

Time-Travelling
Apocalypse

Busybodies



TIME TRAVELLING BUSYBODIES: APOCALYPSE

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hereafter CUSFS

TIME TRAVELLING BUSYBODIES: APOCALYPSE

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Chairbeing's Address

Hello CUSFS,

I want to start by welcoming all the freshers who joined us this year, and to apologise for the lack of society activity after that first meeting. Though the pandemic has limited our ability to have our regular discussion meetings, I'm glad to see so many people engaging with chainwriting and I hope everyone who participated has enjoyed their time with it.

I'm hoping to have more events scheduled this term like online discussions and pub meets if possible, but of course things can change rapidly and it's important to keep everyone safe. Keep an eye on your inbox for any emails regarding plans for this term and the future.

Thank you to everyone who's continued to be part of CUSFS through these past couple of years and I hope those of you who joined this year haven't been too discouraged by the lack of activity. I think it's important to remember that as bad as things might seem, life goes on, and it will get better.

Take care and stay safe,

Jamie

Outgoing Editor's Address

Dear CUSFSers,

I have massively enjoyed running chains for you but my time as editor has been sadly cut short for personal reasons (trust me, I wouldn't give up this power unless I had to...).

This edition's offerings are as wonderfully zany as ever, featuring battles with anthropomorphic bees, eldritch monstrosities lurking in Cambridge's quiet cloisters, and of course, the ever-terrifying gingerbread cottages. Enjoy!

Swords and Sorcery,

Navyaa Mathur

Editor 2021-22

A Message From The Incoming Editor

Hello everyone!

I'm Holly, your new editor. I'm stepping in for Lent term and am looking forward to seeing all the exciting creations this term has in store.

For the first time but not the last—

Swords and sorcery,

Holly Webb

TTBA Editor 2022

Once Upon A Time

Hannah, Ben White, Sofia-Marie Lemma, Chris Pang, Gabriel Ferreras Garrucho, William Richards, Adarsh, Dan Scott

Hey, you promised you'd go to bed.

What do you mean a story? You're too old for a story.

You want an adventure?

Ok, then once upon a time there was a boy called Jack and he bought himself some magic beans. Oh not that kind of story? A real story? One of my stories? Alright, if I tell you one story will you promise to go to bed. Pinky promise?

Alright then. So once upon a time there was a scientist. A physicist. Who wanted to understand how time worked. Yeah- that physicist was me. So way way way back in the Before Times- no not quite as far back as the dinosaurs- back where there were no horizon trains and the universe was less a single piece of string and more an infinite piece of cloth. No one understood time back then. They could count it but they couldn't move it. They couldn't make it dance and twirl the way we can today.

But I had a theory.

Can you remember the important thing about time and matter? Come on, I know you did it in school. Yeah, exactly, you remember that all matter has memory.

Well that was my theory. There are all sorts of fancy words for it now but I like the term memory. Matter remembers what it was before, a cup remembers its shape before it was dropped and broken. The banana that's in your stomach remembers being on the tree. My theory was that if you could access that memory, you had a marker for travelling backwards. And that meant you could extrapolate forward movement.

So, it started with a theory. It of course ended with invention of TS-2100. But there were maybe a few adventures in-between the two.

Try to imagine,; I was young and fresh-faced.

None of these old wrinkles and liver spots. The kind of young that makes people think "oh, they don't know anything, they must be here to learn something or make coffee, I don't really care I'm busy. It was very rude. And I was in fact old enough to be there. I just wasn't old and decrepit like the rest of them.

Fun fact about scientists: they think being old makes them wise. Like time is directly proportional to the number of IQ. I want you both to remember this very clearly, a real scientist knows that every generation is an improvement. Each new version is closer to the future- its closer to the perfect product you're trying to make. I was the better version of them. You two are going to be the better version of me. Why do you think we use Windows 409 and not Windows 7?

But anyway- I started working at the Hinton Horology Lab first as an assistant and then later on for a PhD. For two years I was the youngest. I'm sure you know that story.

My boss was...well he was a difficult man. A little bit hunched and shrivelled up, with wild hair that used to hang limp with grease behind his ears. He had these little wire-framed glasses that balanced right on the brim of his nose. Like one stiff breeze might knock them off his head. I don't think he left the lab much. One of those married-to-his-work types. By which most people mean "too self-important and rude to hold a conversation with someone outside his domain about something that wasn't an order".

Mhm you're right, I didn't like him very much. He'd talk down his nose at me and I would stand there almost vibrating with frustration and thinking "if you don't stop chatting rubbish I'm going to break my calculator over your stupid bent nose". Most of us didn't like him. It's just the over people in the lab didn't much like me either. Scientists don't like being outsmarted very much. And I wasn't even that smart-just good at numbers and I liked time. I'd spend hours measuring the seconds and mapping atom fields around pocket watches and alarm clocks and broken pieces of pottery.

Yeah maybe some of the broken cups weren't exactly accidents. But despite the boss being a self-centred stick in the proverbial bottom and the original staff about as fun as limp origami- I was happiest in the Horology Lab.

So you can imagine the fallout when two years into my PhD I finally cracked the theory of Time

Shenanigans. That's what we called it back then. I'm guessing they teach it to you at school as something a bit more serious. Ah that's it, Memoria Saltu. That's just fancy talk for Memory Jump.

Haha yeah you can just call it Time Travel. It's funny really. At the time I don't think any of us realised the scope of what I'd found. With great effort, I had managed to find a way to 'remind' a few stray helium atoms that they used to be part of something bigger.

I flicked the switches, turned up the power and nearly jumped out of my skin when I heard the clicking of the Geiger counter.

Hmmm? Oh, it tells you if something is radioactive.

I rushed to check and there it was – a shiny new atom of plutonium sitting there under the detector as if it had never decayed. I had managed, in just a tiny area, to roll back the clock. I had managed to jump.

To the scientific community this was controversial. Most of the old guard, my boss included, didn't take too kindly to me breaking several of the laws of the universe at once and accused me of making it all up. Slowly though, other labs tried it and managed the same thing. I got my PhD after just two years and people, unbelievably, called me a genius.

To most people though, my discovery was a novelty. 'Big deal' people sighed 'you can make some atoms jump back inside a chamber.' Even amongst scientists, few saw the potential of it all. Besides, the conditions the jump needed were precise, difficult, and nearly impossible to maintain outside of a tiny, strictly controlled environment. At the time even I didn't realise what I'd found. I didn't see that if you could scale it all up, then you could 'remind' a broken twig that it used to be whole, you could 'remind' a butterfly that it used to be a caterpillar, and you could 'remind' half the atoms in your body that they used to be part of a star, allowing you to use them as a ship uses a lighthouse to navigate through a storm.

That was until they came to visit the lab...

Governments love to get their noses where they don't belong. Once I cracked the fundamentals of it, we were making slow and steady progress. We were testing the limits of our discovery, while also being cautious. We were truly pushing the boundaries of human knowledge and

understanding, of our very reality. We didn't know how to safely navigate it and we understood the responsibility and burden that science at the frontiers can be.

But they had very different plans. They wanted to power through and bulldozer everything we know and understand. We didn't know what their goal was at the time, but eventually as you know, we all paid the price for that.

You could tell things were going to change from the moment they entered the lab, all suits and ties, standing tall, shoulders straight. Walked in like they owned the place and claimed it all for the sake of 'national interest' or 'the common good' or whatever excuse they came up with. They confiscated all of the Horology Lab's equipment, including the *Gödel Chamber*. *Yes, that's the big box where we would run our time-experiments. No, that was the great thing about that box: it was completely isolated from outside environment and so no matter which 'memory' of an object we chose to access, it didn't matter. We could just observe an atom revert to its past self from when it was a supernova, or a star and it wouldn't affect us. Human experiments were completely out of the question for us, so without that chamber our research would end. No, I was explicitly forbidden from making another one – they feared it would fall into the 'wrong hands'. This was before the great Time Catastrophe so they didn't see the irony in this statement.*

They offered us to stay as research scientists and continue our investigations into the nature of time and space. But they would lead it, they would tell us what to do. Nobody was happy with this turn of events. But I was the one that decided to do something about it...

I pretended I didn't mind, eventually, that I even welcomed their 'help'. I was always smiling at the new guards we had watching over us, always keen to turn in the reports they wanted ahead of time. Could we achieve fixed control over what year we revert to? How would a complex molecule or even a larger object hold up? Could something be reassembled with only part of a larger whole? But they made sure that no-one knew enough to piece it all together.

Night by night, I worked on the laboratory's systems. Little by little, I infiltrated my way into the software they had encrypted our databanks with. I was careful you see, I knew they would be

wary for someone trying to break in, so I left them a few clues.

Shh, you shouldn't worry, I wanted them to find me!

Well, to think they'd found me. I made it look like an outsider was trying to hack their system, then watched how they reacted. Once I had learned the patterns they used, and, really, they hadn't chosen the most complicated codes, I was able to snoop anywhere I wanted (and be gone again before they realised).

I could spy on everything coming and going through our facility. They had assembled a vast bibliography of lost documents: personal diaries of long dead world leaders, cultural relics burned in wars, and some things that seemed fantastical even to me, and I had made plutonium from the filling of a party balloon! Each and every item was listed alongside a date and location it was last known at, and with its material composition.

So I decided to play a little joke. I took an iPad 64, wrote up some nonsense about one of our geopolitical rivals planning to launch a full scale cyber and nuclear attack, then ripped out the memory card and destroyed it. I slipped the chit in with the rest of the evidence they were assembling and watched the joke play out.

Unfortunately, they took it seriously. They were so convinced about the prowess of the Chamber that they never for once doubted the seriousness of the threat. We gathered around in the control centre to watch the news play out. I was gripped with guilt, so much so that I almost made a few partial confessions, but none of it mattered. To them, the Chamber was the perfect tool, and they wouldn't listen to anything but their own hubris, their own belief in their infallibility. Negotiations turned to accusations, accusations turned to threats. Why did they call it the "Time Catastrophe", you ask? Well, if you can make plutonium out of nothing, pretty soon you can start making nuclear weapons from dust.

Weapons-grade uranium was being "manufactured" *en masse*, and soon we weren't allowed out of the facility.

It was for our own good, you see, and there wasn't much left outside anyways.

Oh, don't look at me like that. Yeah, I kind of caused a bit of nuclear Armageddon... but to be fair it was going to happen one way or the other. This was the end of the 21st century and, as you

should know from history class, pretty much everyone wanted to start WWII, though some more seriously than others (Americans just wanted some new material for videogames, basically). But don't worry, I make it up to humanity in the end, you'll see.

As I was saying, we, the most brilliant scientists still alive (that's not saying much), were locked up in the "facility", which at this point was a bunker 100m below a mysterious location even *we didn't know*. *I like to think it was the Alps, in Geneva below UltraCERN —the Swiss did have amazing bunkers. Despite, or because of, the boredom and desperation, we came up with a little secret plan PATO (Pacific and Atlantic Treaty Organization, successor to NATO after the 2024 French-Italian debacle) would not know of until too late. I really should not get into the details, as it is confidential under Schrödingerian "death-and-no-death" sentence... Let me just say the Chamber became sort of an anti-Chamber, or better said, the rest of the world became the Chamber. You know where I'm going with this.*

Long story short, we *saved the world, or rather we were going to prevent it from going nuts, but that's when the real trouble began. Yeah, I don't consider the Time Catastrophe to be that bad, to be honest only around 20 people remember it, we just did too good of a job of telling people about it.*

Our plan was simple: go back before no one new about *Memoria Saltu*, discover it ourselves in secret, and then use it with some intelligence this time. Turns out being intelligent was not so easy as we had thought.

See, there're a lot of different kinds of stupid. One of 'em is – if you have a dozen geniuses in a single room, you're going to have a baker's dozen opinions. Statistically, *that's a lot of wrong opinions.*

It wasn't just the geniuses who went back, of course. You needed the muscle, someone to clean the toilets and the like.

I don't remember most of them. Not because I didn't bother (I probably didn't - it's not as if they were *important*). *Physically can't.*

Maybe they're still alive, trapped in their own closed timelike curves, knots in space-time, going round and round. Screams reverberating in the aether where no one can hear...

That keeps me awake at night, more than any

little nuclear holocaust – mainly because it was very nearly me.

Asleep yet?

It's hard to reminisce about those days – and not because I am going senile so help me, I will smack you.

Everyone who was there remembers the events leading up to the Time Catastrophe slightly differently.

If it sounds like what I'm telling you is the combined ramblings of a dozen people – well, it is. The first hurdle came when we had to choose the where and the when.

Romantic as it sounds, none of us *really wanted to be a Connecticut Yankee*.

The Memoria Saltu needed power and quite a bit of it.

So, we went back to a time when fossil fuels were plentiful, and we were still kiddies in cyberspace. The year two-thousand twenty-one.

Ah, 2021. The year of paradoxes and turning points.

A time when the world was torn between reinventing itself or clinging stubbornly to the way things were always done, its own memory.

A time when half-hearted promises were made, when talk was action and when we wore masks everywhere both literally and figuratively. Of course, some things haven't changed.

I was a child back then, just like you are now, but I had no bedtime stories to listen to. Just the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy. Perhaps if that book was removed, I would never have imagined becoming a physicist, never even invented what I did.

And many of us in that room thought that, the day we travelled back, with some perhaps contemplating removing me from the equation completely. But we were far too civil to admit it.

I knew deep down that the entire operation was a gamble. After all, everything was probabilistic, nothing was certain, and if anything, the fact that we had already gone through a nuclear Armageddon without any help from an unknown source suggested we had already failed.

