

The Thing In The Toyshop – a H.P.Lushcraft tale

I never went to Vernet-Les-Bains in the foothills of the Pyrenees, and had I done so I doubt I would have visited the cemetery that runs down into the shadow of the high pine-clad ridges. But they are mostly the same in that part of the world – the local style runs to marble tombs with preserved photographs of their occupants, to concrete plaques and marble chippings that cover everywhere there might have been grass or trees. The overall effect is rather like a scale model of an industrial estate – except that although there are occasional deliveries, there are not usually any exports.

The bravest man I ever knew, was laid to rest there five years before the EU War began, the week after his para-glider was caught by a freak gust of wind and smashed into a hundred metre cliff of unyielding granite. He had no relatives to bring him home to rest under the green grass and tree shade of the churchyard that lies across the road from the house I lived in after him – so the locals put him under the marble and concrete along with their own, who were presumably happy enough with the neighbourhood.

I would not have liked the prospect, myself. And Harry Garsdale liked it still less – although it was years later when he told me, the second time we met. The first time – that first time we met, was a place and a day when the living envied the dead. It was in those final struggles against the EU, where I was a driver in that final advance – and I do not need to check my diaries for what happened, for it never leaves my nightmares.

“They’re breaking through!” The call gasped over the comms net, and was cut off abruptly – then we knew we were on our own. There were four of us left in the vehicle, cut off in the strangely coloured mists that shrouded what the books would later call Third Bergen-Op-Zoom, not that we knew there would be anyone to write them. All around the mists swirled – we would have been happier had their odd colours triggered the chemical detectors, for at least then we would have known what we were up against. I saw the “vehicle stopping” light come on, and dutifully switched the electric motors to “regenerate”, turning them into dynamos and bringing us to a wheel-screaming halt.

There was a silence, with only the sound of dripping condensation and the shuffling of feet from the upper deck as Polovski checked the view out of the firing slits. “The sensors aren’t reading anything – we’re too far in for them to work. Too far in or – it’s too late.” I heard his voice faintly as the big Polish stag shifted restlessly, alone on the upper deck with only Herrington the staircase gunner left. Behind me, the fresh-faced Labrador who had joined us that morning, nervously swung the barrel of the twin 155 back and forth as shapes appeared to loom in and out of the fog, threatening shadows that were possibly nothing more than that.

The condensation dripped. We had started off that morning jammed tight with infantry (forty seated on the upper deck, thirty-five on the lower, ten standing) who had jumped off at the last stop before the notional front line, leaving us to press on along the line the sappers had laid the week before. Normally we would have company, but 437C and 437B that had followed us out had been overwhelmed by an assault of mortal troops an hour before. So we had to go on, scouting the track ahead while the repair teams far behind us pulled the vehicles clear of the track. Only one track ran so far into the danger zone. Our only blessing was the flat Dutch terrain – on the far side of the pocket of EU resistance the liberating armies had had to lay down toothed tracks for the squadrons of assault funiculars that had winched their way over the whole Alpine range.

There was a clatter of boots as Polovski came downstairs and picked his way forward through the economy seats to my cab. “Nothing to see out there,” his ears dipped. “But I don’t like the idea of them gathering around us – there’s too few of us to man the firing ports if we get surrounded. We’d best move.”

“Forward or back?” I looked down at the drive lever, but knew there was only one real option.

With what had arrived on Earth, there could be no retreat or surrender – this was still our planet, but there was nowhere to run or hide.

We trundled on, deeper into the fog.

It must have been twenty minutes later that the bell rang – three pings, an emergency stop. I slammed the brakes on and the tram’s wheels howled on the rails that kept us tied to the still unaffected reality now miles behind us, like a bathysphere dangling on a thin, fragile cable in a sea of horrors. Looking out through the driver’s periscope I saw the reason – the line was broken ahead, a row of fresh shell craters stitching across the track and leaving the rails twisted and curled like so much ferrous noodle.

Polovski scrambled down again, and we looked at the break. Then we looked at each other, both knowing just what we had to do but unwilling to be the first to admit it. Polovski took off his conductor’s cap and reached for his helmet, handling it carefully by the inside rim to avoid the spikes.

“We’d best suit up,” he said flatly. “I hope you made your will before we left the tram shed this morning.”

Outside it was worse than I had thought. Despite our respirators there was a sweet, sickly odour that seemed to be seeping in through our suits, more a feeling than anything our detectors could register. The colours were very bad now, and with horror I realised that it was not just some odd vapour eddying around and distorting our view of the landscape – this was the landscape itself. Fleeting I thought of the science fiction I had read as a pup, with its tales of “terraforming” barren worlds. This was happening as I watched, except it was happening to our own inhabited planet, making it a suitable place for the things that had been let in by the secret plans of the EU.

“No time to waste,” Polovski gasped, struggling to unlock one of the straps that kept bundles of two metre track segments tied to the front armour. “We can take only so much exposure to this, in these suits.” He looked at our tram, and his tail drooped inside his NBCC suit. The ambushes and skirmishing of three days of suburban warfare had blown off much of the added protection – the bare ceramic of the tram showed through where the runes and black spiky bits had been blown off with mundane weapons wielded by the EU’s mortal or half-mortal troops, leaving us with great gaping holes against the sort of attack their masters could bring to bear.

Panting in heat stress we set to work, slapping cutting charges on the last unbent pieces of track, hitting the ten-second fuses and just scrambling into shelter behind the tram as they went off. Another ten minutes of lining up the new sections carefully, packing the joints with thermite and firing it off in four eye-searingly white eruptions of flame – and we were on our paws and knees, examining the weld with the certainty there would be no getting back if it snapped beneath the weight of the armoured tram.

“Sounds sweet,” I declared, hearing the metal ring as I tapped it with the stock of my rifle, a heavy semi-autonomous. I handed it to Polovski, and took a deep breath. “If this goes wrong – well. Rather me than all of us.”

The deer nodded sombrely as he stood well back, his gloved finger a twitch away from flicking the trigger and targeter to fully autonomous. I took the spare jumper of pure, cold iron braided cable that was linked to my inner suit, and clipped the three metres of cable to the rail past the furthest hasty weld. Then, very carefully, I unclipped the safety cable, the one that linked me to the trusted link to the outside world.

Nothing happened. I sagged with relief, giving the thumbs-up sign and picked the repair kit up. “Right. Better get back and...”

Just then we heard something in the distance. Had we been in the tram we would not have heard it – just a faint whisper of sound blown down the wind. Something out there giggled.

Polovski froze in terror – I knew he was brave, but there is a limit anyone will reach after enough exposure, and I knew he had already seen enough to kill most people several times over. I grabbed him and more tackled him than carried him, desperation giving me strength as I staggered with his armoured weight to the open door at the back, where I threw him in while I screamed up to Herrington to get ready to fire. Dumping Polovski in the shielded back row of seats, I charged up to the cab, yelling at the cab gunner to fire blind – and then I halted as if I had run into a wall.

The Labrador, he was just a pup, he had arrived just that morning and I never even knew his name. He must have lost sight of us outside through the periscope, and decided a quick look would not matter, just this once – the shielded cover over the glass vision block was open, and a deadly pale light was flooding through the compartment. My own eyes were closed and my head turned away as I slammed the cover down and latched it – but a wave of nausea washed over me even so. Looking down, the Labrador’s eyes were wide open but unseeing, his ear skin flushed and a stink like varnish on his breath as I ripped off my respirator.

“There’s something ahead! Get up here!” I yelled to the other two, snatching at the first-aid kit on the wall. There was no time for anything fancy – there was a Velcro covered flap securing his rune-embroidered kevlar thigh armour, I pulled it aside and stabbed the insulin injector pen through the inner membrane of his NBCC suit. He was in Sugar shock – massive enough to shut him down for good.

Inside the cold iron shielding of the tram, electronics functioned well enough, and I flicked on the synthetic sight. That’s when I was sure it was all over for us. Something was there, not fifty metres away sitting right in front on our track.

Did you ever make a “fort” out of seat cushions, when you were a kit or a pup? That’s what it looked like. A great square-sided quilted thing, not as tall as our tram but much wider and longer, its sickly embroidered heart runes and flowers reduced to conventional symbols on the screen. It had a turret, too – a great plump cannon and podgy turret aping our own designs, conceived by mocking monstrosities who had looked at the best Earth had to offer in its defence and thought it was screamingly funny. It floated above the ground on what looked like a soiled curtain fringe, as if the earth yet repelled its unclean touch.

It had a crew, too. I only saw the synthetic view but that was bad enough, as I knew something of what the symbols meant – may the Gods let me forget! The pup had seen them with his naked eyes and brain – snake-like symbols peeped out of pocket-like hatches, and then I knew why Corporal Barrindale had screamed about sock puppets before he died. Nobody had seen them outside their vehicles, which is a

mercy – and if they needed to stay inside that environment as our electronics needed shielding to survive against an incompatible world outside – then I was thankful indeed.

Behind it, the fog parted. There was something else. Something that waddled on stubby legs that even so had a ten-metre stride – a great bloated thing with three metres of idiotic grin and a zip fastener that ran down from chin to tummy like an evil pyjama case.

“Main battle Stuffie – and a padded personnel carrier,” Polovski’s voice was a hollow moan. “They’ve got us. At this range they can put a Spare Hare Stare right through our front plate – and what’s in that PPC can get round to our side armour – where we’ve lost the runes.” As he spoke, the chubby thing’s grin widened and a podgy hand reached up towards the ring-pull that would unleash what wriggled inside like a sack full to bursting with maggots.

I don’t know what, but something froze inside me that day, that froze cold for years – or maybe it broke, and until the end it stayed broken. I’ve known rats go into last-ditch frenzies and just launch themselves into impossible odds, and indeed it’s hard to stop someone who’s attacking at one hundred percent with no fear left. All I could think of was the story of that strain of killer rabbits that appeared out of the Russian Gene tech experiments – they’ll see a predator and go for it, even knowing the odds are ten to one. With a ten-percent chance of losing every match, a predator doesn’t get much of a career out of it. And those were predators out there, whatever their shapes, predators who had decided our world was their new territory.

“Loaded! On! Fluff-Piercing!” Polovski yelled, checking the indicator for the twin 155s. Suddenly a red light appeared on the panel. “Coolant leak – we can’t go full auto!”

“Gotcha.” I glanced down, even as I swung the muzzles. “Twenty rounds at the MBS, the Special for the other one.” My voice hesitated, but the drill they had impressed on me ran its course as I unlocked the lead box under the driver’s seat and spared a second to glance up at the honest stag. “Nice knowing you.”

Just then the world ahead vanished in a throbbing coruscation of flame as I stamped on the foot pedals and the cab shuddered in the recoil as the Bagshot gun erupted from its Chobham armoured sponson. The view on the synthetic sight blanked out with overload – ten rounds per tube and I lifted the trigger, to see Polovski standing by with the special. With great tenderness he pulled out the pin, arming the five-kiloton shell. He nodded. “Let ‘em have it.”

I pulled the breech lever over through its wire-sealed “gate” to the setting none of us ever want to use – the single shot setting calibrates the sight only to two kilometres, because you only have one shot and it had better hit a seam line or you’ve taken yourself and a large chunk of real estate off the map for no good reason. But it was only a hundred metres and I’ve hit what the computer tells me is the central heart-rune of one of those things at three kilometres, so I just emptied my mind of everything I didn’t want to take with me, lined the target grid at where the zipper was just starting to pull down, and I fired.

I didn’t expect to live to hear the strange-sounding thump of the reduced-charge round – and I certainly didn’t expect to see the Padded Personnel Carrier stagger back, a chubby paw clutching its throat. Then I knew – the round was a dud, its tantalum plating had pierced the thing’s front padding but the warhead had failed.

Not many people can honestly say they weren’t glad to be alive, but we looked out through the sight and realised that whatever was going to happen to us, it wasn’t going to be as quick as if we’d all gone up taking the monstrous thing with us. I must have sworn, or maybe I prayed, I don’t remember as I swung the sight back towards the lead vehicle. And then I cheered – the fluff-piercing rounds must have hit a weak seam line, for the side had fallen off completely and wisps of pastel matter were rising up, evaporating into Einsteinian space like smoke as the crew were exposed to our environment. The synthetic sight mercifully blanked out the interior – a blocky “No Symbol” icon concealed the unthinkable interior as it unravelled itself.

“They’re done for – quick, get the PPC!” Polovski pointed over urgently. Wisps of pastel matter were writhing from the stricken carrier, but it was already unzipping its swollen tummy and something was peeking out at us.

“Fluff-piercing! Rock and Roll!” I had always wanted to shout that, and it looked like my first and last chance. I flicked the selector back to full automatic and fired, the precious tantalum-foil tipped rounds tearing on full charge through the target – but it was too late, the sight was showing small symbols spraying out like hornets from a disturbed hive and scattering out of the line of fire as the padded personnel inside baled out. Three seconds later the Bagshot gun overheated and jammed – and for a long second we stood and stared at each other.

