



THE GRAY LADY OF MARTYR'S HOUSE

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This is a Christmas story. It's also a ghost story, as all good Christmas stories should be. It has a spooky old house, a creepy housekeeper, a library with a very unusual selection of books, and at least one talking animal. It also has Lucy Wilson and Hobo Kostinen, who are just returning from another one of their strange adventures...

Lucy and Hobo tumbled out of Lucy's bedroom wardrobe in a flurry of snow, crashing onto her bed as the doors slammed shut behind them.

'Wow,' said Hobo, his face buried in Lucy's duvet. 'That was... intense.'

Lucy rolled off the bed and began to shake the snow out of her hair.

'I lost my hat,' she said grumpily. 'Not again.'

Hobo sat up awkwardly, adjusting a golden breastplate embossed with a roaring lion that was strapped on top of his hoodie.

'But you still have your armour,' continued Lucy. 'Of course you do.

'It was a gift,' said Hobo defensively, straightening the breastplate and buffing the lion's nose with the sleeve of his hoodie. 'A gift from a talking lion, no less.'

'A talking lion who is probably eating my hat right now,' said Lucy glumly, squeezing past Hobo to get to her wardrobe. She opened the door slowly, peeping inside to confirm that the mysterious magical snow-bound forest with its talking animals and serious governance problems had been replaced by her coats and school uniform. Finding a portal to an alternative reality wasn't unusual for Lucy. As the granddaughter of Brigadier Alistair Lethbridge-Stewart, she had come to accept that her bloodline came with certain unusual features. Hobo, her best friend and stalwart companion on many an adventure, had called her a 'weirdness magnet'. It was a reasonably fair assessment.

'All clear?' asked Hobo, pointing to the wardrobe.

'Yeah,' shrugged Lucy. 'All clear. You know, I loved those books when I was a kid. I lost my copies in the move somewhere, I even asked Mum for new ones for Christmas this year. That's weird...'

Hobo cocked his head, looking at her quizzically. 'You okay?' he asked gently.

'Why wouldn't I be?' replied Lucy tersely. 'After all, I just got back from a magical adventure to a strange alternative reality that appeared to be based on my favourite books from when I was little, the reasons for which will probably never be unexplained, when all I actually wanted to do this afternoon was get some Christmas presents out of the back of my wardrobe and con you into wrapping them for me.'

'Ah, the old "Come and visit a strange alternative

reality but really I want you to wrap my Christmas presents for me" trick,' said Hobo. 'Understandable. I *am* the wrapping master. DJ Sellotape is my rap name.'

Lucy looked sideways at Hobo, no hint of a smile on her face.

'Never again,' she said firmly. 'Never, ever say that again.'

'Agreed,' said Hobo and they both grinned broadly.

'Lucy?' Mum called up the stairs.

'Yeah?' Lucy called back nervously. She wasn't sure how long they'd been through the back of the wardrobe. Time could be funny like that. It was entirely possible that she'd been gone for anything from thirty minutes to thirty years.

'There's a parcel down here for you!' shouted Mum. 'I had to sign for it. Have you been shopping online again?'

Lucy breathed a sigh of relief. Apparently she could overthrow a despotic regime with the help of a talking lion in the time it took for the post to come. Shaking the last of the snow out of her hair she headed for the door.

'Coming, Mum!' she called, then headed down the stairs.

She was gone just long enough for Hobo to consider getting the parcels out of the back of Lucy's

wardrobe and, having analysed the available data, come to the conclusion that the contents of Lucy's wardrobe (talking lions aside) was a mystery that he was in no way yet ready to investigate. Some things were best left a mystery.

Lucy reappeared holding a small padded envelope in her hand. She'd already started tearing the top open and was peering inside as she walked in.

'Another Christmas present for me?' quipped Hobo. 'This is getting ridiculous. Your friendship is by far the greatest gift I could ever—'

Hobo stopped talking as Lucy pulled a USB stick out of the envelope. It was small, black, and embossed with the unmistakable logo of a not so secretive organisation.

'Oh,' said Hobo. 'I was expecting socks.'

'I wasn't expecting anything,' said Lucy, turning the USB key over in her hand.

'What do we do?' asked Hobo.

'I guess we plug it in?' replied Lucy.

'It could be a trap.'

'A trap by recorded delivery?'

'Fair enough,' said Hobo.

Lucy opened up her laptop on her desk and, after scanning her thumbprint and entering the thirty-two characters including numbers, capital letters, and punctuation password that Hobo had insisted she have, she plugged in the USB stick. Lucy didn't have the heart to tell Hobo that she kept the password written down on a post-it note in her desk drawer. What he didn't know, he didn't endlessly lecture Lucy about.

'It's working!' whispered Hobo, as a video began to play on the screen of the laptop.

'They can't hear you, Hobo,' said Lucy with a chuckle.

'Are you sure?' replied Hobo defensively. 'How do you know they can't hear us all the time?'

Lucy frowned. It was bad enough trying to hold a private conversation with her parents prowling around downstairs, probably pressing glasses to the dining room ceiling or something for all Lucy knew, without having to worry about her bedroom being bugged.

On the screen, the head and shoulders of Dame Anne Bishop appeared.

'Hello, Lucy. And hello George, who I imagine is also with you.'

'See,' said Hobo, wiggling his fingers in the air like a magician. 'They're everywhere!'

'Shut up!' hissed Lucy. 'I'm trying to listen.'

'Right,' said Hobo. 'The message will probably self-destruct after we've listened to it.'

'I hope not,' replied Lucy. 'That laptop's brand new.'

'My apologies for contacting you this way,' continued Dame Anne, having left what she clearly thought was sufficient time for Lucy and Hobo to say 'Hello' back to her, just in case she *was* listening. 'But a situation has arisen that requires your unique talents and immediate attention. I'm afraid time is, once more, of the essence.'

'Did you hear that?' whispered Hobo. 'Unique talents.'

'The services of DJ Sellotape are required after all,' said Lucy with a wink.

Dame Anne vanished from the screen, replaced by what looked like night-vision body cam footage, but her voice continued.

'What you are about to see is footage recovered from the body-cams of a group of amateur mystery investigators who go by the name of "The Conundrum Corporation".

