

The elderly headmaster of the Tusitala School for the Gifted, Troubled and Strange sighed and walked stiffly into the staff room. His own dark office, which he rarely left, smelled comfortingly of books, tapestries, good wine and cigars. The staff room, however, was a displeasing miasma of forgotten lunch-boxes, cheap coffee, red ink, tragic perfume and all the unique aromas of the fugitive ex-class-pets.

There was, by now quite a large selection of small mammals and birds that had momentarily forgotten themselves and bitten children (although never that badly) or eaten their own young (although rarely in public) and had, therefore, officially left the school.

‘Hide the guinea pigs,’ hissed someone. ‘And cover Petrov.’

Mrs Beathag Hide (owner of the tragic perfume) tossed a pantomime vampire’s cape over the cage containing the parrot that was supposed to have been removed after swearing at the school inspector. Dr Cloudburst and Mr Peters started putting the guinea pigs’ cages into the Lost Property cupboard. Luckily

the elderly headmaster moved slowly enough that there was plenty of time to do this.

The school cat, Neptune, uncurled from a hairy cushion and stalked off in the same direction, in the hope of finding himself shut in with the guinea pigs. He was quite deft at undoing their hutches. Mr Peters shooed him out into the main corridor. At least Neptune no longer had to be hidden. His last misdemeanour had now been forgotten, and so he had recently begun to reappear in the School Prospectus and annual newsletter. Parents liked cats.

Today, though, the headmaster was uninterested in the pets and their ignoble pasts.

‘It is time,’ he said slowly, once he eventually arrived in the centre of the room, ‘to finalise our plan for the Winter Fair.’

Everyone groaned. It wasn’t that people didn’t like the Old Town Winter Fair. They did. But things always went wrong during fairs, fetes and open days. It was far better, in all the teachers’ opinions, to keep things well-structured and predictable. Get the children in, lock the doors and try to teach them something – anything – before the end of the day. That, translated into Latin, was the school’s motto, pretty much. Or it would have been if anyone had ever thought to have a motto.

‘We do, presumably, have a plan?’ said the headmaster.

‘We’re sending five children to the university,’ said Mrs Beathag Hide. ‘Some first-years expressed a desire to learn creative writing and, as you know, we have forged some links with the new Writer in Residence there. There will be workshops, I believe, for the lucky children.’ The way she said ‘lucky children’ didn’t make them sound very lucky at all. Quite the opposite, in fact.

The Old Town University traditionally held its Open Week during the Winter Fair. There were workshops for children, and public lectures for people who couldn't afford to go to university and wanted to learn things for free. The beautiful old butter-stone buildings were, for one week only, covered with colourful balloons.

'Ah yes,' said the headmaster. 'A Terrence Dark-Heart, I believe?' He gave Mrs Beathag Hide a searching look, or as much of one as he could manage at his age.

'Terrence Deer-Hart,' corrected Mrs Beathag Hide. 'Yes. A dreadful, sentimental children's writer now apparently working on some dire epic for adults.'

'Remind me again why we are sending the children to him?' said the headmaster, wearily.

'The other lecturers in the department are rather *interesting*. Dora Wright is now there, of course. The new Head of Creative Writing is Professor Gotthard Forestfloor. He's the Scandinavian novelist we talked about last week, if you remember. There's also Lady Tchainsaw, the Russian avant-garde poet. The visiting professor, Jupiter Peacock, is also a rather intriguing person. You may recall that he claims to carry around with him the spirit of the ancient writer Hieronymus Moon in a small ceramic bottle stoppered with a cork. The children are bound to learn something. And we're only sending five of them. The others will be doing Winter Fair crafts with children from the Mrs Joyful School.'

'What about Blessed Bartolo's?' asked Dr Cloudburst, peering at a test-tube which had something dry and black stuck at the bottom of it. It looked a bit like tea that has been left in the staff

room over a long weekend, but was probably more dangerous than that. ‘We won’t be sending any more children there, surely?’

It seemed no one could remember what the arrangement was with the Blessed Bartolo School, or what had happened to the children who’d gone there last year. Had they ever come back? Perhaps not.

‘It’ll all be fun,’ said Mr Peters, the Head of P.E. ‘The children like a bit of fun.’

Everyone looked at him as if he was a complete simpleton.

