

Hub Magazine

SCIENCE FICTION HORROR FANTASY

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ISSUE 102 · 1st NOV 2009

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EDITORIAL:

by alasdair stuart

And like a switch being thrown, it's November. The nights are longer, the mornings are darker and suddenly novelty cakes shaped like ghosts and spiders are jostling for position with the doughnuts and bakewell tarts. It's the end of the year and that end of term feeling, that need to put the chairs on the tables and cocoon is almost irresistible.

Except for us that is.

We've got, in order, *LoveSexIntelligence* by the mighty Dave Barnett, reviews of the latest episodes of *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* and an awesome article on *Fiji* by Kaaron Warren with even more great fiction, non fiction and reviews to come. It may be the tail end of the year, but we're just getting started so stick around, it'll be fun.

FICTION

LoveSexIntelligence

by david barnett

Ms Dorothy Culpepper was tapping a painted nail on her yellowed tombstone teeth and surveying the alien packaging of the Eastern Bloc cigarettes and spirits lining the shelves of the duty free shop. Asif Baig knew what she was thinking. Ever since he had told her that Prague was quite the cosmopolitan getaway these days she had been subtly warning him that it had better live up to her expectation. He knew that if this, in her mind, sub-standard fare was all that was on offer elsewhere in the city then she would not be happy if the bottle of London's and the carton of Mayfair Menthol she had purchased at Heathrow airport did not last the duration of this visit.

Asif coughed behind her and Ms Culpepper finally turned to regard him, laden with bags and scowling. "There you are, Asif," she said mildly. "Do hurry up. We've delayed the start of this business quite enough, don't you think, without you dawdling along like this?"

Asif opened his mouth to tell his boss that he would have joined her a good half hour previously had she not made an elaborate pantomime of rolling her eyes and nodding her head towards him to the immigration control officer, who had finally taken the hint when she hissed "al Qaeda!" as her passport was waved through. Her rather regal bearing and appearance of an elderly though sprightly woman belied what Asif had come to learn was not just a cruel sense of humour, but an one with often practical results and disastrous consequences. Even the production of his MI5 credentials had not avoided an unnecessary wait in a dingy, windowless room for some time while his details were checked with Thames House, and he got barely a cursory mumbled apology when it was determined that he was, in fact, an agent of Her Majesty's security services and not a terrorist bomber.

But Asif was already staring at the back of Ms Culpepper's tan-coloured safari suit as it advanced towards the exit.

"Don't bloody mind me," he muttered as he shouldered the bags again and set off in a stooping half-run after her.

"The Hotel Paris," Dorothy Culpepper was saying to the taxi driver when Asif caught up and began dumping the bags into the already-open boot of the Lada. "You know it?"

The cab driver smiled and nodded enthusiastically. Ms Culpepper dipped into the front pocket of her jacket and brandished the green packet of cigarettes at him. "I smoke in your cab?" she over-enunciated. "Me smokey?"

Asif groaned and slammed shut the boot. The driver nodded wildly, digging into his own pockets for a packet of Marlboro.

"Prah smoker's paradise," he said, letting Ms Culpepper into the back seat. Asif slid into the passenger seat and the driver jumped in beside him, his Marlboro already lit. "Smoker's paradise," he said again, offering the packet to Asif. Dorothy smirked as he grimaced and shook his head, winding down the window as the driver fired the ignition.

"Asif," she hissed, her rouged, creviced cheeks contorting as her thin lips twisted into a ruby-red smile. "We're supposed to be undercover. Blend in, for God's sakes. Didn't they teach you anything at spy school?"

Asif ignored her, coughed involuntarily, and concentrated on watching the squat, blocky suburbs of Prague flash by as the taxi slowly filled with smoke.

Ms Culpepper wouldn't let Asif hand the bags over to the hotel porter. "He'll want a tip," she

whispered. "And I've only got high denomination notes. You can carry them."

"I'm not your bloody houseboy," he snarled. "Even if you were born on a plantation in Ceylon. Does flying always make you so cranky, boss?"

The Hotel Paris was a splendid gothic pile occupying a corner plot close to the historic Old Town Square. Asif felt underdressed in his jeans and black T-shirt, a late summer sweat forming on his forehead as he dragged the bags into the ornate lobby, decorated with Art Nouveau trinkets and dominated by an elegant, sweeping staircase.

Dorothy ignored him as they stepped into the lift which whispered them quietly to the second floor. The disgruntled porter, still hoping for a crown or two, showed them into a spacious room, the sounds of the late afternoon drifting from the street below through the open windows. Ms Culpepper strode in first, casting her gaze around and nodding agreeably. Asif staggered after her and dropped four of the five bags he was carrying, hitching his own modest hold-all up on to his red-raw shoulder.

"OK," he sighed. "I'll go to my room and freshen up. Shall we meet downstairs in an hour?"

The porter looked at Ms Culpepper then at Asif. "Is only one room booked in the name of Culpepper."

Dorothy shrugged. "We're on a budget, Asif. I couldn't afford two rooms in a hotel like this. It's only for a couple of days."

He looked around the room, aghast. It was nice enough; airy, spacious and clean, with large sash windows and a comfortable-looking bed with a huge white duvet and a sturdy oak frame.

"There's one bed," he said slowly as the porter sensibly began to back out of the room. "And it's a double bed. Boss..?"

Ms Culpepper smirked and lit up a menthol cigarette. "Don't worry, Asif," she purred. "I assure you, I won't bite. I did ask for twin beds but, you know, these Eastern Europeans..."

Asif put up his hand and closed his eyes. "Don't. Just leave it. After your crack at the airport, I've had enough of your 'jokes' to last me the week. I'm going for a shower then we're going to meet our MI6 liaison, right? The sooner we get this over with the better."

Dorothy cackled and blew a smoke ring at him as he slammed the door shut behind him and wondered, not for the first time since he had started work at the Department for Extra-Usual Affairs, just what he was getting himself into.

A typical day at the DfEUA's dingy, first-floor office on the Horseferry Road began with Asif making a pot of tea while Dorothy snorted over something or other she found particularly objectionable about modern life, as seen through the lens of the Daily Telegraph. Asif had hoped that since Marie Stokesley had come to work at the DfEUA in a kind of ad-hoc-work-experience kind of way she would take over the tea-making duties; but Ms Culpepper had feigned a gasping, choking death at Marie's first attempt at a mug of Earl Grey and had insisted that only Asif could make it to her satisfaction.

Marie Stokesley's largely unofficial - though waged - presence caused some disquiet for Asif. Reasonably fresh out of training, he was more than willing to accept he clung on to the protocols and regulations drummed in to him at what Dorothy Culpepper always disparagingly referred to as 'spy school'.

"This game is not about rules and systems and initiatives," she would shudder, placing the mug of tea perilously close to the PC on her desk which Asif had insisted she be outfitted with and which she regarded with the deepest mistrust. "It's intuitive."

Then she would invariably go to empty her bowels at eleven o'clock on the dot, and shortly thereafter would toss over some cutting from a newspaper or mention a whisper that had been passed on to her by some or other shadowy contact, then take the flea-bitten office hound Satan for a walk around Westminster.

More often than not, Ms Culpepper's information came to nothing for Asif and the Stokesley girl, daughter of a famous but fake local medium who differed from her mother Brenda in one major respect - she really could see dead people.

