

# Hub

Issue 37  
15<sup>th</sup> December 2007

Editors: Lee Harris, Alasdair Stuart and Trudi Topham.  
Proofreader: Ellen Phillips  
Published by *The Right Hand*.  
**Sponsored by Orbit.**

## Contents

Fiction: *Running the Slash* by Ralan Conley  
Reviews: *The Black Dossier*

## Another Night at the Brewery

Following a successful (and highly enjoyable) evening at the York Brewery in October, the BFS are to hold another Open Night at the venue on Saturday 26<sup>th</sup> January. The brewery itself is an extremely atmospheric venue, and as we'll be in Europe's most haunted city, we're going to have an evening of ghost stories.

And beer. Definitely beer.

Non-BFS members are welcome to come along. Details will be posted up at the BFS website and on the forum at [www.BritishFantasySociety.org](http://www.BritishFantasySociety.org). 26<sup>th</sup> January – enter it in your diaries now. Glasses of beer and tales of spirits – what could be better?

## About Hub

Every week we publish a piece of short fiction, along with at least one review and sometimes a feature or interview. We can afford to do this largely due to the generosity of our sponsors over at **Orbit**. If you like what you read here, please consider making a donation over at [www.hub-mag.co.uk](http://www.hub-mag.co.uk). We pay our writers, and anything you donate helps us to continue to attract high quality fiction and non-fiction.



Supported by  
**The National Lottery**<sup>®</sup>  
through Arts Council England





The tunnel Bagz and me followed opened to a small chamber and then split into two narrow veins beyond. A lava pool below us bubbled, the heat rising in waves, cooking us slow and sure.

I looked back at Bagz's dark face. Streams of sweat streaked the black dust covering it. His hard ebony eyes glared back at me, waiting. A dry tongue darted out in a futile attempt to wet his charred lips, revealing a gap in his upper teeth from a time he should've kept his mouth shut.

"Your call." It was more a croak than a statement.

I'd called the last one, figget take me if I'd do it again after that disaster. "Uh-uh... your turn."

He grinned. "Heading left then." He spit into the lava pool and dragged himself off.

No one knows what Bagz did before he came looking to make the big strike on Anakesh 2. It was obvious he'd been born with his handicap, and rumor had it he'd worked the freakies on Mars and the asteroid belt. I never asked, it didn't seem to matter. He did tell me he was one of the first to arrive here after one of the Company's deep space missions first discovered bloodstones and figured out what they could do. That made it a little more than thirty years for him. His worm name came from the heavy bags under his eyes, so I guess he had them even back then.

Far behind, I heard the third worm in our party, Kitty, cry out. She'd picked the first vein we came to. It obviously wasn't what she hoped for... as usual.

I crawled down the branch on my right, flicking my helm-light to max as the glow from the lava pool faded. Ignoring muscle cramps and a sulfur smell that'd shame a match box, I hobbled to a neck-crimp chamber at the bottom of the vein.

The beam from my helm-light showed an opening in the cave wall the size of my waist. A waterfall poured out of the hole into a small pool in a twisted rock floor. Small holes in the bottom of the pool drained it at about an even rate.

Clear aqua was as rare as icicles down here, and my breath caught in my throat as my eyes spied a bloodstone in that pool. It had been rolled here by the current, that's what always happens. Someone could have checked this same chamber yesterday and found only water.

The bloodstone wasn't huge; less than five kilos probably, but size is not the whole story. A person can only carry so much, quality counts more.

Fumbling in my shirt pocket I got my analyzer out, set it on a rock ledge, and clicked it on. I lifted the red stone out of pool and laid it in analyzer's sensor field. My eyes began to water from staring at the tiny readout screen so hard.

At last the figures appeared. I rubbed my eyes. Couldn't be right. But shaking my head and blinking didn't change the read-out. Eighty-three percent.

I let out one big whoop. Seventy-eight was the highest I'd ever heard of.

Figget, this worm just struck it rich. I slipped the bloodstone into my old, but never used, sack. In this heat, away from the pool, the stone was already drying out. I set the sack in the pool to wet it. That's when my eye spied a second stone. It was smaller than the first, just a pebble really, but finding two at one time was as rare as a soft igneous rock. I snatched it up and checked it. Eighty-two. I dropped the small stone into the sack too.

I retrieved my analyzer from the ledge, but when I slid it in my pocket the stitching finally gave way and the unit shattered on the hard floor. Figget take it! Well, I wouldn't need it again anyway. I filled my canteen and shouldered the soaked sack with my bloodstones in it.

There was no room to turn around in the tiny chamber, so I backed my way up the channel to the chamber above the lava pool.

