

Hub Magazine

SCIENCE FICTION HORROR FANTASY

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ISSUE 131 · 26TH OCT 2010

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EDITORIAL:

by alasdair stuart

More Tea, Lord Vader?

I've been thinking a lot about the English mindset as it applies to horror and science fiction recently. Part of this is because I grew up with *The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and *Doctor Who*, shows filled with polite English people being polite in the face of near certain doom and part of it is because, well, despite my longstanding statement that I am Not From Round Here™, the simple truth of the matter is; I might as well be. The Isle of Man stands next to, and frequently a long way behind, the UK and whilst my national anthem doesn't mention anything about the Queen, I live here so I am, like it or not, English.

Besides, you can't send me back. It's been seven years which means if I do go back? They'll kill me and choose a new king.

I mention all this because this week we have 'Cure' by the magnificent Danie Ware as our short fiction and an interview with Jamie Simcox and Simon Fisher of the I Am Tim webseries as our feature and whilst they're thematically massively different there's a pragmatism, a sense of grounding that unites them. This is the fantastic, the impossible, looked at through the eyes of people who still have to put their boots on one at a time, who still find themselves thinking about their next meal, their last meal, whether or not their life will always be like this. These, in short, are two pieces that both come from the basic pragmatism of the English psyche and do wonderful, intricate, horrific, funny things with it. Hope you like them.

And you should also go check out *Marco and the Red Granny*, our first podcast serial. Written by the incomparable Mur Lafferty, it's the story of a young artist desperate for patronage from the aliens who have revolutionized human society, the terrifying granny who sort of adopts him and what happens when art meets the future...It's a great story and if you liked it, please spread the word and please donate to the tip jar on the site. At the end of the story's run, 75% of what's in there will go to Mur with the rest being used to cover our costs so if you can, please give and show your appreciation. The site's at: <http://www.hubfiction.com/2010/10/marco-and-the-red-granny-part-3/>

See you next week,

Alasdair

FICTION

Cure

by danie ware

I saw the attack begin.

The vehicle was strange to me – I'd watched the shimmering sand, fascinated, until the thing swelled into focus, closing within bow-range of the Citadel. It had sails of fabric and it rode the wind and the sand – we had nothing like it, nothing that could cross the distance. Even the tribesmen, swarming with violence, seemed hesitant at first. As their numbers massed, they held back. They were afraid of it, no matter how much they wanted to ravage its contents.

If they had their wish, our cure would never reach us.

I crouched high in one of the fantastical rock pillars that stood sentinel to the Citadel itself. Red sunlight fell in patches through sand-carved holes; wind sang softly in the stone. My black, curved bow was in my hands, strung and ready. We're the Redfeather, the Citadel's watchers and guardians – at two hundred paces, a Redfeather archer can put twenty shafts to a palm-sized mark in less time than it takes to tell it.

My first one, fletched in scarlet, hit the leader of an attacking tribe, even as the sand revealed him.

The cure is ours. He fell, spluttering blood and startlement. *You can't have it!*

Around him, though, the tribesmen were rising from the sand, swarming, closing on the vehicle in numbers I'd never seen. They're a vicious people, fraught with rivalry and violence; they ride the sand-tides to the leeward sides of the mighty rock pillars, and they fight to keep their ground. This many of them in one place implied an organisation that chilled me.

I shot again; my shaft sprang back, defeated by armour of predators' chitin, by cloth made of gut and spun fur. A miss counts against my reputation. From here, though, it was hard to see them against the pulse-beat of the sand's shifting colours. They guise themselves well and feel the tides deep in their blood and bone; they ride and move with them, just as the predators do.

Sometimes, they've thrown themselves against the great tower of the Citadel, tribesmen and predators both, but always they rage without hope of breaching the rock; always, we beat them back.

Now, it seemed, the tribes had found another way to bring us low and take our oasis for their own.

I nocked another shaft, loosed; my hands blurring with speed even as I reached again for the quiver and the freed arrow found its mark. A tribesman gagged and fell; his clawed mount lurched as his tumbling weight pulled at its headstall. A second shaft was nocked and loosed as the creature stumbled. Its claws rent the struggling figure that had been its rider.

Blood soaked into the sand, darkening its thrum of colour.

The second shaft took the banner-bearer clean out of his seat.

Three.

If I could make twenty, I'd be rewarded with water and fruit. If I could make forty, I may be even granted a pass to the *seraglio*.

What was left of it.

In the spectacular rise of the carven pillars around me, others of the Redfeather were hiding. Now, the bright air was streaked with black-and-scarlet and, on the open sand below, the tide of tribesmen slowed.

Their shouts came to me in pieces, gusts of breath and pain; their assault faltered and their creatures chattered riderless. Wisps of cheers came from the incoming vehicle.

Behind us, the precious, ancient trebuchets on the high Citadel wall were cranked to throw – but they couldn't be loosed until the vehicle was clear. If they hit its cargo, we were all lost. We had to drive the assault back.

And hard.

The vehicle's fabric sails bore shades of the blue sky, of water. They swung, and it tacked back across the sand. There were figures at its sides, their pale, shimmering garments reflecting the deep red of the sunlight and shining oddly bright in my eyes. I shot again, and again, my fingers stinging and my face kissed by sand. Another tribesman fell, and another.

Five. Six.

But their numbers were limitless – as endless as the beating colours of the desert itself. As though every tribe had closed upon this moment, this lone hope, they just kept coming. For every one that fell, six took his place. The sand ran dark with anger and blood.

But, measure by measure, the vehicle came closer to the Citadel's gate.

And behind the gate's sealed jaws, our foot-warriors stood ready to welcome and defend our cure.

We don't know where the disease came from. Auguries were cast for its origin, but the bones told us nothing. My brother died in agony, his children with him; his wife plunged in despair from the top of the Citadel walls. Around me, my friends perished in fever and pain and our healers could only pray to the desert for insight.

And then the healers, too, began to die – the warriors, the seers.

Now, there were few of us left.

Were I not already a fighter for the Citadel's safety, an archer elite, I would've taken up any weapon to fight this unknown, flesh-rotting terror.

