

# Hub Magazine

SCIENCE FICTION HORROR FANTASY

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## EDITORIAL:

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by **alasdair stuart**

### Double Time

Sorry about the lay off. It's a tough time of year, a time where the stresses of daily life seem magnified, where the littlest thing can be the one you can't ignore, where timing is everything. After all, if you don't get the best spit on the sofa for the *Doctor Who* specials, who will?

'Joking' aside, this has been a very tough year, the sort that team managers call 'learning experiences' even as they try and remember whether their cousin said he'd slash the tires of their opponents for a hundred quid or was it just fifty? It's been challenging in every way, occasionally awful and sometimes wonderful.

That last is down to two very important groups; our writers and staff, including indispensable new regulars like Richard Whittaker, Janet Neilson and JR Blackwell and old hands like the mighty Lee, the relentless Phil Lunt and the ever wonderful Ellen. Thanks, guys.

But of course the big thank you goes to you. Like Sandra Bernhardt, without you we're nothing. With you this is the best job in the world. Maybe second best actually. After roller coaster tester.

So thank you, have a jumbo *Radio Times* style issue on us. Happy Christmas and we'll see you next year.

Alasdair,  
Hub magazine

# FICTION

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## *The Tongues of Angels*

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by liz holliday

He was the last knight in all the world, and he was going to kill the last dragon. He knew it in his bones as he stared out of the window of the train, though he couldn't have said how. The land rolled smoothly by, field upon field of yellow rapeseed giving way to brownish, discoloured downland and bare rock. A thin rain began to drizzle out of the sulphur yellow clouds, and he began to pray.

He was still praying as he walked up the hill from the station, past the rows of flint cottages that huddled together as if for protection, past the chapel with the boarded up windows and the barred door, past the closed down factory, to the pub where he had booked a room. As he went in the door, he heard the train pulling out of the station, the roar of its diesel engine as powerful any dragon.

He sighed and hefted his sword-case, which was unwieldy rather than heavy, even with the electronic prayer-base he kept inside it. A large, lumpen woman, all pale skin and bad teeth, ushered him upstairs.

The room was small, dominated by the double bed and ancient walnut wardrobe. He dumped his hold-all and the sword case on the candlewick bedspread and washed quickly in tepid water from the sink in the corner. Then he opened the sword case. The base was stored at one end. He took it out and plugged the lead into the wall socket. Then he picked up the sword, kissed it and slid it smoothly into the slot in the base. Handel's Messiah rang out.

He knelt in front of the makeshift altar and began to pray: for the forgiveness of his sins, for the success of the enterprise he would undertake on the morrow. He prayed also for his parents and sister, but when he tried to picture them, their faces would not come into focus.

"...et nomine patris, et filii et spiritus sanctus," he murmured at last, crossing himself.

He glanced longingly at the bed; but he had sworn to keep vigil all night, and so he would. It would be simple enough, surely, for recently he had found sleep hard to come by.

Yet sleep he did, there on his knees on the thin carpet. And he dreamed...

...he dreamed he lived in a place where the trees and the grass were green, and the sky was blue; and though there were plenty of times when the crops failed, and others when the cattle sickened, the food when you ate it was mostly wholesome. In this place, there were many knights, of whom he was one; and there was a lord, who was no more and no less fair than others of his station.

And so, when the dragon came -- some said when the dragon woke from sleep of a thousand years or more -- and killed first the cattle, and then the people, and fouled the water and the crops, the lord did what a lord should: he sent his bravest and best knights to kill it. He sent, also, his sons. And of these, some were heard of no more; and the bodies of some were found floating in the river; and some came limping and crawling back broken in body and mind. And his sons, his bright, bonny, golden sons -- why, their heads were found the morning after they went up the hill, left carefully on the feast board in the great hall.

And then, oh, the cry went up all over the land. A thousand in gold, ten thousand in gold, to the knight who will avenge my sons and bring to me the head of the dragon. And so they went up the hill, by ones and by twos. But none came down, not whole at any rate. And the Last Knight waited and he watched, and he feared. He feared for his honour, for soon someone would ask him why he did not go and take his chance with the Great Worm; but he feared for his honour not quite as much as he feared for his head. And so in time he was, indeed, the Last Knight, and the lord called him into the Great Hall and asked him hard questions, and took no easy answers, but said that he must go, like his brothers, and face the dragon.

He was not a coward, the knight. Not at all, for that evening, before the light was quite gone, he did

what few men would dare. He went to see Maid Quinsy -- in all that vivid dream, hers was the only name -- in her cottage. A poor thing, that cottage was, with the daub in the walls almost washed away, and the thatch near eaten off by rats. Nevertheless, he came to her, with a fine gift: a pair of fat rabbits he had caught, and this as much meat as anyone in that land was likely to see all summer, unless the dragon be disposed of.

She did not seem surprised to see him, but took the rabbits quickly, and bade him sit on her one stool, while she squatted near the fire and the smoke billowed thick around her, and caught his throat and made his eyes water.

