

NOVACON



11 - 13 November 2016

THE ANNUAL CONVENTION OF THE
BIRMINGHAM SCIENCE FICTION GROUP



THE BRAIN WEEVIL BOOK OF...

THE CON COMMITTEE BARBECUE



"Oh well," says Alice. "At least it's not raining.

"@*&\$!" Says David.

From the Brain Weevil Book of The Con Committee, page 947

PROGRESS
2
REPORT

GUEST OF HONOUR JULIET E. McKENNA



Editorial....

Welcome one and all to PR2.

As I write this I am still a couple of weeks away from getting all the contributions and putting them together in a coherent (mostly coherent) form. I'm hoping that we will have some updates on everything we covered in the last PR. I'm hoping that we have some new stuff for you too. I'm hoping that I still have half a bottle of Vodka in the cupboard downstairs. Two out of three would be great.... three out of three would be awesome. Fingers crossed.

As you may recall, in the last PR, we had horoscopes provided by 'The Great' Papa Dom (available for children's parties, Bar Mitzvahs and the summoning of the dead). Well, I bumped into him in the pub the other day and he kindly offered to do me a Tarot reading there and then. He fell into a trance (which most people wrongly interpret as him being drunk), dealt the cards onto the table and studied them. Throwing his head back he began his reading. He said I had Courage; He said I had Brains; It's only when he said that I also had Bass that I realised he was reading the beer mats! Stupid old fraud. Maybe he was drunk.

Well enough of that, welcome to this PR and, as they say, read on....

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Cartoons provided by Dave Hicks and Gary Starr

THE CHAIR SPEAKS

A cartoon armchair with a speech bubble saying "Ahem...". The chair is white with black outlines and has several small 'X' marks on its backrest. The speech bubble is white with a black outline and contains the text "Ahem...".

You'll recall that in **PR1**, I mentioned that **Novacon 46** was on its way. This is still the case. I said at that stage that great things were afoot and great things are, as reported, still afoot. Naturally I claimed, as is the way of convention chairs throughout the ages, that things were going smoothly, as indeed they still are.

Alert readers (I know that there are alert readers, I met one in 1996) will have spotted that there's been a minor change on the committee page. Yvonne, our former programme supremo, has retired to spend more time with her family. (This, we know, isn't entirely true — she's standing down to spend more time advising various entities on exactly how to manage their waste in a more environmentally-aware fashion. How refreshing it would have been if any of the figures in Westminster who recently stood down had done so in order to better manage their waste (Ah well, a chap can dream).) So now the programme is in the just-as-capable hands of Dave and Richard, who enjoy my complete confidence. Great things, as has already been said, are afoot. Who knows, there may even be an encouraging page about it here in **PR2**. We'll find out.

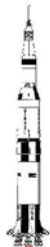
And since more-or-less everything I have to say here has either been said in **PR1**, or is being said in these few paragraphs, or in some notable cases has been said more than once in both places, it's time for me to graciously set my keyboard down and leave space for all the other things that are destined to appear in this frankly excellent progress report.

See you all in **PR3**. And in November. Hurrah!

Douglas Spencer

Chairman

N46



Mansfield Road, Nottingham.
NG5 2BT



Well, not much to say here. Negotiations are ongoing with regards to some of the items we have planned for the con, we now have permission for the goat, so that programme item can go ahead. Everything else is still being sorted out.

If you haven't booked a room yet please do so. The hotel will start to release rooms to the public 30 days before the convention so you really do need to book now to ensure you have a place to sleep (or whatever it is that you do). Please send your completed form to Steve Lawson (address on page 2).

As before, no deposit required but if you intend to arrive after 4pm on Friday you need to ring the hotel direct and reserve your room with a credit card. The number is **0115-935-9988**.

The hotel has informed us that they have a very limited number of family rooms available. These consist of two double rooms with an adjoining door. These are available at the very reasonable price of £110.00 per night. If you are interested in these, then again, get in touch with Steve.

For any other hotel room information, or for a reservation form, it can be downloaded from the **Novacon** website.

Tony Berry

DEALERS TABLES

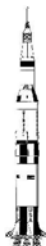
These are available at £20 per 6ft table for the weekend. You have to be a member of the convention to book a table. If you are interested contact Tony Berry or Steve Lawson (email address' on page 2)

ART SHOW

If you want space to show your art please contact Tony Berry or Steve Lawson (email address' page 2) Space and tables are free but if you give us some idea of just how big a space you require.... That would be great.

CONVENTION TABLES

These are also free but please let us know in advance if you will require one of these. Email Tony Berry or Steve Lawson yada yada yada...



