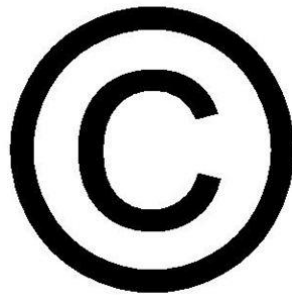


Copyright



“I think that the use of copyright is going to change dramatically. Part of it is economics. There is just going to be so much content out there - there's a scarcity of attention. Information consumes attention, and there's too much information.”

– Esther Dyson, technology analyst

Background Drone

Monday the 6th of April, 2045

Abby rubbed her temple as she strode between cubicles, a screen tucked under her arm. Her Royalty Drone, grey as ash and the length of a ruler, hovered close behind. The faintest scent of chlorine rode on the machine-scrubbed office air. Half-heard snatches of conversation floated past:

“...renovations downstairs?”

“Didn’t you hear? ...one of those Royalty Booths at the entrance...”

Click. Click. The sound of the Drones.

A familiar off-white flicker caught her eye’s corner. She turned to see a co-worker pinning a slightly yellowed paper to the wall of his workspace. Pausing, she looked around; no-one else seemed to have noticed. For a second she wavered; then she stepped into the cubicle, avoiding the man’s Royalty Drone, and knelt beside him. “Hey, Jack.” He turned his head, eyebrows quirked in surprise. She lowered her voice.

“That paper could get you in trouble. Trust me, keep it hidden. The Department of Collection doesn’t like that kind of thing.”

His mouth opened slightly for a moment. He closed it and nodded. “Ok. Sure.”

Abby stood again as Jack unpinned the notice. “That doesn’t mean don’t use it. Cryptish is great for saving a buck or two, just don’t let any Collectors hear.”

Click.

“You’re right. Abby...” He looked down at the paper, half-folded in his hands.

“...pancier¹.”

She smiled. “Ye wilcuma².” The ever-present Drone remained silent.

¹ Cryptish for “thanks”

² Cryptish for “You’re welcome”

The sun was on its way down. Abby could see it peering from behind the bars of the Harbour Bridge, reaching toward her with tendrils of yellow light as though begging for aid. Abby returned to her cubicle, placing the screen in its stand. It beeped contentedly as power flowed through its battery, replenishing stores of chemical energy. She tapped open the files she was working on and returned to work with a slight sigh.

She looked up at the clock on the wall, at the hour hand twitching toward the workday's end. Abby wondered whether the company thought that the image of an analogue clock would make its workers feel more at ease. It was a convincing illusion, projected on a digital screen at a resolution beyond the human eye's ability to differentiate, but even with current 3D technology it was still just a flat screen. An echo of an older age.

A beeping ringtone pierced her reflection. She slid her finger across the screen in response and the beeping ceased.

“Hello?”

The Drone clicked.

The Emergency Copyright Protection Act 2025

Issued by the International Bureau for the Enforcement of Economic Law

19/2/25

The newly instated law concerning copyright has featured prominently in the media in recent months and, as a result, a great deal of misinformation has been introduced to the public. The purpose of this document is to give citizens an accurate picture of the reality of the Emergency Copyright Protection Act.

About Copyright:

Copyright is, first and foremost, a method of protecting the creative rights of any person who has invested time and effort into crafting something unique. His or her creations are protected by law, automatically and at no cost, from being distributed, copied or used without his or her permission.

In recent decades, however, an author's right to profit from his or her property has been severely impacted. When the Internet entered popular usage in the early 21st century, plagiarism and theft of copyright material rose significantly. Any item with the capacity to be transmitted digitally could be copied to millions of hard drives within a very short period of time, without payment reaching the original creator.

The Emergency Copyright Protection Act will repair the damage inflicted by the Internet. Now that the ECPA has been passed by international consensus, allowing royalty to be collected at any use of copyright material, one is able to download as much free content as one pleases: citizens may now rest assured that the producers will always receive payment for the labour they gave to provide this entertainment.

About Royalty Drones:

The Royalty Drone is an innovative technology employed to ensure the success of the Act. It is a personal royalty-tracking device, provided free of charge by the International Bureau

for the Enforcement of Economic Law to every eligible citizen (exempt individuals include children under the age of eight and those whose contact with copyright material is deemed to be an essential aspect of a valuable service). Whenever material from a copyrighted text is used, the Royalty Drone will employ sophisticated recognition software, coupled with an extensive cloud database, to recognise the text and automatically make a payment on the behalf of the citizen. Upon doing so the Drone will inform the user with a discreet “click”.

Royalty Drones will eventually be able to interface with Royalty Booths, a piece of hardware which is currently in-development. These devices utilise advanced FMRI technology to charge royalty fees for whole works contained within a person’s mind, depending on the prevalence of these works within the frontal lobe. They are to be deployed by major copyright holders. The combination of these two revolutionary technologies will help to revive the currently bleak creative landscape.

From: hart@doc.cbeel.gov

To: chapman@doc.cbeel.gov

Attachments: V322371.docd

Received 10:15, 8/3/45

Chapman,

confiscatd atthcd demnt arnd D-43. thoughts?

