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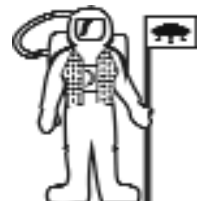
THE FEAR MAN, PART II

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Editorial

Introducing the Band

Howard Phillips

Editorialist and Edutainer

It falls once more to me to introduce the reader to *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction*, since the Editor likes to avoid writing about his own work, where possible. It is not a happy day for me, so I will not go out of my way to make it a happy day for you. This seems to be a penance I have to serve. I am, they say, indentured to the magazine, or at least obligated to its editor.

True, he found me stumbling along beside the canal in Birmingham's city centre, desperately begging for money for alcohol from passers-by, drinking the dregs from abandoned glasses, and generally making a fool of myself, but I had had a difficult few years. My writing had not progressed in the direction which I would have wished, my poetry had stalled, and my plays had fallen into the ditch, unperformed.

True, he allowed me to write once more for his family of publications. He gave me another chance, knowing that in doing so he was taking one himself.

But it isn't for any of those things that I owe the editor of this magazine. The thing for which I truly owe him is that he showed me music. He lent me an old Yamaha keyboard, told me to download Audacity for the PC, and put a microphone in my hands. In a matter of days I had formed a band, and that band was called The Sound of Howard Phillips. You might have heard of us, listened to one of our songs, or dreamed of going to one of our gigs, but have you been introduced to the band yet?

I, Howard Phillips, sing. You may know me as a letter-writer to *New Words*, a writer of unfinished novels, and a poetry of not enough repute, but till you have heard my falsetto, we have not properly met.

On the keyboard is Jack "The Space" Tom. They call him The Space because the gaps between notes are as meaningful as the notes themselves. Perfectly suited to the Sound, Jack "The Space" Tom rarely

comes to the studio, preferring to conceptualise the music at home. He says he cannot concentrate on music unless his grey cat, Harry, is there with him, and unfortunately I detest cats. We have been able to work around Jack's absence from the studio by jerry-rigging a fax machine to receive his incoming jams.

On guitar we have Quids McCall, a genius who was all set for stardom in the 1970s till he broke up his band, The Crazy Quids. He does attend the studio, so I have tried to ask, now and again, what happened, why did he throw it all away?

He simply shrugs and says, "Howard, if you are ever in the same position, and with these amazing songs you might well be one day, then you will have to make a decision too. You might make the same decision I made, or you might not. You might change your life, or you might not. I can't tell you what to do, Howard, and I can't tell you what I did."

He says that every time. I am trying to persuade him to dig some of the old Crazy Quids songs out of the attic, but he won't hear of it.

"If The Sound of Howard Phillips ever does cover versions," he always says, "then before you get to my stuff, there's a whole world of classics to do first."

He is remarkably self-effacing, as you can tell.

On drums, and other percussion as needed, we have the amazing Lumley Clark. There is nothing I can tell you about him that will still be true by the time I have finished writing this editorial. He is the ultimate chameleon of fashion, leading the pack by day, chasing it back to the kennel at night. He drums like the wind, and plays the tambourine like he was born with one stitched to his hand.

That just leaves our bassist, saved till last because I cannot remember his name, but he is very good.

So, till we meet again, perhaps I in the stage, and you in the audience, stay true!

The Fear Man, Part II

Stephen William Theaker

Dedicated to Rano, Lorelei, Stan and Jack

The Marvellous *Badower*

Although certainly not a troll, the Marabian's true nature was in fact unclear. He claimed to be an alien, and looked like one, too, but no other members of such a species had ever been encountered (no other species had ever been encountered of any kind, save the Baboose), and everybody assumed that he was crazy and had made himself that way, either deliberately, or else as a means of reconstructing a face that had perhaps been terribly damaged in a car accident or something similar. Hiding in underpasses and the like did little to suggest that everybody was wrong.

During his time as President, Fatloch had consulted government records on his old friend, but had found nothing whatsoever. He had left it that way, for old time's sake.

The important thing, whether the Marabian was an alien or not, was that he had a spaceship.

"I need your help, my old friend," said Fatloch, "to rescue my daughter from the Bandits' Planet."

The Marabian looked at Bardello Fatloch slyly. "You're the President of the entire Earth and its entire Empire now – what will you do for me if I help you? My old friend."

Fatloch did not blink. "I am no longer President. That was a luxury I could no longer afford, if I can get away with the cliché."

"My old friend is no longer President? And he wants my help now? How much help did he need when he was President?"

"It's different now," said Fatloch. "I cannot stay honest if I want to see my daughter again."

"Sorry," replied the Marabian, scratching one of his tentacles, "that wasn't what I meant to say. What I meant to say was: how much help did he give *me* when he was President?"

Despite this unpromising beginning, Fatloch was soon able to persuade him, or rather the vast amount of money at his disposal was, and they drove to the spaceport, where Margaret was waiting for them at the *Badower*. Unfortunately there was an unpleasant surprise for Fatloch – she was standing there with Inspector Barry Grimmett.

"Are you here to take me in, Grimmett?" asked Fatloch. "I'm afraid that I'm ready to fight to the death."

"Really?" replied the detective. "That surprises me. Your psychiatric record – public knowledge, now, of course – states that your suicidal tendencies have declined in recent years."

"I brought him here," said Margaret, stepping between them, even as the Marabian revealed his possession of a firearm. It was an antique, but that hardly mattered, given that they all (save perhaps the Marabian himself) had the same bodies men and women would have had in antique times.

Fatloch was incredulous at her admission, though he pushed the Marabian's gun to one side. "Betrayal, from you? And so my daughter dies." He clenched a fist and hit himself on the head. "I suppose I should blame myself for hiring someone with a conscience."

"I haven't betrayed you, sir. And as long as we battle criminals I pledge that my conscience will be clear. I have no love for low types, and though I cannot condone such action as you took against the Minister for Galactic Affairs, I must turn my eyes aside if the end result is that those same eyes can one day gaze into those of darling little Taio. During those last six months of your wife's pregnancy, at all times I had continuous imaging of that sweetheart baby beamed directly to my handheld. I got to know her as well if not better than I would have known any child of my own."

"You talk of eyes," said Fatloch with sad anger, "but think of his – one hundred thousand photographs at a time, he told me in my wife's bedroom.

The government's agents will be here in seconds, and our mission is over."

Grimmett put his hand on Margaret's shoulder. "Perhaps I should explain. I do not want to spoil your relationship with him."

Fatloch raised an eyebrow. "Relationship? Yes, that's the word. I see it now. Did the two of you think I didn't know about your little tryst? I thought someday it might be useful to me. I never thought it would backfire on me so spectacularly. Marabian, your weapon please. I should deal with this myself."

The Marabian held out his gun with a smile.

Margaret shook her head. "Fatloch, you idiot – you are the one wasting time now. Agents will be on their way, Godal and Maestri most likely at their head, since the spaceport authorities will have registered your presence here by now, and we need to be gone before they get here. They won't give orders to shoot down the Marabian's ship unless they are sure you are on board and fleeing Earth."

"And you are saying that they weren't summoned by your private dick?"

Margaret took a step back in disgust, then stepped forward and slapped him on the face.

"Okay," said Fatloch, his face stinging in the way that only the hand of a woman can make a man's face sting. "I take that back – I went too far. In view of



what I owe you both after that insult, let's put the explanations on hold and get into the ship, and into space."

They entered the *Badower*. The Marabian sat at the controls and flicked a few switches, before taking hold of the control stick, which was, Margaret noticed with a turn of her stomach, in the shape of a naked and very buxom woman. Soon they were in the air.

Grimmett explained that he had managed to temporarily disable the transmission of the photographs from his eyes – or rather, not disable, but delay. But that in itself had probably been enough to make Godal and Maestri suspicious, and they would have set off immediately upon being sure the delay was not accidental.

"So do you want to explain why you came?" asked Fatloch, now much calmer than he had been at the spaceport. He felt ridiculous – his reaction to Grimmett's presence had been nothing short of imbecilic, but he hated to be reminded that Margaret had needs beyond his own.

"It can be explained simply," replied Grimmett, "when there are no guns being waved around. I could explain even more simply if someone was waving gins around."

"I thought you didn't drink on duty?" said Fatloch. "Or are you no longer on duty? Either way, we have no gin aboard. The Marabian did not know that he would be having guests, and he is strictly teetotal. (Apparently he likes people to believe that he drinks human blood, but I personally know that he tends to drink tea. He drinks it in a disgustingly lascivious manner, but that is what he drinks.)"

"I am on duty in one sense, but not in another, and not in a third," replied Grimmett. "I will take tea while I explain." The President of Earth began to make cups of tea for everyone. "Taking those senses in order, I am on duty to my sworn oath as a Grimmett. I am no longer on duty for the police force of Earth. And though on duty in principle as a Grimmett at this moment, this is as good a time as any to take a break." He marked his point by drinking some tea, even though it was plainly still too hot, and he must have burnt his lip, if not his tongue too. "The Grimmetts have always had a motto. It has three words. The first is 'get', the second is 'the', and the third word cannot be repeated in respectable company, but it is a six letter word often used by police to describe a criminal."

"In effect," said the President, "you always get your man."

"That's it," smiled Grimmett. "The crimes for

which you are wanted on Earth, the involvement of aliens in your procreation..." (both carefully ignored the Marabian's leer) "the torturing of the Minister for Galactic Affairs – none of that concerns me, at least not until I have completed my current case – the kidnapping of your daughter. We both know that the trail leads to the Bandits' Planet, and so that's where we both have to go. If I took you in now, that case would be over. The criminals would have no reason to keep your daughter alive. And without your help, and without bypassing the rules of the police service, there is no way that I could have reached that crime-begotten planet."

There was some shooting from a police patrol as they reached orbit, but they got away safely. Soon they were well on their way to the Bandits' Planet.

World of Ruffians

"Comprehend it or not," said Fatloch, "that is my plan."

"It is not much of a plan," said Inspector Barry Grimmett. "To land on a planet filled with rogues, thieves, murderers and smokers, and acquire enough power to make people pay attention when we ask questions?"

Margaret shook her head. "I knew, of course, that we were heading there, but I thought you would have some contacts. I expected that we would circle in orbit for a bit while you made a few calls. I did not anticipate becoming a consigliere."

"If we do not get shot in the head within an hour," said Grimmett, "we'll die of lung cancer on our way home."

"Those are two risks that I cannot deny we face," replied Fatloch, sipping his tea. "But I will do my best to protect you both, if you even need it. Margaret, you have a stare that could bring down a water buffalo, and Grimmett, you have a fist that could punch one out. Neither of you really has anything to worry about – apart from the smoking, of course, but if we are there long enough for that to become an issue we will probably have already died from the radioactivity."

They stared at him. "Radioactivity?" said Grimmett, his hands unconsciously falling to his waist.

"I'm joking, of course," said the President. "Don't get upset. But you will probably hear about it down there – the Earth intelligence services tried to put a

rumour about that there was some kind of deadly radiation on the planet, undetectable by normal Geiger counters. The idea was that it would encourage criminals to reform – the older they got, in theory, the more likely they would be to get antsy about the radiation, and want to head back to Earth."

The Marabian turned back from the controls to call over his shoulder, pointing to his tentacles, "It's true – that's how I got these!"

"No it isn't," said Fatloch. "You had those when I first met you, before you even had a spaceship."

His interrupter had already gone back to the controls, and began to whistle. Fatloch shrugged.

"The whole thing backfired – the criminals made it a point of macho pride that they were living on a deadly planet, and then, when none of them died – apart from in the usual ways – stabbing, shooting, poisoning, and so on – they assumed they must have developed immunity. So effectively the Earth intelligence services did a fabulous job of boosting the self-esteem of every criminal on the planet. Perhaps the odd criminal or two might have reformed, thanks to that ego boost, but overall the mission had to be judged a failure. Anyway, to let a long story go on as long as I wanted it to, that was why I made that joke about radiation."

"I take it that wasn't one of your initiatives?" said Grimmett.

Fatloch smiled. "Margaret probably remembers this: the first three days of my Presidency were spent reading files and laughing at how catastrophically inept my predecessors were. I very nearly had to consult a surgeon to have my sides sewn back together."

"You seem remarkably chipper," said Grimmett, "given our mission. To hear you laugh and joke I could almost forget your daughter had been kidnapped."

Fatloch blinked, but did not say anything. Margaret was about to speak, to break the silence, but then the President spoke.

"I have not forgotten for a minute what our mission is, and let me tell you, Grimmett, that if you were sitting on a grenade right now and the only way I could get my daughter was to pull the pin, you would have about five seconds to live."

The Marabian shouted back, "That is very reassuring to hear! Watch your goolies lads, the President is on the rampage!"

Fatloch ignored him. "But I won't let it come to that. There will be some way, I am sure, to get you off the grenade first." He poured Grimmett a cup of tea, perhaps as an apology, in a way. "I am feeling

chipper, there is no denying it. We don't know for sure that my daughter is even alive, but the fact that there's a lead is a good sign, at least. It means there is a chance, however small, that she has not been killed, that she is going to be held to ransom, or held hostage, or passed on to someone else. I am holding on to that, and it makes me quite chipper, relatively."

"You also have to consider," said Margaret, "that for the last three months he was unable to make a move to find his daughter. Anything he said or did would have given away his secret, and probably cost him the Presidency, in which case no one would have cared about finding his daughter any more."

"Quite right," said Fatloch. "And although that is in fact what has now come to pass, I feel very liberated. I can act again, and in action I find myself. It is not, perhaps, the same self that has been President for the last few years, and it is not necessarily a self that I still want hanging around after we find my daughter, but it is a self that fills my skin and my bones and my muscles and my blood to the very limit. I could burst with vigour."

"That," said the Marabian, coming back to pour himself a cup of tea, "is a delightful image. There is nothing like bursting to make a man feel good about himself, eh Margaret?"

She tripped him as he walked away, but he was surprisingly agile, and not a drop of tea was spilled, though he landed on the deck face first. He got to his feet.

"Miss Margaret, I might have taken that the wrong way, you know. Fewer hijinks on board ship, if you please, or I might have to lock you in the brig. And I should warn you," he tapped his nose, "that the brig can only be locked from the inside – I designed it that way especially. Anyway, gentlemen, and not so gentle lady, I came back to let you know that we are approaching the Bandits' Planet."

He returned to his seat at the controls.

"Did you not have any other shady friends untracked by the government with their own space-ships?" asked Margaret.

Fatloch shrugged, and went up to join the Marabian at the console.

"How does it look from up here?" asked the President.

The Marabian pointed out the relevant scanner. "It looks like the same old heap of festering maggot-ridden pus-wounds."

"Ah yes," said Fatloch with a smile, checking the data the scanner offered. "Home sweet home." There was no sign of Earth vehicles in the vicinity, which was a good sign, really. If there had been any, of

course, it might have meant they had come to find his daughter, following the same leads he was, but more likely, it would mean they were after him. His hope was that the Minister for Galactic Affairs would not tell anyone what he had told Fatloch, and so no one would have any reason to think Fatloch could be found here. There was a pretty good chance that would be the case – if the Minister for Galactic Affairs did not aim for the Presidency itself, he would be hoping for a seat in the next President's cabinet, after the inevitable election.

"You have been here before? I didn't know that."

"After I decided to go straight, I came here for a year. I told none of my old acquaintances where I was going. I let my old self die, while I took on a new persona here. I didn't get involved in any trouble, I just hung out in bars and chased women, and waited for the laundry to finish. Then one day I decided on the name Bardello Fatloch and headed back to Earth."

"And Bardello Fatloch has never done anything wrong? He never killed a guy with his bare hands? He never plucked the eardrum from a screaming gangster? He never even made tea by putting the milk in before the water?"

"Hey, you watch your mouth, Marabian. I would never have done that, whatever my name was at the time."