Working With Pictures Rather Than Words

by
Juliet E. McKenna



Thank you to JMCK for the use of this photo

These days I'm what writers call a 'hybrid author'. This means I'm working on independent publishing projects in partnership with **Wizard's Tower Press**, alongside my mass-market, mainstream-published books. This means me doing a lot of things that customarily are a publisher's responsibility, such as editing, proof-reading, marketing and promotion. So I've had new skills to learn but this is all still dealing with words, so that's not a particular concern. I do words.

By far the biggest challenge is becoming my own art editor. I'm a writer who uses visual references as I work but I do not have an artistic eye. I know what I like and what I don't, but when it comes to the subtle and effective ways in which an artist can use colour, composition, perspective, light, shade and any number of other techniques to enhance a picture – this is a closed book to me until someone with such insight points things out.

So I'm all the more grateful for the great cover art my novels have had, thanks to Geoff Taylor for *The Tales of Einarinn*, David Palumbo for *The Chronicles of the Lescari Revolution* and Clint Langley for *The Hadrumal Crisis*. My input for those covers was discussions with my editors, making a few vague suggestions and stressing what I really didn't want. No chainmail bikinis! Preliminary sketches based on an experienced commissioning editor's brief invariably showed me what I wanted. Though I'd had no idea what that might be until I saw it, if that makes sense. Now I could suggest tweaks based on my detailed knowledge of the books. That ensured the final artwork reflected these stories to everyone's satisfaction.

The thing is though, publishers commissioned those artworks and all agreements over copyrights and licensing remain between those publishers and the artists. An author like me who retains backlist rights and wants to publish an ebook edition independently cannot expect to use the same cover art. Not without negotiations, new contracts and payments.

I am extremely fortunate that Geoff Taylor had never licensed the *Tales of Einarinn* covers for ebook editions. Twenty years ago, such things didn't exist! He and I agreed on mutually satisfactory terms and a whole new readership is enjoying his artwork online.



Edward Miller was similarly obliging, when I asked to use his original cover for *Turns & Chances*.

Considering ebook covers for *The Aldabreshin Compass*, things were different. Paul Young's designs for the **Orbit** editions are certainly striking and I was consulted in their creation but ten years on, I wanted something closer to my other covers in style and feel. That meant finding and briefing an artist myself. Fortunately the small press sector in *SF&Fantasy* offers a showcase for any number of talented artists these days. I went looking.

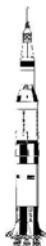
Though this wasn't plain sailing. The first artist I dealt with was extremely resistant to following my design brief, which specified the background colour scheme to reflect the types of magic referenced in each book's title, as well as using the astrolabe, aka an Aldabreshin compass, as a linking element. I sent copies of the visual references I had on file but these were ignored in the initial rough sketches. Then, with our agreed deadline approaching, the artist demanded a higher fee than the amount agreed. Now, I may not know about art but I do know about doing business. This was not a constructive working relationship so I withdrew the commission. Much to the artist's surprise because this was apparently merely a tactic to re-open negotiations. Not with me, sunshine.

Back to Square One? Yes and no. At least now I had some idea of potential pitfalls. Though thankfully, working with the next artist I approached could not have been more different. As I explained the design brief, Ben Baldwin immediately understood what I wanted and why. He asked questions that made me consider new angles and aspects. As we narrowed down ideas, he read relevant passages from the books and I hunted up more visual references. He sent me successive views of the work in progress and I was delighted at each stage. Once we'd agreed the final covers, he suggested a few last additions – notably the vegetation in the foreground at the bottom of each picture. The sense of depth this adds most definitely illustrates just how much artistic talent and visual instinct can bring to a cover.

Which is why I've commissioned Ben to do the cover art for the collected River Kingdom stories which **Wizard's Tower** will publish this year. This time I have even less of an idea for a coherent art brief so I really need to work with an artist whose instincts I trust. Once again, we've discussed the world and he's read the stories as well as studying the visual references which inspired me. I would never have come up with the ideas he's outlined so far but once again, I'm thinking 'Of course! That's precisely what I want!'

At the time of writing, we're discussing masks. As those who've read one or other of these stories know, the Moon God's priests are masked. But what do those masks look like, specifically? He's also called the Horned God. Are these masks horned? I don't know. I just write the words and let people's imaginations do the rest. But now I need to think about the implications of either choice both for cover art and from a practical standpoint in the ongoing stories. More than that, what else do we want to subtly remind people of? Equally important, what **don't** we want to reference visually? Well, the Sons of the Harpy from the Game of Thrones TV series, for a start.

So I'm continuing to learn how best to convey what I portray in words to someone with the very different skills needed to depict an imaginary world and its atmosphere. It's fascinating – and leaves me more in awe of artists than ever.