But there was nothing to fight, no foe to feel my grief and wrath. Outside the walls, the tribes were also dying. They begged us for our insight – for water to ease their suffering – but we didn't trust or heed them. We stood firm and we let them die. When they perished, we could take their herds for our own.

I looked down as they fought to engulf the vehicle.

Look at them – they'd brought their own death back to us. They'd take our cure and they'd lay siege to us, wall us up with our dead and dying. When we'd gone, the Citadel would be deserted... and theirs at last.

Then I heard a distant noise, a shout.

From the walls, the trebuchets cranked, sprang and hurled – a lightweight shot that was black against the bright sky, and then scattering across the coloured sands below.

Tribesmen were knocked from their feet and mounts – but the shot was small, it--

By the desert. It caused panic!

With my total passing ten, I stopped shooting and leaned cautiously forwards, looking warily down the rippling stone curves of the pillar. Down there was a camouflaged blur of tribesman – he had grapple and rope and a bone blade between his teeth. I leaned the bow to shoot, but he was falling back horrified, something small and dark now in his lap.

He dropped it as if it was burning and he backed away, spitting out the blade and seeming to wipe his hands frantically on his garments. Were I closer, I could've seen him shudder.

What'd hit him?

I heard cries and creaks as the trebuchets were cranked back to throw again.

Taking no chances, I shot him anyway, clean in the face – *twelve* – and turned back for the vehicle.

It was turning, sails swinging, ready for its run back – each turn brought it zigzag closer to the Citadel wall. But the turns made it slow; the trebuchet commander had timed his throw perfectly to protect the vehicle's weakest moment.

Whatever he was loosing at them, the tribesmen came anyway. Like us, they'd die unless they took that cure.

Like us, they were desperate.

They were assailing it directly now, a wave of force and fury breaking against the vehicle's high sides. I could make out their grapples – ten, twenty, a hundred, each one gripping chitinous jaws into the thing's flanks.

They made no attempt to scale its sides. For a moment, their tactics puzzled me – then I realised they were pitting their strength of numbers against its weight and movement.

They were trying to stop it.

I had rope-cutters in my quiver – but not enough, and that would be an elite shot from this distance, even for a Redfeather veteran. Instead, I unslung the quiver from my hip, and supported it against my knee.

And then I started shooting, methodically and fast – for every one I hit, the vehicle would move that little bit more swiftly.

Thirteen – fourteen – fifteen.

Around me, in the curve and bulge of the wind-lorn stone pillars, the rest of my patrol did the same.

A distant cry came from the wall and the trebuchets flung again. They didn't shoot the vehicle; their aim was further back, breaking the ever-incoming tide of tribesmen.

And this time, I saw the ammunition.

One fragment of the scattershot came past when I crouched, bow in hand and arrow nocked. For a moment, it was clear as the red daylight, clear as horror. It hung in the air in front of me as though it were looking back into my eyes.

It was the head of a young woman, hacked off at the neck and skin blotched with rot and disease.

We were shooting our own dead at the incoming tribes.

I shuddered – I've seen death many times, but nothing so brutal. Her hair was a deep desert red, her dark eyes open and her tan skin rotting diseased from her skull. I'd no idea who she'd been, if she'd had children or a husband – a family who loved her.

But I bade my horror be still. I was a warrior, and had a task to fulfil.

Nineteen – twenty.

The twentieth shot both filled my quota and emptied my quiver – but it'd passed the point where it mattered. If the vehicle didn't reach us, fruit and water would become prizes, not rewards.

My second quiver held another twenty shafts.

After that, I'd a long bone knife at my belt and a silk rope to throw down the pillar - I'd be slitting throats, down there, in the heat and the stink and the pulse-colours of the tidal sand.

Twenty-one, twenty-two.

The vehicle was still moving, striving against the weight of the tribesmen. Its pale occupants, their strange armour shining, tore the hooks free and hacked at the ropes; my remaining Redfeather brothers shot and shot again, sending bodies spiralling into the sand.

But now, everything was about to change. The wind was shifting; I could feel the sand on my lips...

The desert tide was on the turn.

My heart shrank in my chest – we were running out of time.

Wind-snatched shouts of defiance and fury reached my ears. The vehicle was slowing to a crawl now, struggling to turn another tack. I'd no idea if they understood what was about to happen – but it seemed they could read the wind well enough.

Their fabric sails fell slack and began to flap, sideways and loose. Cries came from the vehicle and suddenly the supports were full of clambering figures, working with the mass of ropes that hung tangled there. The sails swung round, filled with the new wind; the vehicle tilted sharply, but it began to move, to turn – now on a straight heading for the Citadel. I could hear scattered cheers, but whether they came from wall or vehicle, I couldn't tell.

I could also hear the guttural laughter of the tribes.

They knew what was coming.

Up here, I was in no danger. I was high enough that the tide wouldn't reach me; sheltered from the rising wind and the skin-rasping sting. The Redfeather know the desert as well as the tribes themselves.

But below me, the sand was beginning to move. It's colours beat subtly faster and they began to deepen to the blood-red tinge of the sun.

It was delicate, at first, almost an illusion – were you seeing it for the first time, you'd think your eyes played tricks in the red-sun heat. It was only the surface, only the top layer of grains that skittered toward the sunset horizon, a seething like a migration.

For a moment, I stopped shooting, conserving my arrows and waiting to see what would happen next.

Around me, everything seemed to pause.

The tribesmen had pulled back; they'd released their claw-hooks and the mounted fighters were now racing alongside, herding the vehicle as they would herd their meat and milk. Their clawed, many legged creatures seemed eager for the coming death-feast. And behind them came the swarm of their masses.

Fervent.

The cranked trebuchets flung again; great hunks of flying stone cast scudding shadows over the darkening sand.

My pillar shook as they landed; the racing tribesmen poured round them as though nothing had happened.

In front of them, the vehicle ran on, closing on the Citadel now. I could imagine the foot-warriors, bristling with bone-blades and anxiousness – when the great maw cranked open, the Citadel would be vulnerable. And if the tribesmen penetrated our fortress...

They raced eager, chitin and bone glinting, shouts rising into the red air. Under the claws of their creatures, the sands were turning, pulse-colours deepening and beating faster now – the heart-rate of the desert itself. The seethe had become a slither, flesh-crawling and eerie, but the racing creatures were used to the tide and they scuttled across its surface as through they were light as a thought.

