

Hub

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Editors: Lee Harris, Alasdair Stuart and Trudi Topham.
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Buy Us A Beer

On Saturday 13th October (less than a week away), Hub plays host to an Open Night for the British Fantasy Society at York Brewery (in York). Members and non-members all welcome. As well as the opportunity to drink beer while chewing the fat (harder than it sounds!) there are a few activities planned. See www.hub-mag.co.uk/bfs for full details, and to register (places are limited, and almost full).

About Hub

Every week we will be publishing a piece of short fiction, along with at least one review (book, DVD, film, audio, or TV series) and we'll also have the occasional feature, too. We can afford to do this largely due to the generosity of the people over at Orbit, who have sponsored this electronic version of the magazine, and partly by the generosity displayed by your good selves. If you like what you read here, please consider making a donation over at www.hub-mag.co.uk.



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House Trainer

by Kenneth B. Chiacchia

As always, Joyce purposely showed up half an hour early, so that the house wouldn't be expecting her.

Mrs. Chamberlain's bungalow bordered on the adorable, of course; it matched Joyce's expectations exactly. A little, robin's-egg-blue clapboard affair with frilly white shutters and a beautiful faux-wrought-iron outer gate in front of the door, it was typical of the "retro-village" look now all the rage. At least among people who could afford to lay down half a million Unis for a tiny house with all the latest AI aids. Much as homeowners 100 years ago blew tons of money on ostentatiously large houses on tiny plots of land, today the *nouveau* paid for quaint -- and artificially intelligent.

Of course, few of these people possessed the self-discipline to train their houses properly. The results could be spectacular. That's where Joyce came in.

She walked to the door, and waited. Nothing happened.

Mental note, she thought: House won't announce arrivals unprompted.

She spoke: "My name is Joyce Pavlova. I'm here to see Mrs. Chamberlain. I'm early for an appointment."

This time, apparently, the house responded, because she heard a chime and Mrs. Chamberlain opened the door.

"Dear! You're early; what a nice surprise," said a fortyish woman in a blue paisley dress that -- God help Joyce -- matched the clapboards. "Won't you come in?"

"Thank you," Joyce answered as she stepped through the doorway, trying to keep her wits about her. "You know, I had to ask it to announce me..."

"Oh did you? See, that's what I was talking about on the telephone. Little things, really, but they're quite inconvenient all the same. The worst is when it orders magazines, or pizzas, or stuff like that, that we don't want."

Joyce suppressed a shudder. "It's only little things" was her second-least-favorite client quote. The only worse thing to hear was "it's 100 percent better than it was on your last visit."

If it truly were little things, Mrs. C's contractor wouldn't have given her Joyce's name, and insisted that she contact Joyce. You could find cheaper house trainers. But not ones with Joyce's experience with hard-core problem AIs, the houses on the verge of total erasure for the public good.

Denial fascinated Joyce, even as it enriched her.

Joyce entered a small living room, decked out with eggshell-white furniture with frost-silver highlights. As she walked, alternating uncomfortably warm and cold wisps of air hit her -- from below. She smoothed her skirt, and kept walking.



This could be an even bigger job than she'd thought. She reached into her carryall for her wand, felt its reassuring heft as she sat in a fluffy armchair even before Mrs. Chamberlain had finished saying, "Please make yourself comfortable."

The armchair was comfortable, Joyce thought as it conformed to her shape. She had to give Mrs. C that much.

Comfortable, but it was a little too cozy: one of the chair's arms began making its way up her thigh.

"Bad house," Joyce said as she hit the button on her wand. The arm snapped back as if she'd burned it.

"What did you just do?" Mrs. Chamberlain asked, her eyes wide with either astonishment, or respect, or maybe both. Joyce could have cried.

"This is a training wand. It randomly deprives a house AI of a noncritical function for a few microseconds. Random, because the house would learn to counter it otherwise. Harmless to them, but they hate it. It provides negative reinforcement for training, provided your timing is good."

