at us from the other end of a circular balcony. He leaned against the luxurious, curving rail.

“Several, in fact,” the good professor answered, pacing closer to stand beside him. Together, the two men had made their way up here after the show. They now looked on, side by side, towards the glittering cavern ceiling so very far away. “First, about my father.”

Our counterpart peered back at us with his cold, absolute eyes. “You know I cannot tell you what happened to him.”

“But can you tell me if he is alive?”

The older man pondered the question before looking back down towards the shadowy legions of buildings below. “I can.”

“And..?”

“No.”

There was a silence between us for the next few moments. Those moments drew on, seemingly forever. Then at last, the professor spoke. “Thank you.”

Professor Eclipse nodded in return.

“Next, then...” Professor Moonly mumbled. “Tell me how time travel works.”

“I assumed you’d ask that.” Professor Eclipse pushed himself off from the bars, straightening his back. He looked over at us, before beginning what must have been a rehearsed response. “As you know, Professor Sunley built the first Machine 2 by memory alone. He had as vague an understanding of it then as you do now. It was not until seven years later, after much painstaking research that he discovered the mechanisms motivating its mysterious power. Seven years, persistently dedicated to an answer—and when it was found, it did not disappoint.” Our counterpart nodded briefly, folding his hands behind his back. “The phrase ‘time travel’ is at least technically correct. Yet there is so much more to it than just that. Our universe is not unique, but to fully appreciate this fact, James, first consider an infinite collection of realities. Each of these realities contains an infinite number of possibilities—the potential arrangements of matter that each produce a living universe. Of those universes, there are an infinite number that are similar to ours, and an infinite amount of those similar universes contains arrangements of matter at one point in time or another that mimic those of our own.” He

paused, waiting to see if we had caught up to his reasoning. When he perceived the difficulty in our eyes, he brokored a subtle smirk. “In other words, there are an infinite number of universes whose histories will play out exactly the same as our own, though with certain time delays. But you can imagine the immensity of it all, James, and the scientific precision that would be required to master it.” Hands releasing, he motioned outward, then at last looked back to us. “Here in our universe, our actions in the present can control the outcome of the future; if I were to drop a penny from this balcony, then in the future, the penny would be down below, lying at the entrance to the Aphostos.”

The good professor nodded in turn. “Alright.”

“This much can be accomplished without ‘time travel’. But to manipulate the past is a different matter altogether. Within our own universe, there is no way for us to change what has already occurred.”

The professor now observed him quietly once more.

“However, if one were able to travel to another universe—a universe precisely similar to ours but which had not yet reached that chronological point in time—he could prevent the penny from dropping, leading to a new outcome.”

“A new outcome,” the good professor repeated, frowning as he turned the thought over in his head.

“Of course, despite the simplicity of my example,” Professor Eclipse went on, “it is also the most difficult result to achieve. Time-travel, or more accurately, dimensional travel, creates an interruption in the natural order of historical events, and the traveller’s appearance presents an intrusion that was never meant to occur.”

“So then,” the Professor said, scratching his chin, “there are rules involved—certain predetermined ways in which each universe’s history must unfold?”

“Precisely,” our colleague answered. “The manner in which all universes exist is much like a game board—chess, for instance. At the start of the match, the pieces are all positioned carefully, each poised to fulfil their role. Every piece, from the pawn to the king, has particular rules that govern it. Without these rules, chess as a game would be meaningless.”

The good professor nodded as the coolness of the cavern air clasped our collar.

“Now consider someone other than a chess player, a person with little understanding of the game, who moved a piece in such a way that it broke those very rules.”

Silently, the professor envisioned the effect.

“Three results may occur, each depending on the severity of the mistake. If little was changed—for example, a pawn being moved across diagonally without attacking another piece—then our game might very well continue. The illegal pawn may even be removed over the course of play. If the mistake was more severe, such as a bishop moving vertically to take another piece, then drastic changes might occur, distorting the balance and fairness of our game. Yet the game would still remain intact and, to a degree, playable.” Professor Eclipse smirked tellingly. “This second option is a middle ground, a sweet spot in our analogy and the optimal situation for dimensional travel. The events of history can to some extent be tilted in one’s favour, and only at the risk of nearing the tipping point... Let us return to our example. The third and final result comes from a case where a piece is moved in such a drastic way that it ruins the point of the game—say, if a queen was made to attack the opposing king directly, despite what other pieces stood in its way. This, of course, would irreparably end the game. For our universes, the situation is similar. A change too great...”

“Would wreak havoc on the dimensions.”

Professor Eclipse slowly nodded. “Too little a change, and the universe will compensate to erase it; too great a change, and the universe will fall apart.”

“And Professor Sunley managed to find your said middle ground?”

“Correct. However, it was a long and tiring process of trial and error. Though some occasions could be manipulated, James Sunley noticed that despite his efforts, every universe struggled against him, in order to return to what it was like before he travelled there. For example, if he had dropped a penny from this balcony, then travelled to a sister balcony in another universe to thwart its falling, circumstances would try to prevent him from stopping the penny-dropping James Sunley of that new universe—or even meeting him for that matter. This would result in the other Sunley still dropping his penny and, just as the first did, visiting another universe to prevent the penny from falling. Of course, that other James Sunley would also be stopped by circumstance.”

“It seems like one large rigmarole,” the good professor said, frowning.

“Though it brings to mind a certain question about the nature of a universe,” Professor Eclipse answered suggestively, “does it not?”

“It does. You make it seem like the universes actively try to stop the traveller from affecting events. As if they were—”

“Sentient.”

“Yes.”

Professor Eclipse’s eyes widened with an unevaluable mixture of pride and horror. “Yes...”

Professor Moonly, disconcerted, found it easier to draw his eyes up in a long, philosophical stare towards the glittering cavern ceiling.

“The creatures we spoke of in the Aphostos,” Professor Eclipse continued, “Order and Chaos. I said they were Gods, and it was not a euphemism. Perfection and imperfection. They are the wellspring of life, from which all else stems. They have established the rules governing the universes, and They are the Ones who have kept them all alive... all existing.”

“Until Professor Sunley transcended time,” Professor Moonly answered, still looking up.

“Indeed. While changing history could be accomplished in small steps, James Sunley quickly grew tired of this effort. In his uncompromising quest, he constructed a machine that would allow him to reshape the rules of the game, to escape the bars of our cage. From above, he could pluck realities like feathers in between pressed fingertips. He could be like a god.”

The professor, now straightening his back and pushing off the rail, looked over towards our prophetic companion. “And therefore you want me to stop him.”

“No,” Professor Eclipse shook his head slowly. “Not just stop him. I want you to kill him.”

“To kill... Professor Sunley?”

“When I left the physical universe behind in 1894, my transcendence did not have the same effect I thought it would. I was unable to change time, though now I could see it in its entirety. When I was sent back, I found myself re-emerging within random points in different universes, blinking in and out of existence wherever my machine had created fractures in the dimensions. With the omniscience I had gained from my transcendence, I planned ways to best use my appearances to change history, but the moments at which I could enter the physical world were still so very limited, and in particular, the moment my machine was activated—that place in time from where the universe is now beginning to unravel—I could not return to.”

The professor mulled over what the man had said. “My Machine 2 has already been proven to work. Why not simply use it to travel back in time manually?”

Professor Eclipse smiled and he sighed through thin nostrils. “Because time was corroding around me. My journey beyond the boundaries of our temporal universe had left me incompatible with it. The moment I re-entered our timeline, seconds would draw to a halt while minutes turned into hours. The longer I stayed in the physical realm, the worse it became.” He stopped, then looked back at us. “You may have noticed this phenomenon the first time we met.”

The professor thought back, his brow lowering. “Yes... Yes, I recall it. I felt the same thing in the library too, when you pushed me into Machine 1.” He looked around, curious. “But... I don’t feel it now.”

“Correct,” Professor Eclipse said. “The Disappearing Isle is capable of stabilizing my pollution of the timeline. I’ve lost the ability to time travel, but I am no longer confined to temporal flux. This, in a sense, is my sanctuary.”

“You planned this all, then,” Professor Moonly said, his tone lingering between accusation and query.

“Yes. I needed to take the island from Chen, and we both know that despite his disposition, he would have never given it to me.”

“So you had him killed,” the professor said. His voice was cold, jaded.

“I did, and you can hate me for it. But it won’t change the fact that I pursued what was necessary for the survival of this world—for the survival of the human race.” A tightened fist rested beside us on the top of the railing.

“How does your own survival benefit the human race?” Professor Moonly growled.

“My life, in and of itself, is irrelevant. It is what I do with it that matters.” He held out a hand. “And what I choose to do with it is change everything.”

“If you wanted to change things, you could have started by not pushing me into that machine,” the professor retorted, arms crossing.

“My creation and resultant leap back through time to the Mesozoic Era was a particularly difficult moment to change.”

“Didn’t you ever try to stop it?”

“Many times.” Professor Eclipse shook his head. “I attempted to destroy the machine, to reason with myself... to murder you. Eventually, I realized the futility of it. No matter what I did, I was born.”

The professor bit his lip, then begged the question, “If I travel back in time, what guarantee do I have of being able to stop Sunley?”

“You have no guarantee. My omniscience was able to tell me all possible outcomes over the entirety of time, but observing the point in 1894 is like looking into a sphere of mist. As I try to see closer to the day I transcended, the events unfolding become less and less clear until, eventually, I can see nothing at all. I’m unable to know what will or might occur at that exact moment in time, though one thing is for certain. If you are able to kill Professor Sunley before he

enters the machine, your actions will send inevitable ripples throughout the universes, undoing the damage I caused.”

So Professor, let me get this straight. Not-you—who was created by him—pushed you into a cloning machine, creating himself. He then went back in time, eventually building a super-time machine that let him escape time (and become a new not-you). But according to what we saw back in the theatre, this was what caused time to break, in turn leaving the oververse, which time exists within, open to uncreation—which undid everything in existence and is why we’re... still here? Or not. My brain hurts thinking about this.

“That makes two of us, worm,” the professor answered, his head aching.

Then is there a time limit on this? Do we have to stop Professor Sunley by a certain date?

“Yes, you do,” Professor Eclipse answered my question directly. “While the chronology of the oververse’s events will not have an immediate effect on the physical universe, there are other, corporeal threats that might prevent us from remedying our situation.”

“March 23rd, 1933,” Professor Moonly said, his voice low as he remembered the date he’d kept to himself, the one that had been inscribed on the glowing eye.

“Yes, that would be one of those events.”

“What will happen on that date?” the good professor asked.

“I believe you’re familiar with the Weimar Republic of Germany.” Professor Eclipse glanced over.

“Yes, I am,” the good professor answered him.

“On March 23rd, its Reichstag will pass an act that grants emergency powers to the German chancellor. This act will trigger a series of events, leading to a second Great War that, at its culmination, destroys our world.”

“A second World War...” Professor Moonly whispered. “But,” his voice rose, “you must be exaggerating. Man doesn’t have the facilities to destroy an entire planet.”

“He will come to develop them in the form of atomic arms—weapons capable of decimating entire cities.”

The professor, stunned, was quiet for a moment. Then, he managed to ask, “Did Professor Sunley have anything to do with this?”

“He laid the groundwork for those terrible weapons,” our companion answered.

The professor thought for a moment longer. “Then perhaps this underground city serves another purpose, aside from containing you.”