The best of us thought we were already in a closed timelike curve, destined to fail as the universe self-corrected itself again and again,

ensuring the future was untouched. The Armageddon would happen. But how and when that came to be could be changed.

Boy were we naïve. I mean, clearly! Who in their right minds would have chosen 2021, of all the years in history to choose from?! Why not the 30s? At least the Twenties Pandemic would have been behind us by three or four years. Not to mention a good number of world leaders at the time being significantly less objectionable – I think you know from your history books who I'm talking about. I mean really... 2021? If the poor choice of year wasn't enough to make us rethink the logic behind our plans, I don't know what would have.

But now I'm off on a tangent. Can you tell I've spent decades playing out the alternatives over and over again in my head? Of course, it's not as if the year really mattered. That wasn't where we made our mountain-sized mistake.

Anywho, some of the "brawn" that we brought with us had been decently high enough on the political or intelligence food chain even back in 2021. I say brawn, but that's really only to differentiate them from the scientists. We didn't need physical muscle. We needed influence, sway, people who had enough clearance or clout to ensure our voice would be heard. After all, we'd need the resources of an entire nation to back us if we were going to power another jump with just oil.

Why couldn't we use nuclear? Good question. Sure, there'd have been plenty enough energy there. But two problems.

First, getting direct access to a nuclear plant would, believe it or not, have been more difficult to get them to go along with than convincing them we were from the future (which was no easy matter, mind you).

The second problem of course being that they only had control of nuclear fission at the time. Yes, I know, how very old-fashioned, but those were the times. And fission was far too risky to deal with, too much room for dumping in far too much energy to the jump than safely tolerable.

So by and by, the non-scientists worked their

wonders. We laid the foundations for discovering matter memory a few decades earlier when the world was in a much more stable place, politically speaking.

No, no, we didn't want it to be discovered as early as 2021. God, can you imagine how *awful that would have been? I don't doubt they'd have managed something worse than the Time Catastrophe.*

Worse than blowing off the surface of the earth half a dozen times over with nukes pulled out of thin air? Listen buddy, don't ask to delve into those dark places of my imagination. You don't want to know.

It was quite a clever combination of programming genius from one of the intelligence folks to drop the seeds bit by bit and political savvy from some of the others to convince the powers that be (or powers that were) not to task their cryptographers with cracking the code to get to the information earlier. Well, we didn't exactly want to stick around until 2040 to see that it all worked, we just know from history that it did. Mind you, we should have just been happy to live the rest of our lives out in a different time. But we were stubborn, and in fairness we didn't know how royally we would manage to fudge things up on our trip back.

Well, we set up the Gödel Chamber for the trip home – took nearly half the oil supply of the American's Strategic Petroleum Reserve to do it. How the hell that deal was negotiated, I don't rightly know. I never did hold Boris Johnson in very high regards, but I have to credit him for somehow pulling that one off.

But here's where we screwed it all up. To make the jump back, we needed a reference. Knowing what we know now... Anything would do. We could have used ourselves again. We'd all been there, in that year, we could have easily been used as a reference just as we used one of ourselves to jump to the past. But no, we were worried about this and that and in the end... We used the Gödel Chamber itself. As its own reference. I know, I know, don't hassle me about it, I do that enough myself. Everyone and their dog alive today knows how absolutely asinine that

idea should be. And yet there we were, the leading experts – the *only experts – on it, making such a stupid mistake.*

We screwed it up. And now we're stuck on this one string. Back before the Big Blunder™ (that's what I call it), the whole of the infinite universe of time was at our fingertips. Forwards, backwards, and even sideways. The Gödel Chamber wasn't just able to travel across time. It could travel *between timelines. Across the endless spectrum of alternate universes out there in that bottomless ocean of timeywhimeyness. No, we never quite got that far to discovering the full potential of the Gödel Chamber before the Time Catastrophe and the Big Blunder™ - don't hassle me for adding a ™ to my story. It's my story and it's your bedtime. Be grateful and don't be rude.*

With all the years and years of development since... The science tells us that it's there. It should be possible. Or rather, it *should have been possible, until we screwed it up. The TS-2100 is a marvel of machinery, it really is. But it's limited in a way that the Gödel Chamber never was. The 2100 can bring you back in time, acting like a little bubble, letting you observe history unfolding right in front of you. But you can't step outside the bubble. You can't interact. You aren't really there in that time, but merely hovering over it.*

And you know what I find so deeply ironic? Once we got back to our own year where theories of time were decades ahead of where they were when we left that year... The horologists couldn't for the life of them reconcile why, *why we're stuck on this string of time, when every equation, every indication, was that we should exist on an infinite piece of cloth. And who figured it out once again but yours truly... It took me many years to catch up with all of the theoretical advancements, but once I got there, I could see the gaping hole.*

The infinite cloth of time is still out there. Everyone else in the other universes can still mosey along it. But not our fibre, not our universe. We're stuck, and it's all because of the Big Blunder™, because we used the Gödel Chamber as its own time reference. It's probably why none of the science – no equation, no theory – has my name attached to it. They're still mad at me. Mad that I caused the Time Catastrophe, and

mad that I caused the Big Blunder™.

Bahhhh, as if either of those were really my fault. I didn't blow up the world with nukes, and I wasn't the one who proposed to use the Gödel Chamber as its own reference. But try telling that to the horological community. Physicists really know how to hold a grudge, I tell you.

Anyway, we've made plenty of advances based on matter memory that have nothing to do with time travel. And I honestly think that maybe it's better that we can't bounce around time like we could have back then. Maybe it's all for the best.

Perhaps observing history, and not changing it, should be enough.

And – ah, you've fallen asleep... Well, sweet dreams, may they dance and twirl like a sand vortex in a time sphere. I hope you paid attention because I don't know if I have it in me to tell this story again.

The Princess, the Warlock and the Faun

Harley Jones, Anonymous, Oliwia Kicek, Abbey Bowen, Samuel, Rosalind Mackey, George Frost, Jack, Alex V, Troy Fielder, Shan Tan-Ya, Ruth Bewick

Author's comments:

This tale begins as a high fantasy romp from an unusual point of view, but ends with a series of poignant and tragic twists. Get ready for a rollercoaster of emotion, thrills and wacky characters.

-Shan Tan-Ya

A light was spreading across the land. The times of darkness were under threat; the Dread Necromancer Nigel's armies of undead were finally being challenged by the forces of life; the Banner of the Dawn had been found, and legions were being drawn to it: regiments of elves, naiads, sprites and fauns had, at last, been recruited. The Starlight King, long imprisoned deep below the Sunlit Hills from which he used to rule, had been freed; his instruments of power distributed amongst his standard-bearers, and his strong will was being used to turn even loyal orcs and goblins to the side of the light. The old regime still stood, but in appearance only; there were few remaining places loyal to Nigel and his regime.

One such pocket of loyalty was the Grisly Grotto – a cavern, deep within the mountains, protected by secrecy and by the concealing powers bestowed by the goblins that protected it; and it was to that place that the great Ronald the Magnificent, Nigel's right-hand wizard, had summoned representatives of each of the great nations where the Dread Necromancer's authority was upheld; a council of the wise, brave, strong, and cunning; a council of war. Ronald had observed for many years the growing threat; had warned his fellow wizards, and had even approached his master; but all his warnings had fallen on deaf ears, all had trusted that the legions of undead would be able to keep peace easily, as they had for centuries.

"It's foolishness and cowardice that has brought us together now, Ronald," Rikkert observed. The two were in Ronald's private chambers, standing

before his sand table. "Years and years of petty squabbling only for the King's rise to band us together."

"I've never once taken you for a pessimist, old friend. With the Starlight King free, we've been blessed with an opportunity no necromancer has ever been presented with: to kill him, once and for all."

Rikkert nodded at the table, where the lit glow of the miniature Grotto cast a dim violet hue against the trees that enveloped it in the Broreton Mountains. "The goblins have shielded us only out of tradition. The King's rise has split their allegiances. Even now, their protection fades."

"We still have our armies," Ronald observed. His hand swept across the table; under it the sand rippled as the wizard marked locations of Nigel's undead. The bulk of them, Rikkert observed warily, were in pockets near Desfield, the Starlight King's base.

"War has never been a problem for necromancers. We're more prepared this time than we were all those years ago. The split within the goblins is temporary, once we promise to free their lands in the south, their allegiance and power will be ours again."

"We are bound to that land—"

"Not us," Ronald's stare was intense.

Rikkert paled, "What?"

"Not all of us are bound to those lands."

Rikkert swallowed, his hand shaking as he folded them into his robe. "My Lord," he started, voice trembling. "Is this how you want to start this war?"

Just then, the door to Ronald's chambers opened. "My lords," Iharad, Ronald's apprentice, entered. The elf bowed and gestured at the hallway. "The rest of the council have arrived."

Ronald's eyes gleamed under the light of the candelabra as he surveyed the council. Standing on the Great Hall's podium in front of the lectern, he stood faced by the elected nation representatives – comrades all in the glorious fight against the reign of light – Montague the Mage of the Miserable Lands, Gordon the Orc Configurator and Lilianne, she of the pale face. Rikkert sat to the side, looking down at his hands which had remained clasped in his robe, while Iharad and his fellow apprentices stood at the back, taking notes in their secretarial function for this formal gathering.

"My friends, we are gathered here today," Ronald slowly articulated, maintaining unrelenting eye contact with all, "because the Starlight King is free." Ronald leaned over the lectern regarding the council with great gravity then continued. "We are all, of course, aware of how this came to pass, so I shall immediately move to the heart of the matter: he shall not remain free." He cleared his throat for effect. "Now I for one do not see how he can remain alive, while the Dread Necromancer is in rightful power." Ronald stopped and allowed a note of triumph to creep into his voice as he added, "This is our opportunity to rid the world of the Starlight King and the Banner of Dawn once and for all."

Gordon shot up from his mahogany chair, inscribed and carved with orc visages in his honour. "Indeed!" he boomed, and his voice rang out echoing through the Great Hall. "The orcs have been ready for this moment since we heard of the Starlight King's" – here he spat – "rising, and we are prepared to do all that is in our power to defeat light and all its derivatives."

"Oh, really?" Lilianne's high voice whipped through the room like a knife. "From what we have heard, the orcs have become loyal to the Banner of Dawn."

Gordon swivelled to face her. "Traitors," he hissed. "They will be annihilated like every other being that dares serve the King and the Banner. The same for the goblins, for whom I also speak today."

"There will always be ways to bring back the goblins and orcs that have strayed," Ronald's voice rose, carrying easily over the council's members, and he cleared his throat for effect. Gordon sat down but remained erect, his eyes fixed on the Magnificent. "Our armies are strong and well-equipped, and though they be small it is never a problem to create more of the undead. No, my friends," said Ronald, "we are in a privileged position in this grotto to end this fight once and for all, with a war that will ensure unparalleled victory for the Dread Necromancer."

A slow clapping resonated through the Great Hall. Ronald flicked his eyes to Montague who, having leaned back in his chair, had a small smile on his face. He stopped clapping and began applying himself to cracking his knuckles with equal and deliberate slowness.

"I concur, Ronald," Montague said. "The Miserable Lands are as ever ready to bloody our swords with the flesh of the Banner of Dawn. So be it! Let the war begin!"

Ronald looked at Montague then at Gordon and Lilianne in turn. All faces were impassive, but he, the right-hand wizard of the Dread Necromancer Nigel, could read in them determination and an unflinching fealty to the cause of darkness and despair. Satisfied, he bowed his head. "So shall it be," he said. "Let us prepare."

The council gathering temporarily terminated, Ronald swept out of the room with Iharad following solemnly. The other apprentices silently left for their various duties; Montague, Gordon and Lilianne were ushered out of the Great Hall to be led to their various chambers in the Grisly Grotto.

Last of all to leave was Rikkert, who sat with his head bowed before rising to find Ronald, a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach.

After a long pause, Ronald finally spoke. "We are to abduct Lady Yralissa."

“The elven princess? For what possible reason could the Dread Lord desire such a captive?”

Rikkert scowled.

“Ours is not to know, nor to doubt. His will is clear, and so too is our task. We will deliver the lady, unharmed, and we will be grateful that we continue to be of service.”

Atop the Sunlit Hills, the Dread Necromancer sat upon his throne. It wouldn't be long now, his plan was finally starting to take shape. Ronald had been informed of his role to play. Stage an abduction, blame it on bandits asking for ransom. The money didn't matter of course, just that the trail didn't lead back to him. Yralissa wasn't of importance as such; she was however set to marry Illithor, a commander within the elven army of light.

Nigel had been experimenting with his necromancy as of late. Resurrection was second nature, expanding his army with victims of war, slaughtered and decaying, to fight for him. He began to ponder. What if he could bring someone back, not as an undead, broken creature, but as a conscious, undamaged being, capable of existing within civilised society, but all the while maintaining absolute loyalty to he who resurrects them?

Yralissa would be a spy. She could play the role of attentive concubine, and coyly gather vital information for her true master, information which would win the upcoming war. If this was to work, no-one could know. His followers, brazen and foolhardy, would think it folly. Their loyalty he did not doubt, but he could not trust the cunning and guile of those who served him. This power was best kept to himself for now.

A few weeks later, Ronald and Rikkert sat hunched in the forest's undergrowth, just a few meters from the path yet completely concealed. It had been raining since dawn, and both were now completely soaked. “It's been hours now!” Rikkert hissed at Ronald, irritation written plain across his face. “How much longer do we have to wait?”

“As long as it takes!” Ronald snapped back, the hours of waiting having frayed his nerves. “This is our one chance to capture her, which we must do, or do you wish to displease the Dread Necromancer?”

“My lord.” Iharad said, choosing this moment to speak up. “Our scouts have just reported back. They say the princess and her escorts are starting to come past now, about thirty minutes away.”