"You know how sometimes when you make tea, the milk goes off as soon as you put it into the water? Putting the milk in first stops that happening, Fatloch."

"Now listen to me, you appalling piece of animated excrement," said the President, turning from the scanner to grab him by the scruff of the neck, "you better take that back or we are going to have a problem. If the milk goes in first you get a soggy teabag. And if the President of Earth doesn't like soggy teabags, you put the milk in after the water, and if that makes the milk go bad, you make another cup of tea."

The Marabian put up his hands and waggled his tentacles. "Hey, cool down, Pres, cool down. I didn't mean anything by it."

Fatloch let go of him. "Sorry. I guess I overreacted."

"You sure did," said the Marabian. "Living with these fancy folk sure has changed you. Next you'll be telling me you expect to have the mug cleaned before pouring you a new cup of tea."

A few minutes later Margaret and Grimmatt joined them, each having fetched the bag of essential sup-

plies they would need on the planet. Fatloch was piloting the ship down to the ground.

“What happened to him?” asked Margaret, nudging the Marabian’s unconscious body with her toe. She did not make the effort to be gentle about it.

Fatloch did not turn away from the controls. “We made the mistake of getting into an argument on one of the topics that should never be discussed in polite company.”

“What was it?” she asked. “Politics, or religion?”

“The other one,” he replied.

“Ah,” said Grimmatt. “Tea.”

Thus they arrived on the Bandits’ Planet, upon which crime had propagated for a century or more. They checked in at the Hotel du Pont.

The Fear Man

They had landed at the outskirts of the largest city on the planet, named Donor, thus named because it generated so many (in theory, at least – in practice, there were no hospitals on the planet that cared enough to take advantage of the abundant supply of body parts). The Marabian, once revived, sent the *Badower* safely back up into space, using his remote control device.

“That’s very handy,” said Fatloch. “Do you mind if I look after it for you?”

“What’s up? Don’t you trust me?” said the Marabian.

“I do, to a point, but there’s a lot of trouble to get into on this planet, and if you get into a tight spot I don’t want you deciding to dash off.”

“I understand,” the Marabian replied, with surprising complaisance. “Just let me switch it off properly.” He jiggled a few switches and then handed it over to Fatloch, who passed it to Margaret, to put in her bag. “Just so we all understand, I have passworded that control, and if you try to use it without me the ship will just ignore you.”

“I expected no less,” said Fatloch. “You have to look after yourself, and it is your ship, after all. I regret having to be so mean to you over this, to be honest.”

Having studied maps of Donor en route, Fatloch and Margaret had come to the conclusion that the Hotel du Pont would be a perfect spot to soak in the atmosphere, take a few drinks, perhaps make a few tentative contacts, and sleep at night. It was reasonably central to the city’s main entertainment district,

and not too far from what apparently passed for administrative buildings on this planet.

So they checked in, Fatloch paying cash for himself and his two guests. The Marabian had slipped away the moment they reached the city, eager to spend the money the President had advanced him from his payment.

“Will you be staying long?” asked the guy at the bar. Despite its fancy-sounding name, the Hotel du Pont was no more than a pub with a couple of rooms overhead.

Fatloch shrugged. “Maybe. Depends how we settle down.”

“Like that, huh?” said the barkeep. “You can pay extra for the plastic bedsheets then.”

“What exactly are you trying to say?” asked Fatloch, raising his eyebrows.

“Nothing, don’t take offence. But people who don’t know when they’re getting out of this city, don’t tend to get out, you know what I mean?” Grimmatt winced. The barkeep noticed. “Who’s your friend? He looks like a cop.”

Fatloch laughed in the barkeep’s face. “When did you ever see a cop, you dumb asshole? You watch too many movies. You ever even been to Earth?”

“Course I haven’t, so what?”

“So shut the hell up and give me my key, or do I need to speak to the management.”

The barkeep smirked and pulled a key out from under the bar. “You don’t speak to the management, my friend, they speak to you. And you don’t really want them to do that.” He held out the key, and Fatloch took it.

“Thanks for the warning, friend,” said the President with a smile. That sounded very promising. He needed to start somewhere, and why not here?

The barkeep took a set of the promised plastic sheets from under the bar, but Fatloch waved them away. “We will not be needing them, but thanks anyway.”

“They are for our benefit really, but whatever, I don’t care.”

Fatloch paid for the room in advance, and bought three beers. The three of them went upstairs to the room. Naturally the lock was broken, but they sat down, Grimmatt and Margaret on the two beds, and Fatloch cross-legged on the floor. Fatloch drank his beer in one go, turned the glass upside down and placed it in front of him, staring at it as if it were a crystal ball. The others began to sip at the beer.

“Is it even possible to buy water on this planet?” asked Margaret, with a pained face.

“It’s an essential ingredient of beer,” said

Grimmett, "so I guess so. Can I just say that I feel very uncomfortable here? That guy at the bar made me as a cop in seconds, and you were right, he had never seen a cop in his life before. To be honest, I don't know what I'm doing here right now. It seemed like a good idea back on Earth, completing the mission and everything, but now it seems like I'm going to get shot in the head before we even find out where she is. Now if I get shot in the head having found her, my dying action being to pass her into the arms of her mother or father, I'll be fine with that, but I don't want to die for nothing."

Fatloch was silent, mulling over his plans and disinclined to reassure the policeman. Margaret waited a moment, giving the President the chance to speak if he was so inclined, but then spoke herself.

"You will be fine – you've been undercover before. A couple of days and every gangster in the city will think they knew you at school. Anyway, the possibility of being found out might seem like a burden to you, but have you thought about who we are travelling with?" She pointed at Fatloch. "He is the current President of Earth. In theory everyone we meet on the planet should recognise him. That is what really concerns me. What if someone sees through his disguise?"

Fatloch still had nothing to say.

"We should get some sleep," said Grimmett. "Will he keep an eye out?"

"I think so. He's just having a good think." Margaret reclined on her bed. "You are right, though, we should get some sleep." She closed her eyes quickly, after having seen what was on the ceiling, then forced them open again. "What do you make of that?" she asked.

There were at least a thousand huge black flies on the ceiling, skittering about and bumping along. What made it worse was that they appeared to be feeding from a huge red stain, something sticky that had seeped from the room above.

"I can see why they asked us to use plastic sheets," replied Grimmett, seconds before he began to snore.

Margaret wanted to sleep, but she could not. The flies and the blood were part of it, but like Grimmett, she had her doubts as to this enterprise. It might only be criminals who were going to get hurt, but even if that were true, did they have the right to do them harm for something they might have had no involvement in?

Suddenly she heard Fatloch moving towards her. He leant in towards her, speaking quietly so as not to wake Grimmett. "Don't worry about me being recognised. This disguise has stood up to worse scrutiny

than it will face here. Back on Earth this face stood me in good stead as that of Barbe Doolo, an antiques expert as whom I used to dabble when I needed a break from the long days spent Presidenting. I once sold an oak fireplace to a Minister without her batting an eyelid, except at the price."

"Okay," said Margaret, at the same low tone.

"And I will do my best to keep you both alive and out of trouble, you know that. But I'm going out now to do some business, and it might be better if you kept watch. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I do. I have my pistol with me already."

"Good." He began to move off.

"Would you not prefer us to come with you?" she asked.

"It might not be pleasant. I will need you and Grimmett later, once things are under control, and I don't want the two of you put off by anything you might see here tonight."

"I see," said Margaret. "There's no other way?"

"None at all. Don't feel bad for them. If I wasn't going down there, they would be coming up here. I'm just saving them the trip."

He left without saying anything else.

Downstairs, the bar was now pretty empty, the patrons having moved on to the brothels, if they had the money, and to the roof to look at the stars if they had none. The criminals of the Bandits' Planet were more romantic than their Earth counterparts, exiles that they were. They would drunkenly fight over which star was that of Earth, and sing ridiculous songs about finding the right girl to settle down with.

"Hi," said the barkeep, "can I get you another beer?"

"Actually," replied the President with a confidential air, "I was feeling a bit restless. I wondered if there are any games on tonight?"

"Well, you're in luck. There is a poker game in the back room, but I better warn you, those guys play for big stakes."

"Are those guys the management you warned me about earlier?"

"Do you want me to go in and introduce you? They are usually glad to have a new face at the table."

"Sure," said Fatloch, "but give me a beer first. I like to relax before a bit of action."

"No problem," said the barkeep, as he left for the backroom.

The President drank the beer quickly, then leant over and poured himself another one. He felt the alcohol stirring from his stomach to energise and loosen his limbs, the restrictions gone once more, his

youth returned, but that vitality rendered more deadly than ever by long experience.

“Okay,” said the barkeep, coming back out, “they’re happy for you to play, so long as you have a big enough stake.”

Fatloch took out a bankroll and gave a note from it to the barkeep. “I took another beer,” he said.

“That should be plenty,” said the barkeep. “Go on through. Have a good time.”

Fatloch went into the backroom. He emerged five minutes later, covered in blood from head to foot.

“Wh-what happened?” yelled the barkeep.

Fatloch smiled. “My stake just got a lot bigger.”

Thus Bardello Fatloch began to build his empire of crime, taking over the Hotel du Pont first and using it as his base of operations. The gangsters he had done such frightful death to had run the rule over the immediate area around the hotel, roughly five or six streets in each direction.

Fatloch’s first move as a crime lord, and he did it even before washing the blood from his clothes, though that might have been deliberate, rather than just a matter of wanting to move quickly, was to have the barkeep call a meeting of the surviving soldiers of the Hotel du Pont gang. He did not bother to wake Grimmitt and Margaret just yet. He wanted to give them time to practise their game faces before throwing them into this particular mix. Plus, if they did not like what they saw, his plans would be as good as over. There was no way he would be able to run any kind of organisation without Margaret’s help, not in the frantic state he was in. He tried to conceal it, and it helped when he needed to draw on his anger, but ask him to plot a growth chart or come up with a business development plan and he would go to pieces. He needed Margaret for that, because if his underlings saw that he was not taking their business places, he would be forced to battle for his position too often, and that would put the mission – his daughter – at risk. In the same way, he needed Grimmitt, once things had calmed down, to run the investigation for his daughter. His nose for secrets, inherited from a long line of tenacious policemen, would be invaluable on this world of lies.

He returned to the backroom, taking the plastic sheets with him. He turned the card table upside down, piled the bodies up on it, using the legs to hold them more or less neatly in place, and threw the plastic sheet over it loosely. Then he took a seat at the other end of the room.

Five or so minutes later the local gangsters began to enter, in ones or twos. Fatloch nodded to each as

he or she came in, and waited for them all to arrive. The first thing each saw upon entering the room was the ghastly pile of bodies, and because of where Fatloch was standing they were forced to go and stand with those bodies at their backs. Fatloch would have smiled if it would not have spoiled the moment – he could imagine the hairs on the backs of their necks rising, the fear tumbling again and again in their stomachs, as they wondered what their fate was to be. As more of them came in, finally petering out at about twenty, perhaps some would begin to wonder why they should be afraid of this newcomer, but then their imaginations would create a ghostly breath at their ear, whispering that action against him would not be wise.

There was another factor besides fear in Fatloch’s favour – by definition, these men and women had not been a part of the inner circle, or they would have been playing poker when Fatloch made his move. For most of them, therefore, this change was a chance for career advancement. So they listened. When he thought they were all there, Fatloch began to speak.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I do not think any of you will know me. My face is not one you have seen before. But I have decided to try my hand at a life of crime.” A few of them laughed. He pointed to the pile of bodies at the back. “As you can see, I have got off to quite a good start.” A few more laughed this time. That was good – most of the scum on the Bandits’ Planet were there because they enjoyed being criminals. No one had ever been sent there by Earth or the Religizone. They were there because they enjoyed being bad, exiles by choice of profession rather than by government edict. Thus Fatloch had to make sure they enjoyed working for him, though they did it out of fear.

A female gangster stood up. “You sure did, boss. You did for them real good!”

Fatloch smiled. “Thank you for your appreciation. Now, I want to set out a few ground rules for working in my operation. First of all, no one should be afraid of using long words.” Almost all of them laughed, and a few looked at each other as if to say, who is this guy? “Let me explain. We will be an educated gang. If you have received no education, there will be classes here every weekend. And why is that important? Because by the time I am finished we are going to be the biggest gang on the planet, and if you are loyal, and work hard, I will be loyal to you, and work hard for you, and you will end up top of the heap.”

None of them were laughing now. One of them, chewing on a toothpick, spoke up, his voice calculat-

ing and intrigued. "A lot of people have tried that before, you know, and they all failed."

"I don't doubt that," replied Fatloch, "but I bring some special skills to the table." He lightly stressed the word *table*, letting them make the connection for themselves. "I know what I am doing. If you want to come with me, those of that need to will study, because by the end of it you will be ruling a planet, and to do that you need to be able to read."

The criminals were staring at him now, amazed at his plans, as if they were children sat listening to a fairy story. The same toothpick guy spoke up again. "That sounds pretty good, I have to say, but the Lord of Crime isn't going to like anyone looking to expand. He likes everyone to keep on their own turf, paying their dues and keeping quiet. How are you going to deal with him?"

"What is your name?"

"They call me Folio, Folio Sastrum."

"Folio, eh? That is an interesting name. Were your parents bibliophiles by any chance?"

"I would rather not talk about my parents."

Fatloch smiled. "I understand. Well, Folio, you have just become my captain. You were the first to speak out against me, despite the bodies at your back. That is just the kind of man I need, someone I can rely on to be honest, or at least as honest as anyone gets on this planet." He stopped smiling. "As to the Lord of Crime – is that his real name? – I will deal with him when it becomes an issue. First, tell me, which of our neighbours will wake up to a nasty surprise in the next couple of hours?"

The criminals looked and each other, smiled, and some even began to lick their lips.

One held up a hand, as if at school – he must have originally been on Earth, thought Fatloch. "What do we call you? Who are you?"

He thought for a moment of using his old street name, but thought better of it. He did not want to leave any unnecessary clues to his identity.

"You can call me... the Fear Man."

One by one, beginning that very night, the other crime gangs fell to Fatloch's sword. He killed, maimed and tortured his way to control of a quarter of the city within the first week. Though it might seem strange that he was able to achieve so much in such a short time, bear in mind that he did not have to consider the consequences. Those who preceded him in his position as the crime lord of the Hotel du Pont would, if they had murdered their rivals in their beds, have had to fear the same thing happening to them, or their wives, or their children – yes, awful as

it may seem, people did have children on that law-forsaken planet, because that is what people do, wherever they are.

Fatloch knew that in a matter of weeks or months he would be gone. Aside from Margaret and Grimmett (both of whom he kept close at all times, at least until later, when he had consolidated his power), he cared about no one on the planet, and so feared no retributions.

By the end of the second week he had taken almost half the city, and the self-styled Lord of Crime had begun to look over his shoulder. Fatloch had found Folio (the President found the first name so appealing he refused to use the surname) to be very effective. He was ruthless, committed and dangerous. What is more, he had attended both of Margaret's tutorials, showing an eagerness to learn, despite his age – he was in his mid-forties, by Fatloch's estimate, though life on this planet would age anyone beyond their years – that marked him well for the future.

It was during those lessons that Fatloch felt guilt for the first time over what he was doing to these men and women. As they bent to their studies, in numbers that increased every week, desperate to improve their standing in the organisation, he reflected on how they would feel if they knew of his plans to skip out as soon as he had got what he wanted. Was there an argument that they should stay, that he could help the people of this world far more than he could help his daughter? If he ever found her, was a man who could do what he had done an appropriate person to entrust with the education of a young girl? He thought of the table of bodies, which he had had glazed and mounted over the entrance to the Hotel du Pont, and thought that perhaps he was not. He quickly shook off these maudlin thoughts – he would not be the first parent in history to be undeserving of a child's love, and he would not be the last, and for the sake of that love he was willing to do whatever it took.

