

# A Spider, a Ghost, the Income-Tax, Gout, and an Umbrella for Three

## The Midnite Skulker

*Episode 11: In which the author introduces himself, not to mention a ridiculous number of plot devices, and the amount of piteous weeping has to be seen to be believed.*<sup>21</sup>

**ZOOL** Death planet of a thousand worlds!

**ZOOL** Planet of immortals — where even Death does not dare stalk the streets!

**ZOOL** Planet of horror — where even life assurance salesmen fear to tread!

**ZOOL** And you thought the Cowley Road was bad...

The Author neeped piteously to itself and cringed a bit. “So what do I need to do now? Hmm... well, most importantly, I have to introduce myself. Then I need to create a plot, save agent Howarth and her companions from the horribly beweped Gestetner von Herpes, and resurrect the O.U.S.F.G. from  $3 \times 10^{\text{googolplex}}$  universal cycles of stasis. And no more of these silly in-jokes; what we need here is serious hard sf, discussion of deep moral issues, penetrating cultural analyses, and so on...

“Yes, that’s it. What we need is a deus ex machina.”

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### (11.1) *All Hail The Deus Ex Machina*

“Stand by to repel boarders!” yelled agent Howarth.

“You mean... they’re not just going to blow us out of the story?” asked Thur.

“Don’t be silly,” said Howarth in an exasperated voice, “we’ve got script immunity!”

So the four stood by the airlock, gripping spanners, breadknives and each others’ elbows, waiting for von Herpes and the Mad Alchemist to come through. About five minutes later, someone tapped agent Howarth on the shoulder. She spun round to find herself staring down the barrel of a Bek-A-Skweek sonic pistol, held by von Herpes himself. “Wrong airlock,” he sneered.

“What... what are you going to do to us?” quavered Howarth, Cutlass and Thur simultaneously. (The toucan was speechless with fear.)

“Well,” said von Herpes nastily, “first we will expel Cutlass into deep space without an oxygen mask. Then we will sell the toucan to a cat-food firm. And then, Galactic Agent Jane Howarth and Thur of Orlust, we will rape you well and good, as is the traditional role of cliché villains. We were going to have you raped by 150 men, but it’s already been tried.”<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup>©1986 Harlan Ellison Titling Enterprises.

<sup>22</sup>See Peter Tremayne’s LAN-KERN books.

"I'm ready," said Thur bravely.

"It's not so much getting raped that I mind," neeped agent Howarth piteously, "just as long as the guy's got a short fuzzy haircut."

"Tough shit," leered Gestetner, "I warned you I was evil." (As indeed he was.) "Now," he continued, waving the Bek-A-Skweek at Cutlass, "into the airlock, ape, and start saying your prayers."

Cutlass quoted some choice passages from the Book of Armaments, but stood his ground. "I'm not going into that airlock!" he shouted. "I'd rather... yes, I'd rather die!"

"You *will* die," pointed out von Herpes logically.

"Oh... yes... sorry..." muttered Cutlass and shambled sheepishly towards the airlock. "Er, bye Jane, bye Thur, bye Rasputin, hope the lifestyle comes together."

"Don't forget to close the door behind you," cried Jane, "the place costs enough to heat without draughts." The door slid shut behind him, a red light went on, and the computer woke up long enough to growl "Man Overboard, Man Overboard" before going back to sleep. After a bit the red light went off.

"Right," said von Herpes, "he's dead now."

(But von Herpes was wrong. Cutlass was not dead. Instead he had, miraculously and for no apparent reason, been transformed into the ubiquitous bowl of petunias and was happily working out how much damage he could do if he fell on a populated area from a great height. However, for the purposes of this episode he will be considered dead, at least until I need a bowl of petunias as a plot device.)

"OK toucan," barked the Prinz [for the slow/illiterate/braindead among you — we're back on the ship now], "climb into this mincer which I just happen to have concealed about my person — ah, here it is. In you go!"

"He'd rather die," said Thur protectively. The toucan, forgetting its battle training, hid its head under its wings and neeped piteously.

"He will die," pointed out von Herpes, wondering if the same trick could work twice.

