

WWW.PANTECHNICON.NET

ISSUE THREE MARCH 2007

PANTECHNICON

HORROR + SCIENCE FICTION + FANTASY



IN CONVERSATION WITH
GARY RUSSELL
THE START OF A TWO PART
EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

FOUR BRAND NEW
STORIES BY:
SIMON GUERRIER
LISA R. SLOMIN
GAVIN BROOM
TRUDI TOPHAM

PLUS
REVIEWS AND PREVIEWS

CLASSIC SCI FI NOVELS 101 **FIRST MEN IN THE MOON**

THE FIRST OF A SERIES OF ARTICLES LOOKING
AT THE MORE OBSCURE PIECES OF CLASSIC SCIENCE
FICTION LITERATURE

PANTECHNICON

Issue 3 | March 2007



H. G. Wells is highlighted in Classic Sci-fi 101, page 05

We're back... and on schedule!

This issue sees two firsts; an all exclusive interview with former Doctor Who supremo, Gary Russell, and a new series of articles by Sean Parker looking at the more obscure science fiction classics.

What with four brand new stories full of danger and suspense, the third part of our fantasy epic, plenty of cult DVD reviews, and an exclusive extract of the forthcoming Orbit novel, Proven Guilty, issue three promises to have something for everyone!

A quick reminder about our welcoming community at www.pantehnicon.net – the writers are always there for you to share your opinions with.

Andy Frankham-Allen & Trudi Topham, March 2007

Editors: Andy Frankham-Allen & Trudi Topham

Assistant Editor: Rhys Elliott

Cover: Luke Spillane

Website: Trudi Topham

Portable Document File: Andy Frankham-Allen

Selenite CGI Model © 2006 Alex Mallinson

Contributors: Gavin Broom; Andy Frankham-Allen; Simon Guerrier; Paul Kane; Sean Parker; Lisa R. Slomin; Trudi Topham

CONTENTS

Stories

- Walking Alone In Madness** 03
One woman's need to escape the city leads to the country and something much much worse.
- The Receipt** 09
Ray's drunken night out leads him deeper into trouble than he could ever imagine.
- The Bounty Hunters** 31
Some bounties are more personal than others. And some should never be collected at all.
- London Calling** 42
Part three in an ongoing Fantasy series by Trudi Topham.

Interview

- In Conversation...** 21
First of two-parts, Gary Russell talks to Andy Frankham-Allen about his time as a child actor, and how he got into writing.

Article

- Classic Science Fiction 101** 05
New series looking at the more obscure classics. This issue: 'The First Men in the Moon'.

Reviews & Previews

- DVD Reviews** 13
Dead Or Alive; The Wicker Man; Death Ship; Masters of Horror Series 1 Vol. 2; Tideland
- Proven Guilty Preview** 38
Extract from the forthcoming novel published by Orbit Books

With thanks to: Gary Russell, Orbit Books, Simon Guerrier and Alex Mallinson.

All material © 2007 Pantehnicon Publishing & Respective Authors. All rights reserved.

WALKING ALONE IN MADNESS

By LISA R. SLOMIN

One woman's need to escape the city leads to the country and something much much worse.

When I was growing up, I lived with my parents in the city. God, how I hated that place. There was so much noise, all of the time. There was the constant rumble of the cars and trucks careening by on the streets. No matter what time of day or night it was, I could always hear the voices of people streaming by. Living on the upper floor of an apartment building made even the planes seem more turbulent as they roared by.

As I got older, the girls my age in school started dating. I tried it a few times, but found that even the noises of a date were too overbearing for me to handle. Movies were like thunder rolling around in my head. Going out for burgers at the local hangout was too clamorous an event, people yelling and shouting as if they were miles away instead of just sitting across the booth from each other. It didn't matter much though, because I didn't get asked that often anyway.

I worked really hard after I graduated from high school, as hard as I could to save up enough money to get out of that place, that wretched, drumming city. Most of my work I did from home; it was too loud for me to work in an office. I found a place that would let me do their work on my computer and electronically send it to them when I was done. After a few years of working in this fashion I earned enough money to buy myself a small place in the country.

At last, the peace and quiet that I had always longed for. I had saved up enough money so that I was able to take a few months off to gather my thoughts and enjoy the silence. And the silence was indeed golden for a while. It was only interrupted by the occasional visits from my mother. I learned that if I could make her visits short, I was able to tolerate her shrill, loud voice.

My mother could not sympathise with my decision to live all alone, miles from any neighbours. She had never understood my problem with sound and my obsession with silence. To be honest, I never understood my problems either, but I was forced to live with them. Her visits became more and more infrequent. That was ok with me though.

After a few weeks, the silence didn't seem so silent anymore. The sounds started creeping into my head again; different, yet just as detestable and intolerable as the city noises that had invaded my world for my whole life.

The racket from the chirping birds reminded me of the caterwauling of the endless people on the city streets. The throbbing croaking from the frogs seemed as loud as the garbage trucks that had bellowed by my apartment building each morning. And the crickets, how they started to drive me mad! The high pitched squeal of their legs rubbing together was like fingernails on a chalkboard. How would I ever be able to live with all of that noise?

I tried the obvious at first, making sure that all of the windows and doors were shut at all times. It was the middle of a summer heat wave, but the thought of the whirl of a fan or an air conditioner was unacceptable. I sat in the stifling heat of my house, dripping with sweat, listening for noises. It was a little quieter, but not enough. I needed more quiet. The sound of

the breeze blowing through the grass, making that horrible hissing noise, could still be heard. Quiet, I needed more quiet!

I took some large pieces of wood that the previous owners had left in the shed and put them over my windows. I couldn't use a hammer; I think the explosion each bang would have made would have driven me mad. But I managed to make the boards stay up by propping them on tables and using masking tape to attach them to the windows.

I put large bath towels at the bottom of my front and back door so no sound would permeate through those cracks. Still though, still I heard the noises. That's when I realized that many of the sounds were coming from *inside* the house, not outside.

I had never noticed before how much discord there was from the small things; the sound of my chair scraping against the floor, the noise the water made as it rushed out of the faucet, then uproariously whooshed down the drain, even the whirl of electricity each time I turned on a light switch. How did people live with all of this noise all of the time?

I finally resorted to going into my bedroom, turning off the crackling electric of the lights and sitting in the dark. I knew then that I couldn't get away from it; I could not get away from all of the noise. I could even hear myself breathing. There was no way to cover up that sound, no way to make it go away. Like a sudden epiphany, a thought came into my head, something that I had read years ago, something that was the answer to my problems. It was advice from the Bible, so it couldn't be wrong. I remembered the words that I had read so long ago and wondered why I hadn't seen this solution before now. Finally, words to live by, words that I could use.

'If thy right hand offend thee, cut it off and cast it from thee.'

Could I do it though? Could I do it? Absolutely! I could do anything to get rid of all of the bedlam that I was hearing.

I can't remember much about what happened after I finally made my decision. I do remember going into the kitchen and sharpening a carving knife. I remember sterilising it... I didn't want to take a chance of getting an infection. I remember finding a bottle of gin and pouring myself a glass. I grabbed the knife, and I don't remember much after that.

They say that my mother found me, lying in a pool of blood on my kitchen floor. I guess it's a good thing that she picked that day to come and visit me, to check up on me.

When I woke up the next day, I was lying in a hospital bed with bandages around my head. I didn't feel too much pain. It was probably because I was so loaded up with pain pills and anti-depressants. You see, they think that I'm crazy. Crazy like a fox! I finally have peace. It is blessedly silent!

I've stopped taking all of that medication. The nurses don't even realise that I don't swallow the pills that they have been forcing me to take. I just hold them under my tongue until they leave, then flush them down the toilet bowl.

Even though the silence has been wonderful, I do notice something disturbing happening the last few days. All of the colours seem so bright that they hurt my eyes. The pale green of the hospital room walls is starting to suffocate me. The whiteness of the doctors and nurses robes is burning my corneas. I have even started to see things floating past me; I think it might be the molecules in the air. If this keeps up much longer, I really might become crazy. Wouldn't the doctors and my mother love that, proving them right! Thank goodness I still have my bible.

'If thy right hand offend thee, cut it off and cast it from thee.'

I knew that I could do it. Of course I could do it; the Bible tells me so.

I'm glad they left me this pencil. Now I'm going to take care of my eyes.

CLASSIC S.F. NOVELS 101

By SEAN PARKER

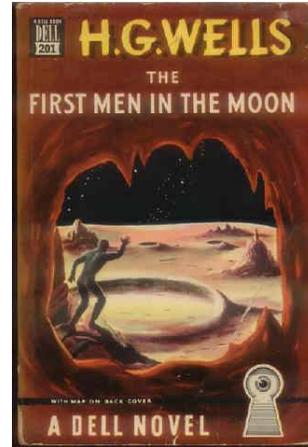
The first in our new series of articles that form an introduction to some of the more obscure science fiction novels. We hope that, like the editors, you'll find this series whets your appetite and you find yourself walking into your local library or bookshop and order these titles. The first of which is;

THE FIRST MEN IN THE MOON by H.G. WELLS

THE AUTHOR

'The Shakespeare of Science Fiction.' - Brian Aldiss

Herbert George Wells was born on September 21st 1866. In his teens he was an apprentice draper for two years, an experience that he didn't enjoy. In 1884 he became an assistant master at Midhurst Grammar school. At the same time, he studied physics, chemistry, biology, geology and astronomy - all of which were to be useful in the writing of his more speculative fiction.



After leaving Midhurst, he took on various teaching jobs in the following years, and in 1890 was awarded a degree in zoology.

Wells started writing short fiction whilst recovering from a haemorrhage of the lungs in 1893, much of this early work falling into the categories of science fiction (a term not used at that time), fantasy and horror. They appeared in such places as 'The Sunday Review', 'The Pall Mall Gazette' and 'The New Review'.

Earlier, Wells had written some short pieces concerning time travel for a small magazine, and, making use of these and running with the idea, he wrote a short novel entitled THE TIME MACHINE, which appeared in 1895. This was the first of his classic SF novels.

The same year, Wells married for the second time, the first marriage having ended some time previously. He remained with his new wife, Amy Robbins, until her death in 1927, although Wells was by no stretch of the imagination entirely faithful.

Over the following years, Wells produced what are probably his most well remembered novels, or scientific romances, as he thought of them, including THE INVISIBLE MAN, THE ISLAND OF DOCTOR MOREAU and THE WAR OF THE WORLDS. He also produced many mainstream novels, such as KIPPS, ANNA VERONICA and LOVE AND MR LEWISHAM, for which he was equally well known at the time.

Taking an increasing interest in world affairs and political and sociological problems (concerns which were already the driving force behind his speculative work), he joined the Fabian Society in 1903, a group with whom he didn't always see eye to eye, but remained involved with for many years. His written work followed these interests closely, and became more involved with concrete problems such as the need (as he saw it) for a World State, and for mankind to adapt so as to be able to live alongside the technological advances it was making without being destroyed by them.

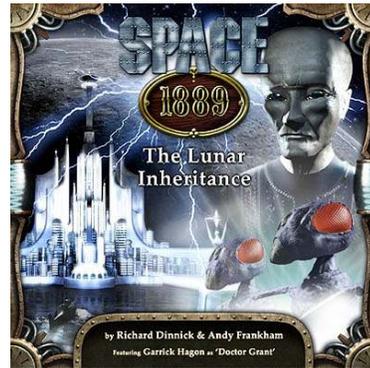
Wells viewed World War I, when it arrived after years of European turmoil, as 'the War to end War' and hoped that from the destruction some new system would be put in place which would make it impossible for such a thing to happen again. In 1918 he was also, for a short while, the Director of Propaganda Policy against Germany.



Between the wars, Wells continued to campaign for the need for a World State, and his work, along with many others led to the attempted 'League of Nations', which in turn, many years later led to the formation of the 'United Nations'. He concentrated his energies in directions such as this for most of the rest of his life. Unfortunately, at the same time, the world was sliding into another war, on an unprecedented scale. World War II left Wells severely disillusioned. Having been ill for some time, he died on August 13th 1946.

THE BOOK

Whilst others of H.G.'s science fiction novels have been updated for the big screen, and are seen to still hold some relevance today, *THE FIRST MEN IN THE MOON* appears to have faded into the background a little. This is not because it is a bad novel; in fact, in my 'umble opinion the very opposite is true. It has all the same quality of writing and inventiveness as those of his other well-known works. In fact, it is written with a slightly lighter tone than, say, *THE ISLAND OF DOCTOR MOREAU*. Also, the reason for it having taken second billing cannot be because it lacks the elements to make for great general entertainment - it was successfully filmed in 1964 (with a screenplay by Nigel Kneale of *QUATERMASS* fame, with an ending that seemed to owe more than a little to another H.G. novel, *THE WAR OF THE WORLDS*) and has been adapted for radio many times (most memorably by the BBC in 1981, with Hywell Bennett and Willy Rushton taking the lead roles, and also a much shorter version starring William Shatner, Leonard Nimoy and John DeLancie). It, like many key works of science fiction from that pioneering era, also appears to have influenced a role playing game which appeared in the 1990s called 'SPACE: 1889'. This, in turn, led to the production of an audio play, *THE LUNAR INHERITANCE* (co-written by one of Pantechnicon's fine editors - small world!), proving that the novel's influence is still apparent in some quarters.



Maybe *THE FIRST MEN IN THE MOON* stands a little further back in the shadows because science has passed it by to such a degree. Man has been to the moon and there is no life there, either on the surface or beneath it. Although we obviously haven't suffered an invasion from the red planet or invented time travel, somehow H.G.'s tale of space travel and lunar life seems to have dated somewhat worse. This really shouldn't matter though, and it is a great fantasy in which Wells addresses issues as serious as those in his other SF works.

The plot is straight forward. Bedford, the narrator, makes the acquaintance of an eccentric, typically absentminded scientist name Cavor, who is working on producing a substance which reflects the forces of gravity. Bedford, being at something of a loose end,

joins Cavor on his venture, adding his supposed practicality and business sense to the whole affair.