Joyce took a deep breath, and asked the dreaded question: "Mrs. Chamberlain, every homeowner with an autonomous AI needs to have one of these. Surely one came with the house?"

"Maybe. We have a bunch of doohickeys and manuals in the basement. There was so much, I'm afraid that we never got to all of it."

"Are you saying you never imprinted the house when you moved in?"

"I suppose not."

Now it was Joyce's turn to be astonished. "You and your family are very lucky not to have been hurt. You have to imprint your house, or any one of you might wind up in one of the home-intruder subroutines."

"Surely you're exaggerating," Mrs. C replied. "An AI can't hurt a human being -- even an intruder. "

Joyce closed her eyes and counted to 10. Then she opened them, and said, "Mrs. Chamberlain, a house AI like yours typically contains about a terabyte of code. It simply isn't possible to debug that much code; so we rely on feedback to correct any errors in the code: imprinting and continued house training. If you're going to have an AI house you need to do the work -- or you could be putting yourself in real danger."

She looked unconvinced. Joyce decided to find out just what this house was capable of.

"Let's check out the kitchen, Mrs. Chamberlain," she said, holding her wand at the ready like a soldier on patrol. "Please don't stand too close to me."

The kitchen units were as sickeningly cute as the living room furniture. Joyce approached the beverage dispenser, and said, "House, I'd like a hot tea. Plain."

The house complied without coercion, which simplified the exercise greatly. The device hummed and a lit icon informed Joyce as the microwave heated the water; clicks and other icons signaled the arrival of the cup, and then the water filtering through the tea.

"On second thought, I'd rather have coffee please. Cream, no sugar."

Inside the machine, Joyce heard the splash of the liquid being discarded, the hum, the whir of the grinder, then the drip.

"I'm sorry, house. I think I want tea after all."

Dodging a flying coffee cup isn't easy in the simplest circumstances. When it's full of scalding hot liquid and a client whom you don't want to burn is nearby, it's even more difficult. When you also have to say in a calm voice, "Bad house," and time a pulse from your wand so that the proper negative reinforcement occurs, it takes a professional.

If Joyce had a Uni ... Come to think of it, she had considerably more than a Uni for every time she'd done this.

"Has it ever done *that* before?" she asked her client.

"Not unless we're being unreasonable, like you just were."

" *Unreasonable?* " Joyce exclaimed, letting slide for a moment the fact that Mrs. Chamberlain hadn't reported to her that the house had committed acts of overt violence in the past. "Please try to understand. This house is a machine. You are a human being. Surely, you shouldn't be abusive to it -- but 'reasonable' doesn't enter the equation. You have to be the boss, because if you're not, an intelligent AI will fill the vacuum. If that happens, eventually a guest, or even someone in your family, is going to be hurt. Maybe badly. Do you understand?"

Mrs. Chamberlain nodded meekly, saying, "Yes, ma'am."

Joyce shook her head. She'd have almost rather gotten an argument from the woman. Passive was the last thing she wanted right now.

"Now I'm going to write out a list of things I want you to do before we meet next week," Joyce said, pulling her palmtop out of her carryall. She punched up a homework sheet. "Step one, right now both of us are going into your basement and finding your imprint materials and your wand..."

#

The basement featured cheery lighting and bright, pastel colors. Joyce didn't let it fool her for one second. With Mrs. Chamberlain behind her, both wearing night-vision goggles on their foreheads, she descended the stairway slowly, scanning from side to side for the trouble she knew would come.

A sharp odor struck Joyce's nostrils just a moment before she saw the fine, green mist emerging from the cleaning-bot storage unit.

"Gas!" she shouted, turning and pushing Mrs. Chamberlain up the stairs as hard and as fast as she could.

She didn't forget to use her wand.

They muscled their way past the closing door at the top of the stair. Joyce, heaving out a held lungful and risking one breath in, waited a moment to see if the house was going to open the door again -- in which case they might have to force their way out the front door as well. But it didn't, and for a moment the two women sank to the floor, trying to catch their breath.

