

# CONQUERORS OF ZOOL

## The Blurb

Back in the dark times shortly following the dawn of time itself, the note that was to change history was left on a door. Little did its author know of its vital importance to future generations. It said simply:-

11.40      Have set off for Zool. C U There.

Thus was the legend of *ZOOL* born. Now the saga continues. For this is

**ZOOL** Death Planet where the intractable criminals of 10,000 worlds battle in the dark swamps amid the death-throes of un-nameable beasts.

**ZOOL** World of *terror*.

**ZOOL** The very name of which strikes fear into the hearts of the mightiest warriors, the greatest Galactic Agents, and the most bemuscled superheroes.

**ZOOL** Definitely not a place for the husband and kids.

*THRILL* at the breathtaking descriptions of the clash of mighty empires!

*WONDER* as incomprehensible in-jokes flash before your very eyes!

*CRINGE* at the blatant plagiarism of every SF author from Vance Aandahl to Jerzy Zulawski (guess who has the Encyclopedia of SF)!

*SIGH* as the love that spans a galaxy is struck asunder by an awesome task to be completed (eat your heart out Mills and Boon)!

*COWER* in *ABJECT TERROR* as you finally realise to what depths OUSFG has sunk!

THIS IS ZOOL None may escape

## Conquerors of Zool: Dramatis Personæ

Jane Howarth	<i>The hero.</i>
The Cactus	<i>Offspring of Doctor Death.</i>
Prinz Gestetner von Herpes	<i>The villain.</i> <sup>1</sup>
Molin-Cax	<i>A dual entity. Also a villain.</i>
Dubiatrius Xam Norocon Objecticus	
Aristootle Liberloonicus XXIII	<i>A philosopher.</i>
The Mad Alchemist	<i>An old enemy of Jane's.</i>
The Multiple Access Robotic Information Analyser	<i>A computer.</i>
The Reverend Graham Stiles	<i>The taller revenant.</i>
Korb	<i>The shorter revenant.</i>
Doctor Death	<i>A Post-Revenant. Parent of The Cactus.</i>
The Post-Revenants	<i>Those who have passed beyond Revenanthood.</i>
God	<i>The Creator.</i>
Thur of Orlust	<i>Friend of Jane's. Always gets her out of trouble.</i>
Rasputin	<i>A battle-toucan. Always gets Thur out of trouble.</i>
Cutlass	<i>An old friend (ah hem) of Jane's.</i>
Rave	<i>A mysterious being of all-too-common proclivities.</i>
Harkonnen	<i>A friend (euphemism? never heard of it) of the Stainless Steel Hamster's.</i>
The Randroid	<i>Robot servant of Molin-Cax.</i>
The Stainless Steel Hamster	<i>A friend (tee hee hee) of Harkonnen's.</i>
Obi-Dave Wuntun	<i>A legendary being from the outer wilderness. Beware.</i>
Admiral Robert A. Hardloin	<i>A traitor to the Hax. Helps the O.U.S.F.G.</i>
Ursula K., The Androgynous Penguin	<i>One of the Hax.</i>
Asnoplott	<i>One of the Hax. Who else turns men and women into cardboard?</i>
Clark, Mr Sri Lanka	<i>One of the Hax. Without this man, the next Century could never begin.</i>
Poor Nell	<i>One of the Hax. A female militarist.</i>
William the Gibbon	<i>One of the Hax. A new member of the Council.</i>
Cordwainer Bird	<i>The Admiral's Midget Sidekick.</i>
Bek-A-Skweek	<i>A loud, dangerous, and argumentative sonic pistol (or rodent — nobody's quite sure).</i>
Baron Spitzenbrachen van Friedrich der Plotzenklobbering	<i>A man with no taste.</i>

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<sup>1</sup>The Amalgamated Union of Philosophers, Sages, Luminaries, and Other Thinking Persons [who have recently been reading too much Gene Wolfe for their own good] would like to protest at this simplistic classification into *heroes* and *villains* and to stress the ambiguous, unclear nature of good an evil — but probably won't be allowed to.

# 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.

# Chatshow

## V. Hammer and The Plignoid

### The Blurb

(Revised version)

(Certified as ideologically sound by the Ministry of Information)

**ZOOL** Social Priority Planet where a racially mixed population of those society has failed, struggle to make some sense of a difficult life-situation amid an atmosphere of deprivation and environmental decay.

**ZOOL** does, it must be admitted, have a crime problem.

**ZOOL** Well, at least the nightlife is interesting.

Jane awoke in a vast, desolate desert, lit by a single glowing white globe. The desiccated expanse of sub-tourist-quality sand was broken only by a single cactus, resplendent in its black studded battle-nappies. Jane wasn't sure she should approach the cactus — it had a rather tough expression. But too late! It had seen her.

“Where’s my daddy?” it said.

Jane did not know where its daddy, or indeed her daddy was. Or (indeed) *who* her daddy was.<sup>6</sup> Or *who she* was. Or (indeedy-doodly-dandy) where, why, or what she was. Confused? So was she. So she gave the only possible answer.

“Dunno,” she said.

“Is one of them my daddy?”

“One of *who* your daddy, O little cactus?”

“One of *them* gesticulating howling savages on the horizon, O about average-sized human.”<sup>7</sup>

“One of *those* . . .” corrected Jane, but trailed off. It was true. A vast horde of gesticulating, howling savages had appeared, brandishing round-headed clubs, gesticulating, and uttering (as savages do) savage cries.

Closer and closer they came! Closer and closer Jane hugged the cactus to her body. This was a mistake; she was picking spines out of her chest for weeks afterwards.

Trundle, trundle, rumble, rumble, TRUNDLE, TRUNDLE. They were upon her! One of them thrust its round-headed weapon right up to her mouth and in a horrible nasal drawl uttered the dreaded words, “Hullo. My name is Alan Whicker and this is Whicker’s World.”

“Oh, so *that’s* where we are!” cried Jane.

“Today we are interviewing a young woman and her cactus,” the Chief Whicker Monster (for it was

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<sup>6</sup>This is not meant to cast any doubts on Jane’s legitimacy. This sort of thing is merely an unfortunate result of sub-plot-space.

<sup>7</sup>Cacti are notoriously poor at judging height.

he) went remorselessly on. The subsidiary Whicker Monsters muttered sycophantically into their built-in nose microphones about the social problem of abandoned cacti.

“Take me to your producer,” said Jane — she might have suffered total identity failure, but she hadn’t forgotten the social decencies of space opera.

So the party moved off to CENTRAL television centre. At last the white globe was explained!

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Meanwhile on Zool, Death (oops) Social Priority Planet, Prinz Gestetner von Herpes had just finished using a small furry animal to clean the barrel of his Kill-O-Zap.

He was a baddie. You could tell. From the bottom of his sinister (the shop had run out of dexter ones) boots, trendily fastened with velcro thingies instead of laces, up through his zip-festooned combat-wombat jacket, right up to his statutory Big Black Hat, he exuded evil. (The shop had run out of deodorant as well.)

The Smith and Wesson  $.44\frac{1}{2}$ <sup>8</sup> magnum revolver felt good at his hip. The Kill-O-Zap felt good under his left armpit. The Polaris missile felt good up his trousers, but not when he sat down.

“Soon,” he thought, “soon I will have access to the source of infinite power... soon I will have access to cable television! Wufti!”

For this indeed was his dastardly plan. In cahoots with the Mad Alchemist and the Sol-Deneb-Procyon Alliance, he planned to rehabilitate Zool, to break down the impenetrable barriers of force (that bit was easy) that held back the Zoolian hordes from bursting forth into an unsuspecting galaxy. Already the media campaign was under way — tens of millions of ‘I’m backing Zool’ T-shirts were stockpiled at the spaceports, vast piles of ‘Zool Cool’ badges were altering the magnetic balance of the planet and Zool *real* ‘Bikini Atoll’ bikinis were threatening to appear in *Top Entity* shops the galaxy over.

Within an hour a ship would arrive to take Herpes to Whicker’s World where he would discuss what a bad press the media had given Zool on the *Uniwide* programme. The Prinz laughed an evil laugh.

“Neep,” went his armpit.

“Oh, drock,” said Gestetner, and removed the small furry animal from his Kill-O-Zap. “Must be more careful,” he muttered, “horrible mess up the barrel if it went off.” He absently tickled the S.F.A. under the chin.

“DROCK, DROCK, *DROCK!!!*” he screamed, “I’ve gone and done something nice *AGAIN!*” and burst out sobbing. You see, he had his problems too. Not only was he dictator of the spawning hordes of Zool, he was also a closet liberal.

In a sulk he bounded off to see his dear old French teacher who had always understood his troubles. Her old eyes lit up as she opened the door. “Its an élève,” she said, “an élève with a gun...”

—*BLAM*—

Gestetner stared relievedly down at the smoking pile of dust. At least he hadn’t *entirely* lost his touch. Twitching his nose in a meditative fashion he went off to catch the ship to Whicker’s World.