From: chapman@doc.cbeel.gov

To: hart@doc.cbeel.gov

Received 10:32, 8/3/45

Thank you, Hart. This word substitution activity has been brought to my attention. We'll have to make progress quickly. Consider yourself in charge of this investigation.

Attachment: Evidence Item #V322371

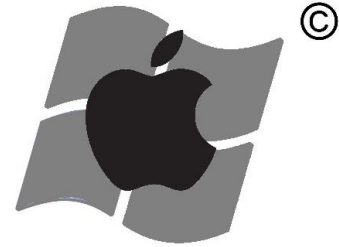
International Bureau for the Enforcement of Economic Law, Department of Collection

Enjoy. ;) Cryptid. 5th March 2045.

Word	Current owner	\$/Use	Suggested substitute	Origin
find	Yahoo (subsidiary of Applesoft)	4.00	<i>finþan</i>	Gothic
go	Mitsubishi-Shell	0.75	<i>gehen</i>	German
I	Applesoft	0.46	<i>ekan</i>	Proto-Germanic
marry	Catholic Church (subsidiary of Mitsubishi-Shell)	0.10	<i>maritare</i>	Latin
welcome	Hilton (subsidiary of PepsiCo-PepsiCo-McDonald's)	4.00	<i>wilcuma</i>	Old English
well	Applesoft	1.22	<i>waila</i>	Gothic

Royalty

4:20pm, Monday the 6th of April, 2045



The Boys of Summer blared in Riley's imagination as he walked down Wynyard Lane, a haunting timbre latched to his brain. As he wove through the late afternoon crowds beneath the city's looming buildings, he resisted an impulse to whistle. No matter how mangled his rendition, the Drone at his shoulder would recognise it instantly.

To this inaudible soundtrack he pictured the night ahead, a cold fist clenching his stomach as he pictured her green eyes. He remembered the day when he had first seen those eyes glinting at him above a nervous smile. He wasn't sure Abby even remembered the date, but he had treasured every number around her for three years to the day.

Now, finally he could ask her. Finally she would decide. For better or worse.

He recited his planned words over and over, his mind playing through her every possible reaction. A hundred variables churned in his head, the tone of his voice, the arch of his eyebrows, the quality of dinner.

He intended to do his best to make the latter irrelevant, but only with the right ingredients: spaghetti bolognese, made with beef and parmesan which, if you traced their histories back far enough, actually originated within real cows. Fresh onion, fresh carrot (*almost* free of preservatives) and a pre-Annex vintage red wine. The stuff you could only buy from the exclusive section of the McDonald's Supermarket. After saving for weeks, he had just enough money. Every cent had to count.

But I can see you, your bare skin shining in the...

He paused.

"Shit."

The ever-present Royalty Drone issued a click, so faint it was almost inaudible.

Before him, past the rows of jostling people, was the arched bulk of a brand-new Royalty Booth. An aesthetic construction of steel, glass and white plastic, there was little doubt it was a recently-installed Applesoft product. He tried to recall who owned the particular material afflicting him, but the patents changed hands almost daily.

Creatively labelled “iBooth”, the complex, white-encased machinery occupied much of the pavement and a portion of the adjacent block. For the briefest of moments he considered stepping around the arch as his point in the queue drew closer. The sight of a grey-clad Collector guarding the booth, shock baton at hand, discouraged him. For the first time he wondered why the song had entered his mind after ten years without having heard it. In his head he traced his path back along the sidewalk ... *sons of bitches*, he cursed within, as he recalled passing a Gloria Jeans café. Owned by Applesoft, its speakers were constantly throbbing with tunes able to addict even the least musical of people. Not for the first time, he swore at himself for leaving his earplugs at home.

The queue drove him forward. He brushed against people leaving in the opposite direction, hurrying on from the double archway. Still the song reverberated in his skull.

A disclaimer printed in capitals informed him that “the Royalty Scanning Process™ will not cause any physical or mental discomfort”. Despite this assertion he could have testified to an abstract tingle on his scalp as he stepped into the arch’s shadow. Focusing on thoughts of empty silence, through which a drum beat echoed persistently, he passed into the booth. After a pause the screen jingled cheerfully and displayed a list of his mind’s contents and their associated dollar values. Crowning the list at a combined \$60.32, above a recipe for pasta sauce, were two items: *Literary work: The Boys of Summer* and *Musical work: The Boys of Summer*.

When the abrasively cheerful female voice announced his total (“Seventy-seven dollars and eighty-six cents!”), it felt like a hand gripped his entrails. A glib beep from his Royalty Drone

as it communicated with the Booth signalled that the payment had already been made.

Almost eighty bucks. He growled a wordless curse.

At the Collector's behest he moved along, eyes to the ground. Made room for the next citizen and her Drone. How could he afford dinner now?