"You wish to kill the dragon," she said, without him having said a word. It startled him, but then he thought, what else would a knight be wanting in these terrible days? "I tell you," she went on, "It cannot be done. Not here, not now; not with any sword forged by any man of this kingdom..."

"Then," he ventured, "I should lead the dragon out from here, over the sea; get me a sword of Spanish steel and--"

"It cannot be done," she went on as if he had never spoken, "With any sword made of mortal man. For see, when a blacksmith forges steel, he puts a little of himself in it. Whether he believes it or not, a little of his soul goes in, sure as if he'd quenched the blade in blood. And this dragon, he knows it. Just as a man can lose his mind, watching the whirling of a dragon's eyes, the beating of his wings, so the sword can lose its purpose. The dragon knows. And it commands, because that's what makes it a dragon."

"Then I am lost," the Knight said, and all the fight went out of him.

"Aye, you probably are," the witch said. She leaned over and took his face in her hand. "Though there's two ways about it. You can be lost and the land with you; or you can be lost and the dragon with you -- if you'll heed me."

"You can give me something to kill the dragon?" he asked, wondering if the Lord God would forgive him dealing with witches if it meant he saved so many innocent souls.

"Oh no," the witch said, and spat into the fire. "But I can send you to a place where swords have no souls because men have no souls. Nor women neither. Not a place that is now, nor will be. But a place that might be. A place sideways in time, and forwards, that will make room for you... if you want it."

"I..." his tongue clogged his mouth. He had to force himself to speak. So many souls to save, against the loss of his single one. But perhaps... perhaps... "I want it. What do you want for it, old woman?" She stared at him out of eyes gone milky with age. "My soul?" he whispered at last.

She laughed at him, a short, hard sound quite without humour. "What use would your soul be to me, good Sir Knight?" she demanded. "No, I'll have your honour, for it's the honour of your sort that keeps my sort in the ditches and hedgerows and margins of the world."

He stared at her, not understanding. She laughed again.

And he woke, knowing the dream for truth. But before he was properly awake, he had forgotten it and was left with only an obscure feeling of loss. He mistook the feeling for fear, for he knew that today his death was surely upon him. So, fearing, he took the sword from its base and sheathed it. He armoured himself slowly, for he needed a squire which he did not have. Then he went to the window and stared out at the dawn. A few stars still stood in the pearl sky. In the half-light it was possible to forget how the mean cottages grovelled against the earth, and the trees failed for lack of clean air, and see only the dark grandeur of the hills.

After some time he went downstairs. He left what money he had on the bar, near the beer pumps, for the landlady. He did not expect to return. Then he went out into the morning, and toiled up the road, westwards out of the village. Where the road crossed the railway he had to wait for an oncoming train to pass; he saw a child point at him through the window; then it was gone. He followed the road a little way further, until it turned off to meet the motorway. Then he climbed straight up the hill, black earth and grey rock, with the sun always at his back. He supposed that would be an advantage.

At midday, he stopped, broke bread and drank water. Then he climbed on, the advantage both of sun and morning energy dispersed. He was tired beyond thinking when he came to the dragon's hole. There could be no mistaking it, for it led straight into the side of the hill, and thick grey mist issued from it. He pulled his coif up over his mouth and plunged into the darkness.

The way led down and around, and his stumbling feet had betrayed him twice before he remembered the flashlight he carried. He turned it on, but its pale circle of illumination only served to make the shadows darker.

He did not know how long he had been walking when at last he heard the dragon's sighing breath. It seemed to echo all around him, and after he realised what it was, he knew he had been hearing it for some time.

Red eyes glared at him from out of the coaly blackness.

"Put out the light," a voice said, sounding, so it seemed, from everywhere at once. "Put out the light, it hurts my eyes."

Reluctantly, the knight did so. He remembered tales he had heard, tales that said dragons speak in the most ancient of tongues, the tongue of angels, and therefore speak only truth; and other tales that said dragons speak with the tongue of angels - fallen angels, and therefore speak only lies. He did not know which of these things were true, or if the truth lay somewhere else entirely; he only knew the hammering of his heart, and the stink of his own urine as it trickled down his legs, and the taste of acid bile biting the back of his throat.

"You have come," said the dragon. "You have come to kill me. I know this, for I know many things."

Yes, thought the knight, but he could not speak.

"You do not need to speak," said the dragon. "Have I not told you I know many things?"

There was the sound of hide moving against the stone. Something shifted: the knight was almost sure of it, though he could see nothing in the absolute darkness. He imagined the dragon's body, stretching down into the heartroot of the mountain, its scales like oiled steel rubbing the stone smooth, forcing passage for the worm as it grew vaster through the centuries.

"Put on your little light, if it will comfort you," said the dragon, "Though I doubt you will be comforted by what it will show you."

The knight switched the torch on. At first he could not make sense of what he saw. The dragon's head was almost as large as the vaulting cavern it filled, and at first he took in for an outcropping of rock, hewn into curves and curlicues by the slow action of water through the millennia. Only the sardonyx eye, glaring at him from beneath heavy brow ridges, made him sure that the dragon was a living thing. A creature. Beast was too small a word, too stupid a word, for the cold intelligence he saw in those eyes.

