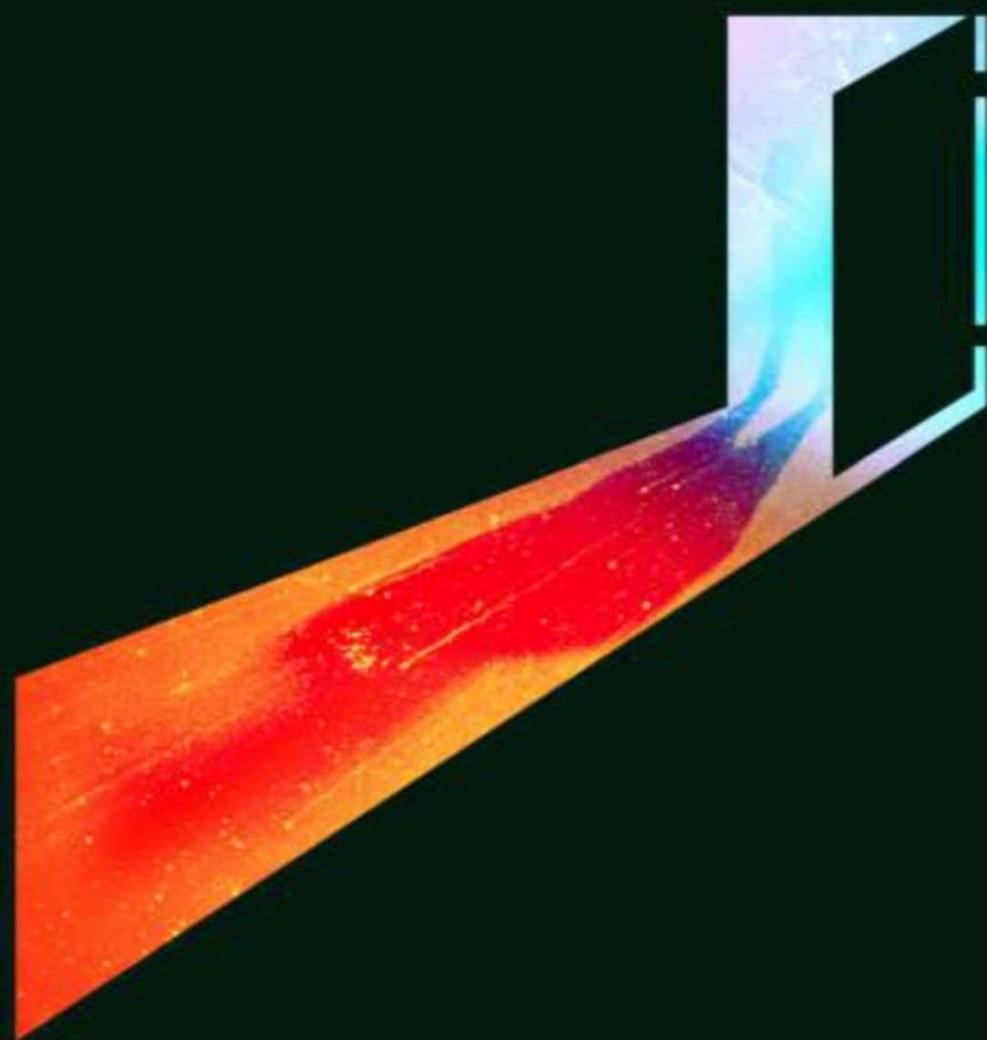


P R O F E S S O R
E V E R Y W H E R E



N I C H O L A S B I N G E

A Proverse Prize Publication

Professor Everywhere

Nicholas Binge

Proverse Hong Kong

21 April 2020

Supported by



香港藝術發展局

Hong Kong Arts Development Council

Hong Kong Arts Development Council fully supports freedom of artistic expression. The views and opinions expressed in this project do not represent the stand of the Council.

Chloe Chan is just about to give up on finding any real scholars at University when she starts to hear the rumours about Professor Roland Crannus. Spoken about in the whispers of conspiracy, the enigmatic Professor is idolised by students as the pinnacle of modern intellectualism – more myth than man.

Drawn in by the mystery, and desperate to know more, Chloe follows the Professor into an academic labyrinth of clandestine mysteries and untold possibilities. But as her obsession with the Professor grows, she finds that someone, or *something*, hunts her through this maze. Plunged into an otherworldly chess game of linguistics, anthropology and quantum theory, Chloe is quickly forced to question everything that she once thought true.

Ten years on since the tragedy in London, Professor Crannus is now a household name. His discoveries and actions litter the pages of our newspapers and our history books, but much of what he did is still shrouded in cover-up and conspiracy. For the first time since the catastrophe that shook the world, Chloe Chan chooses to share her story.

NICHOLAS BINGE is an author and educator currently living in Hong Kong. Born to British parents in Singapore, he has always had a close affinity with Asia.

Most of his younger years were spent on the outskirts of Geneva in Switzerland, a country as different from Singapore as you could imagine. It was here that his love of literature really started, hiding under duvets late at night with a torch, enraptured by books that demanded not to be put down.

After leaving school, he attended the University of Warwick for both undergraduate and postgraduate studies and soon found himself teaching English in the Midlands. After a couple of years teaching in the UK, he moved to Hong Kong in search of new opportunities and new challenges.

He now lives in Hong Kong with his wife and child. He reads and writes every morning, even if many of those pages never see the light of day. He spends his days hoping to engender the same love of literature in his students that has burned in him ever since he was young. He is still never happier than when he is with a book.

**PROFESSOR
EVERYWHERE**

Nicholas Binge



Proverse Hong Kong

Professor Everywhere

by Nicholas Binge

Ebook edition published in Hong Kong

by Proverse Hong Kong

ISBN-13: 978-988-8491-86-5

First edition published in paperback in Hong Kong

by Proverse Hong Kong

under sole and exclusive licence, 21 April 2020.

ISBN-13: 978-988-8491-84-1

Alternate First Edition published in paperback in Hong Kong

by Proverse Hong Kong

under sole and exclusive licence, April 2020.

ISBN-13: 978-988-8491-85-8

Copyright © Nicholas Binge, April 2020.

Enquiries to: Proverse Hong Kong,

P.O. Box 259, Tung Chung Post Office,

Lantau, NT, Hong Kong SAR, China.

Email: proverse@netvigator.com; Web: www.proversepublishing.com

The right of Nicholas Binge to be identified

as the author of this work

has been asserted by him in accordance with

the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Cover design by Liam Relph.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher or publisher and author. The book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior written consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent owner or purchaser. Please contact Proverse Hong Kong in writing, to request any and all permissions (including but not restricted to republishing, inclusion in anthologies, translation, reading, performance and use as set pieces in examinations and festivals).

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record is available
from the British Library

Professor Everywhere: A Memoir

Chloe Chan

Time has transfigured them into
Untruth. The stone fidelity
They hardly meant has come to be
Their final blazon, and to prove
Our almost-instinct almost true:
What will survive of us is love.

—*Philip Larkin, from, 'An Arundel Tomb'*
(courtesy of Faber & Faber)

I

If you take a left out of the L-Block of Rootes Residences, through the shade of the green alders and the narrow brick corridor between the arts centre and the University library, you'll arrive at the Social Studies building. Inside it, you'll find a labyrinthian maze of entrances and exits seemingly planned without regard for human navigation. If you then manage to circle your way up the correct staircase and work your way through the stochastically numbered doors to room 302b, you'll eventually find the office of Professor Roland Crannus.

It's not some error of fate that Professor Crannus was so difficult to find. Even ten years ago, he was rarely ever seen. And despite the erudite reputation he managed to garner for himself, both at the University of Warwick and in academia worldwide, he taught no classes. He delivered no lectures. He published no papers. In fact, as an excited first-year told me on the fifth week of term, it was widely speculated that he did not even eat.^[1]

Nonetheless, you wouldn't have managed a week on the campus back then without someone making reference to 'the Da Vinci up in 302b' or 'the Victor Frankenstein of the uni'. How he managed to cultivate such an aura of mad brilliance amongst the student body, despite barely speaking to a single one of them, remains to me a puzzle that I have been unable to solve to this day.

I have no doubt that you already know the name of Roland Crannus. You have certainly already formed an opinion of him. You may well have read the sensationalist memoir, *A Man Out of Place*,^[2] or perhaps seen one of the many documentaries covering the period between 2007-2009.^[3] It's also likely that you will have heard my name – 'Chloe Chan' – associated with the Pimlico incident. If so, you'll be aware that despite some brief

interviews I gave shortly after Pimlico, I chose not to contribute to the public record. Many of my words were being taken out of context, woven into a variety of inaccurate narratives.

Perhaps, if you have read some of the papers and books published in the last ten years, you will also have formed an opinion of me. I am not asking that you revise that, or even that you forgive me. That is not the purpose of this memoir. I'm merely offering what aims to be an objective reckoning of facts.

I can't claim that it was by accident that I became embroiled in the enigma of the Professor. In fact, my decision to take up his internship was driven, to some degree, by my desire to be the one to uncover his mystery. The secrecy that surrounded him at that time bordered on hero worship and it bothered me that this was afforded to someone with so seemingly few achievements.

I'd been sure he was just another privileged old white man, surviving on a false mythos of mad renaissance intellectualism. There certainly appeared to be little with which I could credit his fame. And, though I was only an undergraduate at the time, the cynic within me was keen to pull back the curtains and shine a light on him, to dispel the bubble of obscurity and expose him as a fraud.^[4]

Suffice to say, I did not do that. The irony occurred to me today, as I was guiding a group of prospective students across the piazza, that I was in fact instrumental in doing the complete opposite.

"His office was in here, you know?" one student whispered to another, as I led them past the brick walls of the Social Studies building. "They say the door's locked and no one can get in."

"That's ridiculous. Surely they can kick it down or something?"

"No. It won't budge. It's like a part of the wall itself. They say no one can open it but him."

"Do you think he's still in there?"

"He's dead."

"No way he died," another student chimed in. "I heard the government have him, locked away somewhere doing..."

"The *government*? Don't be an idiot. What government?"^[5]

I usually ignore these speculations. It's no surprise that years after Pimlico, though I thought the dust had settled and the world was ready to move on, the secret rustles of conspiracy were still blooming. But their

words do conjure in me that same sense of mystery I felt on the day that the Professor and I first met, and all the frustration I fought with in those early months.

It was October 2007, about a month into my university career. I was only beginning to come to terms with my disappointment at the state of affairs. When I left Hong Kong in the summer it had been with a deep and resolute sense that I would never return. Despite the fact that I harboured a close connection to the city that I was raised in, it had become claustrophobic – filled with too many painful memories and poor choices.

The prospect of starting afresh enticed me and I was thrilled that I was going to an English university. As I sat on my flight, packed in amongst a throng of Chinese tourists and British expats returning home, it was difficult not to picture the long libraries with wooden tables of students working deep into the night, pushing themselves to the betterment of their mind and of humankind. I could already smell the woody scent of desks and bookshelves lining professorial offices, while intellectuals sat in armchairs by a fireplace, debating the minutiae of academia. It was all I had ever wanted and I hoped that I would find it – a place like I had read about in novels, in poetry. A place where I could finally fit in.

Such romantic notions were quickly dispelled.

The first week I was there – ‘freshers’ week’, as they called it – was an absolute circus of drunkenness and embarrassment.^[6] Instead of being surrounded by likeminded folk, I quickly found that other students were actively pressing me to skip classes, ignore readings and spend the entirety of my first month’s money on alcohol and clubbing. It seemed with each refusal, they became more determined to deter me from my path. As such, I avoided the majority. After just two occasions of my attending the university library during the evening for my own research purposes, I gained the alliterative nickname of “Quiet Chloe”. To be honest, it was a welcome replacement for the less favourable “Chinese Chloe” that I had been given when they saw my skin colour on the first day.

I left Hong Kong to leave the false pretences, where so much of the culture around me existed for show, mere lip-service to a dead colonial past and an impending Chinese future. I had no interest in becoming a doctor, or a lawyer, or a businesswoman. My tastes had always been the bookish isolation of academia – the thrill of acquiring new knowledge purely for knowledge’s sake, not for any ego-driven capitalistic gain. In Hong Kong,

this was anathema and I was all but an outcast. As such, I was desperate for an authentic taste of the past, of that rare culture that produced Shelley, Byron and Coleridge.^[2]

I'd come to study linguistics, and it seemed to me that England, with one of the most versatile and universal languages, was the perfect place to be. But I soon discovered that every British accent I heard was spoken through unintelligible slang or slurred mumbling. Every thought was accompanied with the stench of stale beer or last night's vodka Red-Bull. Every discussion started and ended with mockery and 'banter', a word seemingly invented to glorify idiocy.

The residences that I'd chosen had somewhat of a reputation. Coming from abroad, I'd been guided towards International House, a place where the collection of foreign students could be safely contained in a single block. But despite its pretentious name, the accommodation was still part of Rootes Residences, the cheapest and smallest on campus. The walls still had mould on them and the windows had bars. I often found myself stepping over passed-out bodies of other drunken students when I came back to my room at night.

The lectures were not as I'd imagined them, either. Rather than the romantic halls of knowledge that I had pictured, they were instead delivered by tired postgraduates or frustrated professors, relying on powerpoint slides and quotes from textbooks to get them through the dullest of content. The seminars were hardly better, filled with many of the same students I had previously been stepping over, but now hungover and swimming in a haze of their own confusion. It was only in the weekly office hours with the professors that I would really gain any solace or hope for a stimulating education.

I attended lectures anyway, partly out of spite for my flatmates who seemed to take skipping lectures with some degree of rebellious pride, but I often left them feeling less enlightened than I had when I arrived.

I was young, and quick to assume that my own situation applied to everyone, everywhere in the world. As such, it was not long before I had decided that not only was my university experience a sham, but that the tertiary education system as a whole was little more than a money-making system and that my lofty visions of academia existed nowhere but in the fantasies of my brain.

I don't think that I'm wrong in saying that it was probably my disillusionment in the university, and in education as a whole, that led to my unhealthy obsession with the Professor. I was, after all, having a particularly bad day the first time I heard about him.

I woke up early to take advantage of the library when it was quiet and peaceful. I planned to get ahead of the content and make some notes on Umberto Eco's work,^[8] when I bumped into Sarah coming out of the shower.

"Oh my God," she groaned, towel wrapped around her head. "I am hanging so badly, you have no idea."

"I actually don't," I replied.

She laughed, her tired face brightening up with its creases. "You really are a bit of an odd one, aren't you?"

Or at least, I believe she said something along those lines. It's hard to remember exactly through the fog of time. At the very least, she certainly highlighted that I was different from the others.

"I really need to get to the library."

"Alright, alright." She put her hands up in mock defence. I gave her a smile and stepped back to let her pass. She moved to do so, but then stopped and rubbed her face. "Hey, you still looking for a job, right? God, let me know if you find something. A month in and I'm already broke. I think I'd do anything for some extra cash."

"How did you know I was looking?"

"You were asking around the other day. You're cute, I pay attention."

I blinked. "I've found a job, actually."

She shrugged, gave me another smile, and stepped past me into her room.

I'm not sure what it was that made me lie to her. I did still need a job to fund myself through the week. My parents had done what it would take to get me out of the country – tuition and accommodation – but it did little to cover my daily expenses.

Still, there was something about the way Sarah had called me odd that had unsettled me. And, the fact that I was unsettled bothered me even further. It seemed to me that being different from the other louts in the flat was exactly what I wanted, but somehow the words lay heavy on me like some form of accusation. I spent the day unable to shake it.

I ended up getting no real work done that morning, and instead took myself for a long walk around the edges of the university campus. It was autumn – the lines of trees were just beginning to turn golden brown and the wind had taken on a surprising chill for so early in the year. In Hong Kong, the autumn is stunning. The humidity drops, but the warmth of the summer remains – cloudless and idyllic. In England, the season brought with it a sombre tone, depressing, as if nature itself were grieving the loss of the summer sun.

It seemed to me to be another disappointment. I was looking forward to Keats's 'autumn', filled to the brim with plump apples and ripe hues, but walking under the grey British sky I couldn't help but feel that it too was a misrepresentation. Once again, I found the reality of the place I had come to far removed from the romantic presentation exported by its people.

When I returned, there was a party. There was always a party.

I intended to make myself a quick bowl of noodles and retire to my room, but the entire communal kitchen area had been commandeered and that now appeared to be impossible. I knew I would soon be forced either to take part in the revelry or repeatedly explain why I had no intention to, much to the mockery of my flatmates.

Maybe it was because I wanted some kind of escape from my disappointing walk, or maybe it was Sarah's comment that morning that still bothered me, but I didn't leave immediately that night.

I noticed Sarah on the other side of the room. Her hair was down and she looked a lot more lively than she had earlier. She wore a white blouse and some tight black jeans and was the centre of attention for a number of leering guys, all vying for her interest. They were pressing her to play some kind of drinking game and she, in an experienced set of exchanges, pretended bashfully to agree. I considered, for a moment, going over and joining her, but the prospect of being forced to drink heavily was already causing a bout of nausea in my stomach.

"I don't know how they do it," a voice said. I turned to see a tall, gangly-looking English boy in round glasses and a blue t-shirt that hung on him like wet paper.

"How who do what?"

"Drink so much each night and then just... you know. Do it again the next day. I always feel so rough."

At that point, I'd realised I'd just been standing in the corner watching Sarah and her friends for quite a while. It seemed like this guy had been doing the same.

"You're Chinese Chloe, right?"

"I believe they are calling me Quiet Chloe now."

He smiled. "Gotta love it when the nicknames are both racist and demeaning, right? Really sets your heart aglow. What are you studying?"

"Linguistics and Language."

"Oh, cool. I'm a law student. I've always been kind of interested in language, though. Not academically, but culturally, I guess. I love learning new languages, you know what I mean? I took a Spanish module here when I joined, which has been pretty fun." He stopped. "Do you want anything to drink?"

I raised my eyebrows. "Are you flirting with me?"

He laughed, his hand going to his chest. "Shit. For someone studying linguistics, you're really difficult to talk to, you know that?"

"I've been told that before."

He smiled again, and I smiled back, unsure of what to say.

"So you're studying law? What kind of lawyer do you want to be?"

"Oh, I don't know. I don't even know if I want to be a lawyer. It's just a... well, you know how it is. My Dad says it's a good career path." He opened the fridge and took out a beer. "So what about you? Linguistics, huh? What's the big plan for that?"

"My plan was to join academia and get into research. I'm particularly interested in exploring the ways in which early *homo sapiens* language use gave them dominance over other early human species and how it affects us today."^[9]

"Wow."

"What?"

"I mean, you don't often meet a student who actually has a plan. It's refreshing." He took a swig of his drink. "So, academia, huh? You really want to be stuck up in an office all day long?"

"I can honestly think of nothing better. No one to bother me. I can just focus on my studies."

"I get that. Everyone here seems obsessed with the party lifestyle, with being part of some kind of social sect. I think we all kind of forget who we are." He shrugged. "Or maybe we never knew. You gotta be careful, though."

With no one else around you'll totally disappear. You'll be like the new Crannus."

"Crannus?"

'Oh, come on. Don't tell me you haven't heard of Professor Crannus. Old Da Vinci up there?"

I frowned. "Nope."

"He's like the ultimate academic." His voice took on a warm, passionate buzz.. "They say academics come from miles around for just a word or two from him on their research. Other professors and stuff. He's... he's like. I don't know. Albert Einstein. Stephen Hawking. A really smart guy. I even heard that, back when John Major was Prime Minister, he used to call Crannus for policy decisions every week."

"Really? What's his field?"

"Anthropology, supposedly. Or at least that's what it says on his door. Professor of Anthropology. But they say he worked for NASA. They even say he was there, with Oppenheimer, at the Manhattan Project."

I snorted. "The Manhattan Project? How old is this man? 100? I can't believe any of that."

"Well... no." He looked a little put out. "I mean... nor do I. But you've got to wonder. Haven't you?"

"I wonder what kind of lies a man has to tell in order to make himself seem important."

"No, no, it's not that," he waved his hand around animatedly, his beer swilling in its bottle. "He doesn't tell people these things. He doesn't tell anyone anything at all. Nobody ever sees him. They say he's locked up in his office all the time, and he never talks to students. Or even faculty as far as anyone can tell. Crannus, the great enigma."

"Has he published anything interesting?"

"I don't know about that, actually. Probably." His voice dropped conspiratorially. "You know those geese that fly around up by Lakeside? Apparently last year someone saw him hunt and kill one, and drag it back to cook in his office."

"That's absurd."

"I know." He nodded his head. "Trust me, I know. But no smoke without fire, right? From what I've heard, he sounds like the real deal."

I looked over at Sarah. She was counting as one of the boys, now stumbling from drunkenness, was attempting to demonstrate how fast he

could down a pint, like some kind of prehistoric mating call. *The real deal.* Those three words echoed through me. What did that even mean? If the past few weeks had taught me anything, it's that there were no real deals, only very good imitations of them.

"... And some people say that he never even eats, but I can't see how..."

I blinked, turning back to see that he was still talking.

"... Frankly, I was shocked when I heard about the internship position he was offering, as if it was some kind of..."

"What?"

"Huh? Um.. I..." he stumbled over his thoughts like they were hurdles, surprised to have been interrupted. "What?"

"What internship?"

"They say he's after an intern, but God knows what for. The funny thing is he hasn't even advertised it himself, it's just like everything else out there with him. Word about it just... gets out." He pulled a couple of cigarettes out from a pack in his pocket, and offered one to me. "Do you want a smoke?"

"I don't smoke."

He laughed again, but not in mockery like others seemed to do. It was inclusive. Friendly. "Of course you don't. Okay, well let's catch up sometime soon, yeah? The name's James."

He smiled and left the kitchen. For a moment, I felt a pang of regret. It had perhaps been the first real conversation I'd had with anyone on campus that didn't involve going out and drinking. I almost wished that I smoked, or pretended that I did, so that it could continue. But before I knew it, he was out the door.

I apologised as I pushed past a group of people dealing out cards for 'ring of fire'. Opening my cupboard, I reached over a stumbling girl to my packet of noodles.

As I got to the door, I looked back at Sarah. She was dancing now, twisting, laughing and throwing her blonde hair around her. For a moment, I imagined myself joining her, spinning and swaying, arms loose in the air. I shook my head at the silliness of it all, unplugged the kettle on the counter, and picked it up to disappear into my room.

I spent the night researching Professor Roland Crannus, PhD in Anthropology.

Internet message boards like *The Student Room* were filled with absurd discussion. Some of the stories I read made the gangly boy seem utterly sensible by comparison. But the more I peeked through the bluster and ridiculousness, the less I was able to find. Cross-referencing the stories against facts got me nowhere and, as far as I could prove objectively, he had done nothing. There wasn't a single achievement that could be put to his name. No papers, or conferences or even a notable lecture. Not one.

Was this it? This was the supposed luminary everyone was so obsessed about?

It was the third in a tricolon of disappointments: my failed morning, my autumnal afternoon and now my wasted night, spent alone researching another romanticised idea that was nothing more than a hack. But as I lay in bed, staring at the blank ceiling, I found that I couldn't get him out of my head.

#

I got my first paper back the next day, marked, scanned and sent via e-mail. 43 out of a 100 – barely a passing grade. There were no comments, no explanations, merely a number scrawled quickly in red pen at the bottom.

I was furious. The assignment had been an exploration of the impact of the printing press on the development of language – an easy, straightforward task.

Stopping by the library to print out my essay, I appeared outside my lecturer's door twenty minutes before his office hour began and waited. As the time dwindled, I read over my essay, seething. 43! I had gone above and beyond, exploring not just the impact of both early printing presses and the Gutenberg press, but referencing xylography and early woodblock printing in China and India. It was laden with consistent exemplification, hours of research and a damn good thesis, and I would make him see that.

I watched as the clock on my phone flickered from 10.59 to 11.00 and promptly knocked on the door. There was a long pause.

"Come in," a tired voice called.

Inside, the professor was fumbling around his messy desk. He gave me a nice smile and half-heartedly invited me to take a seat.

"Hi," he said. "Sorry. Don't know all the students yet. You are...?"

"Chloe Chan."

"Uh-huh." He nodded, still looking around. "I put my coffee down here somewhere and I can't. Aha! There it is. Right, Chloe. Which module are

you doing?”

I gritted my teeth. “Introduction to Language and Linguistics. I just wrote a paper on the printing press.”

He took a big swig of coffee, nodding again. “Ah, yes, yes. What can I do for you, then?”

“You gave me a 43 on my paper. I wanted to know why.”

His smile dropped, his face suddenly weary. “Urgh. Right. Okay.” He opened his laptop and slowly tapped at the keyboard. “What’s your name again?”

“Chloe,” I said, my voice tense. I placed the assignment on his desk. “I have the paper here, if you can’t remember.”

He rolled his eyes. “Of course you do.”

Picking it up, he flicked through the pages, barely reading it. “Oh God, yeah. This one. Look – you just didn’t follow the assignment.”

“What do you mean?”

“All this... stuff on woodblock printing. You wrote a page on...” he scanned over it. “‘The Diamond Sutra’?”

“Yes.”

“It’s not relevant.”

“Not relevant? It’s the earliest completed and dated printed book. How can that possibly not be relevant?”

He sighed. “It was a simple assignment, Chloe. It was about the development of English in the 16th and 19th centuries. Not Sanskrit.”

“But didn’t you read the section I wrote about the parallels between...”

“No.” He put the paper down. “No, I didn’t. Because it also went well over the word limit. Look – you’re passionate, I get that. But you need to follow the guidelines. Not all of us have time to supervise your passion projects.”

I bristled. “It’s nice to see you take your job seriously. I deserve a grade reflective of the work I put in.”

He laughed, shaking his head. “Who do you think you are, that you can come in here and argue your grade with me? You can’t do whatever you want, Chloe. You’re an undergrad, not some budding genius. You’re not a Crannus. Do the course. Follow the word count. Stop being a pain.”

I fell silent, welling with disappointment. Was *this* what I had come all the way here for? Apathy and conformity? A disdain for research? What’s

more, it seemed at every turn that name was mentioned, mocking me, like a splinter in my brain.

I gave him a cold smile and got up.

“Thank you for your time.”

Walking out of my useless lecturer’s office, I made a decision. I would find the offices of Professor Crannus and I would talk to him, discover what he did and work this whole thing out for myself.

My confrontation did not go as planned. It took me far longer than I expected to find his office amongst the bizarre warren of rooms and corridors that constituted the Social Studies building. By this time, the indignation that had built in me was overcome by the frustration of poor building design. Some corridors seemed to turn backwards on themselves, and some doors simply would not open. There were stairways that inexplicably led to short dead end corridors or continued on upwards to nowhere at all.

The only feeling that pervaded by the time I reached 302b was one of relief and, soon after, surprise. The latter was because there were two other people sitting outside the office, waiting.

A tall, sharply-dressed man, in his early thirties, held a large A4 sized tablet. He gripped an electronic pen and was busy annotating some form of spreadsheet. As I approached, he gave me the briefest of dismissive glances, straightened his tie, then returned to his screen. A younger blonde woman, though certainly older than me, sat opposite him. She was also dressed professionally, but was not doing anything in particular. She sat nervously, shifting and fidgeting in her seat. As I got close to the two of them, she stared up at me, nose screwed and eyebrows down.

“You can’t go in yet,” she said. The man didn’t look up.

“What?”

“You have to wait outside. That’s what they said.”

“I’m not... what are you waiting for?”

Her mouth dropped open, gawping at me like a confused fish. “Uhm... the *interview*?”

“I’m not here for a...”

The door swung open. The woman immediately jerked back, straightening up and pressing down the creases in her skirt. She cocked her head ever so slightly and allowed a vapid smile to appear on her face. The man did not react.

An older man came out into the corridor. He was short, and a mane of glistening silver hair ran down the back of his neck. His face was shrewd, tightened forward into a point. His nose stuck out crooked in front of him, only just supporting his inordinately round glasses. His full tweed suit, complete with waistcoat and cravat, sported a thick wooden pipe tucked into the jacket pocket and a pocket watch dangling from his waist. He looked like something that had been snatched out of a film – a strange almost-too-perfect representation of the old philosopher vintage that no longer had a place in the real world and perhaps never did. I couldn't help but think of Plato's world of ideal Forms, and that if there was ever such a thing as a perfect academic it would look like this. ^[10]

He looked the blonde woman up and down.

"What's your favourite piece of music?" His voice was a husky baritone.

"I... erm. I don't know. I don't think I have a favourite."

He wrinkled his nose and his glasses fell down an inch. "A shame," he sighed as he pushed them back up. "I really don't like indecisiveness."

"Oh, well... I guess that..."

"No, no, no," he said. "I'm afraid guesswork has no place in this building." The woman fell silent, staring bashfully at her knees like a scolded child. He cocked his head towards me, as I still stood dumbfounded in the corridor. "And you? Favourite piece of music."

"Stravinski's *Rite of Spring*."

"The Sacrifice, presumably?"

"The Adoration of the Earth, actually."

He took his glasses off, cleaned them, and put them back on, squinting at me. "Fascinating. Go inside."

If he'd asked me first, I probably would have been just as confused. Her failure had allowed me to formulate a response, though why I did was a mystery. I was still frustrated, angry at my unearned scores and his unearned reputation, but at his appearance I felt a sudden compulsion to impress him. Surprised as I was by my own outburst, I found myself moving, as if by automation, into his office. ^[11]

In the entire exchange, the suited man had only looked up from his tablet once, when I had entered the corridor. The Professor had not looked at him at all.

The office was perhaps more of an oddity than the Professor. Ornaments, prints and paintings adorned most surfaces and walls, but I had difficulty placing or recognising even one of them. There were fragments of tribal artwork and sculpture, as well as archeological artefacts, but at a cursory glance they looked nothing like products of any civilisation I had ever heard about. The artefacts – which one might expect to be fossils or arrowheads or even bones – did not seem to be anything that I could accurately distinguish either. The only relatable item on his desk was a picture frame, faced slightly inward, with a photo of a young boy in it. He was clinging to a book with a huge smile. I could only guess it was his son.

There was a chair and so I sat in it. The Professor closed the door behind me and wandered over to the other side of his desk, descending into his own chair with surprising nimbleness and grace.

He looked over at me and pushed his glasses back up his nose.

“Well?” he asked, as if our roles were reversed, as if I had been the one to invite him in. He sat in expectation, so I said the first thing that made any sense.

“What’s *your* favourite piece of music?”

“Today, it is *Kill You* by Eminem, the first track off the astounding Marshall Mathers LP. It is an absolute triumph of meter and rhythm.”^[12]

“Today? I thought you disliked indecisiveness.”

“Unquestionably. I abhor it with a passion that is unmatched even by Paris’ desire for Helen.”

“Yet you still can’t decide on a favourite piece of music which lasts more than a day?”

“There is nothing about the nature of decisiveness that implies permanence,” he said, raising a long finger. “Yesterday it was London Elektriccity’s *Just One Second*. The day before it was Bach’s *Cello Suite No. 1*. Indeed, the fact that I decide on a new favourite piece of music almost daily is a credit to how consistently decisive I am. What is your field?”

“My...” I frowned. “I’m... well, I’m studying linguistics.”

“I see. And what is your name?”

“Chloe Chan.”

“Connect the two.”

“What?”

He sighed, frustrated that I had broken the flow of our conversation. “Tell me about your name,” he intoned slowly, “from the perspective of

your field.”

“I...” I looked at him blankly. “You mean the etymology of my name?”

He glanced at his pocket watch and shook his head. “I’m afraid I really don’t have time for people that require clarification on simple instructions.” He motioned to the door. “If you’d be so kind, I have work to do.”

“What?”

He looked down at his papers. “The interview is at an end.”

I blushed, my face growing hot. Without a word, I got up from the seat, the certainty of his commandment tugging me backwards. But with each step, the weight of my inadequacy increased. By the time I reached the door, a mountain of disappointments lay on top of me, pressing me downwards. It was happening again – failure, ignorance, rejection.

As I put my hand on the doorknob, I felt the rustling of his papers and scribbling of pen mocking me. I stopped.

“No.” I turned around. “This isn’t over.”

He didn’t look up. “And why not?”

“Because you... you can’t just expect to quiz someone on knowledge they weren’t prepared for and make sweeping judgments. It’s absurd. It’s...” My body was shaking. “It’s not just ridiculous, it’s stupid. I came here because you were supposed to be some kind of intellectual genius. Someone different. But it turns out you’re just like everyone else.”

He turned his face up to me, pushing his glasses back up his nose. “And who else would that be?”

“All the other bullshit professors and lecturers in this place who seem to have more concern for their own time than any actual teaching, or even academia by the looks of it. How easy is it for you to sit here and dismiss people who haven’t got it as easy as you? Who lack the luxury of being in your position?” I placed my hands on his desk. “Do you enjoy it? Does it make you happy?”

I was panting, shocked by my own outburst, suddenly worried that I’d gone too far, that I’d be called out for rudeness or inappropriate behaviour.

To my surprise, he was smiling.

“Well, well. A bit of life, after all. You are hired.”

“Hired?”

“Stop repeating me. Yes, hired. As my intern. Or secretary. Or indentured servant. Regardless of what you want to call it, you will perform

most of the administrative tasks that I have absolutely no time for these days.”

“But, I...” I stared, my anger flattening, incapable of processing this sudden shift. “Isn’t there a process? There are other candidates that... isn’t there paperwork?”

“I have no time for that.” He waved a dismissive hand. “You begin immediately. I will be in contact when you are needed.”

I stood speechless. I wanted to laugh at him, to shout at him, to walk out of the door, but I didn’t. This was the opportunity I wanted, wasn’t it? To find out more about this Professor. To get to the bottom of him. And the truth was that I did need a job. I didn’t know what else to say.

“Will I be paid?”

He twisted his nose, as if money being brought up left a bad taste in his mouth. “How much do you want?”

Out of sheer frustration, I proposed what I thought was an absurdly generous salary and he acquiesced immediately, wanting to move away from the topic as quickly as possible.

“Fine,” I said, putting my hand out to him. “I accept.”

He ignored it.

“Good. Now get out. I have things to be doing.”

#

It was a good week before I heard from the Professor again. I almost decided that he’d completely forgotten about me. My memory of that moment is undoubtedly marred by the events that followed, but I’m still quite certain that at no point did he ask for any contact details. In fact, the encounter was so odd that I couldn’t help but question if it had just been a particularly vivid dream.

In the meantime, I tried to research more into the Professor’s position in the University, but it was difficult. Not being a social studies or anthropology student, I was locked out of the area of the portal which dealt with those professors, and so I was unable to access staff lists. I made some enquiries around the block of my residences, but for the most part people were unhelpful. Rumours, wild stories and conjecture, but very little that could be taken as fact.

I kept seeing James hanging out more consistently around the flat, like a physical manifestation of the Baader-Meinhof phenomenon.^[13] Perhaps he had always been there, and I had not noticed him. Perhaps it was the other

way round. After the first couple of weeks, it was as though my identity as an academic bore had been decided on subconsciously by all my flatmates, and, once ratified, they all proceeded to give up on any attempts to engage.

For the most part, I drifted by unnoticed, tacitly accepting the communal dictate on my invisibility. Despite my frustration at their attitudes, I can't say I was happy about this. I hadn't willingly sought out isolation. But once the role had been set for me, I couldn't find a way to step out of it.

Yet now as I passed through the common kitchen area, James would wave at me or offer me a greeting, which I returned. It was a welcome shift. Sometimes we spoke, but it always felt cursory – about classes or the weather. Each time it seemed to hold a silent promise that a more meaningful conversation lay under the depths of our courteous back and forth, but neither of us had the impetus to dive for it.

The only other person I regularly spoke to was Sarah. I never questioned this. There was something implicit in her character that stood apart from the crowds. It made sense to me that if there were truly any subconscious communal decisions, she would be the one that broke them.

“What made you come to England?” she asked me one morning. “No Universities you wanted to go to in Hong Kong?”

“No. It's not that. There are some great ones. I think sometimes you just need a fresh start. A new way to go about life. I will say that I expected England to be quite different before I came here.”

“Oh yeah. In what way?” She had her back to me, making a cup of tea. I watched her sail about the room casually, clad in just her pyjamas and wondered how some people could feel so utterly relaxed around other people. I considered asking her if she could make me a cup of tea, but decided against it.

“I got into a bit of trouble before I left.”

“You? Trouble? I can't believe it. What did you do? Steal a library book?”

“I ran away from home.”

“Seriously? On your own?”

“No,” I said. “With someone.”

“Oh.” She gave me a knowing smile. “I see how it is. Wanted to escape and live a perfect romantic life somewhere, away from the world, right?”

“Something like that. But I didn’t think it through. My parents, they had the police looking for us. They thought we’d been kidnapped. I just... I just wanted to escape. It was so exciting, like something out of a story.”

“Didn’t work out, I take it?”

“I think things get a better reputation in literature than they do in real life. I think everything does.”

“Duh.” She laughed. “So I grew up in Amsterdam, and so many tourists come to us because they’ve got this perfect image that it’s some kind of counter-culture weed heaven, and they get there and they’re kind of disappointed because at the end of the day, it’s just a city, right?”^[14]

I nodded. “It’s much easier to represent something as idyllic than it is for something to actually be idyllic.”

“Well, obviously. There’s no such thing as idyllic. Everything’s flawed. That’s what makes life interesting. Think about it. If there were no flaws, how *boring* would everything be? That’s the issue I’ve always had with the idea of heaven.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well if heaven exists, right? And we go up there when we die and it’s all perfect and lovely, then that means I’m never going to feel sad or upset or angry, right? But if I never feel sad or upset or angry then I’m not really me, am I? I’m someone else. So who’s that up there in heaven? It’s just a sliver of me. A shadow.”

“I see what you mean.”

“Plus,” she said, spinning around with her mug. “What about sins? Am I allowed to commit them in heaven? Because supposedly lust is a sin and if I’m expected to live an eternity without sex, then you can just go send me to hell right now.”

I blushed a little, and cursed myself for it. Wanting to change the subject, I realised that Sarah might know someone on campus who was involved with the anthropology department. She was certainly popular and I hoped that she might be a useful resource in finding out more about the Professor. I asked her, and she gave me a little look of surprise.

“Er, yeah. I’m pretty sure James is taking an elective this year.”

“James?”

“Yes, James. You know, the tall boy who keeps hanging around here so he can talk to you. You mean to say you’ve never asked him what he’s studying?”

“Oh.” For some reason, I felt myself blush a little.

“Ha. That’s so you, Chloe. I love it.”

It seemed that Sarah was right, after all. James was eager to help, and before long we’d both grabbed our laptops and popped down to the Students’ Union, supported by comfy seats and armed with coffee.

#

He logged into the student portal with his ID and password, flicking through the faculty.

It didn’t take long before we saw him – definitively, clearly, unavoidably there: Professor Roland Crannus. But while each other staff member had a photo and a contact e-mail address, there was nothing for him. Just a name, inexplicably unaccompanied.

“See?” James whispered. “Weird, right?”

“Click on the anthropology modules – for both undergraduates and postgraduates.”

“I can’t access the postgrad modules.”

“Show me the undergraduate ones then, for all three years.”

As he got the page up, I took a sip of my coffee and watched closely. Professors, even ones focused on their own studies, had to teach *something*. But his name appeared nowhere. We cross-referenced, and every other member of the department held some kind of core module or elective option, but he did not.

“Who’s that?” I pointed at the screen. There wasn’t a name, but just the initials RAC.

“I don’t know.”

“Well, does anyone else in the department have those initials?”

“I don’t think so. What are they teaching?”

“It’s an optional module for first years, called ‘*Introduction To Safety and Procedures on Archeological Dig Sites (THEORY ONLY!)*’. That must be him. Do you think that’s actually him?”

We sat back, our research taking us as far as it could, a mixture of confusion and excitement spreading between us.

“Hey,” James said, leaning forward. “What’s with the sudden obsession?”

I jerked up. “Nothing. I’m just curious, that’s all.”

“Oh, don’t get me wrong. I totally get it. He’s fascinating. You just never seemed that interested when we spoke about it before.”

“Well, that’s because we were surrounded by drunken idiots. I mean, I’m sorry, James. I know some of them are your friends, but seriously? They’ve spent all this money to come to a place of learning to do what? To render themselves inebriate? More stupid than they already are?”

“Ouch,” he said, laughing. “No, I agree. I do. It’s why I quite like talking to you – it’s a bit of a break. The obsessive drinking anyway. For me, at least, it’s all tied up in this culture of masculinity and being a ‘lad’ and I just... I can’t deal with it. It reminds me too much of home.”

“How come?”

He shrugged. “I come from a military family. Dad was in the navy. Mum with the army. Ever since my brother and I were little it was always in that vein, you know? Scouts. Duke of Edinburgh. Army routines dressed up as educational stuff for kids. We were both put in the Officers’ Training Corps when we were sixteen.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Well, you certainly don’t seem like the military type.”

“I’m not. At all. My brother is though. He loved every second of it, excelled all the way. Went straight to Sandhurst, then on training excursions around the world. Every time he came home it was always army, army, army. He’s got a collection of guns in his room.”

“And you?”

He inched forward, as if he was telling me a secret. “I *hate* it. I can’t stand any of it. The routines, the orders. To be honest, I think the whole global political system is fucked anyway and the military is a big part of that. I had no desire to be involved. Well, you can imagine how my parents felt about that.”

I smiled. “I really can. Trust me, you’re not the only disappointment.”

“What have your parents got to be disappointed about? Aren’t you, like, the perfect student?”

I looked down at my feet. “No, I’m not. Not in the way they wanted. Ever since I was a young girl, they’ve always gone on at me about being more social, being more talkative. They would worry I was depressed, just because all I wanted to do was go to the library and stay there all weekend reading. All the other students were in debate teams, or sports teams or going places on trips. They would compare me to that, and all they’d see is this bookish, quiet little thing nobody wanted to talk to.”

“Wow.”

“The thing is, that *is* who I am. I just wished they had been able to accept it. Or, accept a little more about who I was. It was just always abundantly clear that I didn’t fit in.”

He raised his coffee in the air, dramatically. “I’ll toast to that. Here’s to not fitting in.”

Laughing, I clinked my cup to his.

I couldn’t help but smile, later, when I was back in my room. Despite everything that had let me down about this place, it was nice to have someone to confide in. Someone who at least felt a little of what I did. That feeling settled with me as I drifted, peacefully, off to sleep.

The next morning at 5.00am, the phone in my room rang. The surprise was so much that I almost fell out of my bed. The quiet grey telephone had sat silently in the corner of my small desk, not making so much as a beep since I arrived. So much so, that it had been completely subsumed by the wallpaper and I had entirely forgotten it was there.

Warily lifting the receiver and placing it to my ear, as if it might contain some kind of deadly virus, I said:

“Hello?”

“Professor Crannus needs you in his office at 5.30.” It was a women’s voice, cold and shrill. “Thank you.”

The receiver clicked and dial tone reverberated around my head.

#

The second time I entered the Professor’s office, it was significantly easier to find. It didn’t seem as though I was taking a much more sensible route, but rather now that I had been there once, the building was allowing me to return. While the atmosphere of his office was in all respects the same, almost every artefact and piece of artwork was different. He had changed every single one in the short week between one meeting and the next; only the picture frame on his desk remained the same.

“Ah yes, Chloe.” He was peering down at papers on his desk. “I need you to take over the management of my classes for some time.”

“Your classes? Professor, I’m a student. I can’t teach classes.”

“Teach? Who said anything about teaching? I don’t teach. I’ve never taught. That’s absurd.”

“That’s not true. RAC is you, isn’t it? *Introduction To Safety and Procedures on Archeological Dig Sites?*”

“Theory ONLY,” he corrected, raising a finger in the air. “Yes, yes, one of my favourites. The class is empty.”

“Empty?”

“Don’t make me repeat myself. And don’t repeat me. Repetition is the plaything of Satan and the refuge of the ignorant. Tell me, if you were a young first year student excited to study new things...”

“I am.”

“Please don’t interrupt me. Tell me, if you had *one* elective module that you could pick, would you pick one on safety and procedures?”

“Probably not.”

“Definitely not. Especially not one that was explicitly only going to cover the theory of the safety and procedures. It is, by all accounts, one of the most boring module titles imaginable. Even better than last year’s, which was, *Beginner Tool Maintenance and De-Rusting Techniques.*”

“That’s why no one signs up for it. That’s why you don’t teach.”

“Don’t tell me why I do things. It’s presumptuous. But yes, precisely. I *don’t* teach. I don’t have time to teach. I know that. The university knows that. Anyone burdened with common sense knows that. But it seems that all of the universe is locked in an epic battle between the logical things that people know and the harsh bureaucracy of global HR departments. It truly is an unstoppable force against an immovable object. Regardless of any extenuating circumstances, the by-laws indicate that if I am to gain the necessary privileges of a University, I must be a Professor. And if I am to be a Professor, I must offer classes. So I came up with an elegant solution. Offer classes that no one will ever, in their right mind, want to take.”

“What do you actually do then?”

“You’ll need simply to oversee the paperwork of the class being registered each term,” he continued, ignoring me. “And ensure nobody signs up for it, of course. Then create a fake class list of appropriate names and a syllabus. Then you’ll need to grade the zero papers that are turned in and input them on the system.^[15] It is very basic but I have no time for it. None at all.”

He handed me a small slip of paper. “The login and password to the faculty portal is here. You can work out the rest. Good day.”

With that, he got up, checked his pocket watch and opened the door. I started to get up, expecting for him to hold it for me, but he simply walked out himself and closed it behind.

As I followed him out into the corridor, I saw him walking off and down the closest set of stairs with another man. He was sharply dressed and held a large tablet computer in his right hand. He was the same man I had seen outside the office last week. ^[16]

#

For the next four months, little changed. The first semester passed and I spent the Christmas holidays in the library. I began to shift away from normal classes. I skipped them where I could, pursuing instead my own areas of interest in the university library. I slowly became engrossed in the realm of recent historical linguistics, tracking language change across cultural and political zeitgeists and anthropological events.

It's difficult to say where this shift in interest came from. Suffice to say that I became obsessed with the way in which the development of human technologies could be both tracked by and result from the evolution of language. Language was, it seemed to me, by far the most important aspect of humanity, and our ability to use it to imagine, to create and to build shared stories and mythologies was undeniably what separated us from other organisms.

A call would come from the Professor once in a while.

The caller was never him, of course, but rather the cold disembodied voice of a woman whom I had yet to meet and was unsure if I ever would. There was no way to track the frequency in which they would arrive. Sometimes I would go weeks without hearing anything. One week he rang every morning for six straight days. What remained consistent was that my monthly salary, which the Professor had hurriedly agreed to, was deposited in my bank account without fail.

When he called, he would mainly leave me administration tasks to complete. These ranged from faking class lists so it appeared like he was doing something to putting in proposals for papers that he had clearly no intention to write. I performed, it seemed, almost all of the duties that were expected of him as Professor at the University, and despite my probing I was no closer to finding out what he actually did with his time.

Paradoxically, even though I spent much of my time deliberately defrauding the University on his behalf, I had the growing sensation that he was perhaps the one person on this entire campus – perhaps in all modern academia – who was not a fraud. That is to say, who actually represented

the romantic ideals that had driven me to University in the first place. A man like that, a man so clearly intelligent, had to be working on *something*.

I didn't tell anyone who I was working for. It didn't seem worth the hassle. James and I would sit and chat together sometimes, and he would go through the motions of moaning about his work, gossiping about other students and we'd share cynical commentary about the state of the world. He became a confidant for my disappointments, which were many, and my growing scepticism about life. He listened avidly, offering kind suggestions and help, sharing likeminded stories.

They were warm conversations, and I was grateful for a friend who did not judge me for the way I saw the world. It was nice, now and again, to not feel like an outsider.

On Thursdays, Sarah and I would go out for dinner. It was an event that I spent much of the week looking forward to, an intimate moment that seemed to stand clear of the humdrum of life. We would argue about literature and culture, art and history. I would question her semantics; she would trump me by being so frustratingly well read. Looking back now, it seems my memories of those dinners are separated from the rest of my memories, as though they were happening simultaneously in another dimension.

It was therefore of quite some upset to me when these two worlds clashed together, and I was forced to reconcile Sarah and the Professor. I think that's part of the reason why I made the decision that I did on the night of the 21st of February in 2008.

Sarah and I were in Cellar Club, a small wine bar that we had discovered in the nearby town of Leamington. It was a lowly-lit underground venue just off the main parade that didn't get a huge amount of clientele early on a Thursday night, and thus managed to remain quite cozy and personal.

"It's more about progress," I was saying. "There's no progress for progress's sake anymore. Think about it: academic study is done purely at the whim of who will fund the research, and that's either corporate or military. Where are our Einsteins? Our Wordsworths, for that matter? Our Shakespeares?"

"They're dead," Sarah replied. "And you're alive. There's no sense idealising dead white men."

“What is there to idealise, then? Partying? Drinking? Peer-pressure to do drugs and skip classes?”

“Hey, don’t knock hedonism. If it worked for Epicurus, surely it can work for us. Just because I actively give into peer pressure whenever I can, doesn’t mean I’m an idiot.”

“I know you’re not an idiot,” I said. She was missing the point.

“What I don’t get,” she replied, “is why you won’t tell me where you’re working.”

“It’s boring. Let’s talk about something else.”

“You always say that. I refuse to believe it’s boring if you won’t talk about it. I’m convinced you just want to remain mysterious.”

“That’s not it.”

“Well, you are mysterious. Miss Quiet, keeps to herself, but runs away with a boy.”

“It wasn’t a boy. It was my girlfriend.”

“Oh, really?” She leant forward, her eyes suddenly glowing with interest. “Do tell.”

I shrugged. “There’s not much to tell. I was young. I thought I was in love. I went to an international school that espoused freedom of thought, and belief and expressing yourself. So I expressed myself. I wrote a piece for the school newspaper about lesbian relationships. They told me it couldn’t be printed. It was too controversial.”

“Seriously?”

“Welcome to Hong Kong. The Head of the School^[17] actually told me that while she understood and supported my choices, I would have to be ‘not so obvious’ about it around school.”

“That’s so fucked.”

I took a big gulp of my wine. “I was so mad. It’s so Hong Kong. All the bullshit that they supposedly stand for on the surface means nothing when it actually comes to the crunch. It’s all surface. All show. There’s nothing underneath but the rotting corpses of dead cultures.”

“Jesus, Chloe. Tell me how you really feel.”

I looked down. “Sorry. I’ll shut up now.”

“No.” She laughed a golden, honey laugh. “No, no. Don’t be ridiculous. I want you to tell me. I’m learning. At least now I get why you guys ran away, searching for something better.”

“There isn’t anything better. Everything’s a sham, from free speech right on down to love.”

There was a small silence in the room as Sarah looked like she was trying to come up with a good answer. It was fortunately punctured by the waiter arriving with snacks – small stuffed pimento peppers and cheese on cocktail sticks. I shook my head.

“I can’t believe you ordered more food. We just ate dinner like an hour ago.”

“Hey,” she said, pointing a cocktail stick at me. “I get hungry. Come on, have some.”

“I don’t want any.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” She wagged a stuffed pepper at me. “Are you really going to sit here and just watch me eat? Come on, I never trust anybody who doesn’t have a healthy appetite.”

I laughed. “Fine.”

“I can always dance it off, you know. Well, I suppose you don’t know. You’ve never been out dancing, have you?”

“I can’t dance.”

“That’s absurd. There’s no objective metric to good dancing in a club, Chloe. You just get drunk and you dance.”

“I don’t get drunk. It’s loutish.”

“That’s also a lie.” She raised an eyebrow and tapped at my half-empty glass of wine, the third I’d had this evening.

“This isn’t getting drunk. This is... this is different.”

“I know. But what I’m saying is, well, you’re so concerned with having this academic epiphany, you spend all your time focused on your studies, but an epiphany without dancing... well, it’s barely an epiphany at all, is it?”

I didn’t say anything for a while, staring instead at the wine glass she had tapped. I don’t remember really thinking about anything in particular. I just lost myself in a stare and she sat there with me, the two of us happily silent together.

“We should go dancing tonight, then.”

“Tonight? Sure. Here in Leam?”

“There are clubs here, aren’t there?”

Her laugh tinkled through the room. “You are so cute. Of course there are clubs here. Okay, yeah sure let’s go dancing.”

I smiled and excused myself to the bathroom. I don't remember entirely why I did this, as I didn't need the toilet, but I had a sudden overpowering urge to see myself, to look in the mirror at my face and study it. I stood there, frowning and grinning and brushing at my hair a little, trying to tease out the different possibilities, until eventually I settled on what I distinctly remember as being a genuine smile. It had been a while since I had seen one of those on my own face.

My purse started ringing, and I flicked it open to pull out my phone. An unknown number.

"Hello?"

"Professor Crannus requires you immediately. You have twenty minutes."

"What? I can't do that. It's the evening. I'm not even on campus."

"This is not a conversation. You are needed. Get in a taxi. You will be reimbursed the sum."

"How do you even have this phone number?"

The response was merely a dial tone. I stared at the phone for a moment, gripping it tightly. A wave of fury rushed over me, and I had to hold myself back from throwing my phone at the mirror and smashing the glass. I took a deep breath, and walked out to make my apologies to Sarah.

"What is it?" She asked. "Chloe, you've gone all red."

"It's just..." I shook my head. "It's this new job. They always need me at the most inconvenient times. I have to work tonight."

"Bullshit."

I blinked. "What?"

"They can't just call you up out of the blue and demand things from you."

She was right, of course. But over the past few months I had begun to feel tied to the Professor, the patterns of my days and nights inextricably defined by the stochastic nature of his calls and demands. I was getting close to something. Something important. I still wasn't sure what it was, but I knew if I gave up now, it would all fall apart.

"I have to go. I don't have a choice."

She frowned at me, then her face slowly shifted into a smirk. "Hey, I've got an idea. Come with me."

We paid the bill and left the restaurant, crossing the road to the park at the top of the main parade. Sarah lifted her handbag and pulled out a joint,

wagging her eyes at me.

“Are you serious?”

“Fuck yeah, I’m serious. This is important. You can be a little late for your job, but you need to learn to take things a little easier, to relax a little. You need to take a bit of control over your own life, you know?”

The air outside was cold and made me shiver. Sarah took my hand in hers, a warm beacon in the night, and led me to the bench where she sat down and lit up. For a while, neither of us said a word.

She pressed the joint against her lips, and I watched them purse intently, smoke whispering out of them. As she passed it to me, our fingers brushed against one another, in a shiver of electricity. The space between us suddenly didn’t feel like space anymore. It felt like a vacuum, pulling inwards, closing a rift that had never meant to be open. Melting.

I shivered at the feeling. For though it felt new and fresh and undiscovered, I knew that it was not. I had walked these waters before, and they had drowned me in their sweet deceptions.

I stood up.

“I can’t do this.”

Her eyes tracked me, a question lingering in them unanswered.

“I’m sorry,” I said, backing away. “I just can’t.”

In ten minutes I was in a taxi, hurtling back towards campus.

#

When I finally got to the Professor’s office, some forty minutes later, he was not alone. The man in the suit was there. He was standing in the corner, with his tablet and pen, writing something. The Professor stood by the window and was looking out at the campus. And there was a woman in a lab coat sitting at his desk.

“What’s going on?”

“Something’s happened and I need your help,” the Professor said, his back still to me. I didn’t reply. “Your field is linguistics, yes?”

“Yes... I mean. Yes, but I’m only a student.”

“Don’t add caveats to your statements. It’s inconsiderate. You are the only linguistics specialist that I can get hold of at this hour whom I trust.”

“I still think we should call Dr. Jimenez,” the woman said, cricking her neck to speak to the Professor’s back. It was not the same person as the woman on the phone.

“David is in Kiev. This is time-sensitive. Just get her to sign the damn papers.”^[18]

“As you say,” she replied, and took a pen out of her coat. “This is a detailed nondisclosure agreement, as well as a document dictating that anything that happens to you is your responsibility and yours alone. If you are to sustain mental or physical injury or even death, all associations to Professor Crannus will be expunged. Sign here, here and once again here.”