But he was right. Most children did like a bit of fun, and if you counted as fun seeing bad men ripped apart by demons, hearing prophecies about your best friends’ deaths, almost dying because you have run out of magical energy, having to confront your worst fears, being expected to fight evil, and travelling to other worlds from which you might never return, then yes, some of the children in this school knew all about fun.

‘Everyone loves the Winter Fair,’ said Dr Cloudburst.

This *was* true. During the Winter Fair, stalls sprung up all over the Old Town selling hot chestnuts, fermented doughnuts and marmalade made from foraged fruits. Every well-known shop had its own stall. The Esoteric Emporium brought out some of its dustiest vintage wines and oldest jars of sauerkraut to sell by the warmth of its little ovens, in which fresh sourdough bread baked gently. Madame Valentin brought her exotic snakes, all of which were planning to escape again this year. The Puppet Man displayed his very best marionettes – many of which were too frightening for children under ten to look at. Luckily there were also roasted marshmallows and lots of glittery decorations.

The main thing was that the Winter Fair made people forget

the cold and the dark, as the northern hemisphere hurtled unstopably towards the shortest day, and the various Midwinter celebrations that would keep people cheerful until the Turning of the Year, when mass depression would set in again, as it always did. It was almost as if our world – or at least, this part of it, for it was Midsummer elsewhere – became a bit more like the Otherworld, just for a time. Not that most people believed in the Otherworld, of course.



Alexa Bottle closed the door of Mrs Bottle's Bun Shop and began walking the hundred or so yards to the house where she lived with her mother and father. She was slightly late, which was unusual. Normally she was very late. It wasn't her fault – she just found her after-school job making magical remedies extremely absorbing and never quite remembered to look at the clock. At the moment she was also revising for various M-grade tests, and trying to remember the differences between all the old apothecaries' systems of weights and measures. By Monday, Lexy had to know how many granums went in a scrupulum, and how many of those made a drachm. How many minims were in a fluid scruple? Twenty. At least she'd remembered that. Maybe Dr Green would even be pleased with her for once.

Lexy was still in her school uniform, but in less than ten minutes she was supposed to be wearing her best dress for dinner with the Bottles' important houseguest. What was his name again? Jupiter something. He was a famous writer and philosopher in town to give a public lecture at the university as part of

the Winter Fair. Lexy's family had won a raffle, which meant they got to host their very own visiting personage and they had been assigned Jupiter Whatshisname.

Lexy's mother Hazel was taking her responsibilities as host very seriously. For far too long, she'd said, she had simply been seen as the flower-power, hippy-dippy wife of the local yoga teacher. No matter how hard she tried, Hazel had never appeared quite like other, normal mothers. She had never hosted a successful dinner party (the last one had featured bean hot-pot and group chanting). She wore the wrong things. She had crazy hair. She went barefoot in summer, and in winter sometimes wore homemade skis to go shopping. She smelled of patchouli and herbal tea. She had never ironed a sheet in her life.

Until this week. This week, Hazel Bottle had declared, their houseguest was going to sleep on clean, ironed sheets, and in the morning his toast was going to be served in one of those little metal racks. Everything was going to be normal, just like it was in other people's houses. And Lexy was not going to ruin it by being late, or by letting any of her remedies catch fire, or by making the whole house smell of burnt clove and scabious ointment, and she was going to tidy up her room and remove all her medicinal plants from windowsills around the house, and make sure the new kitten, Buttons, didn't do anything too embarrassing . . .

Lexy's mind returned to the three drachms of powdered water-lily in the jar in her school bag. *Culpepper's Herbal*, a book Lexy was studying for yet another one of her tests, said that the herb 'cools and moistens, just like the moon itself'. Lexy was going to use the water-lily to make a new remedy for sports

injuries and battle wounds. Her friends Effie Truelove and Wolf Reed always needed things like that. Lexy had also promised her friend Maximilian that she would make him some enchanted ear-drops to enhance the sound of music. And Raven had asked for some magical hoof-balm for her horses. It was going to be a busy weekend.

Lexy opened the front door to her house and found that the whole place smelled of the beeswax the Bottles used on the rare occasions that someone decided to do some polishing. Something was cooking, and it wasn't bean hot-pot. There was some other new smell in the air too. Sort of like Earl Grey tea mixed with lavender and lemons and . . . Buttons ran to greet Lexy, which he did by clawing his way up her school tights and then her back, until he was sitting on her shoulder.