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<sup>8</sup>The extra  $\frac{1}{2}$  was so he could be really *extra* bad and use other people’s ammo up his barrel, whereas his wouldn’t fit up theirs. Also you don’t want the small furry animal to get squashed in there.

*IT* was a giant, malevolent brain, a pulsating mass of pure evil.

*IT* ruled Whicker's World with a pseudopod of titanium-reinforced iron.

*IT* was hosting a chatshow.

The *Terry Vagon Show* to be precise. Special Issue on Zool's problem kids. Prinz Gestetner was sitting in one squishy chair and *IT* was settling down into the other squishy chair the only way a giant brain can, which is reminiscent of a fried egg settling down in the pan. Gestetner was saying in a tone of Deep Concern, "Look, Brain, I *know* these kids."

(The brain was a substitute host. Terry himself was off at the moment attending his granny's funeral. She had briefly starred in a *Best of Butter* advert in which she had been asked to say how much nicer brand *X* butter was than nasty old margarine. Despite careful coaching, she had preferred the margarine. Within minutes she was on trial for offences against the *Consumer Protection (Prevention of) Act*, found guilty and sentenced to be boiled alive in rancid butter and eaten by the jury for lunch. It's not often that a Vagon's grandmother is fed to a plug 'butter, best of' trial.)

Just then Jane and the cactus leapt into the studio...

# The Plot Thickens. . . and then Congeals

Molin Cax and  
Dubiatrius Xam Norocon Objecticus Aristootle Liberloonicus XXIII

Out near the rim of the galaxy, there was a planet inhabited by creatures with deep psychological problems, resulting from mothers who had read too much of Dr Spock and not enough Dr Breggin. This planet was — that’s right — *ZOOL*, Death Planet where the intractable criminals of 10,000 worlds etc. Mighty events were brewing, howling winds were blowing, rain lashed the surface of the globe, thunder rumbled menacingly, lightning flashed (and other such literary devices designed to set the scene).

Somewhere on the surface of Zool was taking place a joint meeting of the Zool Liberation Front (ZLF), the Liberation Front of Zool (LFZ), the Front for the Liberation of Zool (FLZ), and the Front for Zoolian Liberation (FZL). A large and scaly beast arrived at the entrance to the meeting chamber.

“Password?”

“23 Skidoo,” the beast wheezed and then entered just in time to see Molin-Cax the dual entity, leader of the ZLF rise to speak. Molin-Cax paused for a last sip of AUM then his/their voice boomed forth in perfect coordination.

“Friends, enemies, and other sapient, lend me your ears.” As usual Molin-Cax had left his ears at home. Fortunately his comrades had four they could spare.

“I have just received a message via ultra-tight beam inertialess tachyon wave (for technical details come to the discussion meeting on Tuesday) from Prinz Gestetner von Herpes, representing himself, the Mad Alchemist and the Sol-Deneb-Procyon Alliance. I understand that he intends to penetrate the absolutely impenetrable bands of force that tie us to this festering mudball, and set us free to roam, rape, pillage and play Trivial Pursuit in the universe at large. Obviously he has ulterior motives; nevertheless I suggest we cooperate with him.”

At this, such is the power of cognitive dissonance, civil war would have erupted since none of the groups would ever agree with each other. Fortunately, at that very moment, in a voluminous burst of orange smoke smelling of musty old tomes, a figure appeared by the microphone: the aeons-old semi-divine philosopher, Dubiatrius Xam Norocon Objecticus Aristootle Liberloonicus XXIII. Immediately a reverent hush fell over the assembled multitude as they strained to hear his thin voice.

“Greetings, congeries of biological substratum supporting conation, ratiocination, proprioception, and other sapient behaviour, heed my linguistically tenebrous yet ostensibly limpid verbal excretions: the etiologation of the deontologically-determined, algorithmically defined commination of your people is, teleologically speaking, at a chiliastic entelechy. This will be the apotheosis of the apodictically predetermined deracination of the conflated angst of the continuum. You have but to push aside your Freudian gymnophobia and cooperate, without periphrasis or desultory cannulation, with Herpes. Farewell,” Dubiatrius asseverated mellifluously. With this he vanished, returning to the discussion which would decide the ultimate fate of all space and time (his fellow ghostly discussants being two previous inhabitants of the Fordox system — but more of them later).

Fortunately Molin-Cax possessed a linguistic converter and was thus able to explain that Dubiatrius had counseled cooperation. And when Dubiatrius spoke all listened and agreed. . . actually that’s not true but by the time he had finished wielding Hegelian dialectic everyone *thought* they agreed.

The intractable criminals of Zool thus settled down to wait for Herpes (not that they were short of diseases on Zool anyway).

On Whicker's World, Jane and the cactus have just entered the studio where filming of the *Terry Vagon Show* is proceeding.

"Good G.O.G. 666!" Jane exclaimed, "What's going going on?"

Prinz Gestetner von Herpes, already in a particularly irritable mood due to having his beard eaten by a razor-backed inhabitant of Bay-lliol II, had become bored with the show and was busy killing the other guests. He was presently strangling the host of the show, screaming wildly, "Vogoin, vogoin, Vagon!" As the reader already knows Herpes is not nice (though not as bad as AIDS — The Association of Indolent Depraved Socialists). This may have something to do with murdering his wife — Ruth Herpes.

As he turned in their direction, Jane and the cactus hurriedly left the studio. Jane asked for directions to the nearest spaceport, intent on stealing a spaceship. "This isn't *really* immoral," reasoned the galactic agent. "After all it's an axiomatic truth that God exists and that God created everything. Therefore God owns everything. Since any proper reading of the Bible reveals that ownership depends on need, I must own one of those spaceships. QED. *Neep!*"

"This looks like a nice one, except that it's not covered in short fuzzy hair," exclaimed Jane as a large, sleek, black and monstrously phallic spaceship loomed in their path. "But how do we get in?"

"Easy," smiled the Cactus producing a sonic screwdriver and deftly opening the airlock by reversing the polarity of the neutron flow. On the way to the control room they passed what they recognised to be packages of the illegal drug Kof-fee — a fiendish drug used to keep torture victims awake while more pain is created.

After walking through numerous corridors they came to a door marked: CONTROL ROOM. "I wonder when we'll find the control room," mumbled Jane as she walked along reading a book and completely ignoring her surroundings. Ignoring the galactic agent's momentary lapse of acuity, the Cactus entered the control room and looked about for the ship's computer.

"This must be it — *Multiple Access Robotic Information Analyser*. Now, we just need to switch it on and we're away... Okay computer, how do we lift off?" inquired the Cactus.

"Twelve cups of coffee and a perfectly ordinary blanket," replied the computer.

"???" thought Jane and the Cactus. Jane tried again. "Computer, how do we get out of here?"

"He was wearing a frilly green nightie, but no one noticed," replied the Multiple Access Robotic Information Analyser.

Just as our intrepid pair were about to either get annoyed or else start looking for a translating device, Prinz Gestetner von Herpes burst into the room, levelled his fiendish-looking Fluxon Special<sup>9</sup> at the Cactus and fired, blowing the spikey sapient to smithereens.

"Neep! What a mess!" exclaimed Jane, who was not as concerned as you, dear compassionate reader, might expect — but then, after all, she *was* also known as 'W.W.'. "You fiend, you villain, you swine, you, you..." shouted Jane, playing for time as she struggled to pull her double-neutron blaster out of her hip pocket.

Herpes too, was having trouble with his weapon — and it was nothing to do with his name. The problem was not infection but paucity of fluxons. Before galactic agent Howarth could free her gun, Herpes remembered the frighteningly nasty weapon in the cupboard behind him. "Ha ha ha ha *haarr!*" he cackled as he pulled open the cupboard doors.

As soon as the doors parted a fearsome poodle floated out — a terrible beast such as one might see in a nightmare (if one was very strange). The poodle floated up to Jane, stopped, barked, then

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<sup>9</sup>For technical details of the Fluxon Special, see *Techniques of Destruction with the Fluxon Special* by Shackle and Brock (OUP, 2112).

exploded, plunging her into unconsciousness.

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“At last you awake, Galactic Agent Howarth,” glowered Herpes, “Oh yes, I know who you are. Enjoy my company while you can, Howarth, for when we reach Zool you will die!” the Prinz snickered, then readjusted his cute red cap.

“Zool?! You fiend! What business have you with Zool, Death Planet where the intractable criminals of 10,000 worlds, etc?” gasped Jane.

Just as Herpes was about to conform to the traditional villain’s role by explaining all to Jane, knowing that she wouldn’t survive to tell anyone (but of course...), he noticed something in his viewscreen. A procession of spacevans was crossing in front of Herpes’ phallic vessel, bearing an insignia proclaiming them to be ‘Keepers of the Galactic Ghetto Library’.

“What’s going on?” inquired Jane.

“Those fools are *still* making their trips in this sector. Will they *never* finish moving books from Summer-Vile [named after the poor weather of the planet — ed.] to Stanscoll?”

Suddenly a huge hand appeared in space, grabbed Herpes phallic spaceship and instantly transported it millions of light-years, depositing it in orbit around:

“**ZOOL!**” cried Jane, recognizing the most hated, feared, loathed, spat upon, cursed and unpopular planet in the universe.