I faced the left branch of the vein. "Bagz!" Couldn't wait to tell him.

His cackle rose up from the depths. "Woo-eee!"

"What?"

"Dozer, your old pal Bagz just found the mother load."

Now the chances of two people making big strikes at the same time are about the same as taking a bath in a lava pool and not melting your rubber duck.

"No way."

"Come on down and see."

This was no time for his foolishness. I fingered my sack. A dry sack means a drying stone, which loses value by the minute. Besides, how'd Bagz know?

"You don't have an analyzer." He'd lost his years ago.

"This is a good one, I can tell. You should see how red it is."

"Could be shamstone, you know that."

"I've been dogging bloodstone longer than you've been burping up cheap beer."

"Bagz, no one can tell the percent just by looking."

"It's good I tell you. Get down here."

"No can do, Bagz, I got my own stone."

"Why didn't you say so? What'd it read, boy?"

"Eighty-three."

Silence.

"Bagz?"

"You pranking me, Dozer?"

"No."

The rebel yell he let out almost started a cave-in.

"Then we both hit it big."

Bagz knew the odds against a double hit on the same run, but the old man wanted this bad. He only had so many more trips through the Slash left in him.

I poured a capful of water on my sack as Bagz grunted and moaned his way up. Licking scorched lips, I stared at my canteen then screwed the top back on. The bloodstone needed that water more than me.

It didn't do any good to put a bloodstone in a plastic bag filled with water. A stone uses the water, converting it on the nano level into the special mass it's made of. The more water, the more it uses -- that's why they grow so fast in the underground streams. The best method is to keep the bloodstone moist enough to stay viable, but not immerse it. If one dries out completely it begins converting its own mass back to water in an unstoppable process and you end up with a watertight bag of H<sub>2</sub>O.

Bagz's scrawny body emerged from the vein ass-first. He'd balanced his stone on his shriveled-up left arm and crawled backwards like I had. Tough to do at his age and state of arthritis, but he was used to hard.

The old man chuckled, pulled his sack back, and held out his stone for ogling. "Let's see yours."

I slid my stone halfway out of the sack. Bagz eyeballed it then peeked at his, which was redder than mine, but that didn't mean anything.

His eyes flashed. "Lend me your analyzer."

"It shattered down there, pocket gave way."

Bagz glared down at his rags. "You're lucky you have a pocket. Well, had a pocket. Hey, where's Kitty?"

"Headed back to our rendezvous by now. Empty-handed for sure, judging by the scream she let out a while back."

"Too bad."

"Not bad. I'm sharing."

Bagz hefted his stone. "I got what I need."

"It's not tested, remember. Let's get out of this boiler."

I led. The path back was no hurdle for me, but not so easy for him. He balanced his stone-sack on his bad arm and crawled with the other. I knew there was no point in offering to help. He's a stubborn old coot.

We stopped to moisten our stones twice before coming to the chamber we'd found earlier, where we could stand without crimping our necks.

It was cooler and Kitty was waiting there. She wasn't carrying a bloodstone as I'd predicted, but she was all right. Accidents almost never happened to her. Born with empty eye sockets, her other senses caught things that took Bagz and me by surprise. You'd never call Kitty careless, or handicapped, unless you wanted trouble. Born on Earth, she'd been cared for by her mother all her life, but when the old lady died Kitty used the small inheritance to get here. She fell in with Bagz and me about two years ago, right after landing. Whether we took care of her, or vice versa, was a good question.

Kitty sniffed our two stones, and that cheered her up some. Though it was plain she had little faith in Bagz's find either, she listened to old man's rants with no hint of a sneer. That was her way.

Kitty knew my stone would make us rich. We only had to keep it moist and get to a company assayer without falling down a ravine, or otherwise getting ourselves massacred. I didn't have to tell her that Bagz's stubbornness cut down our odds considerable, since we'd have to share the water.

As we headed out, Kitty fell in behind me, Bagz brought up the rear.

Following the markers we'd made on our way in, we crossed a smoking chamber with no hurdle. Kitty led us through; following a path my stinging, squinting eyes could never see. Springs of bubbling sulfur drown out everything, even yelling, so we moved in a line, me with one hand on Kitty's slim shoulder and Bagz holding onto the back of my shift, like we'd done in similar chambers a hundred times.

Next, after several swings through a maze of narrow tunnels, we came to a steep hill with huge boulders, forcing an agonizing zigzag ascent.

Bagz and me dribbled water on our stones regular. Our mouths felt as parched as the rocks around us, but we dared not drink. Kitty's next to full canteen gave us a needed edge so, of course, she wasn't drinking either.