But this particular morning there was something to do. "Load of foreign tarts dead in a shipping container at Dover," she'd sniffed, slapping a police report on Asif's desk. "An hour ago. Bob down and take a look, will you?"

Asif had looked at the report and then up at her. "People trafficking? Not our remit, surely?"

Dorothy had narrowed her eyes, tossing the Telegraph on to her desk and gathering up Satan's lead. "Dear boy, I wouldn't be sending you to bloody Dover if I didn't think there was something in it for us, would I?"

Asif had learned by then not to argue with logic like that, nor Dorothy Culpepper's steely stare.

Piloting his BMW down to Dover, Asif stole glances at Marie as she hid behind the curtains of her mousey hair, face turned towards the window. The teenager was still a mystery to Asif; she had proved herself to be formidable in the ways of... he still had trouble finding words to describe the world he had been parachuted into. The occult? The paranormal? But socially, he found her a huge challenge. He indicated the CD player with his hand and said: "Would you like to listen to something else?"

He'd got a Lou Reed compilation playing. Probably not her thing. She looked dumbly at him. "What have you got?"

"What do you like?"

Marie shrugged. She had what Asif's partner Daniel would sensitively call 'stockiness issues'. To Asif's working class Bradford eye, she was a fat lass. "Rap," she said, turning back to the anonymous scenery. "Hip hop."

Asif delved into the door pocket and pulled out a handful of CDs. "There's some bhangra in there, I think. Stuff my brother gave to me. Not too keen on it, personally, but you might like it."

As she leafed through the CDs, Asif considered how little he knew about her. She had been working on an ad-hoc basis with the DfEAU for about a year; ever since that Sid Vicious episode that marked Asif's first week with the department. He found her impenetrable in a modern teenager kind of way, and even thinking that made him feel old and past it despite the fact that he was only in his twenties himself. She was studying A-Levels at college but was seconded to the DfEAU during the holidays. Dorothy was planning to employ her full-time when she had taken her exams, but Asif wondered as to the wisdom of that. She was a fragile thing, psychologically if not physically. And with her background - since childhood summoning spirits on behalf of her fraudulent mother for the delectation of an endless parade of blue-rinsed women of a certain age - who could expect anything else?

She shrugged and handed back the CDs. As a compromise, Asif pulled an old Shamen compilation from the glovebox and stuck that on. They drove to Dover largely in silence, listening to *Jesus Loves America* and *Move Any Mountain* and *L.S.I.*, and Asif was glad to pull up at the quarantined area. He flashed his ID at the woodentop and was shown to the Home Office pathologist, a thin man with unkempt hair and owlish eyes framed by huge glasses, who had just emerged, blinking in the sunlight, from a huge shipping container from which a stench of decay seeped. Asif pulled out a handkerchief from his jacket pocket and covered his nose and mouth, with his other hand presenting his ID. The pathologist, whose name was Delvet, peered at the card.

"Department for Extra-Usual Affairs," he read cheerfully. "How wonderful. Well, it's certainly extra-usual here, Mr Baig. Extra-usual indeed."

Asif peered into the darkness of the container and Marie wandered to the open mouth. A uniformed police officer stepped in front of her to block her path but Asif waved him away. "What's the situation, Mr Delvet?"

The pathologist took off his huge spectacles and rubbed the lenses with his knitted woollen tie. "Eleven young ladies. All dead from what appears to be a combination of suffocation and heat exhaustion, sadly. Unfortunately, not the first time I've seen this at Dover, nor likely to be the last."

Asif nodded, wondering what the department's interest was. "And what's unusual about it?"

Delvet replaced his glasses and motioned for Asif to follow. "You'd better take a look."

He led Asif and Marie into the depths of the container, where two white-jump-suited scenes of crime officers with their noses and mouths masked crouched under the stark illumination of a small suspended arc-light. Asif swallowed his bile and glanced at Marie, whose face remained impassive under her curtains of hair. The bodies were huddled together, as if drawing the last comfort they would ever have from each other in the oppressive darkness. They were all women in their late teens or early twenties, dressed as

though they had been bundled into the container direct from a nightclub or red-light area. Which they probably had, reflected Asif. As Delvet had indicated, nothing new there. Girls plucked from poverty in Eastern Europe and transported to a new life of modern-day slavery in Britain. Nothing new, that was, apart from the puddle.

Delvet angled the arc-light towards it. Sitting between two groups of women, their limbs enmeshed by rigor mortis, it was the colour and texture of pale brown paint. It congealed around items of clothing; a tiny skirt, a pair of orange heels, black panties, a Lycra vest-top. Tangled within the clothes was what appeared to be a dirty-blond wig.

"What is it?" grimaced Asif from beneath his handkerchief.

Delvet shrugged. "It will take us a while to do the tests. But very odd, no? *Very extra-usual?*"

"Very," agreed Asif. "Marie?"

She had taken on a deathly pallor in the sick light, and nodded and closed her eyes. Delvet looked at her with interest through his large spectacles, while the two scenes of crime officers straightened and glanced at each other as she began to speak.

"Some of them have gone. To wherever they go. There are four spirits here. They are very frightened. And not just by their deaths," said Marie slowly, her eyes still tight shut. "That's a relief for them, an escape. I... I can't tell what they're saying. I don't understand the language."

Marie frowned. "One of them is speaking English. A bit. She's pointing to the puddle. She's saying..."

There was a pause. Delvet blinked. The two coppers were frowning. Asif reckoned they didn't come across this sort of thing every day. Marie began to speak again, softly, in a lilting, lyrical tone: "Zelenka... is not Zelenka. *Was* Zelenka. *Was* Zelenka before. But not Zelenka now. Never Zelenka."

"Can you get a surname?" urged Asif quietly.

"Zelenka who?" asked Marie, then answered herself: "Never Zelenka. Not like *that*."

"Zelenka who?" asked Marie again. "Gal... Galecka? Zalenka Galecka. Can we go now? Go to the light?"

"Who did this? Where are they from?" Asif whispered.

"We go to the light?" answered Marie, then in more urgently, in her own voice: "Where are you from?"

There was a silence. One of the scenes of crime officers coughed. Marie opened her eyes.

"They've gone."

Asif sighed. He turned to Delvet. "Any clues?"

Delvet nodded to one of the officers who held out two plastic Ziploc bags. Asif took them and held them up to the light. In one was a matchbook, black, with the flaming logo of an establishment called *Club Met* emblazoned on it, and the address *Ostrovni, Praha*.

"It was in one of the girl's skirt pockets," said Delvet.

"Prague," said Asif. "What's this?"

The other bag held a round, white disc, flat and about the size of an Extra Strong Mint. There was something inscribed upon it in black. "Hebrew?" said Asif after studying it.

Delvet shrugged. "We took it out of the... the stuff. It appears to be made of some kind of plastic."

Asif said: "I'll have to take these."

Another shrug from Delvet. "As MI5 you have more stripes than anyone here. You'll sign a release form, though?"

They wandered outside into the sunlight and Asif removed the handkerchief. While he signed the dockets Marie stood to one side, gazing into the container. Eventually she said: "They've gone now. All gone."

"What do you think she meant?" said Asif as they walked back to his car. "About it not being Zelenka any more?"

Marie pulled a face. "I don't know. All I can tell you is that those spirits were terrified, and it wasn't of what was waiting for them here. It was of what they'd been locked up with in there. They said Zelenka *melted*."