“Upstairs.” Polovski’s voice was a whisper in a dry throat. “We’ve still got the staircase position.” With that he was gone, and I busied myself with setting the self-destruct sequence for ten minutes. If we were alive and uncaptured in ten minutes any of us could disarm it – and if not, well, we had seen there were far worse things that could happen to you. Some of the half-mortal things on the EU side had worn our uniform once.

Herrington must have been glad to see us, after being stuck there all alone facing aft and unable to do more than guess what was ahead – and ten seconds later we were ready to repel boarders. Vainly, I looked into the fog, down the track that led to healthy lands – but once we had ventured in, until our unit bypassed the two out-of-order vehicles there would be no rescue mission coming after us.

There was a silence. None of the rounds in the stairwell cannon were fluff piercing – we had been lucky to have those we had used in the 155. I had heard it explained to me once in a briefing, of how tantalum and technetium behaved against the fluffy things from Outside much as palladium had been supposed to catalyse nuclear fusion – it was not the chemistry that affected things but some obscure resonance effect involving deeper atomic and sub-atomic levels of matter. Or, just as plausibly, the same way silver affected werewolves.

My breath rang loud in the respirator, and I tried to calm myself. In what might be my last seconds I looked around, soaking in the everyday normality lest my shocked system soak in less wholesome things from outside. There were the notices in four languages by the luggage rack – *“Do not pile ammunition higher than this point”*, *“No firing forward of this point”* and *“Except in case of emergency, passengers should not talk to or distract the driver while an artillery duel is in motion”*. Number 437A was a staunch piece of engineering and a sturdy metallic friend that had carried us a long way towards the EU’s pastel heartland – though it looked as if this was literally the end of the line for all of us.

There were just the three of us, all alone in the fog, linked by twin conductive rails of pure, cold iron to the outer world. Even the compound armour array on the front with its blood-soaked runes and black spiky bits would hardly hold up against what was hopping and bouncing gleefully towards the three of us remaining - three, plus the Labrador pup who might already be dead or worse. At least, he was downstairs, and we would not have to worry about his suddenly transformed form rising up behind us.

Everything was almost silent. There was a malevolent giggling and squeaking somewhere in the mists – Herrington frantically cocked his ears this way and that, but even his canine hearing was little use inside the helmet and NBCC hood. His muzzle shield stretched in a frustrated snarl, and he shook his head. *“Can’t tell. They could be anywhere.”*

Just at that moment there was a high-pitched squeak – and behind us, a deadly pale light began to grow. I felt my lips draw back in a terrified grimace. *“They’ve got on top!”* Somehow the stuffed things had piled themselves up like an abhuman pyramid to clamber onto the thinly armoured flat roof – and as three of us cried aloud in horror, their manifest Cuteness punched straight down through the twelve centimetres of rolled homogenous plate!

From inside, it looked as if the metal above the front seats was melting – it glowed and bulged down. But that was the least of it – the very atoms it was made from were suddenly corrupted into stuff that Earth should never hold, a ghastly pastel softness that tore through like wet tissues under the weight of that which had caused its shocking transformation.

The upper deck was ten rows of seats from bow to stern – and had the invaders dropped in on us one row nearer, I would never have lived to tell of it. Polovski screamed, a terrible high-pitched note from his large frame as he saw something drop into the front seat – and tearing off his respirator and helmet, he jack-knifed off the staircase landing to dash himself on the ground three metres below.

I did not see it. I was very careful not to see it, but knew where he had been looking – and a Perchloric acid thrower is by its nature not a precise weapon. I pointed and pulled the release - there was a *“Whumph!”* as the steel and organic matter of the fore section caught light and began to slump in a healthy, normal thousand-centigrade fire. The first thing caught in the pyre must have been a person once, for it squealed as the remaining normal matter in it yielded to the flame and acid, not yet wholly transformed into that which earthly fire cannot even warm. But there were more crowding in past it – one soft thump followed another as things dropped into the inferno knowing there was no harm in it for their unnaturally fluffy forms.

I felt as much as heard the acid-thrower empty with a harsh hiss, and drew my autonomous pistol – not for the foe but for myself, with no tantalum rounds and only plain tungsten bullets left to use. The remaining deck was like a rapidly melting iceberg of sane and normal space melting away under the monstrously pretty pinks and blues that surrounded it. But just as I was about to switch the trigger to fully autonomous, there came a sound from the staircase outside – not the stealthy tread of lethally adorable padded paws, but the ring of honest metal-shod boots on the ersatz stone.

Herrington’s body convulsed – he retched and gasped, the anti-nausea pills failing as he desperately tore as his respirator straps and was explosively sick in reflex reaction to what was advancing down the aisle a few paces away. That probably saved us both – the ancient defensive reflex forming an instant’s protection in which I leaped towards the staircase, wishing vainly that the long-barrelled staircase cannon could turn to point inside the tram as well as out.

The slickness underfoot almost proved my undoing, as I slipped and scabbled on the floor like a landed fish. I twisted and something leaned over me – a sight that fills my nightmares even now, one soul-

blasting sight that will never leave me. A pink and fuzzy paw reaching over the back row of seats, the fingers almost spherical, its chubby grasp wide open and about to pull me snout to snout with its owner!

If I had gone screaming mad then, it would have been a mercy. But something else reached over my writhing form faster, a slate-grey sword with silver edges that flashed in the light of the acid-fed fires forward of me. Straight through the ghastly appendage it slashed, bringing a surprised squeal as its mercifully unseen owner staggered back, stuffing spilling from the severed limb. Over me a very different figure stepped – gaunt and piebald with fur missing in patches from what had been a lion’s frame, filling the air with a scent of strong disinfectant and dry musty rot.

One glimpse I had of that figure, before I collapsed in a dead faint to awake in the decontamination unit behind our lines six hours later. I was the only survivor, I was told – I had been carried the twenty miles on the back of the lone rescuer, a tightrope walk along the greasy iron track from the wreck of poor 437A. At least, I was assured – I was the only living survivor. I asked about the lion who had rescued me, but they told me he had died.

I suppose it might have been more of a shock than my weakened sanity could bear, if they had told me that Harry Garsdale had died five years before I met him. But I remembered him – and four years after that day, I knew him, that day we met again.

I returned from the wars to an emptier land than I remembered – one with most of the twenty-first century’s housing intact but a population resembling that of the eighteenth century. The house I had before was a bare ten miles from the great Political Enforcement Residential Community Centre at Slough, an area that even now is unsafe to stay in more than a few hours, and the consequences of falling asleep to dream near the site of those once tall and smoking chimneys is officially 38% too hideous to contemplate. So I turned my back on the shunned estates of Twocking Cross, Little Twocking and Twocking Magna, and looked for a new home.

There were houses to be had in plenty, and I remembered the name of my rescuer. I had started out to see if he had any relatives that I could help out in gratitude – from the surviving files I discovered he had none, and his fate was a mystery. Six months after the war finished, I went to see his house.

It had been a fine old house. Not large, it had just three rooms plus an echoing and well cobwebbed attic, a convenient earth-floored basement, several abandoned wells on the property and a nice dark stretch of waste ground that spread out to a dark wood that surrounded the village. Just within sight was an ancient religious structure – it had been a Christian church or a Satanist temple or something of that pantheon, and a well-stocked graveyard lay under the shadows of thousand year old yew trees.

Of course, I fell in love with the place immediately. Although whole depopulated towns were abandoned to the wind and rain, this village was thriving, and I moved in to repair and keep the old house alive and lived-in. I applied for and got a job at the village police station as what they used to call a Personnel Data Extraction Executive, and everything was well with me for three happy years.

At least – nothing very specific disturbed me. But there was a long, low mound that I passed on the edge of the village every day, which always made me shiver. I had asked about it with my neighbours – but by their account it was nothing but a twentieth-century landfill, grassed over and sealed for most of my lifetime.

It was one evening after work, that I first heard a hint that there might be something more to it. It was a splendidly atmospheric night, with lashing rain and wonderful displays of lightning that lit up the unlit parlour bar of my local pub, the Royal Tentacle. I was just debating whether to make a run for home through the rain, maybe stopping to get a bottle of fortified wine from the fortified off-license, when my neighbour tapped his pipe against the window.

“You see that long mound?” Long lop rabbit ears swayed in the breeze flowing through the open window, as Mr. Wotan-Hardt pointed out the shape briefly lit by lightning. “Fifty years ago, that site was a factory – long before the War, it turned out toys – and the things that we all thought were toys.”

“What, like those?” I gestured towards a vending machine displaying recreational grenades and other munitions – legally speaking, anything with less than a five metre danger zone. “I didn’t think you could get those back then.”

The buck shivered. “No. The things like the EU brought over – fluffy things. But they were just toys then – they weren’t alive.” He paused. “Not then, at any rate. They’d been in that state for more than a century, every kit and pup was bought them.” His tail drooped. “I had one myself! I remember going to sleep next to it every night, so help me! Of course, nobody knew – even when they started getting bigger, and cheaper, towards the end. I remember life-sized ones in the shops, looking out over streets full of people. If we’d only known what was to come...”

He took a long pull of his Victory Gin Martini and looked up at me, his whiskers trembling. “I’ve heard folk say that it was planned from the beginning – the first models came in from Outside. Have you heard the story about the first Teddies? It’s not very convincing. If that was so – they knew the ones made

out of fabric were just the first stage in the life cycle. They'd draw love and devotion like radio aerials, and pass them back to where the real ones were ready and waiting – till they were ready."

Claws drummed on wood as the landlord tapped warningly on the bar top. The swarthy badger fixed my neighbour with a warning stare. "Now then, Mister W-H," he reproved, "You know it's not safe to think about things like that. Look at young Mister Smithers from number seventeen, he found a pile of old colouring books from just before the Millennium. And he burned up, "whoomph" he went all spontaneous-like right in the street, when he understood them at last."

The buck nodded. "I know – I know." He waited till the landlord was in the other bar, busy with a newly arrived crowd of Atheist missionaries who were all ordering improbably complex cocktails. He leaned over to me, the echoing thunder shielding his low voice. "But – somehow I couldn't believe it. I know what we all saw later on – but those first ones, before the Millennium – I can't believe it, really. They really loved us – as much as things made out of cloth and padding can. I'm sure they did."

I walked out alone into the beer garden, shielding my pint from the hammering rain. Perhaps my job was making me uncaring, I mused as I spotted a telephone box at the end of the garden. But there were certain duties that everyone had, to shield each other from certain monstrous entities that only needed a foot in the dimensional door, a single sympathiser or collaborator, however innocent or well-meaning. Or so I told myself, as I made the call.

Nobody admitted ever seeing Mr. Wotan-Hardt again, and refugees who had been wandering since the fall of Cleethorps later occupied his house. What he had said stayed with me though, despite every effort to suppress the memory. I busied myself with my work, won several minor awards for public service, and for another year everything went well. Sometimes the low mound on the edge of the village seemed far distant – it was barely two hundred yards long, twenty across and five yards high, but it was always there, silhouetted against the rising Summer sun or the gibbous moon.

Then came that night that everything changed. I was walking home under the stars, whistling an old song from my Regiment. I remembered it with pride, being one of the few still alive of the 404th Millwall Highly Irregulars, a keen bunch with our heraldic badge of crossed Stanley knives, rouge, on a boot-print, sable. The moon was rising, and I was within sight of home when suddenly I stopped. There was the unmistakable sensation that someone was watching me.

I turned slowly, and the fur on my neck and tail began to bristle. At first I could see nothing – but then something moved in the shadows. I only saw it for a brief second, as it scampered over the top of the mound and was silhouetted against the moon – but I had seen something hideously like it before. It was small, rounded and moved as if its joints were not constructed quite as those of living creatures – and then it was gone.

A week later, the last Regiment (601st Tottenham) left in disgust, after the area had been searched minutely with the most sensitive instruments – and they had found nothing.

"Not only is there nothing there now," the Artificial Intelligence officer from the last robot surveying unit told me contemptuously, "but there never was. We'd have picked up traces of Pastel matter – one of those from Outside would have saturated the ground it walked on with Kawaiionising radiation. You're either hallucinating, or you're deliberately wasting our time." With that, he was off.

I knew what I had seen. Or rather, I knew that I had seen something that should not have been there. As the last hovertank's engine whine faded into the distance, I felt very alone.

"What if ..." I had asked, that morning, "What if they've learned not to leave a trail like that? They know you're hunting them by their emanations." To that there had been no reply – but if a steel-turreted robot could have looked worried, that one surely had.

Over the next few weeks, I kept watch. When I was away, I rigged up my old autonomous sight to a camera, equipped with rose-coloured filters. The films were always tantalising – on four nights there was movement that was not a wild animal – for night-walking animals are mammals and leave clear body heat traces. I was running through one of the films one night, trying to enhance it, when there came a knock on the door.