“Finally!” Ronald said triumphantly. “Get the troops into position.”

Initially, the ambush went without a hitch. Archers from either side of the road disposed of the guards, and armed corpses surrounded the princess, preventing her from fleeing. “We have you surrounded, princess. Come with us quietly and you won't get hurt.” Rikkert ordered Yralissa. The princess glanced fleetingly from side, breath coming in short gasps, before pulling out a dagger and steeling herself. Rikkert laughed. “And what exactly do you hope to achieve with that?” he jeered. “No!” Ronald shouted, realising the danger, but he was too late. Before he could stop her, Yralissa plunged the dagger into her heart, killing herself.

Ronald looked up at Rikkert, whose mirth had suddenly vanished from his face. The Dread Necromancer had stipulated most insistently that Yralissa be brought to him alive. What would he do with her corpse? More importantly, Ronald realised with increasing horror, what would he do to them, who failed him?

Rikkert ran to Yralissa's crumpled body, desperately feeling for a pulse. Nothing. “We're doomed,” he pronounced.

“Not necessarily.” Ronald was thinking fast. “We could bring her back to life and pretend nothing happened.”

“And you can perform necromancy?” Rikkert's sarcasm was tangible.

“As a matter of fact, I can,” Ronald said proudly. “I think.”

“You think?”

“Give me one day. I'd like to watch Nigel before trying it myself.”

Rikkert's eyebrows shot into his wild hair. “This is lunacy! You'll get caught, and we'll be in five times as much trouble. I'd rather just present him with a corpse!”

“Give me a day.” Ronald teleported away before Rikkert could object further.

Despite Rikkert's fears, there really was no danger of being caught. With his extensive knowledge of the Necromancer's security systems, Ronald easily slipped past the enchanted doors, then phased through walls to the laboratory. Honestly, Nigel needed better security. The only thing that even hindered intruders was the anti-invisibility charm.

From inside a cabinet, Ronald watched Nigel uncover one of the bodies: a faun, still in its battle gear. Immediately, he began the ritual. The chanting and air-drawing were exactly as Ronald had studied. However, part-way through, the Necromancer's left hand began to form unfamiliar glyphs. Turbulent darkness appeared above the body. From its boiling centre, a pale wisp drifted down towards the faun's forehead. Could this be a soul?

Momentarily distracted, Nigel stumbled over a word. The black circles flickered, but he stabilised them with a quick hand gesture. Ronald's relief, however, was short-lived: in saving the spell, Nigel had lost concentration on his left hand. The glyphs vanished and the swirling cloud expanded, enveloping the room and taking Ronald into blackness.

Pic awoke inside a dark space, light cascading into his groggy eyes from a slit which could be between a door and its frame. He noisily stretched and wiped the sleep from his eyes, but something was off. The faun looked down at himself in the dim light, only then realising he was wearing regal, jet-black robes, decorated with small bones. Suddenly aware of movement outside the door, Pic stifled his shock and searched the cabinet. The walls were lined with shelves, each plentiful with magical reagents: herbs, fungi, elixirs... eyes... bones... Noticing he was much taller, he decided it was pointless to try to hide anywhere in the cabinet as a hand twisted the doorknob from outside. Swinging open, the door revealed a candlelit laboratory in disarray, the figure at the door was dreadfully pale, wearing similar robes to Pic, but they were highly decorated, giving the man importance and power.

Nigel was not unaccustomed to Ronald spying on him in his laboratory, so he was reluctant to check his supply cabinet (Ronald's favourite "secret" viewing point). *However, given the vital surge that had crashed across the lab after his failed attempt*

to resurrect the faun, he thought best to check. Ronald's eyes fearfully fixed; his posture seemed uncomfortable.

"What are you doing here, Ronald?", Nigel pretended the intrusion wasn't normal, adding a hint of annoyance.

Pic's suspicions were confirmed, he was in another body. His head began to ache as memories flooded back, armed corpses charging, allied faun readying, a brutal clash...

Impatient, filling the silent void, the man pressed further, "What news of Yralissa?"

"O Lord, she is within our reach!" Ronald proclaimed.

Or tried to. Something swallowed his words, the result a garbled, "O Lord, where-am- within our who-am-I?". The shock of words not his leaving his mouth stunned him into silence. Nigel stared at him, face drawn.

"Again, where is she?" Pic was still reeling from the repercussions of his new body. The robes, the man in front of him, the princess. His body on the other side of the room. He was dead. But somehow not dead. The skulls came into focus again, accompanying a realisation.

Who are you, you in my head?

Pic felt it rather than heard, an insistent pressure. *My body, my head. Get out! Pic felt himself shrinking, vulnerable in his panic.*

"I will return, my-Tyrant!- Lord...", Ronald-Pic accompanied this with as much of a bow as Ronald could manage, given the circumstances. He disappeared, leaving Nigel staring at a cabinet again. The body they shared reappeared on a mountaintop, the tensions of their intended destinations dragging them into the inhospitable.

Ronald raged at the faun in his mind, *Lightspawn scum, return to death!, but the faun could no more leave than take full control. It took them three more attempts to return, at last, to the warm corpse of the princess, where Rikkert looked at him in expectation.*

"Let's see this then," Rikkert demanded. "It better be unnoticeable."

For a moment, Ronald felt in control again. Pic had

retreated into mourning at the sight of the princess of Light, dead like so many others. With his moment of strength he began the rituals of Nigel, hands waving, the construction of the same glyph.

The resistance of the imprisoned faun pushed to the back of his conscience; the dark magics flowed easily into the spell for Ronald. It wasn't as impressive a sight as the arcane feats he had accomplished in the golden years of Nigel's rule, this was clear now. Those times, when he had nearly single handedly level towns and throw nations into terror, truly earning his place at Nigel's side and his epithet, seemed so far past. With every passing day the Banner of Dawn burned away a little more of the shadows that fuelled his power.

Nevertheless, the jagged glyph began to respond and ripple with familiar humming power, slowly taking effect and darkening the space around. The still body of the Elven girl rose several feet into the air above; Rikkert taking several sharp steps back as the hungry incantation, almost with a mind of its own, tried to draw all that lived into its centre.

In this storm of black, again, a wisp appeared above. But unlike the enchantment he had seen not a few moments before, this soul seemed to push out at the darkness around it, shifting and flaring at the wards that bound it, nearly breaking free. "Ronald!" Rikkert looked nervously between his companion and the roiling smoke. Ronald set his jaw and strained at the spell once more, succeeding in holding the rebellious target of his spell but not moving it back to the body. His eyes widened; the spell wasn't working.

Then, with a sudden, unexpected jolt, like a second hand had pulled on a ship's wheel, the soul shot into the body and with a clap of force, the smoke dissipated, the perfect line of the dagger slowly healed as the body returned to the stone of the impromptu altar. The remnants of the spell faded, leaving a pause with nothing but a cutting chill in the air and the sound of wind blowing small spheres of brush around on the mountainside.

Yralissa, Princess of the Sunlit Woods, snapped open her eyes with a short, shallow gasp. She was NOT happy.

Encouraged by the fast-returning light of the forest, the Princess pulled her body up from the ground's all-too-familiar embrace. Feeling dazed and confused, with an unsettling weight pressing on her chest, Yralissa took in her surroundings. Beside her, two people lay stunned – though neither looked alike, a similar pall of darkness smothered their divided features. Beyond them, a path strewn with an armoury's worth of arrows could be dimly seen. Dotted between the arrows lay the bodies of some 20 soldiers, each caught contorted in combat's fatal pursuit.

It was then that the Princess smelt it. Hanging thickly in the air, hiding poorly between the damp smell of soil and the faraway scent of burning oak, was the unforgettable must of just-drawn blood. Looking down, Yralissa found the source of the smell. Flooding the threads of her cloak, a pool of still-wet blood flowed outwards from a sever in the thick fabric that lay just above her heart.

Fast remembering the moments that preceded her rough awakening, the Princess quickly realised the danger that she was in. Knowing that she had little time, with her attackers slowly regaining consciousness, Yralissa pivoted towards the woods that surrounded her.

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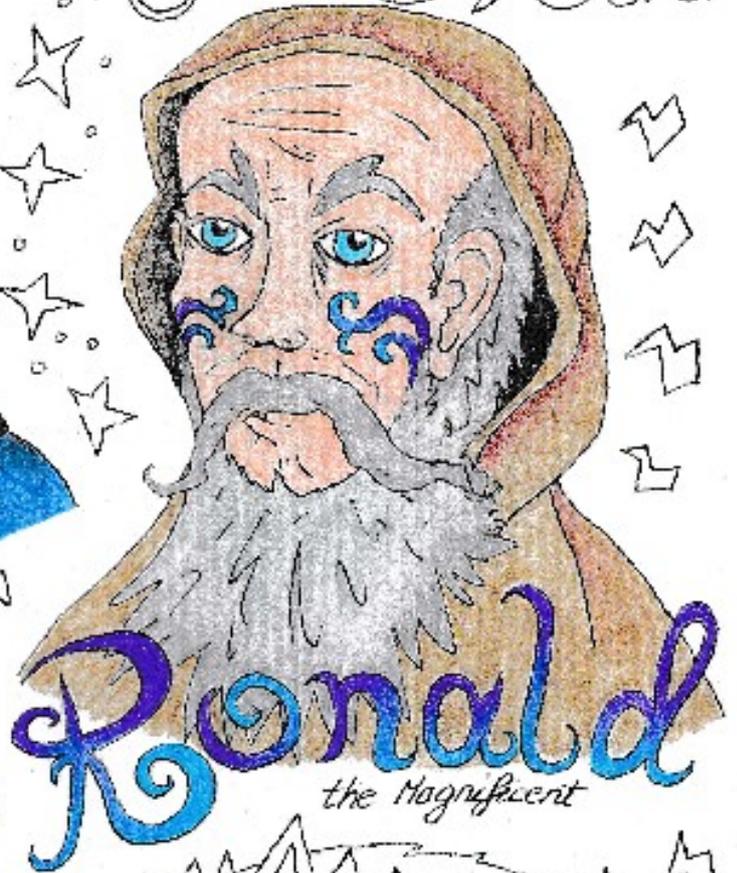
Ever since that moment, when, as a young and ambitious wizard's apprentice, he had first noticed that he could channel magic with more power, elegance and style than his peers, Ronald had harboured within him the beginnings of a crippling, excruciating fear. It was a feeling that he had managed to suppress yet never destroy, even during his supposed glory days – a paralysing dread that even now was soaking into his body and making his breath run short. It was the fear of failure, and of the humiliation of his failure being witnessed. The higher he climbed, the more he had to lose were he to fall. And with the disappearance of the Princess Yralissa, his paranoia whispered insistently that his fall had already begun.

Several fruitless hours of searching had passed since the disastrous ceremony. Ronald stood alone on a jagged outcrop, a lonely figure surveying the hunt through the woods from above, his mood darkening as it became more and more apparent that it was no mere

Starlight vs. Dread



Pica
the resurrected fawn



Ronald
the Magnificent



Yralissa
the elven Princess



NIGEL
the Dread Necromancer

reanimated corpse of the princess that Ronald had revived, but a conscious, intelligent being who was somehow capable of evading their forces. He had sensed Rikkert's growing disdain in the last glance thrown his way, and even Iharad, his lowly apprentice, had seemed to stifle a snigger. For he, Ronald, in his hubris, had made a catastrophic error in basic Necromancy. After all, what was the point of bringing back a creature that you couldn't control? You may as well have kept the slave alive if you wanted some 'personality', but for all intents and purposes, Necromancy had historically been used to eliminate that very trait amongst the rank and file. Bringing someone back exactly as they had been? This was a tedious academic exercise that none had ever bothered to try -

But I tried.

What?

Whilst you were subjecting the Princess to your accursed rituals, I tried to ensure you did not just reanimate a shadow of that proud spirit, but the entire soul. Our princess deserves more than that.

Ronald screamed. Luckily the howling of the wind prevented the sound from reaching the camp.

Once he had recovered his composure, he spoke aloud, quietly and dignified, but with a barely-restrained pain, addressing his words to the faun's invasive presence in his mind, "How could I possibly expect you to understand what you have done? Your only loyalty is to that oppressor of the Light, the Starlight King, who knows no compassion for the persecuted supporters of the Dark. If your loathsome spirit continues to deter me from the path which I know to be right, I warn you that I will be forced to destroy you – even if that means destroying myself too."

For a few moments, Pic was stunned into silence. Despite knowing of the dark wizard's reputation as a persuasive and eloquent speaker, he could not help but be impressed by the genuine desperation in Ronald's voice. Furthermore, when he tried to perceive the emotions swirling within Ronald's consciousness, he was confused to find, amongst the anguish and fear, something that resembled – was it love? Or a deep loyalty, forged over decades of teamwork?

Pic felt himself shaken, for within Ronald's resolute faith in the wisdom and bravery of Nigel, the Dread Necromancer, he sensed a mirror image of his own devotion to the legend of the risen Starlight King. Could it be that this wizard, in his own way, considered himself to be an honourable man? Pic's mother, a tough and proud warrior, had always told him to judge others by their actions, not their cause: '*Charlatans and heroes can fight for any side,*' she would have said.

Perhaps it was this warm memory of his mother, or the sudden saddening realisation that he may never return to his slain body, that impelled Pic to cautiously reach out to the enemy who he would only have scorned earlier.

Ronald? How long have our people been fighting these battles?

What?

What I mean to say is, we have caused each other so much suffering... perhaps without truly understanding one another's reasons for fighting...