Dorothy Culpepper strode magisterially across the Old Town Square. Asif struggled to keep up, finding

himself forced to stop every few yards to rubberneck at the towers rising into the blue sky or the macabre ballet of the Astrological Clock, or to avoid a marionette seller or hawker flogging old Communist cap badges.

"Come along," muttered Dorothy when she stopped for the umpteenth time to allow him to catch up. "Stop behaving like a bloody tourist."

But Asif found Prague wonderful. He'd never been to Eastern Europe and certainly hadn't expected this faded grandeur, this perfectly preserved fairytale architecture. He glanced at his Lonely Planet guide and said: "Did you know Prague didn't suffer any damage during the war because Hitler planned to keep it as a museum to the Jewish race once he'd wiped them out. D'you think we'll have time to look at the Jewish cemetery before we go home?"

Dorothy looked him up and down. "Do you think they'll let you in? Probably think you're a suicide bomber or something."

Asif opened his mouth to retort but Dorothy was already off again. "Museum to a lost race?" she scoffed. "Look what it was preserved for. The place is a bloody disgrace."

Ahead of them, a line of young Brits in matching rugby shirts and wearing felt jester's hats, huge jugs of beer in their hands, conga'd across the square. Asif had to admit, the attraction of the city to stag dos did take the sheen off it a bit. Presumably the lure of cheap beer and cheap sex brought them in on the budget airlines; they made for strange bedfellows with the culture vultures who also found themselves in Prague to stare at the flying buttresses and take in the Mozart concerts, though.

The MI6 office was just off the Old Town Square, in a tiny cobbled alley where the sides of the buildings were too high to allow the sun to penetrate for more than a few minutes every day. Dorothy pressed the buzzer at the side of the plain wooden door. "Nice place to work," she sniffed. "Beats the Horseferry Road."

On the second floor they were shown into a cramped room with a small window facing a yellow-painted wall opposite. Behind a desk piled high with newspapers and box-files there sat a small man with a shining bald head and flitting, ferretty eyes. He stood sharply as they entered, leaving the crumbs of a pastry on the top of his computer keyboard, and wiped his hand on his brown trousers before offering it to Dorothy. She grimaced and ignored it and Asif stepped in to grab it.

"Ah," said the man. "You must be..." he blinked and looked at a Post-it note on his computer monitor. "Doris?"

"Dorothy Culpepper," said Dorothy icily. "And this is my associate Asif Baig."

The man nodded again. "Of course. Of the Dee-eff-ee-you-ay. I'm Ramsay Akroyd, MI6 bureau chief in Prague."

Dorothy snorted and sat down in the one available chair opposite Akroyd's desk. He looked at her then sat down himself. He said again: "The Dee-eff-ee-you-ay. What's that all about again?"

"D-4," said Asif quickly. Dorothy looked up at him with undisguised loathing. "We deal with the stuff that no-one else can."

"D-4," said Akroyd. "Well, well, well. How exciting. And what brings you to Prague?"

Dorothy, evidently disgruntled, held out a dismissive hand for Asif to continue then folded her arms and inspected her shoes. Asif outlined in the briefest terms that a people trafficking operation had brought them to the city and said they were looking for help in certain areas.

Akroyd shook his head. "It's a problem, I can tell you. These girls come in from the villages, or cross the border from other countries, and they get given jobs in these nightclubs. Unfortunately, there's more than enough trade for what they offer, as you've probably seen."

"The stag parties," nodded Asif.

"That's just the half of it. We get a lot of what they call 'sex-tourists' here in Prague. You have enough money, you can have pretty much any taste catered for. What's special about this particular case, though?"

Asif paused. It would not do to give too much away - and raise too many eyebrows - just yet. "We're still looking into that," he said eventually. "In the meantime, do you know this place?"

He handed over the matchbook. Akroyd glanced at it and nodded. "Club Met. One of the more notorious venues. A lot of foreigners frequent it. It does the usual pole dancing and lap-dancing, with more

hardcore stuff in the back rooms. It gets raided quite frequently by the local police. It wouldn't surprise me in the slightest if there was a people trafficking operation centred there."

Asif dipped into his pocket for the small piece of plastic recovered from the glop in the container but Dorothy placed a light but forceful hand on his arm. She said: "Well, I think all that remains is for you to organise the necessary permissions for us to operate in Prague for the duration of our investigation, Mr Akroyd, and we'll be on our way."

After Akroyd had made a number of telephone calls and signed his name to several forms and dockets, they gave him their regards and left. Once back in the cobbled alley Dorothy lit up a cigarette and regarded Asif with an amused but hooded glare. "D-4?" she said.

Asif shrugged. "It's a bit unwieldy, spelling it out all the time. I thought we needed... jazzing up a bit."
"Jazzing up?"

"If you look at DfEAU as though it's a word," said Asif, foundering, "and take the EAU bit as though it's French, it scans really well. D-4."

"It makes us sound like one of those horrible hip-rap combos that young Marie insists on polluting her ears with whenever she's in the office," said Dorothy. "I simply shall not sanction this."

"But it's much more..." Asif sought for the right word that would not send Dorothy into an apoplectic rage. "Streamlined," he decided upon lamely.

She considered it as she smoked the last of her cigarette and ground the butt under her heel. "I suppose," she said eventually, "that it could be pronounced *Defoe*, as in Daniel." She considered this a moment longer. "Mmm, that is not too offensive. And I appreciate the connotations. Like a modern-day Crusoe, I am castaway in a shallow sea of iniquity and foolishness." Dorothy's eyes narrowed, an expression of impending cruelty that Asif had come to recognise.

"No," he said, holding up his hands. "I know what's coming. If you're Robinson Crusoe, that means you're going to make some Man Friday crack about me. I've told you, boss, any more talk like that and I'm reporting you to the Standards Board. Seriously. Like it or not, it's the 21st Century."

Dorothy laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. "Come on, Asif, let's go to a bar on the Old Town Square and you can buy me a drink."

Asif sipped at his beer while trying to ban the spectre of his father, tutting and shaking his head from behind his shop counter hundreds of miles away in Bradford. He fingered the plastic white disc in its Ziploc bag and tossed it on to the round plastic table, ranked with a dozen more outside a bar that was getting busier as the sun began to dip behind the pan-tiled rooftops.

"Why didn't you want Akroyd to see this?" he said. "He is the MI6 bureau chief, after all."

Dorothy snorted. "You think that moron runs British interests in Prague? He's one of a whole number of bureau chiefs with varying degrees of responsibility who get trotted out to deal with people like us. The more important the operation, the higher the bureau chief. As you can imagine, Akroyd's pretty low on the register."

Asif nodded gloomily. After little more than a year with DfEAU - he was already pronouncing it as one word in his head - he had come to realise how little the other MI5 departments thought of them. In some quarters, they were jeered at and mocked - more than once he'd heard that Dorothy and himself were referred to as Moulder and Sunni - in others positively reviled for their perceived wasting of public money.

Dorothy picked up the bag and held up the disc to the failing sunlight. "Besides, I know exactly what this is. I just haven't figured out how it all fits together yet."

Asif sighed. "You're like Velma in Scooby-Doo," he said. "Always solving the mystery and don't bother telling anyone else. Go on, then; what is it?"

"It's a shem," said Dorothy, inspecting it closely. "See these Hebrew markings? That's the name of God."

