

# Hub Magazine

SCIENCE FICTION HORROR FANTASY

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## EDITORIAL:

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by **alasdair stuart**

### The Day Before Tomorrow

As we continue to hurtle onwards into the first legitimate winter in years, the grit runs out, the roads freeze and Roland Emmerich giggles maniacally yelling 'See! SEE! You fools! YOU FOOLISH FOOLS!' it's difficult not to just cocoon, stock up on cocoa, firewood, bottled water and shotguns and wait for the arrival of Paterson Joseph, Max Beesley and co. England does winter like a grandfather clock, slowly winding down until everything grinds to a halt.

And who are we to argue? It's freezing out there, so grab every blanket you have, put the kettle on, get some toast and settle down with the latest issue of Hub. Whilst it can't be burnt for heat when the power fails, it is crammed full of goodies, firewood for the mind instead of the body if you will. Just remember, if Dennis Quaid goes by in cold weather gear looking for his son? Point him in the right direction, maybe give him a cup of tea? It's only polite.

See you next week,

Alasdair,  
Hub Magazine

# FICTION

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## Gonzo Laptop

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by **gareth I powell**

Running late, I pushed through the entrance to the new Willesden shopping mall in West London, skateboard in hand. It was early morning and some of the stores still had their metal shutters down — but that didn't stop their automatic spambots from pinging my phone with offers and entreaties as I passed.

**40% off today!**

**CLOSING SALE**

**Recession-busting deals!**

Spread over four levels, the mall had been open only a year but already some of its shops were vacant, their windows scabbed over with graffiti and old newspaper. Yawning, I collected my usual breakfast order of coffee and falafel from the food stall by the entrance and took an escalator up to the third floor, to the corridor leading towards the car park pay stations.

There was only one shop on that corridor - an empty book store abandoned when its chain went bust, its windows whitewashed with flaking paint.

I knocked on its glass door – four slow raps followed by one quick one, and then a final slow one - Morse code for “OK”.

'It's me,' I said.

I heard the lock turn. The door cracked an inch and I was eyeball-to-eyeball with my bloodshot and bespectacled business partner and former classmate, Lenny Fisher.

'You're late, Alex.' Len pulled the door wide and I slipped inside, to the familiar smells of dust and failed dreams. Old promo posters peeled from the walls; paperback books lay piled on the unstuck carpet tiles. I dumped my shoulder bag on the floor and leaned my board against the wall.

'It's only just gone nine.'

'More like ten past.'

A laptop stood on the counter at the end of the room, where the cash tills used to be. It was an old model but we'd tricked it out with extra memory and a faster processor. We'd even upgraded the webcam built into the top of its screen casing.

'How are the markets this morning, Len?'

He removed his wireless Skype headset.

'Still pretty grumpy, I'm afraid.' He'd been doing the night shift, monitoring the markets in Asia and America. Beneath his glasses, his eyes were red-rimmed and his hair wild, his chin fuzzy with stubble. He'd left an empty pizza box beside the computer. I pushed it off the counter onto the floor.

'You know, it wouldn't hurt you to clear up around here once in a while.'

'Fuck you, Alex.'

We both smiled. Len looked dead on his feet. I said: 'Go home and get some sleep.'

He took his glasses off and yawned.

'Keep an eye on Tanguy and Larsson,' he said. 'Sell if they reach five Euros apiece.'

He grabbed up his stuff and left. I locked the door behind him and then checked the results of the

night's trading, to find we were up around five hundred Euros, which brought our total profits for the week to something approaching six grand.

Not bad.

It proved that even in the depths of an economic recession, there was money to be made picking the bones of failing dotcoms - and it certainly beat working for a living.

We weren't even paying tax. Because we were both under eighteen, we were trading anonymously, using a nested series of fictitious shell companies and accessing the markets via the mall's ubiquitous Wi-Fi cloud, siphoning all our profits into offshore accounts. We were going to use the money to pay our way through college. After that, Len wanted enough to buy one of the new studio apartments by the river, and I wanted to travel to Europe, the Far East and Australia.

I opened a new window on the laptop and called up a real-time webcam view of Sydney Harbour, filmed from the roof of an office block in Kirribilli. It was late afternoon over there. I liked the clean white light of the Australian sun, and the deep, wholesome blue of the harbour waters.