Firstly, let's get Boris Johnson out of the way [*Oh God, please! ED*]. The last time I was involved in the programme for a **Novacon** I wrote a piece for a **Progress Report** that included a Boris joke. I'm sorry, okay. However, if anyone wants to pay me to take the piss out of them in the next **PR** in the hope that, by **Novacon 50**, they will become Foreign Secretary then do get in touch.

Meanwhile I find that Richard Standage and I are now the programme leads on the committee; Yvonne Rowse has had to step down to deal with pesky real life and work. Fortunately we have, as usual, got ourselves an excellent **Guest of Honour** with many accomplishments and interests to drive a lively and interesting programme. Juliet McKenna turns out to be another **Novacon Guest of Honour** whom, on closer examination, is at least three guests in one. She's a fan, an author of long, and short, fiction (the latter a dying art except in our world); a teacher and a campaigner on the vexed subject of arcane VAT rules for micro businesses like our cherished dealers and martial artist. What will she find to talk about?

[Wait, wait! Your are trying to sell our Guest Of Honour on her possible talk about arcane VAT rules and regulations? Do we let these guys staff our sales table at conventions? ED]

[Think we may have stumbled on a floor in our plans - Committee]

As usual we're just starting to firm up what will happen over the weekend. Since we run every year and so many gifted, intelligent people leave it until the last minute to join, the programme only starts coming together from the summer onwards. Not that I'm suggesting that those of you who've already joined *aren't* intelligent and gifted and ideal for the programme items we're now putting together, which is why the arm twisting and blackmail [*Surely 'opportunities to participate creatively'. ED*] will start shortly.

There will be science. Nothing gets the membership out of their – or somebody else's – bed of a morning like a good science talk, with up to date and engaging content



(the likes of which we despair of ever getting from **HORIZON** again). Art will be exhibited and sold and Dave Lally will run his unique programme downstairs. Dealers will deal [er...can we clarify that statement? ED] and maybe we'll talk about some of that very stuff, why it looks the way it does and how much influence do writers have anyway on the way the finished product appears in both the real and virtual - market place (See Juliet's piece earlier in this PR).

There will be panels and talks debating the hot topics of the science-fictional day; perhaps we can launch a publication or two and maybe... just maybe, later in the evening finish with a spot of frivolity - you know the sort of thing: a quiz, a game show... mortal combat.

If there's something you'd like to see, talk about - or demonstrate with the aid of a charming assistant - that would make your weekend more interesting, entertaining or memorable, get in touch [Oh... that's just opening us up to a world of depravity. ED].



• 21ST CENTURY COMMITTEE MEETINGS :
WHEN ATTENDING VIA SKYPE, FREAK OUT
EVERYONE ELSE BY SUDDENLY FREEZING
SO THEY THINK THEIR WIFI HAS DIED.

THE HADRUMAL CRISIS

by

Juliet E. McKenna

(Consisting of: **Dangerous Waters, Darkening Skies and Defiant Peaks**)

A review by Helena Bowles

Pirates are raiding the Caladhran coastline. The loose affiliation of Caladhria's Barons is clamouring for magical aid from the Mages of the island state of Hadrumul. Archmage Planir, however, holds firm to his decree that magic shall not be used for warfare or to solve the political issues of Einarinn's various states.

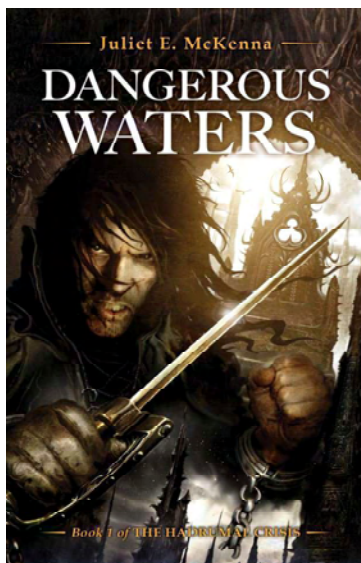
Baron Halferan is desperate to protect his coastal lands and his family. He manages to contact the rogue mage, Minelas, who promises to use his magic in their aid but betrays the Baron to the very corsairs he swore to help drive back. Halferan is murdered and his men sold into slavery.

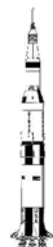
All this takes place in the short story *The Wizard's Coming* which can be downloaded for free at http://www.rebellionstore.com/products/the_wizards_coming.

The aftermath of this relatively minor incident has political repercussions that resonate through every country in Einarinn and will destabilise Planir's governance. This is where *Dangerous Waters* picks up.