They'd sent the disc off for testing as soon as Asif had got it back from Dover. It came back from the labs within a week; it was little more than an enclosed, fairly primitive, computer hard-drive. It had a lot of code on that no-one had ever seen before and some encrypted data relating to one Zelenka Galecka;

basic information such as her date of birth, vital statistics, health records, close relatives' details and some seemingly random childhood memories, all detailed in a rather ancient form of Hebrew that must have taken a clever computer programme to render on to the file.

"A shem?" said Asif. "What's that?"

"There's one of those interweb cafes on the other side of the square," said Dorothy, finishing her gin. "You go and look up 'shem' and 'golem' and meet me back here in an hour."

"What are you going to do?"

"I am going to have a think."

Asif knew that this was a euphemism for one of Ms Culpepper's regular visits to the bathroom, a schedule that had been knocked off course by their travels.

"And then?"

"Then," said Dorothy, "I think we shall take a look at that address we have for Ms Galecka, courtesy of the information on that disc. Following that, and preferably after a couple of drinks, I think it will be time for you to visit Club Met. And, dear boy, if everything goes to plan, I rather think you'll be gratified to hear that we might only have to share that bed in the Hotel Paris for one night."

Asif handed over a sheaf of notes and bought himself an hour of internet time and a cup of strong coffee. Ms Culpepper had been right; Googling *golem* immediately brought up more pages than he could care to read on the subject. He'd had some vague notions of a Hammer Horror-style monster when Dorothy first mentioned the word; the web pages put him right. He scribbled some notes: *created by Rabbi Loew, around 1580s. Made to protect the Jewish ghetto or clean Rabbi Loew's floor, depending on which version you read. Formed from the clay taken from the banks of the Vltava (check - is that name of river in Prague?) Shem - name of God inscribed on stone tablet. Put in golem's mouth to activate it. Taken out every night and golem de-activated - Loew forgets one night and golem runs amok.*

Asif put down his pen and sipped at his coffee. So was Ms Culpepper suggesting that the puddle of glop in the container was a golem? But who had created it? And to what purpose? And had it been a person before, or simply assumed the identity of one? He wondered whether the visit to Zelenka Galecka's home would turn up any answers.

The address led to a monstrously brutalist concrete apartment block, satellite dishes and TV aerials crawling like competitive, spindly black insects over its skin. Not a very salubrious neighbourhood, announced Dorothy Culpepper loudly as she alighted from the tram in the failing daylight. Best be as quick about this as possible.

She and Asif crossed the busy dual carriageway and made their way to the crumbling doorway of the block. The lobby was grimy and dull and what had once been a reception desk had evidently been unmanned for some time, given the layer of dust on the Formica top and the impenetrable graffiti on the wall behind.

Not trusting the lift she led the way up the stairs, which rather inevitably stunk of piss, to the seventh floor and a dimly-lit corridor, every other bare light-bulb broken or dead. Apartment 7-F-14 crouched behind a yellowing door half-way along the corridor. She rapped smartly on it and waited.

An eye well-used to years of checking who was behind a door before opening it - long before the enlightened Westernisation of pizza deliveries and junk mail and consumer trend surveys of modern Prague - regarded Dorothy and Asif through a fish-eye lens for a moment, then the door opened a crack.

Dorothy let her DfEU card do the talking. The man - in his fifties, balding, fat, wearing a shabby, greying vest and shapeless brown trousers - peered at it uncomprehendingly for a second and then looked at her, blinking.

"You speak English?" she said sharply.

He inclined his head to one side, looking from Dorothy to Asif and back again. "A little."

"Good," said Dorothy. "My name is Dorothy Culpepper and I am with the British government. This is my underling, Asif Baig. You understand?"

He dipped his head again non-committally.

"I believe this is an address for Zelenka Galecka. Is that correct? Is that right?"

The man's eyes widened at the name and he glanced over his shoulder at where a female voice was jabbering in rapid-fire Czech.

"Zelenka, she is my daughter," said the man when he turned back to Dorothy. "She is not in trouble with the British government?"

"You know where she is?" asked Asif.

The man frowned and then opened the door wider. They could see straight into the gloomy apartment, the carpets and walls in complementary shades of brown, a beige lamp-shade hanging from the nicotine-stained ceiling, an ancient TV murmuring to itself in the corner. Behind the man was a severe-faced woman, her features pinched to pointedness by her scraped-back black hair. She had her gnarled hands on the shoulders of a slim young woman, her straw-like hair in gradations of blonde and brunette, her jeans stonewashed unfashionably and her T-shirt, with its faded image of Betty Boop, looked incongruous and sullied. The girl was obviously about to depart; she had a small, battered suitcase on the carpet in front of her and a shabby coat hooked over her arm.

"Hmm," said Dorothy. "Most evidently *not* a puddle of mud in Dover, then."

"How do I look?" said Asif. He had changed into his black Prada suit and the black silk Thomas Pink shirt. He had to admit, he was enjoying the wage that he drew every month from MI5, and Daniel was enjoying helping him spend it, remaking Asif in his much more stylish image.

"Like a loathsome, moneyed insect trawling a foreign city in order to visit indignities on an innocent country girl," said Dorothy with a thin smile.

"Thanks," said Asif, deflated. "So, what's the plan, then? What am I expected to do at Club Met?"

"Get answers. Mingle, speak to a few of the girls. Have a drink, blend in. Try to find out why someone is replacing prostitutes with golems."

"And what will you be doing?"

Dorothy smiled. "I shall probably take a bath and have an early night to think things over. Please try not to wake me when you roll in."

Club Met was dumped incongruously within an old building on a quiet street close to the Prague National Theatre, the smell of the river permeating the still, warm air. There was one Germanic-looking bouncer on the discreet door, who gave Asif the once over, pondered a moment, then nodded him in.

Heavy industrial music pounded inside the darkened central room, a neon-pink bar glowing along one side. It was after ten and the place was steady, most of the booths ranked along each of the other three sides occupied. Some had curtains drawn across them. In the middle of the room was a wide circular podium, on which half a dozen blank-faced girls in underwear gyrated to the music or swung, dead-eyed, from the silver poles that ran from floor to ceiling.

Asif stood there awkwardly for a moment. He'd never, obviously, been in a place like this. Daniel had persuaded him to go to a fetish club in London once, and while that wasn't really his thing he hadn't felt the same air of menace he did here, the raging testosterone and ready violence that seemed to lurk under the veneer of slick sex.

A girl, no more than sixteen or seventeen, with a pock-marked face and a flat chest under an ill-fitting corset, materialised at his side. She said something in German and Asif shook his head, then she said in English: "I am Anna. You want drink? Company?"

"I'll take a look around," said Asif.

The girl frowned. "You must have drink. And company."

"Do you know Zelenka?" asked Asif. "Zelenka Galecka?"

The girl's smile melted away. "I know no Zelenka." She glanced furtively around. "Please do not ask."

"I want Zelenka," pressed Asif.

"Zelenka gone," said Anna, pouting. "Away. To England. I am as nice as Zelenka."

"Do a lot of the girls go away? To England?"

"The lucky ones," sighed the girl. "Big money in England. Nice house, near Buckingham Castle. Clean

men. Lords and dukes. Big money."

Her eyes acquired life for the first time. He wondered how lucky she would think the girls who had died of asphyxiation in the container on the way to Dover. He wondered what criteria the traffickers had for deciding who was bound for the prison brothels and crack dens of London. Those girls most accommodating? Those who had proved themselves beneath the sweating, heaving bodies of fat tourists? He felt a little sick.

