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Is this a sonic screwdriver that I see before me?

According to *The Register*, "Fans of *Doctor Who* and *Star Trek* have been told to lay off autograph hunting at the stage door of the Courtyard Theatre in Stratford, where David Tennant and Patrick Stewart are thesping it up in a Royal Shakespeare Company production of *Hamlet*."

Apparently, fans dared to turn up to the stage door with bags of Doctor Who merchandise, hoping to get Tennant to autograph them. The RSC then decided that "Due to the huge amount of interest in the RSC's current production of Hamlet, only Royal Shakespeare Company or production related memorabilia will be signed by members of the company." ie. Buy our stuff, or stuff off!

This led one poster at *The Register's* forum to ask: "Excuse me is the comment section where people who cream their knickers over centuries old plays that they have seen dozens of times show utter contempt and disdain for those who do the same for contemporary entertainment? It is? Jolly good!".

Source: www.TheRegister.co.uk

British Fantasy Society Open Night – York, August 30th.

Once again York plays host to an Open Night for the British Fantasy Society. The event will almost certainly be held (again) at York Brewery – a hugely popular venue with the regular Open Night crowd.

Details will be confirmed closer to the event at prism.britishfantasysociety.org; probably here, too.

Jetse deVries' *Transcendence Express*

Hub-published *Transcendence Express* has been nominated for a British Fantasy Society Award (Best Short Story). Head on over to http://www.hub-mag.co.uk/images/Hub_44.pdf to read it for free, and if you like it (and are a BFS member), don't forget to make your vote count...



Man of Stone

by Guy Haley

To be stone, that was what it took to survive a life of war. Stone in the sinews, so they would not tire; stone in the mind, so it would not fear; and stone in the heart, so the unthinkable could be done. The veteran knew that to be stone was to live. Stone could endure everything, only time was its enemy, and time a soldier rarely faced.

The veteran stood stock still atop a boulder, and looked down into the valley. Wind stirred the horsehair crest of his helmet, but he himself was motionless; the other men, the men who had managed not to die and the nervous recruits that had replaced those that had, all looked to him. The veteran's face did not move, cracked by the sun, it was an outcropping of rock, weathered to a simulacrum of humanity, not the visage of a man.

Stone, I must be stone, he thought, flexing his sandaled feet upon the rock beneath him, feeling its gritty surface tear at the leather of his soles. The men waited as he observed the teeming multitudes of the Qebhbelo, busy forming ranks at the bottom of the hill. Sunlight glinted from their brazen spear tops and helmets. They were so numerous the tramp of their feet made the earth shake.

"This," pronounced the veteran with finality, "will not be an easy fight."

The other men sighed in relief. A strange reaction to ill news, it might be thought, but the veteran had not said that they would certainly die. There was not a good chance of life, that was sure, for the veteran spoke the truth - a hard fight, but not an impossible one. "We have a good position, men, but they outnumber us by a great margin." Far Greater than the prince of Voortis, who led this band had reckoned; but no less than I believed, thought the veteran. He did not say this, for the veteran knew what to say and when not to say it. A clever soldier learned to govern his tongue as well as he did his sword. "But if we follow our orders, and trust in our steel, then we can make it through this fearsome day."

"And trust in the gods!" shouted one man. Nervous mutters of assent rippled out from him.

"Lad," said the veteran, fixing the boy with a glare like a javelin point, "I have fought in the legions of the overlords of Voortis for three decades. Before that, I served in the company of Red Jaaan. I have run with the savage tribes of Klaar. I stood shoulder to shoulder with Captain Verdisen of the last Black Spear. I have seen many brave men die before their time under the blades of foes so terrible that if I were only to describe them to you adequately, your hair would turn white."

The soldiers blinked nervously.

The veteran let the smile into his voice. "Do not fear, I am a soldier, not a storyteller, so you are safe."

Only muted laughter at that. There were an awful number of Qebhbelo, after all, and they were beginning to march up the steep escarpment. But the soldiers had to imagine the filed teeth gnashing in anticipation of the coming slaughter, as at least for now the enemy were a distance away.