Between their manoeuvring flanks streaked our salvation, flat-out before the wind – I could see the cure itself now, a casket in the back of the vehicle, a decorous box that shone like the armour of its guardians.

Our future; our only hope.

By the desert! It had to reach us!

We'd bought it dearly with a tithe of flesh – our sons and daughters, given to these pale strangers who'd promised us life. I remember when they first came, a lone ambassador, crossing the desert with a message of friendship and tragedy. Like the weaving of some ancient saga, he'd spoken of a city at the edge of the world – a city where sparkling water lapped at the walls, where green plants grew and bore fruit that you could pluck, straight from vine and branch. His home was a city of wonders, he told us – but it was dying.

And we had life.

We're a fecund people, we wed swiftly and bear many children – and many of those children die. At the city of water, the ambassador said, there were no children and the people grew older. They feared what would become of their paradise when they were too aged to care for it. And so, they'd sent ambassadors, out into the wastes.

Our ambassador was a dreamer – with his insight, he foresaw the disease.

Life for life, he told us. If you give us life, so we will bring life to you.

And so, we released our tithe to cross the desert and bring youth and fertility back to his home.

In time, the disease came to us, as the ambassador had foreseen.

And the water-people were as good their word – as the disease had come, so did the cure.

If only we could secure it.

The sands were moving faster now, the pulse of colour hard and deep. Over us, the slowly sinking sun was dimming to a richer red, and the evening sky glowed the colour of blood. I saw the Citadel's sand-lights come to life; they made the walls glow yellow, like a beacon.

Aware of their failing vision, the trebuchets cranked back once more.

I took up my bow, shot a lead rider clean out of his seat – *twenty-three!* – but then a new noise caught my ears, and I turned.

The huge maw of the Citadel was opening, cranking upwards to show a bared throat of darkness and fury.

What are you doing? My thoughts screamed perplexity – I'd been many years a fighter and this...

The tribesmen let out a cheer that was half-shriek; they were daring us.

I shot again, and again. *Twenty-four, twenty--* the last shot merely injured the rider. I cursed myself; my attention hadn't been focused.

It'd been on the warrior force that that was spilling out onto the sand.

By the desert!

The Citadel understood – the commanders within knew that we'd surely die if that cure didn't reach us, knew the vehicle would be drowned by the rising wave of sand or the tribes' assault. Bow lowered, I stared, archers' vision seeing familiar shapes among the riders and the foot-warriors that were now emerging from the maw.

Men and women that I knew, that I'd trained.

And yet...

They were older fighters, all of them, in their twenties and beyond. Experience – no, that wasn't it. Then it hit me like a sting of sand – all of these warriors had children.

As the maw started to close, my heart went night-cold.

They'd walked out as a last hope. They didn't intend to go back.

My hand tightened on the black bow. I had sixteen arrows left in my quiver. After that... the desert alone knew.

The sortie formed up, banners fluttering. Mounts were scattered; unlike the tribesmen who cultivate the chitinous predators, the Citadel can house only a few. Yet the foot-warriors were many, fleet and able, and they stood firm, bone-blades glinting white in the deepening red of the dusk.

One last time, the trebuchets loosed.

The vehicle itself was close now – close enough for me to see the fanged-beast emblem wrought on the top of the shining casket, the aged guardians that surrounded it. They rode the rocking, slanting surface with bent knees and long practise, just as I'd ride the shifting sand.

And the sand was shifting faster now. The tide was gathering force; the whole desert, the whole world it seemed, was gliding left-to-right, at an angle to the wind. Grains skittered over the surface; sand was beginning to pile against the side of the Citadel, against the pillars themselves. It blew through the holes and stung my skin.

It was beginning to pile against the vehicle.

High in the weave of ropes, a swarm of workers made the fabric sails larger and the thing began to pick up speed, now flying, almost, across the top of the seething sand-tide and fast towards the waiting ranks of fighters.

A great horn sounded and the sortie, chanting defiance with every step, began to move, even as the desert moved, colour and grain, under them.

The tribes howled blood-lust.

But the sand was rising swiftly now; the drift was pushing against one side of the vehicle, tilting it forcibly and making the climbers cling hard to the ropes. The elders and the casket skidded slightly, alarmingly, towards the sand. They were looking round; I could guess at their wild, alarmed expressions.

The tribes' howling redoubled – they were laughing at us.

The sortie was picking up speed, breaking into a scattered run, sliding and slipping over the movement under them. Wild-horn instruments were blown, raucous and challenging. This was no ordered advance; with the tide running hard now, it couldn't be controlled and the warriors broke into a charge.

With so few shafts remaining, I picked my targets with care. A mounted commander – *twenty-six* – a banner bearer – *twenty-seven* – a water-carrier – *twenty-eight*. I could see, across a rising, abrasive blur, that the rest of the Redfeather shot as I did – aiming to decapitate or disable a unit.

The wind shrilled in the holes in the rock; the bloody sky was being obscured by the whirling gusts of sand.

I could barely see, now; I craned forwards.

Under the feet of the closing fighters, the tide was treacherous, fatal. More than one fell – a grasping hand that reached and was gone, swallowed alive. The tribes fared better; they knew this and could run its surface, light-footed and yowling with challenge. They swarmed like a plague.

A ridge of sand grew against the pillar, the Citadel.

The vehicle tipped further; I thought I could hear creaking. The sand was massing against its underside – as if the desert itself sought to bring it down. Its occupants were skidding, starting to panic.

I saw the casket begin to slide.

Then the sortie hit.

The clash was audible, a rise of shouts, a slamming of bone and chitin and ferocity. This was no skirmish, this was two peoples fighting for their very lives – both sides had committed their all to this last, desperate battle. And in the centre of the seethe and scream, the lurching vessel, its clinging occupants armed with hooks and pins as they drove the boarders away.

In moments, the desert was shrieking and chaos and blood. Claws clattered, creatures chittered. Snatches of shouts reached me, snatched away by the wind in the rock. I struggled to see, spitting dust from a dry mouth.