It was at about the middle of their third week on the Bandits' Planet that the Lord of Crime made contact. He sent a messenger to the hotel. Fatloch welcomed him, and took him up to the roof to talk. It was early in the morning, and Fatloch loved to see the sunrise. It was probably the only truly beautiful thing on the planet, women aside.

"Good morning." The President went over to the balcony facing the sunrise, and stood there, his back to the messenger. It was a deliberate motion, to show how little he felt he had to fear. "What can I do for you?"

The messenger came to stand beside him. Was it to show he could be trusted, or just because he too enjoyed sunrises, wondered Fatloch. He knew that this crook was loaded to the gills with weapons, but their scans had shown no signs of explosives, so unless he decided to test the Fear Man's speed with a gun, they should both be leaving the roof in one piece.

"I have been sent by the Lord of Crime. He has heard of your exploits, Fear Man, and he is very impressed. You have taken a lot of ground, very quickly. You are ruthless, thuggish and brutal in battle, but generous in victory. The people you have not yet taken fear you, but also hope to serve you."

"That is very flattering. I have not taken any territory from the Lord of Crime, so why does any of this concern him?"

"The men you have replaced used to offer the Lord of Crime a certain amount of money out of respect. So far, we have had nothing from you. That concerns us a bit."

"I can see that it might." Fatloch took a deep breath. "It is not that I do not respect your Lord of Crime, it is just that I plan to kill him before the month is out. What would be the point of giving him money now, only to take it back at the end of the month? I am sure you understand. It would create unnecessary work for my accountants."

"Very well," said the messenger, preparing to leave. "I look forward to the next time we meet."

"I do too."

The messenger went back down the stairs, and from the roof of the Hotel du Pont Fatloch watched him walk away. Folio stood at the corner, waiting for a signal, but Fatloch shook his head. He had no reason not to allow the man to leave unmolested. He had told him nothing that the Lord of Crime would not already have deduced for himself.

The messenger had been a sign that the Lord of Crime was willing to compromise, to allow him his fiefdom on a promise that there would be no attempt to make a grab for everything, but the Fear Man had no interest in such a compromise. Where the Lord of Crime had to consider the effect of a war on his revenues, on the well-being of his men and business, the Fear Man did not. All that was nothing to him. If he did not have complete control of the city, if he did not have the ability to undertake an investigation free of interference, he might as well have nothing.

Now it was only a matter of time before the Lord of Crime would make his move, and so the Fear Man had to move more quickly. That night, he called together all his captains, and told them that the big

push was on, but it would not happen in the way they might have expected.

"I am going in alone, to face the Lord of Crime. Once he is dead, I want you ready to move in on his territory. Margaret will direct your movements from here, while Folio will be in charge on the ground. Is that clear?"

"How are you going to get in?" asked Folio. "They will shoot you on sight."

"You are probably right, but we will see. I have my ways, as you know."

He dismissed the captains, telling them to see Margaret for more detailed instructions. Then he went to see Grimmett, who had spent much of the last two weeks reading in his room, waiting for his chance to get out and about. His initial trepidation had long since departed and he was ready for the hunt, but it had not been safe for him, Fatloch had explained time and time again, and it had not been worth the risk. Whoever had taken his daughter would be waiting like a trap-door spider, ready to leap at any sign of approaching prey. Grimmett pointed out that he was not exactly prey for criminals, that he could handle himself very well, but that, explained Fatloch, was exactly what worried him.

"If you get into a shoot-out with the crooks who took my daughter, they will not survive, I have no doubt of that. Or if they don't try to get you, they will make a run for it. At the moment, no one but you and Margaret knows why we are here. I don't want that to change until we control everything."

They had had that conversation more than once, but today Grimmett had actually had something to do, and that was to contact the Marabian, and get him back to base.

It had taken a while, Grimmett having to make multiple calls to the tentacle-headed rogue, but eventually he got through to him on one of the rare occasions when he was not drinking, womanising or looking for children to terrorise, or doing all three in various combinations.

So when the Fear Man went back to his room, the Marabian was waiting there, sitting rather uncomfortably next to Grimmett on one of the beds.

The President sat on the other bed. He smiled at the Marabian. "Hi. Have you been spending your wages wisely?"

The Marabian laughed nervously. "As unwisely as possible. Sensible investment opportunities are pretty rare on this world. But I've had a good time regardless. How come you needed me back – are we leaving already?"

"No, not yet," replied Fatloch. "But we need to

use your ship. You can do the driving, but it would probably be best to do it by remote control."

King of Thieves

Fatloch strode out of the Hotel du Pont, bearing nothing but his laser pistol and an unusual and experimental weapon. He walked through the streets, people leaning out of the windows to cheer him on, those with guns standing on the flat roofs and firing them into the air. There was an air of celebration. None of them knew what his plan was, but he had so totally ingrained in them the idea that he was a man to be feared by his enemies that they had no doubt that he would be victorious.

It took him forty minutes to reach the edge of his territory, and by the time he got close enough to that of the Lord of Crime to see the guns pointing at him there were hundreds of men, women and children following him, and crowding around. What will he do? How will he kill the Lord of Crime? They asked each other the questions, but there was only doubt as to his methods. They seemed certain as to his eventual victory.

He stopped just out of range of the guns and used his handheld to call the Lord of Crime. It did not take long to get through. The Lord of Crime's face appeared on the screen. He was a bit overweight, with a big bushy moustache and beard. His cheeks were florid, and the look of him left Fatloch pleased that this was who would make the final decision today, rather than the lieutenant who must surely do the actual work of running their criminal empire, for example a cool customer like the messenger he had spoken to on the roof. There was no way that a man such as this Lord, who had obviously partaken frequently of the fruits of his position, would deign to do the day-to-day work necessary in a criminal undertaking of this size. He was a king, not a president. And kings lived in the knowledge that they were at best tolerated by their subjects, whereas presidents knew they would rule only as long as they did a good job.

"So this is the famous Fear Man? I expected more."

"Hello."

"Do they call you that because of how afraid you are? Ha! Ha! Ha!"

"No."

"Well, what can I do for you, my taciturn enemy?"

Enema? Ha ha! What is all the brouhaha outside my gates? Have you come to turn yourself in?"

"No. I heard about this guy..."

"Did you? A guy? Ha! Ha! Aha! Are you looking for a boyfriend, Mr Fear Man? Well I *fear* you are in the wrong part of town! Ha! Ha!"

"He calls himself the Lord of Crime, something like that."

The Lord of Crime bristled. "You think you are funny, eh? Ha! I will show you funny, you butt-crinking fool. You are not the first to try to take all this from me, but with luck you will be the last. I will stretch your flayed hide from horizon to horizon, and let a drizzled red rain fall over the city until my point is made. I will make such an example of you that no one will even dare to look askance at me!"

"From what I hear, people already find it a struggle to look at you." The Lord of Crime was apoplectic. "But listen, enough pleasantries. Let's stop pretending that you have a choice about what is going to happen. Directly above your head at this moment, a few thousand miles up, is a remotely-controlled spacecraft, the *Badower*. Every cubic centimetre of that ship is filled with explosives. If I am not allowed to walk unmolested to your chambers, that ship will plummet to the ground at such speed that everyone within a kilometre of your home will be destroyed."

The eyes of all the people standing around Fatloch went wide, and, though a few tried to calculate the distance between themselves and the Lord of Crime's home, the majority decided to be safe rather than sorry and began to run. A few called out good luck to the Fear Man over their shoulders, but in a matter of minutes he was standing alone.

"Rain your bombs down, you fools," shouted the Lord of Crime. "They won't hurt me! Nothing you can do can hurt me! Let a million idiots die around me, and I will be left standing. Ha! You are wasting your time, Rear Man! Ha! Ha!"

He muted the Lord of Crime and spoke to Grimmett via the handheld. "Base, did you get all that?"

"Yes, sir," came the answer. "We are broadcasting it now over all frequencies and to all video sources."

The Fear Man waited for a few minutes more (leaving the Lord of Crime on mute), till he saw the gunmen up ahead drop their guns and begin to run in his direction. He gave them a friendly wave as they passed by, and called after them, "Look after yourselves!"

He was feeling very jolly as he walked towards the home of the Lord of Crime. It was refreshing to be on the dealing end of some rough justice, instead of the

receiving end. After having been forced out of his own home for being immoral, there was a symmetry in now taking the home of someone even worse.

That home was rather nice. It was a true palace, fit indeed for a king. Fatloch walked through the unattended gates to find the Lord of Crime was waiting for him in a quad. They were overlooked on every side by a long running balcony on which there would normally have been a hundred gunslingers ready to blast him to the worms. But it was now empty, like the rest of the place.

“Shall I have a go at killing you, then?” asked Fatloch, stepping up to the Lord of Crime.

“Be my guest, you filthy fool! I won’t even fight back, so that I can watch you realise what an idiot you have been. Once my men are out of range of your suicidal gambit, I will finish you off, and then, bomb or not, I’ll be here, while you will be dead. My men will return, and we’ll take total control of the parts of the city that you had stolen from my colleagues. The heads of those who have helped you will line the roofs of the city until the flesh rots and the birds pick them clean.”

The President shrugged. “We will see, my fat friend, we will see. Others have threatened me in the past. Others have thought themselves my equal. All have been mistaken.”

However, he did find the Lord of Crime quite difficult to kill. His punches and kicks seemed to have no effect, and laser blasts flew off in random directions.

“It is Baboose technology!” said the Lord of Crime triumphantly. “Stolen from the shielding apparatus of one of their ships, and adapted at great cost for my personal use. You will not be able to harm me, however hard you try, you upstart fool!”

“What an unfortunate development.” Fatloch touched his handheld. “It looks like I won’t be able to defeat you after all. Never mind, I will have the explosives dropped here anyway and we shall see if that works.”

“Then I might as well shoot you now!” The Lord of Crime pulled a gun from the holster at his hip. “If you are going to damage my property anyway, there is no reason to deny myself the satisfaction.”

Fatloch prepared to dive for cover, but at that moment both were distracted by a mighty whoosh as the *Badower* arrived a bit sooner than expected, the Marabian’s expert hands guiding the ship to a safe landing.

The Lord of Crime was puzzled. “What’s this? No explosion?”

“No explosion,” replied Fatloch with a smile. He

took out his experimental and unusual weapon and fired it at the Lord of Crime. It sent adhesive metal filings flying through the air, which stuck to his enemy (or rather to his protective field), effectively coating him in a flexible mirror, leaving him blinded.

“Now I don’t pretend to know how your force field works, but you might not want to risk using a weapon in there for a while.”

Fatloch threw a net over the silver Lord of Crime and dragged him to the *Badower*. Once up into space, he threw him out of an airlock and waited for the air inside his bubble to run out. When the Lord of Crime was well and truly dead, he tied his body to the outside of the ship and asked the Marabian to fly it a bit too close to the sun. The Lord of Crime was thoroughly annihilated, and Fatloch worked up quite a sweat (as did the Marabian, imagining the damage being done to his darling ship), but upon returning to the Bandits’ Planet and examining the shielding device, Fatloch was glad to see that although it had broken down, it might be salvageable.

He left it to the Marabian to arrange repairs to the ship (he really had flown *very* close to the sun), while he prepared to take full control of the planet.



It took a few more weeks for him to gain total control. Since he had established himself as a wise and generous ruler to those who supported him, and an implacable and ruthless foe to those who had not,

he met little resistance. In fact, he was able to leave much of the mopping up work to Folio and the other men he had begun with. Their educations well in hand, they were ready to do what was necessary, and then to do the little extra that was not necessary, but would make the difference.

Detective on the World of Thieves

Once established as the undisputed ruler of Bandits' Planet, with Margaret acting as his consigliore, Fatloch felt he could send Grimmertt out to hunt for those who had kidnapped his daughter, as well as looking for any traces of his wife. They made certain that they controlled the spaceports, and though of course on a planet such as this there was no bureaucracy in place, no desire to monitor the comings and goings of the spaceships of the thousand crooks that made this world their occasional home, and so no way to be certain that the perpetrators, if they were still around, would not take flight if they heard they were being sought. But the Fear Man still hoped to make escape awkward, at least awkward enough to kick up a fuss and make it possible for them to follow the kidnappers in the *Badower*.

Grimmett was now in his element. Unfairly, he felt, he had been restrained from going after his quarry, but now he was on the prowl. The information he had so far been able to glean from Fatloch's men had not been very helpful. As per Fatloch's instructions, he had been able to listen, but never to ask any questions, in case he gave away their true purpose. Grimmertt was irked at the thought. He was no amateur, to make such a stupid mistake, but he had known that if he went against Fatloch's wishes, he would either have been on his way back to Earth or on his way out of an airlock.

Now he could do things his way. He had not put the weeks spent in his room at the Hotel du Pont to waste. Day by day, he had meticulously assembled his new personality, that of Garaland Smuth, a man who desperately needed something smuggling from Earth. What did he want smuggling? He would not say. It could have been anything from a nuclear device to the Queen of England's secret pie recipe, but it was at least that important.

(Though the Royal Family had of course been annihilated, along with the rest of the population of

the United Kingdom, during the zombie apocalypse of the early twenty-first century, legends persisted, and, ridiculous as it might seem, one of those tales related to the Queen of England having been able to make the most marvellous pies, and the secret recipes for those pies being recovered from the ruined land by a private in the occupying United Nations army. How this myth came about is a mystery, there being no historical evidence for it whatsoever. I can only conclude that after King Arthur did not wake from his sleep to fight the zombies, those surviving Britons, those who had been abroad during those dark days, had indulged in a spot of creative mythography, to replace those legends that had failed them in their time of greatest need.)

What else was there to know about Garaland Smuth? He was close-mouthed, and he made no direct contact. He moved slowly through the city, leaving only the slightest trace, the bare minimum that his quarry would need to find him, and think themselves clever for doing it.

Garaland Smuth, you say? He was a thorough villain, and none could trust him. What had he done? Who knows? But it is in his eyes. Terrible things can be seen there.

Garaland Smuth? Yes, a thin man, well-dressed, educated, bookish, even. That's him. He was in here earlier, drinking in the corner, reading some novel from Earth, when a gang of thugs walked into the pub, went directly to his table, and then marched him out after a few short words.

Once they were in a quiet alley, the leader of the mercenaries snarled at Smuth. "So what do you want shifting, you ball-whacker?"

"I don't know if I want to get into that. Who am I talking to?"

Grimmett knew the type he was talking to, even if he did not know the individual. A brawler, a braggart, a tough guy who had just about enough smarts and charisma to get a good team together and keep it together. This was the kind of guy you tended to meet undercover, because the uniforms could always find something to pin on the guys who had no smarts at all. The guys with no charisma always ended up blowing the game, either trying to play big shot or letting their gang drift away.

"You don't know if you want to get into that? You munch-butt. You don't need to know our names, because we know yours, Mr Judy Garland Smuth. You want something shifting off Earth, and you ain't found the guys who can do it, have you?"

"And you lot, a bunch of ruffians who accost me

in an alley, would be able to? Get past the security of Earth, get in and out safely, all of that? Let me guess, you have a spaceship made of beer cans?"

"You're a funny guy, Smuth. But you got money, it seems, and I want it. We can do this job for you. We've done it before. We've been in and out of Earth more times than we've done it to your mother."

Smuth was impressed. "How did you manage it, though? Anyone can boast."

"We have contacts, government contacts, don't you worry about that. Someone turns a blind eye to our comings and goings, and we turn a blind eye to him receiving fat envelopes of cash that should really have been ours."

Bingo! thought Grimmett. That ties in with what Fatloch told me about the Minister for Galactic Affairs. It looks like the fish is finally on the hook.