"I have seen many strange things," said the veteran. "I have seen the war plough of Corromay till the fields red, I have seen the dead walk and fight, but I will tell you this, there are no gods. The gods are all dead. A soldier must trust only in his heart!" He hammered upon his breastplate, "his eyes!" he gestured sharply at the slits in his close fitting helm, "and his steel!" With that he held his sword above his head, where it caught the rays of the rising sun. Almost, but not quite, simultaneously, fiery missiles tossed high by the mangonels behind their lines arced toward the Qebhbelo with sure and murderous purpose. It was a pleasingly dramatic moment. Which was a problem, he thought, recalling all the last stands he had seen, and helped end, and how nicely framed they were. If there was one thing fate liked, it was picturesque, doomed heroism. He touched the amulet about his neck, a piece of rock worn smooth by years of wear, a memento of his long abandoned homeland. He would have to be the hardest of all stone today, for even he could not count the foe, and he could count very, very high.

The veteran ran through the mist, clutching at the red soaked neckerchief wrapped about his left bicep. Blood trickled from it, but he ran as if he did not feel it. Stone did not experience pain.

A bloody man, fleeing from a battle where most of his charges had perished is not the stuff of

legend, but even stones know when to roll away. Legendry requires fatality. The veteran would rather retire with a dozen good-looking slave girls, and good credit with the local vintner, than to be a legend, and he intended to still. Heavy droplets of water were sucked swirling into his stinging lungs. Turf of spiked grass squelched underfoot, broad pools of black water spread out to either side, silent and watchful as the dead. They stank, too, like the dead. The air about the pools were as bereft of sound as the pools themselves were of life, only the veteran, stumbling now and then, his ragged panting offending the stillness of slow decay, lent vitality to this sodden environment, his own leaching steadily away through his wetly crimson armband.

Time passed, the light bled from the mist, turning it from white to lead to black, still he ran, and ran, trusting that the Qebhbelo would not follow one man so deep into so treacherous a marsh. As night fell, the dancing lights that gave the marsh its name began their slow arabesques, their eerie green phosphors reflected from the obsidian waters. They trailed in his wake like ocean luminescence swarms about the stern of a boat, but these motes spoke. The veteran did not listen to their promises. Long experience told him such things had little to offer and little power. If he ignored them, he had nothing to fear, so he ignored them, and when their crooning turned to vile threat, he paid them less heed. Night grew thicker, but it left him unmoved, and the whispering wisps grew bored and drifted away. Their power lay in imagination, and stones have precious little.

He ran on, lost in the pant and the pound of his body, until a hollow cry brought his senses up sharp. He stopped and stiffened, and sent his hearing out over the marshes. Silence reasserted its heavy hand for a few moments, then another, the same hideous ululating cry. A third took up the call, closer.

Cursing, the veteran flogged his exhausted muscles into a shambling sprint. He'd taken the chance that he'd avoid the Crying Shem, but he had rolled the dice with fate on that wager and he had lost.

"Damn!" he said. As he said it how he came to know how dry his throat was. The realisation of thirst was like match, starting a fire of need in his body. His stomach knotted with hunger, his limbs clamoured for rest, his eyes yearned for sleep.

The Crying Shem called out behind him, three voices as one. They had been quick to find his scent. He gripped his wounded arm tightly; the blood, of course. Delicate plashing came quick behind him. He risked a glimpse over his shoulder. A pallid glow flashed a hundred yards away.

Jupiter

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Whispers of Wickedness

He slowed. The Crying Shem never abandoned their scent, so it was said. There was no reason to go on, they would kill him, better he did it sooner than they later. “If there are any gods left at all,” he said, falling to his knees, more from exhaustion than piety, “now would be an excellent time to aid me. I have not been a good man, but I am a loyal one, and I will serve you as I have served no other.” And with that he cast about for something with which to end his life.

“Psst! Hey! You, man, you! Over here!” an unexpected papery voice, as out of place in the mizzled marshes as the veteran. He looked up, but could discern nothing in the gloom, he licked his lips and barely hesitated before shouting: “Leave me be, spirit, leave me to my fate, do not torment me!”

“I am no spirit! Come, come quickly, over to your left. The things are almost upon you! Come to my pool, I will drive them away!”