Archmage Planir has a public relations disaster on his hands. He has been adamant that no mage will lend their talents to mundane warfare and Minelas' disobedience has opened a can of worms he had been desperately trying to keep closed. His authority over Hadrumul's mageborn is now in question and a precedent has been set. If the mundane powers of Einarinn discover Minelas' actions it will reopen the question of magic used in warfare. His first action is to despatch the Magewoman Jilseth to track down Minelas and return him. With luck, Minelas's actions can be concealed from the world at large. When it turns out that Minelas is dead it seems hopeful that the incident is over.

Planir has reckoned without one of Baron Halferan's men, Corrain. An erstwhile Guard





Captain, busted down to trooper after an indiscretion with the Halferan's Steward's wife, Corrain has survived. He has endured his time as a corsair galley slave by feeding his fury at his Lord's betrayal, his determination to avenge his master, and by looking out for another captive: a young Halferan trooper called Hosh, who was wounded and disfigured in the skirmish. Corrain focuses his rage-fuelled will on escape and when he does, he will find more magic; magic that will protect his home from the raiders, destroy the corsairs and avenge Baron Halferan's death.

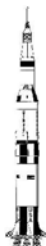
Meanwhile, Baron Halferan's wife waits in fear for Minelas to return. The Lady Zurenne is imprisoned within her own home and can only endure as she tries to protect herself and her two young daughters. By Caladhrian law she needs a male guardian but she refuses to believe her husband commended their care to Minelas: a virtual stranger. She longs to ask for aid from her sisters' husbands but she cannot communicate without being overseen. She fears the ambitions of the neighbouring Baron, Karpis; in the most mediaeval of Einarinn's states, a lone woman in charge of an estate is ripe picking for the more unscrupulous nobles looking to expand their land.

Zurenne does not question that she needs a male guardian but she desires some control over who that role falls to. Protection from the wrong man will leave her with no freedom in raising her children or in running the estate as she wishes to. Her daughter, Ilysh, will marry in a few years and Zurenne does not want to lose her say in her daughter's future.

Magewoman Jilseth is the eyes and ears of Archmage Planir. She confirms Minelas's death and becomes embroiled in the concerns of the Halferan barony. Her testimony helps keep Planir informed and she is witness to the political manoeuvring as the Archmage's position becomes less secure. There are other mages who would like to challenge Planir for his title, not least the Flood Mistress Troanna. Some senior mages wonder at the wisdom of allowing the corsair raids to continue unchecked, others believe Hadrumal's wizards should withdraw from any and all contact with the mundane mainland powers.

Corrain's anger and trauma turn him into a loose cannon. Never the sharpest tool in the shed, he flails around causing chaos as he attempts to fulfil his holy vow to avenge Baron Halferan. Corrain finds the magic he seeks and he thinks he is about to finally close the door on this darkest part of his life. When the cost of that action becomes clear he is horrified. Far from ending the problem he has created a much larger, much more intractable one and has not even managed to secure Halferan's safety. Far from it, he has caused Halferan to be in even greater danger. He has created



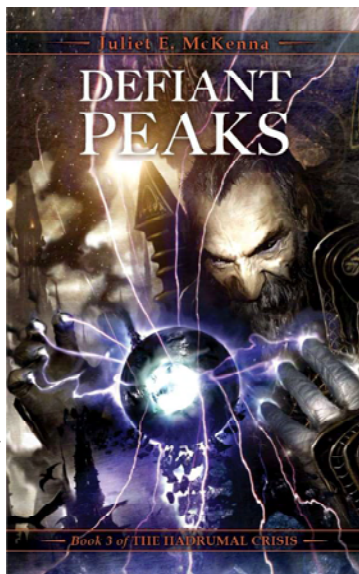


a situation that will further affect Planir's rule and drag the mages unwillingly into a punitive action.

Zurenne seizes on Corrain and his loyalty in order to secure her own future. His marriage, in name only, to the young teenager Ilysh puts Zurenne in independent control of the domestic side of the barony and ensures no other male guardian can be placed over them. Despite that relief, Lady Zurenne finds that she is continually faced with situations that challenge her world views and abilities. To her shock and disapproval, her daughter, Ilysh, responds with an independence of mind that is unsuitable for a Caladhrian lady.

It should be clear by now that the books of *The Hadrumal Crisis* wear a cloak of sword'n'sorcery over a slow burn political thriller. The heart of the story is Planir's struggles to maintain the integrity of Hadrumal as an institution, while keeping his balance on an increasingly wobbly pedestal. He is a master manipulator but finds himself hard-pushed to contain the repercussions of Corrain's single-minded attempts to revenge himself on the Corsairs. When Planir is finally forced to take the mages into a violent, punitive action it becomes very clear *why* he has held out against using magecraft in warfare. This is no matter of shooting spells at each other: Hadrumal's mages are each tied to one of the four elements and that is how their magic is manifested. This is magic that can boil the seas, flatten mountains, scorch the land, and then open the earth to swallow everything. It is power on a grand scale and yet even that demonstration is not enough to secure Planir's position and the security of Hadrumal. Indeed, now the mundane powers fear the wizards. Fear makes people dangerous.

