

Hub Magazine

SCIENCE FICTION HORROR FANTASY

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CONTENTS:

FICTION: *Under A Closed Sky* by C.J. Paget ***HUB COMPETITION WINNER***
The Apprentice's Sorcerer by Dan Abnett

REVIEW: *Doctor Who - Dalek War Boxset*

FEATURE: *You Know You Want It* by Kelly Harker
Icon; The Fourth Doctor by Scott Harrison
Roll the Bones by J. R. Blackwell
Frequently Asked Questions About Time Travel Competition



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EDITORIAL:



Three years ago I approached *Hubs* now-editor, Al Stuart, and said I wanted to produce a physical short story magazine. Al was keen - as a lifelong fan of the short form, and one of the best short fiction writers I know, he jumped at the chance. So, with no knowledge of how the magazine industry works, we decided to publish one. The hardest thing at the beginning was thinking of the name. I think Al eventually came up with *Hub* (which many people - including those published in it - continue to refer to as *the Hub*). We had a few minor production issues with the first magazine (which was square, and looked freakin' awesome!) but nothing too onerous, and reviews of the magazine and the fiction within were pretty positive. Unfortunately, neither Al nor myself were good at selling advertising, and the only people to advertise were Orbit publishers. They also advertised in issue 2, and gave us hope.

Unfortunately, hope doesn't pay the bills, and the magazine folded. Despite healthy (for a new magazine) sales figures the costs of production were overwhelming, and a lot of money was lost. Undeterred, I contacted Orbit and offered them sole sponsorship of a new, electronic version of the magazine, to be published weekly. To my surprise (and undying gratitude) they said yes, and so *Hub Issue 3* was the first of the electronic editions. When the Orbit sponsorship ran out, HarperCollins took over, and we will shortly be announcing our latest sponsor.

So, as *Hub* moves into and past its 100th edition, I'd just like to say a few thanks. Thanks to Al for his continued sterling work on the magazine; thanks to Ellen Allen and Phil Lunt, our latest recruits; thanks to Orbit for the first year, HarperCollins for the current year, and our new (mystery) sponsor for the third year

(from next month); thanks to Arts Council England for an early grant that enables us to advertise *Hub* and bring readership numbers to a level interesting to potential sponsors; thanks to our legion of reviewers and feature-writers, who give us their time and their words free-of-charge; thanks to the scores of authors who have given us stories to publish with a nominal fee; thanks to you for reading this every week, and ensuring *Hub* continues week in, week out.

Here's to the next 100 issues...

Lee Harris, *Publisher*.

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100. The archetypal big number, a mathematical signpost that says this way something epic lies. The thing is, it's not just epic in front of us, it's been epic up to now. 100 issues, 100 stories, 100 windows into different worlds from some of the best writers in the business. That in itself is pretty epic.

So to all the authors, reviewers and readers up to this point, I can only say one thing; thank you. Without you, we wouldn't be here. With you, we're poised on the edge of the next big thing. This week that includes our competition winner, who not only receives £100 but will also feature as the lead story in a book collecting the twelve best entries. We've also got an exclusive short story from Dan Abnett and the debut of our role-playing column by the superb JR Blackwell. Next week?

As always, the future.

Buckle up, the ride only gets better from here..

Alasdair Stuart, *Managing Editor*

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100 issues of *Hub*. It's funny how round numbers are significant. I've been on board with *Hub* since Lee Harris took a chance on a short story of mine and published it in issue #1. Since then, we've moved from print to online, from bi-monthly to weekly, although we haven't always achieved that. The standard that we've held to, throughout, is delivering the best of short science fiction, fantasy and horror to as many people as possible. My own journey has been from reader to writer to proofreader to submissions editor. I wish it went as far as 'astronaut', 'off-world pioneer'!

I'm looking for the next Nicolas Fisk, Douglas Hill, Monica Hughes - for the people who will shape the next generation of childhood ambition, who will take us to the next level, be it off-world or with our own demons. A hundred issues is enough to show you where we're coming from: let the next hundred issues show you what we, what humanity, is capable of.

Ellen J Allen, *Commissioning Editor*

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I'm proud to be a member of the crew on the good ship *Hub Magazine* as we hit issue 100. It's an amazing landmark to achieve in any discipline, not least a magazine born, mainly, out of love. As a member of the team I say a big *thank you* to everyone who has made this possible.

I'm proud *and* privileged as I've only been involved with *Hub* for about a year - I'm like the "Winston Zedmore" character of the piece, or a footballer in a cup final who comes on as a substitute with only 3 minutes to go and still gets a medal! Lee, Alasdair and Ellen are all fantastic people to work with and I know what's in store for *Hub* in the future. Great things are coming!

Proud, privileged and *happy* to be here.

Onwards and Upwards!

Phil Lunt, *Mechanic*

FICTION

Under a Closed Sky

by c. j. paget

They come at night, of course. Infra-red vision gives them yet another advantage in the chaotic dark, and perhaps they believe they cannot similarly be seen under night's black blanket. They hit the shanty-town with three auto-striders left over from Stupid War II. Behind these are the troops with their night goggles, keeping their distance not because they fear the townsfolk, but because the striders have been set to fire at movement.

The robot gun platforms pick their way into the town with exaggerated, nimble, three-legged care. They follow pre-programmed patrol patterns that will keep them at a safe distance from each other. They are mechanized-ankle deep in the litter and rubble before it happens. Maybe it's a dog. Maybe it's a plastic bag shifting in the faint breeze. Whatever it is, the mini-guns on a strider churn into life, and that chattering bark wakes the town. Scant moments later the darkness is alight. 'Houses' made of tin and canvas are swept away by streams of thrown metal. The people break cover screaming, and pour out into the passageways like ants from a disturbed nest. Caught in the gorgon gaze of the auto-striders a person, a man, a woman, a child, decomposes like one of those fast-forward-films of a carcass being stripped by bugs. They stumble over each other and over the piles of steaming meat that were once their families, and cram into the narrow streets, forming tidy rivers of scrambling people that the auto-striders hose with hot metal.

The troops watch through their night vision, laughing and whooping, and making bets on how far this or that person will run. These are the same boys and girls who grin in dress-uniform from photo-frames on parental and grand-parental fireplaces.

The laughing stops when the first strider goes down. The hypersonic slug, still glowing with the heat of re-entry, hits it dead center and punches a hole in it through which a plume of earth leaps as the slug drills into the ground below. The troops immediately surge forwards, almost panicked, knowing what will come next. The sky starts to rain hypersonic needles that pass through sheet armor and human flesh like rain through clouds, exploding bodies with the very wind of their passage.

The other striders are lost in dull thuds and plumes of dirt. The troops scream and roar as they race to the shanty-town. The vehicles that brought them here flare into loud flame, and khaki-clad figures spontaneously erupt into plumes of gore, but they have expected this, they have planned for it. They know their only safety lies in getting among the fleeing crowds. At night, all cats are gray, and from orbit you cannot distinguish or target some blobs of infra-red from masses of others.

Another atrocity in the brave new Congo of president Mwende. But the story that comes out of this, the image passed between cheap cellphones and recounted by word of mouth, isn't the loss of downtrodden lives, nor the burning of rag-roofed homes. It's the image of the first hypersonic munition punching a hole through an auto-strider. From shack to hut to house, from village to town to city, the word spreads in the dozen local languages. Kongo, Lingala, French, Swahili. Each recounting contains that one alien word: 'Orbital'. *The orbital's are with us., The orbitals are coming.*

Out beyond the checkpoints and fortifications that circle Kinshasa, out where food is scarce, water is lethal if you don't boil it, where medicine and education are words in a foreign language, the story spreads like a bush-fire.

Meantime, inside the checkpoints and walls of the capital, where the few strut in imported clothes and imported lifestyles, their bodies fed and watered and medicated and sculpted by the surgeons knife.

Where the nation's wealth drains into the pockets of a few, who spend it in London, Paris, New York, Milan; there's me.

I've been moving from hotel to hostel to pension to B&B, never staying too long in one place, so people don't notice the gradual change of my appearance. The nanoware in my bloodstream prods and prompts cells to grow more thickly here, less there, to lay down bone and muscle, to produce pigment in hair, skin, and iris. The face that looks back at me from the broken shard of bathroom mirror in this run-down flop-house, is not my own. These days, I wonder what my true face would be? This body is a more frivolous design than I usually wear. Big boobs, long legs, the standard off-the-shelf sculpt-me-beautiful choice. Not my choice, but the choice of the person I am slowly becoming. The skin, though dark, is actually a shade lighter than previously. I remember being red-headed and freckled and burn-in-the-sun, but these days, when I'm not working, I choose to be slim, graceful, and black. I like the color. So what?

The technology dividend from my backers extends to nanoware within my skull; I don't need V-shades to cross to the virtual world. I use it to talk to my three little helpers, 'spider-bots' I call them, and that's what they look like. They sit coiled in my daypack, and I call up their diagnostics before my mind's eye. They've been leaching energy from the surroundings and now they're ready to roll, or at least scuttle.

Other than my little helpers, I work alone. It wasn't always thus. In my idealistic youth I fell in with a roguish Japanese boy with some wild ideas. I fell into a lot of things with him, including bed and including love, but the thing that stayed with me was the politics. Those days, the world was going to hell on a fast train; people spoke of the 'end times', and no one laughed. Hideki spoke of a new dawn. He put me in touch with the orbitals. We didn't believe him at first, grouped around his communications rig, drunk and stoned like any band of teenagers playing with a Ouija board. But after a while it began to dawn that it wasn't a trick, we really were in contact with voices from elsewhere.

When the financial crash of '55 put paid to the dream of castles in the sky and cities in low-earth-orbit, some people had refused to come home. Everyone assumed they'd died up there, suffocating in their orbiting dream-homes. But they hadn't. And now, after all this time, they were back in touch. They'd watched the 'First Stupid War' knock us back decades technologically and halve the Earth's population. When 'Stupid War II' rolled around, with bio-weapons targeted at food supplies and the resulting world famine, they decided something had to be done. While we'd slipped back in infrastructure and technology, they'd surged ahead. They gave me my nanoware, my strange powers, and they gave me a purpose in life. We put the word about to the benighted inhabitants of Earth's most corrupt nations. If you want help, you only have to ask for it.

Fiji had been first, you have to start small. Caucau had started off as merely an arrogant demagogue, then President, then he declared himself Emperor. Emperor of what? They say that by the end he was convinced of his own godhood. Hyperinflation, racial purges, unemployment, corruption, famine, snatch-squads and mass executions. Eventually the Fijian's had had enough. They swallowed their pride and said, "Yes, we'd like help please."

It was the most significant televised hit on a world leader since Kennedy. At the height of an impassioned speech on 'traitorous dissidents' Caucau looked skywards, and invoked the divine right of kings, saying God himself had chosen him to lead Fiji.

He may even have seen the vapor-trail of the trans-orbital hypersonic slug hundreds of meters above, moments before it exploded into a cluster of tightly focused shards that zipped through him, exploding his grossly corpulent body in a fountain of offal over the first rows of his audience.

I was there in Fiji, with Hideki. One hypersonic hit doesn't mean freedom blossoms the next day. There's only so much you can do from orbit, you need boots on the ground to bring about change, and the orbitals have changed so much in their strange kingdom, that they can't come down here any more, or so they say.

God, those were the days. It was still exciting. I wonder what faces Hideki wears now?

Anyway, we won. Fiji became the first nation on earth to go into A.I. administration. Like my nanoware and spider-bots, the A.I. (named 'Degei' in keeping with local folklore) was a gift of magic from above. Degei cared only for the good of the people of Fiji. He'd been built that way. For Fiji prosperity and happiness ensued. The idea began to spread, some perfectly stable nations choosing to go into

administration voluntarily, while those places laboring under tyranny had to get to the same destination by a more bloody road.

Congo needs help. A week ago the population went outside, all together, and held something white up to the sky. Some of them arranged themselves to spell the request in Lingala, French, Swahili, Kongo, English, anything. "Help." President Mwende's men machine-gunned crowds and beat people to death on the streets, but they couldn't be everywhere at once. As fast as one crowd was mown down or dispersed, another formed elsewhere. There weren't enough bullets to shoot everyone. They're still trying though, that's what the attack on the shantytown was about.

The angels look down through their powerful lenses, and they see the message. They've made the first move, but it's just a show of support. They need boots on the ground again. The call goes out for people to do the job, just like any hiring process. I'm in place, and I've already got myself some useful 'made-in-orbit' tech. I've a good track-record, and a good plan. I've done the groundwork.

Today I received the message I'd been hoping for, fed straight into my cerebral cortex, telling me that my journey out here to Kinshasa, changing my identity and risking my life, wasn't wasted. I'm the best placed for the job, with the best plan of action. Congratulations. I've got one week to make it happen.

I flex my hands, watching the concealed spines extend from under the fingernails. I know that by now the poison sacks in my fingertips will be full. I have an appointment in uptown Kinshasa.

I hear the whine of the gyro-bike as it glides into the garage. It's a larger vehicle than the name 'bike' might imply, more of a car on two wheels. I don't need to look to know that it's Ms. Bomboko's bike. Tiffany Bomboko, heiress to the riches of the country's leading industrialist, is a creature of habit, at least where her exercise and beauty regime is concerned. Not having my unearthly bio-enhancements, Tiffany has to work hard to maintain her supremely sculpted shape.

I step out of the vehicle that has brought me to the gym's garage, and move silently into the shadow behind a building column. Three days ago I watched my spider-bots climb the walls, subtly vandalizing selected security-cams. As expected, the management hasn't done anything about repairing these, and I'm parked and waiting in the surveillance shadow that I've created.

Tiffany comes clack-clack-clacking on her Paris-purchased heels. Her shoulder-length braids bounce, and her brown skin shines from under, above, around, and through a white dress whose expense seems to have been inversely proportional to the amount of material used. She's a work of art. I'm not going to feel good about this, but my mind still holds the fresh image of slum children who will never grow to be even Tiffany's age.

I step from my concealment as she passes. Something turns under my shoe with a crackling sound, probably a stone brought in on the tires of a car. The sound makes her turn. Damn. But, she doesn't scream, just stares dumbfounded at her doppelganger. I reach out quickly, exuding the retractable spines from under my nails, and sink them into her neck, puncturing the artery that pulses there. Her mouth opens a little, the beginning of a scream perhaps, but the toxin is quick. The spines re-seal the tiny punctures as they come out, not a drop of blood. I catch her as she slumps. She twitches a few times in my arms, and then the gusting of breath against my neck ceases.

I drag her to my car, wobbling on the stupid heels I must wear to be perfectly like her when I appear on the cameras. I bundle her into the back of the vehicle. A command via my implant sets the windows to opaque, and a spider-bot scuttles under Tiffany's bike, initiating a long conversation with the on-board computer. I sprint (as best I can in these shoes) towards the exit, wanting to minimize the delay between Ms Bomboko's entry and my appearance as her on the first of the working cameras.

In the changing rooms I use one of the cubicles, where I enter an auto-hypnotic trance and activate the Tiffany-personality that I've been working on for weeks. My aim from then on is to leave a clear uninterrupted trail of Tiffany, establishing beyond doubt that it's business as usual for Ms Bomboko. I don't doubt that Tiffany is watched. We are all watched nowadays, and she is a high-profile person with an important meeting in her near future. 'Intelligent' software (by Earthly standards, not the real thing like the orbitals have) will be watching her every move. Learning systems will have built a complete picture of

Ms Bomboko's habits and personality. Where she shops, eats, parties, sleeps and who with. What she buys and what she reads and what she watches. Any significant departure from expectations will be flagged for the attention of a human operative. I can't afford any mysterious gaps or changes in her daily routine that might arouse suspicion.