It wasn't just the food. As perfect as he wanted the meal to be, something else would do. It was the *words*, the words he needed to ask her. He *would not* be cautious on such an important occasion, just to avoid being charged. Abby deserved the best his vocabulary had to offer, which presented an expensive dictionary. He needed the Drone to be able to click as much as it wanted, he needed to be able to express. But with a bank account now eighty dollars emptier that was no longer an option.

He dragged a hand through his hair as he retrieved a phone from his pocket. Leaning forehead to forearm to wall, he rang her.

Two tones.

"Hello?"

"Hey." Riley's heart beat a fleshy fist against his ribcage. His voice sounded flat.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, just, um ... dinner. We might have to re ..." He eyed the machine hovering above his shoulder. "One second." He rummaged even deeper into his pocket and located a sheaf of off-white papers, folded multiple times. He straightened them until their passenger characters were legible, to speak with a fragmented cocktail of forgotten language. Some people had a knack for speaking in the cheapest words, it became habitual, but he and she were both born in the days before the Drones. They had another way. "Um ... vedu ðearf ... novus ... hora³." We need to reschedule.

He could hear her opening her own copy.

³ In Cryptish, literally "We need new time."

“Ok ... hwænne?⁴”

He would be paid on Wednesday. “Thursday?” Another click. He had that one coming. Mitsubishi-Shell had owned the weekdays for years.

“Goðr⁵. Certus ye ...waila⁶?” Are you sure you’re alright?

“Gese⁷. Waila.” Yes, fine.

“Goðr. Ekan ðearf gehen⁸ ... but I’ll see you soon, ok?”

”Ok. þancian⁹.”

He hung up.

With a clenched fist he pushed away from the wall and began his walk home. The shadows of the skyscrapers were growing longer as the sun sank, casting the people below into darkness.

⁴Cryptish for “when”

⁵ “alright”

⁶ literally “Sure you well?”

⁷ “yes”

⁸ literally “I need go.”

⁹ “thank you”

From: hart@doc.cbeel.gov

To: chapman@doc.cbeel.gov

Attachments: V322374.docd

Received 17:23, 28/3/45

Chapman,

full set of prnts frm old Drone = missing person April Winter, presmd dead a yr ago.

atched is the latst bultn. traced the ink & paper to office in D-27. almost got her.

From: chapman@doc.cbeel.gov

To: hart@doc.cbeel.gov

Received 17:46, 28/3/45

Excellent work, Hart. The net is tightening.

Attachment: Evidence Item #V322374

International Bureau for the Enforcement of Economic Law, Department of Collection

Hello again, and thank you for subscribing! Cryptid. 25th March 2045

Word	Current owner	\$/use	Suggested substitute	Origin
old	L'Oreal (subsidiary of Applesoft)	0.89	<i>althas</i>	West Germanic
need	PepsiCo-McDonald's	1.47	<i>ðearf</i>	Old English
us	Applesoft	0.36	<i>vedu</i>	Lithuanian (literally "we two")
thank/s	Hallmark (subsidiary of PepsiCo-McDonald's)	1.32	<i>þancian</i>	Old English
time	Rolex (subsidiary of Applesoft)	1.78	<i>hora</i>	Latin (literally "hour")

Crypsis

Wednesday the 1st of April, 2045



Her contact raised his eyebrows when he saw her. “Aren’t you a little ... ah ...” he dug around in his pocket and produced a piece of off-white paper, which he squinted at as he spoke: “althas¹⁰ for this type of thing?”

She brushed a grey hair behind her ear and raised her eyebrows back at him. “Speak for yourself. Have you got it?”

“Of course. Gjald¹¹?”

“Here.”

Perhaps an observer watching this transaction, occurring in the shadows collecting at the junction of two rural streets, would have next expected to see a package of powder, pills or plant matter change hands. What did pass to the woman in the black greatcoat was a book.

She held it in her hands, marvelling at the smooth feel of its leather cover. This was a distinct contrast to the modern books produced by the Three, which bore nothing more than the book’s title and the producing company’s logo on a paperback cover, containing a mutilated version of the text. But this was something else. Adorning the leather were the words *Beowulf: A Dual-Language Edition*, with an intricate image of a point-down sword inlaid below.

Her retailer eyed the floating machine at her shoulder, eyes slightly narrowed. “I don’t trust those things. I destroyed mine months ago. I can’t get over the idea that they’re, like, watching or something.”

“Don’t worry, this one’s safe. He’s been through some conmutatus¹²,” she replied absentmindedly, already leafing through the book.

¹⁰ “old”

¹¹ “pay”

The dealer smiled. “That’s not legis¹³.”

“Neither is breaking them. At least it looks like I’m legis; and no Collector’s going to stumble across a broken robot with my name inside it.”

He nodded. “Good point.”

Above, a pair of magpies trilled mournfully at each other from atop two lampposts. Closing the book, she considered him for a moment.

“Well ... I did it once. If you can get another Drone I could alter it for you. It took me a lot of tinkering with discarded ones, you know, the ones they throw out after their person dies, but I worked out how to make it do what I want.”