I left it open in the background as I ate my breakfast and worked, playing the stock markets in London, Madrid, and Frankfurt.

In the first hour, I made a lot of small deals, spreading the risk, investing in companies with rapidly rising share prices. I bought high as the price approached the peak of its parabola and then bailed almost immediately, making a small profit before it began its inevitable slide back down. I had almost a sixth sense for it, an ability to predict the exact moment the price would stall, so I could make a quick buck before it did.

I wasn't infallible, of course, and over the next three hours, I twice took a bath on shares that fell before I could unload them - but even so, by eleven-thirty, I'd made another two hundred Euros.

At midday, Lisa came by. She was the third member of our operation. She was nineteen, a couple of years older than either Len or I, and a friend of Len's sister from art school. We were both a little in awe of her and, truth be told, I'd had a secret crush on her for years. She worked in the mall and it had been her idea to use the old book store as a base of operations.

I let her in and she handed me a packaged vegetable pasty with yesterday's sell-by date on it.

'I thought you could do with some lunch,' she said. She had blue hair and a lip ring, and a shiny black pendant.

'It's new, do you like it?' she said, holding it out to me on the end of its chain.

I shrugged. I'd seen life-loggers before.

'It's very nice.'

She fingered it with a strange, sad smile. 'Don't worry, it's turned off. I bought it at the weekend to cheer myself up.'

I made sure the door was locked. 'Is there something wrong?' I asked.

She looked up at me. 'I broke up with Ian on Friday.'

I blinked in surprise, unsure how to react. Ian was her boss at the health food shop. She'd been seeing him for a few months but I'd never met him. From what I'd been able to gather, the majority of their relationship outside working hours had been taking place online, in MMORPGs and chat rooms. 'I'm sorry to hear that,' I said.

She shook her head. 'Don't be. He was an asshole and I'm better off without him.'

I walked back over to the laptop. She didn't follow, and she didn't ask about the business. I knew she wasn't interested. All she wanted was a cut of the profits at the end of each month, to supplement her wages.

'We've done okay this week,' I said, 'although the tax people have been all over us. We've had to create two new front companies in the last two days.'

I put the pasty down on the counter and brushed pizza crumbs from the brown envelope Len had left for her. I handed it over and she opened the flap. There were some colourful European bank notes inside, held together with a paperclip. She pulled them out and folded them, and then tucked them into her jacket pocket.

'Aren't you going to count them?' I said.

'Do I need to?'

Her eyes were green and her lips red. When she moved, her pendant caught the light.

I walked with her to the door and unlocked it. As I pulled it open, she said: 'Listen, I'm on my lunch break right now, but do you fancy meeting up later, for a drink or something?'

I glanced nervously up and down the corridor. I didn't want to be seen. If we lost this place, we'd have to find somewhere else with privacy and free 24 hour Wi-Fi. I looked down at her. She was standing very close and her blue hair smelled of peppermint. Her black pendant hung in the cleavage of her low-cut top.

'S-sure,' I said, suddenly stuttering.

She gave my arm a gentle squeeze, looking amused. 'Okay, I'll text you later.'

She kissed me on the cheek and I closed the door behind her. I leaned my forehead against its painted glass until I heard her footsteps retreating back in the direction of the atrium, then let out the breath I hadn't realised I'd been holding.

I touched my cheek where she'd kissed it, and then went to make a cup of coffee and nuke the pasty she'd given me in the small staff kitchen at the back of the shop.

There was a cupboard in there filled with rolled-up posters, signed hardbacks and other promotional junk. As I waited for the kettle to boil and the microwave to ping, I poked through it, hoping to find something useful I could swipe, like a book token or a USB stick.

At the back of the cupboard's top shelf, I struck gold: a brand new ten terabyte external hard drive, still wrapped in cellophane and roughly half the size of my phone. Hardly believing my luck, I pulled it out and read the words etched into its black casing:

### **100 Years of Gonzo: 1937-2037**

The dates meant nothing. I slipped the drive into the leg pocket of my combat trousers. The kettle had boiled. I poured a cup of coffee and took it back into the main body of the shop, where I spent a few minutes checking out the New York stock exchange, which had just opened.