The veteran looked to his left. He could see nothing, no will o’ the wisp. Perhaps the voice did not lie. And even if it did, what of it? There were few fates worse than being caught by Crying Shem. With luck, he would die and his soul escape while they ate his flesh, if not, they would start on that also. What could be worse? He shrugged, and walked to his left.

“Here, here! Stop, stop!” the voice came from his near his feet.

“Where are you?” he said, searching the ground.

“Just stand still, there’s a good man.” The voice was high and piping, but definitely male.

An unearthly howl made the veteran's ears sting, and he clutched at them, and reeled like a drunkard. The Crying Shem were here. They were hideous things, lean hounds that glowed with corpsefire, their faces those of weirdly distorted human skulls, elongated jaws dripping spittle that sizzled on the grass, and high backs of bare vertebrae. Their eye sockets were dark and empty, their bony cheeks wet with the ceaseless tears that gave them their name. Three of them paced round the pool, attempting to outflank him. The veteran didn’t know why, he had no weapon, having lost his sword during the battle, and it would have not cut them in any case. These were sorcerous beasts.

“What are they?” said the voice by his feet.

“How can you live in this swamp and not know?”

“But I do not know.”

“I cannot say their name, it will bring great misfortune upon me.”

“If I may venture, not saying it will bring greater, for if I do not know their name, then I cannot dismiss them.”

“They are...” the veteran hesitated, “they are the Crying Shem.”

The unearthly hounds tensed at the mention of their name, their heads came up. They abandoned stealth, and began to lope directly towards the veteran, weeping as they came.

“Crying Shem!” shrieked the piping voice, “begone!”

And that was that. There was no sound, no light, just an absence where the creatures had been. Had it have been anything else other than the banishment of soul-eating demons, it would have been uncanny, but the swamp without the Crying Shem was a damn sight cannier.

“What were those things?” said the voice.

“Supernatural beasts, eerie creatures, a wizard made them in times past, so they say, fashioned them from the spirits of widows and the bones of orphans and the bodies of merciless mastiffs, starved and beaten to death.”

“Why would anyone want to create things like that?”

The veteran shrugged. “It’s what wizards do, is it not? They live only to bedevil men. How did you get rid of them?” The veteran searched the mist and dark, but could not see any source for the voice. The pools remained placid and evil, the air dank and unstirred.

“I am not entirely sure,” came the voice, and it came from everywhere. “Who are you?”

"I give my name to few men."

"I am no man, I think."

"Even if you were, then you would hear it, for you have saved me. I am Vremloth Kcok, a veteran of many wars." He said this proudly.

"I see, and what is that? What is a 'veteran'?"

"A veteran is a man who kills and lives to kill again. I am the man who survived the 1000 day siege of Parnununu, I am the last of the 132 companions of Mrothler Daahk. I am stone. I am imperishable. I am the rock in the fist of kings. When he dictates I fall, skulls are smashed."

"Ah, a king! This thing I know. Who is your king?"

"Whoever will pay me."

"I think that is as it was, but... yes. Yes, I think that I am your king now."

"How so?" asked the veteran.

"You asked for help, I am here. I saved you, you promised service. I ask that you honour your side of the bargain." The voice grew stronger, then weaker, like a shout on the wind, though not a breath stirred the surface of the pools.

"But, but that means that you are a, a god?" The veteran laughed. "There are no gods, they are all dead!"

"I am not dead, as you can plainly hear. I have been, I think, but now I am not. Yes, that's it. I was a god once, and I will be again."

"Show yourself then, god. I would look upon the face of divinity!" He roared and held his arms up, fierce and unafraid.

"Promise you will not laugh again? It offends mine divine ears."

"What manner of god are you that can dismiss the Crying Shem, yet must needs take a promise of no mockery from a simple soldier such as myself?"

"A new god, that is the kind. Hush now, I come."

There was a sound that the veteran could only describe as a gloopy rustling, though that did it no service at all. There was a plop. Something fell from the air into the pool behind him, the veteran turned to see what it could be, but saw only ripples. Seconds passed, then an eruption of water and a small, dripping creature hauled itself out of the water and dragged itself painfully onto the grass, wheezing disastrously. So poorly did it sound, that without even thinking the veteran went onto his knees and, whipping off the tattered remnants of his cloak, he wrapped it about the creature's shoulders. It sneezed, and the veteran found himself looking into eyes as deep as the night sky. The body was wizened and old and seamed with wrinkles, though in other respects it looked like a baby. But those eyes, they were the wells of eternity.

