

# THEAKER'S

# QUARTERLY FICTION

Issue 5

Spring

2005

**EDITORIAL** .....2  
*Stephen William Theaker*

**THE INDIGO SKIES OF HOME: SABAKU**  
*Steven Gilligan*

Chapter One .....3  
 Chapter Two .....7  
 Chapter Three .....10  
 Chapter Four .....16  
 Chapter Five .....20  
 Chapter Six .....24  
 Chapter Seven .....30

Published by  
 Silver Age Books



# Editorial

Stephen William Theaker  
*Editor and Maestro*

In many ways, I believe this issue of *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction* to be our finest yet. Entirely new, it features a single long story from Steven Gilligan, author of *Elsewhere* (published by Silver Age Books). This story, *Sabaku*, is the opening salvo of his novel-in-progress, *The Indigo Skies of Home*. Having read *Sabaku*, I can only hope that said progress becomes more actual than metaphorical, as I'm keen to discover what befalls these fascinating characters in the future.

Special as this issue is, one should not forget that every edition of *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction* has something amazing to offer, and so I bring your attention to our subscription procedures. There are four options.

The first is to visit our website regularly, and read the issues as they become available. No need to contact us – you can administer this type of subscription yourself!

The second option is this: send an email to us at [silveragebooks@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:silveragebooks@blueyonder.co.uk) with the words "TQF SEND PDF" in the title, and we will email you the pdf of each issue as it becomes available.

The third option is similar: send an email to us with the words "TQF SEND LINK" and we will email you the hyperlink to each issue as it becomes available online.

The fourth option costs £16 – send a cheque for that amount, payable to your editor, Stephen Theaker, and we'll send you the next four issues in the post, on actual old-fashioned paper!

It seems I need some more to fill out this page, and

so I will drift in one of my ever more frequent reveries. The sun shines upon all the readers of *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction*, and we have that in common. What else do we have in common? A love of story, an adoration of tall tales, a softness for genre, and a pleasure in poetry. Not, of course, the kind of poetry that rhymes and rambles in equal measure, not the maggot-ridden corpse of verse, but the poetry of prose, the poetry that comes from a simple soul expressing itself through the tropes of spaceships, laser guns, planets, stars and time travel. What other kind of literature can hope to compete? So let's not stamp upon verse, as might normally be our (entirely natural) inclination, but instead let us all hie from here to try a little Tennyson, borrow some Byron, or sample a little Swinburne. And talking of Swinburne, here is Steven Gilligan's latest story, which begins upon a ship of that name...

**This Editorial was brought to you  
by the Dvorak keyboard.**

Tired of fingers that ache after an  
hour of typing? Try Dvorak.

Google for more details.

*Dvorak... for an easy life.*

# The Indigo Skies of Home: Sabaku

Steven Gilligan

## Chapter One

She had named the planet Sabaku, which in her language meant wasteland.

By the dim light of her portable workstation and the two moons in the sky, Hanikku inspected the small pool of water which cut into the parched sand. Her dry hands, worn and scarred from months of desert survival, dipped into the water and she stretched her fingers. The natural bluish tinge of her skin had darkened in the days she had spent under the harsh sun of this alien landscape and her hair, once a deep golden colour, had all but turned white, and become matted. She splashed water over her face and ran some through her hair with her fingers. The luke-warm liquid soothed her cracked skin and she closed her eyes and imagined that she was somewhere else, somewhere water ran freely and she did not have to struggle to survive. She imagined herself in a place where leafy green trees grew and food was plentiful, a place where she would feel comfortable and relaxed. A place where she would no longer feel fear and solitude. She imagined that she was home.

She took a canister from the workstation and filled it from the pool. An in-built water purifier cleansed the elixir and she lifted it to her mouth and drank deeply. She filled five more canisters (all that she had brought with her) and packed up her workstation. The walk back to her base would take the rest of the night. The workstation was not heavy and fitted neatly on her back with two straps which crossed her chest. It contained all that she needed to test the sand and dry soil for moisture levels. It had a full analysis kit for examining flora and fauna for toxins and infections. On the trail to the water source she had discovered a small patch of almost completely desiccated grass, but it had tested negative for poisons and

it contained, surprisingly, several useful vitamins. Hanikku doubted that it would be very palatable, but at least it would provide breakfast.

Her base had become a farm of sorts. She grew plants and small vegetables from sources she had found in the landscape. A few different types of edible grasses and leafy root vegetables struggled for life in an area she had managed to keep watered fairly regularly. For meat, she managed to snare some insect life that scuttled across the dunes. Large arachnids came out at night and Hanikku had become deft at catching them. They did not taste good and not every part of their bodies was edible, but they were a source of much-needed protein. Water, however, was her greatest concern. She had perfected a technique to pull condensation and moisture from the air, but it provided less than two litres a day. For the most part, she depended on tracking sources of water in the sand and following any potential cache of water. It had taken over a week of observation and tracing to locate tonight's precious find. The water she had collected in the canisters would keep her going for at least ten more days.

Seven months ago, while on a standard scouting mission, Hanikku's ship was pulled off course. She was investigating a settlers' colony on the Pelionis moon orbiting a planet in a system several parsecs from her homeworld, Antila. The colony on the moon had been rumoured to have been damaged by an attack from dissident forces opposed to the Antilan government. Since long-range communications with Pelionis had broken down, Hanikku had been sent to investigate.

Her ship was a one-woman vessel, shielded for the faster-than-light travel found in slipstreams and suited to quick and agile manoeuvres. The journey had taken her less than a week. On her approach to the target system something had gone wrong. She lost control of her ship, it spun off course and spiralling into dead space she quickly became lost. The navigation, communication and scanning controls were dead and she drifted for days. With her food, water and oxygen supplies running dangerously low, the situation did not look good for Hanikku. Mercifully, or so she thought at the time, she passed close to a planet and was dragged down by its gravitational pull. The strong energy shields surrounding the ship were enough protection to stop her burning up in the planet's atmosphere and she crash landed on the sandy surface with only minor injuries. The planet's atmosphere was breathable and, for the time being, Hanikku was safe. She was lost on an alien planet, whose landscape was arid and barren, but at least she was alive.

Survival was one of Hanikku's many specialities and it did take her long to convert her stranded ship into a makeshift base. There was not enough energy left in the power cells to repair the propulsion drives, so escape from the planet was not an immediate option. Hanikku knew that she would just have to wait in the hope that someone would find her and she would be rescued. And so that is what she did. She had been waiting for months.