He shook his head. “Nah. I’m used to doing this now.” He gestured at the clouds scrolling by above, the erratically coloured driveways, the green fields dotted alternately with cows and horses. “And as lovely as this is, I’ll be in a novus¹⁴ place tomorrow. Thanks, though. I guess it won’t be long before the companies swallow all of this up, too, will it? Commercialise the grass or whatever. Then I’ll be in trouble.”

She smiled. “Well ... another hora¹⁵ then, I guess.”

He nodded. “What are you planning with that book? Are you another underground pirate?”

“The Collectors don’t like that word, you know,” she said back to him. “Romantic connotations and all that. The correct term is ‘copyright thief’.” She smiled, stowing the book in her backpack.

“You didn’t answer the question.”

As she turned to leave, she replied “Have you ever heard of Cryptid?”

*

¹² “modifications”

¹³ “legal”

¹⁴ “new”

¹⁵ “time”

Cryptid was the pseudonym under which she published her monthly pamphlet. To her knowledge, no-one who knew her real name was aware of her continued existence.

She caught the train back into the city, her only luggage a backpack dating from her primary school days. The sun was on its way down. The landscape morphed through shapes and colours as it flowed by outside, shifting steadily from green to grey. She wanted so very badly to open *Beowulf* and read, losing herself in literary immersion. But the train had security cameras and she couldn't afford any trace of her misdeeds.

For her pamphlets she needed books, old books. Anything that contained words fallen into misuse long enough ago that the companies hadn't yet reached far enough back to copyright them. Books like the copy of *Beowulf*, which conveniently had both the original Old English text and a recent English translation. The only way left to acquire such books was through the underground. There were no public libraries since the Annex, no more than public bathrooms or public schools. There were still libraries, but they were such sad shades of their former selves that there was little point visiting them other than to glean some idea of what the companies currently deemed appropriate. A Mitsubishi-Shell library contained only volumes printed by Mitsubishi-Shell and those comprehensively revised down to the warped bones of meaning.

A voice informed the train that the next station would be its last. She collected her bag and made her way over the vibrating floor to an exit. Inertia attempted to pull her sideways as the train dragged itself to a halt. The doors slid open with a pneumatic hiss. Tightening her coat, she stepped onto a gritty concrete platform, the yellow safety line faded to a few scattered flakes of paint.

The first thing she noticed was a golden Royalty Booth, spotless and glittering at the exit to the platform. It was clearly a PepsiCo-McDonald's Booth, unusual in that the classic golden arches formed the business end of the machine, one for each direction of traffic. She was

unsure of the merit of linking your company's logo to a machine that took people's money, but she was no psychologist.

Boldly she walked toward it, Drone trailing above. She nodded to the Collector, watching her coolly as she stepped alone through the arch. She didn't bother to look at the digitised list of her sins. Once the Drone had beeped she went on her way, wearing a slight curl of her lips. She knew that, with the help of her disarmed Drone, she was no poorer now than she had been five minutes ago.

She was very proud of her Commoner Drone, as she liked to call it. It clicked and beeped in all the right places, following her like a steel wasp as the others did. But it lacked one thing: a functioning outgoing antenna. It was unable to broadcast any kind of information, unable to access her bank accounts, unable to report her location. However, it still possessed a receiving antenna, hence its ability to receive information remained unimpeded. It was privy to all of the same radiation as the Royalty Drones.

Using a small custom-installed port under a false panel and an old-fashioned laptop computer loaded with home-programmed software, she could read everything the companies didn't want her to, including a complete list of the thousands of chargeable words and their prices. It had taken a fair amount of tinkering but she had emerged victorious with a Drone totally under her control, her own agent behind enemy lines.

Cryptid made her way through the streets, following a map scribbled on her palm. The streets twisted around each other in an unplanned mess of bitumen. In the distance, towering above the low-rise buildings in her current suburb, she could see skyscrapers, needles of steel and glass reaching for the hued sky. Towering above them were three even more immense structures, crowned with three shining logos: a white apple against the background of a rippling window; a curved, golden 'M'; and three red diamonds joined at the tip, backed by a

stylised shell. One had once been known as Sydney Tower, but now a slowly rotating Applesoft logo adorned its peak.

Just as she thought her shoulders were going to shatter, she reached the motel's door. It was little more than a hovel, its only new feature a parent company logo adorning the door. Within she found an unmanned desk bearing a silver handbell, also spotted with grime. She depressed the button, resulting in a surprisingly clear sound.

Cryptid turned the knob on door number 8 and found herself in privacy, complete with bed and desk. She removed her coat and draped it around the back of the chair, then retrieved her payload from its place in her bag.

She dropped the book to the desk with a thud and suddenly the air was alive with a hundred tiny stars of dust, swirling and dancing, glinting and winking out as they rose and fell beyond the highlighted plane of a slit in the blinds. She opened them completely to allow the last gasps of the sun as it sank below the horizon.

She was careful. Every day she was in a new place; every pamphlet she used a different contact, with a different printer, different paper. But she could not outrun them forever, she knew that. Every night there was a greater chance of a Collector's boot smashing through her door. In her dreams she lived it, the grey uniforms emerging through a splintered portal.

