

# Cop Out

## Maxwell's Dæmon

It's Friday the 13th of July, and just like every previous Friday the 13th of July the Eddorians are hosting the Annual (in this region of the galaxy the 13th of every month falls on a Friday) Convention of Baddies — known to all malefactors throughout the galaxy as *Nasticon*.

Following the opening ceremony, a group gathers in the bar. The topic of conversation concerns a rather unusual request.

Ming the Merciless is furious. "Well I'm not going to let these degenerates trample all over me. I'm the most powerful being in the universe..."

"Aren't we all?" comments Servalan acidly.

Ming the Merciless is not one to be interrupted by a mere Earthling. "...I say we tell them to get lost — better still, why don't we invade the Gardener's Arms?"

"You are out of touch," replies the Mad Alchemist, "Didn't you see the Landlord in the main hall today? Ever since he raised the price of blackcurrent and lemonade, he's been one of us. And much as it pains me to say it, these Authors," he spits the obscene word out, "are far more powerful than us. Due to the slip of the tongue of one of their predecessors, I was kept in a battleship for an interminable number of episodes. And that was only an accident," he pauses.

"A what?" they all chorus.

"An *ACCIDENT*. Think what they could do if they set their minds to being nasty. All they want is for us to invent this weapon to get them out of a fix. Having invented it I'm sure we can put it to our own use later."

Darth Vader approaches. If it were possible to sweet-talk while doing an impression of a censored obscene phone-call, Darth Vader would be sweet-talking. "Did I hear you mention a weapon?"

"You did. No — don't take that mask off. I don't care if you want to drink. Your breath smells worse than an Aberdeen mens' toilet (even without the army). If you want to hear about this weapon, you have to keep your mask on. OK." He pauses to collect his thoughts. "It seems that large chunks of *Time Warriors of Zool*<sup>2</sup> have gone missing, so the authors don't know how to start the sequel..."

"Couldn't you tell them?" interrupts Dick Dastardly.

"Ah. I seem to have developed a highly specific form of amnesia."

"(*Cop out*) (*Cop out*)," bumbles the Blob quietly to itself in the corner.

"Well anyway," continues the Mad Alchemist, "they want us to put our heads together and invent a weapon that will allow them to start a sequel that may have major inconsistencies with the original."

"You mean like 2010?" asks Darth.

"Precisely. And if we don't come up with the goods, they have threatened to write us all in as Star Trek security guards or Captain's crumpet." They gasp at the terrifying thought. "But the real reason why we should build this weapon is that it will allow us to rule the Universe (and you thought that I would have an original reason)."

This convinces them. After all who doesn't want to rule the Universe? After the Authors' task is completed each baddie is sure that he will be able to double-cross the Mad Alchemist — just as the

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<sup>2</sup>Also available in type-it-yourself books.

Mad Alchemist is sure that he will be able to double-cross the rest of them. After all they have all had a lifetime's practice at double-crossing and being double-crossed. That's what makes them baddies!

Their weapon is based upon the Mad Alchemist's greatest theory. Only its lowest implications have hitherto been explored, and already Jane Howarth and her intrepid companions have come to dread it. Now these ultimate malefactors plan to stretch it to its furthest limits and beyond!

This theory is known as QSD — Quantum Story Dynamics. Since the term 'Author' can be assigned to a non-local hidden variable, the Mad Alchemist postulated an unseen virtual ploton flux between the start and end of an episode of *Time Warriors of Zool*, which, when parameterised with the episode matrix elements, causes a change of parity in...

"Look, would you kindly leave to explanation of science you don't understand to Doc Smith, and cut out the narration",<sup>3</sup> interrupts the Mad Alchemist. "We're setting up the hyperplot generators."

A bit further back — Right — Switch on — Who forgot to plug the dashed<sup>4</sup> thing in? — OK — just a few more adjustments — Reverse the polarity of the neutron flow — Change the narration switch to Past Tense — Throw open the switches on the sonic oscillator — Step up the reactor power input — More — More — More — Press Go!

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"What the...," shrieked Jane Howarth, and well she might. For as the Mad Alchemist pressed the button marked GO, the entire universe was projected into sub-plot-space. It is not surprising that under these circumstances, reality had a nervous breakdown.

The only part of her surroundings that she could feel comfortable with was her seat in the circle of the ABC Magdalen Street. Then she remembered something about that cinema, and she did not feel comfortable with any of her surroundings.

A little lost cactus approached her cautiously and asked her in a shrill voice whether she had seen its daddy. She replied sadly that, sorry, she hadn't.

In the row in front of her, thirteen black cats started to sing what sounded remarkably like a requiem mass. For John Fitzgerald Kennedy, she was told.<sup>5</sup>

The screen lit up to reveal a man eating cigarette stubs from the ashtrays on the back of the seats. As he did this words moved up the screen:

For those who are not sure whether they would object to not being forbidden to refuse the right to not give up smoking, the right hand side of the auditorium has been designated a total confusion zone. *The Mgt.*

This was followed by a Pathé Newsreel showing: first, the successful lift-off for Mars of St. Mary's Tower, and second, the burning of every copy of a printing of *The Left Hand of Darkness* due to the misprinting of every occurrence of the word 'Ansible' as 'Lesbian'. The publisher loudly denounced this "Bradburiesque censorship".

Richard Milhous Nixon left the cinema early in order not to miss a talk by the Reverend Graham Stiles.

"OK — start the tape," says the Mad Alchemist, who is still in the present tense.

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<sup>3</sup>Alright — if you let me give a reference: more information on the fascinating subject of QSD can be obtained from Shackle and Brock, *All you ever wanted to know about reality but felt too insecure to ask* (OUP, 1997).

<sup>4</sup>Baddies use extremely obscene language.

<sup>5</sup>The little green 'in-joke' indicator light sometimes lights up at the wrong time. Sub-plot-space contains many weirdnesses, not all of them in-jokes.

*The Authors would like to apologise for this (extremely unconvincing) jump in the plot. It has been introduced:—*

- a) because no one knew quite where the hero had been left, and*
- b) in order to introduce the concept of sub-plot-space, which will shortly be of vital importance to all those doing the new education-cuts special: Joint Honours in Physics and English.*

As the booming voice finished, our hero felt her identity slowly fading away. As memories flashed before her and were gone, she grabbed at one and held on tight. As the last left her and a new self began to form, the cinema faded and she found herself. . . somewhere else — with only one memory of her former life remaining: that at some time in her past she had stood on that most terrifying of planets: *ZOOL*, Death Planet where the intractable criminals of 10,000 worlds, etc.