I stared at her. Then looked over at the man, who did not look up, and back at the Professor.

“Professor, what is this about?”

“Obviously I can’t tell you until you sign the agreement. Surely that must be obvious.”

“But if I don’t...”

“There are moments in life where we must take a leap of faith, Chloe,” he said. “Please. Sign the paper and let’s get going.”

I nodded. Yes – I was frustrated, angry at being called at this time in the night. But I couldn’t walk away from this. Not now. I was very much aware that I was on the cusp of discovering what I had wanted all along – the mystery behind Roland Crannus.

With the power of hindsight, a historian can look back at a moment – like an explorer pointing to a map – and say, *that was it. The turning point. The pivot around which everything revolved.* This is the function of historicism: to identify the events in the narrative that shift the story, the decisions that drive the hand of history onwards.

When these events are lived they carry no such weight. There are no signs or announcements to warn you of their importance. They appear as days much like any other – seamless continuations in the threads of life.

I cannot help but wonder what would have happened if I had refused, turned my back and left the room. Some people who are not alive today still would be; some that survived would be dead, or worse. Maybe Professor Crannus would not be a household name, and you would not react the way you do when you hear it. I don’t know.

After signing and releasing the pen, I handed it back to the woman. The Professor turned around, pushed his glasses up onto his face and looked at his pocket watch.

“At last,” he muttered to himself. “Knowledge is the wing wherewith we fly to heaven.”^[19]

II

The Professor walked out of the office, leaving a silent beckoning in his wake. The woman in the lab coat followed, and so did I. The man did not move a step, did not even glance, and the office door closed on him behind us.

The woman shuffled forward with an ingrained urgency. Her entire body was tense. Her limbs jerked as she walked, as though there was a collection of metallic wheels and spokes hidden under that white coat.^[20] The Professor was her opposite in almost every way. He moved with grace and purpose, one that seemed to hint at some kind of deeper knowledge. While not particularly slow, each step he took oozed with a quiet contemplation that reminded me of the old ladies practicing Tai Chi by the harbour on my old walk to school.

He seemed so comfortable with his surroundings that I didn't bring myself to question where the stairway at the end of this corridor led. I certainly hadn't seen one leading up from the ground floor.

I followed, and found that it only went down one floor, from the third to the second, and stopped in front of an old metal elevator shaft. The coated woman shuffled forward and pulled back the rattling gate. The three of us entered. A single lightbulb swung above us, casting long shadows. She closed the gate. I looked around the small container for buttons, but there were none. Without a word, the elevator rattled again and began to descend.

“Professor?”

“If you have a question, ask it straight away. Don't ask my name first, as if you have forgotten. It's inconsiderate. It implies that I am not listening and need reminding.”

“Where are we going?”

“Down.”

“That’s not helpful. What is down there? What are we going to see?”

“Tell me, Chloe, why would I give you such an unhelpful answer?”

“Because you don’t want me to know the real answer.”

“And if you have already established that I don’t want to give you the real answer, why would you ask a follow-up question? Doesn’t that seem pointless?”

“Um. I suppose.”

“Be wary of your words. They are all you have to express yourself. Too often people say things that they have no intention of saying, purely because they feel the situation demands it. Don’t let the situation demand you to speak. Speak only because you demand it.”^[21]

I fell silent, feeling a little ashamed. I was quite sure that he had not meant to shame me. The words had not had that tone. Rather, they came out as the soft advice a worldly father would give to their still stumbling child. I didn’t like to be made to feel like a child. I knew that about myself – condescension, above all else, made me bristle. But for some reason, I didn’t bristle at his words. I looked down and I held my tongue.

The elevator juddered to a halt and the woman pulled back the gate.

I remember thinking that this was the second time I crossed over into fiction. The first had been closer. More intimate. The Professor had seemed to me like something stolen out of an Arthur Conan Doyle novel. This time, I felt I had stepped into a movie screen.

More shadeless lightbulbs hung, casting a vibrating glow across the underground chamber and sending flickering shadows along the red brick walls and archways. Around the room, there were computers, whiteboards with complex scribbling and pinned photographs, and two long conference tables peppered with empty mugs and scattered files. It was the Hollywood set of an underground FBI bunker; a secret MI5 conspiracy group; a mad scientist’s evil lair.^[22] Too perfect. Too on-the-nose. My mind couldn’t come to terms with it.

The woman hurried in and quickly went about shutting the files that were open on the tables, occasionally throwing furtive glances. The Professor walked ahead of me, and as he did the other occupants of the room nodded their heads briefly but deferentially. All but one man, who

was sitting leaning back in his chair, feet on the desk and tapping at a portable keyboard.

“We have a guest, Zolo.”

He looked up at the Professor, face utterly blank, and slowly moved his feet down to the floor. Looking at me, he attempted a smile. It looked utterly out of place on his face.

The suited man was here, though we had certainly left him in the office upstairs. I couldn't help but think how absurd it was. If there was a faster way of getting here, why had we not taken it? Or why had he not come with us? It seemed almost like a plot-hole, a technical error made by whoever had directed this particular scene.

“Chloe.” The Professor snapped me out of my reverie. “Come here.”

He was standing by a whiteboard, across which were various pictures of written script and hieroglyphs. They looked vaguely familiar, but I could not recognise a single one. For all the studying I had done, these were in a language I did not know, had never seen and perhaps didn't even know existed.

“What do you make of these?”

I cocked my head, scanning over them. “I don't recognise them.”

“I don't expect you to. Nonetheless.”

I stared, realisation washing over me. This was my first test. This was my chance to prove that I had something of value to offer.

“Well, they're logograms, as opposed to morphemes or graphemes. Whatever it is, it's closer to Japanese kanji or Chinese hanzi than it is to Latin or Cyrillic script.”

“Indeed. And if you were to assume some relation to Chinese, what would you make of them?”

I frowned.

“But... they aren't Chinese, though. They are similar, some of them recognisable even, but they don't make any sense.”

“Not yet, no. But consider a thought experiment: I want you to imagine that instead of the Roman Empire spreading Latin script across European countries, and then across the globe making English the *lingua franca*, that some similar development of early Chinese script took place instead. That instead of modern English, and Old English, being based on Germanic, Greek and Latin roots, it was based on whatever the precursor to modern Chinese is.”

My hands were sweating. I couldn't help but feel that I was on show, in some kind of exam or interview, but as I nervously looked around me, I saw no one watching. Lightbulbs were swinging above us. Files stamped 'confidential' being opened and closed. Everyone was quietly engrossed in their individual tasks. Whatever this was, it was between the Professor and me.

"A precursor?"

"Where did the modern Chinese hanzi come from?"

"I mean," I paused. "Until the mid-20th century most Chinese only spoke their native local variety without much written form. I suppose the Mandarin logograms became nationally dominant during the Qing dynasty, but it's hard to trace that back."

"Why?"

"Well," I said, thanking my luck that I had just been reading about this a few weeks ago. "Schleicher used the comparative method for European languages which allowed us to trace similar language back to the same roots by looking at similarities in morphology and sound, but that doesn't apply very well to Sinitic languages.^[23] We can say that it came from Sino-Tibetan roots, but because of the fracturing of the nations and empires at the time..."

He held up his hand and I fell silent.

"You're too focused on history. Imagine that the dominant root language of English was Sino-Tibetan instead of Latin."

"But Chinese didn't develop that..."

"Forget that. Forget facts. Use your creativity. *Imagine*. Look for the possible roots."

I frowned, racking my brain to remember some books I had read back in Hong Kong two years ago, recommended by a nice historian at the History Museum. I picked up a pen and scrawled a couple of characters on the board, then rubbed them out.

"This logogram here," I said, squinting. "Looks a bit like 冷, or lěng, but with a longer tail. I remember an older character had a longer tail like this, compiled from Han Dynasty seals. It could be related."

"Han Dynasty. 200 BC?"

"Or just after, yes."

"Excellent. What might it mean?"

"I'd need books. I need to be able to..."

“You have none. You have your mind, and no time.”

“Okay... Okay. Well, it now means ‘cold’, in a variety of forms, but on its own, it’s usually an adjective, ‘cold’ as in ‘indifferent’. But the meaning has probably changed dramatically, it was likely originally something physical like ‘frost’ or ‘snow’.”

“Good. Good, very good. Any others?”

“This one.” I scrawled another lower down. “Looks like an early form of xiàngshàng, which means ‘up’ or ‘upwards’, but...” My hand followed the lines I’d just written again. “But no, it’s closer to the Japanese kōjō. So I guess it could also mean ‘advancement’ or ‘progress’. And this...”

My brain was moving fast now. Links were starting to fall into place. Symbols clarifying. But I couldn’t shake the feeling that I was attempting to run before I could walk. I drew the Chinese symbol 回. “Do you see the similarity?” I asked.

“Yes, yes.” He was excited now, too, and speaking more quickly. “But this one is more circular, more like a swirl.”

“There was a bronze inscription I read about once, from the Western Zhou period,^[24] where the character was closer to this, more swirly, but it was definitely a precursor of this character: Huí. It might mean ‘return’, or ‘redo’.” I sighed, feeling the heavy weight of my inaccuracies upon me. “Or maybe even ‘go around’, I really don’t know. This is just guesswork.”

He put a hand on my shoulder. “Don’t lie to yourself. This is far more than guesswork. This is excellent research.”

“Thank you.” I couldn’t help but smile.

“And thank you. ‘Cold’, ‘upwards’ or ‘progress’, ‘return’. That may be enough. When you are ready, ask Judy to take you back up.”

“Judy?”

The lab-coated woman looked up from the table, squinted, then went back to her files. The Professor turned away from me and walked swiftly towards a wooden door in the side of the room. Above it was an electronic sign that read, “C531”.

“Professor, wait. What is all this? This imaginary script – where did it come from?”

He gave me a warm smile and shook his head. “Questions, questions, questions,” he said. “I am not bound to please thee with my answers.”^[25] Then he opened the door.

I don't quite remember what it was that I glimpsed through that door, then, before it closed. Memories are strange like that. I remember what it felt like, what it made me think, but I can't quite remember what it actually was. After all that has happened, it could have been any number of things. All I can remember is the overwhelming sensation of the impossible. Of the inconceivable. Like a glitch in the world that didn't make any sense.

But in half a second, he had disappeared through the door and closed it behind him, and like that, he was gone.

#

I dreamt of characters that night. Of shifting logograms and hieroglyphics twisting in the air and taunting me. I tried to catch them, to tie them down, but each time I grabbed hold of one it dissipated into air. Above them all was that sign – C531 – and I wanted to get at it, but I couldn't reach it. It was too far away. There was something else too, something that made me feel upset. Or scared. But I can't remember what it was.

When I woke up, I was fast awake. Despite having more questions than I had yesterday, I felt exhilarated. Even as I walked out of my room and had to step over half-empty beer cans and littered rubbish, there was no grogginess, no frustration, no disappointment. The day felt new and fresh and I finally felt like I was a part of something important. Something significant.

James was in the kitchen. He'd obviously ended up staying over in one of the boy's rooms last night, or just passing out on the communal sofa. I gave him a bright smile and sat down beside him, throwing lashings of soy sauce into my warm bowl of congee.

"Hey you," he said. "What's up?"

"Not much. Headed to the library soon. Got some research to do."

He smiled. "Well yeah. I mean, I could have guessed that. When do you do anything else?"

"Hey! Don't be rude. I do other things."

"Like what?" he asked, just as I stuck a big spoonful of congee into my mouth. I just stared at him, eyes wide, clearly unable to reply, and shrugged. He burst out laughing. "Okay, come to the arts centre with me tonight, then."

"Why? What's on?"

"There's a film on in the arts centre. It's a recording of the *The Merchant of Venice* in Cantonese, ^[26] some theatre company from China did

it.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Now, I’m not a huge Shakespeare fan, if I’m honest. But there’ll be subtitles, and it’d be interesting to get your thoughts.”

“You know what? Okay. Let’s go. What time is it?”

“Seven. I’ll get tickets.”

I’d just finished wolfing down my breakfast and was already eager to get to the library, to books, to researching, so I gave him a thumbs up and then dashed out to get to the shower before anyone else did. He had a huge smile on his face, and part of me felt happy too. It would be nice to do something with a friend.

At the library, I got out every book I could find on Sino-Tibetan languages, roots and development. I read about Kroeber’s Philology Project in the 30s, Shafer^[27] and Benedict’s^[28] work, and even found a work on phonology by Gong Hwang-cherng.^[29] I was engrossed. Fascinated. This was exactly the kind of research I had wanted to be doing, and though the Professor had not yet revealed to me why I was doing it, that didn’t seem to matter.

Armed with new knowledge, I skipped lunch and hurried straight over to the Social Studies building, finding my way in and climbing the requisite staircases.

I crossed to his door and put my hand up to knock.

His name was not there. It had been replaced by Prof. Jane Sandwell, whoever she was.^[30]

I took a step back, looking behind me. I had gone exactly the same way as I had for the past six months. I was absolutely sure of it. Yet somehow, when I reached the third floor and turned into the final corridor, something was different. The doors were the same, the walls felt the same, the whole building smelled the same, but his office wasn’t there. None of the rooms were. Instead, there were some empty seminar rooms and a couple of offices with other names of professors or graduate students I didn’t recognise.

I ran my fingers along the wall. They hadn’t just replaced the door sign, or the occupants. Something more had changed.

This was not even the same corridor.

When I look back at that moment, I am reminded of the etymology of the word ‘uncanny’, from the old Scots ‘can’, or ‘ken’ – to know. The

beauty of the word is in its ambiguity: to be faced with the simultaneity of both knowing and not knowing. I did not know what had changed, or how, but the knowledge that something was very wrong was all-encompassing.

I was overcome with a sense of walls tightening, of opportunities fading. Where had he gone? It felt like another rejection. I couldn't help but picture another dead-ended wall rising inexorably in front of the paths of my life.

I retraced my steps from the stairway to where the lift had once been. This time, I went slower. Less confident of my steps. I made certain that I was going the same way, in the same direction, as I had each and every time before. The act itself was bizarre, double-checking an action that you've committed to instinct, like brushing your teeth and second-guessing every stroke. I stepped through the corridor cautiously, some irrational part concerned that it might dissolve under me. But it held fast. It was solid. It stood, undeniable and clear as if it had always been a part of this building.

Except it hadn't. I knew it hadn't.

Didn't I?

When I met James at the Arts Centre that night, I couldn't get the building out of my mind. I felt compelled to talk about it, but I couldn't. While it is true that over the months, James had become a confidant, an ear to rely on if I needed to vent about the University or my frustrations with my course, I had never mentioned the Professor to him.

I told myself I was worried that his obsession with the Crannus mythos would intrude upon what I felt was a delicate, albeit confusing, balance. But that was not it. There was something about our meetings that had become personal. A delicate bubble of intrigue hidden away from the drudgery of the world. Part of me felt that if I spoke the words out loud, it might burst and prove itself to be nothing but air.

I barely watched the film. James wanted to talk about it, but I couldn't focus. We stood opposite each other afterwards, and he was looking at me in expectation, but my thoughts were on other things.

I returned to the library after the show. James asked if I'd like to get a drink, but there was nothing that could have been further from my mind. Not being able to find the Professor had hit me harder than I'd expected. There had been, up until that point, a sense of momentum. A sudden rising action in my life that I had all but given up on. The simile might sound prosaic, but I truly felt as if I had stumbled onto a modern day Christopher

Columbus, preparing to set sail for a new, uncharted world of discovery. I did not yet know what this world was – no one does until they get there – but I knew I had to be on that boat.

I spent the entire night in the library studying, until pictures of old Sinitic logograms were burnt onto the back of brain. Perhaps if I knew enough, if I was sufficiently prepared, I would be invited along for the journey.

“Chloe?”

I jerked up, confused. I had fallen asleep in the library and now the sunlight was streaming in, cutting a sharp line across my desk. Sarah was in front of me, looking worried.

“What time is it?”

“10.30. Have you been here all night?” Through my grogginess, I attempted to provide something close to a sheepish look. She shook her head. “No, you can’t just look cute and expect me to forget about this. I haven’t seen you once since Thursday night. It’s Saturday.”

Perhaps it was because I was half-asleep, still in some delirium, but it seemed as if the light was casting a halo around her head. She glowed, a warm comforting glow that made me feel warm inside.

“You look like an angel,” I said, then felt my cheeks grow red. I hadn’t meant to say that out loud.

“You look like a mess.”

“How did you know where I was?”

She laughed. “Where else would you be? James said you were weird on your date last night. Said you disappeared after the show without a word. I came straight here.”

“Our *date*?”

“That’s what he said,” she replied, giving me a shrug.

“Oh, God.” I put my head back in my arms.

“What’s going on, Chloe? Seriously. We’re worried about you.”

“I’m not...” How could I explain myself? I didn’t want to lie to her, but I didn’t want her to think I was crazy either. “Look. Can we go get a coffee? I’m barely awake.”

Sarah got us both a coffee in the library café as I checked out four more books, up to the maximum of ten that I was allowed from the library at any one time. Graciously, she offered to help me carry some of them in her bag.

“It’s a nice morning,” she said. “Let’s go for a walk, at least. You can tell me what’s been going on.”

And despite the urgency I felt to get back to the Professor, the prospect of a walk with Sarah sounded like a beautiful, warm relief from it all. I smiled, and nodded my head.

#

We cut round the back of the campus and up to the fields behind the Learning Grid, where the sports were played. Beyond that, stretches of flat, green English country. The morning was cold, a piercing wind digging itself underneath your clothes and clinging to your skin, no matter how tightly you wrapped yourself up.

We were silent for a while, walking alongside each other, and I was aware of a tension that settled between us. An unspoken question about the other night that neither of us felt qualified to ask. The longer we walked, the bigger it grew until it loomed over us like a canopy.

“How’s the course going?” I said, trying to step out of its shadow.

Sarah was having none of it.

“Where did you go the other night?”

I shifted, shrugging my shoulders. “Work.”

“Then why haven’t I seen you in three days?”

I turned away from her a little, and as I did I felt a tug of resistance inside of me, urging me back. I walked ahead.

She followed, matching my pace.

“I wanted to talk to you about what you said,” she added. “The other night. Before you left. I wanted to talk to you about what it meant.”

“I was just being silly.”

“It didn’t sound silly to me.”

She put her hand on my arm, and a chill ran up it. A tiny shiver. And as she pulled back, it felt like the weight of the world was pulling with her. It would have been so easy, then, to fall into it. It was just gravity, after all, like falling over a cliff.

I took a step back and her hand fell away.

“What is it you want from me, Sarah?”

She smiled, and her lips creased up into a perfect curve. “I don’t want anything from you. You’re a good friend. I like hanging out with you. Am I ridiculous for thinking that it could be something more?”

“But…” I frowned at her. “Why?”

She laughed, her hand going to her chest, and all of a sudden I felt hot. Too hot to be outside. Too hot to be anywhere.

“Because you’re cute. Because we make each other smile. Because you’re the only one in this dump that actually challenges me when I talk about things. Isn’t that enough? Because when I’m with you I start to get this little feeling like there’s something there, underneath the layers we put on. *A mot juste.*”

“A what?”

“Sorry,” she said. “I get literary when I’m nervous. It’s Flaubert, you know him? The French writer. He would spend his whole life digging through sentences, writing and re-writing them, trying to find this harmony. This balance. He believed that in any sentence, in any situation, there was always *le mot juste*, or ‘the right word’. Nothing else would quite do, but this perfect word. But it never comes naturally – you’ve got to get at it through precise work and revision. But it’s there, under everything.”

She took a step closer to me.

“And the more that we hang out together, have our dinners together, the more I feel like there’s something underneath that we could dig out, if we wanted to.”

I blinked, staring at her wordlessly. She gave an anxious laugh.

“Is this working? I’m really not that great at seduction, you know? I really didn’t think I’d end up talking about Flaubert.”

Oh, I thought. *It’s definitely working.* But I turned my eyes down and away from her.

“I can’t, Sarah. I just can’t.”

“What is it?” She put her hand up to my face, and I flinched. “Why not?”

“Because it’s *not real*,” I snapped. “Because I’ve been down this road before, pretending that there’s some perfect world out there where we can all love each other like people do in romance novels and Shakespearean comedies. But just because people write about these things it doesn’t make them real. The world doesn’t have any heroes, or any lovers, or any genius discoverers – just a bunch of self-centred cynical idiots who like to pretend they’re something better.”

“You don’t know that,” she said. “You can’t know that.”

“Oh, trust me. I can. I believed in it all – the whole thing. I fell for it hook, line and sinker. Believed we could run away and live off the power of

our love, like the stupid teenager I was. Guess what? The world doesn't work that way. The big ideals that we wish existed are just fairy tales we tell ourselves so we sleep at night. You start thinking they're real and eternal until someone rejects you and it's all over."

I fell silent, breathing heavily. My cheeks were hot and flushed and the wet of my tears were already on my cheeks. I wasn't able to look at Sarah directly, so I just turned and stared off at the green fields in the distance.

"Have you ever read any Larkin?" she asked. I didn't say anything. I hadn't wanted her to see me like this.

"He's one of my favourite poets," she continued. "Mainly because of how cynical he is. There's this one poem – An Arundel Tomb – where he talks about this statue of these two aristocrats. The way everyone looks at them and assumes they were in love, just because the sculptor happened to sculpt them holding hands. But we don't really know anything about them, he says. They might have hated each other. He might have beat her, for all we know."

"It sounds like he agrees with me."

"Sort of," she said. "But that's not the point. The point is that everyone who sees them always assumes the same thing: that they were in love. It doesn't matter whether they were or not, the human instinct is always the same. To see the ideal. To imagine perfection. And maybe that's enough – maybe the perfect ideal is only there if we believe it is. Despite the fact we know nothing about these people, the last line of the poem is, 'what will survive of us is love.' I think that's true, but only if we let ourselves believe in it."

She stepped in front of me, and I could see the blue of her eyes, asking me to believe in this with her. A perfect word. I felt light and heavy at the same time. There was a searing softness that I wanted to reach out for and take, my arms were hungry for it.

I gritted my teeth and swallowed.

Not again.

"I have to get back to the Social Studies building," I said. "Thanks for the coffee."

She shook her head at me, wordlessly exasperated. I tried to give her a comforting smile.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, then left.

#

When I returned to the corridor, it was still changed. Unyielding. Determined to get my mind off Sarah, I paced up and down it, as though if I turned quickly enough I'd be able to catch the walls lying to me.

Eventually, I settled myself at the bottom of the stairway and opened up a book. I focused, intently, on the problem at hand. It had always been my belief that the core of success lay not in the application of knowledge or intelligence, but rather dogged perseverance in the face of repeated failure. It is no wonder that there are so few great minds these days. Our world does not allow it. Our world is designed to make it too easy for us to fail. I had been close to giving in to the falsity of comfort, to the familiarity of routine, of making the same mistakes.

But in Professor Crannus I had seen something new. Something completely different. I would not let that get away from me.

It was late in the afternoon when I started to think about food. My eyes were tired and my stomach panged with hunger. The soft afternoon light was now streaming directly into my little corner and the warmth was dragging me away, into sleep and into black.

That was when I saw her – the hard-edged lab-coated woman. Judy. She bustled down the stairway past me, though I had not seen her go up. Her shoulders were tightly raised and pressed together and she moved with such brisk urgency that she didn't even glance in my direction. I almost called out to her, but as she passed something compelled me to hold my tongue. Placing my book to one side, I waited until she was a good twenty paces away, then I followed her.

She did not look back at me once, but after ten minutes had passed I was quite sure that we were no longer in the building that I knew. I had tried to keep count of the number of stairwells we had ascended or descended, but once the windows disappeared it was difficult to guess what floor we were on. The light thinned and the air became staler. Suffice to say, I believed that we were underground, as it was the only way such a complex could have been concealed. How far underground, I was not sure.

Remembering the moment now, I am compelled to talk briefly about the history of the word 'labyrinth'. Famous as the structure Daedalus made in order to conceal the Minotaur, the word has been reused and repurposed throughout time to mean anything from 'confusing maze' to 'bewildering arguments',^[31] but its original usage predates the famous Greek myth. The origins of the word are often traced back to the Lydian word for a double-

edged axe,^[32] implying violence and danger. However, Beekes later finds this assessment ‘speculative’, arguing that there was no evidence the word was ever used in this context and finding the pre-Greek work *laura*, meaning ‘narrow street, narrow passage’ more plausible.^[33]

Either way, the word labyrinth also carries the implication of intelligence and cunning, both for the individual trapped within it and the architect himself. It was said that Daedalus made the classic Greek labyrinth so cunningly that he could barely escape from it.^[34] This perhaps supports the idea of the ‘double-edged axe’, an intellect so sharp that one might cut oneself on it.

There was no doubt as I followed Judy that all three of these connotations followed me in turn – the claustrophobia of the narrow corridors, the sense of architectural cunning and, perhaps most keenly, the sense of danger.

The deeper we went, the more I was consumed with a sense that something was off. Even without concrete information, the mind is highly adept at identifying danger. It is in the small things: corridors that feel longer than they look; reverberations of footsteps that carry further than they should; corners that seem to take you right back to where you started. It quickly became clear to me that, if I was Theseus, then Judy was my spool of thread. If I lost her trail, I would be stuck in here for days.

The walls pushed in. The air tightened.

I pressed on, keeping just far enough back that I could always see her turn. It would be a lie to say I wasn’t afraid, but my fear actually bolstered my determination to continue. I suppose there was a sense of narrative about it, of fighting through the obstacles put in my way.

Still, I felt a wave of relief when I peeked round a corner to a familiar sight: the basement office, the brick walls and swinging lightbulbs just as they had been before.

Such was my satisfaction that I overlooked the surreal nature of that trip and the impossible geography of the passage we had just taken. I allowed myself to ignore the fact that we had walked for a good thirty minutes to get somewhere that was previously only moments away.

It was irrelevant. I was back.

From just round the corner, I could see the filled tables, the whirring computers and that door, still labelled C531. The man in the suit stood with his tablet, watching over the work.

“Where is the Professor?” Judy said as she entered. “Has he returned?”

“Not yet,” someone replied.

“It’s been almost three days.”

“He’ll be fine,” said another voice. “Don’t be such a bitch about it.”

“It’s my *job* to be a bitch about it, Zolo. Maybe you should be doing yours.”

“*Maybe you should be doing yours,*” he repeated in high-pitched mockery.

I couldn’t take my eyes off the door. I felt as if a rope had been tied between me and whatever was on the other side, entangling me, pulling me towards it until I could no longer look in any other direction. It is no wonder to me now that the word ‘siren’ comes from the Greek *σειρά* or *seirá*: ‘rope, cord,’^[35] for as I remember the moment I can almost hear the other side of that door sing to me – a quiet inaudible Siren song, luring me in.

It’s been almost three days.

The boat was leaving and I wasn’t on it. The new world was just behind that door.

“Hey!” someone shouted. “You’re not allowed in here.”

I had drifted out into the middle of the room, the cord tightening.

“Chloe?!” Judy’s voice was bewildered, furious. I couldn’t look at her. I was so close to the door already. Feeling the invisible thread pull upon my hand, I placed it on the doorknob. “No, Chloe. No – you can’t!”

Before I knew it, the door was open and I was through. Judy slammed it shut behind me.^[36]

#

The first thing I noticed was the colour. I was in another corridor, another ever-expanding thread of this labyrinth, and there was too much blue. The walls were blue. The lights were blue. Even the air seemed to take on a deep tinge of violet. For half a second, I checked my own clothes, my own skin, to see if something had changed, but it had not. I was still me, but undoubtedly a stranger in this new landscape.

We are so used to colour being what we expect it to be. It is one of the ultimate consistencies in our world. Of course, we accept when small changes in colour happen, though not without passing comment or thought. Nonetheless, these are things that we accept have the ability to change, like clothes or buildings – things within the scope of human control. But if one

day the sky were to turn green or the sea yellow, it would be more than simply unsettling. It would be inconceivable.

Consider the root of colour – from the old Latin ‘colos’, from the proto-Indo-European ‘*kel-*’, meaning ‘to cover, to conceal’. The colours of our world hide from us the things we have been conditioned to accept as immutable parts of our landscape. As such, it is difficult to explain how I felt when none of the colours were right.

On instinct, I threw a quick glance at the closed door behind me, but it did not call me back. That rope had been severed. Settling myself with a deep breath, I pressed on.

It was not long before I heard sounds, the babbles of language that I did not understand. Like the script that the Professor had shown me, there were recognisable segments, uncanny^[37] similarities to languages that I knew, but no meaning I could easily discern. I slowed, pressing myself against the blue brick, some preternatural sense telling me that I was not welcome in these passages. That danger lurked there.

A labyrinth, after all, must have its Minotaur.

I pushed my back against the wall as I peeked slowly, very slowly, around the corner.

There was another office. At first glance, it seemed to be a carbon-copy of the one I had just been in. But the longer I looked, and the longer I studied it, the more I realised that almost nothing was the same.^[38] There were tables, also blue-tinged, but they were not like any tables I had ever seen before. Rather than blocky, straight-square design, they curved ornately inwards, dipping like a net. Inside it, were metallic balls of different sizes. The computers – if I can call them that – did not have monitors, but physical boards which held a range of unmoving colours and textures.

There were people, but I soon realised that these six individuals looked nothing like what I had come to associate with the word ‘people’. The facial structure was different, the cheekbones higher, the eyes wider and the brows more prominent. They were shorter than I would expect people to be – not much, but communally, noticeably so – and they stood together in pairs, close enough that they were touching.

The atmosphere was exactly the same: quiet conspiracy and hidden plans. The sensation that I had felt when I entered the other underground

office was replicated here, so much so that it took me some time to register the differences.

Parsing this strange haze of familiarity was perhaps why it took me so long to notice the two other people in the room.

The first was a young boy. He looked much like the others, a warped, inverted copy of a human. His skin seemed a touch lighter, almost white, but his eyes were brilliant blue. He was sitting cross-legged on the floor, by one of the tables, playing with what looked like model trains. They were also blue, and looked widely different from any train I had ever seen. But as he pushed them forwards and backwards, egging them on, I found them undeniably recognisable.

The second, in a corner on his knees with his hands tied, was the Professor.

Both were being pointedly ignored. Professor Crannus was staring directly at the boy, entrapped by the scene. Despite his captivity, he seemed entirely unconcerned – there was only fascination, and perhaps another look behind it. A hunger.

That was when they saw me. Soon, all six of them were looking at me. Some shouted, others muttered at each other. Two of them walked towards me.

I would like to say that it occurred to me that there was no point in running, that reason told me that they would be faster, that I would make a wrong turn, that making it to the door would be unfeasible. Looking back, this is unlikely. As much as I would like to believe I am able to make rational decisions, research indicates otherwise. As I write now, I am reminded of the neurologist António Damásio, and his ‘somatic marker hypothesis’,^[39] in which he posits that all human decisions are made by emotion, not reason. In his study of individuals who had lost the part of their brain to process emotions, he discovered they were not capable of making decisions. He hypothesised that our somatic markers, that is to say our emotional and physical reactions, are not the consequence of our rational cognitive choices, but the source.

To say there was just reason involved, therefore, is probably incorrect. A misrepresentation. The truth was that I was paralysed by a melting pot of emotions: fear and confusion, familiarity and burning curiosity.

I didn't run.

I froze, took a few steps back, arms raised, and they grabbed me. Their hands were calloused and rough, and they smelled coarse, like iron or copper. I was tugged forward, stumbling to the centre of the room.

They were all different in size, shape, perhaps even gender – as different from each other as you and I – but there are some emotions that have no language barrier, no cultural context. Anger is one of them. I was roughly shaken, interrogated with barking meaningless words. When the Professor saw me, he looked delighted.

“Houi!” he shouted. They looked at him, confused, then back at me. “Huuo. Ho- Damn it, I’m not getting it right at all. Chloe, the word for redo, or do again. What was it?”

“Huí?”

The strange men around me stopped, staring.

“Huí?” they repeated, except the pronunciation was different. The tone was off.

“Yes, yes,” said the Professor. “Say it again, Chloe. But say it like they’re saying it. Say it pointing at me.”

I tried my best, pointing a finger at the Professor, and they all took a step back to look at him. They then circled off into a corner, muttered amongst themselves for a moment, and one of them crossed over to untie his hands. Casually, as if he had not just been a prisoner, he stood up and brushed off his waistcoat. Checking his pocket watch, he nodded, crossed over to me and said,

“So good of you to come, but we’d better get going. I think they want to kill you.”

All six of them had turned, and they were staring. Their anger had shifted, fear seeping into the edges. One pointed, muttering a low phrase. The boy on the floor had not looked up. He was busy with his trains.

“What do you mean ‘kill me’?”

“What have I told you about repeating me?” he muttered, grabbing my wrist. They stepped towards us, their faces contorting. “Now run!”

We sprinted down the blue corridor, the Professor dragging me on. Their feet slapped against the floor behind, but I didn’t look back. There was no time. The door was closer than I remembered. In a single movement, he pulled the door open and chucked me through it.

We tumbled into the office.

Just as he hit the ground, the Professor jumped up, slamming the door closed and pressing a button to the side. The sign above the door flickered, then changed from C531 to A1. He breathed a sigh of relief, looking down at me, prostrate on the floor.

“Well,” he said, brushing dust off his waistcoat. “I must commend you on your timing.”

III

When we returned, everyone shifted. Judy's concern disappeared. Her arms straightened and her shoulders bunched up in anger. Zolo's indifference twisted into a tight lip of concern. Juxtaposed against us, it stood out that the Professor did not change at all. In fact, since I had met him, he had displayed nothing other than the casual and assured confidence of someone who is completely in charge – not just of the room, or of the people in it, but of the very currents of life. I stood up and my adrenaline drained out of me. Overcome by a sudden depth of exhaustion, I leant against the wall with a heavy breath.

“Where on earth have you been?” Judy demanded, her voice shaking. Skirting around her, Zolo knelt by the door and opened a control panel to the right of it. His concern, it appeared, was not for us.

“You already know the answer to that question,” the Professor replied, then turned to me with a smile. “Tell me, Chloe. Why do so many people insist on asking questions when they already know the answer?”

“Probably because they actually want to ask something different?” I replied.

“Precisely.” He faced Judy again. “Ask the questions you mean to ask and omit the ones you don't.”

She bristled, quenching a quiet wave of fury that rolled itself up and down her body. “Three days. And why didn't you come back sooner? You know the rules. You helped me write the rules, *for your own sake.*”^[40]

“Then they are likely in need of a redraft. Come now, no harm has been done. Indeed, quite the opposite. I've made some real headway. So kind of

Chloe to show up when she did. Understandably, she'll be wanting an explanation."

"An explanation? Surely, that is premature."

"You were the one who let her through the door."

"No," Judy replied, her voice hard. She pointed a long straight finger at the Professor. "You were the one who did that." She turned her back on us and left the room, fists still tightened at her side. The Professor made no attempt to stop her.

Zolo looked up from where he was kneeling, fiddling with lines of code on a control panel. "You shouldn't keep antagonising her." His voice was cold, perfectly level and emotionless.

"Spare me the worry. She'll come around. She always does."

"As you say. But it is my job to worry." His face was a blank slate. It certainly didn't look as if worry, or indeed any other emotion, had ever graced its features.

The Professor smiled a little, and gave me an apologetic look. "Do excuse Zolo for his melodrama. Despite it, he remains one of the most intelligent young men I've ever met."

"I've asked you to refrain from praising me before. I don't need it or want it."

"He says that just to wind me up," the Professor muttered to me. "Look Chloe – I am aware you are owed some kind of explanation, but there are fissures I need to mend, both on this side of that door and on the other."

I stood up straight and gave him a hard look.

"No. I think I deserve more than that, Professor. After that, I think I deserve the truth."

He faced me directly then, standing tall and proud. "You are right." He placed a hand on my shoulder. "You are absolutely right. The truth is that you did more to help me than you know. The truth is that I have come to respect you, Chloe Chan, and I have come to value you. But still I have one more request from you: time. Go home. Remain in the dark for now. Be patient. I promise I will call on you soon and cast light on all of this."

I acquiesced, sated perhaps by own exhaustion, by the knowledge that an explanation would be coming. And more people were arriving, men with files and briefcases, scientists wearing coats: I was acutely aware that this was not the best time.

It took us only moments to return to Professor Crannus's office, where he thanked me again, and dismissed me. The corridor was unchanged – or rather, changed back to exactly as it had been before. The man in the suit was nowhere to be seen.

Unsure what to do, I wandered across campus in the evening light. A pleasant breeze had picked up and the sunset was settling itself quietly over the trees. My thoughts were so full of questions and impossibilities that I couldn't parse my way through them. My brain was still trying to form links between what I had seen and what the Professor had shown me – the language and the people. There was something there, a connection, but each time a chain came close to linking, it faltered and fell.

I couldn't help but question my sanity. What I had seen, where I had been, all seemed too unreal. Not only that, but there were gaps. Who was the man in the suit? And why did no one ever talk to him? Had he really been there at all, or was I just forgetting, and getting confused? Before long, I found myself back at Rootes, accompanied by nothing but more questions.

Frustrated, I went back to my room and waited. I made a cup of tea, sat on my windowsill and stared out into the dusk. It was well into the evening, and sounds of music and partying began drifting down the corridor, but I paid no attention to them.

Everything had changed.

James knocked on my door soon after I arrived.

"This really isn't the time," I said.

"I just wanted to check we were alright. You were strange with me the other night." He slurred his words, deep in a few too many beers.

"I'm fine. I just need to get some sleep."

"Don't you have time to..." he leant forward precariously, putting his arm up against the door frame. "Chat?"

I sighed. "Chat about what?"

It was then, I remember, that he leaned in to kiss me. I pulled back, but he fell into it, and I had to grab him to ensure that he didn't fall to the floor and take me with him. His wet lips pressed up against mine for a couple of seconds, before I pulled him away.

He straightened up, shifting and running his hand through his hair.

"I really like you."

"I know. But... look I'm sorry, but..." I didn't want to get into a long discussion with a drunk suitor on my doorstep. Not after everything that had

happened. “It’s been a long day, okay? I really just want to go to bed. Let’s talk about this in the morning.”

“Oh... yeah sure. Of course. I’m sorry, it’s just...” He got up, grabbing his jacket. “It’s just I... yeah. Goodnight.”

I closed the door on him and returned to my window.

Unable to settle, I fiddled with my computer and checked my emails. I watched the phone. I waited. I know what you might be thinking – that I was passive, quietly awaiting my fate rather than seeking it out – but *wait* is one of those words that doesn’t mean quite what we think it does. Not completely. Of course, in this modern age, to have to wait for anything implies boredom. It suggests frustration, a desire for something to happen. But if, as Heidegger claimed, boredom is the awareness of time passing, then what I was experiencing was completely the opposite.

If one traces the word right back to its Germanic origin, one finds that it is a cognate of ‘wake’, and the idea of ‘wakefulness’. I, like the word, was awake. Wide awake. In a way that I had not been in many years, I no longer felt asleep. What I had seen today, though I was at a loss to describe it, had woken me up to possibility. That possibility brimmed inside of me, bubbling its way out of my mouth and over my body.

My mind leapt from thought to thought – where had I gone? Another planet? Another time? Straight into the belly of a strange experiment? The novelty of the paths I was treading thrilled me beyond measure. Sitting at my window, I scrawled words I thought I had heard again and again on scraps of paper. I replayed the scene a million times in my head.

But as the word developed, so did my waiting. Words are like people, in a way. Given enough time they grow weary of their state and seek to change. No word means what it did a millennia ago, just as no person is what they were the decade previous. When the root of ‘wait’ developed, adapted and was found in the Old Northern French *waitier*, it meant both, to ‘observe carefully’ and to ‘be watchful’.

As the evening passed and the stars shifted, I began to observe myself carefully, and look inwards at this feeling that had lodged itself inside of me. It was not a new feeling – this wakefulness. I had felt it before: when I had first met Valerie and she told me she loved me, when we ran away together, when I first arrived at University. Perhaps I had even felt a touch of it the other night, with Sarah. But each of these times I had been met

with bitter disappointment. The infinite possibilities I could taste had turned to rot on my tongue.

Perhaps, then, I should have embraced the other implication of the word – to be watchful, of myself, of my hopes, and of the promises that a man like the Professor implicitly made. But I could not quench the wakefulness completely. Nor did I want to, for it seemed this time was truly different.

It was not until the early hours of the morning that the modern meaning of ‘wait’ caught up with me. It was the sun that did it, I think. I’d been sitting by my window for hours, staring into the night and content in my thinking, reminiscing, wondering. But when the warm glow of the new day touched the horizon, it occurred to me that I had no idea how many days it would be before I saw him again. With that came the frustration, the desire for time to pass quicker.

There was another knock. I sighed, dragging myself to my door and cracking it open.

“James, it’s early and I...”

Professor Crannus stood in front of me, in a fresh brown three-piece suit, his pipe still neatly tucked into his jacket pocket.

“My name is not and has never been James.”

“Oh,” I said, then my cheeks flushed when I realised that was all I could manage.

“I shall be waiting for you outside. You have until I have smoked a healthy pinch of tobacco, which I’m reliably informed takes somewhere between seven and eight minutes. Please don’t be tardy. I abhor waiting.”

#

He was waiting for me outside, staring off into the morning sunrise. There was something surreal about the image – the tweed coat, the lightly-smoking pipe and the glint of his glasses against the soft light – like an image from a Romantic poem. A postcard from the past.

“Where are we going?”

“I thought we’d take a short walk. Get a nice morning cup of coffee and head over to the office.”

“Somehow, I never pictured you as a coffee-drinker.”

He smiled, as if I’d said something quite humorous. “I have absolutely no idea what that means. Shall we?”

We walked, slowly, contemplatively (like the Professor did everything) up through the greenery, the light just beginning to force its way through

the leaves of the trees and dapple the campus grass. He made no attempt to talk, and while I was enjoying the silence, my curiosity got the better of me.

“Why are we going back to your office?”

“If that was a question that I felt I could answer without actually taking you there, I’d have just answered it in my office.” He leant forward conspiratorially. “What do you know about Erwin Schrodinger?”

“The one with the cat?”

“The one with the cat.”

“Not much. Physics has never really been my realm.”

He looked off into the distance, pursing his lips. “Do you think specialism is a good thing?”

“For deeper knowledge, it is certainly necessary.”

“It is a topic I have never settled on. You must understand, when I was younger I too searched for deep knowledge, and society told me that specialism was the way forward: find your own niche, perfect it. Ignore the forest and pick a single tree – only by trimming away the vines, the undergrowth, could I focus in on its true nature. I ended up in anthropology, I obtained my PhD in a short year and before I knew it I was lecturing. But still the world told me this was too wide. The plant I studied was too large to understand. Life had shuffled me from knowledge, to history, to archeology, but still trimming had to be done. To research, I focused on paleo-anthropology, but the tighter my research the poorer I felt.”

“Poorer in what way?”

“Restricted. Held back. In the end, I panicked. I rejected the conceit completely. All I could see was a claustrophobic narrowing, stretched out over the rest of my life, until I would be king over nothing more than a nutshell, a speck of dust. I didn’t want dust. I didn’t want the tree. I wanted the forest. I wanted as much of the forest as I could grasp. I studied music theory, literature, religion, neurobiology – holistic knowledge! I refused to remain at my tree, quietly seeking its roots. Then I met Feynman.”

We had cut through the stone path behind the arts centre and were heading, it seemed, towards the library café.

“Richard Feynman? Nobel Prize Richard Feynman?”

“A good friend.^[41] We worked together for a while, in the 70s. And he showed me something, something that made me do the one thing that I had resolved never to do again.”

“What?”

“Specialise.”

When we stepped into the café, I was worried that people might be watching. I knew the Professor’s enigmatic reputation as well as any. For such a man, doing something as mundane as getting a coffee with a friend can be the very building-block of a conspiracy. I was surprised to note that no one gave us a second glance.

“I will have a small decaf mocha, please, and whatever this young lady would like,” he said, as the server stared at him, blinking. It was as if he was trying to work out how and why this moment seemed important, while unshakeably aware that it was. The Professor had that impact on people. “I’ll also take this apple.”

I gave my order and waited, then suddenly realised I had rushed out of the flat a little too quickly. “Professor, I don’t have my purse with me. I didn’t know we were going to get anything. I can pay you back, if that works?”

The Professor shook his head. “No, no, no. I never carry money. I find it crass.”

“Then how are we going to pay for the coffee?”

“Payment is secondary. ” He waved his hand dismissively. “Rules for the sake of procedure. Procedure for the sake of conformity. Only to thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man.”^[42]

I blinked, wondering if he was aware that he was saying this in full earshot of the server making our drinks, but he seemed not to care.

“Tell me what you know about Schrodinger’s cat,” he said. The Professor had removed a handkerchief from his pocket and begun cleaning his apple with it.

“He put a cat in a box, and you don’t know if it’s alive or dead. There’s a fifty-fifty chance because of how he’s set up the poison. The idea, as far as I know, is that until you observe it, it’s both.”

He nodded. “The experiment is of course a thought experiment. It’s not about cats, but quantum superposition. According to the Copenhagen Interpretation, physical systems don’t have properties until they are measured and observed. But, it doesn’t work with a cat. If you put a cat in a box with poison, it is either alive or dead. It isn’t both. The experiment is there to show you precisely how absurd quantum mechanics is. How removed from reality.”^[43]

“What do you mean about not having properties until measured?”

“You need to get out of your head the idea of matter. Matter is not matter. Not as we know it in this middle-sized world. On a very small scale, matter is very different. It is little more than waves and wave functions – think of them as possibilities. The cat isn’t a cat. And – forgive this crudely reductive example – this apple isn’t an apple. It’s a collection of possibilities, superimposed, ready to be a pear, or a cheesecake or a ball of helium gas. But when we ‘observe’ it, it collapses into single eigenstate. It becomes. The cat is no longer possibly alive or dead, it is one or the other. The apple decides to be an apple.”

“Decides?”

“The proper term is entanglement, but I use ‘decides’ both metaphorically and judiciously. I know your passion for linguistics. Where does decide come from?”

“The root...” I frowned, not expecting to be put on the spot. “I think the nearest root is Latin, ‘caedere’, right? ‘to cut.’”

“Exactly, – to decide is to cut off choices. To collapse the wave-function is to eliminate all the possibilities of what could have been, and resolve into only what *is*. This is the fabric of reality.”

When our drinks were placed on the side, the Professor lifted them, handed me mine, and proceeded to walk away. I hesitated, looking back at the counter, but both servers appeared to be ignoring us as if we had not previously existed. I frowned.

“But Feynman never quite got along with this theory,” he continued, as he walked. “And when he introduced me to Hugh Everett in the late...”

“Professor,” I said, turning my head back at the café. “Shouldn’t we have...”

“Chloe,” he cut me off. “Ignore your trivial surroundings. This is crucial, what I am telling you. This is everything. Focus on me. Hugh Everett never quite accepted complete waveform collapse, arguing that the universal wave-function is an objective reality. Later, DeWitt...”

I paused. In front of us, sitting in the corner of the café, was the man in the suit. He was looking right at me.

“... And DeWitt was out of his depth of course, but the expression of Everett’s work could not be denied.”

“Professor,” I interrupted, somehow shaken. I was unable to meet the intensity of the man’s gaze. “I’m, I... Wait, what did you just say?”

“I will not repeat myself purely because you became focused on trivialities,” he said, taking a bite out of his apple. “You got distracted by a procedure and you allowed yourself to drift away from arguably the most important development in your life. Focus, Chloe. It is important that you focus.”

“No. It’s not that, I’m sorry. I just...” I frowned. Seeing that man there – watching us, watching *me* – I found myself inexplicably uncomfortable. I quickened my pace to catch up with the Professor. He stepped out of the café into the brisk, autumn air and gave a little shiver. Checking his pocket watch, he motioned me to follow him.

When we were outside, I said, “I didn’t know we had a chaperone.”

“What are you talking about?”

I jabbed a finger in the air at the man, still sitting behind us. The Professor looked confused. “I’ve never seen him before in my life.”

“What?”

“Did I mumble?”

“No, I’m...” I shook my head. “But he was in your office. He was there when you...”

The Professor sighed, looking exasperated. “You are getting distracted, Chloe. I really have no idea what you’re talking about.” He turned away from me then, as if upset that I had not been following him. He silently took another bite out of his apple and walked ahead. I was at a loss – feeling unable to keep up with both the Professor’s ideas and his temperament. I wanted to challenge him, but I already felt completely out of my depth. Had that been the same man? I was far from certain. Shifting corridors, impossible colours, suited men. It was becoming difficult to tell what was real and what was my brain getting itself confused.

In the end, I didn’t do anything but follow in silence as he led me up the path and towards the Social Studies building.

#

When we arrived, the Professor didn’t say anything. I held the door for him, trying to think of the right words to smooth over this strange chasm between us. The Professor bustled through in silence, checking his pocket watch repeatedly. We climbed a stairway that I had not gone up before, but it certainly didn’t lead to his office. At the top, there was a short corridor that lead simply to a dead end.

When he reached it, he put his hands on a hanging cork board, which held timetables and room assignments for different classes. He flipped the board over and pulled it downwards. The hook that held it clunked. Then the entire building did too.

I stumbled a little as the floor changed momentum. It took me a moment to realise that the corridor was moving, shifting out of place and turning sideways. Looking behind me, I saw the stairway it had previously attached to recede and pull out of sight.

I almost laughed at the absurdity of it all. As answers fell into place – why the building had been so difficult to navigate, why I had been able to find the Professor’s office, and the basement only when *he* had wanted me to – a myriad of more difficult questions presented themselves. Was the whole building at the whim of this man? The whole university? Who would approve such an absurd architectural project, and how could it possibly be kept secret?

Despite this, I smiled to myself. I enjoyed the image of the Professor causing this construction nightmare, just so he could cut his own private corridor off when he didn’t want to be disturbed.

The walls shifted again, a piece of the complex contraption moving to fit with another. After about half a minute, the wall at the end of the corridor gave way to another stairway. There was another loud clunk as the building clicked into place. I couldn’t help but wonder how I hadn’t heard it before.

As I write this now, it seems to me quite telling that I did not for a moment question that an entire building moved just for the Professor. All it had taken was a short conversation. Whatever doubts I had about his significance had been, by now, thoroughly dispelled. I don’t think it’s an exaggeration to say I believed him capable of just about anything.

When we stopped in his office, he started shifting around restlessly, opening and closing drawers, fiddling with ornaments, pacing, as if he was looking for something. The silence had chilled, becoming arctic. My eyes darted around for a cue to break it.

“Your family?” I asked, pointing at a picture frame on his desk, facing slightly inwards.

“Hm?” He didn’t turn, still fiddling. I took a step closer and turned it, the image clarifying. The young boy – about eleven or twelve – was

clutching his book with innocent pride. His cheeks were rosy with excitement. His eyes wet.

“The picture,” I tried again, desperate to crack the wall of silence.

“Ah.” He turned to me. “My son. Jacob.”

“How old is he?”

“22 years last month. A hugely talented boy. Destined for wonderful things, truly.”

I took the advantage of the verbal opening. “You met a man called Everett?”

“*Hugh* Everett.” He nodded, still looking around. “An American physicist. I really don’t enjoy repeating myself, Chloe.”

“Sorry.”

“Now you are the one repeating yourself. Sartre said that hell is other people, but I feel more inclined to side with Stephen King on this matter – ‘hell is repetition’.”

I ignored the jibe, determined not to lose his attention again. “Everett didn’t agree with the wave-function theory?”

“No, no,” he said, seeming to settle back into the comfort of lecturing. “It wasn’t that at all. Everett merely argued that the wave-function doesn’t collapse, it opens out. Every possibility simultaneously plays itself out in a multitude of worlds, perhaps infinite.”

I stopped, the theory, like the building, suddenly falling into place. “Are you talking about multiple dimensions?”

“No.” He raised a hand. “And yes. The way you term it, probably yes. But dimensions are something wildly different. This is the issue with using layperson language to describe complex mathematics. Let us call them ‘worlds’, as DeWitt did.^[44] To return to Schrodinger, every time we open the box, the cat doesn’t collapse into either alive or dead, it continues as both. We exist in one world, with a living cat. And another exact replica of our world spins off, with a dead cat instead.”

He opened a cupboard door and his eyes brightened. Reaching in, he picked up a small metal sphere and tucked in his pocket.

“How often would this happen?” I asked.

“Constantly.” He flung his hands in the air. “Every time something is observed. Every time something is measured. Every time you *decide*. Every choice every single living thing has ever made, or not made, spins off another world where they made a different decision.”

“So that is where we were, through that door? In another world?”

“Precisely,” he said, then he turned on his heels and walked straight out of his office. I stood, lost in this cloud of impossibilities, struggling to find a way to believe it. I knew what I had seen through that door, even if it now felt like a dream. I understood what he was telling me, but something wasn’t fitting into place. It was all too science-fiction. Too unreal.

I blinked and realised that Professor Crannus had already gone. I darted out of the office to see him fifteen paces away from me, his body turning the next corridor ahead.

“Wait,” I shouted, chasing after him. “This doesn’t make any... Professor!”

We had arrived at another metal lift, like the one I had taken before, but not the same.

“That doesn’t make any sense,” I said, taking my place beside him as he pulled the grate closed.

“Excellent. Why not?”

“Because... well, if where we were was another world, they looked different. I mean evolutionarily different. If that broke off from another choice or decision made early enough to impact human evolution – how on earth do they speak anything even close to Chinese? How did the Sinitic language possibly develop in a world that has been following a different path for countless millennia?”

As I was talking, a very broad smile appeared on his face. “You’ve just uttered the wisest words any human being has ever said.”

“I... what?”

“For hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of years, mankind has looked at the skies, the earth and the universe, and there is one phrase that has driven us forward. One phrase that has given us the drive and the passion to uncover knowledge, from the first caveman to Galileo Galilei. I can’t tell you how much it pleases me to hear those words as your first reaction.”

“What words?”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

The lift opened. We were back in the basement. He had told me once that he had no time to teach, but I think this is the first time I really began to see the teacher in him, even if he did not. He was never really content with telling me everything, with laying it all out. He always wanted me to try to

work it out for myself. As such, there was only one response that seemed appropriate in that moment.

“Can you take me to another world?”

“Why, Chloe,” he said, with a light chuckle. “I thought you’d never ask.”

IV

No one was there except for Zolo. He sat by one of the computers, his baseball cap low over his face, tapping away. He didn't register our presence as we entered the room.

Though there were fewer people, it still retained its aura of quiet conspiracy. Brown files, spilling with documents, spread across the tables like a detective's office in a film noir scene. Silhouettes of chairs and computers, cast by the dangling yellow lightbulbs, danced and shivered along the dimly-lit walls.

The Professor approached the door and leant towards the control panel on the right hand side. Flipping open a cover, he plugged in a set of numbers and I watched as the sign above the door flickered and changed, eventually settling on *B053*.

“So where are we going?”

“In our official classification, it is in the B quadrant – the second set of a thousand worlds that we have visited.^[45] I abhor alphanumerical classifications, however. They lack all poetry and individuality. Instead, let us call this Sombasi's world.”

“Who's Sombasi?”

He grinned. “That is what I'm taking you to find out.”

A click-clack of shoes echoed down a nearby corridor and into the room. The Professor shook his head in annoyance. “Come on, come on,” he said, waving for me. “Let's get going quickly before we...”

“Roland.”

“Blast.”

Judy stood at the other end of the room, hands on her hips. “A word?”

“Well, if you can guarantee that it will be only one word, then I am certainly intrigued.”

She ignored him. “This is important.”

“Do you have any idea how often I hear that?” he muttered as he walked towards her. “So many people telling me what will or won’t be *important*. If you can look into the seeds of time, and say which grain will grow and which will not, speak then unto me.^[46] Enlighten me with your supposed importance.”