Almost blinded now, I picked my targets as best I could. Easiest to single out were the tribes' banner-bearers; I dropped them in the rising tide and halted their signalling. *Twenty-nine, thirty, thirty-one...* The angry clattering of chitin reached my ears; screams as claws tore a fighter to bloodied pieces.

Another.

Then I could see no more. The sand cloud rose like blood-mist into the air, it glittered in the sunlight and I couldn't distinguish one warrior from another.

Nine arrows left.

I blinked dust from my eyes; reached for my precious supply of warriors' water. The vehicle's blur had slowed to a crawl, leaning more and more to the side – the weights of ropes and fabric were pulling further down. The sands were running faster and higher; even the tribes couldn't ride the full tidal flow; denied the security of the Citadel, they'd place themselves in the shelter of the pillars and outcroppings.

But now, like us, they had no choice; they had to ride the wild red tide, or die.

And so they fought, bestial and furious.

Many of them were carried away on the tidal-wave; swallowed alive, screaming and gagging... but they buried the first strike of the sortie under pure savagery.

In the centre of the melee, I could just see it – the dark mass of the vehicle had stopped. Flashes of the setting sun shone from the armour of its fighters.

It was sinking, now, being driven under the rising sand by its own fabric sails. In the swarm of ropes, I could make out the occasional gleam of a figure – they seemed to be trying to cut the fabric free.

I could not see to shoot; sand gritted my eyes and coated my lips. My water measure was almost empty.

Then – *there!* – a gust of wind gave me a break, a scudding hole in the billowing red.

I snapped off a shot – *thirty-two!* – and I saw...

The sortie was failing; our force scattered across the tide-running sands. Here, I could see a mounted commander, his chitinous beast locked claw-to-claw with one of its fellows – he was surrounded by others and torn, yowling, from his mount. They ripped him to pieces even as sand swallowed the creature.

Behind him, the foot-warriors fought in defence. They were trained to make tight circles, flank-to-flank and bristling with weapons – but the tide forced them to keep running. I watched them get cut down.

I shot a tribesman, another, but hopelessness rose like the tide itself – for every one I shot, there were still ten more, twenty. How could I fight them all?

Thirty-three, thirty-four.

Six arrows left.

With a final, agonised creak, the vessel thumped onto its side, sending a billow of sand into the air.

The tribesman cheered.

Furious, the remnant of the Citadel's warriors raced for the downed vehicle, for its desperately fighting occupants and for their own salvation – but it was too late. I watched as the elders, the guardians of the casket, were dragged down to the desert and their throats slit, their bodies discarded. In the tidal lee provided by the wall of the vessel, the casket slid with a thump to the sand.

The wind was rising again. I lifted my bow before my vision was lost.

Yet, at that moment, amid the wild red tides of the desert, the world seemed to stop.

In the pulsing colours and the billowing grit, the lid of the casket had come loose.

I stood poised, my heart beating like the sand itself.

Our cure!

And the box birthed a monster.

It was pure anger, scale-fleshed, sinewed and twisted, its head on all wrong – it had claws that were split and too many eyes and a mouth that contorted with hunger and hate. Its flesh was gaping wounded and in the wounds were teeth – it was an omen, a harbinger and a bringer of gruesome and screaming death.

Bow forgotten, I crouched petrified – turned to stone by the fear in my belly. My fingertips on my string were numb, and the realisation sank like the vehicle itself through the sands in my mind...

...there had never been a cure!

They had brought this thing to kill us all.

In that moment, enemies became allies. Tribesmen and Citadel warriors alike, fearless to the last man and woman, threw themselves at the monster.

I saw an arrow streak black through the air; strike the thing in an eye. It keened like a wounded child, the noise high and impossible in the shriek of wind and sand.

Six of my arrows became five and four and three, all of them loosed so fast that the first had not yet struck the target before the last had left the string.

Two left.

But the creature didn't flinch. All twists and angles, spindly and long-gaited, it left the shelter of the downed vessel and it began to kill.

And kill.

And kill.

A cry in my mouth, halted on teeth gritted against pain and sand alike, I fell back, my shots faltering and my mouth as dry as the rock. The creature tore into mount and fighter; it clawed a vast and bloody swath through the warriors about it, shrugging off the tide as though it were powerless. It bit, slaving, its maw lifted tiny things that kicked before broken bitten pieces of them tumbled back to the sand. Behind it, loosed from the downed vehicle, came other creatures, smaller and faster. They seemed to be all teeth. They skittered across the sands' surface; their screeching made me shiver.

I saw one, two, three of them scale a rock pillar towards the archer that crouched at the peak. I saw him shooting, calm and sure, then going for his belt-blade. I watched as they tore him down. I heard him scream, the sound shredded by the wind.

And suddenly, I was more afraid that I'd ever been.

Elite Redfeather veteran, I fell back, biting my lip.

Two arrows left.

Over me, the sky was darkening to the rich purple of a bruise, the setting sun a widening haze of glory. Distantly, an arrowhead of flying shadows climbed into the colour-streaked sky. I wondered if I would live to see the sunrise.

Two arrows left. And my belt-blade.

At the foot of the pillar, running over the rising sand, three of the creatures were coming for me – scale and fur and fury.

They were fast, low to the ground and moving almost as though they were gliding. Their teeth gleamed red in the dying light. They had no eyes; as they came closer, I saw that their nostrils were wide and wet – they flared and closed as the sand gusted over them.

They ran up and around the pillar, in and out of the fantastical wind-carving, as easily as they ran on the sliding desert itself.

For a moment, I watched them, gauged their speed and approach.

Then I nocked one of the last two arrows, waited.

No archer draws the string back to his ear and keeps it there – you damage your weapon and lose the force of your shot. I held the black bow low; the weight of string and nock against my fingertips. Poised, like a predator, watching.

There!

The shot was a snap-reflex, a reaction honed into me by boyhood tutors and merciless Redfeather training. *Up, sight, loose!*

The creature squalled and fell back, arrow punched straight into its sensitive nostril and into its skull.

Broken, it tumbled back to the sand.

Two more; only one shot.

My heart pounded, but my breathing was deep, calm. I knew this like my mother's voice, my father's discipline. Yet the creatures were not coming closer.