By the time I'd made a few deals, it was almost one thirty. I fished out the drive and turned it over in my hands. It looked practically unused. I thought if I wiped the promotional data from it, I could resell it for at least a hundred Euros – which would be another hundred I could put towards my college and travel plans.

With a smile, I tore off the cellophane, crinkled it up and dropped it on the dirty floor. I pulled out the drive's retractable USB cable and plugged it into the port on my laptop.

'Okay.' I rubbed my hands together gleefully. 'Let's see what we've got.'

I scanned the contents of the drive, giving an appreciative whistle as a long list of files appeared. The drive's memory held the complete texts of over a hundred books and novels, thousands of photographs, and several days' worth of music and film. I scrolled through it all until I came to an application file marked "reader", which I clicked, expecting it to open a device for viewing the media files. Instead, the screen blanked and a face appeared – a handsome face beneath a camouflage bush hat, with sad eyes looking back at me from behind tinted aviator shades.

Frowning, I leaned closer to the screen. A dialogue box at the bottom asked if I'd like to run the program.

'What's this?' I said. I tapped the laptop's mouse pad, wheeling the cursor over to the "No" option - but before I could press it, there was an urgent knock at the shop's painted glass window.

'Alex, let me in!'

Lisa. Cursing, I put my coffee down and unlocked the door. I opened it just enough to drag her inside. She was out of breath.

'Alex, I've done something really incredibly stupid.' She opened her fist to reveal the black life-logger pendant she'd been wearing a couple of hours earlier.

'What have you done? Have you broken it?'

'No, but Alex, when I came here before, I thought I'd turned it off but I hadn't. It was on the whole time.'

I felt the colour drain out of my face. 'It recorded everything?'

Lisa closed her eyes and nodded. 'It's worse than you think. Ian has access to my feed. He uses it to check up on me when I'm on my own in the shop. If he sees this place and decides to get vindictive...' She made a face.

I put a hand over my eyes and took a deep, shuddering breath.

'Are you telling me you've posted video evidence of our illegal share trading operation on the *fucking internet*?'

Lisa screwed her face tighter.

'Yes...'

I kicked over a pile of abandoned paperbacks and stalked back to the counter. It wasn't just video, either. Those little devices recorded their wearer's GPS location, temperature and heart rate, as well as everything they saw and heard, and downloaded it all onto the web as a live feed, creating a real-time, searchable blog. So far, we'd managed to avoid attracting unwelcome attention from the mall's private security firm, not to mention the tax office and the fraud squad. But if Ian got hold of all that information and decided to blow the whistle, we could find ourselves in some seriously hot water.

'I'm sorry,' Lisa said.

I turned and glared at her.

'Help me with this stuff.' I pointed to the laptop and hard drive. 'If there's even a chance Ian's going to call security, we're going to have to clear out right now, before anyone comes looking.'

Lisa pushed one hand up the side of her head, brushing back her blue hair.

'Maybe it's not too late,' she said. 'He's probably at lunch. He might not have checked up on me yet and if so, we can just delete it before he does.'

I clenched my fists. My heart thumped. 'Can you do that?'

Lisa let her hand drop to her side.

'It *must* be possible to edit a life-log, otherwise what happens if you accidentally record yourself taking a dump or fiddling your taxes?'

I looked into her eyes for a long moment and then smiled. I couldn't help myself.

'Okay, let's do it.' I span the laptop to face her.

She frowned.

'What's that?'

I glanced down. 'I don't know. It was on this hard drive I found in the back room. I think it's an advert or something.'

'It looks like Hunter Thompson.'

I considered the face again and shrugged: 'If you say so.'

Lisa tilted her head to the side. 'No,' she said, 'it's definitely him.'

She put her fingers on the mouse pad, moved the cursor from "No" to "Yes", and clicked.

The face on the screen gave a start. The blue eyes blinked, looking around, getting their bearings, and the man, Thompson, coughed, clearing his throat.

'Where am I?' His eyes were wild and his voice was high with alarm. He looked up at me.

'Who the hell are you?' he said.

We found a way to pause the program, freezing Thompson's face: chin thrust out indignantly, black brows furrowed.

'It's CGI,' Lisa said, 'It's got to be.'

