

Hub Magazine

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CONTENTS:

FICTION: *Montgolfier Winter* by Alasdair Stuart

REVIEW: *Old Flames*
Doctor Who Companion Chronicles: Transit of Venus
Doctor Who - Companion Chronicles: The Prisoner's Dilemma
Doctor Who: The Judgement of Isskar

FEATURE: *Bootstrap SF Competition*



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EDITORIAL:

by ellen j allen

It's impossible to turn on the news right now, pick up a newspaper, trawl the online news sites without being bombarded with bad news about the economy. It seems as though, almost overnight, that everyone's money disappeared. Tips on saving money are everywhere. It seems as though no matter what, we're in for a rough time: there's nothing we can do. Publishing isn't immune, although the effects will largely be felt a year or two down the line, and the same goes for Hollywood.

But hard times aren't necessarily bad for everything. The Depression of the 1930s led to a flowering of fiction in print, films and radio which spawned the first golden age of science fiction. Contrary to some popular opinion, the art of reading is not dead, as the huge queues at bookstores across the UK and the US for JK Rowling's last Harry Potter books will attest. And despite the problems with big-house publishing, small press and independent publishers are still managing to find ways to innovate, new ways of providing the reading public with amazing new things to read. And with sites such as lulu.com, writers can even publish their books themselves for readers to order direct.

In addition to pay-for fiction - since these are hard times after all - there are hundreds of websites full of blogs, ezines and podcasts where you can find fiction by up-and-coming as well as established writers, and then there are all those out-of-copyright works, free for the downloading.

So when the pennies start to feel the pinch and you decide to stay in for the evening, go forth onto the internet and browse! There are amazing stories out there just waiting to be read. And since ideas breed new ideas, those stories you read will turn into new stories, which may well end up on a blog, in an ezine, on a podcast, spawning new stories in their turn.

You never know: they could end up right here, in Hub.

Hugos There

We just received an email from someone wanting to nominate Hub for a Hugo, which is pretty darn flattering. The email was to ask which category we would fit into.

If anyone else with Hugo-voting privileges considering the same, our category would be "Best Semiprozine". Just, you know, so you know...

Don't forget February 28th is the voting deadline, y'all.



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FICTION

Montgolfier Winter

by **alasdair stuart**

The few remaining Seeds were straining at their tethers when Stephen Gibson found her. Haley Cross had watched over the course of the last twelve hours as more and more of the Seeds had torn free and gone sailing up into the blackening sky. There was a ragged terminator of night already visible on the west horizon and she knew that the Seeds were beginning to rise across the whole planet. Winter was coming and Haley wanted nothing more to do with it or the world it was coming to.

'HALEY!'

Stephen was one of the quietest staff member she had, normally reticent and cautious in his movements and way of speaking. Now though, he sprinted towards her with a confidence she'd never seen before. She smiled as best she could.

'Stephen, what can I do for you?'

'We're down a rover.'

She put the box of equipment she was carrying down and looked up at him, Gibson looming above her to a ludicrous degree. 'When?'

'An hour ago, maybe two.'

She straightened up. 'Who signed it out?'

'No one did. I went back to finish stripping down the shed and one rover had gone.'

'Stephen, listen to me, who was the last person in the shed?'

'Professor Curran.'

She was moving before she was consciously aware of it, pulling a headset over her ear as she did so. 'Captain Morris, we have a problem.'

Four hundred miles above her, Captain Louisa Morris stood on the bridge of the Research Cutter Clarke and watched winter fall across the planet. What to Haley appeared as a ragged line of black was, from above, a stain spreading itself across the world. Louisa Morris hated the Fountain run and was delighted that this would be her last time out here.

'Define problem, Doctor Cross.'

'The sort that might delay final departure, how long can you delay the pick up?'

Louisa Morris swore under her breath, wishing, not for the first time in her life, for a good, honest war. 'My window out of this system closes in eighteen hours Doctor Cross.'

'I'll have it solved by then Captain.'

'What sort of-'

Haley cut the link and threw the headset to a colleague. 'Joe, you're running the camp. Get everyone on the shuttles. Don't wait for us. Stephen, put a survival kit in Rover Two, we're going out after him.'

'Haley! Quite a place you have here!'

Matt Curran had paused on the stairs, as though unsure of whether or not to set foot on Fountain again. He saw Haley and seemed to make the decision, stepping down and smiling as she walked towards him. She stuck out a hand, as was her custom, and he hugged her, as was his. He smelt like his study back

at Alexandria, like the last time she remembered being happy. She plastered the smile back on and broke off the hug.

'Hardly my place, Professor.'

He strode off, taking one step for every three of hers. 'Nonsense, you've been doing fine work here.'

She frowned, running to catch up. 'All we've been doing is drawing the same conclusion over and over again. The conclusion you drew thirty years ago.'

The conclusion that ended up driving you off this pathetic little folly, she thought, but did not say. Curran, for his part, knelt a little stiffly and pointed at something. As she caught up, she realised he'd found a Sole, the little animal snuffling its way through the undergrowth at the base of the trees.

'It's a Sole.'

'Not JUST a Sole, Haley. This little creature is a living photovoltaic cell, generating the electrical impulses it needs to move through a biologically created generator in its back. A small wonder, quite literally.'

Curran was looking past it now, smiling distantly. 'Did you know it's effluvia is a remarkably effective compost?'

'I wrote the paper Matt.'

He grinned, looking up at her, cheeky little boy in the middle of a prank. 'Have you ever noticed that you call me Matt when you're angry with me and Professor when you're not.'

'I'm unorthodox.'

'So is Fountain, Haley, in ways so subtle we've never been able to see them. Now, would you like some lunch?'

Haley watched him as he ate, Matt's every movement was precisely controlled and thought through, something which she'd found hugely attractive once. Now, he looked like a carrion feeder, picking off the meat of the situation without expending any more effort than was necessary.

'You heard, I take it.'

He smiled. 'That the colony is being shut down? Yes. I'm so sorry, you were doing good work here.'

She nodded once, sharply. 'And you came to watch.'

'We're all just spectators, Haley.'

'I don't remember you teaching me philosophy.'

'I don't remember you being so hostile. This world has made you hard Haley. It should have made you soft.'

*She nodded. 'So you **are** here to watch.'*

'We're all spectators.'

'Thanks for nothing Matt.' He raised his glass to her in a mock toast and she stormed off, hating herself for doing it.

The rover hummed into life and was moving before Haley was fully strapped in. She forced a smile as Stephen took the first turn into the trees a little too quickly.

'Stephen, we're going to get this done.'

'I know.'

'But only if you don't drive like a maniac.'

Stephen shook his head, eyes on the track. *'I should have known he'd pull something like this, Professor Curran's not exactly been subtle.'*

'He never was.'

Haley turned her attention to the navigation computer, calling up a map of the area. *'Or technically apt. Matt once told me that he liked technology less, the closer to the present day it got. Doesn't trust machines you see.'*

They broke out from under the Seed line and suddenly the cabin was flooded with green and pink light. All around them, the massive straight trunks of the Montgolfier Trees whistled softly in the gathering winds. A hundred feet above them, the Seeds shifted and swayed in the wind, straining at their tethers. Haley remembered when she'd found the view beautiful, then realised how long ago that had been.