I opened the door cautiously, my nose twitching in a strong, chemical odour. A large shape was outside – not a rounded, fluffy one indeed but the moonlit silhouette of a gaunt figure with a curiously lopsided mane of head-fur. Behind him other dark figures were on the garden path.

An illuminated warrant flashed briefly in the darkness. "We're from the Ministry Of Certain Things." The voice was thick, distorted, and I gasped at the stench of powerful preservatives. Then the figure came towards the light, and I knew where I had seen him before.

"I'm glad you're keeping the old place in good shape," said the lion who had saved me before. "I liked it when I – lived – here, myself." And I knew that, impossible though it seemed, Harry Garsdale had come home.

Chapter 2

They used to say dead men tell no tales. That might have been true ten years earlier, but that rainy night I stood on my own doorstep snout to snout with one who had a lot to tell me – and even without the Government warrant he carried, I was very keen to listen.

The mildewed lion gestured to the dark shapes behind him. “My associates.” First forward into the light were two brown bears, wearing the black pinstriped kevlar and “battle bowlers” of UnCivillian Servants. “Fanshaw and Psycho, my Investigation Officers. That’s Von Tappe, my Technician – he keeps me going. “ He nodded to a grey-furred mole whose artificial eye twinkled in the lights of my hallway, its multi-spectral lenses focussing as its owner moved. At the back was another helmeted figure, a hefty boar who appeared to be handcuffed to a small lepine person.

“Bring him forward, Benson,” the lion gestured, and the last two of the party came into the light. “Benson, a valued member of my team. And this rabbit is Wayne the Heretic – we caught him last month.” He turned to me, one ear dipping. “I have to say this to everyone we meet – no matter what he says, please don’t kill him. Not just yet.”

It was a strange party that occupied the living room, as I offered tea and biscuits all round – as befitted members of the Ministry, they all had impeccable table manners, even Psycho (who tended to drool, but had come prepared with an official issue bib.) Of course, I had heard of the Ministry of Certain Things – who had not? For centuries our Parliament had had a Minister Without Portfolio, a “spare” high-ranking officer of the State who was available to tackle any unexpected issues that did not quite fit elsewhere. What had never been revealed was the hidden Ministry he presided over, its membership concealed in other Government departments until suitable circumstances brought them into action – after which they would fade away from sight like shadows in the sun.

Harry Garsdale looked around the room, and in the clear light I could see the ravages of time and decay on him – patches of his fur were missing, and his skin had a dry, half mummified look like ancient leather. He caught my glance, and smiled through shrunken lips. “I’m not pretty these days, but I’m still here.” His gaze lingered over the window that faced in the direction of Old London. “So many aren’t.” The gaze snapped back to the room, boring into the smooth-furred lapine who sat quite unconcerned at my table, nibbling carrot cake. “And some of us here know why that is.”

“And you are – Wayne the Heretic?” I asked, looking at the handcuffed figure.

A bunny nose wriggled disdainfully and a whisker twitched. Looking at him closely, I saw that his fur had a slightly off colour to it – it was hard to define, but I had seen much the same on folk who had radically dyed and bleached themselves too many times. A bright and mischievous eye twinkled. “That’s what they call me. If they understood, they’d call me Wayne the Prophet. Wayne the Redeemer, that was the real idea.”

The boar securing him grunted, a sharp tusk gleaming in the light. The rabbit ignored him.

“So.” Harry Garsdale finished his tea, and leaned over slightly as he put the cup on the table. “I’ve read your report. I’ve read reports on you, too – that’s why I requested this particular investigation.” His moth-eaten tail waved slightly, as he admired the décor (retro Goth, every surface and item painted deepest and most stylishly black.) “Believe me, we take all such ... sightings, very seriously.”

“So you’ve come to look around?” I asked, feeling a wave of relief washing over me. But he shook his head.

“Other folk have already given the place the once-over. What instruments can find, they’ve found – or rather not found. No, we’re moving in.” He pulled out his official warrant. “By Order, this household is requisitioned for the duration of the investigation, until the senior officer, being myself, deems the danger removed.” He grinned, somewhat unnervingly. “Oh, and your military reserve rank just got activated. Tough luck, soldier. Now, put those tea-cups away, and show us where you hide the brandy!”

In the next few days, the Ministry officials hardly seemed to be in a hurry. They had their equipment delivered at first light, chiefly a large casket-like box that was installed in the cellar and plugged to the mains. When I first saw it, it was neither unattended nor empty.

“Our chief is – being indisposed,” Von Tappe, the elderly mole pointed to the sealed casket. “It is being daylight – he is resting, and making good as best he can.” The dials and displays of the Undeath Support Machine held steady or blinked regularly. “He is preserved as best as we can manage, and replenished every day. But even so – he is fading, yes.”

I bowed my head. “How did he – get this far? I saw some strange things at the end of the War, but – they all stopped, after the fall of Brussels.”

Von Tappe relaxed, first checking the status lights on the big chilled casket. The mole took off the artificial left side of his face, popped out a lens and absent-mindedly polished it on his shirt. “Mister Garsdale is a very determined fellow, oh yes. You were at the end of the EU, yes? We have all read your file. You know that it worked both ways, with the changing of the Laws that they did at the very end. They let in reinforcements that way – for both sides.” He paused, the zoom lens on his eye focussing on infinity. “The

last day I was in the Zeebrugge landings, some very surprising things fought on our side. I could not describe them so you would believe me but ... they were brave. They faced flame-thrower troops, though their bodies were only made of cardboard.”

I nodded. “I saw something of that. The unit next to me, were fictional characters. The ones who didn’t make it – they’re no longer in the books they used to be. They had a safe existence, nobody thought anything could threaten that. But they volunteered to help us, and lost it all. When the last one of us who read the original books forgets how they used to read, they’ll have gone as if they’d never been. Nobody wants to try and explain that sort of thing, but it happened just the same.”

“Exactly! So it was with Mister Garsdale. He was buried near the centre of EU rule, one of the biggest of the Bouncy Castles. He disliked where he had been laid to rest – and unlike those around him, for a brief time he had the chance to do something about it.” A small biological eye blinked. “He says very little about that bit of it. The Laws were altered to make way for the things the EU brought in from Outside – people just remember the laws of physics altering, but it was far more than that. I can tell you, he showed our forces where to dig in the graveyard he’d been in – four people there had been buried with replacement joints made of tantalum, metal that we needed so very badly – and he said none of them had minded giving them up while they could.”

He gave a deep breath, and nodded towards the village and its pre-Millennium religious structure that towered above the dark yew trees. “There were hundreds like him. Something different happened, in his case. It might be he had a stronger Will than most people – when the war was over and the EU banished from our space, most things ... went back to normal. But he wanted to get home. Oh, we’d have taken him back here even if he’d fallen apart like most such folk did at the end – but he wanted to get home, and he did so – he walked all the way, out of the area that the main legomancies had affected, and he got here.” He pressed his prosthetic face back into place, and blinked both his natural and artificial eyes.

“And at the end of it, he laid himself down amongst the yew trees, in the cool grass with the birds above him, the shadow of the Church tower falling on him as he came back to where he should have been. That was the end of his wanderings, he had thought – and everyone expected it to be the end. But that didn’t happen.”

I nodded. “Like – when you wake up in the middle of the night, and can’t get back to sleep again?”

The mole cast me a cool stare. “Something like that. Anyway – after a few days he got bored, rose again, and went about his business. We at the Ministry had already used him for certain matters his ... unusual condition is an advantage with. He has been working with us ever since – and we’ve managed to keep him going, so far. It’s what happens later, we’re worried about.”

I was silent. Before the War, one of my relatives had been stricken with a muscle and nerve-wasting disease that had left him progressively paralysed, unable at the end to do much more than blink his eyes. I had thought there could be nothing worse, to be left alive in that condition – but for Harry Garsdale, it looked as if there was a worse fate in store. Everyone dies, but for him it had not been the end. I shuddered, trying not to imagine in just what sort of ... condition ... he might be in while he could still move and feel.

Von Tappe shrugged. “Still. In our line of work, none of us lasts so very long. I am only a Technician – I am the third this team has had, and we have gone through thirty Investigating Officers that I know of. And none of them have got back up again.” He looked up at me, shrewdly. “And you? Are you ready to go on to the end with this?”

I looked out, over the peaceful village. There was a sports day on the village green, loud with the cheerful cries of traditional shin-kicking contests and a dwarf-throwing booth. A travelling freak show had drawn up by the pond, and by the terrified audience screams from the shrouded cages, it had some prime exhibits. And this scene of tranquillity was menaced by nameless fluff, a stealthy invasion that I feared I had seen the first scouts of scuttling through the green meadows.

“Count me in,” I told him firmly. “However this goes – I’ll stick with it to the end.”

The mole smiled sadly, casting a keen infrared scanning eye over me. “The End,” he told me seriously, “Is a place that our job takes us to, all too often.”

It was two days later that we really started work – the surveys that had already been done had eliminated the possibility of any of the usual infection routes from the Pastel Dimensions. Harry Garsdale and his team carried detectors with them at all times, but there was only the occasional background squeak out of them.

“Dirty job, this,” Benson snorted, the boar’s main job seeming to be to haul the odd-furred rabbit around with us. “Picking up the pieces. Dunno what’s worse - people who don’t know what they’re messing with – or the people who do, and go ahead anyway.”

The rabbit gave an exaggerated mock yawn, and contemplated a dandelion.

“Just last year, down Bournemouth way,” the boar hooked a thumb to point vaguely Southwards, “Folk were rebuilding, found a cellar that had been buried in the Second battle of Walmington-on-Sea.

Couple of builders went in after work to see if there was anything worth having down there, before reporting it. There was something there, all right! Something that'd been hit with a self-forging fragment, one of them early armour-piercing rounds – it'd shaped into something like a tantalum icicle, pinned the thing's paw to the wall. And it'd been down there in the dark seven years, 'cos those things don't need to eat or breathe neither. Couldn't touch the tantalum metal, so it was trapped – it played dead. Till one of the builders saw five year's wages worth of precious metal in front of him. Pulled it out, didn't he? Then the thing wasn't playing dead no more, and neither was he."

Wayne the Heretic sniffed. "What my elegant and unwashed friend here doesn't say, is that it was perfectly polite behaviour on the poor trapped thing's part. They're very affectionate. Of course, it gave him a big hug. Wouldn't you be grateful?"

Benson cast the lepine a dirty look. "Smashed him like a rotten peach under a hammer."

Lapine ears twitched. Their owner turned to me, paws palm-out placatingly. "Try to put yourself in its place. Imagine if you landed on a strange world, something a few degrees above absolute zero like you might find on the far side of Pluto. Imagine the cities were made of gossamer, delicate webs of solid nitrogen and methane. You'd so like to help the inhabitants – but your body temperature sets things on fire for twenty paces, and you melt the very ground you stand on. Is that your fault? It's something very like that, for them. Of course there's sometimes accidents."

"It ATE him," Benson insisted. "It ate him like he was so much pate. Your fine friends do that to people."

"Oh, Please," Wayne rolled his eyes. "It was only making the best of a bad situation. If you break an ornament in a shop, you're expected to buy it. Ornaments shouldn't be so fragile – like we are. By that stage, nobody else really had a good use for the builder – you'd have just put him in a hole somewhere. But by being eaten, with great appreciation, he was at least making someone else happy. We subscribe to the holistic view, you see." The rabbit beamed happily. "Well, do you see?"

I nodded, my tail drooping. "I met one of those Holistic types, once. He'd been a doctor in the Political Correctness Enforcement Community Centres, under the EU regime. It was about the first week I was on the job here, they caught him." I felt my fur bristle out. I remembered the poodle confessing freely, with no persuasion needed – it had been unnerving. It was as if I could hear his voice trying to educate us, rather than beg forgiveness.

"The patient, the disease and the Doctor are a combined Process in their own right, an indivisible Whole," I could almost hear that soft voice still insisting. *"To think of only one of them in isolation is unbalanced, and lacking in harmony. It may be that the Patient makes a full recovery, but the Disease dies and the Doctor is neutral in the matter. Where is the benefit in that? On the whole, none. Can we arbitrarily say that any one thing anywhere is better than any other thing? Now suppose the Patient dies, but the Disease carries on and spreads healthily, and the Doctor thoroughly enjoys the show. There is only one negative, and two Positives there – is it not clear which is better, if one understands the Big Picture?"*

I looked at the rabbit closely. Something prompted me to examine his fur; there were a few patches behind the ears that were definitely strangely hued. A question sprang to my lips. "What colour did you dye yourself?"

"Blue. Blue bunnies are Approved of, by the people who count." He relaxed, looking a little wistful. "Do you know, I never even met a real one? I wish I had. They would have taken me with them."

