

Zool: Resurrection

There Is No Story, Only **Zool**

Greetings, earth beings, and welcome to the fourth incarnation of **Zool, death planet where the renegade criminals of ten thousand worlds etc** . Zool is a shared-world anthology; an evolving multi-authored story; a really shit piece of SF parody. People join the Zool project, they each write a chapter in turn, and we stop when the fat lady sings. We end up with a masterpiece: a new work of Zool. The [previous incarnations](#) of Zool are lost in deep time now, and it is time to bring Zool bang up to date with a bitchin' 21st-century cycle. New Zool: New Danger.

The people involved with Zool right now are:

- [Tom Anderson](#) (your friendly local coordinator)
- [Zac Appleton](#)
- [William Ramsden](#)
- [John Phillips](#)
- [Niall Harrison](#)
- [Doug Pippy](#)
- [Tim Adye](#) (elder)
- [Archie Maskill](#) (hero)
- [Phil Gardner](#)
- [Peter Sidwell](#) (lost elder)

The chapters written so far are:

1. [A New Dope](#), [Tom Anderson](#)
2. [Der Stasi Von Catan](#), [Zac Appleton](#)
3. [To Infinity and Beyond](#), [William Ramsden](#)
4. [The Swordsman's Oaf](#), [John Phillips](#)
5. [zOoL](#), [Niall Harrison](#)
6. [Fear And Loathing On Zool](#), [Doug Pippy](#)
7. [The Construction of Fallen Tsars](#), [Phil Gardner](#)
8. [A Gathering of Forces](#), [Peter Sidwell](#) (lost elder)

That is all. This is nothing to do with Ghostbusters. Or Amigas.

Chapter I

[Tom Anderson](#), 20/01/2000

The sky above the port was the colour of a web browser, pointed to a dead link. The Vice-Master for the Widdershins Quadrant finished the glass. He steepled his fingers, gazed into the distance, sank deeper into his ornate chair and let out a breath of frustration.

"Your eminence?" inquired his secretary.

The vice-master held his gaze for a second, and then spoke a single word.

"**Zool.**"

"**Death planet where the intractable criminals of ten thousand worlds ... ?**"

"**Etc.**" he was brusquely interrupted.

"Eminence, i fail to see how a planet dead and dry as dust for more than a century can be a concern to you.", his secretary retorted, confused.

"Then you are a fool.". The vice-master took to pacing the room. "Congregation has finally finished debating our actions there, the actions which left it in that very state, and has found against us; this is just the excuse the southern alliance needs to step in and take Zool from us."

His secretary's eyebrows lifted. "Take Zool? But what possible desire could they have for that worthless orb?"

The vice-master stared into the portrait of his predecessor-but-five at the far end of the chamber and chose his words carefully. "There are reasons for wanting control of Zool; reasons known only to a few, but powerful enough to drive them to desperate lengths to take it."

The secretary's silence communicated his desire to know more.

The vice-master spoke quietly, his gaze never wavering. "Behind these events lies a secret for which the galaxy is not yet ready."

The secretary considered the import of his master's words. "Then congregation's decision is dire news indeed, eminence. What action must be taken?"

The vice-master was clear. "Politics has failed: enough of the lamb, it's time to show the flag. Dispatch the Warlord."

Warlord Munitt Arshall's heavily-armed command cruiser circled the planet like a moth circling a lamp; it was not so much their destination as it was their point of reference. Around his cruiser flocked his fleet: twenty warcruisers and a hundred or more lesser ships. The Warlord himself was in conference with his commanders; he addressed his trusted lieutenant, Bhond.

"As you, know, Jim, we are currently orbiting the planet Zool".

"Death planet ..."; Bhond started to speak, but Munitt-Arshall silenced him with a steely glare and continued.

"A hundred and forty-eight years ago, Zool was incinerated by the atomic weapons of a massed warfleet, all life and structure on its surface utterly obliterated. Its twin moonlets, Huxley and Darwin, were spared that, captured by legions of power-suited stormporters; it is said that their rocket-punts filled the sky like clouds over a Hilary collection."

Arshal's eyes combed the room, crawling over the impassive faces of his other subordinates.

"That fleet, and those porters, were our own forces; the forces of St John's College."

A ripple of disquiet flashed around the room.

"The conflict which culminated in this attack has a long and twisted history. In the beginning, space colonisation was expensive. The costs were great, and the payoff long in coming, but it was an assured investment. Of course, this was anathema to the bankers and stockbrokers of the day, and conventional capital steered well clear of the New Worlds. The investors who were attracted were fantastically wealthy, and thought in timescales of centuries. By 5312, half of known space was owned by St John's, Magdalen, Christ Church and Trinity."

With the background now getting clearer, the Warlord moved on to develop the plot; the conference discussed the options they had for dealing with the Christ Church-Corpus-Brasenose fleet which was conducting unprecedented 'maneuvers' just parsecs from the room in which they sat: maneuvers whose intent was clear, and directed towards Zool. The southern alliance had upped the ante, and the St John's fleet was duty-bound to raise again.

A hush descended over congregation, resplendent in their ceremonial leather-elbow-patched jackets. The stately procession began to enter the chamber: led by the Assessor, brought up by the Junior Proctor, with the supreme ruler of the university at its heart: the holder of the twin titles of Vice Chancellor and Senior Proctor, the undisputed master of the dons, the Don King himself.

As the Don King seated himself in his throne, a measure of noise returned to the chamber. Soon, it fell again as he read the judgment that had been pronounced against St John's the previous week, and then rose as debate was joined as to the action which had to be taken.

The decision was comparatively swift. This was a task for the university police.

Chapter II: "Der Stasi Von Catan"

Zac Appleton, 25.01.MM(S?)

"Zool, death planet where the renegade criminals of ten thousand worlds etc" said BD Primary Bob Hangline, resting back into his antique seat, worn to a smooth finish by centuries of predecessors having to state the same bad news to underlings.

"No! That can't be right sir! What would they have us do there?" asked BD Secondary Michael Artfrog, leaning forward suddenly, his shifting weight making the ancient wood floor groan below.

"The orders are right in front of me Mike, they arrive by stellar cycle just three parsecs ago. Look, you can check the authenticating wax seal if you don't believe me, it's signed by the DeeK himself, we are going to Zool."

The course recycled paper brown envelope that had encased the letter still had glittering beads of nebulaic dust on it. The wax seal was broken, was that the seventh this month wondered Mike? Whatever had stamped the hot wax was so old as to be rendered illegible, so Mike dug into his pockets, found what he was looking for and passed his circular fob over the cracked wax. The nanocircuits within the molecularly bonded wax responded and a disembodied voice said, "This is an official University Communiqué, so sod off!"

With a dejected look, BD Secondary Michael Artfrog said, "If that's it then, what's the problem the Congregation has given us?"

"Well, it seems the Southern Alliance is massing its fleet near Solis, the nearest neutron cluster to Zool, it has even sent reconnaissance cruisers to Zool proper. This has provoked a reaction from the Northerners, which have sent their own forces to the region, insofar as one can have a region in a constantly expanding universe. The Congregation wants us to intervene before things get out of hand." Seeing his worried glance, Bob says, "Don't worry Mike, I'll avoid excessive force, at least at first. We maintain those orbital hydrogen grav-bomb nets around a thousand worlds for the precise reason that we don't have to use them."

Mike was far from convinced, but decided to let it slide, it simply wasn't worth the effort. "Thanks for the plot dumb Bob. This job sounds pretty big, should be call the TVP in to help?"

'Reducing crime, disorder, fear...' how will a bunch of comedians, mimes, and clowns help?"

"Fair enough. Should I ready the Bulldogs?"

"You might as well Mike, oh and do be sure to bring along your inkpulp tonnage, it might just prove useful."

Within 60 sections of timespace measurements that we call "seconds" that somewhat equate to a human heartbeat at rest, the Simu-BellTM started to peel off sonic waves of wall shuddering quality.

Soon, the whole building echoed with the whine of shoe leather, the ruffle of Communi-CoatsTM being fitted, and the coughs of a thousand Bulldogs fixing Grava-BowlersTM, neck protectors, and yellow shield armbands. With crowd-control transformable shield-rods in hand (equally good for villains, malcontents, and acid rain), the University Police are ready.

"Oo-Sool, watch out for that firkin' firth!"

With a double tone clarion call on FemSoothe Level 5, the PanAudioConTM sounded, "Warning, three minutes until structural integrity compromised."

Everywhere was the shriek of crushing metal, heart-stopping explosions, shattering glass control panels, and smoky electrical fires. Thinking quickly, the ship's captain, Jim said to the fortunately-present ship's doctor, "Flesh! Go check out Oo-Sool, he's not responding to my commands! If all else fails, palm that pilot!"

"Dammit Jim, I'm a doctor not an interrogator!"

"I don't want excuses, if we don't get the ship under control, we'll...all...die!"

Amid the whirlwind of chaos, the captain of St. John's enterprising industry ship accessed the cargo control panel in stroboscopic light and jettisoned the Exo-Global Grounders (or EGGs for short) into the vacuum of

space. A skilled multitasker, he thought, 'how could they have come upon us so quickly? Clearly they must've used the Zool's gravity well to hide from our sensors. We were just too busy trying to build that bloody longest road. Dammit, I hate paper cuts!' In the background of thudding explosion, crackling fire, and mad havoc, he could here the slaps Flesh was administering to his worthless pilot.

Just feet away, his seat's Communicator awakened with a report from his Engineer Burns, "she kanna take it anna more Cap'n, the ships too auld!"

"Come on Robbie, give her haggis!"

Then amongst raucous metacognitive applause, a fabulous blockbusting explosion destined to deliver an Oscar to the filmmaker's closet brought about an awful silence.

Sally was playing in her home, on the living room floor. She had nearly finished building her Lego town, a picture of prefabricated domesticity destined for destructive fiction. Unexpectedly, there was a knock on the door. Sally sat up and answered the door. Standing in the hallway beyond was a man. The man is dressed in spats-covered leather shoes, a raincoat, suit, and dark tie. He has kindly hands and a big open space where his head should be.

"Hiya Mister, what can I do for ya?"

Without a word, the Man-With-No-Head reaches into his coat and presents a bright white crystal; he leans down and offers it to the girl.

Sally reaches forward and takes the crystal. Behind her is the sudden sound of fluttering wings, Sally quickly turns and finds her home unchanged. Sally turns back to thank the man.

Sally finds only an empty hallway.

Sally closes the door and returns to her near-complete town and raiding barbarian army when she realizes that she still has the crystal in her hand.