Tiffany enters the gym and works out hard and showy. She sprints for fifteen minutes solid on the running machine, and then puts in a noisy and balletic ten minutes on the holographic kickboxing trainer, demolishing computer opponents to level 15 and beating her previous high score. In the pool she performs a number of showy dives from the middle board, wearing a frankly scandalous swimsuit that barely stays on. She chats with all her usual acquaintances, and flirts outrageously with everyone, regardless of age or sex. At the front desk she books a place in one of the next weeks more popular classes, and registers a complaint about the salinity of the pool. I might be overselling the performance, but I need it to be seen that Tiffany is moving through her usual routine, if a little more visibly than normal.

I leave the stupid spike-heels in the changing cubicle, and walk out in white trainers that happen to go very well with the rest of Tiffany's outfit. By the time I re-enter the garage, the gyro-bike's security has been broken, and it accepts me as Tiffany. Hopefully everyone is that gullible. I clamber into its velvet embrace as the gyro's spin up, buying power from the local grid and leaving another piece of the Tiffany paper-trail. I confess, this is the bit I've really been looking forward to.

The bike is a thing of beauty. It stores power in multiple nanocarbon flywheels, rotating on magnetic bearings in vacuum chambers at over one hundred thousand RPM. In addition to power storage, their gyroscopic effect keeps the bike solidly balanced on two wheels even when stationary. It has a top speed of 100 mph, which would have been unexceptional back in the days when we happily burnt our fossil riches, but now it's the fastest thing on the road. Anyway, top speed isn't everything: 0-60 in just over three seconds, regenerative breaking, adaptive stream-lining. Like a jet-fighter it's built unstable, the gyro-stability being decoupled by computer to allow the bike to throw itself round hairpin bends, its articulated chassis flexing like sinew. It's sex on two wheels. No, let's be honest, when you have a cranial implant that lets you interface your brain to the controls so that you feel you *are* the bike, it's better than sex.

The bike isn't just about muscle, but flesh too. You don't sit in it. You lounge. The upholstery molds to embrace, cushion and support in all needful places. It's like riding a rocket-powered couch. Tiffany selected this model specifically for the large canopy that presents the occupant like a diamond necklace in a velvet lined display case. You can opaque the canopy, but Tiffany always rides with it clear, and her brown, bare, expensive legs on show, shoes kicked off into the corners of the cockpit. I've stalked her down the highways, while she cruises beside the lumbering gyro-buses that carry Kinshasa's workforce. She feigns obliviousness to the way that anything male with a pulse has its nose squashed flat to the glass. If she could get away with it, I'm sure she'd ride naked. Then there is a gap in the traffic and she feeds more power from the bikes spinning hearts, and BOOM!. All they have left to remember her by is the dust from her wheels.

I buzz the buses myself, and feel the heat of those desperate stares sliding over Tiffany's body like sunbeams. I know what lies beyond those hot gazes. Tiffany thinks it's admiration, that they dream of waking beside this princess and hearing her speak their name. Tiffany doesn't understand what it's like to be a cog in someone else's machine. She can't imagine what it's like to see your children hungry, or dying because you can't afford basic medicines, and then see Marie Antoinette riding by in a vehicle whose cost could feed your family for decades. These men think not of romance, but rape and revenge. That's what men like Mwendu reduce everyone to. They squat like toads in the heart of a nation and poison the waters and all drink from them. Hideki used to say...

Oh, listen to myself, Hideki, Hideki. You had him, you cast him aside. Get over it girl.

There's an opening ahead, and I let slip the gyros. I weave through the traffic like a jet-fighter through flak, cutting up at least three people and busting the speed-limit as though I consider it a personal challenge. Desperately seeking to get pulled over, I succeed. I flirt with the cops so outrageously that it leaves me feeling nauseous. Unsurprisingly I escape with only a warning. Annoying, I specifically wanted a ticket and a record of Ms Bomboko's whereabouts at this time. But, when they called up my name on the citizen database and saw who daddy was, they were quickly off to hassle someone else. That's the way

things work here. However, even if I didn't get a ticket, the evidence is there for all to see, that 5pm this afternoon, Tiffany Bomboko was alive and raising hell.

Tiffany has a regular dinner-date with her friend, Damisi. Thus, I must have one too. When I get to the restaurant, Damisi is sitting on the veranda, shaded from the sunset by palm trees. She's smoking a joint with the same poise and elegance that Lauren Bacall once gave to cigarettes. Compared to Tiffany, Damisi is merely pretty; but Damisi has class. Not what people like Tiffany think class consists of, but the real thing. Tiffany gets her shoes in Paris. Damisi got her education there. Her hair is cut businesslike, close to her scalp, and she wears understated jewelry with hints of traditional design, cut from local diamonds and Tanzanite.

'Damisi' means 'cheerful', but she never is. Tiffany and Damisi are startling opposites and I've never figured out why they choose to spend time in each other's company. I've considered all the obvious angles, but as far as I can tell it's not sexual, nor about money (they both have plenty). It's my belief that Tiffany sees Damisi as a great intellect, and hopes some of the smarts will rub off onto her. Damisi just needs an audience for her paranoid ramblings.

I sit and exchange the usual pleasantries. She scares me by commenting that she's glad to see me wearing sensible, African-made shoes. I recall spying on conversations at this restaurant where Damisi would show off by deducing the human drama at each table from body language alone. Sometimes she could predict what was going to happen, including foretelling one fight fifteen minutes before it erupted. If anyone can see through me, it's Dami. I feel the spines flex under my nails, though I'm not aware of having initiated the motion. If I could have avoided meeting her, I would have, but these dates with Damisi are as fixed a pattern in Tiffany's life as anything.

Despite the shoes, Dami seems to accept me as Tiffany, and my heartbeat gradually returns to normal. I let her take the lead in the conversation. It swirls in the usual circles while I examine the menu. While I choose, Damisi pines for the 'Federation of African States', the rising superpower that fell apart when its members started going into administration, and focusing on the small stuff like social justice and education for all.

"It's not fair," she says, blowing smoke. I think she smokes precisely because she knows it might kill her. "Merde, this was our chance to be great, it was our turn. Everyone else had their turn, Europe, the Americans, China, India. This was going to be our time."

I'm entranced by temptations of the menu. 'Tiffany' insists I should get a figure-safe salad. The persona doesn't understand that my bio-enhanced body doesn't need to worry about maintaining its figure. The 'Moambe Royale' is making eyes at me. My stomach growls, it knows whose side it's on. Distracted by the internal battle, the words pop out of my mouth before I've even realized they were coming: "Why do we need to be great Dami? What good does that do us? Is it not better to be happy?"

Damisi gives me a penetrating look. "When did you go over to the enemy Tiff?" she asks.

The auto-hypnosis breaks, like waking up from a dream that you were trying to stay in. Suddenly I don't know what to say. Tiffany has gone silent in my head. Maybe I hear her laughter. I have to plow ahead on my own: "Uh... I... I just feel we always say the same things, Dami. Like we're stuck in a loop. Would it be so bad if the country was taken into administration? I mean, it seems to have worked elsewhere? Even the Americans-"

"The Americans," Damisi makes a dismissive noise. "Washed up. Ess-Double-U-Two knocked the stuffing out of them. They had their time, like Europe. They're better off in administration, but us? We had a future. It was going so well, but then-". She looks about, and leans closer to mutter, "-the likes of Mwende appear. Coincidence? *Non*. Someone plants weeds in our garden. Everything goes to hell, and suddenly we have to accept help from strangers."

"We'd still have a future under administration? A future of peace and prosperity. Isn't that what everyone wants?"

Why don't I shut up? Tiffany would never say this stuff, nor even think it. I must have been slack with the self-hypnosis.

"What future is it to be ruled by machines?" Damisi takes a drag on the joint, but it's obvious she has

more to say, so I say nothing. Smart move.

"As for peace and prosperity," she continues, "Italy under the Borgia's had warfare, terror, murder - they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, the Renaissance. Switzerland had democracy and peace for five hundred years, and gave us what? The cuckoo clock. If the ancient Egyptians had focused on sustainable social justice, they'd have left no trace, and would be forgotten now, like they never existed."

"But what good does it do to be remembered? Ancient Egypt is still gone, right?"

"Tiffany, if you could have anything you want, anything at all, but the only proviso was that you had to stay under house arrest, would you accept that?"

I crinkle my face in Ms Bomboko's trademark pretty-frown that shows she is thinking about something. "Can I have visitors?"

"Yes. Anyone can come visit you."

"No, I wouldn't accept it. I wouldn't feel free."

Damisi smiles like I've passed a secret test. "What about if you were only limited to staying in Congo? You can roam the whole country, but can't leave it."

"Still no."

"So, What size of cage is big enough to be acceptable?"

"Um... I don't understand?"

Finally something Tiffany might say.

Dami takes a long drag on her joint. I can tell she is disappointed in me, and I mustn't have built the Tiffany persona that badly, because it annoys me, even hurts a little.

"Nevermind," Damisi says. "Are you still seeing that crazy guy?"

Eventually I leave Damisi to glitter in her own darkness. I return to the gym, parking in the surveillance blackout, as close to my car as I can. My spider-bots watch for anyone coming as I pull the body from the car. Thank God I'm wearing the trainers, it's far easier to move Tiffany in decent shoes. I load the body into the trunk/passenger compartment of the gyro-bike. Running again to the first camera, I return to the gym and ask if a pair of expensive Parisian shoes have been handed in to lost property. Turns out they have, and they say you can't trust people nowadays. I worry if Tiffany Bomboko would return for her shoes, or would she just buy new ones? Are the behavioral patterning routines that watch my movements smart enough to pick up on this? Or do they just note that I've visited the gym twice in one day, which is odd, and pass this on to a human to investigate? Will a human buy my 'left my shoes' gambit? I hope the watchers have no one like Damisi. If they do, I'm dead.

This time I drive with the canopy darkened, and with all the aplomb of an agoraphobic grandmother. I'm hoping that the watchers will interpret this as being due to my earlier run-in with the police. I make my way to the Kinshasa-Brazzaville tunnel. At intervals along the tunnel length there are pull-off points with mysterious doors. I pull the bike over into one of these, and crack open the cockpit enough to let my spidery friends skitter out. Two run to watch for oncoming traffic, one goes to deal with the lock on the door.

Eventually the bots see a large gap in the traffic and I leap from the bike, heaving Tiffany from the boot with a grunt of effort. I drag her to the door, yanking it shut behind me.

The spider bot illuminates like an ambulatory light-bulb, revealing a room full of highway junk. Traffic cones, cutting equipment, assorted bits fallen from cars. I lay Ms Bomboko down on a pile of tarpaulins. She looks very peaceful in the wan light, like a sleeping child. In truth, she is only twenty-three. Was. Was only twenty-three. Having lived her life in a gilded cage, she's much younger than that in some ways. Despite all the make-up and the fake eyelashes, I could still imagine a teddy bear resting beside that brown face with its pouting lips and stubby, broad nose.

For some reason I fuss over the body, arranging it, crossing her hands over her chest like a queen of Egypt in a sarcophagus, brushing her hair with my fingers, trying to get it neat. I remind myself that what I'm doing will save hundreds of lives over the years to come, and free millions from tyranny, and what is Tiffany

Bomboko measured in the balance against that?

Still, I'm not able to just walk away.

"Tiffany Bomboko, you lived a rich and vibrant life," I tell this sleeping princess, "and if it was short, it was still good. I'm sure you enjoyed yourself, and now you are playing your part in an action that will free your people and save many lives. Few have the chance of such an honor, and for all we know you were going to get wiped out in a gyro-bike crash this month anyway. So, uh..."

Okay not much of eulogy, I admit. On my way out, I click a new padlock to the door, and stalk back to my beautiful chariot. I've reinstated the Tiffany-persona with auto-hypnosis even before I'm back in the cockpit. I drive over to Damisi's place in Brazzaville, and drag her out to an expensive club. I feel I owe it to Tiffany to see her friend has some fun before the hammer comes down. After all, Damisi is going to be amongst the first up against the wall when the revolution comes. We dance well into the small hours. Damisi seems to enjoy herself. At 4am I leave with a muscular young adonis whose name I never bother to ask, abandoning Damisi to find her own way home, because that's what Tiffany would have done. I spend the last few hours of darkness in the one pursuit that my Tiffany-form might be a better choice for.

Thousands of lives saved, remember that.

I pull up at the house, Tiffany-late (between fifteen minutes and a week, depending on occasion). I've been playing my role for two days and I'm nearing perfection. The armed guards either side of the door track my hip-sway approach with more than professional interest.

"Sango nini boys?" I ask as I strut between them. Neither of them answers my "what's new?", they just nod and grunt. I know they track my procession into the house from behind. Anyone could run up and spray them with bullets while they're watching Tiffany's ass. I mean **my** ass. Damn, I'm thinking out of character again. What's wrong with the auto-hypnosis? I can't afford this now, of all times. I **am** Tiffany, I **am** Tiffany.

Tiffany will be starting to rot now. Have you seen how fast things decay in this heat? That expensive body and undeniably lovely face will be-

Stoppit. STOP IT. Papa is looking.

Papa Bomboko looks me up and down, and calls me "Daughter", a title reserved only for his highest flights of disapproval. I do the usual squeal of "Papa" and hold out my arms, but I get that look that tells me that, today, I am not his little girl. I am his Tiffany, just not his little princess. That's good enough for what I need. "We are running late," he says. He's frowning at my dress, but it's not the usual disapproval. "Why don't you wear that white outfit you had imported from Milan?" he asks.

"You said that you'd disown any daughter of yours who was seen in public dressed like that," I remind him. "The word 'harlot' was used." Tiffany wore it anyway of course. Papa disowns her twice a month on average, but she's all he's got. Had. All he had. No, **I'm** all he's **got**.

A strange man, Bomboko. He's colluded in the dismantling of society, and in mass theft and murder, but he's never looked at another woman since Mama died. He still says her name in his sleep, or so I've heard Tiffany say.

"This is a special occasion," he says. "Put it on. Be quick, we have not much time."

I pull a bemused face, but for once I play the obedient daughter. I'm not bemused though, I know exactly what Papa's game is.

As our convoy of black limousines pulls into the aerodrome an airship is landing. Sunlight glints from the solar paneling on its upper surface as its mooring-bots para-sail on wires, till they hit the ground, where they find a suitable surface to apply suction grip to.

Other blimps nuzzle at the terminal like piglets feeding from a sow. One of these will be ours, but which one won't be decided till the last minute. This is why space-to-surface missiles are no longer the method of regime change. The targets hide amongst the little people. They would love us to down a blimpliner full of innocents. I can't claim any moral superiority about this, it's tactically the right thing to do.

In their position, I'd do the same.

We are whisked through the terminal into a VIP lounge that most people don't even know exists. Our baggage will be inspected while we wait. I have had to abandon the spider-bots, sending them to bury themselves in a plot of waste-ground until I reclaim them. My cranial implant has a number of countermeasures that should prevent it being detected by any Earthbound scanning technology.

The lounge has a couple of Caucasian men in dark suits and dark glasses who stand around rather darkly. We have waitress service, and I eye her stylish bolero jacket with interest. Tiffany wants one in white, but I find it an odd choice of apparel for a waitress. I try to peer under the lapel without being too obvious. I'm sure she wears a shoulder-holster.

This is my time of maximum danger. All it would take is a pin-prick, or perhaps a swab from my coffee-cup, and they'd be able to do a DNA check. Even with orbital nano-technology, there are limits to how convincingly I can play Ms Bomboko. Nervousness could betray me, making me either giddy, or subdued, either could be out of character and arouse suspicions.

I try to do what Tiffany would, and ask the waitress where she got the jacket.

These V-shades are small and expensive, but to me they are stone-age tools. Still, I dare not use my implant, V-shades it is. With them I access the public cameras on the outside of the blimpliner, and spy on the world of mortals beneath us. The slums outside Kinshasa roll on and on like lava-flows from the central volcano. Further out there are fields with people toiling in them, and dirt-poor villages full mostly of the old or the very young. All the able-bodied have flown to those Kinshasa slums, or newly industrialized Neville in the north. I see a village with strange puddles of blackness in the streets. Turning up the amplification, I see the puddles are groups of large birds. Dog shaped things, hyenas, squabble with the vultures. On one building roof I see the Lingala word from 'Help' spelt out in white paint, still shouting at the sky. Many of the buildings have been recently burnt to black skeletons. Nothing human moves. I know very well what is in the center of those black bird-gangs.

