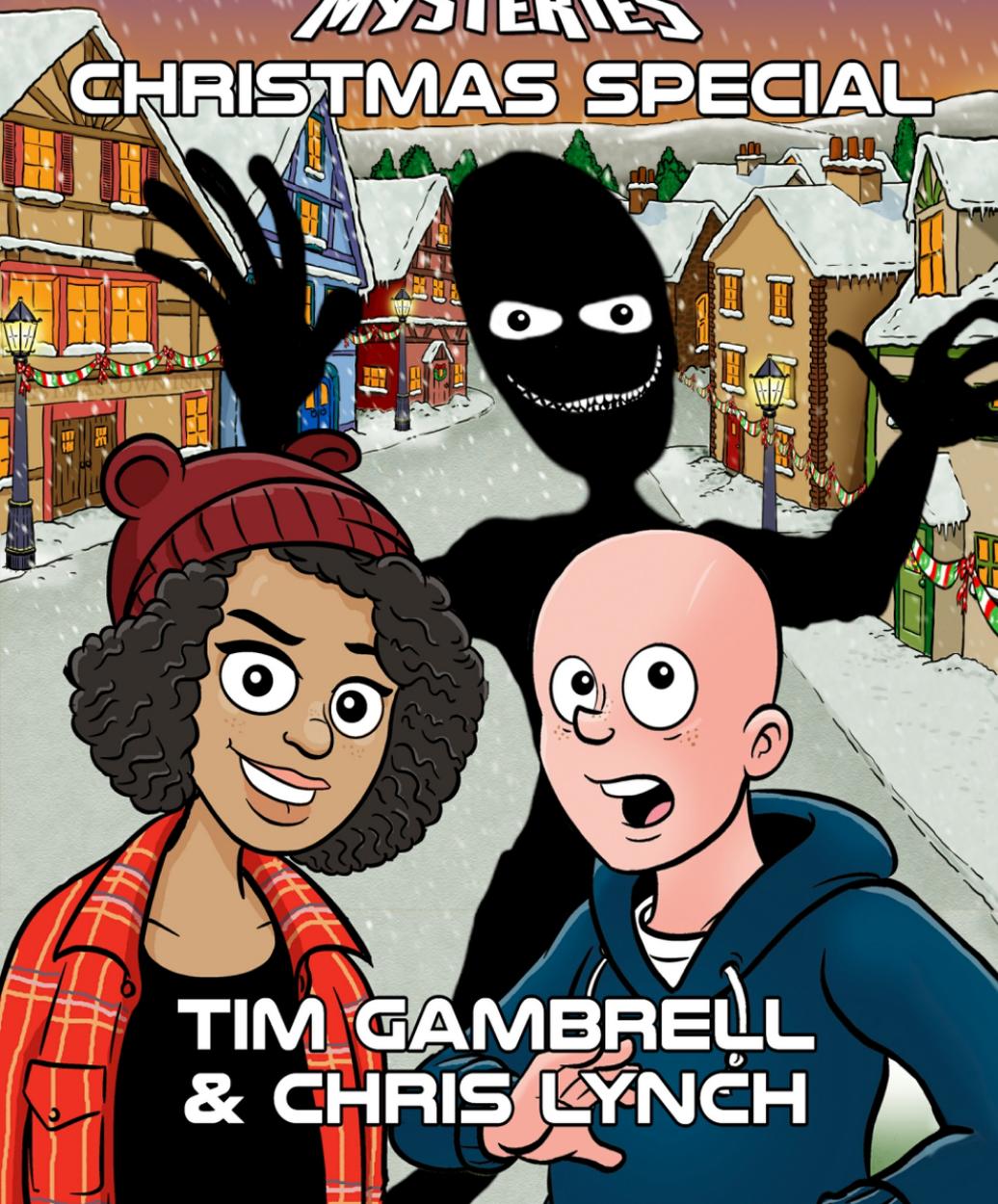


THE
LUCY WILSON
MYSTERIES



CHRISTMAS SPECIAL



**TIM GAMBRELL
& CHRIS LYNCH**

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**THE CHRISTMAS
CRACKER CONUNDRUM!**

Tim Gambrell

It was the morning of the last day of term. The Christmas holidays beckoned. Lucy Wilson, along with her tutor group, filed into the school hall. Years 7, 8 and 9 were being treated to a touring pantomime that morning. Hobo Kostinen would be in amongst the throng somewhere, too. The banner across the stage read 'The Big Bang Theatre Company'. The actors were there on stage already. Only three of them. And they were going to perform *Aladdin*. Lucy thought of all the characters in the Disney film and wondered how they'd ever manage it? She wasn't the only one with a cynical attitude towards this 'kids stuff'. But, as others pointed out, it was time out of lessons and that couldn't be bad.

Lucy was surprised to find herself enjoying the show almost from the off. The actors played many characters each and there was plenty of slapstick comedy. Most of the actual jokes were truly awful puns, like standard Christmas cracker gags, and the actors tended to groan at them along with the audience. Lucy could see some of the teachers having a right old time of it, laughing away.

At the end of the show, the Genie, Aladdin and Princess Jasmine all came together for a bow. The crowd, despite its early cynicism, clapped like mad. Lucy wore a huge grin. Two seats away, Mel was pumping her fist and doing annoying whooping. The three actors each produced a Christmas cracker.

‘That’s where they got the jokes from,’ muttered Lucy in a semi-whisper. Nearby chuckles suggested some of her class had heard her. The actors then joined up, a cracker end in each hand, and started to walk around in a circle. They went faster and faster, the audience loving the moment, waiting for at least one of the crackers to go off.

Suddenly all three crackers went off in one huge bang and flash, like fireworks. They must have been special stage crackers, Lucy thought afterwards. No ordinary crackers went off with that kind of power. The whole school cheered and applauded harder than ever. As the smoke cleared from the stage, there was no sign of the three actors, their banner, props or costumes. The theatre company had literally vanished. Proper magic!

There was nothing else on anyone’s lips that morning. Lessons were a waste of time. What was certain was that everyone wanted the Big Bang Theatre Company to return again sometime.

The following day, Saturday, was one of those family days where Lucy and her mum just seemed to be on different wavelengths the whole time. Conall, Dean and Hannah were coming to stay for Christmas that year. They usually spent Christmas Day with Dean’s family, and mum had always struggled to hide her disappointment. Now that

Lucy and her mum and dad had moved from London to Ogmores-by-Sea, things were changing, it seemed. Mum was determined to make everything 'just right' as she termed it. As a consequence, she was spending all her time hassling Lucy and her dad, Albert. They kept being told to clear things away and tidy up; clean this, that and the other. All the while, her mum made lists and schedules, and even checked whether they had enough tubs of Celebrations. Conall and his family weren't even turning up until Christmas Eve. Still two days away, yet.

It would all be worth it, though. Lucy loved Con and Dean to bits and little Hannah, their adopted daughter, was such a gorgeous little bundle of fun. Having them there would make Christmas vastly more bearable, in Lucy's view. Plus, she knew that Con had got her the new SIMS 4 game and she couldn't wait to start playing it.

Lucy and her dad were sneaking a quick drink and a biscuit in the kitchen. This was a good day for the two of *them*, for a change. They'd come together in adversity, thanks to mum's obsessiveness.

'Careful to eat it over the sink,' her dad said as he handed her the open biscuit barrel. 'You know Mum'll spot the crumbs on the floor.'

It was at this moment that Lucy's phone beeped. A text from Hobo:

Seafront. Now. Gotta see this!

This was unusual as they had both sworn to stay clear of mobiles since their trouble with the Intelligence earlier in the year.

BRT, Lucy quickly replied. She downed the rest of her juice, then headed to the porch for her Ugg boots and Parka. It was too cold down at the front for her usual hoodie and Converse. Dad peered round the kitchen door and raised his eyebrows. Lucy shrugged an apology for leaving him in the lurch.

‘Mum?’ she yelled. ‘Just gotta pop out and help Hobo with something.’

Dad tucked back into the kitchen. He didn’t have a great deal of time for her best friend. After a pause, Mum’s voice filtered down from the spare bedroom, telling her not to be out long as there was still lots to do. Mum was still listing tasks as she closed the front door gently behind her.

It was an overcast day. In London, at that time of the year, this would have made it a warm winter day. A hoodie day. Here, in Ogmores, there was the perpetual sea breeze. On a truly cold day it could freeze the tears at the corners of your eyes and numb your nose. It wasn’t quite that bad today, but Lucy was glad to be wrapped in her Parka at least.

She could tell from a distance that something was

up at the seafront. Usually, at this time of the year, apart from the odd dog-walker, the car park next to the seafront was empty save for the tacky old Christmas lights which adorned the toilet. The lights seemed, to Lucy, to be tired leftovers from the 1950s, or whenever Ogmores-by-Sea was a popular seaside resort. But this afternoon there was a mass of kids there too. Kids from her school, she noted. Hobo stood apart from the main group. He waved to her as she approached. She saw that he was holding something. It was a Christmas cracker.

‘Come see, come see,’ Hobo said.

Lucy made her way through the crowd. In the centre, with the sea as a backdrop, was a sort of pop-up promotional stand. Four girls stood around it, handing out a free Christmas cracker to each child. Just one each, Lucy noted. The girls were strikingly beautiful – flawless, almost like life-size dolls. Each wore a kind of Santa Claus dress and black boots. One of the girls, a brunette, handed a cracker to Lucy.

‘Remember,’ the girl said as Lucy reached to accept the gift. ‘It’s a special one, just for you. Keep it for Christmas Day.’ She smiled at Lucy, then blinked. As she did so, Lucy was momentarily convinced the girl’s pupils disappeared, just leaving the milky eyeball. But when she looked again the eyes were fine. The girl quickly looked away to see if anyone else wanted a cracker. Lucy figured she’d

just been dazzled by a reflection off the sea.

'Thanks for the heads-up,' said Lucy as she joined Hobo again, looking the cracker over. He gave her a momentary smile.

'You're a bit off the boil, today,' he replied.

'Yeah, sorry. Mum's been all uptight about Christmas, working Dad and I into the ground.'

'Did you see the branding?'

Lucy looked at her cracker, then back at the stall. The area around it had cleared a bit, now that the kids had accepted that they'd only be given one cracker each. *Big Bang Crackers*, she read. It rang a bell from somewhere.

'Of course!' Lucy burst. 'The same name as that theatre company.' Hobo gave her a thumbs up. The stand's banner claimed that there was *a surprise in every cracker, and it's out of this world!* 'Could just be marketing speak, I guess.' She looked at Hobo somewhat hopefully. Couldn't they have a quiet Christmas?

'But their eyes,' he said, and Lucy knew she hadn't imagined it.

Crackers had been handed out to all the kids. The greedy ones, pushing for a second, had been skilfully sent on their way. The pretty cracker girls then came together around the pop-up stand. Lucy realised this was like the end of the pantomime at school and

started to back away, pulling Hobo with her. The girls linked hands, via a Big Bang Christmas cracker each, and then leaned outwards. The tug as they leaned back was enough to pull their crackers. There was a huge explosion of light and sound, which knocked all the kids in the vicinity to the ground – Lucy and Hobo included. When they picked themselves up again, they found that the pop-up stand and the girls had all vanished.

‘More magic,’ muttered Hobo.

The rest of the kids were thrilled and amazed, like they had been at the end of *Aladdin*. They wowed and whooped and cheered, even though the stand and the girls had gone.

‘Yeah,’ agreed Lucy. ‘And this time I don’t buy it at all.’

Children rarely follow instructions when unsupervised. Once the Big Bang stand had disappeared, the crowd of kids all started to pull their crackers, eager to find their ‘out of this world’ surprise. Lucy and Hobo, being already suspicious about the crackers, held on to theirs. But Lucy knew that, even if they weren’t suspicious, the puffs of green smoke being emitted with every big bang would have been more than enough to make her and Hobo pause.

The bang seemed to be it, though. No paper hat,

no awful jokes, no trinkets as far as they could see. Just the very loud bang and the green smoke – which dispersed quickly on the sea breeze. The cracker halves were being discarded on the ground. Lucy was having none of that.