The Editor apologises for the Microsoftness of this HTML. This will be corrected as soon as is practical. The Editor also apologises for the use of blinking text, but thought it necessary given the circumstances.

ZOOL: Resurrection

Chapter 4: TO INFINITY AND BEYOND

By W.J. Ramsden

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"Zool. Death planet where the intractable criminals of ten thousand worlds..."

"Etc." broke in Lieutenant Photon, casting his superior a worried glance. "What about it, Captain?"

The Captain frowned, running his fingers over his stubbled chin and leaning forward in his leather chair to adopt the pose of "The Thinker".

"According to our onboard computer, there's a great deal of trouble in that area. It sounds as if the different factions of the University are at war again."

"Not that interminable and bloody struggle between the ChristChurch-Corpus-Brasenose and St John's fleet over planet Zool, sir?"

"Yes, Photon."

"The one that's so far claimed millions of lives and threatens to tip the entire galaxy into galaxy-wide galactic war?" asked Photon, tautologically.

"Yes, Photon." The Captain stood up proudly, surreptitiously flicking a switch to start a fan on the control desk, sending his cloak billowing out behind him. He strode forward, with one hand on his hip and the other pointing out into space through the window. "Zool."

"Er... Captain..?"

"Yes, Photon?" the Captain rumbled.

"What about it, sir?"

"Set course for Zool, Lieutenant. We are sentient beings of the galaxy. We cannot allow this slaughter to continue without making an effort to promote peace and pro-free market propaganda. Send my apologies to the King, and make sure that his fleet is ready to drop in at the last minute to save us in a good deus ex machina finale. All this death will be brought to an end, or my name's not CAPTAIN ZAP!"

*

"Zap!" The Warlord Arshall steepled his fingers under his chin, then stopped, because it looked silly.

"Beg pardon sir," said his obsequious fawning underling, "but all our lasers are fully loaded and our fleet is the most powerful in space. Why should we worry about one lone altruistic fool?"

"Because he is CAPTAIN ZAP!" the Warlord thundered. "Saviour of the people of Keble, protector of the Zoltar, destroyer of the evil swarming Kaleaklex people of Quarble-wokka, the man who obliterated the Dark Planet, fought back the Mutoids of Zegrod Nine, crushed Bart Simpson, repelled the Evil Unicorn, re-energised the Mighty Sceptre of the Ovbiavbbvsoabshqqwur, and... slightly irritated the Daleks."

"Er... yes sir. But... with respect, the Dark Planet was just in a comic." The Warlord sprung from his chair and began to stalk around his dark and sinister domain. Since their victory the other day, Zool was practically theirs. The evil scum of the Congregation skulked with the southerners behind the planet, and total conquest was almost in his grasp. Now, CAPTAIN ZAP threatened to bring an end to all that. He snarled, taking a guard's laser gun and blasting him with it. The Warlord remembered their last confrontation. He'd just been a minor Space Commander then, trying to subdue rebels on the desert planet Arrakis II, when a small space ship had suddenly shot out of Hyperspace and somehow disabled his fleet. When he blasted down to the planet he had been confronted by a tall, cloaked figure in a bronze spacesuit. They had fought for a long time before Zap had won, slicing off the evil Warlord's hand with a laser sword. Now, the Warlord flexed his cybernetic hand and cursed.

"I will destroy you, Zap... I will destroy you..."

"Sir, with respect, we do have a plan that might help you defeat Zap and salvage your shattered ego, sir."

"Well?" Arshall swung round, gripping his underling in an iron grip and raising him off the ground.

"We have regenerated a dead astronaut from the twentieth century, sir. With his advanced knowledge of primitive space travel..." the underling trailed off, then wrinkled his brow. "Er... actually sir, that's a dreadfully silly plan, now that I come to think it through. Sorry."

"No matter!" the Warlord dropped him. "Any ace I can use against Zap... anything... anything!" He began to laugh, evilly. His robot starling mascot started to caw in time with his laughter, and he gripped his stomach with both hands, laughing louder and more evilly. His underling joined in too. The starling fluttered to his shoulder, its red eyes glowing redly. "You're finished Zap... finished!!!!"

*

A few hours later the Warlord stared at the feeble looking figure crouched on the bridge.

"You were right, Underling," he breathed with a sigh. "It was a damn stupid plan."

"Er... this, sir, is Buzz Aldrin, the second man on the moon."

"I see. And you think you can help me vanquish CAPTAIN ZAP, do you, Aldrin?"

"Why... Yessir," came a wheezing American voice from the ancient figure. "Ah travelled space when you wuzn't even born... ooh arr. To infinity and beyond, ah went," continued Buzz, as the Warlord stalked slowly back to his desk and sat behind it. "Ah wuz the second man to land orn the Moon yu see, zur, an ah'm the only here man in this little ol' world that can stop this here Captain Zarp."

"Hmm." The Warlord's finger strayed closer and closer to a small button on his desk. "And you think that you are capable of this, Mr Buzz?"

"Ooh arr, Jim lad," grinned Buzz inanely, turning to Jim Bhond. "Shiver me timbers if I won't send em all to Davy Jones... the noo."

"In fact," the Warlord said to his underling in a conversational tone, "it was a plan so stupid that even John Norman wouldn't have used it as a plot." He pressed the button, and suddenly a concealed trapdoor opened beneath the underling, who screamed as he fell out into space. Bhond looked dispassionately out at space through the hole for a second before it closed, then turned to face the Buzz clone.

"What do you want done with this?"

"Ye lay a finger on me boyo an I'll cut ye into cutlets and feed ye to the sheep, the noo. And a top of the mornin' to ye. Don't ye threaten me or I'll skin you and hang yer skin out for the little leprechauns, boyo." The Warlord scowled.

"Prepare to have him killed in a slow and unnecessarily complicated way."

"Yes sir," snapped Jim, seizing the babbling loon and dragging him from the bridge.

*

In two hours they would reach Zool. CAPTAIN ZAP paced his cabin nervously. He'd sharpened his stubble, put on his most gold cloak, and plucked his eyebrows. In two hours he would face once again the evil Warlord Arshall of St John's College. His nemesis. He remembered the hallucination in the Cave of Confusion on Catworld, remembered going into the cave to confront his worst fear, remembered fighting Arshall, striking him down, and pulling the mask he never wore from his face to reveal his own features. The great enlightened git Horatio Ginger had not been able to explain the illusion. Zap sighed, pacing the cabin more nervously. Horatio Ginger was a legend to the people of Catworld, the man who had lead their people out of the dark ages. Still, he was undeniably an annoying, lecherous, bad tempered, smelly old tom cat. Sorry, tom Cat. Zap sighed, remembering.

*

Catworld was a far off planet, so distant from Earth that it could only be reached by flying through a black hole. It seemed that, millions of years ago, a meteorite carrying DNA from Earth had ended up in the Cat's solar system, and infected the three planets, now known as Catworld, Dogworld, and Birdworld. On Catworld, an enlightened civilisation had developed, one of the best in the universe, but threatened only by one thing. Every seven hundred and three years, it seemed, the planet's orbit would take it close enough to Dogworld, where the evil tyrannical Dogs, savage space pirates with no regard for life, would plan their campaign of evil. They would invade Catworld, crushing all resistance, and brutally gutting the planet's resources, massacring the population, and generally being well and truly unpleasant. This time though, the Cats were organised enough to put up some resistance. During one of the last battles of the war, evacuation transports began to leave Catworld, bearing the children of the race away. One of these was mistaken by the Dog's stupid ruler, Scrounger, as bearing the Cat monarch- Blackcat 1st. In fact, it carried his rather feckless wastrel son, Blackcat 2nd, but Scrounger did not realise this until it was too late. He attacked the ship, boarded it, killing the pilot, but a courageous group of young kittens, led by Sam Ginger, son of the great court advisor and philosopher Horatio, managed to overpower the Dog assault team and, in a courageous attempt to rid Catworld of the Dog leader forever, Sam crashed the ship through interstellar space into the planet Earth.

Four million years passed. The ship had been cryogenically cocooned when it crashed, and only a nearby freak volcanic eruption brought life to them again. The Dogs left the ship first, Scrounger furious at being separated from his massive war fleet, but determined to conquer the Earth. However, the brave Sam Ginger was able to stop him, forging his gang of kittens into an invincible fighting force, the most fabled of fabled invincible fighting forces, the....CAT TEAM!

When Zap had met them, the Cat Team had just defeated the Dogs, after a long and bloody struggle, and Sam had been transformed by the power of the near mythical Catstone into the indestructible, the incredible, the unbeatable Super Cat- Tabby. Tabby was immortal, invulnerable, absolutely unkillable. Sadly, during their absence, Blackcat 1st had been deposed by his evil nephew, the hardline King Catrak, and when Tabby led a civil war to free Catworld from Catrak's iron grip, his own lieutenant, the eccentric scientist Blackcat took the thrown. Power corrupted Blackcat 2nd, and eventually, in the interests of democracy and giving the hero of the story the top job, Tabby was forced to perform a coup against his own former best friend, and assume control of Catworld himself. Zap had helped in both those civil wars, and in the process,had been introduced to Tabby/Sam's now ancient father, the sage Horatio. His mind rippled back across the years.

"You have a destiny, Zap. What it is, I cannot tell, but that your fate is somehow forever bound up with that of Warlord Arshall."

"Then I shall go and seek out that destiny. I hear that Arshall has begun moving against the planet of Zool."

"Zool? Death planet where the intractable criminals of ten thousand worlds...etc?" Tabby enquired, smoothing his whiskers.

"No," Horatio interjected, swishing his tail crossly, "Zool, the new variety of Kitekat. Of course the Death planet. Idiot."

"Then I shall come with you, friend Zap," Tabby purred. "Together we shall draw a line against the night."

"Er... no thank you." Zap took Tabby by a paw and led him to one side. "This is my fight, Tabby. I have to face him again."

"I understand," Tabby nodded. "We all have demons to face, my friend. Still, there is your crew to think of. If you need us, then we will be there."

*

"If you need us, then we will be there." Zap shook his head. There was an ominous feeling hanging over his head. Suddenly, his door flew open. Lieutenant Photon ran in.

"We're coming out of Hyperspace, CAPTAIN ZAP!" he shouted.

"Then let's go!" Zap replied, leaping into action. They ran dramatically along the ship's corridors, into the ship's lift, and continued to run dramatically on the spot whilst the lift ascended to the command deck, for fear of losing momentum. When the doors opened, they ran dramatically out into the ship's brothel, realised dramatically that they'd got out at the wrong floor, turned round dramatically, and re-entered the lift.