I could see them; they'd paused behind one of the bulges in the pillar. A faint skittering reached my ears.

Whatever they were, they were smart enough to try and outflank me.

One arrow left.

The last one; the rope-cutter with the crescent-shaped head.

The idea was sand-crazed, but I had no choice. I had to take them down separately. The creatures had moved out of my line of sight, but I knew where they were.

And where they were going.

To one side of me, there was a hole through the rock, not quite straight and perhaps the width of my wrist. Beneath it, there was a ripple that was almost flat. If I was fast enough, if I'd judged the creatures' intelligence accurately...

I crouched, strung the very last of my arrows.

Watched, sharp as a desert predator.

Watched...

There it was!

The snap-shot was flawless, the arrow straight and true; not even the scarlet fletching brushed the edge of the hole. In that instant, I held my breath, prayed to the desert itself.

But the arrow was the rope-cutter; it didn't end in a point.

One tip of the bone crescent caught the very edge of unevenness – and the thing went sideways, clattering and failing. The creature was past the hole and gone and the shaft was a shadow across the wind-hole, fletchings crushed and shaft splintered.

My bow, life and livelihood, was useless.

And the creature was gone – around the back of the pillar.

I drew the bone blade. The sun was low in the sky, swollen to a great blur, its light hazing across the now-slowing sand. And I could hear them, skitterings in the wind, here, there, teasing me as I turned my head to try and trace them; below me, there was the screeching of the unleashed monster and the rising, defiant war-chant of the tribes.

It gathered pace and then scattered again; the monster was killing them faster than they could muster.

No time for that now – the creatures were there, scuttling around the edges of the hollow, one from either side. They grinned yellow and flesh-streaked teeth; sand clung to their nostrils, blood caked their fur.

I gripped my blade, waiting, daring them. *Come on then!*

But they'd stopped.

They seemed almost quizzical.

I didn't question my fortune, I lunged for one, spitting it like a side of meat at a feast and throwing it from the tip of the blade to the floor, slamming my foot down upon it. It gave a last, teeth-filled snarl and crushed to a smear of fur and scale.

The other one sprang.

It landed on my chest, teeth in my face, stinking of carrion. I reached for the scruff of its neck, brought my blade to carve out its belly...

...and it stopped.

Nostrils flaring, trying to catch a hint of a scent... of something...

I felt the change, though I'd no idea why – the hostility was gone like the dew of the morning. Its nostrils flared again, cautiously, almost disbelieving. It slowly, slowly, retracted its teeth.

I should have slashed it to pieces but I could only stare, captivated. Elite veteran, Redfeather patrolman, my blade fell out of my hand. Forgotten. For no reason, I felt a wave of elation break over me.

A sensation, a feeling...

Success.

Flesh prickling, still hearing the last of the battle clamouring below me, I was understanding something... a picture, beginning to take shape.

Success.

Something about me... something that it wanted, or that it knew...

Then I heard a noise that made me spit shards of horror.

My blood suddenly pounding – *no!* – I heard the rumble. The creature clung to me; I felt the pillar under me shake. I steadied myself with a hand on the wall and I looked out from my vantage to the rising tower of the Citadel, stark against the darkening sky, the sweeping clouds of sand.

The lights about it made it shine – a single bright fang biting at the sky.

The monster was before it, claws rending the stone at the maw. About its feet were creatures like the one that now sat upon my chest; they clamoured for entry.

They would surely tear their way in – and they would kill everything.

Then I saw the might of the rockfall thunder down.

Sealing the maw.

Completely.

The death-creature was hammered down by the stone; it fell back, breaking in limb and movement, keening in a voice that split the sky. And where it'd stood, the rocks rattled and rumbled and split as they fell, burying the Citadel's only door.

Utterly.

I stared. Dust tricked to a halt, fragments rolled to the ground.

Disbelief crammed my mouth – I couldn't breathe in or out. Only an elite would know the measure was there; it sealed the Citadel against the desert. It meant that they'd chosen to do this – to shut themselves in.

Forever.

With no cure for their disease, with the monster tearing down their very gate, the people of the Citadel had given a last defiance. They'd sealed themselves in their own tomb, to die in their own way. Outside the Citadel walls, the monster was loose – it would hunt down and slaughter every last tribesman.

We would all be lost.

Slowly, the sand was settling. Down there, the vehicle lay on its side, its support and sails sagging, its people now down upon the desert and looking about them.

Some of them were laughing, their voices ringing like a wind-horn's call.

On my chest, the creature moved – made an odd, encouraging chatter. Its nostrils were still working; mucus caked with sand. I understood that that the ambassador had brought us the disease – a trick to steal our youngest and strongest. I understood that they'd brought us a monster in the form of a cure to then steal our lands and our herds and our oasis...

But, this, this creature, this I did not understand.

In the pillars across from my vantage, another of my brothers died. The sun was finally setting, shadows long and black over the sand – the air was turning cold.

The Citadel was silent; somewhere, the monster raged as it chased down the scattering tribes.

Was I the last of my people? I hadn't fallen victim to the disease, even though my family, my friends, my fellows, had perished around me...

The creature chattered again, louder as the air grew more still.

Below me, there were cries – in the failing light, I could see the reflective glitter of the figures. The huge shadow of their vehicle behind them, they were pointing at my pillar, at where I peeked over the lip of the edge.

In the still air, I realised something that shocked me...

...that they, too, showed the ravages of the disease that had massacred my people. It was different – somehow slower, like their slower pace of life – but it was there.