By the time Hanikku reached her assembled base, Sabaku's large crimson sun had started to rise. The broken ship, with its canopy extended on one side on two metal legs, cast long early morning shadows across the red sun-stained sand. Even this early, the air had started to heat up and Hanikku entered the shade of the ship with some relief. The interior was dim, but not cramped. After the crash, she had removed the better part of the engine and dumped it outside of the craft. The idea was to use it for parts to construct some communications equipment, but the plan had not worked. No matter what she made, using her great experience in electronics, there was no way for her to create a viable power source. She had fashioned the newly-created interior of the craft as best she could and now it appeared quite homely. A piece of stretched fabric ripped from the pilot's seat provided a comfortable hammock and there was an area that opened up into the desert outside which made an improvised stove. Hanikku did not cook much, as fuel for burning was limited, but when raw spider meat and cold, dry vegetation became too

much for her, the stove was a lifesaver. There was no need to boil water as the automatic purifiers in the canisters were still fully functional.

She stored her workstation and five of the six filled canisters in one of the many storage compartments. The sixth canister was used, first to partly quench her endless thirst, and then to water the tiny sandy garden in the shade outside. Hanikku pulled a small, elongated instrument from a pouch at her breast and plunged it into the earth of the vegetable patch. She waited for a moment and stared out towards the horizon. She could see, quite clearly, that it was going to be a hot day, but she also noticed something else far, far away in front of the mountainous ridges on the horizon. It looked like something was disturbing the air there.

*A storm? Thought Hanikku. A sandstorm?*

She withdrew the small instrument from the ground and inserted it into a reader that she had pulled from a pocket at her waist. She frowned for a moment at the reading before tapping a few buttons on the side of the device. The thing blipped into life and a row of lights pulsed across the front. Hanikku pressed some buttons again and a small square display screen popped up from a slot. She studied the screen for a few moments and then folded it up and placed it back in her pocket.

"This is not good," she said. "The soil is too thirsty." Her voice was one of soft resignation. Having spent months here, struggling daily for survival, she had coped remarkably well, but it had dragged her down. In all this there had been no sign of any other sentient life on the planet, no satellites in the sky and no other visiting craft. Friendly or otherwise, Hanikku would have welcomed any form of interaction.

She went back through the entrance of her base and looked around the interior for something that would further aid her minimal horticultural skills. She knelt on the metal floor in front of a low shelf holding several storage crates. She selected the one that she thought might be most help and groaned as she pulled it free of its brackets. The grey lid popped open with a hiss and the crate's internal illumination flickered on, covering its contents and Hanikku's face, arm and breasts with an unnatural green light. Most of what was in here would be of no use to her whatsoever, but after the crash Hanikku had discarded nothing, just in case. She sorted through the various bits of junk, searching for something that could be used as a growth accelerator for the plants or perhaps something that would help with irrigation or germination. She was about to seal up the crate

and try another when her hand closed around something metallic and cylindrical. On closer inspection it turned out to be a telescope of sorts. She held it to her eye and smiled. *Well, this won't fix my garden, but it will help with another problem.*

Outside, she held the telescope to her eye and looked, engrossed, at the horizon. It certainly did look like a storm. Hanikku had only ever experienced one sandstorm on this planet and that been a few weeks ago. Some of her crops had been damaged and lost and she had needed to make some minor repairs to the outer shell of her base, but otherwise she had got off lightly. This new storm, however, looked much, much bigger. There was always a chance that it would pass her by and come nowhere near her base. She looked at it once again. In the moments of looking at the distant gale, a wind had started to blow, and it was blowing in her direction from where the storm was. Three distinctly separate cyclones were forming and stretching away in the sky. She observed the spectacle for a few moments more and then made her decision.

"The storm is coming here," she said softly, and, without panicking, she skipped back to her base and started to rapidly pack things away. Anything that was loose on the floor or on shelves she stashed into any space she could find in the already crammed storage boxes and containers. Next, using a strong vinyl twine, she tied up the boxes to stop them sliding around. She pulled her makeshift desk out and lodged it behind the pilot's seat. Satisfied that nothing would be disturbed in here, she turned her attention to the outside.

The wind had picked up enormously and she glanced over her shoulder to the incoming cyclones. In the time it had taken her to secure the interior of her base the cyclones had covered almost half the open distance. Still calm, Hanikku, fastened down each of the holding cables that connected the shell of her station to large rocks she had hauled to the circumference. Next came the garden. She pulled a metal dome, originally half of the casing for one of the ship's fuel pockets, and placed it neatly over the seedling plants and grasses. Already the wind was unbearable and sand was being kicked up all around her. She shielded her eyes to the onslaught and, pressing against the strong wind, fought her way to the entrance of her cabin. Her white hair was tossed around and it whipped her face like a thousand tiny lashes. Eyes closed, she struggled to open the pneumatic door and it hissed open – the hiss lost in the roar of the wind. She hit a button and the door closed behind her. She leaned with her back against the door

and sighed with relief as she sank to a crouching position. The sound of the wind battering the walls was very loud and the whole cabin and bridge rocked slightly.

She did not know whether the base could withstand this punishment and she crawled over to the control array of the bridge and perched herself on the edge of the bald pilot seat. She touched a few buttons and a faint image appeared on the main screen. Using only a small amount of solar power, a lens on the top of the base fed an image of the storm into the cabin. Through the thick clouds of swirling orange sand she could just make out the towering presence of a cyclone. It was very close now and it was still moving towards her. For the first time since detecting the sandstorm, she began to feel afraid. *If that thing hits, I may not survive this.* She hung her head and made a silent prayer to Meludar, the Bringer of Evil, asking him to spare her life as he ravaged this desolate land.

As the sound of the fierce wind battering the casing of the base grew louder, Hanikku closed her eyes and thought of home. How she wished she were back on Antila. How she wished she was lying in the tall grasses near her home staring up at the indigo sky. For a moment she was there. She rolled over in the lush grass and peered into the waters of a nearby stream. The water was like flowing crystal and she could hear nothing but its gentle trickling – a sound like a thousand tiny bells all playing together. She sat up and looked over to the city in the distance, she stared at the magnificent and elegant towers stretching high into the sky and reflecting the soft purple light all around them. She smiled to herself and then opened her eyes.

The cabin was shaking violently now and, although still sitting, she grasped a foothold at the base of the wall to steady herself. The noise was deafening; it sounded like an army of men had surrounded the ship and were hammering on the shell with metal hammers. She felt the whole structure lift for a second and then drop. A shelf which she had thought to be firmly attached to the wall fell away and narrowly missed her. She looked over to the monitor but all it showed was the air, thick with rapidly moving sand and small rocks. Then the image vanished and the internal lighting flickered once, then twice more, and then it was gone. Hanikku closed her eyes again and tensed her body. *This is it, she thought. This is where I die.* She felt the cabin lift again and the whole thing sloped at an awkward angle. Hanikku slid across the floor and hit her back hard against the corner of a wall. She

screamed out in pain, she the sound of the battering wind drowned it out. And then suddenly all was silent.

