

CHAPTER 1

The sun was high over the lawns of Oxford University, and a dozen tall spires rose to puncture the sky like great stone teeth.

Beneath the spires was a building, constructed from the same dusky stone and carved with ornate angles and points. Through the arched windows rooms were visible, each one illuminated by the brilliant sunshine.

In one of these rooms, swimming with tiny motes of dust, a few people sat slumped over wooden desks. They gazed sleepily at the pages spread open before them, occasionally stirring to grab for a sheet or folder, or another book. In front of them all a man sat, facing the class, speaking in a slow and droopy voice.

“And so to the relationship, often explicated, between Appearance and Being,” droned the man. He had long, frail hair, and the eyes behind his thick glasses seemed to be barely open.

“Nietzsche makes plain the relationship in his *Human, All Too Human*, section fifty-one...”

There was a burst of shuffling – each of the students gave a jerk and reached across their tables. They seized books, and as one began flicking through pages. Before any of them had finished flicking, the man at the front of the room continued.

“And so we read: *Even when in the deepest distress, the actor ultimately cannot cease to think of the impression he and the whole scenic effect is making...*”

The man looked up from his own book and glanced around. Or rather, he pointed his squinting features at the room before returning his attention to the book.

“The analogy of the actor, we can see, is a telling one. In the repetition of the action, says Nietzsche, eventually comes the habit. And the habit, unbroken and unbreakable, comes irrevocably into the character of the individual.”

Francis blinked a few times, trying to clear the film that seemed to have settled upon his eyeballs. He was not very successful – the droopy-voiced teacher still looked slightly blurred at the edges. Breathing deeply, Francis directed his gaze down at the book instead.

Propping himself up on his thick, pink forearms, he tried to keep his eyes wide. The little wooden chair was forcing him, as it always did, to bend his tall, twenty-year-old body almost double just to fit behind the desk. The backrest dug into the skin beneath his wide shoulder blades, and he

shimmied awkwardly back and forth every few minutes. Trying to ignore all these little aches and pains Francis opened and closed his fists, rubbed his freckled face, and then dragged ten fingers through his shock of red hair.

“The actor is conscious, even in times of greatest trauma, of how his or her grief appears to the world at large, in the same way that he or she is conscious of an outward manifestation of happiness in times of great joy...”

Shadowy tendrils of sleep were creeping in at the corners of Francis’ vision when an odd sound jerked him upright.

It was a very faint sound, and it came from somewhere near his elbow, which rested on a little pile of books just beside the windowsill. For a few moments Francis stared around, snorting and blinking. At last he realised that someone was tapping, very lightly, on the windowpane.

This someone was a man, standing just on the other side of the wide, panelled window. His round and wrinkly face was peppered with stubble, and the deeply carved corners of his mouth were twisted into a smile. Even though he wore a pith helmet tilted low over his brow, it was clear that he had a great quantity of fluffy white hair. His eyebrows, also brilliantly white, stuck out nearly to the helmet’s brim.

He had one gnarled finger raised, as if he was pointing at something in the distance, and he twitched it back and forth to tap, insistently, on the glass.

Francis stared, mouth open, for some time.

“This is not, you will remember, the first time that Nietzsche has dealt with the crucial distinction between aesthetic appearance and epistemological truth. If we turn to *The Gay Science* we can read that...”

The droopy teacher had his eyes locked once again on his books, and had not noticed anything amiss in the classroom. Indeed, it seemed as though the rest of the students were as drowsy and sluggish as Francis, and none of them paid any attention to the wizened little man tapping at the window.

When a whole minute had passed, during which Francis had not managed to do anything but stare, the smile vanished from the mouth of the man outside. The deeply lined face tautened, and came very close to the glass in order to look inside the classroom.

It was only when the man did this that Francis could properly glimpse the eyes. They were so dark that they appeared almost black, but they were quick and clever and they blazed with a startling fire.

With one fiery eyeball pressed to the glass, the man raked the interior of the classroom. Once his gaze had finished roving, he returned it to Francis, and began to mouth something. The words were indistinguishable, but he opened his mouth so wide he looked as though he was trying to swallow a sparrow.

“Can’t... Professor...” Francis tried to mouth back, but it was futile. The two flapped their respective lips at each other silently for a while before Francis gave up.

Rolling his eyes, he began to force his chair backwards.

It moved agonisingly slowly, and the hard wood creaked and protested loudly with every inch that Francis gained. Luckily, the class seemed to have descended even further now into the warm and wordy haze brought on by the teacher’s voice. Nobody seemed to notice when Francis stood up quietly, seized the latch on one of the window panels, and gently swung it open.