After the gravity reflecting substance (named, naturally, Cavorite) is accidentally produced - nearly causing the entire human race to perish from asphyxiation - plans are made to journey to the nearest stopping off point in space, the moon. The vehicle, a sphere, is eventually produced and the two men journey to their destination with relatively little incident. Upon landing, they find what appears to be a dead world, which, as the lunar day dawns, springs dramatically to life, with some wonderful descriptive passages of the foliage of a completely alien world.

The two men begin to explore, and are shortly captured by selenites, an insect-like race that dwell inside the hollow moon. With Cavor and Bedford's imprisonment underground, the novel takes on a darker tone, that pervades most of the rest of the book.

The underworld of the moon is a chilling place. Lit by a pale blue phosphorous liquid pumped up from the central sea, it is peopled by a society similar in some ways to that of many earthly insects. Each 'type' of selenite has its own function, which it is bred for and there is nothing outside its area of specialisation that can interest him. In a precursor to the baby factory in Aldous Huxley's BRAVE NEW WORLD, newly grown individuals, kept in jars, are engineered to have the right mental and physical attributes for their allotted task in life. Every selenite has a purpose, and when workers (for instance) are not required they are simply drugged, and are only revived when they are needed again. At the centre of this cold-seeming civilisation is the Grand Lunar, the head selenite who would very much like to know more about the inhabitants of their nearest neighbour in space.

The workings of this society pose some interesting questions. There is no waste, everybody is fed and catered for, unemployment does not, in the conventional sense, exist, all know their place and the metaphorical trains run on time. Unfortunately, this leaves no room for the individual to flourish. Which would be better, a perfectly functioning society such as this, or the far from perfect examples to be found on Earth. Neither, seems to be the answer that Wells arrives at.

Predictably, when the two cultures meet, there is very little in the way of understanding. Violence flares, and there is fear of the unknown on both sides. The book ends on a low note, with the lunar civilisation shocked at the barbarity of man, with its constant wars and passions and greeds and emotion, taking action to prevent themselves ever having to confront man again. This low estimation of mankind is unfortunate, but perfectly understandable as seen through alien eyes. It is ironic that the character that gives the selenites this information is a man who finds the behaviour of his kind to be just as repellant at times as the lunar creatures do.

This is still an important book, and it is still worth reading for the sheer adventure of it alone. It has humour, horror (some of the descriptions of the lunar sub-surface and its inhabitants are very chilling indeed, all bathed as they are in a pale blue light, shadows and darkness never far away) and is written with H.G.'s customary intelligence. Well worth a read if you haven't encountered it, and certainly worth another look if you have already had the pleasure.

OTHER RECOMMENDED SF NOVELS BY WELLS

- The Time Machine (1895)
- The Island of Doctor Moreau (1896)
- The Invisible Man (1897)
- The War of the Worlds (1898)

- The Food of the Gods (1904)
- In the Days of the Comet (1906)
- The Shape of Things to Come (1933)

'The First Men in the Moon' cover © Dell Publishing
'The Lunar Inheritance' cover © 2006 Noise Monster Productions

THE RECEIPT

By GAVIN BROOM

Ray's drunken night out leads him deeper into trouble than he could ever imagine.

'I'd give my right arm for one of them plasma TVs,' Ray said, swaying dramatically on his bar stool and teasing gravity as he turned to face his drinking companion. He picked up his glass and waved it at the old man's face. 'In fact, I'd give my right ball for one. But it would have to be a good one, mind. Not one of those Yabadabadoobery pieces of crap. No, it would need to be one of those wall mounted, HD-ready, 42 inch Sonys with that light thing happening at the back... that would *really* make me happy.'

The night had started, eight hours ago, in familiar surroundings with well-known faces and erudite debate but was destined to end like this; in a old man's pub he'd never visited before, talking to an old man he didn't know, his friends lost somewhere down the line. What had previously been said to lead the conversation to this point remained as mysterious as how he'd ended up here in the first place, but at that precise moment, Ray was sure he'd never said a truer word in his life. He threw the last of his Drambuie down his throat, winked sloppily at the barmaid and pointed to his empty glass.

The old man took a sip from his half-pint of Guinness. 'Not for me, I'm afraid.'

'Are you kidding?' Ray couldn't hide his astonishment and flirted with gravity again. 'What kind of TV do you have just now? Widescreen? LCD? One of them projectory things?'

'I don't own a television. I've never seen the attraction.' His voice was gentle and soothing; the kind of voice, Ray thought, that you could listen to all night.

'Quite lid ... liddel ... quite lit-er-ally. Liretalry,' Ray stumbled. He blinked tightly and tried to pull the remains of his sobriety to the tip of his tongue. 'Quite *literally*.'

The old man laughed, either at the joke or the delivery, and patted Ray on the back. 'When I was your age, we listened to the wireless or we made our own entertainment. Me and my pals used to go cycling every weekend. We'd cover a hundred miles in a day, meet real characters and new friends. We saw every pub and piece of skirt this country had to offer. And of course, I was stationed in Bnghazi after the war. I've got so many memories of that place; the people, my old buddies. You ever been to Libya, son?'

Ray shook his head and smirked a little at the suggestion. 'I've been to Gran Canaria, though.'

'And what did you see there that was any different to what you've seen tonight? I'm not going to say, "that's the problem with today's youth". There *is* no problem with today's youth. You're perfectly adapted to life in the 21st century. But you've never experienced anything remarkable.'

The barmaid, a spectacled middle-aged woman with an old woman's hairdo, slid a refreshed glass towards Ray. 'That's your last,' she said.

Ray closed his eyes and nodded. He was beyond the level of drunkenness where he was interested or capable of arguing the point. It sounded fair enough to him.

'And another for my friend, here,' he said, putting his arm around the old man.

The old man held up his hands in protest. 'Thanks for the offer but I still have...'

'Oh, come on,' Ray insisted as his eyebrows performed a brief Mexican Wave. 'You're the one preaching to me about experiencing stuff. Let me experience buying you a drink.'

The old man blushed, perhaps embarrassed or uncomfortable at Ray's insistence. Then an idea shot across his face and his blue eyes sparkled again.

'Tell you what,' he said to the barmaid. 'I'll have a Drambuie, too.'

The barmaid nodded and headed off to the optic at the other end of the bar.

'This way,' the old man whispered with a smile, 'you can have a sneaky double.'

Ray reacted like the old man had just outlined his plans for a foolproof bank job. An evil grin stretched out from one corner of his mouth and he tapped his nose while his drinking partner began to chuckle. It was the perfect crime.

*

With his head hanging, the pavement scrolled in front of Ray's eyes, meandering from top to bottom. The tips of his shoes flapped into view at irregular intervals, inelegantly pointing at ten to two. His left arm was raised and hooked around something, his right was limp and bounced against his side. Orange splodges from the streetlights moved through his vision like setting suns.

Then, everything froze.

'Which way now, Ray?'

Ray pulled his head up and clamped one eye shut. The tall hedge that always looked so green during the day seemed purple and a little menacing in this light. A street sign was almost encased in its leaves and branches and was indecipherable, but he didn't need to know the specifics. The whole scene was very familiar.

He mumbled something that was supposed to be a direction and motioned with the raised arm.

'This way?' They started to move in the direction Ray had indicated.

Ray nodded and then started to bubble, sinking into self-pitying thoughts. How embarrassing to get into such a condition that he had to be carried home. Of course, none of this would be happening if he'd stayed with his friends or known when to stop and in his mind, he could hear his mother's voice telling him to sort out his life and get himself a girlfriend. The bubbling soon became a bawl.

'There, there. We're almost home.'

What a soothing voice, Ray thought. His brain then focussed all its remaining power on putting one foot in front of the other until the repetitive slaps on the pavement finally lulled him into unconsciousness.

*

Noise.

Vibration.

Discomfort.

These were the things that woke Ray up and while the first two seemed to keep in time with each other, the third was constant. The next thing he noticed was laboured breathing above him and a weight being pressed into his ribs. His eyes refused to open, as though he was dreaming of dreaming. But this was real. He was awake. He was conscious.

With a concentrated effort, he managed to open his right eye, feeling a rip from his upper cheek. The sudden shock of light blinded him for a moment. He blinked and something stuck against his cheek, trapping the eyelid shut and sparking a new struggle to free it again. As the seconds passed, he realised that there was tape on his eyelid and with this realisation came panic. Right on cue, the tempo of the noise and vibration increased.

He tried to sit up but the pressure on his chest kept him down. His head was frozen and although he could feel the muscles in his thighs and calves and he could sense his knees, nothing worked. It was like the energy had been sucked from him. In his entire body, the only thing responding was his eye and now its gaze darted around the room, trying to identify his surroundings and circumstance.

There was a strong light above his head that was bleaching everything else, but gradually he began to pick out shapes; a green digital light reminded him of his microwave, a wedge of chef's knives that had been a moving in present, some pots and pans hanging from hooks in the ceiling. He was in his kitchen, lying on the counter near the sink.

The noise stopped as did the vibration and suddenly a head, disguised by the light behind it, came into view. It moved from side to side like the arm of a slow metronome, as if it was inspecting something. The longer it took, the further out of the shadows its features became. Just as the head dived out of sight and the noise and vibration recommenced, Ray could make out enough to see who it was.

His mouth and nose were hidden behind a surgical mask, accentuating his blue eyes and the creases of age that surrounded them. The eyes and their wrinkles, Ray could tell, belonged to his drinking partner from the pub.

He tried to speak, to shout, to demand to know what the hell was going on, but his voice was as frozen as the rest of his body and not so much as a whimper escaped his mouth. Somehow, though, he managed to move his head a fraction and his eye strained in its socket towards the source of the noise.

The old man's face was less than two feet away from Ray's, sweat oozing from his brow. His elbow was appearing and disappearing from view in time with the scraping noise and as Ray followed the line of the old man's vision, the elements began to slot together and he knew what he was about to see.

A thin, deep trench had been made by the saw, halfway between his right elbow and shoulder. On the kitchen counter, a wet pile of blood, shredded skin, meat and muscle had gathered as it slipped from the gouge; bone dust sprinkled on top like parmesan on a bolognaise. The saw screeched as it gnawed through his humerus, sending a vibration through every inch of his skeleton. His bloodied hand jolted and the fingers twitched as the nerves and tendons in his arm were carved and stretched.

The pitch of the screech increased, presumably as the saw approached the end of the bone. Then, almost impossibly, a mobile phone rang. The old man stopped the operation and drew down his mask. Cursing under his breath, he bit the tip of a finger on a bright red surgical glove, pulled his hand free and fetched his phone from his pocket.

'Hello,' he snapped. A pause. 'Yes, just about, and there's the other thing I have to take care of.' The old man's eyes flicked to Ray's boxers, although Ray himself couldn't be sure if he was still wearing any. 'There's no rush. I'll be a while yet.' He snapped the phone shut and stuffed it back in his pocket.

Without looking Ray in the face, the old man moved the wounded arm so that it was hanging over the edge of the counter. He planted one hand on Ray's shoulder and put the rest of his weight onto the elbow. There was a crack and a fresh gush of blood as the bridge of bone that was joining Ray's arm with the rest of his body snapped. The arm dropped from sight at a sickly and unnatural angle. He heard it slap and hiss on the floor just as he was passing out.

*

Nothing.

Perfect silence.

These were the things that awoke Ray with a jolt. He was still on the kitchen counter. He was alone. Then he remembered.

He sat up in a rush. The room danced around him, threatening to knock him out again, and just as it subsided, his skewed balance nearly pitched him down to the floor. He brought his arms up to steady himself and that was when the damage became clear.

His right arm was now nothing more than an ugly stump. It was blue and black and purple. It was swollen and bruised. It smelt of burnt steak. Again, his head swam around the edge of consciousness and a stream of vomit tumbled from his mouth and down his bare chest. When his head sagged forward, he saw his white boxers had been almost entirely dyed red.

An anxious desperation filled him. He had to move - to do *something* - and the most obvious was to get to the phone. Throwing his weight to one side, he rolled from the counter and crashed onto his knees. While his left hand broke his fall, on the right side, it was the stump that slammed into the tiles. What remained of his arm and his groin exploded with pain that soared through the rest of his body. He screamed until his lungs were squeezed flat then he gulped for air and screamed again.

He was still screaming and crying as he crawled through to the lounge and to the phone. Every movement in his legs was like a branding iron thrust into his genitals and his stump was leaking in pulses that matched his heart rate, spraying on to the floor.

Finally, after a ten minute crawl that covered as many yards, he made it from the cool tile of the kitchen onto the warm carpet in the lounge. The phone was in sight. He tried to get to his feet, but with only one hand, he didn't have the energy, so he continued to crawl, spurred on that his goal was almost within reach.

And then he saw it. On the main wall of the lounge, mounted perfectly, was a 42-inch Sony plasma TV. A small piece of paper had been stuck to the screen with white tape. A bold heading said 'Receipt' and underneath it, a few lines of perfect, old-fashioned script. The script was illegible, but even from this distance and Ray's delirious state, he was still able to make out the three words in capitals at the bottom of the page:

RECEIVED WITH THANKS.

DVD REVIEWS By PAUL KANE



DEAD OR ALIVE

Directed by Corey Yuen.

Starring Holly Valance, Sarah Carter,
Jaime Pressly, Devon Aoki.

Cert 15. Universal DVD £15.99

Movies based on beat 'em up computer games don't exactly have a great track record. The words STREET FIGHTER should be enough to strike fear in the hearts of any rational being. But DEAD OR ALIVE is actually closer to MORTAL KOMBAT in terms of the slim storyline, and in the intervening years we've had CROUCHING TIGER and KILL BILL, so there are actually a few better homages here than you'd expect. When it comes right down to it, though, Holly Vallance is right when she comments in the 'making of' documentary, men will be watching to see babes in bikinis, women will be watching because those same babes kick serious ass.

The film begins with a zoom through the clouds to an oriental mountain palace surrounded by legions of guards. We waste no time whatsoever getting into the story, as Princess Kasumi (SIN CITY's Devon Aoki) announces that she doesn't believe her brother was killed during last year's 'Dead or Alive' tournament – an illegal, undercover competition to judge the best fighters in their fields. Vowing to go and find him, even though she risks being an outcast, she merrily skips across the backs of the guards and dives off the edge of the mountain; lucky she had that fold-away glider strapped to her back, eh? Now she has her half sister, the purple-haired Ayane (Natassia Malte) after her, plus her own bodyguard Ryu (Kane Kosugi) who also secretly fancies her.