Hanikku winced at the pain in her back and reached behind with her hand to feel it. It was very tender and her hand came away wet. *Blood!* she thought. She stood up and pulled up a shutter over a porthole half-way, just enough to see outside. In the light, she looked at her hand and sure enough, her fingers were wet with her own deep blue blood. She looked outside and saw a scene of devastation. The area around her camp was littered with rocks and other debris. Bits of metal and plastic had been torn from her ship and lay in the sand, half-covered with the fallout of the storm. *Has it passed?* She stared out as far as she could and saw that the storm had not passed. All around the ship, but a good distance away, was a wall of swirling sand. She looked up but it was so high that she could not see where it ended. "This is the eye of the storm?" she half-whispered. She pulled the shutter down and sat back down, flinching again at the pain in her back. Moving quickly, she pulled out one of storage crates and searched for a bandage or a pad of some sort. She found a small soft towel and closed the crate and kicked it back into place. She pressed the towel to where she had injured herself. She could feel with her fingers that the accident had torn a hole in the back of her overalls, and she widened it with the fingers so that she could apply the towel to the

wound. It was very painful and she was sat in awkward position and breathing heavily, but it would have to do. "How much more of this is there to go?" she said as she tried to brace herself for the second wave. She did not have to wait long.

When the cyclone hit again, it felt like its strength had doubled. Everything shook violently and Hanikku, who had been holding her injury rather than anything else, was jolted across the floor again. The deafening noise returned and from somewhere deep inside she screamed out, "Help!" She heard a loud cracking noise and fountain of sparks erupted from the control array, showering her legs with shards of hot white fire. She scrambled to get clear, but the base lifted again and she slid back. She could smell burning. In desperation she clambered to her feet and looked at the control panel. Smoke was billowing up from below and flames were dancing across the controls. She turned and ran up the sloping floor to where she had stashed the canisters of water, pulled them out, and allowed herself to slide back towards the fire. She flipped the top open and drenched the fire with the priceless liquid. Plumes of hissing steam mixed with the thick black smoke and Hanikku coughed and squinted her eyes. The base was shook again and she lost her footing and slipped on the wet floor. Screaming, she fell to the hard metal of the deck and struck her head against the canister as she swirled around. She was unconscious before she hit the floor.

---

Theaker's  
Quarterly  
Fiction 4

Winter 2004

---

**Have you read issue  
four of TQF?**

Why not read it again?

You might have missed  
something!

Best wishes to your  
family from  
**Silver Age Books!**

# Chapter Two

“The sandstorm was an excellent stratagem.”

“Yes.”

“So how would you say it’s progressing?”

“It’s too early to tell. We haven’t even seen the completion of phase one yet.”

“Are we behind schedule?”

“No, no. Everything’s going as planned.”

“You must have some preliminary assessments for me.”

“Like I said, it’s just too early...”

Hanikku woke up coughing. She was lying in the darkness in a shallow pool of water. Carefully she sat up. She could smell smoke in the air, but it was not as strong as before. All was still, and she was glad that the storm seemed to have passed. She groaned as she got to her feet and felt the sudden stabbing pain in the back of her head and the base of her spine. Still coughing she made her way across the cabin, stumbling over rubble and sections of shelving, to the door. She pushed the pad and the door hissed and creaked but would only open about a quarter of the way. Hanikku peered out through the gap and was thankful of the clean air. It was dark outside, but she could see, by the dim moonlight, the damage that had been done.

She pulled away from the door and stepped to the porthole and pulled the shutter up. The catch on the strong window turned easily and she pushed the reinforced perspex of the window outwards. It was a bit of a squeeze but she managed to clamber through the gap to fall to the dusty sand outside. Once fully outside she gasped for air. “Thank Abynar I am alive!” she called out. “I have survived!” She held back tears and got to her feet. The wound on her back had scabbed over and she carefully examined it with her fingers. It did not feel to be too big a cut, but it still stung. She felt the back of her head and it seemed much worse there. A large scab striped the back of her skull and blood had matted even more the back of her long hair. The pain from the wound was a dull pain and her head throbbed with it.

The larger of the planet’s two moons had risen and Hanikku estimated that she must have been unconscious for at least sixteen hours. Still a little unsteady on her feet, she examined the wreckage around her

base. The storm had battered the base itself mercilessly. Large rips had appeared in the shell of her ship and everywhere it was scratched and dented with uneven craters. The whole thing had been moved some twenty metres from its original location, leaving a deep gouge in the sandy earth. Her belongings were everywhere. Somehow, in her haste, she had forgotten the science equipment she had set up at various points to monitor moisture levels. All of it had been smashed and shards of glass and pieces of bent metal lay everywhere. Also there were rocks: hundreds of rock and stones littered the ground. It was all debris that the cyclone had carried here. Despondent, she walked to the garden.

The covering she had placed over the top was missing. *Probably on the other side of the planet by now*, she thought. She knelt down in the dust to examine the damage. This was the worst she had seen, and fighting back tears she scabbled through the dirt with her hands. All the plants she had cared for had been ripped up and were gone. She slumped back on her hands and looked up to the sky. “Why did this have to happen to me? Haven’t I been through enough already?” She rolled forward onto her knees and held her face in her hands. “Why?” she cried. She thought of home again and tried to take solace from the images in her mind. Not for the first time, she lost all hope of ever seeing her homeworld again. She opened her eyes and looked at the ravaged garden again. She blinked and had to look twice, but she was not mistaken. Just barely above the surface of the soil was a single green shoot. She quickly cleared away the sand and grit from around it and examined it more closely. It was definitely alive, but she did not recognise what species of plant it was. “Ah,” she said to it. “You are a good sign, I think. As soon as I get back into my cabin I will bring you water.” She smiled to herself and gently ran a finger over the single small leaf of the little shoot. “I will name you Antila, after my homeworld, and I will make you strong. Strong, like me.”

It took Hanikku several days to get her base back to some semblance of normality. Much had been lost to the sandstorm. The equipment in her ship was beyond repair, the monitor had been smashed and the

control array had been ravaged by fire; the buttons and wires all melting into each other. She managed, by scavenging through what was left, to assemble one complete science kit, but the portable workstation had been utterly destroyed. Of her food sources and water canisters, only half remained, and she considered *that* to be good fortune.

Her plan was to move. Not too far away were a series of caves, and although they would not be as comfortable as her base, they were certainly more secure against sandstorms. Packing all that she could still use onto a small wheeled carrier, she bade farewell to the ship that had served her as a home for the past seven months. The tiny plant, named Antila, she placed in a small plastic tub filled with some of the damp sand where it had taken root. Finally satisfied, she set off, dragging the trolley behind her with flexible cords.