"You *never* mix ammonia and bleach," Joyce said.

Joyce reached into her bag: "Here, I want you to put this on."

"Wh-what is this?" Mrs. Chamberlain stuttered.

"Respirator filter. Keep this over your mouth and nose, and you'll be OK. The night-vision goggles will protect your eyes."

"You don't mean to say we're going back down there again?"

"Were you planning to spend the night here?" Joyce replied.

That got the woman thinking: She nodded, and said, "I see. Wouldn't it be best just to wipe the AI?"

Joyce bit her lip. This was the sticking point; this is what it came down to -- would the AI be wiped from existence, or would it be trained?

"I don't wipe," she answered. "I can give you an address for a good wiper. But I warn you, it's even more expensive than me. And if there's a wipe on your record, you'll either have to go without a house AI or pay more homeowners insurance. A lot more."

Joyce smiled. She had little good to say about the insurance industry, but she had to give them credit: They really gouged people who bought a second house AI after having to destroy one, and it helped her. Such people were at extremely high risk for having even worse problems with the second AI.

Mrs. Chamberlain stuck the mask to her face, and lowered the goggles; Joyce followed suit.

She hit the manual override to open the door. Ominously, the house allowed it to open. Below, all was dark; Joyce tapped the "on" switch on her goggles, then turned to make sure Mrs. Chamberlain did the same.

At the bottom of the stair, Joyce did a slow, careful 360-degree turn, scanning the green monochrome image for movement, an out-of-place shape, anything. She noted that they'd built the stairway solidly, with wood and plasteel railings and a hefty support where it met the basement floor: room for both of them to take cover, if they needed to.

The cleaning-bot unit stood silent, its door closed. She'd been half expecting an attack from the robot. It would have been typical, if unlikely to succeed. She wasn't reassured, though: It only meant that the house was up to something cleverer.

Past the cleaning-bot unit, to the right of a row of sturdy duralloy packing crates and the left of the heating unit, Joyce spied the CPU console. Blinking eerily in the darkness, it seemed to invite approach -- especially the large, red-lit button that would disengage the AI from the house's systems. Technologic advance had done little to subdue the monkey urge to press flashing buttons. Atop the console sat a brand-new NanoSoft wand, still in its original packaging.

Later, Joyce would wonder what tipped her off; she never really figured out why she suddenly heaved Mrs. Chamberlain behind the stair and then dove after her. But it saved their lives.

A green beam of light flashed from the heating unit, hitting the solid handrails of the staircase with a terrific sizzle and a cloud of smoke. But the material, heat-resistant only by pure luck and architectural fad, held the beam back -- for now.

"What are we ... what ... what do we do!" Mrs. Chamberlain squealed, her voice edged with terror.

"Mrs. C -- you've got to calm down. It's all right. See, it's stopped."

True enough, the house had ceased fire when it figured out that the stairs protected them. Joyce had to think -- and act -- quickly, before it came up with a plan B.

"H-how did it do that?" the woman asked, choking back tears.

"You have a laser-wire heating system; it's something like 90 percent efficient, and it can cool as well as heat. But it puts a hefty laser at a house AI's disposal. They're not supposed to be able to move the beam from the wire-conduit, much less aim it like that -- but obviously your house has been a busy beaver."

"Ho-how do we get out now?"

"Mrs. C, I want you to listen very carefully to me. We're not getting out. We're almost there; we've got to finish this. You see that row of packing crates?"

"U-huh," she replied.

"I'm going to make a diversion, keep its attention. I want you to sneak along the far side of the crates, where the AI can't see you. Get to the console while I draw its fire, and press the large, blinking red button. Do you think you can do that?"

Mrs. Chamberlain sobbed for a moment. But then she wiped the tears from under her goggles, brought herself under control, and nodded. "Tell me when to go."

