



Chapter Five Meet the Alumni Explorers' Club.

"Bravo, Paul!" John Englander Pope, a sprightly man in his mid-seventies, swayed slightly as he rose from the center of the group. "Let's give Paul another resounding round of applause, courtesy of the Explorer's Club!"

The room erupted with a mixture of catcalls, expletives, and light applause. A convivial core of ten or twelve elderly white gentlemen, all above the age of seventy, had gathered at the Alumni Explorers' Club under the guise of indulging in fine wine and regaling one another with embellished tales of adventurous lives—real or imagined. Engaging in spirited banter, they playfully cursed, teased, and ribbed each other.

Scattered around the periphery of this animated nucleus were a motley crew of curmudgeons, eccentrics, retired academics, and lonely widowers who appeared unamused, frozen in their own thoughts, or bearing the weight of homelessness, dementia, or bereavement.

Glass in hand, John Englander Pope raised his voice once more. "Next, we have Dr. Yawney, who will present a proposal to excavate evidence related to the hypothetical lost ten tribes or an antecedent to proto-Homo sapiens... aside from the Denisovans and the Neanderthals. Well, they're not exactly ancestors, as I understand it, but something along those lines."

The Explorers responded with a chorus of boozy applause, flamboyant profanities, and playful jeers.

"Dr. Yawney, the stage is yours, my friend," John Englander Pope concluded, offering a nod of encouragement.