She travelled, as usual, by cover of night, to avoid the unbearable heat of the day. With just one small wrist-mounted torch to guide her, the area seemed eerie and unfamiliar. It was not a part of the planet she had explored much. She had seen the caves before from a distance, but she had never been too close. She did not know exactly what to expect, but she thought that there would be nothing in the caves to fear. It would have probably made more sense to set camp there anyway as it would certainly be cooler living in a cave, and it would definitely provide more protection than her damaged and burned-out ship.

As she approached the caves she looked around for an area that might be a good place to call home. The beam from the torch swept left and right until she settled on an opening that looked about the right size. The caves themselves were set into a low cliff that stretched away on either side into the dark of the night. She dragged the trolley the last few metres and stopped at the cave entrance. The interior smelled like baked rock, but it was cool inside. She ran her hand over the walls and found them to be strangely smooth. The cave was spacious and the floor was carpeted with fine, soft sand. This will do, she thought, and she pulled the trolley in and undid the fastenings. The material from the pilot's seat which she had previously used as a hammock was barely touched by the cabin fire, and although it still smelled faintly of smoke, she laid it out on the ground. She sat down and contemplated her situation. She knew she had at least three unpredictable water sources dotted around the area, although they were all some distance away. And as long as she could keep catching insects and harvesting what little vegetation there was, she knew she could keep

herself alive indefinitely. *So what now?* All of her ship's electrical equipment had been destroyed so there seemed to be no hope of getting off this planet, and there was definitely no hope of building any kind of communication device to send out a distress signal. She turned off the torch and looked out of the cave at the vast dark sky. Sabaku's two moons were full and the light trickled into the cave, casting strange double lunar shadows over everything. *I need a plan*, she thought. *I really need a plan.* Resigning herself to sleep on it she lay down on the sheet of material and closed her eyes.

Sleep did not come quickly, and as the night dragged on Hanikku could not stop thinking about her situation. She could not stop thinking about home. Finally, as the first rays of dawn leaked over the horizon, weariness took her and she fell into a deep slumber.

In the daylight she arranged her things in the cave, and found a suitable area in the sun to plant her precious seedling. The day had started with Hanikku waking from a nightmare which she forgot the moment she opened her eyes. She had been unable to shake off a feeling of anxiety all day. The caves were ochre coloured but solid – like marble. The flame-like colour of the rock melted into the soft yellow of the fine sand. A few small dry-looking shrubs grew nearby and Hanikku had examined them and found them to be edible. She had not yet seen any creatures or even insects, but it was not even midday and she knew that most of the sparse planet's wildlife emerged only at night. The cave felt safe and she began to feel a little more secure about her situation. Hanikku considered this carefully. She knew that it was good to feel safe, but she also knew how valuable it was not to feel too comfortable. *I do not want to live out the rest of my life on this world. No matter how settled I get.*

As she set up her only science kit to start new and improved vegetation analysis experiments, she distractedly gazed at the wall of the cave. *Strange*, she thought. *This looks as though it's damp.* She reached over and stroked the smooth wall and was amazed that her hand came away damp. There was moisture here. Not much, but enough possibly to make a difference. She traced the moisture trail back, to where the wall met the sandy ground and followed the line back into the cave. There was enough light to see every detail and she smiled when she spotted the potential source of the water. Right at the back of the cave there was a tiny fracture at the base of the wall and it was ringed with small dots of condensation.



She would not have noticed it had she not been looking for it. "Are you a well?" she said. She grabbed a length of cord and fed it into the crack. At about three metres she stopped and pulled the plastic cord out. The last fifty centimetres were dripping wet. "Yes!" she laughed. She did not put the water to her mouth as she was not yet able to trust the source. There might be toxins or disease in the water. She grabbed the small device she used to analyse substances and switched it on. As she passed it over the small sample of water it hummed agreeably and a green light flashed on and off repeatedly. *This solves many problems*, she thought as she smiled to herself. It was the first good news she had had in weeks.

Within a couple of days, Hanikku had constructed a robust siphon system and was pleased to note that the small well in the wall could provide her with up to five litres of fresh, clean water a day. It could be moisture rising up into a pocket from deep below, or perhaps there was a small underground stream that passed by a cavity to form a small pool. The water itself was heavy with minerals and had an unusual taste, but that concerned her little. For the first time since crashing on Sabaku, Hanikku had a reliable and sustainable water source. It meant that she no longer needed to expend so much energy on long trips to untreated water pools every few days. It meant that the life-threatening danger of water loss was no longer an issue, and that she could now devote her energy to more pressing matters. Matters that included her escape.

She had had a few ideas, but none of them seemed particularly viable. She had briefly considered the idea of building a distress signal large enough to be seen from space, so that any passing craft might spot it and respond. Any such structure would have to be hundreds of kilometres wide and long, and so this was not an option. She thought of building a primitive radio transmitter to send a distress signal, but she would have needed a power source big enough to send a radio signal beyond the atmosphere of the planet. This was also not a possibility. She had toyed with the idea of creating a small pod from parts of her broken ship, and somehow propelling it into space. But she had no way to store an oxygen supply and, apart from natural solar energy, no way to propel the pod. There was certainly no energy source powerful enough to provide the thrust to get her free from the planet's gravity – she had scanned the elements of the planet to find metal, but she discovered no traces of any radioactive elements that could do the job.

As she was thinking, she saw, just in her peripheral vision, a movement. She spun around quickly and her hand darted out, deftly grabbing a large, meaty beetle.

"Ha!" she said. "Protein."

The beetle was a big one, twice the size of Hanikku's own hand. It had a purplish tinge to its shell and emitted a sharp sibilant hiss as she turned it around to get a better look at it.

"Well," she said, "you don't look poisonous, and I'm hungry. I guess that means just one thing..."

The beetle looked up at her blankly and hissed again, its legs squirmed rapidly. Hanikku had another idea. "Where do you come from?" she said with a smile to the beetle. "If you could show me where your brothers and sisters all live, then maybe I could let you go. What do you think?"

The beetle did nothing but continue to struggle and Hanikku placed it on the ground and watched to see where it was headed. At first, it did nothing. It looked around and cleaned itself and then it looked up at Hanikku. "What is it? Go on, go home. I'm watching you, little man."

The beetle scuttled over to Hanikku and stopped just in front of her crouching legs. It inspected them with its feelers and then climbed up her knee to rest of the flat of her thigh.

"What's this, little man? You must have a death wish." She ran a blue finger over the shell of the beetle and it hissed back, quietly and softly.

"Or, perhaps..." she smiled. "Perhaps you need a friend?"

She picked up the insect again and looked at its head. It no longer tried to escape and Hanikku thought carefully about what this might mean. She could use a friend right now, a companion, a pet. She rolled the beetle over and gently stroked its underbelly. Its legs undulated and synchronised with her movements.