“I must say, my boy,” said the Professor, leaning forward and whispering through the tiny, opening, “You do have classes in some very awkward places.”

As he sat back down, Francis arched his back to peer over the top of the windowsill. In his shock he had nearly forgotten – the classroom was on the second floor of the building. In order to tap at the window the Professor had scaled a spindly elm tree, and had his feet perched precariously on the uppermost branches.

“What was wrong with the door?” Francis hissed.

“I was going to use the door,” said the Professor, frowning, “But as I was walking I spotted you through the window.”

As he said this, the Professor jerked a thumb over his shoulder, indicating some distant spot across the green lawns from which he had, somehow, spotted Francis half-dozing in class. The mere motion of pointing caused the tree to sway violently beneath the Professor’s feet, and Francis started and clenched his jaw.

“Well... what do you want?” Francis barely opened his mouth as he said this. He was looking back at the front of the classroom again, his neck muscles frozen.

“My office,” replied the Professor excitedly, “At once, my boy. Debriefing.”

Francis rolled his eyes again. Trying to force a 'yes' through his clenched jaw and throat caused him to let out a sort of quiet warble, and he nodded his head stiffly instead.

“Excellent.”

He was not sure how the Professor managed it, since Francis could only glimpse at the fringes of his peripheral vision. But the face at the window vanished as quickly and silently as if it had been carried away on the breeze, and when he turned, Francis could see nothing but the swaying branches and the bright green lawn.

With a deep sigh, he pulled the window panel shut again, and raised his hand.

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The walls were composed of sandstone bricks, each one perfectly worked and nestled into its corresponding buttress or arch. They rose in elegant curves that met just over Francis' head, and despite the fact that he had passed through this corridor hundreds of times he could not help but look up.

Complimenting the intricate stonework was the carpet, which somehow managed to look just as ancient. It was patterned with the most thoroughly revolting shades of brown that Francis thought he had ever beheld.

The air smelled faintly dusty, and even though he had only taken half a dozen paces down the hall from the airy courtyard, all sound was muffled at once. Tall wooden doors were set into the stone at intervals along both walls, and these passed by his elbows with rhythmic regularity as he walked. He scanned the names printed in small golden letters, even though he knew precisely in which office he would be expected. Francis' feet carried him without direction – he could have found the Professor's office with his eyes shut.

Just as the corridor was about to turn, he stopped at the second last door on the right, and knocked.

The gold lettering stamped at eye level read: PROF D. CROWTHER

“Enter!” came the shout from inside.

Francis took hold of the knob and twisted, and the door swung open with a loud creak.

A person's first thought upon entering the Professor's office was usually that it was much narrower than it should be. The doors in the stone corridor were evenly spaced, and it would be natural to assume the offices behind them to be comfortable, and perhaps even spacious. But the Professor's

office looked to be only a few paces wide, and it gave the impression of a tunnel, or a tall silo thrown over on one side.

Shelves towered all the way to the ceiling on both the left and right hand walls. They were metal rather than wooden, and they were packed so tightly with books and boxes and canvas-wrapped shapes that they looked as solid as the stone they concealed. Francis found the door would not open all the way, and as he slid through the opening he saw that this was because the floor was, as usual, also covered with boxes and curious artefacts.

On the far wall of the office tunnel, very close to the ceiling, was a small window through which the sunlight from outside fell. Beneath this window was a rickety wooden desk, dwarfed by the monolithic shelf structures that closed it in on both sides. Drawn up in front of the desk was a folding chair, and seated in this was the Professor.

He had his legs crossed, and he was reading from the little brown book that lay propped open on his knee.

“I grow tired,” he read, loudly, leaning far back in the chair, *“Of this strange, prickly feeling at the back of my head – this nagging sense that an army of invisible somethings are tracking my footsteps.”*

Francis was still picking his way carefully towards the desk, knowing that the smallest slip would have him crushing something priceless beneath his size twelve shoe. He was sticking out one leg to scale a pile of packing crates when the Professor raised his eyes from the book.

“He writes with such melodrama, Francis,” said the Professor, “With such blind passion. Along with his other talents, and despite his many faults, there was something of the poet about the man.”

Francis placed both feet back on the ground, steadied himself, and considered the statement carefully before making his reply.

“What?” he said.

The Professor laughed and waved a dismissive hand, uncrossing his legs as he did so.

“Nothing, my boy,” he chuckled, “Nothing for you to concern yourself with.”

And he drew out the bottom drawer of the desk and dropped the little brown book inside.