One of the major themes of the trilogy is the things that bind and restrain our abilities to act. Corrain starts as a physically incarcerated galley slave, his later actions are so damaging because he has mentally bound himself to a single path of action. Zurenne is constrained by the rigid, cultural rules for living as a Caladhrian woman. She is physically subject to a male guardian and while she is active in trying to attain what she feels is an appropriate guardianship, she has internalised those conventions so that she is unable to conceive of living in another way. She is deeply disturbed by her daughter's small challenges to the status quo that occur after Ilysh's marriage and elevation in position to Lady of Halferan. Planir is limited by his knowledge of what magic would do if unleashed in war and by the political realities of his world. Jilseth oversteps the limits of her magical strength and faces the consequence of perhaps never using magic again. Everyone has their limits



and constraints on their actions. The question is: when is it appropriate to ignore those limits? What will happens if the constraint is fought against? Maybe like Corrain, it will achieve freedom. Maybe, like Jilseth, the consequences will be far more negative.

All the characters have varying abilities to perceive the consequences of their actions and take responsibility for them. Corrain, who can only ever see the step in front of him and consequently causes increasing amounts of trouble for everyone, including those he cares about, stubbornly pursues his plans, while Planir is playing several games of white raven – a chess like strategy game – with multiple partners simultaneously.

The Hadrumal Crisis is the most recent three of Juliet McKenna's fifteen novels, all of which are set in the same world and in one chronological timeline. It's quite possible to read and enjoy the trilogy without knowing the earlier books but I suspect I would have appreciated some parts more having a depth of knowledge gained from reading the books in publication order. The world building is solid and complex. There are several different states in Einarinn with totally different languages, cultures and levels of development. There are contacts between the states from trade and its accompanying news/rumours to formal politics. As Corrain travels amongst several nations these differences are very apparent. This is a world that *functions* and that elaborate tapestry serves to both inform and guide the character's actions making this an unusually intelligent fantasy.

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Claws And Effect

by
Gary Starr
(age 3 1/2)



The Beams from the car headlights sliced through the night illuminating the dark, wet, country road ahead of me. Rain, soft yet persistent, fell upon the windscreen in an annoying, not quite fast enough to have the wipers going all the time yet too fast to have them only going intermittently, kind of way that produced a nerve gangling screech at every swipe of the blade. I was almost thankful on that last point in a masochistic kind of way as it was, at least, keeping me awake and concentrating on the road ahead.

Which is how I came to see the hedgehog.

It seemed just a blur on the road, only a few dozen feet ahead of my car, but my mind's eye filled in the blanks and recognised it for what it was. With no time for me to react, and with painful regret and familiarity, I felt the wheels of my car bump over the poor chap.

What happened next came as a surprise. First one, then another tyre exploded sending the car into a sideways skid that I fought to control, until the car came, with bone rattling suddenness and a spray of gravel, to a halt.

Checking myself I found my body, if not my mind, to be intact and released my seatbelt to exit the car and check the damage. Fortunately, it being a quiet country lane, my little accident hadn't caused any further complications so I exited the car without being berated by other motorists or jumping to avoid being hit by oncoming traffic. I steadied myself against the car as the chill wind blew against me and studied the damage by what ambient light the headlights produced. Oddly, both the front and rear drivers-side tyres had burst. I looked back down the road for the hedgehog thinking "robust little fellow" but of him there was no sign. Not even a smear on the road.

Surely he couldn't have survived. I knew for a fact that I had hit him, I had felt it. Yet how could a hedgehog have caused my tyres to burst. No, I must have been mistaken, I thought, it must have been something else on the road I had seen and mistaken for a hedgehog; my hitting it must have caused the damage to my car and at the same time, sent the object spinning into the sidings with the force of the collision.

I began to reach into the car to pick up my cell phone and call for assistance when I remembered it had gone flat during the morning sales meeting. Cursing my luck, I popped the trunk and fumbled about for the emergency equipment.

Cars aren't really my thing but I knew enough to always carry a certain amount of stuff that one is supposed to have in these circumstances and though I was



sure the torch would be invaluable I was also pretty certain that the one spare tyre wasn't really going to do me any favours. I also took out the blanket bought, as I recalled, for a picnic that never happened but would now help keep me warm until another car came by and I could flag it down for assistance.