Hanikku roared with laughter and her whole body shook. "By Abynar," she cackled. "I must be going crazy!" And she tossed the beetle into a pot of boiling water that had been bubbling merrily nearby. The beetle hit the water with a tidy splash and drops hissed and fizzed and they bubbled over the rim of the pot.

An evening meal of boiled beetle meat and water-softened shrub grass went some way to relieving her physical symptoms of hunger, but did nothing to relieve her mental and spiritual hunger. The feeling of loneliness and desperation had become crushing. And then there was the boredom. Seven months with

no interaction with another Antilan, or with anyone from any other world, had numbed her. There had been very little in the way of mental challenges apart from occasional problem solving like the recent water siphon, but it was not enough.

Hanikku was an intelligent person, popular in her home city. She longed for social interaction. She longed to be with people. She wanted to tell her friends about the adventures she had had on this planet; her crash; her struggle for survival; the recent

sandstorm; anything. She smiled faintly as she imagined telling her friends, Kumumi and Akiya, about the day she almost befriended a beetle! They would laugh and she would laugh, they would go out to a bar and drink to the early hours of the morning and Hanikku would feel like she had finally returned home.

She grimaced and spat a piece of beetle on the sand. "You are much too sour to have made a good friend, little man," she said.

## Chapter Three

"Is phase two prepared?"

"It's prepared all right. We're working to instigate it now."

"How long will it take?"

The small freighter *Swinburne* was approaching the final stage of its long voyage home from the small cluster of trading planets in the Altarnei sector. Its cargo was a mixture of lucky finds and shrewd trades.

Captain James Curtaine eased himself back in his ergonomic seat and sighed with pleasure. The excursion had been a simple one, and one specific trade-off on Kyushu had been particularly profitable. Curtaine had managed to exchange nineteen crates of untreated salt for eleven containers of valuable silicon parts and two bottles of his favourite sparkling wine. He had never known such luck and was rightfully smug and satisfied. "How far now?" he said.

"Oh, it won't take too long now," came the reply from the pilot and navigator, Wang Chen. "We passed the Aeris Nebula a few hours ago. I estimate that we'll be within sight of home in about another two weeks."

"Two weeks? I guess it could be worse."

Chen swivelled around in his seat to face Curtaine. "Damn right it could. If I hadn't made such good time through that last slipstream, we would be adding another few days to that estimate."

He smiled and nodded his head. "Good work, Wang. Let me know if the situation changes."

"Aye, Captain."

Curtaine flicked a switch on the arm of his chair and a flat and fuzzy image flickered into life to his left. It was the only other human on the crew, the technician and engineer, Amis Wellin.

"Yes, Captain," came the tinny and distorted response.

"Amis, can you come up here when you've got five? There seems to be some sort of interference on these displays. I want you to take a look at it."

"Aye, Captain. I'm almost done down here, I'll be there in a few minutes."

"Excellent. Oh, and Amis..."

"Yes, Captain?"

"Bring Miette up with you. I'd like her to take a look at something too."

"Aye, Captain."

Curtaine flicked the switch again and the image of Wellin dissolved. He stretched his arms and smoothed his straggly blonde hair back with his massive hands. It had been a good trip all right, one of the best ever in terms of turning over a mighty profit, but Curtaine was eager to be home, eager to sell the goods and get back to enjoy some rest and some well-earned quality time. He looked out towards the main bridge viewscreen. It wasn't a big screen, but it wasn't a big bridge either. It was big enough, however, to show the view outside – the vast expanse of space, with stars flying past them on either side like straight lines of white light.

Captain James Curtaine had only been a captain for a few months, but he had been a trader all his life. Trading for a living, as far as Curtaine was concerned, was something you had to be born into.

Commerce was his religion and the religion of those who served on his crew. Wellin was an engineer, but he also had a shrewd eye for a bargain. Whenever a seller was selling something too cheaply, Wellin was always the first to spot it. He seemed to know instinctively that the seller was selling something he was unfamiliar with. Often he would give the signal to Curtaine, the signal which meant, "This guy has something worth thousands of bonds more than he's selling it for..." Curtaine knew the signal well. Wellin's knowledge of stock and commodity prices was unrivalled throughout the galaxy – the man was like a walking encyclopaedia. And then there was Wang Chen. Chen had the most silvery tongue Curtaine had ever experienced. He had the ability to barter goods and haggle down prices like no-one else. He exuded a natural charm and confidence that would ensure Curtaine always got the best deal.

Of course, it did not work one hundred percent of the time. Sometimes they lost out, sometimes they were tricked, but for the most part they came out on top. Curtaine and his crew had a reputation in all eleven trading sectors, and that reputation was a good one. He sometimes bent the rules a little to get what he wanted, but he was never unscrupulous or underhanded. Well, not much at any rate.

Wellin appeared from below deck and his balding head bobbed over the top of the ladder. "Captain," he said, "what can I do for you?"

"Ah, Wellin. This monitor feed seems to be distorting the picture. Can you take a look at it?"

"Mine's doing the same thing," said Chen, helpfully.

Wellin climbed the rest of the ladder and walked to Curtaine's chair. He removed a scanning device from the pocket of his overalls and passed it over the machinery, sucking air in through his teeth as he did so. "Hmm," he said. "I don't think it's the feed, as such." He examined the readout the scanner had given him. "It might be the holographic emitter itself if it's happening to both of you. My station down below seems to be functioning all right, but I'll have to check."

"Good," said Curtaine. "Get on and let me know what you find."

"Aye, sir," said Wellin and he pocketed the scanner and stepped back to the ladder.

"Wellin?" said Curtaine.

"Yes, sir?"

"Miette?"

"Captain?"