*

"ZAP!" Snarled the Warlord, absent mindedly crushing the neck of one of his guards.

"Yes sir. He jumped to normal space about a minute ago sir. He's two light years away. Look sir..." Bhond pointed out of the window. "If you squint really really hard then you can just about see him."

"ZAP!" The Warlord clenched his fist around the dead guard's face, tearing his nose off. "This time he will learn what it means to oppose the evil might of St John's College. Zap... you have made your last mistake." Snarling, he opened his mouth and ate the dead guard's nose. "Set us on a collision course, prepare to loose our deadly secret weapon, and...." He turned a peculiar shade of green, "... and tell me I didn't just eat what I thought I just ate."

*

"St John's fleet dead ahead, sir". Photon pointed to the radar screen, where a large number of green dots captioned "The Bad Guys" was moving slowly towards the centre. Zap swallowed once, then took up his central position on the bridge.

"Open communication channels with the University Police. Inform them that we regret taking this unilateral action, but their rank cowardice in failing to check the evil ambitions of the evil Deceptive... er, the evil ambitions of the evil St John's force has forced us to declare independent action. Let's see them get off their encounter suited butts and *do* something! You are the one. If you go to Z'ha... er no, cut it after, 'and do something!'"

"OK, sir." Photon flicked a switch.

"Now open communications channels to the enemy." Photon flicked another switch. "This is Archie Photon calling the enemy, calling the enemy. Please respond, enemy." There was a dramatic fizz, and the Warlord's face appeared on the monitor screen, a cyborg starling perched on his shoulder.

"So, Zap, we meet again."

"So, Arshall, we meet again."

"So."

"Indeed."

"Well, well, well."

"Well, well, well, well, well."

"Well, well, well, well, well, well."

"So, Arshall, it's finally come to this."

"Yes, Zap. We meet again for the last time. Prepare to die slowly, painfully, and in a groundbreaking special effect."

The screen went blank. Zap clenched his jaw.

"Well, in spite of my best negotiating efforts, it seems we must fight. Now, remember, that is a University fleet, so they may have access to weapons we can't hope to counter."

"Captain, with respect," murmured a female junior officer who had suddenly appeared for no very good reason, "we lost a firefight with Starbug last week. I don't think anyone has weapons we *could* hope to counter."

"They've launched Boaties!" Photon cried, running back to his station and finding it occupied by the new arrival instead. He looked worried. Zap activated the ship's telephoto vision facility and stared. A fleet of Spaceboats screamed towards them, each one a one person craft of destruction.

"Fire Rocket Punts!" A swarm of Rocket Punts zoomed out from Zap's vessel, their rotating Laser cannons destroying Spaceboats by the thousand. The Rocket Punts arced round in a dramatic and physically impossible manoeuvre and headed towards the Warlord's flagship. The Captain peered at them. Suddenly his eyes widened. "Tell them to get clear! The Warlord'll launch..."

It was too late. A series of green, tree shaped objects blossomed from the Evil Warlord's ship, hooking around the Rocket Punts and tipping them over, sending their brave pilots tumbling down to oblivion. Zap stared in horror. Of his hundred strong Rocket Punt fleet, only three had evaded the trees, but these three were also slaughtered as the Spaceboats began firing jets of Cherwell acid on them, killing the pilots instantly.

"Damn him!" Zap cursed, slamming his fist into his hand. A laser bolt shot out of nowhere and hit his ship, causing the control panel to spark. A small spark began to drift towards Zap.

"Look out CAPTAIN!" Bellowed Photon, hurling himself bravely in front of the spark to protect his leader. He staggered, losing his balance, and fell, breaking his neck.

"PHOTON!" Zap knelt by his friend and fellow officer.

"It's all right... Captain... the writing... was on the wall...." He gestured to the female officer sitting in his place. "All I ask... is that you.... " his voice began to fade. "nail.... Warlord..... reproductive organs..... to..... wall..."

"I'll do it, Photon," Zap promised. "I'll do it for you." He sadly dropped his friend's head onto the floor, which it his with a clunk, and stood up. "Take them out!"

*

"It's no good sir," Bhond said, running into the Warlord's office. "Zap's fighting like a maniac. He's destroyed all our St John's Boaties."

"No great loss," the Warlord muttered.

"He's moving in on this ship."

"What? You mean... I might get hurt?... I mean, You mean he dares to attack the flagship of St John's College?" thundered the Warlord. "Very well. Loose our secret weapon. Destroy Zap! DESTROY HIM! Muah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-hah!"

*

"Sir, look!" The new female lieutenant pointed at the small dots emerging from the Evil Warlord's flagship.

"What's that?" gasped Zap, suddenly remembering the enemy could shoot back. Then he narrowed his eyes. A cold wave of fear scuttled down his spine. Surely not even the Warlord would go so far. He had...

Suddenly, Zap leapt over to the command position, where he should have been anyway, during a battle, and signalled the crew's attention.

"People, we have a serious problem. The Warlord Arshall has broken one of the cardinal rules of Intercollegiate Mass-murder."

*

They moved towards the warm metal thing through the blackness of space. Their skin was pallid, their eyes heavy and sunken, rimmed in purple from lack of sleep. Fingers twitched in a grotesque parody of life and they weakly raised their arms to shield them from the painful light of the sun. The warm metal thing held the Chips and Cheese they sought. They would gain entry to the warm metal thing.

*

"Your sensors do not deceive you." Zap swallowed, the only sign of weakness he would permit himself before his crew. "The Warlord has unleashed Students." Then he gripped the rail, unaccountably seeming to hear Horatio Ginger's voice echoing through his brain.

"Use the Kebab Van, Zap." He raised his head.

"Launch Kebab vans. They're the only thing that will stop a student." Metal boxes began to fly out from Zap's ship, encircling the ravening clouds of students. The monstrous creatures paused, hovering, and then moving away from Zap's ship to swarm over the vans. In his control room, the Evil Warlord stamped on the skull of one of his guards. On his bridge, Zap waited, his finger inching closer and closer to a large red button.

Suddenly, the kebab vans exploded, liquifying the students instantly. But, as Zap had feared, the force of the explosion struck his ship as well, fragments of student and hardened unidentifiable supposed meat tearing through the vessel. The ship shook, throwing the new female officer into Zap's arms as they fell to the floor. They stayed that way for a moment, but then the lights came back again, so they got up. Zap's desperate gamble had saved their lives, but at what cost?

*

The Evil Warlord snarled. "Your fault, Bhond! Your bloody bloody bloody stupid plan! Use students?" Bhond stumbled back nervously.

"But it was your..."

"Don't interrupt me when I'm passing the buck!" The Evil Warlord's finger inched closer to the button on his desk, the button that had sent his underling tumbling to oblivion. "Now not only is Zap still alive, but we'll have the entire Congregation fleet out to utterly kill us!" He poised his finger over the button. "Is there anything you can do to stop me pressing this, Bhond?"

"Er, yes," said Bhond, pressing it first. The trapdoor opened under the Evil Warlord's chair and it, and he, plummeted out into the vastness of space. Bhond smiled, shaken, but not stirred, and pressed the communicator switch. "I want to talk to CAPTAIN ZAP."

*

"Your vessel is disabled, Zap. You can't fly, you can't fire. I could kill you in a second."

"Who is this?" Zap stood in a dramatic pose on the flight deck. "You aren't the Warlord Arshall."

"Arshall is dead. I am in charge now." So much for Horatio's stupid prophecies, Zap mused. "I am Space Commander Bhond, and, unlike my ludicrously bearded and frankly majorly psychotic former Warlord, I am a reasonable man. I can tell you that Arshall planned to have you killed, then re-animated by sinisterly arcane technosorcerers from the biochemistry department, then killed again. I am not a hate crazed megalomaniac with a guard murdering fetish, so I'm just going to have you killed."

"Oh, very decent of you, thanks very much." Zap replied, dryly. He licked his lips. *If you need us, we will be there.* Zap clenched his jaw. He'd said that this was his fight, but that had, in all honesty, been a pretty damn stupid thing to say. He pressed his red button.

*

"Muah-ha-ha-ha-hah..." Bhond squinted at the crosshairs narrowing about Zap's ship. Coldly, he imagined that ship exploding in a ball of flame, Zap's body bursting in the vacuum. He opened communicators again.

"Just one thing you should know about me, Zap. I am your father." There was a silence, and then Zap's voice came back."

"Excuse me?"

"I am your father. You're supposed to scream: NOOOOOO!"

"But... I thought the Evil Warlord was my father."

"Look, it was a pretty unconventional relationship, OK. Still, I was definitely the paternal one. And now, Zap, my son, you die."

Suddenly, a vast fleet of ships appeared out of nowhere, their enormous lasers slicing away the weapons systems and engines of the St John's fleet.

"Are you sure about that, Dad? I brought along some old friends." There was a crackle, and then the face of an anthropomorphic tabby cat appeared on the monitor, and a strident yet mellifluous voice filled Bhond's ears.

"This is the voice of Tabby. Commander of the Cat Team. King of Catworld. Defeater of the Dogs. Vanquisher of the Seven Elbowed Qewhfgwo of Amalgam 4. Killer of Captain Kirk. Scourge of all evil, and aspiring sorcerer in training. Also, I can do a fairly good *Hamlet*." He purred briefly.

"Captain Zap is under the protection of the Cat Empire. We have allowed your species to have your own way for a very long time, but we remember and protect our friends. I saved your world countless times and you never even knew about it. I helped Captain Zap destroy Unicron, and you said some cartoon robot had done it. We don't want to control you. Our policy has always been to allow lesser races to grow on their own, just as we grew on our own. Still, if you hurt our friends, then we will cut you up into little pieces and spit on them. What do you have to say to that, you foolish little ape?"

There was a pause. Suddenly, a shadow fell across the blackness of space and, on all three flagships, all talk ceased. Zap and Tabby's eyes widened in amazement as they stared at the vast, planet sized object approaching. A huge purple sphere, massive orange spikes protuding from it and centreing about its hungry maw.

"No... it can't be!" Tabby gasped. "We destroyed it."

"ERROR." The massive voice boomed across the universe in Orson Welles like tones. "I WAS NOT DESTROYED."

"What the hell is *that?*" squeaked Bhond, across the communicator.

"All our worst nightmares," Zap responded.

"I HAVE COME FOR YOU, AND THIS PITIFUL PLANET OF ZOOL. I AM THE PLANET EATER. I AM UNICRON."