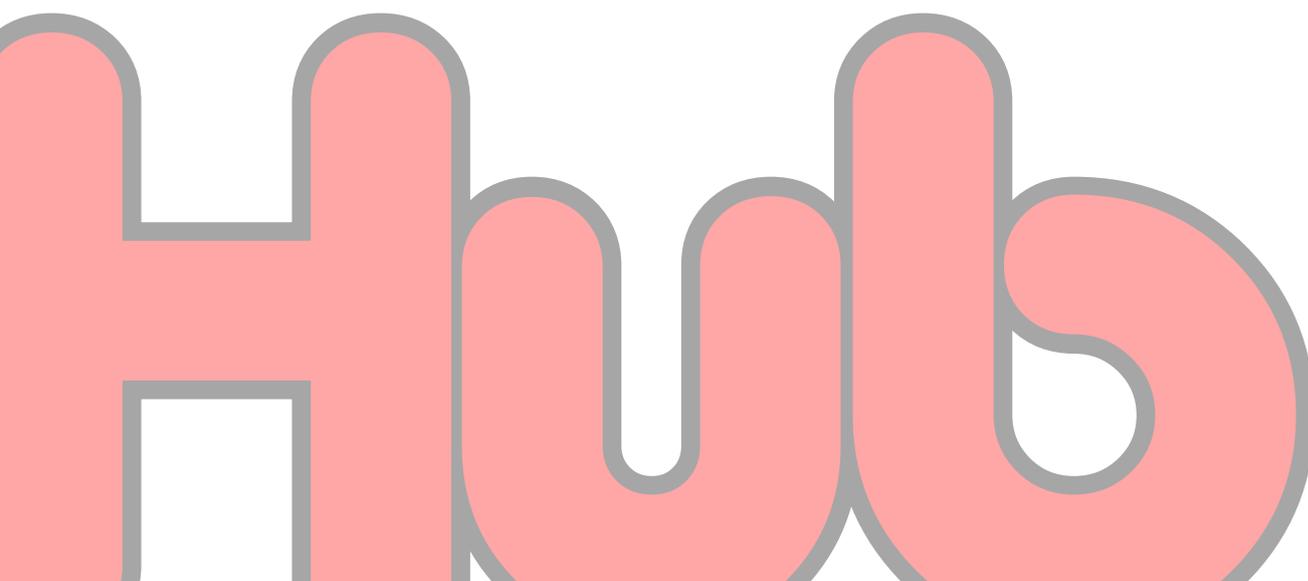
The creature chattered again. It pushed upwards to nuzzle sand and mucus across my stiff, abraded cheeks.

Success. Trust. Even eagerness.

With no other choice left to me, I uncoiled my rope and lowered by way to the now-still desert, to the eternal tide of sand.

To my enemies, ravagers of Citadel and tribe alike.

And they greeted me like saviour, with water from their eyes.



Siege Premiere Hardcover

reviewed by richard whittaker



Siege by Brian Michael Bendis and Olivier Coipel, HC, 144pp, £18.99

Siege: Embedded by Brian Reed and Chris Samnee, HC, 112pp £14.99

Siege: Battlefield by various, HC, 120 pages £18.99

And so it comes to a close. Seven years ago, Marvel Comics started the biggest story arc imaginable: A cross-continuity revamp that began with *Disassembled*, turned into a fully-fledged family feud in *Civil War* and thundered through the *Dark Reign*. It was a simple reversal of the old rules: The Avengers, Earth's Mightiest Heroes, turn on each other and finally split asunder. Into the power vacuum, the villains become ascendant, but not by conquering: Instead, Norman Osborne, the O.G.G. (original Green Goblin), becomes the politically expedient option for the government to head up their new superhero initiative. Now *Siege* brings the whole endeavor full circle: Which, considering that the last few years have seen Captain America get shot, Iron Man re-boot his brain, and Thor rebuild Asgard in Oklahoma, is no minor feat.

The core of the story is collected in the *Siege* hardcover and, sensibly, Marvel has handed writing duties to the man that started all this trouble. Brian Michael Bendis emphasizes the idea that this is *Disassembled* in reverse: After their schism, the big three of Cap, Thor and Iron Man put their differences aside and bring every Avenger, past and future, together to take on Osborne's deranged army of misguided heroes and opportunistic villains. It's a massive and politically-loaded story: The decline into *Civil War* began when a bunch of civilians were killed in the middle of a super-powered fight, and now Osborne decides to replicate the disaster as an excuse to further crack down on the heroes. The titular siege is of Asgard: When Osborne declares war on the home of the Norse gods, it's a huge challenge for Bendis, but of the kind at which he excels. Re-united with his *House of M* artist Olivier Coipel, the duo create a story of truly grandiose scale, a fight where even gods are shocked.

If there's a problem, it's that *Siege* fulfills its commitment to bring over half a decade of Marvel comics to a rewarding conclusion. There's a lot of continuity to cram in, so when the Avengers come face-to-face with Osborne's Dark Avengers, it's real fist-pumping stuff, but it may leave the casual reader baffled (would the real Ms. Marvel please stand up?) However, Bendis' sense of wonder, of having everyone realize that Asgard is a place of magic and legend that has somehow ended up in the Midwest, is remarkable. He manages to make gods both otherworldly and identifiable, and nowhere is that more impressively done than with Ares. Traditionally the poor man's Hercules, Bendis made him into a suitably grim and violent replacement for Thor in his *Dark Avengers* title. His role here is absolutely pivotal, and adds a profound emotional core deliberately reminiscent of the epics, while also making some pretty heavy but not heavy-handed comments about certain other real-world wars of choice.

The second volume, *Embedded*, doesn't make a lot of sense without *Siege*, but paradoxically it is arguably a better – or at least more accessible – work. Marvel's biggest mistake over the last few years was launching *The Pulse* – a comic about journalists in superhero universe – and then turning into a superhero title. That mistake has been redressed in part by the *Frontline* mini-series, a sequence of interlocking stories in which long-time beat reporter Ben Urich gives the everyday man's view of the epic conflicts above. In *Embedded*, Urich heads to the warzone to find out who is really pulling the strings. There are brief appearances by Osborne, Asgardian warrior Volstagg, and Venom, the anti-Spiderman, but the action concentrates on Urich, TV cameraman Will Stern and Todd Keller, a Glen Beckian megalomaniac TV

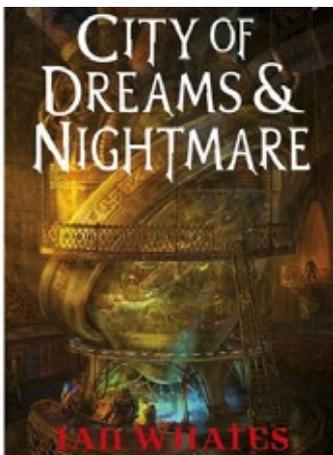
columnist who proclaims himself as “America's Last Honest Man.” Reed writes like Bendis on his creator-owned superhero noir *Powers*, adding a certain political realism to the events. More importantly, he has a grasp of the issues facing the news media, touching on the dangers – both physical and moral - of the modern concept of embedded journalism.