On the laptop screen a large dog popped up and licked the lens of the camera before being pushed back down by whoever was wearing it. The camera panned around what looked like an old, ornate hall. A wide staircase ran upwards before breaking off to the left and the right, while doors ran along both sides of the hall. A large grandfather clock, flanked by a crumbling stone statue of a woman in a toga, was chiming twelve as another voice cut in.

'Conundrum Corporation Investigation 3-17,'

said the voice. It sounded like a young man, his voice slightly squeaky. 'Like, we're here at Martyr's House to investigate the G-G-G-Gray Lady.'

Another voice cut in and the camera panned across to reveal a young woman with short hair, wearing thick rimmed glasses and a chunky sweater.

'For goodness sake, Roger,' scolded the girl, 'Scientifically speaking there can be no such thing as ghosts. There's nothing to be afraid of.'

'I like her,' whispered Hobo. 'Scientifically speaking.'

'Shh,' said Lucy, 'Watch.'

Another girl came into view, more glamorous than the first and with a very large amount of hair. Lucy herself had a large amount of hair, but she'd never been able to control it like the girl on the screen obviously could. Lucy's hair was more like an independent republic, a friendly neighbouring nation to her head that she was on good terms with, but that was ultimately its own sovereign state. She avoided discussing hair issues with Hobo, of course, who's alopecia left him completely hairless, and avoided making any comments on the stylistic merits of this new member of Conundrum Corporation.

'Can we get on with this please? Oliver was going to take me dancing!'

'Right after we complete this investigation,' said

another voice. It was another young man, but with a deeper and more commanding voice. The camera turned again to where he was setting up some equipment on the floor of the hallway. He was wearing a long scarf, flicked back over both shoulders.

'Pressure sensors,' he said, looking straight into the camera and pointing down a large, dark mat on the floor that was connected by some trailing wires to a laptop and camera setup. 'If this so-called ghost applies any pressure here, it will trigger a trap that—'

The large dog started barking and jumping up and down. The camera swung around again, pointing this time to the top of the stairs. There, softly glowing in the gloom, was the figure of a woman. She dressed in relatively modern clothes, a uniform of some sort, buttoned up around the neck and with a thick belt around her waist. Her face was gaunt, almost skeletal, and as she raised a hand to point at the four teenagers at the bottom of the stairs, she let out a blood-curdling scream.

'G-G-Ghost!' gasped the camera man and suddenly the camera started bouncing up and down as he, and his three friends, ran head-long out of the hallway and onto a wide gravel drive. The night vision mode cancelled out and Lucy and Hobo could see that the teens were running towards a large, brightly coloured van that was parked just outside.

Abruptly, the running camera man stumbled and fell, the camera pointing upwards at the night sky. The face of the ghost appeared again, eyes wild with fury and teeth bared, before the video froze and then cut out.

Lucy and Hobo realised that they had edged closer together on Lucy's bed, and awkwardly shuffled apart as Dame Anne reappeared on the screen.

'That incident occurred three nights ago at a UNIT facility called Martyr's House. The facility is mostly decommissioned and is used only for storage but, since this incident, we have been unable to make contact with any of our operatives at the location. Our resources are stretched thin and so I need to ask the two of you to head to Martyr's House and investigate this phenomenon.'

'Oh, em, gee,' said Hobo. 'An actual mission. This is awesome.'

'This is terrifying,' said Lucy. 'It's Christmas Eve. When am I going to sort out my presents now?'

Dad's car came to a stop at the gates to Martyr's House. It was only a short distance from Ogmore on the fringes of a small neighouring village. Surrounded by private land, it was easy to miss the place unless you knew what you were looking for. Thankfully, Dame Anne's USB key had also

included GPS coordinates for the location.

'Who's party is this again?' asked Dad.

'Anne,' said Lucy, unbulking her seatbelt. 'Anne Bish...'

'Anne Bish,' said Hobo from the backseat. 'Annebish Jones.'

'Annebish?' said Dad, 'Never heard that name before.'

'I think it's Welsh,' said Hobo, opening the back door of the car and climbing out. 'Anyway, thanks for the lift, Mr Wilson!'

'Err, and what time are you expecting to come home?' asked Dad. 'We don't want you spending all day in bed on Christmas Day because you've been out partying all night.'

'I'll call you,' said Lucy, flashing her mobile at Dad. 'Now, can you, you know...'

'Drive away before I become an embarrassment?'

'Well, it's too late for *that*,' joked Lucy, 'But if we could avoid total social death?'

Dad rolled his eyes, started the car engine and, after executing what Hobo estimated to be a seventeen and half point turn in the narrow lane outside the gates of the manor, drove away.

Lucy and Hobo looked up at the dark, ominous gates of Martyr's House. For some reason, someone had thought it was a good idea to sculpt skull-faced hooded wraiths into the upper part of the gates and someone else with even less sense had thought it was a good idea to buy those gates and put them at the entrance to their house.

'Someone didn't want visitors,' commented Hobo.

'Yeah,' said Lucy, pulling open one of the gates with a loud creak. 'Someone didn't.'

They trudged up the gravel driveway, the house slowly coming into view. The drive was lined with trees the perfect size and shape to hide a vampire, werewolf, or just run-of-the-mill robber and Hobo found himself jumping at every shadow.

'Scientifically speaking,' said Lucy, elbowing Hobo in the ribs. 'There can be no such thing as ghosts. Kat and I learned that on Fang Rock last Easter.'

'Tell that to my spine,' replied Hobo. 'It is well and truly chilled. And not in a relaxed way.'

'If I were you I'd be more worried that there are amateur sleuths working our patch,' said Lucy. 'What if they stumble onto something real? You know... something Lethbridge-Stewarty.'

'Who says they didn't already?'

'No way,' said Lucy. 'It's like one of those ghost hunting shows on TV. It's done for entertainment. Special effects, a bit of night-vision, it's all for show.'

'So why did Dame Anne send us here?'

'To investigate,' said Lucy. 'Make sure

everything's okay.'

'Something doesn't add up here, Lucy,' cautioned Hobo.

'There's always something that doesn't add up.'