"He'd rather die quickly," corrected Thur.

"Fair enough," said the Prinz and fired the Bek-A-Skweek at the cowering bird.

"Excuse me," said the sonic pistol.

"What?" asked von Herpes in bewilderment, while the other three breathed a sigh of relief and ran (or flew) away.

"Will you kindly stop squeezing my trigger? I mean, we haven't even been introduced yet—"

"OK, I'm Prinz Gestetner von Herpes — villain of the piece, and under the control of either the Hax, C.I.R.C.A. or the Mad Alchemist, nobody's quite sure at the moment — hi, can I take you out to dinner sometime? And now will you shoot that blasted toucan?"

"Aren't we going to talk about me?" asked the Bek-A-Skweek imploringly.

Von Herpes swore under his breath. "Tell me about yourself, then," he snarled, meanwhile setting off after his victims.

"Well," began the sonic pistol, "first you have to know that all new weapons to emerge from the great transgalactic firm of Heddle & Heddle Megadeaths Inc. are now fitted with GMP — Genuine Mouse Personalities — and—"

"Yeah," drawled von Herpes, "you do have all the personality of a mouse.<sup>23</sup>"

The pistol sulked for a bit, then said accusingly, "And you forgot to bring me my morning coffee

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<sup>23</sup>Prinz Gestetner von Herpes' dialogue reprinted by kind permission of David Lane Records.

today.”

“That wasn’t my fault! That’s Molin-Cax’s job — and yes, I know he’s recruited agent Howarth, the Stainless Steel Hamster, the White Queen and that small hairy one whose name slips my mind right now, though I think Howarth knows someone else’s<sup>24</sup> — and he’s defected to the O.U.S.F.G. along with all the others.”

“Oh, all right,” said the Bek-A-Skweek, mollified. “I didn’t want to be woken up anyway.”

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(11.2) *The Bells Of New College Go Ding-A-Ling For Me But Not For You, Et Cetera.*

“Greetings,” said the small hairy creature as the giant hand deposited agent Howarth, Thur and the toucan on the ground in the middle of a well-kept landscape garden. “I see my deus ex machina caught you in time — I mean, found you in time.”

“Oh, er, yes. It’s, er, yours, is it?” asked agent Howarth.

“Yes,” said the small hairy creature, evidently no master of the fine art of small talk. “This way, please.” He led them across the garden towards an enormous and slightly ghastly mansion.

“Er, who are you?” asked Howarth embarrassedly. Clearly she was no conversational whiz either.

The small hairy creature stopped and regarded her lividly. “I,” it said, “as you should know by now, am Baron Spitzenbrachen van Friedrich der Plotzenklobbering. Despite any misconceptions that you and that cringing fool Gestetner von Herpes may hold in common.”

“Oh, yes,” said agent Howarth, privately thinking that any enemy of the evil Prinz was a friend of hers.

“And this,” said the Baron proudly, “is my baronial mansion, Hollidge.”

They were quite close to the building now, and Jane could see that “slightly ghastly” was a kind way to describe the architecture. She couldn’t quite place either the style or the building material, though both seemed disturbingly familiar.

“Hollidge,” continued van Friedrich, “is made entirely out of tiny pieces of atomic bomb casing.” He beamed proudly at the three.

“But why?” asked Howarth, wondering if this explained the hairiness of the creature.

“Because Mike Oldfield had bought out the shop’s entire stock of eggshells,” he muttered sulkily. “Besides, this way I get to call it ‘Nuke-Hollidge’ and pretend it’s respectable.”

“I see,” lied agent Howarth, “er, how many A-bombs did it take?”

“Just one.”

“Just one? For a big place like this? But how?”

“Multiple Banach-Tarski decompositions, of course,” the Baron said contemptuously, supposedly explaining everything.

“Multiple how-muches?” boggled Howarth.

“Banach-Tarski de— look, I’ll show you. First you take a very sharp knife...<sup>25</sup>”

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<sup>24</sup>Only about three people, including me, stand a hope of understanding this reference. Everybody else — tough!