Compare and contrast. Before me, visible if I focus through the image in the V-shades, Bomboko and Mwende cluck and tut over the state of the world like old women. The president makes limp jokes at which Papa laughs too heartily. Mwende's true face, (seen only by the few, public appearances being an invite to assassins and his video lectures being computer-generated) is a shock. How the savage abuse of power has taken its toll on that famous profile that graced election propaganda when Mwende was new and exciting and the future. Now, he drinks only water and admits that this is on his doctor's advice. Papa spurns wine too, choosing coffee. I watch them through the superimposed images of devastation and tell myself this is the face of evil. But all I see are two lonely men, well past their best before date and tired in that way that sleep cannot cure. It's always this way. Real villains are a disappointment when you meet them in the flesh.

Mwende speaks much about the decadence and insularity of modern times, making pointed remarks about the loss of vision and spirit amongst the young, who apparently spend all their time plugged into 'online opium'. I keep my expression blank, pretending to be plugged in myself, but I slide my legs against each other, and from the corner of my eye, I see Mwende watching, and the flicker of a smile pass Papa's face. We may live in the times of VR environments and nanotech, but the games we play are the same ones we indulged in when we thought fire and chipped flint was cool technology.

I could do it now of course, I could casually nick them with my poison spines, or produce a nano-grenade from Tiffany's cleavage (about the only place to hide anything in this dress) and shout "Freedom!", and blow us all to bloody fragments. But that would be gauche, and costly for me. After all the disappearances and death-squads, I think there is more justice in the fact that, in the near future, Papa Bomboko is going to be called in to identify what I've left in the tunnel under the river.

No, no, no. Don't go there. I'm Tiffany, I'm alive.

And there's something else. On Mwende's dark wrist glitters a golden piece of antique clockwork. Some people collect these artifacts from previous ages, while most other people value them not at all. I knew someone once, who had a love of such things. The watch looks very familiar to me.

It may be that I'm not the first to try for this job.
It may be that things are now very personal.

Just one of the dark-suit white-men sits guarding his master's door. He expects no trouble, as everyone on this blimp has passed the most rigorous checks. I imagine his dark shades have a VR facility. Whatever he might be viewing, the appearance of Tiffany, clad only in an inadequate night-robe of white satin, distracts him from it. He shows not a hint of surprise when 'Tiffany' starts coming onto him, perhaps he gets this all the time from the bored daughters of the rich. I move through the game of negotiating ever-closer proximity with well practiced ease, until our bodies and mouths are pressed together. He probably never even feels the nick of my spines against his neck.

I lower his dead-weight to the chair. Mwende won't be so easy, you don't get to his position without suspicion coded into your genes. I need more than the spines. Under the guard's jacket I find a Katamba Industries PP14. It has 'made in Neoville' stamped on the barrel. Made locally by a Bomboko subsidiary. How appropriate. A reliable weapon, the PP14.

I put my hand on the doorknob, and knock with the gun-butt before turning it. He will think it's the guard, everyone knows assassins don't knock.

The door swings shut behind me with a soft click. He looks up from behind his desk with the calm insolence of a man used to commanding power. I point the gun at his face. He shows surprisingly little alarm.

"Ms Bomboku?" he says.

"That watch," I say.

He frowns as though I'm interrupting something, like I've broken from the script. "What?" he says, "This?" he looks down at its glass face as though checking the time.

"It's an antique. Early twentieth century. Rare."

"You've broken in here to discuss antiques? You're not Tiffany Bomboku, that's for sure." There's actually a hint of amusement in his voice.

"Take it off and put it on the table," I say, sighting down the gun into his left eye.

He shrugs, stands slowly, takes it off and puts it on the table.

Stepping to the desk, I put my hand over the watch, and make a prediction. "I think it has an inscription on the back. A young woman's attempt at a Haiku:

Spring movements,
You speak my name,
My heart beats this fast."

I whip it from the table, turn it over.

"Spring movements..."

My heart stops.

My heart restarts with the hard fury of the gyros in Tiffany's bike. I remember the things I wished on Hideki when we broke up, but I never meant any of them. I always thought he'd be around out there, somewhere. Now the thought of a world without him in it is a splinter in my heart. "You got this, how?" I demand. My grip tightens on the gun. Revenge. Revenge.

Something flickers through his eyes. "Oh," he says "well...", and then he briefly presses a thumb against the side of his nose.

I gasp and step back, my unarmed hand clutching at my chest, pressing the watch to my fast-beating heart. I know that strange gesture, a twitch that precedes the delivery of a lie. One member of an orchestra of gestures and mannerisms, smiles and frowns and hand-movements. I knew them all once, and lived with them. And loved them.

"Hideki?!"

He shakes his head and starts to laugh. "Hello Alicia."

"What is this?"

His voice, like mine, abandons its local accent. "That's rather hard to explain."

I raise the gun a little and say, "Try."

He smiles a smile that still makes my chest ache and asks, "Or what, exactly?"

And I realize he has set all this up. He expected to die tonight. I've nothing to bargain with. I let the useless weapon swing down to my side.

He laughs and mutters "This is perfect. Of all the people it could have been..." He comes around to my side of the desk and perches on its edge. His eyes probe my face like he's studying a painting in a gallery. He grins and says "I can still see you behind that face."

"Hidey, what is this? What's going on?" I ask. I can see Tiffany Bomboko's stolen face reflected in glass cabinets behind his desk.

"It's... complicated." He tells me.

"Hidey, Tiffany Bomboko is dead. I need to know what she died for. I thought I knew..."

He holds his hands up, dark pink on the undersides, everything else brown. His every movement makes me twitch, expecting a trick, an attack. "You might want to sit down," he says.

I shake my head. Seated I'd be too immobile, too vulnerable. It's too obviously a trap.

He sighs and says, "You have to understand, we're doing this for you people."

"We?" I ask.

"Alicia, my real name isn't Hideki: it's 'Earthshine-on-the-solar-collectors, Lagrange two, ninety six-thirteen-seven'."

Despite everything, I snort. Orbital names always sound ridiculous, ending in place and date of birth. The first bit seeming to be the whatever the mother saw when she came out of anesthetic. Assuming there is a mother, for all I know they're decanted from jars.

Hideki responds to the snort with a look that tells me I should have more respect for the naming conventions of other cultures. Hideki could always say much in the smallest gesture. "Friends just call me E-shine," he says.

Like that makes it better. I stomp down the urge to laugh, fearing if I did it would become hysterical and disabling.

So many questions, which to ask first? "What are you doing on earth? I thought you couldn't come down here?"

"We generally choose not to. Without nanotech enhancements, my body wouldn't stand it. But our bodies are plastic things these days, aren't they?"

"But why are you here?"

"To change the world of course."

"You came here to do *this* to Congo?"

"My original mission, as should be obvious, was in your not-so-United States, Alicia."

It feels like plate tectonics is happening in my head. "The break-up of the union?" I guess.

He nods. "That was one of ours."

"Why?" I ask.

"Isn't it obvious? People are happier there now. Each state is its own little sustainable country, with walls between it and its differently thinking neighbors. You never really were that united Alicia, there were always at least two Americas, quietly at war with each other. We foresaw that there would be blood between them one day, and even we couldn't meld them into one, so it was better to break them up and keep them from each other's throats."

"But, here in Congo, you've made things worse?. You've implemented the most brutal, bloody regime imaginable."

"No, it's not the worst imaginable, there has been far, far worse in even your recent history. But yes, Mwende is a monster and his regime is an affront to humanity, as was Caucau in Fiji and Woolson in Britain. But look at Fiji and Britain now."

"You made Caucau too?"

"Caucau, no. Woolson, yes. After Caucau we realized that things have to get pretty bad for

people to work together. Congo has hundreds of racial groups and tribal associations. If Mwende weren't here, they'd be fighting each other right now in a civil war that would see millions of deaths, and would go on forever with each ceasefire failing when someone took the opportunity to pay back for something that happened decades before. But Mwende is here, and he keeps the lid on things. Not only that, but he grinds the majority of the populace so thoroughly that they all become indistinguishable to each other. They are united in suffering, and thus united they will build a new future together, rather than killing each other."

I look down at the gun in my hand. In my memory Damisi asks me through smoke if I would be happy with luxurious house arrest. The most intelligent thing my mouth can produce is, "What?"

"Nothing changes Alicia, you're still going to save millions of lives and bring peace and prosperity to a benighted nation."

"WHAT?! You can't expect me to-?"

His face goes serious, as does his voice. "Yes Ali, we do. It's no loss for me. I was over a hundred years old when you knew me as Hideki. The nanoware doesn't make us immortal. I may not look it, but I've not much time left. This is for the greater good."

"The greater good?" I echo. "Whose greater good?". And I see it, the missing piece of the puzzle. I can hear Damisi's voice in my head: "So, What size of cage is big enough to be acceptable?"

"The space program," I say, "When the States broke up, it collapsed. Our sustainable little countries can't support something like that. Then you nobbled China, Neo-Persia, India, and now the Federation of Africa."

He makes a disgusted noise. "Space? Ali, what are you talking about? People here don't even have clean water, scores of children die for lack of it every day. Who cares about space?"

I stare at him incredulously. "You just told me you were an orbital, remember?"

He throws his hands up frustratedly. "We have to get things sorted out down here first. This has always been the problem, you've always been too busy staring at the stars to help those in the gutter."

"Yeah. Right. Our technology is stagnant, our population is fixed, and there are no national or corporate entities large enough to re-instate a space program. That's what this is about really, isn't it?"

"No Ali, this is about clean drinking water and having kids that are able to read. This is about not being driven from your home and forced to live in a refugee camp."

"I'd like to believe that. Look me in the eye Hidey, and tell me it's true."

"Alicia," he says, and rubs his wide nose with a dark thumb.

I swiftly mirror the gesture. My eyes start to sting.

He laughs and shakes his head. "What do you people want with space?" he says, spreading his arms wide. "What use is it to you? You have everything you need right here."

"It's our future," I say.

"This is your future Ali. Clean water, no wars, decent housing and education. Forever."

"You've made us all into Switzerlands."

"Sorry?"

"Switzerland had peace for hundreds of years, and only produced the cuckoo clock." I now know I was wrong about Damisi. Damisi had this all figured out.

He frowns and says "No. The cuckoo clock was an Austrian invention."

Perfect. The giggles start. They're not happy giggles, but sick sucking things that I have no control over. "It's a cage," I gasp "A glass ceiling. We can't leave it."

"But you did leave it. We are the you that left. If space is so important, how come you people turned your back when it was yours for the taking? You abandoned us up here when we didn't want to return home. Well, space is ours now, you chose Earth. You can't come visiting now and expect us to be pleased to see you. Ali, what we've had to suffer to manage without the support of Earth, what we've had to do, you couldn't accept. We had to adapt, not just physically, but mentally, socially. We had to abandon some of the beliefs that are most basic to your societies. We changed ourselves, engineered ourselves. We are so far beyond you now, you wouldn't even recognize us as human. You can't accept your racial next-door-neighbors, you war even with people who share your language. You could never

accept us.

"Just when we're getting established, not just in orbit and on the moon, but Mars and Jupiter's moons too, along you come and say you want to get back into the game. Look at Earth, look at what it was before we took a hand. It was a fucking mess, and you know it. If we let you out, that's what the whole solar system will become. You're right, we don't trust you people. We're not going to let the monkeys back into heaven."

"Monkeys," I say. I look pointedly at the watch I gave him, all those years ago. "You always did like primitive things. Clockwork. That's what we are to you isn't it? That's what you've treated us as, tinkering with us like this." Something slides down my cheek. "That's what I was, a primitive thing that you were playing with. Like a pet."

"Ali," he says, and his voice sounds genuinely hurt, "whatever else you believe about me, it was never like that between us."

"You lied to me Hidey, and I killed for your lies."

"You killed for a better future, and that future is going to come. Nothing changes."

"And now?" I ask.

At least he's uncomfortable. "We both have a job to do," he says.

"No," I tell him. "Get someone else to be your wind-up soldier."

"Alicia, I'm sorry. This is bigger than us."

He speaks words, not in English but in some dark biblical tongue. In a single instant I experience and know many things simultaneously. The thoughts come at once like a box of fireworks with a match dropped in it, like caged animals bursting roaringly free. I know the words are "Do what you came for." I remember an implausibly Japanese Jesus speaking them to an equally miscast Judas Iscariot in a dramatization of the gospels that Hideki took me to see in Kyoto. I remember that it was Hideki who taught me auto-hypnosis. I have a vision of clockwork people moving in patterns under a glass dome. Then I see my arm raising, and the gun's recoil bruises my hand.



Under a Closed Sky by C.J. Paget is slickly told in a smooth and very engaging style. Again, this is a story which plays with familiar tropes but bends and reshapes them to the author's vision. Conflict between Earth and her colonies, political machinations and conspiracies, a Terminator-esque shape-changing and lethally equipped assassin are all here, but are given new twists and surprising sub-plots. The central character isn't a cold-blooded machine but a driven human, and we share her angst and fears as she masters her disguise and fools those who might betray her, all the while closing in on her goal. The gadgetry and devices at her disposal are not allowed to dominate the plot but simply add relish, and the twists and revelations at the end are effective, well disguised and expertly handled. I was hooked from first word to last.

Judged by Ellen Allen, Phil Lunt, Alasdair Stuart and Lee Harris.

Winner chosen by Ian Whates.

About Ian Whates

Ian is the Chairman of the British Science Fiction Association and an Overseas Regional Director of the Science Fiction Writers of America, 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 both Angry Robot and Solaris.

It wasn't as if Nile had ever expressed any dissatisfaction with his life. The letter came as something of a surprise, all his da's doing and well meant, so Nile never blamed the old man afterwards. If Wolrab managed to teach Nile anything at all that summer, it was that life was too short for recriminations.

That year, Nile's fifteenth, the summer was indecently hot. It came in on the heels of a brisk spring that seemed reluctant to stay around very long. Emmett was inclined to believe that this was a bad thing.

"Summer's too soon," he said, "things'll suffer for it before the season's out." Emmett was not a man of prophesy and, at the time, had been speaking only of the fruit and the late barley. But Nile remembered him saying it, and the words became prophetic in hindsight.

The letter had arrived during the last week of spring, while the world was still a place of thin, blue shadows and skies as clear as gin. The missaler had walked his string of pack animals up the keeping lane from the old road. He came once a fortnight in clement weather, knowing from experience that Nile's da was a fellow of avid correspondence. There was often a letter to collect for delivery to some old acquaintance or other in the city, though seldom, if ever, a reply to bring back.

Nile's father went down to meet the missaler, taking him the customary spelt bread crust and bottle of beer. The sun was out, but there was a smudge of rain in the west. Small butterflies, as blue as their best porcelain, tumbled in the hedgerows.

Nile had been working the field ditch at the bottom of Harm Hill with Emmett, staking in a row of new witch pegs along the keeping boundary. Seventh Sunday in the year, and old country customs had to be observed, no matter how empty and arduous they seemed. He had put down the mattock, and peeled the work gloves off his damp hands, watching the distant figures of his da chatting with the missaler by the lane stile, while the tethered pack horses cropped the hedges.

"Don't slack," said Emmett.

"I'm not," said Nile.

His da produced a handful of sealed letters, and gave them to the missaler, along with payment for the courier dues. Nile heard Emmett tut.

"Waste of money, all them letters. We could buy decent hemp seed with what he blows on letter sending. He will write so, your old da."

"It's his only pleasure."

"Yah, I think it must be," said Emmett.