'And who is this charming young lady?' came an unfamiliar deep voice, as Lexy walked into the main living space of the house, an open-plan kitchen, dining-room and sitting-room area that looked a good deal cleaner and tidier than it usually did.

'This is Professor Jupiter Peacock,' said Hazel, removing Buttons from Lexy's shoulder and then taking Lexy's coat and bag and putting them in a cupboard where they did not usually go. Usually they just hung off the bannisters with everything else that people couldn't be bothered to take upstairs. 'Professor Peacock, this is my daughter Alexa.'

Professor Jupiter Peacock stood and held out his hand. He was a tall, broad man dressed in a pair of indigo jeans and a black velvet shirt with a yellow polka-dot cravat around his neck. His hair was swept up in an extravagant pompadour style, like the ones men had in really ancient films. He looked like the sort of

person who didn't normally wear jeans. The Earl Grey smell was his aftershave.

'*Enchanté*,' he said, taking Lexy's hand and winking. 'You must call me JP. *All my friends call me JP.*'

'And I'm Lexy,' said Lexy.

Jupiter Peacock's hand was hot, and his handshake was very firm, much firmer than any normal handshake Lexy had experienced. She winced, and took her hand away as quickly as she could before he broke one of her fingers. She'd have to take an arnica tablet after that. Or maybe even try out her new remedy on herself, once it was ready.

'What a delightful child you have,' said Jupiter to Hazel Bottle.

Hazel blushed. The visit was going so well so far. At the end of the Winter Fair all the visiting personages were invited to rate their hosts, and the one with the highest score got a bunch of flowers, a box of chocolates and had their name engraved on a silver plaque mounted on the wall of the Town Hall. And Hazel Bottle was going to win this year; she was sure of it.

'Thank you,' she said.

As Lexy went upstairs to get changed a small bruise started to form on the outside of her hand. She decided to avoid shaking hands with Jupiter Peacock again. Of course, he hadn't meant it. He was just one of those people who had no idea of their own strength.

When Lexy came down the stairs five minutes later, she was wearing her best pink tutu-style dress with matching ballerina shoes. Somehow this seemed like the wrong outfit in which to be spending the evening with JP. Lexy wished she had something

that looked more grown-up, although she wasn't sure why. Maybe it was because her parents seemed to be acting so much more like grown-ups themselves. Her mother was using her most serious voice, which was a couple of octaves lower than normal, and Lexy's father Marcel had on an ironed shirt. An *actual* shirt, rather than a crumpled, long-sleeved T-shirt with some 'amusing' yoga message on it such as *Yoga Dad, There's No Place Like Om*, or *Shake Your Asana*.

As Lexy reached the bottom of the stairs, she heard her father laugh in the way he did only when there were other adults around and he'd just said something he found very funny.

'That's if any of us survive Midwinter, of course,' he said.

Jupiter Peacock now laughed as well. The sound was loud and strange, like a bittern calling for a mate.

'Don't scare our guest,' Hazel Bottle was saying to her husband.

'Oh, I'm not easily frightened,' said Jupiter Peacock. 'But I must say I am a little unnerved by the idea of the world ending while I'm in the middle of my lecture. That would be most unfortunate indeed.'

'The world never ends when people say it will,' said Marcel Bottle. 'I wouldn't be too alarmed.'

So *they* were talking about the prophecy as well. It had been all over Mrs Bottle's Bun Shop that afternoon. There were often weird prophecies flying about nowadays, but most people ignored them. Of course most people also thought that magic didn't exist and there was no such thing as the Otherworld. Magical people, on the other hand, believed in everything, and took prophecies quite seriously.

Apart from this one. Even magical people thought this prophecy was a bit of a joke, as it had come from Madame Valentin. She'd been cleaning her crystal ball, she'd said, and it had gone off. The thing hadn't functioned for years, and Madame Valentin had used up the last of her M-currency long before the worldquake. But suddenly the crystal ball had activated itself (this is not at all how crystal balls work, which was yet another reason to pour scorn on the whole story) and that was when Madame Valentin had seen it all unfold before her.