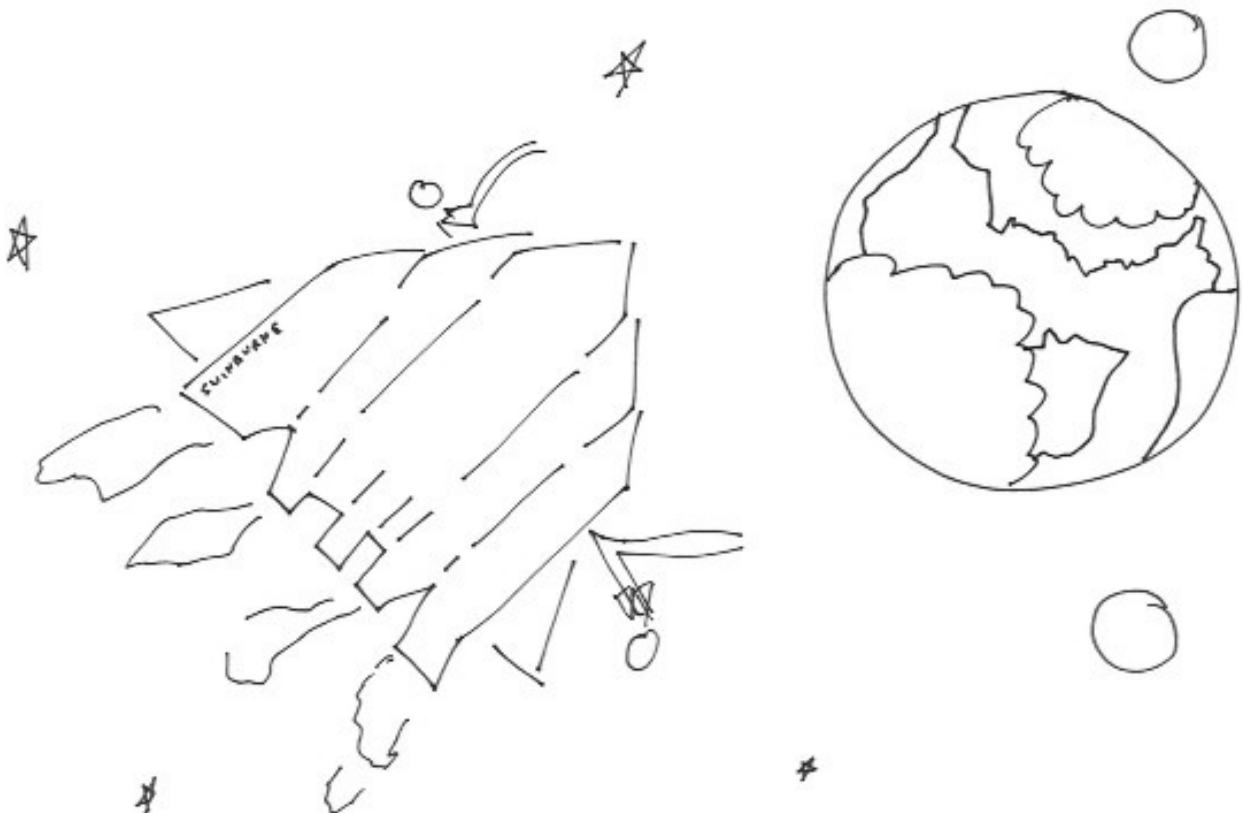
"I asked to bring Miette up with you when you came."

"Yes, sir?"

Curtaine frowned. "So where is she?"

"Er, right behind you, sir."

Curtaine turned his head and there she was. He jumped reactively.



"Captain," she said with perfect diction and pronunciation. "How may I be of assistance to you?"

Chen laughed out loud. "You have to watch androids," he said. "They tend to sneak around a lot!"

"First Officer Chen," said Miette, "I merely ascended the ladder to stand by the Captain and await my instruction. It was never my intention to sneak."

Miette was a medical android, made perfect in every way to look, sound, feel and even smell like a human female aged about twenty, but everything about her was completely synthetic. Her skin was a silicone mix, her eyes were plastic, her teeth were a hard enamel alloy and her dark brown hair, although synthetic, was as fine as any human hair. She was equipped with the latest processing software and extensive data banks. Her knowledge and medical ability were the sum of all knowledge and medical ability the galaxy had ever collected. She had even been programmed to appreciate music. And although stoutly unemotional, she had been known to tell the odd joke. But her timing was terrible. Miette had cost Curtaine a small fortune, but she had been worth every last bond, credit and coin. She was a masterpiece of modern technical engineering – a truly sentient life form with an inexhaustible supply of knowledge and wisdom. If *she* was the right word to use, as although she looked and sounded female she was technically sexless. Curtaine admired her very

much – he did not look upon her as a purchase or a slave, but as a fully-fledged member of his crew.

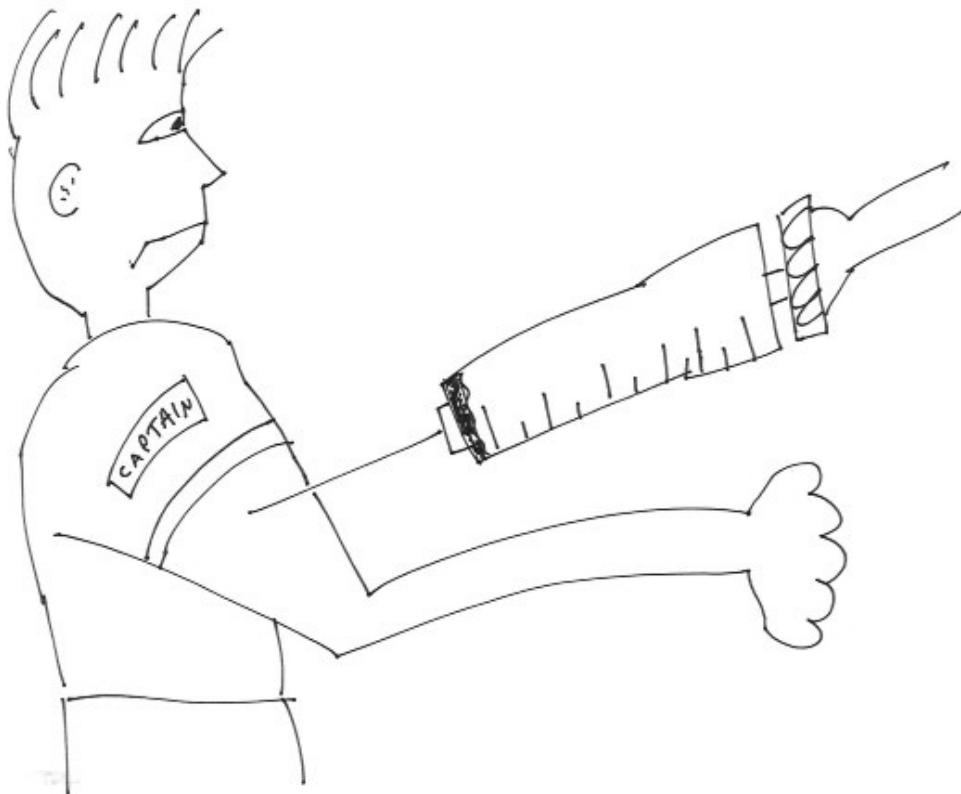
Curtaine waved his hand in dismissal at Chen. "Yes, well, whatever," he sighed. "Miette?"

"Yes, Captain," she answered and moved to his side. "What is it you need? Are you ill again?"

Curtaine looked up at her from his seated position. Human she might not be, but that did not stop her from being very beautiful. She had pale skin and icy blue eyes. Her long dark brown hair caressed her shoulders and swayed with her every move. She was not unique, Curtaine knew that. He had seen her model advertised and displayed in many brochures and advertisements on many channels on many planets. She was top-of-the-range, and in the year or so that Curtaine had owned her he had become more and more attached to her. He knew she was just a machine but he could not help having feelings for her. Miette was the closest he had come to having a *partner* in a long time. Of course, he had never explained this to her, her loyalty to him was assured with her programming, and, apart from the obvious, just having her around was companionship enough.