Meanwhile, ex-wrestler Tina Armstrong (MY NAME IS EARL's Jaime Pressly) and superthief Christie Allen (Valance) also receive invites to the tournament – we're shown Tina's skills as she repels pirate boarders on her ship while she's sunbathing (yes, in a bikini), and Christie's as she takes out the police officers who've come to arrest her just as she's stepped out of the shower (the sequence involving her towel, bra, and a gun has to be one of the highlights of the entire film, and probably not for the reasons you're thinking). Tina's wanting to prove that she's not just a fake wrestler and Christie's motivation is the ten million pounds prize money. All the players make their way to the obligatory secret island hideaway on a plane, and we're introduced to supporting characters like Max (Matthew Marsden), Christie's sometime partner who's just double-crossed her, the cool dude Zack (Brian J. White), and Tina's father, who's built like a brick outhouse.

There, they meet the host Dr Donovan (Eric Roberts) and roller-skating Helena (Sarah Carter), whose father set up the contest and died in mysterious circumstances. Little do they know that their every movement is being watched by the nerdy Weatherby (Steve Howey) on his computer and Donovan – including the girls' physicals! The fights can happen anytime, anywhere, and certainly do: including in the square, on bamboo rafts, and in various guest rooms ('I felt the Earth move,' says Christie in bed with Max, just before Kasumi and her

opponent Leon crash through the wall and almost crush them). As Zach chases Tina, with more in mind than just beating her, and Christie and Max plan on stealing one hundred million dollars from Donovan's vault, Kasumi tries to avoid the assassination attempts. But there's always time for the all-important volley ball match with... you guessed it, the girls in bikinis again.

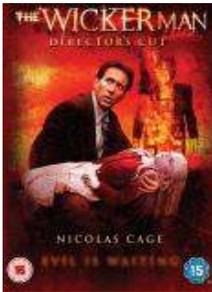
It all builds up to a finale involving some experimentation shenanigans down in the James Bond style evil underground lair before the countdown begins to blow up the island.

Forget the fact that it's based on a computer game, although it does stick to the source material quite closely. And don't read too much into the fact that Paul (RESIDENT EVIL) W.S. Anderson is one of the producers. DOA is closer to CHARLIE'S ANGELS than it is to any virtual reality knockabout. That's no disrespect to director Corey Yuen (who stunt doubled for Bruce Lee in his youth apparently; no wonder this movie resembles ENTER THE DRAGON) as his fight sequences are great – they should be as each one took about eight days to shoot! But this movie is just as much about the girls' relationship and, let's face it, how good they look doing their sexy thing, and managing to make the guys look stupid in the process.

Extras consist of the documentary already mentioned – which is really a series of interviews with the leads rather than any attempt to show you how the film was put together – and deleted scenes. I can understand why the creepy bit where Weatherby asks Donovan if he would like him to make Kasumi naked during her medical was removed, but not why essential information about Nano technology is left out as it would have made the finale much less confusing.

A good popcorn movie, but not one to watch with your brain engaged. There's just one thing I want to know – for a movie called DEAD OR ALIVE, how come hardly anyone dies? Just asking...

Ω



THE WICKER MAN

Directed by Neil Labute.

Starring Nicolas Cage, Ellen Burstyn,

Kate Beahan.

Cert 15. Lionsgate, £15.99

I can remember the very first time I saw the 1973 version of THE WICKER MAN. I was in my teens and watched it late one night on TV and, I suspect like many people seeing it initially, thought: this is completely and utterly bonkers. There's a surrealism about the original that makes for both compulsive and disturbing viewing. When the people in the pub burst into song, for instance, or when Britt Ekland's barmaid, Willow, goes nuts in her bedroom, sending Edward Woodward's policeman, Howie, into a frenzy, or the climactic chase through the community when he dresses as a fool. That's not to mention Christopher Lee's hair. Years later I reviewed the re-release of Anthony Shaffer's novel which went even further into the religious aspects of the film, gaining a deeper understanding of the subtext. So, when I heard the announcement that they were remaking this horror classic, my heart

sank. How could they possibly recreate the air of ‘fly entering the spider’s parlour’ that came so readily with the first one? How would they be able to recreate that haircut? The simple answer is; they didn’t – on both counts.

In the remake, which relocates everything from a remote Scottish island to one off the coast of America, we now have Nicolas Cage as motorcycle cop, Edward Malus, traumatised when he can’t save a little girl from a burning car. To take his mind off this, he follows up a cry for help from his ex fiancée, Willow (Beahan), whose daughter, Rowan (Erika-Shaye Gair), has gone missing. Turning plainclothes, he hitches a ride on a boat plane – without making any arrangements to be picked up again, I might add – and sets out to investigate. What he finds in this place is a community where men are subservient to women (‘Must be ladies’ night,’ quips Malus as he enters the local hostelry and finds only females there). Not a bad thing, some of you women out there reading this might be thinking. Ah, but the community is also barking mad and have been relying on a dark, ancient religion – passed down by witches – to provide them with decent crops every year.

Now that this has failed, Malus fears that Rowan has been sacrificed – and finds no help from the local teacher (played by Molly Parker), nor from the reclusive head of the clan, the island’s namesake: Sister Summersisle (Burstyn). In fact she seems more than happy to lead the insanity that should guarantee good crops the following year. What Malus doesn’t know, and would do if only he’d watched the original film, is that he’s being stitched up like a kipper and is in actual fact their primary target. The only mystery therefore becomes whether he’ll escape the fate of Edward Woodward or make that same singeing date with the Wicker Man.

Further evidence, if any were needed, that Hollywood really is running out of ideas – like so many horror movies that have gone before it (PSYCHO, THE HAUNTING and THE OMEN spring to mind) this is one of those movies that really didn’t need remaking. The only point of doing so would have been to radically alter the storyline, and seeing as nothing much is changed apart from substituting the religious battle between Christianity and Paganism for a battle of the sexes (a neat idea in itself, but one which definitely weakens the original premise), the 2006 version is left somewhat redundant. Yes, there is some decent acting here – from Cage and THE EXORCIST’s Burstyn in particular – and there’s a twist that reveals Malus isn’t a virgin like Woodward’s character (as if anyone would ever believe he was anyway), plus there are some genuinely creepy moments (the scene with the bees, or maybe that was just me?) and obligatory wince scenes (MISERY has got nothing on this movie), but all in all the film seems like less than the sum of its parts. You’re left with the feeling at the end that a lot of money has been wasted – far more than was ever chucked at the original – on a futile nostalgia trip that doesn’t really do anything that different.

Nice to see rising star Christa Campbell – whom I met at last year’s *Chillerfest* and who is in the new DAY OF THE DEAD – making a cameo appearance at the beginning as a waitress, but other than that this has very little to recommend it. Not even a decent set of extras. Wicker’s world? Don’t make any travel plans quite yet...

Ω



DEATH SHIP

Directed by Alvin Rakoff.

Starring George Kennedy, Richard Crenna,
Nick Mancuso.

Cert: 18. Nucleus Films, £15.99

'It's not a ship, it's a killing machine!'

We're told on the back of the DVD sleeve that *DEATH SHIP* was the rental hit of 1983. And there can be no doubt that it has built up something of a cult reputation during its absence from the video stores in all that time. So, has it been worth the wait for this low-budget chiller to finally make it to the shelves in the UK?

When the crew and passengers of a luxury liner are struck by another ship, the liner goes down, taking most of them with it. Only a handful of survivors make it, including two passengers we've seen sneaking away from the costume party to have a quick romp before the crash (Nick Mancuso and Victoria Burgoyne), the ship's entertainer (Saul Rubinek), its first mate (Rambo's superior, Richard Crenna) and his family, including two annoying kids, and a widowed woman (Shakespearian actress, Kate Reid). The grouchy Captain (George Kennedy) also pulls through, fished out of the water onto a life-raft which resembles an upturned biscuit-tin lid. Taking refuge on the crusty old vessel that rammed them, they soon discover that things are not as they should be. 'It's almost as though the ship has a mind of its own,' the characters keep saying, to the point where you want to scream – yes, we get it: the ship has a mind of its own!

As the survivors are offed in various ways by the craft, which owes more to their stupidity than anything else (never has the advice 'watch where you're treading' been so apt for one of them), the Captain seems to be experiencing weird hallucinations relating to the vessel's previous life during the war. And, of course, there's the obligatory nudity as Burgoyne takes a shower, only to discover that it's blood in the pipes rather than water. There's an explanation for all this, naturally, and it's not a bad one at that. But whether you'll make it through to the end to discover what it is, now that's another matter...

The Gabriel Byrne and Julianna Margulies starrer from 2002, *GHOST SHIP*, was almost certainly inspired by this one – right down to copying the poster artwork which depicts the menacing skeletal/monster bow of a ship ploughing through the ocean. Though as bad as that movie was, it never plumbed the depths of *DEATH SHIP*. For the first five minutes alone we're treated to endless shots of pistons in the steam room, which return periodically throughout, liberally sprinkled with endless shots of empty corridors as well. Even the director, Alvin Rakoff, admits this wasn't the highlight of his career, even if it did achieve cult status. The plot – if you can call it that – is flimsy at best, the characters all one-dimensional, even the Captain – a character who, at least at the start, was fleshed out a little, and the effects are hokey, though what would you expect from an early 80s horror flick? There are some disturbing moments, mostly connected with the purpose of the ship, but for the most part the film remains waterlogged and damp.

Included are a slew of extras for this release, such as an uncensored version of the shower scene, a picture gallery, theatrical trailer, deleted scenes and audio commentary by the director and 'English Gothic' author Jonathan Rigby. But the highlight has to be the 40 minute 'Stormy Seas' documentary, in which Rakoff and *DEATH SHIP* writer Jack (FOXY BROWN) Hill barely hide their contempt at each others' talents. 'I would have done it

differently, Hill politely offers when prompted about the fact he wanted to direct. While Rakoff remarks on the lameness of the script which led him to be more creative with the camerawork (it might surprise viewers to learn that Sam Raimi used a similar device from the projector sequence in his seminal EVIL DEAD movie). There's also fond memories from George Kennedy ('It's the only time I've ever played a Nazi.') and Nick Mancuso, who seems amused by the fact that in the production notes it was said that there should be an underlying homosexuality about his character. I particularly like the reminiscences about Richard Crenna though, who apparently turned to Kennedy at one point and said, 'Do you think God can do anything with this script?' Pure gold.

Worth watching purely because you probably won't have seen anything on Earth like it before, and worth owning because of its nostalgia value – harking back to a time of video nasties and censorship uproar. Ah, the good old days, eh? But DEATH SHIP, on the whole, probably deserved to sink without a trace.

Ω



MASTERS OF HORROR Series 1 Volume 2.

Directors: Dario Argento, Tobe Hooper,
Takashi Miike, Larry Cohen,
William Malone, John McNaughton.

Starring: Steven Weber, Michael Moriarty,
Robert Englund, Lori Petty.

Cert 18. RRP: £24.99. Anchor Bay Entertainment.

This volume, as with the previous, comes in a mock leather effect box (and a green protective sleeve this time, for extra protection) that opens out into a nifty collection of six discs, plus a booklet with additional information. Though this may be the second volume of the first season, the makers of this groundbreaking show have definitely saved some of the best episodes for last. We begin with Italian horror supreme, Dario Argento, who brings to the screen the black and white Bruce Jones/Bernie Wrightson comic strip, JENIFER. This was actually quite neatly adapted for the screen by Steven Weber (the TV version of THE SHINING) who happened to mention the strip to Masters of Horror creator Mick Garris while on the set of DESPERATION. Subsequently, Weber found himself in the role of a detective who stops a blonde-haired woman from being killed, only to discover she has a disfigured face and animalistic tendencies. A reversal of Beauty and the Beast, this works on the basis – as Jenifer actress, Carrie Anne Fleming, tells us in the extras – that men will pretty much get it on with something even that hideous if it has a beautiful body. But the real tragedy comes from seeing Weber's family life break down because he can't resist his new charge.

Next we have Richard Christian Matheson adapting his father's short story for DANCE OF THE DEAD. In a post-apocalyptic future where nuclear war has taken its toll, there's an unexpected side-effect in the form of the dead coming back to life. A completely different spin on the subject to the last volume's HOMECOMING, this sees a fantastic turn by Robert Englund as an MC at a bar where the dead provide the ultimate entertainment.

Possibly the most horrific of the set, Takashi Miike's IMPRINT is a brutal story of one man's search for his lost love – a prostitute he left behind years earlier – against a backdrop of 19th Century Japan. Expect some terrifying torture scenes from the man who gave us ICHI

THE KILLER and AUDITION. This was the only episode that was banned from being screened on cable in the US; it's not hard to see why, but if you can endure those scenes you'll get a very satisfying hour.

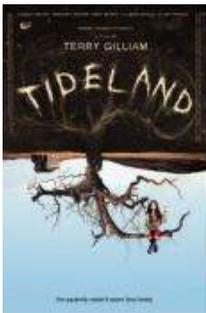
Q - THE WINGED SERPENT and IT'S ALIVE director Larry Cohen then takes on a short story from 'splatterpunk' author David J. Schow called PICK ME UP, which revolves around the ingenious concept of two serial killers being after the same victim. Warren Kole's snake-skinning Walker and Michael Moriarty's maniac truck driver, the appropriately named Wheeler, are set up perfectly as the two bloodthirsty murderers – each having their own strengths and weaknesses. But to get their hands on Stacia (THE CRAFT's Fairuza Balk), one of the passengers on a broken-down coach, they're going to have to get up pretty early in the morning. Just the right balance of black comedy and thrills to this one, and Moriarty is superb as the unpredictable older killer who thinks he'll teach the upstart runt a thing or two.