<sup>25</sup>For further details, see chapter 2 of Shackle and Brock, *101 Ways to Warp Reality Using the Axiom of Choice* (F.U.P., 2020)

**(11.3)** *In Which A Plot Device And A Pun<sup>26</sup> Combine To Spawn Something Worse Than Either*

BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU, proclaimed the posters dotted all over Sane-Tans, and Molin-Cax cringed as he scuttled down a side-street to his secret rendezvous with the other members of the banned, not to mention curiously-named, Sane-Tans' Nastiness Is Sane-Tans' Salvation (SATANISTS) organisation. But his heart sang, for today was the day of change, when Sane-Tans would be free again. Today SATANISTS would summon the Robert Anton Wilson.

For those of you who haven't cottoned on yet, here is the plot device in all its shabby and improbable glory: Howarth had made yet another mistake. She had ordered Cutlass to attack Sane-Tans with a stasis beam — but had given him the wrong weapon. Instead of the expected effect, Sane-Tans was doomed to 3 x 10-to-the-power-googolplex universal cycles suffering the effects of a statist beam.

But not if Molin-Cax had anything to do with it.

He had convened a circle of allies, including the great philosopher Dubiatrius Xam Norocon Objecticus Aristootle Liberloonius XXIII (a name uttered but rarely, mainly because it took years of training to pronounce the bloody thing), the enigmatic Stainless Steel Hamster, the mighty Baron Harkonnen, mad priest the Reverend Graham Stiles, Korb the all-knowing, the White Queen, the Red Queen and the Green Queen and in fact most of the O.U.S.F.G. (Organisation to Unfetter Self-determining beings From Government — not to be confused with any other real or fictional OUSFGs, living or dead). After a thirteen-hour conference — survived in its entirety only by Dubiatrius, the Stainless Steel Hamster, the White Queen and Baron Spitzenbrachen van Friedrich der Plotzenklobbering (who had since fled Sane-Tans in a *deus ex machina*, pleading an urgent appointment “with a man about a gerbil”) — it had been decided to attempt the hideous rite of summoning the Robert Anton Wilson.

Molin-Cax entered the SATANISTS hideout. The rest of the circle were already there. “Right,” he said, “I've been reading up on this and what we need is a sacrificial living statist.”

“What about Howarth?” suggested Harkonnen.

“Gone,” said Molin-Cax in disgust, “kidnapped by that traitor van Friedrich.”

“Or God?”

“We can't kill him, though; he's omnipotent, remember?”

“Well, how about someone here pretending to be a statist?”

“Wouldn't work.”

“OK then, how about the Red Queen?”

Everyone stared at the Red Queen, who too late began to wish she hadn't defended Russian communism quite so fervently. “Er . . .” she said defensively.

At this point the author decided that it wouldn't be polite to kill off a character before she'd managed to utter two words, and in the time-honoured tradition of ZOO wheeled out a *deus ex machina*. The said DEM thereupon walked (or was wheeled) through the door, wearing an “I LOVE THE STATE” sweatshirt, and beamed, “Hi, folks, is this the conference on What's So Great About The State—” but got no further before being leapt upon, gagged and bound hand and foot.

“And now, statist,” leered Molin-Cax, “we are going to kill you and overthrow the government which you so love.”

The DEM neeped piteously through the gag. “There's a law against unauthorised murder, you know,” it whimpered.

“Well there bloody well shouldn't be!” shouted Molin-Cax. “Begin the summoning!”

The members of the O.U.S.F.G. formed themselves into a circle, at the centre of which Molin-Cax

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<sup>26</sup>**WARNING:** this pun is especially virulent if the victim has already suffered from *Time Warriors of Zool*. [The author would like it noted that he no longer remembers why, so don't ask him.]

stood over the prostrate DEM. He began the ritual.

“Korb!” Korb immediately stuck his thumbs in his ears and waggled his fingers violently. The Stainless Steel Hamster and the wizened dwarf, Michael the Unspellable, sitting on either side of him, looked on in stupefaction.

“Hamster and Michael!” shouted Molin-Cax. “One piece of clothing each!”