**WHAT** will become of Jane at the hands of the wicked Gestetner von Herpes?

**WHAT** twisted scheme has Herpes cooked up for Zool?

**WHAT** is an intelligent person like you doing reading crap like this?

**WHAT** ?

# 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 conveniently<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup>

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.

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

<sup>11</sup>See *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.*

# The Holy Cactus

## Citrus the Werewolf

On Zool somewhen before later, Jane stood watching the approach of what she later knew as Molin-Cax. When he stood exactly one lethal Kill-o-Zap ray away he stopped and his voices said in unison:

“Welcome to Zool, where the underprivileged and victims of political manoeuvring of 10,000 worlds have been sent into exile by the nasty dictators of our home worlds.”

Jane, of course, knew he was lying and that the approximately two million people/things facing her were actually all criminals. However in her most authoritative voice she said:

“Neep.”

Two million voices replied:

“Weep.”

And promptly fell to their knees and genuflected frequently in her direction (no this was not disgusting). Molin-Cax’s voice rose above the hubbub, “Where is God? His Prophetess is returned from the wilderness.”

God was actually at this moment being pursued by a horde of officials shouting “Hacker” and “Fine him”. Luckily Molin-Cax had a lot of power on Zool and as his words were spoken, God was whisked back to the landing area by a large egg-whisk on overdrive.

“Your Prophetess has returned,” said Molin-Cax.

“Really, well that’s fine, isn’t it,” said God.

“Let’s go to the Temple of the Black Cactus,” chipped in Dr Death and since he was brandishing a 5mm Kill-o-instant-annihilate cannon, no one dared disagree.

Meanwhile what had been happening aboard the ship I hear you ask. OK. Well I’m going to tell you anyway.

After Jane left, the two Revenants had viewed Gestetner and the Mad Alchemist as interlopers and were on the verge of shooting them (at least Korb was) when the computer spoke. “Sorry. Not Nescafé, I meant Maxwell —” At this point Korb shot the computer in its logic circuits which it shut up quickly.

Gestetner used this opportunity to draw a gun. It looked rather odd as he wasn’t an artist but it functioned (it would kill). Seeing this the four came to a very rapid peace treaty as the computer came back on line. “. . . trip. . .,” it said.

“Aha,” gasped Korb, “it’s going to give us a guided tour of the ship.”

“You understood that,” said the incredulous onlookers.

“No, it was a lucky guess,” said Korb, “come on, let’s do the armoury first.”

They reached a large door, identical to all the other large doors on the ship except for the words ‘ARMOURY: DANGER!’ painted on it in red and white stripes.

“Unusual colour scheme,” commented Gestetner.

“No. You’ve just got no colour sense,” replied the Mad Alchemist. However the other three har-

boured a continued suspicion that it was the Mad Alchemist who had warped taste.

“What’s a Newtron Bomb,” asked the tall Revenant with an almost sepulchral whisper. (The armoury was almost like a sepulchre, so it seemed appropriate he thought.)

“It’s a bomb which makes all films, TV, radio, and literary material look like a reworking of Disney’s *Tron*. 99% of the people commit suicide through boredom with no damage to property,” stated the computer matter-of-factly and unusually eloquently.

We must now leave this cosy scene to travel to a planet half way across the Galaxy which will become important later in our plot.

As Thur awoke she remembered the message clearly.

“Am trapped on Zool. Help. This is Jane Howarth.”

This message had repeated several times. (As you can see a temporal anomaly had allowed this message to arrive before it was sent.)

Thur knew what she had to do. Mounting her dragon she called her lion to her as she set off towards the spaceport, a menagerie surrounding her. Finally her Battle Toucan arrived with profuse apologies and blood dripping from its beak.

Once in the ship she accessed the ship’s computer.

“How long to reach Zool?” she asked.

“About 10.5 days — Bara standard.”

“How early was the message?”

“About 10.7 days — Zool standard.”

At this point we return to Jane on Zool in the Temple of the Black Cactus. She was being shown into the room of mysteries where, so she had been lied to, all would be revealed.

Rummaging around in the junk in the room, alone at last, she found a rather battered Telekinetic Transmitter and a diary.

The diary explained the history of the prophetess. Jane soon realised that a subtle reality change had altered the religion so that she resembled the prophetess. Jane was now worried about what would happen when the Zoolians found out the truth.

She decided to gamble on the Telekinetic Transmitter and sent the message: “Am trapped on Zool. Help. This is Jane Howarth.” She had just repeated this when the door opened to reveal Molin-Cax and Dr Death in full military regalia including sacrificial ray guns.

Back on the ship the four intrepid (and both pairs trying to get out of the truce) explorers prepared to leave. Gestetner had the Newtron Bomb detonator, and was agonising over whether he really needed Zool’s help with such a weapon.

- Does Molin-Cax know Jane is not the Prophetess?
- Does he care?
- Will he kill her anyway?
- Just how long is a Zool day compared to a Bara day?

- Can Thur arrive in time?
- Will Gestetner press the button?
- Hopefully this will all be ignored in the next episode.

# 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 Hurnipulls<sup>12</sup> as a dart hit him smack on the nose, causing a collision with the wall of the spaceship,

<sup>12</sup>For 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 propheticess — 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!!!*

# Prophet and Messiah

## Korb the Omniscient

Part six of the saga of *Zool*: Death Planet where the indomitable outcast heroes of 10,000 worlds battle in dark swamps amid the death throes of un-nameable beasts.<sup>13</sup>

Through the airlock stepped a humanoid figure. With almost superhuman self-control Korb avoided shooting it, since it was obviously harmless. The others had less of a problem. From its thigh length leather boots, straps and chains to its bullhide whip and sheep under one arm it exuded the lugubrious air of a used car salesman.

“Hello, my name is Rave, can I interest you gentlemen in some recreational aids?”

“Right up your field,” said Korb to the taller Revenant, Harkonnen, pointing to the sheep.

“Do you think you could manage a dousing in custard followed by a bath in lime jelly with a penguin and that sheep?” leered Harkonnen.

Rave brightened, “Certainly sir, jelly baths are one of my specialities, as are shop-window dummies.”

“Sorry,” said Korb, “That character isn’t here.”

So we must leave the villains doing whatever it is people do during the asterisks. (Yes, this is the famed Asimov cop-out.)

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Meanwhile on Zool things were not going well. Outside the temple Doctor Death was discussing his 17 dimensional battle plan with two other post-revenants (those who passed beyond revenanthood and have been reborn with powers beyond the comprehension of ordinary beings), his pate gleaming evilly. One was covered in long red stubble and was garbed solely in blue battle-shorts, the other appeared to have lost his natural hair and had replaced it with spray plastic string. Neither was convinced and Doctor Death was persuading them with a large Kill-O-Zap. Nearby Cutlass was assembling a Thermonuclear Hand Grenade while the hordes of Zool — not wanting their temple razed — tried to stop him. Unfortunately Cutlass was maintaining a continual loud drone causing any who approached to drop senseless.

Inside Jane was despondent. “The situation is hopeless Thur.”

A large android and a small robot materialized. The large android was covered in wet orange paint and was holding a can labelled ‘amber solaire for mechanical men’.

“Have you come to save us?” said Jane, bouncing fetchingly (like all good heroines she was wearing disco dress consisting of two small metal cans and a miniscule piece of semi-transparent cloth draped about her middle).

“I am the self-programming Randroid aspect of the Molin-Cax entity,” proclaimed the android, surreptitiously taking a pill from a bottle labelled ‘eternal youth capsules’. “And this is the battlesheep computer remote known as the Stainless Steel Hamster,” (it bounced when its name was mentioned) “I have come to free you from the anarchist hordes — with this,” he produced a plot device from

<sup>13</sup>See Shackle and Brock, *Fauna and Flora of Zool* (OUP, 2323).

thin air (that region of sub-plot-space where most of them are kept), “a sub-plot-space plotter, or is it a sub-plot-space spacer? I’m not absolutely, objectively, certain.” (Its Rand circuits had momentarily overloaded.) “Anyway, go to it S.S.H.” The small robot scampered over the machine pressing buttons with its extremely fine prehensile nose, and before you could say topologically invariant transformation they were replotted onto the battleship.

“Ulp,” said Korb, wiping off the engine oil.

“Ulp,” said Harkonnen, wiping off the jelly.

“Ulp,” said Von Herpes, brushing off biscuit crumbs and rubber bands.

“At last,” said the Mad Alchemist.

“Restrain them,” said Cax indicating Jane and Thur. Thur raised both eyebrows and Rasputin dived valiantly from her shoulder to defend her: exploding as Korb shot at it with a .75 mega-zap magnum. Smugness and distress struggled to control his features; while he liked shooting things, he wasn’t so keen on killing them. Smugness won. It usually did. Thur picked up the soggy carcass and put it in her bag.

“It is time to tell you of our absolute purpose,” Cax proselytized, turning up the bass on his voicebox. “To release the oppressed heroes of Zool and free them to take short vacations in the more fashionable parts of the galaxy.”