‘Oi! Pick up your rubbish!’

A few of the kids closest by looked her way. Their faces were glazed over, as if they’d been hypnotized. Lucy shuddered as she saw their eyeballs momentarily disappear in a haze of green, before returning. Then the children seemed to switch back to normal and headed straight off, presumably back to their homes. No one was complaining about the lack of toy or joke or paper hat. In fact, it seemed like they’d all completely forgotten about the crackers. Lucy tried in vain to get some of her classmates, at least, to pick up their discarded remains. It was like they all had an inability to see what she could see.

Once left on their own, Lucy and Hobo both had the same thought. They bent to examine some of the cracker remains. Whatever they were, they certainly weren’t traditional Christmas crackers. Beneath the shiny cardboard exterior was some sort of sealed container (not quite plastic, not quite metal, according to Hobo). The containers had all split along the middle and separated. Presumably this was what produced the loud bang. There was no sign of the usual cracker ‘fuse’, anyway. Lucy looked

at the unused cracker she still held. The bulging middle section was certainly sealed, there was no way in from either end. She was careful not to do anything that might accidentally set it off.

There was a waxy residue on the inside of the used crackers. *This is probably from the smoke*, Lucy thought. It certainly smelled nasty when they were up close like that. After touching it, both Lucy and Hobo found their fingertips became irritated and had to swill them off in a puddle. Not a safe substance, then.

‘Lucky they were pulled out here in the open air,’ said Hobo. ‘I reckon that smoke could have done serious damage if the crackers were used in a packed family dining room.’

‘You think it could kill the person?’

Hobo shrugged. ‘It’s certainly more like a grenade than a Christmas cracker, don’t you reckon?’

‘Big bang. It said so on the banner.’

‘Yeah,’ he agreed. ‘Merry booming Christmas.’

‘So, what do we do with this lot? Report it to the council as hazardous waste?’

A rustling, crumpling sound made them look again at the cracker remains. As they watched, each piece was curling up, folding in on itself and reducing down to nothing. It was like watching clingfilm held over a Bunsen burner. Something about the materials must have reacted with the air,

causing a fast decay and dispersal. Before they knew it, nothing remained.

No sooner had the cracker remains dissolved away to nothing than Lucy's phone started ringing.

'Mum,' she sighed, looking at the flashing screen. Lucy answered the call and was immediately subjected to a tirade about being out enjoying herself when there were mince pies to be made and presents to wrap. She held the phone at arm's length to allow Hobo to share in her seasonal joy.

'Mum? MUM?' she yelled. 'Breathe!' The voice halted. 'I'm heading home now, don't worry.' Lucy hung up. 'Christmas,' she grumbled. 'What a lot of hard work.' She smiled at Hobo and indicated where the crackers had been. 'What are we gonna do next, then, about all this lot?'

Hobo shrugged enthusiastically. 'Let's keep our ones safe somewhere. Don't let them get pulled, whatever we do. I guess we'll just have to keep an eye out for anything suspicious with the rest of the kids. That whole eye thing, could just be nothing, I suppose?'

He didn't sound very convinced, and Lucy gave him a look which told him that she wasn't either.

'Eyes open, ears open, mouth shut. Standard procedure – Lethbridge-Stewart stuff.'

They nodded firmly to one another, then went

their separate ways.

Whatever else was going on in the world, the next few days passed uneventfully in Ogmores-by-Sea. Hobo was much less restricted than Lucy, owing to his family being a lot more chilled out and his mum having to put in extra hours on duty to cover Christmas leave from the regular police officers. Hobo texted Lucy a lot of updates at first – which were, basically, ‘nothing to report’. She was stuck listening to *Now That’s What I Call Christmas* on repeat, while polishing glasses, wrapping presents and writing last minute cards for the neighbours. She wasn’t allowed to deliver the cards, though. She could tell Mum didn’t trust her not to nip off once she was outside.

Lucy tried to get her own back when decorating the Christmas cake with Dad. She was cutting out fondant shapes and he wasn’t paying that much attention, so she mixed in a few Hallowe’en bats and brooms for a laugh. Then Mum came in to check half way and Lucy felt bad for getting Dad into trouble.

Very soon it was Christmas Eve. Conall, Dean and Hannah arrived in time for a late lunch and the house was filled with mirth and drinks and food, not to mention the squeals of little Hannah as she investigated her grandparents’ house. It made Lucy think of her own grandad. She’d been a little older

than Hannah when she'd got to know him, but visiting Grandad had always held that same sense of thrill and wonder.

The visiting Londoners were charmed by Ogmores' rugged beauty. Mid-afternoon, they all went for a walk to the seafront. Conall stayed behind to prepare his special chili con carne for dinner. Lucy wanted to stay behind also at first, but then she realised this was her first chance since Saturday to see what was going on in the village, so she went along instead.

She sent Hobo a text telling him what she was up to. On returning home, later, though, all she could do was repeat what he'd previously texted her: nothing to report. There'd been a few kids out and about that she recognised from school, but always with parents in tow, and none of them acting suspiciously in any way. She even started to wonder if Hobo's throwaway comment had been right after all? Maybe the whole thing *was* just nothing?

Christmas Day was little Hannah's day, really. Lucy was relieved. It took all the pressure off her. She was no longer the youngest in the family, no longer the focus of everyone's attention. She found she could relax and enjoy herself a lot more – which was exactly what she needed. She grabbed her laptop from her room and uploaded her new SIMS game

from Con and Dean. She'd been waiting for that since February, even though it had only been out since June. She gave them both an extra special hug.

After a lazy breakfast, the phone calls began. Grandpa Sam, Nick, Cousin Gordy. All to wish everyone a Happy Christmas. All to be passed from person to person for an individual chat. Except Grandpa Sam, he just spoke to Mum and then had to go. By the time they'd opened the rest of the presents, cleared away the wrapping paper and sat down to eat, Christmas lunch had become Christmas dinner. Poor Hannah fell asleep over her pudding. Dean popped her upstairs to Lucy's room, where they'd set up the travel cot, and Lucy went up with her too. She appreciated a bit of quiet time, and she'd watch over Hannah while she played her SIMS for a bit.

Lucy knew she'd done the right thing. She felt happy and contented, and the sounds filtering up from downstairs suggested the grown-ups were appreciating being able to let their hair down a bit more, now, too. Her mood was interrupted by her phone chirruping into life. Hobo. She quickly grabbed it and answered it with a harsh whisper.

'What are you calling for? You'll wake Hannah!'

'Sorry,' he replied. 'I didn't know.'

Lucy realised as soon as she spoke that she was being unfair. She was actually annoyed with herself

for not putting her phone on silent. Thankfully Hannah hadn't woken.

'What is it?'

'It's the kids with the crackers. As far as I can see, they're all returning to the seafront. Now.'

Before Lucy could even respond, there was a huge bang from downstairs. With alarm, Lucy realised she didn't have a clue where her Big Bang cracker had ended up, but she hoped to goodness that wasn't it being pulled downstairs.

'Gees, you okay?'

'Gotta go, Hobo. I'll join you on the seafront, soon as.'

The noise had woken Hannah. Lucy scooped her up and dashed downstairs. Bursting into the living room, she was greeted by a foul smell and the faint vestiges of green smoke. Conall, Dean and Mum were lying unconscious across the easy chair and sofa. There was no sign of Dad. Trying not to panic, she placed Hannah between Con and Dean on the sofa then rushed to the front bay windows and threw them open. Immediately the room was filled with the fresh chill of the sea air. She threw open the conservatory doors the other side of the dining table as well, to try to create a through-draught.

Frantically she gave Mum, then Dean, then Conall a rough shake to try to wake them. Conall came to first, coughing and spluttering, but aware

enough to know that his daughter needed comforting next to him. Lucy quickly ran them each a big glass of water. Conall downed his immediately, then set to rousing Dean.

Dean groggily opened his eyes. 'What happened?' He shivered with the cold.

'Did Dad have a special cracker?' Lucy asked, trying not to sound frantic.

Conall nodded. 'He found it in the box. Mum suddenly realised she'd forgotten to set any during the meal. Hang on, where is Dad?'

'Right,' Lucy replied, grabbing her hoodie from the back of the dining chair where she'd left it earlier. 'You stay here and make sure Mum's okay. Leave Dad to me.'

Lucy was immediately struck by how dark it was outside. It was past sundown anyway, but this felt different. This was darker than normal. The streetlights gave some assistance, and in the distance, Lucy could see the washed-out coloured lights along the seafront. As her eyes adjusted she spotted the large group of children gathered there, and to one side of the group was her dad, silhouetted against the backdrop of the sea. She rushed off after him.

Instinct made Lucy cautious. As she approached the seafront she didn't call out to her dad. She kept

within shaded areas where possible and crept the last hundred metres or so. She couldn't see Hobo anywhere and he hadn't answered her text asking where he was. Suddenly, a hand clamped over her mouth and she found herself tugged backwards into the deeper shadows.

Lucy spun round and shoved her attacker away. Hobo staggered back into the wall and an old dustbin clattered under him. His hands shot up in panic and Lucy looked back towards her dad and the group of children. There was no visible reaction.

'Sorry,' Hobo said. 'I guess I panicked a bit.'

'Next time try hissing at me, or just replying to my text.'

'Battery's dead,' he replied. 'That bang, when I phoned you. I take it your dad pulled the cracker?' Lucy nodded. 'I saw him. He looks possessed, just like all the others. And they've all reverted to how they were just after the crackers exploded on Saturday. Merry Christmas, by the way.'

Lucy smiled at him. 'Thanks. Why's it so dark tonight? Thick cloud?'

'Dunno, too dark to see.'

'Hang on.' Lucy looked upwards, gripped by a thought. 'We can't see any stars, but even on the darkest nights you can see if there's a blanket of cloud above. And there is, out at sea. But up above us here it's like—'

‘Like something’s floating there, blotting out the sky.’

With a hum of electricity, the whole area was suddenly brightly floodlit. From the pattern of the lights as they beamed down, Lucy could tell there was some sort flying saucer hovering a few hundred metres above them. The beams were lighting the group of children and her dad, who were all looking up into the beams, raising their hands expectantly as if to a parent, requesting to be picked up. What was this? Alien abduction? She looked at Hobo and chewed her lip.

‘We’ve got to do something before they all get abducted.’

Hobo pulled his Big Bang cracker from his inside pocket. ‘Worth the risk, you reckon? Get one of us on the inside?’

‘But we don’t know if there’s any way back. Hobo, you can’t.’

‘Come on, Luce, I’ve got experience with possession. That’s gotta count for something, eh?’

Lucy grudgingly agreed and promised Hobo she’d do all she could to keep him as much himself as she could. He grasped the cracker with both hands and pulled it apart.

The bang, that close, was tremendous. But still the others on the promenade didn’t look their way.

‘Hobo?’

His face was rapt. His eyes had turned milky white all over, but his pupils didn’t reappear like those of the other children had. This was different.

‘Hobo,’ Lucy repeated. ‘Are you still there?’

He opened his mouth. ‘There is resistance.’ It was his voice, but clearly not his own words. ‘Why am I not totally absorbed?’

Lucy only now noticed a bulge on Hobo’s upper forehead, something throbbing just under the skin. It had a faint greenish tint, visible through Hobo’s hairless head in the bright lights from the spaceship above. Was this what the cracker had contained? An alien mind parasite? Out of this world, indeed. Lucy felt her stomach turn, but she managed to hold things together.

‘Who are you? What are you? And why have you come here?’

‘We have never found the need to name ourselves. But humans would understand us best as protist nemavores, amoeba. We have come here because we need human children.’

‘Lucy?’ This was Hobo struggling against the thing that was trying to control his mind or take over his body. ‘I can feel the alien in my mind, see their plans.’

‘It said they need human children, Hobo. What for?’

‘Host bodies.’ He was clearly struggling and the lump on his skull was pulsating angrily. ‘Refresh the gene stock in their matter manipulator.’