The Hamster reluctantly removed its outermost left hind shoe. The dwarf fainted, shocked by this display of wantonness, and upon waking stormed off muttering something about immorality and Victorian values.

“You’re just inhibited!” shouted Molin-Cax after him.

The ritual continued. After a while, a definite presence was observed in the darkest corner of the room. “The Robert Anton Wilson comes!” cried Molin-Cax in an ecstasy of religious fervour. “Quick, we must continue the ritual so that he may break through into this universe!”

Soon, virtually all the celebrants were hiding the parts other beers cannot reach behind Molin-Cax’s dirty towels and looking highly embarrassed. The only ones still even partially clothed were the Stainless Steel Hamster, who was now down to only two coats, four scarves and twenty-seven socks, a being from Maggie’s World known in his own tongue as Kodakagfagevaerkonicamirandixonpolaroid (which, translated literally, means “he who wields a flash-gun with pitiless might, particularly at embarrassing moments,” or, more loosely, “how much for the negatives, you bastard?”), and a Lesser Spotted Scnarf which had survived so far mainly because no-one could tell he was there under the flourishing ecosystem in which he was covered. At this point Molin-Cax decided to complete the summoning, and sacrificed the DEM with a lethal injection of life-extension drugs.

And then several things happened simultaneously. The Robert Anton Wilson solidified into reality. A majestic figure burst in through the door (identified variously as “an alien” by the Hamster and “Big Brother” by Molin-Cax) and bellowed “TURN THAT MUSIC DOWN!”. The area was devastated by what was at the time thought to be one of those meteor strikes so common in bad sf but was later discovered to be the impact of the ubiquitous bowl of petunias travelling at terminal velocity. And the entire O.U.S.F.G. vanished without trace.

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#### (11.4) *Dignified, Assertive, and Ticklish*

“Herpes!” called the Bek-A-Skweek sonic pistol. (They were in that strange limbo where can be found all characters whose authors skimp on the boring descriptive bits.)

“What is it now?” asked Gestetner sullenly.

“Politely,” warned the pistol.

“Is something the matter... dear?” he repeated with attempted sweetness.

“Yes something is. I am very, very bored of the view from inside this holster. I want to live somewhere more interesting. Also I cannot go to sleep upside-down.”

“Well, where do you want to—”

“You will tie me to the top of your head. I shall get a good view from there, and it will be nice and comfortable.”

“Stick it up your ass,” suggested von Herpes helpfully.

“Thank you, I considered that, but I think it would be a bit claustrophobic. The head will do very nicely indeed, thank you.”

“You’ve blown your bloody top,” shouted von Herpes. “I—”

“No,” said the Bek-A-Skweek, “but I’ll blow yours if you don’t cooperate.”

“You can’t do this to me,” groaned the Prinz hopelessly, rummaging around for some string.

“I can and I am,” said the pistol determinedly. “Now get on with it.”

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(11.5) *The Mad Synaesthesiast Strikes Again*

The Baron was giving agent Howarth, Thur and the toucan a tour of his gardens. They paused to enjoy the view, and he asked, “Nice, aren’t they?”

“Yes,” said agent Howarth, and Thur echoed her opinion.

“In fact,” continued the Baron proudly, “I think they are the finest gardens on Zool, even if—”

“Excuse me,” interrupted Howarth, “but did you say Zool?”

“Indeed I did.”

“That is as in Zool, death planet where the intractable criminals of ten thousand etc.?”

“None other.”

Howarth considered a number of possible responses to the news before opting for “Holy shit!”, which she screamed at illegal (even on Zool) volumes before fainting dead away. When she woke up it was to see Molin-Cax bending over her with a blood-stained knife. “Holy shit!” she screamed again with a lack of originality entirely in keeping with the tone of CONQUERORS OF ZOOL, and fainted again.

When she woke up the second time, Molin-Cax was sitting morosely a few feet away exterminating the local flora. “Hello, statist,” he said, “thanks for the friendly greeting.”

“What are you doing here?” demanded the Galactic Agent. “You’re supposed to be stuck in a stasis field on Sane-Tans for the next 3 x 10-to-the-power-googolplex universal cycles. Surely not even Cutlass could have missed a planet at point-blank range!”