'You studied under him didn't you?'

She focussed the map in on a smaller area. 'Did my postgrad with him.'

'Was he a good teacher?'

'Best I've ever had.'

'And you came here with him?'

'Came for him, in fact.'

'Oh.'

Finally, two round blue dots appeared on the map, closer together than she was expecting. She smiled, grateful for the excuse to break the silence. *'Three miles ahead. This heading.'*

Stephen gunned the accelerator and the tall, thin vehicle leapt forward. Haley rocked in her seat a little and turned to face him. *'Stephen, calm down. Where can he go? Just open a channel, I'll talk to him, persuade him to stop.'*

'I don't think you're going to be able to manage it.'

'Why?'

Stephen shook his head as he pulled the rover around a tight turn. 'Because I know where he's going.'

The chapel had been set up over a hundred years ago, back when Fountain had been owned by the church. The pastors had found a spot where the Montgolfier Trees grew largest first, where the light was naturally filtered through the light greens and pinks of the seeds as they matured and swelled. The effect, during the summer, was like natural stained glass, the light dappling as it passed through the seeds and onto the ground.

The chapel was deserted, as usual, and Stephen had plenty of time to himself. He came here once a week, as much to get some time away from the colony as anything else. He liked the quiet, the familiarity of it. Most of all he liked the solitude.

Matt Curran was in the chapel the morning after he arrived. The corner had been turned overnight and the seeds seemed huge now, even intimidating. The light in the chapel had shifted from green to pink and Matt looked sickly and old as he watched Stephen walk towards him.

'Pastor Gibson, I'm Professor Matthew Curran.'

Stephen forced a smile. 'I just go by Stephen now Professor.'

Matt frowned. 'You left the church?'

'Yes sir.'

'But not Fountain.'

'No sir.'

'And yet you still come here.'

Stephen smiled tightly. 'I'm not overly sociable Professor. This place gives me the advantage of solitude.'

'Where you can moon over Haley Cross in peace.'

Stephen opened his mouth then closed it again. Matt smiled. 'I'm sorry Pastor, I'm an old man and I decided that tact was for the young a long time ago.'

'And that excuses your behaviour?'

'No, not at all. Why are you still here Pastor? If it's not for Haley.'

Stephen folded his arms, his eyes focussed on the broken altar behind Matt. 'Because this is the place where my faith had its best and worst moments. It's my Alpha and Omega. And because someone has to make sure the grass stays cut.'

'God's caretaker is an atheist, interesting.'

'I prefer agnostic. And groundsman.'

Matt smiled and clapped Stephen on the shoulder. 'You're a good man Pastor.'

'I know. What brings you here Professor?'

Matt smiled, glancing at the hills visible in the near distance.

'It's not just your alpha and omega.'

He turned to go, his cane making no sound as it pressed against the loam.

'He's going to the chapel?'

The rover had broken out of the forest into a narrow valley. The trees lined each side of it but the floor was too narrow to sustain their trunks and Haley strained to catch sight of Curran's rover ahead of them.

'No, of course not. He's going to the Cathedral.'

Haley looked at him for a moment. 'No way, get him on the radio.'

'He's going to the Cathedral.'

'Get him on the damn radio!'

'He-'

'STEPHEN!'

'Rover One, from Rover Two. I have Doctor Cross for Professor Curran.'

There was nothing for a moment, then Matt Curran's voice, breathless and hurried. 'A little busy over here right now, Pastor.'

Haley snatched the handset from Stephen. 'Matt, stop the vehicle, do it now.'

'Hello Haley.'

'Matt STOP THE VEHICLE.'

'I will do, once I've done what I need to do.'

'Which is?'

'You'll know, once I'm proved right.'

She closed her eyes, forced her breathing to slow. 'Want to tell me what you think you're right about?'

'Where would the fun be in that?'

'Matt we don't have time for this.'

'Oh I know, believe me, but the best things are worth taking a little risk for don't you think?'

'Not with people's lives!'

'Get the Pastor to stop then.'

'Matt-'

'I notice you're still following me.'

She cut the connection, took a deep breath and turned to Stephen. 'You really think he's going to the Cathedral.'

'He said Fountain wasn't just my alpha and omega.'

Haley stared at him for a moment. 'That's how you view this place?'

Stephen turned to look at her for a moment, his face carefully neutral. 'My faith began and ended here.'

She stared at him, unsure of what to say. Stephen smiled and turned back to the road. 'It's not like I'm dead you know.'

'No, no of course. It's just-'

'Haley, it's okay. The church bought this world, didn't like what they found and it tore them apart. Just because they failed and left doesn't mean I had to.'

'Were you here when the schism happened?'

'Yes. I was a novitiate at the time, and we had to spend a year here studying the true beauty of God's creation. The idea was that by going somewhere else you could appreciate the beauty of Earth much more.'

They were climbing out of the valley now, Matt Curran's rover visible as a silver speck visible from time to time through the vast, endless tree trunks.

'Of course, once it was proved that Fountain was a better ecosystem than Earth's, a more complete and efficient one, some awkward questions started being asked. They decided to pull out and do the best they could to forget Fountain even existed. I decided to stay.'

'Why?'

'Because I didn't like being told what to do. Probably the reason why I was such a crappy priest.' She smiled and was opening her mouth to speak when the first Sunhawk hit them.

The last time Matt had been here had been Haley's first day on the job. She'd stepped off the very same shuttle that he'd ridden down on the first day and stood and looked in blank awe at the sight before her. The Montgolfier Trees extended as far as the eye could see, their huge, translucent trunks vanishing into the sky. She'd come just after winter and the seeds were tiny, little more than buds the size of a human head perched on top of the trees. She knew that in months they'd be big enough to change the colour of the sunlight on the ground, thousands upon thousands of seeds growing across every continent on the planet. Coming in, they'd flown over the oceans and she'd gazed out across millions of huge, flat leaves, each with a tiny seed in its centre. In just three months, every single one of those seeds would float to the upper atmosphere and blanket the planet in darkness. She could hardly wait.

'Welcome to the backwaters Haley.'

Curran was leaning on his cane, scowling at the trees. He'd smiled as she came up to him, she'd offered him a hand and he'd hugged her and together the two had walked out across the tarmac to the temporary living quarters. There, Curran had sat as close to the door as possible, staring out at the sky.

'It'll break you.'

She smiled. 'I thought I was your best student.'

'You are. It'll break you anyway..'

'Professor, this world is unprecedented! How could it break me? How could I possibly be bored spending my career trying to understand this place? You told me it's like a puzzle, that everything is intimately connected to everything else. This world, you told me is a perfect, self-sustaining ecosystem. It heals its own wounds, uses its own creatures to repair itself. We're standing IN Gaia, Professor. Why would that break me? I've waited my whole life to come here.'

Curran looked at the ground, then began speaking, his voice low and venomous in a way she'd never heard before. 'My dad was a watchmaker. Not professionally but as a hobby. I remember sitting there, when I was growing up, watching him lay the tiny little cogs and gears out on the table. I hated it, hated it because there was so much promise tied up in those cogs, so much potential and I knew that the only thing they could do was fit into one another. All they did was work the same tiny little action over and over again and together, those tiny little actions made the whole. But we understood that, we understood what the watch did and the watch was trapped just doing that one thing, over and over again. We're not standing in Gaia, Haley, we're standing in a watch. I've wasted my career examining a watch.'