At the top of Rocky Climb we rested. The worst of the heat was behind us, except for one short stretch ahead. Bagz and me wet our sacks and laid them in a hollow in a rock, then settled in for a nap on the hard floor. It'd been too long since our last sleep and we'd need our strength later.

#

Kitty woke me with a kiss. "How good is it?"

I could feel her body under her thin white-cotton shift. "Feels good."

"Not me."

"Figured. Analyzer read eighty-three percent."

She wiggled, which roused earthy musings in my muddled brain. Her small, dirty face wrinkled with concentration. She looked cute when she did that. "It's big?"

"Going to be bigger if you don't stop wiggling around."

She sighed. "The stone. Is it big enough to make you rich?"

"Make us rich, you bet. Money by the shuttle full."

"I could use some."

"Who can't? I never had any to speak of."

She reached down to caress me. "Not money, I meant this."

She lifted her shift. We both smelled of sweat, sulfur, and yesterday's sex, but it was equal parts her and me. No complaints. After, she slept again, holding onto me. I thought about our life together, how it would change.

When Bagz woke us we moistened our stone-sacks and moved on through a series of low tunnels to a huge chamber with natural limestone columns that seemed to hold the roof up.

Sinkholes erupted all around the chamber, gushing jets of hell-stinking steam that'd cook anyone too ignorant, or slow, to get out of the way. Seconds before they blow you hear a muffled hissing. That's your cue to run like hell; if you know what to listen for and pay attention.

The whole place was heavy with sodden heat and reeking fog. Newcomers, who we journeyman worms affectionately call wigglers, sometimes try to wet their stones with water from these kinds of boiling water pools. I don't recall meeting anyone who actually did that though. No time to get away if the pool you're dipping into blows. Besides, sulfur ruins a bloodstone.

Bagz, Kitty, and me like to scamper through these kinds of caverns as fast as our skinny legs can carry us. They're just about the worst places to lose your cool. You need to stay alert for those hisses and be ready to zip the other way while still listening for more hisses coming from the direction you're running to. Needless to say, they're a favorite place for one of my fits to hit me.

This time it happened just as I heard a hiss under my foot.

#

Kitty woke me with dry kisses. We were at the far end of the chamber and I didn't remember getting there.

I sat up fast. "What?"

"Shush... you had a fit."

"Figures." Panic! "Where's my stone?"

Bagz's ugly old face bobbed into view as he held out my stone-sack in his good right hand. "It's here."

Relief flooded in. "How'd we get here?"

Bagz nodded to Kitty. "Little lady flung you over her shoulder and ran like hell. I grabbed your sack and dogged her." He snorted. "Little fem's got guts."

I stroked her cheek. "What about--"

"It's okay."

Besides being born with no eyes, Kitty also suffered from a bad heart. Her tiny ticker barely pumped half the amount of blood it should. Sometimes her heart took off on a race and she'd turn pale, her breath coming in quick short puffs until she passed out. This didn't happen as often as my fits, but it was worse. Scared me, but Kitty said it meant nothing.

I'd never had a girl back on Titan. My fits made me something of an undesirable on a world with a poisonous atmosphere where everyone worked outside the pressurized city. Who wanted a partner that conked out for an hour or so every few days? My father was a small share holder in the Company. He couldn't raise enough money to fix my condition, but he did give me a chance by paying my fare here. I figured that was pretty decent of him. Some Titanian fathers tossed their defective offspring out the nearest airlock right after birth.

Kitty's empty eye sockets searched my face. "How are you?"

I stretched my arms and took a deep breath. Recovery from my fits was usually quick. "Okay." But they always came in pairs. "Let's move on." I wanted to be out of this cave system before the next one hit.

Bagz handed me my stone-sack. I opened it, pulled out the big loaf, and turned the bag down. The little stone didn't drop out. Must've fallen out as Bagz dodged and ran. I didn't waste any tears on it, the large stone was worth more than we'd ever need.

My canteen was nearly empty, so I traded with Kitty and wet my bloodstone as we made our way through a high tunnel, an easy stroll on a long level surface. I kept my eye on Kitty, knowing she'd seen better days.

It got cooler as we left that last steam chamber behind. For the first time in days we could feel and smell fresh air drafting in. Whenever we felt the flow stop, we knew someone was running the Slash, either in or out. Just the thought of that bolstered us up.

At the next rest stop, Bagz wet both sacks, finishing off his canteen. Now Kitty's had to last for both stones until we got out.

We were lucky to have the excess. I heard of one wiggler who ran dry and kept his stone wet by peeing on it. Urea is not good for a bloodstone, and handling one that's been treated with it doesn't do much for a company assayer's mood either. That wiggler ended up with a worthless piece of rock and a busted nose.