"Let's talk, then," said Smuth, "but not here. I don't want anyone overhearing our conversation and deciding to butt into the operation."

"Whatever. We don't need the job, but we'll take it since we feel sorry for you, for looking so stupid."

"That's nice," said Grimmett with a smile. They must have made a hell of a lot of money pulling the Fatloch job, and the idiots have spent it already. They were as bad as the Marabian. "Let me consult with my colleagues on your proposal, and then we'll talk seriously tomorrow."

"Okay," said the mercenary. "I'm glad we talked. The name is Jim Carab. Sweet Jimmy Carab, they call me down at the whorehouse. You want to find out why? You want to be my bitch?"

Tomorrow they did not really talk seriously, but the day after Fatloch and Carab spoke very, very seriously.

First Grimmett went, as arranged, to the same bar to which the mercenaries had traced Garaland Smuth. Only Carab came, this time. He took a seat opposite Grimmett, and waved for a drink.

"You didn't bring your buddies?" asked Grimmett.

"Naw. I reckon you are okay, Smuth. You seem to be on the up and up."

"Plus, you didn't want them around when you were talking money."

"You got it, my boy. Now how much are we talking?"

"About as much as it takes, plus my commission." Smuth winked. "And I work on a percentage, so don't feel shy about asking for top dollar, if you know what I mean."

"Excellent, excellent." He drank the pint of beer

that had just been delivered to their table, swilling it down in a single attempt.

"Let's get you another one of those," said Smuth, waving to the barkeep. "But before we go much further, I want to hear what you can do. Tell me a story or two."

Another beer arrived, and Carab began to sip it. "That barkeep, eh? Pretty old but I bet she'd give as good as she took, and I bet she'd take it, you know what I mean?"

"I really, really do," said Smuth.

"Anyway, where was I? Well, we used to stick to drug smuggling, and made good money, but at the beginning of the year we got our biggest job yet. You know the President of Earth? What's his name, Fatlick?"

"Whatever."

"Yeah, whatever it is. Well you know his kid went missing? Maybe you don't. Who cares about a stupid baby, anyway... The wife, as well, we had her... You know, I don't know why I'm telling you this, mate; you must have an honest face or something. Ha ha! On this planet, an honest face, what a laugh!" He slumped forward onto the table, unconscious.

Margaret came out from behind the bar, while the other patrons, all of them Fatloch's men, finished their drinks and left.

"Well," she said, "you got your man. How does it feel?"

"Pretty damn good, Margaret. Pretty damn good."

Thus they found the mercenaries who had been responsible for bringing little baby Taio from Earth.

Fatloch decided to undertake the interrogation himself.

Carab laughed (unaware that he was in the presence of the husband and father of his two passengers) at how the tears of each, the alien-loving bitch and her disgusting spawn, had gone unanswered, since neither was aware of the other. It was the last thing he ever laughed at, Fatloch having the tip of his tongue surgically grafted to the tip of his nose soon after.

That operation completed – he felt obliged to do it himself, despite his lack of surgical experience, for the sake of morale – he allowed himself a moment of relief.

His daughter had still been alive when she reached the Bandits' Planet.

Knowing that lent new steel to his arm – strong as it had been when acting in the name of revenge, he felt his biceps swell to think that by might of sinew he might see his daughter once more.

Further investigation – at least two of Carab's gang survived – led to the discovery of the rogue who had arranged transportation of a group of religious zealots to the Religizone. One had had a baby, but he had just assumed it to be their own, conceived during a mission to the Bandits' Planet.

"It is, after all," he joked, leering, in their makeshift interrogation room, "the best place in the universe for a woman to go if she wants to get pregnant."

Since he had not known the baby's identity, Fatloch saw no reason to punish the rogue, but Margaret gave him a slap across the face for looking at her during his leering.

While Grimmatt went back to the Hotel du Pont to follow up the leads, and double check the information from the rogue, Margaret and Fatloch went up to sit on the flat roof of the building they were in, to look at the stars, and think about their next move.

Then an urgent call came in to them from the Hotel du Pont.

"The police are here!" shouted Grimmatt. "It's Godal and Maestri, with a battalion of the navy at their backs, and they are demanding that you be handed over, or they will come down and dig you out like a tooth's rotten root."

Police Battle

The police from Earth arrived in force, ready to clean up or burn out the entire world in their efforts to capture the former President. However, Fatloch had expected and prepared for the attack. He had ensured that early warning systems were set up to monitor objects approaching in space, and to keep a much more careful eye on the skies in general than had been the case under his predecessor. To account for all the new security he had had the Marabian spread rumours of an imminent attack by Earth, of which he had supposedly heard during his sojourn there. He had put it about that Earth conservatives were stirring up the people against the Bandits' Planet, preparatory to an attack.

When Fatloch heard that the attack had actually begun, he had to curse his luck. He had hoped to avoid a confrontation with the police. He had to think of his promise to Margaret that only the guilty would suffer as a result of his quest. He had to consider the danger of getting stuck on the planet.

Once, like many of those on the Bandits' Planet,

he would have relished the chance to have a crack at the cops, but he had long outgrown his childish dislike of them, especially since he had spent a decent amount of his Presidential time making sure that the worst were thrown out of the service, the best were given promotions (officers like Grimmatt, Godal and Maestri), and the rest were given pay rises.

But despite his misgivings, Fatloch would have to co-ordinate the defence, and conduct the battle.

He told Grimmatt to leave the Hotel du Pont and not return until he had dragged the Marabian out of whichever whorehouse he was squandering his pay in.

"Get the *Badower* ready to fly. We'll be leaving as soon as we're all aboard."

Making his way across the city, heading back to the Hotel du Pont and hoping it would still be standing when he got there, Fatloch barked orders over his communicator.

Canvasses were thrown off the flat roofs of the city and the Fear Man's soldiers turned their turrets to point at the sky. In a matter of minutes the night sky was lit up by streams of angry laser fire smashing against the sides of descending police and army troop carriers. Fighters tore across the city from one horizon to the other, making less than surgical strikes against anything that had three dimensions.

Fatloch winced at every explosion, every building that blew up, every troop ship that fell uncontrolled to the ground. This was all his fault. If he could have got out more quickly none of this would have happened.

By the time he got back to the Hotel du Pont, the others were all there, and the Marabian was steering the *Badower* down to a landing.

Folio watched them get aboard.

"Listen," said Fatloch to him, "you have to take command now. They want me – they don't care about the rest of you. Once we get into the air we'll send a signal and lead them away from here."

"You'll be caught," protested Folio.

"We might be lucky, you never know. Anything could happen." Fatloch felt sick at himself as the airlock of the *Badower* closed behind him.

As soon as they were ready to take off, Fatloch triggered the explosives that utterly destroyed the defensive weaponry of the people of Bandits' Planet. He might have liked one or two of the crooks he had met, and one or two, such as Folio for example, might have become half-decent people in time, but he could find no reason in his heart to leave the planet in their charge. Even though he would be

branded a traitor by those he had left to be herded by the Earth forces into cells, he would be thanked by the next generation, who would have the chance of growing up in a fairer and kinder society.

A Bigger Boat

As the *Badower* took off, they had a few anxious moments where it was being shot at by both police and criminals.

The Marabian cursed his luck for having got involved with these fools. They had been very well set up on the Bandits' Planet, with (it sounded) every chance of successfully fighting off the police attack. There was a reason the authorities from Earth had not attacked the planet before (apart from the fact that, like the Religizone, it gave undesirables somewhere to go where they could only usually hurt themselves). The criminals had always been well-armed, and since Fatloch made himself the Lord of Crime they had been well-organised and well-prepared too. The police would still have a fight on their hands, though Fatloch's treachery meant it would probably last a few hours instead of a few days.

Once they had sneaked past the cordon of police ships that ringed the Bandits' Planet, they had to take a bit of time to decide on the next step.

"We cannot simply fly up to Religius and demand the return of my daughter," said Fatloch. "If we are not shot out of the sky we will be left standing to look like fools."

"We could sneak in," suggested the Marabian. "I've done it before. Some of my clients in the past have, you know..." He flicked a glance at Margaret, who surprised herself by being able to avoid retching. "They find all that religiosity very exciting, if you know what I mean. The people on those worlds are crazy, but if you can get them to forget their principles for five minutes, you can have yourself a real good time."

"Only five minutes?" said Margaret with a sneer.

The Marabian scowled. "Did you want to see my weapon again?"

"It's hardly worth it," she said. "It's so small, I doubt I would feel a thing if you shot me."

The Marabian got to his feet and took a step towards her. She began to roll up her sleeves.

"Fisticuffs, is it?" she asked. "Are you very fond of your ridiculous tentacles?"

He stared her in the eye for a moment, and obvi-

ously saw nothing to suggest that the outcome of any brawl would be in his favour. He stamped a foot and went to his quarters.

"Could we try a diplomatic approach?" asked Grimmett. "We do not know that the theocracy is involved in this kidnapping – it is hard to see what they could gain from it. It might well be an extremist group of some kind – religiosity does tend to bring that out in people."

"Oh, I think they know about it," said Fatloch. "And if they do not, they can still be held accountable for encouraging their inhabitants to entertain these silly supernatural notions in the first place. You can't tell someone that an invisible man watches them all day long and then call them crazy when they say that the invisible man has started to talk to them."

He told them about Earth's weapons of last resort. Every President knew about them. A handful of weapons of ultimate destructive force, they were kept off-world for use in the gravest emergency. Considered too dangerous to even keep in Earth's solar system, they were dotted around the galaxy like the warriors of the constellations of Earth, to be brought into play if Earth itself was ever threatened, or destroyed.

Fatloch said that they should head for the unit code-named Orion.

"Are you sure that you want to go in with weapons blazing?" asked Grimmett. "There's no guarantee that your daughter won't be hurt during our attack, not to mention all the other innocent people that could be killed. Margaret, can't you talk him out of this?"

Margaret shook her head. "We will not actually use the weapon. We are not criminals. We will simply use it as a threat, and they will hand Taio over, and we will leave. Nobody will be hurt, will they, Mr Fatloch?"

"No, that's right, Margaret," he said. But he was not really sure what he would do if they did not comply with his demands.

The War Machine

When they finally reached the Orion, which to all appearances was just an asteroid, and landed upon it, all systems on the *Badower* lost power.

"That is not unexpected," explained Fatloch. "Our arrival will have triggered certain defence systems, and woken up the staff. I did not want to mention it

before, because I did not want to worry you. There will not be any power until the staff is back on its feet, and has checked our ship for signs that we are from Earth and non-hostile. There should be enough air in here for us to last till then. In the meantime, we should prepare for using the airlock tunnel."

The Marabian had something to say. "This ship is not from Earth – will that not cause a problem?"

"Of course it isn't," said Fatloch with a laugh, "and that's because you're an alien, right?" He winked at the Marabian, who winked back. "It isn't so straightforward as looking at the shape of the ship – there will be scans taken of us, and one of those will show the Presidential recording device hidden in my body. Once the staff has found that, and established that I am still alive, we will be let in."

Grimmett was puzzled. "The staff? I thought you said this thing had been here for a hundred years?"

"Well..." said Fatloch, scratching his nose. "That's something else I should probably have mentioned sooner. Let's get to that at the right time, but Grimmett, I think you might have heard of her."

He refused to elucidate while they prepared for their walk across the surface of the asteroid. They had landed within a hundred metres of the entry hatch, which was as close as they were able to get. They could have made the walk in spacesuits, and forgotten about the tunnel, but Fatloch pointed out that they could be here for a while, and for the sake of convenience they might as well set the tunnel up right away. Plus, there was the thought that if there was a delay in the power returning, it might be better to be in spacesuits already.

After everything was set, and they were all four standing in a depressurised cargo bay in spacesuits, ready to roll the extensible tunnel out through the cargo door once the power returned that would let them actually open that door, they had to wait just a few tense minutes. Then the power returned, and Fatloch opened the cargo door.

"Let's go," he shouted with glee, and they dragged one end of the tunnel out of the door, all the way over to the entry hatch. Fatloch and the Marabian began to secure it there, while Margaret and Grimmett went back to secure it at the other end, to an airlock in the cargo bay. Once the seals at both ends were hermetically complete, all four rescuers went back through the cargo bay door. Fatloch closed the door behind them, and the Marabian repressurised the room. A few minutes later they were out of their spacesuits.

"Thank goodness for that," said Margaret. "I was getting awfully sweaty in there."

"Perhaps I can help with that," leered the

Marabian, sticking out his tongue and wiggling it disgustingly.

Margaret put a finger to her chin, in an exaggerated pretence of considering his proposal. "Hmm, interesting. But I do not understand what effect making me vomit will have on my sweat."

Each of them showered, separately, and dressed, again separately, and had a cup of tea, together, and then returned to the cargo room, passed through the airlock door, together, and walked down the airtight tunnel, in single file.

At the other end was a surprise. The entry hatch was locked, and would not open to their efforts.

"What do you make of it?" asked the Marabian. "Are we going to have to blow the door?"

"Let me have a think," said Fatloch. He thought for a moment, then tried something out. He ran his hands around the edge of the hatch, causing odd little musical notes to ring out. "A-ha! It is a musical lock. The only question is, what is the tune that we need to play?"

Margaret had a suggestion. "The international anthem?"

Fatloch tried it. "I suppose anyone could know that."

The Marabian was getting a bit cheesed off. "I thought the Orion would already have scanned you to check that you are the President. We should just blow the door. It mustn't be working – the staff are probably all dead."

"Oh, they are!" said Fatloch with a laugh. "That won't be the problem. Let's just try to get it right, it'll only take a minute." He thought some more, and then played a short tune, quite ineptly, but apparently recognisable, on the hatch, which swung open.

"What was that tune, then?" asked the Marabian.

Margaret laughed. "The only one every President is guaranteed to hear – it's what they play when he enters the Parliament."

They filed into the hatch, closing it after them. Since the hatch was designed to open out onto the airless surface of the asteroid, they then had to wait in an airlock for a few minutes while the door to the interior opened.

Grimmett thought he might as well start a conversation. "What will it be like inside?"

Fatloch laughed. "Are you playing detective again, trying to discover my little secret? Why not wait patiently and discover it for yourself?"

Inside was not at first particularly worth the wait. They entered a bare corridor, its only feature the hatch on one wall by which they had entered. The lights were dim. The air was stuffy, but breathable,

and Grimmett noticed the whirr of ventilation coming from somewhere. Whoever had woken up to let them in was obviously working to make them feel welcome, which he took as a good sign.

“Okay,” said Grimmett, “let’s get going.”

The rest of the base was little different to the first part of it they saw. It was a spaghetti of such tunnels, long, bare and dim, with little to distinguish them from each other. Here and there they would see a larger room, with no hint as to what its purpose might have been. The impression Grimmett got was that this place had been designed to hold many, many people if necessary, perhaps an entire government in exile.

Fatloch seemed to know where they were going, though, and after twenty minutes or so of walking, they reached a pair of undistinguished double doors. To one side was a handheld scanner, which Fatloch picked up and ran over his chest. There was a beep as the machine discerned his subcutaneous recording chip, and the doors opened.

“Here we are,” said Fatloch, “where it all happens.” He bowed to let the other three go in first.

They found themselves in a comfortable and spacious lounge, several couches dotted around, with what looked like a food dispenser at one end of the room. On the arms of each couch could be seen computer displays, while a fully-fledged control desk was at the end of the room to which all the couches faced. Beyond that control desk there was a black wall. The other walls were all white, so that black wall struck Grimmett as odd. Perhaps it was some kind of huge display screen?

He went forward to have a closer look.

Sensing his approach, it suddenly lit up! There was another room there, sealed off by a transparent screen that ran from wall to wall.

Inside that room was a gigantic array of controls and readouts, and these were being tended to by one person.

He looked again. That one person, though his or her back was to Grimmett, did not look right. The hair was straggly, the clothes fetid and ragged, the way the body held itself not in true.

