

SPUNG!

Thur of Orlust

Imagine a world of utter bleakness — miles of ravaged desert scenery — scorched earth, barren wilderness.

Imagine a world whose inhabitants are as hard and lifeless as the landscape — bitter, twisted men and women, with no future and a nightmare of a past.

Imagine a world of strange, horrifying religions, eerie silences and mutant vegetation, where only the very toughest have a chance of survival.

Imagine a world where the 'phones never work!

Imagine *ZOOL*. Death Planet where the intractable criminals of 10,000 worlds battle in the dark swamps, amid the death-throes of un-nameable beasts (in the never ending search for lost contact-lenses); where deadly villains are plotting the destruction of humanity; and our heroine, the superlative Galactic Agent Jane Howarth, awaits a fate of almost certain death!!

And then — forget about it. My story begins elsewhere. . .

Far away on Bara, Thur was muttering to herself (and to any of her assorted menagerie who happened to be in earshot): “Now, let me see. . . a Baraday is the same as 0.856 of a Zool-day, which means we have. . . ho. . . hummmm. . . my head hurts. . . ah yes. . . 12.5 Baradays to get there. . . which means. . . wonderful! We have two days spare! Quick everyone! Get the spaceship out! We’ve got a mission on our hands! Just what I need to get out of the tedium of Hae-Bru-Proe-Says!” (a strange, arcane rite which lasts many hours and leaves the officiator with a stiff back, a cramped hand, a scrambled brain and a foul temper; with the only visible result a page of weird scribbles — totally incomprehensible to any but the initiated. But perhaps Thur gets some sort of kick out of it.)

For a few hours, pandemonium reigned as the animals scurried hither and thither preparing the spaceship, the mighty and magnificent Tevath-Tur (actually Thur’s Ark), for take off, then squabbling among themselves as to who should be included in the mission.

“Shut up you scumbags!”, yelled Thur emerging into the arc of light surrounding the spaceship, “I’m deciding who’s going — not you!”

“Now we need maximum speed, hence minimum weight, which rules out the dragon and the lion who can’t pilot the ship anyway. But I must have the battle toucan.” With a squawk of triumph Rasputin the battle toucan flew to Thur’s shoulder, spitting out some hair belonging to a strange alien creature (whose only mode of attack is to clench the wrists of its opponents which mysteriously causes bright flashes of light to appear nearby, incapacitating the opponent entirely) with whom he had been arguing earlier. “And a competent copilot —”

“That’s me!” shouted a voice, belonging to a creature emerging from the armoury, bowed down under the weight of various bits of deadly weaponry, ammunition and explosive devices. . . “If you’re going to see Jane I’m coming because I’m fed up of you not letting me shoot anything — Jane always lets me shoot things.” As he said these words he grinned amiably, twirling a multi-shot super dart-gun purposefully in his right hand. . .

“But I. . .” began Hurnipulls, an essentially much nicer and more useful co-pilot. *SPUNG!* went Hurnipulls¹² as a dart hit him smack on the nose, causing a collision with the wall of the spaceship,

¹²For a discussion of source-critical methods relating to this passage, see *Heinlein the Fetishist* by P. Raines,

and a rather crumpled, concussed Hurnipulls to land splat on the tarmac. At this juncture most of the animals disappeared rapidly, apart from the hedgehog, who merely rolled himself into a ball and stayed very still.

“O.K. Cutlass, you win,” said Thur gloomily, “let’s get this crate off the ground.”

“Oh good,” said Cutlass, with a self-satisfied grin, and climbed into the co-pilot’s seat. [Cutlass, for the uninitiated, is an (almost) intelligent talking ape which accompanied Jane Howarth in her earlier adventures, recorded in *Time Warriors of Zool*. How he came to be part of Thur’s menagerie is one of the mysteries of sub-plot-space, but he wasn’t unhappy about the situation — only about Thur’s ban on the use of deadly weapons. –ed]

“Let’s go find Jane,” said Cutlass eagerly, once the ship had left Baran atmosphere.

“Not so fast. First we must visit the dread planet Summer-Vile, and steal an artifact of vital importance to the success of our mission. We’ll need to make some sort of diversion. . .”

“Oooh!! Can I blow something up?” asked Cutlass, his face brightening at the thought.

“Well. . .”

“Oh go on. . . I’ll only make it a small explosion.” Cutlass claimed, while trying to worm his way onto the pilot’s seat and ‘press’ his idea more thoroughly.

“Only if you do no damage to life or limb or important property — I just want a small fire, that’s all,” said Thur firmly, while extracting herself from Cutlass’ body space.

“Oh, you’re no fun at all! Now Jane. . .”

‘I’m beginning to have a bad feeling about this,’ thought Thur as she plotted the ship’s coordinates for the dread planet of Summer-Vile. ‘Now, where do I keep that pick-axe? . . .’