William (FEARDOTCOM & HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL) Malone's FAIR-HAIRED CHILD changes the direction yet again, bringing into play a couple (the superbly insane Lori Petty and William Samples) who are so desperate to bring their teenage boy back to life they're willing to go to dangerous extremes. Lindsay Pulsipher plays Tara, the pretty girl who is the key to doing just that, and who finds herself kidnapped – at the mercy of an extremely creepy creature in their basement (this thing and the way its shot actually caused me to have nightmares after watching it). A surreal episode, FAIR-HAIRED CHILD is expertly crafted, giving us just as much art to be found as there is gore.

Lastly, anyone who knows of my love for Clive Barker's work will understand why I was eager to watch HAECKEL'S TALE, based on his short story that was recently reprinted in Stephen Jones' *Best New Horror* anthology. With a screenplay by Mick Garris, this one doesn't disappoint and can easily be listed among the best adaptations of Barker's work. Here a young widower in the 1870s seeks a way to bring his dead love back. But after he is told the tale of Ernst Haeckel (Derek Cecil), a Frankenstein-like scientist who sought also to bring back the deceased, he might not be so keen...

The set is packed to the rafters with over sixteen hours of delicious extras, which include interviews with directors & stars, secrets of make-up, documentaries (only here will you get to see the notorious and leg-crossing 'penis biting scene' which was cut from JENIFER, much to Argento's disappointment), storyboard galleries, commentaries, on set features – you name it, it's here. They really do spoil us, you know. To conclude, this is building up into an essential library, not just of TV horror, but contemporary horror in general; a snapshot of our genre at this time. One that you can proudly place on your shelves and will find yourself dipping into time and time again.

Ω



TIDELAND

Directed by Terry Gilliam.

Starring Jeff Bridges, Jodelle Ferland,

Janet McTeer.

Cert 15. Revolver, £19.99

What can I say about TIDELAND? This was an incredibly difficult film to review, and also to watch. I'm a fan of Gilliam's work, have been since I saw TIME BANDITS and BRAZIL in my formative years. The blend of post-Python humour and biting satire, mixed with an emotional core, has always been what's attracted me to his movies. There can also be no denying that he's produced his fair share of misfires: BARON MUNCHAUSEN, for example, or the more recent BROTHERS GRIMM, which, to be fair, suffered from studio interference. He's been threatening for a long time to give us his version of ALICE IN WONDERLAND and writer Mitch Cullin has provided him with the opportunity to do this with his novel, TIDELAND. But what to make of the finished result...

Little girl, Jeliza-Rose (Ferland), spends her days looking after her mom (Jennifer Tilly) and ageing rocker dad (Bridges). Now, by 'looking after' I mean getting her father's fixes ready for him to inject so he can go on his 'vacations' and rubbing her mom's legs – suffering abuse for even touching her chocolates – in the run-down apartment they all share. She escapes from reality by retreating into an imaginary world where she talks to doll's heads placed on her fingers. When her mother dies of an overdose, though, her dad takes her on the run to her gran's old house on the prairies, surrounded by wheat as far as the eye can see.

Here she meets the reclusive Dell (Janet McTeer), who looks like a desert witch all dressed in black, and her brother, Dickens (Brendan Fletcher), who has had an operation on his brain to try and cure his epilepsy. In his childlike way, Dickens is able to share in her imaginary world and understand it, but he also dangerously draws her into his own: that of being a submarine captain on dry land, hunting a dangerous shark which he plans to destroy. The only problem is that said shark is actually a train full of people, that goes through periodically, and he keeps leaving things on the tracks to try and derail it. Add to this their growing relationship in which Dickens and Jeliza-Rose believe she is pregnant because they kissed (in reality it is just her stomach rumbling because she is empty) and you have all the makings of quite a worrying situation. And that's before we come to the fact that her dad hasn't moved in days and is starting to smell funny...

TIDELAND is definitely a movie that will divide audiences – you only have to look on IMDB to see that it already has. Some people praise the brilliant camerawork and cinematography, and there can be no denying this is beautifully shot, with Gilliam providing his unique slanted angles à la TWELVE MONKEYS and THE FISHER KING. It's also extremely well acted, with Jodelle Ferland deserving an Oscar for her performance and Brendan Fletcher doing an admirable job of portraying a young man with a mental disability. There are some standout sequences too – one in particular involves Jeliza-Rose actually falling down a rabbit hole like Alice (although *she* never had to contend with syringes floating around her as she went).

So, what makes this such a hard movie to watch and review? It has to be the truly disturbing scenes which depict the burgeoning 'romance' between Dickens and Jeliza-Rose. Seeing a little girl kiss a man in his 30s takes some stomaching for me, I'm afraid, no matter how innocent Dickens' character might be in the ways of the world. Even though Gilliam shies away from showing anything too graphic – always having the characters interrupted before anything else can happen – they make for extremely uncomfortable viewing. As do the scenes where corpses are treated almost like Jeliza's dolls; the first thing Bridges does when he discovers his wife has OD'd is wrap her up then attempt to dispose of her by setting her alight (a nod towards the Norse, but still in very bad taste). In fact, death as a whole is dismissed in this movie quite casually, as evidenced by the final few scenes with the train.

Some are saying this is a return to form for Gilliam, but I think that all depends on what you expect from the director. If you're looking for more of the BRAZIL, TIME

BANDITS and TWELVE MONKEYS fare then you're in the wrong place. But if nothing else, TIDELAND will certainly provoke a response from you – as all cinema should. Whether that response is good or bad very much depends on your own sensibilities, however, I suspect.

IN CONVERSATION...

With GARY RUSSELL

GARY RUSSELL, he's done it all. Directing, producing, acting, writing... Born just over two months before the birth of DOCTOR WHO, it seems that the two were destined to be forever linked. In this, the first of an exclusive two-part interview, ANDY FRANKHAM-ALLEN joins Gary in conversation.

Gary Russell's TV debut was when he was a mere thirteen, when he a starring role in THE PHOENIX AND THE CARPET. But before we get onto that, I asked him to fill us in on his previous acting experiences.

I started off on stage when I was ten. I did a five week, then seven week, tour of A MONTH IN THE COUNTRY in the West End with a company called Prospect Theatre Company, who are now the Old Vic Company, working with Derek Jacobi, Dorothy Tutin, Timothy West, and people like that. And that was great fun.

The whole acting thing had been because I was part-time at drama school, wanting to be an actor. My mum kind of got involved in it, and she started chaperoning children to auditions and things like that; she was working with an actress from my drama school, on a series called KIZZY which was produced by Dorothea Brooking who was a big name in children's TV back in the '60s and '70s. My mum mentioned in causal conversation to Dorothea at some point, 'oh my son wants to be an actor', and Dorothea said, 'ooh, bring him up to the rehearsal rooms one day', which would have been up in Latimer Road. And so off I went and met Dorothea there, and we got talking at lunch break. She said to me, 'so you're interested in acting', and I said yes. She then told me that she doing a series quite soon and there might be a part in it for me. She made me promise to stay in touch, let her know what I was doing.

And so at the behest of my mother, 'cause when you're ten years old the last thing you want to do is write letters to people, I did stay in touch. Then I got this theatre job, and I wrote to Dorothea. She wrote back to tell me the thing she had mentioned was being put off for a year, but she hadn't forgotten me. And sure enough about a year later my agent got a phone call asking me to come up and audition for THE PHEONIX AND THE CARPET.

We started PHOENIX at the beginning of September 1976, and I had my thirteenth birthday during the making of that. We finished recording it probably late January, early February '77. It actually started going out at Christmas, so we were still making it while it was on TV. And from that I went straight into the auditions for THE FAMOUS FIVE.

I originally got the part of Julian, and Marcus D'Amico, who was a mate of mine, got Dick. Then they found Marcus Harris, and they went 'ooh, he's a better Julian, so we'll put Gary onto Dick', and so Marcus D'Amico lost the part. Which was a big shame for him – I love Marcus, we were good mates, and I'd loved to have worked with him.

Actually, he got a part in *Superman II*, but most of his scenes got cut, I felt sorry for Marcus, but he went on to do *Tales of the City* and became rich and famous, and so I doubt he cares.

So yes, I did THE FAMOUS FIVE, and was the first person cast. Then there was Marcus Harris, then we got Jenny Thanisch, then we spent a long time trying to find someone to play Georgina and we got Michelle Galagher. We started filming in May/June '77.

Very early on we knew we were coming back for a second series, which was nice because everyone liked it. And that was an experience. Five days down there, and we'd go home on a Friday night, come back on a Sunday night. We did that week in and week out, and only once did we stay there for a whole weekend, and that was when we went off to shoot the title sequence. We did thirteen weeks of shooting in the first year, and thirteen in the second, doing an episode a week.



You wouldn't be allowed to do a whole twenty-five minute episode of a kid's drama in five days now – which is what we were doing. It's not just child labour laws; television just isn't made that way any more, a lot more time would be spent on it, and a lot more money. At the time that we did THE FAMOUS FIVE it was one of the most expensive children's programme ever. At about a million pounds a series! Of course, now you would get a million to do an episode of something. But, you know, one million pounds spent on an ITV children's programme was unheard of back then.

The only programme that topped us in terms of expense was WORZEL GUMMIDGE, which was made the following year by the same production team. If we had done a third year, we would have had the WORZEL GUMMIDGE slot.

Actually, during the second year of WORZEL GUMMIDGE I went down, because it was the same crew. And I ended up becoming an extra. In one episode you can clearly see me walking past the camera with a newspaper in my hand. And thus I met Jon Pertwee for the first time.

It wasn't to be Gary's last acting role, or indeed extra role. Nowadays one of the things Gary is most known for is his writing. Having penned almost twenty books in total, plus a whole host of audio dramas, I asked him if he always had some secret desire to become a writer, or was that something that developed later.

No serious desires. As a kid I'd always written; I wrote DOCTOR WHO books. When I was ten or eleven I was at a book club in school and we used to write our own Target books...

Target were an imprint of WH Allen (latterly Virgin Publishing), the publishers of DOCTOR WHO novelisations for three decades.

... 'Cause we were cool kids, and obviously no one else in the world would *ever* do that! Every time I speak to anyone, there's always someone who had a book club at school where they wrote Target books. There was me and a guy called Graham Hatch and three or four other people in our school, and we'd sit and write DOCTOR WHO books. So, yes, I wanted to write but I never seriously thought I could write.

It was an ambition I'd had through most of my late-nths and teens. One thing I'd love to do before I died, having been on telly, was to be able to walk into WH Smith and see a book with my name on it. But I never seriously thought of any way of making that really

happen. It was just *an* ambition! Of all the ambitions you can ever have – wanting to be on television and seeing your name in WH Smith. Done both of those now: cool!

So, no, I never did sit down and think ‘I want to write, must learn to write’. Writing never occurred to me as something to do professionally, in any way shape or form until very later on.

So *when* did you move into writing, and how *did* that come about?

Well, I don’t know how it came about really. It’s a long story. I’d given up acting, I’d done DARK TOWERS for the BBC, I’d been at the National Theatre for two years, which had taken me to America and back, which was nice. This was in ’81-’82. I gave up acting.

You had a short acting career, then, really.

Well, like all kid actors, you know, from ten to nineteen is when I was working. And then I went for an audition; this was in ’81 when Channel 4 was starting. Perhaps it was for BROOKSIDE, but I don’t know. But I was told by this woman at the audition, ‘yeah, you’ve had a fantastic career, but you’re very middle class, you’ve got a very posh voice and there’s no future for that in British television. Everything’s going to be working class, everything’s going to be regional, so you won’t have a career in the future’. And at nineteen you’re quite impressionable and you think ‘she’s a class-one director, so she must know what she’s talking about’. Literally, at that audition, I thought ‘well there’s no point in carrying on’. I’d just done one day’s work on a feature film with Rupert Everett, and I hadn’t enjoyed it very much. Again, I was playing a very upper-class person in a public school. And I thought, yes she was right. Everything I had done was terribly posh – upper- middle-class.

So I gave up and thought, fine, in that case I’ll do what I’ve always wanted to do, which was direct. When I was doing THE FAMOUS FIVE I used to go up into the edit suites and watch them put the programme together, and think ‘ooh, that’s fun, I’d like to be a director’. And really all the way through, from THE FAMOUS FIVE to the end I always wanted to direct TV. I thought the best way to direct TV was to get into the BBC in any job, and see if I could work my way through for the next ten years or so.

In early ’83 I got myself a job in the radio script department, which was looking after documentaries and features. It was the most god-awful dull job but most of the people I worked with there were the ones who’d been there since the 1930s, you know, and they knew everything. I learned a lot. Then I moved over to press and publicity for television in ’84 and I stayed there through to 1991. I did a couple of attachments, as they called them those days in the BBC; one I went to news and current affairs for a year as a floor assistant, doing BREAKFAST TIME and NEWS NIGHT and things like that. It was nice, being responsible for getting the presenters on set. Some of them who you might not expect to be lovely people were lovely, like Jeremy Paxman, who was a good laugh. Others who seemed very nice and friendly, weren’t. After that I went back to the press office for six months, and from there I went up to Manchester as a second assistant on drama and did the first series of MAKING OUT. And that was magnificent! Worked with some great actors, had a lovely time doing that but I pissed off somebody royally back in the drama department, so when it came to the second series I got a firm ‘no, go away, we don’t want you back’.

So I did all that through the BBC, and never, as a result, got anywhere near being a director. While I was at the BBC in about 1983, having been in DOCTOR WHO fandom for about three or four years and editing *THE CELESTIAL TOYROOM* for DWAS (the DOCTOR WHO Appreciation Society), I made contact with Alan McKenzie. I used to phone him up

every month and ask him for some news for CT about what's in the new DOCTOR WHO MAGAZINE and send me the cover and things. And he and I used to chat, because we both liked films, were interested in comics and things like that. One day he wrote to me out of the blue, I've still got the letter, saying 'looking for people to write for DOCTOR WHO MAGAZINE, you seem quite nice and literate and intelligent, we seem to get on quite well, come around for dinner and we'll talk about it'. That would have been about August '83, and so I went around and he made me watch some really good movies like DIVA – a brilliant French movie, fantastic. We had spaghetti bolognese – probably the first time I'd ever had that! And he asked me if I wanted to write for DOCTOR WHO MAGAZINE, explaining that there was no one doing the Jeremy Bantham/Richard Landon thing with co-ordinating it all, writing most of it, bringing a few writers in, and things like that. He'd just met Richard Marson who was coming in to do interview stuff, so I didn't have to interview people – yes! – so that was quite nice. I said yes to that, and that's really how I got into the gig of writing. So all the time I was at the BBC, I was also freelancing for DOCTOR WHO MAGAZINE.