"If they were hungry, maybe." I remembered that last day in the Low Countries, the three of us crouching at the top of the armoured tram's staircase behind the modesty boards that prevented us seeing what might be coming up the stairs – sensors could detect them well enough, and sensors rarely went criminally insane at the first glimpse of what Wayne seemed so eager to meet. "What makes you think you'd live long enough to ask them, anyway? People who look at them sometimes spontaneously combust – and those are the lucky ones."

There came a gentle laugh. "You really shouldn't believe propaganda. Just because a few thousand people suffer from quite unrelated Cranial Deflagration Syndrome, naturally the newest immigrants to the planet get the blame. It's happened all throughout history. Governments try and externalise a threat, without asking what cultural benefits the newest arrivals can bring with them. Is that fair? And the Great Stuffed Ones ... well, other religions claim to offer everlasting life, but only the Stuffed Ones can truly deliver their promises."

Benson bristled, jerking the handcuffs. "That's enough out'o you. Aye, if we meets a real one, we'll stake you out in front of it and you'll see for yourself what they're like. Mister Garsdale, he's dead smart. Why do you reckon you're being kept alive so long?"

Wayne the Heretic's fuzzy tail twitched in excitement. "Oh, please do! You know, sometimes I think being captured by you dreadful people might have been just destiny." He winked. "Who knows – in a few thousand years time, if they take me with them, I'll be able to look back on all this and laugh. How about you? What'll you be doing in a thousand years?"

“For every one they take, they devour hundreds,” I told him, facing that placid gaze. “Even some of the ones who submit to them willingly. You should know that.”

The bunny shrugged. “There’s no such thing as a free lunch. As long as someone else is the lunch ticket, that’s all right though.” He looked at us speculatively. “You know – I’m glad that if we meet them...” his voice trailed off, and an eyebrow raised.

“Yes?”

“Well. Let’s say it’s another reason I’m not likely to meet them with friends around me. The Stuffed Ones have to take someone in exchange for their gift, you know. Fair’s fair. I’d have thousands of years to miss a friend – and I’d hate to regret anything for that long.”

And with that, I understood why the undead Civil Servant had needed to ask me at our first meeting to let the heretic live. At least, for now.

The weather had improved since Harry Garsdale had arrived, which in his case meant having to spend longer and longer in the Undeath Support chamber. Direct sunlight and warm air were not as healthy for him as they were to the rest of us. But every night he was up and active, monitoring the instruments we had set up overlooking the mound.

It was after midnight, and the moon had gone in behind the clouds when I heard him give a hiss of warning. We were out on the village green, both of us “hull down” behind the archery butts not a hundred metres away from the near edge of the mound, when he pointed to one of the motion sensors that were passively scanning in the darkness.

“Movement – it’s small, but it’s definitely there. Not a wild animal – no heat trace.” The lion raised a paw as if to scratch his head, and evidently thought better of it – I had heard how fragile he was becoming, and how hard to repair.

“Nothing on the other sensors though – and they could spot a Spare Hare through the side of a mountain.” The Cuterino probe remained dark and silent, scanning hungrily for the tiny light-speed particles that flooded out of the corruption of baryonic into Pastel matter and could pass unhindered through the thickness of the planet. “So what is it?”

“I don’t know.” He touched his communicator. “Fanshaw! Contact! Are you recording this?”

There came an answering two clicks over the magnetic communicator. It was some relief out there in the darkness that we were not alone. Fanshaw * and Psycho were out in the village, the two Civil Servants ready and equipped to move in against what we feared. Both carried the rare and coveted “seam-rippers”, their radioactive technetium edges normally sheathed in two kilos of lead scabbard till needed. As Fanshaw had pointed out, in the circumstances those blades were drawn, accumulating a small radiation dose was your very least worry.

“Right. We’re moving in.” Stealthy as one of the Girl Guide-trained assassins, he slipped around the side of the archery butt, and I followed him with the noise of my blood seeming to hammer loud in my ears. Everything seemed to be happening so fast, like a tape replay speeded up – a rush of sensations cascaded through my senses, my eyes wide in the darkness and my nose twitching for that too-well remembered sickly scent, like sweet cream just beginning to spoil.

A minute’s slow advance took us to the foot of the mound. We had surveyed it over and again in daylight, measured its every angle and scanned it with ground radars, fluff detectors and all the arcane sciences that the Ministry of Certain Things had at its command. There was metal down there, plastic, gas pockets – even for a landfill from the former Consumer Society, it was a mess. But there had been nothing we had been looking for – not in the daylight hours.

There was an old wire fence around the mound, that had stood for forty years or so, stopping most of the loose papers and plastics blowing over the village. Three gaps had torn and rusted through on this side wide enough to get through – we slipped through and planted signal flare mines on every gap, hopefully covering all the exits. And then – metre by metre, we searched.

“Nothing! Not a solitary ghost!” As dawn broke, we gathered in my kitchen, where a pot of highly enriched, weapons-grade tea revived us – except of course for Harry Garsdale, who no longer ate or drank in the regular fashion. I slumped in my frequent chair around the Occasional table, tired out and dispirited.

Looking over at the lion, I winced – the phrase “looking like death warmed up” would never quite have the same associations to me after having seen him in full daylight.

“Nothing that we spotted close-up, but there was something there all right,” Harry agreed, tapping the recordings we had made. “Something moved – it wasn’t biological, it wasn’t plushie that we can detect, and it wasn’t robotic – not unless it was heat-shielded and didn’t use a spark’s worth of electrical power.

- Pronounced Fanshaw, but actually spelt Featherstonehaugh. An old military family, who changed their name to confuse the enemy.

Those instruments can spot a dead battery that's not even plugged in – they're good, Fanshaw's family makes them." With that, he rose and stretched, beckoning his technician. "I'll have to be off – this sunlight's not doing me any good – and to coin a phrase, you could say I'm dead beat."

I looked at the recording instrument with renewed interest, and then at the smaller of the two brown bears. "This is your family product? I'm impressed."

Fanshaw shrugged. "Me dad got a Military-Industrial Complex. Usual sort of thing – integrated rolling mills, heavy castings and forgings, nitrators, explosives pouring facilities and that. Bought it off a bloke in a pub."

I raised an eyebrow. "That must have cost your father a bit!"

The bear winked. "Depends who you know. He bought this bloke a few pints, and the bloke comes round Sunday morning with his mates in the white van to install the whole complex – they had a spare one, managed to write it off the inventory as broken. Cash in hand, no questions asked. Sorted!"

I nodded. Modern economics had changed since the century before – I remembered reading how several small nations had acquired space programs in exactly the same way, off a bloke in a pub. "And you work for the Ministry?"

The bear smiled, and tapped the side of his blunt snout. "That, and write up equipment reports saying whose kit to buy. Whoops! What a give-away. Still, that's not as strange as some folk in the Ministry – believe it or not, young Psycho there's a poet."

I looked out to the patio, where the bear in question was doing his morning hour's exercise with a big straw dummy. He caught my eye and grinned, saluting me with the bayonet flashing in the morning sun. I could well believe it.

Despite our long vigil the night before, I found sleep elusive. The sun was up, the birds singing and the last thing I really wanted to do was to go to bed. In a while I knew I would have little choice, but first I took a stroll out in the garden. The other bear was there, his bayoneted rocket launcher cleaned and neatly returned to its case as he sat in the gazebo with a pad of paper, a strangely wistful expression on his face as he tapped a protruding canine tooth with his pen.

"Writing reports?" I spotted the stealth paper, which had replaced computers for secure documents, having zero electronic emissions. "Or shouldn't I ask?"

He treated me to an alarming grin. "I'm off-duty right now. This is a song I'm writing for my girl." He fished in his wallet, and pulled out a miniature painting of a slender, black clad female, decidedly not a bear. Most folk carried photographs rather than expensively commissioned paintings, although looking at her pale fur, long needle teeth and bat wings, I could see why a photograph would not have worked.

The bear scratched his blocky head. "I've almost finished. Can't quite finish off the last verse, though. Any ideas?" With that he stood up, and chanted the heartfelt sonnet in a deep, resonant voice:

"Blood! Blood! Glorious Blood!

There's nothing that's nicer – O, try it, you should!

So our prey follow, right down to the hollow

For there we shall swallow its glorious..."

With that he broke off, embarrassed. "I just can't think of a way to finish off that last line. I've tried everything."

"Blood?" I suggested, tentatively.

The bear hummed, scratching his ear as he ran through the verses in his head. Suddenly he laughed, and his muzzle split in another grin. "That's perfect! I'll send it to Morgana tonight. You're a genius!"

"It's a gift," I admitted modestly. I sat down, feeling tiredness pressing down suddenly on my limbs. My gaze was drawn to the mound, seeming to look very large on the horizon, threateningly seeming to crowd the cheerfully painted and well-occupied row of gibbets on the road to town. I pointed. "So, what do you think we've got there?"

"I dunno." Psycho followed my gaze. "But we'd better find out fast. No secret, the Ministry want us to clear it up fast." He pulled out his silicon tablet, and tapped in a few commands. Instantly the screen dented in, the 3-D icons forming a picture like that carved into a Cyclopean monolith, and readable even to the many civil servants who did not use light for vision. I saw the picture stabilise, and recognised the Ministry, the modern Cyber-Gothick building hovering a few metres off the ground supported by the thrust of supremely efficient flying buttresses.

"Oh yeah. If we can't find out what's going on here, they'll have to evacuate the area. Better safe than sorry. And it's a nice place, this! I'd have had a go at that dwarf-throwin' the other day, but they don't let folk compete in village fairs who've done it professionally."

I relaxed a little. Despite the small size of the team, this was certainly a well-qualified unit – and although I was sure of very little, I was sure they would need to be.

That next night, Harry Garsdale decided to change his tactics. Wayne the Heretic was brought down from the attic and under the watchful eye of Benson was staked out on the mound as darkness fell, like a goat to catch a tiger or a tasty sociologist to placate an Elder God. We ringed the mound with motion detectors, and wired the rabbit up for sound and multi-spectrum vision – he preened himself, evidently looking forward to the encounter.

“And where will you all be, so you can get a nice view?” He asked artlessly, stroking his long ears. We had grudgingly given him one last request, to have a bright blue ribbon to tie round his ears.

I was about to answer, when Psycho elbowed me sharply. “None of that! You just wants to know so you can point your damned stuffed friends our way. He’s done this before,” the bear turned to me, scowling as he slapped the lead scabbard of his seam-ripper. “If we hadn’t been ready for that trick, we’d ha’ been cuddled to pulp.”

Wayne stuck his tongue out, and primped. “As if they really needed my help. Honestly – you folk are SO intolerant! Just because someone’s tradition and culture’s a little different to yours.” He gave a strange gesture with two hooked fingers of each paw. “Alignmentist, that’s what you are.”

I smiled wryly. “As in, being prejudiced against Chaotic Evil?”

Bunny ears dipped as their owner nodded. “You can’t say “Chaotic Evil”. The correct term is “Angelically Challenged.” Anyway, there’s no such thing as Evil – that’s just an arbitrary label used against one group by another. If you ask anyone who’s called Evil if they really are, they’ll put you right.”

“I wish you well of it.” I stood up, checking the ground anchors were secure. Wayne was staked quite tightly to five screw poles three metres from each other and all outside his reach. “Say hello for us.”

“Oh, I’ll tell them ALL about YOU.” Wayne smiled, and giggled. The sound had the fur rising on my back, as even in imitation, I remembered all too well where I had heard a similar sound before. There are sounds proper to people and sounds proper to squeaky-toys, and it is very terrible to hear the sound of one coming from the body of the other.

Benson tapped me on the shoulder, and tutted with mock disapproval. I looked down to where he pointed – and gave a grin of chagrin as I saw I had unconsciously pulled my autonomous pistol, and my thumb was on the selector for independent fire. Benson grinned, his tusks glistening in the dim moonlight. “Oh no. I’ve been hauling that fluff-lover around for a month – if he’s anybody’s he’s mine.”

We retired to a safe distance and set up the instruments, including a few autonomous rifles zeroed in to the mound approaches. Since the re-opening of the Neo-Belgian Congo the main world source of tantalum had become accessible again, the Coltan ore that once had been used for components of mobile phones now diverted into less annoying and more morally defensible uses such as expanding flechette rounds.

“So. We wait again.” I tried to relax, setting myself up for hours of vigilance. We had been surveying and waiting for well over a week, with nothing much to see but the mound dark beneath the slowly wheeling dome of the summer stars. Suddenly there was an unearthly noise – a high-pitched chanting note that made my tail bristle out.

Benson laughed, but the sound was grim. “I know who that is.” He pointed to the figure on the mound. “He’s singing one of them cartoon theme songs from the twentieth century. Can you believe it, they had those on broadcast television, and children watched them?” He shook his head, casting a speculative glance towards the nearest automatic rifle, its long barrel twitching slightly as servos scanned its field of view over the south side of the mound.