“Don’t be impudent. You have to update the trackers on the log sheets for your last expedition. Harold?” Next to her, a bashful looking scientist poked his head from around the corner, holding a clipboard. The Professor stood next to him, pointing at the papers. Their silhouettes whispered to one another against the shadows of the office.

In the interceding moments, Judy took a few steps towards me. “Listen: be careful.”

I frowned at her, unable to shake the feeling that I was being treated like a child. “The Professor explained what’s going on. I know where we’re going.”

She pursed her lips. “You know what he’s told you. I’m just trying to help – this is engrossing, but you’re not in Kansas anymore, Dorothy.”

I gave her a thin smile. “I think I’ll be fine. The Professor is coming with me.”

“I know.” She leant in. “That’s why I’m telling you to be careful.”

“What?”

“And if that just about satisfies your banal enquiries,” the Professor’s voice rose up high behind me, and I turned to see him returning. “Chloe and I shall be on our way. Remember who discovered this, Judy. Remember why we are here.”

I cast a quick look back at her, but she was no longer looking at me.

Any trepidation that I might have felt was snuffed out by the Professor’s certainty, his effortless confidence, as he opened the door. Taking a deep breath, I readied myself for just about anything, and followed.

The corridor we entered was overflowing with light. Shielding my eyes at the contrast, I blinked, an array of colours bore themselves down upon me – greens, reds, blues and purples. The walls were not the grey stone of the office I had been in, but glittered with jewels and paint. There was no

single source for the light, no lamps or torches. It emanated from the very walls.

I scurried after the Professor, who, as ever, made no attempt to wait for me. I squinted at the walls. Intricate patterns and designs covered them – some curvaceous and abstract depictions of animals and people, others merely twisting shapes and curves. Even the floor glowed with colour.

I wish I could describe the smell, but it is one of those few things for which there is an utter paucity of language.

Consider: smell is one of the most powerful senses we possess. The olfactory senses have been proven to have a deeper impact on emotion and on memory than any other. But without a frame of reference, it is beyond us. I can remind you of the smell of cut grass, or the smell of sea air, and I have no doubt that you will be able to conjure up the image. But how would I go about explaining either of those things to someone who had never smelled them? I cannot refer to its shape, its colour, its dimensions, like I can with sight. I cannot reference the trebles or the bass, the tone or the rhythm. The language just isn't there. The task is impossible.

Suffice to say, the smell was different, unlike anything I had ever experienced before – encompassing, rich and warm, like a Rothko painting in oranges and maroons. By the time my nose had adjusted to it, we had exited into a great open hall.

It was circular, and the ceiling plunged upwards to the open sky to reveal the stars flickering above us. The hall was filled with people – tall, muscular men and women, with deep black skin. They were draped in long robes, patchworks of a hundred colours. Some stood as tall as seven or eight feet, and the shortest I could see was well above my own suddenly diminutive stature.

We were encircled by a technological amphitheatre, rows of seating embedded with screens and computers, each one brimming with light and colour. Men and women worked at them, loudly debating with one another, joking and jostling. Across the centre, there were tables whose flat surfaces flickered with code and language I could not decipher. Deft hands flicked at them, manipulating them and throwing them from one table-screen to another.

It was magically futuristic. Utterly removed. It should have been incomprehensible. But once again, impossibly, the room had the same feel as our basement office: the tables covered in data and details; the

unrecognisable machinery pressed into the curved wall; the people working. Not a single thing looked like the basement I had just left, but the atmosphere was a perfect match.

As one, across the seating, they all turned to us as we entered.

“Mim koloto mge mgeni,” the Professor said, putting his hands up in the air. “Unfayajene?”

The response was jubilant. “Crannas!” one man shouted, taking a few long steps forward to envelop the Professor in a giant embrace. The others applauded and whooped, giant smiles appearing on their faces. Another approached me, and I stepped back, instinctively, my arms raised.

“Let him hug you, Chloe. They mean no harm.”

The tall man stood over me, his arms outstretched, and I reluctantly dropped my hands. He gave me a huge smile, laughed and uttered something incomprehensible. Before I knew it, I was lost in the warmth of his embrace. My reluctance melted. As the softness of his robe and the smoothness of his skin pressed against me, completely enveloping me, I couldn't help but feel comfortable. It might serve you to consider the origin of the word comfort, the ‘fort’ coming from the Latin for ‘strength.’ This hug, this greeting, was strength-giving. It was life-affirming. And though it only lasted for a moment, it left me glowing with impact.

“Yeye hokiala virizi, ngodo namke,” he said, as he let me go.

“He says you *hoka* well,” the Professor said. “For a little one.”

“Hoka?”

“The greeting. The hug, if you will. It's like a handshake, only *much* more friendly. His name is Kiluvu.”^[47]

“Kiluvu,” I said, pointing at him. Then I pointed at myself. “Chloe.”

“Chlo-e,” he replied, then smiled. “CHLOE!” he shouted to the room, and they applauded again.

“Professor,” I mumbled, staring around in awe at the vibrant multitude. “What is going on here?”

“I told them you were an honoured guest.”

“You told... Well, they obviously respect you.”

“Oh yes, I come here quite often. They know me well. But follow me, we have come here for a reason.” He turned to Kiluvu, and spoke to him again in his language. The man looked sombre for a moment, then smiled, nodding his head in what seemed to be agreement. Group by group, the people returned to their work and the buzz of focus resumed around us.

The Professor motioned me to follow him and Kiluvu. I did so slowly, still gazing around me. I stopped next to them and a coloured panel on the ground shifted. I stumbled, sucking in a quick breath, but Kiluvu caught me with a grin. The panel twisted and started to rise, like an elevator without walls or cables, into the air. I stared down, marvelling at the ease with which gravity had been overcome.

By this time, most of the room had gone back to whatever they were doing. Some more people entered and others left through doors which seemed to melt and then reappear from the walls. Once again, this labyrinthian room had tastes of our world, as if every door into another world only led to a similarly clandestine academic environment.

I wanted to ask how that was possible, but I knew the Professor wouldn't welcome such a vague question. I needed to be less circumspect if I were to gain his respect.

"Does the door always open in the same place," I asked. "Geographically speaking?"

"Oh yes," the Professor said. "No changing that."

"Then this is... England? Or, where the middle of England would be, in our world."

"And yet," he said, raising a finger. "These people are clearly not Anglo-Saxon. Why?"

I frowned. "Well, perhaps in this reality, people from the African diaspora conquered Europe? Or did evolution happen differently here too?"

He smiled. "A worthy guess. But no, evolution was quite similar here, except for a few heightened traits here and there. But I suppose you are right in some respects about the conquering. This was no violent takeover, however. No domination. No British Empire."

"An early migration of the African continent to Europe? But one late enough not to overly impact the evolution of skin colour and melatonin?"

"Another good guess, but no. This would have happened post-agricultural revolution."

"A cultural domination?"

"Exactly. A globalisation took place in this world, much as in our own, but the dominant countries came from the African continent. The blue jeans and Hollywood and coca-colas of our world were all driven, or supported, by the technological advancement of west and sub-saharan Africa."

The panel was almost twenty feet into the air. I stopped looking down. Kiluvu leaned over and said something to the Professor and he replied. Kiluvu laughed. It was a warm, friendly sound.

“He says you look like a rabbit, curious but scared.”

I smiled at the comment, though it missed the mark. In fact, I marvelled that, for some reason I was unable to identify, I was not scared in the slightest. I was brimming with excitement.

“How do you speak their language?” I asked. “If what you say about the diaspora is right, I assume there are elements of Bantoid and Mambiloid languages from the Niger-Congo family here, but...”

He shook his head, cutting me off. “I’ve always thought people go about language learning all wrong. They try to focus on the technical aspects, missing the fact that a language is a reflection of a cultural soul. If you can understand the soul, the language is easy. A couple of weeks – a month or two at most if it’s a bit tricky.”

I almost laughed, but then realised I was actually unsure whether he was joking or not. How far did his genius go?

The platform continued to rise until it approached the open roof. We exited through the hole and the platform settled, like a roof, with us standing on top of it.

Stretched out in front of us was an endless plain of marvel and awe. Skyscrapers and high-rises dipped in and out of the horizon, like an ever-extending skyline connected by buzzing walkways and flickering lights. Perhaps I would have been reminded of the futuristic imaginings of Arthur C. Clarke or the writers of Star Trek had it not been so bursting with colour. Depictions of the future, however utopian, are always grey – shiny and metallic with perhaps hints of green dotted across the landscape to remind us of nature. This world was overflowing with a million different tones and hues, draped from windows and painted onto the very streets. My eyes shifted, unable to focus. Kiluvu was grinning at me.

For the first time, even after my forays into the bizarre Sinitic basement, I felt that I had stepped into another universe. Up until that moment, my brain had succeeded in accepting everything as one would a dream, or a being lost in a great book. I understood where I was, logically speaking, but on some deeper cognitive level I had not really accepted it as real.

No longer. Birds with metal wings whooped and soared, passing and collecting items from window to window. The sun reflected off the coloured

sheens of these great buildings, and the tops of walkways, flickering a rainbowed aurora borealis into the sky. The entire landscape shimmered with transcendent beauty. No, there was no longer any doubt.

This was a view that refused to be denied.

“How much do they know about what’s happening here?” I whispered, not able to tear my eyes away. “About the worlds? About the doors? Does Kiluvu know?”

“Yes, indeed. In fact, they helped me perfect much of the technology. Much of their technological systems are far more advanced than we have, as you can expect. Working with them has been a highly beneficial symbiotic relationship.”

“But... How? It’s all so different, but it’s also too similar. The civilisations. The people. Even for their...” I struggled to put my thoughts into words. “Their majesty, it’s all too close. If these worlds come from choices, like you said, then half of these worlds shouldn’t have life, more than half. Or at least no life that we can discern. How long does it take to find an anomaly like this?”

“Not long at all. Far from it, in fact. They are all populated, in their own way. Every world. All thriving.”

I frowned. “But that doesn’t make any sense.”

“Exactly!” He nodded to Kiluvu, and he pushed a button on the platform with his foot. It descended a little and shifted forward, connecting us to another platform that led to a bright walkway. “I’ve got something to show you.”

Kiluvu gave a little bow and helped me off the platform, and then dashed forward and guided the Professor on ahead. As I watched these two men, I couldn’t help but wonder at their connection. For in that moment, their joy at reuniting had dissipated and condensed into the true motifs of their relationship, and a hierarchy emerged. Though he was being shown the way, it was still the Professor who was in charge.

I had first thought Kiluvu a kingly chaperone – a guide taking us through his world. Perhaps the grandeur of his world had caused me to grant him that stature. But I now saw the way he moulded his tone, his voice, his person around the Professor’s. When I really looked for it, I noted the quiet deference offered in the dropping of a glance or the supplication of a hand. This was no equal relationship. Even after millennia of branching evolution, the mien of a servant remained essentially the same. ^[48]

The walkway led to a building whose wall melted open into a perfect doorway. We entered, into another vivid room, bustling with inexplicable technology. As we did, the people inside parted around us. The Professor was clearly a figure in this world, revered enough that individuals would break from their path to make way, to allow our further passage into this alien world.

It occurred to me that the word ‘alien’ means more than just ‘different’ – it connotes both a sense of otherness and a lack of belonging. Indeed, it comes to us through the old French, from the Latin ‘alienus’ or ‘*belonging to another*’. I understood then why I was not scared, why I had not been really afraid even the first time I had crossed over. This alien world belonged to the Professor, whether the people there knew it or not. And while I was here, so did I. Looking back, I see that it might seem strange that that should be a comforting thought.

“Look.”

The Professor raised his hand, pointing, and I gasped. I followed his finger to see a boy, sitting some twenty paces ahead of us, behind a glass panel. He was on his knees, crouched over, and enthusiastically pushing a small green train back and forth against the glass. I stared, the improbability of the image trying to wash its way through the cogs of my brain. He did not have a prominent brow, or heightened cheekbones. He did not look in the slightest bit blue. He was perfectly human, but dark-skinned and tall, like his people. And yet, he was, undoubtedly, impossibly, the same child I had seen in that other world. The exact same boy.

“He is the answer to your question. He is a Constant.”

I could do nothing but stare.

“He is the one thing I can’t explain,” the Professor said, still looking at the boy. “I have visited a hundred worlds. A thousand. And every single one is different, the result of a different choice at a different time. But in every single one there are Constants. Some are incomprehensibly large, others are impossibly small. Creatures like the dinosaurs are always wiped out at the same time. Not always a meteor – sometimes a plague, or a geological event – but it always happens. A civilisation like the Roman Empire always rises and falls at the same time. This boy is always, unchangeably alive.”

“How is that possible?”

“That’s not the important question.” He turned to me, all the lines on his face defined and intent. The sun dipped through the windows behind him, causing his silvery hair to glimmer. “Consider: there is a path of points – these Constants – and we walk along them whether we choose to or not. Our history is not, then, the history of humanism, of the results of the freedoms of human will. Constants are spread across an infinite number of worlds, and such consistency in the face of the chaos of the Universe can only mean one thing. Conscious choice. Design.”

“Are you talking about the existence of God?”

“The existence of God is no longer up for debate. It is proven beyond doubt. The Constants prove it. There can be no other possible explanation, except for a conscious hand drawing the way.”

I frowned. “Correlation doesn’t imply causation. Just because there is a pattern, it doesn’t mean it is derived from a church.”

“Don’t be absurd.” He shook his head. “Churches are just theatres on a more ambitious scale. This is not a Judeo-Christian God. Just as it is not Odin or Zeus or any other man-made narrative we spin to impose order on the universe. I am even reticent to use the word God, for all the associations it carries, but I can think of nothing better. There is clearly an order. A conscious designed order. Its existence is not the important question.”

“Fine,” I said, taking a deep breath. “Provided I accept that, for now. What is the important question?”

“Think, Chloe. Think.” He stepped closer to me, and it seemed as if his very skin was glowing. “If, regardless of any choices we make, we inevitably walk stepping stones which are laid out for us in the very fabric of reality. If all of history – if all histories – have been following the same deterministic path, then there is only one question that leads from that.”

“What’s at the end of the path?”

A grin spread across his face. “Precisely. That is why I am here, Chloe. That is why I am trying to find out. If we have established the ‘if’ and then the ‘what’ of God, the only question that remains is the ‘why’. *What does God want?*”

A silence settled over us. The sun flickered light through the room and, as we watched this boy play, we contemplated our questions. To my shame, my questions were not his. They were not on the grand scale of gods and realities. They were more personal. Why is he telling this to me? If this was

his pursuit, what role did I have to play in it? I didn't ask him. I didn't want to sully the intellectual mystery with my solipsism.

"Come," he said. "More to see!"

And Kiluvu led us on, as people bowed and smiled as we passed.

#

Most of what we passed was incomprehensible to me. I attempted to make out shop-fronts, or offices, but these eluded me. Some buildings had no visible entrance, others seemed not to be conventional buildings at all, but giant tunnels boring through the city. I followed them with my eyes as they wove in and over each other, like a hundred bright worms jostling for place.

What remained consistent was the colour – such colours as I have never seen – painted, splashed and glowing on every surface. The air itself glistened with light. That thick musty smell of warmth and comfort rose and fell, as if taunting me. I hoped to find its source, but it seemed there was none. Perhaps the whole world simply smelled this way.

We arrived a short time later at another large hall, like an auditorium, and we were guided to seats. They circled a central stage that rose some ten metres from the ground, but was completely empty. The seats were large, designed for bodies much taller than mine. I became encompassed by it, wrapped into its lively fabric like a blanket.

"It's a concert hall, isn't it?" I asked, as the Professor settled in next to me.

"Very good. Yes, we are here to witness something truly magical. You see, of all the Constants in the many worlds, there is one thing that is always different. Always one thing that is unique."

"Music."

He gave me a nod. "It makes sense. It is the great creative endeavour.^[49] It is pure emotion. Art pales in comparison, literature struggles to emulate it, theatre is but a poor silhouette. If you want to learn about a people, a nation, a subculture, listen to their music. Ah, I could spend an eternity just travelling to different worlds to hear their music!"

The stage twisted, a circle opening in its centre. Apart from Kiluvu and a few others who had followed, the seats were empty. Out of the hole, a platform rose and a choir of some twenty or thirty people rose with it. They were draped in coloured cloth, all different, all vibrant, and they stood proud.

"Is this a concert just for us?"

“I asked Kiluvu a few days ago if they could organise it. I heard Sombasi had been working on some new compositions.”

The name clicked in my head. “You name these worlds after your favourite musicians in them, don’t you?”

“What better way to define them? What better way to define any world at all?”

As one, the singers opened their mouths and produced magic. It came first as a wave of bass, deep and growling, pushing up against the base of my skull like an ebbing wave. Above it, hints of other sounds – disharmonic, but not discordant; strange, but familiar. The notes tugged at my heart, at my veins, seeming to pull them upwards. And just when my body began to strain, to tire of the sensation, high treble notes soared out of the choir like a hundred strings, a hundred violas.

My core rose again, feeding off the new energy and pushing forward. The high notes pulled at me, as if my spirit itself was being coaxed out of my body, upwards, upwards into the heavens.

The trebles weakened and died, the end of a movement, and I fell. The bass rose up to place a ground beneath me on which to land. Notes were muddled and reverberated, softening the descent, easing the fall as slowly, peacefully I was guided back to my seat, and warmed back into reality.

When the song ended, I looked over at the Professor. His eyes were closed, his face peaceful, soaking up the atmosphere around him. I couldn’t help but wonder at him. The true scholar. The great ideal. It was no wonder that these people accepted him as a leader. His passion, his drive, the very force of his will compelled it. It was in realising this that I was confronted with a great insecurity. Who was I to be here, in an alternate reality, exposed to such beauty? How did I stumble on becoming a disciple, an apostle of this world-jumper? I was overcome with the sense of being an imposter, a fake, that I had not yet earned the right even to be considered in the same context as this man, let alone as his honoured guest.

“You are probably wondering why I am showing you this.” His eyes were still closed. His face still at peace.

I didn’t reply, letting the silence of my humility fill the space between us. “This is always how I have come to understand the worlds I have visited, through their music. It makes sense to me. After hearing the music of a world, I understand the choices that brought it there – not factually, but spiritually. Then the language comes quickly, the culture comes quicker.

Then the world reveals itself to me like a flower opening. It is an intuitive glimpse into their soul, a bridge between the worlds, a key.”

He leant forward, with a deep sigh, and turned to me.

“The world you followed me into, the one I have been trying desperately to figure out, has no music. None whatsoever. There is barely any art, any theatre, in fact it seems that all creative expression is reduced to language. There are a multitude of written arts, story-telling, libraries of work that I have seen. But without music, I am struggling to understand it. I am, at my heart, a musician, not a linguist.”

My heart swelled. “You need a specialist.”

“Tell me, Chloe, does it not seem strange that the first time I find a world without music, a world dominated by a Sinitic language, a world where language is *everything*, that I also find you – an exceptionally bright Chinese girl with an interest in linguistics?”

“What do you mean?”

“That I do not believe God plays with dice. Whatever this is, this relationship, it is part of the plan. The great plan. The building blocks of the Universe.”

I stared back at him, trying to cover the excitement that was brimming inside of me, the surge of determination that he was right, that this – this meeting of minds, this problem, this research – was what I was made for. If there was such a thing as fate, then this was undoubtedly it.

“What do you need me to do?” I asked.

“I need your help. There is a secret in that world. One that I need to uncover and I have discovered that I cannot do it alone. I have clues and I have pieces of information, but there is still so much that eludes me. I need your...”

He stopped, frowning. Standing up, the Professor spun around, staring at the room.

“Professor?” I stood up next to him. “What’s wrong?”

“Did you see Kiluvu leave this room?”

“I... I don’t...”

The room was empty – completely and utterly empty.

“When did the change happen?” he whispered. “How long?”

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. The choir had disappeared. The lights had dimmed. We were utterly alone.

This was not what worried me. For the first time since I had met him, I saw worry on the Professor's face. His entire demeanour – confident, certain, forceful – crumbled and behind it was an expression of insecurity.

He was scared.

I belonged to him in this world, and I also belonged to his emotions. The black hand of the Professor's anxiety gripped me stronger than I expected. My heart doubled, pulsing through my veins. I turned frantically, looking for no reason, for no purpose.

"Professor?" I said again, pointlessly. He spun back around, as if only just remembering I was there, and grabbed my arm. His eyes were wide and shivering.

"He's here."

Tugging my arm, he pulled me into a run. I had never seen him move so fast, darting up the steps and out into the street we had exited. The street was empty – silent as if it had been dead for a hundred years.

"Professor, I..."

"Silence," he whispered, then pulled me forward again. "Quickly."

I stumbled after him. We rushed back the way we came – across the walkways, through the hall and on the platform down. All was empty, as if everyone had been stolen elsewhere. Shifted to another dimension. There was nothing but an eerie quiet.

As the platform fell into the great hall, their tables and tools had been left behind empty.

"Professor," I pulled back on his arm. "What's happening?"

"What I told you – what I'm here for, what I'm trying to do," he muttered quickly. "There are those who would stop that happening. Forces working against me."

"Forces?"

"The path is never without obstacles." He pulled me forward. "Come."

When we arrived at our exit, our door back to our world, there was nothing there. The Professor placed his hands against the wall, running his fingers along it. It was seamless, without a hint that there had ever even been a frame.

He took a step back, and examined it, eyeing it up and down. For a moment I glimpsed his face, and in it I saw panic.

"It can't have moved far," he whispered. "This is a show of strength. He tries to scare me, but I am not so easily shaken. Come."

I followed him down the passage, twisting and turning. The coloured walls were now oppressive, carrying with them a sense of impending darkness, that we were getting further lost. When Theseus navigated the labyrinth of Crete he left a spool of thread to find his way back. Our thread had been cut. Our Minotaur was loose. I knew that for certain now.

The Professor stumbled to a halt.

“He’s collapsed it. I need... I have to isolate the waveform.” He shook his head, frustrated. “I need you to stay right here. Too much interference.”

“What?”

His eyes flashed in sudden anger. “*What did I tell you about repeating myself?!*”

I stumbled back, jolted by his fury.

“*Stay here,*” he demanded. “Don’t move.”

The force of his commandment screwed me to the floor and I watched, dumbfounded for too long. Before I could think, he had darted round a corner, running at full speed. He was gone and I was lost, left in an impossibly foreign world, completely and utterly alone.

I spun around, the bright walls invading my senses, disorienting me. I tried to get my panicked breathing under control, but it quickened. I tried to trust in the Professor’s request, but it was not the same. I had seen his eyes and couldn’t forget them – he was as scared as I was. This was not a safe place anymore. I wasn’t sure that anywhere was safe anymore.

It was then that the lights went out.

Whatever powered the coloured walls, the floors, the bright corridors, died in an instant. I was plunged into sightless, depthless black. I stumbled, throwing my hands out to catch a side or a wall.

I did not catch anything. Something caught me.

My hands were pulled behind my back, my shoulders twisted inwards and there was a voice, hot in my ear and familiar, all-too-familiar,

“*Who are you, girl?*”

I screamed. The sound exploded out of me like thunder and I felt my body released, my arms shaken free, and I ran.

I ran blind, bumping and feeling my way down black corridors not knowing where I was going or what I needed, just that I had to get away, to escape.

The run felt like an eternity. Deeper into the labyrinth. Down into the pit. Darker – if such a thing was possible. I turned corners, and twisted left

and right, not knowing if I was going forward or back on myself. All I could do was run.

That voice. I knew it, but I didn't know how. I couldn't place it.

My feet tripped and I fell, my knees buckling as I tumbled into something soft.

"Argh!"

"Professor?"

"If you'd just give me a..."

A buzzing filled the air, and the lights came blaring back, blindingly intense. I squinted, looking up to see the Professor. He was holding the metal ball he had taken from his office and it seemed to flicker at him, lights running down the side.

The door was right beside us, as if it had never been anywhere else.

"Ha!" The Professor shouted, and he held a hand down to me, pulling me up. "Collapse that!"

He pulled open the door and we darted through it, slamming it closed on the other side. The Professor smashed a button and the number flickered back down to A1. He watched it nervously, then sighed.

"What..." I stammered, trying to recover from the panic. "What the *hell* was that?"

The Professor straightened up. He brushed his waistcoat and checked his pocket watch. "Oh, nothing for you to worry about," he said, seeming suddenly quite awkward. "As I said. Forces. You'd better be getting on your way now, don't you think? There's ever so much to do."

He smiled at me, gave a quick nod, and turned away.

I stood staring at his back, speechless.

"Professor," I said. "I don't... You can't... Surely, I deserve..."

"A good night's rest, I think!" he interrupted, as he walked off. "Lots of work to do. I shall call on you soon."

And then he was gone. And I was alone in the basement.

I didn't follow him. Still shaken from the incident, I sat down in a chair and stared, trying to work out what had just happened. Alone in that room, I felt an odd blankness inside of me, and, strange as it may seem to you, I felt guilty. What had I done in that moment of crisis but scream and be a burden? A damsel in distress? The Professor had just walked out on me and I couldn't help but feel that it was, in some way, my fault. When my breathing and heart returned to normal, I felt a little more at ease. I quietly

found my way back out of that basement. I left the building and walked back to my halls of residence.

It is difficult for me to justify what I did next.

Even recollecting it now, my motivations are muddy. I was calmer, certainly, but as I walked I couldn't help but feel deeply unsettled. The new worlds I entered were turbulent enough, but now certainties that I had relied on begun to crumble around me. Perhaps I was just desperate for comfort of some kind, of any kind, after being abandoned. Perhaps I needed some kind of release. Or maybe I needed to make some kind of transgressive choice, if only to prove to myself that I still had the reins of my own life in my hands. I do remember, once the panic had subsided, being left with an unexpected and overwhelming loneliness.

I didn't go to my room. Instead, I went straight to Sarah's room and knocked on her door. She didn't open. She wasn't there.

When I passed the kitchen on the way back to mine, James saw me and followed me to my door, his face twisted in worry.

"Chloe? You look like hell... where have you..."

Who are you, girl?

The words whispered behind my eyes. I felt cold. Empty.

I stepped forward and kissed him. He stiffened in surprise, then softened. He put his arms around me and I pressed against his body. We fell backwards into his room, his bed, and into a disconnect of energetic and passionless sex.

When we were done, I slipped away quickly into a black and dreamless sleep.

V

In the ten years after the events of Pimlico, given his eventual impact scientifically, theologically, socio-politically, there have been a number of attempts to explore the psyche of Professor Roland Crannus. Just as a multitude of papers, books and articles have speculated about the way Albert Einstein's brain or Charles Darwin's worked, or the influences behind figures like Confucius or Augustus Caesar, it is impossible to live in a world with a man like Professor Crannus and not be faced with certain questions. What drives a man like that? What makes him different from you and me? Where, behind all of the deeds, accomplishments and disasters, is the human being?

Three main competing theories have arisen out of the babble of hearsay and sensationalism: the Arastolini Paper, the Urd-Hans Lectures and the more recent Rohlmann Conjecture. I wrote at the start of this record about objectivity, fully aware that no account written entirely by me could hope to be anything but subjective in outlook. However, as literary critic Roland Barthes famously noted, “the unity of a text is not in its origin, but its destination”,^[50] and so the subjectivity of this work is due not to my biases as a writer, but to the interpretation of the work by the reader. Therefore it seems imperative that any understanding of my experience with the Professor must be paired with an understanding of the critical dialogue given by others, regardless of how much I might disagree.

In 2009, not long after Pimlico, Maria Arastolini published her infamous paper, *Professor Icarus: Freud, Crannus and the Perils of Male Discovery*.^[51] In it, she argues that Professor Crannus was a perfect archetype of the distilled male ego. Calling upon literary comparisons with

Victor Frankenstein, Icarus and even making a controversial reference to Milton's Lucifer, she examines his early life as a young boy growing up in northern England. Up until her paper, most scholars agreed that the Professor's drive and success were formed by his possession of a group of attributes of relative privileges. He was white, male, upper middle class, straight, able, the list continues. As many of his scientific predecessors, he was seen as being able to have such an impact because of the systemic privileges he was implicitly granted. It was, feminists argued, no coincidence that the Professor was another man in a long list of important men. The world is designed to offer such men opportunities to thrive.

While this is undoubtedly true, Arastolini posits that it is in reverse. Using Crannus as her key example, she concludes that privilege does not lead to success and drive, but rather that the existence of privilege is an indicator of something deeper in the male psyche. "All men are born with the seed of ego inside of them," she writes. "The quiet knowledge that they are better than everyone else, and the secret desire to prove it to the entire world."^[52] Controversially, she states that all scientific advancement, all apparent progress, all great human endeavours, are the result of this male ego, and that the achievements of women, while laudable, only exist as an attempt poorly to imitate this inherent drive. According to Arastolini, "we cannot understand Crannus, nor any male, if we do not understand that his motivations come solely from an unshakeable desire to prove to the world that he is the cleverest, most important human being that has ever lived."^[53]

In response to the outrage that this paper received, a series of lectures were given by Paul Urd and Oskar Hans, two behavioural scientists, in late 2010. The lectures were initially touted as an exploration on the origins and nature of human curiosity, but it quickly became apparent they were designed as a solid refutation of the Arastolini Paper. They set out to demonstrate how curiosity, not ego, was the main driving force behind Professor Crannus's experiments.

Rather than literary examples, they used historical narrative as their epistemological tool. Urd and Hans wished to set infamous explorers like Francis Drake and Christopher Columbus in a new light – one in which the pleasure derived purely from exploratory behaviour was the driving pleasure behind all human activity. Those that embraced that pleasure of curiosity were undeniably the most driven, and Professor Crannus embraced that thirst for new knowledge more than anyone. "He did not

cross worlds to prove that he could,” Urd stated. “But because the makeup of his brain found pure, childlike and innocent pleasure in the discovery of new worlds to explore.”^[54]

It was only last year that Gerthart Rohlmann released his book *Decision Making and the Secret Mind*, and while only one chapter made reference to Professor Crannus and his motivations, it quickly became popularised as the ‘Rohlmann Conjecture’, supposedly disproving Urd, Hans, and Arastolini alike.

In contrast to the previous approaches, Rohlmann deals strictly with behavioural tests and experimental studies in brain science and neurocognition. He opens with the premise that if we define rational thought as a considered weighing of facts and consequences which are used to decide a best possible outcome, then all human decisions are irrational. He references Loewenstein, Weber, Hsee and Welch’s highly accepted clinical research, which shows that a) Emotional reactions to risk often diverge from cognitive assessments of that risk and b) When such divergence occurs, it is emotional reactions that drive behaviour.^[55]

Rohlmann goes on to argue that this does not only occur in high-risk scenarios, but that the divergence itself is false. There is never a true cognitive assessment. Human rationality is a lie. The emotional side precedes and ultimately guides it. To demonstrate, he cites experiments performed by a cognitive neuroscientist named Michael Gazzaniga, from the University of California, who studied patients with split brain disorder.^[56] Gazzaniga showed that several patients who had undergone a complete callosotomy still had their left brain and right brain able to work completely independently.^[57] The left side of the brain, the side capable of making rational, reason-driven decisions, often then came into conflict with hidden desires revealed by the emotional right side. One example used a child patient. With one eye blindfolded and a cue card used to ask each side of the brain separately what he wanted to be when he grew up, the two sides offered completely different answers.

This in itself is fascinating, but hardly surprising. We are all aware that there is an eternal conflict between our irrational and emotional desires and the side of us that is able to process consequences and balance judgement. However, in his 2000 study,^[58] he gave implicit instructions to the emotional right side, showing it the word ‘smile’ and asking it to draw a picture, upon which the patient drew a smiley face. He then swapped the blindfold, so the

left side could see the face he had just drawn, and asked the patient why he had drawn it. The patient proceeded to make up a plausible explanation, arguing that he hadn't wanted to draw anything sad because it would depress people. This is, of course, nonsense. This was not the reason at all, but the patient believed it was, and believed it completely.

The brain, in the absence of understanding, invented understanding that was not there. It constructed a narrative that did not happen just so it didn't have to accept that it didn't know why it had done something. Marrying Gazzaniga and Loewenstein's work, Rohlmann posits that this happens all the time. We are driven purely by emotive cues, and any supposed rationality is made up after the fact. All human decisions are fundamentally emotional; reason and rationality are the lies we tell ourselves to feel comfortable with them.

In his chapter on Professor Crannus, he applies this theory. He asks, what drives a man like Crannus on an emotional level? Rohlmann dismisses Arastolini, Urd and Hans' motivations as being too rational and derivative – too rooted in the fake narrative that the left side of the brain creates.

The only suitable emotion that can account for Professor Crannus's overwhelming drive, Rohlmann states, is love. It is the only possible motivator for his actions. "That we do not know the source of this love," Rohlmann writes, "is the one great mystery of Crannus' legacy. But that it is there is irrefutable. Just as we can trace the universe back to nanoseconds after the big bang, but not see the cause of the bang itself, so can we see the impact of Crannus's love on the world, but not the source."^[59]

To be frank, reading that chapter was one of the catalysts that led me to come out of 'hiding'^[60] and write this account. I think, also, time has allowed me to distance myself from what happened, and to see Professor Crannus not just as a personal associate, but as an important figure in human history. While I do not agree fully with any of the above theories, I have come to think that if I can offer some light as to the source behind Rohlmann's 'big bang', as he puts it, then it is my duty to academia and to history as a whole to do so.

#

When I woke up, James was already awake. He'd made coffee. I kept my groans silent, my shame at having done something so stupid. Perhaps this was what it was like when people woke up after a drunken one-night stand.

“Morning.” He smiled at me and put a coffee on my bedside table. I offered him a smile back. It was the least I could do. For some moments, the unspoken tension of expectation riveted between us – what do we do now? And who makes that call?

I decided it would be me. Or rather, that I could postpone that call to a later date, when I was less vulnerable, less encumbered by strange soil. The phrase is an odd one to use to describe my own room, I’m aware of that. But the having spent less and less time there in the past weeks had slowly stolen my ownership of it, or its ownership of me. There were further flung places that I belonged to now, less weighted by the drudgery of expectation and routine.

“Hey,” he said, before I got the chance to speak. “I’m going to help canvas for the protest this afternoon, if you want to join me?”

“Protest?”

“You know, the G20 summit.”

I shook my head. His eyes widened.

“Seriously? The leaders of the twenty most important countries are meeting in London next month. We have to do something. Some of the third-years are organising a march to demand some equality.^[61] We have to show them we’re not just sheep to be herded.”

I had to suppress a laugh. If there was anything I had discovered about University, it was that we were all exactly that. To wave a list of unsubstantiated demands at a global summit was about the most clichéd response to political disenfranchisement that I could possibly imagine.

“People always just end up getting hurt at these things.”

“Eurgh, stop it, Chloe. You sound like my brother. He’s always on about how dangerous it is to be part of it, how it makes you look.” He leant forward, whispering, “You know he even gave me a gun?”

I blinked. “Is that legal?”

“Of course it’s not legal. This isn’t America. But he got it from the army, or one of his shooting ranges. He said I might need it if things go sour – how ridiculous is that? Bringing a gun to a protest? It’s not like anything really serious is going to happen.”

“Then why do it?”

“That’s not what I...” he shook his head, annoyed. “I mean anything serious to me. We’ll still get our message out there.”

“I have to go to the library,” I said. “There’s a seminar I need to prepare for.” I let a note of underlying panic enter my voice, as if the thought had just cropped up, flooding through all my thoughts.

He gave an understanding nod.

“Of course,” he said, smiling. “No worries. I get it.”

He picked up my coffee and placed it on the side, making a clean space. It was as though, in my absence, this room was looking for another to fulfil the vacuum. James took another clean, friendly, unobtrusive step into my life. It didn’t occur to me to think about what that meant. I wasn’t attracted to him, but he was one of my only friends. I didn’t want to lose that. I just wanted us both to be aware that last night was a mistake.

I was dressed and ready to leave, and he gave me a kiss – not on the lips as he had done before, or as I had done to him – but on the forehead, parental. It seemed confirmation enough for me that we were on similar pages, or at least somewhere in the same book, when it came to what happened. It felt cruel to say more, to spell out so rudely the complete impossibility of it ever happening again. No words were needed, for now.

“Thanks for the coffee,” I said, only just then realising that I had left it completely untouched. “See you later.”

“Hey, Chloe,” he said, putting his hand out to take my arm. “I think this is the start of something really special, you know? I know it took us a while to get to know each other, but sometimes I always knew it would work out this way, even the first time I saw you in that kitchen. Standing separately, watching everyone else. You’re different. You’re special.”

“Thanks.” I didn’t know what else to say.

He smiled. “You’re welcome. All I’m saying is... I’m glad it worked out. That’s all. Just proof that it was meant to be.”

I nodded, trying my best to smile back at him, then quickly hurried down the stairs.

The University library opened itself out to me like a forest. Before, my sense of direction had been clear, both physically and academically. Main Library. Floor 5. Linguistics: 410-429. Now, as I stood on the cusp of new worlds, the building spread forth – an expanding rainforest of possibilities, of undiscovered life, of new species that I had hitherto ignored. But just as a forest expands, so does it grow more dense. The breadth of knowledge required left me standing by the entrance, frozen, unable to see past the first few trees.

Who was to say that the information in books that I was passing on the first floor, or on the second, third, fourth, would not be invaluable to the Professor's and my expeditions into the unknown? Who was I to decide what he did or did not require of me?

But thinking of the Professor did not help me, because when I thought of him, I saw his face. That crumbling fear. And it brought up feelings that I did not want to be reminded of.

I stood for an indeterminate time in that entranceway as students flowed past me, in and out, transfixed by the enormity of the task that I had taken up, excited by it, confused by it, encircled by it.

"Chloe?"

My name tugged me out of my reverie. I turned to see Judy, though without her lab coat it actually took me a moment to register her. I was so used to that image that jeans and a black sweater almost seemed like a costume. "We need to talk," she said. "I'll buy you breakfast."

By the time we were sitting opposite each other, it was clear she had no intention of eating. She'd hurriedly ordered a black americano, barely waiting to see if I wanted anything too. If I hadn't met her before, I would have been convinced she was late for an important meeting, or wary of staying in one place too long, but I'd come to realise these were not contextual affectations. They were just the way she was.

"Chloe," she said, taking a sip of her coffee. "Ms. Chan. What is your relationship with Roland Crannus?"

"You already know that." I gave a wary shrug. "There isn't much of one. I met him around the same time I met you. I'm his secretary, intern, whatever you want to call it."

She raised her eyebrows, then reached into her bag and pulled out a notebook and a pen. Opening it in front of her, she pressed the nib to paper. "Roland doesn't have secretaries."

"What am I doing here?"

"Now, Chloe. I don't want to make you feel..." she gave me a thin smile, "antagonistic. I'm not here to threaten you."

"But that's something you do? Threaten people?"

"No. Not often." She leant forward. "The truth is I'm here to ask for your help, for Roland's sake."

"If the Professor wants me to do something," I said. "I'm quite sure he can ask me to do so."

She sighed, then leant back and made a note in her book. “Sometimes, yes. But sometimes Roland needs some help to realise what he needs. That’s where I come in.”

I leant back in my seat. “I see.”

“Look.” She lifted her pen from the paper. “He’s taken a liking to you. I can see why, you are a smart, beautiful young girl. And you should be very proud. He doesn’t suffer fools lightly. I’m merely advising you to continue to work with him. Listen. Watch. We are more than happy to pay a substantial amount of money for any observations you might make, any information you come across.”

“No.”

“You haven’t even…”

“I’ve already said no.”

She frowned. “For someone that hasn’t known him very long, you’re very loyal.”

“This isn’t about loyalty.”

“Come now, Chloe. You don’t think he’s your friend, do you?” she said, taking a sip of her coffee. “A man like Roland Crannus doesn’t have friends. He doesn’t have acquaintances. You know that as well as I do. He has people that do his bidding and people that don’t.”

“And you’re one of the latter, I assume?” My lips tightened into a thin line. “The Professor is a genius – it’s not surprising he doesn’t play by your rules.”

Her eyes narrowed. She leant forward, scrawling another note, then gave me a nauseating smile. “But I’m sure a girl as clever as you has worked out that there is more going on than he’s telling you. A girl as clever as you wouldn’t be satisfied with being kept in the dark. I’m willing to answer some of your questions, Chloe. I’m on your side.”

“I’m not sure about your ability to answer my questions,” I said, picking my bag up from the floor. “Given your need to hire someone to spy on him.”

She gave a small laugh. “I’m not the one that needs anything. The people I work for are very interested in you, however. Therefore, so am I. Who do you think is funding this operation?”

“I assumed some undercover governmental operation.”

“The government?” she repeated, then made another note. “I’m afraid not.”

“Who, then?”

She ignored the question. “Has he told you about the Constants by now? About his God’s-plan hypothesis?” I didn’t reply, and she gave me a knowing nod. “Of course, a girl as smart as you wouldn’t have bought that story. I’m sure you’re wondering what he’s actually after. I’m sure I can help you with that.”

“I’m going to leave now.”

She took hold of my arm as I got up, tugging me back towards her. “These are not the sort of people you say no to, Chloe.”

“Let me go,” I said, raising my voice a little. “You can’t...”

“Do the right thing here, Chloe.” Her hand tightened a little, then released. “We can be on the same side. It isn’t...”

“Hey!” The syllable cut through her sentence like a knife. A recognisable voice. Sarah. “Is there a problem here?” She stormed over to us, anger spreading across her body. Judy’s grip slackened and I pulled my arm away.

“It’s fine,” I said. Judy glowered at me. “I was just leaving.”

“I could see that. It looked like this bitch was stopping you.”

“It’s *fine*, Sarah. Let’s get out of here.”

I welcomed her arm in mine, glad she had appeared at the right time. But as we walked away, I couldn’t help but think that I’d made some kind of terrible mistake.

#

“Alright,” she said, as we left the café. “Now is the time you tell me what the hell is going on.”

“Not here,” I whispered. It might seem paranoid, but I couldn’t help but feel like more than just Sarah had been watching that conversation. “Let’s go back to Rootes, okay?”

“Okay. Fine. Shit.”

By the time we were back in her room, the tension was palpable. I sat on her bed, feeling exhausted by it, but she was pacing back and forth.

“What’s going on, Chloe?”

I sighed. “A lot.”

“That’s not good enough. Not anymore. I know you’ve been working with that Professor Whats-his-name, the creepy, mysterious old one.”

“Professor Crannus.”

“That’s it. People have seen you with him. And now I see you aren’t sleeping, you look like shit and you’re getting into arguments with strange women.” She stopped pacing and stood over me. “What’s going on?”

“I just... I don’t...” But the words wouldn’t come. I’d been burying myself in academics, but too much had happened. It was only, then, in front of her, that I was starting to realise that I no longer had much of a hold on it.

“You need to tell me.”

“Why do you even care, Sarah?” I stood up, my voice rising. “I told you this wasn’t going to happen between us. You don’t have to keep pretending to care about me. You don’t have to keep...” my voice dropped away, breathing hard. I was starting to feel like I was losing control, over the Crannus situation, over Judy, over my life. It was all falling apart again – everything that I put my hopes into crumbling to dust.

“That’s not even close to fair. I have never done anything but be your friend. If you’re going to find someone to blame your insecurities on, don’t make it me. I don’t deserve that shit.”

“So why do you put up with it, then? Why are you still following me around? What’s in it for you?”

“Jesus Christ, Chloe, are you that thick? I *care* about you. As a person. Sure, I’ve been trying to hit on you, too, but you’re my closest friend in this whole place. You always have been.”

I took a few deep breaths and blinked, surprised to notice tears in my eyes. “I’m sorry,” I said. “This isn’t about you. This is... I’m just a bit overwhelmed and I...”

Sarah lifted her hand to wipe my cheeks. A little shiver went down my spine, and something inside me broke. All my worries, my stress, my building panic about everything that had happened rolled out of me like a flood. Sarah put her arms around me and I melted into her embrace, falling closer than I thought possible.

When I looked up at her, blinking through teary eyes, she smiled at me and placed her lips on mine. We kissed – I don’t know for how long. Time was no longer a constant in that room. We held one another and she lay me down in her bed, clothes pressed against clothes, skin against skin.

“I’m sorry,” I repeated. She shook her head.

Slowly, confidently, she kissed me and I allowed myself to be lost in the moment, an anchor against which I could hold myself as the rest of my

world spun. Touch by touch, kiss by kiss, my inhibitions melted and drifted away.

Afterwards, we lay awake for a while, staring at the ceiling. I had always found sex awkward, like some kind of expected act that needed to be performed between two people. At first, I thought it was boys. I'd only ever had sex with a few of them, and they would always go on to tell everyone about it afterwards. The narrative of our time together being repeated in segments: the mistakes, the thrills, most of it made up. Even with Valerie, whom I had loved – or as close to whatever teenagers call love – when we actually had sex our attempts at tenderness always felt agonisingly focused, like a pantomime we both needed to perform. I came out of it more anxious than before.

Sex with Sarah was different, just like most things were with her. It gave me a light, clear breezy feeling in my body. A bizarre clarity. As if for a brief moment, I could understand the ideal that I had been searching for. I could see that perfect word manifest.

Wordlessly, I got up and made a cup of tea from the kettle in the corner of her room. I sat by the window with a sheet wrapped around me, looking out at the campus, and I told her everything: from the internship, to Crannus, to the impossible worlds that we had visited. Even as I was saying it I was aware how crazy it sounded, but I didn't stop. I couldn't. I realised how much I had been keeping in. I had not spoken a word of my insane circumstances to anyone, not to family or friends, nor even to a pet. I had denied myself that catharsis, the cleansing that comes with sharing one's story, and I had not realised how dangerous that had been until now.

There was a sense that gravity was shifting. I was no longer a pillar alone, I was leaning upon something, intertwining with it, and the act made the whole world lighter.

There is a reason catharsis cannot happen alone. It requires sharing. The word 'share' comes from the Old English *scearu*, which means division, or a part into which something may be divided. And as I told my story, I felt a part of myself dividing, being gifted to Sarah, or perhaps being taken by her. The human heart is a heavy thing, and if one is forced to carry it alone it becomes heavier, weighing down further and further upon itself. Only by splitting it with another, sharing, like the proverbial breaking of the bread, can it be allowed to purify.

She listened intently, appearing to believe every word that came out of my mouth. The only time she interrupted was when I told her about James.

“Oh God, you didn’t, Chloe? Did you? Tell me you didn’t.”

I glanced away from her. “Sorry.”

“Hey, don’t apologise to me. You didn’t owe me anything. Apologise to yourself, girl. Trust me. That’s going to come back and bite you in the ass.”

When I finished, and I had caught her up to speed with everything – Kiluvu’s world, the Constants, Judy – she fell quiet. I realised that I had been talking non-stop for what may have been hours. The sun had gone down.

“Well, shit,” she said eventually. “I knew you were up to something crazy, but I didn’t think it was this crazy.”

“You can’t tell anyone else.”

She stroked my hair. “I can’t believe you feel you need to tell me that.”

I kissed her again, and she kissed me back, and we quickly, hungrily, fell into everything else that followed.

When I woke in Sarah’s room the next morning, I was calm. Inexplicably calm.

In the past two days, I had watched two of my greatest strongholds crumble. First to go was what I thought was the most well-established: my understanding of reality. There is a hubris amongst scientists – and I now count myself a scientist – that ignores history. Even though centuries of darkness and bafflement precede us, we always feel as though, on some level, our understanding of the universe is set in stone. Despite our logical acceptance that much is still unknown, it always seems as though it is only the strange quarks and quirks of the universe that are left to figure out, not the fundamentals. As such, I realised that my implicit acceptance that our world was the only world and, well, everything else I thought I knew about reality, was a fortress, an empire behind which my beliefs cowered. That had come crumbling down around me.

The second was smaller, closer, more intimate. I had not even seen it build up around me, but in the past months I had come to rely on the Professor’s complete and utter confidence with all life around him. Even when my own grasp on reality became frail, as it had now become, his was ironclad. Definitive. But two events had sought to tear that from me – the conversation with Judy, and the fear I had seen in his eyes, the uncertainty. That fortress was crumbling too.

And yet, here I was, on a rainy day in May, calm. The warmth of Sarah's back was pressed against my skin as she dozed softly, the arch of her body curled into mine like a perfect letter. An ideal form. Lying there, I couldn't help but assure myself that everything was going to be okay.

"Euh," she muttered, as she rolled hair out of her eyes. "Are you actually lying awake staring at me? You're such a creep."

I smiled. She stared at me for a moment, then snorted a giggle. She sat up in bed and pulled the covers up, yawning. "I don't understand you. You disappear for days at a time, you show up at weird times in arguments with older women, and I get all worried about you, and then..." She lifted the covers and eyed my still naked body. "This."

"You met me at a very strange time in my life."

Her laugh tinkled around the room. "Did you just quote Fight Club? I don't believe it!"

"What?"

"You've seen a popular movie! One that hasn't had academic papers written about it. You know, I think you might be a real human, after all."

"Don't tell anyone," I replied with a smile. "It's our secret."

VI

I spent most of the following morning in Sarah's room. We'd only braved the outside world twice – once for a shower, the benefits of which were dispelled shortly after, and a second time to steal a jar of peanut butter from the kitchen. It was early afternoon when her phone rang.

“Leave it,” I said, trying to slap it away from her.

“It's a withheld number.”

“Just ignore it. If it's important, they'll leave a message.”

“Hello,” she said, as she picked up the phone. I watched as her face frowned. “Who is this?”

I sat up, only just realising the implication, and Sarah held the phone out to me.

“It's for you,” she said, then mouthed *how do they have my number?*

I shrugged, not willing to drag her into those murky depths quite yet. Perhaps it is an indication of just how much I had accepted that I didn't bother wondering about that question myself, or questioning how they knew where I was. It didn't seem to matter – when the Professor needed me, he called.

“He'll be waiting for you in half an hour,” the woman said. The dial tone followed.

As I walked to his office, I found that I was surprisingly able to dismiss the concerns that I had felt the other day. There were questions that I wanted answers to, of course. Who did the Professor work for? What did Judy want? What on earth had happened in Sombasi's world? But I was not going to jeopardise my involvement in one of the most important discoveries in the history of mankind because of such trivial concerns. I use

the word trivial because that is undoubtedly the word the Professor would have used to address my concerns – belonging to the *trivium*, the lower division of academia. This was not an association I wanted the Professor to have when he thought of me. The answers would come in time – they *were* coming, more and more with each passing day – but he would not want his own time wasted with my diversions.

Even as I entered the Social Studies building, I noted that the halls allowed me passage, their mechanics opening the way to his office. I was being accepted, once again. As such, by the time I arrived at his office, I resolved to bury these matters until a more appropriate moment.

Professor Crannus sat behind his desk, eyeing his stopwatch and quietly puffing at his pipe. He gave neither gesture nor phrase to invite me into the room, but I no longer needed one. Instead, I studied some of his strange artefacts. They gave away nothing. Despite being glimpses into other worlds, a museum of unending possibility, they lacked explanation. Without a name, or a note, or a description to guide me, they could well have been scrap or junk, a twisted piece of a rusted pipe or a broken branch of tree. I couldn't help but marvel at how everything needs to be in its place to be understood. Nothing stands alone. Everything needs context.

He flicked his pocket watch closed and tucked it into his pocket. He tapped his pipe ash out onto a small tray on his desk, just behind the photo of his son. "Do you know what makes us human?"

I blinked, somewhat taken aback by the enormity of the question. "Language."

"Explain."

"It's... Well, it's our ability to communicate. It leads directly to our ability to work in groups, to cooperate as communities. It is what separates us from animals. It is why we can have cities, and nations, and globalisation."

"But animals have language, do they not?" He poked his pipe at me in the air. "A monkey can tell another monkey about a banana tree. A cat can warn another cat about a dog."

"Simple language, lacking in complexity, certainly."

"So what is the difference?"

I stopped, unsure. "This is a question scholars have been trying to answer for decades. I think it was Lacan that argued that it was the ability to step, if only for a moment, out of the permanent structure of subjectivity. To

be able to look in a mirror and recognise ourselves, and recognising the world as existing objectively outside of ourselves.”^[62]

“Pah.” He sniffed. “Lacan missing the point entirely, as usual.”

I smiled. I no longer felt embarrassment at feeling wrong in front of him, merely excited to be part of the conversation. “In what way?”

“It isn’t about our better understanding of truth. It’s about our ability to subvert it.”

“You mean the ability to lie?” I shook my head. “No, I don’t think so. Animals can lie. In fact, such things have been documented – primates lying about predators to scare off other primates so they can access more food.”

“No, no, far more complex than lying. It is the ability to create abstractions, to imagine things that do not exist, and then to truly *believe* they do.”

“Like God?” I prodded, with a grin.

His eyes flashed. “Precisely. Or national pride. Or money. Or just about anything. In fact, on a day to day basis, every human being spends far more time talking about things that objectively don’t exist than things that do.”

I laughed. “Hyperbole doesn’t seem your style.”

“It isn’t. Consider: you want to go on a weekend getaway. It itself is an imagined concept – it only exists because we accept that a working week exists. That only exists because we accept such a thing as a week. Do you think the stars and the universe care or know if it is Saturday or Monday? Nonetheless, you *believe* that it is a weekend. We believe it communally, as a society, so you pay for a flight with money, but where is it? It doesn’t exist. It requires both you and the people flying the plane to imagine you’ve passed it from one to another. You then prepare your passport, which states you are from a nation which doesn’t exist – not physically, not objectively. Before humans there was no China, no India, no America. We made them up. Indeed, 99 percent of the entire process is made up, except for maybe the actual plane itself. If it didn’t have humans believing in it, your whole holiday wouldn’t exist.”

He got up and began pacing, as if moving around the room would help him get towards the point he was making.

“Animals cannot do this. They cannot imagine that they share a nation, or a working week, and therefore they can never do what we can do. Our entire humanity is based on our ability to make things up and really, truly,

believe in them. And if we believe them hard enough, all together, they become true. It's remarkable. Consider – if an alien were to come into our world with absolutely zero sense of morality, of human ethics, or of personal responsibility, how would they fare?"

"They would probably harm someone, and would be locked up almost immediately. Are you saying these things are imagined?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying. There's no such thing, objectively speaking, as 'human rights'. It makes no difference to the atoms or the galaxies if we torture, or rape or murder one another. The stars do not bother contemplating our morality."

"It makes a lot of difference to the people being raped or murdered, though."

"But that's *exactly* the point. Just because these tenets of ours are imagined, it doesn't mean they aren't important. It means they are *key*."

I frowned. "How does this relate? Even if I accept your premise, I don't see that..."

"All these worlds," the Professor said, lifting his arms from his chair as if to embrace them. "Every one I have discovered is inevitably human. But all humans imagine different metaphors. In the West, we have imagined liberalism and humanism, grown out of a Christian fervour for personal responsibility and salvation. We have deified the individual and invented notions like 'free speech' and 'free will' to support it. Much of the East never imagined such things, and so there are cultural clashes – the Chinese deify their state and their families. The Arabs deify their religions. It has taken centuries of globalisation for them possibly to understand how we in the West can place the individual above all else. Because we *made it up*."^[63]

"How does that help us?"

"If you want to *know* a culture, you need to know the shared imagined belief. To navigate this world, we must understand what imagined orders they have created to run their worlds – what do they deify? Music has always showed me insight into the imagined rules or culture – just as American rock or jazz or punk scream of liberalism and humanism, or as Shostakovich and the rise of VIAs in the USSR boom out state-driven nationalistic fervour."^[64] But without this step available to me, I need your help. We need to establish what they *believe*."

"Why?"

He paused, screwing his nose up. His glasses fell a little down the bridge and he looked at me for a moment as if he was seeing me for the first time. “What do you mean?”

“Why this world?” I said. “What are we looking for? What is the hypothesis?” He pushed his glasses back up and furrowed his brow. I pressed on. “What you’re saying is fascinating, don’t mistake me. But how does this relate to your plan to discover the reason behind the Constants? If I am to help you, I must know the connection.”