I couldn't take my eyes from the screen. 'But he's looking straight at me.'

Lisa flicked her hand. 'Ah, that's just an illusion. Unless...' She tapped her fingernail on the webcam built into the laptop's casing, looking thoughtful.

'Let's try something,' she said. She touched the mouse pad again, restarting the program.

'Hello,' she said.

The face on the screen shook itself and turned its baleful gaze on her.

'Well, hello yourself,' it said. 'Would you like me to read you something?'

Lisa shook her head, fascinated. She leaned forward.

'Can you really see me?'

Thompson's lips twitched in a smile. 'I couldn't miss you with all that blue hair, now could I?'

His animated eyes scanned the room, taking in the disassembled bookshelves and piles of abandoned paperbacks.

'Say, this doesn't look much like a book launch to me. I'm s'posed to be giving a reading. There's s'posed to be an audience and I'm s'posed to be reading my book.'

I moved in close to Lisa, peering at the screen.

'The store went bust,' I said.

Thompson's face fell. 'Oh, man. Then who the hell are you two?'

'I'm Alex and this is Lisa.'

He looked up at us. 'You won't turn me off again, will you?'

Rifling back through the cupboard, Lisa found the notes that accompanied the promotional hard drive. She brandished them at the image of the man on the laptop screen.

'It says here, and I quote, you're: "*an artificial Turing intelligence fed with all the books, articles and letters written by Hunter Thompson during his lifetime, and all the subsequent memoirs of his friends and contemporaries, plus all the available and relevant photographs, film clips and TV appearances*" – and that you're programmed to behave as if you are the man himself, "*based on behavioural parameters implied by the contents of those files.*"'

She looked up. Hunter was watching her. Under his plaid shirt and white t-shirt, he had a muscular neck and wide, football-hero shoulders.

'I don't know about any of that,' he said with a sad smile, 'I'm just me, here, now. All dressed up and nowhere to go.'

He looked at me. 'You know who I am though, don't you sport?'

I scratched my stomach through my t-shirt. 'I read your book at school, the one about Las Vegas. I wrote an essay on it.'

Hunter's eyes widened in surprise. 'At school, huh?'

Lisa was still reading: 'You're programmed to read sections of your work to specially invited audiences, as part of the hundredth anniversary of your birth,' she said.

Hunter rolled his eyes.

'Yada yada yada. Those sick bastards. Just because they put me in this here box, it doesn't follow they get to tell me what to do.'

There was a knock at the shop door and the handle rattled as someone tried it.

A voice said: 'This is mall security. Is there anyone in there?'

Lisa and I looked at each other. She grabbed my hand. Her eyes were wide and frightened.

'What are we going to do?'

I looked down at Hunter.

'Screw 'em,' he said. 'Let's blow this joint.'

We took the rear fire escape door that opened into the car park. Lisa had a car there, an old Peugeot converted to bio-diesel. We piled into it, with me in the shotgun seat, the laptop and hard drive on my knees running on battery power, my skateboard and bag on the back seat.

'We can go back to my place and erase my life-log,' Lisa said.

She took us out into traffic. Outside the mall, it was a bright, hard autumn day, with showers of yellow leaves swirling down from the pavement trees.

At Hunter's request, I held the laptop up, so the camera faced the windscreen.

'Where in the hell are we anyway?' he said.

'This is west London,' Lisa replied, changing gear and working the clutch.

'Ohio?'

'England.'

'And where are you taking me?'

Lisa sped through a set of traffic lights as they switched from green to amber. 'We're going to my place.'

I made a face. 'I'm not sure that's such a good idea. If Ian knows about the share trading, he could have reported us to the police or the Inland Revenue.'

Lisa gripped the steering wheel. 'Then what *are* we going to do, Alex?'

From the laptop's speakers, Hunter's voice was low and urgent. 'Alex, how much money do you have on you?'

I turned the laptop around.

'About forty Euros,' I said.

He frowned, nonplussed.

'Is that a lot?'

'Some.'

He brightened. 'Then let's hit the fucking road. There's no way those pigs can touch you if you don't stop moving.'

Lisa was concentrating on the traffic. We were on the North Circular, near Ealing, heading south towards her place in Heston. She said: 'Where do you suggest we go, then?'