I shuddered. For I had heard something hideously similar before in the Low Countries, where the EU’s mortal troops had sung to summon their masters to Earth before a battle. “He really wants to meet them. He wants to call them in from Beyond – even knowing what they’re like. Cthulhu save us!”

“Aye, he does.” The boar’s voice was a flat growl. “And we have to lie here and let him try it – or we’ll be here forever. This place is just weird. I just don’t know...”

What Benson might have been about to question to ask went unasked, as the night lit up and the tearing snarl of one of the autonomous rifles split the silence, from the far side of the mound. We leaped to our feet and charged in, Benson drawing his seam-ripper and holding its radioactive tip at full arm’s length as he ran, charging through the fence gap and up past the blue-ribboned bunny, who cutely poked his tongue out at us as we rolled over the edge onto the far side, every nerve keyed up and ready to confront what was there.

“Nothing! Again! I don’t BELIEVE it!” With a frustrated growl the boar stabbed the blade deep into the earth, as Fanshaw and Psycho charged round the other two sides of the mound, the blue glow of ionisation from their seam-rippers casting a reassuringly deadly faerie-light.

“I’m not sure.” Fanshaw pressed buttons on a control box, and a small red dot danced on the ground just by our paws. “This is where it was shooting at – look! “ With great care he stooped, pulled on extra-black studded gloves over the NBCC suit inner rubber pair, and with rune-graven tweezers picked up a white shred of something fluffy. “You hit something, all right.” His voice was grave. “I think we’ve all seen this before. This is stuffing.”

Chapter Three

Daylight saw a hive of activity in my garden. Fanshaw had set up a portable lab, and had worked all night on the one shred of evidence. As I watched, he unrolled the DancePad of his computer and started to tap-dance and shuffle his report off to the Ministry. The world was full of unexpected consequences, I mused as his feet danced over the forty squares – I was here because Harry Garsdale had saved me, because my own home was no longer in a survivable neighbourhood, because he had a nice house which was unoccupied since he had cashed in his Life Insurance the hard way.

Fanshaw's foot-paws clicked over the pad in a soothing, almost hypnotic rhythm. There had been another coincidence there – the bulky interface had been meant to go with a musical computer game just before the Millennium, but a computing error had led to ten million extra units being accidentally ordered. At that time computer manufacturers were deep in lawsuits with the old mouse and keyboard combination causing joint strain and a chair-bound lifestyle causing all sorts of ill-health – so their marketing folk had seized on the windfall and declared the DancePad to be the “New Aerobic Interface”.

The bear gave a last heel-and-toe shuffle and the flashing lights in the pad dimmed. He sighed, panting – putting piezoelectric generators in the DancePads had caused computers to be mostly self-powered, but made them as physically hard to work as they always had been mentally. He folded the pad up into its case, and scratched between his ears. Fanshaw frowned.

“Stuffing. It is and it isn't.” He handed over the original lab notes, fruit of half a night's careful investigation. “You've seen the real thing before – it's in your file, battle of Eleventh Lille.”

I winced at the memory. “Polovski saved me then. We were crewing a Wuzzle Destroyer when something manifested right in the middle of our squadron – it'd jumped right into battle from their dimension. I don't know what it was – something so twee it burned through every reactive rune we'd got on the turret.” I felt my body shaking, forcing the memories to the surface like a long-exhumed body. “Polovski got me out just in time – that attack was gross overmatch against our side armour, pastel matter fragments spalling off into the fighting compartment ... he hauled me out by my helmet, it was all he could reach. Nearly broke my neck but if one of those pastel matter shards had touched me...”

Fanshaw nodded slowly. He pulled out his autonomous pistol and handed it to me. “Aye, you know what to do.” With that he peeled off his glove and tipped up the rune-shielded alembic vessel that was the heart of the diagnostic kit – and that shard of strange matter lay in his unprotected hand.

I fought the urge to leap back out of range and set the targeter to autonomous – but my finger was on the manual trigger. Beside me the instruments clicked and occasionally chirped quietly – not the mad squeal of nearby flesh and bone dissolving into ghastly stuffed parody.

“Try it. It's harmless.” He pulled his seam-ripper and fleetingly touched it first to his own fur and then to the shred of material. Neither of them burst into cleansing flame. I gasped, in shock and relief – and not a little bafflement.

“We've got something fluffy here that doesn't show up on our instruments – well, hardly. Even its raw stuffing, the stuff that they have like our protoplasm, doesn't behave like anything we've seen before. This is cotton wool, a century old by radiocarbon dating – but it came from something that walked on its own two feet. Something that took at least one hit from a tantalum flechette round without coming apart completely. Explain that. I wish I could – and so does the Ministry.” With that, he returned the white fluff fragment to the alembic, and returned to the house.

I sought my own bed, barely able to stand with fatigue and delayed shock after the night's hideously ambiguous adventure. I pulled the black-lined curtains tight, set the screaming skull alarm clock for six in the evening, and fell asleep.

Dreams came. I saw scenes that were familiar from history vids – and in a few of them I recognised the house, though the gardens and fences were all different, and in the background old petrol-driven cars sometimes appeared. The scenes flashed back, till there was one which lingered – in a glimpse of the background, the surrounding houses were still under construction, and no telephone or other data cable connected it to the row of very new telephone poles that ran down the street.

I saw a room, very elaborately furnished in a pre-nuclear style with bright rugs on a wooden floor and what looked like an oil lamp in the single-glazed window – and I recalled that this house had been far indeed from town and any gas mains when it had been first built in the early years of the twentieth century. There was movement – a young lion cub, perhaps three or four summers old, happily playing in the patch of sunlight that streamed in through lace-curtained windows. I then saw what he was playing with.

Sitting very still on the rug, not moving at all, was a plushie. It was one of the bear types, brown fake furred, and even where it sat it must have come nearly up to the knees of the hapless mortal who stroked it and was permitted to move its unresisting limbs. I tried to look away, but in that helpless roller-coaster ride of dream vision, one is strapped in for the ride and can never turn aside or hit the brakes no matter what hideous thing looms up ahead.

The sunlight fell on the rug, light and shade moving across the floor for all that golden afternoon, and though my watching self writhed and moaned awaiting the seemingly inevitable result, the mortal cub survived – the stuffed thing made no move against him. There came a ghastly parade around the room – the young lion picked the short entity up with his bare hands and sat him on his shoulders, holding on as they romped round, the cub's mouth opening and closing in some unheard song, his face beaming as if he was happily playing with a friend. All of this time the plushie said nothing, biding its time, waiting its chance.

The scene blinked forward a little, and the furnishings changed – there was a time when the bear sat on a shelf, watching every move in the house with its glass button eyes – and then it was put in a crib with another cub, almost a new-born, who embraced the figure larger than itself as if unaware it could be nothing but a ghastly minute's snack break at any time.

Scenes flashed by. Suddenly the view changed, and I saw a lion male, barely in his twenties to judge by his mane. He wore a very new flying jacket, leather and biological fur, and a blue cap on his head. Though his lips moved, I could not read the words – but I saw him tenderly pick up the plushie and tuck it lovingly inside his jacket, before picking up a military canvas bag and heading out of the door.

Scenes passed of light and darkness, flashing fire and the bright blue skies of high altitude. The same lion and half a dozen other biological people in similar uniforms, packed into a four-engined propeller aircraft, the noise unheard but the view shaking with hammering vibration, like a fast flickering film montage. Always a pair of glass eyes watching, waiting – its deathless owner secured in a makeshift flying harness next to a parachute in the cramped belly of the aircraft. One view flashed past dreadfully clearly – a tearing explosion and unexpected daylight followed by flames, then a burned hand reaching for the parachute: precious seconds were spent to grab the stuffed thing and cram it into a torn jacket before a single view of the bright dome of the skies dotted with black smoke bursts, and then the long, long descent. If the parachute worked or not, I could not say – there was at least one on that trip who did not need it.

Time flashed by. The house came into some of the visions, this time with early television aerials crowning the roof, and contrails in the skies above. History repeated itself – there was another loving cub who slept with his arm enfolding a now shabby bear, and in so few years carried it to war. This time the aircraft was white painted and delta-winged, but the bear sat under the flash-shielded canopy and looked out at daytime skies that were purple-black with stars visible and the curve of the earth far below. And all of this time it said nothing, but looked on at the visions unfolding through those glass eyes – eyes that reflected miniature suns blossoming, and a world that had changed when it had returned to earth.

I awoke, drenched with sweat as the familiar eerie scream of the glowing, jaw-gaping skull alarm rescued me from the nightmare. I felt as if I had been running a marathon rather than lying asleep in my own black-sheeted bed; with shaking hands I dashed cold water over my muzzle, shaking my head as I tried to tell myself it had not been real.

There came a knocking at the door – glad of the distraction I pulled on my NBCC suit and opened it. Psycho was there, the civil servant's pinstripes freshly brushed and ready. The bear's muzzle wrinkled, as he looked me over. "You look awful. I've seen folk looking that bad before in the mornings – but that's mostly been our boss."

"Just a nightmare." I ran a comb through the worst of the tangles in my head-fur. "Strange one – I dreamed about a lion family, flew in the past two world wars. One of them had to jump for it – I don't think he made it." I did not mention the common thread that linked the two – that was still several percent too shocking for words.

Psycho cocked his head aside as we went down the cellar to where Von Tappe was reviving Harry Garsdale. "Funny you should mention that. The Boss once told me – this place has been in his family since it were built – and that's just what happened to his great-grandfather."

That night we resumed our vigil, adding a battery of high-resolution low light cameras to our equipment. Our previous Infrared systems had drawn a blank, with nothing recorded on the tapes but empty landscape with the occasional innocent heat trace of nocturnal animals.

"This is the place." Harry Garsdale pointed at the high earth bank around the cemetery. "We should get a good coverage of the West face from here." As Von Tappe configured the cameras and hurriedly withdrew, we relaxed amongst the mouldering stones for another wait.

There was a long silence, as we watched and listened. For obvious reasons, I took the upwind position from the undead lion, my nose twitching as every nerve cell filtered the scents of the night breezes. I found a question springing to mind, and knew that I had to ask it.

"Most of the house had been cleared before I moved in," I began hesitatingly. "Were there any ... heirlooms you lost? Anything that'd been passed down from your family?"

Harry thought, and a minute or so later he shrugged. "Nothing of real value – no financial value. Anyway, it's all yours now, and welcome. I'm the last of my line. Legally, you can't take it with you when you go – or come back for it later. It made things very hard for the Life Insurance companies, folk turning up to collect in person." His gaze swept around the churchyard. "Outside the main areas where the EU's

rulers cast their Legomancies, that wasn't a problem – and even there, folk only revived in that last week or so." He nodded. "I was called on to advise the Government – we had monitoring teams in the recent graveyards, and excavation teams on call with excavators and Jaws of Undeath to open coffins if we detected folk wanted to get out."

"But was there anything else?" I looked at his dusty fur. "So I can return it to you if I find it?"

His mouth opened, and then he abruptly closed it, shaking his head. "No. Nothing you'd want to return." His sunken eyes took on a distant look. "But still – if you do find anything ... out of the ordinary – I'd like to be the first to see. It's my duty."

He was silent for awhile. There in the moonlit night, his figure was as still as the marble effigies on the tombs around us. Without turning his head, he spoke very softly, so that I strained to hear him.

"There's something I found out while I was – away," he whispered. "Everyone knows you can lose your soul. Spare Hares boast about it – they say that's what makes them undying. But – what I found out was – something that starts out without one could gain one. You can live without one – and you can have one, and yet not biologically live." The silence returned.

The night dragged on. Around midnight I pulled out a vacuum flask of easy-pour beef vindaloo, and shocked myself awake with the fiery brew – a far cry from the tasteless gruel substitute and thin ersatz water that had been standard fare under EU rule. Suddenly one of the sensors began to blink quietly – as something moved in the grass. I heard myself give a quiet hiss, and I pointed – Harry nodded, swinging the low-light camera towards the south side of the mound. I saw him stiffen, and he tracked the distant dot a few degrees across to the eastern side before it vanished.

"What did you see?" I asked urgently, checking the autonomous rifles were fully alert to fire at any trace of pinkish or bluish light. "Was it a Spare Hare?"

The mouldering lion was silent. "I – I'm not sure," he said at length. "I've seen Spare Hares of all species, including some damned odd mixes – there was one bunch that were blatant two-species mixes just to confuse us. Something like – but not very like. I saw what you saw, I think." He made no move to rise, but stayed looking over at the moonlit mound with a strange expression on what remained of his face.

I bristled, shock replaced by a sudden urge to head out and rend damned upholstery – the ancient 'fight or flight' response making its choices known. "Let's get after it! We've loaded tantalum rounds – Fanshaw and Psycho have their rippers. We can take one of them out at least!" Those two worthies were already moving in, as I could spot from the telltale dots on the tactical display.