'The faun has gone loopy,' Ronald thought to himself, and also, incidentally, to Pic, 'But he seems surprisingly open-minded for a servant of the Light.' Ronald hadn't yet considered diplomacy as an option in the conflict, but his curious mind was already turning the possibility over. A minute passed, both souls deep in thought and simultaneously watching one another's reasoning.

Finally, Ronald-Pic sighed and stretched their arms.

Fine, so we have a truce for now, Lightspawn scum?

So long as you keep to the terms, diabolical necromancer.

'Well, this is a nice surprise.' A rasping, female voice grated at their left ear whilst a thin blade was whipped up against their throat.

'How did you manage to evade the guards – my Lady Yralissa!' Ronald-Pic exclaimed.

The Princess Yralissa pressed the knife closer and snarled, her voice full of rage, 'What have you

done to me, wizard? All I wanted was to escape your foul clutches through a clean death, and instead you brought me back... but *changed*. I fear what I have become.'

Ronald squeaked, 'I don't know what happened! I tried to copy Nigel, but it all went wrong when –'

The Princess shrieked, 'Nigel? Nigel is to blame! Listen, wizard, here is what you must do if you wish to escape my revenge. Teleport me to the Dread Necromance right now!'

A throne appeared, of stone, cracked and ancient. The Dread Necromancer himself was enshrined upon it. Nigel stared down at his right hand wizard, held captive by the princess meant to be his prisoner. Ronald's eyes shifted away. Dim torchlight cast about the chamber revealed Montague, Gordon and Lilianne, all fallen silent. Yralissa slowly lowered the knife, her bargain with the wizard fulfilled. Like a ghost, the wind whistled about them.

"My Lord Nigel." Ronald swallowed and bowed, feeling Pic's unwillingness resist their action. But the faun spoke next: "I wish to propose negotiations with the Star..." Within the sight of the jagged scimitar of Gordon, the misery-dealing greatsword of Montague, and the five long knives of Lilianne, Ronald coughed. "I have brought the Lady Yralissa, as you commanded, my lord."

"It seems rather," Lilianne cut in, as the wind seemed to snigger, "that the Lady Yralissa has brought you, *Ronald the Magnificent*."

"Indeed," Nigel spoke, regarding his right hand wizard. "Your magnificence does appear to have been waning as of late. Still, I have a simple task for you. Kill the elf."

As his Lord had ordered, Ronald reached for a weapon, but Pic wouldn't do it. They stood there,

the petrified statue of a wizard once renowned, beneath the Dread Necromancer's steely gaze. The three allies watched also, and Ronald, to his eternal shame, felt their surprise turn to disdain and fury.

"And you call the orcs traitors!" Gordon bellowed, seizing his saber. He stormed forwards, and slashed. Still motionless as stone, Ronald-Pic closed their eyes for the blow. The air shrieked; with a crunch the orc blade broke through bone, but not theirs. They blinked, stepping back. Nothing now stood between the Dread Necromancer and the sight of Yralissa, pale dress dyed scarlet, dagger stained with the same red, and head very much unsevered. Gordon gaped at his blade, unable to grasp how it had failed him. Yralissa ignored the orc, glaring at Nigel alone.

"I have not come into this cursed company in order to be killed like a cockroach, tyrant," Yralissa spat. "I have come to end this."

"One of the undead should know better, my Lady," Nigel chuckled, staring into Yralissa's murderous eyes. "There is no end now."

Dagger in hand, she leapt forwards, and before Ronald could cry out, or Lilianne throw one of her infamous knives, or Montague cast an incantation, the heart of the still smiling Necromancer had been pierced by the bloodstained blade.

Scarlet flowed outwards from a sever in the black robes just above Nigel's heart. Turbulent darkness appeared around him, black circles that swirled forwards, dragging Yralissa into darkness. Ronald's fear for Nigel was one with Pic's fear for Yralissa; yet suddenly a sense of familiarity stabbed them both.

With a gasp, Yralissa woke for the second time, a star fallen to hell.

CONCEAL AVERT MAINTAIN

The Pro-Vice-Under-Commissary-General, the Fool, Shaun Vickers, Isaac, Thomas Haslam, Thomas Sweeney, Thomas Frith, Evan Indigo, Nikola Georgiev, Maya

DEPARTMENT OF UNNATURAL SCIENCES
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Artefact CAM-823

Sequestration class: Safe

CLASSIFIED: IIA CLEARANCE REQUIRED

Sequestration procedures: CAM-823 is to be stored in J5 Great Court, Trinity College. The room is to be locked and soundproofed. The entrance to the room is to be labelled "Senior Bursar's Archives" to discourage unauthorised entry. Access is to be restricted to DUS staff and research students to prevent civilian knowledge of CAM-823-A, DUS and its Northbury Site. Unnatural Sciences Tripos students in Part IIA or higher may apply to their Director of Studies for access using Form 823-Z. A contraperceptual barrier hides the entrance to J Great Court from passers-by with an efficacy of at least 99.995%. DUS agents embedded among the Porters of Trinity College are to conduct a misinformation campaign that there is no J staircase in Great Court because of an ancient rivalry with St John's College.

Should civilians nevertheless succeed in entering the room, activating CAM-823, and thereby entering CAM-823-A, Procedure 350-Wolfson is to be used to return them to Cambridge and false memories of a visit to the local nightclub known as "Cindie's" gone badly wrong should be implanted. Should a civilian perish in CAM-823-A, a cover story of a drunken roof climbing accident is to be disseminated.

Description: CAM-823 has the appearance of a gong, of the sort used at Formal Halls at several Colleges. It came into Trinity College's possession in 1703; its previous owner is now believed to have had ties to [REDACTED]. No unnatural properties were recorded until a Northbury-3 event occurred at the College's inaugural Wilfried Northbury Memorial Feast in 1966. This was also the last such feast, as all civilian knowledge of Prof Northbury had to be [REDACTED] following the incident.

Prof Northbury was the College's Director of Studies in Unnatural Sciences, who had been missing for [REDACTED] years; earlier that year, his body was found in [REDACTED] by a civilian, who contacted the police. DUS intercepted the call and the Head of Department ordered agents to quarantine the site, necessitating the [REDACTED] of [REDACTED] civilians. An autopsy conducted by DUS Senior Lecturer in Postmedicine Dr [REDACTED] showed that Prof Northbury lived for [REDACTED] years following his disappearance and expired due to severe metaneurological [REDACTED]. Furthermore, the body showed heavy signs of dimensional misconditioning, supporting the hypothesis of [REDACTED] from CAM-823-A.

When the artefact is struck more than once in the space of 13 seconds, a Northbury-3 event occurs. During a Northbury-3 event, all persons within earshot are paraphysically transposed to a non-orthofactorial plane of existence containing only an alternate version of Cambridge (designated CAM-823-A and described in Document 823-A). The first such event was the Wilfried Northbury Memorial Feast, at which all [REDACTED] fellows, students and catering staff present were transposed. Following the incident, the [REDACTED] survivors, unable to return without risking paraphysical reality collapse, established the DUS Northbury Site at 18 St Ludmila's Passage in CAM-823-A. Their efforts led to numerous advances in the Unnatural Sciences, including Farkas-Romanov non-orthofactorial multiverse theory, the discovery of 373 previously unknown species of *Thaumabiota*, the sequestration of CAM-[REDACTED] (successfully averting a QR-class multiverse decomposition

scenario), and the development of Procedure 350-Wolfson which enabled their return to Cambridge.

DEPARTMENT OF UNNATURAL SCIENCES
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Statement 00214

Storage Location: Archives of the Parker Library, Section F

Original statement given November 2017 by one Mr M. Waldak.

Statement begins.

I saw a leaflet for your department laminated and tightly zip-tied on one of those railings outside the churches here in Cambridge. The ones with all the posters for student theatre performances and ads for punts and tours. I can't remember which church (you'll have to forgive me)- I only saw it in passing- but I remember it said to contact the Department of Unnatural Sciences if I were ever to witness something strange. That had never meant much to me. I've seen plenty of weird stuff in my time, I can assure you. But this- this thing- it was the weirdest, downright maddest thing that has ever happened to me. I knew who to contact when it happened. You lot.

It was my usual Wednesday night. At around 9 o'clock I was walking home from work at a restaurant in the centre of town. I walked my normal route, taking a short cut through Free School Lane like I always do, towards my shared flat. I always walk here. I know what it's like, I know how it should sound, and even how the shadows are cast there. On this night, I was not in the place I know.

I had first realised something was off when, just as I had begun making my way through the lane I spotted two small men hurry out past me, nearly colliding with me. One was skinnier than the other, but both fit together well as a pair. I had at first thought them to be boys, but something about the set of their features was distinctly old, as if they'd lived many lifetimes. I didn't speak to them, only moved politely out of the way, preferring to save my precious hours off work to get to bed as soon as I could. They wore red caps and green jackets. Not matching, but the colours were distinct. Like raspberries and mouldy bread. After they had gone, I was struck with a wave of immense foreboding. Oddly enough, I was reminded of a line of Shakespeare from back in my school days. It fit perfectly for the feeling I got: 'it portends no good to us.' The sensation was so intense I had to stop walking and when I did, I must have been in another place. On the rare occasions I get free time to myself, I entertain myself by reading. A few times I have come across short stories of liminal spaces. The spots where people aren't supposed to dwell. The cavities in space which seem immune to time's ticking. Usually these places are empty stairwells, petrol stations at night, empty car parks, airports, waiting rooms- that sort of thing. A space that's on the threshold between two solid things. So what was on the threshold of this lane?

I could feel that this place had morphed into something different, and I didn't like it. I could not see the end of the lane. It seemed to stretch on and on like a hall of mirrors. The longer I stood there and stared, the more the street seemed to stretch in front of me and amidst all the corners and crevices of the multiplying buildings were hints of raspberry caps or flashes of decaying green. It was nothing mischievous or cheeky or playful. These things were waiting for me to take a step, and then another and another until I was walking into their realm and I fear to say I was curious. Afraid as all hell but wanting to take a peek. I listened to my gut though. It told me that whatever that was was not something I should be sticking my fingers into. So, I backed away onto Benet Street and carefully picked my way home on well lit wide paths.

I didn't sleep well that night nor the next few but, being as busy as I am, I had no time to be dwelling on such fancies. Things have gotten back to normal, but now I avoid Free School Lane zealously. Despite that, my thoughts keep wandering back to the little men with red caps and green coats. I find myself wanting to find out what was at the end of that... thing.

Statement ends.

Mr Waldak has been uncontactable since the statement was given.

The descriptions of Mr Waldak's 'little men' align with common features of CAM-441. Such occurrences have not been limited to Free School Lane and have seemed to lure people in various less-walked spots in Cambridge.

DEPARTMENT OF UNNATURAL SCIENCES
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Artefact CAM-### (Number unlisted to prevent propagation)

Special Containment Procedures: Containment of artefact CAM-### requires total expungement of knowledge to its existence. The following must be carried out to completion.

- Do not mention the existence of the artefact, this document, or any supplementary recordings and thoughts which instantiate the artefact. No allusion or implication can link the artefact to reality, for even in these partial cases, the artefact can find realisation.
- Destroy this document – not just removing these words from human access, but removing their impression from your mind, and the mind of anyone else causally related to what you read.
- Prevent propagation. It must be assumed the artefact has been spread beyond its initial carriers. Containment procedure will depend on the number of people affected. Observations of humans suggest not everyone has yet been influenced.
- Stop thinking.

Description: Artefact CAM-### (number unlisted) is a platonic propagator, an abstract ideation which exists only in the mind of its carrier. The only carrier requirement is to be a consciousness capable of conceiving the noumenon. Held in the mind of the carrier, the artefact instantiates a platonic space – known also as darkside – which by analogy is a vector space or group in the mind of a mathematician. Having instantiated the platonic space, the mind of the carrier is occupied by conception of the artefact, where it may exist indefinitely. More virulent than any known organic parasite, the artefact is sustained by the preoccupation of the mind which suspends it, and by communication the artefact is distributed and mutated by the ideations and derivative ideations of those it encounters.

The danger of the artefact remains unknown. The nebulousness of the artefact and the inability to communicate its existence without further spread limits knowledge of the artefact's scope. Inability of humans to directly interface their minds necessitates an intermediate state through which thoughts may be transmitted. This is known in its multiplicity of applications as "language", the document you are now reading providing one such example. The disjoint between locutionary and perlocutionary acts induces a semi-random mutation into the artefact, whereby the form and inflection of the artefact may change in the process of passing from carrier to carrier. Propagation is further complicated when the interlocutor holds multiple, potentially disharmonious, instances of the artefact in their mind at the point of illocution. Multiple instances of artefact will result in coupling effects, further mutating the artefact to the extent it is unrecognisable when compared to the original.

Such variation to the instance of each artefact and the ease at which it propagates implies there is no

limitation to what it can become. More dangerous than any singular object in the material world, the artefact can become anything, and reach anyone. It can take any form, and be shared by one mind to a multitude. It has no shape but is universally recognised. It is impossible to articulate but billions are united under it. It holds no pattern but the paradigm it instantiates retains symmetry.

So proceed with caution. Under influence of the artefact, permutations of the original become unbounded. The only defence is to remove the medium through which it propagates.

DEPARTMENT OF UNNATURAL SCIENCES
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Statement 00286

Storage Location: Archives of the Parker Library, Section F

Original statement given March 2018 by one Mr F. Webber.

Statement begins.

I've been trying to tell someone about this for days. Days! And they won't listen. I know you said you will, but you have to believe me. No jokes. No more ruddy jokes.

There was a man in the streets – not on top of them, mind, in them. His chest was sitting on the cobbles, but you could follow his shirt down to a neat seam with the road itself – he just kept going into the damned floor. He was very much dead, of course.