“Indeed. It is a place of refuge. A contingency should the world engulf itself in the flames of man-made destruction.”

“Reserved only for the League..?” The Professor frowned.

“The League’s members were all selected because they carried in some way, shape, or form, remarkable human qualities. Some of them are brilliant logicians while others are economic masterminds. There are poets and artists, musicians and architects—no field has been ignored. This new Grey Owl is filled to its brim with superior human genetics.”

“And you would let inferior genetics burn in the world above..?” A look of disgust crossed the good professor’s face.

“Try as he may, one man cannot save an entire world.” The brooding man tilted his head. “Eugenics was merely a by-product of my efforts.” Then, he stepped close to us. “Listen to me, James. Whether or not Professor Sunley is stopped, this war of his will overtake our planet. Go before it breaks out and play your part. If you ensure that the universe survives, I will ensure that humanity does as well.”

The professor’s face went pale. “And what about our family... our friends..?”

“I suspect you won’t help me unless I offer them a place here in this city.”

“You’d suspect correctly.”

“And how many friends do you have? How far does your family extend?”

The professor fell silent.

“I had friends and family who I cared about too, James. Sometimes... I was even forced to murder those I cared for the most.” His voice grew sombre. “Let me be the one to tell you that making the choice to let all your friends and family die is much easier than deciding which of them should get to live.”

It was an unmistakable, grim feeling that drove itself like a spike through the good professor’s chest. Still, our questions dwindling now, we were left with only one more thing to ask. “If I destroy James Sunley, won’t that prevent your creation?”

“Upon my existence outside of time,” Professor Eclipse answered, “I became a viable impossibility—a necessary sort of paradox. I cannot be uncreated, even with the death of Professor Sunley. Nevertheless, killing James Sunley will prevent other events from occurring, including the destruction of the oververse and the uncreation of our own universe.”

“Then there’s no way around it,” Professor Moonly said, stepping back from the balcony and looking at either a monster or a man. Our adversary, a hero. “I must kill Professor Sunley.”

Professor Eclipse nodded, and our deliberation ended.

“James!” someone called out, and we looked back to see Viola and Mr. Gant exiting from the chandelier-lit hall of the Aphostos’s top floor.

Together, Professors Eclipse and Moonly looked back at the two of them. “They don’t know, do they?” the good professor asked.

“No,” our colleague answered. “I thought you would want to tell them yourself.”

As our companions paced up to us, we looked over their expressions. Viola’s calm, emerald eyes reflected our glance while Mr. Gant’s brown ones carried over us and our counterpart professor.

“You two seem to be having fun,” the American growled. His grim, tired face was crested with cold sweat. “Meanwhile, we just had to sit through seven hours of ear-splitting opera.”

Professor Moonly smiled back at our friends, and there was an unambiguous sadness in his voice. “My apologies, Mister Gant. I’ll explain everything, I promise.”



A FINAL INTERMISSION



Chapter of the Lakeland Terrier

A cold air rushed around Holinshed Bend, over the bridge where Professor Moonly stood looking out at the rippling pond. In its clear waters, the commonly-seen catfish and indigenous crayfinns circled over pebbles, their smooth bodies glistening under a colourless sunlight.

“I’m glad you decided to help me with this, Andrew.”

The Grey Owl politician loitered half a foot away from us. “I needed to get above-ground for a w-while anyway.” Mr. Flinch, removing a brown flat cap, sniffed at the winter air. “Who’s in charge of the city now, out of curiosity?”

“After you were sent to Fishknight, Deputy Minister Foliyer took over a number of your duties.”

“I never much cared for Foliyer,” the stocky ex-mayor admitted.

“He’s plainer than you and has a strict moral code.”

Our friend seemed hurt by the sentiment, and imperceptibly, the professor tilted his head.

“Anyway, I’ve h-had your funds converted into pounds, then split between the major dealers you’d requested. That’s forty th-thousand in anti-tank weaponry production, one hundred and twenty in submarine manufacturing, and two hundred forty-seven thousand in agriculture. In addition to routing that money for you, I’ve turned over ownership of the locations and assets previously owned by Mister Rubber. Those facilities now belong solely to you.”

“Frankly,” the good professor admitted, “when I first suggested the idea, I thought you would deny me; in truth, Andrew, I’m very glad you didn’t. If a professional private military is to exist in Grey Owl, I’ll feel much more comfortable with it being my responsibility.” He paused. “Speaking of Mister Rubber, back in the Aphostos I had an interesting conversation with one Charles Bourier.”

Mr. Flinch smiled and listened politely.

“He mentioned a somewhat revised version of events from the Trisfal, in which John Urschel lived to tell the League about our innocence and pin the whole matter on Tiny—not Biggie—Rubber.”

“My, that’s rather convenient,” joked the ex-mayor. He scratched at his beard pensively. “It’s a g-good thing we had a shape-shifting man up our sleeve, otherwise the League might have made quite a bit of trouble for you.”

“What about VVyangfield Evans?” the professor inquired.

“Always was a bit of a wild dog, that one. But wild dogs get put down eventually.” Mr. Flinch glanced sideways, gauging our response to the death, then smirked. “You’re welcome.”

There was a pause between the professor and his friend. Finally, one of them spoke.

“That man of yours—t-the general. How’s he getting along?”

“Mister Gant?”

“Yes, I believe that was his name.”

Professor Moonly tilted his head, blinking once or twice at the sight of the glimmering water. “Since our return from the Isle, his injuries have taken their full toll. He’s been bed-ridden for four days.”

“Shame...” A small, nearly unnoticeable smile crept over the politician’s face.

“Don’t be petty, Andrew,” the professor muttered back.

“Fine.” And so the politico returned to the matter at hand. “You know, not that it matters if I tell you now, what with my mayoralty expired and all—” He shook his head, replacing the cap. “I often helped money change hands when I was mayor of this fair city, t-this Florentine realm built on the bricks of crime.” He chuckled. “That said, I always made sure to know what the cash was being used for. It was my way of ensuring some sense of order amongst the ruckus.” He eyed us curiously. “Not this time, though. This time it seems I do not speak, nor do I hear, nor see what my efforts are for.”

The academic gentleman frowned in return. “If Professor Eclipse did not tell you what was to happen to Grey Owl, then what do you expect me to say to you, Andrew?”

“Nothing, frankly,” Mr. Flinch admitted. “S-Still, it didn’t hurt to ask.”

There was a drawn-out silence, and a cool gust bristled against the otherwise vacant bridge.

“Telling you could alter the fabric of history,” the professor answered at last.

The politician glanced back at us.

“It could bend the very reality of space-time. Set future events on a collision course with cataclysmic destruction.” The professor looked back at the politician.

“You’re going to tell me, aren’t you?” Mr. Flinch asked, wide-eyed.

“What else are friends for?” Professor Moonly shrugged. “Besides, unlike Professor Eclipse, no universal laws condemn me to silence, and there are things I’ll afford myself to mention.” Slowly, he leaned over the wooden rail of the bridge. “War is to engulf the world, Andrew.” The professor glanced back towards the pond. The fish had left their earlier spot and were now farther off. “Those investments I had you make for me are included in my will, along with Moonly Manor. If I do not return from the task Professor Eclipse has assigned to me, you are to gain full ownership of them.”

Our comrade stood genuinely shocked. “J-J-James,” he stuttered. “You can’t be serious.”

“I am. We’ve been friends for years, and despite our differences, I’ve always had a certain admiration for your methods.” Professor Moonly stepped away from the side of the bridge and began to walk down, back towards the street.

“I’m glad there are times they inspire admiration...” Mr. Flinch laughed, but the professor went on, his voice touring along the cold air.

“I see through you, Andrew. Despite your immoral means of achieving it, the end for you has always been a prosperous Grey Owl.” His last words rung in the politico’s ears like an old church bell. “If war comes to the continent, use the army and weapons I’ve assembled to defend this city.”

At last comprehending, Mr. Flinch nodded. “I’ll do that, James. You h-have my word.”



Chapter of the Cavalier King Charles Spaniel

“My goodness, it’s so cute!” Ms. Gooseberry exclaimed.

“In an ugly sort of way, I’d suppose.”

“You wouldn’t dare suppose such a thing,” our friend cried out, taking up the little creature in her arms. Its eyes glistened with the innocence of a small, groomed pet. Yet it was a beast at heart, the terrible little devil.

Earlier in the morning, it had impetuously jumped atop a drawer in the professor’s room, knocking over two glasses half-filled with practicing chemicals—both intended to be used in later trials—a heavily annotated edition of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, and a small oil lamp. Moments later, the professor, returning from the kitchen, had found the beast perched atop its newly-claimed territory. It offered him a supercilious little bark.

“Where did you get him from?” Ms. Gooseberry asked.

“A friend of mine from Geneva sent the pup here to be taken care of during her expedition to Cyrenaica.”

The investigator appeared confused. “But why not pay someone in Geneva to take care of him, or simply ask a neighbour?”

The professor looked down at the gorgeous little devil. Was the beast even sentient? It sneezed, shaking its furry face. “He was concerned that an assassination attempt would be made on its life.”

The investigator glared back at us, running her soft fingers through the creature’s fluffy hair. “What? Why..?”

“Evidently, it consumed the Irish Crown Jewels.”

“The dog did?” Ms. Gooseberry exclaimed. Then she frowned, thinking. “Those jewels... I believe the Intelligence Committee held an investigation regarding them some time ago. A gem-encrusted star—and a badge. Both from the Order of St. Patrick.” She nodded briefly. “Yes, that’s right. They were incredibly valuable, but... they went missing over a decade ago.”

“Yes, and they were found less than a week ago, after which they were eaten.”

“Did you eat the Irish Crown Jewels?” Viola asked the creature in a coddling voice.

Surprisingly, it barked in return.

“Retrieving them,” Professor Moonly went on, “was not an easy matter, and it left a number of influential people... rather distraught.” He cleared his throat. “Understandably, the discovery of the jewels on the continent has not been made public knowledge.” He glanced towards a small coffee table on which there rested the day’s paper.

“What’s his name?” we were asked.

“Lamphardt,” the professor answered, unamused.

The investigator looked down at the puppy as it snuggled against her bosom. “So how will little Lamphardt factor into our plans here?” the investigator then said, bending over and putting the miniature dog back down. It scampered off on its short, fur-laced legs, disappearing out through the door.

“It shouldn’t,” Professor Moonly answered matter-of-factly. “I’ll have the groundskeeper take care of the beast while I’m away.”

And now the room’s air took on a graver feel.

Sighing, Viola returned her stare to us. “So have you decided when you’ll leave?”

“Tomorrow night.” Professor Moonly picked up the newspaper, browsing its front page.

“Very well,” the green-eyed woman answered, “though you still haven’t explained why you don’t want me going with you.”