"Kill you," whispered the knight. It was unthinkable.

"Yet you think it," said the dragon. "And you shall, perhaps, accomplish it, for I am old, and I am tired, and perhaps I am done with the cold earth, and would travel beyond the bounds of flesh-"

"Kill you," repeated the knight. His mouth felt as if it were filled with ashes.

"Listen to me, little knight." The sardonyx eye regarded him. The lid closed over it, and opened again. "There is a time and place we both know of, though you think you have forgotten it. And in that time and place, I am much more powerful than I am here. Yet I am harried, driven across the land for obeying the nature bred in me since I broke the shell of my egg. You understand me?"

"I think I do," the knight answered, and for an instant he had a sense of dream, of a face, faces staring up at him, of a ring he had kissed and sworn by, of a smoke filled space and flames that leapt.

"Yes," said the dragon. "You remember. You swore to kill me. Remember that? But all others failed, for I was young then, strong then, and unassailable. Yet I lived under a curse, that one day one of you would come and would kill me - with a blade not made by man-"

The knight fingered his sword: good English steel, made not by man but by machine, in some factory in the midlands; it was the least-good sword he'd ever held, no more than a child's plaything. Yet he felt its weight in his hand, and began to hope.

"Perhaps," said the dragon. "You might find a way to take it back. You might go to me, my younger self, and have at me with that blade. And perhaps you are my destiny, there. And perhaps you're not."

The knight licked his lips. He wanted to speak, to say something. Anything. But he could not. He kept hearing a dreadful sound: the noise his blade would make, breaking on one of the dragon's upraised claws.

"But perhaps you *are*. I would not wish to die, then. Not in my youth, with a millennium of life ahead of me. And so I have an offer-"

Dragons, the knight thought. They speak only lies. Unless they speak only truth.

"You have no way of knowing," said the dragon. "But hear me out, anyway. You will kill me now - now when I am weary and desire death. You will take my head back to your king, and be feted as a great hero. Your deeds will be sung in all the halls in the land. You will prosper."

"How so?" the knight asked, finding his voice at last. "You won't be dead. Not there. Not then."

"No, but I will sleep. Until you, and your family and your king are all dead, I will sleep under the hill. And when all are gone, why, how will it be your concern what I do then?"

The knight said nothing. He did not believe he could trust the dragon, but what use was mistrust, when trust was his only hope? He clipped the flashlight to his belt.

"Stretch out your neck," he said at last, surprising himself by keeping his voice steady. He raised the sword without a soul.

"Think again, little Sir Knight," the dragon said. "It's my soft underneck you should strike at."

With that, the worm raised up its neck, and the knight saw that there was a narrow band of unprotected flesh where the coif of the dragon's neck scales met those of its body armour. And yet the sardonyx eye was on him, like crimson hellfire in the night. "Thou'lt not harm me?" he asked, suddenly afraid of what he was about.

"Strike," the dragon commanded. "Before I change my mind."

And the knight did. He brought the sword round in a sweeping arc and slammed it into the dragon's neck. The blade bit. The dragon bellowed, and arched its coils and convulsed. The knight forced the blade onward, past the gouts of blood that fountained out, steaming in the cold air. The smoking reek of it caught his throat and brought bile to his throat. His eyes stung and in all the world there was only crimson.

The ground shivered beneath his feet and he strove to keep his balance. The side of the cave split open, and light too bright to look at shafted in. The dragon thrashed again, and the sword bucked in the knight's hand. He held on to it, just.

Then, of a sudden, there was stillness.

The knight stared at the dimmed eyes of the dragon and knew he had killed it. Even so, he crept forward, almost afraid lest he might, somehow, wake it.

His blow had almost severed the head from the body, but not quite.

He struck once with the sword-made-by-no-man. Then again, at a rope of nerve. The dragon's body lashed out. Bucked. Died.

The world turned before the Knight's eyes. He knew that if he let it fade away, he might never return. So, he prayed to Mary and the Saints, and by their help found the strength to stand.

He knew he had to take the head, or else the dragon had won: without it, the King - thinking they had won but a temporary respite from the worm - would summon help from neighbouring lands, and so rouse the dragon from its promised slumber.

And so he once again raised the sword against the dragon's flesh, and this time he succeeded in severing the head from the body.

He knew - as sure as he knew he owed his honour to the maid called Quinsy - that he must not go down again into the darkness. Instead, he scrambled up through the shaft of light, towards the opening in the rock. He dragged the worm's head behind him, and where it bumped against the rock it left a trail of gelid blood.

He squeezed out of the cave and stood on a lip of rock. The world fell away beneath his feet. But he looked up. Sky blue as the Virgin's cloak, with only a handful of white clouds to mar its perfection arched away from him. He was home. He felt himself begin to smile despite the slow fading terror in his heart, and he did not stop, not even when the breeze brought the scent of burning to him, and he looked down and saw the land beyond the crags, all brown and sere. Nothing moved there, except the play of light on the sluggish water of the river - not a beast in a field, nor a boy tending it, nor a bird flying overhead.