Lucy and Hobo stopped talking as they reached the front of Martyr's House. It was an impressive building, a brooding gothic facade of dark leaded windows and leering gargoyles. There was a heavy brass door knocker embossed with a faded coat of arms on the large wooden double doors.

'Do we knock?' asked Hobo.

Before Lucy could answer, the doors swung inwards with a loud groan, revealing a small, hunchbacked man waiting within.

'He wasn't on the video,' whispered Hobo.

'Greetings,' croaked the man. He stepped forward and raised an old fashioned candelabra with six lit candles on it. 'I am the housekeeper. I do apologise for the lack of lighting. We've had... problems with the electrics.'

The man said 'electrics' as if it was a kind of new and mysterious power the likes of which he had yet to fully understand. Illuminated by the flickering candlelight, he was quite possibly the oldest person that either Lucy or Hobo had ever seen, his craggy old face framed by two curtains of wispy, perfectly white hair. He was dressed in an old-fashioned butler's outfit, ragged and frayed at the edges. Lucy

wondered just how long he had worked here or if, perhaps, they had simply built the house around him.

'Lucy Wilson,' said Lucy boldly, holding up her school library card. 'I believe we are expected?'

The old housekeeper held out a gnarled hand.

'Identification,' he snapped, snatching Lucy's library card from her hand. Holding it in his teeth for a moment, he took a pair of half-moon spectacles out of his dusty jacket and perched them on the tip of his warty old nose, before carefully inspecting Lucy's paperwork.

Lucy and Hobo waited nervously as the housekeeper read out each line of the card under his breath before nodding and handing it back to Lucy, damp edge first.

'All appears to be in order, miss,' he said, folding himself downwards into an awkward bow. 'Apologies for the inconvenience. I'm sure you understand. We have to keep the riff-raff out.'

'Absolutely,' said Lucy, stashing her library card in her back pocket. 'Quite right. As you were, housekeeper, as you were.'

The housekeeper turned and began to shuffle into the gloomy hallway, candelabra held high. The flickering light illuminated the same scene as they had witnessed on the video; the sweeping staircase, the doors flanking the hallway, the large grandfather clock and the stone woman in a toga. The only thing missing was the Conundrum Corporation's equipment. Lucy had assumed they'd left it behind when they made a run for it but, if so, where was it now?

'Look at this place,' said Hobo, following Lucy into the hallway. 'It's like a time warp. Also, what's "As you were"? What was that all about?'

'I don't know,' replied Lucy. 'What are you supposed to say?'

'Thank you?' suggested Hobo.

Lucy shook her head. 'Nah. That'll never catch on.'

The housekeeper stopped at the foot of the stairs and waited for them to catch up.

'I expect you'll be wanting to see the Librarian,' he said. 'I won't come up, if that's all the same to you. It's my back. And my knees. And my liver. One of my eyes. I'm not much for climbing stairs these days.'

'That's okay,' said Lucy. 'Just point us in the right direction.'

'Left at the top of the stairs, fourth door along,' replied the housekeeper. 'And do count carefully. Some of the other rooms are... not fit for people. It's the damp. It gets everywhere.'

'Thanks,' said Lucy, and started to climb the stairs two at a time. 'Come on, Hobo.'

'Yes, yes,' said Hobo, looking nervously up the staircase. 'Err... as you were.'

By the time Lucy and Hobo had reached the top of the staircase, the housekeeper had completely disappeared.

'Where did he go?' asked Lucy, looking down into the dark entrance hall.

'Probably to... keep house?' said Hobo. 'I bet his knees are fine. I've got an uncle like him, limps everywhere until there's somewhere he actually wants to go and then he's faster than an Olympic sprinter.'

'Which door did he say to go through again?' asked Lucy.

'Fourth,' said Hobo. 'Why?'

'Take a look,' said Lucy, pointing down the landing.

The landing stretched away from them as far as the eye could see, doors lining either side like soldiers on a regimental parade. Lucy counted eight doors on either side before it became too dark for her to see any further.

'Easy place to get lost in,' said Hobo. 'We should have brought a ball of string.'

'I'd prefer a torch.... Or a baseball bat.'

Taking a deep breath, Lucy began to stride down the landing towards the doors.

'You're going anyway, then?' called Hobo, resolutely staying put at the top of the stairs.

'Girl on a mission,' said Lucy. 'Literally.'

Hobo shook his head and trotted after her. The landing creaked underneath him, the old house having as many aches and pains as its housekeeper. Just before the first door there was an old painting up on the wall, a cavalier with a huge feather hanging from his hat. Something caught Hobo's eye and he stopped in front of the painting.

'Hey, Luce,' he said. 'Look at this!'

He reached up and gently placed his fingers onto the painting where the cavalier's eyes should have been. Sure enough, there were two holes instead of eyes.

'It's like in a haunted house movie,' he said. 'When they look through the eyes of the painting.'

'Like a haunted house movie?' said Lucy. 'Come on, this is getting weird. We need to find this Librarian and find out what's going on.'

They headed down the landing, Hobo nervously checking over his shoulder every few steps in case eyes had appeared behind the picture of the cavalier. They reached the fourth door only to find that there were two of them, one on either side of the landing.

'Which one?' asked Hobo.

'I don't know, open them both,' said Lucy. 'Pretty sure we'll know the library when we see it. It will have books.'

'But the housekeeper said that some of the other rooms weren't fit for human habitation,' said Hobo, grabbing Lucy's hand as she reached for the door knob of one of the doors. 'The damp...'

'My kitchen has damp,' said Lucy. 'And you don't seem too worried about going in there.'

'Your house isn't spooky, with a creepy housekeeper, and pictures with the eyes cut out. It's nice. You have biscuits.'

'Mum would be delighted to hear you say that,' said Lucy. 'She's trying to get our house on Tripadvisor.'

Lucy shook Hobo off and twisted the door open. On the other side of the door was another landing, with another set of doors.

'Weird,' Lucy and Hobo said in unison.

Hobo crossed the landing and opened the other door, revealing another landing and another set of doors. As he watched, the door opposite slowly opened, revealing another landing, another set of doors... and Lucy.

'What?' gasped Hobo, turning around. Behind him, Lucy had stepped through her door and opened the door beyond it. Through it, Hobo could see the back of his own head and, somehow, even that looked shocked.