As he looked around, a girl on the podium caught his eye. Her eyes were deader than the others, her skin a dull, even matte. Her hair looked stringy and synthetic in the ultra-violet light. He watched her awkward, almost-clockwork movements, and said: "Who is that? What is her name?"

"That is Anezka," frowned Anna. "You do not want her. I am as nice as her. Besides, she is going to England. She does not need your money."

"No," insisted Asif. "I want Anezka."

In the booth he had been shown to, Asif sipped his horrendously over-priced beer while Anezka sat demurely beside him. She had ordered a heart-stopping expensive cocktail which Asif suspected was merely fruit juice, but which was designed to bump up his bar bill. He fingered the DfEAU petty cash in his pocket which Dorothy had reluctantly released to him, and looked at Anezka from the corner of his eye. Her eyes were dark and fixed ahead, her hair looked as wig-like as it had on the podium. She was small and thin, but her breasts were plump within the black bra she wore. Involuntarily, he reached out and touched her arm; it was cool and smooth. At his touch, she brought her head slowly to look at him.

"You want blow job? Hand relief? Fuck?" she said in a dull monotone. "Or maybe dance?"

"Dance," said Asif hurriedly. "Yes, a dance will be fine."

She stood and began to move in front of him, swaying this way and that and staring at the sticky red carpet. She moved in a slow, lazy circle, pushing her arse into his face. Asif sat back. He was glad he wasn't straight. This was just so fucking... *squalid*.

Anezka began to shuck off her bra, her breasts round and full, the nipples like slices of salami. The she began to push her panties down, stepping out of them and bringing her rear end around to him once again.

On her left buttock there was a tattoo, a stencilled marking he guessed was Hebrew. As she began to turn again Asif said: "Wait! Wait. Dance like that. Just there. That's great."

Saying nothing, Anezka complied, gyrating her backside at him. He dug into his pocket and pulled out a small notepad, then rapidly sketched the design. He stuffed the notepad back into his pocket and pulled out a wad of notes.

"That was... ah, lovely," he said, handing Anezka the money. "Thank you."

Then he got out of there as fast as he could.

Over a breakfast of coffee and pastries in the Sarah Bernhardt restaurant on the ground floor of the hotel, Ms Culpepper examined Asif's hasty sketch of the tattoo on Anezka's backside.

"You could have got into bed, you know," she said as Asif rubbed his stiff neck. "I left you enough room."

"I was fine on the chair," he said, stifling a yawn. "So what do you make of it?"

Dorothy handed the piece of paper back to him. "It's *emet*. Hebrew for 'truth', or 'God's truth'. It's one of the factors which gives a golem its half-life, along with the shem and the body of clay gathered from the banks of the Vltava. All the classic ingredients. All we have to figure out now is why."

Asif took a sip of the strong black coffee and reviewed the facts. "Someone is replacing girls who work at Club Met with golems," he said. "Zelenka Galecka was bound for Britain in a people trafficking operation. The golem went in her place and, along with the rest of the cargo, didn't survive the journey. Anezka is also due to be shipped out to Britain. She has also been replaced with a golem."

"So..." said Dorothy.

"So it is girls about to be trafficked who get replaced. By the people traffickers?"

"To what purpose?"

Asif shrugged. "So they get the best of both worlds? A girl to work in the club and a reasonable facsimile thereof to send to the brothels of Britain?"

Ms Culpepper shook her head and waved to the waiter for more coffee. "There's no shortage of girls for the clubs or for the trafficking. Why go to so much trouble? It isn't that easy to make a golem."

"Then..?" said Asif.

Dorothy sighed. "Then surely someone is trying to *protect* the girls. Someone is replacing them so that they don't get sent to Britain."

Asif nodded. "The Galecka girl looked like she was leaving. Where did her father say she was going again?"

"Brno, to find work with his cousin. That spurious order I gave that she could not leave Prague for 24 hours won't hold much water if they decide to check with the authorities."

"Then we should go and see her again," said Asif.

Zelenka Galecka sat between her parents on the sofa in the dingy brown living room of apartment 7-F-14. Dorothy perched on a dining chair while Asif stood and glanced around. There was one of those candlesticks with seven curved arms on it sitting on the sideboard. A menorah?

"You're Jewish?" said Asif.

The father looked at him as though he'd made some kind of accusation. "We are," he said.

Dorothy smiled and addressed the girl. "You have a friend called Anezka?"

The girl looked to her father then at the floor. The father answered for her. "Anezka is my brother's girl. Zelenka's cousin."

"And you both work... worked at Club Met?" said Asif.

The girl stared hard at her scuffed shoes. Her mother rubbed her nose and looked away.

Mr Galecka frowned and said: "You must understand that there is not the work in Prague. We were not knowing that Zelenka was working at this place. We thought she was working in hotel. It is a bad place, the club. The girls go missing. When we found out, we..." His voice trailed off, and he finished lamely: "Took action."

"Where is Anezka now?" asked Asif. "Is she going away with Zelenka?"

Mr Galecka nodded. "They are going to Brno to work with my other brother."

Dorothy leaned forward and studied Zelenka. After a while she said: "Who helped you? Who made the golems?"

Mr Galecka started and his wife began to cry. He put an arm around his daughter and said: "You must be understanding. These people at the club, they are very bad. Very dangerous. We needed to get Zelenka and Anezka away from them. They are... gangsters. Very powerful. Very dangerous."

Dorothy nodded sympathetically, and said again: "Who made the golems?"

The oak door of the synagogue was set into a long, yellow wall that stretched off into the distance in the cobbled, quiet square hidden in the Lesser Quarter across the river. Gulls wheeled overhead and the smell of the Vltava was pungent in the mid-morning heat; not too far to go for clay from the riverbank in the dead of night, reflected Asif.

A lined, weather-beaten face peered around the door long minutes after Dorothy had pulled on the bell-rope. The man glanced at them with alert, shining eyes and raised one eyebrow querulously.

"Rabbi Josef Rossum?" inquired Dorothy.

The man nodded in assent, then said in low, accented English: "You are the British. Franz Galecka telephoned that you would be coming."

The rabbi let them into the cool, dark interior of the synagogue. It was much smaller than Asif had been anticipating, with only four rows of wooden benches facing the altar. Josef glanced at Asif and said: "We are a small community. Under the Communists, life was difficult for Jews. When has it never been? Many renounced their faith, or hid it. Subsequently, many children were born unaware of their heritage. Some were told after our Velvet Revolution. Others do not yet know. But we are growing once again. People are finding the old ways."

"Hmm," said Dorothy. "Speaking of the old ways... you want to talk about how you have been replacing young Jewish girls working in nightclubs with golems?"

The rabbi's eyes twinkled at her. "The golem? A legend, Ms Culpepper. Nothing more. An impossibility. You are joking, of course."

"May I remind you," said Dorothy, "that we are representatives of Her Majesty's security services. We - and especially I, Rabbi Josef - do not joke."

There was the sound of a throat being cleared and Asif looked through the candle-lit gloom to a small door that had opened at the back of the synagogue, framing the shape of a young man with curling black hair.

"Father?" said a voice.

"David," said Rabbi Josef. "I am busy." He turned to Ms Culpepper. "My son," he said. "A student. Sometimes he forgets his manners. But no; a joke, Ms Culpepper. There are no golems."

David cleared his throat again and stepped forward. "I am very much afraid there are, father," he said in English.