The professor, lowering the news, looked back sternly. “If what Professor Eclipse said was true, then the man I go to face is one of great cunning. He is careful and determined, meticulous in his plans. His legacy is monolithic and his mark upon this world an unbearable black stain.” The professor replaced the paper on the table, tracing his finger unconsciously over a smaller typed title. “He has manufactured nations from the flames of wars that he himself instigated, burnt through the underground cities of criminal empires as if they were little more than kindling, and murdered thousands if not millions in his vicious attempts to crush the world beneath his foot. All opposition has fallen before him and now that he has tired of his triumph, he sets himself to conquering the universe.” The words below us read ‘Sir Black of the Grey Retires, Donates His Estate to Charity’. “Professor Sunley should be stopped at any cost, but if there are costs I can afford to avoid, then the lives of my friends ought to be among them.” He peered back up at Viola from where his thumb had smudged the article’s heading. “Your investigation ended when we discovered that Biggie Rubber had killed his family. True, Professor Eclipse was involved, though you have no corporeal means of proving it, and Biggie

Rubber—or whatever he’s become—is beyond your grasp. Therefore, you have no avenue left to pursue but that of terminating your inquiry.”

The investigator frowned back at us. “What are you saying, Professor?”

“Your presence is no longer required here in Grey Owl.” Cold, blue eyes regarded her. “I’ve had our acting mayor, Mister Foliyer, sign your debriefing forms.”

“And I suppose you imagine I’ll go quietly,” Ms. Gooseberry answered, crossing her arms. “James, we’ve been through too much for you to do something like this.”

But the professor shook his head, sighing. “It is precisely because we have been through so much that I’ve chosen this course of action.” He removed from his pocket a long envelope marked with the mayor’s seal, reaching out. But the investigator’s hands remained crossed.

“I won’t accept it.”

“You don’t have to accept it,” Professor Moonly said. “You need only obey its command.”

As we stood in opposition to each other, the professor and the investigator were interrupted by the small, flat-faced puppy, who scurried back into the room on his black paws, carrying in his mouth what looked to be a candle. He darted towards Viola and dropped the decoration at her feet.

“You will travel by chartered ship to the city of Perth. There, you will speak with Mayor James Franklin, who will offer you a sum of money and a subsidized estate on the city borders. Consider this a retirement package.” The professor ran a hand through his dark hair. “Your time as an agent of the British Intelligence Committee will likely come to an end, but it’s a small price to pay—”

“For my safety,” Ms. Gooseberry interrupted; concluded.

The good professor nodded, watching as she bent down to take the candle.

The investigator stared at it, twisting the ornament in her fingers. It had been lit a few times before but was still long and decorated, carved with images of swirling waves. It appeared to be from one of the sconces in the drawing room. How had the little beast managed to get to it..?

“This is about the war, then. The one Professor Eclipse told you about?”

Professor Moonly nodded.

“I see,” Viola answered him. Then, her green eyes flicked back up. “I appreciate the sentiment, Professor, but if Britain needs me, then my place is here. I won’t hide on another continent while my own is being threatened.”

The professor raised a finger sharply. “Your life is more important than—”

“The lives of millions of others?” Ms. Gooseberry glared back with a vicious scrutiny.

“I didn’t mean it that way,” Professor Moonly stuttuered. “I—I... meant that to me, you...”

Both parties fell quiet. Then, eventually, the good professor spoke. “It will be one of the safest places in the war to come. Please, at least consider it.” This information had come courtesy of our achronological counterpart.

“And what of Mister Gant?” the investigator added.

“You’ll admit his condition has worsened,” Professor Moonly said, and our composed friend nodded. “I doubt he’ll make it to the war.”

“So that’s it, then?” Viola asked.

“So that’s it,” Professor Moonly answered.

The finality of the statement coiled in the air like an exotic viper, lingering unchallenged, while from outside, the distant sound of a tolling bell caught against the windows of the study.

At last, Miss Gooseberry spoke, looking back to where the pup had cuddled up against the base of a bookshelf. “Lamphardt is a lovely if not troublesome dog.” She blinked once, then turned to leave. “He almost reminds me of...” But her voice had trailed off.



Chapter of the Greyhound

The sounds of war had for past nights assaulted the boy's dreams. But in this quiet, grey library, saturated with dusty air and colour-drained books, the muffled voices of butlers—of servants, of maids, of nannies—took their place, one after the next.

“Perhaps he's gone off to the gardens, then.” A maid's.

“I doubt it—the young master's always been fond of the kitchen.” This one was a servant's.

There was silence until at last a third erupted in a burst of sudden boldness. “Wherever he's gone, I want him found before John's return!”

He'd laid an excess of clues for the others to follow, and faced with this abundance, the ladies and the gentlemen would search high and low for the boy. All places, save for here.

The White Room.

A towering kernel of knowledge, it surrounded him like an ascetic's province, letting in the drowsy daylight from its domed glass ceiling. Streaks of beautiful iron cast reaching shadows, and painted roses adorned the doorway. If there was anywhere he might find word of the world's events, it was here. This room stood free from the coddling of truth-stripped narratives, told too often for his tastes by the older, more experienced folk. How did they think he was to come by experience if the opportunity for it was never given to him?

He reached for a book—paused. No, this time would have to be different. To grasp at forbidden knowledge was a happy habit of his, but now he sought something particular, something that would answer the one question no one else would. Eyes peered up again, meticulously comparing the vertically-printed titles. At last, he found the one he was looking for.

His fingers slapped, then slid over the rough surface, pulled down with the slow gnaw of gravity until fatigued, they dropped away. He tried again, this time standing on the tips of his toes. At last, he grasped it, pulled, withdrew.

The shelf above creaked as the book was stolen from it; it loomed threateningly, as if it intended to crush the young boy beneath its wrathful weight. And then it knocked back into place against the wall.

The boy looked up at the motionless, retreated enemy, which would have won without doubt the battle between them if it had decided to pursue its ruthless course. But it didn't, and here he was. He opened his prize.

“Great Battles of the Grey Owl,” the young boy mouthed the words, “by A. Foglier and R. Harnoldford.” Published this year, only five months ago. Fingers flipped through the pages, and in the silence of the room, blue eyes lit by the winter sun began to register lines of information.

There were dates and death tolls, flags under which combatants marched, and descriptions of the tactics, measurements of each force’s strength; titles were the most important and so were printed at the top of each description. The Vermonite, Balliasta’s Pass, Forge of the Irons. But no War of the Golden Stool.

“Golden Stool...” he murmured. It was a dumb name anyway, one his father had probably made up on the spot. Again, the young Master Moonly had caught himself being lied to.

“James!” The hard rap of knuckles fell against the door. “Open up.” The voice was stern, familiar, and in it issued an iron tone that could not be disobeyed.

I wonder sometimes while perusing the nightly dreams of Professor Moonly how many moments like these have collided to compose the man who will wake the next morning. Have his recent adventures afflicted his identity? Could they be the reason his mind has called up from its depths this particularly distant moment in time—an unimportant thing most certainly, and one I’d have skipped over completely if not for its sheer presence, *now*. It has built none of his character, left no resounding marks on his soul. It is one of a million more that have followed its creation and in turn impressed upon the good professor more greatly than this one ever did.

And if experiences were like marbles—some black as space and others in claim of fleecy finishes; a majority speckled with rainbow pin-pricks and a few left like sculpted imitations of peering cat eyes—what sort of misshapen, glass reject might this memory be? Why might a man knowledgeable in almost every aspect, now privy to even the turns of time, haunt himself with a moment from which he learned nothing? In which he was interrupted? Where he hid from the world instead of choosing to shape it?

This memory is useless to Professor Moonly, and I’d do well to devour it entirely! That way, at least, he could suppose neglect or forgetfulness and I could sit silently content with protecting him from the irrelevance of his own life... Are you surprised? You shouldn’t be. Every life has its irrelevant moments, and in this case especially—

“The memory in question is not one of them.” The good professor’s eyes eased open, blinking against the folds of a soft pillow.

Professor, my apologies. Did I wake you?

“Irrelevance is, oxymoronically, relevant. I’d even dare to say it is the most relevant thing of all, since in combination, the moments we take for granted help make up much of who we are.” He rose slowly, sitting up in his nightgown and rubbing first his right eye, then his left. “Irrelevance is also my greatest fear. In that way, I might understand a man who felt irrelevant, who felt that his place in the universe was not to inform it, but rather to wither away as others stole his place. I think that to be forgotten is a dreadful thing. Worm, do not eat my memories.”

It... was only a suggestion.

“Mmm...” the professor said, drowsily.

Are you worried about tomorrow?

“Of course.”

Despite your attempts, I think Ms. Gooseberry will still want to come along.

“I know she will.”

How do you intend to stop her?

Professor Moonly looked tiredly out into the darkness of the night, sighing. “One does not stop Viola Gooseberry.”



Overton's Overture

The professor descended to the library in the early morning, while the others were still sleeping. Taking the dragon cane, he then climbed a winding flight to the floor on which Machines 1 and 2 awaited.

So what's the plan?

"I will talk to Professor Sunley. Perhaps I can convince him to end his destructive pursuit."

Correct me if I'm wrong, but Professor Eclipse said we had to kill him, didn't he?

"He did." Professor Moonly, setting his dragon cane to the side for a moment, reached into his pocket, removing Mr. Gant's engraved revolver.

You took the general's gun from him?

"While he was asleep." The professor replaced the weapon. "If I cannot convince Professor Sunley to stop, then I'll use it."

From a point of pure logic, it would seem a better idea to, as Mr. Gant himself might put it, shoot first and ask questions later.

"Indeed," Professor Moonly answered uneasily. He redrew his walking stick. "Still, I cannot believe that someone who was once a part of me could go on to commit such heinous crimes."

And you think you'll set him on the path to redemption? Frankly, it seems to me he's already made his decisions.

"All of which were conducted in my absence." The professor neared Machine 2, bending down towards its panel. "If I can, I hope to at least prevent this last one."

Very well. It's your funeral.

"Our funeral," the professor muttered as he finished typing parameters into the machine. Lastly, he set the dial to a particular date in 1894. His hand lingered over the button to commence. "I'll have to be quick. If the machine's process fully engages while the chamber door is still open, the time warp may very well catch the entire premises in its effect."

I'm ready when you are, Professor.

Professor Moonly nodded, then leaned forward, then—

"So the man o' the hour's going off to war, huh?" a gruff voice shot off, and the professor turned to see Mr. Gant making his way up the curling set of stairs. Ms. Gooseberry followed.

"You shouldn't have come," Professor Moonly answered with a frown.

“James,” the investigator said, attracting our attention. “No matter what you think, you can’t do this alone.” She removed her spectacles and those deep, emerald eyes struck us. “If what Professor Eclipse told you was true, then James Sunley is an incredibly dangerous adversary.”

The professor looked back to our two friends. “This shouldn’t be up for debate.”

“I agree,” Ms. Gooseberry answered, glancing back at the American.

He nodded in return, then looked over to us. “If the fate of the world’s at stake, then you’re in no position t’ tell either of us that we can’t help.”

“Mister Gant, with all due respect—” the professor started, motioning to the general’s injuries.

“I know *I* can’t,” the American interrupted, coughing. “I’m no idiot; I’d only slow you down. But Viola should go. She’s a trained government officer.”

Ms. Gooseberry, without hesitation, stepped into the machine. “Oh, I will be going. There’s no argument to be had about it.”

“But—”

“I said no argument.” Ms. Gooseberry shook her head.

Sighing, the professor at last admitted he was outnumbered. “Okay... okay.” He looked back to Mr. Gant. “You must do me a favour though.”

The pale-faced American nodded.

“I’ve already disabled Machine 1, but I needed this machine to travel back in time. Once we leave,” he pointed to two metallic lines connecting to the underside of the floor, “untie these cords. They will leak vital fluids, rendering Machine 2 effectively unusable.”