He forced a smile. 'But you, you're young and you're smart and you're stubborn and you are clearly thinking that I'm a tired, bitter old man. You'll have a lot of fun here. But one day, you'll learn, this

place is just a watch. And you're just a cog.'

The immense bird smashed up against the glass, its hooked beak cracking it almost immediately. Haley swore whilst Stephen, with a presence of mind she'd never seen in him before, flicked a switch on the console. Metal shutters began to rise over the windows and the Sunhawk, still pressing and pushing its way through the glass found itself stuck. The bird began to struggle frantically, yanking its head back and forth in a desperate attempt to break free. It finally did, the shutters closed and the internal lights came on. Stephen took a deep breath.

'You okay?'

Haley was still looking at the crack in the glass. 'I've been better. Should have told you that was going to happen.'

'Is that the flock?'

'One of them. They'll follow the seeds up, feeding on them the whole way. Right now, they're instinctively attacking anything that's moving, doesn't matter if it's a seed or not.'

'So we stop.'

'We stop. And so does he. Matt? You have visitors.'

'I saw them coming.'

'Nice of you to warn us.'

'I trust you Haley, remember who you used to work for.'

'Matt this is a sign. If you don't turn around we'll be up here when the Bronts wake up and you know that neither of us wants that happen.'

There was a pause on the other end of the line. 'Actually, that's where you're wrong. You see, I've never seen a Bront up close before and as I recall, neither have you'

'That's because they'd kill us.'

'Know that for sure?'

Haley snapped, speaking before she was fully aware of it. 'What the hell do you care if they do? You gave up on this place Matt! You couldn't crack the puzzle so you gave up! Threw your toys all the way out of the pram and left me to clean up the mess!'

'...I'm here now.'

'And what good it's done us.'

'I need closure, Haley. And so do you.'

'No Matt, I need to be packing my home up, getting on a transport and trying to work out what job I do next! We don't belong here, we never did and now I just want to go home!'

'...You are home Haley. You just don't know it yet.'

He cut the connection, leaving Haley staring dumbly at the receiver. Gently, Stephen took it out of her hand. 'Best get comfy, there's a cot in the back. I'll sleep here.'

Numbly, she stood up. 'You-um-thanks.'

He smiled. 'It's okay.' Do you want me to call Morris?'

Haley snorted. 'And say what, an old man's gone crazy and we're trapped in a flock of Sunhawks? She'd leave without us. Wake me up in ten hours.'

She turned and left. Stephen watched her go for a moment, then sat back down in the driver's seat, put his feet on the dashboard and closed his eyes.

The absence of noise woke him. It wasn't instant, but he found himself swimming slowly back into awareness, realising as he did so that the clattering outside had stopped. He stretched, worked the kink in his lower back out and stood. Haley was behind him, fully dressed and holding two mugs of coffee.

'Morning.'

Stephen smiled, accepting one gratefully. 'How long have you been up?'

'About an hour. What about Matt?'

'I told the rover to wake me up if he moved. He hasn't yet.'

Haley nodded, drinking her coffee. 'You stayed.'

'Yes I did.'

'After the church left.'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'I like it here. And I don't believe in leaving a job half done.'

'Is that what you think we're doing?'

Stephen took a long sip, buying time as much as anything else. 'Truthfully, I don't know. I do know Professor Curran thinks so and if we want to bring him in safely we need to appeal to that desire somehow.'

Haley arched an eyebrow. 'Since when were you a psychologist?'

Stephen smiled. 'I trained to be a priest remember.'

'So I should confess my sins to you?'

Stephen's smile faded. 'I said I trained, not that I was ordained. Let's open the shutters.'

He turned back to the console and the metal shutters rolled down. Outside, the world was divided into green, pink and black. The seed line had overtaken them overnight and now sat between them and Matt's rover, still visible through the trees. The effect was startling, as though colour was gradually draining from the world. Haley set her jaw, sat down and keyed the radio.

'Matt wake up.'

'I am awake.'

'Have you looked outside? The seeds are rising Matt. Tell me what that means.'

'Why, weren't you paying attention?'

'Oh I was, but I think you've forgotten.'

'We really have to talk about the student/teacher dynamic Haley.'

'Stop acting like a spoilt child and we will.'

'Haley...'

'What does it MEAN, Matt?'

'It means exactly the same thing it meant yesterday, winter has started. It means that no sunlight is reaching the surface under the seed line. It means that right now, above the north and south poles of this planet, storms are forming. Storms which will tear their way down this world and destroy countless trees, at the exact same rate that they distribute the seeds to plant new ones. It means that we're running out of time.'

She rested her head against her hand. 'I knew you'd come around.'

'We're running out of time to get there. Stay close Pastor.'

'MATTHEW!'

Ahead of them, the seed line reached Matt's rover, triggering the running lights. Behind them, Haley imagined she could already hear the wind beginning to build. She turned to Stephen. 'Do we have anything that could disable his rover?'

He shook his head. 'Short of ramming it, no.'

'If we don't catch him in the next hour, that's exactly what we're going to do. Anything you need to do Stephen.'

He nodded and gunned the engine, the lights playing wildly off the grass. As they sped away, Haley caught sight of a family of Soles, frantically burrowing into the wood of one of the trees. For an instant, she wanted nothing more than to join them.

Haley came to the Cathedral on her second day. The path had been laid down by the church and as she drove out there, she was astonished by the way the seeds dappled the sunshine. As she drove higher, the trees thinned slightly and from time to time she caught sight of the world laid out beneath her. The forest stretched for as far as the eye could see, the young seeds nestling in the tops of the trees, barely visible. Then she rounded the corner and caught sight of the Cathedral.

It had been built into one of the largest trees on Fountain, one so huge that the entire building had been fitted inside its trunk. She climbed in through a knot in the wood the size of her student room and sat for a moment in the doorway, astonished at what lay in front of her.

Far above her head, the seed bobbed, its light green colouring soaking the hall beneath it. To one side of her were the priest's quarters, carved out of the wood and surrounded by walkways and gantries. To the other was the Cathedral itself, its two rows of seats almost vanishing into the distance. The altar at the far end was already being disassembled and, feeling suddenly awkward and distinctly guilty, she stood and moved further in. As she did so, a tall man further into the vast Tree noticed her, waved and hurried over.

'You must be Doctor Cross.'

She started slightly, still not used to the title and turned. The man standing in front of her looked not unlike Matt, but wore the black jumpsuit of a Church Exploratory Mission. He smiled and shook her hand.

'Bishop Eaton. Good to see you.'

'Thank you, this place is amazing.'

Yes, it is. Our forefathers did a good job here.'

She clapped a hand to her mouth. 'I'm sorry, I know this must be awkward.'

He smiled. 'Just because the church wants to forget Fountain doesn't mean we should. One of the novitiates told me that yesterday. What can we do for you?'

Haley collected herself. 'Yes, of course, sorry. I was wondering whether I could see your archives. The studies you carried out?'