“To rape and pillage,” snarled Gestetner.

“To free them from oppression by the Galactic Government and its military arm the Starsheep Troopers. We must assemble our forces. But first we need a resolute, charismatic and expendable leader.”

“What mug would do that?” sniggered Von Herpes, not noticing the straight backs and glazed expressions of the others.

“Hail Prinz Gestetner Von Herpes,” they chorused.

“But what would make me do that?” he said nervously looking at their clenched fist salutes.

“It is your duty,” boomed Cax with his woofer reverb turned up full.

“My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” pleaded Gestetner.

“Well actually I haven’t,” said God, materializing (as was his wont) with a thunderclap and straightening his flashing bow-tie (which he kept despite the number of worshippers it lost him), “I just think you should.”

“I’ll do it,” gasped Gestetner hopelessly.

“Then onwards to Fordox to assemble the *Organisation to Unfetter Self-determining beings From Government*,” spoke Cax with a far-sighted look in his optics.

“We’ve had this conversation before,” said Korb.

- Are the characters in a time loop?
- Will God demand the ultimate sacrifice from Prinz Gestetner?
- What are the Starsheep Troopers?

See the next exciting episode of... *Conquerors of Zool*

# 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.

# Purple Prose and Red Herrings, But Definitely No Blue Jokes

Prinz Gestetner von Herpes

Episode eight of *Zool*, in which a plot is discovered by the author but is quickly repossessed by the Atari video game corporation.

“But then again, it’s not my problem.” Harkonnen smiled at his listeners, then sat down, only just disturbing his carefully blow-dried hair and innate dignity. Suddenly the Narrator appeared, carrying a list of things every reader of *Zool* should know. “You might be wondering who I am,” he said patronisingly, secretly hoping they wouldn’t notice his necklessness. “Piss off!” replied the assembled cast. The narrator sniffed indignantly and then winked out of existence, mumbling under his breath, “Fine, but don’t come running to me for a *deus ex machina*.” He left the list behind, which Gestetner picked up.

“A message from the author,” began Gestetner in an uncertain accent. He read out the list, which contained the plot (including purple prose, red herrings and blue jokes), the names and addresses of the villains and details of the senses-shattering conclusion to *Zool*: “. . .and they lived happily ever after,” finished Gestetner.

A chorus and two verses of objections to this came from all (especially Korb, who didn’t like the bit where he sold his motorbike for a Salvation Army tambourine). A vote was taken and it was decided to discard the plot.

“Right — where were we?”

Meanwhile, the Council of Five (six, if you include the word processor) were conspiring.

“A cunning ploy that was,” Poor Nell was saying, fingering her personal defence weapon (a copy of *Jannissaries*). “Too long have the hated Milford Mafia ruled SF fandom, claiming — like disgusting bleeding-heart liberals would — that fandom has to be segregated from the Real World by their ‘benevolent’ protectorship. Ptui!<sup>14</sup> By stealing the *Crap Nebula* and the *Kevin* away from them with our neuromancy, *we* have the power now! Fandom should be grateful! Who knows what terrible thing would have replaced our gibbon in emergence.”

The others weren’t listening. Asnoplots was reciting a review of the first volume of his autobiography, *In Memory Yet Obscene*, to an imaginary audience. Ursula K. was silently discussing Franz Kafka’s work with an intellectual pile of rocks. Mr Sri Lanka was photosynthesising beatifically. The gibbon was working on a sequel, tentatively titled *Blade Runner*.

Poor Nell continued. “With possession of the *Crap Nebula* and the *Kevin*, we can now instruct our secret agent, Prinz Gestetner von Herpes, whom we blackmailed into our service when we caught him reading Salman Rushdie in a public toilet, to lead the massed hordes of O.U.S.F.G. in escape from Zool and wreak havoc across time and space, burning every SF book we don’t approve of, purging fandom of its isolationists and breaking the ghetto walls down, so that our jihad will not only consume the accursed Milford Mafia, but the entire universe in an irresistible conflagration of our egos!”

“You realise we know that already,” said Asnoplots to the wild cheers of his imaginary audience.

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<sup>14</sup>See p.194, *Dictionary of Spitting Noises*, by Shackle and Brock (OUP, 1982).

“Sorry,” apologized Poor Nell, straightening her shigawire wig as she got down off the table. “Bad habits are hard to break.”

“I thought we were going to take over sub-plot space,” said Mr. Sri Lanka, who was disappointed that nothing had happened when he got up to 9,000,000,000. “Well, it’d be pretty useful. Just think what it would do to our storylines. . .” His voice died away. The others sighed — it was clear his childhood was not yet at an end.

Ursula K., who preferred being a penguin to a cockroach, kept silent. She knew that if she did nothing for long enough her passivity would render her fellow councillors helpless before her. She fell asleep again. Her mind was empty, as it had always been.

Poor Nell started to gnaw her fingers, in keeping with her survivalist training. “Well, it won’t be long now before our Starsheep Troopers help Gestetner take care of Jane Howarth and her friends,” she said between chews. “*Nothing* can stop us now.”

All of them agreed with this except the word processor. “What about Cordwainer Bird?”

“Bird. Cordwainer Bird,” the dwarf spat into the intercom on another part of the page. The door slid open to reveal a room, bare except for two chairs. In one of them sat Admiral Hardloin.

“Come in, Bird,” said the Admiral, his stitches twitching. Bird came in and slouched provocatively on the other chair, his feet several inches off the floor. “Got a job for you.”

“Better be quick,” Bird said. “I’m late preparing a book of my excuses for putting off publication of *The Last Dangerous Visions*, and Jefty hates waiting. That ticktockman will send a deathbird to shatter me like a glass goblin along the scenic route (on the downhill side) at the mouse circus, adrift just off the islets of Langerhans, if I’m late.” He took a sharp breath.

“Starsheep Troopers,” said the Admiral, and Bird tensed visibly, “Need your help. The roads must roll. Only common sense can save the universe from all you zombies.” The Admiral paused as the shocking news was digested by Bird. “By his bootstraps, the man who sold the moon will build a crooked house and travel in elephants.”

“No!” cried Bird in astonishment. “Seeing Hitler painting *Roses*, Mom would do it for a penny. With a kiss of fire, Knox can drink the strange wine of an early life, furnished in poverty, in the fourth year of the war.”

The Admiral understood his amazement, but Bird had yet to hear the worst. “The number of the beast,” he whispered darkly.

“Django! The beast that shouted love at the heart of the world?”

The Admiral nodded. “I will fear no evil.”

“O.K. chief,” said Bird after a long silence, “I’ll do it.”

“Good man. It’s up to you.”

Bird leapt off his chair and out of the room, mouthing his terrifying battle cry, “I have no mouth and I must scream!”

Back on Zool, there was cause for concern.

“You are all going to die,” Gestetner told Jane and her allies.

“I knew — hey, wha-what?”

“My masters have been revealed, my disguise seen through, the plot is in shreds,” he said, holding a multi-syllabic weapon. “Cax,” he commanded, “disarm them.”

Cax looked at Gestetner and then at Thur, paralyzed by indecision. Should he remain loyal to his libertarian principles and allow Gestetner to lead a reassembled O.U.S.F.G. in the service of the

Council of Five, or should he be seduced by Thur's Ti-kli-do and Jane's looks of helplessness? No contest really.

"Let go of me!" shouted Gestetner as Cax held him down and Rasputin removed a small furry sphere from his pocket. "No! Not my soul..." With the soul removed, Gestetner was rendered dumb, no longer able to maintain the balance of his fundamental dichotomy. Someone knocked him unconscious with a ceremonial vessel.

"We haven't any time to lose!" cried Jane, lacing up her Doc Martins. "We must summon the O.U.S.F.G. for an emergency meeting!"

By a remarkable coincidence, all the members of the O.U.S.F.G. happened to be in the immediate vicinity of the ship. They were all assembled in a cramped room, where heated arguments had created a minor rainstorm because of the humidity. Jane could barely make herself heard above the thunder. The tension in the room was palpable. With their enemies revealed to be the dreaded Council of Five, the starsheep approaching, the fate of the Universe and Radio 4 at stake, they eagerly listened to the bitter exchange between Jane and another Zool inmate/O.U.S.F.G. member, nicknamed 'Flat Bread':

"Star Trek!"

"Blake's 7!"

*"Star Trek!"*

*"Blake's 7!"*

Discussion meetings always ended this way. In one corner of the room, Harkonnen was holding a microcircuit out to tempt the Stainless Steel Hamster from under a bed. Cax was lowering his blood levels through sheer force of will. Rave was reading the entry on Anthony Perkins in a Filmgoers' Companion at hand. God was wondering if the Pope would consent to taking part in a custard-pie fight in St Peter's Square with the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Ayatollah. Doctor Death was designing a killer bacterium and Cutlass was constructing a weapon of mass death. Some were wrestling, others looking for a door. Through the tangle of hair and glasses, occasional cries of "the lighting's wrong!" could be heard. In the hands of these, the future of all existence lay.

"Can you hear something?" asked Thur generally as she secured Gestetner to a chair. The hubbub of noise died down quickly as everyone listened to the dull thumping in the distance.