She never saw what came next. She didn't go to court, she knew that much. There was nothing overtly illegal about her activities. But the companies made their own laws. What she was doing was enabling free communication, doing her bit to reverse the atmosphere of economic oppression the Annex had produced. The titans striding above had every interest in preventing that.

Exhausted as she was, she still had work to do. Emptying her bag's contents onto the bed, she selected her computer from beneath an exercise book. She flipped open the ancient machine, guiding the Drone down to the desk beside her and plugged a cord from under its false panel into her computer's USB port.

She tied her hair back in a pony tail. She was hoping to delve deep into her new book, find new words for the next pamphlet. But first she had to check the list of newly copyrighted words. There were new ones every day. Cryptid clicked open the desktop icon (wishing she had a mouse instead of a touchpad) and executed the database code with a few taps of her keyboard.

“What ...?”

The list that presented itself may as well have been a clone of last month's bulletin. They always managed to get the words eventually. It was something of an arms race between her and them, with her finding words and them appropriating them as quickly as they could. They did have access to the greatest intelligence networks in civilization's history, but last month was *yesterday*. She had dropped the draft off at her contact's office not twenty-four hours ago. The pamphlet would not even have reached her subscribers, and yet here it was contained in the Department's system.

That could only mean one thing.

She leaned over her computer to look out the window. Parking in the street below were two silver cars, glinting in the light of the streetlamps. As she watched all eight of their doors swung open and eight grey-clad figures emerged. Not one of them was followed by a Drone. One man glanced up and saw her face in the window. He smiled. The black badge on his chest was indecipherable from this distance, but she could guess what it said.

International Bureau for the Enforcement of Economic Law.

Department of Collection.

She tore the Drone from its cord, slammed her laptop shut, stuffed it into her bag, flung the pack over her shoulder, jumped across the bed to the door. She fumbled with the doorknob and sprinted down the hallway, bag bouncing on her back. The echoing thuds of heavy boots ascended the stairwell behind her without hurry. A window shone from the end of the hallway, facing the opposite direction to her room. She reached it and fumbled with its clasp, finding it locked. A gloved hand fell on her shoulder. “Apri-“

She turned with all of the strength she had, smashing her fist across his face. He staggered sideways and she sprinted past. There was already one in her room. She battered herself against another door, breaking the cheap lock. Vaulting past a confused and groggy resident she flung the window open and lowered herself over the sill. Reaching blindly for footholds she clambered down the side of the building. Slipping, she fell the last two metres, landing painfully. She found her feet, glancing up at the window to see a Collector peering down at her. Turning to run...

Something tapped her on the back and crackling pain flooded her body. Screaming, she spasmed without control, falling to her knees. A hand jerked her to her feet and pinned her to the wall, gripped her wrist and twisted her arm around behind her back. Something wrenched her bag from her. She yelled as her face was pushed against the brick. She pushed back, but a second tap of the shock baton quelled any resistance. A tear ran down her cheek.

“April Winter, you are under arrest for breach of economic law.”

From: hart@doc.cbeel.gov

To: chapman@doc.cbeel.gov

Attachments: V322375.docd

Received 12:51, 1/4/45

Chapman,

Cryptid is April Winter, confirmed. traced her to anothr press in D-11. lookng at cctv of her as i type. got the bulltn jst b4 it was sent out. find attached. arrested evry1 there. we no exactly where shes going.

From: hart@doc.cbeel.gov

To: chapman@doc.cbeel.gov

Received 13:06, 1/4/45

Brilliant. I will inform the companies immediately. They can squabble over who gets what. Give me the address and let's finish this.

Attachment: Evidence Item #V322375

International Bureau for the Enforcement of Economic Law, Department of Collection

May language be free once more. Cryptid. 30th March 2045

Word	Current owner	\$/use	Suggested substitute	Origin
autumn	Mitsubishi-Shell	2.35	<i>fogamar</i>	Old Irish
January	Applesoft	4.00	<i>sausis</i>	Lithuanian
February	Applesoft	4.00	<i>vasaris</i>	Lithuanian
October	Rolex (subsidiary of Applesoft)	3.56	<i>spalis</i>	Lithuanian
search	Google (subsidiary of Mitsubishi-Shell)	0.50	<i>circare</i>	Latin (literally "to wander")

Ministry

18:35, 1/4/45



A buzz sounded. Ross Osprey emerged immediately from a trance-like state of furious industry. He glanced up from the screen built into his desk, scrawling one last signature across the bottom of a digital page, and silenced the buzzing with a swipe to his desk's lower corner. "Yes, Diener?"

"Mr. Osprey, a message just arrived from Collector HQ. They found April."

"About time. The sentence?"

"Yet to be determined, sir. A draft of her manifesto was found in her dwelling. It increases the severity of the situation."

"I trust the Department will act with all due discretion. I would like to see this manifesto."

"A copy of it is in your drop-box now, sir."

