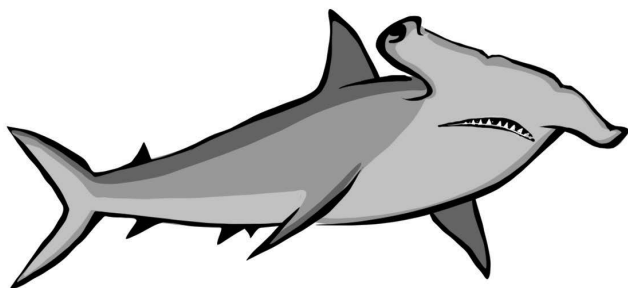


1 POWER-UP



“Luke, use your force field,” Serge shouted from the other side of the splintering ten-storey shark tank that ran the height of Commander Octolux’s vast undersea lair. There was a crack like a pistol shot as the tank sprang a leak and a stream of water arced on to the deck, splashing my foot.

We were about to be up to our necks in hammerheads.

I focused my force-field superpower on the widening hole. Glowing blue energy shot from my fingers and plugged the gap. That would keep the sharks at bay. Now it was Octolux’s turn. I checked my watch – we had less than five minutes before he launched an intercontinental

ballistic missile containing a unique and deadly payload. If we failed to stop him then the virus stored in the warhead would infect the whole world, turning every man, woman and child into a quivering jellyfish.

“I’m going for the command bridge,” I said, sweeping past Serge. I touched a finger to the side of my mask and with a swift tap blasted a fizzing ball of mental energy at the high-security door. It flew off its hinges and hit the floor with a clang. Quickly I stepped over it, my cape fanning out behind me as I raced inside.

The walls of the command bridge were one smooth curve of plexiglass, offering a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree view of the deep ocean. Monstrous shadows cast by dimly glimpsed sea-creatures glided over the surface. The ping of a sonar detector and the gurgle of Octolux’s breathing apparatus were the only sounds. After battling our way past attack squids, lethal lionfish sentries and electric eel assassins, we had reached our final goal.

Commander Octolux stood over the launch-control panel, preparing to fire his fishy missile. At one time he had been wholly human, but where his head used to be was now a surgically attached octopus plugged directly into his brain stem, and although his hands sported four human fingers, instead of thumbs he had a pair of opposable piranha fish. With his octo-brain he could

think of eight different things at once, which made him a master strategist, and his piranha thumbs meant he was a formidable opponent in close-quarter combat. His one weakness was a reliance upon special breathing equipment. He needed to be connected to an air tank or he'd go as floppy as a stunned haddock. All we had to do was cut off his supply. The next few minutes would witness an epic battle between the forces of good (me and Serge) and the evil commander.

The fate of the world was in my hands.

Commander Octolux looked up from the control panel, threw back his bulbous head and opened his vicious beak to let out a great gurgling laugh. Somehow he knew we were coming – we had walked into a trap. His watery gaze fell upon me, that horrifying beak opened once more and he said:

“Luke, I’m not telling you again – your dinner’s on the table.”

Commander Octolux sounded a lot like my mum.

I glanced over my shoulder. Mum stood in my bedroom doorway. Even without an octo-brain and piranha hands she was a fearsome presence.

“Luke, Luke – he is launching *le* missile!” Serge yelled over the headset. “Ah, *mon brave*, we are too late.”

I turned back to the TV screen just in time to witness

an animation of Octolux's missile rising from its undersea silo and shooting out of the ocean depths to wreak jellyfish doom upon the world. I threw down my game controller and sighed.

There were no save points on the final level, which meant we'd have to start again from the beginning, and those platypus mines at the first airlock had been a total pain to get past. Especially since Serge found the word "platypus" so funny that he kept forgetting not to step on the mines.

"I think that's enough *Star Lad* for one day," said Mum, switching off the console.

My parents had been so amazed and stunned and happy at avoiding the recent asteroid apocalypse that when I asked them shortly afterwards for a new games console they'd not only agreed, but also let me keep it in my bedroom. I'm not proud of taking advantage of them in their moment of weakness. On the other hand – brand-new Xbox!

"It's not *Star Lad*," I said. "It's *Star Lad 2: Danger from the Deep*." There were two videogames featuring the world's first real superhero, Star Lad. The first one was rushed out after he'd stopped Earth from being flattened by Nemesis. It was OK, but the sequel was better. However, both suffered from the same problem:

they didn't feel real. For a start, neither was set in Bromley. Even worse was how they portrayed Star Lad. For example, in *Danger from the Deep*, Star Lad's secret identity is millionaire schoolboy Lance Launceston, who is bestowed with superpowers after an accident with a plasma generator at his father's fusion laboratory; he has a kinetic blast power, and a Star-Jet that can do Mach 6.

All of which is complete nonsense.

And how do I know this? Because Star Lad is Zack Parker, who was given his powers by Zorbon the Decider. He gets five pounds fifty a week pocket money, has just regular telekinesis and owns a Carrera Vengeance mountain bike. And he's my big brother.

I slipped off my chair and followed Mum downstairs. I had played a small but, I like to think, key role in Zack's epic world-saving triumph, but no one was making videogames about me. Perhaps because, apart from my best friend Serge and my neighbour (but definitely *not* my girlfriend) Lara Lee, no one knew how I'd helped rescue Star Lad from the clutches of wannabe superhero and comic-book-store owner Christopher Talbot. But even if they had known, who wants to play a videogame from the point of view of an eleven-year-old boy with flat feet and no superpowers? It wouldn't be very popular. In fact, I don't think I'd play a videogame as me.

As I trudged downstairs for dinner I heard a *tuk-tuk* noise from the hallway and then a small shape slid from the shadows beneath the hall table. A red squirrel waited for me at the foot of the stairs. I knew it was for me, since this wasn't the first time. The squirrel sat up on its hind legs and held out a note. It hadn't written the note – that would be silly – but I knew who had. As soon as I took the folded paper it scurried off, its bushy tail bobbing back into the shadows.

“Assemble tonight,” read the message, which was scrawled in the familiar purple ink of a Uni-ball Gelstick Pen with a 0.4mm tip.

Just two little words, but they signified something big. Finally! Things had been quiet since the whole Star-Lad-Christopher-Talbot-volcano-comic-store-giant-asteroid business in the summer. Since then my life had returned to its dull routine. I scrunched the paper in my fist. All that was about to change. Something was in the air. I sniffed. Some kind of fishy thing in a gloopy sauce. But that didn't matter because something else was out there, waiting for me. Something thrilling. Something dangerous. Adventure was in the air, and its name was ... S.C.A.R.F.