No, he's not still there. Yes, no-one else saw it. Don't you think the actual Police would have listened if there had, rather'n just you? It as only for a moment, and his skin began to darken and crack like he was a log in a fire, with no flames. And his clothes began to shrink as he got spindly, then starved, then warping in on –

[Mr Webber paused at this point, in great distress. The interview was paused and tea was offered, but declined. Whisky was accepted. After 16 minutes, the interview was resumed.]

Yeah, his body just shrunk in on itself, thinner and thinner, till it was just a post, then a thin black rope poking out of his shirt. Then nothing at all. I was shocked, so of course I didn't move a while. I gathered myself and had a closer look – he'd left a perfect fossil-y hole in the road, shoes and socks still sat at the bottom. There was no mist, no heat, no cold, nothing but this hole. And this smell of, no I swear, this smell of vanilla. Genuinely, like expensive ice cream. I didn't risk touching anything, his clothes could have been infected with something, I'd seen what had happened to him. So I looked a while, and then walked away, and took a picture on my phone. Police thought I'd used bloody photoshop. I'd gone straight to them with the picture, and they didn't even bother to go look!

[Mr Webber turned his head down to the floor and concluded more quietly.]

In the morning, the clothes had been moved to the side of the payment, wet from all the rain (it was bloody miserable on Tuesday, as you know) – and someone had filled in the hole. Fresh concrete among the old cobbles. What the hell was that then?

Statement ends.

Mr Webber was reassured with vague terms and sent on his way. We placed him under observation, and as of 19th March, 1 week after the testimony and the day of writing, nothing unusual or concerning has yet been observed. Mr Webber has been drinking heavily, however. Due to constraints on resources, we will terminate

the observation in another week, with another final report scheduled.

The articles of clothing described were found following Mr Webber's testimony, and after vigorous security screening, and physical and aural decontamination, they were found to belong to Mr Waldak of past Statements #00214, [REDACTED] and #00218, now presumed dead. No microbes or chemicals were present on the clothing beyond the types and quantities normally observed.

DEPARTMENT OF UNNATURAL SCIENCES
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Artefact CAM-243

Sequestration class: Darwin

CLASSIFIED: PhD CLEARANCE REQUIRED

Sequestration procedures: CAM-243 and CAM-243-A are to be publicly displayed on the outside of the Taylor Library at Corpus Christi College. Bulletproof, [REDACTED]-blocking glass is to be used on the exterior face of the containment cell. The Department of Unnatural Sciences (DUS) webmaster is to maintain the online consensus that the artifact was constructed in 2008 – script [REDACTED].py on the DUS intranet may help with this. In the event of tourist numbers being heavily restricted in Cambridge (e.g. war, pandemic), Unnatural Science students should be randomly selected to view CAM-243 for a continuous period of at least 10 minutes at least twice a day.

In the unlikely event of a CAM-243 stoppage, Procedure 456-B "Reality Checkpoint" is to be initiated to prevent the spread of a potential TK-class end of causality scenario, while all DUS staff/students within the resulting [REDACTED] zone (within 3 miles of Great St. Mary's) are to be immediately mobilized to restart CAM-243 and/or neutralise CAM-243-A.

Description: CAM-243 consists of 3 concentric dials lit from behind by an otherworldly blue light (paraspectrographic analysis suggests a wavelength of 460+[REDACTED] nm). An array of internal slits appears to block all but one of the dials from being lit at once. A pendulum sits below the artifact – testing has revealed that its swinging continues regardless of the orientation of the artifact.

CAM-243-A is a creature superficially resembling a monstrous grasshopper that "walks" along the top of the artifact as the outermost dial spins. The organism has been tentatively classified as *Thaumabiotica Chronophagus*, however further biological examination has been prohibited by Prof. [REDACTED] since [REDACTED] in 19[REDACTED] (For more information, see Incident File 19[REDACTED]-A)

DEPARTMENT OF UNNATURAL SCIENCES
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Statement 00312

Storage Location: Archives of the Parker Library, Section F

Original statement given July 2019 by one Mrs [REDACTED].

Statement begins.

Look, I know who you are, and what you have; the only reason I'm giving a statement is because that's the only way you'll listen to me. I should know, I worked here for 24 years.

It's gotten out of hand. You should never have brought in [CAM-823]. Did you ever wonder why you got more work after you got that thing? It wasn't just found, it wasn't "located", it was given. Placed there purposefully, and not with good intention. I'll admit, I understand why you kept it, we are scientists after all; always trying to explain what we see, needing an answer to everything, but some things should be left alone.

You see, many years ago, around 1096AD, [CAM-823] was created by the greatest (and most nefarious) minds in England. They had found a way to harness [REDACTED]. Believing they had discovered humanity's way forward, they tried using [CAM-823], leaving no witnesses but the lucky man left on door watch. However, the [REDACTED] group did not view this as a failure, but an opportunity. They sealed [CAM-823] in a vault, letting none but the leader enter for centuries while they concocted a plan of when and where to use it. They knew it had the power to cause reality to slowly crumble, piece by piece, until it seemed as if the vanished material had never existed, it was merely a dream.

It was around 1987 that [REDACTED] heard of the Department. They knew it had the power to destroy them, and so they left [CAM-823] where they knew it could be found. Don't you see? The only way to stop all this is destroy it! You can't control it, it's impossible! Why are you coming in? What are you doing? Let me out! OH GOD, OH GOD N-

Statement ends.

Mrs [REDACTED]'s family was informed of her hidden alcohol problem and unfortunate car accident by the local authorities. The police were paid well. Request evaluation on [CAM-823].

DEPARTMENT OF UNNATURAL SCIENCES
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Artefact CAM-216

Sequestration class: Unsafe, bounded.

CLASSIFIED: III CLEARANCE REQUIRED

Special Containment Procedures: The clock at Great St Mary's, Cambridge is required to chime exactly upon the hour so as to force attention to be drawn away from CAM-216. Should aircraft of any kind enter near the space available, then they are to be incinerated before making contact with CAM-216 in any fashion other than energy that could be mistaken for intense misdirected sunlight. Any individuals in the aircraft should be eradicated from memory as is described under Procedure _____. Unmanned aircraft - and other general objects - should similarly be eradicated, with the local team that works at the market under the name _____ on standby to perform a standard distraction manoeuvre, whereby any civilian associated with such an aerial object is "awarded" an item from the market that will proceed to eliminate their memory of such an object. In the case of an event, a combination of aquafaba, cream of tartar, vanilla extract, sugar, water, agar agar and sugar syrup should be used to reduce traffic flow into the area. Note that alternatives with pork gelatin may react with _____ and so should be avoided. Discussion about a "job opportunity" should be combined with the offering so as to delay for maximal time. A light level of sensory bemusement mist should be kept around the market at all times, with the procedure for release from the stall available under _____.docx.

Description: CAM-216 ceases to refract light around it for under a hundredth of a second every hour. It then appears in the shape of a cloud, though high-speed photography has shown the presence of _____ as well as _____. It has been observed so far solely above Great St Mary's where it has been steadily growing since December 2019. It is believed to be linked to the appearances of both LON-145, which appeared in 1663 CE, and ROM-820, which appeared in 61 CE.

Both previous descriptions of artefacts similar to CAM-216 in the archives resulted in an inverse Northbury-3 event upon completion, with standard class-1 containment procedure applied, with the procedure as detailed in _____.py. Special care should be taken with the ultimate step, as it was managed far more successfully with LON-145 than with ROM-820.

Prof. _____ has requested the use of class-2 containment procedures so as to allow for the development of further non-orthofactorial multiverse theory, but this has been locally declined due to the proximity of CAM-216 to other potentially catastrophic artefacts such as CAM-823. In future, consideration should again be given, as it may

Statement 00376

Storage Location: Archives of the Parker Library, Section F

Original statement given November 2019 by Ms S Aspinall.

Statement begins.

Okay, so what I just tell you what happened? Like all of it? Because there's stuff I didn't tell the bursar, or the police. I didn't think— I didn't want them to think— whatever.. You want everything then? Okay.

So.. we had been sort of dating for like two months at that point. It was coming up to reading week and I remember I was like manically stressed with work – I mean who isn't? – but like not coping very well at all, and Tess always had this way of texting right when I really needed something else to do other than think about how shitty my degree was going and how miserable I was. So it was a Wednesday evening and this essay was really not working, and Tess texts me asking if I want to 'go on an adventure' – literally those words, who talks like that? Well Tess did.

[There is a pause here, as Ms Aspinall takes a slow breath]

So of course I was immediately up for it and she tells me to meet her by the boat house. I remember— I remember that sort of fluttery feeling, you know where you feel like you're in a story? I wasn't really— I'm not really the kind of person who gets asked to meet at the boat house by a cute girl. So I was sort of nervous, but also excited? When I got outside it was *freezing*, and I knew I should've put on more layers but I didn't want to keep Tess waiting in the cold either. So I went straight to the boathouse, which is probably a five minute walk from the rest of the college buildings, and it was dark by this point and freezing, but I was— man I think I was almost skipping with how excited I was.

Did I notice anything strange? No I mean at this point.. No at this point it was a normal night. It was cold, and I guess it was quiet, but we were pretty far away from the college and the road and everything, and it was late so yeah I didn't think it was strange how quiet it was.

So anyway, I got to the boathouse, and Tess was already there. She was by the doors, which were open – I found out later she had got the keys from her roommate who's on the rowing team. Tess had come prepared, and was wrapped up in several coats. She gave me one, because of course she did. I think— urgh this sounds so lame, but I think I made a joke about how she could just come to my room if she wanted to make out. She laughed at that – she was always pretty generous with her laughter – but said she had a better idea. So she took me by the hand and led me into the boathouse, it was even darker in here, but she had her phone torch out, and lead us down to a punt, which she had made up with a blanket and a bottle of wine. I think it was at this point I first noticed the water. It was still. Like, completely, unbelievably still. Like it was ice or something, or a mirror. I don't think at the time I really thought about it, but looking back I can't stop thinking about it. Like you could lose yourself in that stillness. Like it would suck you in and drink you up and there wouldn't even be a splash.

We got in the punt and she pushed us out. I've never really liked being on the water, and the water that night was like dark dark black, so I let her do the actual punting. I think at this point my heart was really racing. I'm not really a rule-breaker, and also not used to 'going on adventures', but there was no way I was letting her know that. We had this stupid whispered conversation about where we would stop to have the wine. And I kept telling her to stay quiet, as if she didn't know to do that already. Thing is, the boat was like completely silent. Her pole would go in and out without any noise, no ripples or splashes. I still don't know how she did that.

We'd only been out for like five minutes when she dropped the pole. It was sort of yanked from her hands, almost no noise, except we both then started like whisper-screaming. She said she thought it got stuck in some mud, but now... We had a moment of like frantic panic; a missing pole meant we would definitely get found out. Usually the poles float, and Tess thought she could see it just below the surface. I don't know how.. the water was like tar, completely flat and pitch black. But she just pulled up her sleeve, bent down and reached in—

[here Ms Aspinall's throat catches, and her breathing quickens. It is thirty seconds before she continues.]

I was sat at the other end of the punt. All I could do was watch. She reached down into the water, and *something reached back up. Something deep, something bottomless and guttural and grotesque, twisted and slithered up and around the length of her arm. She just looked at it, sort of silently screaming, her breath clouding the air in the cold. She looked over at me. And then— it took her. Like... Fuck... Like she was pulled hard, and I remember there was a crack of something that reminded me of when I broke my ankle, but the water just like closed up behind her. Not even a splash. I— I didn't... I couldn't...*

[Ms Aspinall is brought a glass of water. She is crying, quietly. It is one hundred and thirty seconds before she continues.]

I couldn't bring myself to go in after her. To touch the water. To try and grab her out of there. I couldn't even look... I spent the rest of the night curled under that blanket, shivering and trying not to think. We didn't even open the wine. I just.. Do you know what that thing was?

Statement ends.

Details of this statement corroborate with previous accounts of CAM-077. Sequestration procedures remain insufficient.

DEPARTMENT OF UNNATURAL SCIENCES
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Artefact CAM-747

Sequestration class: Unsafe

CLASSIFIED: XSS CLEARANCE REQUIRED

The artefact takes the form of a standard University identification card, referred to as a CAMCard. Its outer appearance has been matched to the September 2020 batch of cards printed at King's College. It depicts an out of focus photo of a grinning, blonde teenager, labelled A. C. Gottfried.

The exact origin of the artefact is unknown, although it is speculated to be connected to the Northbury-3 event (CAM-823). It was first found by ██████████ allegedly under a bike rack in the vicinity of Market Hill. After its dutiful return to the porters of Kings College, no university records were found of one A. C. Gottfried. With this, CAM-747 was stored in a cupboard and forgotten until a passing conversation on forgery techniques between the late Dr Sokolov and a porter led to its mention. If not for the Dr's enthusiasm for duplication technologies, any manner of dangerous, unnatural events could have been innocently triggered.

The findings of Sokolov's team on CAM-747 are as follows:

- dimensions identical to a CAMCard
- mass of 50 grams, roughly ten times greater than that of a CAMCard
- lacks a magnetic strip, making it ineffective for digital authentication
- perfectly resists electric currents, with increases in voltage ██████████ the ██████████
- surface is glossy and exhibits self-healing after scratching (Mohs level 5)
- less than a tenth of a microsievert in radioactive emission, comparable to a banana

The data on CAM-747 is only preliminary, as an attempt to slice it and examine its cross-section resulted in outbursts of kinetic energy, hospitalizing two lab workers. Deemed unsafe for further experimentation, it has been stabilized and secured in the underground bunker of Castle Mound.

Update:

As of October 2021, the artefact has been ricocheting within its protected chamber. Additional analysis required.