It was Midwinter, on the dot – this year that meant 8.12 p.m. on the 21st of December, which was this Monday evening – and the sky had gone pink, and then green, and then completely black, a black Madame Valentin had never seen before. There were hundreds of cats flying through the sky. And then – a massive explosion. The End.

'I'm sure when the world does end it will be in a way we haven't even thought of,' said Hazel Bottle.

'All those cats,' said Jupiter Peacock. 'How inventive.'

'Madame Valentin works in a pet shop,' said Marcel. 'So that's probably where she gets her inspiration.'

'She's completely doolally,' said Hazel. 'Has been for years.'

'In the nicest way, of course,' added Marcel. He always hated saying nasty things about people.

'But the end of the world, though . . .' mused Jupiter Peacock. 'How fascinating that would be. Imagine surviving it.'

'Yes,' said Marcel Bottle uncertainly. 'Just imagine.'

2

Euphemia Sixten Bookend Truelove, known as Effie, had been in the Otherworld since the end of school. Time worked differently there; three days in the Otherworld (they called them moons) only took 57.3 minutes of Realworld time, which meant it was always possible to slip off for a long weekend there if you had an hour to spare.

But it took M-currency – also known as lifeforce – to stay in the Otherworld. People from the Realworld couldn't store very much of it, and Effie's seemed to run out particularly quickly.

So she always had to leave too soon.

Today (in Otherworld time) Effie had woken up early in the large, comfortable bed in her lovely light room in Truelove House. This room always had fresh linen and clean towels, unlike in her Realworld home in the suburbs of the Old Town, where if Effie wanted anything cleaned she had to do it herself, and where it never got fully light at this time of year anyway. She'd looked at her watch – it told the time in both worlds – and calculated that she'd have to leave the Otherworld by early

evening if she wanted any chance of being back in the Realworld in time for supper.

But there was still a whole Otherworld day to enjoy, and Effie was going to spend it in the nearby town of Froghole with her cousin Clothilde. She was sure she'd have enough lifeforce for that.

As usual, the morning was warm and bright. After eating the lavish breakfast that Bertie the maid brought for her – a massive bowl of creamy porridge with maple syrup and fourflower jam, and soft toasted muffins with peanut butter, banana, chocolate chips and marshmallows, and a pot of tea – Effie dressed in the blue silk jumpsuit that Clothilde had made her. She brushed her hair and scraped it into a slightly more tidy ponytail than usual. Then she put on the long necklace that held a vial of deepwater that her friend Maximilian kept topped up for her. She didn't have to put on the golden necklace that held her Sword of Light, because she never took it off. She'd stopped wearing her Ring of the True Hero lately, because it seemed to drain her in ways she didn't understand. She'd threaded it on a string to wear around her neck, but she usually didn't even bother with that.

Soon there came a knock at the door, and her cousin's voice. 'Are you ready?' Clothilde asked.

'Nearly,' said Effie. She took her wooden caduceus from where it was propped against the wall and used her magic to shrink it to the size of a hairpin. She admired the two snakes wrapped around it, and the wings carved into it. It had been a gift from her Otherworld cousin Rollo. She tucked it into her hair at the back. 'But do come in.'

Clothilde entered the room. She was wearing a long, flowing dress in one of the Otherworld colours that was close to what we would call yellow. It was something like summer parties and pale marzipan and the middles of soft cakes all mixed into one.

‘So, are you *very* excited about going to Froghole?’ Clothilde said.

‘Yes,’ replied Effie, grinning.

‘And getting your consultation at long last?’ Clothilde raised an eyebrow.

‘Double yes,’ said Effie. ‘I mean, I don’t think they’re going to tell me that I’m *not* a true hero-interpreter but . . .’

‘It’s good to have it confirmed,’ said Clothilde. ‘And there’s your shade, of course. I guess you’ll already know all about it. I know what you’re like with *The Repertory of Kharakter, Art & Shade*. You must have read it fifty times by now.’ Clothilde smiled. ‘Do you already know what you think you are?’

Effie shook her head. ‘No. I heard that if you find out too much about the shades in advance it can distort the results of the test. So it’s all still a complete mystery to me. I’ve saved that part of the book for after today.’ She smiled. Clothilde squeezed Effie’s arm gently. Effie knew how excited Clothilde was for her. It was so wonderful having someone who understood her so well.