Bishop Eaton smiled, folding his arms behind his back. 'Of course, after all, I believe the Alexandria Institute purchased them as well.'

Haley frowned.

'Bishop this is very difficult for me.'

'You have my deepest sympathy Doctor Cross. I'll show you through to our archives.'

He led her though to a hall leading off the altar. Haley noticed he made no move to acknowledge

the altar and seemed to forcibly move his eyes away from it. Instead, he led her down a flight of stairs and into an open, airy room that was ventilated by open knots in the bark of the Tree.

'How big is this Tree?'

'Five hundred feet at the base, did you know it's the Mother Tree for this entire valley?' He smiled. 'When we found that out, it seemed the perfect place to put the mother church. Now, the research archives are just down there, was there anything in particular you were looking for?'

Haley smiled. 'Unusual concepts. Ideas not in line with accepted doctrine.'

The Bishop smiled. 'Four aisles down, heretical studies. Enjoy your stay Doctor Cross.'

'Ram him.'

'You're sure.'

'Stephen I don't want to spend another winter living in a tree and neither I think do you. Ram him.'

Stephen gunned the rover's engine and it sprang forward. In the last hour the seed line had vanished over the horizon and now they were driving through pitch black night, the only illumination coming from the headlights of both rovers. They were on the old Cathedral road now and Haley could sense the vast bulk of the Cathedral, perched high above them.

'No.'

She looked across at Stephen as though seeing him for the first time. 'I'm SORRY?'

'No. I'm not going to ram him. The weather's getting worse, these are the last two rovers we have and I can't afford to damage either vehicle. We're not going to ram him.'

'Well what the hell are we going do?'

'We're going to follow him, then get Captain Morris to send a shuttle here. If that's not possible, then we hide in the Cathedral until the winter passes.'

Haley snapped. 'Stephen you KNOW how long that will be! We'll be up here a month and I know for a fact we don't have the supplies we need on-board.'

Stephen turned to look at her, his face utterly calm. 'We'll find a way.'

'I could take control myself.'

'You could, you won't. You know I'm right.'

Haley slumped back into her chair, suddenly impossibly tired. 'I just want to go home.'

Stephen was opening his mouth to retort when a roar echoed through the woods, and the world turned on its side. Her head smashed against the side of Stephen's seat and when she was next aware, things had righted themselves. Stephen was muttering under his breath, the rover was spinning in place and something was tearing at the hull. She shook her head, looking around in interest as a rent appeared in the ceiling. A single claw, impossibly long, thrust down into the cabin and began yanking backwards. The action was so like that of opening a can that she couldn't help but laugh.

The rover suddenly slammed backwards even as snow began to fall into it. She heard an enraged roar as something was smashed into one of the trees with a sickening thud. A flash of light from their front and something roared over their heads. There was a second roar from behind them and then the rover was hurtling forwards again. Matt's rover swam into view and Haley was pleased to see how close it was, but confused by how it seemed to be facing them now.

'You okay Pastor?'

'We've taken heavy damage, Haley's injured. Looks superficial but I'm going to take a closer look once we're at the Cathedral.'

'Finally on board then?'

'Professor Curran, turn your vehicle around, shut up and keep driving. Haley, HALEY!'

She was surprised to hear Stephen yell, the shock bringing her back to herself. 'What?'

'Haley you've suffered a head injury.'

'Obviously.'

'I can't let you pass out, keep talking to me.'

'What about?'

'I don't know...Professor Curran. Tell me about Curran.'

'Pompous asshole.'

'I'd prefer things I didn't already know.'

She laughed, the action bringing a sharp pain to the side of her head. 'Aren't you supposed to be nice to everyone?'

'One day, one day, I fervently hope to wake up and find out that my past no longer dictates how people treat me.'

'You didn't like being a priest?'

He threw the rover sideways and she heard another roar from nearby. 'I was very bad at it.'

'How?'

'Self control. I don't have very much.'

'In what area?'

'I don't want to talk about it.'

'I'll pass out.'

'I don't want to talk about it.'

'I could die.'

'Fine! Celibacy! I had a problem with the vow of celibacy!'

She looked at him for a moment, the pain in her head forgotten for a moment. 'Seriously?'

'Why is that a source of amusement?'

'It isn't, it's just. You're so quiet. You keep yourself to yourself.'

'And of course, as a result, I'm the colony serial killer.'

She felt nauseous and rested her head against the back of the seat. 'Don't...Stephen you're the best driver we have, you're a great technician and no one has a bad word to say about you.'

'I don't like taking risks. I'm afraid of what might happen if I fail.'

'Better than doing nothing and knowing nothing will happen.'

'Really?'

'Really.'

'Great.' He glanced round at her. 'Can I take you out to dinner sometime?'

Haley opened her mouth, closed it again. 'Me?'

'Yes.'

'Sure. Yes. Of course. Me?'

'I did say.'

'Why?'

As she spoke, they crested the hill and the vast bulk of the Cathedral tree passed in front of them. It had been stripped clean by the Church, the Alexandria Institute and the weather but the basic structure remained and Matt drove down one of the vehicle ramps and parked in the central hall. Stephen followed, parking next to him and turning to Haley. The cut was deep, running the length of her hairline but the bleeding was already slowing. Grabbing a medical kit, he knelt in front of her.

'The good news is it looks like a cut and not much else. You'll have a serious headache for a while though. Oh and this is going to hurt.'

'No more than it does now. We got hit by a Bront didn't we?'

Stephen smiled humourlessly. 'By two. Drove right over a burrow, and it just reared up and grabbed us. The second came out of the trees.'

She sat forward, willing the pain in her head away. 'Pack hunting?'

Stephen was cleaning her wound, carefully running an antiseptic spray across it. 'Seems likely.'

'Maybe they're the dominant species I mean, think about it. The winter month is the time everything happens here, the Soles excess power gets vented into the trees to trigger the seeds rising, the seeds cover the planet, the Sunhawks pick off some seeds, the Bronts pick off some Sunhawks, they're at the top of the food chain.'

Stephen finished the dressing and placed his hands on her shoulders. 'We got footage of them. Lots of it.'

Her eyes widened. 'The cameras survived?'

He smiled. 'On our rover and Professor Curran's. He scared off the second Bront by the way, broad-sided it off the trail and hit the first with a flare.'

'And I didn't even ask for a thank you.'

They both turned to see Curran standing in the doorway. He was leaning against the frame at a jaunty angle, but Haley could see his hands were shaking. Before either of them could react, he stepped into the rover, looking at Haley's cut with interest. 'Your point about the Bronts is interesting, but flawed.'

'Why?'

'Because I know what's really at the top of the food chain. Pastor, your grappling hook still works doesn't it?'

Stephen took a step closer to him, his voice low. 'Yes. But if you call me that one more time, I will use it for something very different to what you intend.'

Curran looked at him for a moment and nodded. 'Okay. Haley, do you feel up to a little target shooting?'

She closed her eyes. 'Matt, we are in the middle of winter. If the rovers can get in here, the Bronts can get in here and we don't have the supplies to last much longer. We're going to call a shuttle to come and pick us up and we're going to do it now.'

He nodded. 'I agree.'

Haley blinked. 'Why?'

Curran grinned. 'Because I worked out what the last cog in the watch is. Come with me.'