It occurred to Nile that they were right, and that seemed immeasurably sad. Quite likely, correspondence was the only pastime lightening the latter end of his father's days, composing jocular, catch-up letters to the people he had called friends when he was still a man of circumstance. Nile was familiar with the typical content of his father's missives. To tutor Nile in both language and penmanship, his da often used Nile as his secretary after supper, by lamp light.

My dear Sinjohn! How is life with you? It seems so long since we last met and talked of the old times...

Rafail my good friend, I beg your forgiveness, for it has been quite too long since I last wrote to you and enquired of your health...

Dear Pieter, I have not heard from you in the longest age, though I expect you are too taken up with affairs of state to find the time to pen a missal to a peripheric antique like me. I will not take it as a slight, old friend! Let me tell you of the keeping these days. Well, we have planted early this year...

Rayf Hamner had once been a man of real circumstance. The weatherbeaten shield strung on the axel post of the Old Barn attested to that, as did the keeping itself, as well as his father's limp, and stump of an elbow. Men of circumstance were often expected to double as men of war, and twenty two summers earlier, Rayf Hamner had ridden out with the Prince's marshal to meet the Skelk at the Field of the North Wheels. He had come back with a pension and a keeping, his circumstance lost somewhere along the way, together with his right arm.

Nile's da didn't speak of the occasion often.

"He's had a reply," said Emmett, narrowing his eyes. Nile looked up from the witch peg he was tamping into the spongy earth. Down on the lane, his father was tucking a brown envelope into his coat with his good hand.

"Seed catalogues," said Nile, "or a tax demand. That's all da ever gets."

Rayf Hamner knew much of the world, and behaved as if he knew much more. He kept the contents of the letter to himself for several days.

Quietly, one supper, just after the grace, he announced the news. They were all there; Nile, Emmett, Prue the cookwife, the three general labourers, Gaze the trapper-husbandman, and Prue's daughter Linhy, who did the washing and tended the dairy stalls and the coop. They always ate together, at the long table in the kitchen. There was a formal dining room upstairs, with a handsome table and fireplace, but Rayf had stopped using it when Leda passed on.

"I am in receipt of news," Rayf Hamner said from the head of the table. "Emmett?"

"Yah, sir?"

"I want you to go to Silo this week. I can spare you for a day. Find two good, fit boys to employ as additional labour. Usual terms."

"We don't need of them, though," Emmett replied.

"We will. They will be taking up Nile's duties. He won't be working the keeping this summer, or in future."

Everyone stared at Nile, and Nile didn't know where to look, so he stared at his plate. His first impulse was to feel flattered that his father would need two men to fill his place.

Then he wondered about the rest of it.

"Why-" he began to ask.

His father put down his twin-tined pewter fork and freed his hand to reach into his coat. He pulled out the letter. From the creases on it, it had evidently been considered a number of times. He unfolded it again.

"I have, at long last, secured the services of a teacher for Nile," he said.

"A teacher now," echoed Prue, not entirely understanding, but keen as ever to express her enormous fascination in Rayf Hamner's doings.

"I have a teacher," said Nile, acutely aware of Linhy's eyes on him. "I have several. Emmett. Gaze. You, of course, da. You teach me what I need. My letters and my physic, my keeping work. I-"

"Not that kind of teacher, son," Rayf Hamner said with a soft smile. He put the letter down and reached out his hand to clasp one of Nile's firmly. "A teacher of devices."

"A teacher of devices, eh?" Linhy smirked.

"Don't mock," said Nile.

"I'm not," she said.

The night would otherwise have been perfect. The stars were out in a sky that had blushed almost purple, and the keeping lay hidden in violet shadow. They were in the loft of the oldest of the keeping's three barns, the one where the shield hung. There was a smell of peat and warm damp. Crickets were strumming in the dark.

"He wants to make a man of you," she said.

"I thought you just did that. Again."

"Hush up, you! He wants to make you a man of circumstance, I mean," she said.

"I know what you mean. Devices. I don't want for devices."

"Oh, but it's the very thing," she said. She took a sip from the bottle of beer they'd sneaked out of the pantry, then set it on a beam so she could pull her shift back on over her head. He watched her in the twilight, the soft curves of her bottom and thighs disappearing beneath the white linen shift. Linhy Stranks was two years older than he was, but they'd been friends since they were kids, and their friendship had

evolved into something else as childhood petered out.

She brought the bottle over, and sat down beside him, so they were looking out into the gathering dark together. She smelled of winter straw and beer and sex.

"You were always going to leave me, you bugger," she said.

"Never."

"Oh, absolutely you bloody were, sonny boy. Your da's always been after advancement for you. He wanted to get you sent up to the city."

"He tried that. No school would have me."

"It was just a matter of time, Nie. He wants you to be what he was. No, he wants you to be better than he was."

Nile shook his head.

"Drink beer and shut up with that," she said, passing him the bottle.

"You know what I want to do?" Nile asked, taking a swig and looking sidelong at her.

"I can fairly imagine."

"Yeah, apart from that. What I want to do... what I always thought I'd do... is stay right here. Learn to run the keeping, take it on from da when he passes. Just... be here, and live here, and do this."

"How much beer have you drunk?" she asked.

"I mean it. What do I need with devices? I'm not going anywhere."

"Well, you're a fucking prat, then, aren't you? No one stays on the peripheric by choice."

Nile read the letter for himself in the solar the next day. His da stood at his shoulder, craning in. Dust motes spun lazily in the light from the long windows.

"Lovely penmanship, of course," noted Rayf Hamner, with a nod.

"Yes, da."

"Very proper and dignified. Look at that S."

"Yes, da, it is."

"What do you think, then?"

Nile lowered the creased letter and looked up at his father. "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why all this, da? A teacher? What do I need with devices?"

Rayf Hamner pursed his lips. "I thought you'd be pleased."

"I'm... pleased, yes, I am. I just don't understand."

His father walked over to his desk and sat down, fiddling amongst the pots of ink and the cups festooned with quills. "Well, as I see it, he's tired of his time in the city and aims to retire. A country keeping like this, the peripheric tranquility, well... it seems he rather fancies that. I can offer a modest stipend, and a place to live. The mill house, I thought. It would suit him."

"That's not what I mean, da."

"What do you mean, then?" asked Rayf Hamner.

"I thought you raised me to run this place."

"I raised you to be my son. I raised you to be the best you could be. You're a man of good stock, Nile, on your mother's side at least. Away in the city, every smart young man of good stock gets his training in manners, sword-craft, devices and so on. Such skills are necessary for a life at court. But out here..."

"I'm happy out here, da."

"Of course you are."

"No, really, I am."

Rayf Hamner looked down at his ink-stained desk. "Your mother," he swallowed, "she wanted so much for you. So did I. I once had the Prince's ear, you know."

Nile nodded. It had become a long-standing family joke to reply 'did you keep it in a box, then?' whenever his da said he'd had the Prince's ear. Now didn't seem the time. "I know, da," Nile said.

"Well, so will you," Rayf Hamner said, enthusiastically. His eyes shone. "Oh, I can't afford a proper tutor, and I certainly can't afford to send you away for schooling. Do you have any idea what the dues are

like at the colleges of devices these days?"

"Beyond our means, I'm quite sure, da."

"Yes, they are. So this is a godsend. Wolrab is a first class teacher, he really is. He's served as tutor to the houses of three of my old friends. Trained their children, you see? Pieter Gartner, your dear mother's cousin, recommended him and put me in touch. Good old Pieter!"

Nile sighed. "This Walrob."

"Wolrab, Nile, Wolrab. Oh, he's quite old," said Rayf Hamner with a brusque wave of his hand. "Wants to slow down, and escape the bustle of the city. Just live out his last years in one of the quieter ends of the world. But he's as sharp as a fishhook still, Pieter says. Happy to train you in return for a modest country living."

"When he's trained me, da," said Nile, "what do you suppose I'll do?"

"Well, go up to the city and make something of yourself, of course."

"What about the keeping, da?" Nile asked.

"Oh, it'll keep. It's not important."

"It is to me."

Rayf Hamner rose to his feet. He beckoned Nile over to a blanket chest under the window. "Look at this, Nile."

Inside the engraved chest, wrapped up in old quilts and balding furs, was a silver scabbard. His father struggled to unwrap it with his one hand. The scabbard was quite magnificent, with chased solstice work around the case and hangers.

"The Prince gave me this, after the War of the Rinx," he said.

"With a sword in it?"

"Of course with a sword in it!"

"What happened to the sword, da?"

"I lost it along the way somewhere. It was a fine thing. It was called Pantoum. All royal blades have names, you see. Mmm. Pantoum. Anyway, the point is, the Hamners once enjoyed influence. We were brought up to be part of the elite. It was only my failure led our line to this blasted peripheric backwater. It quite killed your poor mother. It..."

His voice trailed off. He bundled the scabbard back into the chest and dropped the lid with a bang.

"Da?"

"You could restore yourself, don't you see? With the proper teaching, you could put yourself back where you should be!"

"Da, I think I'm already right where I should be."

Rayf Hamner smiled, and ruffled Nile's hair with his one sound hand. "You're a good boy, you know. A very good, loyal boy. But I had the Prince's ear once, you know?"

"I know, da. Da, I think you shouldn't write back."

"Write back?"

"To this Wolrab person. I think you should leave it alone."

"Ahh," sighed Rayf Hamner.

"He's already written to him," Nile said.

"Yah, hold it true," Emmett grunted.

Nile adjusted his grip on the iron tongs.

"I said, he's already written a letter of agreement," said Nile.

"Uh huh," Emmett said, and hammered at the red-hot iron, *bang-bang chink, bang-bang chink*, two on the iron, one off the anvil's heel. "All right, dunk it," he instructed.

Nile poked the hot iron into the quench bucket. Steam hissed.

"What do you think, Emmett?"

"I think you're a lucky bastard, yah? Me, I'd like to learn devices. Learn how to cast steel with a flick of me hand. Learn how to fly up on the wind. I'd fly up out of this fucking place, that's for sure."

"Really?"

Emett looked at Nile. Emmett's old face was lined like a saddle bag. His shoulders were broad but his hair was thin, and many of his teeth were conspicuous by their absence.

"Only rat arses live out their days in the peripheric, son," said Emmett, "your da knows that."

Almost invisible in the long grass, the hare sat up. The quarrel cracked through its head and it jerked over, its hind legs pinwheeling.

"Like that?"

"Good," said Gaze. Gaze, dressed head to foot in old leather, smelled of owl pellets and rank sweat. He took the crossbow out of Nile's hands.

"I hear you're going up in the world," said Gaze as they walked to collect the kill.

"I'm to be taught devices," said Nile.

"Good for you. You'll be gone up in the city before we know it."

Gaze bent down and began to clean the hare out with his knife.

"Linhy'll miss you, mind," Gaze added.

Nile looked down at the underbrush. Sunlight was pouring through the trees, and the stiff grasses were buzzing with insects. Pollen filled the golden air like a soft blizzard.

"What do you know about devices, Gaze?" Nile asked.

"Absolutely nothing," the trapper-husbandman replied, tipping a pungent slick of hare entrails out onto the earth.

Wolrab arrived a week later, just as summer began in earnest. His coach clattered up the dry lane and came to a halt under the hard black shadows of the elm trees. It was a paid coach from Silo with flaky paint and a driver flushed with heat.

Emett called out notice, and everyone stopped what they were doing to come and see, Prue and Linhy from the kitchen, the hands from the fields and barns, including the two new fellows Emmett had taken on. Even Gaze appeared at the top of the lane, and stood watching, a half-skinned rabbit swinging from his hand.

Rayf Hamner bustled out into the yard, as fast as his lame foot allowed, trying to brush down his coat with his one hand. The sight of him made Nile flinch. He was so used to his da, he hadn't realised how worn out and unsophisticated he might seem to a stranger. especially a stranger from the city.

The driver slid off his perch, fetched a stepping block, and opened the coach door. Lenid Wolrab got down out of his coach into the flat summer light. He didn't look especially old to Nile. He was Emmett's height, not a tall man, and trim in his body. He wore a good grey suit with a white collar and small black cravat. His hands were dressed in soft brown gloves. He was clean shaven, and his thick hair was dove grey.

He looked around with the alert gaze of a dog fox. His eyes were genial and clear. He observed the group that had gathered to greet him.

"This is the keeping of Rayf Hamner?" he asked. His voice was delicate and refined, and the architecture of its accent was all city refinement. It sounded like an intricate silver tool that spent its life resting in a velvet box.

"You have found the right place," Nile's da replied, coming forward. By comparison, Rayf Hamner's voice sounded like a wooden ladle that had been standing in a churn too long. "Mister Wolrab? Or should I address you by some formal title?"

Nile realised he was holding his breath. The moment seemed so incongruous, and Wolrab so out of place. Nile was fully expecting Wolrab to take one further look, shake his head, and say, "I think there's been some mistake. This isn't at all what I was expecting."

Wolrab looked at Rayf Hamner, and the hand Rayf Hamner was extending towards him.

"I think there's been some mistake. This isn't at all what I was expecting," he said. "They'd given me to understand that I was condemning myself to a life of poverty and privation amongst unwashed yokels. The city has such a terrible opinion of the peripheric. What a wonderful home you have, Rayf."

Wolrab shook Rayf Hamner's hand, without any awkwardness that it was the wrong hand.

"May I call you Rayf? "

"Oh, of course."

"I'm very happy to meet you, Rayf. Please call me Lenid. I'm not at all one for titles. This keeping of yours is simply beautiful. The fields, your manor, the air itself. Oh, it's taken years off me already."

"You're very welcome here," said Rayf Hamner. "Let's get some refreshment, Prue, eh? And a beer for the driver there."

Prue scuttled off to oblige, holding her skirts up away from her feet. Wolrab regarded the rest of them with a gentle smile. "I see several young men before me. All strong and fit. One is your son, I presume. Let me guess."

He pointed a gloved finger at Nile. "You, young man. It would be you. I am pleased to meet you at last, Nile Hamner."

Nile took a step forwards. The man's voice was the most compelling thing he'd ever heard. It was as soft as falling snow, but as structured and precise as crystal ice.

"Welcome, sir," Nile said.

Wolrab shook his hand. He took his glove off to do so. Wolrab's hand was perfectly manicured. Nile could smell hair oil and some expensive shaving liquor.

"Well, let me look at you," said Wolrab. He clapped his hands against Nile's upper arms and stepped back, scanning him up and down. "Powers above, you make a change, lad. Proper healthy, and strong as salmon. You should see some of the insipid, pale things they've asked me to tutor in the past. No fire in their bellies, no colour in their cheeks. The city does do that, of course. So dark and oppressive. Things grow up there as if in a cave, all starved of light. Of course, you'll remember that, Rayf."

"I do recall the weight of the city," said Nile's da.

"A weight, my dear sir, that's slipping off me with every passing second. Now, let me know everyone. Who is this lovely child?"

He had turned to Linhy. She hesitated, then managed the only curtsy Nile would ever see her execute.

Rayf began his introductions. Prue returned with a tray of cordial and a beer for the coachman.

"And this is Emmett," said Rayf Hamner. "He's my top fellow, wouldn't be without him."

"Emmett Karson?" Wolrab enquired.

Emmett blinked. "Yah, sir."

"Tenth pike? Oh, no, no, Twelfth. Battle of the Rescend. Came here with your old master Rayf, I suppose?"

Emmett blinked again. "Yah, s'right, I did. Old service. How did you know?"

"Forgive me, you'll have to get used to that. I know. That's the way it is. That's the way I'm made. I hope I haven't spoken out of turn."

"Not at all," said Emmett.

Wolrab took the glass of cordial Prue offered him. He stamped his left foot once before sipping it, as if everyone did that. "Excellent. Delicious."

Prue coloured up and nodded.

"I am over dressed for the country, aren't I?" Wolrab said to Nile, dabbing the corner of his mouth with his folded glove. "I should affect a more sensible mode of dress. Something functional, like that man up there who doesn't join us."