Then it turned around, and Grimmett screamed, even before Margaret and the Marabian, who both let out blood-curdling shrieks. Horribly, Fatloch was laughing.

The face that now gazed upon them was barely recognisable as human. One eyeball lolled lazily in its socket, looking likely to fall out at any time. One cheek was wholly absent, leaving their eyes to wander onto two rows of blood-stained teeth,



cracked to the root from having gnawed on human bones.

It was the face of a zombie.

When the three of them had stopped screaming, Fatloch managed to stop himself laughing. “Do you recognise her, then, Grimmett?”

Grimmett looked blank. And horrified.

“I thought you might recognise her from reading *First the Eyes, Then the Brains*. It is your old family friend, Savita.”

Upon sensing their arrival the Orion had fed her blood and flesh to get her moving again, and once up and about she had been ready to check Fatloch’s credentials.

Having established that Fatloch was a suitable commander of the Orion, she was ready to receive and act upon his orders.

The weapon itself was the one developed by the Zombie Nation of Britain to fight for its independence in the twenty-first century. Upon their eventual defeat (or had it been a surrender?), the rest of the world had analysed the weapons and, appalled at their destructive capability, sent them into space, with a zombie left to man each one.

After explaining all this to them, Fatloch took a position at the controls, and ordered Savita to head for the Religizone.

Into the Religizone

The rescuers slowly made their way into the

Religizone, the Orion piloted through space by the revived Savita. The rescuers mostly stayed inside the *Badower*, where there were more amenities and fewer flesh-eating zombies.

At last they arrived at Religius. They did not know if Fatloch's daughter would be here, they simply knew that she was somewhere within the Religizone, but all knowledge in that region congregated on that planet. The very nature of knowledge was decided on that planet. Before people in the Religizone were allowed to believe in their own toes they had to take a pilgrimage there, to check that it was what they were supposed to believe in. This was the home of the highest Theocrats. At lower levels, the various religions barely spoke, each having its own planets, its own space fleet, its own method of government. But despite their many differences, the Theocrats knew that each religion, in a universe where science, philosophy and despair had proved themselves again and again the only rational responses to reality, was stronger when tied to the others. Together they were strong, but divided each would inevitably peter out in the face of a more powerful Earth, and Religius was the ring that held all the chains together.

"I am going down to the surface," announced Fatloch, entering Margaret's room, where she and the detective were comparing notes on the information they had gained on the Bandits' Planet. The Marabian was in his quarters, still sleeping. He had not had much to do since the *Badower* had begun to piggy back on the deadly asteroid. "I will take Grimmatt with me in the *Badower*; the two of you stay here in the Orion."

"Why take me?" asked Grimmatt. "How can I help?"

"To be honest, if they decide to shoot me on sight, I don't think they will really believe that the weapon will be used if a policeman from Earth is on board. If the Marabian is up here, they will fear the consequences."

"And what about me?" asked Margaret. "Do you have to leave me up here with this degenerate?"

"These people are religious," said Fatloch, "they would expect a woman to do the worst. Just lock the door if you take a nap while we're gone."

Margaret took a deep breath, and looked like she was working her way up to a few angry words.

Fatloch held up his hands. "I'm joking. I need you to keep an eye on him, and keep a gun about you at all times – there are plenty of people who would pay good money for the Orion, not least those people beneath our feet right now. The fact that it won't work without Savita and she won't work without my

orders will not stop him from selling it to them. I'll get him to pilot us down to the surface by remote control. That should keep him out of trouble."

The President went to wake the Marabian, while Grimmatt took a shower, and ran his clothes through the cleaner. Soon the two of them were sitting on the *Badower* while Fatloch's dodgy friend steered them carefully away from the Orion.

"Good luck, lads," called the Marabian over the communications circuit. "Tally ho and all the gods be with you!" He was sitting very comfortably in the lounge of the Orion, twiddling the controls and watching the monitor of his remote control unit precisely as if it was a video game. He sat, of course, facing the glass screen that separated him from Savita. It might have held her captive for a thousand years, but that was no guarantee he would be safe for the next hour.

"Thanks," said Fatloch, "and remember not to drink and drive. Set us down safely or my immortal soul will be back to teach you the consequences. Ha ha!"

The ride at first was very smooth, but as they approached the atmosphere the scanners showed multiple contacts rising from the planet's surface. Suddenly there was no time for jokes.

"Were they expecting you?" asked the Marabian, quickly turning the *Badower* in the opposite direction, which was back into space.

Grimatt and Fatloch held onto their seats as the ship twisted around. "Well, they could hardly have missed the approach of the Orion. I was bargaining on them being curious enough about who was on it to let us get down to the surface before opening fire."

"Looks like they didn't," said the Marabian. "The scanner signatures of those objects are too small to be ships, and no man could withstand the forces that would be generated by the sharpness of the turns they are making."

The missiles – there were seven of them by now, all streaking up into space with the power of a hundred nuclear bombs at their back – were not giving up their chase. The Marabian swung the ship this way and that, and tried dipping in and out of the atmosphere to change its heat signature, but nothing was effective. There was only one option, if he was not to lose his ship and its occupants – he pulled the *Badower* back around to face the Orion.

As the ship raced towards the asteroid, the game suddenly became deadly real to the Marabian. His life was at issue now, but he would rather die himself than see his ship destroyed so ignominiously. Even during his long sojourn on Earth, loitering under

bridges, he had found the money to keep his ship regularly serviced in a paid-up parking spot at the spaceport.

At the last minute he spun the *Badower* into a turn, and it roared around the Orion, flying so close by that it picked up more than one scratch, not that the Marabian was aware of that.

"I hope you know what you're doing," said Margaret, sitting with her hands on her knees, watching the Marabian at work.

The *Badower* was off and gone by the time the first of the missiles smashed into the Orion. Just before it hit, a flashing light drew Savita's attention. She turned a dial and pushed a few buttons and the Marabian opened his eyes to find himself still alive. He distantly heard the explosions, thunder on a distant horizon, and counted them off... four, five, six, seven, and that was it. He breathed again. The gamble had paid off – what good would a planet-busting weapon be if it could not put up with a small nuclear attack.

Soon the *Badower* had landed and Fatloch and Grimmett came to the lounge of the Orion.

"That was not nice at all," he said. "Okay, Savita, put me through to the Theocrats."

He set the conversation to appear the main screen, and they all reclined on the couches while they waited to be connected. First on the screen was a very pretty blonde girl.

"Welcome to Religius! We are happy that you have come here. Do you seek enlightenment or are you here on personal business?"

"A bit of both," replied Fatloch.

"That is wonderful," said the girl. "Could I ask where you are calling from?"

"Yes," said Fatloch. "I am currently in orbit around Religius. I tried to come down to the surface, but unfortunately one of your colleagues fired nuclear missiles at us."

"Oh," said the girl, putting on her sad face, "I am very sorry to hear that, sir, I am sure that it was just a mistake. Could I take your name so that we could get this all straightened out?"

"Certainly. My name is Bardello Fatloch."

"And what do you do for a living?"

"That is a bit up in the air at the moment," he replied, accompanied by the stifled laughter of the Marabian. Fatloch frowned at him to be serious. "I was President of Earth, but I may have lost that position during a period of unexplained absence."

"Fine, sir. Thank you for going over those details for me. I know it can be a bit boring. Now, before we go on, we have a new product which you might be

interested in; it provides peace of mind, happiness, and stability in an emergency, and it is currently available at a special introductory price, though as one of our valued customers you would also benefit from ongoing low rates. Does that appeal to you, sir?"

"Peace of mind sounds very good to me right now. What are you selling?"

The girl pouted. "I am not selling anything, sir. I am just offering you this chance because I would think it would be a wonderful opportunity for anyone." She paused for a moment, obviously checking which part of the script she had reached. "The benefits of a pre-blessing cannot be underestimated."

The President interrupted her. "I do not need a pre-blessing."

"Do you not think one would be useful if you suddenly die and find yourself in hell?"

Fatloch laughed. "That's begging the question, really." The girl did not know what to say, so she said nothing. "If I died and if I went to hell, and if a pre-blessing would actually make any difference to me there, well yes I might find it useful. But that is a lot of ifs. It has been nice talking to you, but I am in command of a weapon that can destroy your whole planet if you don't put me through to someone in charge."

"Let me just speak to a manager." But before putting Fatloch on hold she leaned forward and whispered, "You are going to hell." The screen went blank.

"Well, she was friendly," said the Marabian. "I feel myself coming over all religious."

"I'm sure you do," answered Fatloch, as the screen lit up again.

Brinksmanship

It was a young man, younger than the girl, with slick hair and filed nails, with which he was scratching an eyebrow. "We are sorry for any inconvenience, sir. Your call is being escalated."

Fatloch was about to point out that nuclear missiles were something more than an inconvenience, but the screen went blank again.

It stayed that way for about five minutes and then lit up again, to show a semi-lit chamber, in which six old men sat at a long, ornate desk, like that at which the US Supreme Court had sat, many centuries before. Like the members of the Supreme Court,

these men were judges – God’s appointed judges of mankind.

The President had got through to the Council of the Theocrats, with only slightly more trouble than it would have taken back on Earth. One of them leant forward, his crucifix dangling and striking the desktop. His bald head shone in the light.

“President Fatloch, what are you doing here?”

“Your Holiness,” said Fatloch, inclining his head in mock respect. “I think you know why I am here.”

“Your daughter!” said one of the others. Although they had not met before, Fatloch identified him from his beard. “We don’t know anything about that. Do you really think we would go looking for a fight with Earth?”

“I don’t know,” replied Fatloch. “Would you? Does the manner of her conception not offend you?”

“Aren’t you ashamed to admit to it? You, a leader of men? Regardless, we knew nothing of that, until the details appeared on your own news programs,” said the first speaker. “Why would we care? If anyone in our territory hears of it, it simply reinforces their poor opinion of the godless Earth people. And since the Earth people themselves found out, there has been a steady stream of converts to our faiths.”

Another of the men shouted out, though he was too much in darkness for Fatloch to work out his religion. “How dare you come here! We know you are being impeached – you have no power behind you. We will destroy you for entering our space.”

“Let’s not be too hasty,” said the bearded Theocrat in an aside to his colleagues. “Remember that the missiles failed to destroy his ship. The President would not be here without cards up his sleeve. Each of us has been through too many negotiations with him to ignore his resourcefulness and perspicacity.”

“That is very kind of you,” said Fatloch. He thought of being polite some more, but decided to forget the chit-chat. “Listen, it is obvious that you are not aware of the sheer amount of persuasive power I have brought to this conversation. If you do not hand over my daughter by tomorrow morning, or tell me where she can be found, I will destroy Religius. I am on the asteroid Orion, a bearer of zombie weaponry, and I think, even if you are more likely to have studied the Zombie Nation of Britain for theological reasons than for military ones, you will yet know of the awesome devastation they could have caused to Earth in the twenty-first century, had they not, unaccountably, allowed themselves to be defeated. But to return to the point, give me my daughter, or I will destroy you.”

The Theocrats were silent for a few seconds, none willing to allow the others to see them rattled by this. The bald one was the first to speak up. “We might be able to give you some information.”

Fatloch sat forward, attentively, but one of the other figures spoke first. “Don’t tell him a thing – why should we? He will be dead within minutes. Break the connection.”

“Wait!” shouted the bearded one, but the connection went dead.

“What did he mean by that?” asked Margaret. “More missiles? Haven’t we already shown they don’t harm us?”

There was a distant explosion, but unlike the previous distant rumbles, this one echoed down into their room.

“The Orion has been breached!” shouted the Marabian, leaping to his feet and drawing his gun. “Battle stations, everyone!”

Savita was charging back and forth behind her screen as if there were live humans in there with her (though she kept an eye out for any signs of that screen giving way).

Fatloch ran to the information read-outs Savita was helping to generate. “We do have a breach, and multiple heat sources entering the asteroid. So whoever it is, they aren’t angels.”

“Holy rollers,” said Grimmett, “or maybe Bible-Bashers.”

“Without a doubt,” replied the President. “We are going to be in for a fight if they get down here. Margaret, I want you to stay here at the controls. If the three of us are killed, I hope you will do the right thing.”

Margaret said nothing, and Fatloch did not expect her to, but she took up her position.

“Come with me,” he said to Grimmett and the Marabian.

They headed out of the console room, and began to work their way up to a more defensible position. As they moved, Fatloch quietly outlined his plan. “We are going to have to do this in a basic way, playing on the one weakness these soldiers will have. They will be committed, brave under fire, and have no fear of death, but they will also be inclined to irrationality, slightly fearful of the universe’s horrors, and lack self-reliance.”

“That’s a bit of a generalisation,” said Grimmett as they ran. He wondered how Fatloch was able to talk and exercise at the same time so easily.

“Really?” said Fatloch. “I hope they don’t cry about it as I rip out their guts. Listen carefully. There is no way we will be able to beat them in a flat-out

firefight. We have to take advantage of this asteroid's size and emptiness; because it is our only advantage. Let's make them frightened."

Soon they reached a bottleneck in the array of corridors and tunnels that permeated the Orion. If they blocked this door, and kept it blocked, the control lounge would remain safe, so they could roam free to do their dirty work, while knowing the soldiers would not be able to bypass them.

They picked their first victim, purposely choosing one who had strayed a little from the pack, and after guessing his likely course through the ship they hid themselves in three lockers along his possible route. Soon he approached, coming closest to Fatloch, who gently kicked the door of the locker in which he was standing. The Holy Roller – for that was indeed the group of military churchmen that had been sent to murder them, as Fatloch could tell from the insignia he could see through the locker's grille – stopped and turned. He lifted his rifle to point at the locker, obviously wondering whether to shoot first and risk the ricochet later. Fatloch hoped that Grimmatt and the Marabian, ensconced in lockers on the opposite side of the corridor, were on the ball. This would be a poor way to die.

But then the others went into action, leaping out from their lockers. The Marabian had his knife at the ready, and cut the soldier's throat from side to side, while Grimmatt disarmed him.

Fatloch got out to join them. He gave a nod to indicate his satisfaction with the butchery, and then picked up the man's communicator, passing it to the Marabian, who he then waved into the shadows. He and Grimmatt daubed themselves with blood, and then he used his own knife to strip off the soldier's chest armour and work a few slivers of flesh up from the torso. He pulled at the slivers to create more ragged chunks. The two of them knelt to make a show of eating the body. Grimmatt, though struggling to hide his disgust, was actually able to do a good job of the performance, having read *First the Eyes, Then the Brains* so thoroughly and often.

Fatloch gave the Marabian the signal. Lifting the communicator to his mouth, and flicking it on, he instantly flung it away, screaming. "It's a zombie ship, we have to get off, I can't get away from them..."

The President waited for the first of them to show up, as he dug his hands into the tattered chest of their first victim. He hoped all the soldiers were aware that zombies were impervious to gunfire, or this might get embarrassing.

Their mark arrived, and as he heard the noise of

boots stomping towards the intersection Fatloch lifted his head from his grisly stage meal and groaned at the top of his voice, "Brains..." He drew it out for as long as he could, letting the word degenerate into a blood-curdling howl.

The new soldier turned the corner to see them, and instantly began to back off, holding up his hands and screaming in a way that put Fatloch's noises to shame. He backed off right into the Marabian's waiting hands, and a knife soon put paid to him.

That was how they began, and they continued in an equally bloodthirsty manner, dealing death in a multitude of ways, each of them drawing on the worst depths of Fatloch's imagination. Grimmatt soon lost the stomach for the slaughter. He had liked the idea of a little guerrilla warfare, setting traps and so on, but he was shocked at the things Fatloch was doing. That his President was doing. Sitting in a lavatory, far from the action, but close enough to the bottleneck to be able to step in if necessary, he reflected, as he threw up, that had he known when they were younger just what Fatloch was capable of, he would have done anything to stop him living on Earth, never mind becoming President of it. He was staggered by the contrast between the animal rampaging through the Orion and the responsible, compassionate leader he had voted for so happily.

