

Reality is a Substratum of the Imagination

The Stainless Steel Hamster

Part three of the mighty saga of *ZOOL*, Death Planet where the intractable hordes of (about) 10,000 (10,042 to be accurate) worlds battle in the dark swamps amid the death-throes of unnameable beasts, the world of terror whose very name is enough to send the mightiest warriors, the greatest Galactic agents, and the most sickeningly bemuscle superheroes gibbering into the arms of their psychoanalyst, and so on.

“Yes,” cried the Mad Alchemist, “*Zool!*... What am I standing in?” He had mastered the trick of appearing from nowhere, but had not yet managed to avoid landing in puddles, Fire Dragon pats, or the slimy remains of decimated (not decimalised — this is a base twelve universe) cactusoid.

“Gee, glad you could make it.” Prinz Gestetner von Herpes managed to make it sound like a threat (which, indeed, it was, in his native Stew-Dim). “Your loathsome ankle-appendages are sliding in a morass of decimated artificial cactus, but I’m sure you didn’t really want to know that.”

Jane had been conveniently¹⁰ forgotten. She sat up, and tried to sidle past the two masters of unspeakable evil towards the circular panel in the wall marked ‘Airlock’, not realising that beyond it waited a welcoming committee representing the massed hordes of Zool...

... and that inside it, banished from the interior of the phallic battleship for indulging in ghastly rites involving robes of black and multi-coloured custard, shivered two Revenants, ghostly relics of an era when Cutlass had been more than a name to frighten the children with, and the Mad Alchemist had languished in riches and exile.

“Whatever you do, don’t call it Nescafé,” said the computer. Von Herpes and Sniablib stared cross-eyed at each other.

“Did you say that?” each gasped.

Meanwhile, Jane slipped quietly through the airlock’s inner door, only slightly impeded by the Revenants slipping quietly in the other direction through the same gap since she was a past, present and future master (or should that be mistress? No, that has other connotations – ahem) of creative topological deformation of personal body space.¹¹

The taller Revenant looked around him with all four eyes popping out.

“Oh joy, oh rapture,” he cried, pulling at his dog-collar in ecstasy, “at last! The inside of a battleship!”

The smaller one grinned menacingly over the barrel of a highly charged Kill-O-Zap Multi-Shot water-pistol. The Mad Alchemist and von Herpes somehow got the idea that they were viewing this magnificent piece of hardware from the wrong angle — from their position, it didn’t look very pretty.

“I don’t intend to deprive you of your freedom of movement, of course,” smiled Korb, “merely to blow your heads off if you so much as twitch.”

Outside the ship, the reception committee was arguing fiercely amongst itself.

¹⁰for further reading, see *Extremely Unlikely Coincidences and the Big Burp* by Shackle and Brock (CUP)

¹¹See *Violations of Body Space and Other Authoritarian Concepts* by Rawb Urej, published by S&B Books.

“Violence is a perfectly acceptable alternative,” stated Doctor Death, as he struggled to get a pair of black, studded battle-nappies onto a writhing cactus.

“Zool is being taken over by fascist mutant bacteria!” it squealed, before being silenced by a steel plated finger.

“Consider page eight, paragraph two of *The Man in the Maze*, for example,” he continued. “I’ve noticed in myself, and in a lot of other science-fiction – oops.”

The cactus fell to the ground as its black-garbed parent vanished in a puff of smoke.

“Where’s my Daddy gone?” it asked pathetically.

Jane had the feeling she’d been through this before.

But this time the little cactus was accompanied by Molin-Cax (a hairy orange and purple creature with two of things most people only had one of) and a lugubrious personage known only as God.

The computer’s voice floated out through the open airlock across a definitely sticky silence.

“Sorry, not Nescafé,” it rambled. “I meant Maxwell —”

There was a cloud of dust in the space previously occupied by Molin-Cax, a blurred impression of movement, and a loud crashing noise inside the ship.

“That’s funny,” thought Jane out loud, “I could have sworn on my future grandmother’s grave that there were two things/beings/un-nameable monstrosities (delete as applicable according to culture and aesthetic norm) with the cactus. . .”

- Why is the man/thing/etc. . . known only as God running towards the cardboard horizon as if the massed hordes of Zool were after him?
- Where *are* the massed hordes of Zool?
- *What* (or who) is trying to annoy the neighbours by being very noisy inside the battleship? (As if you couldn’t guess.)
- Is the battleship carrying Mellow Birds after all?
- Are you still awake?

BANG.