Several hours later we reached the end of our marked trail through the endless maze of tunnels. We scrambled over a rocky incline and faced the gash we'd crawled through a day or so ago. The wind blowing out of that fissure felt wonderfully cool.

We were all pretty thirsty by then, but no one dared to even sneak a peek at the last canteen with water in it hanging from my belt.

We wet our bloodstones and adjusted our belts so the canteens were snug to our bellies. Kitty went through first. This was nothing like it would be later in the Slash. I went next and Bagz took the rear.

It was a long crawl, but there were only two tight vertical squeezes where I had to shove my stone in front of me then wriggle up to it.

We had to wait for Kitty a few times, but she made it okay.

At the other end, we hurried through a black canyon and began our ascent of a steep cliff which was hardest on Kitty, of course. Lucky she weighs no more than a short wet rope.

We took a long breather at the top. Before us was a two-hour scramble across a series of rugged tunnels and chambers. This was the last bad spot before the Slash.

A party of four on their way in passed us by; wigglers by the look of them. They eyed our full stone-sacks with jealous eyes, not knowing that Bagz's, obviously the biggest, was probably worthless. They stopped to whisper. We hurried on, knowing that it wouldn't be the first time some worms disappeared while some wigglers came out with a bloodstone and no clear idea of where or how they found it.

The wigglers broke their huddle and started back toward us. We moved as fast as we could, but they were fresh and gaining.

We leaped through a field of stalagmites and rounded a corner to come face to face with a group of four worms on their way in. In the tunnels worms don't look at other worms to see if they found anything. It's just not done.

At that point the wigglers rushed around the corner and piled into each other at the sight of not three, but seven worms.

One of the worms winked at me and his group stepped up to the would be ambushers. "What're you wigglers gawkin' at? Get along!"

The worms herded the wigglers away.

It was common to see groups of four. The company gave everyone who ran the Slash a two-week basic subsidy. That included one cot in a room for four and meals at the company mess. The rooms were simple, the cots lumpy and hard, and the meals just under the number of calories a person needed. All of which kept everyone uncomfortable, and skinny enough to run the Slash after the two weeks was up and you had to. Figget, after two weeks on those cots you welcomed a smooth rock floor.

Our group had been three for a long time. We just didn't seem to find anyone who fit in. Bagz was a heavy sleeper, or at least if he heard anything of what Kitty and me got up to, he kept quiet and it never went any further. His kind was hard to find.

#

After a couple of hours of zigging, zagging, ducking, jumping, crawling, and wearing ourselves out in chamber known as The Obstacle Course, we made it to the Slash at last. Kitty said we needed some naptime before going through. She was worn out, but wouldn't admit it. Bagz needed rest too, so she made a big deal out of that.

We had enough water, so we moved away from a glow globe at the opening to the Slash. In the dark, I told Kitty, "Sleep, no sex." And she did. Guess she agreed for once. Figget.

#

When we woke, Kitty handed out surprises, dried meat she'd hoarded from our company cave supplies last time. We chewed and chewed, happy.

After that meal, we stripped bare and greased up with oil from a company can near the opening. We each took one small sip from Kitty's canteen then soaked the stone-sacks with the rest of the water and wrapped our clothes around them, tying the bundle with the sleeves. We stashed our helmets and belts in 'our spot' -- a hidden hollow behind a big rock, fifty paces from the opening.

Some worms, and most wigglers, just toss their empty canteens in a large pile at the side of the Slash. When the supply gets short outside, the company offers a bonus to any worm who'll crawl through and string them on a pull-out line.

We always string our canteens on the pull-out line before going out. Once we got caught outside, after a long and futile run, thirsty as figget and no canteens in sight. It's a long, sweltering walk into town.

Kitty went first. She was skinny, well-oiled, rested, and had a good chance of making it. I kissed her before she crawled in.

Bagz and me sat without speaking until we felt the draft come through the Slash again. Kitty had made it. I took a deep breath.

Bagz went next. I fidgeted in place until I felt the breeze again, then shoved my stone ahead of me and jammed myself in.

The Slash is tight and dark as despair. Some wigglers go nuts their first time. If you lose it you'll get stuck, and some worm on company bonus crawls in with a lighter and a gas line. Complimentary cremation, dead or alive. Your ashes blow down over the Obstacle Course. Your bones get hauled out and chucked in a pile as a warning to other wigglers not to lose it.

I began the slow process of running the Slash; shove the stone ahead, wiggle up to it, repeat.

Try not to notice a million tons of rock pressing down. Don't even think about getting stuck. Just shove and wiggle.