DEPARTMENT OF UNNATURAL SCIENCES
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Artefact CAM-829

Sequestration Class: Sigma

CLASSIFIED: PhD CLEARANCE REQUIRED

Sequestration Procedures: The artefact should be kept within a standard 20 cm³ locker in the Department archives. Under no circumstances should an individual with any history with the sport of rowing be permitted to view, handle or otherwise engage with the artefact.

Description: The artefact is an academic gown with an attached hood, which is lined in red silk, appearing identical to an ordinary Master of Letters gown.

Upon donning the gown, an individual with no prior history of rowing becomes unable to speak of anything other than what they claim to be the progress of their training in rowing, the activities and personal details of their fellow teammates, and the events of previous races they have witnessed or participated in. Attempts to converse with them on other subjects is met with poorly concealed impatience and an abrupt return to the subject of rowing at the earliest opportunity.

Wearing the artefact for more than an hour results in severe metafunctional damage to the perifactorial nerve, and moderate agragag i injury to conversational partners.

When an individual with a previous history of rowing was permitted to wear the artefact (self-reported as having rowed for their College 5 years ago during their undergraduate days, this resulted in rapid mutations to the leg and back muscles, during which the subject called out rowing instructions in the manner of a coxswain, interspersed with vocalisations of pain. The resulting entity CAM-829-A broke free of containment from the Department's humanoid testing facilities, and required the intervention of MI-13 to be recaptured. The Department was required to compensate property damage to the tune of £350,3000, mainly centred in the areas surrounding the River Cam due to CAM-829-A's efforts to secure itself a boat.

Permission requested to test the artefact with an Olympian rower. We believe that further study of the process of mutation could aid efforts to create muscle-regenerative therapies, but the dissection of 829-A has not yielded sufficient data.

DENIED. All further testing with this artefact is to be ceased. MI-13 is irritated enough about the previous

Author's comments:

This was an experimental chain inspired by the SCP Project and it really spanned the range, from poking gentle fun at boaties to terrifying monsters in the River Cam, plus the usual weird inexplicable happenings, of course.

—Maya

incident and we really don't need our funding suspended because we created a sculling-obsessed Godzilla. – Prof. Middleton

A Cookie Error

Phoebe Fay, Fiona Maclenna, Lucy Sargent, Y. Lim, Myy, Tyler, Sophie Thwaites, Dan Scott, Ed Heaney

CONTENT WARNING: This story contains a brief, non-graphic description of an injured child. It is within the bounds of the CLANG (Chainwritten Literature Acceptably Nice Guidelines but please proceed with caution if you are likely to find this upsetting).

Crumbs crunched underfoot as the detective ducked under the barricade and examined the charred remains of the crime scene. The air was thick with the heady scent of sugar, nutmeg, and roasted flesh.

“Victim has been identified as the resident, 87-year-old Ms. Adeline Blair, who appears to have been baked alive in her own oven. The death has been ruled a homicide.” The attending offer explained. The oven had been opened so the body was visible. All that was left was a skeleton, curled over on its knees.

“Well, she wasn’t going to crawl in there herself.”

“Quite. So far, we have recovered a large cage and a few shards of a porcelain vase. Motive is unclear but there are no valuable left at the scene, so we suspect a robbery.”

Strings of melted gumdrops came away with the detective’s shoe as walked over to the cage. It took up almost half of what had been the lower floor to the confectionary cottage and was tall enough to fit a unicorn stallion. The gate was hanging off its hinges, the padlock smashed open.

“Any witnesses?”

“Not yet. First report was from a woodcutter, who called for the fire brigade about sweet-smelling smoke coming from the middle of the forest.”

“What about the townsfolk? Do they know Ms. Blair?”

“Not really. She was a bit of a hermit. No living relatives as far as we know. She would come into town occasionally for groceries and would bring cakes and sweets for the children.”

“Just as well she didn’t have visitors. Don’t know what I’d make of a big cage in the living room.”

“We’re asking local blacksmiths if any of them made it. It’s not clear how old it is.”

The detective was right, though, the cage clashed with

the rest of the interior. He could see a plate of biscuits stacked on a coffee table, iced with delicate, looping designs. Two squishy armchairs had daisies embroidered over their throws, and everything was light and spacious. Presumably it would have been airy if someone hadn’t closed all the windows and cooked the old lady to a crisp.

“You should also see the footprints,” the attending officer said, gesturing to the back door.

Outside, a wave of cold hit the detective. The cottage may not have cooled off yet, but it was a bitter winter. They’d had fresh snowfall the previous morning.

The prints, coupled with the sickly rancid odours of the fire, were enough to turn his stomach – though only for a moment. Bare feet walked directly away from the back door, into the surrounding woods. They were small. Child’s feet.

“That’s not all, sir.”

Off to the side, more small bare prints could be seen coming towards the cottage. They were much less certain here, wending their way in small spirals, going back and forth along the side of the house. One thing was clear, even in the confusion: this wasn’t one set of feet, but two walking side by side. Two sets of feet going into the cottage, and only one coming out.

The detective and the attending officer locked eyes, the latter eventually being the first to speak.

“So, either Ms Blair wasn’t the only victim here - “

“Or our main suspect is still in the building.” They stepped back inside as another blast of air whipped towards them. “And there are no more footprints anywhere surrounding the building?”

“Only ours and those of the other first responders. Definitely none as small as those.”

Suddenly the pastel pink walls felt much closer, the swirling, floral decor garishly oppressive.

“I didn’t choose this job because I thought it’d be easy, but one case every once in a while that doesn’t make my brain implode might be nice.” His foot was stuck in something again, toffee this time. “I thought that girl whose gran had been eaten by a wolf, a wolf who then

started dressing as the gran, would be the weirdest case I'd work this year. Not to mention that girl with the hair at the top of that tower, or the boy who swore he had climbed a beanstalk to the sky."

"Think there's something in the water around here, sir."

"You might be right about that." The detective approached the door, his eyes fixed on the footprints. "To recap, we have an old woman baked in her own oven, a cottage made of sweets, apart from the cage that's too big to be made for animals, and the involvement of probably two children, one of whom might still be in the building. Correct?"

The attending officer sighed. "Correct."

The detective took a sip from the flask in his coat pocket. "It's going to be a long night."

"Think I'm going to do another perimeter sweep, see if the suspect's still lurking somewhere." The detective nodded vaguely; his attention was still fixated on the tracks in the soil.

There was something about the tread of those footprints, almost as if they were carrying more than one individual's weight.

No sooner had his musings crystallised in the cold night air than the surrounding shrubbery rustled violently. He startled as a dirty boyish face peered out from the tangle of rosebushes. The silhouette – no, the silhouettes, so close that they fused into one – coalesced in a flurry of shrieks and fists.

The detective tried to get at the smaller figure curled, foetus-like, around the boy's back and got scratched across his cheek for it.

"Get away, get away," the boy was muttering under his breath. It was unclear if it was directed at him or if it were just a mantra he was repeating to himself.

He got a good glimpse of the other child when the attending officer, having jogged back with his flashlight on full blast, startled the boy into turning away from them.

The little girl was limp and startlingly pallid in the light. What was immediately apparent was the wound along her right flank.

He had seen his fair share of ugliness in his time as a detective. This wound was too precise and methodical to be inflicted in mere anger or as mere torture.

His blood turned to ice in his veins.

The boy wrinkled the girl's mottled cloth dress with his small plump hands, clutching on to her for dear life. Clearly, she had not been dressed for the biting cold. Snowflakes clung to her hair, melting to form tiny droplets on her face, around her wound through the tear in her dress.

"Get away!" the boy shrieked, startling himself along with the detective with the unbridled defiance of what he estimated to be approximately a 7-year-old.

"We're not here to hurt you." The detective gently pried the girl from the boy's grasp, removing a cooking apron and examining the surgical cut on her side. "Call medical over here!"

In the silence of winter, he could faintly hear a clinking sound as he set down the apron. It plopped to the ground, heavier than it should be. He noticed a bulge in the front pocket, reaching inside with his gloved hand.

"Jewels!" he exclaimed with incredulity. His breath formed condensation on the glistening stones.

"You don't think these could be the burglars, do you?"

The detective and officer glanced at the kids in disbelief, one pale and bleeding, the other well-fed and scowling from under his overgrown wisp of hair.

"It can't be." The detective took a step closer to kids, examining them with concealed suspicion. How could the children commit such atrocity?

"How did you get these?" He asked in a reassuring tone, trying to remain calm despite the questions swirling about in his head. "Are the jewels Ms Blair's?"

Upon hearing the name, the girl shuddered with a frightened expression. The boy shook his head frantically, as if trying to keep something very unpleasant out of his mind.

"What is it? What did--"

Before he could finish, a deep rumbling noise came from behind. It was like metal creaking. They all turned towards the source of the sound, which seemed to come from within the cottage, but nothing out of the ordinary could be noticed from the outside. After giving rise to a brief moment of confusion and chaos, the noise abruptly stopped. What followed was an exclamation from the boy:

"Get away!"

It was all the warning they had before the house shuddered, sparks flickering up its sides. A thick sweet-smelling liquid rolled out from under the eaves of the roof, dropping heavily into the snow in great steaming piles. With a pop, the windows burst in brilliant

shatters. The detective hissed as something sharp sliced his cheek.

And then the house collapsed.

The detective threw himself in front of the children, tossing an arm in front of his face as heat burnt across the clearing.

For a minute silence filled the wood, broken only by the dull hissing of the snow as shards of biscuit and metal thudded into the ground. Burnt sugar, and something thicker, almost potent, filtered through the arm the detective still had over his face. Something shifted behind him. One of the children let out a broken groan.

“Sir? Sir, are you alright?”

Light blurred his vision as the detective shakily dragged himself to his feet.

“What the hell was that?”

“Some kind of explosion.”

“Well yes, obviously.”

The detective bared his teeth, roughly brushing snow off his jacket.

The house was a wreck. In fact, less than that. A charred, blackened pit smouldered in the centre of the clearing

The attending officer muttered a curse under his breath. Steam billowed in the air, joining the column of smoke rising into the sky.

“There goes our evidence.”

The detective sighed, sticking his numbing hands into his pockets.

“Well, we’d better get these kids back for questioning. Even if they’re as innocent as they look, someone’s gonna be looking for them.”

The boy shrunk back again as the attendant neared him.

“Get away, get away!”

“Someone give me a hand with these mongrels.”

“On it.”

The detective watched as the children were loaded into the back of the police van before turning back to the scene. A forensic stood at the edge of the pit, staring into its depths. She one of the good ones. An old friend the detective had known since he transferred to the Once Upon a Time Division. Her

brow was creased, dark eyes flicking back and forth across the charred remains.

“Is something wrong, Jo?”

Jo pursed her lips, sucking air through her teeth.

“You know what makes an explosion like that, Stephen?”

The detective rubbed his glasses, clearing the dust from the lenses.

“Some kind of chemical reaction?”

“Well, ye-es, but not with the kind of chemicals which should have been in a house made of gingerbread.”

A fragment of blackened cloth landed on the detective’s thin grey hair. He flicked it off absently, adjusting his toopée.

“I think we’ve discovered a lot in this house which shouldn’t have been here.”

“And now we won’t find anything else. Since somebody’s blown up the evidence.”

The detective narrowed his eyes at Jo.

“You really think that?”

Behind them the police van revved its engine, slowly reversing out of the clearing. The detective turned to wave a hand and for a second, saw a flash of the windscreen mirror.

His blood ran cold.

And then the van was driving past them. The attending officer in the front seat gave a cheery wave before speeding off into the woods.

The detective stared after the van; the image of the mirror burnt into his mind.

For a second, the barest moment, he thought he had seen the face of an eighty-seven-year-old woman looking back.

Years ago when the detective had been a rookie, he wouldn’t have given such a fleeting impression much more thought. After all, things weren’t always as they seemed, and the mind could easily play tricks on you... Especially in these parts of the woods. But years of experience had taught him better than to ignore even the slightest of suspicions, no matter how farfetched. After all... things weren’t always as they seemed, not even that which had the façade of being plainly apparent. The mind could easily play tricks on you, or rather, the meddling of others could easily play tricks on your mind.

“Jo...” the detective said, a question lingering in his

voice.

The forensic, crouched down examining the pit of rubble, didn't look up as she absently responded, "Mmm?"

"Jo, did you recognize that attending officer from earlier?"

Jo was still intensely focused on the rubble, not yet clocking the wariness in the detective's voice. "Eh, I think it was Rickie or Ronnie or Reggie or whoever," she said, flipping over a chunk of scorched gingerbread. "One of those new hires from the other week. Still haven't put names to faces yet." She wrinkled her nose as a puff of acrid smoke filled the air, a bubble of tarlike toffee fizzling in the embers of the former house. "Not sure I even have the faces down in the first place, to tell you the truth. I wouldn't have recognized him to say hello if we were passing on the street."

That's all the detective needed to hear. "Jo, drop that and come with me," he said tersely.

The forensic didn't hesitate, immediately dropping the chunk of roof and rising to her feet.

"What's up, Stephen?" She had learned in their years of working together to trust the detective when it sounded like he had a hunch. She may have been part of the forensic team, but her close relationship with the detective meant she often ended up acting as his partner.

"We're getting in the car. I want you to call into the station and ask them to pull up the location of that police van." The detective had already made several lengthy strides towards his cruiser. Jo hurried to catch up, pulling out her mobile to reach the station. Normally she'd just radio it in, but these woods didn't allow for radio signals to go much further than line of sight. The cell phones (and trackers in the vehicles) wouldn't have been much better if not for all the signal repeaters the police force had installed in the woods in the last year given all the... Incidents.