Hobo’s posture changed as the creature took back control. ‘Our hosts need to be willing. Children can be more easily manipulated. And they last longer.’

‘You have my dad, too.’

Hobo’s face sagged. Lucy wasn’t sure what was happening. Then her friend’s body spoke again.

‘I have sensed him. Our leader, no less. Mature humanoids do not often succumb. He must have been unusually susceptible.’

‘Half a bottle of wine, I expect,’ mumbled Lucy to herself.

‘However, the body is unlikely to provide much support and longevity. He will be disposed of once we are back on board our ship.’ Hobo turned and walked over to join the rest of the crowd in the light.

Lucy was appalled. She followed Hobo. She knew she had to act fast to save everyone. But what could she do?

With a hazy green glow, the pantomime actors and cracker girls reappeared on the seafront. Even from some distance away, Lucy could see that this time they all looked sick and diseased. The green glow spread out towards the gathered children. Lucy’s dad strode over to the decrepit arrivals. She could

see him drawing deep breaths within the gaseous glow as he went.

‘Come,’ he called to the others. ‘Breathe in the fumes. We must complete the conversion before transfer.’

Lucy watched, frantically hoping inspiration would strike. There was no way of knowing if the conversion would be reversible. If it wasn’t, then Hobo, her dad and all the kids couldn’t be rescued. Her dad started to speak again, this time to the diseased figures.

‘You creatures are near termination. The gene pool has been over-stretched. You have delivered your final service, our new genetic source.’ The synthetic bodies reached out a pleading hand, then seemed to just flake away like withered leaves on the sea breeze.

Lucy’s dad turned and gestured to everyone. For the first time since she got to the seafront, she saw his face. She nearly screamed. There was a large green blob on his forehead – the amoeba leader, according to Hobo. This one hadn’t even made it under the skin. But her dad’s face showed he was completely under its control.

Lucy started to cough. The mist was slowly getting thicker and she had to back away to keep out of its reach. She pulled her hood up, to try to use it like a face mask, but there was something inside it

stopping her. She reached back and pulled out... a Christmas cracker! An ordinary one. It must have fallen into her hood when the family were dishing them out earlier. Could this be any good to her now? *Depends what's inside it*, she thought.

She grabbed an end in each hand and pulled. As she did so, her foot stepped into a divot on the grass and she stumbled backwards. The cracker went off, which it's usual bang. But Lucy hadn't banked on the green gas being flammable. The spark from her cracker was enough and suddenly, from her vantage point on the ground, she saw the whole green cloud disappear in a microsecond, with a whoosh of orange flame.

There was a terrible scream from her dad. Lucy was immediately on her feet again and rushing to him. He was lying, prone, on the ground. All the kids had collapsed also. Lucy hoped to goodness that none of them had been hurt by the flames. The green jelly from her dad's forehead was now lying on the ground to one side. It was crispy and dry, like seaweed from a sushi meal. It was still moving, though, and Lucy could hear a plaintive cry in the back of her mind, claiming that without the gas they will all die. Lucy bent to pick the large amoeba up and immediately felt its presence more strongly in her head.

'You,' it told her. 'Yes, you will do much better.'

Prepare to be absorbed into our genetic manipulator.'

'I don't think so,' she told it. 'You're dealing with a Lethbridge-Stewart, here. Protectors of the Earth.'

Her Christmas cracker had contained a set of nail clippers, and Lucy prodded and nipped at the crispy edge of the jelly in her hand with them.

With a few 'oohs' and 'aahs', the amoeboid leader begged for clemency.

'We underestimated the intelligence and adaptability of human children,' it said. Lucy wasn't entirely surprised when the leader revealed the source of its information and research. Much of what they assumed about humanity and the Earth was based on what they believed were broadcasts by the human leader. Lucy pointed out that the President of the United States was only one human leader, but they tended to shout the loudest.

'I don't understand,' she asked. 'Why do you just need children?'

'We cannot do much, physically, for ourselves, Lucy Wilson. We are amoeboid. Our technology is borrowed. The spaceship you see above was found discarded on our home world. Its operation is based around the standard humanoid form. The spaceship contains a matter manipulator, and our amoeboid forms were able to take over the new bodies it created. But quickly they started to die. We realised that the unit depends on a regular update of the

genetic pattern. We have periodically roamed the galaxy since, to search out suitable new species.' The leader further explained that they found juveniles worked better for their needs than adults. And the gene pool lasted longer.

Lucy's next question was obvious to her, but she was surprised by the response.

'Why don't you build robots instead?'

'I do not understand, Lucy Wilson? What are *robots*?'

Hobo staggered over to join Lucy, his amoeba now quivering on the outside of his head and clearly struggling to hold on.

'Hobo, you okay?'

He nodded. His eyeballs had returned to normal. 'I could hear your conversation in my head. I suspect we all could. I like your suggestion, but I'm thinking if their technology is borrowed and the ship didn't contain any robots, that's why they don't understand the concept.'

'They're only clever enough to use what they've got, not extend the concepts?'

'Seems likely,' Hobo agreed.

The voice returned to her head. 'Help us, Lucy Wilson, please?'

Lucy looked sternly at the crispy amoeba in her hand. 'You see,' she said. 'That's all it needed in the first place.'

*

The interior of the spaceship was everything the jelly amoeba creatures weren't. It was dull, grey, hard and sharp. A few humanoid 'hosts' remained at the control posts. Lucy could see that it wasn't very comfortable for them to live in and operate, even though it was designed for them. The bridge had been temporarily vented of the green gas and filled with air instead, to allow Lucy and Hobo to breathe. Hobo's 'host' had now left him.

To one side of the bridge was the matter manipulator. It looked like a large vat or tank, filled with gloop, and a series of booths connected to it via rubber tubes. Like the rest of what they'd seen, it was purely functional. There was no beauty or art to any of it. Lucy was convinced this ship must have originated from some aggressive, warlike species. She hoped she'd never get to meet them, whoever they were.

Lucy placed the leader in its ceremonial bowl, as directed. There it could breathe the gas again, and its injuries would heal. She watched it as it frolicked happily. Then it spoke.

'Show me these robots.'

'The rest of the children, and my dad, will be released, unharmed?'

'You have my word as leader, Lucy Wilson.'

Lucy pulled out her phone. She still had a 4G

signal. Nice. She opened the YouTube app and pulled up some videos of real and fictional robots in operation.

‘We will transfer images from the device onto our main screen,’ said the leader. Lucy selected a video. The image on the ship’s main screen showed the seashore below, with all the bodies still lying unconscious. As Lucy played the video on her phone, the screen image changed to YouTube.

After several videos, the leader asked Lucy to stop. The screen changed again. Blueprints appeared there. Robot design and construction information.

‘Yes,’ it said. ‘I believe we can construct one of these.’

Hobo pointed out that the leader’s gas-filled globe would sit securely on the shoulders of the robot, like a head. And then afterwards they could get the robot to make more like it.

‘You just let them keep going until you have all you need,’ Hobo said, with a grin. Lucy hoped that wouldn’t amount to an army, but she kept her fears to herself.

‘Thank you, both of you. We have a way forward.’

‘Season of goodwill, and all that,’ quipped Hobo. He’d barely got the words out when the two friends found themselves beamed back to the seafront, below.

Lucy and Hobo immediately looked up, but the

spaceship had already gone. There above them once again was the night sky. All around them the kids of Ogmores started waking, shocked and frightened, unaware what they were doing on the seafront and clearly themselves once again. The area was then invaded by concerned parents and relatives. Thankfully, no one was looking for answers, only to find their wandering children.

Lucy spotted her dad and rushed to help him up. He was very woozy.

‘Dad? You okay?’

‘Mr Wilson, Albert? It’s Hobo. Can you hear me?’

‘Wuh?’ Lucy’s dad blinked at them both, blearily.

Lucy had an idea. ‘No father can resist these at Christmas.’ She smiled at Hobo’s confusion, as she found the cracker joke in her trouser pocket. ‘Here’s one for you, Dad. Why was Santa’s helper depressed? He had low elf esteem!’

Lucy’s dad responded to the awful pun, groggily muttering that he must remember that one for the office.

‘I’m glad I don’t work where he works,’ said Hobo. Lucy grinned at the both of them, then placed the paper hat from her cracker on her dad’s head.

‘What am I doing down at the front?’ he asked, rapidly becoming more lucid. ‘It’s freezing. Why would I come out without a coat on?’

‘We found you down here, Dad.’

'Blimey. Mum's gonna kill me. I'm not drinking again this Christmas.'

Lucy and Hobo guided him homewards. A knowing glance passed between them as Lucy's dad started to hum *A Spaceman Came Travelling*. They smiled and joined in.

**PAST, PRESENT AND
YET TO COME.**

Chris Lynch

At the very edge of time and space, where our universe ends and there is nothing but the howling emptiness of the Black Void, that thing that is nothing and yet is the canvas on which our reality is painted, there is a place called "The Boneyard".

It is a place where heroes go to die in peace, their victories won and their labours done. There, in the moment between the final tick and the ultimate tock of the clock that measures all time, there is a hope that they might know a small moment of tranquillity and reflect on all the things they have done.

It is the least the universe can do for its heroes.

But "hero" is a strange word. It can mean a lot of different things.

And some heroes aren't quite so keen to tick tock off like they're supposed to...

The Crone had been in the Boneyard for a long time. Of course "The Crone" wasn't her real name. The spirits of the Boneyard, the invisible servants who saw to their heroes every need, knew her by many names. They called her The Crone. The Witch. The Woman with Two Faces. The Guardian of the Last Bridge. The Beast of Ogmore. The Terror of Mars. The Anti-General. The Yeti Queen of Ancient Gleet Rigel. Oh yes, they had names for her.

When you're three hundred and eighty eight years old, it's hard not to pick up a reputation, and

a few good stories.

The spirits liked stories. They were what sustained them. They understood that stories were, and always had been, the building blocks of all reality. From the very first moment that an electron called itself an electron, whizzed around the outside of a thing it named a proton and then began to tell all its friends what it had been up to, the rules of everything had been laid down through the telling of stories.

This is why, you can rest assured, good guys always win.

In the end.

It's also why, with so little time to play with, the spirits had chosen to make the moment in between the last tick and the last tock of the great clock be Christmas Eve. There is no time better for a little nostalgia, a little looking back before all the looking forward of Christmas and the New Year. There's also no better time for a good ghost story. Ghosts from the past, ghosts from the present, and ghosts from the future were welcomed, one and all.

The Crone had come to hate Christmas and although she had met ghosts on more than one occasion, she curiously still refused to really believe in them. Perhaps if she had, she might have been a little scared the day a boy who by now would be long dead visited the Boneyard in a magic box that

could fly through space and time.

The Crone woke up as she always did, right at the tick. Time in the Boneyard was a loop, jumping backwards to the last tick in the fraction of a fraction of a split-moment before the last tock was heard. Everyone remembered what they had been doing, but everything else reset itself and everyone woke up once more just as they had done on their very first day in the Boneyard.

The only thing that ever seemed to change was just how long it was between the tick and the tock. Sometimes there was barely enough time to sit up in bed, other times days would go by before the Boneyard and its inhabitants were catapulted back up the timestream.

Mad Old Jackson swore blind that he'd once experienced eighteen years, four months, three weeks and two days between the tick and the tock. Nobody believed him, of course. When you go around with a name like "Mad Old Jackson" it's hard not to pick up a reputation.

For simplicity, and to avoid arguments with Mad Old Jackson, all the inhabitants of the Boneyard just called however much time they had "a day". A day that was forever Christmas Eve.

The Crone needed her staff to walk at any great speed, which is why she kept it by the bed. A simple

shaft of gnarled old wood, a metal band around its middle, the Crone guarded it fiercely, as it was the only real possession that she had. Leaning on it, she made her way from the small but comfortable bed that the spirits afforded her to the small but functional bathroom.