He turned and hauled out the head of the dragon. In the daylight it seemed smaller, or perhaps death had diminished it: yet it was hard to carry. In the end he steeled himself and grasped the ragged end of its hide, where he had hacked through its neck. Then he picked his way down the mountainside.

Once, he glanced down, and saw that where he had walked, the dragon's blood had fallen in

droplets. And for every fallen drop, a tiny white flower had blossomed, impossibly bright against the ochre rock.

As he walked, it seemed to him that his burden grew heavier. Once he stumbled. His foot twisted under him on a patch of scree. He fell, and the rocks came up to meet him. He put out his free hand, and it slammed into a spur of stone. Pain jagged through him and left him breathless.

After a time he moved on. Crags gave way to downland covered in crisp brown furze and the ragged stalks of flowerless heather.

Somewhere, a church bell began to toll. The knight looked up into the dizzying sky and realised that twilight had come quickly upon the land. He took another step, and then another, and then fell forward into oblivion.

When he woke the sun once again stood high in the sky. It gazed down fiercely at him. He tried to raise his arm to shield his eyes from that pitiless glare, and realised his fingers were still tangled in the dragon's hide and sinew. His tongue was swollen in his mouth, and there was a burning pain in his hand, yet he struggled to sit upright.

He turned, and saw the dragon's head. The sardonyx eyes, turned black in death, gazed at him. And beyond that, the mountain from which he had come: but between it and him, tracing out his footsteps was a path made of tiny white flowers and grass impossibly green in the searing heat.

It was beyond him. "Jesu have mercy on me," he whispered, and crossed himself. "Jesu have mercy on us all."

He stood then, and staggered on, knowing that behind him stretched out a path of fertile green, made by the falling blood of the dragon he had killed.

He came at last to the castle of his King. The portcullis was up, the drawbridge lowered as if in times of peace. Yet the place was quiet. No guardsmen patrolled the buttresses, or practiced in the yard. No merchants gathered to sell their wares in the market in the shadow of the curtain wall.

Everywhere silence. And everywhere, the stink of decay.

He walked in, unchallenged. A dull-eyed serving-man regarded him without curiosity, but said nothing.

In the great hall, too, there was silence. The king slumped in his throne, while beside him his wife grown thinner than any man might desire stared listlessly into space.

He walked between the lower tables. Old men stared at him, and children too young to be fostered out. Pale women, faces fixed like stone beneath their wimples.

And still he walked, hauling the dragon's head behind him, wondering if it were still bleeding, still bringing verdant life with it.

And then he was at the top of the hall. He dropped to one knee, with all the flourish he could muster. "My Lord," he said. "It is done."

"And well done it is," said the King. His voice was like an uncoiled hinge. "Let there be rejoicing. Let there be mead poured, and what meat there is brought forth, for truly now our land shall live again."

And since the King had said it, it was so.

They took the dragon's head and placed it on a pike outside the castle gate for all to see, and know that now there was nothing to fear.

That night the Knight slept once more beside his wife, the Lady Maria. She was a delight to him, and ardent, and later as he fell asleep he imagined that the sweet white flowers from the dragon's blood had spread out to cover the land, and that their purity had banished the harsh sun from the sky.

But in the morning, he knew it was not so. He went out of the castle, and saw the land stretching like a sea of stone all around - all but the swathe of white and green that led to the mountain.

He turned to view the the dragon's head on its pike, as if he might find comfort there, or guidance. Yet the pike was no more, and in it's place there grew a strong young apple tree, with leaves and blossom and fruit all growing at once, and in their midst the dragon's head.

The knight turned away from it, unable to meet it's dead stare.

It was a beast, he thought. A cursed beast, that brought its curse with it when it came here: and all this is nothing more than the final working out of that curse; and if there seems to be good coming from the

dragon now, why surely the good has come from its death.

Or else it's a snare set by Lucifer to entrap us.

In the days and weeks that followed, the land did not prosper.

"My Lord, do not grieve," said the Lady Maria. "You have done more than any Knight could, and if it was not enough then perhaps to do more would be beyond any man."

"No!" he said, thinking of the other knights who had gone before him bravely, and died bravely or otherwise.

"But-"

He raised his hand and struck her across the face, and loathed himself for it, for she was both his Lady and his love and what he had done was dishonourable.

*I'll have your honour....*

Someone had said that to him, but he did not know who. He stumbled away, grateful not to have to see his wife's sad eyes any more.

He came at to the chapel. It was cooler there, amid the gemstone colours of the stained glass Bible stories and the stone saints. He lit a candle. Not for the dead, but for himself.

He prayed, but there was no solace in prayer, not when all he could think of was his wife's face after his hand had left its mark on her cheek. And his children, going hungry in the morning and with nothing but a bowl of cabbage soup at night. The land, sere and brown, except where the dragon's blood had wept upon it.

I promised, he thought, but he could not remember what he had promised, as he drifted softly from prayer to half-sleep.

*I'll have your honour, said the voice, and laughed.*

And he remembered: Maid Quinsy, telling him she'd have his honour.