Gary spent much of that time writing OFF THE SHELF, the monthly review section of the magazine. By 1991 he became editor and stayed on until 1995. However, Gary's editorial duties started a lot sooner than is widely known.

I left the Beeb in September 1990, and was still freelancing. By then John Freeman was in charge, the magazine having been through a lot of editors. One day John called me up and said 'are you interested in possibly coming to work for DWM full-time? I'm looking for an assistant,' so I said yes, that would be fun, and I was broke. Freelancing for a year at that point hadn't been the best move. And he gave me a job.

So I went in to be the assistant editor at DWM, at which point Freeman told me he was being promoted. I ended up being the acting editor, but Freeman kept his name on the magazine for the first five months because he wanted to be the longest running editor. My first issue as editor was #181, but I didn't get my credit until #185-6, I think. I remember I arrived on a Thursday, and about three thirty that afternoon Freeman said, 'oh, and by the way, I'm off to Chicago tomorrow for a DOCTOR WHO convention, so can you run this for the next week.' I'd been in the building four hours. Thanks, John! But it was a great baptism of fire – and John was the best possible teacher.



Launched in 1991, THE NEW DOCTOR WHO ADVENTURES were a series of novel tie-ins that continued on from where the series had left off on TV at the close of 1989. They enjoyed a long run, only ending in 1997 when the BBC failed to renew Virgin Publishing's licence, opting to publish DOCTOR WHO novels themselves from therein.

By the time all this happened *Timewyrm: Genesys* was out. I remember it must have been because the cover of *Genesys* was used to front the magazine a few issues before I took over. So I went to interview Peter Darvil-Evans at Virgin, and he had just commissioned Mark Gatiss to do *Nightshade* and we were talking about Paul Cornell doing *Timewyrm: Revelation*. We were chatting away, and Peter said, 'I'm pretty keen to have new writers'. And I thought, well that's a brave and interesting move. Of course, with hindsight, you realise it's actually a great way to get cheap labour, because you don't have to pay anyone a huge amount of money,

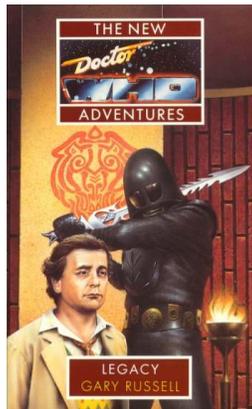
since most of them will fall over backwards to have a book published, so they'll all work for little money.

My first official thing working as editor for DOCTOR WHO MAGAZINE was at a signing for the UNIT Winter Special, where I first met Mark Gatiss. He was there signing *Nightshade*. Peter was there as well, and I said to him; 'What's next for the books?' He said he didn't know, and was always on the look out for things. Now a whole group of us had been doing a thing called Audio Visuals at that point, basically audio dramas sold on cassette, a sort of precursor to Big Finish, and that had come to an end. If we had gone on to do a fifth series, one of the things we were going to do was a script I'd written called LEGACY OF PELADON, but it got scrapped. That story itself had spun out of something I'd said to Brian Hayles in the late '70s when I had met him at a scifi thing. I told him, this is what I think would happen if he ever did another Peladon story...

In the 1970s, there were two stories set on the planet Peladon, both written by Brian Hayles and featuring the Ice Warriors. *The Curse of Peladon* in 1972 and *The Monster of Peladon* in 1974.

... So he politely patted me on the head and told me it was a nice story. But it stayed with me, and I'd knocked it up as LEGACY OF PELADON for Audio Visuals. So Peter says he's still looking for writers and I think, 'I can write a DOCTOR WHO book. If Paul Cornell can do it, so can I', sort of thing. Actually that wasn't what I thought at all, but it was a case of what have I got to lose? Since I'd always wanted to have my name on a book in WH Smith – I submitted a storyline to Peter and thought nothing more of it.

It would have been a year after, I think, that I was at a convention called Blue Box, and Peter was there as was Gareth Roberts. Peter was in the room talking to me and Gareth, telling us about all the people he'd got writing books for him. And every time he said a name, I'm like 'oh, I know them.' And he's all 'is there anyone you don't know,' and I told him,



'pretty much if you're talking about DOCTOR WHO fans, no. Of course I know them all, been around for donkey's years'. He told me he'd got this guy called Justin Richards writing a book in July called *Theatre of War*, and I'm thinking 'brilliant, Justin, fantastic', and then Peter went, 'and then LEGACY will be in August, and Gareth's *Tragedy Day* will be the one after that'. Gareth clearly knew this, but this was the first time I had heard of it. And I'm sitting there thinking, 'can you just say that again, please?' And he told me he'd sent me a letter the previous week. When I got home from the convention, there was the letter waiting for me, saying 'really liked LEGACY, thought it was a brilliant idea, needs some work, but would you be interested in writing it?' So the first I'd heard was him telling

me face to face that it was coming out that year. Panic stuck in, 'cause suddenly I'd got commissioned to write my first novel. And my god I had fun writing that! And it's probably the only time I've ever hit a deadline.

Anyone who's written a first novel knows well the panic and fear that sets in when you first realise you've actually got the gig. And 80,000 words to write! Was this so for Gary?

Panic, fear? Panic, yes, cause I was thinking 'oh, I can't do this, and I can't do that'. Fear, no, because I didn't think I had anything to prove to anyone other than Peter who had taken that

gamble on me. My problem really was 'oh my god, I'm the editor of DWM and I'm writing a book. How the hell am I going to review my own work?'

[And that how's Craig Hinton got the reviewing gig?](#)

I knew that I couldn't carry on reviewing books. So I said to John, 'I can't do this anymore, it's the only freelancing I'm doing, so I'm gonna have to stop cause I'm writing a book'. So Freeman asked me if I had anyone in mind to take over OFF THE SHELF, and I told him that without a doubt it should be Craig. And bugger me if he doesn't then get commissioned to do *Millennial Rites!* Cause I thought it was a bad idea for someone to be writing the book review column who's writing the books. Then Craig got a commission, but that's not my problem.

So I went off and wrote LEGACY and thoroughly enjoyed it – I had a ball! I refuse to say it's terrible, cause it isn't, but it's got a lot of things wrong with it that if I was to rewrite it today I couldn't write it that way, mostly because I'm not the same person who wrote that book back in 1993. It came out in September 1994 and I was as happy as anything!

[Did you go into Smith's to see it?](#)

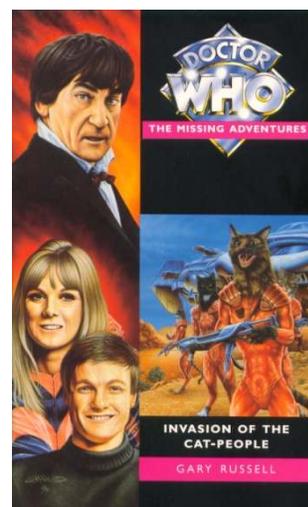
Of course I did! I still do it now. Every time – in fact when THE INSIDE STORY came out this year first thing I did was walk into Smith's, Waterstone's, and everywhere that sold it. Cause I just want to pick it up and stand there....

[And see if anyone recognises you...](#)

No no no no! You just do it because you want to go – 'I've done it. I've achieved that.' Cause everything is a milestone that you want to achieve. So, I had a DOCTOR WHO book with my name on it! That was great. It's always a thrill! My next thing was that I wanted to have a hardback with my name on it. And that came a lot later. But, you know, you set yourself these little goals you want to achieve and prior to writing LEGACY the possibility of writing a book could never have come into it. Having done it, you sit there thinking 'I don't want this to be the only one'.

I wasn't particularly in love with THE NEW ADVENTURES so by that point they were starting to dream up THE MISSING ADVENTURES, and I thought, 'that's where I go'.

I'd met Anneke Wills, so I thought 'fine, I want to do a Ben and Polly and Troughton story'. I submitted INVASION OF THE CAT-PEOPLE, or AFTER IMAGE as it was originally called. That was a bit of a pained birth, because what I wanted to do and what Peter Davil-Evans wanted to do were two entirely different things. I was doing a book about ghost hunters and a group of kids in a house – it's all still there, with machinery and they're ghost hunting, and ghosts come through. Peter said 'that's all very well, but what's the scientific rationale', and I went, 'they're ghosts!' He told me no, since there are no ghosts in DOCTOR WHO and there had to be a scientific explanation. I'd lost heart at this point, but it got commissioned on that basis so I thought 'right, I've got to find a way of dealing with this, I've got to find a thing, so in come the Cat People, in come...'



You know how these things snowball? I met Anneke and Michael Craze in 1993, and that was my kick off point, wanting to write a Ben and Polly book. I went to Australia in '94 just after LEGACY had come out, and I got very into songlines and Aboriginal stuff. Reading their version of the *Just So* stories, which were these brilliant folklore things. So suddenly I was coming back going 'alright, I can use my Australian trip in there, I can put the Aboriginal stuff in there, I got the ghost hunters in there', and everything came together. Exploring the whole thing about how Australasia had been originally attached to the bottom half of Russia... so you had that early primordial Earth where everything had been one big landscape and these aliens come to Earth and leave their mark through the songlines, through laylines and all this kind of stuff. So, that had all come together over a long period but sadly at a point when I was supposed to be writing a book. And I ended up probably being six to eight months late on that. I know that Martin Day's first book (*Menagerie*) and mine swapped, because he delivered early and I delivered late. I couldn't find the emotional core or the through story. It got slated, it got panned, and everybody hated it. I think that's a shame, because I actually love it. I'm quite proud of it. I think it's got some dodgy moments, but it's got some great character moments in it, and I always strive to write characters, particularly female characters well. I latch onto a character and take them through a journey, and I took Ben and Polly through that journey.

[Why do you think INVASION OF THE CAT-PEOPLE got so panned?](#)

Because it was called INVASION OF THE CAT-PEOPLE, and if I'd listened to Rebecca Levene who said 'you really don't want to call it that', and I said 'I *really* do, it's such a cool title'...



I remember me, Rebecca and Peter being out to dinner discussing my lateness and me saying what I wanted to call it. And it was at that meal that Peter said, 'oh it's kind of like an invasion of the cat people', and I went 'that's the title, I'm having it!' They were all no-no, and I said '*seriously* it's such a cool title and no one will forget that title!'

I'm a great believer in a title and a cover that nobody can forget. Hence SPIRAL SCRATCH's cover years later. If they remember it, they've noticed it.

As for why it got panned. I don't know, I love it, and I don't know why people really don't like it. LEGACY had got very extreme views, people have given it ten out of ten, or one out of ten, there is no intermediary stuff with LEGACY. I was destined for a fall.

[You've written some ten novels including the novelisation of the TV MOVIE – it's almost always INVASION OF THE CAT-PEOPLE that gets slated. Which I find kind of bizarre. They have ten whole books to choose from.](#)

Well, it meanders, it doesn't have a central plot, I don't think it's got the strongest supporting characters, and maybe there's too much going on. It needed a really good story pruning, but when you're trying to hit 80,000 words and you're not that an experienced novelist, it's a difficult thing. It probably is a mess, but I've got very fond memories of it and I haven't read it for years. I liked it, and I was very proud of it at the end, but it had a painful birth.

[Fandom have this perceived view that your books are, to coin a phrase, 'fanwanky', very heavy continuity loaded. Is this intentional on your part, do you like to play dot the dots?](#)

I suppose I do. *INVASION OF THE CAT-PEOPLE* is the only the only one that doesn't have any back references to anything. *LEGACY* did really tie everything together, as much as it could, and I suppose that's where the handle came from. Yeah, why not? I mean, I don't think it's quite as extreme as every one thinks it is, certainly not as extreme as certain other writers are. But for me it's all about being in one big universe, and also giving little things a chance to shine. I always try to focus on Doctor/Companions – especially the companions who had not had perhaps the greatest character depth on TV. Other people just see it as fanwank, well good!

There are people out there who like that in their *DOCTOR WHO* books, and I'm one of them. Not that I necessarily want excessive continuity, but I want to feel that I'm reading a *DOCTOR WHO* book and not a book that is actually somebody's idea of sci-fi novel but they only way they can get published is to slap the *DOCTOR WHO* logo on the cover. And I think there's a great many of those in both Virgin and BBC ranges. I don't particularly rate that – other people do, and that's fine. I think there's room in the publishing programme that Virgin and particularly the BBC did to have every kind of book and therefore if someone winces because there's a Gary Russell book coming out, I know there'll be a less vocal group of people who will be actually pleased. There is a great strata of books, and the more you can have the better.

There's no better or worse, there's just difference. The trouble is online people will like one sort of thing and immediately dismiss the other without realising that it just doesn't suit them, and therefore a good editor's job is to balance stuff, and they don't quite realise that. They just want it their own way. I've always had this kind of hate-hate relationship with the internet. I remember when *SCALES OF INJUSTICE* came out writing a very scathing introduction about the reptiles who populated recarts.drwho and Rebecca Levene said to me 'are you sure you want to put that in print in a book?' and me going 'yes I do, I really do. I'm really hurt and upset by the reaction *INVASION OF THE CAT-PEOPLE* got'. Of course, it was a big mistake, cause in my mind I thought I'm writing a book about reptiles and there are reptiles on recarts so it's quite funny. But no, that's not funny cause you're insulting everyone on recarts and I have never been allowed to recover from that. All those people went on to *Outpost Gallifrey* and *Jade Pagoda* and the hatred stuck with it and built. So that was my own fault really.

[So, who or what has influenced you most in your writing?](#)

Oh! Well, Malcolm Hulke; all of his *DOCTOR WHO* books. He's a big influence on my writing, that's where I get my thing about female characters. He always wrote women beautifully, the moments where he'd be inside someone's head... Miss Dawson in *THE CAVE MONSTERS*, writing all that stuff from her point of view. Captain Dent's point of view in *THE DOOMSDAY WEAPON*, the maggots' point of view in his novelisation of *THE GREEN DEATH*. Things like that. A *huge* influence on me!