"Yes. We have to – find out what it is, once and for all." With a strange heaviness Harry stood up, and I made a mental note to tell Von Tappe to increase the resurrection voltages for next time – if there was a next time. He followed as I dashed from cover to cover along the old fence where weeds had grown up tall except where toxic leakages from the corroding rubbish had soured the soil. In half a minute I was on the mound – according to my locator, exactly where the cameras had spotted the movement. There was nothing to be seen.

Throwing myself down, I closed my eyes for a few seconds and trusted to my nose, hunting for the fresh salad scent of crushed vegetation that would tell where a recent set of feet had trodden. It would have revealed my own scent surely enough, in my heavy NBCC suit laden with stylish appliqué black spiky bits and the new Crowthorne armour – a special bismuth laminate material composed of laminates laminated to other laminates. But what had passed this way had been light, and had disturbed the grass no more than a passing breeze.

"Out for a nice moonlit stroll?" I heard a squeaky, cheerful voice asking from close by. I whirled, my autocannon cocked and loaded – but it was only Wayne the Heretic still staked out on top of the mound. I was sorely tempted that there would be an "accident" right there and then – but I slowly tracked the barrel cluster away from him, although the safety catch stayed resolutely on.

"Not for my health," I gritted, looking down on the lagomorph. "Did you see anything?"

"Alas, no." The bunny pouted. "If I did, do you think I'd tell you nasty people?" His gaze seemed to crawl over me, and I was glad of the multi-layered suit. "You know, you really ARE ugly in that suit, did anyone ever tell you? Runes are really not 'you', you know." His eyes seemed to widen, gleaming with a suspicious number of highlights in the moonlight. "How about something in yellow? A nice buttercup colour would make such a change from black, and blue lace would go so well with it." A fluffy tail quivered. "The Stuffed Ones love that sort of thing. I could lend you a spare ribbon, if you want to start simple."

I could hear the harsh sounds of my breath forced through the filters, as I switched the suit's stealth mode off. I realised that there was nothing I could do to persuade the lapine to talk – even if I had him for a full day's being put to the Question at the Police Station, there was nothing I could possibly do to him that would not be happening quite soon anyway. Instead I sat down on top of the mound, upwind and out of range of his tethers.

Risking eye contact, I pulled up the suit visor. Wayne, I told myself, might be one of the last people left on Earth who truly believed in his cause – at least, I fervently hoped so. "Do you really think it's a good

idea? Even if you get what you want – if they take you with them, make you one of them? What about all the planets they strip bare of organic life to convert?”

A flick of the tail. “Organic life is so yucky. They’re clean, and fluffy, and like being boil-washed anyway. Imagine it – the only people they take are the ones who’re really happy that way – and then they’re happy forever and ever, on their new plane. How long have you got? You won’t live another century, and even if you did, that’d be nothing – I mean, nothing, next to their life spans. They can spend that long just thinking up a nice new game to play, and it just doesn’t matter.”

I looked at him, suppressed memories stirring. “None of us matter, to them. I saw the ‘nice game’ they played with captives at the Beachy Head chalk cliffs – they’d invented a new sport, bungee climbing. A Spare Hare and a prisoner were both tied to elastic at the foot of the cliff and they climbed – after fifty or a hundred metres it generally pulled them down. The pluses bounced – the people didn’t.”

Ears dipped in annoyance. “You people are SO obtuse, I don’t know why I bother. Can’t you see? That’s exactly what I’ve been trying to tell you. Nobody who’d had a nice day watching bungee climbing could come away and still think there’s any future in staying as they are.” Wayne primped, making sure his cheeks and whiskers were bright and fluffy in the moonlight. “Oh, and I’d really, really prefer if you stopped referring to the Stuffed Ones as if they weren’t people too. They’re Persons of Stuffing, with an Alternative Metabolic Lifestyle. You don’t go around being prejudiced against that rotten lion, do you?”

Harry Garsdale could be seen in the distance, the undead feline’s ragged form scarecrow-gaunt in the gibbous moonlight. He never complained of his condition, considering (he said) the alternative. In fact, many of the village girls had taken to calling round hoping to meet him – respectable black-clad Gothick maidens with weighty metalwork and pale complexions, who often left bouquets of lilies on my doorstep for my guest. “He didn’t have a choice in how he turned out. You do.”

A cheerful buck-toothed smile was my reward. “Thank you! And so do you. DO let them know where to find me, won’t you?”

I turned away, not trusting myself alone with Wayne and an autocannon whose mechanism had been designed to be on the trigger-happy side of reliability. I made my way back through the dark woods, sure there would be nothing else to see that night – there had been one “event” a night so far, if that.

I was wrong. The path wound through the trees out of sight of the mound, though an ancient wire fence formed a common boundary. I had filed that fact away mentally when we had surveyed the area in daylight – the fence posts all along one side of the mound were very distinctive, and continued all the way through the woods. The whole area had been one complex long before the Millennium, I knew in a detached way, but I had made nothing of it.

I can’t describe my exact mood as I walked slowly through that wood, either thinking or desperately trying not to think of the Heretic’s words. Idly I kicked at a fallen branch, my boot spikes cleaving it apart as it spun in fragments into the darkness. I was tired, and frustrated too – and decidedly not looking where I was going as well as I should have.

The branch caught me right through the open visor, a few centimetres left or right and it would have taken an eye out. But the blow was painful enough – I reeled back as if poleaxed, crashing to the ground in an awkward fall, my knee twisting under me as I rolled off the path down a steep embankment. Under the trees, the ground was hummocked and dented with depressions, with a brick wall visible here and there under decades of cloaking leaf mould. Cursing, I lay back and clutched my knee – as I thanked myself that the autocannon had not gone off in the fall. It had come free though, and I crawled in the dirt and darkness searching for it.

Still struggling, entangled at every step by half-hidden branches and steep slippery drifts of leaves, I crawled up to the top of the bank where the path was clear in the moonlight. I could look down fifty metres into a clearing, where long grass and dry hemlock stems rustled fitfully in the breeze.

Something was there. Something was standing on the path, looking at me. It was very small, maybe twenty centimetres or a little more – its brown body would have blended into the leaves and shadows if not for its eyes that still shone bright as stars under the moon. Glass eyes.

Glass eyes should not blink, and limbs that had taken shape on a sewing machine should not move of their own accord. I heard myself give a tearing moan, as I frantically cast about for the autocannon, and realised it must have slid down out of sight into one of the deep bramble-fringed pits in the darkness. And all the time the thing walked towards me, its sparkling eyes fixed on mine, those short limbs swinging stiffly in a ghastly parody of a military march.

It halted not ten metres away from me on the path. I could see it clearly now – its fur was indeed brown, a silvery brown that had rubbed away in places leaving a coarser fabric weave exposed. Its body was rounded, but – when I had faced the chubby invaders of our world before, I had felt their presence like a spiritual smog, as if their sick pastel colours were a choking vapour around me. With this thing – I checked myself, but realised that nothing of the kind was taking place. Glass eyes glittered at me, star-bright and not the usual flame-red of its kind.

The stuffed thing was one leap away. I opened my mouth, to shout one last defiance and hopefully attract attention – the folk from the Ministry of Certain Things were too far away to save me, but they might at least avenge me. But before I could draw breath, a very strange thing happened. I could see that its mouth was strange, not the usual savage contrast of pastel fuzz and sharp carnivore fangs – it looked bizarrely as if it was stitched onto a solid face. Its mouth did not open, and I would swear there were no hidden speakers concealed in the trees that night – but very clearly I heard an old, old song from my grandfather’s youth that seemed to echo in my head rather than in my ears. An eerie, sadly haunting tune wailed behind it on first-generation synthesisers and antique memories of electric drums, the lyrics seeming to settle like a slow fall of dust around me.

*My painted face is chipped and cracked
My mind seems to fade too fast
Clutching straws, sinking slow
Nothing lasts, nothing lasts...*

*I’m all dressed up and nowhere to go
On a music box, that never stops
I’ll dance for you, if you want me to
Move in time, move in time...*

*A puppet’s motions, controlled by a string
By a stranger I’ve never met
A nod of the head and a pull of the thread
I can’t say no, can’t say no...*

*When a child grows out of toys
(When I was new, you wanted me)
Now I’m old you no longer see (me)
When a child grows out of toys
(Spiteful girls, hateful boys...)
When a child grows out of toys...*

*A wooden head and a broken heart
Used, abused and torn apart
I gave you the best and you gave me the rest
A time to die, time to die...*

*When a child grows out of toys
(When I was new, you wanted me)
Now I’m old you no longer see (me)
When a child grows out of toys
(Spiteful girls, hateful boys...)
When a child grows out of toys... **

The words surrounded me like a smokescreen – filling my thoughts and blocking off every other sensation. They ended softly, like a retreating mist blowing through the darkened forest – and when I came to my senses again, I was alone.

How I reached home I hardly know – I was shivering in delayed shock, my every muscle quivering as if I had run a marathon in full NBCC kit. But I awoke in the afternoon, fairly refreshed – though the night’s encounter still puzzled me.

“Your readings are fine,” Von Tappe assured me, after at my insistence he had scanned me for traces of pastel matter contamination. “There is nothing wrong with you.” He tapped my dosimeter. “Sanity points are a little down, but in this business – it is expected. They should recover after we defeat the invaders.”

“Have you ever ... seen anything like this before? Stuffed things that don’t show up on the instruments?” I looked around my cellar, now transformed into a working laboratory complete with ultra-modern mazes of pipework filled with bubbling liquids and a big static electricity generator that was part of Harry’s Undeath support system.

The mole scratched his stubby muzzle, hesitating. "There is nothing officially confirmed," he regarded me gravely, "But there have been – sightings. One of them just this year, very near an abandoned tip in the Barren Lands near the site of Milton Keynes. A Spare Hare raid in full force followed it up. The very strange thing was, they took no people with them, except some of the Ministry team who were investigating. It was a well-supported raid, too – command groups were present. They don't often risk their stuffing on casual raids."

I shivered. "I only saw that once, near Bergen-op-Zoom." There had been elegant, stylish black vinyl Spare Hares there with their communications squads, four-strong teams of pastel nightmares with video screens and assorted aerials built right into their rounded bodies. "Just once. That was more than enough for me."

"Yes. That was the only confirmed case – the Ministry fear that these undetectable plushes are some new form of scout. Why that raid near the Milton Keynes site didn't grab any people, we don't know. What were they after? We'll just have to keep hunting till we find out." The mole sat down, suddenly looking tired. He scratched at the interface between his biological and cybernetic sides of his face – I did not need to ask why he had needed it replacing. He sighed. "What a way to make a living."

I nodded, sympathetically. "Things never work out the way you expect. *'Into every life a little fall-out must fall'*, as they say. I always wanted to be a Space Cowboy, myself," I offered. "It's all I ever really wanted."

Von Tappe blinked, and his artificial eye whirred slightly as he stared at me. "There is no such job, outside science-fiction films."

"I know! That's the beauty of it – the field's wide open – once I got into it, there'd be no competition! My parents wanted me to be a Space Plumber, you're guaranteed good wages what with callouts and travel expenses – then the EU took over." My tail drooped. "My folks had a Fancy Goods store – they were arrested as soon as Euro regulation 66402218 bis was declared – only plain goods were allowed after that."

The mole nodded, thoughtfully. "I grew up in a circus, myself – ran away to join a financial trading house. Not so far from here." He scratched his head. "I'm trying to remember what this area looked like. Everything was so different then," he waved out towards the green fields and rubble zones now clothed with head-high saplings. "When I was young, this place was nothing but shopping malls and industrial parks. This was quite a complex."

"All the way from here to the toyshop, that's under the tip now?" I asked, recalling the distinctive fences I had seen stretching unbroken from one end to the other.

The mole nodded. "All that way. I don't recall the toy factory, though. It might well have closed down before my time." He stretched, and then cast a glance at Harry's hard-wired sepulchre. "If you'll excuse me, I have some work to do on the boss." He hesitated. "His condition isn't ... guaranteed, you know. He may not be walking around much longer."

I winced. "He knows?"

The blunt snout dipped solemnly. "He knows. He'd last a lot longer if he wasn't doing a job like this. Being what our fluff-worshipping pal out on the mound would call "Metabolically Challenged" definitely has its problems."

Nodding, I looked over to that direction, my fists unconsciously clenching. Von Tappe laughed, imitating the gesture.

"Like the boss said," his loyal technician reminded me, "don't kill him. Not yet. Remember, he's Ministry property – and anyway – we saw him first."

The sun was setting when I strode out to the mound, to check the lepine traitor was securely staked as ever. He could move a few metres either way, though – he was just finishing a meal when I arrived. I shuddered at the sight of that meal –pink and white iced cakes, their sweet toppings rune-engraved with hearts.