“Yessir,” the general answered, nodding. He closed the glass door, lingered a moment, then pressed the black button. Immediately, the machine began to whirl.

“Prof,” the American said from outside, knocking a pair of knuckles against the glass. His voice, though somewhat muffled by the barrier, was still distinguishable for the next few seconds. “You’d better make it back here with my gun.” He pointed to our pocket and the professor, slightly embarrassed, nodded.

We peered to our side as the noise grew louder. Ms. Gooseberry, who had been looking at the American now turned to us. “So...” she said. “I take it this won’t feel very pleasant.”

“You’re not a masochist, are you?” the professor asked.

“More of a sadist, I think,” the investigator answered.

“It’s going to hurt quite a bit.”

Just as with Machine 1, Machine 2's whining screech turned to a horrible, bellowing roar, though this time we could also hear a hissing wave of indistinguishable whispers. Outside, the library's bookshelves were enveloped by a blue light, blurring and bright, and they began to phase out of reality. Mr. Gant's image disintegrated into fragments as if it had been a picture on the glass, now wiped away in blurry streaks. And a horrible, high-pitched ringing, the likes of which the professor could have sworn he'd heard somewhere before let off like a breaking wave.

Though the force of the machine made our muscles rigid, Professor Moonly noticed we were not yet disintegrated. Then in an instant, it was like the rocky surface of a mountain had hit us. Our bodies exploded and it felt as if we had been scattered to the furthest reaches of space.

The only way to describe it was that we felt... wide. Sparse. We were everywhere, all at once, and then we were not. Now, we were in one place, gasping for breath, our drops of sweat staining a dusty marble floor.

"Where... are... we?" the investigator asked, struggling to pronounce each word.

The professor shook his head. His right hand clutched around the handle of the dragon cane.

Together, he and Viola rose. Around us, the ruinous walls of a towering library groaned with their age. Moss grew on old strips of wood and dusty paintings hung alongside green stain-glass windows. An odour of prestige drowned the room.

"It almost looks like my library," Professor Moonly answered. "But..."

The investigator paced over to a large entranceway. Above it, engraved in dark grey stone were the words: 'Noi siamo gli immortali, noi siamo gli indimenticabili.'

"I think I know this place," Viola said. "It's Masketta Castle."

And indeed it was. Masketta Castle, the old and foreboding territory of the famous Italian dynasty stood around us, erect in all its historical glory.

"When I was conducting research on Grey Owl City several months ago, I came by records of this place—it was built by Manellero de Masketta as a show of good faith to the British Crown." The investigator looked up to where a large portrait of an ocean hung over a tall, elegant fireplace.

"I recall hearing of this castle when I was younger," Professor Moonly admitted. "But it was demolished years ago."

“Years from now,” Ms. Gooseberry corrected. A second later, her green eyes flashed as voices rose from outside the library. She stepped back, and started to whisper, “Hide!”

But it was too late. The doors burst open and there in the entrance stood three familiar faces.

Professor Moonly’s eyes met with those of the first, a stranger he’d seen once before. The man had a large, prickly moustache; wispy black hair hung out from underneath a green patterned hood. His nose was large and his chin was pointed, and when he spoke, it was with a thick Scottish accent. “Professor? And Miss Blueberry!”

Ms. Gooseberry raised an eyebrow.

“What are you two doing here? I just saw ye both in th’ other room.” He pointed a finger back down the hall, frowning.

Behind him stood three young boys—one in a snake’s mask, one in an armadillo’s, and one in a bear’s.

The professor gandered at them for a moment before looking up again to the large Scotsman and thinking quickly. “I’m not the Professor Sunley of your time. I’m from the future.”

The man’s eyes widened. “From the future? But that means...” His voice lowered to a murmur, and understandingly he nodded. “I s’ppose ye’ll want me t’ take ye to him, then.”

“Quite right, my good man.”

Ms. Gooseberry watched closely, meanwhile. Her hand was rested on her waist, close to a gun, no doubt.

The walk down the hall was a fascinating if not wholly unnerving one. We passed over a carpeted floor, blood red but patterned with brunette diamonds, framed with gold fabrics, and frequented with shoeprints. On the walls hung lines of portraits, all of Professor Moonly—or rather, Professor Sunley—from various points in time. There was one in which the man wore a turban and his skin was tanned; in another, he was paler and covered in a large fur coat. In a third we saw him wearing what looked to be a Prussian military uniform. All the Sunleys stared at us, all expressionless.

“So it failed then,” the Scotsman said, bounding ahead with his large, impressive feet. He’d flipped his hood back, letting his long, oily hair—tied up in a ponytail—whip behind him.

“Hm?” Professor Moonly asked.

“Your machine,” the Scotsman clarified. “You couldn’t jump beyond time.”

“Oh,” the good professor answered, improvising. “Well, the calibrations on the venting system were offset by too great a degree, which threw my travel out of resonance. It’s only a matter of purging them and making the minor recalculation.”

“Ye seem t’be takin’ defeat very well, Professor,” said the Scotsman. His eyes narrowed and he took a quick look back, as if he were suspicious of us. “It’s unlike ye.” He turned back around and pressed onward.

“I’ll entertain this one, only because it’s so minor and I’m yet so close to my goal.” Beads of sweat began to collect on Professor Moonly’s forehead and neck, and his eyes darted to Viola, who, worriedly, looked back.

Moments later, we had entered into a larger room, then turned left and, passing through a wooden door, descended down nine flights of stairs—at which point I believe we had gone very deep below ground, to a place where the heat of the earth mingled oddly with the cool moisture of the chambers. Ten entrances stood in front of us, and we passed through one on the left. Another long corridor awaited us, this time with black brick walls and violet carpeting. We walked through it until at last we came to a final set of doors. They were large and iron, engraved with images of spearmen and of muses. Two carvings stood out amongst all the others—opposing combatants who, decked in their glorious sets of armour, marched under a much larger figure gowned in winding robes. The overarching creature bore the long, carved skull for its face.

With great effort, the Scotsman heaved open this final portal. As the doors swung wide, kicking up a wispy trail in their wake, we stepped into a spectacular room. Underneath a vaulted ceiling painted in the style of Michelangelo, an exquisite goliath of mechanical parts spun in all its horrifying beauty. It was just as Professor Eclipse had shown us—a sparkling collection of turning rings, gaps left at technical intervals to allow sight into its inner compartments.

Within the shawl of riggings, a long and wide stairway led up to the centre of the beast, which sat upon an ovular platform. There, a chamber large enough to fit a single body waited to be occupied. Panels and widgets surrounded it as from bowel-like tubing, the stench of copper and powerful chemicals flowed forth, flowering invisibly and pooling on the ground. Like a stinging melancholy it gnashed at our nostrils, bringing tears to our eyes and making the professor feel sorry that the natural world ever need suffer it—whatever *it* was.

Regardless, our thoughts were interrupted all at once when we looked back down, for at the base of the long stairs stood the man we had come to see, speak to, and likely kill.

“Professor Sunley,” the Scotsman bellowed, waving a hand out towards us. “Yer future self is here to talk to ye.”

The other professor was gowned in a large, black longcoat. From behind, we could see a hood fall out over it, resting against the base of his neck. It was black, patterned with little grey Sierpinski triangles. When the man turned, we saw a white dress shirt, well-pressed and unstained. Above it, cold, blue eyes regarded us, a pair of black brows lowering against them and cushioned by the folds of tired skin. A pointed nose jutted out as the man hopped down from where he stood. He held a dragon cane similar to ours in his hand.

The alternate professor approached us without a word, his footsteps echoing against the fractured tiles below. It was strange, Professor Moonly thought, to see himself approaching. Each perk of the lip, every twitch of the pupil, intrigued him.

Critical of us, the man we watched watched us back, eyeing Professor Moonly and Ms. Gooseberry one at a time. When at last he had neared enough, stopping but a few feet away, he nodded briefly, pausing, licking at his next few words. “Sir, I am descended of a good Family, and was born a Gentleman.”

The professor looked back, surprised by the statement.

The man in front of us fell silent, as if awaiting a response.

“As am I, I suppose..?”

There was a long, drawn-out silence as the other man’s eyes widened. Then, shockingly, Professor Sunley burst into laughter. Laughter, of all things... It was light-hearted at first, jovial. Then, it darkened, bordering finally on manic. His eyes rose to the ceiling and, grinning madly, he spun around, stepping back towards his machine.

“Of course,” he whispered from between narrow lips. His voice would have been inaudible if it wasn’t for the large, echoing walls. “It only makes sense that you would appear now, in this moment.” He looked back at us, and when he did, his cruel grin betrayed all that he knew. “Professor *Moonly*, welcome to Masketta Castle, in the year 1894.”

The professor’s skin grew clammy as he tightened his teeth. How did he know who we were!?

At once, the Scotsman and the children grabbed the professor and investigator.

“I assume that’s Viola M. Gooseberry standing beside you,” Professor Sunley went on, extending his arms outward. “Come now, there’s no need to be so silent. This is a monumental

occasion!" He seemed exhilarated. Then, he glanced back towards the good professor. "James, tell me—you time-travelled here. How was it?"

The professor frowned with curiosity, but remained otherwise silent.

"How was it," he repeated, "to become, if only for an instant, a part of time and the universe itself?" His eyes seemed almost desperate now that he had discovered someone else who had leapt past the boundaries of physics. They searched, the good professor thought, for another who had felt that rush, who had come to know that sudden and immeasurable state.

"Professor Sunley... I've come here to warn you about your attempts to conquer time." When the sentence ended, the room in turn went quiet. Then, it was our enemy's opportunity to speak.

"Warn me?" His grin turned into a loosely-formed smile, and lips parted again to beg the question, "And what are you to warn me of?"

"In attempting to exist beyond space-time, you end up tearing it apart." Professor Moonly looked momentarily towards Viola, who looked back worriedly at us.

"Destroy... space-time..." Professor Sunley nodded, as if understanding. "I see..." Then, he paused. His sights rested on the long, elegant cane in our hand. "And how did you come by that?" The question was pointed, jaded.

The professor looked down. "The walking stick?"

"Yes..." Our enemy answered, the last consonant a drawn-out hiss as he held up his own cane in turn. "I take it you stole it from some future version of me."

"On the contrary," the professor answered, "it was a gift."

"A gift..." Professor Sunley seemed hardly surprised. "How did you do it?"

"Do what?" Professor Moonly asked.

"Kill me. I would have never given that device to you, regardless of the circumstances."

The good professor scowled. "I didn't need to kill you. You placed it inside of a fortune-telling machine at Boullerolli's Royal Hall."

"In the city?" our enemy professor muttered, frowning briefly.

"In Grey Owl, yes," the professor returned.

But suddenly, the man's tone changed again, back from incredulity to cynicism. "And what kind of person did you find me to be?"

The good professor gazed up towards his clone. "One concerned with the fate of humanity, and with its protection."

But at this, Professor Sunley sneered. “Fool! I have birthed wars of immeasurable scales; commanded men to kill their brothers for the sake of religion. I have broken the corruption that came before me and succeeded it with my own iron will. I felled Troy. I conquered Constantinople. I eradicated the Habsburgs. I am humanity’s greatest enemy, and I am he who will come to replace it once it has found its own extinction.”