Hugh Walters, who was a sci-fi writer in the '50s and '60s, wrote very pulpy *Boys Own Adventures* teenage sci-fi fiction, which I and a great many people around the world would spend huge amounts of money to get hold of his books. Of course, all out of print now. I grew up with those, always loved them.

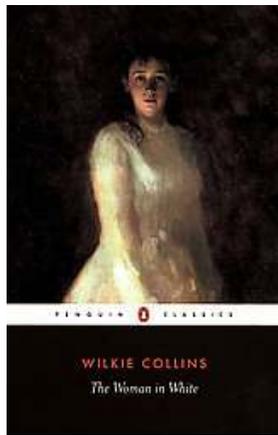
Agatha Christie. Started on her and Rudyard Kipling when I was young, and there's something in the way they write... I don't think Christie's a great author technically, she's a great storyteller, and that's an important distinction. People focus too much on technique and not enough on entertaining stories. Point is you're writing a book to tell a story. If you can

tell a good story, that's far more important than being technically brilliant and grammatical – that's what editors are for.

Who else? Well, there's Terrance Dicks, I suppose. Much in the same reason as Hulke. DOCTOR WHO books are very important to me.

I would never cite your Charles Dickens, your Emily Brontes and your Jane Austens and that kind of thing – I never read them. At school for O Level I had to do Thomas Hardy and as a result I actually fell in love with his work and read them all when I was about sixteen. Much to the chagrin of those I went to school with, who just thought I was a bit weird. 'We have to read *Far From the Madding Crowd*, but why would you want to go off and read the rest of them?' I really loved something about Hardy's writing. I never professed to completely understand the stories, but you see technically (oh how bloody ironic!) I just loved the way he could draw me in, and I wanted to turn the next page.

Possibly the biggest influence on me at school was being forced to do, for O Level, *The Woman in White*.



Which is an amazing book, because every chapter is told from a different point of view. Including chapters from the point of view of a gravestone and from the point of view of a chair. I remember thinking that is so clever. It was just so brilliant, great storytelling that made you become so engrossed. I think that any book that makes you want to turn the page when you're sixteen years old is fantastic, where at that point the last thing you want to do is read literature, you want to read pulp, you want to read the NME, or you want to go and listen to music. And Thomas Hardy and Wilkie Collins made me at sixteen turn a page, at a point in my life where really I had given up wanting to turn pages, other than DOCTOR WHO books, and that was great. I can't say those two writers are a direct influence on my writing, in any way shape or form, but they gave me the urge to read.

[So you'll always go for storytelling...](#)

Storytelling is always far more important than technique, structure or anything like that. I think a good storyteller can make you turn a page, and that's where JK Rowling works. She's not a great writer, but she's a brilliant storyteller. She gives you character and story. Character, I think, is the most important thing. If you like the people, if you understand, you'll want to carry on.

[Do you tend to put messages in your stories? Themes you want the readers to pick up on?](#)

No. I write a book to entertain, not preach. Themes? No, I'm not trying to be deep. Christ, no one could ever level depth at me. I don't write deep books, I don't write meaningful books, I'm not trying to make a political point, or moral point, I'm writing an adventure story with spaceships and ray guns. That's what I do. If you want to read a story with a message, you read Kate Orman. If you want to read a story with a brilliant, brilliant concept, you read Lawrence Miles. If you want to read a technically proficient book, you read Lance Parkin. If you want to read a pulpy book about people that has spaceships and ray guns, that go from A to B, you read me. And I'm so happy to be in that category.

The second part of this interview is in Issue Four, available June 2007, in which Gary discusses the difference between writing prose and radio plays, and his time as the producer of the largest output of official DOCTOR WHO dramas ever. He delves into his non-fiction work, and brings us bang up to date with his latest career move as a script editor on series three of DOCTOR WHO and the BBC3 hit TORCHWOOD...

All covers remain the © of their respective publishers
The Famous Five promo picture © 1978 Southwest Television

THE BOUNTY HUNTERS

By SIMON GUERRIER

Some bounties are more personal than others. And some should never be collected at all.

Commander Lord Imperial Liev Abdamann swept back into his rooms, his long cape billowing behind him. Despite the austere military decor, the rooms were cool and quiet, the ambient blue light soothing. He let out a sigh, releasing the breath through a valve in the side of his neck.

'Meeting goodish were it, master?' simpered Vilter. The short, reedy creature had a glass of liqueur at the ready. Abdamann poured the drink into a slot on his chest-mounted control panel and, a second later, pale steam seethed from the its vent. He looked weary, thought Vilter. But the life support system masking Abdamann's face made it difficult to judge his moods.

Vilter hurried round behind his master and reached up on tiptoe to unclip the cape. While he wrestled it up on to the hook by the door, Abdamann plumped down in an armchair. He proffered his arms and Vilter helped peel off his gloves, revealing wan, emaciated fingers. Finally, Vilter undid the top few catches on his uniform tunic. Then he stepped back, bowing his head so as not to look upon his master directly. Abdamann had still not said a word.

'I run atomic bath if you don't want talking, sir,' said Vilter.

'It was a good meeting,' said Abdamann gruffly. Even after all his years of service, Vilter still found the voice terrifying. 'Everything comes together just as Grand-Usurper Chloris has predicted.'

'How so, sir?' asked Vilter, drawing him out.

'The last members of the old Democratic Union have signed the Imperial Codex. What's more, Luc Belcher's in more trouble than we thought. If our spies are to be believed, we killed several of Belcher's lead team at Imbik Station, and he was badly wounded. We can be confident that we won't hear from him in a while.'

'That is good news, sir. More to drink?'

As Vilter scuttled his fingers over the dispenser's controls, Abdamann bent forward to undo the clasps on his boots. When Vilter turned round with the drink, however, the Commander Lord Imperial was sitting perfectly still, poised and alert, listening keenly. Abdamann's senses were notoriously well tuned, but Vilter could hear nothing.

Abdamann rose from his seat and moved silently to the far wall. He reached up to a ventilation panel near the ceiling. He paused, his head cocked slightly to one side, his telepathic faculties now fully charged. Suddenly, he grabbed the edges of the ventilation panel and wrenched it from the wall.

When the dust had settled, he called out into the exposed ventilation shaft; 'Some sort of bounty hunter, are you?' There was no answer. Abdamann withdrew the stubby blaster from the holster at his hip.

'I've encountered several bounty hunters in my time,' he called again. Still no response. Abdamann turned to Vilter. 'I am worth a considerable fee these days.' He walked

over, calmly, and took the drink Vilter had forgotten he was holding. In exchange, he gave Vilter the gun, drained the liqueur and then called back to the shaft;

‘Well? Aren’t you going to show yourself?’

There was a noise from the shaft, a movement even Vilter could hear. He flinched, and aimed the gun. Who would dare...?

A pair of grubby hands appeared, clinging to the edges of the shaft. The bounty hunter hauled himself out and jumped down to the ground. Vilter let out a gasp: it was a gawky boy, not more than fifteen Standard Years old. He was small and weedy, with acne pebble-dashed across his face. A leather satchel hung from one shoulder. He might have come straight from school.

And yet a brilliant green Mugara crystal hung on a chain round his neck. Without it, Abdamann could have thought-stabbed the boy, killed him as soon as he heard him in the shaft. Where had a boy like this been able to acquire one? Mugara crystals were rare; the Grand-Usurper had an army stationed on the one planet where they were mined. And how had the boy got by Abdamann’s security and into his rooms?

Abdamann, who had surely asked himself these same questions, sounded bemused when he said; ‘And what can I do for you?’

‘I... I’ve been following you for a long time,’ said the boy. He had a nasal, whinging tone, and the words wavered with barely-concealed fright. Vilter noticed the way Abdamann now stood tall, on duty again and keen to intimidate the boy as much as possible.

‘How did you get on board?’ Abdamann asked.

‘I know *everything* about you.’ Was that some sort of threat?

‘What do you want?’

The boy thought for a moment, then rummaged in his satchel. Vilter, gun still at the ready despite his master’s lack of concern, spied all kinds of junk in there: papers, bits of wire, what looked like a basic door-passer. But the boy ultimately produced a torn metal panel. It had been scorched and blackened by intense heat.

‘This is the largest fragment that’s left of the Republic’s Congressional Meeting Palace,’ said the boy. ‘All that remains after you destroyed it.’

‘I see,’ said Abdamann. The boy tentatively approached and handed the relic over. Abdamann took it in his free hand and, having turned it over, showed it to Vilter. It might once have been a roof tile.

‘And what do you want me to do with this?’ Abdamann said.

Again the boy rummaged through his satchel. His hand emerged wielding a thin, cylindrical instrument. He uncapped one end, revealing a soft tip.

‘Could you put,’ he said, smiling, “‘To my good friend Ventak...”?’

*

They had taken their usual table in the cantina, a high-backed booth that looked out across the whole bar, yet also felt snug and enclosed. To the best of their knowledge, Luc Belcher and Brother Claire had once sat here, brokering a deal to smuggle Belcher’s friends off-planet. The place had been made over since those days. Images on the walls showed its seedy, multicultural past, but now it was rare to see non-humans in the place.

Over at the bar, people jostled and crowded round the holoscreens. Those hadn’t been there in the old days. The sporadic, raucous cheering and the sweet stink of narcotic spice meant there was probably a game on. It also meant nobody paid any attention to the two teenagers in the booth.

Martin couldn't help but sneer. 'He smudged it!' he said, handing the tile fragment back. A gibbous partial fingerprint broke the first loop of the signature.

'Not very much!' Ventak insisted, and Martin watched him wrap the tile up in its protective cloth and place it back into his satchel as if performing a sacred ritual.

'I guess it proves it's genuine,' said Martin.

'His bare fingers touched it!'

'So?'

'It makes it worth more!'

Martin laughed. 'Only to desperates like you.'

He took a sip of beer from the Imperial Declaration Day tankard Ventak had bought him. It was glass-bottomed so you could watch for traitors and rebels while you drank the health of the Grand-Usurper. Most places had them behind the bar, but only Ventak would ask to have his beer served in one. No wonder the new barmaid kept looking at them strangely. It wouldn't help Martin's chances with her.

Ventak was still pouting at him when he put the tankard down. 'You're just jealous that I actually met him,' Ventak said. 'You never believed I'd get in there.'

'Okay okay,' Martin conceded. He had to back down or this would go on all night. 'The metal, the crystal, getting into the Secret Skull Base... That is all pretty good.'

'And that's not the most important thing,' said Ventak. 'When I met him... well, I was nervous, but I didn't let him know that. To Abdamann, I wasn't just some kid. He thought I was... I was *grey hot*.'

They used to say that back at school and he still hadn't grown out of it. Martin took another swig of beer rather than say something he'd regret. Ventak hated not being taken seriously.

'What?' asked Ventak.

'Oh look,' said Martin. 'You know I don't share your enthusiasm for the Elite.'

'Yeah, you only like the Rebels,' Ventak nodded in a scornful tone. 'Still, you must appreciate –'

'They're sworn enemies, Ventak!'

Ventak shook his head. 'I'm not interested in the politics, Martin. That's boring, and anyhow now I've met the leaders of both sides.'

'You know I don't agree,' said Martin quietly. He looked furtively around. No one was looking their way but it could be dangerous to talk like this openly. Ventak could be so naive.

'You're always so superior about the media side of things,' said Ventak. 'But they make a difference to the galaxy...'

'Politicians? A bunch of glorified actors,' said Martin, cross now. 'Look at the boots and uniforms the Elite wear. It's like it's fancy dress!' Ventak's ears glowed pink with embarrassed anger but Martin didn't let him interrupt. 'It's the writers who write their speeches who wield the real power. They're the ones worth chasing after. And they're a lot more approachable – and better value. You wouldn't need a magic crystal to speak to Abdamann's chief writer, would you?'

'There's no point collecting if it's easy. It doesn't mean anything.'

'Whatever.'

'Because I make an effort, the messages they write me are personal!' Ventak insisted. 'I'm not just some anonymous geek to them.'

'No,' agreed Martin. 'You're a geek called Ventak.'

They sat in silence, ignoring one another.

'More drinks, guys?' asked the barmaid. It was about time the bar had got more help in, thought Martin. Some of the other girls were downright rude. She leant forward to collect their empty tankards and Martin slyly looked her over. Despite the uniform – unflattering green and made of some heavy, industrial fabric – she would do. He handed her his credit chip so as to touch her finger with his.

'You're so beautiful I'll name a star after you,' he said. She looked at him oddly at first, probably just surprised. Then she shrugged and took his chip back to the bar.

Ventak leaned forward across the table.

'That only worked when Councillor Voodris said it because he really does name stars after people he meets at parties!'

'It's still a great line – the best,' said Martin. 'And Voodris had it written for him.'

'I don't think she's interested.'

'And how would you know?' Martin snapped. Ventak had never even had a girlfriend. Martin could practically guarantee success because of his secret weapon: chat-up lines culled painstakingly from his favourite writers. He'd use them in rotation on any girl that met his list of ten must-have attributes. And twelve percent of times he got the response he wanted.

The attributes were all his own work. The girls he liked had to be pretty, they had to be slim and well-proportioned. They had to be single. They had to have a nice laugh. The second half of the list was more general. 'Must be alive,' was number ten. Ventak always teased him that it was just there to make it ten. But Martin didn't fantasise over media starlets from the past like some others did. He wouldn't oggle old images and holocasts. That was weird and a waste of time.

When the girl came back with their drinks – this time served in sensible glasses – he tried again.

'For just a kiss I'd make you a princess!'

Again, it was wittier when you said it to a real princess. But she wasn't listening, instead twisting away from him to look back at the holoscreen. She couldn't have heard what he'd said. Martin glanced at Ventak, but he too was gazing at the screen, his mouth dropped open in amazement. No surprises why: Commander Lord Imperial Liev Abdamann gazed down on the bar, declaring some city or other an enemy of the Grand-Usurper. It happened so often these days. Where would it be this time? He listened in.