After an hour I began to suspect that another car wasn't going to come along anytime soon. That was when I began to wonder just where the hell I actually was. I had taken the back roads to avoid all the traffic and the irony of that choice wasn't lost on me now.

In the dark I could see nothing in either direction, no lights, not even the burning torches of locals chasing down a suburbanite who had strayed too far from civilization. To the side of the road lay ploughed fields and it occurred that where there are cultivated fields, there was going to be farmhouse. Sure enough, about a mile distant, I could just make out the tiny light in a window.

With no choice I stashed everything back in the trunk and locking the car, from whom I couldn't say, and set off across the field.

The wind had begun to drop and the slow rain hadn't wet the earth enough to make the going slow or messy. I set a good pace, reaching the cottage within a short time with only modest bruising to my shins brought about by collisions with things that my tiny flashlight had singularly failed to illuminate properly.

The farmhouse was an old style two story affair and the small rectangular windows at ground level pointed to a neat little basement beneath. The front door was old, solid wood with large black ironwork and studs. A light from inside glowed through the small square window set into it.

I knocked.

After a brief wait the door opened a crack and the small, bald head of an old man appeared. He looked me up and down, a frown creasing his face.

"Yes?" His voice was surprisingly strong and I began to re-evaluate his age....maybe not so old. Still bald though.

"Hi," I began. "So sorry to bother you...."

"No," he interrupted. "I don't want broadband!" He began to close the door.

"Wait," I ejaculated and jammed my foot into the door to force the point. "I'm not selling anything, I'm broken down.... Well I'm not broken down... my car is and I wondered if I could use your phone?"

His face broke into a wide grin and opened the door fully.

"Why didn't you say, come in, come in."

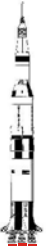
He stepped back to let me in and I was immediately surprised by how modern the interior of the house looked. From the small hallway I could see into three rooms including the kitchen. Everything was very clean and neat but the first thing that struck me was the disturbing amount of stuffed animals adorning every available surface. Ducks, rabbits, badgers, a fox... even a goose. Who stuffs a goose for god's sake?

But stuffed they were and all neatly placed about what I could see of the house.

"This way," he gestured and led me into the kitchen which was painted a pleasant yellow and was dominated by a great range stove and an even greater large oak dining table upon which sat a neat pile of books and a telephone.

"Help yourself to the phone and I'll put the kettle on," and so he did.

Busying himself on the range with an old fashioned whistling kettle.



I took the RAC card from my wallet, dialled the number, and was immediately put on hold. While I waited my eyes scanned the room. The walls were covered with shelves all filled with books and yet more stuffed animals including a band of squirrels all dressed as pirates and posed as if in the midst of a battle.

"Taxidermy a hobby of yours?" I asked the old man.

He turned from the stove and smiled, then he returned to the tea making.

The phone suddenly came to life and was put through to someone who informed me could help.

They asked the location of the car. It occurred to me again that I didn't know where I was never mind the car.

"Where are we?" I asked the old man covering the mouthpiece.

"Badgers Creek." He replied.

"Do they?"

"Badgers Creek Road," he corrected.

I relayed that to the girl on the line and after confirming that I wasn't, in fact, a woman on her own, was politely informed that it would be about 90 minutes.

Great. I put the phone down.

"About an hour and a half," I informed the old man, "thanks for the phone I won't disturb you anymore..." and I began to rise.

The old man gestured for me to sit back down. "No trouble at all, besides you haven't had your tea yet and it's a foul night out. Might as well wait here till they arrive." He smiled and offered an open tin, "Have a biscuit."

When the tea arrived it was hot and strong and we sat at the table and made small talk. The old man looked at me as if sizing me up which made me slightly uncomfortable as did all the beady eyes looking at me from the many animals arranged on the shelves.

I coughed and asked, "The animals are very good... er, very lifelike... apart from the pirate costumes. Is this a hobby of yours, stuffing animals?"

The old man looked around. "A hobby... no, no, not as such."

He stared directly into my eyes and paused, "Tell me," he asked. "Have you ever lost anyone important to you?"

"You mean misplaced?"

"No, no," he sputtered. "As In Died."

"No," I replied. "Been lucky so far. You?"

"My wife." He looked away.

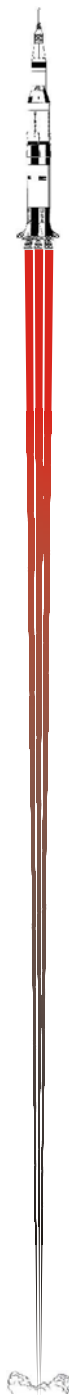
"I'm sorry."

"No, no, long time ago now." His face fell and he sighed. "Nothing to be done now. But death does interest me hence the animals." And he gestured about him. "Almost like they could live forever this way. Never aging, no disease... unless you count a little mould here and there that is."