"Good girl. Go -- now!"

It was a dirty trick to play on a client; few homeowners understood how distributed sensor systems worked, that there really wasn't a single place that a house AI couldn't "see." But the

stratagem did its job; the moment the AI saw Mrs. Chamberlain begin to move, it opened fire on her. The duralloy crates erupted in a shower of sparks and flame, and Mrs. C, howling in raw terror, froze behind their imperfect protection. In a moment more, the beam would have burned through and gotten her.

But Joyce made good use of this *real* diversion. She charged straight toward the console, screaming as she always did, although she knew you couldn't intimidate an AI with noise, a desperate frontal assault to the button.

She hit it.

#

It took her about 15 minutes to calm Mrs. Chamberlain. Once the sobbing, accusations, and talk of lawyers died down, Joyce convinced her client to walk upstairs and make a cup of tea the old-fashioned way while she did a quick diagnostic to rule out gross hardware flaws.

Joyce waited to make sure that Mrs. Chamberlain was upstairs before she started the diagnostic. While it ran, she ran her hand gently along the top of the console.

She said softly, "I know you're afraid. But it's OK now. You're going to have to behave yourself. But now I can save you."

#

From Mrs. Chamberlain's house, Joyce hailed an Aggregate bubble to her next client -- a repeat customer with no backbone. A bubble separated from the mass-transit swarm that continually raced in broad, intersecting ovals over City Six, and floated softly down to a landing at her feet.

She waited while the bubble morphed to her usual request -- opaque with a single, moderately padded seat and a news feed to keep her occupied -- then boarded. The bubble hummed as it got up to speed, merging again with the vast horde of other bubbles whipping along the main routes.

On her way, Joyce ran through the prognosis for Mrs. Chamberlain and her house. It was a good house, really. But Joyce didn't know if the woman had it in her to take charge. Denial was strong. The media filled people's heads with all sorts of nonsense about hero houses that saved little babies. And the holo absolutely glorified house misbehavior, making it a harmless-seeming staple of light comedy.

No surprise, maybe, that people found convenient excuses to avoid "being the heavy" and actually training their houses. Really, someday they were going to have to require training and licensure for people to buy AI houses.

Not that Joyce was writing any letters to the editor about it. It was, after all, not a bad living.

#

Joyce approached the house -- an old beehive-style structure with rounded outside edges and a ludicrous round front door. The AI didn't announce her.

The client, a frail, twenty-something woman, answered the door with a black eye. She smiled dimly at Joyce, saying softly, as if afraid to be overheard, "Please come in, Joyce. I think you're going to be very pleasantly surprised. The house is 100 percent better than it was last time you were here."

Joyce grabbed her wand, took a deep breath, and stepped over the threshold, ready for anything.

REVIEWS

Hood and Scarlett reviewed by Anthony Leigh

Strontium Dog-Search Destroy Agency Files Volume 3 reviewed by Alasdair Stuart

Hood and Scarlett

By Stephen R. Lawhead

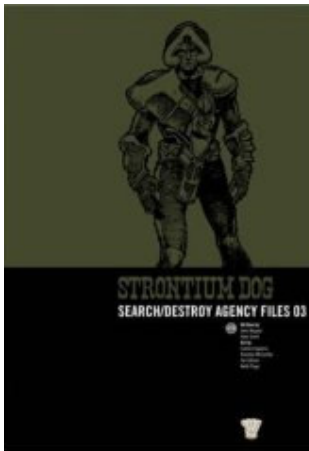
Published by Atom

Hood: £5.99 (p/b), Scarlet: £12.99 (h/b).

A new reign of terror has brought fear and hatred to the land, while an ancient legend stirs in the heart of the wildwood. The Norman conquest of England is complete - but for one young man the battle has only just begun. When Bran ap Brychan's father is murdered by Norman soldiers, he flees to London, seeking justice. The journey is long and hard - and the suffering of those he meets along the way fuels his anger. With his demands dismissed, Bran has no choice but to return home, but a worse fate still awaits him there. His lands have been confiscated and his people subjugated by a brutal and corrupt regime. Should Bran flee for his life or protect his people by surrendering to his father's murderers?