Each person's quarters in the Boneyard were styled to their personal tastes. Some were lavish, some were homely. Some, in keeping with the beliefs of their inhabitants, were modelled after the afterlife that person had always expected they would have. There were more than a few hells, as a consequence. "Hero" is a funny word, after all, and the spirits of the Boneyard could be quite mischievous in their interpretation of what a "moment of quiet reflection" fully entailed. Some people do their best thinking under the strangest of circumstances.

The Crone's quarters were exceptionally Spartan. A bed. A chair. A bookcase (empty). A desk (bare except for an unfinished Rubik's cube). One window, curtains drawn and never opened. The walls and floor were bare, as if neither art nor carpets had ever been invented.

The bathroom, at least, had the usual fixtures and fittings, all in a dull brushed chrome. If the decor had a name it would have been "low tech military", although the Crone herself gave off an air at all times that made it clear she was the type of person who

did not fit well into structures or hierarchy. This was perhaps why the spirits had made her quarters such a blank canvas; they didn't really know what to do with her. Or perhaps it was because the Crone didn't naturally take to tranquillity and spent most days, if they proved long enough, testing the security of the Boneyard with repeated escape attempts.

Leaning on her staff in the bathroom the Crone stared into the mirror, a much older woman than she remembered ever being stared back at her. A fringe benefit of living backwards and forwards at the edge of time was that you didn't age, which was for the best as The Crone didn't look as if she had one more day left in her. Her hair, once dark, was now a mad frenzy of silver and grey. It hung down over one side of her face, covering the eye patch that sat over her left eye and the deep scar that knew the story of how she lost it. Her dark skin was patterned with wrinkles to go with the scars, a complex map of a long life that had seen more than its fair share of danger and death. She smiled a crooked smile, examining her teeth, glad to see that they at least were all still there. She wasn't allowed a toothbrush anymore; she guessed the spirits must somehow clean her teeth when she slept. She didn't like that.

Today felt like a good day to escape from the end of everything.

However, there was one thing that was different

in the mirror this morning, which of course should have been impossible. It took the Crone a moment to notice it, mostly because it couldn't possibly have been there.

But it was.

There was a boy in the mirror.

The Crone spun around, whipping her staff up from the floor and bringing the tip up fast under the boy's chin. It stopped less than a centimetre from the boy's throat, quivering in the air with violent potential.

'Hello, Lucy,' said the boy, swallowing nervously. 'It's good to see you?'

'Who the hell is Lucy?'

'Lima Bravo this is Umbrella, what's your status?'

Major Lethbridge-Stewart peeked out of cover, then quickly ducked back in again.

'Well, I can confirm the presence of an absolutely massive and terrifying spaceship over London, does that count?'

'Say again Lima Bravo?'

The major sighed. 'Contact confirmed. I have eyes on the target.'

'Roger that Lima Bravo.'

The spaceship was indeed massive and terrifying. Office blocks rose up on every side of the major's vantage point on the deserted London street,

and what little sky they didn't obscure was blocked entirely by the underside of the ship. Adjusting the goggles built into her helmet, the Major studied it carefully.

'Umbrella, do you copy?'

'Go ahead, Lima Bravo.'

'I'm seeing at least twelve different alien technologies on this thing, only a few I recognise.'

'I make it... seventeen.'

'Who is this?' asked the voice of Umbrella urgently. 'Please identify yourself.'

The major closed her eyes for just a second and offered up a silent prayer. When aliens turned up, when there was a very good chance that your entire planet was about to be ransacked, enslaved, burnt to ash or worse, there was really only one person you wanted to hear from. The stupid helmets made everyone's voice sound the same, and so she prayed it was him.

'Hotel Kilo, also on site.'

The major breathed a sigh of relief.

'Thought you couldn't make it, Hobo?'

'Got a lift off a friend.'

Major Lucy Lethbridge-Stewart grinned. Those aliens? They were in real trouble now.

'Lucy, it's me?' said the boy incredulously. 'It's Hobo?'

The Crone looked at the-boy-who-called-himself-Hobo, her one good eye moving slowly over every inch of him like a predator stalking a herd.

‘No,’ she said gruffly. ‘Still don’t know you.’

Hobo took a step backward. Barely fourteen, he and the height and bulk of a much older boy. He was dressed in jeans and a plain, dark hoodie. His head was completely bald and his eyebrows missing, alopecia having robbed him of his hair. The Crone took a step forward, keeping her staff at Hobo’s throat.

‘You’re different,’ she croaked. ‘Unusual.’

‘I get that a lot. I did try a wig once, remember?’

‘Not that. I mean you weren’t here yesterday.’

‘No, I just arrived.’

‘There are never new people,’ said the Crone. ‘Not here.’

That was one of the other things about the Boneyard; everyone seemed to have been here from the beginning, from very first last tick.

‘Well, I’m here,’ replied Hobo. ‘So, now there are. Things are only impossible until somebody does them.’

The Crone smiled. ‘Well then, Mr Hobo, let’s see if you can manage two impossible things before breakfast, shall we?’

The Crone lowered her staff and shuffled off towards the door.

'I'll lead, you follow.'

'Typical Lucy move,' said Hobo.

It took Hobo and Major Lucy Lethbridge-Stewart eight minutes to climb the stairs to the top of the office block, find the access ladder and clamber up to the roof. For Lucy, a new personal best, whereas Hobo had barely broken a sweat.

'Don't you train?' asked Hobo, waiting for Lucy to catch her breath.

'Not as much... as you... clearly...' replied Lucy, pulling off her helmet and dropping it to the ground. Her Umbrella uniform felt heavy, with too much equipment in pockets and strapped to her belt and across her back.

Hobo flipped up his helmet visor. Still no eyebrows, Lucy noticed, but the same kind eyes regardless.

'You need to train, Lucy. You can't get by on gut instinct and luck forever you know.'

Lucy straightened up, taking one last deep lungful of air.

'You've literally been telling me that for a decade, Hobo. You're going to have to admit defeat eventually.'

Hobo looked up at the ship overhead. It stretched as far as they could see in every direction, a ramshackle combination of technologies that

blended into and overlapped one another. As they watched, a ripple passed over the surface of the thing, reconfiguring and replacing and changing the arrangement of the mismatched machinery.

‘Let’s see how we get on today,’ said Hobo grimly. ‘Live through this one, and I just might concede.’

‘What’s it doing?’ asked Lucy. ‘It’s changing.’

‘Evolving?’ suggested Hobo. ‘Adapting? Whatever it’s doing it’s probably not good for us.’

‘When is it ever?’

‘Fair point,’ replied Hobo. He unsnapped a cylinder from the back of his belt and began twisting a large dial on one side.

‘I see you got an extra stripe,’ said Lucy, poking the Umbrella rank insignia on Hobo’s shoulder.

‘Yeah,’ said Hobo, unable to hide some small amount of pride in his promotion.

‘After the Tokyo mission. Feels right, you know? I’m ready.’ Lucy smiled earnestly at her friend. She’d always believed he’d run the country one day, now he was on his way to running the world. ‘I’ll be calling you Brigadier soon.’

‘The Umbrella’s getting bigger, Lucy. It needs good people at the top. It needs you.’

‘I’m happy as I am, Hobo,’ replied Lucy, pulling a matching cylinder from the back of her belt. ‘I was born into this thing, I didn’t choose it. I’ve seen what

it does to people, in the end.'

Lucy glanced down at Hobo's cylinder.

'Twenty-eight.'

'What?'

'Turn the dial to twenty-eight, Lucy.'

Lucy twisted the dial on her cylinder. 'Thanks.'

'You really don't train at all, do you?' Hobo raised his arm, aiming his cylinder at the underside of the vast ship that hung motionless above them. Lucy did the same.

'Wait, we'll go after the next ripple,' said Lucy.

'You're sure?'

'Gut instinct.'

Hobo rolled his eyes. 'Well, it's got us this far.'

Another ripple passed overhead, the configuration of the ship changing again.

Lucy squeezed the cylinder tight and, with a sudden pop and cloud of white gas, a metal cable burst out and flew up towards the underside of the alien ship. Hobo squeezed his too, a second cable snaking up after the first. The cables hit home and, a second later, the cylinders let out a high pitched whine and both Lucy and Hobo were hoisted up into the air, heading towards the ship.

'Is this the biggest ship we've ever broken into?' shouted Lucy, the sound of rushing air and the whine of her grapple filling her ears.

'Yeah, I think so,' Hobo called back, his eyes fixed

on the vessel above.

‘Cool,’ said Lucy. ‘Cool.’

The door of the Crone’s room led out onto the main atrium, just like every door of every other room in the Boneyard. “Atrium” however was somewhat too small a word for what the place actually was. The atrium was so vast that it was impossible to see from one side to the other; where you would have expected the other side of the room to be there was a horizon, and where you would have expected the corner of the room to be there was just the slightest curve as the wall bent inwards. Every few feet there was a door, the gateway to one of The Boneyard’s inhabitants personalised spaces. As for the atrium itself, it was a pristine white space interspersed with a seemingly endless array of chairs, sofas, occasional tables, cushions, rugs, pots of steaming tea and plates of biscuits. Everything was bedecked in Christmas paraphernalia and there were more Christmas trees than had possibly ever grown in all of time.

The easiest way to imagine what the atrium felt like was to imagine a planet turned inside out and then filled with the contents of every grandmother’s living room ever from all of history, all trapped like air in a balloon.

Above them, the ceiling was entirely dominated

by a single giant clock. It had just two numbers, a one and a zero, and a single hand that was moving slowly from the one down to the zero. No matter where you stood in the atrium, you could always see the clock, counting slowly down. The hand was moving quickly today. It would be a short day.

Thankfully, it wasn't far to Hobo's spaceship.

'What... is... that?' asked the Crone.

'My ship,' replied Hobo nervously. 'Well, not mine exactly. It had to borrow it.'

The Crone turned and fixed Hobo with a withering stare. If she had had two eyes, she could probably have turned him to stone where he stood.

'It's a box,' she said sharply.

'It's not just a box,' said Hobo defensively. 'It's a Punch and Judy box.'

The Crone pushed past Hobo and headed back towards the door to her room.

'You're wasting my time,' she said bitterly. 'Which is saying something, given that it's been Christmas Eve here forever.'

'Lucy, wait!' called Hobo. 'Please!'

The Crone stopped, half way between the atrium and her room.

'I'm not Lucy,' she growled. 'I don't know you.'

'Then ask me!' shouted Hobo. His whole body was shaking and he could feel tears like pinpricks at the backs of his eyes. He forced his trembling hands into

the pockets of this hoodie and twisted the material tight between his fingers.

‘Ask me, please. Ask me because... because I’ve come right across time and space in a box, a very small box I might add, looking for you. Earth is in danger, real danger, and I need help! I need help so much that I asked anyone, and everyone, right across the whole universe and only one person answered. One person gave me a chance and the chance that they gave me is you!’

The Crone tightened her grip on her staff.

‘Earth,’ she whispered.

‘Please,’ said Hobo desperately.

The Crone turned once more and if Hobo’s eyes hadn’t been dewy with tears he might have noticed that, somehow, the Crone looked suddenly a little younger. A light, a spark, somewhere deep inside, had been rekindled. If even half the stories about the Crone were true, lighting that spark meant that you should, immediately, stand well back.

The Crone stamped her staff on the ground, a loud snap that echoed back from across the atrium.

‘Are you clever?’ asked the Crone. ‘You look clever.’

Hobo wiped his eyes on the sleeve of his hoodie.

‘I’m a fourteen-year-old boy who just flew a puppet show to the edge of reality, what do you think?’

The Crone banged her staff on the floor again. The echo came back, quicker this time than before.

‘Then tell me something,’ asked the Crone. ‘We’re standing in a room so large that we can’t see the other side of it.’ She slammed her staff once more on to the hard floor, cocking her head as the echo came back. ‘So, where’s that echo coming from?’

Hobo didn’t have time to answer as, in the distance, something began moving rapidly towards them with a sound like grating chains. Chairs flew up into the air, tables toppled, all knocked aside by the invisible force.

‘What is it?’ asked Hobo.

‘The spirits,’ answered the Crone. ‘The things that run this place.’