Hunter grinned a toothy, rogue's grin.

'I always say: if in doubt, head west.'

Len phoned me a few minutes later.

'I've just been past the store,' he said. 'There are security guards crawling all over it. What's going on?'

I glanced across at Lisa. We were on the M4 now, heading out of town, the afternoon sun shining on her blue hair.

'We got caught.'

On the other end of the line, Len made a choking noise.

'What about the money?'

'It's safe, as far as I know. At least, for now...' I felt my sixth sense kick in. I knew we'd peaked. From here on, the only way was down.

'Look, if the police and the Revenue are involved, they're going to trace the transactions sooner or later. Just get to a cash machine, take out as much as you can, and we'll see what happens.'

I switched my phone off. 'Pull off at the next services,' I said.

We left the motorway just south of Reading, rolling to a halt in the car park of a service area surrounded by fields and hedges. I left the laptop containing Hunter on the passenger seat. I pulled a baseball cap from my bag and went inside, past the concession stands and the MacDonald's, to the ATM machines, where I withdrew as much cash as I could, pushing my phony business and personal cards to their limits, all the while keeping the brim of my cap as low as possible to hide my face from the security cameras.

On the way back, pockets bulging with banknotes, I paused long enough to pick up two bottles of spring water and half a dozen sandwiches, and then called Len back from a payphone. He'd taken refuge in an internet café in Ealing and he sounded angry.

'I don't get it,' he said. 'At least we were doing something. We were earning money instead of moaning about the recession. The government should be encouraging us not trying to close us down. If this country's going to pull through, it's going to need people like us.'

He paused to take a breath and I said: 'Look, you're probably in the clear. If all Ian's got is the footage from this morning, then no-one knows you're involved. There are probably fingerprints in the shop but what do they prove? Keep your head down and you should be okay.'

He was silent for a few seconds.

'What about you?' he said.

I shifted my weight from one foot to the other. 'The only two bits of evidence linking Lisa and I to the operation are the life-log and the laptop. If we can get rid of them both, we'll be okay.'

'You want me to see about the log?'

'Can you?'

'No problem. Even if Ian's seen the feed, he won't be able to prove anything if it's been erased. Just get Lisa to text me her passwords and I'll get it sorted.'

'Thanks, man.'

I hung up. When I got back to the car, I found Lisa in conversation with Hunter, clutching her pendant. She was saying:

'Your books are all based on events from your life, right? Well, that's the same thing as life-logging. That's life-logging, Seventies-style.'

She looked up as I slid into my seat. I handed her a bottle of water.

'I think we're going to be okay,' I said.

Even with the evidence gone, Lisa thought it best we stay out of town for a few days, just in case the police or the tax men came knocking. For want of a better option, we continued west on the motorway, passing Swindon and Bristol, heading into Wales and the lowering sun over Cardiff and Swansea.

Lisa said: 'I have an aunt we can stay with. She runs a guest house near St David's.'

Sitting on my knee, Hunter was digging it all, watching the white line unroll under the car's wheel with inexhaustible machine enthusiasm. Occasionally, he burst into muttered snatches of half-remembered song.

At the wheel, Lisa said very little. She had the radio on, listening to the traffic reports. Her face was set, her jaw clenched, her whole body bent to the task of concentrating on the road ahead. Her knuckles were white on the steering wheel.

Afraid of distracting her, I used my phone to Google the works of Thompson.

'Do you have all these books in your memory?' I asked as I scrolled through the Amazon listings.

Hunter stuck his bottom lip out. 'I have the reviews too, but don't go paying attention to them. They're the ravings of cowards and dope fiends.'

He closed his eyes with a chuckle. 'Thing is, Bubba, most people get caught up with the drugs and bad craziness and they miss the great mystical lonely terror of it all.'

When he opened them, his eyes behind the shades were dull with regret.

'My boy, you and I both know I'm not the person I think I am, now don't we?'

I shifted in my seat. We were somewhere past Swansea now, on a dual carriageway, and it was getting late.

'Look, what do you want, Hunter?' I was tired and stiff. 'How do you think this is going to end?'