He took Haley's hand, only for Stephen to step forward and help her up. They followed and found him standing a few feet away. He waited until they got closer then pointed up. Above them, the immense central seed of the Cathedral still hung, further up the trunk than before but not at full extension.

'We move the grappling hook on your rover onto mine. We fire the two lines over that seed, winch the rover off, tie the lines up and ride the seed out of the winter.'

Stephen scowled. 'Why?'

'Because it's the only way out of the atmosphere.'

Haley stepped out from under his arm, regretting it instantly but refusing to let the pain show. 'And what, get picked off the seeds by a passing shuttle? You're an idiot. Stephen, call Morris, tell her where we are.'

Curran scowled. 'Oh and what will she do Haley? You know as well as I do that the colonists were evacuated overnight, you know no shuttle will come near the lower atmosphere for a month and you know that you could have turned back hours ago. You're just as curious as I am.'

She turned on him. 'You sanctimonious *bastard!* You sweep into my colony acting like the cat with the cream after dumping me here and expect me to run around after you like your faithful little field assistant!'

'You did though, didn't you?'

She slapped him, the acoustics of the Cathedral magnifying the sound. He rubbed his face and smiled. 'The seeds sit on top of the weather they create, not under it. The rover's pressurised and we can get a clear signal to Morris to pick us up. It's a good plan.'

Behind them, Stephen stood up, still doubtful. 'But we'll be under the seed. Still in the weather.'

Curran smiled. 'Not for long. Most seeds turn over when they rise.'

Stephen scowled. 'What about the Sunhawks?'

'The Cathedral seed has never failed to make it to the seed line for as long as mankind has been on Fountain.'

'There's always a first time.'

Curran frowned. 'Why are you so against this idea? You came up with it.'

Stephen stood up, eyes blazing and Haley instinctively stepped between them. She turned to Matt, eyes wide. 'You're kidding.'

Curran shook his head. 'Not at all. Mr Gibson's novitiate thesis was on unusual ways of getting around Fountain. He recommended using the seeds as balloons fifteen years ago.'

Haley turned back to Stephen. 'I read that. Why didn't you tell me?'

Stephen refused to meet her eyes. 'I submitted it anonymously. It was viewed as heretical, the Bishop believed that by trying to rise above the winter I was trying to bring man closer to God.'

She took a step back towards him, touching his arm. 'It's a fantastic idea. The bishop was wrong.'

After a moment, he took her hand and met her eyes.

'What do we need?'

'The grappling hooks and pressure suits in case the cabin's breached.'

Curran smiled. 'All in my rover. Ready when you are Mr Gibson.'

Stephen looked up at the seed far above them, shifting in the wind. 'Let's get started.'

Haley stood first watch during the first day of winter. The church had never encountered the Bronts face to face but had seen enough of them on their cameras to know they didn't want to. They'd recommended electrified fences be placed around the trees the colony would shelter in and failing that, large calibre weapons be used to bring the creatures down. Haley was surprised by that but her research at the Cathedral had confirmed how badly split the church was over Fountain. It was a world in perfect harmony and she could see the wisdom behind those who wanted nothing to do with it, whether for fear of changing it or because it challenged their view of themselves.

The wind had been howling solidly for a full day, the blizzard throwing drifts four feet deep into the tree, where they were quickly melted and the water used to run the heating systems. They were a hundred miles away from the centre of this winter's superstorm but already she could see two smaller trees had been downed by the winds. The knowledge that those trees would break down into rich mulch that would be littered with saplings in a month's time did little to comfort her. She wondered whether she'd ever get used to this weather.

It took two hours, in the end. The idea was so simple that a full hour of that was transferring everything they'd need from their rover to Curran's. After that, it was simply a matter of firing the grapples over the seed, securing them and winching the rover into position. Finally, they were sitting a hundred feet off the ground, upside down and crammed into pressure suits. Haley felt absurdly like an old astronaut, perched under her rocket and waiting to see if it would ever take off.

'Pressure is secure. Suits check out. Rover is locked down.'

Curran had relinquished the driver's seat to Stephen and was sitting behind him in the main body of the rover. Now, Stephen turned awkwardly to look at him. 'We're all set Professor Curran.'

Curran grinned. 'Then let's cut the cord.'

Beneath them, the other rover blinked into life. The sturdy vehicle piloted itself towards the centre of the Cathedral, where the seed's root was swaying in the growing winds. As it got nearer, the rover suddenly accelerated ramming the root at full speed. Already weakened, it snapped and the Cathedral seed bounced once against the side of the tree then began to rise.

In the rover, Curran let out an uncharacteristic yell of joy as the ground fell away from them. Stephen was breathing heavily, eyes flashing over the controls and next to him, Haley was staring at the walls of the tree as they floated by. Then the seed broke out into the wind and they were thrown sideways, the rover tipping wildly. Haley risked a look out of the side window and saw something that would stay with her for the rest of her life.

Thousands of Sunhawks were battling their way through the winds, their black forms silhouetted in flashes of lightning and against the warm glow of the seeds. The seeds that ruled the skies, millions of them rising as far as the eye could see.

The Sunhawks fell on the rover, their claws banging and scraping against the metal. They made no impression and instead tried to attack the seed. Haley, Stephen and Matt watched as the birds pecked and clawed at the immense balloon above them, waiting for the sudden rush of escaping gas and the plummet downwards. Haley wondered if she'd be conscious enough for it to hurt.

Then, without warning, the seed began to turn. The horizon panned around and suddenly, they were upright again, the Sunhawks beneath them instead of above them. The movement threw the birds off and as the winds blew the seed ever upwards, they weren't able to catch up. Behind her, Haley heard Matt unbuckle from his seat and turn to one of the side windows.

'Matt it's not safe.'

'Dear God.'

'Matt.'

She looked out of her side window and saw what he was seeing. They were already so high that the curve of Fountain's surface was visible beneath them, its mountains and valleys clearly discernible through the rapidly thinning clouds. Gently, Stephen tapped her shoulder.

'Look at this.'

He leaned forward and pointed up. Haley followed suit and gaped as she saw the roof of the world. Above them, millions of seeds jostled for position, still glowing and still bouncing lightly off one another as though they were nothing more than balloons.

'Professor Curran, strap yourself in, we're coming up on the seed roof.'

Reluctantly, Curran obeyed and a few moments later, a creaking noise heralded their arrival. The Cathedral seed veered sideways for a moment before suddenly popping up into place, and placing them in the centre of an entirely new landscape. They were at the edge of the atmosphere, the blue fading to black all around them. The seeds glowed internally, throwing a warm green and pink light out across a world of gentle, bobbing curves. The planet curved away beneath them and they were completely, utterly alone. Haley put a hand to her mouth, only for it to bounce off the faceplate of her suit. She found herself smiling, even as tears streamed silently down the sides of her face.

'They look like apples.' She shook herself, suddenly embarrassed and spoke into her suit microphone. 'Cross to Morris.'

Captain Morris' voice was crystal clear and dripping with fury. 'Where the hell are you?'

'Four miles above the surface, we're going to need a pick up in situ.'