“Here I am, Professor,” Francis said, spreading his hands and presenting himself as he hopped the last few obstacles before the desk, “You wanted to speak to me?”

“Of course I did. I realize that I am obliged to return you in time for your classes, Francis. But surely you will not begrudge me a little post-adventure deconstruction?”

He had removed his pith helmet – Francis could see it perched atop a pile of papers on the desk – but his fluffy white hair still retained the domed shape. The dome tipped as the Professor leaned towards Francis, a wide and happy smile on his rugged face.

“Ah,” replied Francis, “Debriefing.”

“Debriefing,” repeated the Professor, and he nodded.

With a sigh, Francis sat down heavily on top of a squat wooden crate that was pressed up against the edge of the desk. His shoulders slumped as he did so.

“Whatever is the matter, my boy?” asked the Professor loudly, “I thought you had always wanted to see Mexico! I distinctly recall listening to you talk about it – was it on the flight from Burkina Faso last year? Or perhaps it was during our bus ride from Delhi to Kanpur? Yes! I remember now. You had to shout over the sound of that man performing surgery on his rooster.”

“It was,” said Francis, leaning his elbows on his knees, “And I did say that I wanted to see Mexico.”

“Well? What is it that’s troubling you? You look as if you have the weight of the world on your inordinately large shoulders.”

The Professor was regarding Francis with a look that betrayed more exasperation than concern.

“Are you really going to tell me that you would classify what we did as ‘seeing Mexico’?”

“Classification in Nature is a tricky business, Francis. We academics often spend decades arguing over even the finest of lines of order, genus and species. You are, in a sense, correct. There was hardly time for sightseeing. But I would still call our expedition a resounding success.”

Francis lowered his eyes, and stared at the ground between his shoes.

“We caught it, I suppose...”

“That we did, my boy! That we most certainly did. Have you been to visit it since we brought it home?”

“No,” Francis replied at once, shaking his head gently, “The little bit that I saw in the Yucatan jungle was quite enough for me.”

The Professor tutted.

“You are missing out, Francis. It really is extraordinary. All of the Department heads have been to visit already – they are most impressed. Every college I ever lectured at has been in touch.”

With one gnarled finger he indicated a lump of handwritten letters on the desk. Arching his neck slightly, Francis could see that this small pile was only the beginning. Stuffed in beside the desk were several canvas sacks, each one overflowing with similar correspondence.

“The media interest has been significant, too,” he continued, “A young man from the *Sun* said there wasn’t any circulation in the story. Frightened to put a picture of the thing on his front page, I expect. But the *Times* offered page three of their Wednesday science lift-out. I’ve given more interviews in the week since we got back than I have in the last two years. They weren’t this keen to talk to me even after our little trip to Madagascar, my boy. And you remember how much fun we had there.”

Francis remembered. He kept his face impassive and said nothing.

“But that is not the best of it, Francis...”

The Professor was suddenly leaning forward conspiratorially. An enormous, smug grin had split his stubby face, and his dark eyes were burning with excitement.

“I am going to be on television tomorrow night.”

As he said this, he threw his thin chest out proudly and crossed his arms.

“Really?” Francis enquired. His orangey eyebrows were climbing up his freckled forehead.

“Oh yes. I was out yesterday to collect a new suit. My grey one was completely ruined in Mexico – nothing would take the stains off the lapel. That elderly gentlemen from the village obviously mixed up something particularly stubborn for his ammunition.”

“He wasn’t aiming for your lapel, Professor,” said Francis.

“Hmm. I think you have a point there, Francis.”

A silence fell. Francis looked deeply into the Professor’s fiery eyes. Even while recalling the downfall of his grey suit, the pleased glow had not vanished from the Professor’s face. Indeed, if anything, he looked even more excited about his television interview than he had done before.

“May I get back to class now, Professor?”

The Professor uncrossed his arms, and his smile faded for just a moment.

“Yes, Francis.”

Francis pushed himself to his feet, and was about to begin hopping towards the door when the Professor spoke again.

“I mean, no. Forgive me, my boy. There is something I would have you do.”

Francis turned back towards the desk.

“Yes, Professor?”

“I need you to take this plane ticket and go to Prague.”

Compared to that of a few seconds ago, the silence that fell now was as thick as butter. It hung in the air between the two for nearly a minute, while Francis stared at the Professor in the little folding chair. The envelope that the Professor was now holding lightly in his hand sat directly in the path of the sunlight that poured in through the single high window, and the white paper burned almost gold.

“Prague?”

“Yes.”