I looked again at the animals. They were very good, all posed, some natural, some not so natural.

"I did them all myself you know? Fascinating procedure."

"Really?" I answered in a tone that said a) I really doubt that, and b) I really don't want to know.



"Oh yes. Come you must see, I so rarely get to show off my workroom." He stood and walked towards the end of the kitchen and a door that, I guessed, lead down into the cellar.

"Oh no really I wouldn't want to..."

"It's no trouble. You have time to waste anyway and there's cake after" and he opened the door.

Cake? I really doubted I would want cake after looking at a bunny abattoir but he smiled and assured me there was nothing gory down there.

He turned on the light at the top of the stairs and we descended a short staircase into a cellar which was impressively large. One wall was full of bookshelves lined with all manner of books and yet more assorted stuffed rodents. Against the far wall, and under the high windows I had noticed from the outside, was a series of workbenches arranged on which was a series of neatly placed tools. More tables filled the centre of the room but upon these rested jars of what I took to be chemicals. Bright overhead lights illuminated the room giving the look of an operating theatre.

"Very impressive hobby room," I commented. "I've only got a shed myself."

"Thank you. I've built it up over the years." And he wandered about the room before stopping to busy himself over a table.

It was impressive and I took it all in, from the sturdy workbenches to the very large jars of chemicals at the far end of the room. The bookcases in particular caught my attention. Grouped in no particular order I could ascertain where books on biology, home sewing, furniture manufacturing for amateurs and chemistry books, all leaning against a squirrel posed to look like it was holding them up.

"Yes," began the old man turning towards me. "Yes at first I stuffed the animals to preserve them. Death shouldn't take everything from this world. But then I thought 'stuff them'?"

"Exactly," I interrupted.

He coughed. "Stuff them," he continued. "Why stuff them when it would be better to bring them back to life!"

That caught my attention. "Beg pardon?"

"Yes, bring them back to life. Reanimate the dead" He exclaimed triumphantly.

"You mean... like Frankenstein... or a *Butlin's* 70's weekend?"

"Yes... to the first." He answered.

I began to feel uncomfortable. Had I misjudged this Guy? Was he three bees short of a hive?

I turned back to the stairs. A squirrel, posed on the book shelf, caught my attention. It winked at me.

I blinked, gulped and stepped back.

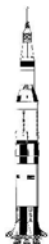
"This is all terribly interesting," I began to sidle around the squirrel towards the cellar stairs. "but if it's all the same to you I think I'll wait in my car."

"It's not." The old man said, narrowing his eyes.

A scratching from the top of the stairs drew my eyes and I saw many furry paws descending into the light.

I backed away.

Down the stairs they came, rabbits, ducks, badgers and the band of pirate squirrels now with their sabres drawn.



I backed further into the room. "What is this?" I stammered. What do you want?"

The old man smiled.

"I began small you see. Mice and the like, and I found that by injecting a large amount of chemicals and a certain stimulus..."

"A Certain stimulus?" I enquired backing towards the benches under the window.

"A shitload of electricity... forgive my technical jargon. You should see my bloody electricity bill. Shocking what they charge these days."

He smiled. He was doing more and more of that now. Me... not so much.

"It's not without risks. The chemicals are quite unstable hence my lack of eyebrows!"

"The look suits you," was all I could think of to say.

"My little friends are reanimated to be sure, but alive...? They follow my will as you can see, but they have no independent thoughts."

"Like TV weather girls?"

He ignored Me.

"They do pretty much as I tell them," he continued. "Like the hedgehog you hit." He chuckled here. "Or more accurately hit you. I sent him out, armoured and covered with metal spikes, for the very purpose to bring you here. Actually I think he quite likes the spikes, surprises the local foxes no end. You've heard of the Six Million Dollar Man? He's my £9.39 hedgehog."

"You're mad?" I shouted. More because I felt it was the thing to do at this point.

"Maybe... maybe, but we'll see which one of us gets a Nobel Prize first shall we?"

My back was now to the benches and the room was filling with assorted animals. Down by my foot a squirrel looked up at me malevolently. An unusual look for a squirrel I thought.

The Old man continued. "You see, I think the problem is the small animal brain. Not enough mass to retain the electrical energy needed to keep memories and personalities alive. I need to try my technique on something bigger" He looked at me.

"I think I saw a moose on the way over here," I suggested helpfully.

"Nice try, but I think you'll do for now. Maybe I'll try the moose tomorrow." He stepped over to a bench and picked up a scalpel and studied it. "This won't hurt a bit ... probably hurt quite a lot."