*

At first there was a terrible, numb silence. Then the screaming started. The barmaid – Karin, the name badge on her breast said – seemed to expect them to say something.

'He's actually a nice guy,' said Ventak. 'When you meet him.'

Over at the bar, someone threw a glass at Abdamann. It passed easily through him and shattered into the wall behind. More glasses followed, then furniture. Two men began to fight. Abdamann continued to explain, stern but fair, about recent incursions and rebel activity. Strict counter-measures were regrettable but necessary.

Martin finished his drink. 'We should get out of here.'

Ventak took Karin's hand and she did not resist. They joined the turmoil at the door, pushing out into the street. It had been a bright, sunny day. Martin had even suggested earlier they find a bar with a garden. Now, though, the air was hot and hard to breathe. A terrible rumbling drowned out the noise of human misery everywhere. A wall of searing white light broke their view of the end of the street. It reached up tall into the sky and crept

almost imperceptibly forward. Squinting, Ventak could see how things and people burst into glittering dust clouds a moment before the light engulfed them.

'It's the Imbik Cannon,' said Martin, dumbfounded. 'But they said it didn't exist!'

Karin still held Ventak's hand. Ventak himself felt strangely calm, watching the wall of light sweep regardless through the city like something out of a movie. A good one.

'It's been a pleasure knowing you, Vent,' said Martin. He held out his hand and Ventak very nearly took it.

But then he had an idea.

'Come on!' he said. He led them bobbing and weaving through the people standing horror-struck in the street, waiting to be consumed.

'We won't outrun it on foot!' insisted Martin.

'We're going to die!' said Karin.

'No we're not,' Ventak told them, glancing quickly all around. 'We just need to...' He stopped, seeing what he needed. 'Come on!'

He hurried them towards the light itself. Martin muttered protest, but hadn't got a plan of his own. The fight had gone out of Karin, though. Maybe she'd just given up, was happy to be led. Ventak veered suddenly to the left, racing up a short flight of stairs. The train was there at the platform – he had seen it from the road. It might just get them away.

'Check the cockpit,' said Martin, vying to take charge. Ventak did; it had not been locked but he would have broken the window if need be. He helped Karin in, fighting the controls for a response. Taking the Mugara crystal from round his neck, he used it to replace the ignition key in the slot. He bashed the controls but still nothing happened. Karin had begun to cry. She wasn't berating him for his efforts; she just knew it was hopeless. Ventak could only wonder where Martin had got to.

He looked round. The wall of light had reached the far end of the platform. Behind them, it seared away the ticket office. Leaflets for days out and special fares sparked spontaneously into flame an instant before the light enveloped them. Martin was out there, punching the coloured buttons in the wall, the ones the station personnel used. He was swearing through gritted teeth.

'Get a move on!' called Ventak, leaning from the cabin.

Then the digital displays in the cockpit came on: Martin had done it. Ventak didn't pause, keying the ignition hard. The train began to move, agonisingly slow. But if he tried to push off too quickly it would stall. He glanced quickly round to ensure Martin had got aboard. But the place where his friend had been standing was now a wall of light. The light crept steadily on towards them, through the train's empty carriages. Even in the front cabin they could feel the heat. There was nothing left he could do. He almost kissed Karin goodbye.

Then suddenly the train was hurtling down the track. The cabin was filled with terrible noise and the gears and motor screamed. Karin grabbed his hand.

'We made it!' she laughed.

Ventak almost smiled. They watched the wall of light unhurriedly eating up the track behind them. It would not give up, and they could not run forever. The back of the train was gone, the carriage immediately behind them wrenched apart. It stank of fuel and industry, like the hanger of a spaceport. Ventak felt hollow, his guts clenching inside him. But it was not Martin that he mourned. He kept his eyes on the heat-blackened metal, the burn marks identical to the roof tile in his bag.

Karin took a wireless communicator from her pocket. Ventak had seen Luc Belcher's lot with similar, but hadn't realised they were fashionable. Whoever she was trying to call wasn't available, and he saw her blink back tears. He gingerly put out his hand, rested it on her shoulder. She smiled, briefly, but didn't say a word.

As they sped away from the doomed city, they could see other vehicles – cars and hoverbikes making their escape. Further out into the suburbs, they could see the far side of the wall of light and the ravaged black crater, which had once been the centre of town.

Other than that, it was still a beautiful day.

*

Ventak's bedsit was a short run from the monorail station, through eerily empty streets. Anyone who had been here had got away quick. Ventak ran the passcodes through the door and let Karin inside. Directing her down the hall, he ducked into the kitchen, rifling through cupboards for biscuits and a bottle of drink. His mum made sure he always had 'proper' food in, for the day he brought home a girl. Yeah, she'd be so pleased for him now.

Karin was in the living room, marvelling at the triple-stacked shelves of files and papers that crowded in from all sides. He didn't need to justify himself now, telling her he knew how sad it was, like Martin always did. Even now his collection made him feel better in himself. Out the window, the wall of light made its way calmly towards them, picking through blocks of flats and housing towers that had once been his neighbours.

Ventak pushed the low table out of the way, then pulled up the trapdoor underneath. He ushered Karin down, and while she was on the ladder he whirled round his shelves, picking out items to save. A file of addresses. A two-dimensional image of him and Martin from when they were at school. The HoverSquash bat Luc Belcher had signed for him. He hugged them to his chest with one arm as he started on the ladder, hesitating for one last look at the precious library being left behind. He didn't feel anything but empty, as if none of this was real.

The small room at the bottom of the ladder was cool and dark, and it always made his ears ring. Karin was leafing through his first edition of the Imperial Manifesto. He wouldn't even let Martin touch that.

'I'm not sure we'll be safe down here,' he said. 'But it's probably the best place there is.'

More than all his trips and meetings, this room had been where his money had gone. A shrine for the very best of his collection, proofed against fire and earthquakes and most of the known military systems. Martin had scoffed, of course. 'Why would they ever attack here?'

With little else to do but wait, Ventak settled on the sofa. Karin came and joined him, sitting very close. She tried her communicator again.

'You probably won't get a signal,' he said, unsettled by the fury coursing through him. She didn't owe him anything.

But she did get a line out, and having got through to whoever it was, she handed it to him. Then she got up and went over to his satchel. Ventak didn't ask; just held the communicator to his ear.

'Mr Ventak?' said a voice he thought he recognised. 'I'm glad I decided to keep an eye on you.'

It was Luc Belcher.

'We don't have any time,' Belcher continued, calmly. 'I need you to scan your print.'

Karin busily unwrapped the roof tile, and brought it over to him. She took the communicator from his hand and passed it over the blemish on the edge of Abdamann's name. A pink light tracked over the fingerprint.

'Got it!' said Belcher. 'Best of luck!' and the communicator went dead.

Ventak couldn't look at Karin. She sat by him, waiting for him to say something. Dimly, they could hear the furious destruction getting closer.

'If Abdamann is Belcher's dad, we can claim inheritance rights and break up the Elite,' she said quietly. 'There needn't be a war; we can do it all in the courts!'

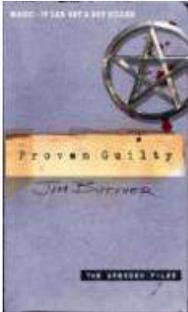
The look he gave shushed her. He didn't want to hear the explanations. He looked over at the HoverSquash bat Belcher had signed for him, wondering vaguely whether he'd be able to see the likeness in the handwriting.

Perhaps Abdamann realised what he had given away, and that's why the city had been sentenced. In which case this was really all his fault. If only Martin could have been here to share that. His collection really was worth something.

The strange whispering from above must have been the building burning up. He stared at the small pile of precious items, the scraps he had chosen to save. Now, finally, he felt something. Revulsion.

The room trembled under the onslaught. The air got dry and uncomfortable, prickled with savage heat. They might not make it. He didn't care.

Karin sat silently beside him and he didn't take her hand.



An extract from
PROVEN GUILTY
Jim Butcher
April 2007
ISBN 9781841495309
Paperback, £6.99

1

Blood leaves no stain on a Warden's grey cloak.

I didn't know that until the day I watched Morgan, second in command of the White Council's Wardens, lift his sword over the kneeling form of a young man guilty of the practice of black magic. The boy, sixteen years old at the most, screamed and ranted in Korean underneath his black hood, his mouth spilling hatred and rage, convinced by his youth and power of his own immortality. He never knew it when the blade came down.

Which I guess was a small mercy. Microscopic, really.

His blood flew in a scarlet arc. I wasn't ten feet away. I felt hot droplets strike one cheek, and more blood covered the left side of the cloak in blotches of angry red.

The head fell to the ground, and I saw the cloth over it moving, as if the boy's mouth were still screaming imprecations.

The body fell onto its side. One calf muscle twitched spasmodically and then stopped. After maybe five seconds, the head did too.

Morgan stood over the still form for a moment, the bright silver sword of the White Council of Wizards' justice in his hands. Besides him and me, there were a dozen Wardens present, and two members of the Senior Council – the Merlin and my one-time mentor, Ebenezar McCoy.

The covered head stopped its feeble movements. Morgan glanced up at the Merlin and nodded once. The Merlin returned the nod. 'May he find peace.'

'Peace,' the Wardens all replied together.

Except me. I turned my back on them, and made it two steps away before I threw up on the warehouse floor.

I stood there shaking for a moment, until I was sure I was finished, then straightened slowly. I felt a presence draw near me and looked up to see Ebenezar standing there.

He was an old man, bald but for wisps of white hair, short, stocky, his face half covered in a ferocious-looking grey beard. His nose and cheeks and bald scalp were all ruddy, except for a recent, purplish scar on his pate. Though he was centuries old he carried himself with vibrant energy, and his eyes were alert and pensive behind gold-rimmed spectacles. He wore the formal black robes of a meeting of the Council, along with the deep purple stole of a member of the Senior Council.

'Harry,' he said quietly. 'You all right?'

'After that?' I snarled, loudly enough to make sure everyone there heard me.

'No one in this damned building should be all right.'

I felt a sudden tension in the air behind me.

'No they shouldn't,' Ebenezar said. I saw him look back at the other wizards there, his jaw setting stubbornly.

The Merlin came over to us, also in his formal robes and stole. He looked like a wizard should look – tall, long white hair, long white beard, piercing blue eyes, his face seamed with age and wisdom.

Well. With age, anyway.

‘Warden Dresden,’ he said. He had the sonorous voice of a trained speaker, and spoke English with a high-class British accent. ‘If you had some evidence that you felt would prove the boy’s innocence, you should have presented it during the trial.’

‘I didn’t have anything like that, and you know it,’ I replied.

‘He was proven guilty,’ the Merlin said. ‘I soulgazed him myself. I examined more than two dozen mortals whose minds he had altered. Three of them might eventually recover their sanity. He forced four others to commit suicide, and had hidden nine corpses from the local authorities, as well. And every one of them was a blood relation.’ The Merlin stepped toward me, and the air in the room suddenly felt hot. His eyes flashed with azure anger and his voice rumbled with deep, unyielding power. ‘The powers he had used had already broken his mind. We did what was necessary.’

I turned and faced the Merlin. I didn’t push out my jaw and try to stare him down. I didn’t put anything belligerent or challenging into my posture. I didn’t show any anger on my face, or slur any disrespect into my tone when I spoke. The past several months had taught me that the Merlin hadn’t gotten his job through an ad on a matchbook. He was, quite simply, the strongest wizard on the planet. And he had talent, skill, and experience to go along with that strength. If I ever came to magical blows with him, there wouldn’t be enough left of me to fill a lunch sack. I did not want a fight.

But I didn’t back down, either.

‘He was a kid,’ I said. ‘We all have been. He made a mistake. We’ve all done that too.’

The Merlin regarded me with an expression somewhere between irritation and contempt. ‘You know what the use of black magic can do to a person,’ he said.

Marvelously subtle shading and emphasis over his words added in a perfectly clear, unspoken thought: *You know it because you’ve done it. Sooner or later, you’ll slip up, and then it will be your turn.* ‘One use leads to another. And another.’

‘That’s what I keep hearing, Merlin,’ I answered. ‘Just say no to black magic.’

But that boy had no one to tell him the rules, to teach him. If someone had known about his gift and done something in time—’

He lifted a hand, and the simple gesture had such absolute authority to it that I stopped to let him speak. ‘The point you are missing, Warden Dresden,’ he said, ‘is that the boy who made that foolish mistake died long before we discovered the damage he’d done. What was left of him was nothing more nor less than a monster who would have spent his life inflicting horror and death on anyone near him.’

‘I *know* that,’ I said, and I couldn’t keep the anger and frustration out of my voice. ‘And I know what had to be done. I know it was the only measure that could stop him.’ I thought I was going to throw up again, and I closed my eyes and leaned on the solid oak length of my carved staff. I got my stomach under control and opened my eyes to face the Merlin. ‘But it doesn’t change the fact that we’ve just *murdered* a boy who probably never knew enough to understand what was happening to him.’

‘Accusing someone else of murder is hardly a stone you are in a position to cast, Warden Dresden.’ The Merlin arched a silver brow at me. ‘Did you not discharge a firearm into the back of the head of a woman you merely believed to be the Corpsetaker from a distance of a few feet away, fatally wounding her?’

I swallowed. I sure as hell had, last year. It had been one of the bigger coin tosses of my life. Had I incorrectly judged that a body-transferring wizard known as the Corpsetaker

had jumped into the original body of Warden Luccio, I would have murdered an innocent woman and a law-enforcing member of the White Council.

I hadn't been wrong – but I'd never... never just killed anyone before. I've killed things in the heat of battle, yes. I've killed people by less direct means. But Corpsetaker's death had been intimate and coldly calculated and not at all indirect.

Just me, the gun, and the limp corpse. I could still vividly remember the decision to shoot, the feel of the cold metal in my hands, the stiff pull of my revolver's trigger, the thunder of the gun's report, and the way the body had settled into a limp bundle of limbs on the ground, the motion somehow too simple for the horrible significance of the event.

I'd killed. Deliberately, rationally ended another's life.

And it still haunted my dreams at night.