The saga will continue... I'm afraid.

John Phillips <john.phillips@keble.oxford.ac.uk>, 10/2/2000

Meanwhile, on the other side of the galaxy, on a planet suspiciously similar to Earth, whose inhabitants happen, by freak chance, to be identical to humans, and speak perfect English:

Aeron glanced around. From his vantage point on the rocky bluff he could see the vale of Trry, and castle StrongFort, his home for many years. Finally, his quest was nearing completion, and the Sword of Giving Really Rather Good Powers would be his. He could almost imagine it in his hands. With that sword he could right the wrongs of his world, vanquish the evil. He would finally be respected.

The wind howled through the nearby copse of trees. Oddly enough, Aeron hadn't noticed those particular tree's being there before. Now, as a (fledgling) heroic type, Aeron couldn't afford to be superstitious, but only a fool would ignore such a blatant Plot Device (TM). It must be a sign. A sign from the mighty god of this world. A sign from Author.

The tree's rustled in the wind, almost seeming to speak.

"Zool. Zoooooooool."

Memories flooded back to Aeron.

"Zool"

Aeron said to no one in particular,

"Zool. That is a name I have not heard in a long time.

The planet of my birth, from whence my parents sent me when I was but a child. Sent me to this place, so I might have a chance to learn. To grow. To take my rightful place."

The wind began to gust harder. Aeron continued,

"Zool, death planet where the renegade criminals of ten thousand worlds..."

"Etc."

The trees seemed to add (in direct contravention of all known laws of wind-plant interaction) as the wind once again rushed through them.

Aeron turned sharply at this. Just then, an unusually strong gust blew Aeron's heavy black cloak sharply to the side. His trained hero's senses indicating he was in danger of looking foolish, Aeron neatly sidestepped, grasping the hem of the cloak as he went... and promptly fell off the side of the outcropping on which he was standing on.

The wind was not _the_ begining, but it was _a_ begining...

* * *

"Fuckwit"

Prince Benedict Armaline lowered his telescope and turned away from the window.

"That's the third so called hero who's gone off the Rocky Outcropping of Windiness in as many months."

"'Tis said that there is a tree," began the old man.

"Shut-up you old fool" countered the Prince,

"Everyone in the castle knows about the Tree of Trickery, there's no point in explaining what it is every time you talk about it. Now, go and fetch anything that idiot left behind in the castle."

Castle StrongFort, located as it was within the Vale of Trry, always had an unusually large number of wannabe hero's visiting. Most of these hero's, being the types who are trying to avenge wrongs done to them, and win the hearts of fair maidens, had no next of kin (or at least none within easy distance). Thus, any belongings which were left in the castle after their inevitable deaths reverted to the ownership of the King.

Routing through such remains of a man's life was one of Benedicts favourite hobbies.

As he stood pondering what he would discover in this next batch of belongings, the door to the tower room swung open and a woman entered.

"Hello mother, to what do I owe this pleasure?"

"I'll have none of your impertinence" retuned the Queen,

"I've had quite enough of you".

"But why mother? Have I not agreed to marry that ugly hag of a daughter of the Duke Rumourman? Am I not here looking over the Kingdom when others of my age would be galavanting about on heroic adventures? What can I have done to upset you now."

"Well you know that I never intended you to marry Zelda. She's a few Links short of a Nintendo game, and her looks are truly appalling. I had rather

hoped that the threat would spur you into going on some quest to locate a fair Princess to marry."

"But I don't want to marry a fair princess. They're more trouble than they're worth. Firstly you have to go off on some Author-awful quest to actually find them. Then when you have found them and convinced them to marry you, they all turn out to be dreadful snobs who want nothing more than to sit around and do their embroidery all day... Are you listening to me mother?".

"Wha... ?", the Queen quickly put her embroidery down,
"Of course I'm listening to you. You were talking about Zelda?"

"No Mother. Anyway, if I married a princess she'd only go off and have an affair with some stablehand after a few years, and where would that leave the kingdom."

The Queen began to pace up and down the room, deep in thought.

"I see I'm going to have to take some drastic action. I'm sorry Benedict, but if you don't go off on a quest this instant then I'm going to have your father strip you of your rank and privileges."

"Bu..." began the Prince, as the door to the tower room swung open.

"No buts. You can start getting ready now."

The old man stepped into the room and cleared his throat.

"My Queen, Prince Benedict. I have bought the items you required, Prince. This one, in particular seems most intriguing."

The old man handed Benedict a cylinder, about 6 inches high, 5 in diameter. Benedict studied it carefully.

"Ha. A trans-dimensional ergonomic translation anchor." said the prince cryptically.

"A what?"

"How did you know that" began the Queen and the old man simultaneously.

"Oh, it's obvious" replied the Prince,
"It's written on the bottom."

"And what, pray tell, is the purpose of this device".

"Well, it allows the user to instantaneously transport himself and anyone else touching the device to somewhere else".

"And I suppose that's written on the bottom as well, Prince"

"No, you fool, I learned it in my trans-dimensional physics lectures."

The Prince paused, as a blindingly obvious thought slowed built within his head,

"By Author! This bauble could be the perfect staring place for my great quest. Ha! But first I must outfit myself with the appropriate equipment - to the Seamstress."

* * *

With unbelievable swiftness, Prince Benedict, with the old man in tow, rushed to the castle seamstress.

"Seamstress, I require a suit of your finest magical protective clothing" demanded the Prince.

The seamstress rapidly returned with a heavy grey cloak,

"This be the finest garment of shielding I have seen in all my years as the seamstress of castle StrongFort, the Cloak of PGP."

"The legendary Cloak of PGP" chimed the Prince and old man together.

"One and the same. 'Tis said that it proves the wearer is who he claims to be, as is virtually un-crackable"

The Prince struggled to think of some cutting witticism involving public keys, but, failing miserably, decided to press on with the preparations.

"Now I am protected, but I must have a weapon with which to fight - to the armourey".

* * *

The Prince dashed to the armourey, only to find it closed for the night.
"Drat. Where shall I find a sword at this late hour."

The Prince's incredible neurons leapt into action, taking barely minutes to find the solution:

"The Sword of Giving Really Rather Good Powers!"

Barely containing his feigned interest, the Prince sprinted to the Rocky Outcropping of Windiness.

"Ordarlen"
"Ordalennnnnnnn", murmured the Tree of Trickery.

"And if you think I'm falling for that you've got another thing coming. I know full well that my mother had an affair with Baron Ordalen, and I was the result, and what's more, I don't particularly care".

"Wha..." began the old man, turning to face the Prince in amazement, only to loose his footing and slip over the side.

":-)" said the trees, in a very curious manner.

"Never mind," cried the Prince
"the Sword o'GRRGP is within my grasp".

Climbing the last few steps to the Magical Altar of the Sword of Giving Really Rather Good Powers (placed there, it was said, by the Goddess of Excess Capitilisation), Benedict took the sword into his hand.

"At last, mighty Author, now I may begin my quest!"

Benedict pulled out the trans-dimensional ergonic translation anchor. With a few swift yanks, he triggered the device. Swirling beams of scintilating twisting light consumed Benedict in a carousel of colour and an over-wordy description. In an instant, Prince Benedict Armaline was gone.

* * *

"I HAVE COME FOR YOU, AND THIS PITIFUL PLANET OF ZOOL. I AM THE PLANET EATER. I AM UNICRON."

There was a shocked silence, and then a flurry of action as all three fleets in orbit around the planet moved rapidly into defensive formation. It was too little, too late. Stabbing beams of translucent opaque energy engulfed the fleets. In barely more than an instant all three of the fleets were just so much interstellar dust. But all hope was not lost. On each of the flagships, barely an instant before they were vapourised, last ditch emergency escape systems flared quietly into action. Three seperate trans-dimensional ergonic translation projectors instantaneously flung three seperate captains out of the clutches of doom.

* * *

As the light from the trans-dimensional ergonic translation faded back into the usual twilight, four different individuals looked around, searching desperately for something familiar. Prince Benedict, Commander Bhond, Captain Zap and Tabby surveyed their surroundings.

"I am Prince Benedict Armaline, I am on a quest to save the universe and to win the heart of a fair maiden. Who, pray tell, are you?"

"I am space Captain Zap. This is my friend Tabby, commander of the Cat Team, King of Catworld, etc. etc. The other one you see is Commander Bhond, my new found nemesis."

"But where are we?"

Where indeed, intrepid readers. All will be revealed in the next exciting chapter of

Zool: Resurrection.

Niall Harrison <niall.harrison@magdalen.oxford.ac.uk>, 25/2/2000

Commander Bhond idly watched the ashes from the fire spiral lazily into the crisp evening air, working out exactly how many of his limbs he'd give for a working weapon of some kind. Sadly the trans-dimensional ergonomic translator had done it's job far too efficiently to allow him to lay his hands on anything so practical as a blaster; and the same appeared to be true for his erstwhile foes, Zap and that infernal cat being. Which meant that, absurd as it was, all three of them - three of the mightiest warlords in the galaxy! - were at the mercy of some savage brandishing a blade of dulled steel; a savage, who, at the moment, appeared to be deep in conversation with Zap.

"So, *where* did you say you came from, exactly?"

"I was in orbit around Zool, death planet where the renegade criminals of ten thousand worlds, etc....surely you've heard of it?"

"It must lie across the burning desserts of pedantry; none have ever returned. That was to be my quest, in fact, until I found yon ergonomic translator. Now, I am on a quest to save the universe and -"

"-win the heart of a fair maiden," interjected Tabby. "Yes, you've told us that about fifty times already. What you haven't mentioned is the nature this quest will take - what, exactly, are you attempting to save the universe *from*?"

"Well, the Dark Lord of course. What else?"

"Quite," purred the feline, "and where were you planning to locate said Lord?"

"Well, obviously, as a tool of the righteous, the ergonomic translator will guide me. Unfortunately, it appears to have broken." The prince picked the dented machine off the ground and gave it a wistful shake. Something rattled. "See? Do you think you can fix it?"

"Don't be absurd," said Bhond, "no-one can fix an ergonomic translator that's been used. The damn things are designed for one-use only; just enough to get you out of trouble. It would have been pretty stupid of the corporation to sell them as re-usable items, now wouldn't it? Who'd bother with spaceflight then?" He stood up, brushing the dirt from his jumpsuit. "We're stuck here, the four of us, and that's that. Whatever has happened to Zool will have to wait until we can find a way home. And we can't begin to do that until it's light. I suggest we get some sleep, and reconnoitre properly in the morning." Without waiting for an answer, the supreme commander of St John's forces turned and made for a particularly soft-looking patch of grass, lay down, and went to sleep.