A long time ago, one company smart ass came up with plan to widen the Slash. Had the explosives all ready, until some company thinkers recollected how homosaps had nearly ruined old Earth by messing with her ecology.

Fact is, no one understands how a bloodstone forms. All they know is that it's some kind of biochemical, electro-thermal process with hundreds of elements and thousands of interactions, all on the nano level. Start blasting and who knows if anyone finds a bloodstone again. In fact, do anything and they might dry up. Even widening the Slash even a little might allow too much air in, upsetting the delicate balance.

Shove and wiggle.

Don't think about having a fit.

Shove and wiggle.

The company uses bloodstone in the biochembot process. They make tons of money selling gene-defect cures to rich homosaps and other species. Defects like epilepsy, or shriveled-up left arms, or empty eye sockets and feeble hearts.

Shove and wiggle.

Is it lighter ahead?

Shove and wiggle.

The light ahead fades to black.

#

I lifted my head and stared at a grisly old worm, lit by the flame of his lighter, ready to turn the valve on his gas line. He looked more shocked than me.

"You alive, Dozer?" he asked.

"Guess so."

"Stuck?"

Shove and wiggle.

"Nope."

"Guess I won't burn you then. Shame to lose my bonus though."

"Life sticks."

"Yeah." He rubbed his bristled chin. "I could burn you anyway."

"You'd earn your bonus that way, yeah."

"Well, you did borrow me some water once." The lighter flickered out and I heard him wiggle out backwards.

I counted to twenty-six before I felt the wind hit my face. Not far to go.

Shove and wiggle.

Bagz hauled me out. "I told the Slash Warden it was just one of your fits. Think she'd listen?"

"Who was that worm she sent in? He seemed to know me."

"Grubstake? He headed over to the duty shack, waiting for the next bonus."

"That was Grubstake? Didn't look like him."

"He made enough on his last haul to get his wart removed."

"Big difference."

"It was a big wart. That's why he's doing bonus work. He blew the whole wad on his looks."

"Well, I owe Grubstake a drink. You okay, Kitty?"

She ran to hug me. "Scared."

"It's okay now."

We wet our stones and put our filthy clothes back on. Bagz's skin is naturally dark while Kitty and me are pale as limestone, but right then we looked like we were family.

The grime didn't matter. After my stone got assayed we'd be rich. We could shower, buy new clothes... maybe even leave this cave-trap planet on that shuttle poised for lift-off down beyond town.

We pulled our line out and retrieved our canteens, filling them at the spigot the company provides. In a giddy mood we started down the grade of the road to town, accompanied by a few worms and some wigglers who hadn't gotten up the courage to run the slash yet.

The bright orange sun blazed in a cloudless sky, sending up waves of shimmering air from the surrounding orange desert. The road was smooth, a five-kilo stroll down to town then a flat kay beyond to the company assay platform near the spaceport.

Halfway there I heard the clip-clop of an animal pulling a rattling sulky behind us.

I craned my head around. The animal looked like pure terran equine; a small one. Only a company boss would have rig like that, and they were notorious for riding down clients who didn't dodge out of their way. He cracked his whip and yelled at us to move.

I edged to the side of road, making sure Bagz did the same. Kitty, out in front as always, hadn't heard the sulky; maybe her mind was on something else.

The sulky clattered by, throwing up sand and sweaty horse smell. The noise drowned out my warning scream. At the last second, Kitty glanced back and froze. So did Bagz and me.

The little horse threw up its head and tried to veer right. The driver hauled on the reins left. I saw a short, blurred form launch itself at Kitty. Dust rose as I sprinted forward and tripped over her.

Rising, I helped her up. "You okay?" I hugged her as the dust cloud from the sulky blew out over the sand dunes. "How'd that twerp miss you?"

"Someone pushed me away... I thought it was you."

"No. I saw someone--" I looked around and spotted a bundle of clothes on the ground a meter from us. They stirred, so I helped the owner up. He was even smaller than Bagz and had an arm like his, only on the right side.

"Thanks," he said, not looking at me.

"No." Kitty came forward and took his hand. "Thank you."

He looked embarrassed, as wigglers who haven't dared run the slash yet often do. The company gave new arrivals a cot in a fifty-bed room and mess for a month while they worked up their nerve, lost weight, formed groups of four, or got themselves adopted by an existing group.

"Anyone would do the same." He hurried off down the road.

"Sure you're okay?" I asked.

She hugged me. "Yeah."

I kept seeing her as it might have ended, lying in the road, tiny heart pumping her blood onto the sand.