In all the time she’d been visiting the Otherworld, Effie had still not actually been to an Otherworld town. People kept meaning to take her, but Pelham Longfellow – the other traveller who regularly visited Truelove House – was always being called away urgently to investigate ‘the Diberi situation in Europe’, and Clothilde couldn’t leave the Great Library for very long. But today, at long last, it was finally going to happen.

‘And you’ll be getting your Keeper’s mark as well,’ said Clothilde.

‘I know,’ said Effie. ‘I can’t wait to be able to help you all in the Great Library. To be actually allowed to go in, and—’

‘Oh no!’ Clothilde suddenly put her hand to her mouth. ‘We’re supposed to do a sort of official induction in the Great Library before you get your Keeper’s mark. I can’t believe I forgot. I think it’ll only take five minutes. We’ll do it before we go. Is that all right?’

‘OK,’ said Effie. But somewhere nearby the sun seemed to go behind a cloud. It wasn’t that Effie was scared of the Great Library exactly – she wasn’t afraid of anything – but the last time she’d been in there she’d almost died.

‘I’ll go and get my things and wait for you downstairs,’ said Clothilde.

Effie found Clothilde in the entrance hall, carrying a large wicker basket that seemed to be full of tissue paper and colourful striped boxes. Her cousin now put these down and took from around her neck the brass key that opened the Great Library.

‘Ready?’ asked Clothilde.

‘Yes,’ said Effie, frowning slightly. ‘Definitely.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes.’

‘Is something wrong?’

Effie shook her head. She couldn’t lie and say no out loud. She couldn’t tell Clothilde about the slight headache that had just started. Was it because she was remembering what had happened last time she’d been in the Great Library? Or did it

mean that she was running out of M-currency? Effie blinked and tried to put it completely out of her mind. Lexy had once told her that something between 90 percent and 100 percent of pain was in the mind. Which meant you could control it – if you knew how. The first step was not believing in it, apparently.

The wooden panelled doors to the Great Library were just underneath the large sweep of the grand staircase that went up to the gallery, where Effie's room was, and the doorway leading to the staircase to Cosmo's private study. Clothilde approached with the key. Effie gulped silently. Would it be like it had been before?

'All right,' said Clothilde. 'You first.'

'Really?' said Effie.

'We're not going very far in,' said Clothilde. 'I just want to map your version of the Great Library onto mine, so that we can go together in future. While you're being initiated it will help you to go into my version until you build up enough strength to go to your own. Eventually we'll be able to merge our versions in order to be in there together. And then you'll be able to visit your version on your own too. Does this make any kind of sense at all?'

'Yes.' Effie nodded. 'I think so.' She already knew that the Great Library was in a different dimension and in order to become real here it had to be sort of folded down into three dimensions. Everyone did this in their own way, which meant the library looked different to each person who went in. Generating the library took lots of lifeforce. That was only one of the reasons it was dangerous.

Clothilde opened the door.

‘OK,’ she said. ‘Step inside. Just a small step. Concentrate – but not too hard. Get your brain onto the frequency you use to do magic.’

‘All right,’ said Effie.

‘Now tell me, what do you see?’

It was the same as the last time she’d been in here. Effie described to Clothilde the small country-house library she saw in front of her, with its old-looking bookshelves and dark polished-wood floor. There was a wooden filing cabinet that held the classification system. And, of course, the books, all shelved so neatly, with their spines in dark, sober Realworld colours: red, blue, brown. Effie described the yellow wallpaper, with its faint mint-green-stripe pattern. There was a small reading table with a chair next to a window on the right-hand side. Last time Effie had been here it hadn’t had a little lamp. But today there was one.

‘Is it supposed to change?’ Effie asked Clothilde, when she got to that bit.

‘It will change a little for a while at the beginning, as you get used to it,’ she said. ‘It’s normal. There’s no need to worry unless it changes a lot. Right. Take my hand.’

Effie held Clothilde’s hand. It was small, dry and soft.

‘Now close your eyes. And listen. My library is similar to yours, but different. There are all the same books, for one thing: we don’t get to decide that bit. But my library is arranged around a central spiral staircase. There is a gallery rather like yours, but my shelves are all around the main walls. In the middle of the room are four reading desks. They are all made of old wood – again similar to your library. Each one has a pen pot containing

a fountain pen and a pencil, and each one also has a little jar of peacock blue ink. And on each desk there's blotting paper . . .'