I'd had little choice. Given the smallest amount of time, the Corpsetaker could have called up lethal magic, and the best I could have hoped for was a death curse that killed me as I struck down the necromancer. It had been a bad day or two, and I was pretty strung out. Even if I hadn't been, I had a feeling that Corpsetaker could have taken me in a fair fight. So I hadn't given Corpsetaker anything like a fair fight. I shot the necromancer in the back of the head because the Corpsetaker had to be stopped, and I'd had no other option.

I had executed her on suspicion.

No trial. No soulgaze. No judgment from a dispassionate arbiter. Hell, I hadn't even taken the chance to get in a good insult. *Bang. Thump.* One live wizard, one dead bad guy.

I'd done it to prevent future harm to myself and others. It hadn't been the best solution – but it had been the only solution. I hadn't hesitated for a heartbeat. I'd done it, no questions, and gone on to face the further perils of that night. Just like a Warden is supposed to do. Sorta took the wind out of my holier-than-thou sails.

Bottomless blue eyes watched my face and he nodded slowly. 'You executed her,' the Merlin said quietly. 'Because it was necessary.'

'That was different,' I said.

'Indeed. Your action required far deeper commitment. It was dark, cold, and you were alone. The suspect was a great deal stronger than you. Had you struck and missed, you would have died. Yet you did what had to be done.'

'Necessary isn't the same as *right*,' I said.

'Perhaps not,' he said. 'But the Laws of Magic are all that prevent wizards from abusing their power over mortals. There is no room for compromise. You are a Warden now, Dresden. You must focus on your duty to both mortals and the Council.'

'Which sometimes means killing children?' This time I didn't hide the contempt, but there wasn't much life to it.

'Which means always enforcing the Laws,' the Merlin said, and his eyes bored into mine, flickering with sparks of rigid anger. 'It is your duty. Now more than ever.'

I broke the stare first, looking away before anything bad could happen.

Ebenezar stood a couple of steps from me, studying my expression.

'Granted that you've seen much for a man your age,' the Merlin said, and there was a slight softening in his tone. 'But you haven't seen how horrible such things can become. Not nearly. The Laws exist for a reason. They must stand as written.'

I turned my head and stared at the small pool of scarlet on the warehouse floor beside the kid's corpse. I hadn't been told his name before they'd ended his life.

'Right,' I said tiredly, and wiped a clean corner of the grey cloak over my blood-sprinkled face. 'I can see what they're written in.'

Jim Butcher's *PROVEN GUILTY* is available in all good bookshops from April 2007, priced £6.99. For other pulse-pounding supernatural thrillers, visit the Orbit website at www.orbitbooks.co.uk

LONDON CALLING, part 3

By TRUDI TOPHAM

Things heat up in this instalment of our ongoing fantasy epic. If you've missed the previous parts, don't forget they are still available for reading by downloading issues #1 and #2 from our backissues section at www.pantehnicon.net

Neena sat squeezed up against the wall of the micro-sub, peering out at the gloomy water that surrounded it. She disliked being underwater intensely, and she had every intention of giving Otto a stern talking to when they found him.

She had no doubt that they would find him. She glanced across at the Sarge, whose bulk was crammed into the pilot's seat. His expression was intense, his eyes glaring out into the unknown without once blinking. He was controlling every fish they came across and forcing it to help them on their search.

But that left her, the radar, and not a whole lot else. She looked down at the display in case it suddenly reported a gigantic dragon right behind them, but there was just the boat traffic on the surface, each piece of noise on the radar accompanied by the radio tag ID the boat was broadcasting.

She read the tags. Then, out of boredom, she consulted her charts.

'Woolwich ferry,' she murmured. 'Huh. Do you think he's this far east, Sarge?'

Baxter grunted. 'He went this way.'

Neena shrugged. Who was she to argue if that's what the guy three times her size said? She returned her attention to the chart in her lap.

'Sarge,' she said slowly.

He didn't even bother speaking this time. It was just a vague Neanderthal sound.

'Sarge... There's a boat above us that I can't ID.'

He glanced at her display, then looked out ahead again. 'Royal Navy.'

'Oh.' That would explain why they, too, were sending out radar.

*

Nicholson peered over the edge of the powerboat. The Thames was as disgusting as he remembered it.

'They're moving again, sir,' Aziz warned.

Nicholson nodded and grabbed the handrail before the boat powered up and surged forward. Aziz knew to keep tailing the sub. There was no point repeating the command.

The boat was painted in Royal Navy livery, and was sending out a Royal Navy ID. Hell, even the pilot was Royal Navy. But D Section had commandeered it, and Nicholson was thinking of commandeering Aziz, too. The guy had one hell of a level head on him, even if he wasn't a para.

'All right. On board we have Baxter and Chakrabarti.' McGregor came up beside Nicholson and consulted her clipboard. 'Savage is MIA. Baxter's abilities are going to be hampered by his current situation, and Chakrabarti's are going to be practically useless to her. Savage is the only one who poses a threat.'

Nicholson smiled faintly, turning and leaning against the handrail, regarding the muscular, highly strung woman that was almost his height. 'Allison, calm down. We're only here to observe and report.'

Her response was, as ever, chilly. 'With respect, *sir*, if they find out we're tailing them they're going to be none to pleased bout it.'

'What is it with you ex-military?' He nodded toward Aziz. 'How is it you're never as level and stable as he is?'

She smirked. 'Keep your mind off where you want to shove your cock, sir, and on the mission.'

Nicholson straightened up and turned back to looking down at the water. 'It's this tolerance of others that I love about you, Allison.'

She shrugged. 'You don't love anything, sir. Or anyone.' And with that, she turned and stalked back to her seat.

Nicholson's lips twitched slightly.

*

Savage swam. He'd shed all the additional biomass and left it drifting around like a gigantic blancmange, and had taken the form of a smallish sea lion, retaining only his original mass. That way there was nothing more to discard, and no need to steal from anything else.

He'd just killed someone.

He'd been trained to do it, and like any nineteen year old facing instruction on how to murder a fellow human being, he'd laughed his way through the lessons, jabbed his instructor in the ribs, and pretended he was so cool he could kill a hundred guys James Bond-style without batting an eyelid. Yeah, he was so cool he could shapeshift into a dog and tear out a guy's throat then swallow his spleen!

He felt sick. He'd *been* sick. Somewhere back there in the muck of the river was his breakfast, along with some of his stomach lining.

Being a super-powered spy wasn't so great. Come to think of it, just why the hell *did* he change his mind and drop out of Uni for this?

*

'Got him, sir.'

Baxter cocked an ear in Neena's direction. 'Sure?'

She nodded. 'Absolutely. Three hundred feet, dead ahead.'

The mini-sub surged forward.

*

Nicholson ran his fingers over his earpiece. 'I'm sorry. Please repeat?'

McGregor glanced toward him, shuddering slightly as she felt her skin goosebump beneath her shirt. She could look at his eyes when he wasn't facing her, but even then they made her itch somewhere between her throat and her stomach.

She watched as he pursed his lips, then gave a curt nod. 'Understood.' His hand fell to his side and he sauntered toward her.

She took up her carefully practiced nonchalant stance, gazing directly at the bridge of his nose. She was pretty sure it gave the impression of eye contact, and she sure as hell never

wanted him to think she was scared of him. Not her. She'd seen front line combat in Afghanistan. Nicholson was just one guy. A guy who looked... troubled.

That gave her pause. She tilted her head slightly. 'Something wrong?'

'Mmm-hmm.' He ran a thumb along his jaw as he gazed across the water, then looked to her. 'America's gone public, Allison.'

She scowled a little. She hated that he assumed everyone knew what he was talking about. 'About what? Friendly fire incidents? Crack babies in the White House?'

Nicholson shook his head. 'No. About us. About Parahumans.'

Allison felt her mouth moving. But eventually all she could find to say was, 'shit.'

*

The sea lion was out there, and they had an unflattering view of its arse end. Baxter had tried controlling it, on the off-chance, but it was a human mind in there and those were beyond his talent.

How the hell was he going to bring him in?

He sat back in his seat and took a slow look around the mini-sub. Controls, fire extinguisher, Neena, and some sandwiches. He could start nudging Savage, he supposed, but that probably wouldn't achieve anything.

'Neena.'

'Sarge?'

'Can you modify the electrical field around the sub?'

She gave a nod. 'To what end?'

Baxter gave a slow smile. 'I want him to hear what I'm about to say to him.'

She looked a little worried, but placed her hands on her console. 'Go, sir.'

*

'Oi, kid.'

Otto turned this way and that, only to see a mini submarine behind him, Neena and the Sarge inside. The Sarge was glaring at him, and his lips were moving, but it took a few seconds for the sound to reach out into the water.

'Pull over.'

He can't be serious!

Baxter looked serious. It was impossible for a guy that solid to look anything but. He gestured toward the south bank, jabbing his finger toward it, and repeated, 'pull over.'

Savage went up for air. There was a Royal Navy boat inches from his head, and a guy whose eyes made him shit himself was staring right at him, so he dove again without hesitation and began steaming in the direction Baxter told him to go.

The mini sub began trundling after him.

*

Baxter was soaking wet. He'd joined the army so that he could blow shit up without having to get wet, and now here he was mucking about in boats. Well, crappy little subs. It was all the same to him.

He'd surfaced the sub, but Savage had beached himself on the mud flats and was refusing to come over, so Baxter had climbed out and swum over. The mud wasn't so bad. It

was the cold, disease-ridden, condom-drenched waters of the Thames he was objecting to as he scrambled onto more solid ground.

‘Savage,’ he grunted, glaring down at the sea lion. ‘What the fuck do you think you’re playing at?’

The sea lion made a pathetic barking sound.

‘Change back and talk to me properly.’

There was something of a standoff for a little while. The sea lion seemed far too comfortable with being unable to put its thoughts into words, and the soldier was all too comfortable biding his time. And then Otto caved, slowly re-taking human form, his body making disgusting wet sounds with the occasional snap or pop as his internal mass shunted around.

Baxter grunted, giving a slight nod. ‘Better. Just answer one question.’

Otto, naked, wet, shivering, didn’t lift his gaze as he muttered, ‘what?’

‘Is all this because you just killed someone?’

There was another pause. Baxter knew the answers that were racing through the kid’s mind. He’d thought them all himself once. Hell, every soldier did. Those who didn’t were the ones to keep an eye on. The ones who joined the army because they thought it was a great excuse to murder whomever they pleased whenever it suited them.

‘I didn’t want to,’ Savage finally whimpered.

Baxter nodded and clapped a hand on the kid’s shoulder to steer him away from the river. ‘Good. Now let’s get your skinny, feeble arse somewhere dry and warm.’

*

It was a Holiday Inn, of all places, that saw the huge, damp soldier in civilian clothing dragging a straggly teenager wrapped in a blanket through its front doors. Baxter had stolen a car, found a picnic blanket in the boot, and now Otto was wearing garish tartan and more than a few breadcrumbs.

The receptionist had her hand on the phone to call the police before Baxter had shown her some ID and convinced her that he *was* the police, but she still looked dubious about giving a room to a grown man hauling a naked teenager around with him.

Not for the first time Baxter found himself wishing that he had Strathclyde’s mind-altering skills. Instead, as usual, a combination of looming and shouting eventually got him what he wanted, although he wasn’t convinced that she wasn’t going to call the police anyway.

Once they reached the room, he shoved Otto toward the bathroom. ‘Hot shower,’ he ordered. ‘Clean yourself up.’

The poor kid looked shell-shocked. He stumbled into the shower without complaint, and stood under water so hot that it lobstered his skin. Baxter watched him a moment to make sure he wasn’t going to top himself, then walked away, touching his earpiece.

‘Holiday Inn, Neena. Meet us here ASAP with transportation and clothes for both of us. Also, call off the police if they’re headed here.’

‘Will do, Sarge. Is he okay?’

‘He’ll be fine.’

*

It was only once both Otto and Baxter were in fresh, dry clothes that they sat facing each other in the crushingly small room's only two chairs. Neena was relegated to sitting perched on the end of the bed, examining her fingernails.

Baxter regarded the kid who was usually so full of himself there was little room for anyone else's ego. Now he looked like his world had ended, and Baxter had given the same pep talk to countless other teenagers who'd undergone the same transformation.

'It was him or you.'

Otto lifted his head, meeting Baxter's eyes, and Baxter gazed steadily back at him.

'Who attacked who, kid?'

'He started on me.' Otto blinked slowly.

Baxter gave a nod. 'And was he playing with you? Did you at any point feel that he was going to let you walk away from that encounter still breathing?'

'No.'

'He intended to kill you, Savage. And you couldn't stop him by wounding him, because he was healing himself, wasn't he?' Okay, so maybe he hadn't given anyone *that* part of the pep talk before.

Otto just nodded.

'You tried disabling your opponent. It didn't work. You acted in self-defence. What's important, kid, is that you wouldn't feel like this if you were a killer.' Baxter rose to his feet. The motivational speech was over. If the kid was too fragile, he supposed the SOE would give him counselling or some such psycho-rubbish. Whatever happened to the days where you just dealt with things and got on with life?

There was a knock on the door. It echoed down the little corridor outside, and Baxter threw a frown toward Neena.

'I cancelled the police, Sarge,' she stated calmly. 'Only Strathclyde knows we're here.'

Baxter strode to the door and glanced through the peep-hole before wrenching the door open. 'Lookie here,' he grumbled. 'It's everyone's favourite slimeball.'

Nicholson smiled sweetly, and stepped around Baxter into the crowded room. 'Good afternoon everyone. And how are we all today?'

Baxter peered out into the corridor, smirking slightly as he saw McGregor guarding the stairwell. He nudged the door closed and turned to face their visitor.

'Neena, Otto, this is Stephen Nicholson, D-Section. He's very good at being a grade-A wanker, so don't let him upset you.'

'With such a warm introduction I feel as though I can get straight to the point.' Nicholson slid his hands into his trouser pockets. 'You nice people need to come back to HQ right away, I'm afraid. There's something of a situation.'

Baxter folded his arms across his chest. 'Explain.'

'It looks as though the Special Relationship is about to become a little less special...'

To Be Continued...

Issue #4 – JUNE 2007