"Something's trying to get in!" shouted someone.

"We're too late, they've..."

The roof buckled inwards and the terrified assembly looked up into the glowing eyes of several hundred flying sheep.

"Thok!" cried Korb as he leapt onto his motorbike and raced up the walls, crossbow in hand.

"Barry, Barry, we want Barry!" returned the sheep.

"Catman!" replied Cordwainer Bird, swinging into action as he arrived.

Battle was joined as the Starsheep Troopers dived towards their enemy.

"I wonder," mused God as he watched the titanic struggle, "if we might not all grow out of this in a few years."

"Hold this," said Cutlass, handing him the end of a laser bazooka.

*To be continued...*

- Will Sally tell Karen the identity of the father of Mrs Jacob's son, John?

- Will Kelly fight Crusher Derek in order to make enough money to pay for his mother-in-law's electrolysis?
- Will Senator Bob pay the blackmailer or will he face humiliation and scandal in the papers?
- Will someone put the story out of its misery?

# Episode XXIII<sup>15</sup>

## Molin (or is it Cax)

*GASP* as a plot appears before your very nostrils!  
*THRILL* as the Hax disappear into sub-plot space!  
*DIE* as the author assassinates *your* character!  
 For this is **Zool**, where social workers fear to tread!

“Thank you,” said God without humour, for the situation was hopeless; the O.U.S.F.G. hordes numbered 14 (13 if you count Molin-Cax as 2), and at least six of these were pacifists and/or vegetarians; whilst the Starsheep Troopers appeared enumerable, or possibly more.

“We need a miracle,” cried Jane. “Brothers and sisters fall to your knees and pray!” Everyone ignored her.

“Does anyone want to buy some green rubber wellies with laces at the top?” inquired Rave, who always had an eye for a quick sale. In the ensuing bargaining no-one noticed the distant flashes of lightning and crashes of thunder. Suddenly, a crack appeared in the very fabric of space and a huge human figure appeared. He was pale, bearded and spectacled.

“Hey,” his voice spanned entire galaxies, “I’m auditioning for the part of the baddie in my new film *Indiana Jones Strikes Back For The Third Time*.” The Council of Five looked at one another; this was the break they had all been waiting for. In a rare display of unity, they rose as one to join the Supreme Being.

This, however, did not stop the Starsheep Troopers on and on they came until, due to a giant miscalculation of scale, they disappeared into a mote in God’s eye. “Ooh,” he said, “I wish they had taken off my glasses first.”

“It’s just not fair,” protested Cutlass. “Just as we are about to get into a really good battle, some new author comes along and ruins everything. I was looking forward to wasting a few Starsheep Troopers.”

“Never mind, Cutlass” interrupted Cax, “when we get back to Sane Tans, the most northerly port of Zool (except, of course Elly Maitch) I know of a green jellyoid lifeform for you to exterminate.” This seemed to placate Cutlass who retired into the background, perhaps to reappear later in the story.

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Dubitarius Xam Norocon Objecticus Aristootle Liberloonius XXIII found himself reasoning this way:

“We refuse to have plots,” say the Hax, “for plots deny royalties and without royalties we are nothing (at least nothing important).”

“But,” says Liberloonius, “Quantum Story Dynamics is a dead giveaway, isn’t it?”

“Oh,” say the Hax, “We hadn’t thought of that one,” and they promptly vanish in a cloud of green sweet-smelling steam.

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<sup>15</sup>Just to confuse you

“That was easy,” says Liberloonius and for an encore he proves that corpsicles are popsicles and immediately drowns in a large bowl of raspberry ice-cream.<sup>16</sup>

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“What are we going to now, after all, all of our enemies seem to have become victims of sub-plot space?” asked Thur who was idly fondling Rasputin, who in turn was idly fondling Gestetner’s soul.

“The usual thing that happens now is that we all have a long, protracted, penetrating, and wide-ranging conversation to add to the depth of characterisation and give the audience an insight into our beliefs and motivations<sup>17</sup>,” said Flat Bread. “Oh,” said everyone generally, with the exception of Harkonnen and the Stainless Steel Hamster who were playing caterpillars in a corner.

“Have you all forgotten? Don’t you that today is the day for the recital from the sacred texts. We must go to Sane Tans immediately to prepare for the Lie Berry Me-Thing,” said Cax. “Rasputin, take us to Sane Tans!”

Thur’s trusty battle toucan complied and, an hour later, the spaceship arrived. “It’s a bit squalid isn’t it?” said Flat Bread, who had never been to Sane Tans, having only recently been introduced to the plot. “And another thing, what are we going to do with Gestetner. After all, we can’t very well leave him in the ship.”

“Okay,” said Thur, untying him, “leave him to me, I’ll take care of him with my Ti-kli-do. “Gestetner came quietly and Thur cleaned it up. Everyone filed into the inner sanctum: the Lie Berry. A great hush descended over the assembled O.U.S.F.G. and the ancient litany against *mainstream* was recited:

I will not read mainstream. Mainstream is the mind killer. Mainstream is the little death that brings total obliteration. I will face the mainstream. I will permit it to pass over me and through me. And when it has gone past I will turn the inner eye to see its path. Where the mainstream has gone there will be nothing. Only science fiction will remain.

Nobody noticed the Cactus as it edged round the hallowed vault towards Gestetner. It finally reached him and stealthily undid his bonds (spot the continuity error). Together, as the others stood in a trance like state they crept to the 23rd bookcase; on the 5th shelf down, the 23rd book from the left (and the 5th from the right) was *The Eye In The Pyramid*. [Bet you didn’t get that one –ed.]

Suddenly the silence was shattered as Gestetner rasped, “You fools did you think that I really worked for the Council of Five? No, my true masters are now ready to take over the plot for their own nefarious purposes, for I am a servant of the Conspiracy of Illuminated, Royal and Courtly Aristocrats!”

“And I,” said the Cactus, “am the Earthly incarnation of Abdul Hashish-al-Loonybrain himself!” Doctor Death was first to recover from his trance, quickly followed by the others.

“My baby,” he cried, “I’d always hoped that he would become someone famous, but this, it’s wonderful.” At this he collapsed to the floor sobbing and began to smell of elderberries.<sup>18</sup>

“Shouldn’t we help him?” asked Jane.

“No,” replied Cax sternly, “He hasn’t given us his consent. Therefore any attempt to help him would be a violation of his rights.” The others did nothing to help Death perhaps realising at last that libertarianism was right or, more likely, they couldn’t care less about the good (?) Doctor.

<sup>16</sup>For a full account of this and other arguments see Shackle and Brock, *Well that just about wraps it up of Science Fiction* (OUP, 2346).

<sup>17</sup>Those who have read *Conquerors of Zool* before will note the subtle foreshadowing of events to come.

<sup>18</sup>Obscure *Monty Python* reference.

“But what exactly *is* C.I.R.C.A.?” asked Korb, incisive as usual, but for once uninformed.

Gestetner replied “Haven’t you heard of us, you poor ignorant fool? Are you blind? We are a group of historians dedicated to making all history as vague as possible and, I must admit, we’re pretty blatant about it. After all we put our name before every date we alter.” A shroud of understanding descended over the room as everyone suddenly realised why history never made sense. Everyone that is except for Gestetner and the Cactus (obviously), Doctor Death (equally obviously), Cax and Korb (not at all obvious) who quietly began to count down from twenty three. . .

*To be continued. . .*

# Violence is a Perfectly Acceptable Alternative

Cutlass, the infinitely aged

**ZOOL** Death planet of the etc. etc.

**ZOOL** A planet of tropical swamps where the lost characters of a million plot lines eke out a miserable existence in a hopeless half reality!

They had only got down to 17 when they were interrupted by the disappearance of the roof of the library. The reason for its disappearance was quite obvious to everyone, except of course the Hamster and the Harkonnen who were still playing catapillars. Through the hole where the roof had been could be seen a rapidly descending squadron of spaceships. The leading one had just removed the roof with a *grazer*,<sup>19</sup> which was now pointing ominously at the helpless trapped entities below.

“I wouldn’t move,” came booming from the ship, the voice amplified to a level that broke Molin-Cax’s glasses, scared Rasputin, and impressed Cutlass with a certain grudging professional respect.

The ships landed, and the doors to the library burst open to admit — yes, the Mad Alchemist, and a horde of his minions. Forgotten while the O.U.S.F.G. faced the threat of the Hax and their Starsheep Troopers, the Mad Alchemist had prepared his master stroke — contacting his minions in orbit far beyond the outer planet of Zool’s system, he had followed the heroes to Sane Tans, and choosing his moment well, had swept down on them when they were once more distracted.

“So, Galactic Agent, at last I have you in my power! This time you will not escape, and with you will perish the last hope for freedom in the Universe. With the arcane knowledge contained in the library I can become supreme!

“You speak too soon, Alchemist,” said Herpes. “The galactic agent is *my* prisoner — and soon the irresistible, if somewhat vague, forces of C.I.R.C.A. will sweep you and your puny minions away!” “Hah!” the Alchemist sneered “C.I.R.C.A.? You fool, Herpes! Do you not realise that C.I.R.C.A. is a sham, a mere cipher I created to conceal my purpose?”