By the time all the soldiers were dead, the attack fully repulsed, Grimmatt had pulled himself together, and washed himself from head to toe a dozen times over.

The Secret History of Mrs Fatloch

Eighteen months previously, Mrs Fatloch, with Doctor Sykes and her husband, the President of Earth, had travelled to the world of the Baboose for alien assisted fertility treatment.

The voyage had taken place in the utmost secrecy, no one on Earth knowing where they were going, or even that they were going anywhere at all, which Arabella supposed had been both difficult and uniquely possible for her husband, given his position. She had had no contact with the crew of the ship, Fatloch and Sykes bringing her meals to the tiny book-lined room where she had to pass the endless days of travel. Another couple, she had thought sadly, would have spent that time together,

having another few goes at conceiving naturally, for the fun of it for nothing else, but Fatloch did not see the point in that. He had taken part in intercourse on a couple of occasions, presumably to avoid it becoming a matter of distraction to him, but he had insisted upon their use of contraception, to ensure no potential risk-ridden normal pregnancy could get in the way of the Baboose procedure. His cold reasoning had upset her terribly.

She had spent most of the trip in tears.

What happened on that planet of the Baboose was, for many years, a matter of conjecture, since none of the participants were willing to talk. However, in the writing of this book I have had, as previously mentioned, access to the recording chip carried by the President himself for the sake of posterity.

As a result, I have been able to ascertain that the procedure which led to so much devastation was not medical in nature, but sexual. I have paid particular attention to the records of this particular event, because of its historical importance.

Doctor Sykes, to his surprise, was asked to remain on the ship.

"Thank you for preparing the parents," said the Baboose that welcomed them after the ship touched down. He was a serious figure, and accompanied by two larger members of his species. "And bringing them here in a good and healthy condition, but your knowledge of the human anatomy will not now be required until after the procedure is over." He turned to Fatloch and Arabella. "I am sorry to bring guards to meet you, at a time that must be very sensitive to you. I am afraid it was insisted upon by others, who do not necessarily trust those who are less Baboose than ourselves."

It seemed to Arabella that Fatloch did not want to ask any questions, almost as if scared that he might see through a lie, and have to call off the procedure, but as they walked into the Baboose buildings, he could not stop himself from asking about the phrase used by their guide – or doctor – or host? Arabella was not sure which.

"We have a very fluid idea of what it is to be Baboose. It stems from the way we reproduce, if it is not too delicate to bring that up at the moment?"

"Be my guest," said the President, as his wife looked away.

"A mother of the Baboose is able to combine and recombine DNA at will, to create any offspring necessary for the species. It has made us adaptable and resilient, first on our treacherous home planet, and then as we travelled beyond the skies. I, for example, do not resemble in the least the typical inhabitant of

my homeworld. I was produced directly as a result of our initial encounters with your species. The race needed someone who would be able to form the same sounds that you are able to make."

"I feel very privileged," replied the President.

"The result of this genetic diversity is that there is no fixed strain of Baboose, each generation being different, and so it is easy for us to think of another race, such as your own, as being Baboose too. You are simply not quite as Baboose as some others of our species."

"That sounds like a very healthy attitude," said Arabella, speaking for the first time since they had landed. "On our world, even though we are effectively genetically uniform, there are many people who set one type of person above another, over infinitesimal differences."

"There are always those who want to establish certain guidelines, who want to dictate to the mothers what and who they should make," replied the Baboose. "At the moment I am alone of my type, but it is hoped that this experiment will be successful enough to warrant the creation of more like me, to demonstrate that those who seek to restrict our diversity are wrong – it is our very strength."

All around them Arabella and Fatloch could see unmistakable signs of construction and development. However long this base had been established, it was now clearly undergoing rapid expansion. The Baboose obviously hoped that this procedure would lead to others, that other humans needing children would follow. And after what she had heard, Arabella could not help but question their long-term plans – would humanity one day be subsumed into the Baboose, becoming simply one more strain of genetic difference among so many? Was this an invasion by stealth, as had been suggested by so many of the people she had classed as ignorant idiots back on Earth? Back then, she had dismissed many of the ways people had expected the Baboose procedure to be done (the offer to humanity of reproductive aid had after all been public – which had made people all the more suspicious, knowing the problems the President and his wife had had conceiving), but now she began to wonder, and soon she was to have her worst fears confirmed.

After showering, and resting for an hour or two, while they adjusted to the atmosphere and the gravity on the planet, which were not quite Earth standard, though not different enough to cause more than a bit of disorientation, they were taken to a mother of the Baboose. She took them both to her birthing place, where they took part in sexual congress.

First she had encouraged them to begin their coupling in the fashion usual for their species. Even removing her clothes in the presence of this bizarre glutinous creature disturbed Mrs Fatloch more than she dared show. She and the President, once naked, began to perform their procreative act, and, after watching for a little while to see how it went, the Baboose mother had joined them, pulling them into her, pushing herself around them, and between them, and inside them, until finally the act was complete. Mrs Fatloch rolled away, struggling to hide the disgust that wracked her body. Mr Fatloch lay back, and began to whistle.



In the months that followed, for Arabella, this seemed like the most terrible secret of them all. Her husband did not understand. He had been more than happy with the turn of events, regarding it as nothing but a pleasant way to spice up the test tube. He agreed to keep it a secret, of course, for the sake of his public position, but he saw no reason for personal shame.

She had not let him touch her ever again, and had slept alone for the entire period of her pregnancy.

They had quickly returned to Earth, and upon successfully reaching the end of the first trimester the pregnancy had been announced to the world. As the due date approached, she had felt more and more guilty, more sure that people – that her mother – would find out; discover her depravity. She tried to convince herself that it was worth it for the sake of having a child, that anything was worth it. But although Sykes had not said as much, she had become pretty sure that she would not have had a problem conceiving in the normal run of things.

It had been six months into the pregnancy that Fatloch had confirmed that suspicion, and finally let slip the extent of his duplicitousness. Half drunk on whiskey, he had been looking forward to the birth of his child so badly, and feeling so grateful to her for everything, he had sat down on her bed. She had put down the book she was reading (Greenwood's *The Foundling*, she remembered, which had been appropriate), surprised at the unusual level of attention. He had fooled her into loving him once, a long time ago, and love, once felt, is something everyone is eager to feel again, even if the heart has to play a few tricks on the brain and cloud the eye. She had no intention of allowing him into her bed – even when resting there on her own, the memory of the interpenetration of their three bodies made her shiver in horror. But that did not mean she was displeased at his attention.

“You are wonderful!” he had said, reaching out to stroke her hair. “I waited so long for this.”

“I know,” she had said. “It’s been a long journey.”

“Longer than you know,” he had said, stretching his arms out, and spilling some of his drink on her. “There is literally not a single other person on the planet with whom I could have had this lovely child.”

He had closed his eyes for a moment then, and when he opened them to check her reaction to his words she was looking carefully away. But the next day she began to research their problems for herself, even stealing a strand of his hair for analysis.

Soon she knew that the problem was Fatloch's, and once she came to that realisation, the bizarre trajectory of their relationship began to make sense to her: the way his sudden frantic wooing had so quickly led to a proposal of marriage; to the rapid-fire and draining attempts to have children; the way he had seemed to be less and less interested in her after each failed attempt; his refusal to offer her any support. He had thrown himself into his work, if he could even have been said to be incompletely immersed in it already, and she had been left to gather dust, like a Christmas toy which failed to live up to an eager child's anticipation.

Looking back, the certainty grew in her mind that if the problem had been hers, the marriage would have been over at that point. Fatloch would have found another wife. But although she had not known it then, Fatloch had run out of options. He had no reason to leave her because he had nowhere left to go. If she could not give him a child, then no one else would be able to.

It was only after he broached the possibility of the Baboose procedure to her that he had behaved in the

slightest way like a husband again. From that point on he had been driven by a fire that scalded her even as it bore a child towards her arms.

As the baby grew within Arabella's womb, she spent hour after hour watching it on the scanner, just as Margaret did. She tried to find love within herself for the tiny being she saw growing within her, but something stifled it from the very beginning – guilt.

There had been no tendency to religiosity in her family, no brothers or sisters or mad uncles who had run off to join the church worlds, but the guilt festered so hard within her that she could not believe others could not see it burning upon her face. She was afraid to look anyone in the eye, from Margaret to her mother, for fear of what they might see in her.

From there it was a small step to believing that if other humans could not see her guilt upon her face, then the gaze she felt upon her must be that of someone unseen, an invisible judge.

Of course she did not speak to her husband about it. By the letter of the law he would have been forced to have her examined by a doctor, and she did not want to add another crime to his list on her account.

There were no churches to go to on her planet, of course, and no synagogues, mosques or temples. It was not because it was illegal – there was simply no one who wanted to build them. People who found religion stirring within themselves faced no imposition or imprisonment or torture on Earth, simply ridicule, astonishment and in the most extreme cases medical treatment. Most chose themselves to head for the Religizone worlds, where they might live out their lives under whichever God they chose. Most left... she had put that thought out of her mind the first time it came, but later it returned, again and again, more insistently each time.

Her personal library held many of Earth's great works of literature – the plays of William Shakespeare, the novels of Alec Abernathy, the *Odyssey* of Homer, and so on, and of course as a corollary of that it contained the great works of religion, without which so much of that planet's literature would be nigh unintelligible, so deeply ingrained had been the supernatural mindset during the first millennia of history.

She began to read the Bible, right from the beginning, and although much of it was patently silly, parts of it spoke to her. Who can say, from our more civilised vantage point, why people in those days still found it necessary to turn to the supernatural to help with their personal crises, but that was what Arabella Fatloch did. Perhaps we can speculate that in creating for herself a belief in a god of judgment, she was

externalising feelings that she was unable to express in any other way, effectively creating an alter ego to take on both the burden of guilt (for if there was a supernatural controller of mankind's affairs he would have to take ultimate responsibility for our misdeeds) and of judgment.

During the final months of her pregnancy, she began to save scraps of money, as discovered by Maestri. She planned to leave as soon as possible after the baby was born. She would leave Fatloch with the child he was so desperate for, and melt into the background herself, never to be seen again, secluded in the contemplation of God to atone for her sins, like Guinevere at the close of the legends of King Arthur.

When the baby disappeared she almost felt it a reasonable retribution for what they had done.

Eventually she left and went first to the Bandits' Planet, in a mercenary ship, never realising it was the same that carried her daughter, and from there took a ship on to Religius, and that was how she came to be on that planet when her husband destroyed it.

The Marabian's Story

All of them were in the Orion lounge, watching Savita go about her work. In theory the Orion was ready for action, but Fatloch had commanded her, via the computer, to double check everything. As she completed each task a slice of what looked like raw human slid down through her feeding tube. She gobbled each greedily, waited to see if there was more to come, then moved on to the next task, as per her training.

"Look," said the Marabian, "I really don't think that destroying Religius is a good idea."

"He's right," said Grimmett. "It won't bring your daughter back, if something bad has happened to her. In fact, there is every reason to think that she might still be alive down there."

Fatloch sighed. "It is easy for the two of you to say that. This is all abstract for you. Neither one of you has any notion of what I am going through. And anyway, I'm only threatening them. If they hand her over, the Orion goes back into deep space storage and we can all go back to our sleepy little lives."

"That isn't so," said the Marabian. "Let me tell you the truth about my life. No one else has ever heard this story, because I never thought there was any point. This may come as a surprise, but I really

am an alien, the last of a race of Moon-men destroyed centuries ago.”

He had managed to surprise everyone, especially Fatloch, who had known him the longest. “What? You are an alien – I thought there were no other aliens except the Baboose?”

“Well, there aren’t. I’m the exception that proves the rule. My race, as is the doom of all races, ended. I managed to survive. We do not really age. Conditions on the moon never having encouraged a proliferation of life, those life forms which did develop tended to reproduce rarely, and live long.”

“What happened to your people?” Margaret for once found herself able to speak to the Marabian without retching.

“We had been living safely on the moon for long, long centuries. You might say that we had dodged evolution’s bullet, but eventually we were discovered, as the accidental result of a visitor from your own world, and our world came to an end. I was on Pluto at the time, in the *Badower*, doing some research, and when I returned I found my world in ashes.”

Something was tickling at the back of Grimmett’s head. “What was the name of your home on the moon?”

The Marabian laughed. “You are thinking of the novel *Professor Challenger in Space*, aren’t you?”

“Did you write it?”

“I had little to do on Earth. I spent a century moping around, hiding out in jungles and arctic areas. At the end of the twentieth century I began to write novels to pass the time, and yes, one of those novels did provide a fictionalised account of what had happened to my species. Much of the book is nonsense, of course, and was not meant literally. In it I wrote that our species had been hiding on the moon, which was true, but we had never lived anywhere else, and what we were hiding from was no alien marauder but our own violent selves. We destroyed ourselves, turning the remnants of an ancient civilisation into nothing but crumbling rock and dust. The visitor from another world brought war back from your world to ours.”

“And was it really Professor Challenger?” asked Grimmett. “Surely he was just a fictional character?”

The Marabian answered in an unusually serious tone, “Is there such a thing as *just* a fictional character? Characters in books can have more effect than real people, you must know that. The legends that grow up around actual people last far longer than the true stories.” He shook his head, as if to shake out the melancholy. “For example, did any of you ever hear

the story of Chuck Berry eating a sandwich before a show?”

“I would rather not,” said Fatloch. “Listen, I genuinely feel sorry for you. Well, not in as much as you survived, though that must have been hard, to live on for so long alone, but rather in that your species died in such terrible circumstances. But that is not the same as what will happen here. I have no intention of using this weapon unless they do not hand over my daughter. And even if they do not, I will think long and hard about it.”

“But that is it,” cried the Marabian, slapping his hands on a bulkhead. “It isn’t enough to say that such a weapon will only be used as a last resort. Even bringing it to the table creates a climate that can only lead to mutual destruction. Can you not see that?”

Fatloch shrugged. “You knew the odds that we would end up in a situation like this at some point. Why have you suddenly turned into such a lily-livered coward?”

“It isn’t cowardice, and you know it. We have known each other a very long time, Fatloch. Do you two know just how far back our history goes?”

He told them, not everything, not the gory details, but enough to demonstrate that all in all, he probably knew Fatloch as well as either of them.

He had met Fatloch (though of course he was not going by that name then – the Marabian declined to give either his real name, or his street name, because he had no wish to be linked as an accomplice to any of the crimes with regard to which the owner of those names was being sought), when he was just a boy, a boy who had been begging on the streets at that time, at least apparently. He had actually been spying for a criminal organisation, monitoring the movements of police, marks and other gangs. The Marabian had been sent to consider him for a promotion.

“We had ended up working together on some of the greatest crimes of the century! We both built up enough cash to do exactly what we wanted for the rest of our lives. I spent twenty years drinking and whoring myself silly, knowing all the while that my ship was safe and sound in spacedock, and that my anonymity was assured. He used the money to go honest, get a job, get into politics and buy the wife he needed.”

“I had no idea,” said Margaret.

Grimmett agreed. “I think we may have to check some DNA against a few old files when we get back to Earth.”

“This does not change anything,” said Fatloch. “Margaret and Grimmett have seen for themselves over the last six months that I am no saint. They saw

what I did on the Bandits' Planet to get what I needed. And, anyway, to get back to the point, I told you, I have no intention of using it. I am not going to destroy a world."

The Marabian started to speak again, to try a new tack, but he saw something in Fatloch's eyes that told him he was wasting his time. "I'm sorry," he said at last, "I wish I could believe you."