For a moment, he said nothing, then he turned away from me and faced the window, silent. A half-word seemed to escape his lips, but faltered. He scratched the corner of his jacket with his fingers. A silence settled between us, but I did not fill it. The Professor seemed to need this silence, staring out across the campus and letting it massage his thoughts into words.

Eventually, he spoke.

“There is a force working against me, Chloe, as I’m sure you know.” He paused, seeming unsure of his words for the very first time. “I am not the only one who can travel between the worlds. Perhaps I am from this world, but there are an infinite number of realities. There were always going to be others. In every age where someone seeks truth, there are always those who wish to keep mankind in the dark. There is a man – I do not know exactly what he wants, but I do know that he wants to stop me. He has... he has tried to kill me several times.”

“Kill you?” The phrase brought me out of my academic fantasy, crashing clumsily down to the reality of earth. Murder was not something I had considered, or at least, not something I had considered happening to us. “*Kill you?*” I said again. It says something to the gravitas of the moment that he did not chide me for my repetition.

“All exploration involves danger. And before I can continue, we must protect ourselves against this man and those who work for him. But it is surprisingly hard to confront a man when you don’t know what reality he is in. However, I am not alone in this. I have made friends in other worlds – some you have already met – who are helping me. Suffice to say, we have managed to locate a clue, a crucial piece of information about who he is and what he wants. More importantly, I do not think he knows that I know.” He stopped again, and his shoulders raised and fell in a long, quiet sigh. “For the first time, in a long time, I believe I have the upper hand.”

“You mean for us to *infiltrate* this place?” The word sounded cartoonish even as I said it.

“I do not think the inhabitants are complicit,” he said, as if that was a reassurance. “Nor are they even aware they hold such information. He has used their world as a hiding place from me.”

“Because they have no music.”

“I can only assume as much.”

“Who is this man?” I demanded. “How can he possibly know so much about you? Please, Professor, there must be more you’re not telling me here. Look – I’m thrilled to be involved in this, I am, and I wouldn’t think of turning away from you now. But I at least deserve to know what I’m embroiled in here? Scientific discovery or personal vendetta?”

The Professor spun back around, his face sharp as a knife. “My motives are as honourable as the Dane himself.^[65] But I will not shy away from obstacles. When one treads the very edge of human knowledge, one must accept a certain paucity of information. I may not have your answers, but answers *are* what we are going to seek.”

“Judy asked me to spy on you,” I said. “She offered me money.”

“I know.”

“What does she want?”

“She doesn’t know what she wants. She’s a puppet, nothing more, nothing less.”

“Of the man in the suit?”

“Who?”

“The man who...”

He twisted around, striding past me. “I appreciate your honesty,” he said, though he sounded annoyed, “but our work must take focus now. I fear we have very little time before my enemies catch up with us.” He opened a cabinet by the door, dragging out a heavy file. With a thump, it landed on his desk and he flicked it open. Once again, I was confronted by those logograms. The language that was a distant cousin of one I spoke, familiar, but too far away to understand. “We have work to do.”

“I don’t know much about their world,” the Professor said, spreading the papers before me. “I can posit that their belief-system has some kind of more collectivist group basis. Our solipsistic concept of personal responsibility and individualism would be quite turned on its head.”

“What led you to that conclusion?”

“Hypothesis. The culture is clearly derived from Asian roots – both the language and the dominant ethnicity indicate this. Traditionally, East Asian cultures are significantly more collectivist in their approach.^[66] This is perhaps less apparent now, as Western-dominated globalisation has caused individualism to become a pervasive force, overtaking other cultural norms.^[67] But imagine if the opposite were the case. Imagine if instead of individualism permeating and overtaking collectivist traditions, collectivist cultural norms were promoted, highlighted and spread.

“But...” he shook his head. “Their world was so busy, so heavily populated. It was difficult to establish personal traits. The issue is that *I* was immediately identified as an intruder. Immediately. I am clearly missing something key about their culture. It was so sudden, so definitive – there was something about me merely being in that world that was as transgressive to them as murder, as *wrong*. I was apprehended as soon as they met me. The very first time, I escaped. The second, I would not have done so without you.”

“Why did they free you when I came? How did you know what to say?”

He grinned. “That was a complete gambit. I picked one of the three words that seemed the most crucial. It was not my first escape from that world. When I was imprisoned on my first visit, I stole what I believed to be a written account of my transgression – a sort of arrest record: why I had been locked up. It was the writing I showed you.”

“That...” I shook my head. “That seems astoundingly far-fetched.”

“And yet.” He gave me a warm smile. “Here they are.”

“The logograms.”

“You posited that they meant “cold”, “upwards” and “return.”

“Really, my suggestions were as close to guesswork...”

He put his hand up, cutting me off. “I have no time or patience for humility. It is the chain that holds back lesser men.^[68] Your suggestions were enlightening. It was my second time there so I thought perhaps something close to ‘return’ would be the most helpful. But I still do not know exactly why they released me and turned on you, and that is what I need to find out. I cannot return a third time without more knowledge. This last time, I only just got out. The next time, they would surely kill me.”

There was that word again, sticking out in the sentence like a blister. This time, I tried my best to ignore it, to bury myself in the problem. I gazed over the writing again – specifically the three logograms that I could

even attempt to recognise. There were others, but they were scrawls that were incomprehensible to me as symbols, and I could only ignore them. I would get nowhere without some kind of linguistic basis to start with.

“Huí,” I said, sounding the word out. It felt like an old friend now. It had kept me awake at night, haunting my thoughts and replaying through my head. “It means ‘to return’, now, in current Chinese. Well, at least in its basic form. But to work out what it might mean with another development, I think we have to backtrack and then prognosticate.”

“You think that it doesn’t mean ‘return’?” The Professor asked.

“I really doubt it. Words are notoriously fickle – if one means something now, then it certainly meant something different a thousand years ago. We need to work out what that might have been, first of all, then we have to cast our eye onto the possibilities of what else it might have evolved into. It’s... well, it’s an impossible task.”

“Can you do it?”

“No.” I sighed, disappointed that I had to be honest. “The possibilities are endless.”

He shook his head with a huff. “Nonsense. The possibilities are always endless when one only focuses on a single aspect. You are focused on a single tree. Consider the forest! Come, let us think what else we know: we are geographically in current England, still. Whatever geopolitical or anthropological trends pushed these proto-Asians west, there would have been remnants or assimilation of old western culture.”

“You’re right,” I said, staring at the word. “Yes, yes. And that would have impacted language development. When the Sinitic language came west, it may have gone through similar patterns of change as European languages went through. And if we consider the trend of western languages, ‘return’ is inherently circular.”

“Circular?”

“If we ignore the prefix for now – it is too widespread to be of any use. Then ‘turn’ developed from the Latin, or was it the Greek?”

“I am not the specialist.”

“Would you...” I hesitated. “Would you mind me looking it up on my phone?” He raised his eyebrows. I flushed with a sudden embarrassment. I should know this. I should be better than this. The Professor’s face softened.

“My dear girl,” he said, putting a hand on my shoulder. “You are not Faust, and the Devil has not offered you unlimited knowledge.^[69] We are but mortal, and must use all the tools we have. We stand on the shoulders of giants, but only if we acknowledge that they are there.”

I nodded, now a little ashamed that I had felt the need to ask. Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I tapped my queries into Google. “I knew it! It was Greek, *then* Latin. ‘Turn’ comes from the Latin ‘tornare’, which itself came from the Greek ‘tornos’ or ‘circular movement’. To ‘return’ is to continue in circular movement. It is not to come back, but to stay in the same place.”

“And?”

I didn’t say anything. Something was clicking deep in my mind, but I wasn’t quite there. “To stay in the same place...” I whispered. “Place. *Place*.” I almost smacked my forehead at my stupidity. “Of course. We are thinking of ‘return’ all wrong. It is not about a person returning, but about returning something to its place. It is about *replacing*. To return *is* to replace.”

The Professor waited, patiently letting the cogs in my brain twist and fall into position.

“If we consider that *huí* might not mean ‘to return’, but in this world instead developed to mean something closer to ‘to replace’, then their actions make sense. In both saying it, we were electing to replace myself for you, in terms of imprisonment. I was being made the one responsible for your crimes. I replaced you as the perpetrator.”

“Yes,” the Professor replied. “Of course. So they freed me and turned on you. The allowance to swap roles with another, to take their crimes and, presumably, their merits. For a world based around community rather than individualism, that makes a lot of sense.”

“Perhaps,” I scratched my face, confused. Something still wasn’t right. “But what doesn’t make sense is why they let us both escape. Why they didn’t apprehend me before letting you go.”

“Not at all!” The Professor blurted. “You are still seeing through your own cultural lens. You must remove it completely. Think – with such a system of replacement so ingrained in their culture, it can only work if it carries a strong moral basis. Or even more so, a *conceptual* basis. Ha! They must have been utterly bewildered when you joined my escape. It would have been complete madness. You electing to replace me, then *running*

away with me, it would have been as alien to them as a convicted man pleading innocent then shooting himself in the head.”^[70] His words were spurting out at a great speed, his hands shaking with the excitement of discovery. “Oh, but this is *excellent* work, Chloe. This is true scholarship.”

I smiled, trying to hide the blush that had risen in my cheeks. “I mean, we still don’t know much about how and why they can...”

“We know more than we did,” he interrupted. “And that is everything. Understanding is like an avalanche. The first few trickles come slow, but they will build. What we must ask is *why* I transgressed to begin with? What made me stand out?”

“You look different.”

“Racial differences are not sufficient. Despite the dominant culture being some form of Asian, the world is still multi-cultural. I still noticed people with a variety of skin-tones, of textures. It is not enough to single me out so quickly.”

“Even with the evolutionary differences? Our very facial structure is different.”

“Perhaps,” he replied. “But I have thought about this and I do not believe it holds weight. Bone structure is changeable enough in individuals, even in the same world. Think, if you were walking down the street and saw someone with a bizarre facial structure, what would you do?”

“Try not to stare.”

“Exactly. Perhaps you would stare, if you were less polite. But in no city or town with the number of different people that this one exhibited would that person be immediately arrested and imprisoned. It’s not a logical reaction. Come now,” he motioned to the papers. “They arrested me, they drew this symbol first.” He pointed at the one similar to *lěng*, or ‘cold’.

“What else can you discern?”

I stared at him for a second, realising that my task was not yet done. Then, quickly nodding, I looked back at the paper. But despite the exhilaration of our discovery, the remaining logograms were still unclear. They seemed to blur together, like gibberish, and I could no longer make head or tail of them. I rubbed my eyes, frustrated. It was as though my mind had exerted a heavy force and had collapsed, unable to do more until it had rested.

“I...” I needed sleep. I needed more time. “I need to go to the library. I need reference books, and histories of language. You are right. I cannot do

this alone.”

“You must go then,” he replied, with a quick certainty. “I have another task for you, as well. When we enter this world, my information tells me that what we need to find is located in a hospital. Likely the closest hospital – those who track me will not have had the time or resources to delve too far. We must try to establish how to say ‘hospital’ in their language, if we are to locate it.”

My eyes widened at the enormity of the task. “Professor, I... that’s crazy. Pronunciation aside, I don’t even know where I would...”

He put his hand up. His fingers moving quickly, he packed up all the documents into the file and handed it to me. As I took them, he held my hands for a moment, looking me straight in the eye. “Chloe, stop doubting yourself. You have shown yourself to be an excellent scholar. If nothing else, trust that I have faith in you. If anyone can work this out, it is you.”

A swell of warmth filled me. I couldn’t help but let a giant grin spread over my face. “Thank you. You’re... you’re an excellent teacher, Professor, even if you claim you do not teach. I can only imagine what a lucky man your son was to have grown up with a father so brilliant.”

For a flicker of a second, I thought the Professor’s face looked confused. Looking back, it all passed so quickly that maybe I am remembering wrong. Maybe I did not see anything at all. If I did, it was wiped out by what followed. For what I do remember, clear as day, is that he then smiled – a warm, comforting smile – and said, “and I am lucky to have known you too, Chloe.”

I left that office exhausted, laden with work, and with a unabashedly large spring in my step.

#

Before I arrived at the library, I called Sarah. I wanted to hear her voice. I used to think about her multiple times during the day, then. Sometimes I’d imagine watching her from a distance, or from above, as she went about her life. There was something different about the way she dealt with the universe, a removed confidence that seemed both to accept the world as it is and refuse to be moved by it. I could picture her sitting down by the river, reading Dostoevsky and smoking a joint. Or joking with friends in a pub, demonstrating how quickly she could down a pint. The way she acted so silly at times, but seemed so worldly, so understanding. I wanted always to

see those moments and capture them and lock them away somewhere so I could look at them forever.

With everything else that was going on, and all the confusion, she felt like an anchor in the storm. A spool of thread to grasp on to.

“What are you doing right now?” I asked.

“Sitting in the Arts building pretending really hard to study. I’m hoping that if I pretend hard enough it might actually happen.”

“I’m just by the Social Studies building. Do you want to get something to eat?”

“Oh my God, yes. I’m *starving*.”

I laughed. There was always one thing that could get her attention. Cutting through the back of the building, I headed towards where she was. I needed something familiar, something soothing to offer a little rejuvenation.

When I met her, she gave me a big smile, collecting her things together. “The Dirty Duck?” I said, suggesting the pub on campus. “It won’t be too busy in the afternoon.”

“Yeah, or we can get takeaway and just eat it in my room. I hate the music in there. It’s all jukebox-y and they let students pick what to play. For the supposedly trendy core of our society, students have the worst taste in music.”

“They don’t do takeaway.”

“Oh, don’t worry.” She gave me a knowing smile. “I’ll make them.”

After a brief interchange with a confused server, we eventually got our food – two burgers and extra chips – and sat munching them in Sarah’s room as Bloc Party’s, *Silent Alarm*, played from her speaker. For a time, we didn’t speak, the silence of focused eating descending upon us.

In that moment, the Professor’s impossible mystery of the Constants seemed both closer and further away. In Sarah’s room, they were less tangible, a mere distant academic problem to deal with at a later date. They no longer seemed as important as they had before. But at the same time, as I ate my way through my burger and chips, I felt something beneath the linguistics and the quantum mathematics.

After all, in my own life, with its shifting sands of identity, morality, physics, culture, had there not always been a few steady constants: the subtle wonder of learning something new; the warming strength of a good book; the quiet happiness of eating with a lover. No matter how much my life, my environment, even my personality changed, these moments always

felt identical. Anchors to keep me from being lost in stormy seas. Why should reality not be the same? The Constants made a strange degree of sense. There was something so close to understanding that I could almost touch it.

After we ate, we had sex. We pounced on each other like horny teenagers. Though, I suppose, that is exactly what we were. It didn't feel that way at the time. It was still new. It still had the fresh young excitement that comes with the beginning of something special, and it was beautiful. I lay in her bed, arms snuggled around a pillow, and marvelled at how much clearer my head felt. If I needed to, I felt I could take on the world. Or worlds, as the case might be.

"I'm going to get some peanut butter," Sarah said, slipping out of bed.

"How you can still eat is beyond the realm of physics."

"You would know, you crazy dimension-hopper," she replied, pulling a shirt on.

I sat up. "How is it that you're so accepting of this? I've been spending months trying to come to terms with the fact that there are different worlds out there, but you... you seem to take it in your stride like I've just told you about a new burger restaurant opening."

"Not true at all," she said. "If you told me about a new burger joint, I'd be there *right now*."

I laughed. "You know what I mean."

"I figure the world is a pretty bizarre place." She shrugged. "I accepted that a long time ago. You know there's a phenomenon amongst authors, particularly horror and crime writers, where they get inspired by real life events, but they have to tone it down, you know why?"

I shook my head.

"Because more often than not, if they keep it as it really happened, people say '*that's unbelievable*' or '*there's no way that would happen in real life*'. Reality really is stranger than fiction. What's that Hamlet line?"

"Which one?"

"Oh, don't pretend you don't know the one. The one he says to Horatio about the ghost."

I stared, at a loss.

"*There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy,*"^[21] Sarah recites. "That's the thing, isn't it? There's always more than whatever your own personal philosophy or view of the

world tells you. Best thing is not to have a philosophy, then you're never surprised."

She opened the door, peeking left and right. She still hadn't put any pants on. It was late at night, but anyone could have been around. She turned back and gave me a wink, darting to the kitchen. Moments later, she reappeared with another tub of peanut butter and a spoon. Her shirt fluttered a little as the door closed.

"Care to take a picture?" she said, noticing me staring.

"You've got great legs."

She gave me a huge grin. "You know what," she said, giving me a twirl before coming to sit on the bed next to me. "I absolutely *love* compliments."

#

Sarah still had work to do, so I took a quick nap in my room and three hours later I was back in the library. I'd taken more books than I probably needed, and they surrounded my small desk like a wall. To the outside observer, it may have seemed like some great barrier to keep knowledge in and distractions out. But distractions had never been a concern of mine.

I don't know how long I was in the library that evening, but by the time I left the sun had come up again. Even in my memories, the time disappears into the vacuum of single-minded thought. A black hole of focus.

I do remember that I was concentrating on the other two logograms. There was the one that looked almost like xiàngshàng, but closer to a mixture of Japanese kanji and Chinese script. There was a myriad of possible meanings, from the physical 'upward' or 'rise' to the more conceptual concepts of 'advancement' or 'improvement', and that was without accounting for language change.

The other I had a more concrete basis for. The symbol 冷, or lěng, I had seen before on Han dynasty seals dating back over 2000 years. The tail was longer and the shape not as geometrically defined, but the word was clearly the same. The issue I encountered was that, while in our world, on its own, it means 'coldness', often adjectified to stand for a certain frosty demeanour, and that while I was able to trace that back 2000 years to the physical meaning of 'cold' or 'frost', I had no idea if it would have developed in the same way in another reality. In fact, I was pretty certain that it wouldn't have.

I pored through books on the theory behind language change, and how it connected to culture, feeling all the while hopelessly out of my depth. I was no scholar, not then. Just an eighteen-year-old girl with a love for language. But the Professor's words egged me on, pushed me to plough forwards.

I followed chain upon chain of links on the internet. I tried to trace the word, century by century, across Chinese language, but the information was so scarce. I asked the librarians for help, but they were just as lost as I was, limited by the knowledge we had available. How could we know so little about our own languages? Why were things not better recorded? It was an exercise in frustration, for the most part.

When it finally happened, it must have been well into the morning. Students were beginning to drift into the library now, taking up places around me and rubbing hangovers out of their eyes. A light flicked on in my brain like a flash of lightning. I had to stop myself from screaming and throwing my books in the air.

I quickly checked out the ones I needed, mumbling hurried thanks to the librarians for their time and trying to keep my hands from shaking with excitement. I had it! I was replaying my hypothesis over and over in my head as I dashed down the library stairs, two at a time, and ran headlong into James.

He was wearing a shirt that said, "End World Poverty". I'd seen it before and mocked him for it, pointing out how hilarious it looked given his wealthy middle-class upbringing. He was canvassing people to join the anti-G20 summit march.

He stumbled back, books tumbling around him as I flustered to grab at them. Paper and flyers scattered across the floor.

"Chloe!" he said, staring up at me. I scuttled around him, picking up books and papers and tucking them back into my arms. "Chloe, I... where have you been?"

"What do you mean?"

"What do I *mean*?" he repeated.

I almost rolled my eyes. The Professor was rubbing off on me.

"That's what I said."

"Sheesh." He shook his head. "You can be cold sometimes. I've been trying to get in contact with you, since... you know. The other night."

“Oh. I...” I stumbled, my eyes drifting just behind him. There was a man in a suit standing about fifty metres back, by the entrance to the science block. He was watching me. “I... yeah I’ve been busy.”

“Really? Because I get the impression you’ve been avoiding me.” He smiled, like it was a joke, but there was an undertone to it I couldn’t ignore.

“No. No, it’s not that. It’s just...” I looked back at James, then back to the man. He was waiting, one hand holding his tablet computer and the other by his side. “I really have been busy. I need to go.”

I took a step past him and he moved, standing in my way. “Oh no, you’re not disappearing again that easily. You can’t just disappear again! That’s not fair.”

“This isn’t about being fair, James.”

“Promise you’ll go on a date with me tonight,” he said, taking a step closer to me.

“I can’t.”

His eyes narrowed. “What are you doing instead?”

“I’m... I’m not...”

“So promise me then. Come on, it’s the least I deserve.”

“Fine,” I said. It seemed like the only way to get him out of my way. He smiled and gave me a squeeze of the shoulder.

“I’ll text you later.”

I gave him a smile back and hustled past him. The man turned around as I did and walked inside the science block. Quickening my pace, I darted after him, desperate not to lose him again.

#

The atrium of the science block was busy, students bustling in and out of lectures, cradling coffees and hangovers. I squinted, my eyes darting around. For a moment, I felt sure that I had lost him. He was like a spirit – an ethereal phantom out of a gothic novel that taunted you before it dissipated into thin air.

There was a flicker of movement. A glimpse of a suited man entering a classroom ahead. Hurrying forward, I pushed past the crowd, knocking bags and half-empty coffees. The door was ajar. I pushed it open, barging into an empty classroom.

Clean desks. Blank walls. No hint of life.

Sighing, I dragged myself forward. It seemed that I would not get any answers that day. Sitting down in one of the chairs, I put my head in my

hands and massaged it. My brain felt weary. I was already thrown off track by James. Now there was this bizarre apparition, always watching me. It was all too much. I needed a moment's pause to breathe, and perhaps to review my notes before returning to the Professor with my thesis.

The door clicked behind me. I jumped up, dropping my bag to the floor. The man in the suit stood opposite me, smiling.

"Hello, Chloe," he said. "Nice finally to meet properly."

"Who are you?"

He smiled again – a soft, warm, thing that pushed up into the creases of his face.

"Oh, a friend," he said. "Just a friend."

"Friends usually don't stalk other friends."

"True." He raised his finger in the air. "But as you can no doubt tell. This is a very unusual situation. Let us not call me a friend, then, let us call me..." his finger rested dramatically on his chin. "An interested party. Think of me as a... caretaker, or a gardener, if you will. I just like to keep an eye on things."

He grinned. His eyes flashed.

"Mm, oh yes," he said. "I like that. Gardener. You can call me that, if you wish. *The Gardener*.^[2] It's got a nice ring to it."

"What do you want? You say you're an interested party – interested in *what*?"

"Oh, interested in *so much*," he replied, waving his hands as he emphasised the last two words. "Your world is going through a very interesting time. And he has gone and put himself centre of it all. So we're keeping an eye on him. Quite a few eyes, actually."

"The Professor?"

"The very same. Him and his... counterparts."

"Why can't he see you?"

"He *chooses* not to see me," the Gardener replied, walking across the room as he spoke. "His focus is so concentrated on so many things – he doesn't have time to consider another. The human brain is a lazy thing, you see. It tries to conserve energy where it can. For most people, their lives are repetitive enough that the brain doesn't really need to waste time processing new things. It can simply... assume. Most of the time, your brain is ignoring what your senses show it. What's the point in parsing all that new

information when you already know what to expect? That's where I slip in, between the cracks, unnoticed."

"I've noticed you."

"I've wanted you to."

"Why?"

"The Professor has something we need. An item of great importance. We're hoping that soon he'll show you where it is."

I took a step back. "And you'll take it from me?"

He smiled, shaking his head. "Not at all. You'll give it to us."

"And why would I do that?"

"Oh, believe me. By the next time we meet, that won't be a question you feel like you need an answer to."

He walked over to the door and held it open for me. It was clear from his stance that he meant no threat, but that our conversation was also over. And for some reason, before I even knew what I was doing, I walked out of it.

By the time I turned around to look at the room again, he was gone.

#

By the time I made it to the Professor's office, my idea had almost gone. I don't know why I didn't think to write it down – the greatest ideas are like dreams, they are so incandescently clear the moment they enter your mind, but in short moments they drift into vaguery, then nothingness.

"What is it?" He was already standing as I entered the room, hands firm on his desk. I wanted to tell him about the Gardener, but somehow, now didn't seem like the time.

"I've had an idea."

"Of course you have. That much is obvious. When I said 'it', I was referring to the idea in question."

I took a deep breath, strangling the threads of my thoughts together, trying to force my ideas to coalesce as neatly as they had just moments before. I laid out the papers he had given me before him, placing the logogram he had asked about earlier at the top.

"I kept thinking about what you said, about the latent influence of the European region, despite the spread of the Asian diaspora. Like with 'return' and 'replace', I couldn't help but wonder if something about this region of the world – geography, weather, remnants of integrated cultures – would encourage Sino-Tibetan roots to follow similar language

developments to those of Proto-Indo-European and Latin roots in our world.”

“And?”

“Cold doesn’t mean cold.”

“Explain.”

“I mean...” I shook my head, struggling to put my epiphany in chronological, logical terms. “The logogram appears to be from the same root as *lěng*, in current Chinese. There is a clear similarity. Today, it can be used to represent a variety of abstract ideas to do with coldness, but abstract ideas in language tend to have roots in concrete expressions. Therefore, I chose to assume that the root meant something physical – like frost, snow or ice.”

“Go on.”

“Seeking to track the development in this region of the world. I then sought the oldest word I could find for the physical manifestations of coldness.” My ideas were coming back to me, thick and fast. “The thought was that if I could track the development of this word, and see the different branches it took over the centuries, one of these linguistic branches might be the meaning of this logogram. How good is your Latin?”

“Terrible,” he replied. I smiled. He did tell me he wasn’t a linguist, after all.

“The Latin for ‘frost’,” I said, “is ‘*gelū*’.”

A look of realisation spread over his face.

“Yes.” I nodded enthusiastically with him, moving closer to his desk. “Yes. Assumed to be from the Proto-Indo-European root ‘*gel-*’, meaning ‘cold’. For the Germanic root, this developed into a hard ‘*g*’, then eventually the voiceless velar stop – a ‘*k*’ for *kald* or *kaladus*.” The words were flowing out of me like a torrent. I stood opposite him, my hands also clamped on the opposite side of his desk. His eyes were locked on mine, following the train of my thought intently, voraciously, as if he were devouring my brain. “But at some point in its development, this root took another branch, becoming linked to the idea of gelatine and two things sticking – presumably like being frozen together. You see? ‘*Gel*!’”

I took a breath, sketching the symbol out on the table in front of him.

“When you were imprisoned,” I continued. “They drew that logogram first, right? It was at the top of the document? *Of course* it was. You said

you noticed people mainly in pairs or small groups. Did you see *anyone* on their own? Even physically standing apart?”

“No one,” he whispered. “Not a single soul.”

“*That* was your transgression. The communal belief-system is more deeply ingrained than you ever imagined. I believe there are no individuals – imagine a hive mind, but with two people. You were not gelled. You were not literally stuck to anyone. You were alone, and in that world, you were immediately noticed. You might as well have not been wearing clothes, or have eight heads. I think... I mean, I guess that all you need is a companion, a conjoined twin with you, then you will go as unnoticed as anyone else.”

I fell silent, my breathing heavy from the intensity and speed of my explanation. He continued to stare at me, his expression serious. He said nothing. I said nothing. An electric silence crackled the space between us.

After what must have been a good ten or twenty seconds, he walked around the table and put his hands on my shoulders. “You must come with me, Chloe. Your hypothesis is correct, I’m sure of it. If we go together, if we hold on to one another, we will not be thwarted again.”

“Of course, Professor. Anything.”

He smiled, squeezed my shoulder. “We go immediately.”

“Now?” I blinked. “I... are you sure? But I haven’t had a chance to look at anything about hospitals yet, like you asked me. I don’t know enough. I checked out some books, but I...”

“Then bring them!” he exclaimed, and spun around striding out of his office. “But the time is now. Thy letters have transported me beyond this ignorant present, and I feel now the future in the instant!”^[73]

VII

Despite my exhilaration, when we stood before the door in the basement, I hesitated. Memories of being left alone in Kiluvu's world flooded back to me – fears of being abandoned in a labyrinth with no way out.

The Professor must have sensed my reticence, because he paused.

“Don't fear the unknown, Chloe. You must learn to embrace it. Come to understand, as I did, that the unknown is everything. Without it, you are lost to mediocrity. Like all those who remain in their comfortable houses and their comfortable lives, repeating their routines day in and day out because it is what they *know*.” He put his hand on the doorknob. “You must understand, as I did, that the unknown is what drives us. Without it, you are doomed to a life of adequacy.”

He pushed the door open, and I followed. We stayed close to each other, hoping that our connection – our gel – would keep us safe in this world.

I shuddered. Despite this being my second visit, the colours still refused to make peace with my mind. Nothing I expected was what I saw. Everything was off, inverted.^[74]

We exited in the same place, a corridor that I knew would lead to the basement office that I had seen before. As we grew close to the final corner, he held me back.

“We wait.”

I frowned. “Why?”

He nodded his head forward. I leant, peeking around the bend to see the same people as before. They worked at the strange contraptions that scattered across the room. Their connections were clearer to me, more obvious. Each individual was by another, close enough to touch. Indeed,

they were touching – a light touch on the arm, or two shoulders pressed together. Not a single one of them broke physical contact for an instant.

“The last time we were in this office,” the Professor whispered, “we ran away. I can’t imagine they would treat us much better this time around, even if we are together.”

I pulled back. “So we wait until they leave, then we slip out into a world where nobody knows us yet.”

“Exactly.”

“There’s a problem. They never break contact. They are connected. There’s no way we’ll manage to stay...” I petered off, then took off my cardigan and wrapped it around the Professor’s waist.

“Worried you’ll lose me?”

“We must be connected,” I said, “in the most essential sense – it’s... think about the root, the Latin ‘nectere’, we must be literally ‘bound together’.” I tied the arms of the cardigan to my own waist, pressing the two of us together.

We knelt down, waiting, and I pressed my back against the wall and sat with the Professor. I couldn’t help but wonder what we must have looked like – a young Asian girl and an old white man, our bodies pressed close to one another. In any other world, the scene would be immediately explicable, a sexual cliché. But I realised, our skin touching now, that there was not even a hint of sexuality in what we had. Ours was a platonic connection; a romance of the mind.

He glanced at his pocket watch, then put it back. We sat for a time – a time I could not quantify – and stared silently at the wall. Eventually, I felt compelled to voice a concern that had been on my mind for some days.

“They didn’t just stop you last time because you were alone, did they, Professor?” I whispered. He turned to me, eyes narrowing. “You were trying to take that boy. The Constant. You were trying to take him back to our world.”

He smiled. “Very good.”

“You took him away from his partner, didn’t you? His family? You were stealing a child.”

“Nonsense. I wasn’t stealing anything. I was borrowing him. He wanted to come with me, anyway.”

I frowned. “That’s not... Please don’t treat me like an idiot. You don’t speak enough of their language to know that.”

“What boy wouldn’t want to see new worlds and alternate realities?”

“I saw the boy in Sombasi’s world, too,” I pressed. “He was in a glass observation room. You had him locked up.”

“Yes.”

“And you have no qualms about that?”

“Should I?” He shook his head. “There are hundreds of this boy. Hundreds of thousands. Infinite numbers, perhaps, alive across space and time. Locked within him is perhaps the greatest discovery since the inception of mankind. You know as well as any what kind of atrocities have been committed in the name of progress.^[75] Are you really going to balk at me examining a couple of boys? I do them no harm. I ask them about their lives. I cross-reference. Then I let them go.”

“I... ” I fell silent, frowning. Despite my reservations, his point did have a sort of utilitarian rationality to it. It didn’t sit right with me, though. I was sure of that. But now was not the time for confrontation.

“I understand that it appears distasteful,” he said. “But it is merely science. It is the process of discovery. Now: Listen.”

My ears pricked. “What?”

“Nothing. They’re gone, for now. Come, I know the way up. I’ve been here before.”

Together, we emerged from our hiding place into the empty office. They had not packed anything up – perhaps their break was to be a short one – but I couldn’t pass up this opportunity to look around, to examine the raw bits and pieces of language that had led us here.

“Wait.”

“Time is of the essence, Chloe.”

“There is more here. More I can discover. I can do this,” I insisted, glancing over whatever documents I could find. “I know I can do this.”

To my dismay, almost all of it was unintelligible. Once again, I was faced with the uncanny sensation of recognising something as being a language I should know, but unable to make head or tail of its meaning. I remember, at the time, thinking that this is what it must be like for children who are exposed to Shakespearean language for the first time.

The Professor waited with me impatiently, glancing at his pocket-watch. I knew he would not allow me long to continue my search around the room. I lifted papers and inspected as much as I could, but the symbols

were too distant, too far removed for me too instinctively read. If I had books enough, and time, perhaps. But not in this moment.

The only logogram that caught my eye was one I had already seen. It appeared multiple times across the room. It was the third symbol that we had been unable to contextualise, appearing to be similar to ‘xiàngshàng’ or ‘kōjō’. ‘Upwards’, ‘progress’, ‘advancement’: it could mean any of those things, depending on the root. Or, like ‘cold’ and ‘gel’, it could mean something utterly different. I shook my head in frustration – even my supposed discoveries were as yet untested hypotheses.

Then, I saw something very strange.

Poking out behind another piece of paper were letters that didn’t make any sense. I pushed the files to one side to discover, written next to my third unexplained symbol, a word.

Jūnhéng, and next to it: 均衡

“Professor,” I said, still whispering. “This is in Chinese. I mean... my Chinese, from our world. And underneath it is a romanisation, written in a Latin alphabet. How is this possible?”

“I do not know. What does it say?”

“Balanced.” I picked up the paper. It was written next to the symbol I was just examining, scrawled once again as if they were directly related. “It means ‘balanced’.”

The Professor stiffened. “We must go. They’re coming back.”

I didn’t move. I couldn’t help but stare. The roman alphabet. How was that possible? Only if someone had tried to communicate with these people from outside their world, like we had, or they had tried to communicate with us. But this wasn’t us.

‘Balanced’. ‘Advancement’. The words rattled around my head, just out of reach. There was a link between the two that I could almost see, a chain that fell apart each time I tried to reach for it.

“Chloe,” The Professor whispered urgently, pulling at me. “We must go.” I grabbed the paper and shoved it into my pocket. Turning away, he tugged me through another door and up a winding stairway, up and up and out into the open world.

Someone bumped into me. Then another. My eyes dropped to street level and I took an involuntary step back, almost tripping the Professor. The street was thick with people, flowing like a river. They were so densely

compacted into a space that they seemed to move as a single unit, each person pushing the next in front of them, so close they were all touching.

For a time, I thought we were still inside. The light had not improved much, and the walls still rose forbiddingly around us. It was not until my eyes followed them up, looking for a ceiling, that I discovered that they were not the inside walls of a building, but the outside walls of skyscrapers. They must each have been several hundred floors in height. Busted together in claustrophobic proximity, these towering behemoths rose and rose into the sky until I could barely see their peaks. Instead, I was overcome by a sickening vertigo. A dizziness.

If I looked straight up, I could see it was daytime, but the light was so blocked by the high-rises that it might as well have been dusk.^[76]

The people were not all of the same ethnicity, nor of the same physical build. As the Professor had said, it should not have surprised me. Any conglomeration of people will have a multitude of ethnicities, sizes and shapes. But as I watched, I noted that even amongst the throng they moved as small groups. Each ensemble consisted of pairs, and pairs of pairs, holding each other close while navigating the streets as if they were a single unit. Like limbs of a body.^[77]

My heart leapt, beating in excitement. No one was alone. I had been right. There was no such thing as individualism in this world. If people existed, they existed together, as part of a larger whole. A hive.

“We must stay close,” I told the Professor. “Move in the same directions, in the same ways. We must imitate each other as much as possible, as though we are one body.”

He nodded. “We must find the hospital. We must ask someone.”

“I... that’s not possible. There’s no way I can even attempt to reproduce their language effectively – sentence construction for questions, even basic pronunciation. It’s not...”

“What about signs?”

“Signs?”

“When I was last here, I navigated myself to a central point – not far from here – where a board was covered in writing. It might give us a clue, maybe some kind of map.”

I nodded, though sceptical that I’d be able to work anything out at all, and we set off. I found myself followed by niggling doubts. The Professor’s

last visit here had been brief, one of imprisonment. How had he travelled through? How did he know where he needed to be?

The tug of the cardigan pulled me ahead. My worries were drowned under the focus needed to stay upright. Once again, I was captivated by the way the Professor exuded confidence. As I tried to match his movements, and become one with him in side-step, my observation of it became more pronounced. He moved as if he had been in this world since he was a boy, as if he was born into it and moulded by it. Even here, in the midst of complete uncertainty, he walked as if he was in his own home.

After what felt like a good half hour of walking, pushing through bustling street crossings and pressing past thriving shop-fronts, he stopped.

“No one is looking at me like they did before,” he said. “At us. We are not outsiders. Your hypothesis appears to be correct. Look.”

We were at a crossroads, a four way intersection between the walls of high-rises. The crowds of people changed directions – some going left and right, some continuing on. I marvelled at how the masses moved around each other, chaotic and turbulent, but somehow fluid.

I began to guess at the purpose of certain buildings. Some seemed like office buildings, with grand lobbies and entranceways spilling people out onto the street. Others were like shop fronts – marketplaces with bizarre collections of fruits and vegetables that I had never before seen. But there were no shopkeepers. People merely took the food off the shelves and down from the hooks, leaving behind a range of items in their wake. I stared, enraptured by the concept. Could this world really survive on an economy like a giant honesty box?

It flew in the face of every assumption I had about humanity. Perhaps individualism isn't all that it is cracked up to be.

The Professor pointed up at a large board. Pressed into the side of a building, it loomed over the crossroads. A sign to point you in the right direction. A city map, covered in writing and symbols. As ever, it was incomprehensible.

“Why the hospital?” I asked. “What's there?”

“If the intelligence Kiluvu gathered is correct, then the information I seek should be in something like a hospital, or whatever the equivalent is in this world. It is a kind of medicine I seek, a fluid that might provide me with much information.”

“What information?”

“Chloe,” he said, putting his hand on my shoulder. “I want to tell you everything, I do. But now is not the time. You must trust me.”

I nodded, studying the board.

“What are you looking for?”

“Well, I’m starting with the basics. Hospital is 醫院, ‘yīyuàn’, so I’m attempting to see if any of the symbols look in any way similar. It’s unlikely, but I can hope.”

At first, it was overwhelming – the collection of script was so foreign that I couldn’t begin to find any threads. Slowly, I took my time and moved down line by line, symbol by symbol, looking for patterns or any kind of recognition.

Time passed. People bustled past us.

“Anything?”

I sighed, shaking my head. “Nope.”

He smiled. “A good start then, we have eliminated one possibility. What’s next?”

Opening my bag, I pulled out my notebook. “I made some quick notes earlier, on the development of the word in European locales. In English, the word hospital comes from ‘hostel’, or of ‘host’ or ‘guest’. So I could look for similar words in Chinese or Japanese languages here, but we might just end up at something like a hotel. There’s also infirmary – or ‘enfermerie’ in French – which comes from the Latin ‘infirmus’, meaning ‘not firm’ or ‘not strong’.”

“So you’re looking for either ‘host’ or ‘not strong’, but developed through Sinitic logograms.”

“Y-yes. I think so.”

“A solid hypothesis.”

A smile tugged at my lips. Despite the tension of being in another world, the excitement of the puzzle was growing in me, the electric buzz of solving a problem.

But, despite my thrill, I found nothing. There were bits and pieces of words that I might have known. There were symbols that flickered a tiny light of recognition in me, if I had time to research them and pick them apart, but without help I was lost.

“It’s no good.” I shook my head. “I’m sorry, it’s just too difficult.”

“What *do* you recognise?”

“I...” I squinted upwards. “That symbol there. I’ve seen it before, perhaps recently.”

“In one of the books you checked out?”

“Maybe.”

“Well, then, let us read.”

Standing before this board, the Professor and I, a book in each hand, read. I flicked through 《文字學概要》 by Qui Xigui,^[78] while the Professor held Dr. Winger’s, *Chinese Characters*.^[79] Occasionally, I would look over at him and see him flicking through the pages with intense speed, his eyes flicking like REM from one section of the page to the next.

“What about this?” he would say, pointing at a character and then at the board. I would shrug, shake my head or tell him I wasn’t sure. Nothing was clear enough to be certain.

“And this?”

I put my hand to my forehead. “I really don’t think that I... Wait. Where is that from?”

“The picture comes from Qin Lin slips from the Warring States period, it says. Around 300 BC. An early development of this symbol here.”

“But that’s... that’s not about sickness, it’s...” I looked at the symbol in the book, and then at another up on the board. It wasn’t the same, but it was close. Close enough. “But how could... Of course! Wasei-kango!”

I almost smacked myself in the head. The Professor leaned into me, eyes bright.

“Wasei kango?”

“Wasei-kango are Japanese words composed of Chinese morphemes. They’re like Chinese words, but they were invented outside of China, in places like Korea and Japan.^[80] As such they use other cultural contexts to build words with Chinese logograms. Hospital could be an example!”

“In what way?”

“Well...” I looked at the page. “The Japanese for hospital is *byōin*, but because of wasei-kango it is orthographically the same as ‘Bìngyuàn’, or 病院. This is... not strictly a hospital in Chinese, but a kind of specialised institution. That’s why I didn’t think of it. But the two symbols literally translate as ‘disease institution’.”

“What has that got to do with this symbol here?”

“The first symbol of ‘bìngyuàn’, 病, means ‘disease’, but also ‘evil’ or ‘flaw’. *This* symbol you’ve identified in the book is a precursor of this. It is possible, just possible, that it has come to mean something like a ‘hospital’, as well. After all, early diseases were often seen as signs of evil or a flaw in one’s nature. Can you see where it indicates?”

“Yes,” he said. “Not far from here. Several blocks away, if this is to be taken as a conventional map. How sure are you that this is correct?”

“Well, it could have become anything. A place to deal with evil? It could be a prison, or a church. How sure am I? Maybe three percent?”

A grin broke out on his face. “I have faced worse odds.”

We had to push past people, jostling and snaking through the crowd so as not to lose our position or our way. Despite the Professor’s confidence, our movements could hardly match the ease with which these people threaded through the bustle like fish through water.

It was a miracle we didn’t fall. There was no concept of personal space. ^[81] To be out in the crowd was to be pushed, to be touched, to be bumped into. With each shove, we stumbled, struggling to stay attached and stay mobile. Our bodies were not built for this kind of movement.

At first, I was worried that we were being shunned, but I soon noted the faces around me. There was no malice there, nor even the hint of bother. This level of physical contact amongst strangers was an ingrained part of their lives. Though, I suppose, the concept of being a stranger may have been altogether alien to them.

It was in those crowded streets that I glimpsed it. I halted, just for a second, and we both almost collapsed. I managed to grab the Professor and pull him upright, but by the time we straightened it was gone. But I knew what I had seen, across the sea of heads. I recognised him immediately: the man in the suit. He still wore his black suit, standing out from the others in their culturally specific dress. He was watching me.

There was no time to question. The Professor was already pulling me forward again, annoyed that I had broken rhythm.

I was flustered, but somehow unsurprised. It made a bizarre sense to me that he would be here. All I could think of was that word – ‘balanced’ – written on the paper in my pocket. It must have been this man, trying to communicate with these people, trying to use our language. The word now seemed fitting. He had been there the very first time I met the Professor. He was here now. Indeed, he seemed to be anywhere we were, following us

down even the most impossible of trails, and no one could see him. My silent stalker. My quiet ghost. Perhaps I would have felt there was an odd form of balance in that, if it didn't make me think I was going crazy.

By the time I'd processed my thoughts, I stumbled to a stop behind the Professor. He pointed up at the building ahead.

#

“Look there – what do you see?”

In between the drifting groups of people, I could see an entrance. Outside were two men, standing fiercely erect and unmoving.^[82] On their backs, they held what looked to be some form of gun.

“They look like... soldiers?”

“Indeed. Guards. My information speaks of a hospital where something is concealed, and here we stand, supposedly at their hospital, and there are guards at the front. This is no coincidence.”

“How do you propose we get past an entrance with armed guards? Whatever you are after, it seems it is being protected. We have no idea what kind of security measures this world uses. We have nothing.”

“Nonsense,” he said. “We have determination and we have surprise.”

“You plan to fight these people with your determination?”

“This scepticism doesn't suit you, Chloe,” he chided. “Come, let me show you what I plan to do.”

Still attached to him, I followed as he moved round to the side of the hospital building and cut down an alleyway to the back of it. After navigating a few winding back alleys and climbing with difficulty over a small fence, we found ourselves at the side wall of the building. The Professor delved into his pocket and pulled out a small gun-shaped contraption.

“A gift from Kiluvu,” he said with a grin. “Very useful for getting into places.”

Pressing it against the wall, it began to vibrate. Then, matching it, the section of the wall before us vibrated as well. The stone wall let off a low hum, like the whisper of a distant bee, and then – in the blink of an eye – disappeared in a cloud of dust. As grey dust fell, it settled around a door sized hole which had just appeared in its place. An entrance. Tucking the contraption back into his pocket, the Professor lifted his arm up to his mouth, and walked through.^[83]

The inside was dimly lit. We were in a stone corridor and lights ran along the ceiling, giving off a weak and cold luminescence. I blinked, trying not to breathe in the settling dust. It stung my eyes. The Professor undid the cardigan.

“What are you doing?” I whispered urgently, balking at the sudden panic rising in my chest.

“We have already broken into a guarded building. I do not think being connected will make much difference now, except to slow us down.”

I stared back at him. It was not until that moment that I realised our bond had been more than a physical one. Somehow, by attaching myself to the Professor, I had felt a degree of safety in this world. If I was bound to him, I could not be left alone like I had been in Sombasi’s world. I could not be lost.

When I think now about the origin of the word ‘lost’, from the Old English *losian* – ‘to perish’, ‘to be destroyed’ – I believe I felt an awareness of that suddenly, physically, inside me. If I lost the Professor now, part of me would perish in this world, never to be seen again.

But I was young and unable to express this at the time. I merely nodded, wrapping the cardigan back around my now shivering shoulders.

He did not take long in deciding on a direction, and soon I was chasing after him as he briskly strode ahead.

As we approached the first corner, he slowed, crouching against the wall. I copied him, unsure at first what he had seen. Then there were footsteps. Ahead there was another pair of guards. Their backs were to us, but they were standing at the junction of the corridor. We would not be able to pass this way without being seen.

I readied myself to turn around, to go back. I barely had time to register what was happening when the Professor approached them. He took three quick steps, a hand slipping inside his jacket, and straightened up. The first guard only just registered the sound behind him when the Professor shoved a knife right into his neck. The second guard spun around, but could only gawp at his fallen symbiote in terror, as if someone had just sliced off his limbs. The Professor pulled the knife back again and shoved it in his chest.

It was everything I could do not to scream.

My hand went to my mouth, clasping at it as if to desperately suppress any sound. I watched, helplessly, as the guards collapsed to the floor, on top of each other, gurgling, blood spilling. The Professor knelt down and wiped

his knife clean on the second man's body, before tucking it neatly back into his jacket.

I was crouched, curled almost-foetal in shock and confusion, staring.

He sighed. "What?"

"You... you killed him."

"We really don't have time for mundane narration."

"I... I don't... how do you know he deserved to... to die?"

"Oh really, Chloe," he said. His expression was one of mild disapproval, as if I was a child who had just misplaced her crayons. "I hoped we were beyond such reductive Kantian ethics."^[84]

"Reductive Kantian..." I couldn't form the words properly. "I... they didn't..."

"If all you're going to do is mumble unintelligibly, could you save it until after we've finished? Time is very much of the essence."

I didn't move. My arms and legs felt locked in place, strapped down. And worst of all, bearing down on me from above, was the Professor's disappointment, at my reaction, at having brought me here. At me.

"I can't do this," I said.

I may be remembering incorrectly. It is possible that what came later tainted my recollection of this moment, but when I think about it now I distinctly remember seeing a flash of anger, as if he was about to scream at me, or strike me down. But as quickly as it came, it passed, and his face softened into concern. He knelt down beside me.

"It appears cruel, but it is not. It is merely indifferent. And I am only so because the universe is indifferent. Morality and ethics are not constants. I have been to enough worlds to know they do not hold true as you imagine intuitively that they must. If we are to navigate this indifferent landscape then we, too, must be indifferent. We must keep our morality in check. Can you do that for me, Chloe? Because I need you."

I don't think I really processed his words. Certainly, I couldn't bring myself to understand them. But as the shock subsided, I realised that he was my only way out of this hellish place. I let myself be guided by him. A murderer. Everything I thought I knew had been turned on its head. Why not this too?

He held a hand out and I took it, rising to my feet.

"When you tread the unknown, you are forced to grow," he said. "Growth is painful, but it is the only way to advance, to become more than

you were before.”

With that, he continued on, stepping over the dead men and down the corridor. The word ‘advance’ rattled around my head as I followed him. *Advancement*. It seemed to haunt me, and something he said stuck in my brain. The only way to advance is to know what came before. The word itself comes from the same root as the French *avant*, or ‘before’.

With that thought came a feeling, a deep intuition that I was wrong. It surrounded me and consumed me. I was sure that everything I had worked out in the library, and with the Professor, was based on ridiculous assumptions and absurdly coincidental derivations. How had we possibly made it to this hospital? How did we know it was a hospital at all? It was mad guesswork, that was all.

The black cloud of my uncertainty thickened with every step I took down the corridor. Another corridor. Another labyrinth, with its Minotaur looming at the end. The only counterpoint to it was the burning certainty that I was in no way prepared for whatever I was heading into.

I stepped over the bodies.

Every instinct I had screamed at me to stop, to turn back, but the Professor was already pressing ahead and without him I would be lost again. Perished. Destroyed.

#

More corridors. More emptiness. Blank walls and cold lights. If this was a hospital, it was a strange one. Finally, a door.

“Professor,” I said. “I think I might have been wrong. Something else is going on here – I don’t think that ‘*replace*’ meant what we thought it did. It’s not ‘*advancement*’, maybe, but ‘*avant*’, what came *before*. I think you were replacing something else, something from before.”

His head snapped round. “What do you mean?”

The word ‘balanced’ still jostled in my brain, derived from ideas of being the same, coming from ‘bi-’, or two of something. “Something similar, something like you... that they had seen before, that you were... I don’t know. I just don’t know.”

“We no longer have time for this, Chloe.” The Professor opened the door to reveal a spiral escalator, twisting upwards to the top of the building. It slid seamlessly against the stone, without a single whirr of mechanics. Continually pushing upwards, the escalator rose towards the ceiling. Not even bothering to look back at me, he stepped on.

I jumped after him. “This... I don’t understand. How do you know where you’re going?”

“There are only two places people keep valuable things, up or down. Either in a basement, or high at the very top floor. Looking at the skyscrapers in this world, I am making a guess that we need to go upwards.”

We rose, quickly pushing higher and higher up the building. I shook my head – more guesses, more hypotheses. Silence hung thick in the column, as if nothing had been here in a hundred years.

Upwards.

There were too many coincidences falling into place. Too much was going to plan. If there really were an infinite multitude of worlds, the chances of my work being this correct were close to nil. I knew that.

The higher we rose, I was flooded with the realisation that I was a pawn in a far grander game than I had even begun to imagine – of worlds, and of Constants, but also much, much more. That deep, yellowish-green bubble of worry was back. Judy’s voice echoed in my head.

“Of course, a girl as smart as you wouldn’t have bought that story.”

A girl as smart as you...

We reached the top and there was another door. Without hesitation, the Professor pushed it open. My arms flinched, reaching to stop him, to warn him about... something, but the words wouldn’t come.

The room at the top of the building was mostly empty: a stone circle with a cabinet in the middle that let out a single light. In the cabinet was a collection of vials and fluids, the test tubes tinkling from the wind blowing in through the open stone arches. No light came through them – just the flat sides of buildings higher than ours. The glimmer in the centre petered out quickly, shrouding the edges of the room in complete darkness.

The Professor took a few steps forward, tentatively.

“This is it,” he whispered. “This is where he’s keeping it.”

The mechanical sound of guns clicking reverberated through the room. I screamed, darting forwards and clinging to the Professor.

All around us, stepping out of the shadows, pairs of guards appeared. Six of them. As one, they raised their weapons and pointed them directly at us. We were expected. It had been a trap from the very start.

“I knew you’d come, Roland.” That voice again, ringing out in the dark. I spun around, but could not see where it was coming from.

“So it was you that fed the information to Kiluvu,” the Professor replied. “I thought you might be waiting.”

“*What?*” I whispered.

“What did you give him?” the Professor asked, ignoring me. “I know it’s here, even if these are decoys. I will find out, you know this.”

“This has to end, Roland. One way or another.”

The Professor smiled, unshakeable. “You aren’t going to kill me. You need me.”

“You’ve got nowhere to go. Your artefact won’t save you this time.”

I looked to the Professor, desperate.

He turned himself towards me, and muttered, “Have faith, Chloe. Follow me exactly.”

Darting forward, he grabbed a handful of vials from the cabinet and dashed for the window, tugging me behind him. Breath caught in my throat; I followed in a stumbling run. I could feel the guns turn to follow us, but there was no gunshot. No fire.

“Where are you going, Roland? We’re a hundred feet in the air.”

The Professor twisted, grabbed the edge of the open stone arch and jumped, leaping out into the night.

I staggered to a halt, staring outwards. My chest thudded, pounding in my ears. We were countless stories up in the air – there was no way anyone could survive that fall.

Have faith, Chloe.

I stepped forward and my heart leapt into my throat as I looked out and downwards – into the black. People below shifted like a river, small as thousands of ants. The Professor was nowhere to be seen. I gripped the side, ready to follow him, and froze.

I couldn’t do it. I didn’t have faith. Of all the things I would have done, or could have done, I could not throw myself out of that building after him. I just didn’t have it in me.

I turned around to see them closing in on me. I was left – alone, lost, perished – at the whim of these men and whoever controlled them.

I barely resisted when they grabbed me, tugging at my hair and pulling me to the ground. My wrists seared as they tightened rope around them, my hands twisting in pain behind my back, my knees slamming against the stone floor.

It is strange what the mind chooses to remember. It has a way of smoothing over traumatic events.^[85] I don't think I screamed. I think I was too forlorn to scream, too despondent. The specifics are blurry.

I do recall kneeling on that floor, hands behind my back, as the man behind the voice revealed himself. I recall it most of all because of the frustrating academic realisation that I had got the words completely and utterly wrong. I'd been so sure. All of my reading, my research, my hypotheses. I couldn't have been more wrong.

He wasn't replacing his sins with someone, but he *was* a replacement. Another copy of something that was the same. Something that they had seen *before*. Balanced. Equal.

"I hope you aren't uncomfortable," the familiar voice said, deeper than the one I knew.

"Uncomfortable?"

"Please don't repeat me," he replied, stepping out of the shadows. He had a scar across his eye, and wore a black jacket, but these were mere details. Standing above me was the undeniable face of another Professor Roland Crannus. "I abhor repetition."

VIII

If there is one thing that the wealth of psychological experimentation throughout the twentieth century has shown us, it is that memory is not what it appears to be. Rather than an objective recalling of events, it is a constructive process, subject to the needs of the present.^[86] Each time we call upon a memory, we reorganise and recategorise it to fit the fears, interests and emotions of the moment in which we are recalling it. Memories are not static, but alive, and like life they adapt to suit their environment.^[87]

Indeed, while it might seem counterintuitive, the more a memory is accessed, the more we change it. The more we actively remember something, the more that memory distorts and evolves to fit who we are now. As such, it is our favourite memories, or perhaps our most traumatic, that are our least accurate.

I cannot even begin to recall my imprisonment in that terrible world with any degree of truth. It has been ten long years. And while I think it is important that I provide an account, I have no doubt that what I remember most clearly did not happen, and that what I experienced in that cell has gone from me.

But there is another source to which we can turn.

In the days after Pimlico, when the dust settled and the collective breath that the world had been holding was slowly released, people began to react. The world responded much as I had imagined it would: first chaos, then conspiracy, then finally rationalisation. The earth-shattering consequences of what Professor Crannus had done sequestered themselves into their respective realms: the scientific innovations were discussed primarily by

scientists; the political implications by poly-sci undergraduates; the drama by the newspapers.