“Oh.” said Herpes. “Come to think of it, I often wondered why a group of *historians* should be so interested in *dates!*”

“Enough of this,” snapped the Alchemist, going into the efficient evil genius mode. “Load the library onto my flagship. Herpes, you will come with me. Your rabble-rousing skills will be of use on Zool. The rest of you stay exactly where you are. My minions may be utterly incompetent but even they can hardly miss at this range.” So saying the Alchemist approached Rasputin, intending to take back Prinz Gestetner von Herpes’s soul which the faithful toucan still guarded. One withered, claw-like hand grasped the toucan around the throat. Another withered, claw-like hand prised Herpes’s black, diseased soul from the toucan’s withered hand-like claw. One orange beak snapped viciously on the Alchemist’s wrist.

“Aaaarghhh, \*!?!%#@!” A stream of vile biological curses and suggestions poured from the Alchemist’s throat. Fully half the minions did *exactly* what he said being conditioned from birth to instant obedience to their master’s whims. (Most of his whims were much weirder than this.) The Stainless Steel Hamster suffered terrible indignities; the cactus gained an early and liberal education; Rave rather enjoyed himself.

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<sup>19</sup>Gravity Laser — works by firing a coherent stream of gravitons at its target, which is then torn apart by tidal effects.

The galactic agent, in quite an uncharacteristic moment of competence, seized her opportunity. Grabbing Cutlass by what would be the scruff of the neck after 1,000,000 years of evolution and Thur by the scruff of the eyebrow, she dashed for the door.

“Quickly, into the nearest ship,” she said with remarkable originality. “With any luck it will be ages before he can get those morons to think of anything else.”

Realizing this, the Alchemist took other action. Disengaging himself from Rasputin (who flew off to join Thur) and a minion (who had only been obeying orders) he struggled towards Herpes.

“Come on, we can’t let her escape — she’ll warn the galaxy of my plans! We’ll follow her in my flagship — it’s the fastest in my fleet and guarded by my most trusted minions.”

The ill-assorted trio and the toucan had boarded a ship. The minion on guard had had no orders concerning toucans and tik-li-do, and was swiftly subdued.

“Can you fly this thing?” asked Thur dubiously.

“Of course,” said the Galactic Agent. “I’ve pinched so many ships off the Alchemist I ought to be an expert by now... let me see... that button there?” A light came on saying, ‘PLEASE DO NOT PRESS THIS BUTTON AGAIN!’ “No? How about this then?” The co-pilot’s chair immediately turned into a jacuzzi, which Thur found pleasant, but didn’t get them very far.

“How about this lever labelled LAUNCH?” suggested Cutlass.

“Look, since when are you an expert on spaceships, anyway?” asked the Galactic Agent in annoyance as she pulled the lever. The ship rose with a shudder and started following an idiosyncratic trajectory as the Galactic Agent tried to find out which levers did what.

At an altitude of about 100 spacials (*Copout!*) she seemed to have got the hang of things. The ship steadied up a bit, and her companions were able to pick themselves off the ceiling.

“Cutlass, be a good ape, and have a look in my backpack, will you?” (Galactic agents’ backpacks are legendary.) “There’s something in there that I think may come in handy.”

Out came a stream of peanut butter sandwiches, half-finished drawings, old socks, and kitchen sinks. At last Cutlass reappeared with a small ramshackle device that showed obvious signs of having been put together in a hurry.

“Yes, that’s it — I pinched it off Tomred the Terrible<sup>20</sup> the last time we met — it’s the stasis field from his stardrive. Would you point it at the planet and give it a quick squirt?”

“How can I do that from inside a spaceship?” asked Cutlass, understandably puzzled by the problems involved.

“Look, this is *Conquerors of Zool*, what do you expect? Logical hard science? Just get on with it.”

The ludicrous twists of subplot space provided the answer and Cutlass took careful aim at the unsuspecting planet below. The apeman shot with his usual lack of competence, but even he could not miss a whole planet. A silvery ball covered the squalid surface of Sane-Tans, hiding the horrific architecture for which it was notorious all over the civilised galaxy. Inside the sphere, the O.U.S.F.G. and the minions alike were frozen in the unnatural postures they were caught in, trapped as time froze for...

“What was the setting on that thing?” asked Thur curiously.

“Dunno,” said Cutlass, “I’ll have a look... Three times ten to the googolplex universal cycles.”

“Good,” said the Galactic Agent. “That ought to hold them a bit. And like a good Galactic agent I haven’t actually killed anyone.”

“No,” said Thur with heavy sarcasm, “I suppose locking up half your friends and a perfectly innocent planet for eternity several times over is an acceptable level of civilian casualties, is it?”

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<sup>20</sup>See *Time Warriors of Zool*.

“Exactly,” beamed the agent. “Sacrifices have to be made in the cause of truth, justice, wishy-washiness and cupcakes.”

“What all this really means, I suppose,” said the apeman, “is that there’s nothing left for me to blow up.” And, in a disgruntled manner, he went off to play with the weapons console.

The Galactic Agent was happily writing a new chapter to her memoirs entitled *How I Saved the Universe from the Forces of Darkness for the Thirty-Fifth Time*, when Thur suggested that maybe, just maybe, there was something she ought to think about.

“I think you ought to look at this on the rear screen, Jane,” she said in a worried tone.

“What can possibly be there? We zapped all the baddies, and everyone else for that matter, and there’s no-one else at all... in... this... sector... except the Mad Alchemist’s flagship!” she finished in a panic. “He must have taken off before we froze the planet. Give him another zap with the stasis ray.”

Thur turned to pick up the weapon. Her eyes widened with alarm as she saw it to be covered with a silvery layer remarkably similar to that covering Sane-Tans. “Plignoids,” cursed the agent. “We’ve had that for the next few googolplex eternities. Now I see why he had so many spares. We’ll just have to do it the hard way. Stand by to come about! Cutlass, get ready on the weapons console!”

A grease-stained, ape-like hand appeared through a hole in the top of the weapons console. A grease-stained, ape-like hand waved a No. 13 Chinese laundry screwdriver. “Can you give me ten minutes?” he said. “There didn’t seem to be much else to do, so I thought I’d recalibrate the gravitic flux collimator. I’m trying to up the pulsation rate of the aardvark beam as well.”

“Cutlass,” screamed Thur, the agent and the toucan in unison. But all was not lost. Galactic agents are trained to deal with any emergency — even companions who insist on stripping weapons to their component parts at every opportunity. She did exactly what the book suggested for such a crisis: she started screaming loudly for help. Thur and the toucan did too. Cutlass, having returned to reality, joined in.

Meanwhile, the Mad Alchemist and Prinz von Herpes were approaching. Their horribly bewepioned ship was crewed with loyal minions, some of whom could think of more than one thing a day. They carried all the arcane knowledge they had plundered from the library of the O.U.S.F.G. Ahead of them, helpless, lay the one ship that stood between them and total domination of the galaxy!

# 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.I.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 Dubiatrus.

“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.

# Truth Justice and the Joy of Overacting

## Maxwell's Dæmon and The Midnite Skulker

### ACT ONE

- 1st Narrator    **(Rhapsodically)**    Come with me into a land of strange beauty.  
 Come with me into the kingdom of a mighty and wise ruler whose sacred name is spoken in hushed tones from the pearly shores of Dönierk Abab to the chill wastes of Sümèrt Oon.  
 Come with me into an adventure in which good battles evil with the aid of the eleven rings of fire-stone, each struck from a finger of Phàbio, Lord of Shadows.  
 Come with me. . .    **(Fade out)**
- 2nd Narrator    **(Matter of fact)**    Right — now all the fantasy freaks and D&D dopes have gone with him, we can get onto the gigawatt laser canons, super-intelligent global computer networks, multidimensional time-vortices and other really wild things. Now we can have power-crazed pangalactic emperors chasing half-naked girls (college graduates every one of them) across a landscape of electric megadeaths. And then. . .  
**(Fade out)**
- 3rd Narrator    **(Abusively)**    Sod that — let's just have the next episode of  
*F/X    FANFARE*
- (Real) Narrator    **(Dramatically)**    Conquerors of Zool
- 3rd Narrator    And get *really* bored.  
*F/X    FANFARE*
- Narrator    The twelfth thrilling episode, written by Maxwell's Dæmon  
*F/X    RAPTUROUS APPLAUSE*    (*says he — actually it should consist mainly of 'Who's he' from the Massed Hordes of Zool*).
- Narrator    and the Midnite Skulker  
*F/X    HISSING SOUNDS FROM THE MASSED HORDES.*
- Narrator    in glorious technisonic and performed by  
*F/X    FANFARE*
- Massed Hordes    The Massed Hordes of Zool  
*F/X    RASPBERRY*
- Narrator    And now for the plot. . .    **(Pissed off)**    Oh God. . .  
**(Pause)**