The eyes on the screen narrowed, considering me, weighing me up. At length, he said: 'I know I'm not real, Alex, and I can't go on living like this. We've all got to die sooner or later and I know there's no mystical inner spark lighting me up. Hunter S. Thompson is dead and gone. He shot himself in 2005. It says that right here.' He tapped his temple with a gloved hand. 'I'm an after-image, a phony, a ghost. I'm so tired and beat and all my memories are in black and white. I need to rest.'

I put my hand on the power switch. The battery was almost gone. 'Do you want me to turn you off?'

He shook his head, eyes wild with terror. 'Hell, no! If you do that, there'll always be a chance someone rat bastard will turn me on again.'

Lisa looked over. 'So, what do you want us to do?' she said.

Hunter lowered his chin to his chest.

'This place we're going, it's about as far west as we can get, huh?'

'It's the Atlantic coast,' Lisa said. 'There's nothing after that except the ocean.'

Hunter looked up and stuck his jaw out. 'Then when we get there, I want you to throw me off a cliff into the sea.'

'Are you sure?'

His eyes widened in annoyance. 'Sure I'm sure. You need to get rid of this machine and I can't go on like this, stuck in this impotent little box, not really being me. I never liked computers. Now look at me. I'm a goddamn fucking typewriter. No, I'll be better off in the sea, with all the fish and the dead pirates for company.'

He gave a big, shuddering sigh.

'But before that happens, Alex my boy, you need to take a good long look at this lovely lady here.'

Lisa and I exchanged puzzled glances.

'She's crazy about you,' Hunter said. 'She told me so, while you were out getting cash.'

Lisa's eyes snapped back to the road. Her ears were going pink.

'Shut up,' she said.

Hunter laughed. 'Hey, there's nothing more important or downright necessary to a man than the love of a good woman. Am I right, Alex?'

I could feel my own cheeks burning.

'We're just friends,' I said.

'Ha!' Hunter shook his head. 'I might not be real, but I do have eyes. I've seen the two of you together and I know what's going on.'

He appeared to lean forward, jabbing a finger at the inside of the screen. 'You like her, Alex, I know you do. And she likes you too. And the two of you could do a lot worse, a hell of a lot worse, take it from me.'

We passed through Carmarthen into the green rolling landscape of the Pembrokeshire National Park. Without taking her eyes from the road, Lisa said: 'I've just been through that whole thing with Ian.'

'I know.'

She slowed for a roundabout, took us through it and started accelerating again.

'I don't know if I'm ready.'

I put my hand on her shoulder. Her skin felt warm and smooth through her cotton top.

'We've got a few days here in the country. Let's just see what happens. '

She reached up and took my hand.

'Do you want to, really?'

I swallowed. 'Of course I do. I've always wanted to be with you.'

She gave me a sideways look, pleased and amused.

'Okay, then.'

Hunter had his eyes closed, nodding along to some unheard internal rhythm.

Lisa peered through the windscreen, squinting against the light.

'We're nearly there,' she said.

We were still holding hands. I turned the laptop around so that like us, Hunter faced forward, into the molten bronze of the setting sun.

Ahead of us, beyond the shadowy fields and hedgerows, we knew the ocean waited, shimmering like a sea of a fire.



# REVIEWS

## The Clone Wars Series 2 - Episode 9-10

reviewed by richard whittaker



"Grievous Intrigue" Directed by Giancarlo Volpe, Ben Edlund

"The Deserter" Directed by Robert Dalva, written by Carl Ellsworth

Starring: Matt Lanter, James Arnold Taylor, Matthew Wood, Dee Bradley Baker, Chris Edgerly, Angelique Perrin, Tom Kane, Cara Pifku

Considering how handy they are in a fight, the Jedi spend a lot of time bemoaning the fact that they are stuck in a war. But what about those involved in the Clone Wars who aren't just reluctant participants or innocent bystanders, but were born for battle, designed for battle, know nothing but battle? That's the core conceit of this latest two-parter, and that it makes its point so subtly, and without any explicit statements, is what makes this quietly one of the best mini-arcs of the show so far.

It also marks the return of season one's big bad of choice, the Jedi-slaying General Grievous (Wood.) He's cornered and captured Jedi Master Eeth Koth (Edgerly), and made it very clear to the Jedi council that his death will be slow and torturous. This gives the Republic a chance to not only rescue their comrade, but a shot at taking down the Separatist's greatest commander while he is distracted.