She had brought this on him. She had brought him to false glory. She had made him strike his wife.

He stumbled out, into the bloody noonday sun. He would find her, make her pay for it, pay for all of it. Down by the river, that's where she would be, he thought - down by that thick brown trickle, murky as her heart, that had once been a raging torrent.

But he did not have so far to go.

She was by the apple tree outside the castle gate.

"I knew you would come," she said.

He stared at her, at her mocking eyes. "You lied to me."

"I did not. Tell me how I lied," she said. She tilted up her face to him. "And then I'll tell you how you did."

"You said you would help me..."

"I said I would help you kill the dragon. And the king has proclaimed that you have done so - so it must be true, Good Sir Knight, must it not?"

She knew, he thought. She would tell them, tell them of the dragon sleeping under the hill, even while its head nestled in the branches of the apple tree. "Be silent," he said. They would hear. Whatever she said, they would hear. They would know.

"But why?" she demanded. "Have I said an untruth? Is the King forsworn?"

"You know the way of it," he answered her. "Now be silent or-" he realised his hand was raised to hit her. He would not hit her, though she was only a peasant and not a lady like his wife.

"Have you lied?" she whispered. He couldn't answer. She reached up, and pulled an apple off the tree. "Here," she said. "Perhaps if you don't know whether you've lied or not, this will help you."

*Some say dragons speak with the tongues of angels.* He heard the voice clearly in his mind. *And thus speak only truth.* His hand reached, all of its own volition, for the apple. If it came from one who knew the tongue of angels, how could it be evil? He glanced up. Saw the dragon's head, staring at him. The fruit of the tree, he thought. Offered by the Great Serpent.

Eat of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge and be driven out of the Garden for all eternity.

*And some say dragons speak with the tongues of fallen angels, and thus speak only lies.* Again, that

voice, true as anything he'd ever known.

He slapped the apple away. "I don't need your cursed apple to know right from wrong," he said. "The Church tells me all I need to know to live my life as a man; my honour tells me all I need to live my life as a knight. I need no other schooling."

"And which tells you that you may lie to your king?" Maid Quinsy asked. "For you did, did you not? Tell him you had killed the dragon, when the dragon lies asleep under the hill?"

"I did what I must do—"

"And when did chivalry value pragmatism over truth, Good Sir Knight? Or have you rewritten all you learned as a boy and a squire and a man to suit your needs?"

"The dragon would have killed me," he said, remembering.

"Are you so afraid to meet your God, then?" Maid Quinsy's face seemed to glow with righteousness.

"No." The word was torn out of him. "But I thought to save my people. My wife. Our children."

"So you lied to your King."

"Yes I lied," he said.

"And at last you speak truth."

"Never in my life before or again," he said. "I will do penance—"

"For lying? Or for failing to save your children, your wife, your people?"

"For both," he said at last. "For everything."

"Yet if I told you there was still a way to save them - to make the land whole and fruitful? And that you might, even, be alive at the end of it to live out your days with your wife at your side?"

He shook his head, slowly. "It cannot be," he said. "I have doomed us all."

"Look at the land."

Compelled by her voice, he looked around. Baked earth and dying trees. And a verdant path leading to the hill.

"The dragon's blood did that," she said, gesturing. "Go then to the hill, and kill the dragon. Let his blood water the land—"

"But I promised," the Knight said. "I promised I would let it sleep until after my time. I would be forsworn—" He stared at the ground by his feet, at the cracks in the hard red earth.

"You are already forsworn," said Maid Quinsy. "To your King, to whom you swore fealty. Can it be worse to be forsworn to a..." her gaze flicked towards the dragon's head, and away. "Dragon?" Yet he would have sworn on his life that he heard her say *serpent*, for all he knew it was not so.

"A lie is a lie," he said. He needed to think, but nothing would come clear.

"And if by one lie your family lives, and by another it dies?"

"But—"

"What of your wife? What of your children, slowly starving?"

"The dragon kept its word," he said, finally articulating his vagrant thoughts. "Therefore it spoke with the tongue of angels. Surely to lie to it is to lie to the angels? To God?"

"Would your God have you kill your family, then?"

"No! Never."

"Then lie. Save them. Perhaps in a day, the dragon will rouse from its slumber, and ravage the land again. Perhaps it is in its nature to do so. You cannot know."

"It would not lie to me—"

"If it speaks with the tongues of angels, no." She looked at him, speculatively. The apple, long disregarded, was still in her hand. She raised it to her mouth and bit down on the red skin of the fruit. Juice spurted out and ran down her chin. The knight's mouth flooded with saliva. After a moment, Maid Quinsy spoke again. "But if it lied? If it spoke with the voice of fallen angels, what then?" He could only stare at her. He felt dizzy, as if he stood on the brink of a great abyss and could do nothing but stare into its depths. "The apple is very good," she said. "You should try it."

"Would I know, then?"

"Perhaps." She took another bite. "Or perhaps not." She laughed then, like a child. "Perhaps a man who needs divine knowledge to know whether he should save his wife and family is damned no matter what he does."