Wayne turned at the sound of my paw steps, and greeted me with a giggle. That sound had a certain indefinable tone to it that sent shivers down my spine and the fur on it bristling up in alarm. It was as if there was some special quality overlain on it that a mortal throat could not get quite right – as if it echoed back from something huge standing a little distance apart from this world. He smiled knowingly, and I noticed he had woven flowers into his head-fur.

"Glad you could join me!" Whiskers twitched gleefully. "It's a lovely night for it!"

I checked my dosimeter, something I had been doing twice an hour since the dreams began – thankfully my Sanity Points were still well within the accepted range. "A lovely night for what?" True, the skies had been blue all day, and only now were great billowing masses of fluffy white clouds massing in the last of the light.

“Ohh ... fun stuff.” Lepine ears twitched mischievously. “The world’s full of fun stuff – you only have to know how to enjoy yourself ... properly.” Again came that eerie giggle, but then he was mercifully silent for some minutes.

The first stars began to come out as I waited. Wayne smiled, relaxing as he reclined on the grassy slope, as if he had stopped noticing the fact he was tethered there. “I always find it – reassuring.” He pointed up at the stars.

My eyebrow raised in the fading light. “Find what reassuring?”

“Oh. Don’t they tell you these things? You ask your rotten friend if he’s heard of Professor Lebenow? He wasn’t even one of us, but I doubt if you’ll find any of his works surviving. I expect those dreadful Vicars wiped the data files and burned all the books he wrote. They’re like that.”

I shook my head, teeth gritted. “Never heard of him.”

“He was very famous – an astronomer, a great scientist. Unless your friends have already rewritten all the histories, you won’t find anyone to argue with that – he was famous, respected and all of that, until he started his final project.” Long ears drooped.

Wayne gazed up at the stars, and the abyssal voids between the stars. His eyes seemed to gleam unnaturally bright considering the dim light. “You can’t see it, can you? You’ve heard of it though – all those stars and galaxies, they’re only a fraction of what’s out there. Where’s all the missing mass? Why can’t you see it? Professor Lebenow told us. Nobody else wanted to hear the answer he gave them.”

He draw a deep breath, then fixed me with a gaze that just failed to penetrate the front panels of my reactive cardigan. “For years all those serious folk went on about Dark Matter, but they could never find it. Of course they couldn’t. They were right about one thing though – almost everything is made of quite different stuff – everything we see is just a dirty bubble floating on an endless ocean of something else, but you don’t see it.” Excessively round eyes sparkled, as he looked me over.

He paused, and winked conspiratorially. “It’s like Sherlock Holmes said to Watson – ‘*You See, but you do not Observe.*’ It’s out there – but your strait-jacketed mind just blanks it out.” He shook his head, almost sadly. “I almost pity you. You’re like people living on a tiny island with the waters rising – in the end, you’re going to get wet. You can’t stop that. The only thing is – you don’t want to learn to swim.”

I shuddered at his words, as if something very unclean was pressing against me, rubbing filth into my fur. Without an answer I left him, hurrying down the mound to where the reassuring spiked bulk of Psycho stood guard with his seam-ripper, monitoring the sensors.

“Evenin’, squire,” The armoured bear touched his helmet brim respectfully with the sheathed seam-ripper. “Been bluntin’ your Sanity Points on our pal up there?” He patted his own dosimeter, reassuringly. “I make sure I can’t hear him unless he shouts – and then I don’t listen.”

I turned to look up at the solitary figure silhouetted against the rising moon, who seemed to be grooming himself. “What’s he doing now?”

The civil servant squinted at one of the low-light camera displays. “He’s fluffing. Does that a lot, our pal does. Better move away before he starts singing – you’ve had enough exposure for one day. Ministry rules.” He paused. “O’course, the Boss is immune to that – he’s been up against the Stuffed Ones, right enough. He’s got nothing they can take from him.”

Privately agreeing, I left the noble bear to his vigil. Behind me, a solitary figure on the mound pranced and fluffed itself beneath the stars, singing a tune that ancient Anaheim knew and knew as accursed in its final minutes. Shaking my head, I returned home.

In the cellar, Harry Garsdale was just climbing out of his sepulchre, removing the electrodes. I cast a glance at the instruments Von Tappe had explained to me, and winced – the voltage was set to its maximum, and even so the lion had needed half an hour to start moving. He stretched, and his shrunken lips parted in a ghastly approximation of a smile.

“Dead tired this morning,” he quipped, his dusty tail thrashing. “Anything to report?”

I shook my head. “Just the same. That rabbit’s trying to call his friends over to party – I hope they don’t hear him.” I paused. “I know that’s why he’s out there – but still...”

“I know. Like being a fireman waiting for a fire. It’s the job – but you wish you didn’t need to do it.” Harry Garsdale dusted himself down, while his technician sprayed on alcohol preservative. He cast a speculative eye over the instruments. “I wonder...”

Just then, there was a squeal like tortured steel tearing – and five very special Detectors on the wall suddenly began to flash a sickly pink colour. We stared at each other – and then Von Tappe hit the panic button, alerting the distant Ministry and the external sirens sending every resident for miles running for their sinister rune-shielded shelters.

I flashed a glance at the directional finder – just as Von Tappe had said – first the traceless, unfamiliar stuffies had sneaked into our space-time – and then a following force of their regular invasion troops, the need for stealth now gone.

“This”, I told myself as I snatched up my cuddle-proof vest and helmet “is too much. It’s just one damned thing after another!”

Chapter Four

The night was falling as we assembled on the village green – the Ministry team and myself along with a mixed militia of my neighbours, most of whom had fought in the EU wars and brought all their equipment home afterwards. I felt my tail droop as I looked around at the heavy support mustered from the surrounding cottages – four railguns and three Perchloric acid throwers. That might have been good enough against mortal EU loyalists, but against what we might be about to face, only tantalum weapons would be any real use. The Ministry team was effectively on their own to face this.

“Yes, Minister ... it’s genuine. We’re picking up Kawaiionising radiation, three separate sensor suites have it fixed.” Harry Garsdale was talking fast into his rigid immobile phone, its sturdy structure anchored deep in the local bedrock. “They’re not heading towards the population centres though – looks more like the Milton Keynes raid. We’re moving to engage. What’s the arrival time for our backup?” The lion’s sunken face fell further, as the distant voice buzzed in his remaining ear. “Oh. Yes, Sir – we’ll hold as long as we can.”

He turned to face us, slowly. “This isn’t the only incursion tonight. There’s a bigger one been reported – off West of us on Salisbury plain, at an old dump near Pysyng Down. Most of the ...” he hesitated, his dusty tail thrashing hesitantly, “most of the ... qualified units are already heading there. The Spare Hares are heading towards Salisbury town. Twelve thousand people there. Three hundred here.”

We nodded. Our village was our concern – what had come here seeking blood and souls would pay a dear price with their stuffing. Around me was the mixed ragbag of defenders – some of them were Dark and Gothic, others the next level (Darke and Gothick), but all determined to defend their village.

Nearly fifty villagers had joined us, and we spread out in a skirmish line. Von Tappe could see the sensors’ displays beamed to his artificial eye – thankfully, a small invasion like this generated little reality distortion, and our earthly electronics were still working. Only in a land where the Spare Hares had truly planted their adorable toes, ringed with Bouncy Castles and cored by great seething cuddle-piles, was there any true danger of their reality beginning its exponential growth.

“He did it. The bastard went and did it.” Next to me, Benson pointed ahead where something like a ghastly mutated rainbow was forming, seeking to anchor itself to our planet. I knew that very soon there would be things sliding down that nauseously pastel pathway. “The heretic managed to get them to come for him!” Suddenly the boar gave a harsh bark of laughter. “Much good it’ll do him! We’ve fixed those tethers proper!”

Around me, the crowd gave a moan of fear and horror as something pink and fluffy appeared on the rainbow, hitting the uncorrupted mud of Earth a second later and bouncing lightly away to clear the drop area. I winced, trying not to look at it too closely – but I could not avoid the impression of something three metres high, a dread rune embroidered on its swollen tummy. Another one emerged, then half a dozen more welling up from the dimensional rift like red arterial blood from a fatal wound. These were bad enough, but something I had seen before. It was what followed them that set the warning instruments to squeaking frantically.

“A command group. What ill luck.” Harry Garsdale drooped slightly, before turning to resolutely face the six glossy entities that elegantly promenaded on the mound. Alone of their hideous genus, these were not fluffy – they glistened in the moonlight, their smooth forms crafted in blatantly synthetic colours that put me in mind of extremely cheap-rate first generation imitation leather. Protectively surrounding their command squad flat entities flapped and rippled like evilly embroidered manta rays – the feared Security Blankets.

“What are they doing?” I saw two of the sleek and glossy things gesture towards us and presumably squeak orders to the big padded entities that had been first through the tunnel – and for a second I thought of young queen ants ordering the specialist soldier castes to secure the nest against invaders. The rest of the command group turned their backs on us and began to examine the surface of the mound in detail, pointing and gesticulating at intervals along the featureless grass. They stood at the far end to Wayne the Heretic, for the moment ignoring his fluffing and hippy-hopping as he tried to impress them further with his cuteness.

“I don’t know – we surveyed that mound left, right and centre. There’s nothing in there.” Von Tappe’s voice was a sob of frustration. “No artefacts, no hidden chambers – it’s just rubbish. From back before Spare Hares first got here.”

“Ah.” Harry Garsdale suddenly drew himself up, stopping dead in his tracks (or undead in his case, as one irreverent part of my brain commented). “Before the Spare hares ever got here. Things were different. Before anybody knew ... or ... before such things as those really...” his voice tailed off, and his expression changed. Like the rest of us, he had been charging grimly to face the vile fluffy invasion, knowing our chances were slim. But the look on his face now was something I had rarely seen, and hope never to see again – it was as if he had realised the flood of horror that had already been unleashed around us was not ankle-deep but the depths of Jovian oceans and a thousand times worse.

I saw what was happening too, but I did not understand – then. Four of the command group suddenly linked arms as if they were about to unleash a Spare Hare Stare, the air shimmering as power was built up. For half a minute the air writhed and foamed around them, with raw Cuteness energies that could have punched through the rune-graven compound armoured front plate of my old fighting tram as if it had been so much steel. But this summoning of energy was not aimed in our direction - they pointed their snouts down towards the ground and began to sing, gesturing as if they were pulling something up out of the earth.

For a few seconds nothing happened – then something like a wisp of very white cloud appeared, almost mushrooming out of the cracking clay cap that sealed the landfill. It was small, and seemed to have a definite shape that I could not see clearly – except that it moved, and something in the way it moved prompted a dim part of my mind to claim that it *struggled*. But not for long – with a triumphant giggle, one of the vinyl vixen things seized what they had raised from the mound and swallowed it, sliding it down like a cormorant with a wriggling fish.

A cold, bleak sensation washed over me, though I could not have said just why. Next to me, Harry Garsdale stumbled, and gave a choking sob that was terrible to hear. In a second he was back up with us though, his half-eaten face set in a rictus of grim fury that I flinched away from.

“V-T!” He yelled at the mole behind us. “You have to tell the Ministry – we have to clear away these tip sites! All of them! Clear them fast! Shield them tight and incinerate every single thing in them – there’ll be megatons to treat but we have to do it.” He gasped for breath, and a stray clump of fur fell off his mane. “It won’t hurt them any worse than they already are – but we have to stop the Others from getting them!”

“What?” Von Tappe had his communicator links already open, but blinked his remaining biological eye in bafflement. “What do you mean?” But there was no more time left, for the first wave of Spare Hares was already upon us.

My synthetic vision kicked in with the visor locked down, and the world resolved itself into low-resolution constructs. Something huge was outlined as a wire-framed image in front of me – I winced and ducked aside as it bounced cheerfully past me, grabbing one of the unarmoured villagers and cuddling. There was a scream and the awfully familiar sound of breaking bones, and the rounded image turned to seek a new playmate.

I felt my blood run cold – cold as liquid hydrogen spilling into a sanctified rocket motor, soon to ignite in searing fury. I had been trusted with one of the precious tantalum-plated weapons; about as much of the metal itself as would make a razor blade edged the directionally crystalline steel seam-ripper. This was no place for chivalry – I used the backstab manoeuvre I had learned in finishing school, leaping in the air and using all my momentum and strength to bring the consecrated blade down towards the hidden back seam, deep in the thick fur. There was a hideous squeak and the thing convulsed, spinning round to face me. A chubby paw swiped at me, the impact almost breaking my neck – and ripping my visor clean away.

Time seemed to stand absolutely still for a moment. I was staggering back, my head spinning, surrounded by a cloud of virulently pink fur my blade had dislodged – and I knew that if I breathed in one of those fibres my fate would be beyond description. I had missed the back seam line. Towering over me was a colossus of gleeful pastel horror, its non-allergenic, flame-retardant fur sparkling clean with an unnatural sheen as it absorbed and fed on the spilled blood of the unfortunate villager. In that second I was looking up at it with my naked eyes and brain – looking directly into eyes that gaped empty as the ultimate void beyond the final galaxies – except that the hideous realisation came to me that the void was not dark but pastel.