Effie saw Clothilde's library take shape in her mind. Clothilde described the turquoise and gold wallpaper and the vast paintings of various birds from the Otherworld that were all large and pink.

'Open your eyes,' said Clothilde.

When Effie did, it was Clothilde's library, not hers, that she saw. She took a step forward, but Clothilde pulled her back.

'We won't go any further today,' she said. 'I know Cosmo's already told you that what we have in here is the blueprint for all existence. There are books on geometry, physics, music theory, harmony, perspective and so on. Everything that's real has a corresponding book in here. Books can't be removed, for obvious reasons. Well, they can, but it's very unusual and . . . You probably don't need to know that bit now. New books can be put into the library, but again it's very complicated, and . . .'

Clothilde was good at many things, but explaining wasn't one of them. As she talked about something called a Wizard Quest, and the Great Ritual needed for a book to be accepted into the library, and where they put the book on the Great Split, and the problems of visualising the two different halves of the library, Effie's stomach started to grumble. So soon after such an amazing breakfast, too. This lecture about the Great Library was very interesting, but Effie was particularly looking forward to getting to Froghole and doing some shopping. And having lunch out. She wondered what she'd order. Everything that was chocolatey here was *really* chocolatey. And the marshmallows came in

colours that didn't exist in the Realworld, and they were much softer and sweeter . . .

'Sorry,' said Clothilde, and blushed. 'I've been babbling on and on. I've never initiated anyone before. I'm probably boring you stiff. We can do the rest next time.'

'No, it's—'

Clothilde laughed. 'You're very sweet,' she said. 'But we should go.'

'Are you sure?' said Effie.

'Yes, we've covered most of it, I think. And there's no test. You just have to learn by doing it all really. OK. Are you ready to go?'

'Yes,' said Effie. 'Absolutely.'

But as Clothilde locked the library door behind them, Effie felt weak suddenly, and strange. Was it going to be like last time all over again? She'd had to go to London, where a powerful doctor had given her golden tablets, and . . .

'Are you OK?' asked Clothilde, seeing Effie hesitate.

'Yes, fine,' she replied.

Effie was determined to remain excited. She absolutely wasn't going to ruin today by thinking about the Yearning or worrying about what happened when you ran too low on lifeforce. It would be all right. Maximilian would get some new deepwater for her when she got back. It was just . . . she *couldn't* run out of power again here. She'd had the Yearning once and it had been the most awful experience of her life. Well, except for losing her mother and her grandfather, that is.

Effie didn't understand why her lifeforce seemed to run out so quickly when she was in the Otherworld, even without

draining trips to the Great Library. She knew one reason was that Realworlders weren't really designed to be here. But she was a traveller, and someone had once said her energy was more Otherworld than Realworld. So what was going wrong? And the Ring of the True Hero was supposed to help, but it just seemed to make things worse. Effie used to think that it turned used-up physical energy into magical energy and that playing tennis for a long time while wearing it was the key. But recently it hadn't been working. Playing tennis just seemed to drain her as well. And she hadn't even been playing well lately. Coach Bruce kept telling Effie she had to get back in the zone, whatever that meant.

She put it all out of her mind. Her headache began to fade. Maybe it was in her imagination, like Lexy said.

'I'm all right. Let's go,' she said to Clothilde.



Back in the Realworld, in the dim silvery light of the rising moon, this almost Midwinter evening was full of slow, delicate intrigue about which most humans knew nothing. More than half the Cosmic Web was in hibernation of course, and so at this time of year those who didn't want to be seen started creeping about, safe in the knowledge that news of their activities wouldn't spread very fast.

Most people ignore the constant sounds of the animals around them: the hooting, clucking, meowing, barking, howling, baying and so on. More fool them. This, of course, is the sound of the Cosmic Web in action: it is the way that animals talk to each

other, spreading all sorts of news and gossip and warnings and prophecies.

So it was that the Northern Lights were on holiday with the Bermuda Triangle, resting before the big display they always put on for the various Winter Fairs around the northern hemisphere. Even the Luminiferous Ether had given itself some much-needed days off and had gone to join them.