The knight nodded. He turned away.

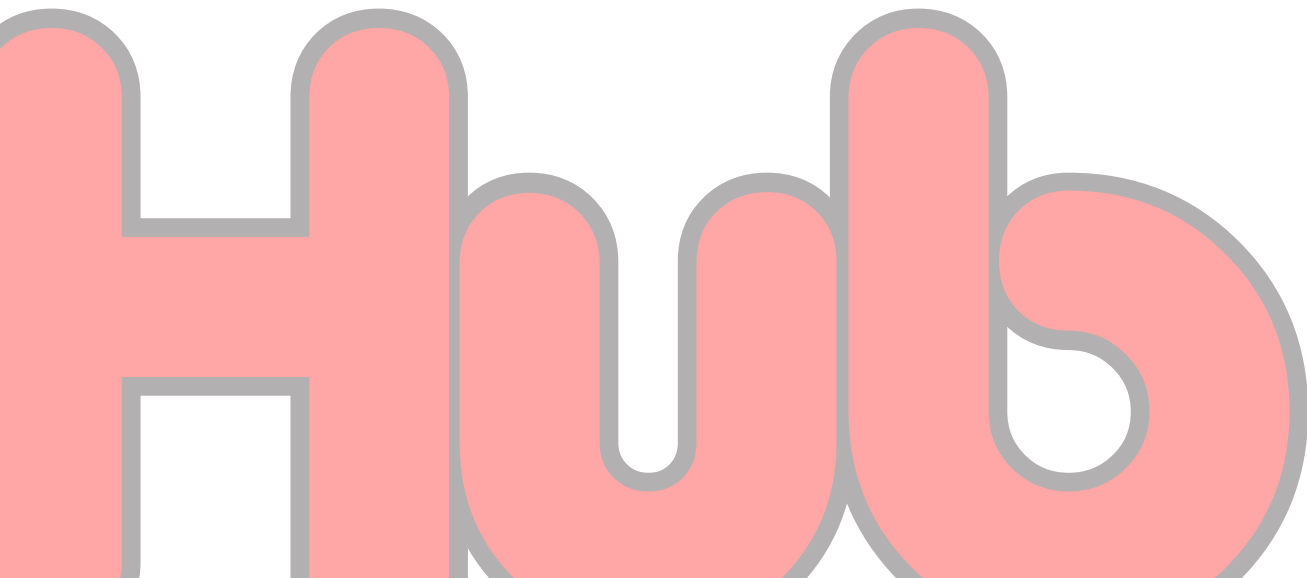
*I will have your honour.* He thought he heard her say it, from behind him, but it might have been the fading echo of a half-remembered dream. *For the honour of the likes of you has kept the likes of me in the ditches and hedgerows and margins of the world.*

Do you hate me so very much, he wondered as he walked along the green path that led to the hill, that you would give me the means to save my world and yet take everything from me?

*I will have your honour.*

As he climbed the hill, the setting sun turned the white flowers to the colour of blood.  
The last knight in all the world was going to kill the last dragon.

fin



# REVIEWS

## The Clone Wars Series 2 – Episode 7-8

reviewed by richard whittaker



“Legacy of Terror” Directed by Steward Lee, written by Eoghan Mahony  
“Brain Invaders” Directed by Steward Lee, written by Andrew Kreisberg  
Starring: Matt Lanter, James Arnold Taylor, Ashley Eckstein, Brian George, Meredith Salenger, Matthew Wood, Olivia D’Abo, Dee Bradley Baker

Nothing says “horror” like brain worms. So far, the darkness in *The Clone Wars* has come from the grind of the rolling conflict, but having zombified giant bugs and mind-controlled Jedi takes the show into a different direction.

The franchise has been getting good word for its first major excursion into horror, the recent novel *Death Troopers*, but it’s easy to get graphic when the image is left to the reader’s imagination. An animated show, especially one that has to remain teen and pre-teen friendly, has a tougher balancing act: How to create a real air of unnatural tension without turning into *House of a Thousand Corpses*. As a compromise, what the show reaches is the kind of non-graphic creepy that a good Bela Lugosi movie provides.

The story starts where the last arc ended – in the ashes of the droid factories on Geonosis. Having recaptured the planet, the Republic is in a clean-up operation, and hunting for Geonosian leader Poggle the Lesser (Wood, providing the chitinous clicks and purrs of the winged villain). Heading off into the catacombs of an ancient temple, Jedi Master Luminara Unduli (D’Abo) thinks she has found him, but also discovers exactly why they call him “The Lesser.” The massive Geonosian queen is churning out not simply an army of flying warriors, but a nasty little breed of creepy-crawly that likes slithering into the cerebellum and re-animating corpses. Not only that, but it can take over living creatures like, say, a ship full of clones and a couple of convenient Padawans.