'Some kind of portal?' suggested Lucy, reaching

forward cautiously until she could put a finger onto Hobo's chest. On the other side of the landing, the other Lucy did the same.

'Definitely not a library, I'll say that much,' said Hobo. 'Unless...'

'Unless what?'

Hobo took a deep breath and stepped forward through his door, through the next door, and reappeared on the landing in front of Lucy. Then he did the same again, walking across the landing, through one door and through another. This time, when he reappeared, the door on the other side of the landing had closed without a sound.

'Fourth door,' he said, reaching out and turning the door knob. The door swung open to reveal the library of Martyr's House. A wide room, shelves running from floor to ceiling, every one filled with books bound in red and brown leather. In between, tables, desks, chairs, and packing crates were scattered across the floor. Half way down on one side, a woman stood on a rolling ladder. A woman in an old-fashioned military uniform. She turned, adjusted her glasses, and smiled.

'Hello,' she said. 'You must be Lucy and George. I'm the Librarian.'

Hobo looked down at the china teacup, saucer, and side plate stacked with slices of angel cake. As much

as he was a life-long fan of refreshments, he didn't quite see how they fit with the whole haunted house aesthetic. Lucy, meanwhile, had started Christmas early and had already cleared her plate before the Librarian had finished pouring the tea.

'So,' she said, wiping crumbs from her mouth. 'That was obviously you at the top of the stairs and chasing those kids.'

'Guilty as charged,' said the Librarian. She stood up and crossed over to one of the packing crates, pulling out a ghoulish mask from inside. 'A mask, a few lighting effects, a little dry ice. The housekeeper's not impressed that I blew the fuse box, but it was worth it.'

'And the thing on the landing?' asked Hobo. 'With the doors?'

'Mirrors,' replied the Librarian. 'And a long corridor.'

Hobo pushed his cup of tea away across the table.

'So, what?' he asked. 'This is a training centre for stage magicians?'

'Hobo!' scolded Lucy. 'Bit rude.'

The Librarian laughed. 'It's all right Lucy, it's a perfectly sensible question. A very insightful question. Your file doesn't do you justice, George.'

'My file?' asked Hobo suspiciously.

'That's what this place is,' said the Librarian, waving her hands around. 'This is the Hard Archive.

Every file, since the first day. When the computers go down, when the lights go out, we'll still be here. Everything you need to know to save the world. In hardback.'

'No way,' said Hobo. 'You can't possibly have everything printed out, you'd need...'

'A really massive library?' said the Librarian. 'Trust me, this house is bigger than it looks. It has levels.'

'Like a basement?' asked Lucy, slyly sliding Hobo's cake plate towards herself.

'Sort of,' replied the Librarian.

'So, why aren't there any guards?' asked Lucy. 'I mean, the whole ghost thing was cool but, wouldn't a large soldier holding a rifle be a better deterrent?'

The Librarian took a sip of her tea, her lips pursed.

'Well, that would be nice but George isn't the only person who has... reservations about the future of the Hard Archive. Our funding has been cut back over the years. There used to be a whole team of us here but now it's just me and the housekeeper, most of the time.'

'Most of the time?' asked Lucy.

'Well, an old house like this, obviously we have a few ghosts.'

Behind the Librarian, a book rattled on the shelf. Hobo looked at Lucy, but she was too busy laughing and giving the Librarian a double thumbs up. 'Very good,' Lucy laughed. 'Nice call-back.'

'Lucy?' hissed Hobo, pointing at the shelves behind the Librarian. The rattling book was edging forward, separating itself from the others.

'I'm serious,' said the Librarian. 'It's why I thought you were here? Tonight's the night when they're most active. I thought you were here to help?'

'Oh, yeah,' said Lucy, giving Hobo her best "say-a-word-and-I-will-end-you" look. 'I mean, if you've got ghost problems...'

The rattling book suddenly launched itself out of the shelf and landed on the table between Lucy, Hobo, and the Librarian, smashing crockery and sending teacups flying. It flipped itself over onto its back and popped open, pages flicking from side to side until it was resting open.

'Freaky Ghost problems...' mumbled Lucy, staring wide-eyed at the book.

'Get back!' said the Librarian, getting up from her seat and pushing Lucy and Hobo back from the table as well. 'Get back!'

A swirling green light sprang up from the book, a whirling column of letters and numbers that coalesced into the figure of a tall, broad-shouldered man with an enormous beard, dressed as a pirate. He looked down at Lucy and Hobo with a wide grin and lifted his tri-corner hat in greeting, a grinning skull shining from it, before pulling out his cutlass

and raising it over his head.

'Who you gonna call?' offered Hobo meekly. 'Run!' shouted the Librarian.

Candelabra in hand, the Librarian raced through a room of library stacks, Lucy and Hobo hot on her heels. A few yards behind them, the ghost pirate floated along a few inches from the ground, brandishing his cutlass and bellowing a range of pirate-themed threats.

'Left!' ordered the Librarian, her sensible shoes squeaking on the hard wooden floor as she veered to the side and vanished between two sets of shelves. Lucy and Hobo followed as quickly as they could, looking over their shoulders to see if the ghost pirate was following them. Up ahead, at the end of the stacks, they could see a door.

'Come on!' said Lucy, realising that she'd pulled a little ahead of Hobo.

'Doing my best!' said Hobo. 'At least I gave the cake a miss!'

'That's my superpower,' said Lucy. 'I'm a cake powered running machine.'

The Librarian reached the door and yanked it open. As she did, another book leapt from the stacks, bounced off the shelves opposite, and landed on the floor between the Librarian and Lucy. The pages began to turn, faster and faster until, just as

suddenly, the book stopped moving and the green light burst forth, a climbing shard of letters lifting up from the pages of the book. A pair of hairy bare feet appeared, then ankles, then legs.

'Jump it!' shouted Lucy, dipping her head and building up extra speed.

'Are you sure?' gasped Hobo.

'Nope!' said Lucy, launching herself through the air, over the book, and landing on the other side with the Librarian. Hobo closed his eyes and launched himself through the air, his feet trailing through a set of ghostly shins before he landed with a thud on the other side.

