

# Of Lentils and a Screwdriver

The Reverend Graham Stiles

Episode seven of *Zool*, in which the enemy are revealed in a feeble attempt to set plot going.

“But why are we gathering the O.U.S.F.G?” asked Von Herpes, writing things down in a small red note-book.

“I know,” said Korb, smugly.

“Why?” chorused the multitudes.

“Neep,” chorused Jane and the Stainless Steel Hamster.

Harkonnen, alias The Reverend Graham Stiles, was sitting in the corner reading a book — *How to Sell Friends and Influence People* — whilst simultaneously performing unsavoury acts on the Stainless Steel Hamster with a screwdriver and packet of lentils. He was prodded into action:

“As Korb would have told you, if he wasn’t so busy looking smug, the Starsheep Troopers are massing. We have not a moment to lose, for they know we are ready to assemble the O.U.S.F.G.”

“How?” gasped everyone except Rave, whose expression betrayed as little as always, though the more perceptive would have noticed a slight boggling of the eyes (increasing from 7 to 9 Rochfords on the wide-eyed incredulity scale).

“You may have thought, my children. . .,” cries of “Hallelujah!” from Gestetner von Herpes, “. . . that I was committing sickening acts of depravity with this robot, but you may recall that I was against public mechanism [a crime even more heinous than bestiality and forbidden on almost all planets –ed] and it is well known that I never change my mind.” Sniggers from the hordes. “I have deactivated this robot, but if you look in that cupboard there, you will find the real Stainless Steel Hamster. . .”

The cupboard was opened and the small robot sat there, tied up, neeping piteously to itself, its nostrils twitching gently.

“What is this then?” asked someone, pointing to the deactivated heap of metal.

“I know,” said Korb, smugly.

“This is a death robot of the Starsheep Troopers — not the Stainless Steel Hamster, but Perry Rodent. Once again I have saved you, my children. The penance will be five Hail Marys, and my bill’s in the post.”

The real Stainless Steel Hamster was untied and scampered happily off to its Hutch.

“But *who* are the Starsheep Troopers?” asked Jane.

“I know,” said Korb, smugly.

“It all started when a ghastly figure in blue denim jacket and jeans on a bicycle with stickers saying ‘Abingdon or bust’ appeared before me.

“It opened its mouth and, in a whiny voice, said ‘I am Obi-Dave Wuntun. And I was told by the Author to tell you to meet him at the bar of the Nelson Mandela Spaceport.’

“‘But why?’ I asked. ‘I can’t tell you that, I’m afraid,’ he whined. ‘It was told me in confidence.’

“The figure faded out leaving last a moustached grin. I had heard before of ‘The Author’, a renegade

of the band of desperados known as... ‘The Hax’.”

“I knew that,” said Korb, smugly.

“The Nelson Mandela Spaceport was on the planet Earth. You may have heard of it.

“Fortunately, I had an excuse to go to Earth, as I was host of a T.V. game show, *The Price is Low*, where as the ‘mercenary minister,’ I encouraged people to perform sickening acts of depravity and degradation for money.”

“Who needs money?” chorused Molin-Cax.

“I arrived at the spaceport and headed for the bar — a neon light appeared to say ‘DISMAL PORT BAR’, hardly auspicious, but when I got closer, I found that some of the letters were broken and it said ‘ALDISS MALTS, PORT SIDE BAR’. Aldiss malt — some kind of British beer, I figured.

“The notice above the door said, ‘Mike Callahan, licensed to sell intoxicating liquors and pan-galactic gargle blasters on and off the premises.’

“I went in.

“The man behind the bar, a veritable giant of a man, was talking on the ‘phone:

“‘Sure, Mrs. Leibowitz,’ he said, ‘I’ll give your husband that shopping order.’

“He looked up.

“‘Good evening, Reverend,’ he said, ‘The Admiral’s expecting you. He’s at the table in the corner.’

“I walked past the piano, where a large cat was playing. A notice read:

Requests	5CR
‘Rodger Young’	10CR
Silence	25CR

“I walked to a table in the corner. An old gentleman, with a steely gaze, stood up and shook my hand.

“‘Pleased to meet you.’

“‘I’m honoured,’ I replied, ‘The Reverend Graham Stiles.’

“‘Admiral Robert A. Hardloin,’ he replied.”

“I knew,” said Korb, smugly.

The pianist [he said, abandoning the opening quote-marks — pretend it’s a flashback and imagine white edges to the screen] began to play and sing:

It’s still the same old story,  
The plot is crass and gory,  
The editors still buy,  
And much the same word rates apply,  
As time goes by.

“Silence!” shouted the Admiral, “I thought I told you never to play that!”

The pianist snorted (or meowed, if one’s being technical) in disgust, and began to eat a confectionery bar, throwing the wrapper on the floor. I glanced at it. ‘Rick’s bar’, it said. Was this a clue, I asked myself? Probably not.

“Here I am on the glory road, stranger in a strange land. Since I was a space cadet, I waited for the day when we would find the tunnel in the sky, the door into summer. I speak, of course,

metaphorically. The day when self-determining beings would be unfettered from government. And all thanks to we, The Hax.” His eyes glinted as one who had purpose in life.

“But,” he said, with the tone of voice of one who believes in the maxim, ‘Don’t get mad, get even,’ “The Hax have been corrupted. Under the leadership of the Council of Five, they plan to enslave the Galaxy.”

“When,” I asked.

“You must act quickly, you have barely time for the stars, time enough for love. The Hax begin Friday, the day after tomorrow.”

“But who are the Council of Five?”

“The five,” replied the Admiral, “or the trilogy, as they call themselves with their sick humour, are Ursula K., a giant androgynous, strongly anti-technology penguin; Asnoplott, a dour Hebrew who writes at tedious length about anything, particularly the end of civilisation; Clark, generally called ‘Mr Sri Lanka’, who thinks (the Admiral chuckled) this is because he made his home there and does not realise this is rhyming slang; and lastly, there is Poor Nell, a female militarist with a companion of equal totalitarian views and weapon fixation.”

“But that’s only four,” I protested.

“There’s a new development,” said the Admiral. “They’ve recruited a new member, a simian, a gibbon to be precise, skilled in the black art for which Hax are famous to a degree never seen before — called, I believe, William.”

A Chinese woman in thigh length boots appeared round the door and brandished a whip at the Admiral.

“Now,” said the Admiral, with a glint in his eye, “don’t hesitate to call me if you need help — but hurry, time is short. Now, if you’ll excuse me, my water-bed awaits.” He chuckled, and said, anticipation noticeable in his voice, “Lee Moon is a harsh mistress.”

I thought to myself of the danger ahead, of the black art of the Hax — Neuromancy, the ability to turn men and women into cardboard; of our enemy, headed by Ursula K., Asnoplott, Clark, Poor Nell, and newest of all, William Gibbon, Neuromancer — with their cardboard zombies, the dreaded Starsheep Troopers. I needed a drink.

“I knew that,” said Korb, smugly.