INCURSIONS

Report from the front line.

BY LAVIE TIDHAR

The wardrobe had sat in the old house by the seaside for generations. Who bought it, we didn't know. Its timber came from our far-flung colonies in the South Pacific, places that have long since gained their independence from us, at least by letter of the law. It had survived the bombings in the Second World War and subsequent ownerships, recessions, booms, property bubbles and changing governments.

All through this time the sea continued to beat against the shore, futilely, and the wardrobe just sat there, unchanged, made of old weathered teak and oak and pine. Often, when you opened it, you would feel a cold draught blowing, and hear the rustle of pines, but it was an old house and such things are not unheard of. A previous owner stored old fur coats there, but those had long since rotted away and were thrown on the rubbish heap. Nowadays, it just stored children's clothes bought off the rack.

The first incursion occurred at a quarter past one at night. There were no witnesses but for a young girl, clutching her teddy bear, who opened one eye in her bed and glanced into the darkness and then looked away. The faun (it was an older specimen than the ones later caught) tiptoed through the room and out of the door. When it was first spotted it was some two hours later, on the road leading to London. Witnesses later said that the faun looked disorientated, confused. The glare of passing lights frightened it.

The element of incursion (sub-species Pan) was eliminated three hours and forty-seven minutes after entry. In his testimony, the lorry driver who hit the intrusion said, "He just stood there. I had no time to brake. He just stood there as though he'd never seen a truck before."

We can confirm that the specimen was male. It was vaguely human-shaped, with cloven hooves, reddish skin, curly hair and horns. An extensive autopsy carried out later concluded that it died of severe injuries caused on impact with the moving vehicle.

There was a delay as the information filtered slowly through the ranks of law-enforcement and government agencies until

reaching my department. This was unfortunate in light of later events. By the time we had set up a perimeter around the house, an unknown number of entities had escaped into the English countryside. From later, partial reports, we know these included: centaurs (category: Hybrid), dwarfs, giants, nymphs, two unicorns, a tribe of talking mice and assorted other species, and at least one river god, who hid itself in the Severn. It took an eight-day battle with the army before the entity was successfully eliminated.

Our first real break was when a farmer in East Anglia managed to catch one of the badgers. Although we had placed the entity under interrogation, it initially refused to talk. When it did, it — like the first incursion — seemed confused. It insisted the entities were refugees, fleeing some sort of oppressive regime in their land. Our interest was aroused at the mention of a possible WMD, a device capable of causing permanent winter. Such a thing is beyond our current tactical capabilities. We established a working group to look into the military implications as we sought simultaneously to contain the incursion and round up the intruders into secure facilities, or camps, an operation that was, on the whole, successful.

There were, however, complications.

A troupe of travelling fauns was spotted around Piccadilly Circus, begging for scraps from passers-by. They proved to be surprisingly fleet-footed, and avoided capture for several months.

An assembly of nymphs took root in

Epping Forest. They assaulted joggers and ramblers and violently resisted any incursion by our forces. Several giants took residence in Surbiton, on the hill, and talking mice bred like the plague in some parts of Manchester and the northwest.

Local police forces, ill-equipped for this sort of thing, found it hard to cope.

The family who inhabited ground zero were evacuated from the house on the first day of the incursion. We had set up a perimeter to prevent any further unauthorized access, but refugees continued to slip through. Worse — we

began to suspect that their tales of a cruel monarch and her despotic rule were not altogether untrue. Hostile elements successfully planned and executed an attack — using unknown means — which turned half of Rickmansworth into a block of ice (though it was hard to tell at first). A series of ritual killings, targeting lions, shocked the nation, leaving behind it dead and mutilated animals in every zoo in the country.

We reluctantly began to discuss counter-measures.

The wardrobe has been sitting in the house for generations. Who bought it we didn't know. Its interior smelled of pine needles and ice, of lichen and washing powder. We continue to send men into the forbidden zone, although few come back, and those who do are changed by age and years, despite the fact that little time passes beyond the perimeter fence.

As for the refugees, they continue to come. We attempt to contain them, and the camps, daily, continue to grow. The wardrobe has been sitting in the house for generations and could last, at a conservative estimate, for generations more.

Who bought it, we still don't know. ■

Lavie Tidhar is the author of the *Jerwood Fiction Uncovered Prize* winning *A Man Lies Dreaming*, the *World Fantasy Award* winning *Osama* and the critically acclaimed *The Violent Century*. His other works include the *Bookman Histories* trilogy, several novellas, two collections and a forthcoming comics miniseries, *Adler*. He currently lives in London.

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