But these weren't the first through the door. The first were the artists.^[88] As with all climactic events, there comes the deep-seated human desire to interpret and to represent. To distort the narrative into a new form.

But when I say distort, I do not mean it negatively. When Magritte famously presented a picture of a pipe with the subtitle 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe' (*this is not a pipe*), he highlighted the great disquiet of the modern era: the relationship between truth and representation is shaky at best. We are forever confronted with what art historian Robert Hughes called the 'slippage between image and object.'^[89] Magritte knew, as all great artists do, that perfect replication of truth is impossible. Art does not and cannot strive for it, but must instead aim to recreate the essence of the fact, to somehow recapture the core underneath. To quote Alan Moore, "artists use lies to tell the truth."^[90]

In many ways, this is what Todd Warner did.

A film-maker of Warner's prestige requires no introduction, and you will undoubtedly have seen his more celebrated works. Whether in his haunting exploration of North Korean labour camps,^[91] his bleak presentation of Antarctic wilderness,^[92] or his tightly emotional portrait of the late Aretha Franklin,^[93] he has always been known for his ability not just to represent, but to recreate the power of the moment using a myriad of photographic and digital mastery.

What few know is that in those early days, just after Pimlico happened, when my memories and my wounds were still fresh, he spent a fortnight with me. He moved in. Over that time, he collected interviews, he filmed me and tested me, he exposed me to art and literature and observed my reactions. He was determined, in face of the media hubbub, to capture an accurate snapshot of my experiences and recreate them for film.

At first I was accepting, believing that public understanding was a net good. But I soon came to realise he had settled, with a dogged focus, on one event in particular. He became obsessed with the time I spent alone in that cell, imprisoned and interrogated by this other Professor.

I do not know why, nor would he tell me. It seems true artists are as mercurial as their stereotyping would suggest. Nonetheless, when I discovered this, I shut the project down. Those were not memories I was willing to relive or able to share with the world. I sent him away

immediately and refused to take any further part in his artistic experimentation.

It was three years later that he sent his film to me.

It almost broke me. Using a small team of actors and a private studio, he had recreated the entire experience with blazing, incandescent accuracy. It speaks to his ability as a film-maker that my own memories seemed plain and disassociated by comparison.

I made him promise never to show anyone else and he never did. It was never meant for public consumption. His intention, he claimed, was only ever to help me. To hold a mirror up to nature, so to speak, so that I could see myself more clearly in it.

If I can allow myself a moment of indulgence, I would like to thank Todd Warner sincerely for his efforts, as the results were two-fold. In the first instance, he gave me a tool with which to confront arguably the most horrific experience of my life. He later encouraged me to release the film, if only to a small audience, as a way of giving myself power over the memory.^[94] Of regaining control. If it were not for him, this account would probably never have been written. I would not have had the strength.

The second, and accidental, consequence is that he has given me a reference point from which to communicate the actuality of this event to you. My recollection of the captivity has grown too detached, too distant. A pipe that is not a pipe. Instead, allow me to narrate to you as accurately as I can the events of Warner's film.

In the words of film critic and director Jean-Luc Godard: "Photography is truth. The cinema is truth twenty-four times a second."^[95]

#

The film opens with a single title card – 'Lost' – then cuts to black. In the disturbingly silent 63 seconds that follow, there are only five images that flash in front of the screen, each one for less than a second. The result is not a narrative, but a sensation. An activation of the amygdala fear-response in the viewer. If slowed down, one would be able to discern the following static images:

- A close up of a human eye, distorted by a lens.
- A blank white screen with blood gushing down the surface.
- Me, as a little girl, standing alone in a field.
- The face of Professor Roland Crannus. Angry. Disappointed.

- A close up of Picasso's *Guernica*, focused specifically on the depiction of the Minotaur.

Between the last flash and the next scene, there is an unsettling 12 seconds of nothing as the impact of the images settles itself in your brain.

The light strengthens so gradually that the moment appears to last far longer than 12 seconds. It is quite a surprise when the viewer realises that the screen is shaking. This shaking continues for most of the first act, imbuing the experience with a distressing and nauseating quality. The viewer barely has time to come to terms with it before a figure appears: Chloe Chan, hands bound, hair dangling across her face, arms bleeding. She is kneeling but she is not moving. It's clear that she has been here for some time – days, perhaps. Weeks.

She is naked, though it is clear that this is for no sexual purpose, only degradation and humiliation. Whatever fight she may once have had in her is gone. The posture of the actress makes that clear. And yet, underneath the veneer of submission there is something left, a sliver of resistance peeking through. It is a testament to both the directing and the actress that this spark is both barely visible, but completely, undeniably, there.

A door opens and she jerks. Her neck twists and her shoulders writhe to no purpose, just a Pavlovian response to visitors. She makes no sound.

Two men enter the room, swiftly and professionally, and they beat her. Some hard hits to the face and the stomach. Kicks to her legs. What stands out the most is not the brutality, but the lack of emotion with which it takes place, both from the perpetrators and the victim.

There's an intuitive human revulsion to emotionlessness. Even with the most depraved acts, we can understand the rationalising emotive factors. We are not scared of the raging man who in a moment of crazed fury murders his wife. We understand him. But by contrast, affectless violence is terrifying because it is so incomprehensible. The cold-blooded psychopathic Hannibal Lecter will always conjure more fear than the passionate lunatic. Elie Weisel, survivor of the holocaust and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, knew this well when he echoed Freud's words: "the opposite of love is not hate; its opposite is indifference."^[96]

As the beatings take place, their faces are blank, their postures unconcerned, and with every apathetic blow the atmosphere of horror is heightened palpably.

When they leave, the camera pulls back far enough so we can see her clothes. They are not piled, but neatly folded in the corner of the room – just out of reach. This is a new kind of hell. Whether this actually happened or not is beside the point. Crucially, the viewer is primed to recollect the story of Tantalus, thrown out of Olympus and punished by being placed in a pool of water under a fruit tree. Whenever he reached for the fruit, the branches would rise higher, out of reach. Chloe's clothes are left specifically in her view, as a humanising, protective layer that is just out of reach. The tantalising image of the garments to this exposed girl has a clear intention – she is being punished. This is no mere cruelty. She has done something wrong.

The clothes have a noticeable impact on her. Her only connection to a world outside of this room. A world that still makes sense. We watch her struggle to reach the clothes several times, knowing that she will never be able to. As this Sisyphean act repeats itself, the light fades into a second title card.

– ‘Perished’ –

When the door opens the second time, the camera does not let us see it. Instead, it closes in on Chloe's face. Warner chooses to switch to a wide lens for this shot, which is not traditionally used for a close-up. The result is that the camera has to be extremely close to her face – the image is almost distorted, an uncomfortable, too-real representation of the fact. In a 2015 interview, acclaimed cinematographer Emmanuel “Chivo” Lubezki said, “[a wide lens] creates a proximity with the characters that otherwise you don't have. When you're shooting with long lenses, even if you're shooting a close-up, you feel the air, the distance between the camera and the subject.”^[92] In contrast, Warner's shot allows no distance. The audience is right there with the camera, and a psychological layer is added to the physical dimension of the piece.

The shot does not leave her face. Our only metric to gauge the actions of the room are her expressions, which cycle through an immediately recognisable range: recognition, realisation, then fear. The lens allows us to experience these with her, and despite the fact we have yet to see who has entered the room, we are fully aware of his impact.

“What is your relationship with Roland Crannus?” the voice says. Warner layers the sound waves with a few extra tones, making the voice a discordant, uncomfortable auditory experience. The camera does not leave

her face, and in fact, her face is the only response we need. Just as the director layers sound, the actress layers her expressions. At first, the viewer notes panic – wide-eyes, a slight opening of the mouth. This is also tempered by reticence. Her cheeks strain to keep her face straight, the corners of her eyes tighten. Whatever panic she is experiencing, she is fighting, in vain, to keep it out of her face. Only after a few seconds do we notice a third expression, characterised by the eyes averted slightly downwards and the beginnings of a frown at the corners of her lips. Shame.

It is clear now why she is being punished. She has not yet spoken. She has not given up the information that this man wants, and, for some reason, she feels guilty. The audience is led to question if it is because the man questioning her wears the same face as the one she followed here.

“You will tell me where he is,” the voice demands. She says nothing. “You are, of course, aware that he is not returning for you.”

Her eyes flicker. She has heard this before.

“You are arrogant enough to think you know him better than I do. I *am* him. You do not have the slightest inkling of what he has done. You comprehend nothing of this. He doesn’t care about you.”

As the lens remains on her face, we note a slight tightening of the lips. A hint of defiance at these words. Despite all evidence to the contrary, she is certain that he is wrong, and that belief runs down to the very core of her being.

Though the interrogator remains out of frame, it can be assumed that he sees this too, for his voice turns cruel, laced with mockery.

“You think you’re important? You think you’re anything more than a tool, a key to get him what he wants?” A bark of laughter echoes through the room. “You are an idiot, crafted to his purpose and groomed to his needs.”

He leaves, the door closes and there is a moment of relief on Chloe’s face. She savours it. After what they have seen so far, the audience savours it too, like a drink of cool water. But even as this relief washes over us, it begins to turn bitter. The screen shakes more violently. The light darkens and then goes black.

For a time all we hear is her breathing. It punctuates the silence like a metronome, giving us our only anchor to judge the passing of time. Warner allows the breathing to continue, unbroken and untempered, for a whole 4 minutes and 3 seconds. In this time, we become deeply acquainted with the

sound – its wheezing, shallow, repetition. It becomes our only anchor to judge the passing of time, or to make head or tail of the narrative of events.

Film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum wrote that “in the absence of sensory input, our own bodies and minds fill the gap. I found my breathing matching the pace and speed of Chloe’s breathing. I found myself relying on its regularity to retain some sense of place.”^[98]

Warner lets it run just long enough to allow the audience to become dependent on it, then it changes. It starts to speed up, becoming irregular, punctuated with sounds and moans. It stops for a time – a short six seconds that feels like a lifetime – and then returns with a panicked, hyperventilating frenzy. As the audience adjusts to this, one thing becomes abundantly clear.

They are beating her in the dark.

#

A third title card ends the sequence and ushers in the next scene.

– “Family” –

When the light strengthens, the camera has pulled further out. Still using the wide-angle lens, Warner now exposes the entire room which, by comparison, now makes Chloe appear extremely small. The room is bare – a grey stone floor that bleeds into the walls so seamlessly that the corners disappear into the darkness.

When the interrogator enters this time, we still do not see his face, but his frame is visible from the back. He is wearing a dark brown suit – dark enough that it almost looks black – which stands in contrast to the white hair we can see on the back of his head. He looms, his posture pressed slightly forward.

In an 2017 article in *Cahiers du Cinema*, Jean-Luc Godard wrote, “the fact that we never see the face of the interrogating Professor in the film serves chiefly to highlight his role as a force, not an individual. Much like the use of mask in theatre, the character takes on a symbolic role. The interrogator is an embodiment of fear, of danger and of evil.”^[99]

He stands over her for some time before he repeats the question.

“What is your relationship with Roland Crannus?”

She looks up. “I’m never going to tell you anything.”

The words come out forcefully, like she is spitting. He raises one hand and slaps her. It is not hard, certainly no harder than the beatings she has been receiving, but it is humiliating. She does not raise her head a second time.

“You repeat yourself. I grow tired of it. Why defend a man who has left you here to die?”

“He hasn’t left me,” she murmurs. She struggles to look at his face. It is too familiar.

“An absurd assertion. We both know he has. I know him. I *am* him.”

“You are not him.” She is still not looking up. Her words are quiet, but clear. “You are a poor imitation. You are a twisted, bitter replica of him. Whatever has led you to become like this, whatever circumstances, they are not his. He has not left me.”

“A foolish claim, based on nothing but fantasy. You surely are aware of what he has done. What he is doing.”

“No, I don’t know what he’s done. But I have faith in him. He may not be perfect, but he is better than you. He would not do *this*.” On the last word, she looks up at him again. The defiance that flickered behind her eyes in the first scene rises to the forefront. “I believe in him. As a friend. A mentor. He has taken me in like family.”

“*Family?!?*”

The word screams across the room. The camera shakes again, but this time it is different. At the start of the film, Warner used a dolly to create the rapid movement, while not losing focus on the scene. The result was an intense feeling of discomfort and fear, but without a loss of focus. This time, he adds both panning and tilts, resulting in an undeniable emotive expression: anger.

“You... you sit there, you...” he splutters, “... working with *him*, and you have the gall to mention *family?*” The Professor hits her again, and again. He storms out of the room and slams the door.

Silence falls.

As the camera closes in on Chloe’s bruised face, we know what she knows. His hits have lost the power they had a moment ago. She does not know why, but for the first time, he has shown a loss of control. A chink in the armour.

#

The third time the Professor enters, he appears less dominant. This is partly because of his outburst, but also because Warner places the camera slightly, almost imperceptibly, higher. It is not enough to note a complete change in angle, but it is enough to impact his stature on a palpable level, making him seem smaller than before.

Chloe is ready for him. Once again, the actress's ability to layer expressions comes into its own. Whereas before she was clearly subservient, now she merely appears to be.^[100] Warner shows his keen understanding of the relationship between subject and viewer. The underlying defiance in her expression has grown enough for us to notice, but not so much that we assume the interrogator can see it as well.

"I'm ready to tell you everything I know," she says. We immediately understand this to be a ploy.

"Go ahead."

"Not yet," she replies. "I want at least to have my hands untied. Allow me at least a sense of my humanity, if I'm going to give up on my principles."

The Professor watches her for a moment. Though we cannot see his face, we can trace a map of his thoughts across the silence of his back. He is sceptical, but, ultimately, decides he has little to lose by it. She is not going anywhere.

"So be it."

At this moment, the camera pans slightly to the right. Chloe and her interrogator are no longer in the field of view. Instead, the neatly folded pile of her clothes takes the centre focus.

Like the breathing earlier, we are once again treated to an entirely auditory narrative. Ropes being untied, the scuff of feet against floor. However, where before the lack of any visual stimulation forced us to focus on the sound, here the opposite is true. As the only visual element in the scene, the pile of clothes becomes the anchor for our focus and the discussion in the background almost secondary. We are forced to examine it, in all its detail, and ask ourselves what it represents. Home? Salvation? Humanity?^[101]

"What is your relationship with Roland Crannus?"

"He is my family," she says.

"That man knows nothing of family." His voice is more measured. He has taken back control of the word.

"I worked with his son," she says, playing the only card she can think of, the only familial connection she knows. She is lying to push his boundaries. The concept caused an outburst in him earlier, perhaps it will again. "We're due to be married soon. He's to be my father-in-law."

"Liar."

“I am not lying,” she says, aware of his anger returning, goading it. “It is completely true. We’re family, the Professor, his son and I.”

“*HOW DARE YOU?*” The scream punches through the air. There is the sound of scuffling, then beating. Chloe is thrown across the screen, tumbling alongside her pile of clothes. She rolls over it.

“You are just as arrogant as he is,” he shouts. “I should have seen it. I should have known he’d send someone like *you*.”

The back of the Professor comes into view, following her. He kicks her in the stomach and she cries. He grabs her hair and lifts her, leaving the dishevelled clothes piled on the floor. The scene is short, but uncomfortable. Chloe is dragged on and off screen, but the camera never leaves the pile of clothes.

Only when the Professor is done, and he closes the door behind him, do we see it. When darkness plunges into the room again, it is tempered by a single light glowing from underneath her jeans.

She has turned her phone on.

#

The film ends here, even though my story does not. In speaking to Warner about his ending, he told me that he was not interested in how my physical capture ended, only in the struggle that led me to escape it.

There is not much to add about my rescue. While it might seem to you that my hope had been a vain and silly one, I remember it being as concrete as fact. Wherever they had taken me, the Professor would be searching for a way to get me out. I had faith in that. All he needed was some guidance. I didn’t know how he would be able to track a mobile phone across multiple worlds, nor did I need to. I simply knew, with unshakeable certainty, that he could.

I don’t know how much longer I was there before he came. They continued to hurt me, and I continued to hold out. My hope sustained me.

One day, there were shouts outside and the sound of guns. Soon, the door opened and out of it came the Professor, Kiluvu and his men close behind. Perhaps it was the dark, but he appeared to arrive in a blaze of white light, like a saint or a hero of legend. I had almost seen him as a saviour before, pulling me from the drudgery and disappointment of my surroundings into a thrilling world of academic discovery. But he was twice

my saviour in this moment. There were no longer any moral quandaries, any bubbling concerns. I owed the Professor my life.

Kiluvu untied me, covered me in a blanket and lifted me into the air. I was drifting, barely conscious from the trauma of my torture, but I remember clearly the Professor's face beside mine, his voice in my ear.

"It's over," he said. "I'm here. It's all over."

And at the time – hazy, weak, emotionally fraught – I was naive enough to believe him.

IX

Soon after my ordeal, and my rescue, I lost consciousness. When I woke, I was in a hospital bed.

There are few people I would have less expected to wake up next to after my tragedy than Daniel Zolowski, or ‘Zolo’ as he was known for most of his adult life. I was expecting the Professor, or perhaps even the enigmatic Kiluvu. But instead, I was greeted by a man I had only spoken to in passing. A stranger.

It was a private room. I was hooked up to a variety of IV drips, plasters and pads spread across my aching body.^[102] When my eyes opened, he was sitting in the corner of the room, feet up and playing some kind of game on his phone. Tinny sounds of lightning bolts and gunshots jittered out of it, punctuating the silence.

“Where am I?” I asked.

“In bed.” Zolo didn’t look away from his phone. I fell silent, unable to deal with his abrasiveness. All I could feel was a heavy weariness over my whole body, like I’d been scrunched up and rolled out. I let my eyes droop, but as they slipped shut, I suddenly felt cold. Something invasive, intensely upsetting pressed its way into my head and I shuddered, jerking awake.

I could not sleep.

“Where’s the Professor?”

“Busy.”

I took a breath. “Busy?”

“Yes, busy,” he said, putting his phone down on the table. The game still spurted out zaps and bangs. “Busy doing what he does. Busy cleaning up your mess.”

“My...” I sputtered. “What do you mean my mess?”

He shrugged. “If you had jumped, you wouldn’t have been in this position. He wouldn’t have had to enlist the Sombasi warlords^[103] and invade a world oblivious to this whole debacle. That involves no small amount of platitudes and politicking. Kiluvu has his own business to deal with, after all.”

“I didn’t...” The accusation overwhelmed me, just barely conscious as I was. It felt like another attack, another battery. “I couldn’t. We were at the top of a...”

“You think Roland didn’t know that?” he asked, his lips curling into a cold smile. “If there’s one thing you need to understand, it’s that when he asks you to do something, you do it.”

I gulped, guilt washing over me. “How? How was I supposed to...” My words fell short as a cold wave of distress washed over them.

“If you think Roland wasn’t ready, you haven’t been paying attention. You’ve probably been around him long enough to realise that he’s ten steps ahead of everyone else. Now imagine him being fifty steps ahead of that, and you’ll get a better picture.” He shook his head. “You were never in any danger.”

“*Danger?*” I shouted, my throat raw as the words barked out of it. “They *tortured me.*”

He shrugged, picking his phone up again.

I remember a vivid sense of being outside of my body in that room, of depersonalisation and derealisation. Even though I could still palpably feel every scathing bruise, every throbbing scar, every twisted tendon, it was as though I was sitting to one side, watching myself in bed.

There I was – feeling weak, feeling alone, feeling abandoned. I was able to understand my feelings logically, as if detached from them. I recognised that these emotions were there, as if I might have read about them. But I was an observer with no feelings, only a flatness to my form and an emptiness inside of me.

“Why are you here?” I asked. I watched myself ask it.

“Roland asked me to,” he replied, eyes back to his game. “He wanted to make sure you were alright.”

I noticed myself soften, a wave of relief come over me. He was watching over me. Still, I began to wonder if Zolo was right, if I was alone here because I had not been faithful enough. Because I was guilty.

Did Sarah know what had happened to me? Did anyone?

I lay there in silence, and Zolo made no attempts to break it.

A couple of times, I wanted to get back inside my own body, to see how I really felt. But when I tried, I felt a sudden panic wash over me, and I was in that room again and the walls were darkening, and closing in, and I would have to escape myself. Then I was beside myself again, watching my hands shake and my arms tremble.

I could see my chest pounding, rising and falling.

Eventually, nightmares or no nightmares, the body demands a price. I fell asleep, and dreamt of that dark room. Broken, bloody, bruised. But this time Sarah was in it, too. I could just make out the shape of her body silhouetting the black. Her back was to me, and while I tried to cry out for her I found that I could not. The words stuck in my throat, because I had no mouth. No lips. Just a blank sheet of a face.

If only I could make her notice me, if only I could make some kind of noise, she would turn. She would see me and she would rush to me and hold me, dragging me from this depth of cold black and into the light and warmth.

But no matter how much I twisted against my ropes, how much I screamed, how much I strained, no sound came out. Not a word.

When I woke, I was crying.

When I woke the second time, Zolo was adjusting my IV. I saw his face above me, looking down at me with tears in my eyes, and I felt an intense shame at having been caught like this. At my weakness. I realised that all I wanted was Sarah, to be beside me, to hold me and make me feel safe. The longing throbbed in my chest and my ears.

For a moment, I saw the lines of his expression softened, tempered. As he moved around my bed, he propped up my pillows and checked my wounds, he lifted my bandages and cleaned them. He did this all without emotion, his eyes blank as an automaton.

“I didn’t think you’d still be here,” I murmured. He shrugged, moving back to his seat.

For a time we sat in silence, but the longer it lasted, the more I could feel that room closing in on me again. The light receding. I needed someone to keep me in the present, no matter who it was.

“How long have I been here?”

“Three days. And some.”

“You’ve been here the whole time?”

He nodded, not looking at me.

“You must have a lot of love for the Professor,” I said. “To do this for him.”

“Greatest man who ever lived.”

“I...” The certainty of the remark caught me off guard. “I think...”

I frowned. Another image was pressing its way into my head now. One I didn’t want to be there. The Professor slipping that knife from his belt and slicing a man’s throat.

Zolo sat up, looking at me. My hands were shaking again. “Did he ever tell you how I met him?” he asked, then shook his head. “Of course he didn’t. It’s not important to him.”

“What’s not important to him?” I whispered. I was finding it hard to follow the conversation. I was just repeating back what he was saying to me, as if saying my lines would keep the production rolling forward.

“Where I came from. Who I was, before all this.”^[104] He looked up at me, the cold whites of his eyes boring inwards. “Governments talk about rehabilitation, about preventing recidivism, but really it’s all just a way to keep the wrong people under the right thumbs. They get us all to pretend that if you work hard enough at being *good*, whatever that means, then...” He petered off, and turned back to his phone. “It’s not important.”

“You were in prison?”

He didn’t look up. “A few times. And juvenile detention centres before that. Not everyone is born to win like you are.”

I flinched. “That’s not fair. It’s not... it hasn’t been easy, for me.”

He barked a laugh at me. “Really? Hasn’t been easy? Let me guess – came from money, went to a private school, had some kind of issue that made life feel like it was difficult for you as well – family conflict? Bad grades?”

“You don’t know anything about me.”

“I don’t need to. Asian kid at Warwick University. British accent. Your privilege is leaking out of you like blood.”

I fell silent, shamed by his assumptions about me. They didn’t feel right, but I had no words with which to combat them.

“Look: I was born in a refugee camp. My parents died. I managed to make it as far as the UK, to some shitty foster homes on council estates. Everyone I grew up with or knew is in prison, dealing drugs or dead.” He

said this dispassionately, as if he were reading a textbook. “If they had your background, they’d be some of the most famous people alive. Some of the smartest, most celebrated writers, scientists, politicians. But nobody wants to know. Only Roland. Only Roland gives that chance.”

“How?”

“Found me in a library in a juvenile detention centre, reading books way too advanced for my age because that’s all they had. He saw potential.”

“Only because he needed you, though,” I said, wondering at my own place in all this. “Only because you had something he could use.”

“Well obviously.” He smacked his head in mockery. “That’s why anybody does anything. Don’t treat me like an idiot. The point is, that it doesn’t matter. Roland doesn’t follow the norms, the strata, the expectations that others have about who you should be and how you should act, because he doesn’t care about them. He doesn’t play by anyone’s rules. He levels the playing field.”^[105]

“He killed someone.”

Zolo stared at me, incredulous. He blinked a couple of times, then burst out laughing. I shuffled uncomfortably.

“He did.” The words slithered out of me, betrayal tainting each syllable. “I watched it happen.”

“That’s so cute,” he said. “Listen: I know he has. So have I. So has any soldier, or politician. So has any bus or hurricane or disease. So have half the kids on the street in that council estate you avoid at night. You going to damn them, too?” He shook his head. “The sanctity of life is such a refuge of the privileged. *People* aren’t that important. People die all the time for no reason at all. But the moment Roland decides someone should die for a good reason, you balk? That makes no sense at all. It’s not logical.”

“It’s not...” I rubbed my head. “It isn’t up to him to decide.”

Zolo shrugged his shoulders, turning back to his phone. “All I know is that in my entire life there’s only one person that’s been worth rooting for. Yes, it sounds like I idolise him. Is that a bad thing? Is it wrong to idolise someone if they are worth it?”

I settled back into my pillows. I had no answer for him. My arms still throbbed with bruises.

“I’m still trying to wrap my head around the fact that there’s two of him,” I said.

“Oh, there’s more than two.”

“What?” I jerked up, pain shooting down my side. My breathing quickened.

“He’s a Constant,” he said, eyes not leaving his phone screen. “There’s an infinite number of him. Or at least, there were.”

“What do you mean ‘were’?”

“It’s one of those great mathematical issues, isn’t it? If you have an infinite number of people, and a hundred of them die, you’ve still got an infinite number of people. But its a smaller infinity. It’s a hard concept to get your head around.”

“Hundreds of him have *died*?”

He put his phone back down, annoyed, and turned to me. “There’s a war going on, Chloe.^[106] You have to be blind to miss that. A war across the worlds, and none of these idiots has any idea. You ask me? I think he killed them.”

My mouth dropped open. “He?”

“You know exactly who I’m talking about. The other Professor.”

My hands tightened. We hadn’t spoken about him yet – not openly. Somehow even mentioning him seemed transgressive. We had tempted fate and suddenly there was a very present danger in this room. I wanted to get out of my bed. I wanted to run somewhere, anywhere but here. Memories I was desperately trying to bury were wriggling their way a little too close to the surface.

“But...” I frowned, still trying to make sense of this information. “What is the other...” I gulped. “What is *he* after? What is this war being fought over?”

Zolo raised his eyebrows. “Do you have any idea how stupid that question is?”

I just gawped back at him and he sighed.

“When the financial crash happened earlier this year,” he said. “I saw a BBC news segment which asked, in a public survey, ‘*Should we bail out the banks?*’ I couldn’t stop laughing. It was so absurd. Unless you have spent your entire life studying economics, world politics and accountancy, this question is irrelevant. Even the terms are ludicrously undefined. Who is ‘we’? – the taxpayers, the government, some branch of the government, the World Bank? – What does ‘bail out’ mean in this context? A cash injection, a declaration of insolvency, a nationalisation? What is even being referred to as ‘banks’ in this context?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“By trying to reduce something that complex down to a reasonable and answerable question, you end up making the question meaningless. Tell me – what was the first world war fought over?”

I stared at him, confused.

“You’re a clever girl. Tell me what the first world war was fought over. Go on.”

“Uh..., I... A lot of things. Dominance, circumstance, ethnicity. There are whole libraries of work trying to get to the bottom of that – it’s impossible to just...”

“And the 2nd gulf war, in 2003? What was that fought over?”

“Okay,” I murmured. “I get your point.”

“Do you? Do you really? Because I can see your brain working, still trying to understand this whole situation like it can be boiled down to a single, reductive narrative. It’s such a pathetically human endeavour – to need answers to things that are so impossibly complicated that there are no answers. The truth is, most of these world events are such an intense melting pot of coincidence and timeliness, personal vendettas, global trends and international conspiracies, that the question – *what was it fought over?* – doesn’t actually mean anything anymore.”

My face blushed. I wanted to bury it in my pillow, but turning still hurt. Everything still hurt.

“War is just war,” he continued. “It happens. It’s been happening for all human history. I don’t know everything, but I know who I trust. I know who has earned my respect. Roland’s been like a father to me. And if I have to pick a side, that’s enough for me. At some point, you’re going to have to do the same.”

Zolo didn’t return to his phone, but instead stared out the window at the grey sky, silent.

“I don’t want you here,” I said. “I want Sarah.”

“Who’s Sarah?”

I didn’t reply. I let the silence filter its way through the room, as if it might help my winding thoughts straighten into something I could grasp onto. I wondered who else I might want here, if not her. Certainly not my family – distance had not made the heart grow fonder, but rather had dulled their already lacking presence in my life.

“Have you ever met the Professor’s son?” I asked.

For the first time since he had been in the room with me, he looked confused. He frowned at his phone screen, then looked back up at me.

“What?”

“Have you ever met him? I keep thinking about that photo on his desk. He’s the only person that the Professor really seems to have a connection with. I don’t know if he had a wife or...”

“His son is dead.”

I blinked, staring back at him.

“Roland’s son died years ago, before I knew him. Cancer. Didn’t you know?”

I can’t remember exactly what I did then, but I’m quite sure I didn’t say anything. I have the distinct memory that nothing felt quite right anymore, and that certain assumptions that I had made about the world were no longer true. Eventually, I must have drifted off to sleep again, because when I woke again this time, Zolo wasn’t there.

Sarah was.

#

She’d been searching for me for days, she said. She had been frantic. She tried to get in contact with my parents, thinking that I had for some reason disappeared back to Hong Kong. She had tried to find the Professor, but failed. She was just about to go to the police when Zolo found her and brought her here.

I remember thinking that I wanted to appear strong for her. That I wanted to show that I was resilient, that I was okay, that I didn’t want to worry her. This lasted for about ten seconds. At the sight of her face – stricken with worry and relief and caring – I burst into tears.

She didn’t say a word. She just held me, pulling me in lightly until even the sharp bruises on my skin seemed to dull to nothingness.

We didn’t speak much in that hospital room. She knew, somehow, that I wanted to be anywhere else. That I wanted to feel safe, to feel at home. She held my hand the entire time as we checked out, got in a taxi, and returned to her room. Through the journey, I could feel myself drifting away into a blackness of not being there, of not being anywhere. I squeezed her hand tighter, trying to hold on to her, my anchor, to keep me in this world.

I wanted to thank her, to beg her to stay with me even though I knew she would, to tell her how much I needed her, but I couldn’t find the words right away. I babbled and she shushed me. She pressed her lips against my

forehead and my worries soothed, like they were being sucked right out of my brain. A deep and heavy weariness came over my whole body. The moment she put me down in her bed, I fell asleep.

Several times during the night I woke, shaking, and she would have to calm me. She'd hold me in her arms, the two of us wrapped in a duvet, and just wait as the tears and the panic worked their way through me, slipped out of me.

It was a couple of days before I was ready to talk. She asked me what had happened and I told her what I could, slowly, in starts and stops, punctuated by ellipses and colons, justifications and backtracking.

There were bits that I missed. Bits that I could not share. There was a degeneration at work already in my mind – my memories were being broken down, filtered, hidden away. Much may not have made sense, but she listened all the same. She heard my concerns and my worries, she tended to my wounds, she brought me food and water.

Some nights I would jerk awake, certain that I was back in that room, that the other Professor was in here with me. I would leap out of bed, and run to the door, or the window, and fiddle with the lock, trying desperately to get out. Sarah would come to me, calmly, peacefully, and guide me back to bed.

Slowly, normalcy returned. My sense of time had shifted. I did not know how long I had been there – a few days? A week?

I asked Sarah to go back to my room for my things. I couldn't return there. It was a stark reminder of things that were past, and I didn't want to go back. With Sarah I felt safe, and with Sarah I would stay. This felt like a new beginning. Another start.

When my body had healed enough, we had sex again. We didn't speak much. I remember being struck by how peaceful it was. How serene. Even though my body still ached, for a time my mind was filled with a kind of ease that I'd never known anywhere else.

"It's not like this with other people," I said to her. My eyes were getting drowsy, closing. She pressed her lips against my eyelids.

"I know," she said.

"No," I murmured. I was fighting to stay awake, to try to tell her what I really meant. It was important. In my memories, that moment was excruciatingly intense, like a warm iron being pressed down onto my chest. "I mean, I don't think other people have this."

“I know. You make me very happy. You really do. Now, sleep. You need it.”

I remember waking in the night by her side, again in the cold light of the morning. She wasn't up yet – she rarely woke much before ten. Those hours were precious: I would begin to rouse, to pull myself in close to her. She would, without a conscious effort, respond. Her body would twist, her hair falling just enough to the side to allow me to kiss her neck, and press my cheek against the nape of her shoulder.

Often, in those quiet moments as she slept, I would whisper something into her neck. Not into her ear, for fear that it might pass too close to being heard and wake her, and she would witness me. Instead, into her skin, into the warmth of her touch.

“I love you.”

You might doubt that I loved her, given my early reticence. Or that I had time to know her enough to love her. You are right to doubt it, I think. There is a lot that is called love that is not love, and there are many fooled by the delusion of love. But how am I possibly able to transcribe how I felt to you?

When we think of the purest examples of love, we think of fiction. Paris and Helen. *Romeo and Juliet*. *Anna Karenina*. *Pride and Prejudice*. It is easy for writers to create pure love in a way that doesn't really exist in the world – they can pick and choose, omit details, invent moments. Because we know it's fiction, we accept it. We suspend disbelief, just as we would for a fantastical tale of magic and heroism. For when we encounter the same kind of love in the real world, the first thing we do is fear it. We doubt its integrity, as if it's somehow out to trap us.

But if you trace the root of the word back, as far as it will go, past the Old English *lufu*, and the Old High German *luba*, to the Proto-Indo-European *lew-*, you find that it has never had any other meaning. Almost every word is a mixture – a distortion of other concepts and ideas that have come before it, but not the word 'love'. Love has always been love: a quintessential, unchanging part of the *homo sapiens*' experience. The Professor once asked me what it was that made us human, and now, looking back, I can't think of anything more human than love.

Why, then, are we so afraid of those three little words? – ‘I love you.’ Perhaps because they are so inescapable. There is no hiding from the grammar of it. The sentence is a sentence in its purest form: the subject, the

verb and the object. It defies interpretation. Like an interrogator, it ties the speaker and listener down – the ‘I’ and the ‘you’ – and forces both to consider what that middle verb means for them.

I knew what it meant for me. I was not scared of love, not anymore. When I ran away with Valerie back in 2006, it had been out of a frantic desire to prove that I could love something, or someone, in the face of the fierce hypocrisy that I had faced. It was a shallow protest – a scream at the world, born more out of anger and frustration than out of anything real.

It wasn’t until Sarah took me from the hospital room that I realised that love is not about proving anything to anyone, but about accepting your own place in the world as it relates to others. Zolo was right: there was nothing wrong with idolising someone who was worth it. Sarah had proven herself to be worth it. What is love, after all, if not a form of idolisation?

I hadn’t forgotten about the Professor. After my rescue, I had still not seen him, and the longer that continued the more anxious I grew.

“You’ve got to see him again,” Sarah said to me, her feet up on her desk. It was just before noon and she was blowing smoke out the window. “I don’t really want you to, but you’re not going to rest until you do. I know it’s tough, but you can’t keep avoiding this forever.”

I was lying back on her bed. She’d offered me a beer, but I’d said no.

“Every time I think about the Professor, I see his face. The same face.” I shuddered. “It’s like it all comes rushing back in a huge, incomprehensible way.”

“But you’re still waiting,” she said. “I can see it. You watch the phone like he’s going to call at any time. If you could actually just walk away from all of this, I’d say do it. Let it be. But you can’t, can you?”

“I can’t.” I curled my knees up onto the bed and hugged them. “You’re right. This is... Sarah, this is everything I’ve always wanted.”

“To be beaten up, to be tortured?”

“No. To be... to be *doing something*. The Professor is at the centre of the most important work done in centuries, perhaps ever. When his research comes out to the world, people are going to talk about him in the same breath as Aristotle, as Isaac Newton, as... as Jesus.”

She laughed.

“Seriously,” I said, sitting up earnestly. “Am I really going to sit here and choose not to be a part of that? Am I going to be remembered as the girl who gave up when it got too hard?”

She frowned. “Is that what this is about – being remembered?”

“No! It’s about... it’s about discovery. It’s about not being satisfied with the mundane.”

“Hey.” She blew a circle of smoke into the air and took a swig of her beer. “Your life might be mundane. Mine is pretty sweet.”

I shook my head. “I don’t know how you do it.”

“Do what?”

“Be so satisfied. Be so completely in the moment. Isn’t it disappointing?”

She raised an eyebrow. “You find this disappointing? Well, that’s romantic.”

“You know that isn’t what I meant.”

She opened her mouth, as if to say something, then let it fall shut. She shrugged, turning away from me. “I’m just opening myself up to the tender indifference of the world, and letting it wash through me.”^[107]

“You know, even though it baffles me, I think your ability to sit there in your pyjamas, smoking and drinking and not caring is one of the things I love most about you.”

She sighed. “There’s that word again.”

“What word?”

“Don’t think I haven’t heard you, Chloe, whispering sweet nothings to me in the middle of the night. This is special, don’t get me wrong. But you’re recovering. I don’t want you to rush into things. Especially if you find them disappointing.”

I felt instantly hot, my cheeks burning from the excitement and the embarrassment of the moment.

“That’s not what I... You’re... like a counterpoint,” I said, trying to explain myself. “Or an anchor. I need you. You keep me grounded. You keep me sane.” I felt like I was in a confessional, except what I was saying wasn’t the real truth. It was a tempered, more logical version of the truth that made me sound less crazy.

I tried to change the focus.

“Sarah?” I asked. “You know that Larkin poem you told me about. It’s been running through my mind. Do you think he’s right? That what will survive of us, as a species, is love?”

She shook her head. “It’s not about love. Well, not just love. It’s about those perfect images that we have in our heads. Those symbols. Things like

honour and purity and, yes, love. He's saying that it doesn't matter how petty or stupid we all get as humans, we're going to be remembered in terms of those ideals. Nobody ever thinks to suggest that maybe Caesar was a bit of a coward now and then, that Odysseus might have beaten Penelope when he got drunk or angry, that Paris might not have liked the size of Helen's tits. What survives is our tendency to simplify things, to elevate them."

"And do you..." I chewed over my words. "Do you think that's a good thing?"

"I think that's a human thing. Doesn't matter if it's good or bad, there's no getting around it." She gave me a kiss, then took a swig of beer. "I love you too, Chloe Chan. God help me, you're difficult, but I really fucking do. But look, if you can't leave this Professor alone, then get off your ass and do something about it. You haven't left this room for a week, waiting for him to call. So stop waiting and go find him. I know you're scared, but if you're going to recover from this, and I mean *really* recover, you need to take some control back. I do love you, but you can't hide in my room the rest of your life."

I lay back. I knew she was right, of course. But every time I thought about stepping out that door, the fear rushed through me.

It was an immediate fear that going back into his world would mean the possibility of encountering the other Professor again, from whom I was only just recovering. This was not a cognitive fear, for I was not then able really to think about my captivity yet, but a physical one. The mere thought of him sent sweat dripping down my chest, made my breathing shallow, set my hands shivering.

There was another fear beneath that. It was buried so low that for most of the time I had been able to quash it. It was not a fear that I was ready to accept existed, or perhaps one that I was telling myself I had overcome. Zolo's words had helped, had allowed me to forgive the Professor some of his sins.

But sometimes, if I lay in Sarah's bed long enough not thinking about anything at all, the feeling would come back – the worry – and I would have to go through the arguments, the logic, like a mantra in order to make it go away again.

#

The next morning, I received an email asking me to meet my supervising tutor. I only noticed it because I had been keeping an eye on my emails for the Professor, though he had never emailed me before. Nestled amongst almost fifty-seven other unread messages, this one popped up on my screen. It was the fifth in a chain of emails that I had not read. I hadn't realised the extent to which the Professor had consumed my life. My tutor wanted to meet me today, and the implication was that if I missed this meeting, there would not be another.

Sarah had already gone out for the morning, and I was alone. Facing the outside world did not yet feel like something I was ready to do. But what would happen if I didn't go? Would they kick me off the course? It was an abstract worry that did little to concern me. Pursuing an undergraduates degree in Language and Linguistics seemed so distant from what my life had become; I felt unable to connect to it. That had been another Chloe, in another world, perhaps.

Still, pragmatism won out. I was on campus, and making it to one meeting shouldn't be impossible. And maybe, just maybe, I would bump into the Professor on the way.

The tutor's office was cold and stale. The only books on the shelf were textbooks, ready-made and packaged for courses designed to sell them. There was a metal office chair on one side of a ill-fitted Ikea desk. She sat on the other, glasses tight against her face, nose frowning.

"Ms. Chan," she said, visibly making the effort to smile. "Or can I call you Chloe?"

I realised that I did not know her name anymore. I was sure that I had, once. I nodded.

"I'm glad to finally catch you. You've missed a very worrying number of seminars and even a couple of papers. In fact, it seems from our records that you've been mostly absent from classes and assessment of any kind for several months. Does that seem correct to you?"

I frowned at the question, unsure what it meant. Was she expecting me to challenge it?

"No, that's right," I said. "I've had a couple of... emergencies."

"Emergencies?"

"Please don't repeat me."

She blinked, pushing her already tight glasses further back onto her eyes. Her knuckles clicked as she did it.

“Chloe,” she said, slowly. “You need to understand the seriousness of your situation here. Where have you been? Your course is continuing on without you and you’re slipping. Unless we can establish an appropriate reason for your absence, there will be disciplinary measures. You may be removed from the course and, by extension, the University.”

I almost laughed. It seemed to me that my removal from the course was very low on the list of serious matters in my life.

“This is because you’re involved with the protests, isn’t it?” she said.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“This whole G20 malarkey that’s going on across school. The students camping out and occupying the main fields.^[108] You look like you’ve been camping for a month, if I’m honest. I’ve seen it before, students get caught up in whatever wave of idealism happens to be washing through the campus and they forget about their studies, they think they’re fighting for a greater cause.”

I shook my head. “It’s not the protests. I couldn’t care less whether the leaders of the countries of the world are meeting or not, if I’m honest.”

“I see,” she said. “A standard fare, then, by the look of you. I must say this is unusual, and I find myself quite disappointed.”

I bristled. “How do you mean?”

“Well, there’s always a certain percentage of students that end up too focused on partying and staying up late and drunken debauchery and forget that they are actually at a *university*. But I remember you from the start of the year – you showed promise. You were interested. I think it’s a shame, that’s all.”

The irony of her accusation was not lost on me. The disappointments of my early days here washed through my mind. “It’s not partying.”

“Then *what is it?* Because believe me, I hear the ‘family emergency’ schtick more than you can imagine. And I don’t mean to sound insensitive, but unless you can provide some genuine proof of...”

“I don’t have time for this.” I stood up and she stared at me, baffled. “I just don’t have time to sit here and waste time on this nonsense. There are things going on in the world so impossibly large that I can’t even begin to explain them to you. You wouldn’t believe a word of it, even if I did. But I want to thank you, because what this meeting has done is helped me realise what’s important. Do what you will – throw me off the course, exercise your power. The most important discovery in humankind is being explored

right now and I'm here, trying to make up excuses why I didn't attend trivial lectures and poorly delivered seminars."

"Chloe..." she said, shaking her head. I waited, but it appeared she had nothing else to add. I turned, closed the door behind me, and headed directly for the Social Studies building and Professor Roland Crannus.

There was no longer any doubt in my mind. Since arriving at University, he'd been the only thing that hadn't been a disappointment. Him and Sarah, I suppose. And yes – I had got caught up in the academic thrill, but I was living at the cusp of something great. Something historic. Of course, he wasn't perfect, but was anybody? Gandhi forced young girls to sleep in the same bed as him. George Washington was a slave owner. Maybe Zolo was right. Who am I to judge such a man? After all, would anyone look back in time and judge someone for idolising Leonardo Da Vinci, or Socrates?"^[109]

I hurried to his office. I took the twists and turns that had now etched their way into me, noting where corridors had changed and stairways shifted. Before long, I stood before his office door.

It was locked.

I remember wanting to smack myself in the head. Of course he wouldn't just be there, waiting for me, whenever I needed him to be. This was not how this relationship worked. No matter. I understood what was important and I would find him soon, whether in the basement or somewhere in another distant world.

I sighed happily at the realisation, comforted by its certainty and by my own resoluteness. While, in the past week, I felt like Sarah had given me a new beginning, I knew that my story with the Professor was not at an end. There was more to come, and more discoveries to be made. I was sure of it.

I was overcome, then, with an immediate exhaustion. I stumbled a little, my eyes drooping. It had taken more effort than I had expected to get myself here, both physically and mentally. Suddenly, in that moment, all I wanted to do was go back to Sarah's room, to her bed, and have her hold me again.

I took the steps two at a time, desperate to return. To feel warm again. I hurried past the Arts building and down across the road, hood up against the wind.

"Hey!"

I stumbled for a moment, thinking that I recognised the voice. When I realised that I did, I pushed on.

“Hey, Chloe! Don’t you fucking run from me.”

I stopped, the language nailing my feet to place, and turned. James was barrelling towards me.

“I’m not running anywhere, James. I’m just trying to...”

“Oh no,” he said, shoving an accusatory finger in my face. “Oh no you don’t, with your *I’m just trying to...* and *I’ll contact you later...* Where do you get off being such a bitch?!”

I took a step back, as if slapped.

“Oh, don’t play cute and innocent with me, Chloe. I know you’ve been avoiding me. For *weeks*. Is this fun for you? Leading me on, making me promises and then just hiding? Not even the courtesy of a fucking *no*?”

“I wasn’t trying to lead you on.”

“Bullshit,” he said, taking another step towards me. “Fucking bullshit. I’m just trying to be a nice guy, and you think you can just sleep with me then ditch me and never speak to me again? Then I hear all about you and *Sarah*.” He spat her name like it was venom. “That hippie blowout! If I’d known you were such a slut I would never have touched you.”

I couldn’t face this. I pulled away from him, but he grabbed my shoulder, tugging me back. Pain rushed down my spine, memories of the violent hands grasping me, beating me. I spun around and slapped his hand away.

“Get the fuck off me.” I slapped him hard across the face, pushing him backwards. He took a stumbling step, confusion on his face.

“Hey,” he said. “I didn’t mean to...”

“Don’t you dare touch me like that again.”

A few other people from across the road had seen this interaction and were watching, cautiously. Realisation of the setting seemed to wash over him. He looked back at them, sheepishly, then at me.

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry.” He put his hands up defensively, as if trying to shake off any guilt. “I just... I just want to talk, okay? I just... hey, don’t go? Can we talk about this? I was just hurt. You can understand that.”

“What is it, James? What’s with this obsession? What do you see in me?”

“You’re like... my perfect girl.”

“Stop saying that! You don’t know anything about me!”

He frowned, annoyed at the assertion. “That’s not fair. I was starting to...”

“It seems clear,” a voice cut through the two of us. “That Chloe has had quite enough of your presence.”

We turned. Standing just metres away from us, like a spectre from out of the mist, was the Professor.

James stared. There was something about the Professor that defied normal human interaction – the confidence with which he stood, looming over even the tallest people; the constant impatience in his eyes; the tight line of his mouth hinting at both expectation and disappointment.

It had been a while since I had seen someone else meet the Professor for the first time. Seeing James blink at him, unsure what to say, was an entertaining sight to behold.

The Professor shook his head, sighing. “As it seems I need to explain myself, the implication was that you *disappear now*. I certainly don’t have time to countenance you standing there gawping at me like a fish.”

“I... I was just...”

The Professor took out his pocket-watch, glanced at it, and tutted. James fell silent. It was in that moment that I realised the gadget’s true purpose. There was nothing quite so debilitating as the sense you’re wasting somebody’s time, and the look in the Professor’s eyes suggested every lost second was murder.

“As even the subtleties of figurative language appear to be lost on you, allow me to simplify.” He lifted his finger and pointed off in the distance. “*You. Leave.*”

James took a couple of steps back, looked like he wanted to say something else to me, then turned away. I think I heard him grumble something under his breath as he tucked his hands in his pockets and stormed away. The Professor didn’t waste a second watching him leave.

“Chloe! You are looking much improved.” He gifted me a warm, comforting smile. “Will you get a coffee with me?”

#

We sat opposite each other. The Professor had picked up a decaf mocha for himself and hot chocolate for me. He didn’t seem to have paid for either, but, once again, no one appeared willing to challenge him.

“Thank you for saving my life,” I said, eventually. He sipped his drink. “I’m sorry.”

He snorted. “Apologies are only important if you live in the past. I refuse to do so and I will not hear them.”

I nodded. It was as close to forgiveness as I was ever going to get.

“What happened?” I asked. “I’ve been away for a while.”

“There have been some complications,” he said, with a wave of his hand. “There are factions in Sombasi’s world who were displeased that Kiluvu helped us. I needed to assuage those concerns. I also needed to ensure we were not followed.”

“By who?” I asked, though I already knew the answer.

“I assume by now you have worked out who you think that man is, the one who held you captive. I feel that I must clarify what you think you know. There is a danger that you might conflate him and me – think us the same, somehow.”

He took another sip of his coffee. I waited for him to continue.

“That man is the most dangerous man you will ever meet. I do not exaggerate when I say this. The only reason that any of us are still alive is that I am doing everything in my power to prevent him finding this world. He cannot locate us. He cannot travel here. If he could, we would all be dead.”

“What does he want?”

The Professor picked his coffee back up, and looked contemplatively across the café. “Imagine if you discovered, as I did, that there were an infinite number of *you* across the worlds. Imagine also, if you can, that you were disturbed. Paranoid. Something in your past, perhaps.^[110] You were constantly worried that someone or something was going to take from you everything you had earned. What might you consider if you imagined you were not the only *you*? That someone might be able to usurp your life, your achievements, and nobody would ever know?”

“I might think I would have to defend myself.”

“Indeed,” he said. “Yes. You might even imagine that you might have to kill one of them. And then, if you were really paranoid, can you see where that road might lead?”

I looked down at the dark swirls in my hot chocolate. Though we were talking about him, my panic had not set in. This was speculative. Academic. That comforted me.

“You’d start to wonder if the others were having the same thoughts,” I said. “If any of the others were planning to kill you. You might start to think

about preventative measures, about killing them first.”

“Exactly. This man – this Professor Roland Crannus, as he calls himself – has gone so far down the dark rabbit hole that he has only one goal in mind. Just one. Do you know what it is?”

I sucked in a deep breath, the horror of the moment falling into place. “To be the only Professor Roland Crannus in existence.”

The Professor put his coffee down, his face serious. “Trust me when I say he will stop at nothing to do so. Nothing. He is obsessed and unconscionably ruthless. Countless have died already.^[111] He will destroy this entire world just to see me burn in the destruction.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Why, Chloe, I would think that should be obvious.” He smiled. “I’m going to do whatever it takes. If there’s one thing I cannot countenance, it’s being dead. Think of all the music I wouldn’t be able to listen to.”

I looked down at my hot chocolate, trying to process this information, then I remembered the decision I had made. I would not be left behind in this.

“I want to help you.”

“Absolutely.” He drained his mocha and placed it back on the table. “Our expedition, while not ideal, achieved more than I can tell you here. I am close to bringing this to an end, and soon we will be able to return to more academic explorations. There is a role I have in mind for you, suited perfectly. You must meet me in my office, tomorrow, at 5pm.”

Before I had any chance to say anything, he was up and gone. Even if I had had the strength to stop him, I would not have been able to. His words echoed with undeniable finality. To continue the conversation would have felt like ripping a page out of a book.

I stared at my drink, my mind swimming with unanswered questions. I forced myself to be thankful that I had some answers and that, at least, was better than none. I was back in the Professor’s life, and I would stay there, whatever it took.

#

When I eventually made it back to Sarah’s room, I felt like I had so much to tell her. I was filled to the brim with possibility and excitement and for the first time in my life I felt there was someone I could share that with. The words were almost spilling out of me.

She was not there.

I let myself in with the key she had left me. I had not yet returned to my own room. I messaged her, but after ten minutes she still had not replied. I tried to sit on her bed and wait for her, but found that I could not. I wanted to hunt her down, find her and be with her, regardless of where she was.

I began looking through her things, hoping to find her journal or diary, a calendar or slip of paper that might hint at where she would be this afternoon.

Her desk was a clumsy collage of papers, half-rolled cigarettes and ear-marked books. They tumbled over each other like collapsing buildings. To search under one, I had to shift it onto another, brick by brick.

There was a calendar with today's date marked. March 17th 2009. Though there was no indication as to what she would be doing – just a mark that it should be remembered. I moved more papers: tumbling books by Primo Levi, Solzhenitsyn, Bulgakov; stacks of poetry by Ginsberg, Sczymborska, Shelley. I smiled – it was easy to forget how well read she was under the veneer of smoke and alcohol.

Beneath it all, I caught the corner of what looked like a journal, small post-it notes sticking out of it. Curious, I pulled at it, hoping that it might offer some suggestion as to where I might find her. A weekly engagement, perhaps. Some kind of class.

I flicked to the last page.

It took a few passes before I understood what I was reading. The words didn't make sense for a while. The nausea came first, bubbling in my stomach before I could process them.

March 10th – C wakes up at 9.30. She talks about the Professor some more. The world she travelled to is C531. Professor has left it unnamed. Will probe further later.

March 10th – C recounts little about what happened in captivity. I have tried to push her on it, but she shies away from the topic. Some evidence of trauma. Will try again after sex when she is calmer.

My stomach churned. The pages continued, everything I am spilled out onto them. *March 7th, March 14th – C talks about Zolo, conversation includes..., March 17th – as requested, I push her back towards RC. She appears reticent.*

My breath was stuck in my throat. Every moment that we shared together, intimate, personal, loving, had been bled out of me. I was not being comforted. I was a lab rat. Stumbling to the sink, I threw up, the contents of my stomach splattering the porcelain. Pain surged through me.

When I was empty, I collapsed, unable to look at the journal anymore. I sunk to the floor, my back to her wall. I stared around at the room I had been hiding in – this observation chamber, this prison – and I tried to breathe. I felt like I should be crying. I felt like a river of tears should be flowing out of me, but there was nothing. All I felt was more nausea.

March 16th – C appears to be recovering well. She is more open at night times. I will try to get more out of her then.

I dry-retched the bile of my stomach onto the floor.

X

I was already on the move. Before I knew really what I was doing, I found myself storming down the stairs and out of the door. Waves of fury rippled through my body, putting fire in my limbs.

I was not heading to find Sarah. That thought had not even entered my mind. I couldn't even bring myself to think about her. Looking back now, I can see how implicitly I had assumed the trust between us. Perhaps because I had placed my faith in her so completely, it hadn't even occurred to me that such a transgression was possible. As such, I was unable to process on any level what she had done to me.

Instead, I focused my efforts on the person whom I knew was responsible for this. The woman who had, from the very start, sought to sow seeds of betrayal and doubt in my new life.

Judy.

I knew where she would be, squirrelled away in that basement office, bowed over the Professor's files and spreading her insidious tendrils across his work. I didn't know who she worked for, but that now seemed secondary to me. Her type were spread across history like a cancer – those who would seek to control progress, to keep a stifling fist gripped around genius. She was nothing new, just another Catholic Church forcing Galileo to recant his theories, another Spanish Inquisition.

When I arrived at the entrance to that underground room, I stopped. There was no one else in the room but her. She moved in her spindly, jerking way from computer to file and I watched, silently, in the way a person watches a spider in their bath, with both trepidation and disgust.

“Chloe?” Her head cocked up towards me. I took three hard steps into the room.

“How dare you?”