Molin-Cax winced at the memory of the awful pun by which he had been saved from this fate. “That traitorous Baron Spitzenbrachen van Friedrich der Plotzenklobbering summoned us here just as we were about to summon the Robert Anton Wilson to break the... er... stasis field.”

Howarth looked around. Yes, all the signs were there: exploding flash-guns, embarrassed squeaks as O.U.S.F.G. members discovered just how many holes there were in Molin-Cax’s towels, wizened dwarves wandering around looking shocked, piteous neeping<sup>27</sup> from the Stainless Steel Hamster as one of the nastier creatures from the Lesser Spotted Scnarf’s ecosystem managed to bite through her much-reduced protective clothing, etc., etc.. This was much more like the Zool she knew.

“Quiet everyone PLEASE!” shouted van Friedrich at the top of his voice. “We will now continue the tour of the gardens!” Everyone ignored him. “Chocolate chip cookies will be served!” he lied hopefully (and not a little desperately), and the members of the O.U.S.F.G. were all ears. “This way,” he shouted, and the ears turned back into members again (for which their owners were extremely grateful). The assembled beings followed the Baron across the garden.

After showing them some boring bits, he got to the first pun. Pointing to a large tree, the fruit of which bore a remarkable resemblance to brassieres, he told the assembled O.U.S.F.G., “This is the fabled Whore’s-Breast Nut tree, a plant thankfully unique to Zool (death planet where the

<sup>27</sup>There is not sufficient space here to go into the full details of neepolinguistics, but those interested in pursuing the subject should consult Rochford, *Neepolinguistics for the Advanced Student* (OUP 2317); or, for a more theoretical viewpoint, Burrage and Towlson, *A Synchronic and Diachronic Consideration of Neepolinguistics* (Sfinx Publications 2280), which has appendices on the effects on culture and literature. For children we recommend Shackle and Brock (eds.), *A First Reader in Neepolinguistics* (Ladybird 2228).

intractable criminals etc.). And you see those small creatures running all over it, hitting each other with the fruit? They are — wait for it — the Conquerors of Zool.”

The multitude groaned as one being.

“And now to the herb garden!” He snapped his fingers and the plot convulsed, depositing them without transition, rhyme or reason in the herb garden. “Marjoram,” pointed the Baron. “Basil. Rosemary. Dave. (Hi, Dave.) Thyme. And you see those dog-like creatures who keep snapping at the thyme? Unique to this planet — we call ’em the Thyme Worriers of Zool.”

The multitude groaned again.

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(11.6) *This One Go Plunk.*

The Baron was leading Howarth, Thur, the O.U.S.F.G, and the bloody toucan (whom the author now realises he should have allowed Gestetner von Herpes to shoot) up a seemingly endless flight of stairs.

“How did we get here?” asked agent Howarth in confusion.

“Through the Asterisk Gate,” said the Baron, “it’s my own invention, albeit based on a device of Asnoplots — I mean, that fiend Asnoplots.”

They continued in silence for a bit. Then Howarth asked, “It’s a long way up, isn’t it? How many stairs are there?”

“Aleph-null,” said the Baron. “I counted them,” he added proudly.

“That *is* a long way,” said Howarth.

“In that case we had better hurry up, hadn’t we?”

A sound effect went off in the background. “Someone at the door,” said the Baron. “Excuse me.”

“I’ll come with you,” said Howarth, “in case it just happens to be von Herpes.” She and the rest of the O.U.S.F.G (not forgetting Thur and the increasingly superfluous toucan) charged downstairs after the Baron.

Strangely enough, it was Gestetner von Herpes, with the Bek-A-Skweek sonic pistol tied to his head with a particularly vile ribbon. Behind him was God, similarly bedecked but with an orange ribbon and no pistol. “Hi,” said von Herpes, “this bloody pistol — er, I mean, we were wondering about the possibility of a guided tour of —”

He was interrupted by a piteous neep from the Stainless Steel Hamster, who squeaked at God, “My ribbon!” She was about to launch into an attack but was prevented by the Baron, who said, “I’ll handle this.” He turned to God. “Listen, chuckles, you’re omnipotent, right?”

