

# CHAPTER 32

November 15, 1932

Professor Vladimir Aelfric's voice, sharp, thunderous, boomed off the high ceiling. Qualified to teach at Oxford, and he'd been given the opportunity, he nonetheless relished a smaller environment, and its female challenges that passed for students; Wycombe was notorious for harboring hard-headed girls with Machiavellian agendas. Time for writing his books was available as well, that and a dearth of university intrigues and Oxfordian religious entanglements. Tall, thin, aged, bald, he garnered both fear and respect. Keen eyes behind round tortoise spectacles missed nothing.

He rolled his words out like pub barrels down a ramp. "*Trans-mu-ta-tion* of species, Darwin proved his point. Natural selection is the *mode* by which all life on Earth is honed, perfected. E-volution's dynamic mechanism of change for the better." Lowering his specs on his long nose, he then placed both bony hands on his desk, leaning towards his collared colloquium. "When he was a young man at Edinburgh University, he un-re-luct-ant-ly forgave medical studies to concentrate on marine invertebrates. *This...was* the beginning of his own *e-vo-lution*, his own transmutation from protean proselyte to enlightened academic. I *expect...nothing* less from you restive lot, nothing less than a cerebral transmutation once some of you, the some that will not be married as of yet, leave these hallowed stone walls for university. And I *shall...make* inquiries. Always remember the original title of his book, *Origin of Species and the Preservation of the Favored Races*." He shut the book with a *crack*. "He was referring to animals of course, but I can see in this chamber a select few of you that might benefit the human race by weeding *yourselves* from the future garden of mating."

Giggles.

Undeified, demerit-free Deardra Vandermyde Somersby, Gertrude's daughter, scribbled copious notes neatly in longhand. Plump, pleasant, and brunette, she had a permanent smile set firmly in a cherubic face. Her handwriting was beautiful, exceptional. Stars and bullets proceeded every important factoid, and spaces were kept neat between sentences and paragraphs. Little hearts marked an especially important bit. She had a nose for academic and personal perfection, her grooming and smart uniform second to none. Her Mayan step pyramid of books and letters were doubly tied with a thick blue ribbon. On top was a Babar children's book, a link to childhood she promised never to sever.

She was from an old navy family of diminishing status and fortune, her father having squandered most of it during his three marriages. Her mother, the third wife, kept the name. Deardra, like her paternal grandfather, a famous navy surgeon that specialized in tall persons' backbones, wanted to become a doctor. "Take notes. I'm not sharing with you anymore," she whispered somewhat seriously, then began writing a poem in Italian, French, then German for fun.

Bea's notebook, a potpourri of half notes, scrawl, poems known and fantastical, contained mostly drawings within. Her unkempt griffonage was in stark contrast to Deardra's, the sketches remarkable. A spotted mono-wing aeroplane dueled with a spectacled osprey, colorful fish swam in schools, a rotund camel with the face of Aelfric drank from a dry well of dusty books, two skeletons having tea dressed in panniered skirts and feathered riding hats spoke vicious bubbled innuendos, a marine

mammal skeleton smoked a pipe, and a Bentley motorcar grill with roses and hearts pockmarked her disjointed paragraphs which contained vital class information interlaced with faraway, palmed esoterica. A *Paris Match* with dog-eared pages, copies of *Autocar*, *Aero Digest*, a torn article on the film *Hells Angels*, and folded, gossipy *Tattler* periodicals were all mashed into her father's old leather briefcase with the flap and belts hanging; frayed academic papers feathered outward. She rubbed her elbowed chin, still red and a smidgen swollen. "Look," she whispered.

Deardra contained her amusement under her palm when Bea discreetly displayed her artwork to her. "Mmmphhhh-hmm-hmm-hmm."

"Shhh," whispered Bea, "bloody sea cow."

Directly behind them, Lisa Liddy, pale blue eyes to ceiling, artfully pushed a heavy textbook off her desk with an index finger; it smacked the floor with a solid *whap*.

Three giggles and a hushed "*phhhtttt*" arose from the class.

The Professor crushed his chalk piece on the board and pivoted like a ballerina. "Am I to gather... that there *exists*...something more determining than Mr. Darwin's cogent findings at hand? A... *new species* of marsupial perhaps found in a tattered, perfumed notebook? New theories of...*sexual selection* by height, size, and tan line? Please...do us all the kind favor of revealing your precious, invaluable findings, Miss *Sunderland*, Miss *Somersby*."

Not a sound could be heard beyond the hissing of a steam pipe.

Deardra mumbled pathetically: "Well I, that is...she..."