* * *

Bhond made sure he was the first to wake. Sitting, and then standing, he looked around. They had slept on what appeared to be a manicured grass lawn. In front of him, and stretching out to either side, was an immense tawny-bricked building, all arches and gargoyles. Behind, another, more elaborate stone building; older, by the look of it, with moss covering the roughly-hewn gray bricks. On his left, more manicured lawns, separated by neat gravel paths; and to his right, a wrought-iron gate, opening onto a bridge which crossed a narrow stream before wending its way around a large field filled with deer placidly sleeping. Narrowing his eyes with suspicion, he gave Zap a kick.

"Hey!"

"Wake up, fool. Does this not look familiar to you?"

Zap raised himself on one elbow, and glanced around. "Hey, yeah, it's like one of those colleges you guys are always harping on about. I thought they'd all been destroyed?"

"Almost. Many were, indeed, reduced to little more than piles of glowing embers during the nuclear fire that rained down upon Oxford a scant millennium ago; but a few used their fabulous wealth to shield themselves, and escape into space, where they remain hidden to this day. Exeter, Worcester, Merton...and Magdalen. My college swore an oath of vengeance against those who escaped, even whilst rebuilding a new and better headquarters for itself. We never did succeed in finding them, though...but now, it looks as if our luck may have changed," the Commander grinned broadly. "Perhaps, for once, some good will come of our involvement with that accursed death-planet; for unless my eyes deceive me, we have landed in Magdalen itself!"

By this point, the other two members of the party were awake and listening to Bhond's words. Tabby looked around in awe, the Prince in some bemusement. The former seemed on the verge of speaking, but was interrupted by a screaming whine; from nowhere a dark green shape suddenly flashed across the lawn, all white teeth and hard scales, severing the poor feline's head from it's shoulders in an explosion of bloody ruin. The prince threw himself to one side, coming out of a tight roll with his sword drawn to face the demon; but whatever it was, it was gone. Zap swore, running to the corpse of his ally. "Tabby!"

The prince looked to go to him, but Bhond laid a restraining hand on the younger man's shoulders. "Leave him," he said harshly, "we must move - and quickly. Zap, cease your whining!"

At that, the Captain looked up, tears leaving glistening trails along his face. "What sort of damned college does this to visitors?!"

"A paranoid one," returned the Commander, "which is why we must move. If I remember the plans correctly, the plodge - the command centre - is through cloisters. This way!"

The three moved off warily, constantly glancing around for any sign of the deranged monster that had killed the cat. But there were no signs of life, only an eerie silence.

* * *

"I didn't realise the old colleges were so damned big!" gasped Zap, "how much further?"

"Not all were as large as Magdalen," Bhond replied absently. "Corpus, for instance, you could easily have fitted inside your left shoe. In fact, the only real rivals for Magdalen in terms of size were St John's and Christchurch, but their superstructures were razed to the ground with the other colleges."

"Superstructures? You mean -"

At that moment, the Prince whirled, drawing his sword as he turned. With a swift thrust he impaled the creature that had been about to decapitate Zap on a nearby bench. The green thing twitched spasmodically for a while, before lying still. Even so, it was a few moments before any of the travellers dared approach it. Bhond was the first.

"It's mechanical!"

"Of course it is, ye fool! By the code, don't ye know a Jeremy-class Screamer when ye see one?! Mister Christopher, see what ye can get from that monster; we'll need those parts later. Now, where in the net did ye three port from?"

All three travellers stared in complete astonishment at the two new arrivals. One - the shorter - looked somewhat like a ball on legs. It held a notepad in one stubby hand. The taller appeared to be built from cubes, stacked one on the other, and was wearing a large red three-cornered hat, and a red suit with gold lace trimmings. An elegant gold monocle covered his single large eye, and he pointed a cutlass at the three adventurers. "What manner of creatures are you?" demanded the prince.

"They appear to be robots" observed Bhond.

"Robots?" responded the taller of the two individuals. "Robots? By the code, are ye so scanned ye don't even recognise the Crimson Binome?"

"The crimson *what*?" asked Zap.

"Binome. Again I ask, which system are ye from?"

"Until recently, Zap here and myself were in the Zool system; The overly dramatic Prince, on the other hand, appeared out of thin air, as it were."

"Zool, eh? Can't say I've heard of it. Are you on the web?"

"Look, er, binome - "

"That's captain to ye!"

"Captain, then. We don't know where we are. Our trans-dimensional ergonomic translators dumped us here when our ships were destroyed by Unicron, the destroyer of worlds. I believe it to be the lost sanctuary of the president and deans of Magdalen; am I correct?"

"In a manner of speaking, lad, in a manner of speaking..."

"Well, then, you must help me. I seek to destroy this place and those who rule it. Are you with me or against me?"

"Are the three of ye together on this?"

Zap and Benedict glanced at each other. The Prince spoke first. "I am on a quest to save the universe and win the heart of a fair maiden; unless you care to supply a better example, I see no reason why I should not join Commander Bhond in tracking this Dark Lord to his lair and slaying him!" With that, he pulled his sword from the bench, brandished it dramatically overhead, and tucked it into it's scabbard.

"Until recently, Bhond and I were the deadliest of enemies. But circumstance makes strange bedfellows, and I have less love for the University than most. I'm with him."

The Captain shook his head. "Foolish souls ye be, indeed. Brave - but foolish. Come, then, if ye wish to know the secret of this place."

With that, he turned and walked off, followed by his companion. The three companions glanced at each other, then at the thing the Captain had referred to as a 'screamer', and then followed.

* * *

"There it is!"

The five of them were crouched in the shadows of an immense and ornate wooden gate, looking out over a barren stone quad at their destination: the plodge. There were no people to be seen; only a group of what appeared to be fish, floating about a metre off the ground. The sun was high in the sky by this point, and Bhond had to rub his eyes when he saw the shadows the creatures were casting. "Zap, do you see - "

"So, that is his lair," said Benedict. "I say we launch a frontal assault right now. There are no guards posted, and no obvious defences; they aren't expecting any trouble."

"By the code, lad! How did you get to be so big with such a tiny brain? Do ye really think they'd leave themselves defenceless?"

"Well, what do **you** suggest?" queried Zap. "You seem to know so much about this place, after all..."

"That's right, I **do** know about this place. Ye'd do well to listen more and question less. Now, what we must do is - " the Captain was cut off in mid-speech as a vast column of flame burst into existence in the middle of the quad, incinerating the fish and stretching high into the sky.

"THIS IS THE VOICE OF THEN MEGATRON! HEAR IT AND TREMBLE, O MORTALS!"

"What **now**," groaned Bhond.

"LISTEN AS THE MEGATRON SPEAKS! THERE ARE UNAUTHORISED PERSONNEL IN THE COLLEGE! SEEK THEM OUT AND DESTROY! THE MEGATRON HAS SPOKEN!"

"Defenceless, eh?" Zap glaned at the Prince with a raised eyebrow. "Looks to me like we might be a little outclassed."

"Fear not, lad - it is not us of which the megatron speaks. Look!" With his cutlass, the Captain gestured to the far side of the quad. There stood four humanoids, with varying skin colours, wearing dirty white overalls and clutching what appeared to be some form of energy weapon. A cable connected the guns to power packs on the back of the four. One, the shortest, with green skin, shouted "Spoken too soon, I think, Mega-breath," upon which the apparent leader of the group slid a small box towards the still-incandescent pillar in the centre of the quad.

"Who ya gonna call, megatron?"

Simultaneously, all four figures fired on the entity. Coruscating beams of energy lashed out towards it, enfolding it in a neon caress of power. The megatron screamed, a long, drawn out wail which caused the heads of the five companions still huddled in the archway to vibrate ominously.

"We must get inside!" shouted Bhond. "Quickly, whilst it's distracted!"

The five began running towards the plodge, keeping to the edge of the quad, shielding their eyes from the blinding energies being released scant metres away. As they reached the entrance to the plodge, Bhond glanced

back over his shoulder to see the megatron apparently being drawn into the box-device released by the leader of their saviours. Without waiting to see what happened next, he stumbled through the door and slammed it shut behind him. Gasping for breath, he turned to face the others.

"Who *were* those guys?"

He didn't have time to hear the answer, however; from everywhere and nowhere a female voice came, saying "Game Over. The User loses". Suddenly the commander felt light-headed. His surroundings seemed to lose solidity as he gazed at them, periodically fading to transparency to reveal another world beyond. The walls bulged outwards, as if under immense strain. His companions appeared to be changing before his eyes, appearing variously as human, alien, and unidentifiable. A wind picked up from nowhere, howling through his mind and scattering his thoughts around the room.

Then, suddenly, there was silence, and darkness.

* * *

For the second time that day, Commander Bhond opened his eyes on unfamiliar surroundings. Although 'surroundings' appeared to be a somewhat generous term for a place which appeared to have no discernible features. There was no colour, no shape, and (as he was somewhat alarmed to discover when he glanced down), no ground. He tried speaking, but no sound came out. He tried moving his limbs, but appeared to have none; just a point of conciousness, all alone in the night. All about was a featureless void, nothingness in all directions. Except, that wasn't quite true. As the Commander examined his surroundings more closely, his perception adjusted to this new existence, and he percieved some discontinuity about him. One, two - four in total, all simply points of difference with his surroundings. And different to each other, as well; one appeared to have the characteristic that Bhond would have defined as crimson, if it hadn't been for the total absence of colour. He tried focussing on that one, and found that the it was as if he was bringing the singularity into focus. Concurrently, it seemed as if he could 'hear' things; more impressions, thoughts than actual sounds, and nothing he could readily define, but something outside himself, nonetheless. He was not alone.

After a time, during which the Commander could detect no changes in his existence, he decided to attempt contact with the singularity. He attempted to expand one single point to crystal clarity, reaching from the deepest inner mind to the outer limits of the continuum, with a certain amount of success; he seemed to have established some kind of link to the other point. Or rather, the entity; for Bhond recieved the distinct impression that it was concious, thinking, and in fact trying to communicate with *him* In fact -

"Captain!"

The word was felt, rather than said. It hung in the nothingness between the two points, then drifted away into nonexistence a few seconds later. No response.

"Captain, is that you?"

"Commander? By the code, be ye *alive*?"

Again, the sense was not of speech, but of a *knowing*; some kind of link had been established between the two, and now the ideas flowed more freely.