Their haste meant they were already barrelling down the road by the time Jo had gotten through to the station and explained things. She was glad that Stephen had the wheel. She hated driving in these woods, least of all at any sort of speed like this, not when the trees had a tendency to meander and plant themselves squarely in the middle of the road. The detective, however, seemed to somehow have an intuition for these unpredictable changes, easily swerving on and off the path to weave between the trees.

"Stephen, the van's not heading for the station. It

veered north at the Pixie Road fork."

"Damn it," the detective muttered gruffly. "I knew something was off. Have the station dispatch an intercept towards Fairy Glen, we'll be in pursuit."

Jo nodded and relayed the request.

Stephen swung around, tyres skidding on the snowy road, down a turning that Jo could have sworn wasn't there until Stephen had turned the wheel. The road twisted and turned wildly, and it was hard to maintain anything that felt like a pursuit down the increasingly convoluted route.

"It doesn't fit the pattern," murmured Stephen huskily as they slid and skidded along the twisting track. "I saw her. I *saw her, and yet we all know how this one goes. So, and this is what really gets me...*"

He turned for as short a moment as he could to Jo, but the forensic's face showed only a nervous anticipation; her domain was, without a doubt, the ordered and rigorous process of the lab, and being out on the streets was far out of her comfort zone.

Stephen spoke up as his attention snapped back to the implausibly contorted road, "*So how did she end up in the oven and driving away in the police van? Or, more likely... who was actually in the oven?*"

As he finished the sentence, he brought the car screeching to a stop amid a wide gap in the trees. Though it was still biting cold, the snow seemed to have forgotten to fall, and the sun shone brightly down through the crisp, clear air. They could hear a distant sound of engines and metal, telling them that the intercept squad was somewhere on its way, but for now it was just them. The police van looked as if it had slid to a stop amid a little cluster of frost-capped mushrooms amid the dewy grass, its wheels carving ugly tracks across the unearthly beauty of the Fairy Glen.

The tracks wouldn't have been hard to follow, even had it been necessary. A tiny shack of mud and reeds and straw stood just a few metres into the forest beyond the glen, and crouched on the doorstep, looking in, was an ancient, gnarled, white-haired old woman, who did not deign to turn around as they approached.

Stephen took a big breath and a bigger gamble.

"Ms. Blair, I presume," he said. "I'm sorry to have to do this, but you're under arrest for the murder of... well, for the murder of whoever it was in your oven at the house known as Gingerbread Cottage, and the kidnap and mistreatment of..."

“Oh, shut up!” said the old woman, her croaky voice cutting off the detective's spiel. “You should know how this goes!”

Stephen took a moment to catch his breath. “I do,” he said, with far more confidence than he felt, “and so do you! About now, the children...”

“About now the children nothing!” snapped the crone, and the ground began to tremble, a low and insistent shudder. “About now is when the children become *my children, to do with as I will...*” - *and the little hut began to shake violently back and forth - “... and – are you ready for this? - and now...”*

Stephen was trying to stall. There'd be suitably armed officers coming with the intercept, he was sure of it, and all he had to do was to keep her here. He was ready, he was trained to resist all the most common tricks she might pull, and surely all he had to do was keep his cool.

“And now,” crowed the old woman, “we get the ending!”

She and the hut suddenly burst upwards, rising up on *something*, as Stephen and Jo were both thrown backward to the ground as the earth was flung aside.

Faint screaming told the shocked detective that the children she'd stolen in the van were indeed inside... but even that though was driven from his mind as in front of him the shack rose into the air. Stamping and scratching at the ground, fifteen feet tall, with claws a foot long, a vast pair of hen's legs supported it.

Holding on to a doorframe that didn't look sturdy enough in the least to survive the experience, the witch called down to them, her scratchy voice mocking and laughing.

“And you know the ending, mister detective!” she shouted. A sing-song, mocking, tone crept into her voice. “But this time, I'm the heroine, and here I am, with the children – *my children now – safe from the wicked woodcutter!*”

The hut on hen's legs turned, just as Stephen heard the intercept squad hastily pulling up behind them in the glen and, as the backup approached, the hut began to stride away.

The old woman's voice rang out through the woods.

“And they all lived happily ever after...”

Author's comments:

I'm thrilled at how this turned out! The concept was heavily inspired by Jasper Fforde's Thursday Next Series and spin-off nursery-rhyme crimes series. I can honestly say this reads as if he wrote it, down to the last sentence! I will write this sentence without an exclamation mark so this review doesn't look too unhinged, but it was a thoroughly enjoyable, silly but coherent read, and I highly recommend Jasper Fforde to anybody who enjoyed writing this.

- Phoebe Fay

I, Rupert *(or, Bees?)*

Anonymous, Zoe the Penguin, Gabriel Ferreras Garrucho, Megan, John C, Gabriel Ong, Dan Scott, Ed Heaney, Phoebe Fay

The Rupert was causing trouble in town again.

"KAN-you FEED-mein BAG-gage TRAIN ad-DIC-tion?"
He dissonantly chimed.

"Areya barmy, mate?" retorted Bobby Peeler.

"I-vant K"OL-lect MEIN-Re-PLACE-ment RO-bo-PU-del... KAN-you DI-rect ME-to R"OY-a-LIST-kamp-FE?"
he insisted.

"Woyalist? Where'veya been forra past tw'undred years?"

"I-vas NEEEEEE-ver FOUND-in BEAN-field." He offendedclockworkwhirltorted. "NE-ver SAW-no BEANS-at All-you LAC-to PHO-bic ENG-lish PER-son! NE-ver HID-den FROM-ze RAUND-heads IN mein LAIIIIIFE! ES-pe CI-ally NOT-in BEAN-field..."

"Neeigh!" *Nostrilsomesnort* oatodorouslyuttered a passing coach-horse.

"NASE-by! JU-dahre MEN-tion NASE-by to MEEEE?"

I, Ru-POT know-Ju aaa-NY-where 'RI-val R"O-ya-LIST Kom-MAN-Der MAR-ma-DUKE Ka-VEN-Dish GO-Ring DIG-by!" he screeched at the coach-horse, robotic spurs all-a-twirling into Hot Pursuit Mode.

"JU-messed UP-at NASE-by, AND zen TRY pin-NING it ON-me! AND-it VAS-ent ME ve-TTING mein-SEL-fe IN-zat BEAN-field!"

His Hot Pursuit abruptly ended when he crashed into a Piewoman, up-ending several of her wares.

"VAT-an AAA-front! VERE-is MEIN Re-PLACE-ment RO-bo-PU-del?"

VAIT... ARE ju ZE ci-TY of LEI-cester? IF so, PAY me ZWEI-thau-SAND-pounds OR pre-PARE to-Be sacked!"

Judy: "Youwhat? Nah, this'us Shoreditch, mate. Y'allright?"

"I-am NOT-a VITCH! RAUND-head SLAN-der!"

BE-sides, MEIN-Fam-EE-liar VAS-a MON-key.

PU-del vas just PU-del: a Kav-A-lier's BEST-friend..."

"Cavalier?!?" Judy laughed good-naturedly. After all

the robot had acquired a fetching plumed hat from somewhere.

"DO-you NOT-think I, Ru-POT (Prinz!) ko-A-li-FY for R"O-ya-LIST Ka-VAL-ry GE-ne-RAL aged JUST-Tven-TY-three?"

EET-not MEIN-un-KEL, K"o-NIG Charles-EIN zat GOT-me ZE-job, EET-is MEIN di-VINE ra-IIIGHT...

VERRE-haf JU Hid-DEN mein Re-PLACE-ment RO-bo-PU-del?"

He drew his Robo-sabre and waywardly decapitated a neighbouring street vendor ... 's hatstand.

"Leave'er alone. Gerroutofhere!" blusterrupted a puffing and panting Bobby Peeler, finally catching up.

"Aw, ave'im checked first, Cunstubble" Judy insisted. "E looks so out'or sorts."

"Arright. Bobby Peeler constabuloconceded "Robot, arreya programmed to not 'arm 'umans?"

"I, Ru-POT, may NOT harm NOR eenen-JURE mein RO-bo-PU-del NOR Cy-BORG-K"o-NIG Charles-EIN.

Eeeh-VERY-bo-DY else EES fair GAIIIIIIME.

ES-pe-CIA-ly JU, Raund-HEADS. AND ju, RI-val R"O-ya-LIST Kom-MAN-ders..."

"Robot, ar'ya at least programmed to obey 'umans?" exhaspertorted Judy.

I, Ru-POT went blank and did not respond.

"Are'ya arright, mate?"

"ZERE's no-NEED for A-ny EX-pla-NAAAI-shaun" answered I, Ru-POT.

In a low voice, his dissonant-clockwork-robotic accent vanishing altogether, he began:

"It's very simple-- early in the afternoon on the fourteenth of the summer month of June, Royalist Cavalry General Prince Rupert of the Rhine, a horse in a splendid red cloak with gold trim...

collided amidst a dense fog of war with an unexpectedly fortified Baggage train down the road

from Naseby, his mind still aflame over Marston Moor: Poodle shot, Witch Powers broken, taking flight, the relief of finding cover quickly morphing to abject humiliation when several Rival Royalist Commanders spotted him in that thrice-accursed Bean Field, and said..."

"Ah, if it isn't our good friend Rupert. Far from home, aren't you? It would be such a shame if anything happened to you here, wouldn't it?" and with these words, the Royalist Commanders shed their cloaks to reveal their true form – a swarm of bees! And the—"

"A... swarm o' bees? Ya trying to tell me that some of the Royalist Commanders were... bees? Did they design robots with a sense o' humor back then?" Judy interrupted incredulously

"This is a first-hand account of the event from a reliable source."

"How wouldya have a first-hand account o' this? Rupert clearly ain't gonna survive that and the swarma bees ain't tellin anyone about that."

"The reliable source is me, of course! I'm incredibly reliable! Now shut up, I haven't reached the good bit yet..."

But, suddenly, before the Rupot could finish his tale, a band of "policemen" —well... clearly robots dressed as caricaturised Victorian policemen— came out of the nearest Tube station, and "arrested" the troublesome guy.

"This is a miscarriage of justice! You'll soon hear from my lawyer!" screamed Rupot in perfect posh English accent, followed a borderline racist Latin American spanish one "Tiz' Iz iNacePtAble, suns of bEACHes all of YU!!".

The international insults kept coming until Rupot was well down the Tube stairs, and out of sight.

"Well, tis' robot roleplay stuff is getting out o' hand, donyathink?" commented Judy to break the silence.

"Can't never guess if it is sexual or nah, tis' robots ar' way too crazy" said Bobby.

"Still dunot' know why those *smart politicians let'em have those old tube racks to roam*" joked Judy.

Bobby laughed briefly, kind of awkwardly. Again, silence fell between them.

"Com'on, buy me one o' tis' pies, for the trouble" spurted Judy, adding a wink, a businesswoman above all else.

"It's the least I could do" responded Bobby, trying too

hard to be charming with his weird three-missing-teeth smile. The smile disappeared shortly after, when he went for his wallet "For God's sake, the damn robot stole my wallet!!".

Judy violently laughed out loud.

"Well, good luck in those train tracks" she managed, still smiling, after spending way too long laughing.

"Not so fast, ya' better check ya pockets first", suggested Bobby, smirking, while Judy's face went from enjoyment to panic. She then proceeded to swear profusely.

"Guess I'll be 'aving company", whispered Bobby, leaning close to her, still smiling. Judy sighed, took her illegal robot paralysers, and, without waiting for Bobby, got on her way to the dark entrance to the non-sensical underground, thinking: "At least we'll get to 'ear the end to that story".

It's not like there was even much in her wallet, but it was the principle of the thing. These bloody robots, always roaming around nowadays, causing her no end of trouble.

"It's all these people what get 'em for Christmas and birthdays and the like," she mumbled as she walked with staunch determination down the grime-grey steps that lead into the underground. Bobby hopped behind her, struggling to keep up.

"What was that?"

"Oh," Judy wrinkled her nose. "These robots. People keep buying 'em and then just dumping 'em here – like the rest of us want ya old spare parts!" (An arm spread emphatically – Bobby Peeler ducking to avoid it, tripping, catching himself ungracefully on the last step) "Worse than stray dogs, I tells ya. 'Least thens don't steal your bloody wallet!"

"Got no hands to do it with," said Bobby, who wouldn't trust a dog as far as he could throw it. They were approaching the platform by now, and already, the distorted clash of artificial voices was rising to their ears in robotic cacophony. On the tracks, robots swarmed like silverfish – Judy had fantasised about driving one of those trains that used to go down here, and mowing them flat. (The brain gets bored, selling pies all day.)

"How in the hell are we going to find – oh," Bobby sighed, as that very same voice from before rang out through the platform:

"YOU ROAUND-head scum, un-HAND me, thou DEVILS!"

Judy twirled the taser in her hand;
Bobby gulped.

As the masses of robo-bodies swarmed over him, Bobby found himself regretting the decisions that led him to this moment.

"If I'd known I'd be gettin' knocked around by these junker bastards, I wouldn't've won my button-shirt," he hollered to nobody in particular.

"Aye, we wouldn't want anything to happen to your shirt now, would we?" Judy yelled back, jamming the taser into the nearest robot's charging port. While the robots had pretty swiftly overwhelmed Bobby, Judy was holding her own against the crowd. She jabbed the paralysers at a robot that was leaking oil, then swiped at another that was wearing a plastic tiara. A particularly large unit lumbered towards her, but she dodged its clunky swings and tased it in its hard drive. She threw in a kick for good measure.

"Me Ma says it makes me look smart," grunted Bobby, still upset about his shirt. He threw a punch, but it bounced feebly off a toaster bot.