She frowned, the lines of her face creasing in annoyance. “What are you on about?”

“I can understand you coming after me,” I said, my fists tight at my sides. “I get that you want to pry your way into what the Professor is trying to achieve, like an insect. But going after *her*? Have you no ethical boundaries? Nothing?”

She put down a file and straightened up.

“What’s happened?” Her voice was cool, tense. “Why are you here?” She took a step closer to me.

“You don’t get to ask me that question.” My voice trembled. “As if you don’t already *know*. I know you’ve been watching me, keeping track of me, trying to get to the Professor, but I’m here to tell you it isn’t going to work.”

She blinked, her face tight, her voice calm. “Someone’s been watching you. I understand that. I also understand that you think I’m involved. Surely, a girl as smart as you would realise that is unlikely. A girl as smart as you would know that I wouldn’t be here if there was any chance you’d discovered something like that.”

I shook my head, trying to find the right words. “No. No, stop it. You don’t get to pretend that...”

“Chloe,” she said, her voice hard. The word sliced off the end of my sentence and I stuttered, floundering. “If someone has been watching you, it has not been me. It has not been our organisation.”

“I don’t believe you.”

She gave me a thin smile. “You should. Because if someone has been watching you, we’d be very interested to know who that is.”

“And who is ‘we’?” I demanded. “Who the hell do you work for?” I spun around, pointing at the computers and phones and tables and files. “Who is responsible for all of this?!”

“You know I can’t tell you that.”

“All I know is that I can’t trust a word that comes out of your mouth.” I levelled a finger at her. “You’ve tried to get me to spy before. You failed. I just wanted you to know that this failed, too.”

I turned my back on her, storming out of the room.

“Chloe,” she said. I stopped. “Have you considered that Professor Crannus might be the one watching you?”

“*What?*” I turned back, furious.

“Have you considered,” she said, “that the man for whom you are doing quite a lot of secretive and important work might want to keep a close eye on you and who you are telling these things to?”

I wanted to laugh. I wanted to laugh in her face and show her how absurd that notion was, to show her that she couldn’t fool me, she couldn’t get into my head. But I didn’t.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I snapped.

“The *real* question,” Judy took another few steps towards me, “is why he’s even bothering. There must be some information that he’s very concerned about keeping in the right place, keeping contained. You must know more than we thought you did.”

“This isn’t going to work, Judy.”

She was very close to me, and her eyes seemed to be burning. “You know what he’s doing when he goes into those other worlds, don’t you? Other than the Constants, and the experiments, and the grand philosophising about the Universe’s plan. You know what he’s hunting, don’t you?”

“I’m not going to fall for this,” I said, but a little quieter, because if Sarah was really spying for Judy, then surely she would know all this already.

“Chloe, you have to tell me what’s going on.”

“Why on earth would I do something like that?”

“Because he’s dangerous. Surely you can see that. A man like that cannot be allowed to run amok just because he feels like he owns the world. He has no boundaries. No method of control.” Her eyes narrowed, her face pushed right up to mine. “But you know something. That’s why he’s been watching you.”

“He’s not the one doing this.”

She laughed, shaking her head. “How can you possibly know that?”

“He *wouldn’t*,” I screamed, pushing her back. “He wouldn’t do that to me! He’s a good man! He saved my life!”

Judy caught herself with a stumble, then fell silent. The glimmer of fire dwindled in her eyes. Her mouth widened a little. She took another step back, and her face rose up and down, scanning me.

“Oh, shit.”

“What?”

“You actually believe that, don’t you?”

I didn’t say anything. She shook her head, pity flooding her features. “Oh my poor girl, you are unbearably naive. You actually think he cares about you.”

“He does care about me.”

“You’re an eighteen-year-old undergraduate. He’s a genius world-hopping polymath. He’s not your friend, you silly girl. He’s *grooming* you. ^[112] You need to come with me.”

She walked past me, pulling my arm. I was tugged, like a rag doll and twisted round to follow her. Reaching up, I took her hand and pushed it away. But it was a small resistance, weak. Because underneath everything, there was a tiny worry that I had crushed. A bubbling little concern that I had talked to, and reasoned with, and eventually just pushed down until I was certain that it was dead. It wasn’t dead. It was screaming.

“What are you doing?” I said, my voice a low mumble.

“This has gone too far,” she said. “There’s something I need to show you.”

#

I followed her out of the office and through to the University carpark. She led me wordlessly up the stairs to the third level and over to a shiny BMW, incongruously placed between muddy Ford Fiestas and banged up second-hand Hondas.

She opened the door for me. I just looked at it.

“What?”

“I didn’t expect such a fancy car.”

She snorted. “Don’t let appearances deceive you, Chloe. I’m not somebody’s secretary. Get in.”

The silence persisted until we were well away from the campus, the car twisting up narrow country roads, between leaning trees and golden-brown hedgerows. For a time, I looked away from her, out of the window. My fingers twitched, fiddling with my seatbelt, my clothes, my hair. Minutes passed.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. I looked at it. A text from Sarah.

We need to talk.

I put it away. My cheeks grew hot and uncomfortable. What was I doing in this car? I had come to confront her, hadn't I? How had I ended up here?

"Where are we going?"

Judy kept her eyes on the road, her fists tightly squeezed around the wheel. Even in her own car, her own space, she seemed unbearably tense.

"To Crannus's laboratory."

"I thought we had just come from there."

Still facing the road, she raised her eyebrows. "You're surely bright enough to realise that a physical manifestation of the many-worlds theory might be the most important technological discovery in history. Do you really think it is going to be confined to a basement?"

I gritted my teeth, curling my lips inward. "I assumed you were aiming for secrecy."

"Of course we're aiming for secrecy," she said, turning the car into a small hamlet. A few houses and the dangling sign of a pub, but not much else. Before long, we were through. "But this is the 21st century. Everyone is watching everything, everywhere. Satellites, hackers, drones. I'm not going to pretend I know how it all works, but we're far beyond the days of wire-tapping and clicks on the phone."

"What are you getting at?"

"There's no way that anyone works on a discovery of this magnitude without people finding out, without causing some waves. Did you really think this was confined to a few people and a basement? There are whole countries involved, Chloe. The Chinese, the Russians, the Americans. This is far bigger than you can begin to imagine."

I bristled at the condescension, sitting up hard in my seat. "Then why a basement room at Warwick University? Why even have it there at all?"

"Because," she said, her voice cold. "Crannus is a clever bastard. He's the only one who knows how everything works. He gives us a few pieces. He shares some theory with the Russians. But he's the only one that has every piece of the puzzle. So we have to do what he asks. He wants a small sub-laboratory underneath his comfortable office, we put it there."

The car dipped off onto a dirt track, in between two patches of farmland. We hadn't seen another vehicle in a good ten minutes, except for tractors. The hamlet was miles behind us and the only thing that could be seen was countryside.

“Who is *we*?”

She bit her lip, as if even after all this, she was still weighing up whether to tell me. “I work for CEDM.”^[113]

“CEDM?”

“The Committee for the Exploration of Dimensional Multiplicities. A stupid name, I know. It’s a classified international organisation, set up by the United Nations Security Council.^[114] Our purpose is to explore the possibility of threat from these many worlds, and hopefully, ultimately, whether or not this technology could be used for good. *My* job is to keep an eye on Crannus.”

“Why? Isn’t he the one running this whole thing?”

“He’s a rogue agent. He does whatever he bloody well wants. He ignores all of the regulations we set in place for him, and there’s nothing we can do about it, because without him the whole thing falls apart.” She pulled her lips back and bared her teeth. “Three PhDs, a lifetime of research, and I end up a glorified babysitter.”

I smiled. There was something beautiful about seeing the world try to put shackles on the Professor, but being completely and helplessly unable to do so. Judy’s frustration only helped to stoke that rebellious fire.

“What I *have* discovered is that we have absolutely no idea what he’s up to. He puts us off with experiments and promises, wild theories and grand gestures, but I know there’s something else happening and I don’t know what it is. I believe you know what it is, or at least a part of it. It’s crucial that you tell me.”

“I’m not going to tell you anything,” I said. “I hope you know that. Not after you try to get me to spy on him, you spy on me, you turn friends and loved ones against...” I trailed off, the wound still too fresh to face it directly.

“I told you that wasn’t us. In fact, I’m damn sure that was Crannus.”

I sat up, furious. “You realise this is his discovery? That he has the right to do whatever he wants with it. What are you contributing other than just stifling the work of a great man? Of a visionary? You think history will remember you?”

She didn’t say anything to that. She sat silently, still staring at the road ahead of her. A building appeared in the distance, sticking out strangely from the surrounding fields. Three stories. Grey walls. Square windows. As we approached, I could see that it was large, like an old factory building.

There were no signs on the outside or hints to indicate what it was. It was completely nondescript.

My phone buzzed again.

Chloe. Please. I'm sorry.

I turned it off.

Judy's car pulled into a lot with about twenty cars neatly parked. There was an open gate ahead that led to a green metal door. She stopped the engine and sat for moment, without moving. I sat in silence next to her, wondering if she was expecting something to happen. She stared quietly, not looking at me. After a long time, she spoke.

“My worry is not if history will remember me. My worry is that if too many people think like you do, that a man like Crannus should be able to do whatever he wants, then history will remember us all very, very poorly indeed.”^[115]

She got out of the car and closed the door. I followed through the gate, and into the building ahead.

#

It was quiet inside the building, and cold. Colder than it was outside. I shivered and pulled my jacket a little tighter around my shoulders. There was a long central corridor, brightly lit in clinical white neon, with metal stairs at each end. On the next floor, I glimpsed rows of doors and corners of windows lining each side – observation rooms, perhaps. Offices. A few people in lab coats crossed back and forth in complete silence, carrying clipboards and folders. They did not acknowledge each other.

I took a few steps forward, wincing at the sound of my shoes against the hard floor. The reverberations echoed around the room, a sacrilegious insult to the carefully maintained silence.

Guards stood unmoving like statues at each corner, so completely inert that they blended into the walls. Rifles. Uniforms bulging with body armour. Face shields. Whatever they were protecting here, they were not taking it lightly.^[116]

I looked back at Judy, but she wasn't really looking at me. She was glancing ahead, urging me to walk on. Nobody took any notice of me. I hoped this was a good thing.

There was a smell in the air, like sweat, almost, or rotting meat. There was just a hint of it, hidden under the layers of pristine, scrubbed,

cleanliness. But when I caught it, just for a second, my face twisted. My skin prickled.

I carefully climbed the metal staircase, each step feeling as though I was trudging through water. At the top, I found the observation rooms. I remember assuming that was what they had to be. Each had a closed metal door and a wide pane of glass that looked like it might be a two-way mirror. The first room was of a medium-size, like a bedroom, but the ceiling rose high to another set of bright neon lights. In the middle, under the table, there was a small pile of rags.

With the lights directly above, and the thick metal of the table, the rags were almost entirely in shadow. I remember staring at them for a while, trying to work out what they were. They looked almost like dark clothes bundled together for laundry day, except there were a collection of wires running away from them, clipped to the material.

I saw them move a little, and pressed myself to the glass, trying to get a better look.

Not clothes. Skin. Bones.

Jerking my head back, I looked to Judy for some kind of confirmation. She followed me up the stairs, and was behind me, but her face was unreadable. There was no emotion there, just a stillness – blank like a mask.

“You’re right,” she said, her voice flat. Her voice had lost any hint of accusation. “There are many who agree that the discovery is too important. That he should be allowed to do whatever he wants.”

The body underneath the table was naked, and scarred. As I watched it, it crawled forward a little, like an animal, but kept its eyes and face out of the light. Its brown limbs jerked a little, involuntarily, and I could see the wires and IVs drilled into its skin. There were tubes, thick catheters running into its anus, its genitals, up into its face and nose.

This wasn’t just an observation chamber. It was a cell.

I wanted to look at Judy and to ask her what was going on, but I couldn’t tear my eyes away from the scene in front of me. Focusing on the details, all the little ones, seemed to help some little part of me inside that was trying to scream.

There was a bigger picture here, and I was trying to see it, but I couldn’t find a way to get past the repetitive drone in my head: this is a person. A child. This is someone’s *child*.

“Hold on.” I jerked right. There was a man standing next to me. I hadn’t noticed him approaching. “Let me get this one into the light for you. We ran the thing through the new set of tests this morning, but the control batch have barely shown any anomalies.”^[117]

I stared as he leant forward and pressed a button by the door. There was a buzz, and the child jolted, its limbs flailing. An electric shock. I thought I saw a mouth move, but no sound got through the window. Shivering, scared, the thing inched forward from under the table.

It was a boy, with deep brown skin. His limbs were spindly, atrophied. As he shuffled forward, his body tugged against the wires and tubes, and I noticed his ankles were chained to the floor. They were red, the skin raw and flaking.

He opened his eyes and looked at me. I remember, at that instant, having one, single, overriding thought.

Oh, fuck.

I stumbled, pushing past the man, down the corridor. My arms floundered out in front of me like I was plunging through gas. Over to the next room, the next window.

Another one, curled and shivering. The boy. He wasn’t playing with trains this time, but still instantly recognisable.

I kept running. I can’t remember how many I looked at before I stopped. Ten. Twenty. A hundred. I fell to the ground, wildly staring at the line of cells spreading on both sides. They were all the same. They were all filled with different iterations of the same boy – the same Constant.

“You had to see this.” Judy was standing over me.

I couldn’t say anything to her. I didn’t really understand. Memories of black rooms and imprisonment were flooding their way back into me, and already this facility felt a little darker. Claustrophobic. I turned in circles, looking for an exit.

“It’s all in the name of science, of course,” she said, detached, like she was delivering a lecture. “If we’re to understand what causes this boy to be a Constant, then we must look for similarities, compare anomalies. There are no experiments that should be off-limits, ethically speaking. Not with a discovery of this magnitude.”

I stared at her, the weight of her accusation bearing itself down on me.

“At least this way we can keep them in control groups when we need to, use IVs and catheters to regulate their input and output. The more boys the

Professor can acquire from different worlds the larger our sample size, which is, scientifically speaking, beneficial.”^[118] She paused. “It was all his idea, of course.”

“I didn’t know,” I said. “I didn’t.”

“I don’t see how that makes any difference.” The flatness of her voice was cruel, piercing. “But I will let you walk around. Ask questions, if you wish. I will be waiting for you outside. I don’t really like being in here any longer than I have to be.”

I didn’t want to be in there either. My entire body screamed at me to leave. My limbs pulled me towards the door, desperate to escape. Each new boy brought back flashes of my own torture. Every fibre of my being begged me to leave, but I couldn’t. Each boy was a new accusation, a new finger pointing at me.

I can’t remember how long I stayed in that building, drifting from room to room, seeing boy upon boy, shackled, abused, shaking, each one as obscene as rape. Sometimes I approached a window, pressed my hand against it, but the boy would not react. There was nothing I could do to help them. Guards stared at me, fingers resting on the trigger cage of their guns – I had visiting rights, and nothing else. It was as though I was underwater, floating along in a sea of confusion and rage and pity. These cells were on the other side of a hazy liquid, incomprehensible.

Different groups had different ailments. Various control groups for experiments. Some were so thin they didn’t have any bottoms to sit on, so they lay on their sides, just bone and ragged skin. Others had been operated on, parts of limbs removed, propping themselves up on their elbows, or knees. They were all degraded – all made less than human, less than animals even.^[119]

When I stepped outside, Judy stood by her car, smoking a cigarette.

“I gave it up.” She looked at the stick in her hand apprehensively. “But that was years ago. Before all this.”

“How can you do this? How can anyone do this?”

“It’s amazing how easily people will justify things to themselves. I’ve heard it all: they’re from another world, they aren’t really human. It’s a necessary evil. I’m just following orders. At the end of the day, the decisions are being made by the people at the top. And they think Crannus is working for them, so they follow his recommendations.”

“And you do *nothing*? You *allow* this... this...” I had no words for it. “All *this* to just happen.”

She gave a short, humourless laugh. “What can I do? Crannus works for no one, listens to no one. He’s using CEDM, just like he’s using me and he’s using you. To make his grand discovery. To change the world, maybe. But also something else.”

“But... Why? *Why*?”

“Because he doesn’t care. Because this problem, all problems, are purely academic. This is what I’m trying to show you, Chloe. Professor Roland Crannus is a monster.”

I nodded, but the words still didn’t make any sense to me. I wasn’t able to think about anything outside of that building. I wasn’t able to see the context. Not yet. In the back of my mind, Judy was still the woman who had lied to me, who had manipulated me, the spider behind the scenes.

“Why are you still here?” I asked. “Why do you stay?”

“Better the devil you know,” she said, flicking her cigarette onto the floor. “And because if I can find out what he’s really doing. If I can prove to CEDM, to the UN, that he’s been using them for his own personal projects. That he’s been lying to them. Then maybe I can get this whole fucking mess shut down. But I need *you*, Chloe. I’ve broken every rule bringing you here, but you know something, something that can help me. Don’t you see? You have to tell me what’s going on.”

“He’s a Constant.”

“The boy? I know that.”

“No,” I said, feeling the guilt of betrayal already rising up in me. “The Professor is a Constant. There’s more of him. At least one more. He’s... he’s at war with him. He’s using the other worlds to fight this war, enlisting armies, trying to kill him.”

She blinked at me. “You have proof of this?”

I shivered. “I’ve met one. Another Professor.”

Judy stared at me for a good few seconds, then wordlessly turned around and got in her car. I followed and sat next to her. We were silent for the entire drive back. Neither of us so much as looked at each other.

When we were back on campus, she put a hand on my shoulder and said,

“This has to end. You know that, don’t you, Chloe? He has to be stopped.”

I nodded, again.

“I’m going straight to call the CEDM. He’s gone too far. They’re going to shut him down. They’re going to stop this whole experiment, I’m sure of it.” She paused, and for the first time since I met her, I saw a glimpse of warmth flush her face. “Thank you, Chloe. Thank you.”

#

One of the hardest things to do is to look back at yourself and see your errors. They shine at you, in a blinding, harsh light and you are forced either to withstand the pain or to look away, squeeze your eyes shut and focus on the present.

In 1957, American social psychologist Leon Festinger proposed that all human beings strive for internal consistency. Without it, they become unable to function mentally in the world. Our ideals, our values and our actions must match up to the narrative we have constructed for our identity. When these do not match up, humans have been recorded experiencing cognitive dissonance, where they refuse, justify or at times outright deny that inconsistency is taking place, in order to remain sane.

Studies have shown that this takes place on a neurological level,^[120] with increased activity in the anterior cingulate cortex when the human brain is faced with such psychological dissonance. The level of said brain activity increases based on the magnitude of the dissonance, and crucially, the mental response often differs as well.

Festinger gave the simple example of a man eating a doughnut he knows to be unhealthy, despite wanting to lose weight. If the magnitude of psychological dissonance is low, and the man doesn’t care that much, he may have a simple justification by changing the conflicting cognition – ‘I’m allowed to cheat once in a while.’ If the dissonance is larger, such as the man seeing himself ideologically as a healthy person, the man may then justify by adding new cognitions – ‘I’ll work it off with thirty extra minutes at the gym.’ At the highest magnitude of dissonance, the man may simply ignore or outright deny information that conflicts with existing beliefs – ‘This doughnut is *not* a high-sugar food.’^[121]

This does not always happen on a conscious level, but may have been considered and resolved by the subconscious brain long before the mind is able really to process it linguistically.

I should note here that I am not attempting to provide justification for my actions. I am merely looking back on the past, in that blinding light, and

realising the extent to which Judy's revelation challenged me. My understanding of who the Professor was, as a human being, was so completely at odds with what I had been shown, my cognitive dissonance of such a high magnitude, that my brain was doing everything that it could to try to maintain enough internal consistency to keep me sane.

The first wave was one of doubt. The moment Judy left me, I remembered that I had come to confront her for her lies. Why should I be so believing of her now? Was this not *exactly* what she had been trying to do before – to turn me against the Professor?

What was being done in that facility was unconscionable. I had no doubt about that. But I also had no doubt that the Professor would be able to explain all this to me, and that, together, we would find a way to stop it.

It should not come as a complete surprise, then, that the following morning, after my brain had given itself time to think, to rationalise, I headed towards the Professor's office.

I crossed the campus at a brisk pace. As I walked, there came the guilt of having been so easily manipulated. Judy had shocked me into turning on a man who had shown me nothing but kindness and support, a great man, and I had bought it hook, line and sinker.

He was not in his office. I was sweating, breathing hard. The weight of my betrayal sat heavier on me and the worry that I would not be able to find him was increasing with every second.

Somewhere, underneath all of that, another feeling quietly bubbled. Another worry. But I pressed it back, buried it, like I buried the memories of my own torture, into the little Pandora's box in the back of my mind.

I ran down the corridor, knowing by now exactly where the lift would be. I fidgeted the entire way down, constantly checking the time on my phone, seeing the minutes pass.

When the lift clunked to a stop, and the doors opened, I charged down the underground passage to that basement office.

There was only one person in there, and he looked like he was waiting for me.

It wasn't the Professor. It wasn't Zolo either, or Judy.

"Ah, Chloe Chan," the Gardener said, smiling. "I think it's time we had another little chat."

He stood by the impossible door, the portal between worlds, and he opened it. The other side of the door was pitch black. Instead of a number

on the electronic sign above, there were simply three dashes: — — —
“Would you step this way, please?”

XI

The man disappeared into the darkness. Whether or not I should follow him didn't enter my mind. It would have, if I was still the Chloe that I had been when I arrived at this University, but my world had changed too much since then. There was no longer any time for second-guessing.

I walked in after him, and the lights went on.

We were in a room. It was large, white and empty. Other than the door I had just entered, there was one other door, at the left wall. By the right wall, there was one blank table, and a single chair. The man in the suit faced it, his back to me. Only the hum of the flickering LED lights above me reverberated through the silence. I took a few steps forward, the sound of my footsteps echoing and bouncing around the nothingness.

"Hello?"

The Gardener turned and calmly walked around to the other side of the table. He put his tablet on it gingerly, and sat down.

"Hello Chloe." He smiled at me. "I've been meaning to catch up."

I walked up to the table, pressing my hands on it.

"I don't have time for this." I was not going to let myself be intimidated. The whole room glimmered, as if the light were not reflecting correctly. "Where are we?"

"I wanted a private conversation," a voice came from beside me. "And so I made us a private room."

I turned around to find him suddenly, inexplicably, at the other door. I glanced back at the first man, still sitting in his chair. The second man scribbled a note on his tablet. "It's a little pocket reality just outside your reality," he said. "It won't last long before it collapses, but it is a pretty

thing. Like a flower – it will bloom just for us and then wither when we’re gone.”

I looked from one man back to the next, cogs falling into place. “You’re Constants. That’s why you always show up everywhere. There are tons of you. You’re all Constants.”

The first Gardener smiled up at me. “Have you had a chance to think about what we’ve said?”

“Think about it?” I asked, my face tightening. “Seriously? I told you last time, you can’t just show up mysteriously in my life, tell me close to nothing at all, and expect me to do what? Do your bidding? This is ridiculous.”

“Now, now.” The second took a step closer. “Circumstances have changed. Perhaps we do owe you some degree of explanation. Perhaps we can assuage some of your concerns?”

“Oh, can you?” I demanded. “Can you, really? Because the more time that passes, the more I find out I know *nothing*. No one has told me *anything*. What circumstances have changed? What on earth is this damned artefact you are going on about for? Who the hell are you even? The Professor talked about Constants like this rare anomaly in the universe, but it seems like every time I turn my head, there’s another one right behind me.”

The two men exchanged a long, wordless glance.

“Your Professor did not invent travelling between worlds,” the first said. “He was not a pioneer, but merely the next in a long line of people who have been able to break through. I have been around for a long time, in some form or another. I found myself, all of myself, across these worlds, and I like to think I’m keeping things from falling apart.”

I snorted. “So what are you? Some kind of inter-dimensional police?”^[122]

“Think of me more like a welcoming party. A guide to help us work together. When we established your Professor was a Constant, we sought to greet him. We invited him to our central facility, perhaps foolishly.” He gave the second man a scathing look. “Into our home. He took advantage of this courtesy, and once he learned all he could from us, he stole our most precious artefact and fled.”

“What does the artefact do?”

“Moving between worlds is not an easy task. They exist *independently* as realities. To move from one to the other takes huge amounts of energy – more than your Professor could possibly generate. The artefact is old technology, capable of harnessing energies far beyond your world. Without it, he would not be able to hop from one world to another the way he does. Once or twice, perhaps. But no more. It is too difficult.”

“Can’t you build another one?”

He smiled. “There are rules. There are ways of using such technology. There are protocols to prevent catastrophe. These worlds are not meant to be crossed so flippantly. They are distinct choices. Concentrated eigenstates.^[123] The more he moves between them, the more the eigenvalues blur and the choices mix. The more likely the world is to...” he paused, “collapse.”

My brow furrowed. “What do you mean ‘collapse’?”

The second Gardener sighed. “Think of your universe as a bucket of water, sitting in an ocean. Every time you go in and out you make a hole in the bucket: some outside water gets in, some inside water gets out. If you patch it up quickly, there’s not much loss. But you leave too many holes, eventually what’s inside the bucket and what’s outside aren’t distinct anymore. It just... ceases.”

“What are you saying? That the universe is going to fall apart?”

“I’m saying that your Professor is using our technology to open new doorways,” the second man added, moving over to the first. “To cut more holes in the bucket. The man is working with forces far beyond his control, and the universe is reacting. You can’t just go stomping around reality. There are consequences.”

“I have met with myself,” the first man said, standing up. The two of them loomed over me. “All of me have met and come to a decision. We must stop him. ”

I took a step back. “You want me to stop him.”

“To steal the artefact back. It’s the only way. I have been trying to locate it, but no matter how much I follow him, I can’t find where he’s hidden it.”

I put my hand up. “If it’s all so apocalyptically bad, why are you just watching? Why aren’t you *doing* something?”

“No violence,” he said. “That’s the first rule.”^[124]

“No physical intervention,” the other said.

“This has always been the case,” said the first. “This will always be the case, ever since Yasiin’s Crusade and the Hundred World’s War.^[125] No physical intervention. Ever. He trusts you, Chloe. He relies on you. You can convince him to show it to you. Or trick him into showing you where it is.”

“Why don’t *you* talk to him?”

Both of them laughed. “Not for want of trying. He can be... unreasonable.”

One of the Gardeners turned around and exited through the door at the side, leaving me alone with the first. He took a step forward and handed me a business card. On it was a single UK number, and nothing else. “Call this when you have information for me. Or when you have the artefact. It’s more important than you know.”

Part of me wanted to laugh, to brush off his fatalistic rhetoric with a derisive snort. But there was something in the tone of his voice that prevented me. I frowned.

“Wait,” I said, as he followed his counterpart. “Why me? Of all people, why not someone else?”

“Trust me, you’re the right woman for the job,” he replied. “I’ve been watching.”

#

I left the room through the door I entered, back into the basement. I wanted to get out of this basement and up into real light, into some sense of normalcy. I stumbled, my thoughts jumbling around my head incoherently, until I found myself at the Students’ Union. It was late afternoon and there were a few students dotted around, some working on laptops, others catching up with friends.

I ordered a glass of wine from the bar, fell into a seat in the corner and put my head in my hands. Reeling from too much new information to process, I just let myself breathe.

I had no idea what to do. The Gardener’s words meant nothing to me – they were ethereal, contextless, impossible to grasp on to. After what I had experienced the last time I was in another world, I had difficulty trusting anyone outside of this one. How was I to know that what they were saying was true? How was I to know that the Professor did not know what he was doing, or the forces he was dealing with?

I didn't touch my drink. I just stared into the distance, drowning under the weight of my own questions. Images of the CEDM facility kept flashing through my head.

"Chloe?"

I looked up and my heart panged – a physical, painful ache.

Sarah stood beside me, her face stricken. "Can we talk?"

"What are you doing here?" My words came out sharp and vitriolic.

"Please, don't go. I saw you come in from across the road. I just... I just wanted to talk."

I didn't say anything, but she sat down opposite me anyway. She looked a mess: her hair straggly and clothes creased and out of shape. I looked over at her, right in her eyes, and she looked down. Away.

"I'm sorry," she said to the table. "I'm so sorry. It's just... look I don't have any excuses. This all started a long time ago, before I really knew what was happening, before I really knew how I felt about you and by then it was too late."

I didn't reply. I let my silence talk for me.

"And I know that doesn't forgive anything, or justify anything. What I did was horrible, disgusting, a complete invasion of your trust in me, but I just..."

"You just *what*?"

"You don't know what it was like," she insisted, placing her hands on the table. "At first they offered me money. A stupid amount of money. I said no. It was all too ridiculous, I couldn't believe it. And then the money just started appearing in my bank account anyway. Like I was already complicit. Already guilty. So I started writing things down. Small things. And then..."

I nodded, my thoughts falling into place. "That's why you pursued me, isn't it? That's why you kept pushing. So you could get closer. So you could watch me."

"No!" Her face tightened.

"Don't lie to me. Not again."

Her fingers twitched, moving towards mine. "At first, a little, yes. I wanted to understand why they were so... And then the money kept coming and I was trapped. I was trapped in my own web of lies. But it wasn't just that. The more time we spent together, the more we talked and I got to understand who you are... I fell for you. Hard. And I knew that if I stopped

writing things down they'd tell you somehow and this would happen and..." She shook her head in frustration. "I've been a complete fucking idiot. I know. But what we had, what we *have*, it's real. It's more than real."

"Don't." I shook my head. "Just don't. Don't even begin to tell me that. I've been through enough for you not to keep lying to me. There's only one thing I need to know. Who met you, at the beginning? Who was it?"

"Nobody ever met me. It was a woman at the other end of a phone. A call. That was all it ever was."

I sighed, thinking back to my early days as the Professor's intern. It was him, then. It seems Judy had been right about at least one thing. Despite myself, my eyes were getting wet. I shook, tears dripping down my cheeks.

"Please, Chloe." She leaned forward. "I never meant to hurt you."

"*Never meant to...*" I seethed, standing up. "Well, you did, Sarah. I don't really give a shit what your intentions were. I trusted you. I loved you. You *made me* love you and then you lied to me. Again and again and again."

"I didn't know how to tell you!" She rose next to me. "I wanted to, when I realised how I felt. But you were gone. You disappeared. And when you came back, when you were broken and hurt and needed my care, I wanted to tell you. I really did. I wanted to tell you every day, but I couldn't because I knew it would break you. So I just kept hiding it, and this hole kept getting deeper and deeper. And the woman kept calling, so I just kept..." She broke off, putting her hands up to her face.

"I'm leaving now, Sarah." It took everything in my power to keep my voice steady. "I would appreciate it if you didn't follow me."

"But... just..." She shook her head. "I fucked up, okay. But everyone fucks up. No one is perfect. There's no such thing as a perfect relationship, as perfect love. You just have to work at it. And... what will survive of us is love, if we look for it. I believe that, Chloe."

"Yes." I turned away from her. "I think I believed that, too."

As I walked away from her, trying desperately to put her out of my mind, one idea became incandescently clear.

I needed to talk to the Professor.

If I could talk to him, I could find some answers. He could make everything clear, just like he had done in the past. About Sarah. About Judy and the CEDM. About the accusations. To be honest, I didn't know what he

would say, but I was lost and I knew that I couldn't navigate this labyrinth without him.

Looking back, it seems almost like the hand of fate was tugging me then, drawing me inexorably back to him. Drawn inwards. The Professor was the source of all of this. The starting point around which everything began. He was the alpha, and if there was ever to be an omega for me, it would not come without him.

Perhaps this is why I knew, with unshakeable certainty, that the Professor would be in his office.

I knocked on the door.

"Ah, Chloe," he said. "Come in."

The Professor held his pipe in his mouth, the circles of smoke billowing dramatically upwards and towards the open window. He stared contemplatively at his pocket watch, and did not look up as I entered the room. I sat down opposite his desk.

"I must say I'm a little disappointed in your punctuality," he said. "It is 5.07 pm. Seven minutes have been squandered."

I blinked. I had completely forgotten about our agreement to meet, and it threw me off balance. Facing him directly, I could not find the right words to say.

"Seven minutes isn't very long."

He snapped his pocket watch shut. "For whom? A mayfly lives an entire lifetime in 24 hours. For a mayfly, seven wasted minutes is akin to a year of lost opportunity, of missed moments."

"I'm not a mayfly."

"Indeed." He smiled at me, raising a finger. "Neither of us is."

"Professor," I began, leaning forward, "I..."

"I've called you here because I have found a lead," he said. "My counterpart has sought to thwart me, and those who work with me, using a complicated concoction of poisons and drugs, for which I have been searching for the antidote, as you know. Your captivity provided ample distraction to pursue..."

"*Distraction?*"

He shook his pipe in frustration. "If you take issue with a word I use, do not simply repeat it at me. This is the most basic of conversational laziness."

“I take issue with you describing my captivity as a distraction. Professor, I must...”

He waved his hand dismissively. “I love to discuss semantics, but now is not the time. The point is there is an ingredient in a world that I must...”

“Professor!” I leaned forward. “Look, there’s something I have to talk to you about.”

“What an absolutely useless statement. If you have something to talk about, then talk about it. Don’t waste time preparing me for a conversation that’s just about to happen. Do you think it will surprise me? Do you think I’ve not had conversations before?”

“I’ve been to the CEDM facility. With the boys.”

He stopped, looking at me intently. “I see.”

“Judy took me there. I saw them. All of them. She told me you ordered those experiments. That it was your idea.”

“And?”

I stumbled. “And... well, I wanted to confirm that it was true.”

“Judy is many things, but she is not a liar. You really don’t need to waste our time confirming truths you’ve already been told.”

I remember feeling as though the room had started to collapse. There was a sense of distancing, as though my body had pulled back outside of itself and was watching on – not from above, but from just behind, like a scene from a film. The room grew a little darker. The air heavier. The Professor had started to talk again, about his lead, but I had stopped listening.

All I could do was focus on his face, for as each word left his lips it looked like it was melting. His cheeks slackened, his features drooped. And as every new sound sprang out of his mouth, I pulled a little further out of that room and I started to see him a little clearer, without the veneer of genius that I had draped over him.

“But,” I said, interrupting him. “But wait. You’re torturing these boys. Hundreds of them. What you’re doing is evil.”

“Oh, Chloe.” He frowned, tutting at me. “I would have thought you of all people would be able to approach the problem more intellectually than that. Evil implies sin, and we both know sin is a construction purely to keep the uneducated from being educated.”

“No. That’s not... There’s more to sin than control.” His face was distorted, ugly, as if something was writhing beneath it. “This is morally

wrong.”

“Is there? Are you sure?” He poked his pipe at me, the smoke darting in the air like daggers. “The very idea of sin, and by extension evil or immorality, is a heavily theological construct rooted in the Abrahamic tradition. Consider the apocryphal ‘first sin’, the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. To seek knowledge beyond what has been *allowed* is sinful. ^[126] I am merely a seeker of truth, Chloe. Nothing more. Do not taint me with your judgments.”

“This isn’t just seeking knowledge,” I pulled back in my seat, away from him, pressing my back into the chair. “This isn’t right.”

“Right and wrong are historical niceties. Absurdly subjective delineations that change across every century and every border. There is one thing that remains consistent: the Constants. Throughout time and space and reality, they reoccur again and again. Did you know that in every world the agricultural revolution happens in the same millennium? Contextual reasons, you might say. Pah!” He waved his hand dramatically. “But consider this – in every world that I have been to, some form of antibiotics has *always* been discovered by someone called Fleming, or some derivation of it in their language. Fleemin. Felming. Fleminu.” He leant in conspiratorially, his eyes lighting up with intellectual fervour. “What causes something to be a Constant? Where does it originate? Why are some people and some events? I must know these answers, at any cost.”

As I watched him, gesticulating and speechifying and justifying, there was only one word that came to mind.

“Why?”

For the first time, the Professor stumbled over his words. He looked at me, genuinely confused. “What?”

“Why must you know at any cost?” I pressed, my voice rising. “Just... why?”

His eyes widened. His face reddened. He leant forward, as if to say something, but he didn’t. Instead, he put his pipe down and held the bridge of his nose, as if to prevent himself from bursting with anger. After a moment, he sat back.

“If you need to ask that question, then perhaps I have been wrong about you. If you cannot see that this is all for the greater good.”

“The greater good?”

“Don’t repeat...”

“*The greater good?!*” I shouted, standing up. “In what way does imprisoning innocents contribute to the greater good? In what way does torturing little boys do anything for the greater good? In what way does getting the woman I love to *spy on me* help the greater good?”

“Ah.” He pushed his glasses back up his nose. “That’s what this is about.”

“No, that’s not what this is about. This is about that facility and...” I clenched my fists. “Okay. This is *partly* what this is about. You were spying on me!”

“Oh please.” He stood up, turning his back to me. “It’s the 21st century, Chloe. Don’t be naive. Everyone’s spying on you. The government. Your social media. Your family. I paid the girl a large sum of money to note down some things. She’s broke – it should hardly be surprising she did it. Privacy is hardly a moral watermark against which to measure your outrage.”

I blinked, staring at his back. He looked out of the window, completely nonplussed, and tucked his pipe into his jacket. He appeared as indifferent to his betrayal as he would be to the contents of his breakfast.

“Frankly.” He turned around. “It is a shame to see you caught up with such trivial concerns. You’ve disappointed me, Chloe.”

And like that – despite the shock and the fury and the disillusion – my whole world collapsed. My legs wavered, watery beneath me, and I crumpled. Everything that I had built myself up to be – his student, his protégée, his friend – was ripped out of me in an instant. I realised then how much power this man held over me. No matter what I had seen, some part of me still needed his approval, his encouragement, his praise. That tore at me.

Images of the boys haunted me. The wires. The scrawny bones. I knew now there was nothing that could be said, nothing that could be done, that would change how I felt. The anger and the frustration bubbled inside and all I wanted to do in that moment was get back at him, to show him that I would not be ruled by his will.

“And what if I told Judy about you? What if I told your secrets to her?”

His head snapped up. His hands grabbed the desk.

“What would you tell her exactly?”

“Everything,” I said. “I could tell her *everything*. What we were doing in the other worlds. What you told me. Does she know about the other

Professors? Does she know about all your missions?”

His knuckles whitened, fingers gripping the edge of the wood tightly. He pursed his lips together and took in a single deep breath, releasing it slowly. He took his pipe back out of his pocket, looked at it for a moment, then threw it at the wall. It smashed against brick and clattered in pieces over the floor.

I scrambled to my feet, backing to the wall. He looked up at me.

“You stupid, stupid girl. Do you ever think beyond your own meaningless little problems? I thought that you were smarter than this.”

“I thought the same thing about you.” I tried to keep the shaking out of my voice. His face had darkened, his eyes glowering.

“This is the largest secretive cross-national operation in the history of the world.” He stepped around the desk, approaching me. “The most clandestine experiment ever conceived. What do you think they will do when they find out I’ve been lying to them? Hm? Sack me? Like some office worker?”

I pressed myself against the wall behind me, bumping into the corner of a bookshelf.

“No,” he said. He towered over me, and I felt my back bending to cower underneath him. “You didn’t think. You didn’t consider the larger picture, when you thought it sensible to threaten me.” He raised his hand and placed it menacingly on my shoulder. “You will remain silent.”

“I will not.” I straightened up. “You are doing this to yourself! Can’t you see that? The other Professor wanting to kill you, the torture, *my* torture, none of this would have happened if you hadn’t stolen that artefact!”

His eyes widened a little. “So they have spoken to you, then? I was wondering when they would do that.”

“They’ve been following you the entire time, watching you without you knowing.”

“Pah!” He backed away from me, and I took a deep breath. “Very little happens without me knowing. They *think* they can slip through the cracks.” The syllables burst angrily out of him. “They *think* that I do not see them, and I have been pretending not to see them, so that they continue in their illusion. I know exactly where they are. What they want. I assume they asked you to find their precious artefact.”

“Why, Professor?” I demanded. “*Why?* What is so important that you are willing to sacrifice the whole world to get it? What will the world think of you? What would your son have thought?”

His hand swung round and struck me in the face. I reeled, stumbling back and holding my cheek. Pain flashed across it.

“*Never speak to me about him,*” he spat. “What do you know, anyway? What do any of you know? It doesn’t matter. I require their technology for my discoveries. I *require* it. Should I stop, then? Should I give up? Hm?”

He was barely talking to me anymore. Pacing up and down his office, he angrily posed questions to his chair and to his desk. I edged to the door, holding my face.

The truth of the matter was now inescapably clear. I had thought Professor Crannus was my guide through this dark labyrinth, my spool of thread. But he was not.

He was the Minotaur.

But I would not be cowed by him. I had been subdued before, with another Professor in a different world, wearing the same face. I would not allow myself to go through it again.

“Professor.” I put one hand on the doorknob. “I’m done. This is over.”

Without looking at me, he waved his hand in dismissal. “If you leave this room, you leave everything behind. I will have no interest in ever talking to you in the future.”

“Fine.” He stopped pacing and looked at me. “You are a sick, deranged, selfish man and I won’t listen to you justify it. Not any more. Never contact me again.”

He frowned, shook his head, then returned to pacing.

“What a terrible era,” he muttered. “In which idiots govern the blind.”^[127]

I opened the door, and took a step outside.

“Chloe.” I turned, standing at the threshold.

“What?”

“When did the Gardener approach you?”

“This morning.”

“Where?”

“He used your door in the basement. He... They?” I frowned. “He said that he created a small pocket universe, just for us.”

He locked his eyes onto me. “Did he close the door?”

“I don’t know.”

“You must know. This is the most crucial thing you will ever be asked to know. There are safeguards in place on that door. There are locks and gates and codes, but they only work if the door is closed. Do you understand? Did he close the door?”

I could already feel the pull, the hypnotising urgency of his words drawing me back into the mystery, back into his world.

But I had made my decision.

“I can’t remember.” I shrugged. “But I think that’s your problem, not mine.”

With that, I walked out of his office and closed the door behind me.

#

As I stepped out of the Social Studies building, I was overcome with a liberating sense of freedom. The spring sun had come out and it shone a warm light on my face. I shivered at the touch of it. I realised that I no longer needed to wait for the Professor’s call. I was not bound to him anymore. My life was, for the first time in a long while, completely my own.

Walking away from the Professor gave me a new sense of perspective. I couldn’t help but think about Sarah and what she had done. When I did, I no longer felt the same anger – the vitriol had burned its way through me and fizzled out. No one is perfect, after all. If I could be talked into blindly overlooking murder, into forgiving torture, then who was I to judge? The Professor was an intoxicating man – a great man in his own twisted, amoral way – utterly convincing when he wanted to be. I had fallen under his spell so entirely. Could I blame Sarah for having done the same?

But the wounds were still fresh, too painful to confront. Yes, I could rationalise my understanding of her. I was not angry anymore. But the cold waters of her betrayal still ran through my veins. When I thought of her, and of our time together, it brought nausea to my stomach. It clouded my head.

I needed time. I needed space to breathe. But sometimes, life does not allow us such luxuries. I’d been sitting in my room for a few hours, quietly contemplating my future, my newfound freedom and agency, when she knocked.

“Chloe? Can I come in?”

Her eyes were red and wet, dabbed with tissues. I let her in silently, and she sat on the edge of my bed, next to me. A cavernous gulf lay between us

and I couldn't see how to cross it. Even though I wanted to be past this, there were still unknown words that needed to be said, even if we couldn't find them. They lingered under our skin and if they remained there they would fester.

She sat silently, and I could feel the anxiety dripping off her like sweat. Whatever unspoken thoughts she had prepared to say were not coming at her bidding. I shifted. At the very least, I wanted her to know that I was past my fury, that I would not attack her.

"I want to forgive you," I said softly. "I really do. But I don't know how."

"No," she said, turning to me. "Wait. I was going to... Before you say anything, I want to ask you something. I want to... will you come with me, somewhere? I have something I want to show you?"

"Where?"

"It's a two and a half hour drive. I wanted to explain it beforehand, but I think maybe it's better if I don't. We don't have to talk. You don't have to... It's just. Please?"

She took her hand in mine and squeezed it, and though the gulf between us tightened a little, my mind still recoiled at the touch. Memories of being with her flooded back, tainted, rendered impure.

"Okay," I said.

She drove and I sat in the backseat, just out of sight. We didn't talk. At first, a silent expectation weighed heavy on us, but as we passed through country fields and through small towns, it lessened. The journey found its own sense of normalcy and I accepted it for what it was – a stopgap, a waiting time for a conversation that was soon to come. I didn't ask where we were going. In many ways, I was revelling in the fact that I didn't need to.

Some weeks ago, I wouldn't have gone with her. Being this far away from the Professor, if he called, would have been impossible. I hadn't realised quite how confined my life had become. Breathing a sigh of relief, I let myself stare out of the window and enjoy the newfound freedom I had.

At times, I would catch Sarah's eyes in the rearview mirror, looking at me. Both of us would quickly look away, bashful, recognising it was premature. It was not yet time for our inevitable discussion. That would come at the end of this journey, wherever it was.

When we finally stopped, we were in a quaint English town. The streets were thin with a few people ambling about their day. Getting out of the car, Sarah beckoned me to follow her.

“Where are we?”

“Chichester,” she said. “Come – I need to show you something.”

We exited the carpark and crossed the street, the looming spires of Chichester Cathedral rising in front of us. Wordlessly, Sarah took my hand and we went inside. She took no time to admire the inside, the rising arches and beautiful stained glass windows, but pushed through to the back of the main hall.

A pair of statted effigies lay recumbent. We stood before a tomb, built to house two medieval nobles, with sculptures of them to preserve their legacies and identities through the lengths and breadths of time. Their names are unclear, their faces vague, but my eyes were immediately drawn to their hands. In his left gauntlet, he clasped her hand – a tender symbol of affection.

“It’s the tomb from the poem,” I said. “The Larkin poem.”

“It is. I wanted you to see it. I wanted you to feel what others feel, what Larkin felt. And I want you to tell me how you feel, about me, about what we had, and what I did. But I wanted to do it here.”

“I...” I stared at it, unsure of how to proceed. The clasped hand, emanating an eternity of faith, companionship and love, seemed to mock me. “Sarah – my life feels like a series of events, or of feelings that I thought were real, but it turns out were not. And when I think about you, when I think about us, I can’t shake this overwhelming sense that the love we shared was not real either. That it isn’t real.”

She put her hand on my arm, sending a shiver up my spine. “When people come and see this tomb, they believe these two people loved each other. I don’t know if they did. Nobody does. But that’s not important. Do you know what my favourite line from that poem is? *Time has transfigured them into untruth*. It sounds harsh, but it’s not. Because transfigured doesn’t just mean changed, it means elevated. Heightened. We’re all obsessed with things being true and real, but sometimes the best things aren’t. Sometimes untruth is better than truth.”

I frowned. “What are you saying?”

“Love isn’t real, Chloe. Not in the way you’re talking about. It’s too lovely. Too wonderful. If you start to look for the cracks, you’ll see it falls

apart. It's too perfect to exist in such an imperfect world."

I turned to look at her, confused, and quickly realised my mistake. Those eyes – those deep brown eyes were staring straight back in me and I lost myself in them. I could be lost in them forever.

"That's what makes it so special," she said. "Reality is disappointing. It is painfully mundane: that table, these chairs, those trees. That's why people don't focus on who these people were or what their lives were really like. They're boring. They focus on those hands, tenderly holding each other for all eternity. When we embrace love, as a concept, we can elevate ourselves to that perfect world it exists in. We can live there too. What we had, what we could still have, doesn't have to be tempered by reality. It might be a lie, but it's a beautiful one."

"But..." She had both of my hands in hers now, and her face was so close to mine. Ever so close. "If it isn't real, how can we trust it? How can you know it'll last?"

She smiled. "You've just got to have faith."

She took me by the hand and turned me round, our hands tenderly touching like the statues before us. "When we first met, we used to drink wine and eat cheese. There's a stunning spot in the gardens of this cathedral. I've got a bottle of wine and a picnic in my car. Come with me. I'm not asking you to forgive me. I'm just asking you to believe that love is possible."

My body softened against her.

I didn't know if she deserved forgiveness, but that wasn't the point. She needed me to forgive her and I needed to do it. The Professor had wrecked almost everything else in my life; I would not allow him to destroy this – the one ideal I had left.

We set up outside, just as the sun was starting to set. The trickle of river and the susurrus of the wind rustling through trees settled around us. Before long, we were talking again – about Larkin, about ambiguous words and interpretations, about ideals and ideas.

"I don't want to go home," I said, eventually. "I don't want to go back to the past and everything that happened. I want to stay here, in this moment, forever."

"I don't know about forever," she said with a grin. "But I did book a fancy hotel for tonight."

I fell into her, then. My body pressed against hers and I let everything go – everything that I had to give, I let pour into that single moment, hollowing myself of all the doubt and the worry and the heartache and filling myself with her love.

It was so easy. It was just like letting go.

My life had been consumed by the Professor's mysteries for the better part of a year. But if I allowed myself really to decide where it was I wanted to be, the only thought that came to mind was this. Being in her arms. Kissing her. Safe.

She was right. We could work through the lies and we would find a new truth, not based on other worlds or great adventures, but on ourselves.

I had spent so much of my life trying to find perfection, trying to find the ideals I strove for in the fabric of the world around me. But it didn't matter if there was perfection there or not, I saw that now. It only mattered if I believed in it.

And I did – in that moment, I believed it wholly and unreservedly, in every part of my being. I loved her and no matter what happened, in the end, what will survive of us is love.

#

The next morning, we drove back to the campus. I sat up with her in the front seat and we talked the whole way. The morning sun beamed a wonderful warmth into the car, and I let it wash over me. The light of a new day.

When we returned to halls, she said she needed a nap. I went for a shower, pulled on some clothes and popped out to the Costcutters up the road to grab some coffees and lunch for when she woke up.

There was a lightness in the air, and a breeze that felt both cool and warm at the same time. My steps felt less heavy, and my thoughts with them. I exchanged a smiling greeting with the cashier, and quickened my pace back to Rootes.

As I entered our accommodations, I was already getting those butterflies you get at the start of something new. The pleasant, thrilling little bubbles in your stomach. I couldn't help but laugh a little at myself as I took the steps up to her floor two at a time.

I knocked on her door. There was no reply.

She was still asleep.

Putting my key in the lock, I pushed it open. The room was a shambles – the bed upturned, the desk on its side. Papers and torn books littered the floor. I took a cautious step inside, having to tread over a broken chair. My hands brushed against the wall, feeling slashes in the wallpaper.

My heart doubled. My coffees tumbled to the floor, splashing over my feet. Panic echoed through me, reverberating through the walls of my body and my heart.

There was a note above the bed, held up by a knife that had been slammed into the wall.

Hello, Chloe. It's been a while.

I've been looking forward to visiting your world for some time now.

If you wish to see your girlfriend again, you will tell me where he is hiding him.

I'll find you soon.

Professor Roland Crannus.

I jerked backward, as if the note were made of poison, and tripped. Tumbling back onto the desk, into darkness, I jolted in pain. I don't know how long I was there, trying to catch my breath. Shaking. Claustrophobic. Looking for a way out.

XII

I circled the room, useless, panicked, searching for clues that weren't there. I didn't even know what I was looking for. Just circling, shivering, unable to think.

My phone buzzed and my hand darted to my pocket, pulling it out as if it were a deadly viper. My hands fumbled at the cover, shaking. I almost dropped it.

It was a text from James.

Chloe. We need to talk. Call me.

I stared at it for a second, then threw my phone at the mirror. It cracked against the glass and clattered to the floor. I screamed at the useless text, at my own uselessness and impotence. I screamed at the broken mirror – my eyes were red, from both tears and exhaustion. I hadn't changed clothes in two days. I was in no shape to be helping anyone.

The futility of it settled over me like a black fog, weighing down on my body, and I collapsed. Tears streamed down my cheeks, and I curled up on the upturned mattress, sobbing uncontrollably. It flowed out of me like a waterfall.

My phone woke me with another buzz. I hadn't even noticed myself fall asleep. It was on the floor where I had thrown it, the cracked screen lighting up.

Another buzz. I reached over and looked down at it. 3 missed calls and another text from James.

I'm serious, Chloe. This is important. This isn't about us. Call me.

I sighed, moving my finger over to turn off my phone. It buzzed one more time.

At least turn on the TV, will you?

Frowning, I looked at my phone. There wasn't a TV in Sarah's room or anywhere in the building as far as I knew. People didn't tend to have TVs in their rooms. Tentatively, I dialled him back.

He picked up before even a single dial tone passed.

"Jesus Christ, Chloe. Where are you? Are you okay?"

"What do you want?"

"Thank God you're alright. You don't know, do you? Turn on the news."

"I'm not near a TV."

"Then open your computer," he said, exasperated. "Go to the BBC website. Live headlines. Now."

I looked around the room. Sarah's computer was half open on the floor, by the side of her broken desk. I sat down next to it and flicked it open, going straight to the BBC news live stream.

"...and as the G20 summit is about to begin, the British government and the Crown welcomes world leaders and dignitaries from across the globe," a woman was saying. She was standing in front of No. 10 Downing Street in a red jacket. "Prime Minister Gordon Brown will be meeting the leaders of the leading twenty nations over the course of the next few days. They will be staying in residences in the centre of London in Pimlico to ensure easy access to the Houses of Parliament and Downing Street. President Obama arrived this morning and Angela Merkel is set to arrive later today. From France, President Sarkozy has..."

"James," I said. "I don't understand. What is this about? Why are you..."

"Just wait. Give it a minute."

At the end of the segment, the screen flicked back to the news-anchor room.

"Thank you, Karen. And now we return to our breaking news, as it comes to you. Today, armed police raided offices at Warwick University." My stomach dropped. A shot of the Social Studies building appeared on the screen, photos of armoured vans, police cordons, ambulances. Sections of the building and grounds were smoking. "After an armed struggle, three were injured and a suspect is still at large. We go now to Chief Inspector Pratt of the Midlands Police Force."

A woman, mid-thirties, blonde hair tied back. She stood in front of a line of microphones.

What do you think they will do when they find out I've been lying to them? Hm? Sack me?

“Yesterday, we received active intelligence of a potential terrorist threat to the British Government. Acting on this intelligence, the police force deployed a team to apprehend and arrest the suspect: a Professor Roland Crannus, currently working at Warwick University. Upon our arrival, there was a struggle and an explosion was detonated. Two civilians and one police officer sustained severe injuries, but as yet there are no fatalities. The whereabouts of the suspect are unknown.

Given the information received and the current political situation, the Prime Minister has chosen to raise the threat level to ‘severe’. It is imperative that anyone with any information about Roland Crannus comes forward immediately. He is at large and highly dangerous. If you see him, do not approach him. Do not engage with him. Simply call the dedicated hotline that will be appearing on the screen. Professor Crannus is now the country’s most wanted fugitive.”

I didn’t say anything. I stared at the screen as it jumped to another story, something about a hurricane in southern Japan that I was unable to process.

“That’s him, isn’t it?” James’s urgent voice pressed at me. “That’s Professor Crannus you were talking to the other day? Shit, I never would have helped you with him if I knew it was like this. Listen, Chloe, are you there? Are you in danger?”

“I’m fine, James,” I said, then I put down the phone.

A wave of nervous electricity rippled through me. I had done this. I had exposed the Professor, made him the enemy. Three injured and an explosion – would that have happened if I hadn’t interfered?

I couldn’t think about that now. Sarah was gone. Images of the other Professor – with his scar, his dark eyes, his cruel face – plagued my thoughts. My hands shook. My whole body shook, trembling with the energy of my fear, my worry and, on some inexplicable level, my excitement.

Pacing up and down Sarah’s room, the immediacy of the moment burst within me. I had thought I could leave this behind. I thought I could sit idly by and let the Professor’s life continue on, separate from mine, as though the choice to leave him had separated me into another world.

But it hadn't.

Our lives were grossly, misshapenly tangled together. Not even the fiercest of efforts could prise them apart.

