

### **Truth is the daughter of time**

The new Prime Minister ordered Neville to get to the bottom of it. They were Oxford men, English and PPE respectively, and so Cambridge scientists meant trouble.

‘My predecessor was an idiot,’ the PM said, waving the file. ‘But someone on his team was smart enough to hide the expenditure. What the hell are they up to out there in the Fens – turning gold into lead?’

‘I’ll go for a little look round,’ Neville said. Neville didn’t care that what he called elegance, others called sleek and sinister. Let people hate him so long as they feared him.

He read what he could in the Bentley. The laboratory hid a few miles outside Cambridge, low anonymous sheds surrounded by trees and an impressive double fence. Professor Malone waited at the gate, thickset in a tweed skirt. One of the country’s top theoretical physicists looked like a hearty, county school Headmistress. She controlled her body language but still, a very anxious Headmistress. Neville liked the people he met to start anxious.

‘Mr Neville, we’re delighted to see you...’

‘Well, Professor Malone, I have to say your report was unintelligible. Deliberately obscure. This thing costs more than an aircraft carrier. What is it, and why can’t you explain what it’s for in writing?’

‘Well, as far as we can see, it’s a macro-scale quantum-tunnelling-like chronological anomaly...’

The boffins called it the Window. ‘Window into what?’ he said.

The Professor took a deep breath. ‘I didn’t believe it either. A window into the past.’

He was genuinely shocked by the absurdity. ‘*A time machine?*’

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A darkened room - at the centre a faint upright patch of light, the grey of the first thought of dawn. It hung with no obvious source. In size, his oval dining room table in the Chelsea house. It was surrounded by Perspex walls floor to ceiling – a barrier against infection.

Two or three anxious underlings played with keyboards on sleek machines at the edges, their faces in pools of light.

‘I can’t believe they gave you taxpayers’ money to play with this,’ Neville said again. A splendid scandal would serve the new administration well. Leading the news - ‘Former PM Tried to Build Tardis’.

‘The previous PM saw the possibilities. He was particularly keen around arms control and nuclear proliferation...’

‘So, you can look through this crystal ball and tell him what the Iranians are up to?’

‘Yes. Were up to. We can’t see forwards and there’s a week or two margin of error, it widens the further back you go. We can get light, not sound, and as far as we know, matter doesn’t pass through it. We decided to keep it sealed because of ancient diseases’

If it worked, it would be worth every penny.

‘Yet, you have no photos from inside the Iranian facilities,’ he said. ‘No intelligence at all.’

‘Lot of interference there, we don’t know why,’ she said, gritting her teeth a little.

‘The trials on Orkney were very convincing though. We can show you the pictures...’

‘One windswept island is much like another. It doesn’t sound like the taxpayer got much for our money.’

Professor Malone produced a couple of photocopied pages from inside her jacket. She had the air of someone playing her last card. ‘You wrote this at Oxford,’ she said. ‘Richard III and the Princes in the Tower.’

‘Oh, that.’ He hadn’t thought of that for many years. ‘Richard was ruthless enough to have it done. Yet, there’s only one accusation written in the time, and that’s only that the children ceased to be seen. If Richard had the boys alive, why didn’t he produce them to quash the rumours? Henry made no propaganda use of it until he was well on the throne, but he did not produce the bodies or hold a trial. Any decent politician would see the opportunity. The likeliest is that Richard had them killed, or they died of neglect, but it’s hardly certain.’

‘Shall we find out?’ said Malone. ‘We’ve recalibrated from Iran. Knowing your interest, we’re homing in on the Tower of London in the summer and autumn of 1483. You’d better sit down.’

‘I opened the Newcastle Virtual Reality Centre,’ Neville said. ‘A few special effects won’t convince me.’

The light condensed, shifted, like coming into focus. Darkness, stoniness in the night, a ragged patch of something hanging in mid-air. Not a film, or a projection, he could see why they called it a window. But onto what? Neville shifted forward; it intrigued him.

A man in dark clothing walked through their point of view, vanished. Extraordinary. ‘How do you steer?’ he said. ‘How can we find the Princes in a royal palace at night?’

‘The calibration is very sensitive. We just have to hop around and hope.’

A big if, he thought, but if this is real, we shouldn't rush to tell the Americans. We really need some new cards up our sleeve.

The chair was a little low and Neville's back twinged, but he was gripped. It took an hour, maybe more, while the Window hopped around. Day, soldiers in the right uniforms. Pure darkness. A man confined, but elderly and ill. And then... A dark room, twilight, a younger boy stroking the dozing head of an older. There was strong evidence that Edward was ill, Neville remembered.

'Good Lord,' he said to himself. I mean, they could be anyone. But the Window seemed to allow the researchers to spy, unseen. Maybe that old fool, the ex-PM, knew what he was doing. Or maybe he funded several such lunatic projects and this one worked.

'Get a little closer,' Professor Malone said, eager. 'I'd like to compare a close photograph of their faces with portraits. Their relatives and so on.'

Later, they didn't agree. Neville was sure the Window split, somehow; others said that it moved. One technician claimed it blinked out. What was unarguable were the boys were right there in the room. One prone, one squatting, amid their bedclothes. The Window had moved and the Perspex walls had disappeared.

The older boy moaned. The younger squawked, gabbled something in terror. Everyone else stared.

Neville held out his hands. English or schoolboy Latin, he might as well try English first.

'We are friends,' he said. 'We won't harm you. You're safe here. What is wrong with your brother? We will help you.'

A private republican, he decided to give a little bow.

His mind whirred. ‘Professor, we need a medical team who will keep their mouths shut. They might be infectious – Edward might have TB - and we might infect them with modern diseases.’

Lice. They would need baths, new clothes, food.

The younger boy was praying.

Culture shock – they must get some sort of psychologist – a first rate medievalist - a priest. A Catholic who could reassure them with the Latin rite. Neville was called diabolic by his enemies, but he rather liked children and they deserved good treatment. Of course, they would need to be hidden away for now.

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An hour later, the doctors were busy, and the children deserved their privacy. ‘Prime Minister, Professor Malone’s operation is exceptionally interesting,’ he said into the secure phone. ‘A visit would be fruitful once I have tidied up a bit.’

He fed coins into the machine and bought two more bars of milk chocolate. Chocolate had been a hit once he had eaten some himself.

If the boys disappeared to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, then the problem was resolved. Neville thought, in theory you might argue the boy was rightful King of England. One for the lawyers.

Professor Malone hadn’t the slightest idea what she’d discovered. This went beyond mere research. Jerusalem, one Passover, two thousand years ago. Neville always believed that knowledge was power.

Ends

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