"Captain, what has happened? Where are we? *What* are we?"

"The game ended, lad. We should have been returned to the main system, but something has gone wrong."

"Game? What game?"

"Where we were before. The college. The megatron. By the code, you didn't think tht was *real*, did you?"

Bhond considered. The ergonomic translator came with no guarantees as to where it translated its users; just that they would be safe. Other existences were a perfectly possible end-point. But -

"All of that was a *game*? How is that possible? It seemed...real!"

"It's one of the most advanced games ever developed. It's called...zOoL." The concept was transmitted with a distinct capital O and capital L. But...Zool? The coincedence was too great.

"If that was a game, did we win?"

"Not us lad, but allies, yes, they won."

"So where are we now? Shouldn't we have been ejected from the system?"

"That's what I was trying to tell ye, lad. By the code, when will you learn to listen? Something has gone wrong. We're trapped."

Bhond could feel the horror in the binome's voice, palpably real in this stange existence. "You mean....?"

"Aye, lad. We're still in the game!"

TO BE CONTINUED.....

The Editor apologises for the Microsoftness of this HTML. This will be corrected as soon as is practical. The Editor also apologises for the use of blinking text, but thought it necessary given the circumstances.

Chapter VI: Fear and Loathing in Zool

We were somewhere around Alpha Centauri on the edge of the system when the drugs began to take hold. I remember saying something like "I feel a bit lightheaded; maybe you should drive ..." Then suddenly some foul and hideous shapes clouded my vision, swooping, diving and mocking us with an insane gibbering of unknown languages. "Holy Jesus! What are these goddamn animals?!" It was all I could do keep my grip firmly on the controls of the starspeeder to stop us from loosing control altogether. Skipping between dimensional vortices in a frighteningly erratic spin, I suspected that we'd actually lost control a long time ago. Flying through hyperspace is a damn tricky business and it's made even trickier when the pilot has been abusing most of the known drugs in the galaxy.

"The milk! The milk! There's too much honey! Not enough money!"

These strange and savage sounds drifted into the cockpit from the smoky entrance to the lounge. What were these deranged sounds? Who was making them? What did all of this MEAN? There was far too much craziness going on. I needed to concentrate and think about important things like hyperspace and where it was we were going and the importance of our MISSION. I had to stop the insanity before we lost sight of the dream and bounced off a star. We needed a break; a time to pause, regroup, and refuel before moving on. It was time to ACT.

"Shut up you crazy bastard!" I screamed over my shoulder "The bats are here and the fuckers are messing around with the controls. Your nonsense is only getting them excited. I'm taking us out."

I slammed the emergency cut-off switch and we immediately dropped back into real space. As the stars reappeared on the viewscreen, I took a long, deep breath and tried to relax. It was pointless, however; the bats were still with me, swooping and diving around the cockpit like highly deranged moths. I could feel beads of cold sweat running down my forehead and my mouth was dry and cold. I knew what was coming next. THE FEAR.

This had to be avoided at all costs and only swift action could forestall the impending tragedy. I leapt to my feet and charged aft through the billows of smoke and into the lounge.

My attorney was sprawled over the couch and pouring beer over his distended stomach. His hair was matted with filth, an obscenely large cigar hung from his lips and his ankles were tied together with a long length of fibre-optic cable. Strewn around the lounge was the evidence of massive and varied consumption of highly illegal drugs. Though his eyes were hidden behind dark sunglasses, I knew they were screaming at me a message of complete depravity. It was quite clear that he was perilously close to the edge and drastic measures would be required.

"Get up you fucking animal! Do you think the monkeys will wait all day?"

My attorney paused for a moment, cocked his head to one side as though listening to unseen voices, and then threw his can of beer at me.

"Just what the fuck are you trying to SAY?!" he shouted at me while waving his arms around as though he were trying to swim.

"The monkeys, the monkeys on Vega-2. They've got your money, man. If we don't act soon we'll never get it back. It a CRISIS SITUATION." This of course was complete nonsense. I had no idea what I was saying. Where was this garbled insanity coming from? What disused corner of my brain had been triggered by these terrible drugs and awakened to do combat with my logic and speech centres?

"You're right," responded my attorney "You're so damn right. It's a goddamn crisis situation and we need to do something. Those bastards won't get away with it this time!"

"Now you're talking!" I replied as I lit up a smoke, "Here we are in this ultra high-speed starspeeder and they're out there with our money. Let's go get them!"

My attorney rolled off the couch and staggered to his feet. He picked up a half-empty bottle of rum from the table and drained it in one gulp. He looked around through the debris for another bottle but came up empty handed.

"I'm so fucking thirsty," he said as he started opening up the storage lockers, "This is likely to be thirsty business. We'll need more drink. Some fluids you understand, to keep us motivated."

"Not a problem," I said, aiming my attorney towards the cockpit and giving him a shove, "There's got to be a planet somewhere around here just bursting with drink. We'll just pop in for a friendly visit and then we're back on the trail of those monkey-bastards."

"Back on the TRAIL man!"

We staggered into the cockpit and I deftly deflected my attorney away from the command chair and into the passenger seat. There was no way I was letting that twisted fiend get control of the ship. I quickly tapped out some commands and the main screen lit up with a map of the local star system complete with a full description. The third planet was the closest and most promising. I asked the ship's computer for a fuller description and it responded with a massive holographic projection which filled the cockpit.

"What the fuck is that?!" screamed my attorney as he scrambled madly to get out of his chair but somehow managed to remain where he was.

"Keep quiet you fool, it's just the computer." His erratic behaviour was giving me the creeps and I knew he was close to the edge again. Strong action was urgently required to keep him quiet until I got the situation under control. I dug into the pockets of my tattered vest and retrieved a handful of multi-coloured pills which I handed to my attorney. "Here, eat these quickly. They'll make everything better."

He looked at the pills doubtfully and then narrowed his eyes suspiciously at me. "What the hell are these things?"

I laughed. "I have no idea."

Hearing this my attorney immediately relaxed and started munching on the pills. "Good. Now I know you're not trying to poison me, you filthy bastard."

The holographic planet spun on it's axis while the computer droned out a description. Type-7 geomorphology. Type-Q atmosphere. Strong magnetic fields. Frequent dust storms. Dry, desolate, inhospitable. Great, just fucking great. There we were, out on the edge of nowhere with the MISSION in mortal peril, and when we really needed a good drink we end up popping out of hyperspace next to a desert planet.

"Shit!" shouted my attorney, "Just LOOK at that thing. Not a drop, not a goddamn drop."

At that moment the command console lit up like a Christmas tree mainlined straight to the national grid. Warning messages were pouring in from every sensor on the ship; a fleet of battle-cruisers had emerged from the far side of the desert planet and had immediately detected us. Their shields went up instantly and they started powering up their weapons. Alarms were howling like the bells of hell and the computer was shrieking multiple warnings simultaneously in four different languages. The holographic display replaced the image of the planet with a fearsome projection of some really nasty looking warships hurtling through space towards us.

This was simply too much for the two of us. Most of the drugs were out of my system but it still felt like I had entered into a new plane of existence. My attorney was deep into the drugs I had fed him moments earlier and I could only imagine what horrors his mind must be living through. In a spasm of complete desperation, I slapped the control panel until the noise stopped and the hologram disappeared.

"Sweet Fuck!" cried my attorney, "Don't EVER do that again. You sick bastard. You did that on purpose, I know you did. I should KILL you, you understand?" He was doubled over and clutching his guts with obvious pain. His eyes were protruding dangerously and I had no doubt that he meant what he said. My only comfort was in the fact that those battle-cruisers would certainly kill us before he ever got the chance.

I looked up at the main display screen which was still showing the stats on the desert planet. It was only then that I noticed what it was called and only then that it all made sense.

Flashing on the top of the screen were the words:

ZOOL. DEATH PLANET WHERE THE INTRACTABLE CRIMINALS OF TEN THOUSAND WORLDS, ETC.

Oh shit, I thought, we'll never get a drink there.

* * * * *

Now, at the end of my days, I like to think back on those wild and crazy times and I often wonder how we ever managed to survive. We were two of the worst burn outs, drug addicts, alcoholics, and social deviants the galaxy had ever known. We had lied, cheated, and burned our way through most inhabited worlds and savagely exploited many powerful people in the process. We were living right at the very fringes of human existence, pushing the envelope so far we threatened to split off completely and form our own dimension. Ours was a dangerous life; at any moment we could be gunned down by bounty hunters, arrested by the space police, or torn to shreds by one of the many alien races we had offended along the way. But it wasn't a life without rewards. We were famous, legends in our own time, and all we had to do was show up at a spaceport and we'd be besieged by legions of adoring fans. Raul Duke and Dr. Gonzo, forever on the heels of the American Dream.

But somewhere the dream got lost. The drugs and the alcohol, the women and the money... it all ran into a blur once we made it past Saturn. Years went by and we lived the dream, but the dream was fading and with it faded reality. What good was the American Dream if it was our normal state of being? Like the addicts we were, we needed to push farther and harder and make it work for us.

I felt cheated. We had worked so hard for so long and in the end all we were left with was a smelly spaceship and strange memories. I was about ready to pack it in and retire to that old-folks home in orbit around Venus when Dr. Gonzo came to me in a moment of rare sobriety and said:

"We've lost the dream, Thompson. Time to get it back."

I knew then that he felt it too. There was hope. We would go on one last trip, the burn to end all burns, and we'd find the Ultimate Truth. It was to be a change of course, one of those profound moments where you seize the reins and take control of a life that somehow got away from you. This was our mission.

It had started off well, we planned our route and "borrowed" a nice little star-speeder, but things got out of hand when it came time to buy provisions. One bottle led to some tokes which led to a suitcase of drugs, and pretty soon our ship began to resemble one of those educational displays the drug cops are always parking in the lobbies at the spaceport. We blasted off in more ways than one and headed out on our final epic adventure.

Approaching the dead world of Zool and with an unknown but evidently hostile battle fleet bearing down on us, I paused to wonder where we had gone wrong. For a brief time we had seized control and broken the vicious cycle, but somehow we'd fallen back into the American Dream. A horrific future lay before us, forever trapped in a life of barbaric excess. But then, when we needed it most, providence looked favourably upon us and sent a few dozen really scary space ships to fuck us up. This was just the right sort of shock therapy we needed. As I stared at their evil looking blaster cannons and rocket launchers, I came to the realization that this Zool planet must be something special. Fate had brought us here, and in that shrivelled portion of my brain that kept me attuned to the solar winds, I finally reached an understanding.