The sound of clanking, clinking, grating chains got closer as more furniture was tossed up into the air, landing with a crash in the distance. An invisible wave of force was approaching, knocking aside everything in its path.

‘And why, exactly, did you let them know we were here?’ said Hobo, a note of panic in his voice.

The Crone grinned. ‘Testing a theory. Plus, I needed to know if you were one of them.’

Suddenly, something invisible snaked around Hobo’s legs and dragged him down to the floor. He landed hard on his front and was dragged quickly backward, away from the Crone and from his ship.

He reached out, trying to get hold of anything he could.

The rattling and clanking grew louder as a door flew open in the wall. Beyond it, the howling nothingness of the Black Void waited.

‘Lucy, help!’ screamed Hobo.

The Crone shrugged. ‘OK, so not one of them. Looks like it’s game on then,’ she said to herself, then stuck two fingers into her mouth and whistled.

A door burst open in the wall and out of it came tumbling the largest man that Hobo had ever seen. Eight or nine feet tall, five feet wide at the shoulder, with hands the size of car tyres. He was dressed in what looked like an enormous Victorian nightshirt, although it was possibly just the sails of a ship that had been stitched together. He had a huge red beard that hung down almost to his waist and a mass of bright red curly hair on top of his head.

The giant looked at Hobo, then at the Crone, then at Hobo again.

‘Is it Christmas?’ he asked.

‘Afraid not, Jackson,’ replied the Crone. ‘But if you wouldn’t mind...’

The Crone nodded in the direction of Hobo, who was still skidding across the atrium floor. Jackson took two colossal steps, catching up with Hobo in an instant, and scooped him up by the scruff of the neck. The invisible things held onto Hobo’s leg tight,

and Jackson shook him in mid-air to get them to let go.

‘Get out of it!’ he bellowed, and with a clank and a clatter the spirits moved off. They circled around in a pack, stalking their prey.

Jackson tossed Hobo through the air and he landed in a heap at the Crone’s feet. Nursing his one ankle, Hobo looked around, trying to pin down the source of the constantly clanking of chains.

‘What are they?’ he asked.

‘Stories,’ replied the Crone. ‘Histories. Reputation. Choices that were made and chances never taken. The chains we make in life...’

Hobo furrowed his brow. ‘That sounds familiar.’

The ventilation grate in the floor of the ship popped open, allowing Lucy and Hobo to clamber up. Lucy scanned the corridor in both directions while Hobo carefully replaced the grate.

‘You know,’ said Lucy. ‘If aliens ever figure out what a massive security risk ventilation shafts are, we’re going to be in trouble.’

A ripple ran down the corridor, transforming everything around them. The corridor got narrower and the grating disappeared.

‘Interesting,’ said Hobo, crouching down to examine the patch of floor where the grating had been. ‘Like it was never there.’

Lucy shook her head. "I really need to stop thinking out loud.

'I don't think it was you, exactly,' said Hobo. 'But have you noticed how each time the ship changes, it gets a little more advanced?'

'Oh yeah,' said Lucy, 'Absolutely. Like these err, these things...'

Lucy waved her hand around in no direction in particular.

Hobo sighed.

'OK, honestly, I lost track of what tech whoever these guys are have got about four or five changes ago. It's like this ship doesn't really exist or something.'

'Or something,' replied Hobo.

Lucy looked up and down the corridor again.

'This way,' she said, turning away from Hobo and heading off down the corridor.

'You're sure?'

Lucy tapped a finger to the side of her head. 'Lethbridge-Stewart radar. Always points directly towards danger and trouble – definitely this way.'

Hobo got up and followed Lucy. Danger and trouble pretty much summed her up.

The Punch and Judy show unfolded itself into existence in the car park of Ogmores sea front. It was a particular part of the way that it worked that

nobody would notice, except for the appearance of a few tatty fliers advertising the puppet show that simultaneously appeared on nearby lamp-posts.

Hobo popped out of the back of the box, forcibly ejected by the Crone.

He staggered a few paces, then straightened up, holding his hand against the small of back.

‘Must have... got taller since last time,’ he muttered to himself.

The Crone stepped out, leaning on her staff once more. She took the sea air in great lungfuls and looked around with a strange smile on her lips.

Hobo turned. ‘Welcome to Ogmore-by-sea,’ he said. ‘Population... dwindling.’

‘Ogmore,’ said The Crone wistfully. ‘That’s a name I haven’t heard in a very long time.’

‘So you do remember!’ said Hobo. ‘I knew it.’

The Crone didn’t answer, patting the side of the Punch and Judy box as she hobbled away up the car park.

‘Nice little ride,’ she called back over her shoulder, changing the subject. ‘Now, tell me about this... dwindling.’

Lucy and Hobo stopped at a junction between two corridors as the ship reconfigured itself around them. When the ripple had passed by, the junction was gone and they were facing a dead end.

‘Think it’s a defence mechanism?’ said Hobo, pressing his hand against the new wall that appeared in front of them. ‘Keeping us trapped?’ Lucy looked around, checking the floors, the walls, the ceiling.

‘No,’ she said. ‘I think you were right first time – this tech is just a little more advanced than before. It’s not defending itself, it’s evolving.’

‘Evolving?’

‘Yeah. Right now, let’s say we’re standing in ship version 1.0. The wave comes through and changes things, that’s version 1.1. And it keeps happening, faster and faster...’

‘Until?’

‘No idea,’ said Lucy. ‘But I do have a theory.’

Lucy pulled two cylinders off her belt, one from the left and one from the right, and snapped them together. With a twist, they lit up.

‘Whoa, whoa!’ said Hobo. ‘You know the blast radius on that?’

‘Worried you can’t outrun it, Mr. “You need to train more”?’

‘Worried about the somewhat important city right underneath us is more like it.’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Lucy, holding the bomb against the wall where it attached with a magnetic clang. ‘If I’m right, it’s never going off.’

‘And if you’re wrong?’

'Well, I don't want to live in a world where that's a possibility, do you?

The bomb bleeped. Ten seconds.

Nine.

Eight.

A ripple passed through, subtly changing the corridor around then again. Suddenly, Lucy and Hobo were in a room without doors. No way out. Lights blinked in the wall behind the bomb, pulsing in time with the countdown.

Six.

Five.

Four.

'Lucy?'

Three.

Two.

One.

Another ripple passed through the room. The bomb disappeared, swallowed up by the wall it had been attached to just as the wall itself receded, the tiny room-without-doors expanding into something much larger.

Lucy and Hobo spun around. The room had opened up into a large, circular space now. Shadows danced on the walls, cast by unseen lights. Shapes, morphing and changing as the ship did, until one shadow peeled itself away from the wall on freshly formed legs and walked, awkwardly at first,

towards Hobo and Lucy.

Arms sprouted from the torso, stretching down to where the shadow had tapered itself a waist. A head, little more than a dark flat egg at first, bubbled up from the torso. It inclined itself left and right, regarding Lucy and Hobo with eyes that simply were not there.

The egg split open, forming a mouth that was far too big and that curved upwards into a smile that was nothing like a smile at all.

‘Lucy,’ whispered Hobo, ‘What did you do?’

‘I got someone’s attention.’

Two more slits appeared in the egg, opening up where eyes should have been, showing nothing but the wall behind the creature. Watching Lucy and Hobo with its empty eyes, the thing spoke from its empty mouth.

‘Hello,’ it said.

‘Hello,’ replied Lucy. She took a step forward, pulling off her tactical gloves before reaching out one hand. ‘My name is Lucy and, well, you’re on my planet.’

The shadow-thing inclined its head, folding it over like a piece of paper, the eye slits popping open into circle shapes. It stared at Lucy’s hand.

‘It’s a greeting,’ explained Lucy. ‘You take my hand in yours.’

The creature straightened its head and the too

wide smile turned into a frown

‘We are unaware of your protocol,’ said the shadow-thing. ‘This is non-optimal.’

A ripple ran through the room and, without warning, the ship pitched forwards. Hobo and Lucy lost their footing for a moment as the interior of the ship changed once again, the clean metal plating and elegant technology giving way to rusted plates, heavy pipes, and exposed wiring that sparked and fizzed.

The shadow thing looked left and right, its eyes moving in two different directions at the same time.

‘What happened?’ asked Lucy.

‘We were unaware of your protocol,’ answered the shadow-thing. Its face achieved more definition as its eyes came back together, its mouth achieving more regular proportions. ‘We are now aware. We have optimised.’

‘I meant your ship,’ said Lucy, lurching into Hobo as the ship pitched to the side for a second time.

‘We optimised,’ replied the shadow-thing. ‘There are consequences, sometimes.’

Hobo followed the Crone up the road towards Ogmores itself. For an old lady from the end of time, she set quite a pace.

‘How many did you say again?’ she asked over

her shoulder.

'Thirteen,' replied Hobo. 'That I know of. There might have been others, people I didn't know. Lucy was last... that was when I started to ask for help.'

The Crone grunted something under her breath before asking 'And they just disappear?'

'Not exactly,' replied Hobo. 'They do disappear but it's not just like they are there one day and gone the next. It's like they were never there, ever. Like they've been erased from the world and from people's memories at the same time.'

'But you remember them?' asked the Crone.

'Yes,' said Hobo, finally catching up the Crone. 'Don't ask me why but... I remember them.'

'And the things you remember,' asked the Crone. 'How can you be sure that they're real?'

'What do you mean?' asked Hobo.

The Crone stopped. 'I mean,' she said. 'If a person only exists in your head and you have no physical evidence of them ever having had existed... how can you be sure that they were ever real at all?'

'I'm not mad,' said Hobo defensively. 'I'm not. I guard my mind.'

'Guard your mind,' mused the Crone. 'Hmm.'

'I know you're her,' said Hobo. 'You have to be.'

The Crone rolled her eyes. 'And why's that? Because whoever loaned you that box told you so?'

'No,' replied Hobo, looking down at his feet.

'Because the last person to disappear was Lucy. And if you're not her then, well... she's really gone.'

Lucy and Hobo collided with each other as the ship pitched backwards. The ship's hull creaked and groaned like a dying animal.

'We're falling, aren't we?' gasped Lucy.

'I'd say so.'

The shadow creature looked around, its empty eyes passing over the interior of the ship. It moved, not walking but somehow extended and contracting its legs like pistons, and placed the pointed tip of one arm onto the wall.

A ripple ran through the walls again, larger than any that Lucy or Hobo had seen before, a visible bending of the world that sent a stale wind across the room. Behind the ripple came another new version of the ship, a gleaming white version that shone with a strange and otherworldly light.

The ship suddenly levelled out. Lucy and Hobo tumbled to the floor together, quickly righting themselves before the creature had turned back from the freshly recreated wall.

Hobo kept one hand on the floor.

'What is it?' whispered Lucy.

'Feels different,' replied Hobo under his breath. 'Different engine.'

Lucy looked around. 'Different ship,' she replied.

The shadow-thing turned, rotating its head completely then reversing its approximations of arms and legs. Walking on the tips of its pointed legs, it advanced on Lucy and Hobo, a smile once more splitting open its oval head.

It reached out, its arm ending in a pointed tip. 'It's a greeting,' said the creature. 'You take my hand in yours.'

Lucy watched as fingers like scissor blades extruded themselves from the tip of the inky black arm. She swallowed her nerves and reached out her own hand.

'I wouldn't do that,' said Hobo, grabbing Lucy by the forearm. He was holding a small scanning unit in his free hand, one of Umbrella's toys that Lucy would have probably taken the time to understand if she didn't have such unshakeable faith in her own intuition.

Lucy's hand hovered in mid-air, inches from the scissor-tip fingers of the creature.

'It is a greeting,' said the creature, its voice becoming stern.

Hobo held the scanner up so that Lucy could see the display.

'It's not there,' he said. 'That's not an alien. It's some sort of negative space... it would be like touching a black hole.'

Lucy yanked her hand back. The creature that

wasn't a creature, the shadow that wasn't a shadow, dropped its head to look down at Lucy and Hobo.

'It was a greeting.'