Morris didn't speak for a moment. When she finally did, her voice was more controlled. 'We've got-'

Haley's helmet was pulled off her head and she gasped instinctively. It was cold in the rover, very cold but the atmosphere had held. She whirled, eyes blazing and stared at Curran. He was pale and frantic, his eyes darting everywhere.

'What the HELL ARE YOU DOING?!'

'They're not here yet.'

'Matt I was *calling* them when you ripped my helmet off!'

He turned to her, his face taut. 'Not them. The missing cog.'

'Matt what are you talking about?'

'We've been wrong about Fountain! Wrong about it for years! The winter isn't just to propagate the seeds, it's to let them feed!'

'What?'

He walked up to her and just for a second she was convinced he was going to hit her. 'What happens to the waste matter from the seeds?'

'It falls in the snow.'

'No it doesn't! I looked at every study of the snow on Fountain for over a hundred years there's no cellulose in it! None! Something else is involved in the ecosystem Haley, something we've never seen before that feeds off the seed material and it should be here by now! It's why I picked this seed.'

Haley felt something cold run down her back. 'What did you just say?'

Curran was still peering out of the windows and waved her away as he spoke. 'The Cathedral tree has one of the largest seeds on Fountain. It's one of the richest sources of cellulose so they should come here first.'

She took a step towards him and slammed him hard against the wall. 'You used us as a decoy?'

Curran nodded. 'Of course.'

Haley remembered the passionate, intelligent man she'd studied under. He seemed miles away from the pale, frantic figure standing in front of her. 'Stephen, did Morris send the shuttle?'

'Yes, it's five minutes out.'

'Tell them to get here sooner.'

Matt opened his mouth and Haley raised a finger. 'Shut up. Just, shut up. Stephen is there anything we can use to look for these things, anything in the rover's sensor suite?'

'I'm afraid not. It's not designed to operate at high altitude.'

She turned and walked back to the front of the rover. 'Anything you can do about that?'

'Yes.'

She turned back to Matt, who had gone back to peering out of the windows. 'Great. Professor, I have one question.'

'What?'

'Why has no one seen these things before? There have been ships over Fountain during winter for decades and they've never reported anything.'

'They've seen them. They've just not known it.'

'How do you mean?'

'I don't know. Maybe they come in under the weather, maybe they're too small to register.'

'Or too big.'

They both turned to see Stephen pointing out of the window. The sky outside was darkening as a cloud rose through the seed roof. It was pitch black, its shape boiling and shifting as it rose higher. In the time it took Haley to walk to the front of the rover the cloud had doubled in size.

'Stephen, what can we get on it?'

Visibly rattled, Stephen's eyes flashed to the sensor readouts. 'It's organic.'

'It looks like a cloud, Stephen.'

'It's *organic*. 1.2 billion individual particles, just over a centimetre long. It's difficult to get anything because that thing's putting out massive amounts of electromagnetic interference.'

Haley frowned. 'Is it affecting our beacon?'

'Not yet.'

Curran barged past her, sticking his face as close to the windscreen as he could. 'I was right.'

Haley swallowed, hard. 'This is the missing cog?'

'This is the missing cog.'

The cloud finished rising and began to compress, solidifying in front of them into a black fist.

'What's your theory?'

Curran smiled. 'Insects. Billions of insects born in the air and on the winds. No one on the surface sees them because they never get that low. Once a year they spawn over winter, using the cellulose from the seeds to feed the next generation.'

Haley keyed her headset. 'Shuttle this is rover two, we need that pick up right now.'

'Haley we can't just leave-'

She held up a hand.

'Rover two, this is shuttle. We're two minutes away.'

'Haley we need to study these-'

The fist surged forwards and night fell in the rover. Haley covered her eyes as it hit the windscreen with a thick wet smack. Then the internal lights came on and she turned to Curran.

'Helmet! Now!'

But Curran was heading for the rear doors, her helmet lying forgotten on the floor behind him. She ran after him as the seed shifted wildly backwards. Curran fell the rest of the way onto the rear doors and Haley followed him. Her helmet thudded painfully into her thigh a second later.

'Haley!'

'Stephen get the shuttle on the horn now!'

She clipped her helmet in place and stood up, offering Curran a hand. He brushed it away as the seed righted itself and they stepped back onto the floor. 'We need to see them.'

'We can see them!'

'I need to know! I need to see for myself!'

'Matt we can't! We'll die, the change in pressure will suck us out of-'

The roof was torn off. Haley was thrown backwards as a lightning bolt tore straight through the vehicle into the seed beneath it. She grabbed the back of a chair in desperation as the air was hurled upwards and out of the vehicle, pulling her vertical as it went. She looked up, curious to see what was going to kill her. Above the rover the sky was black, blue arcs of electricity dancing within the swarm. An orange, flaming speck was visible at the centre of it and she realised absently that that was Curran. Her hand was slipping and she wondered idly whether or not it would hurt. Whether or not she'd be conscious. As she watched, the swarm circled and then began to dive towards the rover. She closed her eyes and let go.

A hand closed around her wrist, incredibly tightly. She opened her eyes to see Stephen, wedged

under the navigation console. His eyes locked with hers and what she saw inside them was fierce and alive and utterly focussed. She held on with both hands and forced herself back down into the rover.

'CLOSE YOUR EYES!'

She did so, heard a dull *whoosh* and *crump*. A wave of heat washed over her and when she looked up again the swarm was further off, part of it engulfed in flame. Stephen let the flare pistol in his hand go and it was swept up and out of the rover. He buckled her in and slumped back into his own seat, his voice muted.

'Shuttle this is rover two. Emergency pick up requested. We have one casualty.'

Twenty four hours later, Haley was sitting in the passenger lounge on the *CLARKE*, watching Fountain turn beneath her. There was already talk of a new research colony, one which would almost certainly be named after Matt Curran.

'How are you?'

Stephen Gibson looked faintly guilty as he sat next to her. She didn't reply, instead smiling and laying her head on his shoulder. 'Very tired.'

'Are you going back?'

She smiled, folding her legs up under her as she did so. 'The first time I set foot on Fountain I thought, this is it. The frontier. The bleeding edge. This is home.'

She turned to Stephen, and her eyes were glistening. 'Matt's findings were on the money you know. The only thing he missed was that the swarms generate massive amounts of static electricity. No one-'

She closed her eyes. 'Are you going back?'

'I don't know.'

She smiled. 'That was going to be my answer.' She smiled. 'But, like the man said, no useless cogs in a watch.'

'The man went mad, remember.'

She looked at him but said nothing. Stephen met her gaze. 'The last lesson I paid any attention to in seminary said everyone has their calling. Everyone has a job to do, a role to play.'

'Like cogs in a watch.'

He shook his head. 'More than that. A path to follow or to choose to follow.'

She nodded. 'What do you think our path is?'

He smiled, closing a hand around hers. 'For the moment? Spectators.'

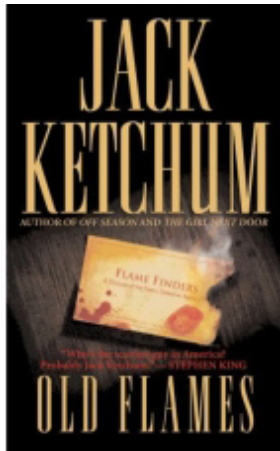
She smiled and rested her head against his shoulder. Together, they sat and watched the world turn without them.