In opening act *Grievous Intrigue* Ben Edlund, creator of *The Tick* and regular writer on *Supernatural*, has created one of the best 22 minute animated scripts of recent memory. That may sound like a big claim, but what he does is build up 15 minutes of plan and counterplan, as the viewer attempts to guess whether it is the Jedi trapping Grievous or vice-versa. In the third act, both plans fall apart, and it becomes about what each will do to survive, and how long they will stay committed to their failing missions. Edlund's script is simple but textured, and melds perfectly with the themes Ellsworth puts forward in *The Deserter*. As Grievous hides from his pursuers on farmland on the remote planet of Saleucami, clone trooper Captain Rex (Baker) is injured in the hunt and seeks assistance from Twi'lek farmer Suu (Pifku.) When her husband Cut turns up, Rex immediately realizes that he's looking at an older version of himself.

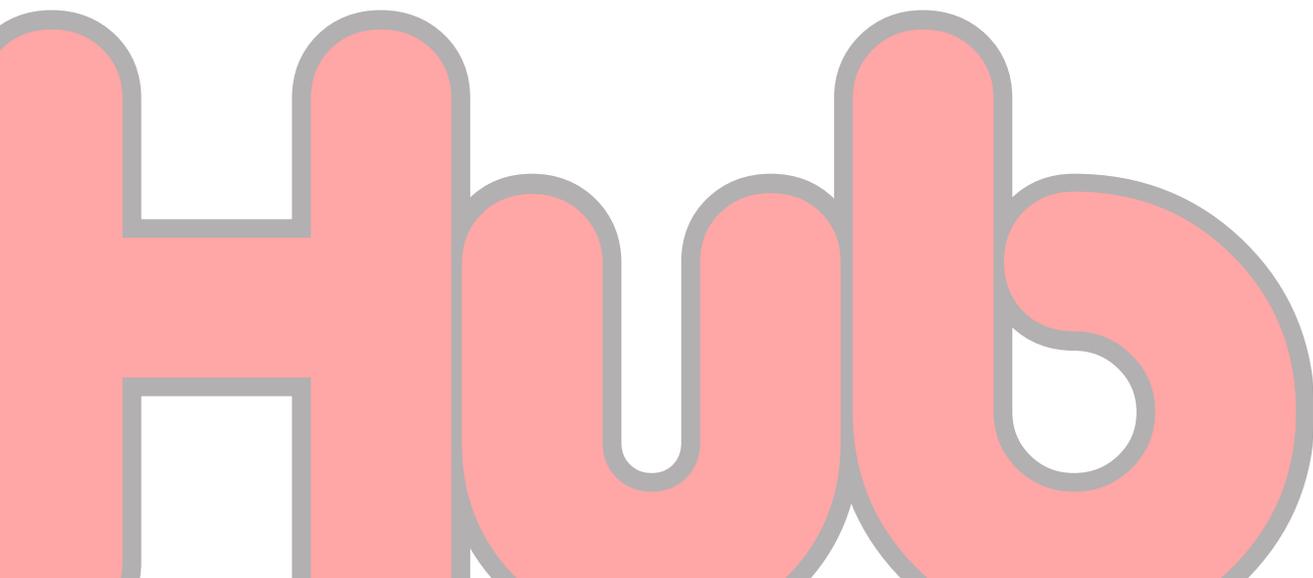
It's not as strong an episode as the opener, with occasional lapses into the saccharine when dealing with Cut's family. That's the same accusation that can be made about Ellsworth's script for the wholly unnecessary 2009 remake/ravaging of the classic *The Last House on the Left*. OK, that's the least accusation that can be made against that abomination, but here he is as comfortable writing a quiet dinner conversation between two warriors as he is setting up a fight for survival against droid invaders.

What really binds the two episodes together is that they are both meditations on what motivates those at war. Grievous is depicted as a pacing obsessive, a creature that has no ambition beyond leading an army that he regards as disposable. "A futile quest for power, a mutilated body, and your place as Dooku's errand boy," General Kenobi (Taylor) spits at him as they duel on his ship's bridge (a duel that is deliberately choreographed as the claustrophobic antithesis to their roaming fight in *Revenge of the Sith*.) Cut, on the other hand, is a man who has left behind a war he doesn't believe in to fight for the family he loves. Between them, they provide a context for Rex, a man who is as born for war as either of his exemplars, and has never even contemplated that he may have options.