They say you never know when you go insane. But I remember hearing the detector at my belt squealing like a steam-whistle, and heard myself laugh even as I screamed in living nightmare. I remember one more thing – the starlight glittering on the blade of my seam-ripper as I wheeled and lunged to tear into the stuffed horror’s vulnerable side seam, pastel matter spilling and evaporating like smoke as it hit our reality. There was a horrifying squeak that stung my ears, and then the thing fell, crushing me as it toppled like a falling tree – and then I knew no more.

It was starlight that I awoke to. Stars all above me. I wondered if I was alive, or floating free on some astral plane now. But I breathed in, and a sharp pain stabbed through my body – as I realised I was lying on my back on the mound, looking up at the clear skies with about an hour before dawn.

I could move. I could breathe. I could tell I had cracked several ribs, and when I tried to rise I discovered a stabbing pain in my left foot-paw that insistently informed me of more broken bones. Gasping, I looked around the mound, but there was nothing moving there. Perchloric acid fumes stung my nose, and from one side a patch of earth still smouldered, the very organic matter in the subsoil still alight. Many huddled forms were sprawled there under the stars, but even the ones still in one piece would clearly never rise again. Of fallen Spare Hares there was no sign, for they are stuffed with that which is alien to our world, and must conquer or perish here.

“Hello!” I tried to shout, and instantly regretted it, my ribs feeling as if they were knife-blades twisting in my chest. There was no answer. But as I looked around, I caught a glimmer of light in the woods towards my house. Not the sickly pastel hues of the dimensional rift that had vanished – this was a warm, golden glow, like a late afternoon at the very end of Summer – and more so, like a hazy memory of one’s cubhood days, when such days seem to have lasted forever.

I caught sight of the seam-ripper glowing at my side in the pre-dawn gloom – hauling myself upright, I used it as a makeshift crutch as I made my way very slowly and carefully towards the woods. There I passed what had been Wayne the Heretic. I shook my head, looking down at what remained.

“You nearly made it,” I heard myself whisper. “You were right. They were going to take you with them, after all. You started to transform – and found out the tethers were tantalum cored. You couldn’t get out – and for all their strength the Others couldn’t pull you out to take with them. Not in one piece – but they took what they could.”

It took me ten minutes to lurch down the mound and into the woods, a distance I could have jogged comfortably in one at the start of the evening. The light grew slowly – it was more like a honey-coloured fog than a definite light source, and had a scent that I could not define – something very far and faint in my memories seemed to be telling me that I had known it once before.

Coming into the clearing, I stopped, looking around. There were fresh excavations, new scars torn in the earth. Old brick walls were exposed, distinctive pale sand-lime bricks from before the Millennium, the sort I had seen in the ruins half-buried all through the woodland. To judge from great rounded paw-prints the Toyminators had been frantically trying to unearth something here before being cut down, and had broken through into a cellar. I checked my Cuteness detector for anything lurking nearby, but only an occasional fading squeak remained to tell of shreds of unstable pastel matter decaying and evaporating into relatively harmless hard X-rays and thousand Mega volt pi mesons. I froze, looking at the pit as unwelcome thoughts reeled through my shocked mind.

My neighbour had told me about the toyshop that had been where the mound was. Von Tappe had told me about the factories that had been on this site. I had seen that the fence ran unbroken along the whole area. I looked at the gaping pit before me, and a sensation like iced water began to trickle down my spine as I realised what it must have been. Wayne the Heretic had formed the gate on top of the mound, but the invaders had abandoned him and made for this spot above all others.

“The Toyshop – under the mound. No - some of it was under the mound – some wasn’t. The Spare Hares – it wasn’t living people they’d come for, not this time.” My voice was a cracked moan as I stood there. “Yes, the toyshop was there, but the factories were here. It’s all one site! And – what were they making?”

“You know.” A voice from behind had me whirling around, unconscious of the pain as I planted both paws on the ground and jerked the seam-ripper up in a defensive stance. “I only found out, tonight.”

It was Harry Garsdale, standing with the mist around him. Something small was half hidden in the coiling vapours, less than knee-high to him.

I gasped – first in relief, then in shock at the sight of the lion. His armour had been smashed and crushed, one arm hanging limply – and as I watched, another tuft of mane-fur detached itself and fell to the ground. His death was evidently getting worse. I staggered towards him, but he held up a hand, warning me back.

“We’re the last ones left. I rolled that big Toyminator plush off you before you suffocated. Psycho, Benson, the rest – all gone. The villagers too - they were very brave, but they went up against Security Blankets. And soon there’ll be only you. Von Tappe wouldn’t have been able to fix me anyway. Not now.” He knelt down, and I realised that despite everything, he was smiling. “It’s over. After all these years – it’s over. Show him.” The mists parted for a second, and I cried out in amazement when I saw what he was talking to.

A small brown plush was there – one that I had seen before, not fifty metres away in these woods. Distant stars twinkled reflected in its eyes, a clean bright light innocent of the twisted colours that things outwardly similar radiated in token of their elemental corruption. Its limbs moved stiffly – but I saw how it moved to the lion’s side, looking up and touching the damaged lion as if to comfort Harry. And as had happened before, I looked and somehow understood – as if someone had whispered it all softly into my sleeping ear so many years ago.

Those that live can lose their souls. And those that do not live can gain one. The glass eyes seemed to look through me. Again, the images flashed through in quick succession – generation after generation, this ragged piece of cloth and sawdust had guarded the dreams of cubs, lying with them through the long watches of the night. And there had been millions like him. Small wonder that in two generations it had followed its owners as a good-luck mascot – bringing them back time after time, safe to their beds until the time came to pass on to be the guardian of a new-born cub.

Yet that final time I failed. A new scene unfolded to me, a more recent one with a background of needle-nosed aircraft shining anti-flash white painted in the background. The small mascot had followed its

owner, selfless and silent, lovingly cradled in a spare helmet in the cockpit – when cold merciless electronics had guided explosive death onto its owner’s aircraft on the final leg home. Still in the helmet as the aircraft broke up in the high airs, those glass eyes had seen the approaching earth seeming to swell huge and fast towards it as it fell, a great expanse of Eastern European swamp and pine forest promising a soft landing – soft enough to bury it deep and forgotten for decades while the world changed and things that looked outwardly similar entered with very unloving intent.

I looked from one to the other, realisation hitting me. “And then – you both got the chance. Just for those days when the EU Legemancers changed the rules, you could – start making your way home. And you made it – before things went back to normal. But you’d already gone out of range ...” I struggled with the ideas, but pressed on relentlessly, as relentless as the two before me had had to be. “When things went back to normal you were left behind – almost the only ones.”

The only ones who could move. Not the only ones. An image struck me, forcibly. This place was the remains of a toy factory. It had produced millions of such things. Almost all had been disposable as any towel or mop, never acquiring what they needed to be more than fabric objects, simply decaying unaware into their component elements at the end. But what of the others? Where did they go? When a loved plush had become too threadbare to be repaired and the shops were bright with the next new style of the season, what happened to the old ones? I had a sinking sensation as I thought about that great mound. A mound where Spare Hares came to look for particular things buried there in preference to mortal souls, of which they had already been sated with millions very recently. And before the Spare Hares had invaded in the night – for months, something small and almost undetectable had been trotting around freely as it searched. What had it been searching for? It had been working on the mound – and so we had searched the mound. Not the abandoned factory complex two hundred metres through the woods, where its physical body had resided, close to the home and family it had always known.

A threadbare head nodded. *And now I’m almost the last one. I rescued three more of us tonight – barely in time. They’re right here.* Three rounded shapes were further off in the mists that swirled denser and yet somehow brighter; without being able to explain it, I knew that ordinary woods were not what awaited on the far side for them.

I looked, and something seemed to melt like ice inside me, a cold block that had set years before in the Low Countries. I remembered how my neighbour had claimed such things had existed – had been pure, loving things before the Spare Hares came in from Outside and made all such things accursed, down to their very memories. They had been the tempters of weak souls such as Wayne – they had made it impossible to tolerate even the thought of plush that was unlike them.

We have little time – but we can go. Follow the rest. To where they should be. The stitched snout looked up at the last of the Garsdales. *We two are linked, Harry. Only one of us can go. One of us has to stay. Close the gate. So they can never follow us.* As I looked, the golden glow began to flicker.

Harry Garsdale kneeled there in the fading light. He rested a paw on the small thing’s threadbare head. And then he stood up, picking it up and hugging it tight one last time before putting it down on the ground. “You go. Whatever bound you to my family – I release you from it. I’ll stay to guard the gate, as long as I can – and for as long as I can – I will remember you.”

A small head bowed. And it turned, as the last four of its true kind left on Earth walked on short stiff legs into the mists, which swallowed their fading forms and suddenly flared bright as if a new sunrise had dawned on the other side of that door they had passed through at last. And then there was darkness.

Epilogue

A month later, I stood on the mound again in the moonlight and raised a glass of mead to the spirit of a brave lion and a brave toy whom I hoped were reunited at last. How Harry had sealed the door, he would not say – except that he had been told how to do it. Knowing how to close such a thing is akin to knowing how to open it – and where those living toys had gone, I hope the Spare Hares can never learn to follow.

The mound looked harmless now, its secrets revealed, and indeed there was nothing left to tempt the pastel invaders of our world. They had paid a high price for their raid – every one of them sent back to their world as discarnate wraiths, only slowly to take shape once again over the long years under the mocking gaze of the Great Unknown God of Stuffing, who has no love of failures. The Salisbury raid had been smashed too; stopped before it had reached either the town or the dump, in an epic contest of armoured firepower against padded cuddle power. Stuffed Command groups had been there as well with full Security Blanket coverage: mortal casualties had been heavy but the new compound armour with nanotech upgrades rendering them thirty percent blacker and spikier had proved its worth. Main battle Trams in the outer suburbs of Salisbury had been parked almost wheel to wheel, the Aleph class sinister runes on their hull and turret fronts glowing white hot against the cuteness brought to bear on them – but enough of them had survived to bar the way.

Harry had stood vigil on the mound for a week afterwards, till he declared there would be no further danger. His task, he declared, was done.

We found him the next dawn, and this time when we buried him there was no need to worry about him changing his mind – for his long-delayed demise had caught up with him, accelerated overnight to the point where there had been little but bones to lay in the cool earth under the long shadow of the ancient spire. At long last, he was at rest where he had wished to be.

There was only one thing that I did not like to consider – the family bear had looked after the Garsdales so long and so well, protecting them with the powers it had been given by the love of generations of cubs. Nobody knew how Harry had stayed undead after the rest of his kind returned to their long rest – without even knowing it, for five years had the loving toy kept him as nearly alive as circumstances allowed? Once it had gone – events took their course. I did not tell that to the Ministry team that arrived afterwards, but since then I have not rid myself of the suspicion.

The moon rose above the mound, as I drained my glass in a final toast. To things past – and things to come. When I had told the Ministry what I had seen, I never had expected to be believed. But that night there had been a knock on the door, and I had opened it to see the tall and stern form of a Vicar, dressed and cloaked all in midnight black except for the crush proof white ceramic throat protector of his office.

“We remember the time before the Spare Hares,” he had told me, standing there with the wind making a flag of his rune-embroidered cloak. “We knew the time when stuffing was not accursed, when even toys were innocent – before the Pastel Lords came in to feed from Outside.” And he had told me more besides, things that few would believe the dread Vicars could care about. There was more to their Guardianship of our space-time than simply hunting down the likes of Wayne the Heretic – and that damned soul had lied when he claimed that they erased all uncomfortable truths. They kept some hidden, certainly – shielded from casual touch like the rune-graven scabbard of a sharp blade of revelation.

“And one day” spoke that gaunt, austere figure, “we shall tell the world something it will find hard to believe. But from us, they shall believe it.” Cuteness was a neutral force, just as atomic energy had good and bad sides of it – just as the fusion reaction that could be usefully vaporising an enemy city could give you a painful sunburn when used unsupervised in the Sun. One day, the world would know that again.

He had said little more, but what he did say left hope still in the air. It had been three years since Spare Hares had mounted a dangerous raid, one that had taken more than a week to defeat: one day they might decide Earth was too tough to conquer, once and for all. There were few left like Wayne, thanks to the Vicars – fewer and fewer living leaks in our defences, and organisations such as the Ministry were heading towards becoming an effective immune system for our world. On that day, the Ministry could open its long-sealed archives, to tell how things had been in that time of innocence, and might be again. Just as Spare Hares knew (all too well) the way back into our world – when the world was clean again, others too might return and be welcomed.

I looked out across the dark woods to the abandoned toy factory, where once a golden haze of antique cubhood days had faded into the night. One day, the Thing In The Toyshop could come home.

The End