“But...” Francis was trying to marshal his thoughts. Unfortunately, there were so many of them that they seemed to be tripping over one another in the rush to be voiced.

“... but I have class, Professor. Doctor Semler won't allow me to miss any more seminars – especially not after my absence for our Mexico expedition.”

The Professor stood up. He was nowhere near as tall as Francis, but he advanced now with his shoulders thrown back and his chin high, looking at Francis in the same way a train enthusiast might regard a very grand old locomotive.

“I have spoken to Doctor Semler, Francis. He tells me that the essays you submitted before we left for Mexico were truly exceptional – both stunningly well researched and deeply insightful. You will need to take some of your books with you to Prague, but he will credit you for the course when you get back. Apparently he is quite keen for you to tutor next semester. He has never met a student so at home with Nietzsche.”

Francis opened his mouth to reply but found he had nothing to say. He was dimly aware that he had just received a compliment. But although he was glad of the praise, he had hoped to spend a little more than a week at home before setting off with the Professor again.

“Are you sure you'll be needing me this time, Professor?” he asked at last, “You'll hardly need someone to carry your equipment in Prague like you did in the Yucatan. There are probably some nice hotels, with very helpful porters who could...”

“It is not your Herculean back that I require this time, Francis. Although I imagine it will come in handy at some point. No – I need you to use your head this time, my boy. This next trip will require a little more research than the last.”

The envelope with the plane tickets remained, very still, in the Professor’s outstretched fingers. He gave it a jiggle.

“If I know you, Francis, you haven’t yet unpacked.”

This was true. Francis still had his bags heaped on the floor of his dormitory. He dreaded the prospect of having to scrape jungle mud from the tread of his boots. And there was a good chance that some of his fatigues might be beyond the reach even of soap powder and steel wool.

“Well, yes. But...”

“There you are then,” intoned the Professor, gesturing with the envelope in his hand as if he had just completed a complex mathematical proof, “Although, I think you would be well served taking some of your university daywear, Francis. The safari suits might not go down so well in such a cultural centre.”

It was difficult for Francis not to scoff at this statement. On the desk was the pith helmet that the Professor had just worn for a walk across the university grounds. But Francis nodded and stepped forward to take the envelope. It was thick and surprisingly weighty – it obviously contained more than just plane tickets.

Once it had left his fingers, the Professor clapped his hands together.

“Wonderful, my boy!” he cried, “There are further instructions inside. Plenty for you to be getting on with until I arrive.”

Francis was turning the envelope over in his hands, unwilling, as yet, to open it.

“When are you coming, Professor?”

“There are a couple of things I need to take care of,” the Professor replied, and his flaming eyes wandered briefly around the office, “And there is my interview, of course. I will join you as soon as I can. In the meantime I have made all the necessary arrangements with the British Embassy. You are going to meet a very old friend of mine.”

The prospect did not exactly fill Francis with confidence. The last time he had been asked to work with one of the Professor’s ‘old friends’, the shrivelled little man had fallen fast asleep at the

wheel of a jeep doing sixty miles an hour down a remote mountain track in Zimbabwe's Eastern Highlands.

Some doubt must have shown in Francis' face, because the Professor spoke again.

"Peter is the cultural attaché to the British Embassy in Prague. He should be much more reliable than some colleagues of mine you have met in the past. And even if he is not, at least as a diplomat, he does not drive his own car."

The fiery eyes sparkling knowingly, and Francis could not stifle the smile that took hold of his features.

"What are we after this time, Professor? Your last High Table dinner went pretty well. And the chupacabra will be a hard act to follow..."

Francis asked the question in an off-hand tone, turning to leave as he spoke. Over the last three years, he had followed the Professor to all corners of the globe in pursuit of creatures fantastic and elusive and dangerous. And though the Professor's game grew more outrageous with each new quest, Francis secretly looked forward to hearing what astounding non-existent beast they would be chasing next. He had taken a few cautious steps when he realized the Professor had made no reply.

He cocked his head back over his shoulder.

"Professor?" he asked, his voice rising higher now, "What are we after this time?"

The Professor's eyes had unfocused. He seemed to be peering straight through Francis, and he was so deep in thought that his eyebrows twitched spasmodically. Finally he answered, in a voice that was only fractionally more than a whisper.

"You will soon know, Francis. Let me assure you, for the moment..."

His gaze suddenly refocussed, and latched unerringly onto Francis' face.

"... that the chupacabra was a warm up act. You and I, my boy, are about to bring the house down."

And he turned back to the desk.

Francis understood himself to be dismissed, and he left the office, managing to save his look of consternation until the door was shut at his back.