Wolrab said this without ever turning his head or indicating that he had seen the distant figure of Gaze.

"You look the part to me," Nile replied. "I think we should be impressed by you. And I think we are."

Wolrab smiled.

"I'm nothing like you expected, am I, Nile?"

"No, sir."

"Well, I do love symmetry. You're nothing like I expected either. In a good way, I mean. I think we're off to a famous start."

They spent that afternoon moving Wolrab into the mill house at the corner of the lane. The place

was small and musty, despite Prue's attempts to open the casements and air it. Wolrab did not seem concerned. He had his luggage carried into the bedroom, and then walked around the house three times, stamping his left foot and clapping his hands every now and then.

"You can go now," he told them. "I'll settle in."

They left him to it and returned to their chores. The summer, like a hot iron, slid over the fields.

"He seems nice," said Linhy.

Nile nodded.

"You've known me all my life, and you've never told me you were in the marshal," said Nile.

Emett shrugged. "It never come up."

"It never came up you were a soldier in the long wars?"

"You never asked."

"I never knew to ask."

Emett shrugged and took another iron nail from between his teeth. "Hold it up square, yah?"

Nile pushed the door into place and held it so that Emmett could reseal the hinge.

"He knew."

"Well, it's his job, innit?"

They were gathering for supper in the manor's kitchen when Wolrab came in. Rayf Hamner was just lighting the lamps with a taper, a job he always insisted on doing himself.

"I'm not too early, am I?" Wolrab asked. He was wearing a linen shirt and moleskin breeches, and seemed much more in keeping with them all.

"Do sit yourself down," said Prue, lugging a cook pot from the stove.

"Here?" asked Wolrab.

He had somehow chanced upon one of the seats at the table that no one regularly occupied.

They sat down. Gaze came in last of all, and was introduced to the tutor. He held Wolrab's handshake as briefly as possible, and took a seat at the far end of the table. Rayf said grace, and then Prue began to spoon out the supper onto bowls that Linhy passed around.

"Have you settled in?" Rayf asked.

"Indeed, sir," Wolrab smiled. As a bowl appeared in front of him, Nile heard him stamp his left foot under the table. "I think I'll be very happy here," he said.

They began to eat. One of the hands told a funny story about a bullock that had run around in a field because of the bother of a horsefly. Everyone laughed, because it was well told. It was the sort of thing that was often told at supper.

"Horseflies trouble your cattle, then?" asked Wolrab.

"Yah, they can be big as your thumb," said Emmett.

"Will you start tomorrow, or... or what?" asked Rayf Hamner.

"Well, tomorrow suits if Nile is game," Wolrab replied. "No time like tomorrow."

Looking up from his plate, Nile nodded, his mouth jammed with food.

"Yes, then," said Wolrab, "best to get started."

"Mister Wolrab?" Prue asked, from down the table. "Would it be too much to ask you, I mean... about devices and such. We don't have much experience of such things out here, and I wondered... I mean... we'd love to see..."

"Oh now, Prue, I told you not to embarrass him," said Rayf Hamner.

"No, no, no, that's all right," said Wolrab, putting down his knife and fork. "I'm sure I can manage something. Now, what might be appropriate? Let me guess."

Wolrab closed his eyes and took a sip of wine. Nile heard his foot stamp twice under the table.

"There," he said.

"Well, very good," nodded Rayf Hamner, even though nothing had seemed to happen.

"Ma?" said Linhy quietly.

"What, dear?"

"Ma, look."

Prue looked down. Three inches above the crepey fold of her cleavage, a single white pearl hung on a silver thread.

"Oh my good lord!" she cried out, jumping up.

"For you, madam," said Wolrab, resuming his meal.

"Is it real?" she asked, holding it up to the light in wonder.

"As real as anything else," Wolrab replied, chewing on a mouthful of food.

"That's so kind and generous of you," said Linhy across the table.

"It's the most beautiful thing ever!" Prue exclaimed, regarding it.

"My pleasure."

"Why, that deserves a round of applause, in my opinion!" Rayf announced.

As the clapping died off, and the bottle began to recirculate, Gaze got to his feet.

"I'm sorry to eat and run. There's things I have to attend to to."

"On your way, Gaze," said Rayf.

"I'll keep some pudding warm in the firebox for you later," said Prue.

Gaze nodded and went out into the night.

"What a funny man," said Wolrab, pleasantly.

At dawn, unable to lie sleepless in his bed any longer, Nile went down into the yard. No one else was awake. The yard was in shadow from the elms, but long golden bars of sunlight already stretched out on the ground where the branches had let them through. It was going to be hot again. Where the light pierced the shadows, it possessed a foggy quality, like a lamp's glow reflected in an old worn mirror. There was no heat, but there was a promise of heat.

Nile walked about in the still hour, and washed his face at the pump. He felt foolishly eager. Wolrab had not specified a time to start. It might be hours yet before the teacher rose. Nile didn't know what time schooling usually began.

He went to the head of the lane, and looked out across the hedges and fields. With no trees to shade him, he felt the sun on his skin. He smelt the cold of the overnight ground expiring. He glanced down the lane towards the mill house. Its windows were shuttered and it was just a silent, grey silhouette except for the wall that faced the rising sun, which gleamed almost pink.

"I presume you're ready?" asked Wolrab.

Nile didn't know how long the teacher had been standing beside the stile. What's more, he didn't know why he hadn't seen him.

Wolrab grinned. He had on a green overcoat and carried a satchel. "I knew you'd be up early. I couldn't sleep myself. I'm not yet used to the quiet out here."

At Wolrab's bidding, they took a walk. Wolrab let Nile lead, and asked him to indicate the bounds of the keeping. They skirted the orchards, and then went along the footpath beside the stream, which was low for the time of year. Wolrab asked Nile to tell him the peripheric terms for certain plants, and seemed to relish their old country names. He told Nile their proper classifications in his delicate voice, and Nile tried to remember them all, supposing that his education had begun.

They crossed the water meadow to the cow bier, and then went up along the ditch by Harm Hill.

"Witch pegs," Wolrab said.

"It's just a tradition."

"These are new, though."

"We seat them every year. My d- my father likes to observe the old customs."

"Well, so he should," said Wolrab.

They circled the copse on Tobit Hill, and came back across the lower fields. By then, an hour into the walk, the sun had become tall enough to find its heat. The air was silver, and Nile could feel the light on the back of his head.

Wolrab was suddenly wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat. Nile wasn't exactly sure where it had come from. It was too big to have been in the satchel.

"Home in time for breakfast, then," said Wolrab.

"And after breakfast?"

"Well, we're done for the day. I don't want to rush things." He noticed Nile's look. "I really must unpack properly. I just didn't want to disappoint you on this first morning. I knew you'd be eager."

"Can I help you?"

"Oh, that would be too tiresome for you. I tell you what... read this for me." Wolrab took a small book from his satchel. It had red linen covers.

"What is it about?" Nile asked.

"Everything," said Wolrab. He gave the book to Nile and walked on up the lane. Blue butterflies followed him, like trailing ribbons.

"What's that?" asked Linhy.

"A book."

"What's in it?"

"I don't know yet," he said.

She put down the basket of damp washing. Her hands were blotchy pink from the tub. "Show it me."

Nile got up from against the wall and held the book out for her to see.

She frowned. "That's just marks. Just funny marks. Like cat scratches on a doorpost."

"I know. I think it might be some sort of test."

"He gave it you, then?"

Nile nodded.

"And you're reading every page?"

"No, but I'm looking at every page."

He dutifully read the book from one red linen cover to the other. There were no words to follow. It was like studying a pattern in the grass or, as Linhy had remarked, claw marks on a doorpost. He felt no better or wiser when the reading was over. He wondered if Wolrab had misjudged him. Perhaps he had no aptitude for learning at all.

"I confess I didn't really understand it," he said, as he returned the book to Wolrab over supper. Wolrab put the book away in his coat.

"Don't worry," Wolrab said. "You'll know soon enough. Ohhh! Lamb shanks!"

That night, Nile dreamed that the sun had red linen covers, and saw pages of golden light stretched out on the ground between the shadows of the elms in the yard.

In the morning, he went to the mill house, and they sat in the back parlour at a small table.

There was nothing on the table except a small cup of leaf tea that Wolrab had brewed.

"Devices," Wolrab said. He paused. "Yes, we've started in earnest, Nile."

"Good," said Nile, eagerly.

Wolrab leaned his lips against his steepled fingers and looked at Nile. "I think," he said, "we need to be honest, Nile. There's only so much I can teach you. In fact, there's very little."

"Oh."

"It's an age thing. In the city, I was tutor to old families. I was kept on retainer. I spent seventeen years with the Goldarks, a household fixture. I started with their boys at the age of three or four, when their minds were still supple. Their education was a long, gentle process, mingling letters and lore, history and philosophy, command of language. One doesn't just teach devices, you see? Devices require a proper context."

"I see," said Nile, not really seeing at all.

"You're a bright lad, Nile. God knows, if I'd had you younger. But you're, what, fifteen, sixteen?"

"Fifteen."

"Far too late, I'm afraid. You're too much of a man now to accept the imprint of what I can teach."

And there's so much lost time, so many rudiments that you're lacking. Several languages, a grasp of heraldry and law and motif, not to mention history. It would take years just to fill in the-

Nile looked down at his dirty finger nails.

"Oh, now look, I've offended you."

"No, sir."

"I have. I'm sorry. I just wanted to be honest."

"I thank you for that, sir."

Wolrab sighed. "I will teach you, Nile. I will teach you everything I can, and everything you're capable of knowing. I just want you to be realistic. And I'd appreciate if you didn't share my honesty with your dear father."

Wolrab leaned forwards and stared at Nile. "He expects so much," he whispered. "All I want is a quiet life. A time to rest. I don't want to disappoint him."

"I understand."

"Yes, I think you do. Good for you. Nile, I'll do the best I can."

Nile nodded.

"Good. Now let's take a walk again, shall we? Where's my hat?"

"On the third hook in the kitchen," said Nile.

Wolrab got up and left the parlour. Nile blinked. The tea glass was empty, the leaves dried to the bowl. Nile hadn't seen the teacher take a sip.

Wolrab returned with his straw hat in his hands and a smile on his face.

"Third hook," he said. "That's really very good."

The next day involved another book, a book with hard green covers. Its brown pages were full of confounding charts and tables, and a whirly text that looked like worm casts.

The fourth day was a yellowed scroll with wooden binders. The paper seemed to have no marks on it anywhere.

The fifth day was another walk, up around Harm Hill and into the leas. Wolrab classified the plants and flowers they passed, and Nile gave the country names, though when he got back to the manor, Nile had the strongest feeling it had been the other way around.

"How's my boy doing?" asked Rayf Hamner over supper.

"Really quite well," smiled Wolrab.

During the second week, most of which involved a strange yellow book with indeterminate etchings, the summer grew more drowsy and vile. Rayf Hamner kept to his chambers, sipping cordial and fanning his face. The hands complained, and stole away to bask under the barn. Prue lost her temper in the kitchen, and could not find it again, no matter how hard she yelled.

The grass was yellowing by the hedges. No one could remember when they'd last seen Gaze, though skinned rabbits turned up at the doorstep most mornings.

Wolrab and Nile took one of their regular walks late one afternoon, when the scolding might of the sun was in abeyance. Just prior to the walk, in the parlour of the mill house, Wolrab had asked after his hat, as he always did.

"In the upstairs back," said Nile, "in a brown box under the bed."

"Of course it is," said Wolrab.

They met Emmett coming up the lane. Emmett was puffing in the heat, his face as shiny as a conker. He was carrying a glass jar that looked like it was full of uncut diamonds.

"Hello, Emmett," Nile smiled. "What's that you've got?"

"Horseflies," said Emmett. He held out the jar for Nile to see. The lumps inside, clumped like rock sugar crystals, were the fat bodies of dead horseflies. Nile peered down into the jar. The afternoon sun made the wing cases glint like oil in a puddle.

"They're all dead," said Emmett. "All over the paddock. Just dropped dead out of the air. Must be this fucking heat- oh, begging your pardon, sir."

Wolrab smiled from under the brim of his straw hat. "Don't mind me, Emmett."

"They're just dead?" Nile asked.

"Save us, yes," said Emmett, shaking his head. "I just gathered up a few to show, for the marvel of it."

"Well," said Wolrab, "the cattle will be pleased, at least."

They lay on the crown of Harm Hill, under the hot stars. The sky was heavy with heat, swollen and purple.

"What's wrong?" Nile asked.

"Nothing," said Linhy.

He sat up and brushed corn husks from his bare chest. Some stuck in his sweat.

"Where's the bottle?"

She rolled over and passed it to him.

"You haven't been that keen in a long time," she said, watching him drink.

"It seems like forever, since we last-

"It was two nights ago. Am I that forgettable?"

"Don't be silly."

He sat back, leaning on straight arms, his palms feeling the itch of the dry grass turned to straw, the beer bottle nested between his bare thighs. She got to her feet and stood on tiptoes to look up at the stars. He relished the back view of her, the tension in her calves, and felt his blood moving again.

"Come back here."

Linhy turned to face him, her breasts swaying heavily against her ribcage. She made her eyes mock wide. "Really? Up again? What would my mother say?"

The next day, Wolrab brought up what he described as 'a delicate matter'. "There is a fundamental purity to the uses of devices," he said, "I do hate to burden you..."

"I don't understand," said Nile.

Wolrab shrugged. "For one thing, alcohol. It has a powerful use, ritually, but can be counterproductive when consumed for recreation."

Nile hesitated, then nodded. "I'll be more prudent, then."

"And sex, Nile."

Nile looked away.

"Oh, she's a lovely enough girl, don't get me wrong, but carnality fatigues the spirit. It wastes the humours. Ordinarily, it wouldn't matter, but I need you to be as strong as possible, you see-"

"For what?"

Wolrab huffed. He got to his feet and walked around the small back parlour. "Nothing," he said.

"What did you mean, sir? As strong as possible to do what?"

"To learn. To learn as best you can, for your father's sake." Wolrab looked Nile in the eyes. "Tell me, how much do you think you've learned already, Nile?"

Nile thought about it. "It seems, begging your pardon, like nothing at all. I couldn't quantify it. I couldn't make a list of any actual things. Sorry. But then-

Wolrab raised an eyebrow. "Go on, Nile."

"It's on the head of the scare-a-crow in the leas field," said Nile.

"What is?"

"Your hat," said Nile.

Wolrab grinned and nodded.

Rain came in, very suddenly, early on the first day of the fourth week. Linhy wasn't talking to him by then. They'd had a row the week before in the Oldest Barn, the one where the weatherbeaten shield hung. It was difficult to repair the damage done by a row that had begun while one of you was deliberately naked.

The rain was savage. Brooks and rills burst out along the hedge banks, and the back lane turned

into a stream for a good quarter hour. It was the first of only two rainy days that would punctuate that burning summer.

After the rain, the yard smelled of peat and soft dung. The manor's gutters gurgled and frothed. Vapour came off the meadows like fog. Nile ventured out but got no answer when he knocked at the door of the mill house.

He thought for a moment, and then walked all the way up to the top of Tobit Hill. The air was cold and moist. Wolrab was sitting on a tree stump in the hill top grove. He was soaked to the skin.

"What are you doing up here?" Nile asked.

The teacher rose to his feet and shook out his sodden overcoat. "A more pertinent question would be 'how did you know I was up here?'"

"I don't really know. I thought of your name, and then I knew."

The sun came out, poking from the smeared grey cloud cover like a brass coin stuck in a dirty fleece.

"In all matters of devices, Nile," said Wolrab, "names are the most important things of all. If you know something, if you know its name or - if it has no name - you know a thing well by its qualities, then you have a measure of power over that thing. Do you see?"

"I think so."

"The real trick, the best trick, the only trick that matters in fact, is to know how to know things. If you can do that, then the rest is simply window dressing."

"Right," said Nile.