REVIEWS

Old Flames

reviewed by ross warren



by Jack Ketchum
Leisure Books
£7.50

When horror writer Stephen King refers to another author as the 'scariest guy in America' people are going to take notice. Sadly the comment, about author Jack Ketchum, was evidently not made after reading the title novella, coupled here with a similarly themed tale from earlier in the writer's career.

'Old Flames' is a well written thriller but it isn't really horrific or frightening. The plot concerns Dora, a recently dumped career woman, who rues the missed opportunity of a high school romance with Jim that ended prematurely through her stubbornness. Through an agency, *Flame Finders*, she is able to track him down to LA where he lives with a wife and two children. What ensues is a by the numbers thriller that is reminiscent of made-for-TV movies from the 80's, particularly in a swimming pool scene which borders on cliché.

Jack Ketchum is a skilled writer and there is nothing wrong in the execution of the tale it's just that ultimately the plot is too flimsy and the characters too un-likeable to make this story engaging. Having said that it is a quick and engrossing read, although Ketchum appears to have lost the comma key from his computer, so rarely is it used, which leaves you almost unable to pause till the end of the paragraph. This is peculiar to this story and appears to be a conscious choice on the author's part, possibly to convey a sense of the way in which Dora is ploughing ahead with her actions without pause to consider the implications of her decisions.

The additional bonus novella, *Right to Life*, is actually the longer of the two stories but being a re-print from earlier in Ketchum's career you can see why it is not the story on the cover. The protagonist of this story is Sara, who like Dora is a strong willed woman, who finds herself pregnant with the baby of her married lover. Choosing to have an abortion, she is abducted whilst on her way to the clinic. Her kidnappers imprison and abuse her with the aim of taking the baby for themselves. Sara uses her strength of character to remain dignified until the moment arises when she can attempt her escape. This story is arguably more effective than *Old Flames* and is certainly more gruesome and horrific.

As an introduction to the themes and style of Ketchum's work these two novellas are an adequate representation and should be sufficient to compel the reader to search out his more entertaining works such as the acclaimed *Girl Next Door* and *Red*.

Doctor Who Companion Chronicles: Transit of Venus

reviewed by guy adams



Written by Jacqueline Rayner
Produced by Big Finish
www.bigfinish.com
£8.99

The Companion Chronicles were an obvious step for Big Finish, widening their scope to cover all eras of Doctor Who and adding a cost-effective line in these days of internet piracy (you bastards) and dropping sales. 'Dramatic readings' told from the perspective of one of the Doctor's companions, the plays use just two voices -- a second 'guest' character working alongside the lead to break things up a bit -- alongside a full soundscape of music and sound effects to bring the story further to life. As long as your lead voice keeps things lively -- and they usually do, acting the tale rather than simply narrating it -- then you have a drama that lives somewhere between an audiobook and the same company's range of full cast plays.

Here we have William Russell returning to the role of Ian Chesterton in a story set during the very first series of Doctor Who way back in 1963. Who fans have been lucky to have Russell's voice on a number of audiobooks over the last few years and it's delicious to listen to, like warm rice-pudding being gently nudged into your ears by kitten tongues. I'm a great fan of early Doctor Who and the chance to hear Chesterfield in a 'new' historical is utter ear porn. Trapped on Captain Cook's *The Endeavour* he is convinced that famed naturalist Joseph Banks (performed beautifully by Ian Hallard) is not what he seems. Not that the first incarnation of the Doctor is any help, in a pitch-perfect characterisation from writer Jack Raymond... Jimmy Rayfield... Jam Raincoat?... he's far too busy burbling at sea gulls and forgetting what Chesterman's name is.

While I found the resolution a little unsatisfying -- a fantastical element to the plot was dismissed so simply that it would have been better not there at all -- the story makes up for it with a lyrical evocation of a much cherished era, oozing the charm of those old historical tales with such conviction that I could almost smell the corned beef sandwiches wilting in the studio canteen. Sometimes the best storytelling outweighs the nuts and bolts of plot and this is a good example, I found the journey so pleasing I couldn't give a damn about the slight deficiencies of the destination.

I dearly hope Big Finish have secured the services of William Russell for more than just this tale, having been reminded what a splendid traveling companion Chestertrainstation is I can't wait for the opportunity to take a few more trips by his side.

Doctor Who - Companion Chronicles: The Prisoner's Dilemma

reviewed by guy adams



Written by Simon Guerrier
Produced by Big Finish
www.bigfinish.com
£8.99

When the balance between good and evil shifts too far in either's favour the universe must be 'paused' so that the damage can be rectified. To achieve this one must use the Key to Time. Like all remotes, the Key is hard to find, forcing those tasked with the job to yank at the metaphorical sofa cushions of the universe getting really grumpy when all they come up with are stale peanuts and Quality Sweet wrappers.

Originally devised by producer Graham Williams, the Key built a running narrative into the sixteenth series of Doctor Who, six stories offering scripts from Douglas Adams, predatory slabs of polystyrene, Tom

Baker ditching all pretense of sanity and 'the story about all the extras who couldn't get the green paint off at the end of shooting.' I think so anyway... I'm usually far too busy imagining naughty things happening in Mary Tamm's underwear to remember precisely. Big Finish have resurrected the concept as a theme for three of their audio dramas with this, another in the Companion Chronicles series, acting as a prologue.

Breaking from convention, the pleasingly non-linear narrative is partly delivered by a companion already extensively featured in their dramas: Ace, as performed by Sophie Aldred. Alongside Aldred is Laura Doddington as Zara, a freshly 'born' construct designed as a living tracker to the Key to Time.

Zara is the focus for most of the first episode and Doddington does such an excellent job that I confess I felt a twinge of disappointment when Aldred took over with episode two, the actress had captured my complete attention and I could have listened to her for hours. I'm a fickle swine though and Sophie Aldred is a vocal Dorian Grey, somewhere in her attic the woman possesses a dusty vacuum jar that contains her 'real' voice... a ropey donkey's fart of a cackle that festers while hers never changes, sounding just as young as it did twenty years ago. She is in league with the devil, curse her.

Writer, Simon Guerrier, knows that Sci-Fi, as much as it must be a genre of shiny concepts and cool ideas, needs plenty of heart to balance out the technology and his script is one of moral grey area and dark emotion. There are plenty of levels here to involve us, both in terms of plot and character, and his ability to craft believable and engaging dialogue must take its share of credit in making the drama such a success.

The play doesn't completely stand-alone -- this is Zara's story more than Ace's and that story will continue in the dramas that follow -- but it seems churlish to level that as a criticism. I find myself looking forward to the next installment immensely and berating one chapter for enticing me into the next would be like slating a glass of really good Shiraz for being so nice that I fancied another.

Doctor Who: The Judgement of Isskar

reviewed by guy adams



Written by Simon Guerrier
Produced by Big Finish
www.bigfinish.com
£14.99

We continue Simon Guerrier Month over at Big Finish with the first in their Key 2 Time series 'proper'. We shall ignore the fact that I am such a miserable old git that I look at the numerical "2" in the title and -- rather than seeing a visual reference point denoting "sequel" as is no doubt intended -- I feel the urge to smack the next person I see texting on a mobile phone. Yes, we shall ignore this, after all, it only makes me -- a man who methodically uses bloody *apostrophes* when texting as I am so anal my colon could snap -- seem even more of a humourless fart than usual.