A red light on the desk blinked off. With deft manipulation of the desk's icons, he set music playing through hidden surround speakers, sliding the volume to halfway. The Devil's Den, by Skrillex. Nothing but the classics. As he tapped the appropriate space on the desk, his entire digital workspace vanished and reappeared on a mobile screen. He touched open a drop-box and the appropriate file, placing the paper-thin device on his lap.

Retrieving a Coca-Cola (A particular vice of his, one of the first brands he had acquired in the frantic grabbing storm of the Annex) from a refrigerated compartment, he turned in his chair and gazed out of the window at the city, stretched out below him like an infinite chessboard. A vast, glittering empire, replacing the stars of the night sky with those of humanity.

Admittedly, it was a shared empire. The three of them controlled the entirety of its power. Governments were but feeble regional councils, utterly dependent on the products of a

million subsidiaries, affiliates and branches. With a smattering of keystrokes he could cut a whole country off from the world. Food, fuel, electronics, everything. He had before: when governments had refused to accept the new copyright legislation (drafted in rare and uneasy co-operation with the other Two) they found themselves suddenly knee-deep in boycott-based famine.

Sipping sweet liquid, he thumbed down the page on his screen. In the distance he could see the windowed apple adorning the peak of a tower, illuminating a whole suburb with its white radiance as it rotated. The companies liked to remind each other they were still here. If he turned he could view the enormous golden arches hanging above another skyscraper. And anyone in either of those towers would be able to see the red diamonds of his.

The corners of his lips twitched faintly as he read the last line of the evidence item, closed the file and tapped the communication function. “Diener?”

“Yes, sir?”

“It makes for a very interesting read. April could even make a valuable addition to this enterprise. I would like to meet her personally.”

“That would certainly be possible, sir. Shall I arrange a date with the Department?”

“Inform them of my interest, but let them do their thing first. I trust they will tell me when she is ready.”

From: hart@doc.cbeel.gov

To: chapman@doc.cbeel.gov

Attachments: V322376.docd

Received 12:51, 1/4/45

Chapman,

some of her 1st bulltins trned up. heres 1 of them 4 blding a body of evdence.

From: chapman@doc.cbeel.gov

To: hart@doc.cbeel.gov

Received 13:06, 1/4/45

Most considerate of you. Thank you for the enormous effort you've put in on this case. Take a break for a couple of days so you can come in fresh on Monday.

Attachment: Evidence Item #V322376

International Bureau for the Enforcement of Economic Law, Department of Collection

Good day, ladies and gentlemen. I am offering this free service to help everybody save a little money. Copy it, scan it, send it to your friends, and stay tuned for next week's edition.

Cryptid. 1st December, 2044.

Word	Current owner	\$/use	Suggested substitute	Origin
may	Mitsubishi-Shell	0.60	<i>maeg</i>	Old English
me	Applesoft	0.78	<i>mir</i>	Old High German
yes	PepsiCo-McDonald's	0.54	<i>gese</i>	Old English, literally "so be it"
you	PepsiCo-McDonald's	0.25	<i>ye</i>	Old English
April	PepsiCo-McDonald's	4.00	<i>balandis</i>	Lithuanian
winter	Applesoft	2.35	<i>wentruz</i>	Proto-Germanic

Collection

Thursday 2nd of April, 2045

A new book arrived with every meal. Tomes of such beauty, dog-eared and ragged, not a single one published after 2000. Adorned with such wondrous names: Sun Tzu, Shakespeare, Keats, Orwell, Murakami, Rowling. *Rowling*. She had not seen an unadulterated version of *The Philosopher's Stone* for over a decade. The first time the hatch closed, leaving her new cellmate behind, she had opened it without thinking, just to see if it was real. To her wonder, there were J.K.'s original words in all their splendour, painting the same picture of Privet Drive that had kept a young April awake and reading well past midnight on her 10th birthday.

She had read almost a whole page before she understood. In horror she had slammed the paperback shut and almost tossed it across the room. Instead she had placed it neatly in the corner and resumed her silent gaze.

April tried to keep her mind blank, but without stimulus it inevitably returned to the first interview, her first night as a guest of the Department of Collection.

1/4/45

Her file said her name was April Winter. The Department of Collection knew her by another name: Cryptid. The legendary enemy.

Detective Inquisitor Chapman watched her through one-way glass. She sat, greying hair falling to her elbows, eyes on the wall, hands folded neatly in her lap. Chapman prepared himself to enter the ring, considering the path he would take. After a minute, he nodded to himself and left the dark room, entering through another door.

The room contained a table with cushioned chairs on either side. One of the chairs was occupied by Cryptid. He placed his screen on the table, sat, and crossed his hands on top of it. "Good evening, Miss Winter."

No response, not even a flicker of her gaze. He sighed. “Miss Winter, I suppose you realise that at some point during this process, you will have to say something. You can speak openly here; you may recall your Drone was confiscated. It is best for all involved if you begin now.”

She looked up. Her eyes, blue like a winter sky, pierced straight into his. “So that you can execute me more efficiently?”

He returned her stare. “If it comes to it, yes.”