. . . Not quite meanwhile (due to time lapse), our heroine is facing a truly ‘sticky’ situation on far-away Zool, death planet where. . . (you know the rest):–

“Greetings,” intoned Dr. Death, covering Jane with his sacrificial ray-gun. “It’s bad news I’m afraid. I’ve consulted the sacred texts and you just cannot be the prophetess — you’re far too short for a start. Therefore you must be an impostor and the penalty for blasphemy is sacrificial death.”

“Isn’t that an intzy-wintzy bit drastic?” asked Jane in her smallest voice. “Have you no pity?”

“I’m afraid not,” replied Dr. Death. “Anyway, we all have to learn to make sacrifices.”

“And I,” added Molin-Cax in unison, “have reason to believe you are an agent of the State, an oppressor of the freedom-loving people of Zool, whose death will gratify my allies exceedingly.”

At this point, the door flung open, and in strode an eccentrically dressed figure with a determined look on her face and a battle-toucan with slavering chops perched on her shoulder.

“Greetings,” said Dr. Death. “Who are you?”

“I am Thur of Orlust, Supreme Beast-Mistress of Bara, Interpreter of the Ancient Texts, Guardian of the Mysteries of the Czech-buk, Keeper of the Secrets of the Oos-Fooga Counts. Upholder of the. . .”

“Yes, yes,” interrupted Molin-Cax (for once not in synch), “stop the self-eulogizing and tell us whose side you’re on.”

“Oh. Jane’s of course.” And without pausing to see what effect this statement had on her listeners, she added nonchalantly, “Does anyone know why a small cactus in black studded battle nappies is wandering around outside?”

“My baby!” cried Dr. Death and vanished through the door.

“And while I think of it: I brought you — at great pain and personal cost — this, Jane,” continued Thur, holding out a small bowl of raspberries and cream.

“Oh Thur! You stole this! From the dread planet Summer-Vile! Oh joy, oh rapture! Oh, I’ll never forget this! I am eternally grateful! You must know how hard it is being a Galactic Agent! People expect you to go through an entire epic without so much as a bite to eat! You’re a real hero! I’m overjoyed!”

“You’d better be. You don’t know what trouble Cutlass caused me. . .”

“Cutlass?! He’s with you?”

“Yes, but he had a slight ‘accident’ about half-way here. I should think he’ll be coming round any minute. . .”

“Uh-hem,” said Molin-Cax loudly. “I hate to break up the happy reunion scene but I would like to point out that you are at the wrong end of the large and deadly implement I am holding. i.e. you are my prisoners.”

Thur smiled sweetly and raised her right eyebrow. With a squawk and a blur Rasputin dived off her shoulder, wrenched the large and deadly implement from startled hands and noisily crunched it up in a corner.

Thur smiled sweetly and raised her left eyebrow. Nothing happened.

“We can still defeat you unarmed!” growled Molin-Cax.

“I would just like to point out that I am a fourth-dan adept in the deadly martial art of Ti-kli-do,” commented Thur, taking a step towards the dual entity.

“No! No! We submit! No more! I can’t take it!” he cried covering against the wall.

“Well then Jane, is there anything else bothering you?”

“I’m afraid there is. Like the massed hordes of Zool advancing on the temple and the evil Prinz Gestetner von Herpes and the Mad Alchemist and the Author knows who else plotting dastardly evil in the battlesheep!”

“I see. What we need is a plan. Is God around somewhere? He might be quite useful but he’s normally not around when actually needed. . .”

. . . Truly meanwhile, in the battlesheep, plans to conquer the galaxy are afoot.

“With this I — I mean we — can conquer the galaxy!” declared Prinz Gestetner, waving the Newtron Detonator around triumphantly. “But first, we must deal with that meddling, infuriating little nuisance, that tiresome Jane Howarth — for I will never have another good night’s sleep if I haven’t first witnessed her die a gruesome death!”

“Well that’s typical,” said Korb to the taller Revenant in a whisper. “Just when we’re in a good position to go out and conquer the galaxy, some stupid person decides to pursue some petty revenge on a person of no importance, which will no doubt tie us up for the next umpteen episodes and get us absolutely nowhere!”

“It seems to be a fatal flaw in arch-villains,” agreed the tall Revenant. “It’s probably why they never. . .”

“Shhh! Stop whispering you two! I can hear something,” said the Mad Alchemist.

As the four villains listened, there came a low, ominous knock at the door of the inner airlock.

“Yah-oo,” said Prinz Gestetner, which in his language roughly means, ‘you may enter, but if I don’t like the look of your face I shall blast it away from the rest of you.’

As all four gazed and trained their deadly weapons towards the airlock, slowly, the door began to open...

- What will happen in the next exciting episode of *Zool*?
- Who is at the door of the battleship?
- Will Jane and Thur be able to disentangle themselves from the temple of the Black Cactus?
- Is Dr Death's offspring really outside or was it just a ploy?
- Will someone liquidate this boring Thur person before she defeats anyone else?
- Is Cutlass awake?
- Is God?
- All this and more (or quite possibly less) in the next enthralling episode of *Conquerors of Zool!!!*