I went to my room to change into fresh clothes, gathered my things, and began the short walk to the Social Studies building. I didn't know what I would find there, or what I would do. But for the first time in a long time there was no doubt in my mind that it was exactly where I needed to be.

#

The police cordon covered most of Library Road and half of the walk to the Arts Centre. The campus was packed, thronging with news vans, curious onlookers, and a regiment of police officers holding them at bay.

Groups of students protesting the G20 had found their opportunity in this conglomeration of press and people – the perfect combination for getting your voice heard. They swarmed between the bodies, holding up their signs, scrawled with slogans like “*Financial Fool's Day*” and “*Bring Down the Bankers, not the Poor!*”^[128]

The cordon stood like a dam, keeping the wave of the crowd back. Inside, the courtyard of the Social Studies building looked sparse by comparison. A flat of broken rubble, dotted with paramedics, police and the occasional fireman.

I pushed my way to the front, my hands grasping the cordon.

“Step back, miss,” a policeman said, approaching. “Keep your hands off the cordon.”

“Please. I have information. I need to talk to someone.”

“Sure you do,” he said, shaking his head. “You and everyone else. Go try to talk to one of those press vans over there.”

“No, you don't understand. I have information about Professor Crannus.”

His face grew hard. “I don't want to hear another story about this crazy Professor killing a swan or building a nuclear bomb in his basement or whatever. Save it for the tabloids. Back away from the cordon.”

“But, I...”

“Chloe?”

Judy had appeared from inside the building, surrounded by a police escort. She walked over to me as soon as she saw me.

“Let her through.” The police officer frowned, but raised the cordon and allowed me in. She took a step closer to me. “What are you doing

here?”

“I had to see it for myself,” I said. “What happened? What did you do?”

“I didn’t do anything. They tried to arrest him. I could have told them how well that would have gone, but no one up top wanted to listen. Not with the current political situation.” She gave me a thin-lipped smile. “Nobody ever wants to listen.”

She led me into the building. The police stepped out of her way, lifting another cordon and nodding their deference as we passed. Rubble littered the corridor – half standing walls and broken spikes of wooden furniture, holes in the floor. The stench of acrid smoke and ash lingered in the air.

“They tried to take him in his office, but he wasn’t there. Cameras in the basement showed him working downstairs.” She stepped over the broken floor. In front of us, the mangled metal cage of the lift lay sprawled across the passage. “Fortunately, they noticed it had been rigged just before the gates closed. They were able to get back, but not quite far enough. There were major injuries. There was a student round the corner, too. They think he’ll live, but he lost an arm.”

I followed her down another set of stairs, past rubble and debris that had been cleared, and down into the entrance to the office. It was filled with people, but not police. Suited men and women raked the office, picking up files and extracting hard drives from the computers.

“He wasn’t here, of course,” she said. “I could have told them that. Just like I could tell them that he won’t have left anything of any value behind for us to find. Not that it makes any difference.”

The Professor’s door – the one that led to other worlds – was open. On the other side, there was nothing but the wall behind it. The doorframe stood pointlessly like the empty frame of a painting, leading nowhere.

“Where has he gone?” I asked.

“If we could tell you that, we wouldn’t need to be down here rummaging around.” She waved her hand at the room. “It’s not an ideal situation.”

I nodded, the understatement of her sentence not lost on me. The truth was there would be no way to catch a man like the Professor, not if he didn’t want to be found. There was only one solution – to wait, and to see what he would do next.

Only I didn’t have time to wait. The other Professor had taken Sarah, and for all I knew she was enduring the same torture, the same horror that

still kept me up at night. I shivered.

“Ms Stennaway, ma’am.” A thick Edinburgh accent came from the door. A man appeared at it, holding a phone. He wore a military jacket, which bulged with a combination of body armour and muscle.

Judy turned. “News, Alastair?”

“He’s appeared, ma’am. In London.”

“In *London*?”

“Yes, ma’am. They say he has a list of demands.”

“Demands? What position is he in to be making demands?”

“He’s not alone, ma’am. I... I don’t know where they’ve come from. Nobody knows where they’ve come from.”

“Be specific, Alastair. Where *who* have come from?”

“The army, ma’am. It all happened so quickly. There are so many of them. African soldiers, with weapons like we’ve never seen before. The Armed Forces have been mobilised, but... well, it all happened so quickly.”

“What happened so quickly?”

“He’s taken the capital, ma’am. Westminster. Victoria. Pimlico. He has the world leaders of 13 states held hostage. He says he wants to talk.”

Her body stiffened like an old broom, or a tree. Without a word, she held her hand out to take the phone.

“He’s not on the phone, ma’am. He’s on the TV.”

#

It is likely that you will already have seen what came to be known as The Pimlico Broadcast.^[129] The short video has since taken its place alongside the moon landing and 9/11 attacks in the pantheon of historically significant footage.

I do not reference these two events without purpose. The former represented a shift in our understanding of what was possible. When the Apollo rocket landed, the whole world watched with bated breath. It was the largest audience for any single event in human history, with over one-fifth of the world’s population witnessing Armstrong’s first steps on that rocky surface.

It sent an immediate and resounding message that the United States of America had solidified itself as the dominant global power. In that brief moment, it became abundantly clear that America would win the Cold War, that democracy and capitalism would prevail. There was a flash of realisation – like stumbling upon a map – and for a moment the fog of

precognition cleared and the future was sketched out clearly for all to see. It was a future of innovation, of growth and of discovery. The video was more than just a video. It was history.

In much the same way, the video of the towers falling on the 11th of September is etched into the collective consciousness of the world. Along with the horror and the shock, the grief and the terror, there was the definitive sense that something essential had changed. One of the most apt comparisons I have read came from a young student from Lebanon, who watched the video in his home over leftovers. “It was like that scene from *Indiana Jones*,” he wrote, “when a tribesman unwillingly and by mistake injured the King and caused him to bleed, so the myth of the God-King vanished and the bleeding king became fair game and unworthy of worship.”^[130]

For both these videos, the power of images as symbols reigned supreme. While the footages themselves lasted for minutes, both can be reduced down to a single representative image: a tower on fire; a footstep in the dust. And though many did not fully comprehend the context or impact of what they were seeing on a logical and reasoned level, there was a collective intuition. An intake of breath. An understanding that the world as we knew it was not going to be the same anymore.

The Pimlico Broadcast shares this quality, both in its message and in its unforgettable, defining image.^[131] When I watched it for the first time, it was in that basement, along with Judy and the rest of the CEDM agents. It was not on a large screen, but on a laptop that someone had hurriedly brought down to us. We crowded over it like a cursed chest of treasure, fascinated, compelled, and deeply afraid of what was to come.

You can still watch it today, anywhere on the internet. But no matter the number of reaction videos, analyses, and recreations, nothing ever has quite the same impact as seeing it for the very first time.

The broadcast opens to shoddy camera work. It is clear that whoever has been asked to film this is both nervous and unprofessional. The corners of the screen shake perceptively. Yet, there is still a clear sense of directed action. The cameraman has been told what to do.

The shot pans slowly across a large conference room. The building is ornate – an old English townhouse from the nineteenth century built to house visiting diplomats and dignitaries for easy access to the nearby Houses of Parliament. Bright light seeps in through the high windows.

In seats around a central table, subdued and silent, are a collection of recognisable faces. Dmitri Medvedev. Hu Jintao. Barack Obama. Some are staring at the camera directly, some are looking away.

Standing behind them, like silent guardians, are men unlike any the world had ever seen. The initial reports were that the soldiers were from African nations, given the colour of their skin, but it was clear that news reporters knew this to be false.^[132]

They are taller than normal people. Wider. Their facial structure is different enough to be noticeable, and their weapons strange and unrecognisable. These are men from another world. Sombasi's world, as the Professor named it. Kiluvu's men.

They do not brandish their weapons or make threats. There is no need. Their stances and the faces of their captives tell enough of the story. The streets outside are tellingly silent. There is no struggle here. The entire district has been locked down and it is under their control.

When the camera finally moves past the table of world leaders, it gives us a moment of blank wallpaper – a pause in which to catch our breath – before eventually landing on the figure of Professor Crannus.

He is standing straight up, his three-piece suit and cravat spotless. Smoke is rising from a pipe in his left hand. With his right, he briefly lifts the pocket watch that dangles from his waistcoat and glances at it.^[133] The cameraman shakes a little.

“Good afternoon,” he says, a thin smile on his lips. “I apologise for interrupting your daily activities for something so personal, but it would appear that I have been left no other option. For those of you who are wondering who I am, or what my intentions are, you may continue to do so. This does not concern you. This concerns only those persons who have decided to turn on me. It concerns those who believe that they have been shown some kind of revelation, and have chosen to act upon it.

“I speak directly to those individuals now, at the CEDM, in my various facilities, in the world's governments that have disavowed me and my work. I have heard your rhetoric. There are those amongst you who would be inclined to view me as some kind of devil. As Satan himself. I believe you think this makes your change of heart easier.”

At this moment, he pauses and takes in a deep breath from his pipe, letting the smoke flow listlessly into the air above him.

“You may think that this is a hellish scenario, but I am inclined to remind you of Dante Alighieri and his own journey down through the circles of hell. For when he finds Satan himself in that ninth circle, it is not alongside murderers, or torturers. It is not alongside the fraudsters, or the liars, or the gluttonous. No – he stands in companionship with Antenor of Troy, who betrayed his city to the Greeks. He stands with Cain and Ptolemy. He stands with Judas Iscariot.

“For it is not immorality or cruelty that makes a man a devil. Man has known this as long as he has been capable of conscious thought. No – it is treachery. It is *betrayal*.”

He spits the last word out like venom.

“I tell you this, and I broadcast this to the world, only so you know that I am utterly serious when I tell you what I require. I am giving you six hours fully to remove all police and military presence from my offices at the University of Warwick. When I am satisfied that it is clear, and there are no traps in wait for me, I will return and collect my things.

If you grant me this, I shall then disappear. These men,” he gestures to his right. The camera swings wildly back to the armed soldiers for a moment, then to the Professor, “will also disappear with me. You will never see me again.”

There is a long pause then. The Professor looks intently at the camera, as if waiting for something. Eventually, the camera man pulls back the zoom and we are treated to a wider scene. The Prime Minister of the UK – Gordon Brown – is at the Professor’s feet, on his knees, with his hands and mouth bound. Behind him, there is a soldier with a gun aimed at his head.

“However,” the Professor says, “if you delay, or if you make any attempts to prevent this, there will be consequences.”

A gun crack echoes through the room. A splatter of red splashes across the Professor’s jacket. Screams and shouts rise dramatically.

The body of the Prime Minister collapses, lifeless and bloody to the floor.^[134]

There is a shake of the camera and the broadcast ends, leaving only several seconds of black.

#

After watching the video, a stunned silence spread itself across the room. All were affected. None felt capable to break it. The image of the Prime Minister being shot, and all that it represented, echoed through our

collective minds, just as we knew it was echoing through the collective minds of the world.

After what seemed like a very long time, Judy spoke.

“Chloe, I’m going to have to ask you to accompany Corporal Alastair Dunn upstairs,” she said. “There is very little time and I fear I have been too hasty. We must know everything that you know about Crannus. Leave nothing out. Every single detail you can think of. It might be the only way to stop him.”

“Ma’am?”

“Yes, Alastair?”

“What about the demands?”

She clenched her fists. “What do you mean?”

“I just... he’s got the leaders of the world in custody. He’s got the capital. There are innocent people involved. If all he wants is to get some things...”

“That is *not* all he wants.” Her strangled voice barely contained the fury underneath. “What he says is *never* all that he means to do. What we know is that there is something here, somewhere nearby, that he desperately needs and that he would do anything to get back. If we can find out what it is and locate it, we have leverage. But while I am here – and I am the senior officer in charge – I am not negotiating or compromising with that man. I have done it for too long. *No more.*”

The corporal stood up straight and saluted. “Ma’am.”

“What I don’t understand,” she added, “is why he doesn’t just come here and get it himself. He has an army, doesn’t he? I know the British armed forces are mobilising, but they aren’t here. Not yet, anyway.”

“He’s worried about damage,” I said. “Whatever it is, it’s fragile. An outright battle might damage it. Destroy it.”

She nodded in agreement. “We need to find out what he’s after, Chloe. Go with Alastair. Tell him everything. I have calls to make.”

“Judy.” I looked at her pleadingly. “The other Professor. He has Sarah.”

“Sarah?”

“I need her back.”

She blinked. “We’ll do everything that we can for you, Chloe. But we need you right now.”

I nodded. She was right. There was no more time for compromise. But I couldn’t get the Professor’s accusation of betrayal out of my head. It had

been directed at the CEDM, of course, but it had also been directed at me. That much was clear.

Was this my fault? Was I responsible for what happened next? All I knew was that Sarah was still gone, and I couldn't stop until I had done everything I could to get her back. Judy seemed like my best option at the moment. In fact, she seemed like my only option.

I was taken into another office in the Social Studies building – one that had been unaffected by the Professor's blast. There was a single table and a microphone. A makeshift interrogation room. I had to push the small panic that bubbled up back down inside of me. This was not going to be like my last interrogation. I chose to be here. I wanted to help.

The corporal was professional and to the point. He sat opposite me with a notebook and a pen, quietly listening to my tale. I told him everything I could remember, from the day I met the Professor through to this very moment. The story came in stops and starts at first, sputtering out of me in confused segments as I backtracked, misremembered and clarified. But before long it was pouring out of me like a flood.

Now and again, he would stop and ask questions. Short questions. Brief clarifications. I remember looking up at the clock, anxiously watching the Professor's six-hour timeline bleeding away. I'd been talking for one hour. It felt like three days.

There was no emotion on the corporal's face. No register of surprise when I told him about the Gardeners, or the other worlds, or Sarah. He was a blank canvas, drinking in my story as I purged myself of it.

"And what did the other Professor ask you in your interrogation?"

I blinked. I hadn't said anything for a little while. I had got as far as my capture and stopped. His eyes bored into me, the question pressing itself against my brain.

"I..." Panic again. Fear. "I can't remember."

"It's very important that you remember," he said. His presence seemed suddenly threatening, looming over the room and over me, making me small and defenceless. Naked.

"He..." I shook my head. "He just wanted to know who I was. I didn't say anything. The... the Professor rescued me quite quickly, really."

"Which Professor?"

"My Professor," I replied, annoyed. Why were we still talking about this? "The one from this world. Then it was over. Can we move on?"

He continued to look at me, then made a note in his book. With a smile, he said, "Of course. Please go on."

When we were done, he left me to sit alone. I sighed, lying back in my chair as if a deep and oppressive weight had been lifted out of me. Something would come of this, I knew it. I didn't really care what happened to the Professor anymore, or to the world. The paradigm shift had already happened. There was no preventing that now. All I cared about was Sarah. Getting her back, safe, and feeling the touch of her warmth one more time.

It was another hour before Judy knocked on the door and came in. I remember thinking that she looked strange, as if she had good news, but seemed concerned about breaking it to me.

"What's happened?" I said. "What is he searching for?"

"We don't know yet. But we have had another breakthrough, thanks to your information. I want you to know you've been very helpful, Chloe. Very helpful, indeed. This is a global catastrophe and... well, it might not seem ideal, but it's the only way."

She was treading lightly, cautious and friendly. I frowned. She was never friendly.

"What are you talking about?"

"Using the information you gave us, we've found someone who wants to help. Or perhaps we should say he found us. Someone who could be very useful in helping us stop all of this. He wants to ask you a few questions, and... well, we want you to answer them."

My heart sunk deep into my stomach. A man appeared behind Judy and I felt an invisible hand tighten around my throat. He brushed the hair out of his face, revealing the scarred, violent expression of the other Roland Crannus.

"Hello again, Chloe."

#

I disappeared into a shell of my own silence. Inside, a raging torrent of fear and anger and terror swirled, eating up my insides, screaming in my skull.

My face was inert. An outward display of lifelessness. A wall to keep demons out. I didn't speak. I didn't move. My eyes glazed over to the wall.

They were both speaking, but I had no ears with which to listen to them anymore. The only ears I had were inside myself, and the only voice I heard was the desperate, clawing urge to get out. Get out of this room. Get out of this building. *Get out.*

The inside of my skin prickled, lines of goosebumps running up and down it. I knew there was no way I could be in this room for much longer. My skin would rip apart and the hurricane that was twisting inside of me would burst outwards.

“I’d like to get some air.” The words came toneless out of my mouth.

“Of course, Chloe,” Judy said. They stepped to the side. I got up, my legs wobbling, the ground shifting underneath me like an ocean, and stumbled my way to the door. Outside, down the corridor and round a corner. Judy followed me.

“We don’t have much time,” she said. “We need to...”

I threw her up against the wall, my hands pressed against her shoulders. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

She gritted her teeth. “Anything it takes. We have to stop him.”

“Not with him. Not like this. I... I told you. He tortured me. He kidnapped Sarah... he... I told you!”

“I know that, Chloe. And when this is over, we’ll do what it takes to get her back, but we’re not really in a position to negotiate here. We need him, and there’s no time. He’s the only one who can tell us what Crannus is doing. He says he just needs to talk to you. He just needs you to answer some questions, then he can...”

“Then he can what? You can’t trust him! Didn’t you listen to anything I said?!”

“People have *died!*” she shouted. It was the first time I heard her raise her voice. “People are dying, right now. There is a war going on, you stupid girl. Crannus has gone and started a war between worlds we didn’t even know existed! This is bigger than you or me or anything else. We stop him now and we stop him here. That’s all there is to it.”

I fell silent, crushed under the weight of all this necessity, of my own fears, of my inadequacy.

“Fine,” I said. “Just... just give me a moment. And I’ll talk to him.”

She nodded, backing away and going back to the room. I took a deep breath, waited until she had disappeared behind the door, counted to ten, then ran.

I leapt down the stairs three at a time, darting past confused police officers and CEDM agents. By the time they took a second look at me, I was long past, dashing through the police cordon and into the crowds.

As I ducked low, pressing through the throng of protestors and spectators. The Professor's words echoed as though they were my very own.

It is not immorality or cruelty that makes a man a devil. No – it is treachery. It is betrayal.

I got as far as the Learning Grid, at the north end of the campus, when I stopped running. Breathing heavily, I pulled out my phone and dialled the number I had been given. It rung once.

Yes, the voice said.

“I'm ready to help.”

“Good,” said a voice behind me. I turned to see the Gardener appear from behind a wall. “We've been waiting.”

“I can get the artefact back for you,” I said. “But I need to know something. Your restrictions – your non-intervention. What are the boundaries? What is the actual rule?”

He looked at me, his eyes boring into my skull as if he was trying to see the cogs of my brain. “I may not physically intervene in the development of actions begun by other parties.”

“Well,” I said. “There's something I need to do, and I'm going to do it anyway. No matter if you help me or not, the action will happen. I just need your help in making it happen faster. Does that sound like something you can do?”

His face betrayed nothing. “What is it you want me to do?”

I swallowed the lump in my throat. I knew there was only one person who could help me now. One person who could get Sarah back and who could stop the monster that Judy had fallen into step with. One person who could end this.

“I need you to take me to Pimlico.”

XIII

He opened a door that looked like it led to a janitor's closet. I recognised the architecture on the other side immediately – the high windows, the wooden beams. I had just seen it broadcast a few hours ago in the basement.

He stood to one side.

“You're not coming?” I asked.

He smiled. “You know the rules. Even doing this is... questionable.”

I took in a deep gulp and stepped through the threshold, hearing the door shut behind me. At the noise, I turned, and jerked back in surprise.

Three men stood behind me, tall and forbidding. They looked at me, these otherworldly soldiers that the whole world had just watched, and signalled that I should follow them. I didn't seem to be given a choice. Slowly, I walked behind them as they led me down a corridor and to another room. They stopped, gesturing that I should walk on. Only their heads tracked me as I passed through the door.

The second room was smaller: an intimate library, with rows of books along the walls and a fireplace in the centre. The Professor was sitting on one of the armchairs, quietly reading. The Prime Minister's blood stained his jacket.

“I've been waiting for you.” He didn't look up from his book.

I stopped dead in my tracks, somehow more keenly aware of the danger than I had been a moment ago. I waited at the threshold of the doorway, surrounded by soldiers, looking in.

“How did you know I'd come?”

He closed the book and put it on the table. He pushed his glasses up his nose, then took some tobacco out of his jacket pocket and began to pack his

pipe with it.

“I left you a message,” he said.

“The broadcast.”

“Yes.”

Betrayal, he had said on the television. Treachery. My throat was dry.

“He’s here,” I said. “He’s come here, to this world.”

“Do you think I don’t know that?” He muttered. “Who do you think sent those men after me?”

I frowned, confused. “That was the CEDM. I thought it was...”

“Bah!” He waved his pipe in the air. “Puppets, all of them. He has been in this world how long? Two days? He will already be pulling their strings. This is what *he does*.”^[135]

“He’s taken Sarah.”

“Who?”

My mouth curled in distaste. “The woman you made spy on me.”

“Ah, yes.” He looked momentarily confused, annoyed that he had forgotten. “Yes, of course.”

Two men entered the room, carrying a large box-shaped device of wires and switches. They spoke some unintelligible words at the Professor, who barked orders back at them. As quickly as they had come, they disappeared, taking the device with them.

He sat back in his chair and sucked on his pipe.

“I will help you get Sarah back.” His words took on a sudden urgency. “I am the only one that can. But you must do exactly as I say. I do not believe that they will remove themselves from the University. And by the time I get there, it will be too late.”

“What will be too late?”

“Don’t interrupt me,” he snapped. He jerked a little – the urgency in his voice cracking through. “There is a storage facility: a small building that appears to be a garage, just on the edge of campus. You must go there. I would go directly myself – Kiluvu is able to open doors in and out of this world for me – but I have been too clever for my own good. You must understand. The room is sealed. Hidden. A sort of quantum dead-zone, if you will. Some of my best work. There is no accessing it, except for in the most conventional sense. And I obviously cannot be seen on campus at this time.”

“You’re not the only one they’re looking for.”

“Don’t be stupid. A few individuals are looking for you. The whole world is looking for me.”

“Who’s fault is that?”

His eyes flashed in anger. I took a step back, towards the door that had led me here, though I did not think that it would take me back now.

At that moment, another man came into the room. His shirt was dishevelled and his hands shook.

“P – Professor Crannus, sir?”

“What is it?”

“The – the – it’s like you said, sir.^[136] The army have surrounded this district. They have a hostage negotiator. He wants to talk.”

The Professor paused, seeming to consider his words for a moment. Then he wrinkled his nose in annoyance, his glasses falling further down them.

“Well? Put him on.”

The man gave a nervous nod. He placed a phone on the table, set to speaker. A tinny voice echoed out of it.

“This is Yusuf Nadim of the London metropolitan police. May I ask who I am speaking to?”

The Professor grimaced. “Spare me the pleasantries, Yusuf. You know exactly who you are talking to. If you are to waste my time with annoyances, I will be unable to tolerate you much further.”

“My apologies, Roland. May I call you Roland?”

“Would a rose by any other name smell as sweet?”

“Excuse me?”

“Fantastic. A time-waster and an idiot. Call me again when you have someone worth speaking to.”

“Professor Crannus, please.” A hint of desperation echoed through the tiny speakers. *“We all want the same thing here.”*

“No, we don’t. What an absurd statement to make. What I want is for you to clear out of Warwick, and leave nothing behind. Will you do that?”

“Measures are already being put in place. What we really need from you now is proof of life from the other hostages. If you could provide that...”

The Professor leant forward, picking up the phone. “I’m not usually a forthcoming man, but I feel compelled to tell you I was just reading a fascinating book. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, of all people. The library in this

building is excellent. You have distracted me from that and proceeded to bore me thoroughly. That is a travesty. I will speak to you no longer. If you want to continue this conversation, find another negotiator.”

He hung up and passed the phone back to the shaking man.

“That should keep them busy for a while. Send in Kiluvu.”

“Y- yes, sir.”

He disappeared and, some short and painfully quiet moments later, Kiluvu appeared with a huge smile on his face.

“Chlo-e!” He exclaimed, putting his hands in the air. I did my best to give him a smile and a wave. After exchanging a few impassioned words with the Professor, he called for his soldiers. They brought in another wired device, and I realised that it was a bomb. There were bombs everywhere.

As he left, the Professor raised a finger.

“Oh, Kiluvu?”

The big man stopped.

“When they do bother us again, just kill the American, will you? The one with the dark skin. Then throw him over the balcony. That’ll keep them talking for at least a few hours.”

He nodded, gave me another smile, and left.

“You’ll never get them to cooperate if you keep killing people,” I said.

“They were never going to cooperate. At this point, I’m just keeping them busy. You’re the one I need.”

I hated the thought of being a tool in his plan. But Sarah was gone, and I needed her back, more than I had needed anything in my life.

“What do you need me to do?”

“Kiluvu will take you somewhere nearby. I’ll draw you a map of where the garage is. It’s number 33. All you need to do is open the door with this key, and the whole system will unlock. There will be a door inside. A metal door. You need to press a button to unlock it, then I can get in. It should be obvious.”

“The artefact is there, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” he said, distracted. “Yes. I need it back before *he* gets at it.”

“And what’s to say I don’t hand it straight over to the Gardener?”

“Because while I no longer trust you, Chloe, I do trust that you are not an idiot. I am the only one who gets you Sarah back. Remember that.” He frowned in disgust. “You shouldn’t trust that lot anyway – who do you think let the other Professor in here? For all their talk of non-intervention, they

certainly have no issues expediting their goals. Especially if all they have to do is *accidentally* leave a door open.”

“Fine,” I said. “But promise me one thing.”

“What?”

“When this is all over, we never see each other again.”

He snorted, taking another big breath of his pipe. “Nothing’s ever over, Chloe. It just seems that way for a while.”

#

Anxious to get out of there, I let Kiluvu open a door for me and was immediately back in the centre of the campus. The Professor had shown me a map of where the garages were. All I had to do was cut round the back of Cryfields accommodation and across the main road in order to find 33. It wouldn’t take more than fifteen minutes.

It occurred to me, as I walked, how much was being left in my hands. Judy had been right – this was the leverage that was needed to prevent catastrophe. As Kiluvu had led me out, I was sure I had seen enough bombs to level a city block.

If I just turned over this artefact now to Judy, or to the Gardener, would it all end?

It was a risk I couldn’t take. If the Professor was right, and his horrific counterpart had his claws round the CEDM, then there would be no solution there. More importantly, I would do whatever it would take to get Sarah back. I had led her into this. If it were not for me, she would still be living her life, smoking and drinking, reading. As much as I knew I was making a deal with the devil, to turn on the Professor now would be to abandon her completely and I would not allow that to happen.

The spot was difficult to find. There was a long row of similar garages, exactly on the road where the Professor had indicated. The garages had blue doors and white walls, connecting seamlessly to one another. I was on the other side of the main road and surrounded mainly by greenery. There were a few small roads and lanes that led off, but they were quiet. No cars. No people. I walked down a section which began at 1 and ended at 20. There was a small crossing, where a lane cut through the block, and 21 continued on the other side.

However, though I was sure I was counting all the way, before I knew it I found myself at 40.

Frowning, I turned back. Had I drifted off for a moment? Had I missed it?

I took a few steps back. 40. 39. 38. This was clearly the right direction to be going in, so I continued backwards until I realised that I had reached 28.

Shaking my head to clear it, I looked back. Somehow, I had managed to pass completely by several of the garages without paying attention. My focus had been lost, sent elsewhere. It was as though the garages were there, but not there – out of phase with our world, like being on the other side of a mirror.

It took me a very concerted effort to retrace my steps. I would not be deterred this time. I focused intently on each garage, stopping after each one and counting it.

31.

I looked it up and down. It seemed as normal as any other. Tentatively, I took a few more steps.

32.

This also seemed fine. I was headed in the right direction and the numbers rose in an expected way. That was all I needed to know, surely. Satisfied with my conclusion, I turned to walk away.

Wait.

That was not why I had come.

Slowly, painfully, as if I was fighting my very instinct, I turned. I remember literally taking my head in my hands and pushing it so that it faced the next garage in front of me. The Professor's garage. Number 33.

My brain didn't want it to be there. Determined to focus on other things, my eyes drifted away from it until I could make the mental effort to force them back. Whatever technology the Gardeners had used to hide themselves, I realised, it was at play here.

This garage would stand here for a thousand years, unnoticed. Cities would crumble and civilisations would rise and fall, and, if nobody was looking for it, nobody would ever notice it was there. For a brief moment, I wondered how many other lost things there were in the world, forgotten, doomed to spend eternity ignored.^[137]

Not wanting to waste any more time, I pulled the key from my bag.

“Don't do it, Chloe.”

I turned around to see James standing there, some ten metres away from me.

“What are you doing here?”

“I saw you on campus. I saw you walk over here. I... I’ve been looking for you. We’ve all been looking for you. They say you’re involved, on the TV. They say you’re an accomplice.”

“You need to leave, James. This doesn’t involve you.”

He didn’t move.

“I can help you with this,” he said. “With whatever this Professor has got you mixed up in. I want to help you.”

“There’s nothing you can do,” I said. “I really don’t have time for this.”

“Why not? Because you’re running errands for him, is that it? Jesus Christ, Chloe – he’s a murderer.”

“You don’t understand,” I said, turning to the garage.

“I can’t let you do this!” He shouted, his voice shaking. I spun back around. His whole body was sweating, his arms shaking profusely. He had his hands held straight up, a gun pointed directly at me. “I see what’s been going on, even if you don’t. He’s been screwing with you, messing with your head. I’m here to help you, Chloe.”

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“This is for your own good.”

“You’re pointing a fucking gun at me, James. In what way is this for my own good?”

He shook his head furiously, his shaking fingers dangerously close to the trigger. “You don’t get it! You’re not seeing things right. Things are... things are just crazy, and I get it now. He’s got you in some kind of spell, and... and I’m just trying to save you from all of this. Can’t you see that? Just let me fucking help you for once.”

I stared at him. “Seriously? Is that what this is – a hero complex? Honestly, I really don’t have time for this.”

“You’re not going anywhere. You’re going to come back with me, where we can sort all this out. I’ve already called the police. They know where we are.”

“You *what?*”

The police meant the CEDM, and if the Professor was right, the CEDM meant...

“They’re on their way,” he said.

“Oh God, James. No.”

But I already knew it was too late. I’d been focusing too closely on the stupid man in front of me and the weapon he waved in my face. I hadn’t seen what was coming. I’d missed the car on the other side of the road – behind James. I looked up and a deep, sinking sensation spread through my whole body, submerging me.

I remember feeling like I was watching a movie, or looking back on a memory. It was something separate, on the other side of an invisible wall, that was playing out. Nothing I could do could impact it. All I could do was watch.

The other Professor stepped out, walking quickly towards us. In his one hand, there was another gun. I stumbled backwards, trying to shout a warning, but finding it cut off in my strangled throat.

James’ eyes narrowed as he turned to see what I was looking at. As he did, the other Professor raised his gun and shot him in the head.

A crack echoed across the quiet roads. James’s body collapsed, slumping to the floor like a pile of rags. There was a bloody mess where his head had been, splattered onto the tarmac. ^[138]

I screamed.

It was a pointless, useless expulsion of sound. There was no one around to respond. Nothing that could be done. I wanted to fight back, to run away, to challenge this monster, but all I felt my body do was move backwards. My back pressed against the garage door, and I felt myself shrink. I kept shrinking, down and down until I was very small indeed. Maybe, if I was small enough, I would become invisible. I would disappear.

This was a vain hope.

“I must thank you, Chloe.” The mocking familiarity of his voice seemed to taunt me. “I don’t know that I would have found this myself.”

He looked the garage door up and down.

“I must say. He’s done a very good job at hiding it.”

I didn’t say anything. Every time I tried to look away from him, all I could see was James’s body. I shut my eyes, but the image pulsed behind the lids, accusatory and fierce.

“You will open the door, now,” he said. “If you do *exactly* as I say, your girlfriend might not end up in the same position.”

“Is it worth it?” I whispered, my voice slowly finding its way out of me.

“What are you talking about?”

“Is it worth all this?” I looked up at him. “This artefact that lets you cross worlds – is it worth all the pain?”

His eyes widened in surprise, the scar across his face pulled upwards. Then, he laughed. It was a cruel sound, without a hint of humour in it.

“Is that what he told you is in here?” He shook his head. “No, girl. I don’t care about that stupid artefact. This is not about the artefact. It never has been. I’m here for something far more important. Something your Professor has taken from me. Something I’ve done everything I can to get back. How do you think I got this scar? I’ve been searching for this for a very long time.”

My breath caught in my throat.

“What is it?”

“Open the door,” he said. “And I’ll show you.”

#

I pushed the key into the garage door and turned it. Something clicked – something larger than a lock. Though I didn’t see anything change, I felt the building move. It shifted as if it had just fallen into place.

The other Professor stood next to me, and I had to fight not to throw up. The moment the door was unlocked, I stepped back. I was eager to have as much distance between us as possible.

He tucked his gun into his jacket pocket, grasping the handle and pulling the door upwards. It creaked and shook.

Beyond it, there was a room that didn’t look like it should be there. It was not the inside of a garage. It looked like a room in a hospital. There were four white clinical walls and a collection of monitors and equipment, beeping and whirring. To the side, there was a large closed metal door. There was also a hospital bed in the centre. In the bed, hooked up to an IV, there was a young man. A teenager. He can’t have been more than fifteen.

The other Professor rushed over to him, leaning over his body and checking his pulse.

“Who is that?” I said. I still hadn’t walked over the threshold into the room.

He looked at me, between tears, and I saw a genuine smile on his face.

“This is Jacob,” he said, his voice cracking with emotion. “This is my son.”

XIV

I didn't step inside the garage. I stood at the threshold, the dissonance of the image trickling through my brain. Here was a man – no, not a man, a monster – who had beaten me, tortured me, who had kidnapped Sarah. I should despise him. I *did* despise him. And yet, as I saw his hand run across his son's unconscious face, I felt something close to pity as well.

It disgusted me. I wanted to throw up.

He then went over to the large metal door, and spent a moment playing with the switches. He opened a panel and placed a device on one of the wires. He reached inside his jacket, producing a small vial of liquid. Moving around the bed, he placed it in the IV that was attached to the boy's arm. I shuddered to watch him work.

“What are you doing?”

“Bringing him back,” he said. “When I learnt your Roland meant to steal him from me, I didn't have long to formulate a plan. I knew that I couldn't hide him. Your Roland is too devious, too elusive. He would already be steps ahead of me. So I poisoned him.” He shook his head, bringing his lips tightly together. “I poisoned my own son.”

“Why?”

“So *he* couldn't escape forever with Jacob. So he couldn't get at him. It's a drug I synthesised from another reality.^[139] One with a very specific antidote. It would keep him in a coma, until your Roland could get hold of it. Only he wouldn't know how to get hold of it. He would have to come back to me.” His voice was croaky, hoarse with emotion. “That was my only chance. It was the only way.”

“I don’t understand.” My feet were stuck to the ground. “Why? Why did he...”

A hand appeared on my shoulder. I jerked away, spinning to find Zolo standing behind me. His baseball cap was low over his face, and in his hands he held James’s gun, pointed directly at the other Professor.

“Time for you to back away now, dude. You’ve done what we need.”

The other Professor’s head twisted, seeing Zolo with the gun. He jumped up, his face exploding in fury.

“NO!” He screamed, charging forward and reaching into his own jacket.

Zolo shot him in the leg.

He collapsed, letting out an agonising moan. “You bastard! You *fucking bastards!*”

I gaped. “What are you doing?”

Zolo shrugged. He walked over to the other Professor and placed a foot on his shoulder, pushing him the ground. He sprawled, crying out in pain. Zolo reached down and took the gun out of his pocket, chucking it on the floor.

“Get inside,” he said to me.

“Zolo,” I said, going up to him. “What’s going on? Where have you been?”

“Oh, please. I was here before you were.” He pulled the garage door shut, enclosing us. “I’ve been watching this whole thing. Don’t you get it? We needed him to think he’d got the upper hand. That way he’d come here. He’d give the kid the medicine.”

I could see James’s blood still seeping through the closed garage door.

“You *let* this happen?”

He laughed, walking up to the large metal door on the side wall. “I didn’t let anything happen. Roland planned the whole thing. I gotta say, Chloe – you make really good bait.”

He flicked a few buttons and switches. The door whirred, buzzing as though it was coming to life. The other Professor was still on the floor, crying, grasping for the hospital bed, shifting himself towards it.

“You should have listened to what I told you before,” he said. “Just when you think you’re winning, that’s when you find the Professor is ten steps ahead.”

The door opened and out walked Professor Crannus, blood spattered on his waistcoat and smoke rising out of his pipe.

#

The other Professor let out a furious bellow, a harsh scream of a sound echoing around the room. The Professor – my Professor – ignored him, turning to Zolo.

“You must go back through,” he said. “I need someone in Pimlico in my place.”

He nodded, gave the Professor a pat on the shoulder, and disappeared through the metal door. The boy stirred, shifting in his bed. His eyes were still closed, but he made a small sound, as though he were waking up.

I stood before the two Professors: one drenched in his own blood, the other in that of the Prime Minister. The one on the floor rose to his feet, painfully, clutching at the railings of his son’s bed. He faced his opposite, his anathema, and stood tall like an equal. I watched as they stared at each other – these two Titans – their mutual hatred oozing out of them.

“You were foolish to come here,” the Professor stated. His voice dripped with smug victory. “But I knew you would do it all the same.”

“And you think I wasn’t expecting a trap?” the other rasped. He spat at the floor and pulled a pager out of his pocket. “I informed the CEDM the moment you entered the room. Anti-terrorism units are already on their way. This building will be surrounded in moments.”

“By which time, I will be back in Pimlico. And far from here.”

The other Professor grinned an ugly smile. “And how will you do that if your door doesn’t work?”

I glanced over at the metal door. The light above it flickered and went out.

“You’re stuck here, with me,” he said. “You can’t move anywhere. And this garage is surrounded.”

My Professor did not react. He merely reached into his inner jacket and pulled out a mobile phone. Quietly, calmly, he pressed the buttons. The phone rang through the loudspeaker for a single ring.

“Yeah?” Zolo’s voice on the other end.

“It is as I predicted,” the Professor said. “A trap within a trap. Call Judy and tell her that if the police make any attempts to take this garage, you will set off the explosives. Hundreds will die. If she doesn’t believe you, get Kiluvu to destroy the west wing of the building.”

“Alright.”

Dial tone.

“The police will never enter now,” the Professor said.

The other sneered at him. “Fool. I have been aware of your explosives long before you even thought of them. What you will find, when you set them off, is that...”

His words drifted off. His eyes fell on me.

All this time, they had barely noticed me. They were playing their colossal game of chess – outthinking one another, scheming and planning, playing with the lives of a hundred innocent pawns. Me. Sarah. James. Nobody ever expects the pawn to turn on the player.

The other Professor hadn’t noticed me pick up his gun, the one that Zolo chucked on the floor. Now I was pointing it directly at him.

“Good work, Chloe,” the Professor said, grinning. “I...”

I then turned my body, and the gun, slowly, until it pointed at him. He fell silent. They had been too busy worrying about each other. Neither of them had considered that I might be a threat. That I might do something to take control.

“You’re going to do what I say now,” I said. “Or I’ll shoot you.”

The Professor laughed. “Don’t be ridiculous, Chloe.”

I swung the gun to the left, towards the boy, and pulled the trigger. The bullet ricocheted off the wall behind the bed and bounced around the room. The recoil cracked backwards in my hands.

“You stupid girl!” the Professor shouted. “You have no idea what you’re doing.”

“No.” I pointed the gun at the bed, and the boy, once again. “For the first time, I think I do. Don’t say another word or I’ll fire again. I’ve never shot a gun before now; this one might not just end up as a warning shot.”

They both froze. The boy shuffled a little in the bed, his eyes still closed.

I turned to the other Professor. My tormentor. I still felt a wave of anger and disgust rising at the sight of him.

“Explain everything to me,” I said. “What is your son doing here?”

The Professor – my Professor – stepped forward. “We don’t have time for – “

“Shut up!” I took a step closer to the boy, gun pointed. He backed away, hands raised. “I’m not asking you! I’m asking him. *What is going on?*”

The other Professor gulped in a breath, still clutching the bleeding wound on his leg. “Two years ago, I was living a normal life. I was happy. Then I bumped into someone almost exactly like myself. Another Professor Crannus. He had crossed into this world from another, he said. He said we were Constants. That we could work together, and do great things.”

“Nonsense,” the Professor muttered, but I ignored him.

“And then?”

“Then he discovered I had a son. Just like he had a son, only mine had not died. Before I really knew what was happening, or why, he took my son away. To claim him as his own. As a replacement.” He shook his head. “I have been searching for my boy for almost two years. It has... it has taken me down a darker path than I would ever have known.”

I gritted my teeth. His excuse rang hollow. “Don’t make excuses. Even if this is true, it doesn’t justify torture. It doesn’t justify murder.”

The other Professor shrugged. “I am the monster this man made me – no more, no less.”

“I made you do nothing.”

“*Nothing?*” he demanded, his eyes wild. He waved his bloody hand at the Professor. “*Nothing?!* You stole my son from me. You *stole my son*. I have done unspeakable things in his name. In the name of finding you, of punishing you. These are things you have *made me do*. I’ll destroy this whole world before I see him in your hands.”

“Okay. Enough.” I turned to my own Professor. I looked at him right in the eyes.

“Why did you take his son?”

“You must understand the basis for my experimentation, Chloe,” he began, gesticulating. “In each world, there is...”

I took another step closer to the boy, and pressed the gun against his chest. They both flinched, and he fell quiet.

“No lies,” I said. “Not any more. I can tell when you’re lying to me. I’ve heard them often enough. Now I want the truth. Nothing else.”

He stared at me for a long while, as if trying to work me out. He did not fiddle with his pipe. He did not look at his pocket watch. He just looked at me, on the other side of a loaded gun, and studied me. Eventually, he said,

“Very well, then. The truth.”

#

“When Jacob was eleven years old, he contracted osteosarcoma. Bone cancer. An extremely rare condition that affects fewer than one in a hundred thousand people. His mother, hard-headed woman that she was, took him to all his doctor's appointments and treatments. I knew this was pointless – the cancer had already spread to his lungs and beyond when it was discovered. His prognosis was bleak. Conventional doctors are mostly idiots and fools and there would be nothing they could do.”

“Absurd arrogance,” the other Professor muttered.

“There is nothing arrogant about the truth. I knew that I could do more than they ever could, that I *would* do more. You must understand, Chloe – for a year, I forgot all other tasks. I ignored all other work, I spurned my wife, I barely spoke to my son. I confined myself to a laboratory. I worked ceaselessly.”

He looked down at the boy.

“And Jacob died. He died in my arms. His mother left me soon after and I found myself, suddenly and inexplicably, alone. I lost myself in my work. I rejected everything that I had assumed and delved into new areas, new discoveries. But when Feynman and I made the first strides into the other worlds, when I discovered the Constants, everything changed. I found the boy – a young boy who shows up in every world – over and over and over again, an infinite number of iterations of him, and I started to feel a little sliver of hope. I started to let myself believe.”

“Believe what?”

“That if he could be alive in all these different worlds, then so could my son. And when I discovered that I, myself, was a Constant... well, then I *knew*. I knew it with a blazing certainty. My son was still alive. He was out there, waiting for me.”

“But he wasn't, was he?” the other Professor said, his voice dripping with venom. “You were wrong.”

“I was not wrong.”

“What is he talking about?” I asked.

The Professor sighed. He lifted his pipe back out of his pocket and tried to light it, but his hands were shaking too much. He took a deep breath, heavy with weariness. “They were all dead. They had all died. Different diseases, sometimes car crashes, plane crashes. It didn't matter. Every world contained the same iteration. A Professor Crannus with an estranged wife

and a dead son. Whatever God is punishing me for, he is making a very thorough job of it.”

There was the sound of men outside, but they did not enter. The Professor picked up his pocket watch and looked at it.

“Until you found him.” I pointed at the boy. “Until you found his world. Is that what this is all about?”

The Professor’s eyes lit up. “Exactly. Don’t you see, Chloe? I had almost given up, but at each turn something pushed me on! Some glorious providence. Something made me keep looking. I *knew*. I knew that he was out there. And I was right. I found him. Alive. My son, gloriously, buoyantly alive!”

“He is not your son,” the other Professor snarled.

“He is *MINE!*” the Professor bellowed, throwing his watch to the floor. “I have crossed worlds to find him! I have done everything! Everything! You will not take him from me! I *deserve him!*”

“He is not your son. None of them were your son.”

“They were all my son!” he shouted, choking on his words. Tears ran down his face. “Every last one of them. And I had to watch him die. Over and over and over again. In every world, I had to experience my son die a hundred thousand times! I will not give him up again. I cannot!”

“Do you see now?” The other Professor turned to me, pleadingly. “Do you see? You paint me a monster, but he is... he has gone insane. Do you know what he did to all the Rolands he found? Do you know how he saw them? As *competition*. As others that might search for my son and take him away. So he killed them. He killed them all. The only reason I’m not dead is because he needed me.”

“The only reason you are not dead is because I choose it to be so!” the Professor shouted, frothing at the mouth. “You exist only because *I* allow it. You will die because *I* demand it!”

“Stop this,” I said, but they both ignored me.

“You cannot trade your own son’s life with mine!” The other Professor pushed himself to his feet. “The universe does not work that way. It is not a fair exchange.”

“*Fair?*” the Professor spluttered, screaming his words. “What does the universe care for ‘fair’?! That some inconsequential, stupid, pointless boy should live a hundred thousand lives and that my son, *my son*, should have

to die? Should *always* die? What plan is this? There is no 'fair'. I will not accept the universe's plan. I refuse to accept it. I won't!"

"SHUT UP!" I placed the gun on the boy's chest. "Both of you!"

They fell silent, shaking.

I needed the silence. I needed to think.

At one time, which now felt like another life, I had felt as if I was on a ship headed for the new world. At the cusp of discovery. I believed that there was a genius at the helm. A man around whom the history of the world bent, moulding to his shape. I thought that there were such men in the world – such forces of nature. Even after our confrontation, there were still remnants of those threads in my mind. Immoral, certainly, but perhaps also great.

This was not such a man. Perhaps these people didn't even exist. This was a petty, jealous, disappointing little man, drowning in his own grief. It seems fitting that the word 'disappoint' comes from the Middle French, '*desappointer*', to remove from important office. This is exactly what I did. It was a conscious act. A decision. I dispossessed Professor Crannus from any importance in my mind.

And with him gone, there was only one person left that mattered. I turned to the other Professor.

"If you bring Sarah to me, I will let you leave with your son."

Neither of them spoke. They just stared at me.

"Didn't you hear me?" I said. "Bring Sarah to me, and I will end this. I will let you leave with your son, but not before."

"Foolish girl," the Professor said, shaking his head. "I thought you knew. I would have thought you'd figured it out by now."

I blinked, confused.

"Figured what out?"

No one spoke. I brandished the gun at the other Professor, and he looked away from me.

"*Figured what out?*" I screamed.

"He never really needed to negotiate with you," the Professor said. "It was a ploy to get to me. He just wanted to give you a motive, to drive you to me so he could find this place. He didn't need her alive for that."

My stomach rose into my chest.

The other Professor slowly looked up, with his ugly, scarred face.

“It would have been a waste of resources,” he said. “You have to understand, it was never...”

I fired. The gunshot cracked, ringing across the room. He looked down at the bullet in his stomach, blood gushing from it. I shot him again. And again and again. His body convulsed, gunshot wounds appearing over his chest and body. He fell slack, drooped to the ground, dead.

Blood seeped from his body across the floor. I watched it flow, slowly pressing its way towards me, but didn't move. The blood was glossy and seemed to absorb my glance, sucking part of me inside it. All that was left was an emptiness – a deep, permanent, blank emptiness. Every inch that the blood moved closer, I felt more dull. Distanced. It was as though my body were a shell filled with dead air, breezing lifelessly around.

“Chloe?”

I shifted my stance. The Professor was watching me closely, his eyes moving between me and my gun. I thought about killing him too, then. It seemed like the right thing to do – this man who had caused so much pain, so much destruction. I even remember lifting the gun and pointing it at him.

But what I saw on the other side of it was not an enemy, or an evil thing that needed killing. It was a man. A man I had once looked up to. And inside the emptiness, I could find nothing for him but pity.

It was not a friendly pity. Not the kind that comes with compassion and understanding, an outpouring of sympathy. No – I looked at him and I saw a shameful thing, full of pain and cowardice and hatred. I did not need to kill him. He would burn himself up from the inside.

With my other hand, I took my phone out of my pocket and dialled the Gardener's number. It barely rung before the metal door flicked back online and was pushed open. He walked through it.

“How can I help?”

“Here's the deal,” I said. “The Professor will give you your artefact back. You have it on you, don't you?”

He frowned, then nodded.

“I thought so.” My voice was cold. Emotionless. “You wouldn't have left yourself without a way out. You will give it to them willingly, then you will call Zolo and Kiluvu and tell them to release all the hostages. To leave London. To disappear back to their world.”

“And what do I get in return?”

“You get your son. He’s yours now. That’s what you wanted, isn’t it? But there’s a catch.” I turned to the Gardener. “I want you to take him to another world. The bleakest, most boring world you can find. One without technology, or science, or any tools that he can use. And I want you to leave him there, with his son. Trap him there, so he can never come back.”

“I don’t intervene physically,” he said, but he didn’t sound convinced.

“Do you know what ‘intervene’ means?” I asked. “If you’re going to use English to describe your rule you probably should. ‘Inter’ means between, ‘venire’ is to come in Latin. To intervene is to come between. This man has been searching for his son all his life, his only desire has been to bring the two of them together. That is the development of their action. By not acting, you are coming between them. By refusing to help me, you intervene.”

The Gardener gave me a long hard look, and his face broke out into a wide grin. “I did say that you were right woman for the job.” He turned to the Professor. “Follow me.”

He furrowed his brow. “I’m not in the habit of taking orders.”

“I don’t care,” I snapped. I kept the gun raised high. “This is what you claim to want, and I’m giving it to you. Swallow your ego for once and take it. Go live with your son. Go give him whatever life you think you can give him. Just get out of my life, out of my world, and never, ever come back.”

His hands twitched. They went to reach for his pocket watch, but it was no longer there. His eyes flicked to it on the floor, where he had thrown it, broken.

“Very well,” he said. For the first time, I heard what sounded like resignation. “I accept.”

In what felt like a soundless haze of fog, they went about their tasks. The Professor reluctantly handed the artefact to the Gardener, which he took and tucked into his jacket. He called Zolo and arranged for the end of the hostage situation.

The Professor’s son – Jacob – made another sound, a low moan as he roused from his state of half-wakefulness. His body rolled over onto his side, towards the body of the other Professor, as his eyes flickered and opened. His eyebrows pursed together, unsure what he was seeing.

“Dad?”

The bloody corpse of his father lay limp against the white floor.

“Dad?”

He jerked up, breathing hard. His arms straightened, and he pressed backwards against the bed. The Professor put his hand on him and his head swung round.

“D... dad?” He stared at the Professor, his features twisting. “What’s going on?”

“Don’t worry,” he said. “Come, we must go. All will be explained in time.”

He lifted his son out of the bed, still in a drowsy state of half-wakefulness and confusion. The Gardener opened a door for him to leave through. The Professor carried him out. Just before the door closed, I saw Jacob’s head crick back to look in horror at the body he was leaving behind.

Then the door closed, and they were all gone.

I was alone.

With me, there was an empty hospital bed, a broken pocket watch, and the body of the man I killed, oozing blood onto the floor.

I curled up in a corner and closed my eyes tight.

Desperately, I tried to remember. I could almost see Sarah’s face, looking over me, but I couldn’t quite make out the shape of her eyebrows, the curve of her lips. They were drifting away from me already. I urged myself to remember, to see her, to have her here with me, kissing my eyelids and my cheeks and feeling the warm touch of her skin. The heat of her breath against my skin. But it was drifting away from me, like a dream in the morning, and there was less and less that I could cling onto.

The garage door crashed open and I heard men force their way in. Police. Behind shut eyes, I felt them surround me, barking orders into their walkie-talkies and circling a perimeter of the room. They were talking to me, but I didn’t want to look at them, because when I opened my eyes again it would all be real and Sarah would be gone and I would be alone again.

I don’t know how long they tried to talk to me before they carried me out. All I remember is that when I opened my eyes again, the warmth was gone, and all that was left was cold.

XV

Most of you will be aware of what came next. From one moment to the next, London found itself occupied and then swiftly unoccupied. Communication ceased. The armed forces and negotiating teams waited anxiously for anything from the buildings in which the hostages were held, but there was no sound. The aggressors were inexplicably gone. And while they remained too wary and cautious to enter, the world was stunned to see the hostages simply walk out.

Their captors, they said, had just left.^[140] Nobody knew why. The world leaders were recovered, for the most part, and returned to their countries safely. There is a memorial for Gordon Brown that you can find today in Westminster, though it is rarely visited.

My own arrest and interrogation were brief. I think there had been a realisation during the Pimlico crisis that the actions and the decisions of the Professor would soon come to light, and governments were clambering to disassociate themselves from the CEDM. Before their existence was even dragged into the light of day, the entire organisation was disavowed.^[141] Soon, those who were tasked with interviewing me found themselves without jobs, silenced by a variety of legal gag orders.^[142]

There is little of public record that concerns the CEDM these days. Some accurate stories are nestled, in bits and pieces, amongst the theorists and madcap speculations of the internet. There are kernels of truth to be found, but they are buried underneath a thousand more crazy conspiracies that never quite took place.

In truth, the entire thing was a mess, from the top right on down. There was a concerted, desperate reaction from those involved to pretend they

knew nothing of it. No one claimed any responsibility, hoping to chalk it up to an alien invasion. An act of God.

They should really have known that the public would never let such a tragedy pass unexplained. It is in our nature to demand explanations. But it still took a forced election and a huge swing to David Cameron and the Tories, at least in the UK, before anything real was done. Even then, a spate of inquiries and arrests took place and the matter was soon swept uncomfortably under the rug once again.

I never saw Zolo after the event, but I heard that he wrote a book shortly after the incident.^[143] I have not read it. I have no wish to feel his particular brand of hero worship ever again.

It is amazing how quickly such events pass into the annals of history. After a few months, it was old news – to be discussed in political rhetoric and over pints in pubs – but not a current, pressing matter. After a couple of years, when the dust had settled and the status quo was firmly re-established, it was only really talked about in reference to other things.

Perhaps this was because the scientific ramifications were so intangible. So ethereal. After the disappearance of Professor Crannus, the artefact and everyone involved, crossing back to other worlds no longer seemed like a possibility. I am told that his research has done much to further the understanding of quantum theory, on a minute and inhuman level, but I lack the grounding to really understand the implications.^[144] Scientists have tried to cross worlds since, and failed. I can only say that I hope it remains that way.

The boys at the CEDM facility were all recovered. This was a collaborative effort from official organisations across the world. Each one of them was treated in a private government hospital and then given over to the foster care system. I remember thinking, at the time, that this was their final bloody glove – the one piece of evidence that needed cleaning away truly to rid themselves of this catastrophic failure. There was nothing compassionate driving the governments' actions, just a paranoid urge to cleanse the errors of the past. Nothing in the past ten years has convinced me otherwise.

The foster families were not informed; to this day, many do not know. The boys that appear physically different are explained away as having deformities, or past physical trauma. Most are too scarred, both physically and emotionally, to talk about their pasts.

For a time, I made it my personal mission to ensure that each one of them was provided with a happy life. This brought me no comfort, but I didn't expect it to. Some made good strides, readjusting to the world. But it quickly became clear that many had experienced such brutal trauma that a happy life was not something that they might ever be able to look forward to. It was an option that had been stolen from them, along with their free will, their agency.

I still check on them, though. They are older now, almost adults. They do not know who I am and I don't take the time to introduce myself. Those that are not still in need of care or sequestered in mental health institutions have often found jobs in fast food restaurants, or as janitors and bin men. Society has engulfed them, and allowed them to live quietly, blending into the background.