Dorothy feigned interest but in truth she neither understood nor cared about the technology that David demonstrated to them. Asif, on the other hand, was fascinated as David showed how he had encoded the plastic shem with the data to give the golems a semblance of the memories and personality of the human being it was replacing. Asif could almost get a handle on this, it was almost science. Almost *normal*. Until the moment that David started to talk about how he had synthesised a pliable modelling substance from a combination of Vltava mud and the latest advances in plastic technology to mimic human flesh, and how he had brought the golem to life using the ancient rituals of Rabbi Loew.

Rabbi Josef was furious, of course. He shouted at David in rapid-fire Czech, then Hebrew, finally throwing up his hands in despair and turning to Ms Culpepper.

"Three years at university," he sighed. "Robotics and electronics. Nanotechnology! The tools of the future. And what does he do? Revisit the mistakes of the past. Dabble in magic. It is against everything I teach."

David looked crestfallen. "I love Zelenka," he mumbled. "I wanted to save her, and her cousin. I am going to join them in Brno."

"You are not!" said Rabbi Josef firmly. "You have your future ahead of you."

"My future is with Zelenka!" said his son defiantly.

As they began to squabble again, Dorothy held up her hands. "This will all have to go, of course," she announced stridently. "We shall have to impound your computer and all your notes. We simply cannot have golems loose in the world, I am afraid. They are just too unpredictable. One golem with a faulty shem could cause untold damage, horrendous loss of life. This has been a very foolish venture, David."

"You listen to Ms Culpepper," said Rabbi Josef sternly. He turned to her: "I apologise for the trouble my son has caused. It shall not happen again."

"We'll send someone to collect the stuff," said Dorothy. "Your son really is talented. He should make a lot of money when he settles down to a job. You will keep control of him in future?"

"You have children?" said Josef.

Dorothy gave a tight smile.

He shrugged. "If you do, you know that control is impossible. Damage limitation, I believe you say. That is the only thing."

As they walked away from the synagogue, Asif gave Dorothy a sideways glance. "He liked you, you know. You should have got his number."

Dorothy snorted then looked at him as they strode in the direction of the statue-festooned Charles Bridge. "Well? Is that a result?"

Asif shrugged. "I suppose we've solved the mystery. But it doesn't seem to have helped anyone much."

"As I told the Rabbi, a golem is a dangerous magical construct. It isn't the sort of thing that should be on the loose."

Asif gestured towards the spires of the Old Town, and the flesh-pots of the New Town beyond. "But

nothing has really changed, has it? Girls are still working in places like Club Met. The people traffickers are still forcing them to go to London."

"Not our jurisdiction," said Dorothy firmly. "We can pass on our dossier to the proper departments when we get back. Our purview is the extra-usual, Asif. Not the everyday and mundane."

"No matter how *wrong* the everyday and mundane can be?"

"No matter how wrong," agreed Dorothy.

"So that's it? We just go home?"

"Not quite," said Dorothy. "There's still one golem at Club Met. We need to deactivate it before it is sent to England. Another night out for you, I'm afraid."

"Deactivate it? How?"

Dorothy leaned on the stone balustrade of the bridge, watching the sluggish water flow below.

"Remove the shem, for starters."

"And how do I do that?"

Dorothy smiled. "I'm sure even a raging poofter like you knows how to get a whore to open her mouth, Asif."

Anna spotted him immediately. He nodded to her and she approached, still wearing the same slightly ragged underwear, an empty tray balanced on her hand. "Drink?" she smiled. "Company?"

"Anezka," said Asif firmly. Anna pouted and pointed to the podium, where Anezka danced slowly and jerkily. Minutes later she was leading him to a booth.

"Hand relief? Blow job? Fuck?" she intoned after she had secured his beer.

"Erm. Blow job," said Asif, his mouth dry.

Obediently, Anezka knelt on the dark, sticky carpet in front of him. She fumbled at his trousers but Asif knocked her hands away, more harshly than he intended.

"It's OK," he said. "I'll do it. You, ah, just close your eyes. And open your mouth."

According to David's instructions, the shem was held in a housing in the roof of the mouth. A simple push should open the invisible hatch and allow the shem to pop out. It proved easier said than done. The second Asif put his fingers in Anezka's mouth her eyes flicked open and she began to bite down in an act of self-preservation either pre-programmed or purely instinctive. Her plastic teeth were hard and sharp; Asif felt his skin break and blood pump from the wound before he managed to manipulate the hatch and felt the shem fall into his damaged fingers. Immediately, the light in Anezka's eyes faded and she slumped forward, her face resting heavily in his lap.

For a moment he sat there, breathing heavily with the golem deactivated across him, a grotesque tableau of fornication. Then he heaved her heavy, lifeless body up and dumped it in a heap of limbs on the carpet. One thing remained to be done. According to what Ms Culpepper had said, the golem was only temporarily deactivated with the removal of its shem. He turned Anezka on to her front and pulled at her knickers. There on her left buttock was the stencil of the word *emet*, truth. Taking a small-bladed knife from his jacket pocket, he scratched at the first character until the word resembled what Dorothy had sketched for him: the Hebrew character *met*. Death. The Anezka golem convulsed and then slumped again, and slowly began to shudder and melt, the clay and plastic separating and spreading in a brown puddle across the carpet, the wig and underwear sinking into the gloop. Grimacing in distaste, Asif slipped from the booth, leaving the curtains pulled tight, and made for the exit.

It was done. The last golem was destroyed. DfEAU's mission was well and truly accomplished.

At the door, as Asif composed himself, he felt a hand on his arm and turned to see Anna, her pock-marked face turned towards him, her dull eyes shining with... all he could think was that it was hope. He felt sick.

"You want more company?" she pleaded. "You want me to be nice?"

"Do you have to do this?" he whispered. "Can't you go? Leave this place?"

She shook her head sadly. "I owe too much money. For my apartment and for my food. I must repay them."

Then she brightened slightly. "But they say I may go to London soon. You are from London?"

Asif nodded wretchedly. "I live there."

"And it is nice? I might see you?"

Asif shook his head, but Anna was already moving on as a clutch of new punters came in through the door. He could hear her saying: "You want drink? You want company?" as though pre-programmed, shoving her flat chest at the red faces of the leering tourists.

Asif looked at the blood-slicked shem in his hand.

Yes. Mission accomplished.