'Did I touch it? Did I touch it?' he asked, opening one eye.

'Oh, no,' said Lucy, patting him reassuringly on the shoulder. 'You cleared it by a couple of centimetres, easily.'

'If you've quite finished,' said the Librarian tersely. 'I'd quite like to get back to running for our lives.'

'As you were,' said Lucy, and the three of them dashed through the door and slammed it behind them. They found themselves in a quiet room, the walls again lined with books, glass display cases arranged in a grid pattern across the floor.

'Ghosts can walk through walls, right?' said Hobo, backing away from the door.

There was a thud from the door, then another, then another.

'Not these ones, I guess?' said Lucy.

'They will find a way through eventually,' said the Librarian. 'Come on, we need to move.'

Lucy and Hobo followed the Librarian through the room, the tiny sphere of flickering light from the candelabra illuminating the contents of the glass display cases one by one. The head of something that might have been a robot, one half of its face crushed inwards, leered from the first. In the second, a patch of fur was stretched out between poles. Lucy stopped at the third where something that looked like a large plunger was displayed.

'What's that one from?' asked Lucy, 'The world's most dangerous plumber?'

'Pray you never find out,' said the Librarian. 'There's a reason I avoid the D section of our files.'

'Err, Lucy,' said Hobo, 'Have you seen this one?'

Lucy turned to find Hobo peering into another glass cabinet. Inside it was a small woollen beanie hat with little ears.

'Is that my hat?' asked Lucy.

Hobo pushed his way around the case, blocking Lucy's view.

'Don't look,' he said gravely, 'I really think... you shouldn't look.'

From somewhere behind them in the darkness

there was a loud crash. Two glowing green figures appeared, a knight in a suit of armour and an old-west style miner holding a pick-axe, drifting towards them through the gloom.

'Keep moving!' said the Librarian, already vanishing into the darkness. 'We're almost there.'

'We're going to talk about this,' said Lucy seriously, pointing at the display case holding her hat. 'We're coming back to this.'

Hobo grabbed Lucy by the hand and ran after the Librarian. The remaining display cases flashed past them, a seemingly random selection of items that varied from the mundane to the bizarre. Suddenly books started to launch themselves from the shelves on either side of them, landing open on the floor and sending up their own shafts of green light. The Librarian swerved left and right to avoid them, Lucy and Hobo following her course as closely as they could.

Up ahead, Hobo spotted another door.

'Almost there,' the Librarian called over her shoulder.

Around them, new ghosts began to appear, built up piece by piece and layer by layer. A ghost in a tiki mask loomed forward and swung a long skulltopped staff at Lucy, forcing her to duck and swerve onto a different path, breaking away from Hobo.

Separated, Lucy and Hobo weaved their way

through the display cases, avoiding the ghosts and following the Librarian's flickering candelabra towards the door at the end of the room. A rectangle of light appeared as she opened the door.

'Hurry!' the Librarian shouted.

'Hurrying!' replied Lucy and Hobo in unison.

Lucy raced past a display case holding a pair of Punch and Judy dolls, a ghost that looked like an old sheet trailing behind her. She met Hobo at an intersection, skidding to a halt then swerving left for a final dash together towards the door.

'What did you get?' asked Hobo.

'Your basic sheet ghost,' replied Lucy. 'You?'

'Some kind of spaceman,' said Hobo. 'Big space suit but with a glowing skull inside the helmet.'

'Kooky,' replied Lucy. 'You win.'

They reached the door together, tumbling through it as the Librarian slammed it shut behind them. They found themselves in a large, circular room the centre of which was dominated by the entrance to a circular shaft, several yards across, edged with a brass safety rail. The walls were rough brick and rose up, without windows, in a dome above it. Rusted iron girders formed a spider's web around the room, supporting a Frankenstein mix of monitors all filled with scrolling text and numbers, connected by bundles of cables to keyboards and large computers with whirling reels of tape and

flashing banks of lights. An old Christmas tree, its branches almost bare, stood between two of the computers, twinkling lights of its own. A table was laid out for Christmas dinner next to it, the places set with old fashioned crockery, cutlery, and crackers all covered in a thick layer of dust.

Lucy crept up to the safety rail and looked over it. The shaft ran down through the house, its walls filled with endless rows of shelves all packed with the same leather bound books and journals she had seen in other parts of the house, interspersed with glass storage cabinets full of strange curiosities. Lights were mounted every five or six shelves, casting small pools of orange light that illuminated the shelves. They formed a spiralling track that led down into the darkness, further than Lucy could see.

'I told you,' the Librarian said, appearing at her side. 'This house has levels.'

'You weren't kidding,' replied Lucy. 'Just how big is this place?'

'And more importantly,' added Hobo, waving his arms around the room, 'what is all this?'

'And what...' gasped Lucy, pointing down into the shaft, 'Is that?'

Together, Hobo and the Librarian peered down into the shaft. One by one, books had started to leap from the shelves and tumble down into the darkness, their leather covers spread out like bat wings. They

flapped and flailed as they fell, green shafts of swirling letters shooting out and leaving ghostly trails behind them. Somewhere, far below, something was beginning to form in the blackness.

'You need to tell us what's going on,' said Lucy gravely.

'Have you ever heard the phrase "The Ghost in the Machine"?' began the Librarian.

'Gilbert Ryle, 1949,' interjected Hobo. 'The idea of the mind being separate from the body?'

'Correct, George,' smiled the Librarian. The half-light of the room, mixed with the twinkling lights from the banks of the computer, made her skin look deathly pale. 'Well, as I may have already intimated, there are some people that have begun to question the value of the Hard Archive. Our storage needs are increasing exponentially...'

The Librarian cast a suspicious eye across at the shaft. Flashes of green light came from within, painting the room a sickly colour.

'Did you dig something up?' asked Lucy suspiciously. 'Something from... down there?'

'In a manner of speaking,' replied the Librarian. 'The Hard Archive contains some information that isn't available anywhere else. Records get lost, systems get damaged. So, if the Hard Archive was going to be decommissioned, it would first need to be digitised.'

'Impossible!' said Hobo. 'It would take decades to scan all of these documents!'