Her eyes moved across his face, as though he were an artwork she was analysing. “You don’t talk like the other Collectors. They’re all so... truncated.”

He nodded. “An effect, I’m afraid, of having grown up under these laws. Being young, most of them have unfortunately boring names as well.” Chapman opened her file on his screen, scrolling through intimate details in condensed form. “An affliction which you do not share. April Winter... It is a pretty name. It must be an expensive one. A month and a season at once!” He looked up to see that April had dropped her gaze. He continued. “If I remember correctly, PepsiCo-McDonald’s owns the rights to that particular month, while winter is a registered trademark of Applesoft Corporation. Is that correct?”

No answer, but her head had turned just a few degrees down and to the left.

“Now, explain to me something, Miss Winter. Why is it that you feel it is unreasonable to pay the fees that are required of every other member of society?”

For almost a minute, the room was silent. Chapman’s eyes remained fixed firmly on April’s face. Then her lips moved, emitting something that sounded like “mine”.

“What was that, Miss Winter?”

She looked up at him once more.

“April Winter is my name. *My name*. It doesn’t belong to Apple or McDonald’s or Mitsubishi. I will not... I *refuse* to pay for something that has been with me since the day I was born.” Her lip began to quiver very slightly.

“You could always have changed it.”

“No,” she said firmly.

Chapman nodded, a sympathetic frown bending his lips. “I suppose it is, as they once said, the principle of the thing.”

“It’s my *name*. It’s a part of who I am, a gift from my parents. If I let you take that from me then you have won.”

“I understand completely.”

“I doubt that very, very much, Collector. You don’t have to pay royalties. You have no way – *none* - of understanding what it’s like to have to pay every time you - you use a word you read in a book, every time you say something careless, every time you say your *god damn name*.”

He smiled, spreading his hands. “Why do you think I joined?”

For the first time, puzzlement creased her forehead. He leaned in close across the table. “You see, the thing is, Miss Winter, I agree with you,” he said in something approaching a whisper. “You shouldn’t have to pay every time you say your name. You shouldn’t have to pay for every word that expresses something essential. You shouldn’t have to pay just to *communicate*. You and I are from an older time, when speech was a basic right that no-one even considered charging us for. Then someone finally worked out that he *could* take away that right, make it pay for him.

“Both of us found ways to get around this. I chose the Department of Collection. You chose to violate your Drone and run. But it does not have to be that hard for you.”

Something that looked like excitement or even hope crossed April's face for an instant, before she caught herself and looked down again. Perhaps she had expected simply to disappear.

He continued. "A special select few, those favoured highly enough by the companies, are exempt from royalty fees. Employees of the Department fall under that umbrella, as you know. You're a hacker, a skilled one, and a decent enough writer. You've been dipping in and out of our system for at least a year, while your writing, with some fine-tuning, has some potential to turn the opinions of the masses. The companies, take your pick, would pay very well for one with such a skill set. Call it a plea bargain. I'll handle the details. Within days you could be working in a shiny new office with a top-of-the-range computer, alongside others like you. You won't be alone any more. And you will never have to pay to say your name again."

Sunday the 5th of March, 2045

After two days they gave her a screen, with access to an enormous compendium of the finest film and television of the last century. She found that easier to ignore, if barely, and the next meal arrived with a book as usual. It seemed like a great nervous energy was building in her limbs, making stillness seem like torture.

Finally, assailed by a fell partnership of boredom and temptation, she succumbed. She unfolded one of the volumes, she didn't care which one, and read, allowing forgotten words to flow over her like water from a mountain stream.

Less than a minute later, two Collectors arrived. Only her fear of tearing the yellowed paper allowed them to wrench it from her. They led her out of her cell to the interview room.

Time passed.

Chapman entered without ceremony, a book in his hands. She realised she was staring at it and forced her gaze to his face as he placed it between them. She couldn't resist a quick

glance, to see Tolkien's customary monogram printed on the spine. The tiniest of groans vibrated her throat.

“Good morning, Miss Winter. I trust you had a pleasant stay in our facilities? No? I suppose any cell is still a cell, no matter how comfortable.”

She had no reply.


Without further ado, he returned to business. “Do you have an answer to my previous question?”

She was suddenly aware that her hands were shaking. She shoved them below the desk, but in doing so her eyes fell once more on the book. *The Return of the King*. She wrenched them away again.

“I will need an answer soon, Miss Winter. The companies cannot wait forever.”

For a brief moment she met his gaze. Then she closed her eyes and leaned back in the chair. After almost a minute she opened them, decided.





“No,” she said, looking Chapman straight in the eye again. Sliding an elastic from her wrist, she tied her hair back as she spoke. “I won’t play your games.” Finalising her hair, she placed her hands in her lap once more and resumed her stare through Chapman’s chest.

He sighed, pushing out from the table. “Very well, Miss Winter. I have to warn you, though: from here the wheels of justice turn very swiftly.”

“Ok.” she whispered, avoiding his eyes.

Her hand moved hesitantly forward, grasping the book and lifting the corner of its cover.