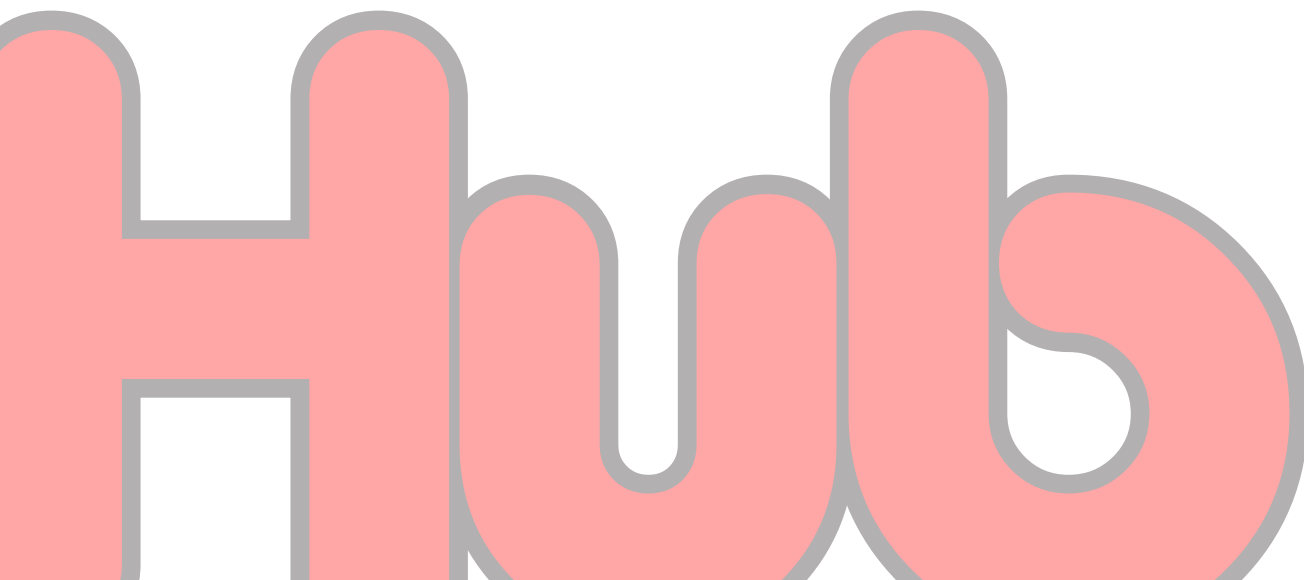
He left the club and walked into the balmy night, turning only to glance at the neon sign winking above the doorway.

Club *Met*.

He almost laughed.

Almost.

fin



The Clone Wars Series 2 – Episode 1-3

reviewed by richard whittaker



"The Holocron Heist" Directed by Justin Ridge, written by Paul Dini
"Cargo of Doom" Directed by Rob Coleman, written by George Krstic
"Children of the Force" Directed by Brian Kalin O'Connell, written by Henry Gilroy and Wendy Meracle
Starring: Matt Lanter, James Arnold Taylor, Ashley Eckstein, Terrence "TC", Dee Bradley Baker, Matthew Wood, Corey Burton, Seth Green

At the end of season one of the animated *Star Wars: The Clone Wars*, a pair of facts were made clear about season two. First, that it was going to be treading into darker territory. Second, that bounty hunter Cad Bane (Burton) was going to become, if not the next big bad, at least the next tall, dark and deadly. So a lot falls on this opening volley of the show's sophomore year – not least seeing whether Bane is really a worthy adversary. It's a challenge: After all, the show has never had a major recurrent that is a serious threat to the Republic without being Force-sensitive. So what's required is to add more depth and cunning to the Lee van Cleef of the saga.

After the closing events of last year, when Bane sprung Ziro the Hutt from a Coruscant jail, the mercenary has new targets, courtesy of his Sith lord sponsor. To complete his plan, Bane needs three components: A Holocron (which, as ane fule kno, is the Jedi's method of storing information); the Kyber crystal (not to be confused with the Kaiburr crystal from the original *Star Wars* expanded universe novel, *Splinter of the Mind's Eye*) containing the location of every Force-sensitive child in the Republic; And a Jedi, to unlock the Holocron, insert the crystal, and give Darth Sidious a map to devastating the future of the Jedi order. So what begins as a cover raid deep into the Jedi Temple to steal a Holocron turns into a cross-galaxy hunt, as Bane stays one step ahead of the Republic.

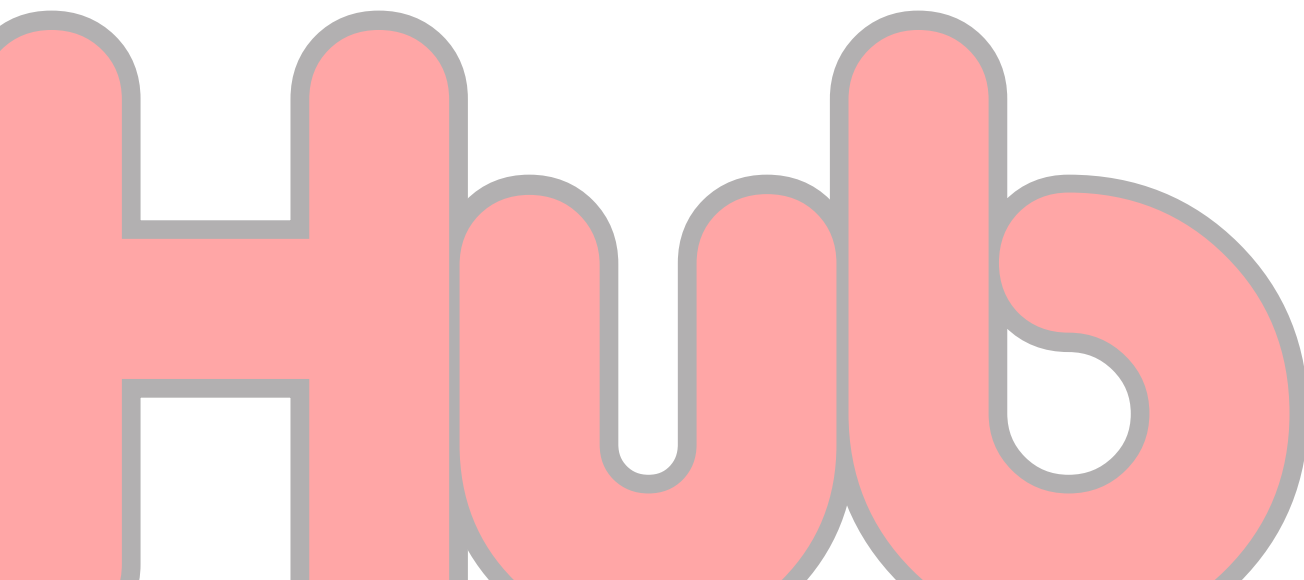
The challenge is to make Bane devious rather than charmingly roguish and, while having a face like a blue egg and a voice like blenders in phlegm helps make that distinction, the show producers bring in some of their big directorial guns to get the edgy feel. Between them, Coleman, Ridge and O'Connell were responsible for directing the Ryloth saga, which was one of last season's high points. This time, Ridge sorts of misfires. So, while opening chapter *Holocron Heist* is a nice idea, unlike Bane's raid on the Jedi Temple this episode is not perfectly executed. Arguably, and this may be heresy to some comic fans, it could be *Batman Adventures* creator Dini's script. The problem is that a good heist plot relies on a sense of tension. Instead, Dini, shows exactly what Bane and the Jedi are doing at all times, so it's less a game of cat and mouse and more just Bane making the Jedi look kinda dopey. He also wastes the opportunity afforded him by the cameo appearance of *Robot Chicken* genius and arch-*Star Wars* geek Seth Green as Bane's droid sidekick Todo 360. He could have been an interesting long-term addition. Instead, it's a one-shot appearance, proving that it's not just people called Skywalker that get stuck with sniffy and self-possessed droids.

Fortunately, with *Cargo of Doom*, Coleman sets a tone and a pace that should be the guiding principle for season two. Trapped on a burning Trade Federation frigate, Ahsoka (Eckstein) and Skywalker (Lanter) search for Bane and the Holocron. There's a real sense of menace here, as Coleman uses a fire spreading slowly to a stack of explosive rounds to ratchet up the tension. It also has some nice, low-key homages to the film – not least a headbanging moment that will cause a few beardstroking nods. From a directorial point of view the high point may be a zero-g fight in the hanger of the frigate: Beautifully choreographed, it has a strange grace while still implying a brutal menace. As for the script, yet again it's Ahsoka that is more Anakin than Anakin – misguided, headstrong – and the question plays strong of how much of a role her training plays in his ultimate downfall.