'Let's just say hello, shall we?' said Lucy

The creature seemed to stare at Lucy for a moment, the empty voids in its head occupied by a view of the glowing white walls of the ship. Then it twisted its head to stare at Hobo.

'Lucy... I don't like this,' said Hobo. He took a step back, his hand moving to the pouches on his belt. Lucy never found out what he was reaching for. In a flash, the blade like tips of the creature's fingers sliced through the air and vanished inside Hobo. There was a ripple, emanating from Hobo's chest as if he were nothing more than a picture, painted on the surface of a lake.

Hobo Kostinen dissolved to nothingness, torn silently and gently asunder by the ripple that passed through the air like a breeze over water.

'Hobo!' Lucy screamed.

But it was too late.

Hobo was gone.

The Crone lumbered past Ogmores's small run of seaside shops, curling her lip at the range of plastic buckets, spades, beach balls, and small inflatable boats.

'I'd forgotten these existed,' she grumbled.

‘I didn’t bring you here to make sandcastles,’ said Hobo irritably.

‘Don’t worry,’ said the Crone, tapping the side of her nose. ‘I’ve got a special sense for danger and it never lets me down. If I just wait here long enough...’

The Crone twirled a spinner rack of novelty key rings, stopping it in the “L” section and picking out a plastic cat with the name “Lucy” on it.

‘Any minute now...’

Hobo was about to let out an exasperated sigh when, right on cue, there was a scream from inside the shop.

‘Ah,’ said the Crone, sounding slightly relieved. ‘There we go.’

Lucy staggered back from the space where Hobo had been standing a moment before. A pale outline of her friend hovered in place for a moment, before fading away, leaving no trace of the man who had been Lucy’s best friend since childhood.

That was it. Their game, their great adventure, their endless rounds of chicken with the best and worst of the universe combined was over. Lucy wondered how she had thought it might end. Hadn’t this been inevitable, somehow? One of them had to fall, eventually

Lucy decided it didn’t matter. Hobo was gone,

that was all there was too it, and the space that he had once occupied was now filled without nothing but a white hot fury. The fury of Lucy Lethbridge-Stewart. Had the stars known, they would have trembled in their orbits

Lucy turned to face the creature, the shadow thing with scissor fingers, her face contorted by rage

‘What did you do?’

‘We optimised,’ replied the creature. ‘Your actions here could not be predicted. Our first optimisation was flawed and we briefly lost our engines. This new optimisation is a great improvement, but your friend is... unnecessary.’

‘Unnecessary?’ snarled Lucy. ‘Unnecessary?!’

She fumbled with the pouches on her belt, pulling another cylinder like the first that she had attached to the ship, just minutes before

‘You will not come here and take my people,’ she said, her voice shaking slightly. ‘You are not the first to try and oh, oh you’re the first to manage it all right so take some pride in that but, maybe, just maybe... you will be the last.’

‘We do not understand,’ replied the creature. Its empty eyes were drawn to the cylinder in Lucy’s hand. She twisted it, hard, and a bright red ring illuminated.

‘They’ve had me on a leash, you know? The great big mighty Umbrella, protecting the whole world

from rainy alien days. Well, maybe if we'd taken that umbrella and shoved it where the sun doesn't shine with the first lot of you that came here..."

'Ahhh,' said the creature. 'We see. It is you that do not understand.'

And, with that, the creature thrust its ebon fingers into Lucy's chest.

The Crone crashed into the gift shop, the door bouncing off the wall. A little bell tinkled overhead. It wasn't the entrance she wanted to make, but it would have to do.

Behind the shop counter, a young girl was screaming as a black figure stood over her. A black figure with a head shaped like an egg, long pointed fingers, and empty voids where eyes should be.

'You...,' said the Crone.

'You...,' replied the creature, freezing where it stood.

Out of the corner of her good eye the Crone could see Hobo creeping, head down, past a display of Ogmores snow globes, beckoning the young girl from behind the counter to make a break for safety.

'It begins here,' replied the creature. 'There will be consequences.'

The girl, petrified with fright, refused to move. The Crone motioned for Hobo to stay where he was. She didn't want him any closer to the creature.

‘Let the girl go,’ said the Crone. ‘Or I’ll show you some consequences.’

The girl let out another scream. Hobo, ignoring the Crone’s subtle instruction, lunged forward to grab her. The creature, its dagger fingers extruding, made ready to claim its victim.

‘OK, here we go,’ growled the Crone. She held her staff aloft, then brought it down hard across her knee. It split in two, the metal ring that had run around the middle of it spinning up into the air. The Crone caught it deftly and slipped the ring onto her finger.

Hobo gasped. ‘That’s Lucy’s ring...’

The Crone held her hand, palm up, to the creature.

‘Go.’

A white light filled the room for a moment, so bright that Hobo had to shield his eyes. When he could see again, the creature was gone. The girl from the behind the counter finally found her legs, and vanished out of the shop.

‘We should go,’ said the Crone. ‘Your mother will be coming through the door in a few minutes.’

‘My mother?’ asked Hobo.

‘She’s still a police officer, isn’t she?’

‘I knew it was you, Lucy,’ said Hobo with a wide grin. His eyes were shining, with tears or excitement it was impossible to say. ‘Why were you pretending?’

‘I had my reasons,’ said the Crone. She glared at

the spot where the shadow creature had been. 'Reasons that may be about to change.'

Lucy opened her eyes and found herself standing on the lawn of the small sunlit garden of a red brick cottage. A gentle breeze tickled the leaves of a few small trees and flowerbeds were just coming into bloom. The smell of spring was in the air, a far cry from the strange and stale air of the vessel she had been standing in moments before.

The shadow creature stood next to her and she noticed immediately that neither it, nor she, cast a shadow on the ground.

'Where are we?' she asked.

'We call it The Interface,' replied the creature. 'From here, we can optimise.'

Lucy thought the thing looked more real here, more three dimensional, until she realised with a start that it was in fact her that had flattened out. She turned her hand back and forth in front of her face, marvelling at the strange elongated flatness of it. Her fingertips brushed something in front of her, something invisible that felt like ice cold water. The world beyond The Interface rippled, the same way that the ship had rippled around her. The way it had rippled around Hobo.

'Have a care,' said the creature. 'The Interface is delicate.'

Suddenly the back door of the red brick cottage burst open and a gaggle of children came piling out. Three, four, then five, they ran and shouted and tripped and laughed until they finally collapsed in a wrestling, play-fighting heap in the middle of the lawn. Three boys, two girls. One boy completely bald, one of the girls with skin the brightest blue Lucy had ever seen.

Then, another figure at the door. A figure that made Lucy gasp.

'Hobo,' she said in a whisper, her voice catching in her throat. 'Hobo!'

Hobo, this new Hobo, limped out of the door. In one hand he balanced a tray full of glasses of lemonade, with the other he kept his weight steady with a metal cane. He walked awkwardly, his left leg unable to bend or take much weight. He was a little older, by Lucy's estimations, or maybe just out of shape. He was still hairless, but his face was more careworn and his shoulders slouched a little. The world, perhaps, had ground him down just a bit.

'Kids!' he called out. 'I've got... woah!'

Hobo's cane punctured the ground, dipping a few inches down some invisible hole in the lawn. It wasn't much, but it was enough to make him trip and fall face first onto the lawn, the tray of lemonade crashing down with him.

The children immediately gave up their game

and came running to help.

One of the girls, the one with blue skin, who seemed a little older or maybe just a little more mature than the rest, struggled to help Hobo to his feet.

‘It’s all right, it’s all right,’ said this new Hobo, irritation in his voice betraying his wounded pride. ‘Just be careful of the glass, Ylime.’

The girl, Ylime, must have been stronger than she looked because he hoisted Hobo to his feet with ease and, once his cane was restored, busied herself clearing up the tray and glasses. Hobo hobbled over to an old deck chair and gingerly set himself down in it

One the boys wandered over as the others, Ylime included, got back to their game of “who will be going to casualty first and whose fault will it be” (a modern variation of the game “you’ll have someone’s eye out with that”, which was adapted from the early prototype “this will end in tears”).

‘It’s OK, Papa,’ he said. ‘It’s only lemonade.’

Hobo ruffled the boy’s hair. ‘It’s all right, Casper. Just one of those times, you know?’

Casper looked away, his lip trembling. ‘One of those times when you miss Mummy?’ he asked, his voice quavering

Hobo gave a sad smile. ‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘One of those times.’

With a groan he pushed himself back up to his feet on his cane. 'Come on, little soldier,' he said to the boy. 'I'll make some more lemonade and this time you can carry it.'

The boy snapped off a reasonable approximation of a salute and together the two of them heading back inside, leaving the rest of the children to continue their game.

'What am I seeing?' asked Lucy. 'What is this?'

'This is your friend,' replied the shadow creature. 'We have optimised him.'

'Optimised...?' said Lucy, slowly bending her mind around the concept. 'This is really him, now? This is real?'

'Yes,' replied the creature. There was something in its voice that Lucy couldn't place. Compassion? Pride maybe? 'Can you not see what an improvement this is? He is safe, he has family.'

'I was his family'" said Lucy, venom dripping from every word. 'You've crippled him and broken his heart.'

'Optimisation often has consequences.'

'How long?' asked Lucy, staring up into the blank face of the shadow creature. 'How long have you been doing this?'

'Always,' replied the creature. 'We have always been doing this. Optimisation is... gradual. Eventual. Inevitable.'

‘And is this what it looks like?’ said Lucy, incredulous. ‘Snatching people out of the world and dropping them off in a different life? Changing things willy-nilly to suit yourselves?’

‘We improve things,’ implored the creature. ‘We optimise.’

‘And what about me? What about the people who knew Hobo? Do we just forget, is that it? What about all the things he did, the things we did? You have no idea the lives that man has saved, how many times he saved me!’

The creature shook its head slowly. ‘You do not understand. You will forget. The life he led is gone and this new, better life takes its place. He has children. He has a place in the world.’

‘And the people he saved? The worlds he saved?’

‘Consequences,’ replied the creature. ‘But we will optimise them also. All will be optimised. The universe will be optimised.’

‘For you,’ said Lucy quietly. ‘You mean the universe will be optimised for you.’

Without another word, without a moment’s hesitation, Lucy shoved her hand forward again through the icy barrier of the Interface. Passing through it completely, she watched as it transformed into the black, scissor fingered hand of a shadow creature... except for one thing. There, sitting proudly on the pointed finger of her jet black hand,

was Lucy's silver ring.

The ring she had been given long ago, during her first encounter with alien life, by a member of her strange extended family. The ring that was so much more than a ring. The ring that had saved her life maybe even more times than Hobo Kostinen.

'Ha,' said Lucy. 'Didn't count on my bling, did you?'

The creature's eyes opened from slits to wide open circles. Here, on this side of The Interface, there was nothing to show through form behind them as there had been before. There was only the void, the great black void, a place where things that didn't exist howled and raged against their nothingness.

'You're not from around here, are you?' asked Lucy. 'Hobo nailed it. He said you weren't there. That's the point isn't it? You're not there. You're not there because you're not supposed to be and you need to change things in our universe until it's just right for you.'

Pulling her hand back through the interface, Lucy grabbed a hold of the creature. Her ring blazed on her finger, incandescent with a white light.

'What happens if I shove you through there, eh? If I become one of you when I go through, what happens to you?'

The creature's mouth sprang open, a gnashing nest of razor sharp teeth.

‘You cannot!’ it screamed. ‘We are not ready! We are not yet optimal!’

Lucy swung her leg around and used her boot to press the creature forward. It squirmed and writhed, bending itself impossibly, but Lucy’s grip, and Lucy’s ring, held it firm. The smooth blackness of the thing degraded as it got closer to the invisible surface of the Interface, breaking apart into millions of tiny, writhing worm-like things

Lucy pushed, the thing pushed back, the ring blazed with light.

‘Tell me...’ snarled Lucy. ‘How many people are dead now because of what you did?’

‘All things die,’ replied the creature. ‘To die is optimal.’

‘You first then,’ said Lucy, and shoved the creature forward through the Interface.