“Naturally,” said God.

“Then, by creating a chocolate bar so large you cannot eat it, you become logically self-contradicting and thus non-existent. Kindly leave the universe.”

“Verbal trickery,” sneered von Herpes.

“Yes, well, it’s not that simple, you know,” warned Dubiatrius.

“Damn! Back to the drawing board!” said God and vanished in a puff of logic and chocolate stains. The ribbon fell to the ground and was rescued by the Stainless Steel Hamster.

The Baron turned to the Prinz. “Snigger,” he said. “Chuckle. Ho ho ho,” and fell about pointing to Gestetner’s head and laughing hysterically. The Prinz gave him an evil look and stalked away,

cursing. Agent Howarth closed the door as the Baron recovered.

They were about to set up the stairs again when there was another knock at the door. “Yes?” said the Baron, opening it.

“Hi,” said the man in a Redskins cap. “Like to buy some fresh, ideologically sound chocolate-chip cookies? Or . . .”

“Piss off, Herpes,” chorused the multitude.

Almost as soon as the door was slammed there was another knock. The Baron tried to open it, but decided to open the door instead. In rushed a figure, cowled and caped in black and a sort of sick purple. “Dinna–dinna–dinna–dinna!” it cried, running around the room enthusiastically.

“It’s hungry,” wept the Stainless Steel Hamster.

“It’s mad,” observed the Green Queen tactlessly.

“It’s Batman,” suggested a passing mugger.

“It’s Prinz Gestetner von Herpes,” explained Howarth, Thur, and the Baron simultaneously. “You can tell by the ribbon, the pistol, and the aura of evil.”

“Nosslewot!<sup>28</sup>” swore von Herpes, miraculously changing back into normal (for him) clothes. “I confess. But look, I only wanted a guided tour.”

“Well, OK,” said the Baron. “But you’ll have to pay.”

“He’ll pay,” said the Bek-A-Skweek grimly. “How much?”

“Your money and your life.”

“Urp,” equivocated von Herpes. “Will you accept a Heddle and Heddle Megadeaths Inc. Bek-A-Skweek sonic pistol, never used, in part exchange?”

“You can stick your pistol up your *ass*,” said the Baron.

“No,” lamented the Prinz, “I suggested that but it — she — said it would be clustorophobic. And it would lead to a rather painful goosing.”

“Anyway, pay up now. And no funny busness. I have a vast fleet of deus ex machinas in geostationary orbit above Hollidge just waiting to turn you into green and otherwise repulsive slime.”

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**(11.7a)** *If the Charge of Writing Nonsense Were Ever Brought Against the Author, It Would Be Based On the Line “Then the Bowsprit Got Mixed with the Rudder Sometimes.”*

- WHAT is the real purpose of the Baron’s fleet of deus ex machinas?
- WILL Gestetner von Herpes and the Bek-A-Skweek sonic pistol work where their heads are at, powerstrugglewise?
- WHERE are God and Cutlass now they’ve been thrown out of the story?
- WHOSE side is Baron Spitzenbrachen van Friedrich der Plotzenklobbering *really* on?
- WHY do all the interrogative words begin with ‘W’?
- WATCH OUT for the next stunningly derivative episode of . . . Conquerors of Zool

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<sup>28</sup>A word so obscene that even Shackle and Brock’s *Universal Dictionary of Unspeakables* omits it. Indeed, whole planets have been ostracised because their languages contain words nearly similar to this ultimate vlieness.



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**(11.7b)** *For Whom We Are About to Deceive May the Lord Make Us Truly Thankful*

The Bek-A-Skweek sonic pistol appears courtesy of Heddle and Heddle Megadeaths Inc, Alpha Kentauri.

Piteous neeping composed, produced, arranged, and remixed by Ivan Towlson, performed by BMR Sound plc (Barbara, Maria, and Rebecca) and recorded at the Leckford Road studios. Also available on extended 12".

N\*sslew\*t dreamt up by Barbara Rochford in a moment of extreme sickness.