While bloated bug Queen Karina (Baker) owes an obvious debt to the Alien Queen from *Aliens*, there’s still something uniquely *Clone Warsy* about her. The weak point is Baker’s vocalization, which is weirdly shrill and histrionic: But the design is extraordinary, really capitalizing on the carved wood marionette feel that underlies the show’s artistic paradigm. However, she does undercut somewhat the development of the Geonosian warriors: In *Attack of the Clones*, they were an effective mob, but *The Clone Wars* has added a real brutality to them, making them as likely to rip a head off, or snatch a clone trooper into the skies and then drop them onto the rocks, as give them a sanitary death by sonic blaster. Add in the idea that the undead can only really be stopped by being pulverized or dissected, and the grey, crumbling flesh of their re-animated corpses strikes the right balance of shambling and slaying.

If *Legacy of Terror* is *Night of the Living Dead*, then *Brain Invaders* is *The Thing*, as returning Padawans Barriss Offee (Salenger) and Ahsoka Tano (Eckstein) contend with a cadre of clones that may have something in their noggins, or may just have taken a bribe from the Trade Federation (hey, it’s happened before: See both *Cloak of Darkness* and *The Hidden Enemy* from season 1). There’s a greater tension here, not least because there’s a real risk that some series recurrent characters may not make it out alive (or at least worm-free).

Ultimately, this micro-arc serves multiple purposes: It weaves a little more menace into the show without sacrificing its universal appeal; It changes gear without distracting from the main storyline; But most importantly it continues the development of the central character. What may make this a turning point storyline is that, so far, Anakin (Lanter) has been a hero with weaknesses. But this two-parter starts to build the bridge between the flawed protagonist of the prequels and the villain of the original trilogy,

and unify the two more closely. It's more than just set-dressing (although the eagle-eyed will spot a brief glimpse of the Imperial sigil, as well as some corridors straight from *A New Hope's* Tantive IV). Instead, there is something deeper, as the first real signs of the brutal killer with the "by any means necessary" philosophy start to emerge. Hey, it's not like Anakin learnt to throttle people with the Force when he was having a lover's tiff with Padme on Mustapha in *Revenge of the Sith*.

With General Grievous (the closest the show has to a resident serial killer) scheduled to crop up again in the New Year, it will be interesting to see if the horror component abates. Even if this was the one concession to the genre, it still makes for an interesting, and fairly successful, experiment.

## Love Songs for the Shy and Cynical

reviewed by lee harris



Written by Robert Shearman

Published by Big Finish.

Various formats, from £8.95

Last year in *The Hub Awards* Shearman's debut short story collection - *Tiny Deaths* - was described as "Not only the best collection I read this year, but perhaps the best collection I have ever read!" The collection went on to win a World Fantasy Award, and deservedly so.

Shearman has followed this remarkable debut with an equally remarkable second collection. His writing style is unmistakable, having emerged seemingly fully-formed, and his observations about the world around us are as accurate - and as funny - as ever. There is an occasional mis-step - the creatures that appear in the story *Road Kill*, for instance, are surplus to requirements. The tale would work perfectly well - perhaps better - without them. A small criticism, however, for a story that so accurately and poignantly describes the loneliness of the human condition, and one which contains the single funniest sex scene ever put to paper. Ever wondered how much your partner/spouse/family member *actually* loves you? Read 14.2 and find out why it's best not to know. There are too many highlights in this collection to name them all, so I'll just echo the sentiments I expressed in my review of Shearman's first volume: *Buy a copy now*.

# FEATURES

## roll the bones

by *j.r.blackwell*

### Too many imaginary people can kill your game

Games are about the players. However, in many games a surpurfluous amount of Non-Player Characters (or NPC's) in a scene can ruin a great concept. Although NPC's can add a lot to a game, having too many makes the game feel like it's just about the NPC's and indeed, would proceed quite nicely even if the players got up and left the building.

This can not stand.

Gamers are often creative types – we like creating characters, writing intricate backstories, painting little metal men and using our imaginations to get in all sorts of trouble. Storytellers, Dungeon-Masters, Game Designers, whatever moniker they go by in your circle, are often the cream of this creative crop, because they like to build big great worlds for their friends to roll around in. Of course, some of them can be rather enthusiastic about it, and instead of building a fantastic world, intricate clues or a well-crafted storyline, they just make a giant list of NPC's. This can be a problem.

NPC's play an important role in tabletop or live action games – they are characters that the player characters don't control, but that still play a role in the action. NPC's help players find clues, act as mentors, give quests or act as villains to our characters heroes (or hero's to our characters villains, depending on the kind of game you are involved in). They are an excellent tool to guide a story, and, properly applied, they can be a delight to your characters – they can motivate them to conquer their fears, save the day or provide a sinister challenger to defeat.

But having too many NPC's is a reoccurring problem in many of the games I've played. The trouble is, having too many NPC's in a scene can be confusing for player characters, especially in tabletop. The player has enough to worry about without having to remember the names, jobs and importance of lots of different NPC's. The person running the game can get around this a bit by having distinct voices, visuals and a clear sense of how an NPC contributes to a plot, but still, a variety of NPC's will contribute to confusion.