I Panicked. There was no way out. The animals were blocking any escape to the stairs. I looked up at the window. It was a tad narrow but I figured with the right impetus, and this was definitely it, I could squeeze my fat ass through.

I needed a distraction. I swung my leg back and punted the squirrel at the old man. Not being very aerodynamic, the squirrel went wide, missing the old man and slamming into a lit Bunsen burner. It caught light and began running around the table top in frenzied circles.

The old man jumped in alarm. "You fool! What have you done? The chemicals!"

Confused I looked at the squirrel who was now burning merrily but just standing there looking at me. It twitched. It winked. It detonated.



The force of the blast threw me to the floor and vaporised half the table the squirrel had been standing on. Burning wood and fur rained down setting light to some of the other animals.

“What have you done?” Cried the old man picking himself up and running for the fire extinguisher at the far end of the room. “What have you done?”

Taking this as my chance I scrambled onto the bench and pried open the nearest high window. As I scrambled through it the smell of singed fur assaulted my nostrils and the screaming of the old man rang in my ears. As I pulled myself up and through the window, claws scratched at my legs. It was a rabbit, its ears singed, it bared its teeth and prepared to bite. I booted it back into the fury inferno that was now engulfing the cellar.

Pulling myself fully through the window I ran. I ran for all I was worth until a colossal explosion blew me off my feet and threw me into the ground.

All around me fragment from the house rained down. A burning badger’s arse barrelled through the air and thudded into the ground next to me. I picked myself up and ran.

Half way across the field I orientated myself back to my car.

Minutes later as I rested my head against the car bonnet I looked back at the house. The fire was almost out, the explosion having blown everything flammable far and wide.

I needed to sit down. I reached into my pocket for my keys. Had all this really happened? It was so fantastical I was beginning to doubt my sanity.

That’s when I heard it.

The Honking.

From behind my car came the goose, its dead eyes gleaming at me with hatred. How it had escaped the explosion, I didn’t know, but now the look it gave me told me my fight for survival this night had not yet ended.

I stepped to one side.

It waddled to the side and hissed.

I stepped to back. It hissed and prepared to charge.

I had had enough

I took off my shoe and so armed, launched myself at the goose. We rolled around, pecking and beating at each other. Feathers flew as I repeatedly hit and tore at the devilish, murderous beast.

And that is how the RAC found me, bloodied and beating a goose to death with my shoe.

You know how it all makes sense in your head until you try to explain it to someone else? Well you try to get the RSPB to believe that you were fighting for your life with an undead zombie goose.

Good luck with that.

NOVACON 46



11 - 13 November 2016

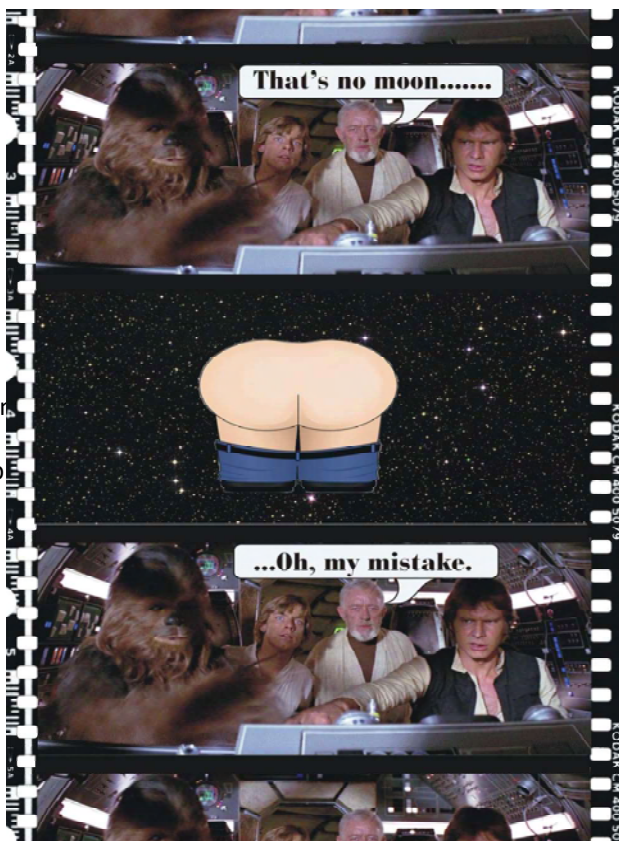
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130. SMS
131. Cuileann Short
132. Helen Gould
133. Mike Gould
134. Noel Collyer
135. Peter Buck
136. Allison Buck
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138. Kathryn Duval
139. Chris Duval



SUNDAY
MORNING ON
THE CON TABLES
AT EASTERCON
IS NOT FOR
THE WEAK...