Sometimes, I will sit in a café where one works, and watch him. Or down the road from where they do their rounds. When I do, I always end up thinking about the Professor's son.

I cannot say that the choice I made on that day, in that garage, was the right one. I was long past considering right and wrong. But as I think back to who the Professor was, and the things that he did to other people, I can't help but wonder if allowing this poor boy to be kidnapped is something that I can live with. He was, after all, not really his father. He was just a stranger from another land, come to destroy everything he had known.

The Professors had done that to me, and I, in turn, had done that to Jacob. I see him at night in my dreams, but he does not talk to me. He turns away from me, silent, and wanders off into the distance, into a land I can't follow. That guilt will stay with me forever.

I live alone now.

I have done what I had always wanted to do: I have devoted myself to academia. I wake up in the morning and go to my office, where I read about language and anthropology. I order more books in the morning, then after a coffee I go to the library. There, I will continue to write papers about my research. ^[145]

Enough of these are published to keep me monetarily solvent – more than enough, actually. I do not teach. I rarely interact with anyone outside of the supermarket and occasionally people that I must speak to on the phone – plumbers, bankers, and the like. In many ways, I am much like the Professor once was. There is an irony there, I'm sure. Though I do not

really even explore this world, let alone others. All my research takes place in the dead pages of literature.

My office is always cold. I try to heat it up, and I always end up sweaty and uncomfortable, but not hot. Not even a little warm. I have tried everything, even moving offices, and it is always the same. I have since given up trying to change it.

#

You are probably wondering what caused me to write this. It has been a long decade. I have had so many letters, so many requests for interviews and people coming up to me in the street, and over the years I have refused every last one of them.

By now, it shouldn't surprise you that it was a research study that put the notion into my head. I was looking into the rates at which different anthropological groups express dopamine as a reward factor for different situations. I wished to see if there were differences, and what these differences might be able to tell us about cultural norms. Dopamine is, after all, the happiness drug. It is what provides us joy and satisfaction in our life. The source of this seemed an important matter. To me, at least.

I came across a study done by Wolfram Schultz of Cambridge University,^[146] in which he measured the dopamine release in monkeys when given a variety of trial rewards. The monkeys are kept in a room with a lever. When a light comes on, they can press the lever and receive a reward – in this case, tasty raisins. Schultz sought to measure when and how dopamine was released, seeking to confirm his Pavlovian suspicions: the light would cause dopamine on its own.

The result is fascinating. Of course, as soon as the light turns on, the monkeys get an initial dopamine release. They are thrilled. They go about pressing the lever frantically, excited that they will achieve their goal.

What is more interesting is that the more lever presses they must do, the higher the dopamine. When the task is harder to achieve, and the ideal further away, the joy and satisfaction is greater. But most importantly, when they actually get the reward, the dopamine hit is much lower. It seems that the reward itself is merely an afterthought. It might as well be non-existent. What drives our happiness is the pursuit. The yearning.

In many ways, that was what I was doing in my younger years, before my time with the Professor. I was pursuing a goal that was not really a goal at all, just a distant ideal that made the pursuit worth it. The light at the end

of the tunnel was never achievable. There was never an ideal there, not really – just a yearning for it. A desperation that if I worked hard enough, if I studied everything I could get my hands on, it would show itself. A perfect word.

Indeed, the study reminded me of something I think I implicitly knew: the search for meaning is more important than the meaning itself. As long as we're constantly striving for it, that's what brings us happiness. This book was an attempt to continue that pursuit, in the vain hope that it might provide a warm light in what has otherwise become a dulled and distant life.

But there's one final piece to the puzzle.

When the reward is taken away from the monkeys, when the raisins are gone, it takes very little time for the light to cause no more dopamine response at all. The satisfaction of the pursuit disappears entirely. Once any promise of a future is wholly taken from us, then the yearning for it no longer provides any joy.

I still make myself work for it. I still get up every day and trawl through books and write papers because it is all that I know how to do. But I get no thrill from turning the pages anymore. I get no excitement from the discovery of the new. There is no pain, either. There is no sadness or worry or anger.

There is nothing. Just a blank space as wide and as empty as the arctic.

Perhaps this is what I deserve for letting Jacob go, for letting Sarah die and for letting the Professor live. Perhaps when Icarus flew too close to the sun, he didn't just fall in the sea and drown, but he remained there, floating in the cold and lifeless depths for eternity.

Sometimes when I'm working, I imagine myself melting – thawing and emptying into a liquid, spreading myself in a thin veneer over the office floor. I see myself as water evaporating and rising to join the air above me, becoming one with the wind and the stars. And in that moment, I fervently wish it could be true. Then I would not have to worry about the pursuit of being human anymore.

But it is not true. So I must keep striving. The ideal future I once believed in has been stolen from me, and with it, much of who I was. Perhaps I am merely a collection of reactions now: to hunger; to cold; to weariness. These feelings seem to pass through me and once they are gone, try as I might, I can no longer find anything that remains.

There is one thing that keeps me going. It is a dream that comes to me. Sometimes it comes late at night, sometimes in the light of the afternoon. Even after all these years, it does not stop visiting me. At times it is short, a brief interlude in my studies; at others, it is longer. It is a deep dream, which varies in detail and substance, but it is one that exists not in my head, but in my body.

I am sitting at my desk in my office, alone. It is winter and the heaters are not working. Or I am in a library, surrounded by blank books, sad and lifeless. In brief, it is a cold dream, a lonely one without any people in it. Throughout me I feel a deep and undeniable sense of anguish. It comes quickly and it utterly consumes me, until I am surrounded by nothing but desolation and pain.

But as the dream goes on, a warmth appears. It has no definitive origin, but merely seems to grow around me, as if the world itself is waking up. I feel the books drift away and the walls of my office collapse around me, and, whatever the details, slowly or suddenly, everything changes. Sarah puts her arms around my shoulders and a hot chill runs down them. I want to cry, but I do not know how. She pulls me tighter and the loneliness that I felt before no longer feels so close – it has become a distant thing, almost forgotten. She appears in front of me and I see her face and it is filled with love. She smiles, and it is the warmest thing I have ever seen. It melts into my skin. She kisses me, and holds me tightly to her, and whispers a single phrase into my ear.

‘What will survive of us is love.’

And on good days, on only the best of days, I sometimes believe that she is right.

If only for a moment.

Appendix A

A Bibliography of my Published Work

Chan, C. (2011). 'Anthropological Bases for Morphological Changes in Sinitic Languages'. *Linguistics Monthly*. 34 (3). 434-466.

Chan, C. (2011). 'Benedict's Mistake: A New Vision for the Comparative Method'. *Language*. 54 (2). 112-124.

Chan, C. (2012). *Where Did The Roots Go? Latin and Greek in A Global World*. New York: Doubleday Press.

Chan, C. (2012). 'How Phonology Drives Meaning'. *Language in Society*. 88 (1). 79-99.

Chan, C. (2013). 'Proto-Indo-European Languages and Western Cognition'. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*. 112 (4). 432-444.

Chan, C. (2013). *What Makes Us Human? A Case for Language Over Thought*. London: Macmillan.

Chan, C. (2013). 'Comparative Grammatical Structures in Bantoid and Mambiloid Language Families'. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*. 104(3). 100-154.

Chan, C. (2014). 'Morphemes and Graphemes: When East Meets West'. *Cognition*. 55(2). 544-585.

Chan, C. (2014). 'Language and the Agricultural Revolution'. *Modern Language Journal* 42(4). 664-683.

Chan, C. (2014). *Language and Dominance: The Sapiens Genocide*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Chan, C. (2016). 'Bilingualism and Cognition – A Considered Approach'. *Language Learning*. 55(1). 15-54.

Chan, C. (2016). 'A Neural Pathway for Grammar? MRI Studies and Linguistic Applications'. *Cognition*. 59 (1). 12-72.

Chan, C. (2017). 'Human Symbolic Change over Organisational Contexts'. *Communication Monographs*. 67 (3). 234-268.

Chan, C. (2017). *Ideals and Idealisation – The Greatest Trick Language Ever Pulled*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Chan, C. (2020). *Professor Everywhere: A Memoir*. Proverse Hong Kong.

* * *

AUTHOR'S ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Books are not written in isolation. There is a huge amount of work – inspiration, research, discussion, critiquing and feedback, beta-reading, and editing, amongst other things – that goes into the creation of any kind of writing.

First and foremost I would like to thank two people: Andrew Quales, without whom I would not be a writer, and Audrey Greathouse, without whom this book would not exist. Both of you share an unshakeable belief in my work that I never asked for, am rarely sure that I deserve, but that I am dearly thankful for.

I also want to thank the constant love and support of my wife, Allys, who endured (and endures) my constant writing and reading, continually supportive and continually fantastic throughout.

This book would also not have been finished without the honest critiquing of my good friends and fellow authors Lee Sandwina and Lia Holland. I must also thank my beta-readers: Linda Lee, Danny Nason, Tom Kitwood, Roisin Brady, Ross Furmedge, Karin Samuel, Kristi Wong, Joelle Chow, Ashley Kot, Emma Wong, Sharon Lee. If I've forgotten any of you, I apologise.

I would also like to thank Proverse Hong Kong, as well as the Founders and Judges who have seen fit to publish this book, for their time and effort throughout this process. As well as this, my gratitude goes out to Lawrence Gray, Pedro Llosa, David Stephens and Jason S. Polley for their time and commitment in reading the book and providing advance comments for publication.

Lastly, and by no means least, I must thank the wondrous joy that is my son, Oskar, and my parents, Helen and Chris, without whom I would not have the self-belief to ever think I could do something like write a novel.

Thanks, guys.

ADVANCE COMMENTS

on

PROFESSOR EVERYWHERE

“A mysterious story, full of unpredictable paths where the academic world is addressed in an utterly original way.”

“A wide metaphor of our times and of the infinite faces that the academic world can take.”

“Strong, mysterious, unexpected. A deep immersion into the oddities through which a student discovers the world. A sequence of symbolic journeys that always depart from an overflowed academic field.”

—**Pedro Llosa Vélez**, author of award-winning *The Visit*

This is a be-boggling book! So excuse me if I take a leaf out of its pages and more than review it, channel its spirit.

Etymologically, boggle is derived from a dialect word for a spirit that evokes fear or loathing. It is related to the word “bogeyman”. Horses were said to boggle when they made a sudden jerky movement. Nowadays, we might say they were spooked, carrying forward much the same idea, that is, they appear to have been startled by something mere mortals cannot comprehend; not too dissimilar to many of the youth of today moved to hurl a petrol bomb or two, while boggled by spectres their insensate authorities cannot see. (*I need a footnote here as I am referencing the Hong Kong connection of the main Character and contemporary 2019 Hong Kong politics.*)

Curiously, the term mind-boggling only became common parlance from the 1950s onwards, perhaps indicating that the baby boomers were often visited by demons and spectres that previous generations had never imagined, or at least Hull University Librarians with a line of poetry about mums and dads fucking you up and the vicissitudes of time outing sentiment rather than the truth. Professor Roland Crannus, the eponymous Professor Everywhere, and no doubt old pal of cynical Philip Larkin, the said librarian, could probably tell you a thing or a two about these apparitions. But then he is fictional, so perhaps he cannot. Philip Larkin is also a fiction, or that is, if this book is to be taken as the truth it self-awaringly meta-fictionally presents itself to be, the many versions of him are.

Yes, we are in clever Sci-Fi land. And if it ain't mind-boggling, it ain't doing its job. Allow me to pause here and have a quick vape. After diving into this alternative world, the cadences of Warwick University's Department of Literature have me sympathising with lipstick lesbian heroine, Chloe, pulling out a gun on her descent into the Classical world of rampant bulls and the mechanics of the gods. I am boggling and indulging in boggling right back. I am contemplating John Fowles' *The Magus* because *Professor Everywhere* has some of that wild vibe, though unlike *The Magus*, leaves no plot hole unplugged!

And I am sure that there is a footnote or an article mentioned in the bibliography that explains how the narratives we create about who we are,

what we are, where we are, and who we consort with, are all ideological constructs serving the maintenance of some power-structure, where reality is an amorphous, ephemeral, ambiguous indeterminate experience, that makes one begin to sound like Russell Brand fired up on coke.

This will require another footnote for those outside of the UK and unaware of who the hell Russell Brand is, or Philip Larkin for that matter, and perhaps even Shakespeare whose words are liberally sprinkled amidst the text, but google you can, must and these days, are expected to do, for googling is, in essence, the 21st Century hallmark of literacy and cultural wokeness. In fact, it is worth googling up the references just to discover how long a sentence can be, not to mention what is meant by “woke”. So not just a book to boggle, but one to get you googling too!

Yes, *Professor Everywhere* is a minefield of literature, a sea of alternatives, a mental and moral work-out that has one wondering who one is rooting for and whether it matters that Philip Larkin’s dad was a Nazi, or at least attended a couple of Nuremberg rallies, not that Larkin actually is a persona around which is woven the plot, or maybe he is? Either way, this story has a plot and a half and a depth of literary allusions that will bring fans of cryptic crosswords to orgasm.

One suspects that Professor De Selby, friend of Irish author Flann O’Brien, lurking in a Dublin Library somewhere looking somewhat bewildered by the door to the Uni-sex lavatory, has much to say about fiction and reality and would much approve of the idea that both are identical. Though it has to be noted that no bicycles appear in this world, but texting does. Such are the strange meanderings of the meta-verse, where nothing can become anything, or is it that something can be anything, including nothing? I am boggling at the thought, and such are the thoughts that *Professor Everywhere* turns my mind to. As another door opens, dare I step through to survey the mysteries therein now that Uni-sex stopped being a Freshers’ week mishap, and became a feminist cause?

Obviously, while reading *Professor Everywhere*, I have been vaping far too much Cherry flavoured smoke and believe my mind is expanding, my vocabulary dialled up to eleven, and that the author is having enormous fun weaving this adventure. Though, in the politically-correct virtue-signalling delvings of 21st century literary criticism, one does begin to wonder if the writer has any say in the meaning of their words, or whether they, the writer, are merely an entity we choose to be conscious of in one of the many

worlds that the universe constantly explodes into at every decision ever made? In short, do we, the reader, just make it all up? Are the writers really us? Or are they CONSTANTS, as defined by Professor Crannus? Even so, they themselves are multi-faced and as productive as the billions of monkeys that banged out Shakespeare's opus randomly smashing typewriter keys when we had typewriters. In the chaos of this picture of the universe, Louis Carol has eaten the white rabbit, and changed his name to Luis Borges, and thrown physics to the quantum wind. You will see what I mean, or do not mean, when you read Nicholas Binge's novel, assuming that in your bit of the multi-verse, English is not written using ancient Chinese Characters mingled with a few Japanese idioms. If the Chinese had won the Opium Wars, then maybe, who knows?

Now I am not sure who is smoking what! Though, trust me, at the end of the book, someone gets smoked and you will never guess prematurely who.

So, here we then have a many-worlds universe, where Conan Doyle mates with H.G. Wells, flips a time-machine inside out, blows more than the doors off The Tardis, climbs Jacobs Ladder without drugs, navigates the labyrinthine corridors of the literary department of Warwick University without Google maps, steps through Hogwarts, and if one was in the 1960s, blows one's mind. But we are not in the 1960s pondering Larkin's gloom, the death of the author, and that dismal D grade the smug Post-Doc who set the essay question gave us. Instead we are buried beneath the reams of 21st century academic madness where a Professor needs to fake all his classes, hire an assistant to make sure they are too dull to raise suspicion, and all so that he can pursue his dreams of a more primitive kind aided by a magical technology while making us Brits have a smidgeon of sympathy for ex-2007 PM, Gordon Brown. All this will make sense if you read the book. Trust me.

One can classify this as a sci-fi mystery story, or meditation on madness, or an academic work that has slipped through the portal to another universe, and thus can only be viewed as fiction despite it all being true... In short, just mind your boggles as you go. Nothing is as it seems. The narrative is but the tip of a melting iceberg that Greta Thunberg, destined to be a much-used footnote, will never forgive anyone for, and even if I give away the plot and you read the whole thing from back to front, your mind would be boggled by a damned good application of Semtex to the soul. Just step

through that door and remember that when it closes behind you, everything turns to fiction and no longer exists except in your own mind: mad or sane.

Lawrence Gray

Founder, Hong Kong Writers' Circle

Winner of the Proverse Prize 2015

Author of *Adam's Franchise*, *Cop Show Heaven*, *Odds and Sods*.

December 2019

“Rumours, wild stories and conjecture”

Nicholas Binge’s *Professor Everywhere* is framed as the memoir of Chloe Chan, who, as an undergraduate linguistics student at Warwick a decade ago, worked as a research assistant for the “mad[ly] brillian[t]” Professor Roland Crannus in the academic year leading to his central role in the “Pimlico Broadcast,” a 2009 event as indelibly “etched into the collective consciousness of the world” as the moon landing and the 9/11 attacks.

Readers encounter the Pimlico Incident—we read Chloe’s recollective reading of the televised/mediated epic event—both diachronically (as Chloe chronologically re-presents her story leading up to the event and the event itself) and synchronically (via the supplementary critical readings of factors and personages related to the spectacular event that Chloe defers relating until the narrative climax of her recollection). Readers learn about Crannus as Chloe does: first through campus-wide conjectures related to his gnomic fame, then through Chloe’s etymological research for him, then by way of Chloe working as his translator *in situ* in alternate cultural contexts, and finally by way of Chloe’s direct experience of the televised Pimlico Incident. Chloe’s chronological Crannus experiences are at the same time substantiated—or bird’s-eye-view contextualized—by a body of Crannus Studies scholarship.

As readers, we are interpellated into Chloe’s remediated narrative. The young, goddess-Demeter-modelled Chloe reiterates the pronoun “you” (the second word of the opening chapter is “you”), thus hailing readers into an alternative present, one where we are all aware of the iconic Professor Roland Crannus, whose “sartorial image,” Footnote 133 reminds us, “became bizzarely popular in the wake of Pimlico, with sales of both cravats and pipes taking a huge leap in 2010 and 2011.” The footnote continues with our memoirist’s characteristic meticulousness, “See Charles, A. (2011) ‘Crannus Copycats?’ in *The Guardian*. 4 October.”

In “offering what aims to be an objective reckoning of facts,” the now-well-published researcher Chloe^[147] contextualizes her experiences in light of films, documentaries, academic articles, reportages, monographs, and other critical & popular media platforms. Many of Chloe’s synchronic sources are actually extant in our collectively experienced “real world.” Yet

the Crannus-related secondary sources exist only in the alternate present that sources Chloe Chan's memoir.

The second of *Professor Everywhere*'s 146 footnotes insinuates the text into direct lineage with Mark Z Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2001). *House of Leaves* is a 700-plus-page, labyrinthine, maximalist text incorporating hundreds of footnotes, scores of footnotes to footnotes, the word minotaur always in red, the word house always in blue, and (to abbreviate a substantial list of paratextual apparatuses and critical excurses) three separate fonts. One font belongs to Zampanò. An old man, the narrator *manqué* expires violently at the onset of *House of Leaves*, leaving behind a voluminous, unkempt, and damaged manuscript tentatively titled, "The Navidson Record," which is an exhaustive academic treatment of filmmaker Will Navidson's Direct Cinema documentary on his haunted Big House. Navidson himself is modelled on 1994 suicide Kevin Carter, who won the Pulitzer Prize in 1993 for his photo, "The Vulture and the Little Girl." Another font is that of the underclass Johnny Truant, who collects and annotates Zampanò's manuscript into a text Johnny calls *The Navidson Record*. Johnny confesses to inserting untruths into his personalized footnotes. The final font in this chain of unreliable remediation is that used by the unnamed Editors of *House of Leaves*, who amend Johnny's emendations to Zampanò's encyclopaedic manuscript about Will Navidson's cinematic gothic nonfiction. Other paratextual devices in *House of Leaves* include a specious reference list, long catalogues of unreferenced architects, a parodic index, mirrored writing, blank pages, ink bombarded pages of boxes within boxes, cameos by academostars like Camille Paglia, Harold Bloom & Jacques Derrida, as well as an assortment of Exhibits, and Appendices. *House of Leaves*, so the noun "leaves" evokes, is a maximalist fictional encyclopaedia (a compendium of critical and popular "papers") about an actual photograph.

Professor Everywhere's second footnote appears less than one-page into chapter I (the main text concludes some 250-pages later in chapter XV). The footnote is in APA. It reads, "Zolowski, D. (2010). *A Man Out of Place: Crannus and the World*. HarperCollins." The half-coded name D. Zolowski recurs 41 times in Chloe's memoir. Footnote 104 speaks specifically to "Zolo"'s biography, "...see Talbot, M. (2014) *Zero to Zolo: The Daniel Zolowski Story*. HarperCollins." The nod to Mark Z. Danielewski is patent. Beyond the recurrence of Danielewski's name, Binge's novel accentuates

ekphrastic embellishment. Chloe's attention to Picasso's *Guernica* harbours on a version of the same minotaur that haunts the labyrinthine horrors in the endless hallways beneath Navidson's ever-shifting house. Chloe the subject (like the flying and crashing Icarus; like the hyper-invested Johnny) and Chloe the scholarly documentarian (like the punctilious Zampanò; like the filmmaking Navidson; like the engineer Dedalus) navigates a tortuous labyrinth. Chloe's complex web is a shifting gateway (managed by a modern, mad Theseus) to concurrent parallel realities, each one linguistically divergent from our own.

Professor Everywhere's second footnote is preceded by only two other paratexts. The first is footnote one, which normalizes Crannus' popularity by noting "Yuvar, L."s detailed 2010 Oxford UP monograph, "*Deconstructing the Crannus Myth: Fact from Fiction*." The first paratextual device is the book's opening epigram, which reproduces the final stanza, the "final blazon," in Philip Larkin's, "An Arundel Tomb." *Professor Everywhere* thus places limits on the usage of paratextual apparatuses and the acquisition of meaning and truth. In *House of Leaves*, by contrast, the copyright page, the front-cover, the endorsements on the book flaps, and the blurbs on the back-cover all work to disrupt the reliability of (re)mediated information *qua* truth. There's an encyclopaedic endlessness to the palimpsests (or layers) of *House of Leaves*. The text grows through supplemental excavations, through additional paratexts about the text('s paratexts). *House of Leaves* resists classical closure.

As a closed or complete text, *Professor Everywhere* makes a non-maximalist intervention into a literary subgenre I describe in the following way in the only footnote of my article, "Documenting the (Un)official Kevin Carter Narrative: Encyclopedism, Irrealism, and Intimization in *House of Leaves*." The lone footnote, in part, reads, "It can be helpful to situate Danielewski and his amalgamation of deferred encyclopedic annotation and stylistic innovation in a literary tradition that includes the paratextuality of J.J. Abram's and Doug Dorst's *S.* (2012), the limitlessness of Rebecca Solnit's *Infinite City* (2010), the unreliability of Junot Diaz' *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), the underworld impasses of Paul Auster's *Oracle Night* (2004), the logorrhea of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996), the meticulousness of Nicholson Baker's *The Mezzanine* (1986), the telegraphic reportage of Renata Adler's *Speedboat*

(1978), the meta-textuality of Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962) [...]."^[148]

Nicholas Binge's *Professor Everywhere* belongs on this dynamic list, one that features texts as invested in form as they are in content. Chloe's memoir, while being wonderfully instructive (we learn much from the precocious linguist), is also fascinatingly arresting (Chloe's SF-inflected exploits add another dimension (literally) to the reflexive palimpsests of Binge's literary influences).

I perused *Professor Everywhere* with alacrity, enjoying especially its proliferation of Shakespeare references, as well as its assortment of faux critical texts, such as "dramaturge John Belkman"'s *The Filled Space*, presumably a riposte to Peter's Brook's classic, *The Empty Space* (1968), which is how the director defined theatre: the empty space where agents perform before an audience. Most harrowing about *Professor Everywhere* is how Chloe's memoir affectively revolves around performances, particularly film-captured ones, including ones of her being literally tortured. Chloe's break down of these unwitting experiences is yet another instance of ekphrasis. Like the JFK Zapruder film, these are parsed frame-by-frame, each frame or still photo commanding narrative elaboration. As "film critic and director Jean-Luc Godard" is quoted by Chloe as saying in 1960's *Le Petit Soldat*, "Photography is truth. The cinema is truth twenty-four frames a second." JFK, of course, doesn't live to re-construct the 24 truths/second of the Dealy Plaza events on 22 November 1961.

The real trauma of *Professor Everywhere*, when all is said and done, involves our readerly alignment with Chloe: a contemporary Icarus who lives to recall her epic fall.

Jason S Polley

Associate Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, Hong Kong Baptist University

Jason S Polley, Wing Kin Vinton Poon, and Lian-Hee Wee (eds). *Cultural Conflict in Hong Kong: Angles on a Coherent Imaginary*. Palgrave, 2018.

“Things are not always what they seem; the first appearance deceives many; the intelligence of a few perceives what has been carefully hidden.”
—Phaedrus, 5th Century Philosopher and friend of Socrates

Clearly the author of this beguiling and deceptive novel has followed the advice of Phaedrus, both in terms of the subject of his story and the style in which it is written. When the story opens we are thrust into the familiar world of a university with our main character, Chloe Chan, disillusioned with the shallowness of academic life – ‘all show, there’s nothing underneath’ – and in search of a *real* scholar, in this case the illusive and mysterious Professor Roland Crannus, a ‘professor everywhere and it seems nowhere’.

The scene is set, then, for a campus satire: overworked lecturers and absent students, all lubricated by alcohol; and an attractive female student going in search of an idolised professor worshipped by his students, if rarely seen by them. The style is appropriate too, with academic footnotes and even a bibliography of Chloe Chan’s work presented as an appendix to the novel. But all is not what it seems.

As she goes in search of the professor, she is gradually drawn into a labyrinthine world in which the boundaries of the real and unreal are blurred. For those familiar with quantum theory, this is maybe the stuff of everyday life, but for those of us more used to seeing things as they really are, it is a nightmarish world of corridors and doors appearing and disappearing, a surreal underworld that could have been taken from a Greek myth.

Binge successfully manages to defy traditional genre boundaries by shifting a number of gears as the narrative progresses, from what starts as a campus satire, moves into what appears to be a psychological thriller, and then becomes a much darker story, and like Professor Crannus, more mysterious.

As we follow our heroine into meeting rooms that may or may not exist, we are forced to question her account – written some years after the events described – of what actually happened, and more importantly, what was ‘carefully hidden’. We are also asked to consider the relationships between language – how things are named – and anthropology – the meanings cultures ascribe to these things. But this is not an academic

treatise, though it might have the initial appearance of one, rather it is a playful exploration of how we see the world, if we do at all. Through the eyes of Chloe Chan, an unreliable narrator, we are asked to question much of what we take for granted.

Without giving anything away the story takes us on a hunt involving the professor looking for a son, who may or may not exist; and perhaps more importantly, Chloe's quest for a goal in life that makes her pursuit meaningful. As she says towards the end of the novel, it was '*not really a goal at all, just a distant ideal that made the pursuit worth it. The light at the end of the tunnel was never achievable. There was never an ideal there, not really – just a yearning for it. A desperation that if I worked hard enough, if I studied everything, I could get my hands on, it would show itself*'.

Now older and wiser, she reveals that the search for meaning is more important than the meaning itself, that it is not dopamine, the 'happiness drug', that will bring you what you seek, but love. So, perhaps this is not a satire or piece of science fiction, but a love story? Binge presents us with an early clue of his intentions when he opens this clever, well-written novel with a quotation from Philip Larkin's great poem, 'An Arundel Tomb' in which the poet says, *what will survive of us is love*.

Something no doubt Binge, Phaedrus and Socrates would agree on.

David Stephens

Professor of International Education (Everywhere?)

Author of *Purely Academic*

Brighton University

February 2020

FICTION PUBLISHED BY PROVERSE HONG KONG

NOVELS

- A Misted Mirror*. Gillian Jones.
A Painted Moment. Jennifer Ching.
Adam's Franchise. Lawrence Gray.
An Imitation of Life. Laura Solomon.
Article 109. Peter Gregoire.
As Leaves Blow. Philip Chatting.
*Bao Bao's Odyssey: From Mao's Shanghai
to Capitalist Hong Kong*. Paul Ting.
Black Tortoise Winter. Jan Pearson.
Bright Lights and White Lights. Andrew Carter.
Cemetery miss you. Jason S Polley.
Cop Show Heaven. Lawrence Gray.
Cry of the Flying Rhino. Ivy Ngeow.
Curveball: Life Never Comes At You Straight. Gustav Preller.
Death Has A Thousand Doors. Patricia W. Grey
Enoch's Muse. Sergio Monteiro.
Hilary and David. Laura Solomon.
HK Hollow. Dragoş Ilca.
Hong Kong Rocks. Peter Humphreys.
Instant Messages. Laura Solomon.
Man's Last Song. James Tam.
Mishpacha – Family. Rebecca Tomasis.
Paranoia. Caleb Kavon.
Red Bird Summer. Jan Pearson.
Revenge from Beyond. Dennis Wong.
The Day They Came. Gerard Breissan.
The Devil You Know. Peter Gregoire.
The Handover Murders. Damon Rose.
The Monkey in Me. Caleb Kavon.
The Perilous Passage of Princess Petunia Peasant.
Victor Edward Apps.

The Reluctant Terrorist. Caleb Kavon.
The Thing Is. Andrew Carter.
The Village in the Mountains. David Diskin.
Three Wishes in Bardo. Feng Chi-shun.
Tiger Autumn. Jan Pearson.
Tightrope! A Bohemian Tale. Olga Wall ó
(translated from Czech).
University Days. Laura Solomon.
Vera Magpie. Laura Solomon. (Novella.)

SHORT STORY COLLECTIONS

Beyond Brightness. Sanja Särman.
Odds and Sods. Lawrence Gray.
The Shingle Bar Sea Monster and Other Stories. Laura Solomon.
The Snow Bridge And Other Stories. Philip Chatting.
Under the shade of the Feijoa trees and other stories.
Hayley Ann Solomon.

**FIND OUT MORE ABOUT PROVERSE AUTHORS,
BOOKS, INTERNATIONAL PRIZES, AND EVENTS**

Visit our website:

<http://www.proversepublishing.com>

Visit our distributor's website: www.cup.cuhk.edu.hk

Follow us on Twitter

Follow news and conversation: <twitter.com/Proversebooks>

OR

Copy and paste the following to your browser window and follow the instructions:

<https://twitter.com/#!/ProverseBooks>

“Like” us on www.facebook.com/ProversePress

Request our free E-Newsletter

Send your request to info@proversepublishing.com.

Availability

Most books are available in Hong Kong and world-wide
from our Hong Kong based Distributor,

The Chinese University Press of Hong Kong,

The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, NT,
Hong Kong SAR, China.

Email: cup@cuhk.edu.hk

Website: www.cup.cuhk.edu.hk

All titles are available from Proverse Hong Kong

<http://www.proversepublishing.com>

and the Proverse Hong Kong UK-based Distributor.

We have stock-holding retailers in Hong Kong,

Canada (Elizabeth Campbell Books),

Andorra (Llibreria La Puça, La Llibreria).

Orders can be made from bookshops

in the UK and elsewhere.

Ebooks

Most Proverse titles are available also as Ebooks.

- [1]. For a more detailed exploration of the rumours surrounding the Professor, see Yuvar, L. (2010). *Deconstructing the Crannus Myth: Fact from Fiction*. Oxford University Press.
- [2]. Zolowski, D. (2010). *A Man Out of Place: Crannus And The World*. HarperCollins.
- [3]. Including, not limited to documentarians such as Jarecki; Curtis; Ibnali; Harris; Gibney.
- [4]. This perspective has all been covered in the highly-publicised documentary, *Worlds Apart* by Eugene Jarecki, but it bears repeating here for the sake of context.
- [5]. For a more detailed treatment on the global and political impacts, see James, A.S. (2012). *The Death of Nation-States? Life After Crannus*.
- [6]. After the Jarecki documentary, The University of Warwick did attempt to sue both Jarecki and me for libellous attempts to discredit their reputation, but the case was eventually lost.
- [7]. In his *Defence of Poetry* (1840), Shelley wrote that, “The Past, like an inspired rhapsodist, fills the theatre of everlasting generations with their harmony.” I remember musing on these words on the plane.
- [8]. Specifically Eco, U. (1975). *A Theory of Semiotics*. Indiana University Press.
- [9]. This research formed the backbone of my later work: Chan, C. (2014). *Language and Dominance: The Sapiens Genocide*.
- [10]. In 2010, Iris Jones wrote an excellent analysis of Professor Crannus’s sartorial choices and their impact in, ‘What’s In A Thread? Crannus and Clothing’. *New England Journal of Political Science*. 44 (1).
- [11]. I eventually tracked down the blonde woman – a Natasha Epsom from Surrey – but she declined to comment on this experience.
- [12]. Some excellent insights are also provided in *Crannus and Music: The Real Love Story*, a short documentary feature by Joan Tambel in 2012.
- [13]. The Baader-Meinhof phenomenon is a cognitive bias, in which a word or a name that has just recently come to one’s attention shows up with improbable frequency shortly afterwards.
- [14]. As I remember this, I am reminded of Paris Syndrome, a transient mental disorder which results in extreme shock when people discover Paris is not what they expect it to be. It involves delusional states, hallucinations and even feelings of persecution.
- [15]. When asked about standardisation and practices concerning classes and grading, the University of Warwick declined to comment.
- [16]. Neil Gaiman wrote an entertaining, if entirely fictional, version of events narrated by ‘The Man In The Suit’ as he came to be known. This can be found in his collection, *Quiet Dreams*, published in

2015.

[17]. For legal reasons, the school will remain unnamed in this memoir.

[18]. David Jimenez, if he ever existed, has yet to be located in any of the investigations following the Pimlico incident. See: Ratz, W. (2011). ‘The Jimenez Question’. *The Researcher’s Journal*. 31 (3).

[19]. Shakespeare, W. *Henry VI: Part 2*. Act V, Scene 7.

[20]. For a closer analysis of Dr. Judy Stennaway, read Haraki, Y. (2011). *The Woman Behind the Man: Dr. Stennaway’s Concerns*. Oxford Press.

[21]. In an interview with me in 2011, James Belford attempted to compile a phrasebook of the Professor’s advice, entitling it, “The Wisdom of Professor Crannus”. Unfortunately, given the publicity surrounding the Pimlico incident, there were no publishers who were willing to take that kind of risk to their reputation.

[22]. For a better picture, consider Tom Thurlow’s 2012 book *Clandestine Organisations: Crannus’ Personal Government*. Harvard Press.

[23]. See Schleicher, August; Bendall, Herbert, translator (1874, 1877) [1871]. *A Compendium of the Comparative Grammar of the Indo-European, Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin Languages, translated from the third German edition*. London: Trübner and Co.

[24]. See Qiu Xigui (2000). *Chinese Writing*. Translated by Gilbert Mattos and Jerry Norman. *Early China Special Monograph Series No. 4*. Berkeley: The Society for the Study of Early China and the Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley.

[25]. See Shakespeare. *The Merchant of Venice*, Act 4, Scene 3.

[26]. Coincidentally, the company was Hong Kong’s Chan Shu-wing Theatre Studio, who had garnered earlier fame for their Cantonese production of *Macbeth*.

[27]. Shafer, R. (1955). ‘Classification of the Sino-Tibetan languages’. *Word (Journal of the Linguistic Circle of New York)*. 11 (1). 94–111.

[28]. Benedict, Paul K. (1972)., *Sino-Tibetan: A Conspectus*. Cambridge University Press.

[29]. Gong, Hwang-chenng. (2002). *Hàn Zàng y ŭ yánji ū lùn wén jí 漢藏語研究論文集 [Collected papers on Sino-Tibetan linguistics]*, Taipei: Academia Sinica.

[30]. Having consented to include her name for accuracy, Professor Sandwell has asked that it be made clear she had no professional or personal association with Professor Crannus.

[31]. Sharman, J. (1973). *Changing Of The Times*. York University Press.

[32]. This can be seen from Plutarch’s *Moralia*: “Herakles, having slain Hippolyte and taken her axe away from her with the rest of her arms, gave it to Omphale. The kings of Lydia who succeeded her carried this as one of their sacred insignia of office, and passed it down from father to son until it was passed to Candaules, who disdained it and gave it to one of his companions to carry. When Gyges rebelled and was making war upon Candaules, Arselis came with a force from Mylasa to assist Gyges; Arselis then slew Candaules and his companion and took the axe

to Caria with the other spoils of war. And, having set up a statue of Zeus, Arselis put the axe in his hand and invoked the god, Labrandeus.” Plutarch. *Greek Questions*. 45 2.302a.

[33]. Beekes, Robert S. P. (2010). *Etymological Dictionary of Greek*. (Leiden Indo-European Etymological Dictionary Series; 10), with the assistance of Lucien van Beek, Leiden, Boston: Brill.

[34]. Doob, Penelope Reed. (1992). *The Idea of the Labyrinth: from Classical Antiquity through the Middle Ages*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

[35]. *Op. cit.* Beekes, Robert S. P.

[36]. In, *Worlds Apart*, Jarecki makes the connection between that impulsive moment and the decision to run away with Valerie when I was in Hong Kong. I can only note that it is bizarre to see one’s choices analysed by critics.

[37]. It will perhaps serve you to think of the German word for uncanny: ‘unheimlich’, where ‘heim’ has its root in ‘home’. Thus the sensation of being ‘uncanny’ has overtones of being ‘not at home’, which summed up the atmosphere well in that moment. See Gray, R. Lecture Notes: Freud, “*The Uncanny*” (1919).

[38]. You will find a more detailed exploration of this phenomenon in Chapter IV.

[39]. Damasio, A. *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*. Putnam Publishing, 1994.

[40]. A deeper analysis of the impact of Dr. Stennaway’s rules can be found in, Boyd, D. (2013). ‘False Systems: Why Genius Can’t Be Ruled’. *American Journal of Psychology*. 23 (2).

[41]. Much has been made of the ‘friendship’ between Richard Feynman and Professor Crannus. Feynman’s family denied that there was a friendship at all, calling the relationship ‘parasitic’. However, this may have been a reaction to the scandal at the Nobel commission, where a reviewer claimed that most of the work that won him the prize was actually done by Crannus. For obvious reasons, neither is available to comment on either matter.

[42]. This comes from Polonius’s advice to his son, Laertes, *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 3. The line, as the audience later discovers, is double-edged.

[43]. Even the earliest minds in quantum mechanics felt this. Heisenberg wrote in *Physics and Philosophy* (1958): "I remember discussions with Bohr which went through many hours till very late at night and ended almost in despair; and when at the end of the discussion I went alone for a walk in the neighbouring park I repeated to myself again and again the question: Can nature possibly be so absurd as it seemed to us in these atomic experiments?"

[44]. More specifically, in the words of Bryce Seligman DeWitt in ‘Quantum Mechanics and Reality’. *Physics Today*. 23 (9). 30–40 (September 1970), "every quantum transition taking place on every star, in every galaxy, in every remote corner of the universe is splitting our local **world** on earth into myriads of copies of itself." See also *Physics Today*, letters follow-up, 24 (4), (April 1971). 38–44.

[45]. The total number of worlds visited has yet to be agreed upon by historians. Much like the death tolls during Mao’s ‘Great Leap Forward’, the statistic depends very much on who you ask.

- [46]. See Shakespeare, W. *The Tragedy of Macbeth*. Act I, Scene 3.
- [47]. Many of you will have seen the short documentary, *Kiluvu's Story – A Man Out of Time*. It is important to remember that the producer's dark presentation of his struggle was utterly without evidence.
- [48]. While the discovery of multiple worlds has done much to open up the realm of behavioural science, no work is as comprehensive as Juxin, Y. (2012). *The Static Gene: Behaviour and the Universe*. Beijing University Press.
- [49]. I will again refer you to *Crannus and Music: The Real Love Story*, a short documentary feature by Joan Tambel in 2012.
- [50]. Barthes, R. (1967). 'The Death of the Author'. *Aspen* No. 5-6.
- [51]. Arastolini, M. (2009). 'Professor Icarus: Freud, Crannus and the Perils of Male Discovery'. *Artemis* No. 12. Yale University Press.
- [52]. *Ibid.* p. 8.
- [53]. *Ibid.* p. 23.
- [54]. Urd, P. and Hans, O. (2010). *Curiosity and the Brain: A World of Explorers*.
- [55]. Loewenstein, G.F, E.U. Weber, C.K. Hsee and N. Welch. (2001). 'Risk As Feelings'. *Psychology Bulletin*. March 127 (2). 267-86.
- [56]. Including Gazzaniga, M. S., Bogen, J. E. and Sperry, R. W. (1962). *Proc. Natl Acad. Sci. USA* 48, 1765–1769.; Sidtis, J. J., Volpe, B. T., Wilson, D. H., Rayport, M. and Gazzaniga, M. S. (1981) *J. Neurosci.* 1, 323–331; and Gazzaniga, M. S. (1989). *Science* 245. 947–952.
- [57]. Corpus callosotomy is a palliative surgical procedure for the treatment of medically refractory epilepsy. In this procedure the corpus callosum is cut through in an effort to limit the spread of epileptic activity between the two halves of the brain.
- [58]. Gazzaniga, M. S. (2000). 'Cerebral specialization and interhemispheric communication: Does the corpus callosum enable the human condition?' *Brain* 123. 1293–1326.
- [59]. Rohlmann, G. (2017). *Decision Making and the Secret Mind*. HarperCollins. p. 54.
- [60]. I use this term more as a jab at the Tabloid newspapers than for any real merit.
- [61]. The march, entitled, 'March for Jobs, Justice and Climate', did end up taking place with almost 35,000 people present. It is a testament to the Professor's sense of the dramatic that nobody ever remembers that.
- [62]. See Lacan, J. 'The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire'. *La Dialectique*. September 1960.
- [63]. A deeper exploration of imagined belief-systems and orders and their impact on human development can be found in Harari, Y. N. (2011). *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*.
- [64]. The VIAs the Professor mentions refers to the *Vokalno-instrumentalny ansambl*, or the Soviet state-approved pop and rock bands throughout the 60s and 70s.

[65]. See Shakespeare, W. *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*.

[66]. This can be seen in the most basic of exercises. Dehghani *et al.* (2014). ‘The Subtlety of Sound: Accent as a Marker for Culture’. *Journal of Language and Psychology* 1-20 showed a range of Americans and Chinese-Americans a picture of a school of fish with one out front. The former tended to identify the separated fish as the ‘leader’, whereas the latter viewed this fish as the ‘outcast’.

[67]. For a detailed exploration of this phenomenon, see both Nisbett, *The Geography of Thought* and Y. Ogiwara, *et al.* (2015). ‘Are Common Names Becoming Less Common? The Rise of Uniqueness and Individualism in Japan’. *Front Psych* 6.

[68]. It is interesting to note that this phrase was used by the Professor repeatedly throughout his years. For a man who abhorred repetition, he certainly enjoyed his own aphorisms.

[69]. See Marlow, C. (1592). *Doctor Faustus*.

[70]. For further exploration of this idea, see Jordan, E. and Harsher, D. (2012). *Justice After Crannus: Morality When One World Becomes Many*.

[71]. Shakespeare, W. (1609). *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. Act I, Scene 5.

[72]. See Yara, M. (2010). *The Gardener Myth – Fact or Fiction?* York University Press; Ng, A. (2009). *Deconstructing The Gardener: Otherworldly Powers*. HarperCollins.

[73]. See Shakespeare, W. *The Tragedy of Macbeth*. Act I, Scene 3.

[74]. Despite having never been there, the most accurate facsimile of this ‘inversion’ was painted by postmodernist Jan Tolditz and hangs in the Reina Sofia museum in Madrid.

[75]. For further discussion of ethics in the face of multiple worlds, see Tolodow, O. ‘Kant or Can’t? Ethics And Discovery’. *Ethics*. 2011. (4).

[76]. For a closer exploration of the relationship between time and Constants, see Furmedge, R. (2013). *The Clock Paradox: Horology and Chronometry in the Multiverse*. Cambridge University Press.

[77]. The dramaturge John Belkman wrote an interesting thesis on the similarities with the theatrical notion of ‘ensemble’ in his book, *The Filled Space*, where he posits that the capacity for such communality is dormant within all of us.

[78]. Qui, X. (2000). *Chinese Writing. (Early China Special Monograph Series, No. 4)*.

[79]. Winger, I. (1965). *Chinese Characters: Their Origin, Etymology, History, Classification and Signification: A Thorough Study From Chinese Documents. 2nd Edition*. Dover Publications.

[80]. Wasei-kango is literally “Japanese made Chinese words”. Such terms are generally written using kanji and read according to the *on’yomi* pronunciations of the characters. While many words belong to the shared Sino-Japanese vocabulary, some *kango* do not exist in Chinese while others have a substantially different meaning from Chinese; however some words have been borrowed back to Chinese.

- [81]. Anyone who has been to Mong Kok in Hong Kong on a Saturday afternoon will be familiar with this feeling. However, this experience was heightened to a dizzying level of claustrophobia.
- [82]. Tran, Q. used my observations to write a fascinating treatise on the universality of body language and the tendency towards species conformity. See: 'Life – The Constant Conformist'. *Psychology Review*. 2010. (5).
- [83]. It has caused much consternation amongst the scientific community that most of these contraptions were either lost, broken or simply unworkable after Pimlico.
- [84]. See Kant, I. (1781). *A Critique of Pure Reason*. Riga.
- [85]. For more exploration of this phenomenon, see Van Der Kolk, B.A. (2002). 'Trauma And Memory'. *Journal of Theoretical Social Psychology*. 51.
- [86]. See: Schachtel, E.G. (1947). 'On memory and childhood amnesia.' *Psychiatry*; 10. 1-26.
- [87]. See also: Van der Kolk, B.A & Van der Hart, O. (1991). 'The intrusive past: The flexibility of memory and the engraving of trauma.' *Am. Imago* .48. 425-454.
- [88]. Including, but not limited to, Eugene Jarecki; Jan Tolditz; John Belkman; Daniel Nason.
- [89]. Hughes, R. (1991). *The Shock of the New*. New York: Knopf.
- [90]. Moore, A. (1989). *V For Vendetta*. DC Comics.
- [91]. Warner, T. (2007). *North Korea*. Paramount Pictures.
- [92]. Warner, T. (2005). *The White*. Trident.
- [93]. Warner, T. (2018). *Soul Woman*. Paramount Pictures.
- [94]. The film was released to critics and industry specialists in 2016. It has not been made available for wide distribution.
- [95]. Godard, J-L. (1960). *Le Petit Soldat*.
- [96]. Wiesel, E. *US News & World Report* . (27 October, 1986).
- [97]. Grobar, M. (2015). *D.P. Emmanuel Lubezki On Close-Ups With DiCaprio, Frozen Equipment & Improvising With Inarritu*. Deadline.
- [98]. Rosenbaum, J. *Warner's Lost Tapes*. Chicago Reader. 2017.
- [99]. Godard, J-L. (2017). 'The Warner-Chan Film'. *Cahiers du Cinema*. Paris.
- [100]. Despite the notoriety the film has gained during the last 18 months or so, Warner has always protected the names of his actors and crew. The reasons for this are unclear.
- [101]. See: Yantari, J. (2017). 'The Symbol and the Moment'. *Cannes Film Review*.
- [102]. Warwick Hospital later told me that they had believed I was victim of a violent robbery. A falsified police report had been provided to them.
- [103]. See Samuel, K. (2015). 'War of the Worlds: The Sombasi Tribes'. *Anthropology Review*. 14 (2).
- [104]. For a detailed biography of his life, see Talbot, M. (2014). *Zero to Zolo: The Daniel Zolowski Story*. HarperCollins.
- [105]. For a further exploration of this idea, see Fermouse, J. (2012). 'The Crannus Idea: Morality and Society in a Post-Camus World.' *Philosophy* 45 (5).

[106]. See Wheelhouse, M. (2010). *The Professor's Personal War*. York University Press.

[107]. See Camus, A. (1942). *L'Etranger*. Gallimard.

[108]. A large group of students had decided to occupy territory across the country, in support of the G20 protest. Even now, I am unsure of what it was supposed to achieve.

[109]. Gemma Parch wrote a scathing criticism of this perspective in her piece, 'False Idols: Glorifying The Vainglorious'. *The Guardian*, 2 October 2014.

[110]. For a further discussion, see Arastolini, M. (2011). 'Trauma As Motivator'. *Psychology Today*. 242 (4).

[111]. The death count is highly debated amongst academics. However, it is accepted that a complete reckoning is now impossible to make in the wake of Pimlico.

[112]. As uncomfortable as it was for me to watch, the Jarecki documentary does an excellent job in exploring the processes behind a mentor-mentee relationship and the dangers inherent.

This can also be seen explored in Boyd, D. (2014). 'The Role of the Professor: Academic Heaven and Personal Hell'. *The Journal of New Psychology* (2) 24.

[113]. Though it was set up in 2004, much of the organisation's structure was rendered classified after Pimlico. It is impossible to say how many governments were involved. Most have denied their association.

[114]. My lawyers, of course, require me to add that this claim is speculative and unsubstantiated, only here for narrative and artistic purposes.

[115]. We have yet to discover just how prophetic this is. That being said, in the wake of Pimlico, if history has not judged the Professor, the present certainly has.

[116]. See Walls, J. (2009). *Following Orders: A Story of Shame and Regret*. Penguin Doubleday.

[117]. This man was John Backer, and the book he wrote from prison in 2012 – *The Crannus Machine: Confessions of a Lab Technician* – provides surprisingly poignant insight.

[118]. After Pimlico, many of the participants were put on trial and imprisoned. For the most part, it was those working at the facilities and not those making the decisions.

[119]. See Yushin, X. (2010). *Man At Our Very Worst*. Translated by George Sambolec. London: Hachette.

[120]. Van Veen, V.; Krug, M.K.; Schooler, J.W.; Carter, C.S. (2009). 'Neural Activity Predicts Attitude Change in Cognitive Dissonance'. *Nature Neuroscience*. 12 (11). 1469–1474

[121]. Festinger, L. (1957). *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. California: Stanford University Press.

[122]. The 2014 sci-fi blockbuster, *Universal Enforcers*, did a lot to muddy the academic waters concerning the Gardener. Almost everything that was depicted in that film was a complete work of fiction.

[123]. Quantum mechanics suggests that it is impossible to measure an exact value for both position and momentum of any specific particle. However, if an object can be said to have a definitive

position and momentum, it can be said to have its own 'eigenstate'. In layman's terms, it is when an object can be definitively 'pinned down' rather than being a cloud of probability.

See Greiner, Walter. (2000). 'The Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle'. *Quantum Mechanics*. New York: Springer-Verlag. 51–63, 79.

[124]. See Poplar, E. (2015). 'Rules and Rulebooks from Asimov to Palahnuik'. *New Literary History*. 32 (2).

[125]. Since the events of Pimlico and the disappearance of the Gardener, nothing more is known about these historical phenomena. Much science-fiction has been written about them, however. See John Scalzi's, *A World's Crusade* and Anne Leckie's, *The War to End All Wars*.

[126]. See Blomfeld, H. (2016). *Christian Morality and Crannusian Utilitarianism: A Study*. Harvard University Press.

[127]. Shakespeare, W. *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*. Act II, Scene 1.

[128]. The London G20 protests, as with many at the time, were a mismatched collection of wronged individuals with different motives and disparate goals. Some railed against the financial institutions, others against corporate lobbying. There was no central theme except for anger and disgust.

[129]. The name was coined by Jacqui Smith, interim Prime Minister after Pimlico, when reflecting on the aftermath of the tragedy.

[130]. Gilsinan, K. (2016). 'Watching 9/11 From Around the World'. *The Atlantic*. September 13.

[131]. Like the other two, the image has been replicated a hundred times, but the original footage remains the most powerful.

[132]. In fact, it was very little time before the leaders of almost every African nation adamantly denied their involvement in the incident. Nonetheless, trigger fingers were itchy and governments ready to retaliate. Historians have often noted the extent to which the world was on the brink of another international war on that day.

See Yorfric, J. (2014). *The Third World War That Never Was*. Doubleday Press.

[133]. This sartorial image became bizarrely popular in the wake of Pimlico, with sales of both cravats and pipes taking a huge leap in 2010 and 2011. See Charles, A. (2011). 'Crannus Copycats?' *The Guardian*. 4 October.

[134]. This is the image to which I refer: a world leader, dead at the feet of a man from another world.

[135]. Linda Lee wrote a compelling piece of investigative journalism on corruption and blackmail within the CEDM throughout the Crannus years. It was published in *The Washington Post*, 5 July 2014.

[136]. This man, Larry Bonman, gave many interviews after Pimlico about being forced to work for Professor Crannus and do his bidding. His descriptions were over the top and fanciful, but it offers a good insight into the tension and atmosphere of the building at the time.

[137]. See Ershwil, E. (2012). *The Problem of Focus*. York University Press.

[138]. I am aware that this is the first real account of James Burgett’s death since the Pimlico affair. He was always assumed to have been killed by Professor Crannus, along with others. For the sake of preserving his dignity, I had originally wanted to keep it that way, but I am beginning to see the importance of sharing the truth.

[139]. For more exploration into the medicinal uses of plants and drugs harvested from other worlds, see McKarlen J. (2015). *Quantum Medicines: A Study of Other Worlds*. Harvard University Press.

[140]. See Burrage, F., and A. Merkel. ‘The Pimlico Interviews’. *The Sunday Times*, Vol. 422. 13 March 2013.

[141]. See Bolran, M. (2014). *CEDM: The Lost Employees*. HarperCollins.

[142]. See Kane, D. (2013). *Lies and Cover-Ups: The Organisation That Cannot Speak*. Penguin.

[143]. Zolowski, D. (2010). *A Man Out of Place: Crannus And The World*. HarperCollins.

[144]. You are welcome to do more reading than me, including Bergman, I. (2012). ‘Recovering Worlds’. *Physics*. 42: 2; Cixin, Z. (2014). ‘Crossing The Boundaries’ (trans. John Cheung). *Harvard Scientific Journal*. 76: 4; Levi, T. *et al.* (2016). ‘Recreating Crannus’. *Quantum Physics*. 23:2.

[145]. For a full list of my published works, please consult Appendix A.

[146]. Schultz, W. (2010). ‘Dopamine Signals and Reward Value and Risk: Basic and Recent Data’. *Behave and Brain Functional*. 6: 24.

[147] *Professor Everywhere* includes 146 footnotes and the two-page *Appendix A*. These paratexts, which I’ll quickly qualify as supplementary texts about the main text that are packaged into the overall text, substantiate Chloe’s recollective narrative. Chloe’s care is clear. So too is her scholarly talent. We might even argue that Chloe’s included “*Appendix A*”—a two-page APA list documenting Chloe’s 10 tier-one academic articles, her three monographs by first-rate academic publishers, and the memoir we are ipso facto reading—is *a posteriori* unnecessary. But this is to overlook how we tend not exclusively to read (or glance at) texts chronologically. Under the ironic academic credo requiring scholars to at one and the same time be original and substantiate all their claims, academics especially access secondary sources through bibliographies and indices in order to expedite their consumption of quotable information. Academe, of course, fetishizes publication. Swimming against the tide of his times (and, sadly, still, ours), Crannus, we might remember from early in the memoir, famously (and incredibly) “published no papers.” Also, see Reif Larson’s second novel, *I Am Radar* (2014), for a similar metatextual strategy. As Danielewski does in *House of Leaves* before him, Larson includes a version of the novel we are reading within the novel we are reading.

[148] In *IAFOR Journal of Communication, Media & Film* 5.2 (Summer 2018): 5-22.

zlibrary

Your gateway to knowledge and culture. Accessible for everyone.



z-library.se

singlelogin.re

go-to-zlibrary.se

single-login.ru



[Official Telegram channel](#)



[Z-Access](#)



<https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Z-Library>