"Any fool can be taught methods of conjuration," said Wolrab, "the practical rigmarole, I mean. But they are of no use without the means to employ them. Teachers like me, Nile, spend years and years in the houses of the high born, offering instruction. Often, the pupils we leave behind, though well schooled, have no practical ability in devices. They cannot perform a single thing. They have all the scholarly lore, but not the head sense to apply it."

As he said the words *head sense*, Wolrab tapped his temple with an index finger. "It is the head sense I've been trying to give you, Nile. To make up for lost time because you're coming to me so late. Accelerated learning, so to speak. I haven't bothered with the primer stuff, the facts and figures, the learn-by-rote basics. I've exposed you to certain potencies, and gone straight for the head. I hope you don't mind. The basics can come later."

"There's a reason for this, isn't there?" Nile asked.

"To catch you up."

"There's another reason," Nile insisted.

"Yes," said Wolrab.

They walked down Tobit Hill onto the ditch path, and followed it down the loamy gullies where spinneys of elder and gorse grew. Raindrops glittered like pearls on the leaves.

"The books you've had me study," said Nile, "the ones I read though I can't read them..."

"A student would usually come to those much later, at the end of his study," said Wolrab. "By then, he'd have enough mastery of languages and ciphers to literally interpret them. But I thought you might read them with your heart. Or that they would read themselves into you."

"When are you going to tell me the reason?" Nile asked.

"I'm not," said Wolrab. "You'll know it like you know everything else that actually matters."

In the last hour before supper that day, Nile worked with Emmett to clear some gutters at the back of the manor that had clogged up in the morning's downpour. They used long withy twigs to coax the leaf-muck out of the pipes. Water and thick black sediments sobbed from the mouths of the gutters.

"There was two fellows out on the lane today," said Emmett.

"Yeah?"

"Two strangers."

"Oh yeah? Who were they?"

Emmett cleaned off the end of his twig with a pinch of his finger and thumb. "I didn't see 'em, me.

Gaze came and told me about them."

"You saw Gaze?" Nile asked. "Where's he been? I haven't seen him for weeks. I thought he'd done a wander."

"He's around," Emmett replied. "He ain't taken much of a liking to our Mister Wolrab, see."

"Why?"

Emmett shrugged and blew out his lips. "I dunno. Why does Gaze do anything? But he come and told me about these men. They was on the lane, and came up as far as the witch pegs, but no further. What do you make of that?"

"What did Gaze make of that?"

Emmett stabbed his twig down a drainpipe. "Fuck only knows," he said.

He said his name once, then sat down to wait in the corner of the barn. The night was as dark as a blindfold. Nile had lit one candle to keep himself company.

Gaze arrived after about fifteen minutes. Nile had never seen him look so angry before. He had his crossbow in his hands, and it was loaded, but he uncocked it when he saw Nile.

"What did you do?" he growled at Nile.

"I called you."

"Very fucking funny, boy. Very fucking funny. Damn devices. Learned so much, have you, you can fuck around with the likes of me?"

"I just called your name."

"And I came running, even though I didn't want to."

"I'm sorry," said Nile.

Gaze shook his head. "I thought it was him. I thought it was him had called me."

"Why don't you like him?" Nile asked.

Gaze took a small flask of cider out of his pouch, unscrewed the stopper, and took a swig. He offered it to Nile, but Nile shook his head.

"You don't usually decline."

"No, I don't," said Nile. "Why don't you like him, Gaze?"

"He has a smell on him. I could smell it from the off. The sweet smell. Devices is one thing, but that."

"What about it?" asked Nile.

"My da taught me to fear that smell, like his da had taught before him. Same fear that makes us put in witch pegs every year, though, of course, your Master Wolrab was invited in. Not like them men on the road."

"What were they?"

Gaze took another swig. "I dunno. Mean and hard, they were. And wouldn't cross the peg line."

"If you see them again," Nile began.

"I'll tell you," said Gaze. He put his flask away and went off into the night.

It was Prue who invited them in. She was coming back up the lane one morning three days later, in heat that was too much for so early, with an apron full of wet garlic she'd cut in the meadow. The two men were waiting by the pegs. Prue knew at once they were gentlemen, from the cut of their fine dark suits and their city accents. The older one was tall, with grizzled grey hair. The other, younger man, was shorter.

"We are enquiring after Rayf Hamner," said the older man.

"Well, you'd better come up, then," said Prue, uttering the half a dozen innocent words that would change everything.

She led them up to the house, nattering away. They said nothing except for an occasional courteous rejoinder. Prue thought they were very graciously mannered men, just the sort of visitors she would expect Rayf Hamner to receive.

From the row of elms, quiet as a fox, Gaze saw them coming. He started to run up towards the keeping, hoping to skirt round and come in through the back of the house. The older man saw him, though Gaze was out of sight. He nodded to the shorter man, who immediately cut away and headed off towards

the elms. Prue didn't notice him depart.

"I expect you'll like a drink in this heat, Mister...?" She held the last word out, inviting the man to offer his name.

"That would be lovely," he replied.

The shorter man entered the line of elms. They were still, as if too indolent to move or rustle in the baking sun. He walked between them, his feet making no sound on the dry grass.

Something buzzed at him through the air, as fast and bright as a horsefly, although, of course, there were no horseflies around any more on the keeping that summer. The shorter man reached up with a snap of his hand and caught the buzzing thing just an inch from his face. He opened his hand, and looked at the crossbow quarrel. He tossed it aside.

Gaze lowered his bow in simple disbelief, and started to run again.

The shorter man clapped his hands together.

"Gaze," he said, as if the name had just that moment occurred to him.

Gaze ran head first into a large elm that had somehow shifted a yard to the left. The collision made an ugly crack. Gaze flopped over onto his back.

The shorter man turned and headed for the house.

"Where is Lenid Wolrab?" asked the older man for the third time.

"Who are you?" Rayf Hamner replied. "What is your name?" He stood defiantly at the front of the small group outside the kitchen door. Behind were Prue, Linhy, the hands, and Emmett.

The shorter man approached.

"Was it him?" asked the older man.

The shorter man shook his head. "A poacher, I think. There's no sign of Wolrab or the son."

"Take them to the barn," the older man instructed. "I'll search the house."

"How dare you just-" Rayf Hamner cried.

"Be quiet, Rayf Hamner," said the older man and Rayf shut his mouth, even though he still had words ready to come out. His lips refused to open. He put his hand to his sealed mouth in dismay.

Emmett could not stand to see his old master used so badly. He had been working at the anvil that morning, and he lunged forwards with an outraged growl to plant his shoeing hammer in the older man's skull. Prue squealed, "Emmett! No!"

Then Emmett was sitting on his arse, and the hammer was dangling from the older man's hand.

"Take them to the barn," the older man repeated.

As the shorter man led the frightened group of them away towards the barn, the older man entered the kitchen. He stamped his foot, and put the shoeing hammer down on the kitchen table.

"Nile Hamner," he said.

Nile had spent the first part of the morning reading another of Wolrab's curious books in his father's solar. The book, with patterned blue covers, had been full of odd chequerboard designs laid out in grids. It had grown pleasantly warm in the solar and, after a while, Nile had dozed off.

He woke at the sound of his name. He felt a cold pressure at the base of his spine. He got up and instinctively made to hurry down to the kitchen. The book pitched off his lap and hit the floor with a thump. He looked down at the grids.

He stopped. Somewhere outside, he could hear Prue sobbing and Emmett cussing. The sounds were drifting away.

Nile paid attention to the cold nagging at the bottom of his spine, and suddenly felt sick. There was a sweet smell in the room.

In the kitchen below, the older man looked up at the sound of the thump and headed towards the stairs.

Nile looked around, panic rising in his belly. He heard footsteps coming up the kitchen stairs. There were several objects in the solar that might serve as makeshift weapons: a candlestick, an inkstand, and a brass telescope all of which looked solid enough to crack a man's head. He tried to pull one of the old

pikes down off its wall mounting, but it was wired onto its hooks.

The footsteps reached the top of the stairs.

Nile ran to the blanket chest under the window, opened it, and rummaged around inside until he had laid his hands on his father's silver scabbard. Behind him, the door opened.

Nile held the scabbard tightly to his breast, not daring to look behind him.

"Pantoum," he said. "Pantoum. Pantoum."

"Nile Hamner?" a voice at his back said. "Nile Hamner, look at me now."

Unable to disobey, Nile turned to face the older man. As he turned, the sword that had been lost along the way somewhere drew cleanly out of its silver scabbard. Nile stuck it through the older man's chest. It was so sharp, it went in with no resistance at all. Nile stuck it through the older man so far the point of it came out between his shoulder blades

The older man blinked. "Oh," he murmured.

Nile pulled the sword back out. The older man sighed. Blood began to stain the front of his clothes from inside. He stepped backwards, unsteadily, and sat down on a chair.

"What has he done?" the older man asked, to no one in particular, and died.

He sat in the chair for a while, his head lolling further and further forwards, and then he toppled onto the floor. His clothes were soaked with blood, front and back. The solar gradually filled with the abattoir smells of the man's released innards. Nile felt sicker than before, and gagged. His pulse was chasing away like a greyhound. There was no blood on the sword at all.

Holding on to it tightly, he went to the stairs, more than anything else to escape the odours collecting in the solar. He stumbled down into the kitchen, went outside, and ran off towards the mill house.

It was mesmerically hot out in the open. The sky had baked white, like fired clay. The sun glared down like an open furnace, and the light of it winked off the blade waving in his hand. There seemed to be no shadows anywhere. When he reached the mill house, Nile's clothes were sticking to him.

Nile opened the door of the mill house. "Mister Wolrab? Sir? Lenid?" He stepped inside. "Mister Wolrab?"

Wolrab appeared. He looked unsettled and drowsy, as if he had just woken from a bad dream.

"They're here," Nile said.

"I know they are," said Wolrab.

They went out into the sunburned yard together, side by side. Nile was still holding the sword. The shorter man came out of the barn and faced them across the patch of caked earth. The ground was the colour of powder cinnamon.

"You've made quite the killer out of him," the shorter man called to Wolrab from across the yard. "Very clever. A device of deflection and innocence. You've fashioned him to perform your dirty work for you, and he doesn't even know why, does he?"

Wolrab narrowed his eyes, as if struggling to remember a name. "Runcy, Rouncy, Rampsey..."

He stamped his foot.

"You won't get my name, you conniving devil," said the shorter man. "I have devised it against you."

"Roundsey," Nile suggested.

A smile extended slowly across Wolrab's face.

The shorter man visibly blanched. "But-"

"Roundsey," said Wolrab triumphantly. He stamped his foot again. The stamp raised a puff of dust from the sun-dried dirt. The shorter man flew backwards abruptly, clear off the ground, as if fired from a circus cannon, and splintered through the planked side of the old barn.

Wolrab looked at Nile. "You knew, Nile."

"As you taught me. To know how to know."

"This isn't over, Nile. These men were just the advance."

"What is this about?" Nile asked.

Down on the lane, a dozen grimly dark figures were approaching the keeping through the summer's heat. Lacking an invitation, they had undertaken fierce and uncompromising devices against the witch pegs. The peg circle, describing the keeping's limits, had caught fire. Threads of black smoke trickled up into the bright, bleached air in a three mile rim.

"They intend to kill me," said Wolrab.

"Why?"

"Because they think they must," said Wolrab.

The first of the invaders came in under the scant shadow of the elms and reached the yard to face them.

"Pounderson," whispered Nile.

"Pounderson," Wolrab echoed appreciatively, and stamped his foot. The man sailed away over the hedgerow, arms and legs flailing, as if shot out of a catapult. They heard him land in the meadow beyond with a wet bonecrack.

"Oh, enough of that," said the next man coming up the lane in poor Pounderson's wake. He was thick set and balding, with a fussily clipped beard. "Enough now, Lenid. It's time to stop."

"Garvery," said Nile.

"Yes, I know," said Wolrab. "Garvery. Hello, Iain Garvery." He stamped his left foot.

The bearded man, Garvery, took a step or two backwards as if suddenly fighting his way into an invisible gale, then came on again. "I'm prepared, Lenid Wolrab," he said, clicking his fingers.

It was Wolrab's turn to stagger back a few feet.

"Very good," Wolrab said lightly, though he was clearly hurt. His eyes had suddenly become very bloodshot.

"The boy's a natural," Garvery said. "You've given him everything, haven't you, Lenid Wolrab?" He clicked his fingers again.

Wolrab winced and took another backwards step.

"He learns well," Wolrab replied.

"You've soaked him in all the art and none of the method, haven't you? He knows the know, but he doesn't know why."

"He doesn't need to know why, Garvery," said Wolrab, making another quick stamp. Garvery swayed backwards three whole steps. Blood welled out of his gums and seeped over his bottom lip in stringy dribbles.

"What did you tell him, Lenid?" Garvery asked, wiping his mouth. The dark men were coming up either side of him, walking slowly and with great purpose.

"Never you mind," said Wolrab. "I'm warning you now..."

"Baint. Farlus. Shardlow," said Nile as the names came into his head.

"Baint," said Wolrab with relish. He stamped his foot. The soberly suited man to Garvery's left took off into the air and plummeted into the stream bed.

"Farlus," said Wolrab. Stamp.

Another man tumbled away, end over end, like a poor soul swept up in an invisible avalanche.

"Shardlow," said Wolrab. Another stamp.

This was the worst. Shardlow caught fire from the inside, and fell down on his face, burning like a wick, writhing in torment.

"Stop it," said Garvery. "Nile? It is Nile, isn't it? What did he tell you?"

"Nothing," said Nile.

"Then listen to me, Nile. Listen to me. He's using you. He's armed you and he's using you. Lenid Wolrab is a killer. He's quite mad. His long exposure to devices has turned him. That's why he fled the city to this quiet end of the world, to hide away."

"You're lying," said Nile.

"Am I?" asked Garvery, taking another step forwards. He was flanked by his remaining students. Foul, fatty smoke billowed up from Shardlow's trembling body. "We've been searching for him, Nile. Hunting

for him. He cannot remain at large. He's a danger to the public."

"He's lying," said Wolrab.

"You're lying," Nile told Garvery.

"He's taught you how to know, hasn't he?" Garvery asked. "For the love of God, use that. Know him."

"No, thank you," replied Nile firmly.

"Please, Nile! Just take one look. Use what he taught you! Know him for just one second! One second! What harm could that do?"

"Don't listen to him, Nile," said Wolrab. "He's talking utter nonsense."

Nile looked at Wolrab. He saw a glass of tea. He saw a book with red linen covers. He saw a straw hat, hanging on the third hook along in the kitchen of the mill house. He saw what he had been taught to see and knew, instinctively, what he had been taught to know.

For one brief second, he saw maggots gnawing at a bloated carcass. He saw them squirm. He saw rot and decomposition. He saw and he knew.

"Oh god," Nile whispered. "What have you done to me?"

Wolrab smiled. "I've taught you, Nile Hamner," he said. He was about to stamp his foot again.

"Exactly what have you taught me, Lenid Wolrab?" Nile asked.

Wolrab hesitated. He stood on one leg, his left foot refusing to thump down.

"I-" he began, distracted.

There was a buzz and a hard crack. Wolrab's head jerked violently, like a whip's lash. When he looked back up at Nile, his features were oddly slack, and his left eye was bulging grotesquely out of its socket. Blood dripped out of his nostrils. He opened his mouth, and it was full of blood too, as crimson as Prue's beetroot soup. The blood dripped out down the front of Wolrab's shirt.

Wolrab swayed for a moment, and fell down on his face. A stout crossbow quarrel was embedded in the back of his head.

Gaze, his face grazed and bloody, limped out of the elm stand.

There was a lot of to-do. Garvery's men scoured the farm and made a bonfire of the books they found in the mill house, all except some that Garvery took for himself.

"He was a deceiver, sir," Garvery told Rayf Hamner. "A rogue. Don't blame yourself. He had committed so many crimes in the city, he fled out here to start again, where no one would know him."