In one game I played, there were so many NPC's that they would end up having whole scenes just with each other. I remember clearly the players sitting quietly around a table as the storyteller had a long chat – with himself! At that point, the players felt like there was no reason for them to be there. In another game I played in there were so many NPC's that the players made the Game Master wear different hats every time someone new was speaking. We had a giant red top-hat for our villain, a bowler for one of our allies, and a flowered hat for a young lady with superpowers. Without these props we would have been confused.

Of course, the argument goes that preparing for your game is a great idea – how could over preparing hurt your game?

For the answer, I turned to David A Hill Jr, a Game Designer, for his thoughts on when an NPC might be appropriate. David said: "When portraying an NPC, ask yourself how the scene progress would change if you removed her. If the answer isn't, "a lot," then you should just suck it up and remove her."

Remove what doesn't work and what isn't fun for your players. I've found an excellent system for NPC's is to constrain yourself to one NPC conversationalist per scene. This doesn't mean that you can't have a battlefield full of enemies, or a ballroom full of guests, but there should only be one personal interaction per scene where the characters have to remember the name of the NPC. There should never be any confusion about who is talking. Remember that the game is about the players, and nothing, not the world, not the NPC's, not the mechanics, should ever get in the way of anyone having a good time. If the NPC's are taking up time and focus in the game, ditch them. Let the spotlight shine brightest on your players.

## **Interview: Al Ewing**

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*with alasdair stuart*

I'm with Al Ewing Block, who're you with?

Al Ewing is one of the rising stars of 2000AD and is front and centre in Prog 2010, out now. His combination of invention, humour, wit and a fondness for the darker side of the panel has already marked him out as a fan favourite. We talked to him about Dredd, the mighty Zombo, prose vs comics and what he thinks the future holds...

**Hub Magazine: 2000AD is something of a cornerstone for a lot of British creators and writers. What characters did you gravitate towards when you were growing up:?**

Al Ewing: Dredd, obviously. I was one of those kids who made comics to alleviate the bullying at school, and often those were little Dredd episodes, one page at a time to be passed around among the other kids. I didn't have much of a handle on the character at that stage. What else... I was a big fan of all the classic characters, really - Robo-Hunter in particular, who was just coming to the end of his original life when I started getting the comic. I remember going back and getting all the Titan reprints, and Day Of The Droids was a particular favourite. If I ever manage to write something as intelligent as that, I'll die a happy man.

**HM: You've been working on Judge Dredd this year. Is it difficult finding new things to do with the character given his extensive history?**

AE: Not really - his extensive history means that if I'm feeling a bit lazy I can reach back into the past and grab something from there as the seed of a story. If anything, the long history - in real time, yet! Try finding another comics character who's done that - makes him easier to write. If he's dropped into a situation, I know pretty much what he'll do, and the more I write him, the more confident I get that I can predict his moves, which helps when plotting.

**HM: How difficult is it to balance the satirical elements of Dredd with the world building? Is there a side to the character you prefer working with?**

AE: Again, not really. I try and build in elements I can use later - I've created a few new judges and other characters in case I need to come back to them. I've got a Good Judge, a Bad Judge and a Clever Judge that I can bring in where the story needs them, and because I made them up I know I'm free to kill them off, which is nice.

The satirical elements are so ingrained in Dredd that they come naturally - it's not really a Dredd strip if there isn't a little black humour tucked away somewhere in there. There are so many sides to Dredd that you can pretty much do any story - from fairly grim, miserable downers like the New Year strip to saucy comedic stuff like the Sex Olympics one. It's straight action, police procedural, political thriller, satire, out and out slapstick - anything you want it to be, which you can't say about Batman or Spider-Man. Spidey can't really be a political thriller, Batman can't be slapstick, Superman can't easily be police procedural - Dredd slips

naturally into any role, without distorting the character.

**HM: Zombo was one of the best new series to debut this year. What does the future hold for the character?**

AE: Well, next year he's rampaging around a zombie-infested space station and beating up Frank Sinatra and the year after that... your guess is as good as mine. Henry's got some ideas, but we'll need to sit down and thrash out a few things. It'll be laffs a-plenty, you can bet on that.

**HM: You've also enjoyed a lot of success with your work with Abbadon. Which do you prefer, working with prose or comics?**

AE: Oh, comics, definitely. My first love. But I am increasingly leaning towards the idea of prose - I'm starting to come round to it. It doesn't hurt that the novels reach a fairly different audience to the comics - I deeply value the respect of the long-term 2000AD fans, but I'm greedy and I want more, I want all the love in the world...

**HM: What's on the slate for 2010?**

AE: Well, I've got six Hollywood producers up my ass, daaahhhling, I'm making eight films and ten TV shows and I'm up to my ears in cocaine and whores.. no, only kidding. But I am doing a couple of prose books, a nice creator-owned OGN (*probably*), a filthy Euro-porn album (*maybe*), more Zombo, more Dredd, hopefully more Tempest and the biggie - *Damnation Station*, my grim and gritty future-war-is-hell drama. I'm pulling all the stops out for that one. That and the cocaine and the whores and the Hollywood people.

*Prog 2010 is out now. Death Got No Mercy, part of Abbadon Books' Afterblight Chronicles series is also by AI and is available now.*