‘Where are you going now?’ called Hobo, chasing the Crone once more along Ogmores beach.

‘Back to the ship,’ growled the old woman. She wasn’t as steady on her feet without her staff and the fishing net on a long pole that she’d liberated from the gift shop wasn’t as good a replacement as she had hoped it might be.

‘That’s it?’ said Hobo. ‘What about the people that that thing took?’

‘Gone,’ replied the Crone. ‘To better places, if you

believe that nonsense.'

Hobo stopped, his breath leaving his chest and refusing to come back.

'Lucy's... dead?'

The Crone stopped too, turning back to face Hobo. He had slumped down to the ground, sitting with his knees tucked up under his chin, the hood of his hoodie pulled up over his head.

'Hey!' she called.

'Leave me alone,' said Hobo, his voice ragged and choking.

'Hey!' she called again

Hobo yanked his hoodie back off his head. His eyes were red, his cheeks streaked with tears.

'If Lucy's dead, then who the hell am I?' she asked
Hobo wiped his eyes on the sleeve of his hoodie.

'I don't know.'

'A few minutes ago you were convinced I was Lucy. Now, what? I'm suddenly out of the possible-future-Lucy club?'

Hobo shook his head. He didn't know what to think anymore. Boys from Ogmore weren't supposed to go travelling from one end of the universe to the other in wooden boxes. Boys from Ogmore weren't supposed to fight shadow creatures, or monsters, or aliens. He had always prided himself on being the smart one, the clever one, the brains to balance Lucy's gut instinct and

weird knack for all things cosmic and strange but now... now he was just a kid and he was out of his depth and

‘Hey!’

‘I don’t know, OK?’ replied Hobo sullenly. ‘You said she was gone.’

The Crone limped back, a lopsided smile on her scarred old face, and sat down clumsily next to Hobo.

‘Oh, Hobo,’ she said gently, her voice the softest it had been in long, long time. ‘I said gone, not dead. Gone is just... gone.’

‘What’s the difference?’ sniffed Hobo.

‘The difference?’ said the Crone with a chuckle. ‘The difference is we’ve got a time machine.’

Hobo looked at the old woman. He had no idea what Lucy would look like when she was old, especially not as old as the Crone seemed to be. He wanted to believe he would know his friend, his dearest friend, anywhere and anywhen but...

‘Lucy, is it you?’ he asked.

The Crone grinned. ‘If it were, I’d never tell you.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I live to drive you nuts,’ replied the old woman

It was all the confirmation that Hobo needed.

In a blinding flash of light, Lucy and the shadow

creature were once more aboard the creature's ship

Lucy patted herself down. As best she could tell, all of her was here

The creature staggered left and right, unable to recompose itself.

'You fall apart in this world,' said Lucy. 'You disintegrate. You're not... compatible.'

'We will... optimise,' said the creature. It sounded like it was gasping, despite being too flat to possibly have lungs and Lucy realised that wherever the creature's voice came from, it couldn't have been from the physical body that it had. Another part of the Interface perhaps

'Why did you even come here?' asked Lucy, 'Like this? Why a ship? Why London?'

'For you,' said the creature. 'For Lucy Wilson.'

'It's Lethbridge-Stewart these days,' said Lucy defiantly

The creature, slowly composing itself, grew larger so that it towered more over Lucy than it had done before. It's long, sharp fingers dragged against the floor, leaving tiny ripples in their wake.

'You... will never optimise. We have tried; we have tried so many times.'

Sounds like me,' said Lucy. 'It actually says "Not a team player" on my official file.'

'And so we optimised,' said the creature. 'We learnt that the Lucy Wilson Lethbridge-Stewart must

choose.'

'Choose?'

'You will choose to optimise.'

'No,' said Lucy flatly. 'No way.'

She hoped she was being convincing. When she had been young, she had been "Lucy Lethbridge-Stewart" every chance she'd had. She'd hunted out the weird, the strange, the dangerous. She believed it was her destiny, her duty, her inheritance. It was a long time before she realised that the right word, the word that perfectly described being the next in line to hold the Lethbridge-Stewart name was "curse".

'You will choose,' replied the creature. 'And you will help us.'

'Still no,' said Lucy. 'Instead, let me tell you what is going to happen if...'

'An excellent suggestion,' said the creature. 'Let us see what may happen.'

The creature whipped a hand towards Lucy, sending a ripple through the air. Lucy tried to dodge, but felt the icy cold of the Interface slam into her back, carrying her into darkness.

Lucy opened her eyes, realising instantly that she was once more in the Interface. She watched as she, another she, and Hobo ran across a field, explosions erupting on either side of them. Hobo had a new

insignia on his uniform, a new rank. Behind them, more soldiers, all with the same insignia. Ahead of them, shrouded in smoke, dark shapes. Alien shapes.

‘Don’t fire until you see—’ shouted Hobo, his voice cut off by the roar of another explosion, an explosion that tossed his body up into the air.

Lucy observed as the other her ran to the spot where Hobo’s body landed, a crumpled and lifeless heap. She watched as the other her ripped the rank and insignia from Hobo’s uniform and slapped it magnetically onto her own.

‘Like the man said,’ shouted other Lucy. ‘Don’t fire until you can see the eye stalk.’

Lucy and the soldiers ran forward into darkness, leaving Hobo behind on the battlefield and all the world went black.

Lucy opened her eyes, realising instantly that she was once more in the Interface. She saw herself, and Hobo, strapped to metal tables in a small room, struggling against leather straps that held them down tight. Around them, insectoid creatures in white robes scuttled around on four legs, dragging rusty old machinery across the room.

‘Don’t give them anything, Hobo,’ said Lucy through gritted teeth. “No matter what they do to me. Nothing’s more important than protecting the intelligence now.

One of the creatures startled itself as it started up one of the machines with a mechanical belch and a cloud of greasy black smoke. Lucy heard the unmistakable sound of a saw blade spinning at high speed.

‘They keep their ideas,’ clicked one of the insect-men. ‘Inside their skull bone.’

‘I get,’ said another, heaving the rusty, whirling saw up in its front legs. ‘Human skull bones soft.’

Lucy closed her eyes and covered her ears as the room filled with the sounds of a saw cutting into bone, and the sounds of Hobo screaming. She knew, of course, that the other Lucy would have no choice but to watch.

Lucy opened her eyes, realising instantly that she was once more in the Interface. Surrounded by flames, she watched as she and Hobo helped a group of soldiers load children into the back of an army transport.

‘Are they close, ma’am?’ asked one of the soldiers.

‘Too close,’ said other Lucy, snatching a glimpse into the distance through some field binoculars. ‘Damned Yetis, they’ll never stop.’

‘We need a distraction,’ said Hobo. ‘I’ll slow them down so you can get to safety, work out our next move.’

‘Hobo, you can’t...’

I have to,' said Hobo. 'It's my fault, Lucy. I set them free.'

'Hobo, no!'

'I have to!'

Lucy watched as two of the soldiers grabbed her and, under Hobo's orders, forced her into the transport. She watched herself fight, and kick, and scream, and she watched as the transport drove away. She watched Hobo pull a chocolate bar out of his army fatigues and calmly munch on it as the enemy advanced. She watched the world go black once more.

Lucy opened her eyes, realising instantly that she was once more in the Interface.

'Stop!' she said, closing her eyes tightly. 'Just stop.'

'Do you understand now?'

The voice of the creature, either in her head or in her ear, it didn't matter which.

'Yes,' she said quietly. 'I understand.'

Another ripple, the icy feel of the Interface on her skin again, and a gasping lungful of the stale air of the ship told Lucy she was back. She opened her eyes, gingerly at first, then with a sigh of relief as she saw she was back on the alien ship.

On all fours, she touched the floor with trembling hands to ensure that it was real.

'I hate you,' she rasped. 'You should know that.'

'We will optimise,' replied the creature.

'I'm going to call you Goldilocks,' she said. 'I give all my enemies nicknames.'

'From the human story,' replied the creature. 'I understand.'

'How long?' asked Lucy. 'How long did you have me in there? I remember... so much.'

'By your reckoning,' replied the creature. 'Nearly three hundred years. Your capacity for watching your friend die is... quite remarkable. Please understand, none of those lives were optimal, but we had to find a way to make you understand. We must optimise, there will be consequences.'

'Why do I remember it?' asked Lucy. 'Only one of those lives can be real, so why do I remember them all?'

'Because you are Lucy Wilson,' said the creature. 'Lucy Wilson will not optimise.'

'Lucy Wilson must choose,' said Lucy. 'Lucy Wilson will choose.'

'This is good,' said the creature. 'You will help us, Lucy Wilson. You will help this universe to optimise.'

'One condition,' said Lucy, standing up. 'Hobo Kostinen.'

'He will be optimised,' replied the creature.

'In my way. I get to pick the time and the place

you take me out of his life. Forever.'

'This,' replied the creature. 'Is optimal.'

The Crone and Hobo stood outside the Punch and Judy show.

'So, you're telling me you know that... thing?' asked Hobo incredulously.

'In a manner of speaking,' replied The Crone. 'It was my boss.'

'What?' shouted Hobo. 'How?'

'I took some persuading,' said The Crone. 'About three hundred years worth, as it goes.'

'What?' said Hobo, waving his hands around in frustration. 'Nothing you're saying makes sense!'

'Well, that's because you're not getting the story in the right order,' explained The Crone. 'Let's start with old shady from earlier, OK? It comes from outside this universe, from the Great Void. It wants to change this universe to make it compatible with itself, so it can enter. So it can take over. That's what it does.'

'Like terraforming?' asked Hobo. 'But, the entire universe? All of... space?'

'Not just space. Time too,' replied the Crone.

'Is that why your ring stops them? Did you figure it out? Is it a time machine?'

'No,' said the Crone, 'I'm still not sure what it is, not entirely. But you can't go jumping around in

time without creating paradoxes, and it does seem to keep me safe from those... or at least it did.'

The Crone held up her hand, which was clearly devoid of rings.

'What happened?'

'It disappeared,' replied the Crone. 'Maybe it finally ran out of juice.'

'You realise that you've pretty much admitted to being Lucy, don't you?' said Hobo with a grin. 'That was her ring.'

'What a pity your only piece of evidence has disappeared,' retorted the Crone. 'Anyway, the point is that time's not a linear thing and there is no time in the void, so that's the thing the creature understands the least. It makes changes, all through time, but it doesn't see the consequences coming.'

'I know all space-time,' said Hobo. 'Space-time is curved, shaped by mass and energy and...'

The Crone held up a hand. "Slow down, professor. Let's just stick to "things don't always have to happen in order", OK? That's the important bit. Most things can happen or might happen or maybe won't ever happen but some things, some things always have to happen, more or less.'

'I was happy when time was a curved in eleven dimensions,' grumbled Hobo. "You know where you are with eleven dimensions. I mean, Bosonic theory says twenty-seven but—'

‘Would you pay attention? There are things that have to happen, Hobo. Things that no matter what that creature does, always have to happen. That’s what’s stopping it from turning the universe into what it needs it to be.’

‘So what is it doing here? What were you doing for them?’

‘Well, eventually they figured out that there were people, special people, who could interact with those “fixed points”. People who were always there, always part of the story. People who could change things... just a little.’

‘People like us?’ said Hobo. The Crone winced; the note of excitement in Hobo’s voice was unmistakable.

‘People like me,’ she said kindly. ‘People who are always there when there’s trouble. People the universe seems to... need? Like? I don’t know. People like Lucy Wilson, I know that much. People like the Lethbridge-Stewarts.’

Hobo looked dejected. ‘But not people like Hobo Kostinen...’

‘No, not people like Hobo Kostinen. I’m sorry. Hobo shrugged.

‘It’s not a bad thing, you know. Your life can be... anything you want. You’re a teenager who flies spaceships and battles aliens...’

‘And how could anything be better than that?’

The Crone didn't answer, but the misty faraway look in her eye let Hobo know that there was an answer to his question; it just wasn't an answer that she was ready to give. Hobo wasn't sure it was an answer that he wanted to hear either.