It probably helps the flow of the story that *Children of the Force* picks up exactly where *Deadly Cargo* leaves off, almost down to the very frame (inexplicably, that is not true for *Holocron Heist*, which ends up

strangely disconnected from the rest of the arc). O'Connell also picks up on Coleman's sense of urgency, as Skywalker and Ahsoka try to rescue the children Bane has kidnapped, while Obi-Wan (Taylor) and Mace Windu (Carson) second-guess the bounty hunter's motivations. However, where this episode may be most interesting is not in the action sequences, which are possibly a little speedily dispatched after the *tour de force* of *Deadly Cargo*. Instead, it's in the subtle portrayal of the Jedi's flaws: A mixture of eerie power and alarming control, plus a political dead ear, that hint to their eventual downfall.

But back to Bane: Does this arc push him to the upper echelons of EU badness? Pretty much so, yes. The series will have to avoid turning him into its answer to Captain Black (turns up, causes mayhem, gets away, repeat as nauseam). Yet the suggestions that, even under all the calculating streak, there's a fear of the Dark Side could give him a texture that blunt tools like Durge or walking Freudian nightmares like Asajj Ventress can never really match.



FEATURES

Circling Fiji

by kaaron warren

As a horror writer, I'm drawn to the macabre, grotesque and scary, no matter where I'm living. Here in Fiji, with spirits, curses and cannibals, I've had plenty to see.

To experience macabre Fiji, you need to circumnavigate Viti Levu (Big Fiji), the main island. This is not a huge prospect; on good roads you could drive it in six hours.

In Fiji, give yourself a week and plan for some sleepovers.

Start in Nadi, where the plane will deliver you. Ignore all offers of a lift to a resort; maybe next time.

Grab a taxi and head to the Coral Coast. Plan to stay a night or two.

Every time you get in a taxi, ask him (there is only one or two female drivers) to tell you about ghosts and curses. They all have a story.

The Sigatoka Sand Dunes are the site of some of the oldest settlements of Fiji. The stretch of road is highly cursed because of the great disturbance to the Ratus (Chiefs).

Every seven years, I've been told, prawns crawl out of the sea here. If you touch one, it will turn into a butterfly. This image makes me feel ill.

Drive onto Pacific Harbour. There's a golf course and resort called The Lagoon. It's here you'll be able to climb all over The Bloody Mary, a rickety boat custom-built for the movie *Anaconda II*. You can see the canal where the giant alligator swam. They do a rather civilized, if basic, lunch here. The bathroom needs to be experienced. Golden walls, golden taps, square marble toilet seat. They tell me the resort was built for 'businessmen'.

After lunch, head on to the capital, Suva. On the way you'll see great rotting mounds of broken cars, all merging with nature until they look like a hulking depressed monster.

Suva is worth spending a couple of nights at least. I've been here three years and I'm still making discoveries.

There is much to see if you are looking to be spooked. The shop window mannequins are astonishing: Insane clown heads, or blank-faced children. Sharp pointed scalps or green growth for hair.

Taxi drivers will tell you plenty of ghost stories, including the one about the girl who climbs into the back seat in the city and asks to be taken to the graveyard. As the taxi pulls into the cemetery, the girl vanishes in the air. Who is That Girl?

The cemetery itself is a mixture of great worship and neglect. Some coffins are festooned with saris and garlands. Others are cracked, with pale finger-like roots creeping out.

A taxi driver will also show you the house where the head of the Red Cross, John Scott and his partner Gregory Scrivener were murdered in 2001. They say you can see the bloodstain from the bedroom floor where it seeped through to the garage. Staff who have worked there since say they can't sleep for the noise of footsteps running upstairs in an empty house.

The Fiji Museum is worth a look to give yourself a chill and a sense of Fijian history.

They have a selection of large stones, chained to a wall. It makes me laugh; anyone who could lift one of these stones could easily yank the chain out of the wall. Where would you hide the things as you smuggle them out, though? The round stones used to roll down the hill onto invaders are the size of large exercise balls.

There's also the killing stone. This is tall, rectangular and stands on its end. There is a semicircle worn away along the top edge. This edge is stained dark.

The groove is where men, women and children lay their necks so their heads could be severed.

The Museum is in Thurston Gardens, the site of the original village of Suva. The inhabitants were slaughtered by distant neighbours, the Rewans. There is a room set up as a proper Englishwoman might have had her room in the 1980s. Sewing machine, doily centered on dark wooden low boy, rocking chair. My children refuse to walk past this room, saying it's haunted, and I do imagine the chair rocks sometimes

and that I can smell bread baking.

Reverend Thomas Baker, a Sussex lad, is remembered by his boots here. The villagers of Nabutautau ate all the rest when he caused offence in 1867. It's said he touched the Chief's hair. They have since apologized to try to lift the curse they think was laid on them. Some villages do blame curses for their misfortune.

When you leave Suva and travel to the Naviti Jetty, you'll pass by another cursed village, where someone dies every week. "There's a devil living there," my taxi driver told me, but he couldn't remember exactly which village it was.

Stay two or three nights on Naigani Island. Pronounced Naingani, it means 'mysterious lady' and the island does look a sleeping woman from afar. It's a beautiful place, with nice bures (huts) and glorious snorkeling. You need to boat to the best snorkeling place, and on the way make sure they show you the Cannibal Cave. It's vast, dug into inhospitable mountainside. It's highly tabu (taboo; pronounced in Fiji as tambu) to go inside. You can see from the water that the walls are all blackened. "From the fires!" our boatmen told us gleefully as he clicked his teeth together. Naigani also has an old fort where they used to roll the rocks onto their enemies. Sometimes this is tabu to visit, sometimes not. It depends on who you talk to.

There is a certain sort of fish they catch on this island called the saqa. I think we'd call it trevally. Pronounced sanga, this means 'tankard' or barrel. It is said that if you do not break any bones when you eat the fish, you can throw the remains back into the water and flesh will form again.

I'd eat it with local lemon, chili and a little sugar.

When you leave Naigani, you'll travel the difficult road to Raki Raki. It's beautiful, truly beautiful. You can stay on the mainland or on the island; I have no stories about either. People tell me witchcraft is very strong in this area. It's secret, though. No one will give details. I guess it's the kind of thing; once you find out it's too late.

Do visit the grave of the last cannibal, Ratu Udre Udre (Oondray Oondray). It's a long, cracked solid concrete slab, surrounded by small stones. Some are painted white. These represent his victims. Some say he ate close to a thousand people and never shared a bite. I also heard that he only needed to eat one more person and he would have been immortal. Interesting to see how the Methodists would have coped with that one.

From here, you can travel through sugar cane country back to Nadi. Stop at some of the small towns along the way to see the collapsing colonial buildings and the fruit and veg markets where food is cheap, good but not varied. If you stop at Teidam, between Ba and Lautoka, you may see lights at odd hours, wailing in the hills, and strange movements at night. The dacoits murdered a lot of women for their jewelry in these parts and I think the women want their things back. You could stay the night at Lautoka, a small town with a cinema and café to ease you back into the real world.

Fiji is a rich source of material for a writer!

Kaaron Warren's critically-acclaimed debut novel - *Slights* - is available from all good booksellers. See her page at www.angryrobotbooks.com for more details.



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