Professor Moonly shook his head, trying a different approach. “You have also studied the oververse,” he countered. “I know that for a fact—you told me it was essential to your understanding of time travel.”

At this, our enemy’s ears pricked.

“Scattering yourself throughout time will tear a hole in it,” the professor tried to reason with him. “That hole will link our universe to the oververse, and the oververse to a realm of uncreation. All at once, everything that is and everything that is not will come to clash, and all of creation will be annihilated in the process.” We looked up at our nemesis, pleadingly. “You must listen to me. There will be nothing left to rule if you pursue this course of action. You yourself will die as well!”

The Scotsman and children followed our gaze wonderingly, and now, all eyes looked to the one on whose shoulders fate rested.

At last, our adversary—the adversary—spoke. “Man is inseparable from war.” He placed his hands together, then drew them apart, reaching into his pocket and removing a pair of black leather gloves. “It is essential to his nature, as much as love, or joy, or the need to create. The need to destroy—whether oneself or others—is part of what it means to be human. There has never been a counterexample, James—not even in yourself.” He sighed, fitting them on. “I cannot imagine a case where you succeeded in convincing me to relinquish my destiny.” He stepped back down and motioned to his servants.

At his command they brought us to our knees.

“I never wanted to rule the world,” continued Professor Sunley, standing over us. “I wanted to *destroy* it.” He then inhaled through his narrow nostrils, eyes widening with insanity. “To destroy the world and conquer the heavens... It’s something only a god could even hope to dream of. I have already conquered the world. It bores me now, insults me with its presence; and so I turn to the realm beyond it—a realm I’ve only ever caught glimpses of. A hopeful dream.” He pressed his cane against the ground soundly. “If that means I ensure my own destruction, then so be it, but I will not be destroyed until I have met with God Himself.”

“You’re speaking madness!” Professor Moonly shouted back.

“Of course I am,” Professor Sunley laughed, placing a hand on his forehead. “I am mad. I was driven mad long ago. I hate this world, and its people, and you.” He clenched his fists and we heard the tightening of fabric. “I am hatred incarnate.”

The professor grimaced, wounded by this contorted image of himself. “What could have ever driven me to such terrible ferocity..?”

“I AM NOT YOU!” Professor Sunley suddenly shouted, striking the good professor with such force that spit and blood splashed across his cheek. Above us, James Sunley’s eyes danced with anger. “I am your end, and it is a shame you will die without knowing the life I have been forced to take up.” He drew his cane, until that moment unused, aiming it up towards the terrible machine. When he spoke again, his voice was more composed. “I’m everything you could have been had you only seized the chances presented to you and served a greater good.”

Good? This is lunacy! Professor, are you alright?

Slowly, James Moonly nodded. A bruise had formed under his left eye and blood dripped from his nose.

“I suppose this is it, then,” our enemy pouted mockingly. “I’m going now, James.” He looked to our side, nodding. “Viola.” With little else left to say to us, the enemy professor spoke next to his sycophantic followers. “Kill them and be done with it.”

“Wait!” Professor Moonly shouted. “*Wait!*”

“I have spent my entire life waiting,” Professor Sunley answered scathingly, turning back only to offer us a sparing glance. “Now, at last, I act.”



Schrödinger

It took the investigator half a moment to warn us of her plan; before the full of it came about, she'd spun around, twisting her wrists free from the grip of the children and reaching for her weapon. She aimed it upwards and fired, sending the Scotsman stumbling back while he cursed and clutched his chin.

The professor rose from where he had been subjugated as well, drawing his own weapon—the dragon-headed cane. He swung and slammed it into the Scot's thick knees. From them rang a sickening crack, and our captor, howling, fell down against the tiles.

Noticing our uprising, Professor Sunley began the dash up the stairs of his machine, towards its epicentre in an attempt to activate it, but well before he could, we were upon him. This time, the professor offered no quarter.

We lashed out first at his head with our cane, but the enemy professor, sensing our approach, threw himself to the side, and we caught the machine, recoiling against hard metal. The shock left us unguarded for long enough that our enemy threw his own cane outward, its deadly mouth latching onto the end of our pant leg.

He pulled and we were dragged down to one knee.

“Hah!” the villain shouted, releasing his own weapon's grip from us and bringing it up to strike again.

But we took our cane above us and the two shafts clashed. With a concerted effort, we threw his strike off to the side, then pushed him back with the end of our cane. By accident, our thumb pushed a blue ring left, and the dragon head snapped up, opening suddenly and vomiting a line of pure blue fire.

Our enemy, shocked, rolled out of the way just in time, erecting his own weapon and returning the favour.

We dodged three lines of flaming liquid, which splashed up against the rails behind us and ignited them. Sparks sizzled as the stairs around us burnt, and with nowhere else to go, both Professors Sunley and Moonly dashed the only way they could—up.

The eviler of the two was the first to turn, and when he did, he swung out with all the force he could muster.

Professor Moonly parried just barely, then struck back, hitting our enemy at his chest.

He faltered in turn, and we pressed in closer. But Professor Sunley twisted a ring on his cane, and a piercing shriek stunned us long enough for him to lash the side of the professor's shoulder with his weapon.

The good professor recoiled, clambering up against the rails.

It was as if we were again on that bridge, caught in the enveloping danger of the night. But the man in front of us now was younger, more agile than Professor Eclipse. He was vicious, relentless, and set on our death.

In front of us our enemy laughed. "You lean against the rail as if you've already tired, James!" His eyes narrowed, and he teetered on his toes like a snake about to strike. "Could it be that you've failed to prepare for our encounter?" When he caught our returning dismay, excitement overcame him. "I used to wonder if you would one day come for me—to stop my plans and end my life, knowing what I would ultimately become. I feared you would have such a great advantage that I'd find myself unable to stop you." His teeth drew up, and his smile bore white daggers. "You were like an overarching shadow, always stalking me through the gullies and the alleys. And now..." He motioned to us. "I see all my fear was for nothing."

The good professor's body trembled with the effort of rising forward.

"But for what it's worth I have not been so lax! In preparation of our meeting, I have trained under countless militaries, mastered the martial arts—"

Suddenly, our enemy, eyes flashing, threw his force upon us, grabbing Professor Moonly by the throat and pushing him over the stairway's rails.

We felt ourselves plummet down onto the grating below, a large and wobbly platform that shook when our weight came crashing against it. It was a moment before the good professor was able to get to his knees; when he did, he caught sight of Viola.

She was fighting against the Scotsman—who had recovered—and the children, who now punched and scratched at her despite the last few shots that had gone off.

As our attention returned to the situation at hand, we felt the ground groan with the weight of another human being. Professor Sunley had jumped down, and now standing tall, he struck out at us, smacking the professor's temple with the end of his cane.

When he did, a sharp and cutting agony sent us sliding to the edge of the platform, clambering seconds later to our feet. We spun. We fell.

Our sweat-stained skin pressed down against the floor, we saw double of the world—the blurring metal grates, the tubes and gears of Sunley’s machine, the grimy tiles twenty feet below us—

Another crack muffled by flesh sounded, this time from the place where the demented parody of a professor kicked at our ribs. “I’ve waited years for this moment, James—years to destroy you.” He burst into laughter. “But to be completely honest, the more of my life I lived, the more insignificant you became to me. More and more, until at last you were smaller than an afterthought.”

Slowly, the professor’s grip loosened from around the dragon cane.

Our enemy’s longcoat flapped behind him while we saw a small boy run up the stairs overhead. “Still, something about tonight must have reinvigorated me. Because now,” he reached down, grabbing us by the throat. “I *do* want to kill you myself.”

The good professor struggled to whisper something.

“Hm?” Professor Sunley asked, yanking us closer.

“I said...” Professor Moonly groaned, “You gloat too much.”

Our nemesis paused as he felt the press of Mr. Gant’s revolver against his jacket. Slowly, he looked down to where we held him at gunpoint, then frowned.

“Let me go,” the good professor demanded, his voice raspy and hurt.

Fingers lifting from our collar, Professor Sunley stepped back, a look of silent calculation lingering in his eyes. He was thinking of a way out.

“Make any kind of move and I’ll shoot you.”

“Fair enough,” our clone answered, placing his hands in the air. Then, he cocked his head, eyes appreciating our weapon. “I don’t recall you ever having a gun collection.”

Professor Moonly scowled. “I became an enthusiast when I learned I might one day have to shoot a maniac.”

“Shame,” our nemesis answered, eyelids lowering as if he were tiring of our conversation.

From above, we heard a call. “Professah Sunley! The machine is ready!” It was the young snake-masked boy, who now bolted back down the stairs—but the good professor dared not look. Instead, his eyes crept to where Viola had managed to subjugate the Scotsman and the two other youngsters. Her gun aimed directly at them, she shouted back to us. “What now, James!?”

Professor Moonly pondered the question himself, but he barely had enough time to weigh one decision with the next when our cold counterpart paced up towards us, so close that the end of the gun pressed up against his breast.

“Stop!” the good professor cried out, stepping back, but our counterpart pursued us. “I’ll shoot!”

“I know,” Professor Sunley answered. “But the gun won’t fire.” His eyes narrowed cruelly. “Because it’s not yours.” The monstrous man grabbed at our arm and out of shock, we pulled the trigger.

A click sounded, and to our horror we discovered that he was right.

Professor Sunley smiled, his eyes widening horrifically. “I don’t believe I ever told you about the time I met General James Gant.”

In a moment, Professor Moonly’s wrist was snapped and the sabotaged weapon dropped from our hand. “GAAH!” Pulling back and away from our enemy’s grasp, the professor clasped his injured appendage.

In the next moment we felt a kick to our stomach, which threw us from the edge. As his body slipped past the metal platform, the professor reached out with his free hand, snatching the cane we’d left behind. We dropped several feet before the dragon’s head caught the scaffolding’s bottom-most beam. The abrupt halt shook us, dislocating the professor’s shoulder. He groaned, air hissing through his gritted teeth, and I could sense the horrible pain.

Professor, whatever you do, do not let go!

“Naïve and trusting by nature,” a voice from above bellowed. “Ah, the great James Hubert Moonly...” We could just make out Professor Sunley’s hideous smile through the criss-crossing metal girders. “You have overlooked a great many things, I’m afraid.” Abruptly, we heard a loud ring as our enemy’s weapon struck against the floor, sending heavy vibrations down along it to where we hung from. “It is a fault punishable by death.” Unable to grasp the quivering metal any longer, the professor’s hand slipped, the cane remaining locked to the beam as we soared down through the air, crashing feet-first against the chamber floor seconds later.

A sharp pain shot up Professor Moonly’s back, and he collapsed, crippled.

“James!” Viola called out from where she still held her weapon to the Scotsman and children. We saw her hesitate, then lower the gun and start towards us. The moment she did, the children scattered and the Scotsman ran for the door.

He’ll go to get more help—Professor, tell Viola to stop him!

But Professor Moonly could barely speak, instead stuttering incoherently as from above, the dragon cane unhinged itself and landed loudly on the floor nearby. He stared at it, wheezing. Then, his vision began to blur.

From above, the professor felt the investigator place a hand on his wrist, checking for a pulse. It would certainly be faint. “James,” he heard Viola sob. Professor Moonly opened his eyes and in turn saw hers, frantic. “Why didn’t you shoot him?” she asked.

The professor attempted to rise up, but the investigator stopped him.

“Don’t move or you’ll injure yourself more!”