Zool was the key. Zool was the truth. It was what we had been looking for all along; the antithesis of the American Dream. Brutal medicine for two incredibly brutal people. Our subconscious, aided by some very dangerous drugs, had guided us there and our lives would never be the same again.

* * * * *

"Get your hands off me you fucking savages!" I cried as the space marine threw me through the airlock. "Don't you know who I AM? I'll have your nuts in court you bastard, sue you for the shirt off your back!"

"That's right you goddamn swine," bellowed my attorney, still in the throes of the drug trance but putting on a brave face and fighting for our lives, "I'm this man's attorney and I'm ordering you to put us back in our ship and leave us alone."

SHUT UP, came the robotic sound from the speaker in the marine's helmet.

"You fucking Nazi!" I screamed as I struggled to my feet. "Just wait 'til I get back to my ship and get my gun. A bolt of plasma right to the brain!" The marine didn't react at all, other than to coolly pick up my attorney and heave him through the airlock too. He landed on the floor with a sickening thump. I had a feeling these guys meant business. I looked around and found myself inside a large open room. Standing at one end of it were a number of men dressed in a variety of military uniforms.

"Mr. Duke," said a tall man who stepped forward from the crowd, "Or should I say Mr. Thompson? Your arrival here is very unexpected but not entirely unwelcome. I'm sorry we had to attack and board your ship but it was a necessary precaution. Things are very tense right now. You're lucky we didn't just blast you."

"Who the fuck are you?" My attorney was on his feet but swaying disturbingly from side to side. I suspected the events of the last 10 minutes were really taking their toll on his basic motor functions.

"I am Captain Zap and these men who stand with me are the generals and admirals of the fleet of the Combined Oxford College Kommandos. We are the only ones left who stand to fight against the dreaded Warlord. Ours is a mission of the utmost importance, responsibility, and honour. I would welcome any assistance you could offer us."

At this point my attorney began to giggle uncontrollably. Giggles soon became roaring laughter. "Excuse me mister Zap, but are you aware your super battle fleet is named COCK! That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard!" I joined Dr. Gonzo and began to laugh wildly. Then some of Captain Zap's aides began to laugh too, and even a few of the generals and admirals.

"Silence you fools! Silence! This is a matter of great seriousness and you mock me?! Take them away!" Captain Zap pointed randomly to a nearby door which, fortunately for us, lead to the ship's bar. If we were going to be involved in some huge space battle, we must as well be locked in the bar and go out in style. Captain Zap then whispered to one of his aides, "Have Lieutenant Photon change our name immediately, and check the acronym this time you idiot! What kind of military is this? And prepare the fleet for battle! I sense the time for action is rapidly approaching."

* * * * *

The ship's intercom blared:

I HAVE COME FOR YOU, AND THIS PITIFUL PLANET OF ZOOL. I AM THE PLANET EATER. I AM UNICRON.

"Jesus," I said as I looked at a half empty bottle of GIN!, "This shit is dangerous."

"Tell me about it" mumbled my attorney from his position on the floor "I can't feel my feet."

The ship shuddered violently as nuclear tipped rockets detonated against the shields and energy beams seared the outer hull.

"Get me another drink," I asked, "I can't reach from here."

"Sure, anything for the Duke," said my attorney as he reached for the controls of the drink replicator. He pressed a few buttons at random. The ship shuddered again with even more violent explosions and shifted wildly to one side. The bottle that appeared in the replicator bay rolled out, across the room, and smashed against the wall.

"Sonofabitch!" I shouted, "Get me another one quick. If I don't keep drinking this stuff I'll realize how bad it is."

My attorney hammered on the controls again, but this time something entirely different happened. Instead of a bottle, the replicator produced a bright white crystal.

"What the fuck?!" My attorney reached for the crystal and it began to glow with a mysterious pulsating light. Through an alcoholic haze, I felt that something really strange and twisted was about to happen. The Gin! was burning a whole in my gut and I felt an odd sensation in the back of my mind like I wanted to be as far away from this place as possible.

The ship shuddered again as the battlecruisers of the three fleets were torn to pieces by the powerful weapons of Unicron. A white hot energy beam sliced through the hull of Zap's flag ship, detonating several warheads in storage. Explosions wracked the ship and the grav generators failed. Bulkheads exploded outwards and men were sucked into the void of space. The ship was doomed.

At that moment, two very different yet oddly similar things happened. My attorney grabbed hold of the white crystal and we disappeared out of existence. A split second later, Captain Zap engaged his trans-dimensional ergonic translation projector and the remains of his flagship disappeared as well. With the heroes gone and the mighty space fleets destroyed, Zool was left to the dreaded Unicron.

* * * * *

We flashed back into existence into what looked like a fine domestic living room back on good old earth. It was a terrifying change from the filth and squalor that I had become accustomed to over the last few months. There were some obvious problems, however, as it appeared that whatever craziness had brought us here had also taken part of the bar with us. The paralysing fear that gripped me during the teleportation immediately left once I saw that there were several bottles of liquor lying on the floor. My attorney already had one open and was guzzling it back as quickly as possible.

"You evil son of a bitch," he said wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, "You did this to us, sent us here to this place. Just when things were getting FUN!"

"Not me, you rotten pimp, it was that crystal thing."

"Did my crystal bring you here?" said a small girl standing in the doorway. I hadn't noticed her there and the sound of her gentle voice sent me diving for cover.

"Who are you?! Are you with THEM?!" I shouted from behind a couch.

"My name is Sally and this is my house. Would you like to play Lego with me?"

Hmmmm... Lego.... A very fine toy if I remembered correctly. Perhaps this was just what we needed. Sitting down and playing Lego with a sweet young girl in a nice earth home. I could feel the day's craziness slipping away and I started thinking that maybe we could back to the MISSION.

"Okay there little lady, we'll play with you. Just be sure to keep me between you and that man over there. He's a filthy animal who's addicted to some very dangerous drugs. There's no telling what he'll do in a place like this. ANYTHING is possible when Dr. Gonzo's involved. We'll also have to keep ourselves very drunk, but we've brought our own supplies so you don't have to worry about that."

"Right-o, follow me." Sally lead us into the next room where she had set up a large town made out of Lego. My attorney looked completely dazzled by it all and the rolling glaze in his eyes had me worried.

"Drink some of this," I said, shoving a bottle of Scotch Whiskey! into his hands. "It's fucking worse than the Gin! but it'll keep you moving."

"Thanks man, this place is really starting to get to me. Making me all itchy, like I need to BUST something up."

"Just sit the fuck down and relax man, we're playing the game and then getting out of here. Relax."

Sally was eager to show us her Legos and she went through the whole town describing the buildings and the little

plastic people. I noticed that she keep hold of a bright white crystal the entire time.

" ... and this is one of my favorites. I call him Prince Benedict. He's actually from my castle Lego set but I like him so much I let him play with the others. And this is Captain Zap, he's from my space Lego. And this is..."

Something jarred in my mind. Zap? That bastard back on the starcruiser? Just what the hell was happening here? I took a long pull on a bottle of rum and then looked down at the other small plastic figures.

"Who's this one?" I said, picking up another plastic space man.

"Oh that's Commander Bhond. Sometimes he's bad and sometimes he's good. Did you see Megatron? I made him myself, but he just fell apart a few minutes ago. I think I'll try to put him back together again. Would like to play a game with me?"

Strange and disturbing thoughts were ricocheting around my brain. Could it be that Zap, Bhond, Photon and the others had been somehow turned into Lego figures? Or maybe this child was some kind of supreme being, a god playing around with the Lego set of Life. Either way, my attorney and I were in one seriously fucked up situation. The fates of Bhond, Zap, and Prince Benedict were literally in our hands.

"Sure thing Sally," I said as I took another long, hard drink from the bottle of rum, "I love playing games, especially with my friends."

"You evil bastard," said Dr. Gonzo as he too took another drink. "You're a sick man Duke, but I wouldn't be your attorney if you weren't. Let's get to work."

..... And so ends Chapter VI of Zool: Resurrection

TO BE CONTINUED

face, and I have attempted to assist you. I have summoned a great ancestor of mine, whose knowledge will be invaluable to you."

A man, his face lined and wrinkled with many years made yet another dramatic appearance from out of the shadows.

"Greetings, Captain", he said "Consider yourself fortunate that I should come at this time. For I am Nicholas II, last Tsar of Russia."

"But that's impossible."

"I am older than I look. I am one of the Original Ones, of which your people know little, if anything."

"Why are you here?"

"Mainly to explain the chapter title, but also to give you a dire warning from a higher source that you must heed."

"And what is your warning?"

"If you go to Zool, you will die."

"I've been told that already."

"Oh, well then I'm not needed here." replied Tsar Nicholas II, and instantly vanished. Before Chippendale had time to react, his hand started beeping at him. He answered it. It was his Security Chief Mike Bourbon, a man who was desperately trying to make his hairline recede further in order to look more like Bruce Willis.

"You'd better get up here, Captain." he said. "We've just arrived in Zool's solar system."

* * *

The Captain once more dramatically came out of the shadows and back onto the bridge. The Black Hole had moved into orbit around Zool and Bendova was examining a console as the ship scanned the planet.

"Life signs, Bendova?"

"I already am, sir. Anyway this is incredible, impossible!"

"The impossible is my business, Commander. What is it?"

"There seem to be some faint signs, Captain. But they're not on the surface, they're deep within the planet. Almost... at Zool's core."

Chippendale strode up and down the bridge for a few seconds, reviewing the situation. Finally he spoke.

"Take her down, Commander."

"What?"

"You heard me. Land this ship on Zool."

"But, sir, if you go to Zool..."

"I know. Now do it. And arm the nuclear warheads I brought along just in case. That's an order."

Bourbon sat at the back, astonished by his captain's decision.

"He's gone crazy." he thought "The PsiCorps must have got to him."

"No we haven't" said the voice inside his head.

"Oh, that's all right then."

* * *

The Black Hole hurtled planetwards, entering the thin gravity of Zool. On board, panic was starting to break out.

"She's out of control, Captain!" yelled Bendova. "We've lost propulsion and guidance jets. The whole ships just falling apart. We're going to crash!"

"Something built by the Atari, crash? Never!" replied Chippendale.

But it did. The ship ploughed into the barren surface of Zool and triggered the armed nuclear bombs carried on its underbelly. The resulting fireball vapourised the ship and its contents and sent massive shockwaves right across the planet, shockwaves which even penetrated far deep into Zool.