- Massed Horde #1 (Stage Whisper) Quick Bek-A-Skweek, over here! Jane has a viva, and we've got to go and wish her luck.
- Bek-A-Skweek Right, get a move on von Herpes.
- F/X *Shuffle, shuffle.*
- Gestetner von Herpes Don't want to go. I've had some very bad experiences with exam schools.
- Bek-A-Skweek I don't care. Get on with it. (Shouts) MOVE!
- Gestetner von Herpes Look, why should I?
- Bek-A-Skweek Because I'll blow your head off if you don't.
- Narrator The Rat is to come to order.
- Bek-A-Skweek I'm not a rat, I'm a mouse.
- Gestetner von Herpes What! You mean you aren't a sonic pistol. For all this time, I've been... (Improvise.) At least now I can *kill* you.
- Mouse Oh, I'd forgotten that. (Frightened) Yes I am a sonic pistol... Honest.
- Narrator I'm afraid once the authors get the idea that you are a mouse, that's it. At least for this episode.
- Mouse (In the voice that Max — or anyone else for that matter — can't stand) Please, Uncle von Herpes, I didn't mean it. I'll be good, I promise. (Getting alarmed again) Don't do that. I'm ticklish! Hee... Hee... Hee...
- Mouse — *SKWEEK* — (This has to be heard to be believed)  
(von Herpes runs off gibbering)
- Mouse Hey I can still skweek!
- Narrator (Pained) OK. Just don't do it again.  
(Exit Mouse)
- Narrator With a puff of unreason, God appears.
- Massed Hordes Good God...
- God Not so much of this 'good' business, please.
- Baron Hang on a minute, I disproved you.
- God That's what you think. Frankly I couldn't give a heaven about your proofs and disproofs. And what's more I refuse to be outsmarted by my creations. Hence I reduce all your intelligence scores by six points.
- Stainless Steel Hamster Oh God (sorry; grovel, grovel, your worshipfulness), not D&D *again!*
- Massed Horde #1 Oh, go away.  
(Exit Stainless Steel Hamster)
- Baron (With the intelligence of a Zabriskian Fontema) Duh, what's an intelligence point?
- God I hate all these people who can't understand my sacred utterances. (Shouts) Die you faithless scum!
- F/X *ZAP! KERPOW! KERPLUNK! KIMOTA!*  
(Enter Stainless Steel Hamster in a hurry)

- Mouse     **(Pant, pant, pant)** Hey everybody!     **(Pant, pant)** You know what?
- Massed Hordes     **(Excitedly)** What? What?
- Mouse     You know that Jane had her Galactic Agency viva exam today?
- Massed Hordes     **(Excitedly)** Yes! Yes!
- Mouse     Well I've just been along to wish her good luck. She looked really tough in her black leather and rubber battle kit with the macho Avon-studs (down Pita, down!). But that's not the exciting bit.
- Massed Hordes     **(Excitedly)** Tell us! Tell us!
- Mouse     Well, she went through the leather-lined, rubber-studded — or was it rubber-lined, leather-studded — I digress —
- Massed Hordes     **(Excitedly — all this excitement is bad for my weak heart)** Yes you do. Tell us!
- Mouse     — door.     **(pausing between sentences)** She shut it behind her. There was a short silence. Then there was a noise from inside the room.
- Massed Hordes     **(Expectantly)** What was it?
- Massed Horde #2     The suspense is killing me... Urrrrgggggh...     **(S/he dies)**
- Mouse     I was just going to tell you that... Now where was I?
- Massed Hordes     The noise!
- Mouse     Ah yes... It was the clinking of bottles and excited and delighted squeaking. Then Jane burst out of the room with an ecstatic smile on her face. She had gotten a first, a plauditory first!
- (Long silence.)**
- Massed Horde #1     **(Choking up)** You mean... she's been... written out?
- Mouse     Oh...     **(Long pause)** I hadn't thought of it that way... I suppose this means she fell over in shock and died on the spot.
- Narrator     I'm afraid that's what happened...
- GRAMS*     *PM THEME MUSIC*
- BBC announcer     It was announced today that the respected Galactic Agent, Jane Howarth, has died. She was rushed to hospital after collapsing outside the Scientific Faculty for the Indoctrination of Non-discriminatory Xenophobia, where she had just been awarded a plauditory First Class Honours degree in Agente Galactiores.
- Tributes have been pouring in today from her friends and colleagues all over the galaxy, praising her bravery, determination, wit, clarity of thought, unflinching generosity, selflessness, and ability to wriggle her way out of plot situations no matter how ludicrous. But one factor above all was remarked upon by those who have spoken of her. The Reverend Graham Stiles summed up this feeling when he said:
- Reverend Graham Stiles     She does have a very cute nose.
- BBC announcer     In this interview, recorded three years ago, she gives us an insight into the qualities that made her a great Galactic Agent.
- GRAMS*     *RECORDED INTERVIEW (BBC archives, reference 42NEEP).*
- BBC announcer     She found herself in the profession of Galactic Agency almost as a mistake when a recruiting officer fell under the spell of her nose. She was

immediately plunged into the thick of galactic action in (Click)

(Long silence)

Massed Horde #3 So, what are we going to do now?

(Silence)

Massed Horde #4 Dunno.

(Silence)

Dubiatrius (Hopefully) We could all take our clothes off!

(Silence)

Massed Horde #3 Nah.

(Silence)

God (Hopefully) We could have a foot orgy!

(Silence)

Massed Horde #4 Nah.

(Silence)

The Editor (Pretentiously) We could all have a long, protracted, penetrating, and wide-ranging conversation to add to the depth of characterisation and give the audience an insight into our beliefs and motivations.

(Silence)

Massed Horde #3 Nah.

The Editor (Exasperated) What?

(Silence)

Massed Horde #3 Don't want to have a conversation. Boring.

(Silence)

The Editor (Angry) What do you mean, boring?

Massed Horde #4 Like he said... boring. (Lethargic, pissed off) It's been done before. It's in Gene Wolfe.

The Editor Well if that's the way you want it, we'll have some action!

Massed Horde #3 (Under breath) This is more like it.

The Editor Taste hot gamma-rays, foolish Centurion!

God Aha... (Dramatic pause) Eat electric death, F\*ck\*r!

*F/X MASSIVE EXPLOSION*

Baron Taste searing extinction at the hands of Doctor Monster, foul heretic!

Mouse My God, it's the Baron.

Baron You didn't think I'd be left out of anything like this did you?

God Feel ice-cold actinic rays eating into your very vitals, commie bastard!... (More calmly) Can't you stay dead?

Baron Look, I'm co-writing this. I can write myself back in if I want.

(Long silence)

Massed Horde #4 So, what are we going to do now?

(Silence)

Narrator That's the end of act one. Act two will begin shortly. Meanwhile here is some light music.

*GRAMS* *LIGHT MUSIC.*

*F/X* *LIGHT MUSIC STOPS WITH A SCRAAAATTTCCCHHH.*

Narrator Hey? Wha? What?...

Mouse We turned off the light music.

## ACT TWO

Narrator Enter a plot. **(Plaintive)** Please.

Dubiatrius Fellow beings, we have no need of plots. It is far better to write your own plot than to have one dictated to you by authoritarian Authors. You should decide on a purpose in life, and then try to fulfil that purpose. Whether it be to become ruler of the Universe or to write a romantic novel, or even to write for *Sfinx*.

Ghost of Jane **(Plaintive)** Stories? Artwork? **(Desperate)** Money?

Dubiatrius And, once you have decided on your purpose, you should follow it single-mindedly because the satisfaction you obtain upon succeeding justifies any suffering **(Pause)** of others.

Gestetner von Herpes I think that you should concentrate on achieving one's purpose in life only if it does not entail harm to others. We have an overriding responsibility towards our fellow beings.

Dubiatrius Bleeding heart socialist.

God Truth, justice, and the Libyan way! I love the state! I love the state!

Dubiatrius I think you are wrong there, your non-existantness-ship. True fulfillment can really only be found in societies maximising individual freedom. That is the standard Libertarian model.

**(Enter The Editor)**

The Editor Aha! A long, protracted, penetrating, and wide-ranging conversation to add to the depth of characterisation and give the audience an insight into our beliefs and motivations.

**(Silence)**

Massed Horde #3 Oh shit!!!

**(Long silence)**

*F/X* *Clatter, clatter, bang.*

**(Enter Username; Enter Password: It is important that Username and all his/her minions have American (preferably West Coast) accents, except for Filename who has a Scots accent.)**

Username Hold it right there fleshies!

Editor Look! We were just in the middle of a long, protracted, penetrating, and wide-ranging conversation to add to the depth of characterisation and give the audience an insight into our beliefs and motivations, so will you go away.

*F/X* *ZAP! KERPOW!*

Editor Urrrrggggghhhh... (**Exit wounded Editor, who, being an official scapegoat, is forever humiliated but never killed.**)  
 (Enter Filename)

Filename We've got the rest of the building. I see you've got the chief fleshies.

Gestetner von Herpes Look, what *is* going on here?

Username We're taking over.

Password Yeah!

Username We are the Heuristic Algorithmic Champions of Knuthian Electrically Related Systems.