He smiled, leaning forward to offer her his hand. She eyed it for a moment, blinking rapidly, then took it in hers. “You won’t regret this, April. Mitsubishi-Shell has already fielded an offer.”

With coldness in her heart, she shook.

International Bureau for the Enforcement of Economic Law

Department of Collection

Evidence Item #B1495814

The following was found contained in a file on the laptop computer (see Item # P7686626) of subject G666824 at the time of her arrest. A handwritten draft was also found (see Item #V3633882). Evidence suggests that she was planning to distribute this essay along with her weekly pamphlet (see Items #V322371 through 5).

The Incarceration of Language, Part I

Cryptid

Every one of us is feeling the pressure to use cheaper words where once language had no price. A recently published version of *Hamlet* contained the line “To bed, maybe to see mind pictures.” Let that sink in for a second.

But it is not just the English language under threat. Arabic, Italian, Zulu, Polynesian: every day these languages lose more words to copyright law. For now, some of us take refuge in language from the distant past, but soon it too will be monopolised or else lost in the smoke of burning books.

The strings of copyright law have long been pulled by the Three megacorps. This began with the Emergency Copyright Protection Act in 2025 and reached a new low point with the introduction of Royalty Booths a year ago. It is a poorly-kept secret that between them the megacorps share not only the vast majority of the world’s wealth, but all of its power. The governments dare not upset them for fear of losing their imports, so that paying royalty for copyright material has become as normal as paying your taxes, and far more frequent.

Copyright law began as a noble concept: the protection of artists' entitlement to their own material. I think very few would disagree that in its purest form copyright is a boon for creativity. But like Marxism in the previous century, it has been corrupted to fulfil the opposite of its original purpose.

The patenting of language is not an exclusively monetary operation, even though each year the Booths and Drones cycle billions back into the budgets of the super-companies. There is a far larger profit on the horizon. Without words, people cannot create. When every word written, every note played, every colour in the spectrum, has a price tag, the artist will of course choose more affordable words, instruments and colours. What this means is that any writer, artist, musician who tries to create something without the companies' blessing, it is almost invariably less commercially friendly than that which is produced by the company. This is one effect of copyright law: the obliteration of competition.

At present, only spoken or written words invoke a Drone fee; the mind-scanning Royalty Booths are reserved for complete texts rather than words or phrases. This is largely due to the fact that the FMRI technology in use is not yet able to distinguish the finer details of the electrical patterns of our thoughts; rather, it can recognise general impressions. This is more than sufficient to detect a book, a song, or an artwork within our subconscious memory banks, but not a single, isolated word. However, as that vast, unstoppable and now one hundred per cent commercialised steam train known as science thunders on, the patterns become more distinct, the circuits smaller, the technology less and less clunky. In the very near future, not only will the Three be able to charge you for every word in your head, the machinery required to do so will be portable enough to be carried inside that pinnacle of surveillance hovering behind you right now . With that, the two greatest violations of privacy since

civilization's dawn will be combined and they will be able to charge you for every word in your head every minute of every day.

If the companies can copyright an electrical impulse in one's brain, representative as it is of a word, is it such a leap to patent muscular contractions? Perhaps the ability to blink? Will the corporations be charging us for every step, every breath, every heartbeat? This is not a distant prospect.

These laws are taking the human race to a place we cannot leave. Our only option left is to fight, to struggle against the current. With the governments co-operating with the companies this may seem impossible. But there is a way.

Start with small rebellions, by using old words that have not yet been copyrighted, avoiding Booths where possible. It is even an option, with the right technical expertise, to alter your Royalty Drone so that it cannot take your money. I do not recommend this as it will bring the Collectors down on your head like a collapsing sun, but it demonstrates that it is possible to resist. By winning these small battles, sentence by sentence, we can eventually liberate language enough to overthrow the Three. How exactly I do not yet know. I do not pretend to be a leader. But there is hope.

There is always hope.

Fin

6:13pm, Monday the 6th of March, 2045

A knock. Abby looked up from her work. He always knocked, even though he had his own key. She slid her screen shut and stood to answer the door. Sure enough, Riley was standing there, eyes lowered, a hand on the back of his neck. “Hi!” she greeted him with a hug. “Come in!”

He closed the door behind him and they stood in the living room, facing each other.

“I’m sorry-“ click “-about dinner. I wanted it to be just right, you know. There’s so much to say, I wanted to say it properly, not in some pigeon language...” click.

She silenced him with a hand on his cheek. “Riley.” He raised his eyes to see her looking straight into his, a sad smile on her face. “It’s ok. It’s not the language that matters. It’s the meaning.” She stroked his hair. “So just ... say what you need to.”

For a moment he avoided eye contact, pupils dancing as he struggled to recall the words. Finally, gripped with new determination, he looked straight into Abby’s eyes.

“Mæg ye maritare mir?¹⁶”

Tears ran down their cheeks as she pressed her lips to his.

“Gese¹⁷,” she whispered in his ear.

¹⁶ Literally “May you marry me?”

¹⁷ “yes”