We headed direct to the assay platform. A lot of folks were milling around, nothing much else to do, except hang around to see if someone makes a score, and then try to get a drink out of them. A couple of worms were getting some small, sad-looking, brown stones assayed. They wouldn't be worth much more than a few days' spree - if they were lucky. Bagz split off to the right with a hurried, "Good luck."

I stepped up to the middle table. The assayer was an old worm I recognized, who'd retired to work for the company. The pay was barely above basic subsidy, but when your Slash-running days were over there was no other choice. I slipped my bloodstone out of the sack and handed it to him. His one good eye grew wide.

"You analyzed this, Dozer?"

I nodded. "Eighty-three percent."

With a snort of disbelief he set it into his analyzer. It was a bigger, more accurate model than mine had been.

I held my breath. What if that old analyzer of mine had read wrong?

He frowned. "What percent you say you got?"

I gave him a weak smile. "Eighty-three?"

The assayer lifted his eye to glare at me. "Mine doesn't read it that high."

My throat tried to swallow, but couldn't.

He looked down again. "Nope. Sorry, it's only reading..." he glanced back up, "eighty-two point six percent." He slapped his machine and howled. "You dog, Dozer. It's the highest reading I've ever seen."

I couldn't catch my breath. Even prepared for it, the reality was overwhelming. I turned and Kitty was there, her blackened face frozen in shock too. Guess none of us really believed it was true.

Finally I drew air into my lungs and crushed her to me. No words came. We just cried together.

"Weight of stone..."

Holding her, I swiveled my head back to the assayer.

"Four point five-eight kilos." He slapped his cheek and gaped at me in envy. This had once been his dream too. "Figget take me, Dozer, you are now the richest bastard in this quadrant."

Everyone was crowding in now, slapping me on the back, howling, and asking for money. Kitty got shoved back. I caught a moment of Bagz at an assay table two lines down, staring at his stone and shaking his head. Like a puppet he turned to glare at me. I could see it in his eyes. It was shamstone -- worthless.

I wanted to tell him it didn't matter, we were rich. We were going to get off this damn planet and get cured. But those pesky worms kept crowding me, pressing in with loud demands.

A loud voice stopped everything. "What's going on here?"

A company boss, standing behind the assayer, lowered his bullhorn. The worms around me backed off as silence fell.

"That's better." The boss tapped the assayer on his head and pointed at my stone. "What's the score?"

"Eighty-two point six percent, four point five-four kilos."

The boss's jaw dropped before he recovered his dignity. His eyes focused on me for the first time. "Well, sir... congratulations. You're a very fortunate man. If you'll come with me, I'll take you where you can get some privacy." His nose wrinkled. "Perhaps a shower and some fresh clothes are in order." He opened a gate and waved me into the company area.

No one had ever called me 'sir' before. My feet started toward him then stopped. "Wait, my friends--"

"You can give us their names if you want to donate a small amount to them. We'll make sure they get it."

"No, I want my friends with me. They're leaving too." I turned to look for Kitty and Bagz. Spotted them pushing through the crowd toward me. "There they are." I turned back to the boss.

He frowned. "Take them with you? Off planet?" He laughed. "Impossible."

"But I'm rich now, I can pay for them."

"I'm afraid that's not allowed. If you'd studied your contract, you'd know that in section twenty-three, paragraph eight it clearly states: 'Under any and all circumstances, no client-worker may divert from their personal assets more than seven days sustenance funds to any other client-worker.'"

"I don't remember that part."

"You can read can't you?"

I shook my head.

"Well, I can read it all to you if you'll step this way."

"No! I made a promise. My friends come with me."

A voice from behind me spoke. "I'm afraid the boss is right."

I spun around to face... no one, and then glanced down and spied the wiggler who'd pushed Kitty to safety.

"What do you know about this?"

"I'm a lawyer, even if I can't get many clients because of my size... and my legs."

"And?"

"He's right. I've read the contract. You can't take another miner off-planet."

"Why not?"

"About ten years ago some old nut hit it rich and decided to take all his friends off. He had a lot of friends. The company's profits dropped drastically for almost a year while they brought in new wrigglers to learn to be worms. That's when they added this clause, to prevent the same thing happening in the future."

"But I made a promise to my friends."

Kitty and Bagz had made it to the steps. I stared at them down there, surrounded by worms, held apart from me by some silly legal tangle.

"The most you can do is to bestow a week's food, drink, and lodging money on them. They'll have a hell of spree. In time they'll forget you."

I stared at Kitty's face. She knew. Maybe she'd known all along, maybe not. Bagz didn't read either, most people like us didn't, but because of her blindness the company may have read the contract to her. Somehow she felt my eyes on her and her thin, blackened lips broke into a brave smile as she whispered, "Go."