"Not ill, exactly. I've been having some chest problems again."

Miette removed a long thin analyser from the long pocket in the leg of her white jump-suit and moved it over Curtaine's chest. "Have you been coughing in the mornings?"



“Yes. A lot. And it hurts.”

“Well,” said Miette, staring at the reading on thin screen of the analyser. “It is not asthma. I’m certain that I cleared that completely. Hmm...” She pocketed the instrument and faced Curtaine. “I will need a blood sample and a couple of hours.”

Curtaine rolled up the sleeve of his jacket. “So, what is it?”

Miette removed another thin object from another pocket, this time a tube. She flipped open the top and removed a long syringe. She held it one hand and grasped the bend of Curtaine’s arm with the other. “This won’t hurt a bit,” she said.

Curtaine screwed his face. “You know I don’t like needles,” he said. “And that’s quite a grip you have there.”

“There. All done.”

“Thanks,” he said, flatly.

“I will need to run some tests and I will let you know what I find.”

“Thanks, again.”

“It’s always a pleasure,” she said and smiled at him. Although Curtaine had an attraction to her, he hated it when she smiled as, although there was a smile there on her lips, it never materialised in her eyes. *I wonder how much it would cost me to get that altered?* he thought.

Miette sauntered away to the lower decks, where a small room had been converted into a treatment area and laboratory. Having a skilled medical android was essential to traders, especially as most were nomadic in nature. Have no fixed working location it was difficult to get medical attention when needed. Traders spent their lives travelling to many and diverse alien worlds and, although most were friendly, some had biological systems that were hostile to humans. No matter what protection you took, it was very easy to pick up diseases, infections and viruses that could prove fatal if not treated effectively and efficiently. What was just a common cold to one species could be the equivalent of a fatal plague to the average human trader, traveller or explorer. Miette was very good at what she did. The crew of the *Swinburne* had been lucky, managing to avoid being seriously infected by anything. Wellin contracted a rare and brutal virus after a trip to the planet Ulethen in search of raw yttrium for a valuable trade. He could have easily been in grave danger but Miette had quickly concocted a treatment for him. He suffered no more than a couple of days of bed rest. And Curtaine had had a chest complaint for some time now, but he was certain that Miette would be able to diagnose and cure it in no time.

Chen spun around in his chair to face Curtaine. “The course is fully plotted now, and the cruise has been activated. Unless we encounter an asteroid field that’s strayed off course, it should be plain sailing all the way.”

“Good work, Wang. You’re being amazingly productive at the moment. Is there something you need to tell me?”

Chen smiled. “Oh, you know,” he said. “It’s going to be good to get home and sell off this silicone. I’m looking forward to finishing this trip and I guess I’m just in a good mood today.”

“Well, that’s great,” said Curtaine, returning the warm smile. “Now, how about a game of yoto?”

“You’re on!”

Miette carefully emptied the blood sample she had collected into a small sterile container. Not that care was needed as her every movement was perfect and precise. A tiny mechanical arm set into the wall swung itself into position and hovered over the top of the container. Miette typed in a few commands on the keypad which was set into the table and the arm lowered itself into the blood sample and extracted the information she needed. It would take over an hour for the tests to be complete and a further hour for Miette to analyse and cross reference the results, so for the time being she sat on a rigid plastic chair and looked around the room.

The small, white-walled laboratory was equipped with everything she required to treat the three humans on the ship. Every eventuality was catered for, except space. There was just about enough room for one man to lie down on the fold-away bench, but only if Miette remained standing.

Set into the walls were various tools that could be automated, using a central computer, to perform most medical tasks – pulse and blood pressure monitoring; administering drip feeds; checking temperatures and the like. More precise tasks, such as surgery, were carried out by Miette herself. Not that she had ever needed to perform any surgery – but she had the skills if they were required.

She liked her work but she was also aware that she had been pre-programmed to like her work. It had taken her some time to understand this, but now she accepted it – for the most part at least. According to her own data banks Miette was just over two years old. She had been built at a factory on the largely industrial planet of Kurelin VI, a planet located at the trade centre of the galaxy. Demand for her particular model had risen in recent years and she was pleased that she was so popular. The sales had even out-

stripped the most popular pleasure models. Having not been activated until she was safely in Curtaine's possession, she had never met another model the same as herself and often she considered what it would be like facing up to a doppelgänger of herself. Finding it difficult to display, or even process, emotional responses, Miette thought that she would find the encounter interesting, but could not be sure until she had actually experienced it for real.

A short, sharp buzz roused Miette and she turned to the laboratory display screen.

"Curious," she said.

In the main access room to the engines Amis Wellin flipped a switch and a display panel lit up above him. He reached up and ran his fingers over the readout. Everything appeared to be functioning within normal parameters and he nodded his head agreeably. Since their departure from the Altarnei sector trading planets, the engines had run so smoothly he had hardly needed to lift a finger. Following the Captain's command, he turned his attention to the holographic emitters. As he suspected, his own communication station was performing perfectly well and the holographic display was faultless. He turned to the main computer console and ran a system-wide check to search for any errors that might have been occurring.

A series of blips and beeps later, Wellin examined the information on the flat screen of the viewer.

"Hmm," he said, furrowing his eyebrows. "This is strange."

He tapped a few command buttons and waited for a response. The viewer flashed once and a new series of figures and data appeared.

"This is not what I expected at all."

He turned to his communication station and flipped open the slim hatch to expose the holographic emitters and then he switched the station on.

"Captain?" he said.

An image of Captain Curtaine blinked into life in front of him and as it did it blurred and flickered.

"Yes, Amis. What is it?" said the image.

"Well, it seems you were right, sir. There is definitely some distortion on the image. I'm looking at the emitter right now but I can't see what's wrong."

"Have you opened a view-channel to me?"

"Yes, sir."

"I can't see you at all."

"Is the image of me distorted?"

"No, Amis, I mean there's no image at all!"

Wellin pulled over a chair and sat down, shaking his head. This was a problem, all right. The

*Swinburne* had been in operation for nearly ten years and in all that time it had never malfunctioned seriously. Amis Wellin's job had been an easy one.

"Any theories?" said Curtaine.

"I don't know. Overuse, perhaps, though nothing seems to be worn out."

"Could it be some kind of bug in the system somewhere?"

"I've run a full system-wide diagnostic and it hasn't detected anything."

The Captain paused before responding. "Well," he said at last. "Just keep on it and let me know what you find."

"Aye, Captain," said Wellin and he closed the communication channel.

Wang Chen moved the flat round counter to an open square using a popular triangular move. He smiled at the Captain triumphantly.

"Don't get too overconfident, Wang," said Curtaine. "It's not over yet and you know I always win when I play yellow and green."