'That's what we thought,' replied the Librarian. 'But that's when we discovered the World Engine.'

'The what?!' said Lucy and Hobo in unison.

'You're standing in it,' said the Librarian. 'Or at least an approximation of it. Alien technology, recovered by UNIT in the '70s. Or was it the '80s? Anyway, it can take any document, any report or story, any idea even and make it real. Imagine it; words brought to life.'

'Ghosts *from* a machine...' said Hobo in a hushed tone, his jaw falling open.

'We don't really know how long the device has existed, or how long it's been on Earth. There are instances of things we think might be the World Engine throughout mythology; Aladdin's Lamp, the Spear of Destiny, the Cursed Monkey Paw, the Cintamani—'

'And you've sprung a leak,' interrupted Lucy.

'You might put it that way,' said the Librarian.

'We've seen it,' said Lucy. 'We found a magical realm in the back of my wardrobe today.'

'That is... unfortunate,' said the Librarian. 'We thought that the World Engine, with its ability to absorb information and convert it into other forms, might be the answer to preserving the contents of the Hard Archive.'

'A machine that takes stories and makes them real?' said Hobo incredulously. 'And you fed it all this top secret information?'

'When you put it that way it does sound reckless,' said the Librarian, turning away from Lucy and Hobo and fiddling with some dials and switches on one of the banks of computers.

'When did all this start?' asked Lucy. 'This equipment looks... old.'

'Antique even,' added Hobo.

'Time is rather a tricky concept in the Hard Archive,' said the Librarian. 'I don't get out much. One day rather blurs into another.'

'And you said "We",' added Lucy. 'Are there other people here, other than you and the housekeeper?'

Without warning, a rumble came from the shaft in the middle of the room. Lucy, Hobo, and the Librarian turned around to see the green eldritch light had formed itself into a giant, writhing mass of tentacles, the quivering ends of which were probing the air above the shaft. Riding on the largest of them was a glowing figure in an old fashioned deep sea diver's suit, green light glowing from inside its spherical helmet.

'Did your grandad's lot ever fight a sea monster?' asked Hobo.

Lucy shrugged.

The Librarian looked from one side of the room to another as the creature's huge tentacles slammed down onto the ground on either side of them, blocking their path around the shaft.

'We're trapped!' she gasped.

'Back the way we came?' suggested Hobo, looking at the thick metal door behind them.

'More ghosts that way,' said Lucy. 'We're going to have to stand our ground!'

'How on earth do we fight that thing?' said Hobo, pointing at the monster. More tentacles were forcing their way up from the shaft, crushing the metal safety rail and breaking through the stone floor.

Lucy grabbed the Librarian by the lapel and turned her around.

'How do we use it?' she asked. 'The Engine?'

'You just have to feed in the data,' replied the Librarian, realisation slowly appearing on her face as she followed Lucy's train of thought. 'Over there... but you can't be serious?'

'I'm never serious,' said Lucy with a wink. She followed the Librarian's finger to where she was pointing and saw a small, rusty typewriter attached to the rest of the machinery by a thick coil of cable. 'But I am going to need some paper.'

'This is the Hard Archive,' said the Librarian. 'One thing we never run short of is paper.'

Lucy and the Librarian dashed towards the

keyboard, leaving Hobo trailing behind.

'What are we doing exactly?' he asked.

'Remember last Christmas?' asked Lucy, taking a sheet of paper from the Librarian and feeding it into the typewriter. 'We had a little adventure?'

'The wishes?' asked Hobo, recalling last Christmas when he and Lucy had been shrunken down into a model Christmas village by the power of some mysterious extra-dimensional creatures that Lucy had called the Wishes.

'Yep!' said Lucy, winding the paper into place. 'Well, it's Christmas. Time to wish really hard!'

Hobo watched as Lucy began typing, slowly, on the keyboard. Behind them, the sea monster had begun to tear at the iron framework that held the roof up, wrapping itself around the girders and peeling them away from the wall. Bricks began to tumble down, smashing into the equipment in showers of sparks and electricity.

'Okay, I think I get it,' said Hobo. 'And if that's your plan, you'd better move aside.'

'Why?'

'Because you are the world's worst typist,' said Hobo, elbowing Lucy aside and leaning over the typewriter himself. 'Thankfully you are best friends with someone who understands the value of learning these things. Now, just tell me what you were going to type!' 'Okay,' said Lucy. 'Mr Kostinen... take a memo! Lucy and Hobo and...'

Lucy paused, realising she didn't know the Librarian's name.

'I'm Hannah,' smiled the Librarian.

'Right,' said Lucy. 'Nice to meet you! So... Lucy and Hobo and Hannah were trapped by the... big sea monster thing... and facing certain doom...'

'Almost certain doom,' corrected Hobo. 'Not sure how literally this thing takes things.'

'Almost certain doom,' continued Lucy, 'When, through the door, came the greatest soldiers of all time to save the day at the last minute.'

Hobo hit the carriage return on the typewriter triumphantly and all three of them; Lucy, Hobo, and Hannah; turned to the door expectantly. Seconds passed by, bricks and ironwork tumbling around them, sparks flying from the World Engine. Beneath them, a low rumble began, shaking the whole room around them.

'I shouldn't have typed "the last minute",' said Hobo. 'I *knew* this thing would take everything literally!'

Suddenly, finally, in a blast of fire and smoke, the door flew off its hinges. The deep sea diver turned and directed the fury of his sea monsters at the squad of glowing green soldiers who came charging in. 'UNIT soldiers,' said Hannah. 'Of course.'

At the back of the group, a tall man with a dark moustache directed the soldiers' attack. 'Chap with the deep sea diver's helmet!' he barked. 'Five rounds rapid!'

'Grandad,' whispered Lucy reverently.

'Best soldiers of all time,' said Hobo, putting his hand on her shoulder. 'Literally.'

Lucy, Hobo, and Hannah watched as the soldiers fired on the deep sea diver, every shot hitting its mark. The diver staggered back and tumbled off the fat tentacle he'd been balanced on, vanishing back down into the shaft with a scream. The soldiers directed their fire onto the tentacles next, slowly advancing on the creature as they drove it back into its pit. Grandad broke away from the group, dashing across to where Lucy, Hobo, and Hannah were sheltering.