"Sir?" The company boss shuffled his feet. "We have to get out of here now."

I flicked a glance at him. He stood behind the assay table, waving me into the company area; into wealth, freedom, riches, a cure for my fits... everything. My eyes shot back to Kitty.

Bagz fidgeted next to her. "Don't be a damn fool, boy." He placed an arm around Kitty. "I'll take care of her."

They turned to leave.

"Wait!"

I whirled back to the boss. "Can I give the stone to someone else?"

He sized up Bagz's and Kitty's backs then eyed me with that sly look cats give rats before pouncing. "I can allow that."

I knew what he was thinking. As a client-worker I was worth four of them. Except for my fits, I was almost healthy. Without my help they were nearly helpless.

"Anyone?" I had to make sure.

"Yes." He glanced at them again and nodded.

I spun back. "Kitty, you can go! Get you some new eyes, grow a big strong heart. Come on."

Out in the crowd she stopped and turned. "With you stuck here? No."

She meant it, and in all our time together she'd never changed her mind about anything.

"Bagz? Here's your big chance. Get a fine new arm, maybe they can even make you young again."

He shook his head. "I'm too set in my ways. Been here too long. Guess I'll die here."

"Bagz, that's crazy."

"You found the stone. This is for you, boy. Take it and go."

They staggered away.

I watched until their backs disappeared in the crowd then turned back to the boss.

He frowned. "Guess it's you after all, sir."

I whirled on the lawyer. "What's your name?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I don't have one... haven't made a run yet."

"I mean your real name."

"Samu Hiyando." He stuck out his hand.

I took a hold and pumped it up and down. "Samu, I'm making you the richest man in the quadrant."

"What?"

"On one condition. You're a lawyer and you've seen how things are here. Use some of this wealth to help us. Force the company to make life better for us."

We both knew that once he left, my word would have no hold on him, but he nodded and I got the feeling he'd do what he could.

"You're serious." He wet his lips. "Okay, I promise. And I'll make sure you three get a week's spree money too, as much as I can give you."

The company boss rushed forward. "Hey, I don't know about this. I thought you meant one of those two."

Samu faced the boss down. "You said he could give it to anyone." He turned to crowd. "You all heard."

Samu was answered by a resounding "Yeah!" from the crowd.

The boss frowned. "Well--"

"I'm coming through." Samu squeezed by him into the company area. "I want a full report on the percentage and weight of that stone, with an independent lab doing a second analysis. Now, you mentioned a shower?"

I jumped off that platform and ran after my friends. Caught up to them halfway to town.

Bagz stamped his foot. "You damn fool!"

Kitty hugged me until my sides ached.

"It'll be okay." After a long kiss, I extricated myself from her. "Samu's going to make sure we get some money, so we can have a hell of a spree. Then it's back to the grind, like before. And there's always the chance that he'll be able to make things better around here."

Bagz laughed. "And maybe I can squeeze water out of a rock."

"Always the optimist, Bagz. We'll be okay, we always have been."

All this time my sack had hung on my arm after I'd removed the bloodstone. I began to fold it when I felt something hard at the bottom.

"What's that?" I reached into the sack, grabbed the small stone -- which had lodged itself into a flap in a bottom corner -- and pulled it out. I stared as it shimmered bright red in the afternoon sun.

After my fit in that sinkhole hell chamber I'd upended the bag and when this little one hadn't dropped out I thought Bagz had lost it while running for his life. But here it was, and my analyzer had put it at eighty-two percent. At its size it wouldn't bring enough for a ticket off-planet, but it was worth enough for a new heart and maybe an eye or two. And it would keep the three of us alive for a few years without having to work.

Except for me. I'd still run the Slash every now and then. Who knows what else this worm might find?

I grabbed Kitty and gave her a hug. Maybe it would be enough for a small wedding too?

### **About the Author**

Ralan Conley lives in an alternate universe, inside a cave where wine and cheese are aged, which is hidden on the frozen wastes of Scandinavia. This, of course, limits his diet considerably and may be the reason for his overactive imagination. He earns his living writing, running his writers' resource, [www.Ralan.com](http://www.Ralan.com), and doing a bit of ice longship piracy. He recently became a grandfather and has been busy teaching his grandson how to stand straddle-legged with his hands on his hips and a parrot on his shoulder and say, "Avast me hearties!" His work has appeared in print and electronic publications too numerous, or obscure, to mention. Some of these, to the consternation of his former writing coaches, have won contests, awards, and reader's polls. Among these, he is a three-time finalist for the Bram Stoker Award and a runner-up for the Sapphire Award. Always a bride's maid....