"Thank you, for this act of service. You may go."

"That's it? You are my lord no longer?" The veteran stood up, confused. "No life debt?"

"That's it, you have discharged your due, one good turn is enough payment for another. I am your king no more. I won't lie to you, though I could – I am a god after all."

"Which one?"

"I think I was Mikiki, or perhaps Bonz. Or maybe both. But I won't be again. I will be whatever I am needed to be, in the here, in the now."

"Needed?"

"Indeed. A world without gods is a sorry place, and not likely to last too long. Who will people blame, for one? This world has been free of them for far too long."

"I see," said the veteran, though he did not. "Well, my divine friend, thank you for saving me from the Crying Shem."

"A pleasure. And thank you for the cloak, a more than adequate recompense."

The veteran stood, and made to be off. This had been the strangest night of all in a life full of them.

There was another sneeze.

“Look,” he said, and turned round, “Will you be alright?”

“Probably not,” said the godling disinterestedly, “I might well die.”

“I thought gods were immortal.”

“We are, but that term does not mean what you think it does, and now I am weak. I have only one believer after all. But if I perish, well, so be it. It is a small matter. I will go away, and some other godling will fetch up at some other propitious time, and meet some other believer. It may be me, it may be not. I have done this many times over.”

“And this, this is a propitious time?”

“It could be, it might not be.” The godling shrugged. “That depends on you.”

The veteran paused. “I believe I also said I was a loyal man.”

“You did.”

“Tell me then, for other services, protracted services, what might you offer?” □ “Oh, riches, women - whatever you want. It depends on how you might serve.”

“That depends on what you are to become.”

“Well, that depends in turn to a large degree upon my first apostle.”

The veteran was silent awhile, and eyed the shaking godling speculatively. “To serve a god, even one so feeble as you, would be better, I think, than more time in the employ of petty tyrants. The next time I run into something like the Crying Shem, there might not be a god around.”

“There never is a god when you need one,” agreed the godling, “unless the time is propitious.”

“Like now?”

“Possibly, as I said.”

The veteran had begun to shiver too, it was very cold, the chill time before the dawn, and his leathern kilt and tattered tunic were no ward against the damp. “Say, then, what will you offer for a lifetime’s service?”

“How about your heart’s desire?”

“I have no idea what that might be.”

“Fair enough. It might be fun to find out, though.”

“You are right, it might be, it might be.” The veteran nodded slowly.

“Are we then agreed?”

The veteran stopped, thought for a moment, and then nodded, sharply this time.

“Yes. We are.” He bent down to pick up the godling.

“Good, and don’t you think that you’ll be selling me for magical components or to a sorcerer’s menagerie. I will be back eventually, and would wax most wrathful; and all that.”

“I could do that?” said the veteran, as he settled the godling on his shoulder.

“You, my friend, do not think much do you?”

“No, I prefer to act.”

“That is excellent news.”

And with that, they walked out of the night and the marsh and into posterity. The veteran served the godling his whole life, and the godling, for his part, grew quickly, so bereft of divinity was the world at that time. As the god rose in prominence, others joined him. Time passed, and the civilisations of gods and men both rose and fell, as is the way of these things, and eventually even the new gods were forgotten, and replaced by those yet newer.

But there is still an ancient temple, or rather, the ruins of a temple, lost far away in the dusty

highlands of some forgotten country. It is a temple to the memory of Shembane the Munificent, or another god, depending on which antiquarian you ask. The temple is mostly rubble now, though a few broken stumps of columns poke out here and there through the soil to hint at its former size. In a world littered with such relics, this is nothing out of the ordinary, but what is remarkable is the statue of a man, life-size and perfect in every detail, of a soldier dressed in archaic armour that stands still at the temple's gate, as fresh as if it were made yesterday. His one hand is held out to the eastern horizon, the other clutching the bundled body of, perhaps, a child against his shoulder. Though the locals shun the place, they do not fear the statue. This man of stone must have had a big heart, they say, for out of the hard, unyielding rock beams the warmest of all smiles, carved for all time upon his face.