The epic is rounded out in great part by *Battlefield*: A compilation of five one-shots, each story concentrates on one character or team in between issues three and four of the core *Siege* title. As such, they're a mixed bag. *Loki* reads a little like Ennis and Dillon-era *Hellblazer*, as the God of Mischief strikes a deal between Lucifer and Hela for his own nefarious ends; *Spiderman* is only interesting to find out exactly how Venom ends up getting thrown at Urich in *Embedded*; Captain America has a couple of interesting character notes, but is marred by Federico Dallochio's scabbled arts, complete with visual continuity-errors; And *Young Avengers* adds little beyond allowing Marvel to highlight that it has two openly gay superheroes in a happy, well-balanced relationship. The highlight here, like *Siege*, ties in to the Greek Gods. In *Secret Warriors*, former SHIELD head honcho Nick Fury takes most of his troops into battle, but leaves his youngest warrior behind: Phobos, god of fear and son of Ares. How he responds to being left behind, and what he does while his father and his mentor have their swords unsheathed and the safeties off, is a reminder of why gods and mortals don't mix.

There are other premium hardcovers covering other aspects of the Siege of Asgard, but these three combined hold the core of the story, and stretch from the streets to the skies with scale and drama. Most importantly, they bring one of the most complicated eras in the company's history to a satisfying conclusion. Wow, a conclusion in mainstream comics. If that's not worth laying down some cash for, what is?

City of Dreams & Nightmare

reviewed by keith harvey



by Ian Whates
Angry Robot
rrp £7.99

*O, wonder!
How many goodly creatures are there here!
How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world,
That has such people in't!
The Tempest (V,i)*

Ian Whates's new novel, *City of Dreams & Nightmare*, is a wondrous and ingenious read. Highly plotted with multiple point-of-view characters set loose in a mega-city that might not be a city at all but a living creature, this genre bender is a marvel to digest. Allusions abound, which suggest an author that happens to have read widely in his field and who expects a close reading.

At first the novel seems to be science fiction, situated in an arcology, but eventually the science, though always there—the physics of a falling man, the bionic structure of genetic monstrosities, the aerodynamics of human flight, the devastating effect of a man-made parasite—morphs into something more. The novel is a mystery, fantasy, and a political thriller; and, along with its brazen creativity and richness of imagery, it serves as the introduction to one of the most unique settings in modern fantasy.

The novel concerns the story of Tom, a street-nick, who is sent to the upper levels on a perilous mission by the leader of his gang; however, once there he witnesses a murder of an academic, coincidentally named Thomas, and has to flee back to the lower level of the city. Pursued by a Kite Guard and an assassin, Tom falls into the hands of Ty-gen and the female gladiator of the Pit—Kit. The first part of the novel

feels Dickensian, with its feral street gangs operating in the squalor of a crowded underworld; however, with the appearance of the Jeradine, Ty-gen, an alien creature (or perhaps I should say the first non-humanoid), it becomes clear we are not in a London-like environ (Kansas) anymore.

Through the stories of these various characters, many from different levels of Thaiburley, Whates reveals his real character and subject—the city. Through his gradual revelations and unstinting presentation of exotic beings in a naturalistic but organic *polis*, the novel reminds me of a video game in which one of the purposes of the game is to explore the universe as well as to complete the quests and bedazzle the player. And like a brilliant game designer, Whates allows his world to reveal itself through the plot's progression. With this strategy he avoids one of the biggest mistakes of modern fantasy: modern fantasy writers tend to produce a plethora of details about their world in the first few pages and overwhelm the reader with their prolixity and minutia. Whates does not fall into this trap; perhaps, because he has approached novel writing in a different way—through editing and the writing of short stories. In other words he has learned his craft.

Once the city begins to reveal itself to the reader through its characters; its complexity and multiplicity is much more alien than we originally thought. Most novels have one or two interesting creatures to allow the reader to see the world's alien-ness but Whates' world is different; it is so unique and so multifaceted that I soon lost my moorings. I began to feel, at some point, the same vertigo that grips Tom, when he climbs the outside wall of the city. What I thought, at first, was a human world in a different time became a fantastic world with humanoids, situated in a phantasmagoria; so strange and unique was the setting that I began to wonder if these creatures calling themselves people were in actuality humans.

But the book is more than just its images; it is also a well-hewn novel with an exciting plot and interesting themes that employs many of modern fantasy's tropes. For instance, Whates employs the trope of clockworks but not in the sense of steampunk; even here we receive a different view, another turn of the screw. We sense cosmological machinery grinding in the background. Whates' clockwork demonstrates itself in the mechanical formation of the city as well as the political apparatus of the arkademics. On the one hand, the architecture and social hierarchy contain a touch of medievalism and the city's governance is similar to the Roman Senate; while on the other, the heavenly or daemonic machinery feels Miltonic or biblical. This medieval view comes late in the story when the protagonist Tom sees creatures flying among the spires of the upper levels. When he questions the prime master about these beings, he tells him that they are demons. The more Tom studies them, however, the more he realizes that "the demons looked like angels." And here we begin to see the great fantasy skeleton of the novel with its resonant themes beginning to exert itself.

This then is the novel's greatest strength; Whates refuses to remain constant; his images do not concretize, which provides a sense of movement. Just as the reader thinks of the city as a machine, a mechanical *polis*, consisting of clockwork gears and levers, the author shifts the image and characters discuss the city's core, as if it is a living being. Suddenly, we ask: is Thaiburley the world tree, growing from the omphalos, and the characters mere avatars of its world consciousness? Or is the novel an allegory of the fall expressed in both literal and figurative images. The city of a hundred rows becomes the living novel of a multiple images and tropes.

No matter how you read the work, it is a gem. And, although, the mystery is solved in the end, allowing the book to stand along, there is so much material here and so many wondrous things suggested and alluded to that I, for one, await the sequel eagerly. However, before then, it demands another reading.