"Stand up," he shouted.

Both girls rose, the slow erection of shame.

"My fault sir," said Bea, "I was trying to explain my sketch of a theoretical invertebrate sea mammal with the head of a humanoid and the tail of a killer whale. You see, if God found the time, He would..." Laughter began, drowning her out.

"*Silence*. Approach the board...Miss *Sunderland*, if you please. This is a science class, not a theology lesson." He pointed. "Now, kindly draw your metaphysical beastie for all of us to examine and critique. Sharpish now. Miss *Sommersby* you will remain standing."

Bea drew; sniggers backgrounded the room.

"Quiet, please...a fledgling naturalist is at work. You there, Scurlock, *sit down*," he commanded.

Bea stood by her work proudly.

Aelfric then commented: "I want the class to tell me why this mammalian hybrid would either work or not work in the natural world. I want reasons why, I want to know why this hasn't happened before in nature's grasp." Silence bloomed. "Come now...time's wasting away, along with what little intellect is left in this hallowed chamber."

Deardra and the blank-faced class all looked as if they'd seen a Rippered ghost in a Whitechapel cemetery.

Bea piped up. "Perhaps the human brainstem couldn't merge with an aquatic—"

"Not *yo-o-ou*, *Sunderland*, *them*," he said, pointing.

A lone hand periscoped.

"Yes, Miss *Robertson-Bostwick*?"

"Sir, I believe humans and sea mammals are incompatibly suited, genetically speaking. Our brains are made to control the complex movement of our bodies in bipedal motion. The brain also had the capacity for making tools and overcoming insurmountable obstacles. In effect, I think, well, our

brains are too big for an aquatic animal, it would be a waste in a hybrid,” proclaimed smarty-pants Jennifer, sweated arms crossed in arrogant contentment.

“Solidly put. Anyone else care to comment?” Aelfric slowly turned to face Bea. “And now, what do *you* think, Miss Sunderland? Would your head and brain be wasted if it were attached to this... *metacreature* by some stroke of natural selection or genetic mutation? Griffith and Avery’s discoveries in genetics shed light on this theory, class, take heed.” He *tap-tap-tapped* on the board with his crumbling chalk, then wrote the two scientist’s names. “The ancient Sumerian tree of life and the serpent represent genetic advancement and knowledge.”

Bea’s confidence suddenly shattered like ancient pottery.

Deardra looked at her wide-eyed and mouthed: “Oh, no.”

Bea began: “I think...”

“Really?, I couldn’t *imagine*,” he snorted. Giggles abounded. “Continue your proscenium. I see a dim spark in your eyes, perhaps your brain can generate a flame.”

“Sir, I don’t think anything’s right impossible.”

He pub-barreled the word: “E-lab-or-ate.”

Bea drew breath and pointed to the drawing of the long, blue-purple fish on the blackboard. “Giant megalodons gave way to modern hammerheads, why can’t this bloomin’ tetrapod evolve onto land, its lobed fins into legs like the, um...Devonian mackerels did, then eventually grow hollow bones and wings. If the earth of the future had denser air pressure, the kind that allowed those giant insects to fly in the Paleozoic, was it?, then perhaps womankind could eventually fly on her own, and with the brainpower to do it.”

Restrained snorts bubbled forth.

Aelfric seemed annoyed, tapping the fish portrait in question. “Eusthenopteron, not *mackerel*.” He shook his head back and forth quickly, a habit. “Enthralling hydrodynamic hypothesis, but hyperbolically so. Are you implying that the word ‘mankind’ is derogatory? Are we to go back to a pacific matriarchal society like Atlantis?” He then ran his eraser over the sketch. “Hmmm?”

“I was...”

“She’s crack-brained, just like her *mum*,” quipped Laura Barney, the quipper from the match.

“Slurp piss, you snotty totty!,” retorted Bea. This time the class spewed forth an ocean of unrestrained laughter.

“That’s quite enough sniggery-jiggery for one day,” he yelled. “Five hundred lines Miss Barney, on my desk by four. You know the rhetoric, and no fibbery.” As the class settled into calm, he grabbed her arm and said tersely: “If you were my daughter *Sunderland*...I would spank you every...single... day.” The arm shook in his grip.

Bea bit back. “I’ll bet you’d love that!”

More gobs of laughter spewed from the class.

“What’d he say?” asked Deardra to a friend.

“Something about a spanking,” said the friend.

“*Quiet*. I shan’t say it again.” Aelfric looked at Bea and pointed with his long bony finger, an evolutionary necessity for his chosen profession. “Headmistress’s study, The Chair, I imagine you know your way.”