He pulled out his gun and fired, but the bullet ricocheted from Fatloch's chest, making a tiny hole in the glass and striking Savita in the head. She lifted a hand, gouged it out, and looked at them in mute sadness. Then, spotting the hole, she dived for it, hoping to force her way through to the fresh meat on that side, but the computer was able to sense her intentions, and she was brought to the ground by a blast of laser fire, while a maintenance robot came out to patch the hole.

The Marabian was cursing his luck, and trying to decide whether it would be worth firing again. Grimmatt and Margaret were yelling, though they hardly knew what.

"The lord of crime's personal force shield," said Fatloch, quietly, almost apologetically, and his voice broke through all the noise effortlessly. "I'm sorry about this, really I am, old friend, but I think that eventually you would find a way to circumvent it."

Fatloch took a small laser weapon from a pouch on his thigh and shot the Marabian in the face before any of the others could react.



The body of the Moon-man was taken down and frozen in a hold. As Fatloch shut the door on his former friend, he could not quite put into words why he did not just throw it out of an airlock. Perhaps, he thought, he wanted evidence against himself in the event that he did not find his daughter and he allowed the whole thing to come to trial.

In that regard he was different from his wife – he saw judgment as an inevitable administrative duty, and one with which he would comply as a good citizen where it suited him, whereas she imbued it with an etheric supernatural quality, as if it was something that existed apart from humanity.

In this day and age we might have an opinion as to which of them was right and which was wrong, but we then have to consider also which of them com-

mitted the greater evils, and wonder whether the two things have any connection.

Until Margaret found a use for it, the body stayed in cold storage.

Deeds in the Night

Inspector Barry Grimmatt and Margaret awoke the next day to discover that Fatloch had destroyed the planet Religius while they were sleeping.

That was not the first thing Margaret discovered that day.

However, Grimmatt was up first. Waking early in his quarters after a troubled sleep, he had spent an hour or two reading before finally getting out of bed. He made himself a cup of tea and then, when he found no one else in the *Badower* control room, he headed down through the airlocked tunnel to the Orion. (Perhaps he would have been happy with his own company were it not for the eeriness of expecting the Marabian to slouch in, making his louche comments.)

Margaret, on the other hand, slept reasonably well. She had held no love for the Marabian, and though shocked at the manner of his death, it had not been a surprise. What's more, she he was a sleazebag, and she knew all about his habit of pretending to be a troll to frighten children, which made her think that no punishment was too severe.

She set that thought aside upon waking up, as one that was too callous for her conscious self to accept as its own. She showered and dressed quickly and efficiently, and made herself some tea, trying not to think too hard about the alien body in the cold storage, and failing. They did not know anything about the Marabian's physiology. His blood had not been red, which seemed to show how different he was, but she assumed he was utterly dead. She had read stories where the individual cells of an alien life form possessed some kind of life of their own, but she dismissed that as far-fetched – and he was frozen anyway, so there was no need to worry.

She too went up to the control room, where she noticed, where Grimmatt had not, since he had not familiarised himself with the operations of the ship, that a message had been received the previous night. She assumed that meant Fatloch had not returned from the Orion, and hoped that he had managed to get some sleep, regardless of the zombie at work so near by. He had had a very stressful year, and today

might be the most stressful yet. She did not want him making any big decisions after a sleepless night.

She decided to check the message. It should have been relayed to the Orion, but that it was still marked unread seemed to say it had not been. She brought it up onto the main screen, and spilt much of her tea.

It was a message from Arabella Fatloch.

Margaret put her tea down and wiped up as best she could in the few seconds she allowed for it. She started the message playing.

Mrs Fatloch was wearing very simple unadorned clothes, and her once ornate and sculpted hair was tied back in a straightforward pony-tail. Margaret scolded herself for thinking it, but the President's wife was most recognisable by the dark rings around her tired eyes and the worried creases on her forehead.

"Bardello," she began, blinking away the last traces of the tears she had obviously shed, "I heard that you have been asking about our baby. I am really sorry for everything that has happened, but you have to know that it was not my fault, and it was not the fault of the Theocracy of the Religizone either. But I should start my explanation at the beginning, so that what comes at the end makes at least a minimum of sense, if that is at all possible."

She paused, and took a deep breath, then talked about how her religious feelings had developed during the course of the pregnancy.

"The disappearance of the baby took me by as much surprise as it did you. But once I had recovered from the emergency surgery I began to see it as a sign, that what we had done was beyond the pale. I got together enough money and bought my way off Earth, hoping that you would just forget about me. From the Bandits' Planet I was able to find transport to Mary, one of the outer planets of the Religizone. I took religious orders there, in anonymity, but after speaking to my spiritual adviser, I realised how unfair it was of me to hide among the flock without their knowledge, when I knew a wolf might well be following me. I revealed who I was to Mary's most senior Theocrat, and found myself put onto the next ship to Religius."

She had been taken before the Theocrats, the ultimate power of the Religizone, the council made up of the spiritual leaders of each of the great religions. Once, such leaders would have been bitter enemies, sending their followers into war with each other, and they still did that from time to time, but in general they got along well, having realised that they agreed on more than they disagreed. After all, each had at some point in his life decided to step over that chasm

that separated the ordinary logical thoughts of men from the religious, taking the decision to believe in a faith, a book, a leader, a god, when there was absolutely no rational reason to, other than the fact that others before them had done the same. It was that step that would have had each referred to a doctor had they still lived on Earth, but living in the Religizone, where everyone had made that step, and moved on from it, accepting it as the basis for their lives, and attempting to build rational structures upon those shaky foundations, their wisdom and sagacity were unparalleled.

All of the Theocrats were there, which showed how seriously they were taking the matter. They revealed to her that Religizone authorities had apprehended, weeks before, a group of extremists who had been found to have abducted her daughter, and now they had no idea what to do with the girl. They knew the trail would inevitably lead Earth's authorities to the Religizone, and they knew what the consequences of that might be. There was every reason for Fatloch to blame them for the kidnapping, since they had the baby in their custody, and since there were so many motives that could be attributed to them. It might have been to strike at the President, wounding the democratic empire, or to hold Earth to ransom. Neither of those motives were truly rational, but then no one would expect that of them anyway.

"I told them then how Taio had been conceived, which they had been entirely ignorant of until that point. I told them that my guilt over that had been one of my reasons for taking orders. But that made it even worse for them – it made their motivation for kidnapping Taio even stronger. They had done it because she was an abomination, an evil seed, that had to be destroyed."

The Theocrats were shaken to their core – they had no wish to fight Earth, despite some of their public pronouncements, and the likelihood of being blamed for a kidnapping such as this would thoroughly shame both them and their followers. Each took a turn to pray, then asked Arabella Fatloch for guidance. She asked if she could see her daughter. The Theocrats sent for her.

"At that point, you can only imagine how I felt at the chance to see our daughter in the flesh, for the very first time, but I knew what I had to do. Be patient: soon, if you hear me out, you will see her too."

Taio was brought to meet her mother. The lady who had been caring for the girl showed Arabella how to hold her, and for the first time she saw her daughter.

"She was more beautiful than I could ever have imagined. There was no trace of the alien intervention in her face or body whatsoever. She had sweet wispy brown hair that tickled as it touched my face, a delicate little nose, that turned up a bit at the end, and a way of screwing up her face to laugh that only worked because her teeth had not yet grown."

Soon everyone in the room had fallen entirely in love with her. The Theocrats were cooing as loudly as anyone – being religious did not stop them from loving babies, of course. After all, the precepts of their various faiths only forbade about half of them from having babies of their own.

"She was so lovely that I began to wonder whether my plans had been good ones. But by that point you were already on our trail, back on the Bandits' Planet, and I knew that our course was set."

She had decided to take Taio back to the Baboose before coming back to seclude herself on Religius. She had thought that such an abomination, as she had come to see her daughter over the last year and a half, despite her pretty brown eyes, had to be returned to its creators, and not left to create inevitable trouble on the human worlds.

The Baboose had been shocked to have their gift returned, and had struggled to understand her motives. But she had told them to expect a visit from her husband, and they had agreed to care for the child till he arrived.

"Look at the damage already wreaked by her influence," she said. "I know what happened on the Bandits' Planet after I left, and what you did there. A trail of refugees preceded you. Now please leave us in peace – go to your daughter, and leave us here. If you must have revenge, though it makes me sick to say it, the Theocrats are willing to hand the kidnapers over to you, as long as you do not tell anyone. So you have no reason to hurt us here, or to see me again – so, for the last time, this is goodbye."

The message ended.

Margaret sat, stunned, for a moment, and then finished her tea, forwarded the message to the Orion, and hurried down through the airlock tunnel to join the others in the lounge.

"Listen," she called excitedly as she entered the room, "it worked! Arabella is on Religius, and she's told us where to find Taio!"

Grimmett was slumped on a couch, dumbly watching Savita go back and forth about her business, while Fatloch sat at a desk, resting his head upon his chin.

Seeing her come in, and hearing her words, Fatloch raised an eyebrow. "How ironic," he said.

"What do you mean?" asked Margaret.

"He means it is too late," replied Grimmett, stirring sluggishly. "He destroyed Religius last night, while we were sleeping."

A Corpse for the Creature

Margaret left the room silently and went to the store-room where they had frozen the body of the Marabian. She removed it from the freezer and looked at it with a disgust that did not even come close to the disgust she felt for herself at that point. How could she have let this happen? How could she possibly have believed it would not happen? Some ridiculous faith in human decency had sustained her faith in the former President, but she had read the police's psychiatric reports on him: she had known exactly what he was: a high-functioning psychopath.

"You, my lecherous friend," she said to the slowly melting and decomposing body, "are finally going to be of some use."

She wondered whether she should treat him with more respect – after all, he had been the only one to stand up to Fatloch, though it had cost him his life. She felt sure that Grimmett would have done no less at the crucial moment, if he had not been sleeping. But when the Marabian attacked, of course, no one else had really believed the former President would actually go through with his threat. They should have listened – the Marabian had known him longer than any of them. They had known each other when Fatloch was but a boy – the Marabian had seen first hand what he was willing to do when he was desperate to get something. None of the rest of them had ever seen Fatloch truly desperate – merely perturbed, or annoyed, whereas the Marabian had seen him ready to kill for food.

She stared at the ghastly remains of the Marabian's face, the inch-wide hole punched through by Fatloch's weapon thick with matted hair and green blood. "However you lived, Marabian, you get to be a hero now."

She hefted the body onto a shoulder and took it to the engine room, the warmest place on the *Badower*. After taking a nap in her quarters for a couple of hours, she returned to find the body fully defrosted, and even a little crispy.

She found a zippable refuse sack to put it in, put

the sack on a cart and began to head for the *Badower's* exit. Her heart sank to find Grimmatt waiting for her at the exit.

"Hello, Margaret," he said, "I haven't been able to find you all day. We need you in there – we need a voice of reason. Fatloch is ready to wage war on the whole galaxy, and the next one along if need be."

She sat back on the cart, ignoring the squelch beneath her buttocks. "I needed some time to think about what had happened. I spent some time alone on the ship. I had a nap. Now I'm taking some meat for Savita – it was going off anyway after the power cut, and letting her eat it is probably as good a means of disposal as any."

She wondered whether she could trust him enough to reveal her plan. There was probably no reason not to believe he would side with her, but she felt so tired, and to convince him, she would first have to convince herself. She was trying to push ahead without giving it enough thought for objections to arise.

"Can't you talk sense into him? He's asleep in his quarters right now, but you have to be there when he wakes," implored the detective. "He has to stop here. We have almost found the girl."

"And is that all you care about? Finding the girl? Your precious case? Do you even realise that we just destroyed a planet to help you solve that case?" She stepped towards him with each question, hoping to drive him off.

But Grimmatt stepped towards her instead. "I know," he said. "I can't believe what happened. I should arrest him..."

She took few steps away from him and began to push the cart again. "Frightened?" she asked.

"You know it isn't that. We have to see this through to the end, and get his daughter back. After that I think he will turn himself in."

"You have not got to know him very well, this last year, have you? He will not spend a second behind bars if it means being separated from his daughter. And with him wearing that force shield, there is not a thing you will be able to do to stop him. Now leave me alone, the zombie is probably getting hungry."

Grimatt shrugged and went away, and she continued down through the airlock tunnel, pulling her macabre parcel.

On board the Orion once again, she used the computer to find out the procedure for refreshing Savita's food supply. Minutes later she had convinced the computer that the existing food had gone bad, and had to be ejected into space. Minutes after that, she had fed the Marabian into the apparatus. She moni-

tored the body's progress as it was ground and minced and began to trickle into Savita's enclosure.

The girl approached the food slowly, put off by the colour, but then turned with her ruined eyes to look at Margaret, who approached the glass. Savita's eyes narrowed, and she slapped the glass hard at the point where the Marabian's bullet had passed through, testing its strength a final time, making Margaret jump even though she had totally expected it.

She felt so sorry for this poor girl, though she knew nothing of her really. Presumably she was the same Savita who appeared in *First the Eyes, Then the Brains*, but that meant nothing, since the author of that novel's version of life through the eyes of a zombie could have no foundation in reality – unless he had found some way to communicate with the living dead? Perhaps it had been a part of preparing the zombies for the current work in which they were employed. Perhaps those words she had read really were the thoughts that this ruined girl had had a thousand years ago.

Did Savita come to an understanding of what Margaret was doing, or did she just become too hungry to care? Either way, she went to the green food and began to push it greedily into a gaping hole that had once been shaped like a mouth. If she noticed what must have been the foul taste of the Moon-man's alien biology, it did not slow her feeding.

Soon, though, the zombie's movements came to a stop, and she, or it, began to slump to the ground, clutching its stomach, trying to hold it together as it struggled to contain what Margaret had brought to the Orion.

Thus she brought Savita's miserable life finally to an end, by allowing her to eat what was to human biology (even the only formerly human biology of a zombie) poisonous alien meat, possibly earning for a few seconds the gratitude of that dread remnant of a girl.

She returned to the *Badower*, going straight to the control room to tell the others what she had done.

"Hello," said Margaret, upon entering the control room. Grimmatt was there, drinking tea, and so was Fatloch, as she had hoped. He was drinking his own cup of tea, having evidently just got out of bed.

"Good morning, Margaret," he said. "How are things on the Orion?"

"Fine," she said, sitting down to face him. "I have just put an end to the life, such as it was, of that poor girl Savita. As I understand it, that puts the Orion's weapons capability out of order, since it is based on zombie technology. Without a zombie around, it just

won't work."

Fatloch barely reacted. "I thought you might do something like that. It seems reasonable in the circumstances. I hope I slept long enough for you to do it without too much haste?"

"Yes, you did, sir."

Grimmett was amazed, though pleased, at what he was hearing. "I am glad you are taking it so well, Fatloch."

"It does not really affect my plans. I know where my daughter is, and I do not need weapons, or your help, to get her back. Though the weaponry on the Orion was of zombie manufacture, the propulsion technology was made by normal human beings, and will still work. We can split up, Margaret, if you want. One of us can take the *Badower*, and one the Orion."

"That is what I want, Mr President. It is in my mind to take the Orion. It may not be able to do any damage, but its intimidatory effect may be useful to me in what I do next."

She spoke for a moment about her plans, talking as much for Grimmett's benefit as for Fatloch's, about how she would be returning to the Bandits' Planet, to try and do some good there, to help the people rebuild. She had to atone for the events in which she had been complicit.

She would park the Orion nearby, though not near enough to attract the attention of any remaining Earth forces, in case she ever needed to reassert her authority, and use the Holy Rollers' ship to reach the surface.

Her first thought, she explained, had been to kill Fatloch, but she reconsidered, having made a vow to help him find his daughter. He had almost reached her, after all. But if she met him again, she promised, her conscience would not balk a second time.

Grimmett decided to go with her.