The Fifth Doctor, played by Peter Davison (whose voice is often so husky and out of breath in these audios that I have no doubt he causes a stiffening amongst his more dedicated fans), is lifted out of time and embroiled once more in the hunt for the Key to Time.

Where the previously reviewed prologue to this series played heavily on morality and character development here Guerrier offers us more of a romp. This is not to suggest a shallow script, far from it, but there's no question that the author fancied a little more fun this time. Ice Warriors battling flying space insects... those that weren't stirred by Davison's voice will certainly be paying attention now.

The whispered tone of an Ice Warrior is marvelous for audio of course and this isn't the first time Big Finish have featured them. The Isskar of the title is played by series producer Nicholas Briggs. Briggs plays most of the monsters in Big Finish audios (as well as on the TV show) -- in fact his voice is so often heard in my office there are days I suspect the bastard is hiding in one of my drawers. He gets some flak for this which I could understand if he were bad at it but his voice work is consistently above par so I can only assume it to be the usual 'sour grapes' of fandom's online muttering (One has to bear in mind that any Doctor Who fan you find online is capable of writing, directing, acting, lighting and composing the soundtrack for a much better class of Doctor Who than could ever be found professionally. This is something they are only too happy to tell us and one has to find methods for shutting them up -- emailing them a photoshopped picture of a Zygon dripping with breasts often does the job. Perhaps Briggs could phone them instead? Whisper evil things to them in one of his many mean, hissy voices? '*I... am vatching you! Leave ze internets be!*' Just a thought...)

But I digress... We are reunited with the previous play's Zara and introduced to her 'sister' construct Amy (the one to involve the Doctor as she feels the need for an experienced companion to accompany her on her quest). Much is made of the difference between these two newborns, particularly their susceptibility to having others imprint their personalities on them. It is here, as well as in the blossoming culture of the Ice Warriors, that we are offered something to sink our teeth into beyond all the hardcore Martian Vs Space Wasp action. The balance is well struck -- there's a reason Big Finish are happy to see two discs with Guerrier's name on them, the lad knows his dramatic onions -- and yet again he pulls the trick of having me bristling with impatience to hear the next installment.

While Ciara Janson's performance as Amy left me somewhat unconvinced to begin with, I'm pleased to say I began to enjoy her much more as the play progressed. She'll make a fine companion to Davison -- or he to her if you prefer -- and I very much look forward to hearing her character develop further as their quest continues.

As always with these dramas the first episode is available to download from the Big Finish site at an insultingly cheap price so that you can dip your toes before committing to the full purchase. Bear in mind though that if you haven't ordered the full thing within a fortnight of download you will have Briggs calling you late at night, promising to do unutterable things to your pets (in various sibilant tones) unless you pony up the cash.

FEATURES

Hub Writing Competition – Bootstrap SF

We've teased you long enough. Today is the day we launch our short story competition – Bootstrap SF.

First of all, a general outline of the rules – we'll get to the competition specifics, later.

General Rules

- The competition is open to anyone currently living in the UK (don't worry, rest-of-world – we'll have something for you soon, too).
- Writers must not have had any short story sold to any publication for a professional fee. For the purposes of this competition, "professional fee" equates to 5p per word or more.
- There is no entry fee.
- The winning entry will receive £100.
- The winning entry and the 12 runner up entries will be published in the following ways:
- The winner will be published in issue 100 of *Hub Magazine* (August 2009), for which no further fee will be payable.
- The 12 runners-up will be published in *Hub Magazine*, for which no further fee will be payable.
- The winner and 12 runners-up will be collected in a paperback volume, and the authors will receive a copy of this volume. Further volumes will be made available at a discount (amount to be confirmed) to authors whose work appears in the book.
- Non-winning entries may be published in *Hub Magazine*, for which no fee will be payable.
- Writers retain full copyright to their works, but assign indefinite, non-exclusive print, electronic and audio rights to Right Hand Publishing Ltd (publisher of *Hub* magazine).
- Other general terms and conditions, as set out in the Competition Agreement (downloadable from [here](#)).
- The judges' decision will be final, and no correspondence will be entered into.
- The judges will not be able to critique individual stories.

The competition:

Bootstrap SF: A Very British Future.

The British are an unusual combination of heroism and fatalism, humour and malice. Their Science Fiction is unique, blending pragmatism with sarcasm and death with laughter. For the British, Science Fiction is something subtler than the standard utopias and dystopias, something more concerned with exploring the future with a healthy cynicism.

The genre faces stagnation. Fans who discovered SF in the Sixties and Seventies are now actively resisting the very progress that they embraced when they were younger, cutting out new audiences by relentlessly defending stories which have little relevance to newer, younger readers. SF has built a wall around itself, and for it to survive we must break it down.

Bootstrap SF is designed to please the core fans whilst attracting new ones. By focusing on British stories about people, characters, the audience doesn't feel excluded if they don't quite grasp the science behind the plot.

And the authors? The authors are new. Previously unpublished in the professional arena, these people are brimming with ideas and passion, and aren't blinkered by decades-old notions of what SF should be. The authors are what's happening right now in SF. And SF has always been about progress.

In short, Bootstrap SF is about British authors who love SF. New British authors. New British SF.

For an excellent example of bootstrap SF, see this week's short story, *Montgolfier Winter* by Alasdair Stuart.

The Judges:

Hub staffers: Lee Harris, Alasdair Stuart, Ellen J Allen and Phil Lunt.

The winner will be chosen by Ian Whates. Ian is the Development Director of the British Science Fiction Association (BSFA), Overseas Regional Director of the Science Fiction Writers of America

(SFWA), Proprietor and Senior Editor of independent publisher, Newcon Press, Editor of the BSFA news and media review magazine, *Matrix* and Co-chair of the NewCon Convention Committee. Oh, he's also a writer with numerous professional short fiction credits, and a multi-book deal with Solaris.

How to Enter

Your story must be between 5,000 and 10,000 words long. It should be sent as an RTF file to the competition address (see below). In addition, you should attach a copy of the Competition Agreement to the same email. Your story will not be considered without these things. **Electronic copies only, please - hardcopies will not be accepted.** The story file should contain the following things:

Page 1

- Your name, address, telephone number, email address
- The title of the story
- How you would like your name to appear (eg. pen name if you use one)
- The word count
- The words "I agree to the terms and conditions set out in the attached Agreement"

Page 2 to end of story

Your story.

- Single-spaced, 11 point Arial (or Helvetica).
- New paragraphs should be tabbed with no blank lines between (except to indicate a section break).
- If you want to indicate italics, *use italics*.
- If you want to use bold, **use bold**.
- If you want a dash – use a dash; do not use two hyphens --.
- Make sure you check the basics – spelling and grammar – before you hit "send". We expect the odd typo, but if we get distracted by too many errors it won't help your chances.

Send your entry by May 14th to:

Bootstrap.sf@hubfiction.com . Entries received after this date will not be accepted.

The winning entries will be announced by 31st August in *Hub Magazine*.

Good luck, and get writing!



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