



#### **Chapter Four: The Business of Academics and Institutions**

As Friday night gradually descended upon the nearly deserted campus, a serene stillness enveloped the university campus. Navigating the dimly lit concrete paths, Miles arrived at the university's central quad. Six stands of faux English gas lights cast a warm, gentle glow onto the red brick buildings bounding an empty lawn. Towering at the far end of the rectangular expanse, Alumni Hall, an architectural homage to Dartmouth's iconic Baker-Berry Library, stood glowing majestically. Though relatively new, the university's architect had skillfully enhanced Alumni Hall with a sense of tradition and legacy, elevating it on a stepped base of twelve luminous white marble stairs—a blend of the Lincoln Memorial and touches of Disneyland. At night, the building seemed to hover, ethereal, shimmering twelve feet above the ground.

With a spring in his step, Miles bounded up the white marble stairs, ascending two at a time, and entered the empty grand foyer. A tapestry of names, fonts, dates, and inscriptions adorned plaques, bronze placards, marble slabs, terrazzo floor tiles,



window panes, door handles, and even the chandelier's baubles. It was a symphony of remembrances, a testament to a not-so-secret hierarchy: the amount of a donation.

Taped to an interior wall, Miles spotted a simple photocopy that read, "Alumni Explorers' Club Meeting in Conference Room 3." An arrow, large enough for even the most visually impaired, pointed inward. Miles meandered along the corridor, drawn deeper into the bowels of the building. As he followed another broad arrow, he noticed a slightly ajar door emanating a soft blue glow.

Approaching cautiously, Miles peeked into the room—a high-tech executive lecture space illuminated by the mesmerizing blue hue of an ongoing PowerPoint presentation. As Miles' eyes adjusted to the dark, he saw silhouettes of approximately forty older men and a few women scattered across eight raised rows within the room. Near each silhouette, Miles saw the distinct outlines of wine bottles and glasses adorning the tabletops.



"In conclusion," droned the presenter, "this video serves as evidence that the Black-naped Pheasant-Pigeon, long believed extinct by Willis and Campion, is, in fact, alive and breeding."

Polite applause, playful taunts, and good-natured jests followed.

Behind Miles, an older gentleman chuckled softly. "It was considered extinct because it was too dull to search for."

"People secretly hoped it was extinct," whispered another Explorer, "so they wouldn't have to endure twenty minutes of that PowerPoint..."

Soft ceiling lights gradually brightened, guiding the attention of the Explorers. Many lips were already finding solace in their wine glasses. As the room came into sharper focus, Miles observed the gathering with a keenness reminiscent of an explorer observing exotic creatures in their natural habitat.