And so instead, Professor Moonly focused on the details of our companion’s face, tracing the contours of her expression. “The weapon didn’t fire... It was... sabotaged.”

All blood, it seemed, left the investigator’s face. “No...” we thought we heard her whisper. Then, she looked back up to where the professor’s clone had reached the distant top of the stairs. “I’ll stop him, James. I’ll stop him!” She kicked off from the ground, bolting towards the machine.

Meanwhile, the professor faded in and out of consciousness. Only a loud crash brought him back to reality. Professor Moonly turned his head towards the iron entrance where the Scotsman lay stunned, his back braced against the tiles.

Growling, the immense man flew back to his feet, charging out through the door once more. A second later, we saw him thrown back, rolling, then sliding to a painful halt.

“Ye damned bastard!” he shouted, as through the doors stepped...

Professor, don’t close your eyes!



Adagio

The sounds of struggling were stifled for the first few minutes. As the professor came to, they turned clearer. Curses flew as fists landed, and when his eyelids rose, Professor Moonly caught sight of a large man standing over him. He was unfamiliar, with dark brown pupils and messy brunette hair. His chin was block-like and his forearms large. His nose was crooked, bent out of shape from either a landed punch or unfortunate genetics. By the look of his clothes, he seemed to be a mercenary.

“Professor Moonly,” the big man said, grinning brutally. “You look worse for wear.” Above us, the large man’s eyes rolled slowly back in their sockets, and his skin grew a foamy shade of purple. Muscles contracted and veins bulged while bones could be heard crackling and regrowing. The body trembled violently, moaning with an anguish only imaginable at either end of life’s fragile spectrum. And then swiftly, all subsided. One figure had transformed into another, and Biggie Rubber, bathed in a breaking, bloodied sweat, stood over us.

“The little guy up there—” He pointed towards the staircase, his back arching forward and eyes gleaming with interest. “That’s Sunley, yeah?”

“Yes,” the good professor mumbled back, noticing the Scotsman lying some distance away, either dead or unconscious.

“Good. S’cuse me.” The genetic monstrosity stepped over us, making his way towards the stairs, but he stopped short a second later. “Almost forgot.” Mr. Rubber bent down, reaching out with a large arm dressed in a torn striped sleeve. Twisting the bottom-most ring on our cane, he placed the dragon-headed device next to us. “Targeted epigenetic radiation. Courtesy of Ol’ Biggie.” He nodded. “A temporary stimulant of the *Lin28A* and *IMP1* genes that allows for faster healing.” He paused, huffed, then chuckled. “Ah, what’s the point in even telling you? You’re half-out.” The large man slapped our cheek a couple times. “Chin up, Professor. This’ll all be over soon.”

Professor Moonly turned his head feebly and watched as Mr. Rubber flung himself to his knees, morphing suddenly and with evident effort into what looked like a snowy-haired lion—larger than anything the professor had ever seen. Its front legs were massive, and its teeth, long and vicious, dripped with saliva. Ghostly eyes with shocked white pupils fixed on their target, and suddenly it was off, bounding up the steps towards the evil Professor Sunley.

The lion passed Viola, throwing her to the side of the rails, but the other professor, realizing its approach, hurled himself into the spherical chamber at the centre of the mechanism, sealing the thick glass barrier seconds before the beast crashed against it.

The animal clawed and gnashed, but its efforts were useless.

Professor Moonly for his part managed to finally stand and, taking up his black, scuffed cane, started to make his way up the stairs. His legs and back still burnt with searing pain from the fall, though at least he was mobile. Nonetheless, the healing the cane provided was far too slow.

Glancing up, the good professor realized that one of his eyes must have been bloodshot. Bright light from the machine's chamber flashed against us, making it difficult to see, but the professor reached out with a hand and took the rail, informing himself instead with the sounds of the scuffle above.

Far away from us, Viola had caught up and without hesitation fired three bullets into the glass. We heard a crack, but nothing shattered. Mr. Rubber, meanwhile, made ghastly noises as he once again morphed—this time, gauging from the silhouette, into a larger version of the animal. He slammed with greater claws against the damaged barrier, but to little avail. A piercing whine had begun to fill the air. It would be only moments now.

Professor Moonly! Look!

We had made it nearly halfway up the long and open stairway, but now we reached the place where we had fought Professor Sunley. The entirety of it was engulfed in bright blue flames. Like the jaws of an elemental behemoth, burning waves of fire burst open, leaving gaps for half a second before closing soon after. We saw molten metal spark and crumble and knew that the pathway would not hold for much longer.

"There's only one way to get across," the good professor said, grimacing against the heat.

But the flames are everywhere! It will be impossible!

"We have to!"

We had to.

Suddenly, the metal groaned, and with no other choice, the professor instinctively jumped. Miraculously, he dodged the flames, but when his foot touched down, the jagged cross-section of the stairs buckled in. We felt ourselves fall for half a second—then suddenly, we landed with a thud.

The professor, startled, stared down at the still-failing platform. As if caught in a wave of invisible turbulence, it rumbled slowly, pulled on by gravity but falling in a slowed, impossible motion. “I don’t believe it...”

What’s going on!?

Professor Moonly smiled wearily. “My good worm—it’s time! Time itself is beginning to warp.” Strangely enough, as he spoke I could feel the good professor’s injuries repairing themselves, faster and faster. While we were sped up, the world around us had slowed to a crawl.

How long will this last?

“I don’t know,” Professor Moonly answered, turning grim with the realization. “Let’s make haste.” He straightened his back, and with a satisfying crack, it fell back into place. This was similar to the kind of time warp that surrounded Professor Eclipse. And if that was true, then we had to hurry, for it likely meant that Professor Sunley was nearly at his transcendence.

Our footsteps broke upon the stairs while pockets of whirling pressure rapped against our clothes. Strobing brilliance engulfed us for moments at a time as red, then white, then yellow set the good professor’s corneas ablaze. And in one outstanding moment, time recomposed itself. Sparks and the emergence of a bursting mist, a brilliant whine of prickling noise, and screams from the scaffolds above all caught our senses at once.

We jolted with the sudden potency of the distilling seconds, and Professor Moonly forced his head up.

Metres above us, the cat, which we could now fully see to be a black and horrible beast, had smashed through the hard glass casing and torn away its soft, inner man. Professor Sunley, crying out, was thrown back towards the stairs, tumbling down with horrible speed until his roll brought him to the section where we stood.

His pursuer allowed no rest and was on him in seconds, jumping down through curtains of fog and landing with such strength that its feet bent the previously-solid stairway. Behind us, the rest of the flights past the flaming section had begun to buckle downward on either side; now, the floor sloped beneath our heels.

As it did, Professor Sunley staggered to his feet, anger flashing in his eyes.

“G’day,” said the humanoid creature as it finished its transformation back into a human shape. It took four more steps down the groaning ground. “I’m the man who’s gonna kill ya.”

The cruel professor smirked, intrigued by Biggie's ability. "How fascinating... Still, you'll be a short-lived anomaly." He brought up his walking stick, spinning a ring at its bottom and taking aim. The dragon head viciously snapped up and—

Biggie, reaching out, shoved it to the side, grabbing the evil professor by his throat. There the thinner man dangled, a stream of beautiful blue fire spilling out from his weapon and into the misty air.

As Professor Moonly watched, he gripped the shaking rail to our side. Sparing a brief glance upwards, we could see Viola running down to where our group was. She'd aimed her gun, but resigned from firing.

Professor Sunley struggled as the large hand grew tighter around his throat. His eyes bulged, rising to the ceiling while his legs kicked futilely. Beside him, the cane ended its mechanical assault, its head clicking back down and its grim mouth sealing shut.

And in that moment, the good professor was lost to contemplation. Here was a man who had murdered many and brought nations to their knees. If given the chance, he'd go on to commit his magnum opus, damning all life in his wake. He had to die, didn't he?

The professor stared on and at once found himself sickened by the sight of tortuous justice. It demanded that he watch this permutation of himself die for the crimes he had committed and for the crimes he was attempting to commit. Reason whispered in his ear, but Professor Moonly, lapsing for a moment, shook it off. "He should not be condemned to death."

Biggie Rubber, having wrenched the cane from the other man's hand, looked back at us, smirking incredulously. "Really?"

"Really," Professor Moonly answered. For once, he was the one who had to tilt his head upwards. "Biggie, I cannot answer murder with murder. If he dies here, then we're no better than him."

But Biggie Rubber shook his head. "When you fought him the first time, did ya think it was just for fun? Did ya think you could bring him in, just like that?" His blue eyes narrowed. "Nah, you fought him with the intention to kill!"

Undaunted, the professor answered, "I made the mistake once. I won't make it again."

But the large man laughed suddenly. "A mistake... Just like he said." He threw Professor Sunley down severely, dashing his unconscious body against the teetering copper platform. "Professor Eclipse knew you'd never be able to go through with it. That's why he sent me." In a

half-hearted attempt, Biggie tried to reason with us. “Think about it this way—is it better t’live tortured by your own madness, or to die a sudden death?”

“I’m not a man fit to judge that.” The professor’s eyes narrowed.

“But I am, and Professor Eclipse is, so,” the big man shrugged, “here’s a much blunter philosophy to chew on: you’re outvoted.” He turned his attention downward again to where Professor Sunley, who had momentarily regained consciousness, was coughing and spewing up spit. “Right then, let’s finish this.”

As he brought up the cane to strike, a shock erupted throughout the floor.

Viola, still a distance off, though close enough now to shout, competed with the gasps of the terrible device. “It hasn’t stopped! The machine is still functioning!” And every man standing on the shaking ground grew suddenly pale.

The moment Viola had finished her sentence, the stairs beneath Biggie and Professor Moonly snapped, contorting and buckling downward. The professor fell to his feet while Biggie tripped backward and the dragon cane slipped from his hand, striking the rail and nearly falling past the edge. But Professor Sunley reached out and just in time managed to grab it. In that moment, he seemed more inhuman than ever before; his eyes narrowed like a snake’s, and before Biggie could make another move, the diabolical academic aimed his weapon upwards, unleashing a flock of howling fire.

The well-muscled man cried out in pain, reaching for something in his pocket. We saw it to be a small flask, which he poured onto himself, but strangely, it did nothing. The flames devoured him ravenously, and his charred screams died away into a gurgling growl while, stepping over his maimed body, Professor Sunley stood grinning, eyes wide with pleasure. Seconds later, those same, wrathful eyes fell on us.

In an instant, the cane turned and, sputtering out what seemed to be the last of its flames, it gnashed its horrible teeth.

Stunned, Professor Moonly made no move.

Professor Sunley had also stopped, eyes falling back to the sight of his cane’s failure.

“You tried to burn me, even after...” The good professor growled with a cracking voice. “You bastard!” He threw up his own cane and brought it down against Sunley’s handle, knocking the hard, black shaft to the side. We were thrown into a rage, and Professor Moonly, losing his civility, hurled himself at our enemy.

Around both men, the squeals of turning metal drove on as the golden shell of rings spun faster and faster, breaking the tiles a great distance below and scraping up against the ceiling. The commotion we'd caused must have thrown them out of balance. But a balanceless world soon gave us a spurt of luck, and time whipped against Professor Sunley, his half of the stairs groaning to a halt while ours remained untouched.