As they said farewell, Fatloch thanked Margaret for what she had done, both that day and in the past.

"I am glad you did it. If I had had that power in my hands for much longer I do not know what would have happened..."

"Unfortunately, sir," replied Margaret, "we do know, because it already happened."

The two of them left to the Orion, and after the airlock tunnel was withdrawn back into the body of the *Badower* the ship took off, Fatloch going on the last leg of his journey alone.

Margaret and Grimmett did reach the Bandits' Planet, where they worked hard for many, many years to make a difference. Enough vestiges of their

former authority remained, especially when coupled with the threat of the Orion, to enable them to take a measure of control quite quickly. Despite their efforts, the criminals remained criminals, the library Grimmett founded with the books he had rescued from Arabella Fatloch's burning rooms being pilfered on a daily basis, for example. But in a way, that was sort of the point of what they were doing, and the difficulty of the work they were engaged in only made it easier to forget, for a few moments here and there, the terrible event they had been a part of.

Farewells

As he passed through space on his way to the planet of the Baboose, Fatloch was conflicted. He was of course anxious to see his daughter for the very first time, but he did not know if he could face her, given what he had done. He could barely believe it himself. Somehow, during the long night, sitting up with only a zombie for company, he had become despondent and embittered, and had managed to convince himself that if the Theocrats were refusing to hand over his daughter, despite what he was threatening them with, they must have already killed her in fear of retribution. He tried to console himself with what he had said to the Marabian – back before he had killed his oldest friend, that is – about encouraging people to believe ridiculous things – that you have to take responsibility for the ridiculous consequences when they act on those beliefs – but the logic did nothing for his conscience. The Theocrats might have been bumbling idiots, but they had not behaved maliciously. Once the dust had settled they would probably have let him know about his daughter's location; they could never have expected him to take the course he did.

The knowledge that the original kidnappers had met their deaths during his attack gave him a little pleasure – that had been his original goal, after all, given that until his inventive interrogations on the Bandits' Planet he had not actually known his daughter was still alive. Even so, their deaths had been inconsequential, accidental. They had done all this to him and escaped from their lives without seeing him face to face. If they had met in person, it would only have been face to face for a short period of time. He would have plucked out their eyeballs, ripped off their lips, gashed their cheeks... ah, but it was too late now. They had been lucky.

He wondered why he felt like that – why dream of torture when he could be dreaming of his daughter? He felt sorry for himself, and for those he had dragged through all this.

He reached the planet of the Baboose in a matter of days. Much of the time in transit was spent thinking events over, trying to come to terms with it, trying to justify his continued existence. But there were more important things to do. He used the onboard library of electronic books to prepare himself for meeting Taio. She would be about one year old, so he skipped the first few chapters of every baby book, concentrating on the pages most relevant to his child's current development. She would probably have learnt to stand on her own by now, and would most likely just be learning how to get to her feet without assistance. If she had been on Earth, she would be moving from formula or breast milk to cow's milk now – though who knew what the Baboose would be feeding her! She would be pointing at things to elicit names and descriptions, and trying to learn lots of new sounds. Her legs, proportionally, would be much longer than at birth, starting to approach half her total height. If she had known them, she would probably be able to say Mummy or Daddy by now.

It all upset him very much, and at times it almost made him glad for what he had done. To have taken that first year away from a parent, on a political or religious whim, should lead to punishment. But then he thought about all the children who had lived on Religius, and all the children who had had parents on Religius, and he considered whether it would just be best to open the airlock.

Arriving at the planet to which the Baboose had formerly welcomed him, Fatloch was surprised to see another ship, of unfamiliar design, on the landing pad. It did not look like a ship from Earth or the Religizone, so he concluded it must be the Baboose's own. Although his heart was not really in it, he instructed the *Badower* to take pictures and such scans as it could get away with. There might be a lot of money to be made later on from those. He might not particularly care at the moment, but he knew enough of himself to believe that his crasser desires would not lie dormant forever.

He left the ship, to be met by the same Baboose who had first welcomed him here, two years ago, the one specially designed to communicate with humans. This time, though, he was alone.

"Hello," said Fatloch. "I have come to collect my daughter."

"She is waiting for you inside – follow me."

The Baboose turned to go without another word, and Fatloch followed him. The differences from last time were striking. All construction had ended, leaving buildings unfinished, and as they walked he saw the Baboose removing equipment, ferrying it out to their ship. He thought of asking what was happening, but his guide walked too intently, making it plain that he was not there for small talk.

They reached a small room, this one still fully furnished, and brightly coloured, and full of what looked like strange and wonderful toys. There was a cot in one corner, and a Baboose sitting on the floor, playing with a baby girl.

Fatloch did not recognise her, so his reaction was not instant. But when it came, it was like a punch in the stomach.

It was his daughter.

He had reached her. After a year of fighting, horror and destruction he had finally reached her.

She looked up as he entered the room, and was alarmed by this stranger, huddling close to the Baboose who sat with her.

"There, there," said the sitting Baboose, "it is alright. That is your dad – your daddy."

Fatloch was surprised to hear another Baboose speaking English. He turned to his guide, "So the experiment was a success? They created another human-compatible Baboose?"

"I am afraid the experiment was not a success," said the Baboose, though not sadly. "This Baboose was produced in response to the needs of your daughter. There shall be no more like us."

"Is that why everyone is packing up?" asked Fatloch, glancing at the little girl playing on the floor. She had begun to give him the odd shy glance. Though he knew it was important to ask the Baboose these questions, he was also stalling for time – he was so nervous about approaching the girl, and anyway, all of the books agreed that it was best to give children of this age plenty of time to get used to strangers – he felt his fists clenching as he thought the word – before forcing them into their company.

"The Baboose are leaving this galaxy forever. Our experiment has been a failure, a grave error of judgment."

"What?" exclaimed the former President. "It has been a great success – just look at the little girl. She is beautiful." He paused to look at her. She really was beautiful. She took after her mother, he realised, and that thought surprised him, because he had never really looked at Arabella in that way. She had been a means to that end, and now he had reached that end, she was no longer there. Perhaps if she had been,

they might have been happy now. He might have seen her for the glorious and strong woman she was, rather than a slightly obdurate test subject. But of course it was too late for that.

"The girl was not the experiment," said the Baboose. "I thought I made that clear when we first met. The experiment was humanity. And look at your actions over the last year."

Fatloch was shocked. "You have been watching me?"

"Your adventures, if you would like me to call them that, have been the talk of your worlds. We know what you did to get here. And we want nothing to do with a species that could produce such brutes."

There was nothing to say to that. It was undeniable: Fatloch felt the same way. He thought of all the daughters that had died to bring him to this room, to bring him to his daughter, and he could not say anything to persuade them to stay. This time the crimes had been his, but he knew that there would always be



others as ready as he to torture, kill and destroy to reach their goals.

"So if you are leaving, can I ask what your motives were – why did you come to us at all? Why did you want to do this?"

Now the Baboose looked sad. Fatloch wondered whether that was an appropriate description of an alien physiognomy that bore so little resemblance to his own, but this Baboose had after all been designed to communicate with humans, and given the proportion of human communication that was non-verbal he felt confident in thinking: he is sad.

"The universe is a vast place, and so far as we have travelled, very empty. We have been very, very lonely. Until we met humans, our philosophers and scientist debated these questions endlessly: Why are we alone? Why do we find no other spacefaring civilisations? If we met another species, what could we do to encourage its survival? Because we had come to the conclusion that what had kept the Baboose alive through long millennia of space travel was our adaptability; that even if other life forms managed to achieve a certain level of consciousness, of technology, upon reaching space the challenges, the dangers became too great, and so one civilisation after another would splutter out. And we knew this to be true, because we had found their remains. Imagine that, Mr President, searching the universe for friends, and finding one burnt out planet after another.

"But we did not give up hope – we knew that just as those other firefly civilisations had leapt up into space before dying, there would be others in the future, and if we could catch that firefly before it fell, perhaps we could help it to fly a little longer.

"And then we met you humans for the first time – naturally, you shot at us, you stole from us, you tried to exploit us. But we considered those the actions of an immature race, which is exactly what you are, of course. We thought we must try, or face being alone forever, since the chances of us finding another spark in the galaxy before ours, too, went out, were so tiny as to make it not worth the effort of searching any more.

"So what better way, we thought, to make friends, than to help the human species propagate. That was our only motive, literally to make friends. We knew what your species was like – the hostility with which any open displays of friendship would be met – and so we held back, waiting for you to come to us, and you did.

"We hoped that one day, after many generations of infertile couples had been able to have children thanks to our methods, the initial hostility to our

presence in this galaxy would have declined; that one day, far in the future, we would be able to broach with you the benefits of genetic diversification; that we would be able to pass on to your race the gift that has kept our race alive long enough to meet another civilisation; that you, one day, in your turn, would meet another civilisation too, and pass on to them the gift we gave to you.”

“And now?” asked Fatloch.

“And now: we have seen that no friends are better than bad friends. We fear that in destroying yourselves you might destroy the Baboose, and so we will stay away from humanity from now on. No human will ever encounter our species again.”

Fatloch could not blame them. “I am sorry to have been the cause of all this. I just wanted my daughter back.”

“You shall have her,” said the Baboose. “We hold you no ill will. Your actions were inevitable; your worlds ready to destroy themselves; humans a lost cause. But the experiment was not a total loss for us. The human genetic material which we have collected will add to the diversity of the Baboose, should we require it. Perhaps you can take some comfort in that: although your race will inevitably die, whether in a year, or a hundred years, or a thousand – but not more than a thousand, I think – some portion of your DNA will live on in our genetic library, ready to be used when needed.”

Returning Home, Looking for Fireflies

There was nothing more to be said, so Fatloch went to his daughter and picked her up, letting her rest her weight upon his hip. She was everything he could have hoped for, in that he finally had a child in his arms, but there was so much to her beyond what he had expected. She had bright piercing eyes, that interrogated him with a stare, and though it seemed she could not yet speak any words, having never had a reason to learn Mummy or Daddy, her mouth articulated one funny little grunt or expostulation after another.

“Hello, Taio,” he said. “How are you?”

She did not respond, so he stuck out his tongue and blew a raspberry. She laughed, a funny gurgling natural laugh, which he resolved to emulate from then on.

He gave her belly a little tickle, and she laughed again. For a moment he forgot that he had doomed her entire species to destruction, and it was not too difficult for him to do that, because all humans live in the knowledge of their death, and that knowledge reigns supreme over pretty much everything else, and the idea that the people of Earth would no longer exist a few centuries from now meant nothing to him with a baby sitting on his hip.

So, when all was done, Bardello Fatloch and his little baby daughter, Taio, returned to Earth. The weight of all he had done, everything that he was responsible for, was heavy on his shoulders, but he hoped that back home they would be able to find a little happiness together, perhaps a quiet spot where she could spend her childhood, blissful in her ignorance of her father’s crimes. Later he would tell her the truth – perhaps after she had committed a few crimes of her own, he joked to himself, so that she would not have the moral high ground.

On the way back he monitored communications, watching the news whenever he could find a transmission, using the reports as a guide to which areas of space he should avoid. Much of the galaxy was at war, at least during the first few weeks of their voyage home. Since he had not officially been removed from office by the time of his attack on Religius, the surviving, lower-level, Theocrats had no option but to take his actions as a declaration of war. The border between Earth and the Religizone had erupted in flames, but with their home planet gone, the Religizone attack soon fizzled out, leaving Earth forces with ample justification to move in and occupy any worlds with particularly attractive natural resources. The remaining Religizone worlds regrouped behind their new borders, and began to plot revenge.

Upon reaching Earth, Fatloch landed the *Badower* at the same spaceport from which they had set off, one year ago. Then he had had friends with him, but now he was alone, save for Taio. He hoped that Margaret and Grimmett would be successful in their efforts on the Bandits’ Planet, and silently apologised to the Marabian for having shot him. It had seemed like the rational thing to do at the time, but now he wondered when last he had been rational at all.

Upon leaving the ship, he was amazed to find himself welcomed by a cheering crowd, kept out of the spaceport by a ring of police officers. Ironically, he thought, members of the same police force that a few months earlier had been trying to kill him on the Bandits’ Planet.

Godal and Maestri were waiting to escort him.

Both had extremely sour expressions, suggesting that they too were aware of the irony of the situation.

"We are here," said Maestri, trying hard to make herself heard over the cheers of the people ringing the spaceport, "to take you to your parade."

Fatloch was having a difficult time keeping Taio happy. All the cheering was a bit overwhelming to her. He let her snuggle under his arm. "My parade? Let me guess, they looked at my record in office, and started to appreciate all I did – the human rights reforms, the equal pay legislation, establishing the international health service, ending world hunger?"

"The people of Earth have been watching everything that happened through the eyes of Inspector Barry Grimmett," replied Godal. "You are a hero to them. You cleaned up the Bandits' Planet, single-handedly won a war against the Religizone, and word has already reached us, chased the Baboose out of our galaxy. Well done, Mr President."

Fatloch shook his head. "You mean I betrayed a whole world of people for the sake of a quick getaway, started an unnecessary war and murdered a planet of peaceniks, and lost humans their only friends in the universe, dooming us all to inevitable destruction?"

"That is exactly what I mean, sir," replied Godal, "but the people do not see it that way. You have made great television. When they haven't been watching Grimmett's photography directly, they have been watching discussion of it on the news, dramatic reconstructions, fictionalised accounts and even a soap opera based around your kingdom on the Bandits' Planet. The people love you, sir, and they are glad to have you back."

Fatloch went with them, mainly because whether he wanted to be there or not, he needed to restock on supplies, but it was only a matter of days before he left in disgust. The people of Earth had learnt nothing from his mistakes, could see nothing of his terrible guilt. They were proud of him where they should be ashamed. They would have made him President for life if he had wanted.

He stocked the *Badower* with baby food and took off in the middle of the night. He circled the Earth a few times before deciding on a direction. He headed away from Earth, away from the human worlds, and within a few weeks he and Taio were in uncharted territory. Whether they wanted him to or not, he had to fulfil his duty to the people of Earth, and that meant he had to find them some new friends in this cold, hard galaxy.

He sat Taio on his lap, and looked in her eyes.

When she was born, he knew, they would have been blue, like the eyes of every new-born baby, but he had never seen her with blue eyes. He had not been able to hold her after she was born, to give her a little kiss as her mother held her for the first time. He had not been able to watch her first soundless cries.

Now he would get to spend all the time he wanted, while knowing always that some day he would have to tell her what had happened to her mother, that he had killed her, that he had destroyed the entire planet on which she had been hiding from him, that he had killed everyone who stood in the way of this moment. The moment should have turned to dust, but it did not: he was holding his daughter, and she was curiously investigating the stubble on his chin, and nothing else mattered at all.

Afterword

I suppose there are a few discrepancies which will need to be cleared up in the second edition of this partial biography of one of Earth's greatest figures, though the question of whether he is hero or villain will be a source of argument for centuries to come, just as it has been with regard to Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar and many others. I will not try to resolve that argument, leaving it readers to decide for themselves, from the evidence I have offered.

Hopefully none of my errors will have distracted from my readers' enjoyment of this book. (It has, of course, had to be rushed into publication somewhat, due to the scandalous attempts of rival publishers to snaffle the highlights of my research.) But although I am eager to apologise for and itemise the shortcomings of my own work, and I do hope to have the chance to complete further research and settle the answers to these questions myself, it would be a privilege if, in the event that I die before I am able to do so, future generations of historians and biographers take any inconsistencies as a series of challenges, starting points for their own work. There is no doubt that the life of Bardello Fatloch is fertile ground for any writer. I have barely scratched the stories of his youth, in which area I have no doubt a little digging in the right places could find much biographical treasure.

To you, then, my readers of the future, I pass on my apologies and my congratulations! To the happy few!