"But my wife's cousin, Pieter Gartner, recommended him personally!" complained Rayf Hamner.

Garvery sighed uncomfortably. "I'm sorry, sir. Pieter Gartner has been dead these eight years."

"But I've had letters!" Rayf Hamner protested. His voice trailed away. Garvery walked away to check on his students.

"My son knew him, didn't he?" Rayf Hamner called out after him. "He knew Wolrab for what he was. I mean, when it truly counted?"

Garvery turned and looked back over his shoulder. "Yes, sir, he did."

"What happens to my son now? Will you take him up into the city, for proper schooling?"

"Oh, there's no need for that," said Garvery.

"Well, that's everything," said Garvery. His men stood ready to leave. It was a hot evening. Garvery's dark men had pulled off their coats to counter the heat. They stood in their shirts at the top of the lane. "I'm truly sorry about all of this trouble," Garvery said to Rayf Hamner. "I really am."

"Go away now, Iain Aleksander Garvery," said Nile, standing at his father's side.

Garvery and his men turned aside sharply as one, like a herd of bullocks bothered by the attentions of a horsefly, and hurried away down the lane and off the keeping's property.

As it turned out, Linhy was wrong. Nile didn't leave her. Prue sent Linhy away that winter to live with an aunt the other side of Silo. Gaze gave in his notice and went to work at a keeping south of Salestown. Nile put the sword back in its scabbard, and placed them both in the blanket box under the window in the

solar.

"I'm sorry, son," Rayf Hamner said.

Nile didn't reply. In the last of the lazy summer heat, he walked down the lane, up the ditch track past the scorched remains of the witch pegs, and sat down on the crown of Harm Hill.

"Dawny meadowbutter," he said, pointing at a nodding flower. A wind was up in the east, promising relief from the heavy summer.

"Cup bower blue," Nile said, gesturing to a passing butterfly.

"Sky," he said, laying back and pointing up. The heavens opened.

Rain slammed down on the keeping.

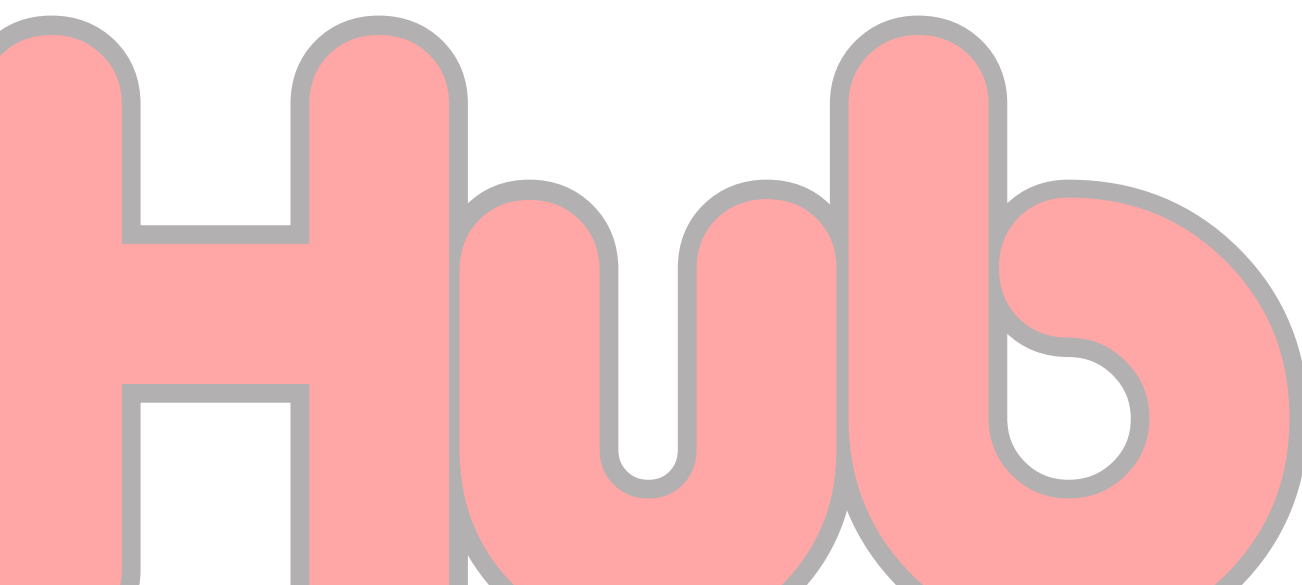
Nile felt it streaming off his face.

He smiled. He knew.



About Dan Abnett

Dan made his name in the tie-in SF and Fantasy fiction field, selling more than 1.2 million copies in English language of his Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000 novels for Games Workshop's Black Library imprint. They've also been translated into ten other languages. He's also recently made the UK fiction charts with original Torchwood and Doctor Who novels. His comicbook scripts, for major publishers such as Marvel, DC Comics and the UK's 2000 AD, have attracted critical plaudits and strong sales on both sides of the Atlantic. Dan's first original novel – *Triumff: Her Majesty's Hero* – has just been published by Angry Robot.



Doctor Who – Dalek War box set

reviewed by scott harrison



Directed by Paul Bernard & David Maloney
Starring Jon Pertwee, Katy Manning, Roger Delgado, Bernard Horsfall
BBC
rrp £34.99

Doctor Who was celebrating its tenth anniversary when it began screening its first story of the season, *The Three Doctors*, in late December 1972. Not a bad innings for a small, low-budget sci-fi show whose reach, more often than not, tended to exceed its grasp. Only grimy, kitchen-sink drama-soaps such as *Coronation Street* and *Z-Cars* had been running longer; even popular long running sci-fi/drama anthology serials such as *Out of the Unknown* and *The Wednesday Play*

had sadly been axed by the beginning of the 70s. Fitting then that the production team should want to celebrate in style the programme reaching its tenth year on British television screens. And celebrate they did!

BBC Enterprise's latest Classic Who release brings together the Third Doctor's unofficial 12-part adventure comprising of the two 6-part stories *Frontier in Space* and *Planet of the Daleks*. The box set itself has been released under the umbrella title of '*Dalek War*', which although sounding rather nifty (and will no doubt be responsible for shifting more units) is something of a misnomer, having almost nothing to do with the two stories contained within – taken from a line spoken by the Doctor in *Planet of the Daleks* referring to a 1963 William Hartnell story.

The Doctor and Jo Grant arrive in the 25th century to find the vast empires of Earth and Draconia erupting into chaos. For centuries the neighbouring empires had enjoyed an era of peaceful co-existence, establishing a frontier between the two expanding territories, a 'neutral zone' that neither side could enter. But now that peace has been shattered as diplomacy starts to break down and both sides begin to prepare themselves for a war that neither side can win. Accused of spying for the Draconians and imprisoned on a lunar penal colony it's not long before the Doctor soon discovers a third party, The Master, behind it all, plotting to put Earth and Draconia at each other's throats and paving the way for an invasion by his employers, the Daleks!

Following them to the nearby jungle planet of Spiridon the Doctor and Jo meet up with a Thal expedition, sent from their home planet of Skaro on a suicide mission to destroy the vast Dalek army that lies in wait in suspended animation beneath the surface of the planet. As the time of awakening draws near the Doctor and co must race to stop the invasion force from leaving it's underground lair while battling against hostile plant life, ice volcanoes and an invisible indigenous population.

As a 12-part story this works remarkably well, with episode 6 of *Frontier in Space* ending on a traditional cliffhanger and episode 1 of *Planet of the Daleks* beginning with a reprise, there is a definite natural progression as one story moves into the other – even if the quality of writing dips somewhat at the halfway point. Malcolm Hulke's far-reaching political space opera is by far the stronger of the two stories, standing head and shoulders above Terry Nation's adventure-by-numbers Dalek section. *Genesis of the Daleks* aside Nation has contributed very little of any particular note to *Doctor Who* since 1965, and *Planet of the Daleks* is no exception. Although still a highly enjoyable adventure yarn in its own right, it is by far the weaker of the Third Doctor's three televised Dalek stories. Coming across as 'The Dalek's Greatest Hits' there is sadly little that is original either to sci-fi, *Doctor Who* or other Terry Nation stories in the 6 episodes. Jungle planets, hostile plant life, invisible monsters, the Doctor leading a Thal expedition to destroy the Daleks, Nation has used all these ideas before in his previous Dalek scripts and arguably to much greater effect. Still, Dalek's in *Doctor Who* is what the viewing public have always insisted on and a tenth

anniversary season would not have been complete without the inclusion of the bad-tempered little pepper pots! It's a little sad that most people will be buying this just so they can get their fix of more Daleks as the Draconians are by far the better 'alien', and still look beautifully realised some 26 years later!

This release's biggest downfall, however, is found amongst its rather generous extras in the form of the awful two-part documentary 'Perfect Scenario', which is, somewhat ironically, far from perfect. Although well meaning this 'experimental' doc is in turns infuriating, self-indulgent, confusing and thoroughly tedious. Presented in the style of a sci-fi story involving two men from the future researching *Doctor Who* in order to think up 'dreams' to entertain hundreds of sleepers...or something...I really couldn't be bothered to try and work it out...the research is presented in the form of 'archive' interviews from real present day cast and crew of the two stories

as well as actors pretending to be future experts about the 20th century and television...or something...to be honest I'm boring myself just writing it down. I'm sure it seemed like a good idea when they were dreaming it up over a few pints in the pub at lunch time but unfortunately the result comes across as so much long winded, look-aren't-we-clever tedium. Fortunately the box set is saved by the remaining extras which comprise of wonderfully informative, if slightly too brief, traditional 'making of' documentaries, a superb biographical doc on actor Roger Delgado, two featurettes on the comic strip world of *Doctor Who* as well as the usual fantastic cast and crew commentaries.

For those who love the Third Doctor era, its grandness of scope, its wonderfully thought out and crafted stories, its monsters, its action, its gadgets then this release is for you. Produced at a time when the Jon Pertwee/Katy Manning partnership was at its peak and featuring the final note perfect performance of Roger Delgado's Master before the actor's tragic death this box set is classic Third Doctor. If you're new to *Who* and aren't that familiar with the Pertwee's Doctor then this is a good place to start.

FEATURES

You Know You Want It

by kelly harker

Lots of hot, steamy sex. There is nothing wicked in enjoying a bit of adult science fiction. And there's no shame in enjoying a lot of it, either. I proudly admit that I am a woman who loves the adventure of sci-fi mixed with really intense sex scenes. I don't believe that there is anything hypersexual in my desire to watch sex being performed in zero gravity, I just value the intense sexual pleasure that it gives me. It's not about an obsession with sex; it's about finding beauty in sex and in the human body, and mixing it with another one of my passions: sci-fi.

Of course the simmering eroticism that some science fiction movies and shows express will be host to critical attack on the grounds that they are a matter of sexual offense, but honestly I praise anything intended to boost my sex drive. And while many would run in disgust when watching atypical sexual relationships represented on film and television (Ex. Aliens having sex with humans, or the use of an "Excessive Machine"), I am one who is a defender of any sexual experience that deviates from the conventional. And isn't that one of the best things about sci-fi – to deviate from the conventional, and to be imaginative? I'm thrilled that we can openly celebrate and challenge our sexuality through the science fiction genre. Especially when there's lots of hot, steamy sex.

There are many sci-fi movies and television shows that celebrate our sexuality by bringing both intellectual as well as sensual pleasures for its audience. Here are just some of my favourite few:

Barbarella: This 1968 sci-fi erotic film directed by Roger Vadim tested the limits of sexual content –

Hooray for that! – helping to pave the way for future science fiction erotica. There isn't any graphic sex in the film; the focus is on having fun. But that doesn't mean it won't induce arousal: Jane Fonda stripping her space suit in zero gravity, exposing her beautifully sculpted breasts is just one of the many scenes intended to "get you off". But the movie doesn't need nudity to keep your blood pumping wildly - the creatively designed come-fuck-me costumes that both the men and women wear in the film would make a great addition to any wardrobe designated for "role play". Am I the only married woman who has a section of her closet set aside for just that occasion? I reckon, no. And of course one of the best sexually charged scenes in the film is watching Jane Fonda's character experiencing overwhelming orgasmic ecstasy in the "Excessive Machine", which will no doubt blow even your gasket! If you have yet to see this film full of fun debauchery, then you're in for a delicious treat.

Caprica: While some folk don't like to see naked bodies and graphic sex on television, I'm someone who finds full disclosure sexy. Ron Moore and David Eick have definitely delivered something different, which becomes evident in the racy opening sequence of the pilot. Let see...the idea of being able to experience an orgy in virtual reality? Sign me up! Although the show isn't set in space, there's still promise for a lot of juicy Cylon activity. Do you think Tricia Helfer will make a cameo in this new series? If I've been praying to the right God, then yes. And I wouldn't protest to seeing some robot sex scenes. It's one of my stranger fetishes that I'm not afraid to admit to a wide audience. You can now raise your hand if you have the same fetish. I'm sure I'm not alone here. I would also like to praise the series for gifting us with those wonderfully scripted hardcore group sex scenes. Thank you, thank you, thank you, writers! The idea of having sexual fantasies being played out in a virtual reality setting really is the wave of the future. Seriously guys, where do I sign up?! I'm definitely looking forward to more *Caprica*, and more frakking on the show. This is going to be a smart series that also satisfies the sexual interest of the viewer.

Torchwood: Science Fiction definitely mixes with sex in a brilliant and raunchy way in this *Doctor Who* spin-off. The Omnisexual Captain Jack Harkness pushes boundaries with his unconstrained sexuality that has both excited and repulsed viewers, depending on how prude one may be. But those who value social progression and freedom of expression will love and appreciate Jack's power of sexual beguilement. Not only is Captain Jack Harkness an alien hottie, but every member of the *Torchwood* team is a visual delight. There seems to be a lot of controversy over the sexually adventurous nature of the series, but really the show is not as graphic as it could potentially be. There is some fantastic hankey-pankey going on amongst the team members, but we never do see bare breasts or spread limbs. Such a shame. It's the idea of sexual freedom that seems to offend people, not the actual sex act. I say, roll on Season Four!

I clearly don't mind a bit of indecency in my science fiction, but when does sex in sci-fi become pure galactic porn?

Not that there's anything wrong with watching pornography – I'm a huge fan! – but I like to separate good science fiction that peaks my sexual interest, with tasteless porn with a sci-fi feel, that is so crude it doesn't even make me peak. I think the best way to put it is that I'm a smart girl, who needs smart porn. So what's the difference between sci-fi porn and sci-fi with sex? Science fiction erotica isn't pornography if it doesn't show the actual moment of penetration. Once it does, however, it enters a whole new ball game. So you see it's very easy to differentiate between a sci-fi show that has hot steamy sex in it, and sci-fi pornography. Have you ever seen *Porn Wars*? I have. Don't make the same mistake I did, and let the lure of a *Star Wars* feel to it fool you, because you'll only be very, very disappointed.

Everyone wants to feel sexually aroused. I know I'm not the exception for wanting it. I think the hard lesson that I learned from experimenting with sci-fi pornography is that it isn't as intellectually, imaginatively, or sexually stimulating as watching my favourite science fiction shows and films are. Everyone hopes for movie or show that is satisfying, and science fiction that has sex mixed into it – sans the penetration – is most definitely fulfilling.



In the early years of the 1970s *Doctor Who* had undergone a dramatic resurgence at the hands of new producer Barry Letts and script editor Terrance Dicks. Audience figures had leapt to a steady 8-9 million viewers a week and all talk of taking the show off the air was irrevocably silenced. However, by late 1973 both Letts and Dicks expressed a keen interest to hand over the reins to a new production team and move on to other projects, prompting the show's star Jon Pertwee to come to the decision of making his fifth year in the role his last. Concerned that his commitment to the programme's lengthy production schedule was

forcing him to turn down other work, coupled with the steady break up of his close circle of friends and colleagues around him on the show finally persuaded Pertwee that bowing out as the Third Doctor at the same time as Letts and Dicks would be better for the programme as a whole. The production team wasted little time in setting about their task of searching for a new lead actor, considering a variety of names from the worlds of children's television, sit-com and London theatre; producer Barry Letts pondered over such known faces as Michael Bentine, Graham Crowden, and Fulton Mackay. It was the then Head of Serials Bill Slater who first brought a little known actor called Tom Baker to Letts' attention.