'So, you worked for them?' he asked. 'You helped them?'

'It's a long story,' said the Crone, 'And it doesn't all happen in order.'

'So just tell me what happens next.'

The Crone patted Hobo on the shoulder reassuringly and lifted up the flap at the back of the Punch and Judy box.

'Now, I steal your spaceship and leave you stranded and confused on Ogmore beach.'

'What?'

The Crone, half in and half out of the box, looked back over her shoulder with a grin on her face.

'Don't worry. If the next part of the story goes to plan, you won't remember this ever happened.'

Lucy stepped out of The Interface, back into the shadow creature's ship.

'It is done?' asked the creature.

'It's done, Goldilocks,' said Lucy grimly. 'Ogmore will never be the same. Another step closer to turning my universe into your perfect porridge.'

A ripple ran through the ship, reconfiguring it

once again. Lucy had grown used to them now and she ignored it, pulling her gloves out of her pocket and slipping them back on before clasping her hands behind her back in an “at ease” pose.

The creature stalked over to her, limbs stretching and shrinking as it poked and prodded itself into this world through the icy invisible barrier of the Interface.

‘Optimisation,’ it hissed gleefully. ‘I can feel it. We can all feel it.’

‘As long as he is safe,’ said Lucy. ‘Just tell me what I have to do next.’

The Punch and Judy box unfolded itself in almost exactly the same place it had been, just seconds before, in the vast atrium of the Boneyard. Mad Jackson did a double take, not sure if the thing had disappeared and reappeared or not.

The Crone stepped out of the back, stretched the kinks out of her old bones, and gave Mad Jackson a wave.

‘What sort of day we having, Jackson?’ she asked.

‘Short,’ grunted Jackson.

‘Good,’ replied the Crone. ‘I hate waiting around.’

Looking up at the clock, the Crone watched as the giant hand moved steadily forward, approaching the inevitable tock.

‘Did you know that I designed this place,

Jackson?’ said the Crone.

‘Eh?’

‘The perfect prison, tagged on to the last second of available time, where nothing ever changes.’ The Crone looked up at the clock again. ‘At least, let’s hope so. Any second now...’

And then, there it was. The tock, inexorable and inevitable, the very last moment of all possible time.

The Crone opened her eyes, as she always did, lying on her bed as she always was at the start of the day. She turned over and smiled. There it was – her staff, whole and complete, along with her ring halfway down the shaft.

She jumped from the bed quickly, grabbing the staff, and hobbled over to the small desk and snatched up the Rubik’s cube. With a half muttered prayer, she twisted it hard. It opened up, the top layer of cubes coming away, revealing a secret compartment hidden inside. A secret compartment that held a ring. A small, silver ring. A small silver ring that couldn’t possibly be there, but was there all the same. A small silver ring that had been waiting there for a very long time. A small silver ring that an old woman had given a shadow creature that wasn’t a shadow creature at all in a gift shop in Ogmore a long, long time ago. The Crone slipped it onto her finger and smiled before bringing her staff

down hard on the desk, snapping it in two and catching the ring that fell off it in her free hand. The same ring, in the same place, twice over. She slipped it onto her other hand. She could already feel energy moving between them, each battling the other, each treating the other as an aberration... a paradox.

The Crone took a deep breath. 'OK,' she said to herself. 'Here we go.'

She strode out in the atrium. Above her, the clock ran quickly down from the tick to the tock.

The rattling began almost immediately, the invisible spirits of the Boneyard rushing across the atrium. They could sense something was different, and difference was never allowed here.

'Wakey wakey!' bellowed the Crone. 'Look lively you horrible lot!'

On either side of her, doors in the atrium wall opened, the inmates of the Boneyard pouring out. They were all heroes, but heroes is a strange word. It can mean a lot of different things.

'Is it time?' asked Mad Jackson.

The Crone grinned. 'Oh yes,' she said with relish. 'Time is exactly what it is.'

Tables and chairs leapt into the air as the rattling spirits grew closer.

'Come on!' shouted the Crone. 'Let me look you in the eyes!'

The rattling grew louder, shaking the Atrium.

Inmates continued to pour in, banging on doors and waking up their neighbours.

‘Form the circle!’ ordered the Crone.

‘You heard the lady!’ bellowed Mad Old Jackson, taking a step forward. He reached out his huge arms and joined hands with the inmates from the rooms either side of his. Others followed suit, forming a circle around the outside of the atrium, disappearing from sight where the place vanished over its own horizon.

And then it came. The thing the Crone had been waiting for oh, so very long.

A ripple. A change. A tear in the air right in front of her as a rattling spirit rose and forced its way through in the Boneyard. A black, formless thing that stretched and extruded and pulled itself into a form approaching human. Eyes that were not there, a mouth that contorted itself into the shape of a smile but without being a smile at all.

‘Hello, Goldilocks,’ said the Crone.

‘Hello, Lucy Wilson,’ said the shadow creature.

Its eyes swivelled side to side, looking suspiciously at the circle of people that had formed around it. Countless people, drawn from points all across time and space, all united in this place and in this moment.

‘Why have you summoned us here?’ asked the creature. ‘This place is the least optimal place of all.’

'I know,' said Lucy innocently. 'I made it, remember?'

'We remember.'

'Fixed points in time, people who couldn't be optimised, that was the problem wasn't it? You couldn't find a way to work around them, to make the universe what you needed it to be with them scattered all through time and space.'

'Until you corralled them here,' said the creature. 'And now we are able to optimise.'

'Except... you won't,' said Lucy. 'You see, the thing with time is, things don't always have to happen in order. There's a reason that you're outside of this universe – have you ever wondered why it is?'

'We do not wonder. To wonder is not optimal.'

'Well, I do. I wonder a lot. I daydream. I had this friend, a long time ago, now he was a thinker. Thinker with a big "T" if you know what I mean. He used to talk about this stuff all the time. Cause and effect. Causality. Paradoxes. He loved talking about paradoxes.'

'Optimisation has—'

'Consequences, I know,' said Lucy. 'But this time, the consequences are for you. What you do, reaching into our universe and moving people around like chess pieces – it's not right. Nobody should have that kind of power, to decide which

lives are right and which are wrong, which choices we should and shouldn't make, who to save and who to leave to die. You are the worst possible monster of all – the monster that thinks it's right. The monster that doesn't know it's a monster at all.'

'You helped us,' said the creature defiantly.

'No,' said Lucy. 'I tricked you. You never really got your heads around time, and that was the weakness that I needed. You remember the first time I used the Interface, when I pulled myself out of Hobo's life?'

'Of course. You became optimal.'

'Yeah...,' said Lucy. 'Kinda didn't, actually. Might have even lied a little bit.'

'Impossible!' snapped the creature. 'We knew optimisation. Your opposition to us was no longer an obstacle.'

Lucy held up her hands. One ring on each hand, each glowing white. The creature recoiled with a hiss, its form unravelling wherever the light from the rings touched it.

'What you felt was this,' explained Lucy. 'Two rings, but both the same ring, each one trying to protect me from the other. A walking paradox. Just like you, I couldn't exist. And if I couldn't exist, I couldn't be a problem, could I? That's what you felt.'

The creature staggered backwards, hissing, its arms tapering to sharp points that it raised in front

of itself defensively.

'You have betrayed us.

Lucy carefully pulled off the rings, holding each between a thumb and forefinger.

'You came to my world. You took away my friend. You tortured me. Betrayal is the least I could have done in return.'

Slowly, Lucy began to bring the rings together. They glowed brighter as they moved closer. Above her, the great clock began to shudder. The arm stopped, between the tick and the tock, spasming back and forth.

'I told you that I'd build you a prison at the end of time and fill it with all people who were like me. I just didn't tell who the prison was for. I didn't tell you it was for you.'

'We have been optimising your universe ready for arrival since the dawn of time. You will not keep us out.'

'I already did,' said Lucy. 'That's the biggest paradox of all. I'm the one who casts you out. I'm the one you search for. I'm the one you think is going to help you, and I'm the one who casts you out again.'

Lucy took a step forward, then another, forcing the creature back.

'Look around,' she said, 'There's a reason I made this place a circle.

The creature, its eyes narrowed to vicious slits,

its mouth cracking into row after row of needle sharp teeth, let out an otherworldly howl. It was a sound of rage, and of anguish. It was a sound of infinite loneliness, unbearable jealousy, and endless hunger. It was the sound of the Great Void.

‘You are the void. The void is you. I cast you out now, at the end, and at the very beginning of time.

The creature lunged forward, its scissor fingers lancing towards Lucy’s face.

Lucy brought the rings together. Two rings, overlapping, merging into each other to form a Moebius loop. The hand of the great clock leapt forward.

Tock.

Blinding light filled the Boneyard, a light so pure and so white that there was not a single shadow anywhere to be seen.

The Crone sat with Major Lucy Lethbridge-Stewart, sipping tea in an Ogmores tea room that hadn’t been redecorated since some time in the early 1970s. As fixed points in time went, it was a definite candidate.

The Major checked her watch

‘She’s late,’ she grumbled.

‘Of course she’s late,’ replied the Crone. ‘So were you. So was I. It’s a good sign. It means things are already going to plan.’

‘What if she doesn’t come?’

'She comes,' said the Crone, dunking a biscuit in her tea. 'I remember, from when I was you. And from when I was her. So, I know you remember.'

The Major rolled her eyes. 'Good to know I end my life an insufferable smart-ass.'

'If you keep moaning, I'll tell you the exact time and date you lose your sense of humour.'

'Probably right around the time you told me I'm about to spend the rest of my life kidnapping people across the universe for evil creatures from another reality after being psychologically tortured for nearly three centuries.'

'Touche.'

The little bell above the tea room door rang before the Major and the Crone could continue their conversation. Lucy Wilson walked in.

'I cannot remember being that young,' whispered the Crone.

'I can,' said the Major. 'It was awful. I'd rather fight an entire battalion of Quarks single handed than go back to school.'

'You'll get your chance,' muttered the Crone, a crafty look in her eye.

The girl sat down opposite them, still in her school uniform. She pulled her hair loose and let it fall down around her face. Clearly, she didn't want to be seen.

'Tea, dear?' asked the Crone.

'I don't like tea,' replied Lucy.

'You will,' replied the Major and the Crone.

'Mum's always telling me to have a word with myself,' grumbled Lucy. 'If she could see me now... OK, future weird versions of me, what's up?'

And that was how it began, over tea and biscuits in a little tea shop that time might just have forgotten, in a little town on the edge of the sea. A plan that it would take until the end of time and back to the beginning again to complete. A plan that needed three people who were all the same person, two rings, and a lot of luck.

A plan that would save everyone, everything, everywhere, and everywhen in the universe and that, if it worked, only a few people anywhere would ever know even a part of. Only one person, who was currently three people, would know the whole story and even then not until the very end of her very long life.

The Major was the first to leave. She had a great many things to do and in some ways her road was the longest of all. The Crone's work was done and all Lucy had to do was wait, and to disappear when the time was right.

A fake disappearance, hidden amongst the time-meddlings of the Major and the shadow creature – the trigger for Hobo to reach out beyond the Earth for the most unlikely of help, and to journey even

further in search of his lost friend. A friend who would come to Ogmores and face a monster that was herself, and pass a ring through space and time to create a paradox that was the final building block in a paradox so vast that none of this would ever happen at all.

'And you're sure I can't tell him?' young Lucy asked the Crone.

'Absolutely,' she replied. 'Hobo can't ever know. It's too much risk. If the plan fails...'

'But, what about those things... those things you said the creatures showed you. Do you think those really happen to him? Even one of them? I can't live with that.'

The Crone finished her tea with a loud slurp and stood up.

'I have to go,' she said. 'I have to persuade an insane alien to loan a schoolboy his magic time travelling box when he calls.'

She shuffled awkwardly around the table, leant down and whispered something in Lucy's ear.

Lucy smiled.

'I'll have to remember to tell myself that, right?' she asked.

'I don't know,' said the Crone. 'I didn't do it last time.'

And with that, she left, leaving Lucy with just the right number of unanswered questions.

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