In the final analysis, Whates' imagination is energetic and enchanting and similarities to the novels of Ian Watts, Michael Moorcock, China Mièville, and Mervyn Peake inevitable.

FEATURES

I Am Tim Interview

with Alasdair Stuart



horror, their dream effects and what lies ahead for the intrepid Tim...

I am Tim is one of a new batch of web series which not only embrace the format but combine the best elements of modern horror with that unique part of the English psyche that, when it comes down to it, wants to respond to ghastly crises with a nice cup of tea and a biscuit. This combination of pragmatism and too many hungry, seeking mouths is uniquely charming, huge fun and lies at the heart of *I Am Tim*. We talked to Jamie Simcox, writer and star of the show and his special effects guru Simon about the genesis of the show, English versus American

Hub Magazine: What are the major influences on I Am Tim?

Jamie Simcox: I'm not really sure. The idea is an evolution of a short film I made a few years ago, long before the idea of a web based series even existed. It was called "Zombie Force" and I tried to film a half hour pilot episode in about six hours. Obviously the final product was terrible, but looking back at it it had hidden little charms and there was definitely something to it. The idea rattled around in my brain for about a eight years, by which time someone else had already beaten me to the punch. So I took the idea back to the devising stage and created the characters of *I Am Tim*. The decision to shoot it as a fake documentary appealed to me so much, as it allowed us to shoot the series a lot faster.

I was always a huge fan of all things Whedon, especially the way he placed his less super-powered characters into the most ridiculous situations, yet always allowed them to react as a real person would. I think that's the main idea behind Tim, he's just this guy... you know?

HM: English horror always seems a little more pragmatic, more grounded than American horror. Is that something you've found with the series?

JS: Totally. The whole idea of *I Am Tim* is that Tim is all of us. He's working nine to five every day, he's bored... tired... directionless. Then one day he has to fight monsters to stop the world sliding into chaos. Nothing else changes in his life, he doesn't get the ability to fly or shoot fire out of his eyes. In fact, the only thing he has going for him is that he can take a bit of a kicking...

Plus, aren't we a little more grounded as a country? The way we deal with things is totally different to America. They can be a little more hysterical about things than we can. Could you imagine *Piranha 3D* if it was set in Cornwall? It'd be bloody brilliant, nowhere near as sexy, and all the teenagers would leave the water a lot faster.

HM: There's been a huge rise recently in the 'monsters walk amongst us' genre recently, from Buffy down to True Blood. What do you think makes this sub genre of horror so attractive?

JS: I think all fans of sci-fi and fantasy have that little voice in their heads that whispers "what if..." I watch an unhealthy amount of zombie films, and I often daydream of when the time comes that I can be the zombie killing hero I know I could be.

Vampires are romantic and sexy, they go against all the rules we have to follow each day. Wouldn't it be amazing to shrug off society and wander the Earth an immortal? Plus... if *True Blood* is to be held up as a possible reality, if you're a vampire you get laid. All. The. Time. One of the characters in *I Am Tim* improvised

a line that has become one that a few people, dare I say fans, quote at us on the Internet.

"It's like True Blood, but without the boobies."

HM: Given unlimited resources, what would you do with the series?

JS: I'd have less bruises. Seriously, I take a pounding. The finale of series one is brutal. We shot a fight scene in one take, and the guy that I was fighting threw me around like I was a rag doll.

The style would be the same, but I'd get to tell the stories that I know I just can't do on zero budget. Tim fighting a dragon? Yes please. It's referred to in an episode but to actually show it would be amazing. He'd be utterly rubbish!

I'd love to take care of the cast and crew a little better. We've shot some late night stuff, and on one particular shoot we were all stood around in a pitch black forest until 4am. Noone complained, which just made me appreciate what they were giving up to help me create the series. Paying them would be nice as well...

HM: What's next?

JS: For Tim? You'll have to watch the series. The first three episodes were there to introduce the characters and establish the world the documentary takes place in. We're about to start telling a story now.

For me? I've got another web series in my head. No monsters, no blood, all interior. With electricity and endless cups of tea... I won't be in that one, I'm much happier behind the camera than in front of it!

Simon P. Fisher, is *I Am Tim*'s special effects guru, the inventor of the blooderbus and a man who delights in throwing awful things at Jamie on camera. We talked to him about the special effects for the show and, of course, ended up discussing the practical effects holy trinity of Tom Savini, Rob Bottin and Rick Baker.

HM: What are your influences when it comes to the visual effects? I'm seeing some Tom Savini in there but a fair bit of Rob Bottin as well.

Simon P. Fisher: Rick Baker work on *American Werewolf in London* was probably my biggest influence, it was the only film I had to turn off when I was a kid. I had nightmares for a week! When I eventually managed to watch it all the way through (during the day) the make-up and effects blew my mind....and that was it, that's what I wanted to do.

HM: What attracted you to special effects work?

SPF: I've always wanted to have a hand in making the kinds of films that I grew up watching, and the special effects artists seem to have the most fun.

HM: How do you think CGI has effected the field?

SPF: It's the next logical step, it's depressing but eventually there will no longer be any need for make-up appliances or physical effects, it will all be CGI.

HM: What effect are you proudest of?

SPF: My first Blooderbuss effect (a compressed air gore cannon), I made it for the first episode of *I Am Tim* (Tim vs The Total Cycle Path). We used it at the end of the episode to hose down Tim with gore....Jamie gets

a little nervous twitch when ever he's near it now.

HM: What would you like to do with the effects next?

SPF: Get bigger, better and bloodier! For that to happen though we need money. At the moment we are funding all the episodes ourselves. We're constantly having to cut corners and looking for heap ways of doing things, which is fun but some of the things we would like to do with the series are a little beyond what we can afford at the moment.

HM: Given an unlimited budget, what would be your dream effects sequence?

SPF: A massive explosion! Like the one in *Tropic Thunder*, I'd love to (literally) blow 4 million on a huge explosion that would make mother nature piss her pants!

I am Tim is hugely funny, hugely nasty and completely free. Go to <http://www.hisnameistim.com/> and find out exactly how hectic the life of a monster hunter with a 9 to 5 job can be. Just stay out of the way of the blooderbus...