Without regret, Professor Moonly swung his cane into our nemesis's face, leaving no impression save for a slow ripple in his flesh. He took it back and struck again, this time in the man's ribs, clothing only beginning to flutter at its touch. At last, from the other side, the good professor came down on the man's left knee, a slow boom emitting from where the cane had hit bone. At last, the professor stepped back, his heels pressing in against the hard floor.

In front of us, time lapsed back into its normal flow, and Professor Sunley, all at once, was destroyed. He twisted with the crush of each simultaneous blow—his face, then his chest, then his knee all giving way. In seconds, he had fallen to the ground, gasping.

And Professor Moonly stood over him, seething anger in his expression. How could such a creature have such little regard for human life? For the order of the universe? For... The thought trailed off. "James," the good professor finally said, and our hateful enemy nodded up to meet our gaze. "I can't imagine what your life must have been like."

Professor..?

The man below us, sneered. "Spare me the rhetoric."

"I intend to." Like an executioner's axe, Professor Moonly brought the great dragon cane up, and at last, the moment was upon us. With all his driving force, he swung down, then slowed, then stopped. In front of him, Professor Sunley rose with a sudden, horrifying speed. He grinned evilly, and we realized that now, we had been held back by time.

The enemy professor, claspng his ribs, reached down with a free hand and took up his own cane. Then, he looked at us for what must have been minutes on the outside. But he did not strike. Instead, at last he left, starting up the stairs and towards where Ms. Gooseberry waited. Why wasn't she firing?

We discovered the answer a moment later, when Professor Moonly was at last freed from the time ripple. He stared up, then began to dash towards the centre of the machine, passing Viola a minute later. She had been frozen in place as she fired a shot at Sunley. The bullet was half-frozen in the air, soaring slowly towards the end of the rail. But we could not stop for her.

Below us, the failing stairs trembled, and when we reached the final platform, it seemed as if the whole machine had begun tearing itself apart. Gravity appeared to pull in all directions, and portions of our clothing fluttered up, as if caught in a powerful storm.

“It’s over!” Professor Sunley, seeing us first, shouted past the clamour and cracking flashes. “Nothing can stop my machine; nothing can stop *me!*”

But Professor Moonly, screaming, charged one last time towards the man who gloated triumphantly in front of the broken glass barrier.

Our adversary tried to defend himself, but the good professor struck with his cane, slashing at the other. It flew up against the insides of the machine, breaking a vent, and a black steam struck both men under it.

Bursting from the noxious cloud, the two professors fell down against each other; realizing that his own cane had dropped from his hand, Professor Moonly clasped instead at Professor Sunley’s shoulders.

The villain gripped us back, scowling.

“Worm!” both professors shouted with ear-splitting cries, and as commanded, I—and likely my unseen counterpart—aided in the deathly struggle.

We punched at him, our strikes absolute and uncompromising; he kicked at us, knees and feet landing with hard thuds against our lower body.

And the professors writhed upon the floor, locked in their ruthless combat.

Blood stained our clothing and grit-smearred knuckles struck the metal grate moments later. Nails dug into flesh and teeth bit into coat; foreheads butted as with sweating palms, both men attempted to choke each other. They were as primal savages now, each set only on the other’s death.

At last, Professor Sunley delivered a disastrous blow that rendered the professor stunned and myself unable to help. In the time he had, our enemy rose from us, staggering, then limping towards his machine. He leaned back into it while Professor Moonly brought us up to our feet.

He’s escaping!

The good professor fought against the pull of gravity while I regained my senses, throwing one foot down after the other. With all the effort he could muster, he pulled us up to the side of the machine’s cylindrical chamber, and reoriented, I granted him what strength I had left to offer. Together, we craned the good professor’s head up to gaze inside the machine’s shrieking chamber; by now, it was the most we could afford to move.

And Professor Sunley, exhilarated, glared back out at us. His hair was dishevelled, and the look on his face inhuman. His coat and robe kicked up violently while palms pressed out against handlebars on the concave walls around him. The chaos devouring the room made his words inaudible, but when his lips moved seconds later with such simplicity, they effortlessly delivered his last, tormenting message. “I win.”

We did not hear the first shot—only witnessed a blossom of blood as it grew on Professor Sunley’s chest; the next two were clearer and fired from a closer distance. The monstrous professor jolted with the impact of the bullets, coughing up red spit. Shocked, his body grew limp and dropped to the floor, sliding down the wall of the machine. Shattered glass crunched as his shoes slid out, and our eyes roamed down to where his dragon cane had rolled out from his hand. Its head stared up at us with that same, cruel look it had always presented.

We turned a moment later to face the investigator, who hauled herself up onto the platform, gasping desperately. She looked at us through whipping hair, those beautiful green eyes feral. Slowly, she lowered her weapon. “James!” Viola shouted over the commotion of Professor Sunley’s machine.

The professor was silent, still stunned.

“James, is there any way to stop it!?”

Beneath us, cracks in the fabric of our surroundings were beginning to emerge. A bright white light engulfed the centre of the machine, and the body of Professor Sunley disappeared into its folds. “No,” our own professor finally croaked, looking back. “There’s no way.”

The investigator stepped closer to us, reaching out as the machine’s terrible light twisted underneath our heels. “Come on, then!”

The professor, returning to his senses, bent down to the flooring, picking up the cane he’d dropped, then rose, grabbing the investigator’s soft hand.

Palms clasped, and we were pulled forward.

“We have to get as far away as possible!” the investigator shouted as we attempted to distance ourselves from the glowing epicentre. A tangle of whispers and cataclysmic booms erupted now from it, and in places, the platform had begun to transmute into gleaming ash. Other sections had warped out of reality, and others more had contorted to the point where they’d entirely shattered. “Run!”

RUN!

Below us, a portion of the stairs exploded in a magnificent burst of metal shards. The cloud of spinning slivers caught the professor's jacket; beside us, Ms. Gooseberry was hit directly by them, and bleeding from her legs and arms, she tripped over the hole in the floor.

Professor Moonly turned back as quickly as he could and, catching sight of her, reached out. He took her hand just in time, though her weight sent the professor to his knees, and slipping farther, to his stomach.

"Worm!" he thought. *"Help me pull her up!"*

The... the cane! Use the cane!

The professor thrust the cane downwards and the investigator took hold of it. "Don't let go, Viola!"

We watched as she lost her gun. The weapon, falling vertically at first, made a sudden curve upwards, disappearing into the white sphere that had formed at the centre of the room. Professor Sunley's machine was now gone, replaced entirely by that horrible, screaming veil of mist.

Then, all at once, it struck us. We saw Viola slip, saw her disappear into the endless void. We ourselves fell shortly after, watching the other two from above as the white light consumed us; together, we looked back down, staring, shocked, at the people who looked like us. We wished one of them the best. Viola, scarred and bloodied, collapsed outside the falling castle, and there, she sobbed desperately. The professor did the same, realizing I had died from the impact of the gravity blast. More pressing matters occupied me now; from the husk of Professor Moonly's lifeless body, I surveyed all fleeting options as we fell towards the abyss, hand in hand with the dying Viola. My options were running out, and I did not know what to do without my friend, without my professor. Against all odds, we'd made it to the outside of Masketta Castle. Lungs burning, Professor Moonly and Ms. Gooseberry stood tiredly beside each other. We were safe. We congratulated each other; the professor and the investigator kissed. The professor and the investigator died.

"Professor!" Ms. Gooseberry screamed. Returning to the moment, we saw she was about to slip. Her hand had slid down to the very end of the dragon cane and was now caught by the eloquent beast's black face.

Professor Moonly, looking down at her, blinked, shedding tears from his eyes. The drops fell in the prescribed pattern, first vertically, then turning up in a curve until they disappeared

into the unstable, whirring sphere. “Viola,” he whispered. “I can’t hold on.” On his end, the cane’s handle began to slip from his trembling hand.

I’m tightening the muscles as best I can, Professor!

“James.” The investigator looked back up to us, and in those final seconds we lost ourselves in her emerald eyes. “I...” Her voice was drowned out by the noise, which had now reached its terrible peak.

Then, in an instant, everything stopped. The sounds. The sights. The sphere of light concluded and disappeared into a singular point, like a marble of bright snow. The cracking remnants of the gargantuan machine, battered and broken down to their skeletal frames, teetered threateningly. And Ms. Gooseberry felt weightless. We looked around, awed by the strange beauty of the machine’s ruins, by its null heart and the dead dimness of the chamber. And in this moment we could have said anything, could have carried on a conversation or lived out the rest of our lives.

There was choice.

Yet, it occurred to the professor that on this particular occasion, despite all else he hesitated, not quite knowing what to choose. It felt odd, the lack of knowledge. So rarely had he ever felt it in his life. Instead, he stared back at the pure white marble, which, now devouring the fleeting seconds, erupted all at once in a great explosion, washing us all in its brilliant light.



*The actors have been cast.
Now, we must defend our choices.*



SYMBOLGY

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR



Penward Emelius Rhyme was born in the Spanish capital city of Madrid in 1961 to Robert and Linda Rhyme. Fascinated as a child by the stacks of books in his father's study, he began to self-teach, learning from textbooks and periodicals he would find at the local library, four streets down from his house. His interests soon drew him to Switzerland's famed University of Zurich to study the humanities, then later to Oxford, where he refined his ideas through pursuit of doctoral degrees in history and archaeology. Penward has received a number of awards and acknowledgments for his work in transcribing various texts and for his book *Of Tongues and Tales: A Survey of Middle-Eastern Literature*.

Over the past years, he continued this work from his residence at the University of Oxford, travelling throughout Europe to collect and analyze artefacts, though never failing to reminisce about what he has come to call the "rustic and homely charm of the English countryside". Despite this, it was in the urban heart of Oxford city at St. Michael at the North Gate, on March 21st, 1997, where Penward Rhyme married his long-time colleague, Amanda Hobbes. They retreated from the world of academia for roughly half a year, returning only after their travels to Argentina, China, India, and Canada.

In 2008, Amanda was diagnosed with lung cancer, passing away one year later. After her death, Penward moved to Canada, retiring fully from academia in 2010. He has since been living with friends in Northern Ontario.

Any queries, quotes, conundrums, or concerns pertaining to *Symbology* or related works may be addressed to penward.rhyme@gmail.com.

THE WORLD OF GREY OWL CITY

WHERE TO FIND MORE STORIES

The world of a city: it's an oxymoron, certainly, though there is no better way to describe the organic growth that Grey Owl has seen in these past years. *Symbology* is part of a collection of short stories, pamphlets, essays, and other documents, all describing the qualities and culture of Professor Moonly's quaint English home. Grey Owl also has a long and fascinating history, detailed in records from the city's Printhium Museum and in news reports from its infamous papers—the Barbadore, Tricorn Daily, and Grey Owl Chronicler.

If you'd like to discover more about this glorious English city, its peoples, and its history, visit www.symbology.wikia.com. In addition, you can keep updated on the latest *Symbology* news by visiting www.facebook.com/readsymbology.

SYMBOLGY AS A CHARITABLE WORK

If you're reading this, then it goes without saying that *Symbology* is a not-for-profit work! However, donations can be made to the Symbology Generosity Project, which aims to raise \$2,000 for various charities and initiatives. All money generated by the project will go to these groups, save for fees charged by Generosity.com and any taxes. In addition, donating to the project gives you the opportunity to access special prizes and extra literature, all of which have been created in advance. It's a win-win situation and a great way for you to help charitable causes. You can learn more about the Symbology Generosity Project by clicking [here](#).