Much of the credit for the success of *The Deserter* goes to Baker. As the voice of all the clones, he's consistently asked to hold conversations with himself, but he gives Cut a totally difference cadence and flow to any trooper he has played before. It helps that noted editor turned director Dalva (*Star Wars* trivia:

A long time member of the LucasFilm team, he was second unit photographer on *A New Hope* back in 1977) makes Cut craggier and more world-weary than his clone brothers, setting him apart and showing that, while the troopers may personalize their armor and their haircuts, they still have a long way to go to become true individuals.

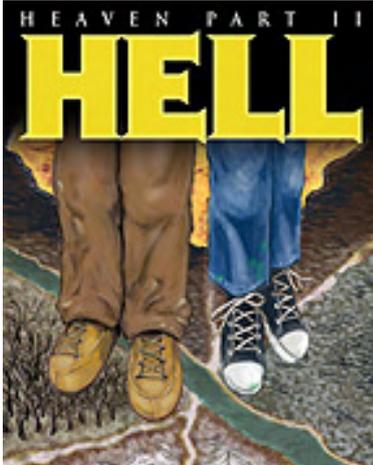
This is the kind of arc that speaks to the strength of this show. This is a mature, complex theme that is still accessible to even the younger viewers and that, after all, is what *Star Wars* was always about.



# FEATURES

## Heaven Book 2 : Hell

by *alasdair stuart*



By Mur Lafferty

Available from Itunes, [www.podiobooks.com/title/heaven---season-two-hell](http://www.podiobooks.com/title/heaven---season-two-hell) and [www.murverse.com](http://www.murverse.com)

The world has ended but, as usual, it's not ended cleanly. Countless souls are in the wrong afterlives, countless more have been sent to hell and the only people who seem capable of retrieving them are Kate and Daniel. As they set off though, it becomes clear that even after all they've been through, Kate and Daniel are keeping things from both each other and themselves.

Kate and Daniel's uniqueness lies in their normality and the way they struggle to maintain that normality in the face of the impossible worlds they travel through. Daniel in particular gets a lot of development here as Lafferty explores the ways Daniel's personality has been changed and magnified by his death. This leads to a confrontation with Anubis that's both moving and genuinely surprising and the way Daniel's reasoning and actions are gradually revealed is one of the highlights of the series. Daniel's past is quietly horrific in a completely plausible way and the damage he's taken simply by surviving it is almost enough to damn him. By exploring Daniel this way, Lafferty takes the amiably sarcastic, reluctant hero of the first volume and places him in context, showing his growth from that to the brooding, troubled figure we see in *Hell*. He's far from perfect but as the series progresses, he realises that may not be a problem.

Kate, for her part, undergoes quieter but even more significant changes. Both she and Daniel find new purpose as they make their way through the hells but Kate also finds new found power. There's a scene involving the ghosts of murdered children that in the hands of a lesser writer would be cackhanded, exploitative or cheap. Lafferty handles it with honesty and compassion and in doing so makes it one of the most poignant and affecting moments in the series.

It's in the closing stages of the story though that Kate really comes into her own. The reasons for her actions and new-found powers are revealed in a scene which brings her relationship with Daniel out into the open, re defines both of them and changes the nature of the series completely. It's a fascinating, audacious piece of writing that combines romance and violence, spirituality and humanity. The final scenes of the volume take everything that's been expanded out and explored and compresses it down to a fight that's metaphorical, physical and incredibly emotionally charged.

*Hell* is a remarkable achievement, building on the events of *Heaven* and giving them closure whilst at the same time setting the series up for the following volumes. Kate and Daniel's journeys, complimentary yet opposing, take the listener through very different hells that include a surprisingly poignant nod to JC Hutchins' *7th Son*, encounters with Roman emperors and ultimately, a confrontation with each other and themselves. It's a series of very personal apocalypses that combine to create a genuinely unique take on modern fantasy. It's also, like it's predecessor, unmissable.



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