'Anyone injured?' asked her ghostly grandad.

'We're fine,' said Lucy. 'It's... nice to see you, again.'

'And you,' smiled Grandad. 'Still in the family business, I see!'

'It's Christmas,' said Lucy, pointing at the Christmas tree that had somehow miraculously survived the battle around them thus far. 'I like to keep it traditional.'

'Quite right,' replied Grandad.

Another rumble shook the place as the soldiers pushed the tentacled creature back further. The Librarian looked nervously up at the ceiling as a crack snaked across the brickwork.

'Time to go?' asked Lucy, looking at Grandad.

'Yes,' replied Grandad, a sadness in his eyes. 'Time to go.'

Turning, he took command of his soldiers again, barking out orders that they responded to immediately. 'Clear a path!' he ordered, 'Civilians coming through.'

The soldiers formed two ranks, leaving a clear path behind them, and continued to fire at the creature. Lucy and Hobo broke into a run, heading for the door. It took them a few seconds to realise that Hannah wasn't with them. They skidded to a halt and looked back to find her still standing in front of Grandad.

'Two civilians,' said Hannah, correcting him. 'This is *my* facility.'

Grandad pushed the Librarian backwards as a huge chunk of masonry slammed into the ground where she had been standing a moment before. The ghost and the woman looked at each other for a moment, something passing silently between them.

'As you were then,' said Grandad. 'As you were.' 'Hannah!' called Lucy defiantly, 'Come on!' But the Librarian didn't answer. Instead, she

propped one foot up on the desk next to the typewriter, hitched up her skirt, and pulled an old service revolver out of a holster around her thigh. Standing alongside Grandad, she opened fire on the creature.

'We have to go, Lucy,' said Hobo, earnestly tugging at Lucy's sleeve.

Suddenly, another tentacle burst out of the pit, swung through the air and came down with a crash in the middle of the soldiers, scattering them in all directions.

'Lucy?' urged Hobo again.

'Run,' said Lucy. 'Let's run.'

Without another word, the two friends began to run again, racing around the edge of the pit and through the door and back into the gallery they had passed through before. The ghosts that had pursued them here earlier had vanished, their books now dormant on the floor.

'This way!' said Hobo, leading Lucy by the hand through the glass display cases. Behind them, a tentacle forced its way through the open door, the wall around it cracking and crumbling, as it lunged for Lucy and Hobo. Hobo dived forward, dragging Lucy with him, as the tentacle smashed its way through the display cases, sending the contents through the air. Picking herself up off the floor, Lucy glanced back over her shoulder and smiled.

'Hey look!' she said, reaching down into the shattered remnants of a display cabinet. 'My hat!'

Hobo shook his head as Lucy pulled her hat onto her head and tucked her hair up into it.

'That's better,' she said. 'Now we can go.'

'Now we can go?' mocked Hobo, getting to his feet and racing with Lucy towards the end of the gallery. 'Oh, what a relief!'

Behind them the tentacle burst into the gallery again, thrashing left and right but unable to reach them. The gallery door came into view in the gloom, swinging open as they approached it, the housekeeper on the other side.

'Astounding,' he said, looking at the devastation in the gallery. 'Madness takes its toll. Now, listen closely... take the first right and the second left after you've crossed the library. Hurry... time *is* fleeting.'

Lucy and Hobo looked at the caretaker, then at each other, and decided to take the advice at face value, even if the face giving it was somewhat... unusual.

'Thanks!' they said in unison, then broke into a run again.

One right and a second left later, Lucy and Hobo were racing back down the ornate staircase and heading towards the open doors of the manor. The grandfather clock was chiming, over and over again, and Hobo stole a glance to the side as they reached the floor.

'Where did the statue go?' he asked, pointing at a vacant space next to the grandfather clock where the stone woman in a toga had been.

'One mystery at a time, Hobo!' panted Lucy, leading the way through the door and out onto the gravel path. Stopping half way down the path, they turned and looked back at the house. Spectral green tendrils had burst out most of the windows, wrapping back on themselves and winding around the house like a huge, tentacled hand. With a creak and a groan, the house began to collapse in on itself, the upper floors crumbling down as the tentacles grasped tighter and tighter.

Suddenly, a shaft of green light burst up through the floor of the entrance hall. The house began to bend towards it, as if it were being sucked into a hoover. Arcs of energy spiralled out and, as Lucy and Hobo watched, the house was drawn down into a single point of light that flickered for a second and then vanished.

'What...' gasped Lucy. 'Was that?'

'I think we just crossed the streams,' replied Hobo breathlessly.

'What does that mean?' asked Lucy. 'Is crossing the streams bad?'

'Try to imagine...' began Hobo, but he didn't

have enough breath to finish. 'Oh, just ring your Dad, Lucy. The party's over.'

Christmas Day arrived on schedule the next day and was as resolutely normal as anyone could hope for. There were presents, music, repeats on TV, and Mum was transformed into a human whirlwind that brought terror and tidiness in equal measure everywhere it went. In short, everything was exactly as it should have been.

Hobo's family had delayed Christmas this year on account of his mum pulling the short straw and being on patrol for South Wales Police on Christmas Day. Fortunately for Hobo, the Wilsons had welcomed him as an additional Christmas Day guest with open arms. Secretly, all of the Wilsons agreed that having Hobo there would mean one more person to take on Mum's Christmas dinner, which was a dangerous and mysterious threat all of its own.

Shortly after a lunch of turkey so dry it seemed to be sucking moisture out of the atmosphere around it and sprouts so hard that Hobo pocketed one for future use as a potential armour piercing weapon, Lucy and Hobo made their excuses and retreated to Lucy's bedroom. Lucy had sent Dame Anne Bishop a message the night before, relating the details of their visit to Martyr's House, and was eagerly awaiting a reply.

Dame Anne was waiting on the screen of Lucy's laptop when they walked in, a mixture of frustration and concern on her face.

'Good afternoon, Lucy,' she said, 'Nice of you to join me.'

'Christmas dinner,' replied Lucy, depositing herself on her bed. 'Unavoidable, I'm afraid.'

'And possibly indigestible,' added Hobo, lowering himself down onto the bed next to Lucy, nursing his stomach through his hoodie.