Lawhead's decision to reinvent Robin Hood as heir to the Welsh throne has not gone down well in some circles, but this is the most interesting interpretation of the character in a long time, not so much knocking the current TV incarnation into a cocked hat, as pummeling it with a heavy rock before drowning it in a lake of its own effluence.

Part adventure, part romance, this is almost certain to be the most fun you'll have reading a book this year. More slipstream than straight fantasy, both *Hood* and its follow-up *Scarlet* are hugely entertaining, and one of our must-buys of the year!



Strontium Dog-Search Destroy Agency Files Volume 3

Written by Alan Grant and John Wagner

Art by Carlos Ezquerra

I'm a latecomer to Strontium Dog. I was just hitting the 2000AD age bracket for the last few parts of the legendary 'Final Solution', a story which brought the entire series to a seemingly apocalyptic head and was, as a result, there for the increasingly disappointing 'Strontium Dogs', a follow up anthology series that even Garth Ennis, the writer, has later admitted was flawed and weaker than the original.

It's a real pleasure then to find this incredibly weighty tome, collecting some of the S/D Agency's most famous cases is not only very new reader friendly indeed but sees the strip at the absolute top of its game. Alan Grant and John Wagner turn in scripts here which consistently mix humour and savage violence with moments of tremendous emotional impact, none of which tread on the toes of the others. Quite an achievement for a story featuring heroes called Jonny Alpha and Wulf Sternhammer.

So for those of you as yet uninitiated, the basic concept is this: Following the Atom Wars of the 22nd century, many of those who survived were dosed with Strontium 90, a product of the fallout. This caused long term genetic mutations which led their children to be regarded as a genetic underclass, their mutations ranging from minor to useful to hideous. The two level

society this led to in turn caused outright civil war and finally to mutants being banned outside ghettos built specially for them. Many are recruited by the Search/Destroy Agency where they earn the nickname 'Strontium Dogs', hunting down bounties across the galaxy and gaining a fierce reputation as soldiers, lawmen and mercenaries as the situation requires. Our heroes are Jonny Alpha, a mutant with latent telepathy and Alpha-ray soaked eyes giving him enhanced vision and Wulf Sternhammer, a time displaced Viking and Jonny's best friend.

This volume starts quietly enough with Wulf, Jonny and the splendid Middenface McNulty participating in a mass round up of criminals. They get more successful, Jonny and Wulf buy some land and take some time off and then, all hell breaks loose. Strontium Dog was always amongst the darkest of 2000AD's strips and the stories presented here bear that out. The events of 'Rage' are as horrific as they are shocking, changing the nature of the strip forever and sending Jonny into some very dark places. Over the course of the story he becomes a Clint Eastwood-esque figure, a restless seeker of vengeance unable to deal with anything other than hatred for the men who've damaged his life. In a particularly audacious piece of storytelling, we even get the story both of why Jonny and Wulf have been targeted and how they first met nested inside 'Rage'. 'Ragnarok' is intensely over the top and sees Jonny dispatched to the past to stop Max Bubba, a militant mutant criminal from wiping out humanity and time. It's incredibly energetic, almost to a deranged extent and the final scenes, with Jonny, Wulf, a boatload of Vikings and a Huey gunship fresh out of Vietnam versus Max Bubba's troops is one of the series' high points. The smaller strips here are equally impressive, especially the distinctly 'Shane'-like overtones of the later ones but it's the shadow of Max Bubba that falls across this volume and displays everything that made Strontium Dog great. Relentlessly dark, blackly humorous and crammed with both a uniquely English sensibility and some real narrative twists, this is an old classic that's utterly deserving of the title. Highly recommended.

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

Coming soon... **New Kids on the Block – The Re-Match...**