CONTESTS & REWARDS

REWARDS & YOU

Outside of participating in the two *Symbology*-related contests—listed below—the easiest way to find fun and fascinating awards is to contribute to the **Symbology Generosity Project**. Through this, you can gain access to news articles from Grey Owl, computer and mobile wallpapers, vintage postage stamps, previews of *Tautology* and other books, bona fide land titles, and even official Grey Owl citizenship.

So where do your donations go? The majority of funds generated from donations to the Generosity.com project will be sent to charitable organizations and groups dedicated to advancing knowledge and the wellbeing of society. A second, smaller portion will go to the producers of fun and informational Youtube videos. A detailed breakdown of this financial structure—including what will happen if the \$2,000 goal is surpassed—can be found on the Generosity page, or at bit.ly/donations-breakdown.

CONTEST 1: “IT PAYS TO PROPOSE”

Relax—it’s not that kind of proposal. *Symbology* is currently accompanied by a number of shorter works that together make up a collection of Grey Owl literature. Some of these short stories, accounts, articles, and essays are available at the **Symbology Generosity Project** for contributors, while others can be accessed freely on www.symbology.wikia.com. Through the “It Pays to Propose” contest, you now you have the opportunity to add your fine work to this vast and prestigious collection.

THE AWARDS

\$500 will be awarded to the first place winner, \$250 will be awarded for second place, and \$100 will be awarded for third place. All contest winners will have their work added to the Symbology Wikia and will be granted the title of “Honorary Professor” at the University of Grey Owl. Confirmation will be sent to each contestant who submits an

essay, though only the winners will be contacted again to notify them of their success. The names of winners will be shared on the **Symbology Facebook Page**.

THE CLOSING

This contest ends at the close of New Year's Day (12:00am on January 1st), 2019.

INSTRUCTIONS

Contestants will write an academic essay (roughly 1000-2500 words, size 11, Georgia font, 1.5-spaced, with numbered pages and containing a "Works Cited" page if other sources are used) on any one of the topics below. Contestants should ensure that their full name appears on the essay they submit. Contestants may submit more than one essay. Each essay must be submitted through email to **penward.rhyme@gmail.com** as either a Word document or a PDF file. In the email's subject field, the contestant should write "Contest 1 Submission". The body of the email must contain the contestant's mailing address, postal code, province (or territory/state/jurisdiction/kingdom/sea-bound principality, etc...), and country.

ESSAY TOPICS

- 1) As a work of literary, science, and fantasy fiction, what on Earth is the purpose of *Symbology*? (What message does it hold for its audience, its critics, and society as a whole?)
- 2) Narrative conflict is used in literature to drive a story's plot by creating strife, often between man and man, man and society, man and nature, or man and himself. How does narrative conflict function in *Symbology*, who is in conflict with whom, and what meaning does this carry for characters and audiences? (The number of characters a contestant chooses to focus on is left to his or her discretion.)
- 3) Is Professor Moonly a hero or a villain? Explain your answer using evidence from the text.

- 4) *Symbology* is written in a semi-disjointed manner, actively utilizing chapter breaks and scene transitions, intermissions, and changes in narrative structure. What purpose does this style of writing serve?
- 5) The 4th wall is indirectly addressed within the first few chapters and sparsely addressed throughout the rest of the novel. At one point, Professor Moonly reminds the worm of his duty, to record his travels “for the posterity of future generations”. Keeping the professor’s mysterious end in mind, who is *Symbology*’s audience and what does the book’s relationship with the 4th wall tell us about them?
- 6) If the *Mary Poppins* series was written during and after 1934, how is Professor Moonly’s worm able to make the reference he does on page 33 in the year 1927?
- 7) Comment on the literary significance of either animals (such as the deer in “Ornithology”) or trees (such as the willow in “Nor’Easter”) within the book. What do animals (or trees) tell readers about either *Symbology*’s characters or its themes?
- 8) Describe in detail the definition and purpose of the Bourier Bubble. Contestants must support their answer with scientific evidence from this or other texts, which needn’t necessarily be factual.
- 9) Explain the nature and purpose of the theological references in *Symbology*. What do these references contribute to the book and why? Move heaven and earth to provide your answer.
- 10) Contestants may create their own essay topic pertaining to *Symbology*. If this option is chosen, they should include a description of the custom topic at the start of the submitted essay.

CONTEST #2: THE MYSTERY OF THE CHAPTERS

The Mystery of the Chapters is a lengthy puzzle based on the titles of chapters and their significance in *Symbology*. The puzzle took 1 ½ years to produce, and will likely require concentrated effort to solve. Solving this puzzle will yield an important message that will allow the winning contestants to best understand the book and illuminate the story's most important and unanswered question.

THE AWARDS

In the first year that this puzzle is released to the public, a winner discovering its secret will receive \$3,000. If the puzzle is not solved within that year, then on New Year's Day of the following year, the prize will increase to \$5,000. If the puzzle is not solved within this year either, the prize will increase again to \$8,000 and remain at that amount until the Mystery of the Chapters is solved.

THE CLOSING

This contest only closes when a contestant presents a *complete* and *correct* solution to the puzzle, along with the final message. If more than one contestant works on a submitted solution, then all the names of those people involved must be provided in the submission. How prize money will be split is the sole responsibility of the submitting group and should be determined before submitting a solution.

INSTRUCTIONS

The Mystery of the Chapters is a symbolic puzzle consisting of 11 "chapter families" (found on pages 347 and 348). They consist of The Chapters Instructional, The Chapters Mathematical, The Chapters of Campaign, The Chapters of Experiment, The Chapters Imprisoning, The Chapters Sacrificial, The Chapters Ascetic, The Chapters Catastrophic, The Chapters Canine, The Chapters Orchestral, and The Chapters Celestial. Analysis of each group will produce a unique symbol, and analysis of these 11 symbols in combination will produce a message. Send the message to penward.rhyme@gmail.com, along with the legible rough work that led to your answer. Pay close attention to each family's title, the chapters contained within the family, the order that the chapters have

been arranged in, the denotation of each word, the connotation of each word, and the spelling of each word. No chapter family relies on chapters outside of it to solve, and no chapter relies on the chapters after it in the list to solve, however, understanding the meaning behind chapter titles will often require analysis of the chapter itself. Overall, each group of chapters has a different method of discovering its symbol, though to offer further instruction, one of the easiest chapter groups has been solved on the next page.

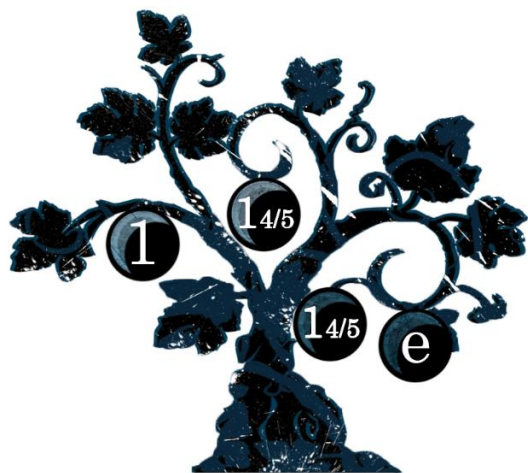
EXAMPLE

The Chapters Instructional

The Chapter Tree
Chapter One
Chapter One & $\frac{4}{5}$
Chapter, Too
Chapter e

The Chapter Tree appears first in this chapter family, and so we will examine it first. It presents us with a vivid image—a tree with chapters growing from it. Hence, we can easily sketch out our chapters—Chapter One, Chapter One & $\frac{4}{5}$, Chapter, Too, and Chapter e—as if they were fruit or flowers on this tree; we will start with the first two chapters, labelling them “1” and “ $1\frac{4}{5}$ ” respectively. This is easy enough. Hence, the Chapter Tree so far will have 1 and $1\frac{4}{5}$ as two of its fruit.

Chapter, Too suggests that another fruit must appear, and furthermore, “Too” implies that this fruit should also look like one of the other chapters. Remember that analyzing a chapter never requires the chapters after it, and so Chapter, Too must look like something that came before it: either 1 or $1\frac{4}{5}$. To determine which of these our Chapter, Too mimics, let us delve now into the actual content of the chapter. The first number mentioned in Chapter, Too is 12,439.72: the oddly specific size in square feet of Professor Moonly’s manor. Furthermore, we are told that the manor was built by Odaor G’ttili, whose name is an anagram for “digital root”. Taking the digital root of this number, we achieve our result—the number 1. Because “1” is also the number of our first chapter, we know now that Chapter, Too mimics Chapter One². Therefore, we label our third fruit “1”. Finally, we’ll denote the last chapter by “e”, and altogether, this gives us the first symbol.



The first symbol is a tree with fruit on it labelled by the characters 1, $1\frac{4}{5}$, 1, and e. Later, it will connect to the other symbols produced from solving different chapter families. Contestants will apply logic to the clues provided for the other 10 families in order to discover what their symbols are and what significance these symbols hold. Contestants may solve chapter families in any order they wish, though it is important to remember to solve the chapters within these families in the order in which they are listed. Best of luck!

² Some chapter families may require reasoning like this, though there is an easier way in this case to have figured out Chapter, Too’s true identity: read The Chapter Tree’s first sentence and consider it’s meaning closely. You should also find a hidden hyperlink that directs you to Chapter, Too. Try it out!

LIST OF CHAPTER FAMILIES

Below is a compiled list of the chapter families, which contestants may use for reference.

The Chapters Instructional

The Chapter Tree
Chapter One
Chapter One & 4/5
Chapter, Too
Chapter e

The Chapters Mathematical

Spira Mirabilis
Chapter 01110100 01100101 01101110
Chapter $\int x dx$; $[0, \sqrt{14}]$
Chapter i
Chapter h
Chapter (R, M, φ)

The Chapters of Campaign

Tea Time
Windfall
Nor'Easter
Bockwurst & Company
Chapter of the Sugarplum "Hah! I'll bet you did not expect that!"
Voyage of the Bauhinia Blakeana
A Confrontational Chapter

The Chapters of Experiment

Chapter 101—Introduction to Symbology
A Bioethical Chapter
Schrödinger
Ornithology
Chapter, Iris.
Chapter of the Black Dragon's Secret
The Curious Case of Dr. Quantum

The Chapters Imprisoning

A Hole in the Ark
A Fishy Chapter {But a metallic kind of fish!}
The Importance of Being Well-Read

The Chapters Sacrificial

The Lamb's Chapter

The Chapters Ascetic

Euclosis
天命
Chapter of the Eastern Dragon
Your Fortune: You will meet an eleventh chapter in a dark alley
Dream of the Red Chamber
Glaucus Atlanticus
Excelsior

Continued on next page.

The Chapters Catastrophic

An Unsuitable Chapter for a Professor
Limiting Factor

The Chapters Canine

Chapter of the Lakeland Terrier
Chapter of the Cavalier King Charles Spaniel
Chapter of the Greyhound

The Chapters Orchestral

Allegro
Overton's Overture
Adagio

The Chapters Celestial

Paradise's Requiem
Chapter 0.9
Chapter 0.8
Chapter 0.7
Chapter 0.6
Chapter 0.5
Chapter 0.4
Chapter 0.3