Later this night there would be snow. Everything would be white and everything would be very, very silent. And, just after midnight, in the basement meeting room of the Old Town University, Terrence Deer-Hart would be presenting himself for the first time to the secret meeting of the Fifteenth Order of the Diberi, originally based in Vienna but lately moved to new headquarters in the Old Town.

Which meant he had to take special care doing his hair with his heated comb, and so he had already started, just as the moon came up, which it did so early on these last days of the year. Terrence had already given up writing for the day. He had too many flipping projects on the go and his head was spinning.

Terrence Deer-Hart was a famous children's writer who unfortunately hated everything about writing. He hated paper, and pens, and pencils, and words. For Terrence, even one project was one project too many. And yet here he was with three different flipping piles of paper on his desk, each in its own different way thin and pathetic and ridiculous.

The nearest pile was the beginning of his first novel for adults. Now that he was allowed to swear as much as he liked, and write without limit about violence and kissing, he suddenly didn't want to. He had only got three pages in, although he'd been

telling everyone it was going to be a great epic with multiple volumes.

The second pile looked like a school project that had been left on the bus, damaged by rain and half-chewed by a dog. A lot of work and thought had gone into it, and it interested Terrence far more than his novel. These pages formed Terrence's dossier on the children who'd killed his beloved Skylurian Midzhar. They had buried her alive, the flipping brutes! Terrence was intending to get revenge, but as he was very afraid of blood, and violence, and, if we're honest, children, he was relying on the Fifteenth Order of the Diberi to get his revenge for him. That was one of the main reasons he intended to join them. They were properly evil, and would be able to come up with a suitable death for each one of the revolting brats who had been involved with dear Skylurian's death. Sadly, whenever Terrence tried to think of, say, boiling Effie Truelove alive, he got a migraine.

Anyway, their names and addresses were all here. Euphemia Truelove. Alexa Bottle. Raven Wilde. Maximilian Underwood. Wolf Reed. Terrence had already given a copy to the Diberi, who had been pleased, as it turned out they were looking for children to use in some kind of evil spell. Was one of the children to be sacrificed somehow? Maybe on Midwinter's Eve? Terrence couldn't quite remember.

Terrence ran the heated comb through his dense curls and tried to think himself into his third project, the one Lady Tchainsaw had said would be a work of immense genius. He quite liked Lady Tchainsaw. You couldn't always tell what poets meant, especially not when they were Russian, but she had come quite close to him – close enough that he could smell her perfume,

the top notes of which were dead things and violets – and whispered straight into his ear. What she had said sounded something like, ‘Your abundant locks, they are so beautiful, darlink.’

Then she had asked him to write the blueprint for a whole new universe.

This was the project Terrence was having most trouble with. Given that he couldn’t even manage to get going on his epic adventure for adults, how the flip was he supposed to author an entire universe? He just couldn’t face it today.

So once he’d finished his hair, he began changing slowly into the special outfit the Diberi had given him: a dangerously tight yellow jumpsuit with a small red cape. Did this ensemble suit him? It did not. It did not make him feel remotely diabolical or magical. It made him feel like something from early evening Saturday night TV shows from the olden days.

And he was ready five hours too early, like some kind of flipping teenager attending their first flipping ball. Still, once he was part of the Diberi, everything was going to be different. Terrence would be officially evil! In return for his initiation, and for promising to kill the children, Terrence would give the Diberi all the information he had on the location of Dragon’s Green, in which they had seemed extremely interested.

Then, somehow, the Diberi were going to take control of the entire universe. And Terrence, once a mere children’s writer snubbed by big prize juries and reviewers despite selling millions of copies of his books, was going to be the author of this universe. If only he could get started on the flipping thing.

How did you write a whole universe? Lady Tchainsaw had given him some tips, as had Professor Gotthard Forestfloor. The

main thing, they'd told him, was that this universe had to depict only the Realworld, and that this world should be extremely magical and controlled by the Diberi. There was to be no Otherworld. They'd both been very insistent about that.

'Write the Otherworld out of existence, *darlink*,' Lady Tchainsaw had said, 'and you will be celebrated for ever.'

Being celebrated for ever sounded quite nice, and Lady Tchainsaw was very pretty, in a harsh sort of way. Terrence already knew he was going to do everything she told him.