* * *

"It's a quake!" yelled Bhond in terror as the High Street began to shake wildly beneath him. "Everyone get down!" Turning, he saw in the distance the tall structure of Carfax tower slowly wobble, then with an almighty crash topple on to the crossroads below. The sky darkened above and the roads began to crack.

"No!" screamed Bhond "It's the End. The destruction of Oxford is happening again, just as the old stories told it." A thought then occurred to him. "Back to Magdalen." he called to the others. "It was one of the four that survived the End, so they say. It's our last, best hope." With that the companions turned and hared off down the rapidly disintegrating High Street.

* * *

"Stop fuckin' shaking the town, Dr Gonzo." I said, opening another bottle of GIN. "Put it down."

My attorney reluctantly laid down the perfect Lego reproduction of the infamous old English city of Oxford, and turned back to stuffing his face with junk food.

"Glorious food." he muttered for no reason. We'd had enough of Reason for one day, I reckoned. I finished the GIN and turned back to Sally, who was staring down at her now somewhat dilapidated creation.

"I'm bored with this game." she said, picking up four of the Lego colleges at random. "Let's play something else."

Chapter 8: A Gathering of Plot-Threads Forces

[Peter Sidwell](#), 13/01/2001

The sky above the port was now the colour of a .exe attachment, leading to a corrupted file. The Vice-Master for the Widdershins Quadrant finished another glass. He steepled his fingers, gazed into the distance, sank yet deeper into his ornate chair and let out a breath of frustration.

"Your Eminem?" inquired his stand-in secretary - the normal fellow was at his mother's funeral.

"No," said the Vice-master, glancing up from his glass, "No, put on some Hendrix. It always helps when I'm at this stage."

His secretary dithered for a moment. "Sire, shouldn't you let it cool a little, before you start the engraving?"

The Vice-Master turned his steely gaze upon this dispensible flunkey - but the anger that had started to flare died away before it truly flamed, and with a weary hand he accepted the advice. "Very well, Jimi can wait. Put on the Goths On Prozac album - I need to consider carefully what we are to do about Zool."

"Zool!" scorned the secretary. "Why bother with Zool? Leave it to Unicron. Dead and destroyed a century..."

"Zool, yes," interrupted the Vice-Master icily. "Zool, death planet where the intractable criminals of ten thousand worlds..."

"Et cetera," sarcasmed the other. "A worthless lump of rock. Why, we should pay Unicron for..."

The Vice-Master frowned his irritation and with a flick of his left hand sent a coruscating wave of blue force arcing around his aide. As the charred form of his ex-secretary crumbled to the floor, he let out a heavy sigh, of the sort favoured by powerful despots just prior to times of crisis. "Would that it were that," he whispered to himself darkly and with the font in a lesser point. "Would that it were merely that."

"Right," said Dr Gonzo, dropping the other half of the pizza back in the box, "what are we up to now?"

I sighed and swigged the last of the GIN, passing the bottle to Sally to do something with - kids are creative like that. "It's a simple bloody game, Dr Gonzo. Those four buildings are the last bits of THEM left over from the big war, and you have to get the lego bastards from the tall one to the sofa." There was something in my head about a MISSION, but I guess I was too sober to think about it. It was the second time we'd played the game - Gonzo kept losing track and having to order junk food - but it was kind of compulsive - like shooting up in the eyeball. Sally made us play some space stuff for a bit, but that was weird and we'd returned to a decimated lego town scenario.

Sally watched all this patiently, too quiet for a normal child. "What is that thing?" I had to ask, waving vaguely at the white crystal she clutched.

"It's a secret," she said. "She's my friend."

"Bloody Chocky™," said Gonzo, through a mouthful of Pringles. "We've ended up in a fucking John Wyndham. I can't litigate around that, Duke."

"God this whiskey's foul," I gasped, "pass me another bottle. Who the hell's Chocky™?"

Sally held the crystal firmly and pouted. "She's not called Chocky™, she's called Saitra. And she helps me play. She made the barbarians have spaceships and she made them clever and she makes it fun and anyway you both smell horrid."

"SHIT!" screamed Gonzo, leaping onto the sofa, "What's that on the TV?"

I focussed on the screen after a bit of effort - the caption said *Pet Shop Boys* and underneath *Can you forgive her?* - which was kind of weird, but Sally had told us about MTV and we'd seen something like it on the negative world of Rhesus-B. What was scaring Gonzo wasn't just the DTs or a para. hall., but the fucking Unicron planet-eater bouncing around the screen like shit on a spring while men in pointy hats chanted. The drink was losing its effect and I had the munchies bad. The hole in my stomach you could drive a Galaxy-class starcruiser through. I couldn't think about this without food, and I wanted to get away from the creepy kid for a minute.

"Let's just head to the shops for food, Gonz. Anywhere round here we can score, Sal?"

Sally narrowed her eyes, then giggled. "You could try on Cornmarket," she said. "There's a stall on Ship Street where a man deals."

"Cheers - we'll be back soon," I said, trying to get up, which didn't work, then trying to make the floor stay down, which did. "GONZO!"

The Doc startled back awake and we headed out the house into town.

"Well," said Bhond, "for my galactic credits, we're just going to go round and round for ever. We're no nearer Carfax now than we were."

"Indeed," uttered Prince Benedict, "the mighty seat of Carfax stands still some distance off. Does this geography make sense to you, Crimson Binome?"

"Ah," intoned that Binome, "to be honest, no. I understand many things - I am a fount of knowledge on matters arcane and hidden, having wandered the Virtual Vaults of Bodley for long: I know the secret ways of many things. But a tower that is never reached has me bugged. So to speak," he added quickly.

"Perhaps," suggested Captain Zap, mindful of how many plot threads were unravelling, and eager not to be forgotten as one of the four survivors, "Carfax is not our objective. Let's try to work out what the point of this zOoL is likely to be."

The Binome frowned. "zOoL is after all only the game-engine," he shrugged, "and many quests can be fitted to it. We would need to know this game's creator, and what their desires are. By the code! - these days, it feels as though some dark force controls our world, and it seems we merely replay scenarios for the destruction of -everything." An ominous silence followed, more or less as you'd expect.

But Zap was staring intently down the road at two figures who were staggering, when upright, in their general direction, screaming abuse at random objects and one of them stopping from time to time to beat off invisible attackers. "I know these," he muttered to himself. "The two incoherent lunatics who turned up just before Unicron came to take Zool."

Prince Benedict drew his sword at once, for he had decided, being a man who went on appearances, that they looked like they served a Dark Lord. Good men walked straight, in his world. But Zap restrained him, and called out, "Well met, sirs! I see you, too, evaded Unicron the planet-eater - will you join us?"

To which Gonzo responded with an incoherent scream and passed out. I was puzzled for a moment, so I knocked back some pills I fund in my pocket and everything sort of settled down. "We in Oxford here?" I asked the bloke in the bronze suit.

"Aye," the Crimson Binome responded instead, "albeit a fictive one."

I eyed this one carefully. I don't think I've ever done enough drugs to see a guy like that before. It was like an image of how basic geometry could build a world worth living in, only in a kind of metaphorical way that nobody would ever be able to decipher. Looking good, but badly. "We met the girl that's making it up," I offered, keeping one eye on Gonzo who was inhaling cocaine off a parking meter. "But I didn't figure she'd be inside the game - we just left her house back there -"

I looked back as I pointed, but the street wasn't there. I guess she'd somehow ditched us into it as we left. "Her and her white rock thing."

- At this the others all started. "A glowing white rock?" whispered Prince Benedict in awe. "That speaks to her and makes her thoughts real? The Epiphany Stone, most powerful artefact ever made by the Dark Lords, back when they hung out in groups and held regular evil-device-designing competitions - the legendary *Scraphex Challenge*?"

"Never mind that," said Bhond, "The Vice-Master has mentioned such a device to me under the influence of neural disinhibitors, but it was hidden in the distant past by the mysterious Tsar Nicholas, lest it fall again into the hands of the dreaded Saitra."

"Ah," I said, shaking my head to clear away the first tinges of paranoia, "you really are in a bad way. That's what she called the thing. What the hell is it?"

The Binome thing looked horrified (I guessed). "By the Code! By the damned Source Code itself! It cannot be the Saitra I have read of in the Vaults of Bodleian! The psyche-absorbing reality-engine that seeks only to obliterate the remnants of the Great Colleges! Buried as it was deep in the heart of the most godforsaken hideous planet in the galaxy! None surely could reach it, let alone be consumed by it! For Saitra grows as a fungal thing that absorbs the minds of those that consume her, and grows stronger, ever stronger! - and it would take perhaps ten thousand minds to give her the power necessary to free herself! And many more to project herself through time! How could this be?"

Bhond gave him a level gaze. "Rather more exclamation marks than I like in my plot dumps, but I suppose that's a hazard when you have a Binomial expansion - Crimson or otherwise."

Prince Benedict stepped forward and placed one gauntleted hand on Bhond's arm. "Call it but exposition, Mr Bhond, and leave it. It is not for us to question the ways of Author."

I was getting kind of freaked out and into a bad trip, so I didn't like to get too involved in this - plus you can get too metatextual when you're trapped in multilayered narratives. Captain Zap, the man who ran COCK and who I recognised as the fascist bastard who'd messed us round near that barren godforsaken hideous planet, was clearly in no mood either for this.

"Look," he said impatiently, cutting across further exposition by any of the others, "I'm afraid I don't give a flying monkey's left testicle about any of this, I just want a big fuck-off battle, preferably with huge big-budget scary stuff and galaxy-spanning apocalypse shit all over the place. So let's ditch this game, get off our encounter-suited butts and **do something!**"

"Yeah," said Bhond. "Fair enough."

Meanwhile - Convocation - and Don King slowly rises from his ancient creaking seat. "So - it is confirmed. Bhond is lost for the moment, and while Unicron aims to devour the death planet, as we planned, it is too late. The renegades of Zool

have been absorbed, and she has escaped."

"What are we to do?" enquired the Vice-Chancellor nervously, in the tense atmosphere of the Sheldonian Station. "Is she attempting a full frontal attack?"

"No," said King. "She aims to destroy us before we became this powerful. She has gone back...."

- *But what is Saitra's plan?* - Has Convocation a strategy to deal with this? -*Is the death planet really to be devoured by Unicron?* -What is Bhond up to? -*Has Don King really organised his last big fight?* - And how much time travel do we really want to get bogged down with, anyway?

- ***And what is / was the truly terrible secret of Zool?***

Some of this will be revealed next time, gentle readers and Zool-ots...