At the time Tom Baker was a struggling out of work actor who had dabbled in both film and television; appearing in such diverse productions as the BBC's *Play of the Month* series, Amicus' British portmanteau film *The Vault of Horror*, Pasolini's Italian version of *The Canterbury Tales* and Columbia Picture's *The Golden Voyage of Sinbad*. Down on his luck and working as a labourer on a building site Baker wrote a rather desperate letter to Slater (who had directed him in *The Millionaire*, his episode of *Play of the Month* in 1972) begging for any work that he could offer him. Letts was greatly impressed upon his first meeting with the eccentric actor, as was incoming producer Philip Hinchcliff and new script editor Robert Holmes who had been brought in to help cast the new Doctor. Eager to see if Baker could act producers Letts and Hinchcliffe along with writers Holmes and Dicks took a trip out to their local cinema which was currently showing the actor's latest film, the Ray Harryhausen fantasy sequel *The Golden Voyage of Sinbad*. Interviewed in the 2007 documentary *Are Friends Electric?* Barry Letts went on record as saying that in his opinion "Within minutes of Tom appearing on the screen I knew I'd got my Doctor."

Finding a new producer for the programme had proved a altogether tougher challenge than finding the lead actor. Known within the corridors of the BBC as being a rather problematic and difficult show to produce this manufactured a great reluctance among staff producers to step in to the soon to be vacated role. In fact, resistance was so vigorously against the programme that when both Barry Letts and Terrance Dicks had tried to move on to other work at the end of 1972 they had both been strongly persuaded to stay on and steer the show through at least one more season. Philip Hinchcliffe, a 29 year old script editor and associate producer from ATV, trailed the outgoing producer for several months, striking up an immediate and strong rapport with both the new lead actor and incoming script editor Robert Holmes. Together, over the next three years, these three key players would go on to produce one of the most successful and popular periods of the programme, what has now become known amongst many fans as the Golden Age of *Doctor Who*.

Words such as 'gothic', 'macabre', 'dark' and 'horrific' are often bandied about when describing the Hinchcliffe era (1975-77) - Tom Baker's first three seasons - and it's true that during this period many stories looked to the horror films of Hammer and Universal as well as John Wyndham's *Day of the Triffids*, Jack Finney's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll & Mr Hyde* and Jack the Ripper amongst others for their inspiration. With a noticeable increase of horror and violence into a programme that was being transmitted at 6pm on a Saturday evening - a slot traditionally aimed at family 'teatime' viewers - it was not long before it caught the eye of Mary Whitehouse's Viewers' and Listeners' Association. One scene that rankled with her most was at the end of part three of *The*

Deadly Assassin where a freeze-frame cliffhanger lingered upon an image of the Doctor being drowned. As something of a change of policy for the BBC Whitehouse's complaint actually prompted a written apology from the then Director General Charles Curran and several frames were removed on subsequent broadcasts. Interestingly, these lost frames were not replaced back in to the story until it was released on DVD in May 2009, where it was presented uncut for the first time since its original broadcast 33 years earlier in November 1976.

When approaching the character of the Fourth Doctor Tom Baker decided that he wanted to accentuate the Time Lord's alien qualities, a sharp contrast to the Third Doctor's agreeable 'gent' with a love for Earthly pleasures. Baker emphasised the Doctor's aloofness within certain dramatic situations, making the character seem colder, more detached, with a propensity for violent mood-swings, thoughtlessness and inappropriately timed humour. In fact, the character of the Fourth Doctor can be split into two distinct 'personalities' throughout his tenure, that of the sombre, thoughtful and shockingly unpredictable intellect from his first four and seventh seasons, and the Monty Python-esque, child-like clown of his fifth and six seasons. Although the former is by far the more alien, chillingly successful and exciting to watch it is, sadly, the bumbling clown of producer Graham William's era (1977-79) that is often mimicked and recreated by fans and writers. It was decided by the production team that as Pertwee's Doctor had been the fussy, well-dressed dandy then the fourth incarnation should be the opposite, scruffily attired, with an eclectic, ill-matching collection of clothing that appeared to have been thrown on without any thought whatsoever. The trademark long, woollen scarf came about quite by accident, when a lady with the unlikely name of Begonia Pope, a relation of one of the BBC staff, was given a large amount of wool by costume designer Jim Acheson hoping that she would knit him a couple of stripy Parisian scarves. Not realising that more than one scarf was required Pope instead used up all the wool producing just one scarf that was an estimated twenty feet long. The look of this new Doctor was of a turn of the century bohemian, and based very strongly on the paintings and posters of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec of his friend the singer and nightclub owner Astride Bruant, who famously used to wear wide-brimmed hats, black cloaks and a long red scarf.



Although the Fourth Doctor's first season included stories featuring old enemies the Daleks, the Cybermen and the Sontarans (commissioned by Barry Letts and Terrance Dicks before vacating their posts) the new team of Hinchcliffe and Holmes were somewhat opposed to trotting out the same familiar villain and – with the exception of the Master in *The Deadly Assassin* – would only present the audience with brand new villains that were both fresh and different to those seen in the past. Not since the 3 years that William Hartnell occupied the role in the 1960s would an era of *Doctor Who* create such vivid and iconic monsters and villains that would appear only once in the programme's original 26 year run. From the ancient Osirian god Sutekh to the parasitic Krynoid plants, from the shape-shifting Zygons to the Peking Homunculus of the 51st century these images would terrify a nation of young children and embed an indelible image on their subconscious forever. It was arguably this era of the programme that produced the most chilling and instantly recognisable images that would be associated with the show until its reinvention in 2005. Aside from the obvious image of the curly haired, toothy-grinned, be-scarfed Doctor himself it is Tom Baker's first four seasons that has buried itself the deepest into British social consciousness. An era of foggy Victorian streets, deformed mad scientists, robot mummies, gleaming white space stations, gothic castles and huge mining ships on alien worlds.

Perhaps the two most important additions to *Doctor Who* mythology during Tom Baker's tenure is the introduction of the Dalek creator Davros and the complete reinvention of the Doctor's old nemesis the Master. Introduced in *Genesis of the Daleks* this is the first time that we truly learn of the origins of the Daleks (outside of a few lines in the 7-part Hartnell story *The Daleks*) and, more importantly, Davros' involvement in their initial evolution. By this time writer Terry Nation had firmly decided that the Daleks were based on the Nazis and, fittingly, gave them a ranting, power-hungry fascist dictator in the form of their crippled

megalomaniac creator. Davros would go on to appear in all the remaining Dalek stories from that point until the show's cancellation in 1989, which some fans and critics have stated lessened the impact and menace of the Daleks themselves, rendering them little more than spear-carriers. Although very little was actually revealed about the character or origin of Davros in the original series it's interesting to note that Russell T. Davies' book *The Writer's Tale* contained the first draft script of the 2008 episode *Journey's End* which did include a brief scene of Davros before he is disfigured caught in a devastating explosion in a hospital ward that would transform him into the monster we see now. However this was cut at script stage and was never filmed.



When actor Roger Delgado died in a car accident in Turkey in 1973, his final, farewell performance as the Master went unfiled, instead the character simply vanished without explanation from the programme. It would be 4 years later, in *The Deadly Assassin*, that Hinchcliffe and Holmes decided to bring him back for a rematch in a story penned by the script editor himself. At the end of his 13th and final incarnation and holding on to life by sheer force of will, the Master is found weak and decaying on the planet Tersurus, an emaciated skeleton driven by hate. Viewers

again found him in this condition when he reappeared 4 years later under the new team of producer John Nathan Turner and script editor Christopher H. Bidmead in *The Keeper of Traken*. More importantly, this story would see the Master finally acquire a new body for himself which he would inhabit for the rest of the programmes run, this time played by Anthony Ainley. Although Ainley's Master would bear a remarkable similarity in appearance to Delgado his portrayal has often been criticised by fans as being over-ripe, bordering on the pantomime villain. On the DVD commentary for Tom Baker's final story *Logopolis* Christopher H. Bidmead himself comments that the actor tended to overplay the 'I'm rather pleased with myself' element and lacked subtlety.

Baker's performance was an immediate success and the viewing figures leapt again, this time to an average of 10 million, with his second story *The Ark in Space* peaking at a staggering 13.6 million for part 2. Within a matter of months the actor had become the most recognised face in the country, reaching a fame of rock star proportions. The programme had now become popular with university students who identified with this new rebellious, anarchic incarnation of the Doctor. Its popularity with an older audience was facilitated by the production teams decision to raise the content of the show to a more mature and adult orientated level. For many fans, both loyal and casual, the Tom Baker years of *Doctor Who* have become the 'classic' era and Baker's portrayal has become, for many, the definitive incarnation of the renegade Time Lord. In a recent 2009 survey, Panini's *Doctor Who Magazine* polled its readership asking them to rate all 200 stories of the programme, from *An Unearthly Child* to *Planet of the Dead* as well as all 10 Doctors. Unsurprisingly Tom Baker came in at second place, being pipped to the number one spot by present incumbent David Tennant by a mere 0.91%. Of the 200 stories rated by fans 5 out of the top 10 were Fourth Doctor stories, the highest being *Genesis of the Daleks* at number 3 – the others being placed at numbers 4, 7, 8 and 9. He went on to have a further three stories in the top 20, peaking at numbers 16, 17 and 20, proving that popularity for the Fourth Doctor is as prevalent now as it was 30 years ago.

It's no surprise to discover that many of the current *Doctor Who* and *Torchwood* novel and script writers were avid fans and viewers of the series during Baker's run on the programme which is why, when Virgin Books began their range of Missing Adventure novels in the mid-1990s many writers opted to tackle this particular era of the Doctor's life; a trend that would continue when the range was later picked up by BBC Books. It is obvious, through the great care and attention to getting the detail of the period correct, that the writers have great love and affection for this time in the programme's history – unfortunately this can either be a curse or a blessing depending on the writer. While certain Fourth Doctor novels such as Chris Boucher's *Last Man Running* and *Corpse Marker*, Simon A. Forward's *Drift* or Peter Darvil-Evan's *Asylum* are wonderfully evocative of Baker's third and seventh season's, recreating a character that still had great depth, charm and gravitas, as well as being highly successful and well written novels, unfortunately Gareth Roberts opts to set his novels *The Romance of Crime* and *The English Way of Death* smack in the middle of the notoriously bad 'season seventeen'. Although both novels are well written, Roberts does insist on

evoking the plain absurdity, Python-esque silliness and general feeling that no one is taking this all quite seriously enough, familiar to that period of *Who*, something that we'd all rather have left behind in the late 70s. Perhaps the worst example of this is Dave Stone's Fourth and Second Doctor 'crossover' novel *Heart of TARDIS*, a novel that is so bad it is arguably the worst piece of fiction ever written for the programme. Smug, self-congratulatory and, above all, desperately unfunny this novel is littered with bad puns, tacky sci-fi lines (intentional, but still not welcome), the worst use of two Doctors in a single adventure (the whole point of the Second Doctor's inclusion in the book is to open a door for the Fourth Doctor!!) and actually having the Fourth Doctor look out of the page of the book and speak to the reader in a scene that's supposed to mirror a similar incident in the television story *Invasion of Time*. By far the most inventive and successful novel written so far incorporating the Fourth Doctor is Jim Mortimore's *Eye of Heaven*, a novel set on Easter Island in 1872 and written in first person form from the point of view of both Leela and the Doctor.

By late 1979 Tom Baker had been playing the role of the Time Lord from Gallifrey for an unprecedented six seasons and behind the scenes things were once again going through great changes. Since Philip Hinchcliffe had left the show in early 1977 Baker's irascible and difficult nature during recordings was beginning to get out of hand and his fractious relationship with co-star and fiancée Lalla Ward was only exacerbating matters. Added to this was incoming producer John Nathan-Turner's systematic tampering with both the format and look of a programme that had, over the past three seasons, spiralled slowly downwards in to a cheap, self-parodying pantomime of the sci-fi show that had begun 16 years earlier. Nathan-Turner set about updating what he believed to be a programme that had started to look old, creaky and very dated. These little changes, such as changing the theme music arrangement and incidental music, opening and closing credits, costumes and sets, began to irritate the leading actor and when he approached the production team to inform them that his forthcoming seventh season would be his last there were no voices of disagreement or attempts to persuade him to stay on as there had been in the past. For the first time since William Hartnell in 1966 it had been agreed by the production team that due to his increasingly destructive behaviour it was better for the futurity of the show if the lead actor was replaced. As Baker's final season went into production Nathan-Turner began to cast about for a new leading actor, the first time the role of the Doctor had been changed for nearly a decade. For many younger viewers who had never seen any other portrayal of the Doctor other than Baker's this was to be an enormous wrench. To ring in the changes Nathan-Turner decided to take the character of the Doctor in a direction it had never gone before in its 18 year history and cast an actor who was only 29 years old. The next Doctor would be an old man trapped in a young man's body.

roll the bones

by j.r.blackwell

Ancient Man Rolls The Bones

We are born naked, the rest is role-play. Roleplaying is as old as the upright spine. Before the human race walked across the fertile crescent we were pretending to be what we were not – it is part of human nature, the “fake it ‘till you make it” cliché which is, nevertheless, true. We pretend to be until we are. Roleplaying endures, all the while holding hands with storytelling and narrative, mythology and lies.

Modern roleplaying has its roots buried deep in the theater. In the 16th Century improvisational theater was in vogue and actors would take on the roles of stock characters and situations, tailoring their performances to fit the crowds. Murder mystery games were a popular party past time before anyone thought to write stats on a page and roll the dice. In the early 20th century, people played parlor games, taking on characters in dramatic situations for entertainment. Recently, historical reenactors have taken on

the Renaissance and the American Civil War, using their creativity and skills to step into great moments in history.

Today, roleplaying is at its most diverse. A variety of games are played, some tailored to drama, others focused on strategy. These games are played online, offline, on a tabletop and in campgrounds. Roleplaying encompasses historical re-enactment and fantasy sword and sorcerer games. There are games played alone in front of a computer, and games played with hundreds. There are games that span the world, events that happen between players in Dublin effecting events that happen in New York. Roleplaying takes the form of computer games, story games, LARP, War games, Simulation games. It's science fiction, horror and fantasy.

Roleplaying is ancient. I'm not talking about the stories humans told each other around campfires, wearing a mask to embody the spirit of a God or War games or Simulations. It is ancient within your child heart. It is a toddler pushing a tiny toy baby stroller, pretending that she is mama. It is the time when you wore Superman pajamas with the little Velcro attached cape and bounced on the bed, pretending to fly. It's even later, when you lied to say that you knew more about sex or physics to impress your friends. Playing pretend, taking on a role that isn't quite you, but that makes the world run a little smoother is something that all of us do. Playing a role is natural – when we dress up for a job interview or show off to impress a date. It's a part of us as deep as our bones.

So roll your bones, and play on, player, play on.

COMPETITION:

Frequently Asked Questions About Time Travel

Starring Chris O'Dowd, Marc Wootton, Dean Lennox Kelly and Anna Faris, *FAQ About Time Travel* is a British comedy about the perils, pitfalls and paradoxical nature of time travel. It is the feature directorial debut for Gareth Carrivick, who has worked on many projects for the BBC, from a script by Jamie Mathieson and we have 3 copies of the DVD to give away. All you have to do is answer this question;

In the Back to the Future series, what speed did the time machine have to reach before it could travel through time?

Send your answer by 24th October to competition@hubfiction.com.

3 winners will be chosen at random



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