'Lucy, I've read your report,' said Dame Anne. 'And I must say, I am concerned.'

'I don't think the World Engine will give us any more trouble,' replied Lucy. 'As far as we could see, the whole place was sucked into... wherever it came from and—'

'That is not my main concern,' interrupted Dame Anne. 'Although it does require more investigation. Lucy, I need to make sure you understand that I am not in the habit of sending mission briefings via registered post. Especially not at this time of year.'

'Christmas post,' whispered Hobo. 'I told you!'

'We... didn't think of that,' said Lucy apologetically, elbowing Hobo hard in the ribs to stop him talking. 'Sorry.'

'And you say that this phenomenon, words becoming real, is something you've experienced before?' asked Dame Anne. 'The curious incident involving a lion, a witch, and your wardrobe?'

'Where I lost my hat,' confirmed Lucy. 'But then I found it again. In the library. Which is weird, actually, now that I say it out loud.'

'Indeed,' said Dame Anne. 'And I suspect George and I will be having a conversation about that at a later point in time.'

Hobo found an interesting point on the ceiling to look at just when Lucy would expect him to jump into the conversation. They hadn't talked about whatever it was that Hobo had read on the display case containing Lucy's hat, but even if she trusted him that it was better for her not to know, Dame Anne clearly saw things differently.

'For now, however,' said Dame Anne. 'We need to concentrate on investigating whoever it was who sent you that USB key and so expertly faked a communication that it fooled the two of you into walking into what may well have been a trap.'

'The Hard Archive,' asked Hobo. 'Was it even real then?'

'It used to be,' said Dame Anne. 'It took a little while to dig up the information, ironically, but there was indeed a hard copy archive of the UNIT files, although it was decommissioned some time ago.'

'What about Hannah?' asked Lucy, softly. She'd been too exhausted to do anything other than sleep last night, but she suspected the fate of the Hard Archive's Librarian would weigh on her tonight when she was alone with her thoughts.

Dame Anne looked down and shuffled some paperwork just out of sight.

'Yes, about her,' she said solemnly. 'Lucy, I'm afraid that although she was indeed the Chief Librarian and Archivist at Martyr's House and did work at the Hard Archive, she also died in 1977.'

The news hit Lucy like a punch, knocking the wind out of her. She sat in silence, aware that Dame Anne was still talking but unable to take in anything else she had to say, words washing over her like background noise. It took Dame Anne a few minutes more to finish the debrief, a series of questions and answers that Lucy answered without much thought. She was vaguely aware that she had agreed to have all her personal mail redirected for inspection and made a weak promise to confirm with Dame Anne before going on any other UNIT-type missions. Mostly, her thoughts were about Hannah and about what their trip to Martyr's House had really meant

Neither of them spoke for a little while after Dame Anne signed off until, finally, Hobo broke the silence with a single 'Wow'.

'Yeah,' replied Lucy. 'Wow.'

'Lucy?' asked Hobo.

'Yeah?

'Are you sure we definitely left the Hard

Archive?'

Lucy turned around to face Hobo on the bed.

'What do you mean?' she asked.

'Well, most of the ghosts were pretty obvious ghosts, right?' said Hobo. 'Green, swirly, spooky looking. But Hannah didn't look like that. She looked... real.'

'Yeah,' said Lucy. 'But she wasn't so...'

'So, what else isn't real?' asked Hobo. He got off the bed and started prowling around the room, poking and prodding things. 'Is any of this real? What if we're still in the Hard Archive right now, inside a story the World Engine made to keep us trapped there?'

'That's a bit... what do you call it? Mega?' said Lucy.

'You mean meta, but, yeah,' continued Hobo. 'But how would we know? Did Hannah know what she was? I mean, yesterday we fell through the back of your wardrobe and fought in a civil war from one of your favourite books when you were a kid. Then, we went to the Hard Archive and got chased by ghosts and some kind of tentacle monster thing. Ask yourself... Just when did our normal lives stop and the story start?'

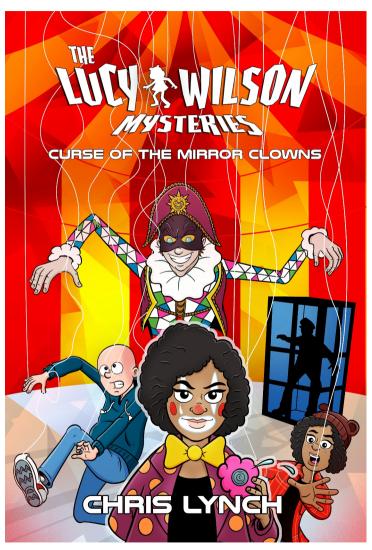
'Hobo, if this were all a story, who on earth would make up my mother's Brussel sprouts?' asked Lucy. 'You'd have to be a complete maniac.'

Hobo shook his head and smiled.

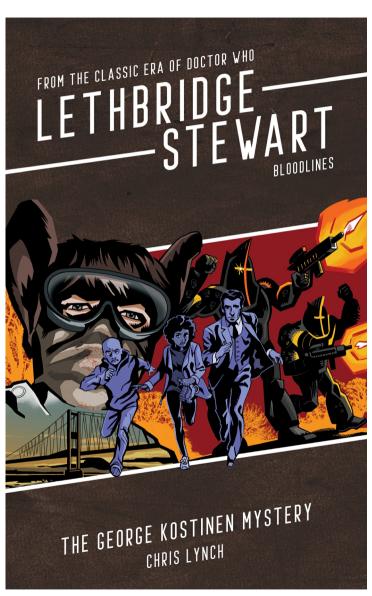
'That is a very good point,' he said. 'Well made.'

'Maybe we are still trapped in a story, Hobo,' said Lucy, 'Or maybe we're not. Either way, we've got mysterious forces trying to trap us, or who have trapped us, or maybe they want to kill us, or maybe something else. We live on a planet that seems to be the most hotly contested piece of property in the galaxy and, more often than not, we're on the front line of protecting it. That's enough to be getting on with for a new year I think so, until we know better, Mr Kostinen? One mystery at a time and... as you were.'

'As you were,' replied Hobo.



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