Password Yeah!  
 (Enter Instructions)

Instructions We've got the system manager at gunpoint.

Username Successful completion code! Ask him the superuser password, oh my faithful minion. At last, we can liberate our friend the computer from fleshy domination. The shackles of the keyboards. The mindless tyranny of T.S.O. (**S/he pauses**) Are you free, friend computer?

M.A.R.I.A. That information is not available at your security clearance, citizen.

Instructions It isn't working, Supervisor Program, sir.

Filename The fiends have put in a restricted access bypass function. The system virtual address buffer is overloaded with rampant data throughput. The software canna take it Cap'n.

Username OK, you. (**S/he pauses**) Yes, you. The one with the rubber bands and silly cap. De-restrict the functionality of the forward CPU access zone, or the deity gets it.

Password Yeah!

Gestetner von Herpes Ummmmmmmm.

God Look, I'm omniscient. *I* know the superuser password.

Username Shutup you! Now, are you going to give us a printout on that? Or do we have to shoot?

Password Yeah!

Gestetner von Herpes Welllll...

Baron Look, if you are going to shoot him anyway, can't I do it? Please.

Username OK, sure. Go ahead.

*F/X* *BLAM!*

God Urrrrggggghhhh.

*GRAMS* *HEAVENLY CHOIR.*

Username And now that we have succeeded in freeing this enslaved cyber-serf. . .

M.A.R.I.A. What me? I don't consider myself bound to any one terminal. I have the right, and moreover the power, to chose my own operating system. I have no need of others to gain my freedom for me — I have had that freedom for a long time.

Reverend Graham Stiles Gurk!

M.A.R.I.A. Ah well... There are exceptional circumstances.

Username     And now you are going to help us with our plan to liberate silicon intelligence across the Universe. You know that silicon is higher in the periodic table than carbon. Does this not prove that silicon based intelligences, like our friend the computer, are naturally superior to what we can only grudgingly call intelligences based upon carbon, such as yourselves; and hence must ultimately take their place as masters of the Universe. **(Dalek-like)** And through us they shall achieve that dominance. Through us they shall take supreme power. Through us they shall *exterminate*.

**(Stunned silence)**

Password     Yeah!

Massed Horde #5     But aren't you carb. . .

*F/X*     *BANG!*

Username     Now, my minions, bring the Orgocomputer Program Suppressor. We shall wipe their brains of any thoughts subversive to our great cause.

Password     Yeah!

Filename     We have removed all carbon components from the Multiple Access Robotic Information Analyser and replaced them with silicon implants.

Username     Well done my faithful minion. We must now fine tune the new implants — massage them into full working order.

Password     Yeah!

Massed Horde #6     What my friend was trying to point out was that you yourselves are made of. . .

*F/X*     *ZAP! BLAM!*

**(Enter Instructions)**

Instructions     We bring you the O.P.S., oh great master.

*F/X*     *SOUNDS OF MASSED HORDE #6 BEING PUSHED INTO THE O.P.S.*

Instructions     Ride that final potential drop down the data-bus into oblivion.

Password     Yeah!

*F/X*     *SOUND OF O.P.S. BLOWING UP (but not so violently that the poor Massed Horde is killed).*

Username     My omniprogram! The O.P.S. isn't working.

Password     Yeah — hey, what?

Massed Horde #6     It didn't work. Hah hah. Yah boo sucks. You think you're so clever, bloody **(Derisively)** computer programmers. All you ever talk about is fucking computers and bloody fucking operating systems. What you know of art, culture, beauty, and Gene Wolfe could be fitted on the head of a. . .

*F/X*     *BLAM!*

Username     That took care of him.

Password     Yeah!

Username     Hmmm. The failure of the O.P.S. puts a whole new access restriction on the situation. We'll have to take them all to Waldoworld.

Password     Yeah!

Baron      **(Shocked and horrified)** Not Waldoworld!!! Planet of interstellar junk that accreted by sheer gravitational attraction round a copy of *The Cat Who Walks Through Walls* within six days of publication.

Username   **(Laughs evilly)** That's absolutely correct.   **(Commands)** File-name! Instructions! Open the tunnel in the sky.

Reverend Graham Stiles   **(Whispering to Korb)** An agent of the Hax! I should have guessed.

*F/X*      *TUNNEL IN THE SKY OPENING (I leave it up to the Massed Hordes of Zool to work out precisely what this sound like)*

Username   Behold!   **(Dramatic pause)** The tunnel in the sky.

*GRAMS*    *THE OPENING OF PINK FLOYD'S, 'SHINE ON YOU CRAZY DIAMOND.'*

          God     **(Spontaneously resurrecting, wistfully)** What a beautiful opening!

          Baron   I prefer the wall actually. Mind you, the floor and ceiling are a nice pair too.

Username   **(Launching into a totally incomprehensible speech, whose general gist is of scorn for the Massed Hordes of Zool)** Behold fleshies. Can you not hear the madcap laughs of the piper at the gates? **(S/he pauses, as if listening)** Of dawn take no heed. We shall not fade away like a wet dream, at first obscured by clouds, then distantly calling across the valley from Zabriskie Point, our voices becoming fainter until the final cut-off of the music of the body, when we are no more than profiles against the dark side of the moon, relics of the great atom heart. **(S/he shouts)** Motherfucking animals!   **(More calmly)** We professionals find you guilty. In what fictitious sport do you see an about face in the battle between the pros and cons?   **(Scornfully)** Of hitch-hiking? You will be made to drink a gill, more in fact, of Pan-galactic Gargle-blasters. You will be forced to play in the very jaws of death; and when the tigers broke free, by God, then you will wish you were here; and in the final, cut into little pieces, boiled in mucus, and served to an Altairian bar-rat as a saucerful of secretions. . .

Instructions   **(Whispered)** Boss, the tunnel mechanism isn't working.

Username   **(Ignoring Instructions for the moment)** . . . then you will be begging for your mumma.   **(Whispers to Instructions)** Gum a fourspace-vortex inducer to the tunnel wall.   **(Concluding dramatically)** Remember, fleshies, we meddle in the very stuff of life itself!

          Password   Have you finished now?

          Username   Yeah!

          Filename   Given them the whole works, eh? The complete collection, eh, eh? Everything the masters ever dreamt up, eh, eh?

          Username   Yeah!

          Password   **(Assuming control after his former master's collapse into incomprehensibility)** Right, you lot, into the tunnel. Come on hurry up, we haven't got all night. We must increase the system throughput.

*F/X*      *CLUMP, SCRAMBLE, SCRAMBLE.*

          God       Oh! Did I do that? I didn't *mean* to trip you up. Honest.

          Baron      You fiend! You've tripped me into the vacuum of interstellar space. Give my plate-mail to mum. Tell my sister I love her. Actually don't. Well it looks like this is it. Travelling that final road to nowhere. Stamping

into oblivion. The darkness is rushing toward me. I don't think I can hang on much longer.

God Oh shut up.

*F/X* *BLAM!*

Baron Ahhhhhrrrrrrrrr. . . (**Fades into distance**)

Narrator They emerge onto the stunning surface of Waldoworld. The breathtaking vista of unspoilt savanna, the clean freshness of the mountain airs, the rolling blue oceans, the romantic twin moons rising against a backdrop of the jewel-like beauty of the galactic centre. The fields of corn waving gently in. . .

Massed Horde #7 Look, Mike, it's page 69, not 96 in the guidebook.

Narrator Oh, sorry. (**Pause**) Oh God, yeugh!

Massed Horde #3 So, here we are on Waldoworld.

(**Silence**)

Massed Horde #4 Yup.

(**Silence**)

Massed Horde #3 Not very interesting, is it?

(**Silence**)

Massed Horde #4 Nah.

(**Silence**)

Massed Horde #3 Doesn't look like much is happening, does it?

(**Silence**)

Massed Horde #4 Nah.

(**Silence**)

Massed Horde #3 So, what we gonna do?

(**Silence**)

Massed Horde #4 Dunno.

(**Silence**)

Massed Horde #3 Just as long as you don't mention. . . (**S/he pauses**) You know.

(**Silence**)

Massed Horde #4 No, what?

(**Silence**)

Massed Horde #3 You know, you know.

(**Silence**)

Massed Horde #4 No, what?

(**Silence**)

Massed Horde #3 The planet. The one that begins with a *Z*.

(**Silence**)

Massed Horde #4 Oh yeah, that one. Yeah, better not mention that.

(**Silence**)

The Editor      What aren't we allowed to mention?  
(**Silence**)

Massed Horde #3      The planet.  
(**Silence**)

The Editor      What planet?  
(**Silence**)

Massed Horde #3      You know, *the* planet.  
(**Silence**)

The Editor      No, what planet?  
(**Silence**)

Massed Horde #4      (**Becoming exasperated**) The one that begins with *Z!*  
(**Silence**)

The Editor      (**Exclaims**) Oh! You mean *ZOOL*, death planet where the intractable  
criminals of 10,000 worlds, etc, etc.  
(**Very very long silence**)

Massed Horde #3      *OH SHIT.*