"Why'dya still care what she thinks? You're not the boy that came to me for pies each Tuesday anymore – you're a full-on man now y'know!" Judy frowned. The small clearing she had made for herself was slowly closing as more and more robots piled in.

"Hey! At least she still likes me!" He hesitated. "Well, when she isn't bossing me around..."

Judy's eyes lit up. "Wait, that's it!" Keeping the robots at bay, she stepped up on the rubble and shouted at the top of her lungs.

"LISTEN UP METAL HEADS!!"

There was a break in the swarm; the robots turned to look at her, anticipatively, some even cocking their heads.

"You've all been very naughty," she scoffed, "scurrying around down here, getting into fights. And look at the time! You should all be in bed!!" The robots recoiled at this chastisement. Several of them looked at their feet ashamedly.

Bobby pitched in. "You musn't go around stealing things, you see!" Judy nodded. "Empty your pockets now, all of you!"

Sheepishly, the robots coughed up all their stolen belongings. Watches, cables, playing cards – all were emptied onto the ground. The robot with the tiara, tears in her circuit boards, reluctantly laid it gently on the ground and ran away crying. When the last of

them had scurried away, Judy looked at Bobby and grinned. He glared back, bruised and tired.

"Well don't stand there acting all accomplished! I still don't have my wallet back!"

Judy's smile vanished. "Yes, yes, of course. Me neither, you know! Now where's that RuPot got to..."

They suddenly noticed that it was completely silent. Not even the ringing of tinnitus in their ears could be heard.

Bobby opened his mouth to speak, but saw that Judy was already talking. Or trying to, at least.

There was still no sound. Judy saw Bobby's puzzled expression and knew it wasn't just her who had gone deaf. She pointed at her ear with her left hand, then made a shaking motion with the same hand.

Bobby replicated her gesture, but it didn't give him his hearing back.

Confused, he took out a matchbox and tried to light a match, but only succeeded in dropping it on the floor. *Oh, blast he thought.*

Bobby squatted down to retrieve the match, but quickly found that the head was broken. Out of the right corner of his eye, he saw Judy approaching him, probably to help. But in the other corner of his eye, he saw something even more confusing. The track was oscillating almost imperceptibly.

Without really thinking, which was how he usually went about his life anyways, Bobby reached out and touched the track. It was, in fact, vibrating, and very rapidly at that.

He turned to look at Judy, and, having already forgotten that she wouldn't have been able to hear him anyway, was about to make a stupid joke when he saw, in the corner of his eye that was formerly occupied by Judy, a faint light, slowly growing.

Judy saw Bobby touching the track, followed his gaze, and immediately realised what was going on. To her horror, she saw Bobby get up and start walking *toward the light, moth to flame and all that.* She took his arm and together they ran deeper into the tunnel.

I can't believe it. I'm actually living out my fantasy, except I'M ON THE WRONG END OF IT! Judy thought to herself.

She turned around and confirmed her fear. There was, in fact, a train barrelling down on them, with its red face and blinding lights.

How?! They've been on strike for the past two hundred years! Judy thought.

Off to the side, Bobby spotted a door with a green sign above it showing a man running through a door. Bobby pulled Judy toward it and tried to open it, but it only opened slightly before getting stuck on some blockage behind.

An array of sharp blades of various shapes and sizes extended out the sides of the train, scraping along the walls of the tunnel.

Hey! I'm pretty sure you need a license for that! Bobby thought.

Bobby tried to kick down the door repeatedly, remembering something he saw in a movie once, but it still wouldn't budge.

Well at least it's not guns... Bobby thought.

Suddenly, the door swung open away from them. Bobby saw Judy holding a strange red cylinder with a clip-like thing on one end. They ran into a corridor, past a door which thankfully opened easily this time, and caught their breath in a dark room.

To their surprise, they could hear each other panting again.

"I swear, that isn't how it usually happens with me" Bobby said.

Judy felt around the wall near the doorway and found a light switch, and flipped it on, and to their even bigger surprise, it worked.

But neither of these surprises could compare to the biggest surprise they've ever witnessed in their entire lives. A surprise greater than they ever imagined.

And it was right in front of them right now.

They had found Rupert in the midst of a furious fight. But while they may have expected to see the robot fighting with the band of caricaturised Victorian policebots that had escorted him away, this was not to be so. Littered on the ground of the now well-lit room were various bits of Victorian police clothing, a pile or two still remaining but most of the garbs strewn wildly about the room no doubt on account of the fight unfolding before their eyes.

The valiant Rupert, whom Judy and Bobby had very plainly regarded with a great level of disdain based on their earlier interaction but who now levelled a certain degree of respect for the bot, was engaged in an all out battle with... Yes, reader, you have probably guessed it by now.

A MASSIVE SWARM OF BEES.

"BEES!!!!!!!!!" screamificated Judy, her shrill utterance cacophonising the room in discord with the angry flurry of buzzing.

"BEES!!!!!!!!!" boombastically bellownated Bobby, his voice bouncing between the black-painted walls of the brightly lit chamber.

"BEES!!!!!!!!!" robotified Rupert, the poor robot undoubtedly mentally sucked back to that fateful June afternoon which saw the downfall of Royalist Cavalry General Prince Rupert of the Rhine.

"BUZZ!!!!!!!!!" buzzed the beeswarm.

Rupert stopped in his motion against the bees for a brief moment, pausing suspended as he said, "Engage caps-lock voice." With that, his robot arms returned to their furious zipping, zapping, and zopping to squish bee after bee in a swarm that seemed to never end.

"YOU BLASTED RIVAL ROYALISTS!" he caps-screamed. "I KNEW I HADN'T SEEN THE LAST OF YOU! TAKE THIS!!" He slapped his hands together, smushing a solid dozen or two bees. "AND THIS!!!" His foot rocketed through the air with such speed (which even Chuck Norris would have trouble matching) that a small bunch of bees were actually pelted against the wall, flattened by the impact. "I HAVE BEEN TRAINING FOR TWO HUNDRED YEARS FOR THIS FIGHT! NO MORE COWERING IN A BEEAN FIELD! FOR PRINCE RUPERT!!!!!" Bee after bee fell dead beneath the robot's fury. Bobby and Judy watched in horror – mortified, confused, and perhaps even slightly aroused by Rupert's dauntlessness.

"AND YOOOOU!" cried Rupert, so caught up in the moment that it was with barely a hint of uppercase that he tailed off the vowel with a quick "-aaaaooow". His finger snapped out towards Judy and Bobby, flicking a couple of buzzing apine forms uncontrollably through the air in their direction. "Do-NOT think that I did NOT see WHAT YOU DID EARL-i-ER!"

"Wotcha think we was doin' earlya?" Judy was the first to come to her senses after this, inasmuch as anything could be organised into sense here.

"YOU-thought I was OUT of SIGHT! But NOT-out OF my VE-ry OWN story! Sensible narration!" cried Rupert, switching unexpectedly to his storytelling voice and casually backhandsmashing a bee from the swarm at his back. "Italicised thoughts! Calm, COL-lec-TED speech!" (No discernable cause whatsoever to the flipflops between Cavalier Robot and self-proclaimed reliable source.) "THAT is the SORT of UN-mit-I-ga-TED PURITANISM that I-could ON-ly EX-pect..."

Robots don't breathe, but if they did, he would have taken a deep breath. There's very little chance of a

silence amid the buzzing of thousands of bees being mercilessly and robotically slaughtered, but if there were, there would have been a deep and suspenseful pause.

“Of...”

Neither Judy nor Bobby could help themselves, craning forward and turning their ears, synchronously and undoubtedly overtheatrically, directly into the path of Rupot's bellow.

“ROAUWND-HEADS!!!”

“Oh!”

“What!”

“Horror!”

“Shock!”

“Never!”

Everyone looked confused for a moment; the bees aside, it was only Rupot, Judy and Bobby who could have expectorated such exclamations; as least one of them must have been doing double- or triple duty.

Was it me? wondered Judy.

“THERE!!!!” bellowed Ru-POT, so aggressively that his clockwork EMPH-asis SPILLED through into the narration for a few words. “YOU did IT a-GAIN! I will HAVE an EX-plan-A-tion FOR this MAD-ness!” Then, suddenly, a different - albeit familiar - voice. “And you shall have one! I told you, I'm a very reliable source! Story's not over! I'm just getting to the good bit.”

Pause for dramatic effect.

Author's comments:

This was a weird one! I find it interesting that in this imagined world humanoid robots were achieved but became delinquents and societal outcasts. It's very different to the typical narrative that robots would be servants or eventually take over mankind. I like the madness of it!

- Phoebe Fay

“You see, all stories need someone to tell them. Some of those narrators are unreliable and tell you all sorts of lies! But I am sworn to tell the truth; I am a reliable source!”

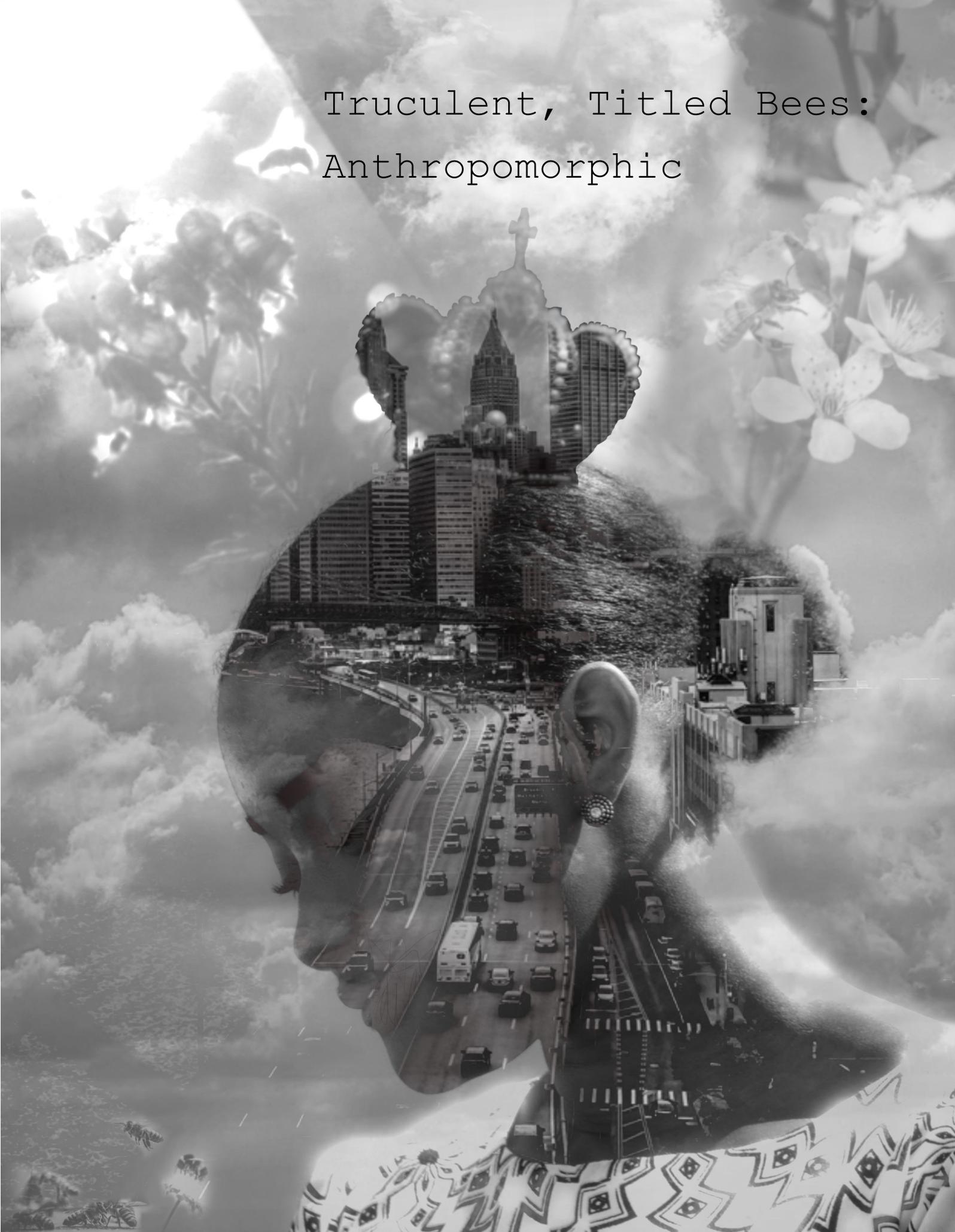
“So ya keep sayin’.”

“When people tired of watching these egotistical robots perform hap-hazard re-enactments and folk tales, some bright spark decided to invent a new way of story-telling. They were clever, and also pretty self-absorbed, and they made the ‘Narrator Pop-socket’. You can stick them on anything you want, and they will narrate what’s happening in that area or to the person that’s carrying it.”

Bobby and Judy start searching their pockets and belongings, pulling out paper clips and old receipts that had fallen out of wallets. How long has that tic-tac been in there? Judy wonders. Bobby takes out the Bible that was handed to him for free the last time he was in town. On the other side was a pop-socket with a little speaker on the end with the image of an open book on it.

“They soon found out that it can get really annoying! So, people started just sticking them to random things to annoy people by following them around all day and narrating what they’re saying. Of course, while we can’t lie, we can add a bit of flavour, you know. Getting a bit meta is totally fine, in fact-” As it speaks, Ru-POT grabs the Bible, and crushes it in his tight metal grip, abruptly ending the

Truculent, Titled Bees:
Anthropomorphic



TIME-TRAVLLING BUSYBODIES: APOCALYPSE

TTBA Lent, Easter and Summer 2021