## Extraordinary League of Gentlemen: The Black Dossier

By Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill  
Wildstorm (DC Comics)

As soon as an item is hard to find, the hunt is on in a rush of blood and this is only exacerbated if something is banned, or illegal, or in this case is not allowed to be sold by the publisher for fear of retribution from UK copyright holders.

That adrenal rush is the knowledge that the coveted item, once beyond our grasp, is only sated as, at last, the comic is taken from underneath the counter and discreetly passed across, with a level of reverence and care.

One can nearly hear the clichéd guttural utterances ‘many bothans died...’

So it is with one of the finest comics to be published this year. The specifics are still unknown to the general public, but with the editor, Scott Dunbier, parting company with the publisher, some copyright infringement issues have resulted in the comic being unsaleable in the UK.

However, many copies really are available under the counter and with amazon.com being an unstoppable beast, the effort seems rather in vain. The comic has been readily available, reportage alternating between the heavy handed DC sending out cease and desist letters to independent comic shops and larger chains allegedly getting a silent wink and nod of approval as long as it's not sold online. Nothing like a ban to bring out the unseemly in an industry.

Many Hub readers may just have to don a long mackintosh and sidle down to the comic store, and in between deft scans for peelers and drags on a fag, ask for a copy, and I hope you do, as this happens to be one of the finest comics I have seen this year, up there with Bryan Talbot's *Alice in Sunderland* for sheer elegance and ingeniously visualised beauty.

*The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* draws totally on fiction for sources of ideas, characters and occurrences. Yet it is incredibly original story telling none the less in its use of these well known book stars and settings. In Volume One we saw Mina Harker, Alain Quartermain, Dr Jekyll, Captain Nemo and the Invisible Man embroiled in a turf war between Fu Manchu and Professor Moriarty.

In Volume Two, our intrepid team heroically take on the Wellsian invasion from Mars.

John Carter and Gullivar Jones appear, as does Champion Bond, perhaps a forefather of another famous character. And so it continues; every scene, every character in these two volumes has a relationship to Victorian or modern day fiction.

After that horrendous rendition of a movie, and please do not allow that to sully your opinion, we are presented with this standalone comic set in the late 50's, where Britain is coming out of a period of rule under Ingsoc. Rocket travel is a reality and there are some interesting people in power, who are all a dither, not about a zither but rather about two of the late Victorian incarnation of the League who are attempting to get the Black Dossier.

Harker and Quartemain, rejuvenated by water from the Fountain of Life, are on the run. They have been missing since the end of the Second World War, when they disappeared in time to avoid the rule of Ingsoc and the ever watchful eye of Big Brother.

A spy called Jimmy, back from killing a Doctor for the CIA in Jamaica, together with Bulldog Drummond and Emma Peel, are hot on the well-turned heels of Mrs Harker, who manages to acquired the Black Dossier.



This Dossier contains a selection of articles, cuttings and reports about the various activities of such extraordinary human teams, both in Great Britain and also abroad over the last number of centuries, as well as filling in gaps in the reader's knowledge of activities of the League since the Victorian escapades.

The comic is thus formed of normal frames as we follow our adventurers and then as they read the dossier, we too are shown the beautifully crafted prose and stylistic imagery and lettering that go with such a rich document.

The relationship between the State and the various Leagues, at times quite disdainful, and the control that the State tries to assert upon them, is obvious. In this ongoing sequence we have the government secret agents tracking down once-patriotic colleagues, who were hailed as heroes but are now persona non grata and effectively viewed as enemies of the state.

I marvelled at the way that Moore so cleverly invoked the thought-provoking work of George Orwell and at the same time included rockets that were thoroughly Gerry Anderson. The humour is as dark as the title, there are some real quips in the dialogue that can do nothing else but bring a smile.

There is a sweet little insert, a Tijuana Bible, an item from the time of Ingsoc, a thought police product, for Porn Sec, all wonderfully realised from Orwell's imagined world.

Later we are treated to a section in 3D created by the world class Ray Zone over Kevin O'Neil artwork, in an anaglyph, which stands out so well: with the glasses provided it is just a wonderful ending to this very thoughtful and cerebral comic.

O'Neill's exceptionally researched artwork complements Moore, who as always takes some clever ideas and in his own special way pays homage to the great works of our time. One wonders which living author could have any issue with the method in which these men so fantastically bring together this literate wonderland. It is the companies and lawyers who applied the brakes to the release of a story by Britain's finest comic team, perhaps the world's, in their home country.

If you have enjoyed this week's issue, please consider making a small donation at [www.hub-mag.co.uk](http://www.hub-mag.co.uk). We pay our writers, and your support is appreciated.