REVIEWS

Wall-E reviewed by Alasdair Stuart

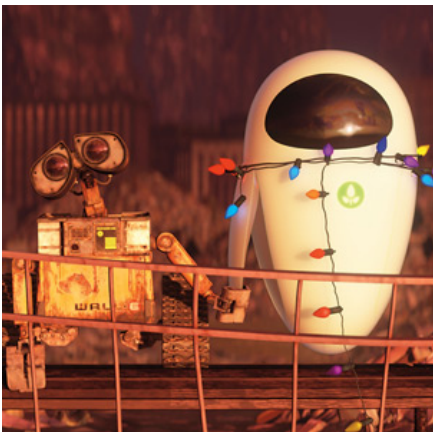
WALL-E

Starring Ben Burtt, Elissa Knight, Sigourney Weaver, Jeff Garlin, Fred Willard, John Ratzenberger and Kathy Najimi
Directed by Andrew Stanton

Seven hundred years ago, humanity evacuated an Earth choked by waste, despite the best efforts of legions of robots designed to compress and dispose of it. One of them, WALL-E, is still active, still working and has developed something very odd in all the centuries alone; a personality. He's curious, smart, funny and, with the exception of his trained cockroach pet, completely alone. Until EVE arrives and WALL-E finds himself thrust into the centre of events that will change humanity forever...

From the opening, near silent first half hour to the mosaic over the end credits this is a film which abandons very nearly all the traditional trappings of animation and in doing so becomes something much greater than the sum of its parts. Minimal on dialogue and massive in scale, it's a film which manages to embrace both the simplest concepts and massive science fiction ideas not just with ease but elegance.

As well as WALL-E discovering the truth about his world and his growing romance with EVE, the film also covers the human desire for adventure, over reliance on technology, the conflict between individuality and the establishment and the idea that small acts can have massive consequences. It does all this as well, it should be pointed out, with barely two hundred lines of dialogue. This is pure visual storytelling that's as complex, as multi-layered as any film you'll see this year, if not more so.



Where the film really shines however is in the character design. WALL-E himself is a wonderfully chunky, functional robot who has clearly been tracks-deep in mud and grime for seven hundred years. In the hands of a lesser director, his binocular eyes would have been used again and again to pluck the audience's heart strings but Stanton endears him to us in a far subtler way. WALL-E is neither a brainless cute machine or a holy fool, the two traditional routes for main characters in stories like this. Instead, he's simply a nice guy who wants to help people and who finds a quiet form of rebellion in that. There's something distinctly gleeful about his actions in the second half of the film and that mischievous streak, the gentle anarchy he unleashes is almost impossibly charming.

The other cast members are equally endearing, especially the sleek, minimalist EVE. Openly modelled on Apple technology she's an elegant piece of design that somehow has as much character as WALL-E's endearingly blocky frame. The interaction between the two is where the film absolutely sings, with colossal amounts of emotion and feeling being communicated by nothing more than their posture, their eyes and their names. Equal parts double act and couple, they're the literal heart of the film and the script's at it's most affecting, it's most endearing when it explores their differing viewpoints and how they change through their time together.

The human cast members, despite their small roles also score. The always excellent Raztenberger and Najimy are great as John and Mary, two passengers aboard the Axiom who WALL-E helps and inadvertently introduces to the universe. In fact, the moment where Mary notices the stars for the first time even as the rest of the passengers hurtle past in their hover chairs, completely oblivious is one of the finest in the film. Special mention must go however to Jeff Garlin as Captain McCrea. His fascination with Earth and his one very peculiar, very personal moment of heroism is one of those rare moments of pure,

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unalloyed cinematic joy and he's a very strong addition to a very strong cast, even if the two principles are entirely artificial.

Simply put, WALL-E is a masterpiece. This is Pixar at their absolute best, demonstrating a lightness of touch, complexity of thought and elegance of execution that no one else comes close to. Not just one of the finest science fiction films of the last twenty years but one of the finest films, it's an absolute must for anyone remotely interested in film.

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