Chen leaned back in his seat and clasped his hands together over his chest, intertwining his fingers. "Ah," he said smugly, "but white and red have a better chance of victory, statistically speaking."

"That's still under debate," said Curtaine as he executed a move with one of his green counters which blocked seven of Chen's red pieces.

"Nice move," he said, "but watch this..." He moved a single white counter three positions to block half of Curtaine's counters. His position on the hexagonal board meant he had earned himself another move. He liberated a red counter and jumped five positions to successfully block the remainder of Curtaine's counters.

"That's yoto," he said with wide smile. "And game over!"

Curtaine stared at the board in disbelief. "You've won! You've won, but... but how?"

Chen smiled even wider. "Oh, you know, I've been studying some techniques."

"Indeed you have! I didn't see that coming at all. Well done, it was a good match."

Curtaine lifted himself out of his seat and stood over the board, studying the positions of the counters. "I think I'll have to..." he started to say but was cut off by the ship violently jerking to one side. He lost his footing and fell onto the stand holding the yoto board, scattering the coloured counters and the hexagonal checkerboard across the bridge.

"What the hell was that?" shouted Chen.

The ship rocked again and Curtaine was tossed from the stand to the floor. He landed heavily on his side and the wind was knocked from his lungs. Chen pulled his seat straps across his chest and spun his seat around to face his controls. He ran his hands over the controls and the overhead lights in the bridge flickered on and off. "We're losing power!" he called out.

Curtaine dragged himself to his feet and sat in his seat, strapping himself in as he did. He pulled a control panel out in front of him and examined it. "What do you mean we're losing power? From where?"

"I don't know, yet, Captain. Just a minute..."

"You don't have a minute!" Curtaine flicked a switch on his communication station. "Amis! What the hell's going on down there?"

There was no response.

"Amis? Amis! Get your ass up here!"

The ship jerked again, this time much more violently. Everything rocked and shuddered and a panel behind Curtaine blew open, showering him with sparks. He flicked another switch on the communication station and the flickering image of Miette appeared.

"Captain," she said flatly. "What's happening?"

"We don't know. We're losing power it seems."

"Why would that cause the ship to oscillate?"

"I don't know that either!" he yelled, losing his patience. "Go and find Amis, I can't contact him. Get him up here!"

He flipped the switch again, the holographic Miette vanished and he shoved the communication station away. "Wang," he shouted. "Update me." The *Swinburne* was shaking even more now and items were being scattered all over the bridge. A fire had started somewhere and automatic extinguishers came to life, filling the area with opaque carbon dioxide.

"As far as I can tell we're venting ion from the engine..."

"What?"

"That's not all, sir, we're losing power too. From everywhere. I don't know why..."

The ship jerked again and a maintenance kit floated past Curtaine at head height.

"Oh, and," continued Chen, "we've also lost internal gravitation."

"What's causing this?" shouted Curtaine.

"I think it may be something outside the ship," came the reply from Wellin who appeared at the hatchway.

"Strap yourself in, Amis, this is getting pretty rocky."

"I agree with Amis," said Chen. "I think we've been pulled off course by something, and whatever that something is, it's affecting the internal workings of the *Swinburne* too."

"Amis," said Curtaine.

Wellin sat in a seat and pulled the straps over himself. "It might some kind of magnetic interference." He activated the panel in front of him and typed in some commands. "Or it could be a build up of sceleratus particles..."

"What particles?" said Curtaine through another blast from the extinguishers.

"Sceleratus particles are rare, but..."

He was cut off again as the ship rolled and shuddered violently. For a moment all the lights, including those on the many panels in the bridge went out and the cabin was lit only by the intermittent bursts of sparks. The noise was deafening as the hull groaned and creaked.

"We're spiralling out of control, Captain," shouted Chen as loud as he could manage.

"Where are we now?"

"This area is mostly uncharted..."

"Is there a planet we could land on?"

"I've got nothing here..."

"What?"

"Where are we?"

"What the hell is going on?"

"Miette?"

The hull's breached!"

"Where's Miette?"

"Captain!"

"Captain?"

"Aaaaaaaaahhhhhh!"

The *Swinburne*, powerless, on fire and plunged in relative darkness, banked and rolled, turned and dipped. It moved of its own accord and the crew were powerless to do anything but sit and pray for life. It had reached a critical stage when it hit the outskirts of the gravitational pull of a planet. It was tugged, slowly at first, then with increasing speed. Asteroids narrowly missed the fins of the ship and bounced harmlessly off the upper shell of the hull. By that point life support and oxygen levels on board had reached a critical level and the crew, with the exception of Miette, were all unconscious. Miette crouched on the floor of the bridge and, without hope, calmly switched herself off. Her body, impotent, slumped to the floor.

# Chapter Four

"What do you have for me?"

"Phase two is now ready for implementation."

"Excellent. What's your overall projection?"

"Overall projection?"

"How long will it take them?"

"It's impossible to say, General, this is all a part of what we were hoping to observe."

"Of course, but there has to be an extrapolation."

"There are too many unknowns – too many random factors – but this is what we expected isn't it?"

"Well, yes. I suppose..."

The early morning sun washed over Hanikku's sleeping blue body and she opened her eyes slightly to greet the dawn. Yawning, she sat up and stretched. Her mouth was unbearably dry and she reached for a canister filled with water from her well and drank deeply. She tipped the remainder of the water over her head and allowed it run through her hair and down her dehydrated face. As she rubbed her wet eyes she massaged the lids and prepared herself mentally for another long day. Sitting in the mouth of the cave, she looked out over the flat, featureless landscape of Sabaku.

"Sabaku," she whispered to herself. "Sabaku the wasteland."

Her thoughts turning quickly to food, she rose and walked into her cave to check the stores. There was not much left, just a few strands of a leafy plant she had found a few days earlier. Knowing that this would not sustain her for long, she decided that she would spend the day hunting for insects and searching for more vegetation. There were still areas nearby that she had not yet fully explored. At one time she had started to draw a map of the area in the sand, but the sporadic winds had stolen it. Now, she kept a map only in her memory, but it was accurate enough.

Fully awake and refreshed, she packed a small satchel, tied two canisters of water to her belt and picked up her only weapon – a long pointed shaft of metal salvaged from the wreckage of her ship. She guessed it must have originally been part of a railing but it now served her well as a spear.

Leaving the cave she walked out into the desert in

a westerly direction towards one of the lesser-explored areas that showed the most promise. Luck was on her side, as after only about half an hour of walking she discovered a small patch of densely leafed bushes. She pulled her analyser from her satchel and checked the plant. It did not contain many useful vitamins, but it would provide valuable carbohydrates. She harvested several large branches and tied them with a cord. Her mission a success, she started back to her cave. The next thing she saw shook her to her core.

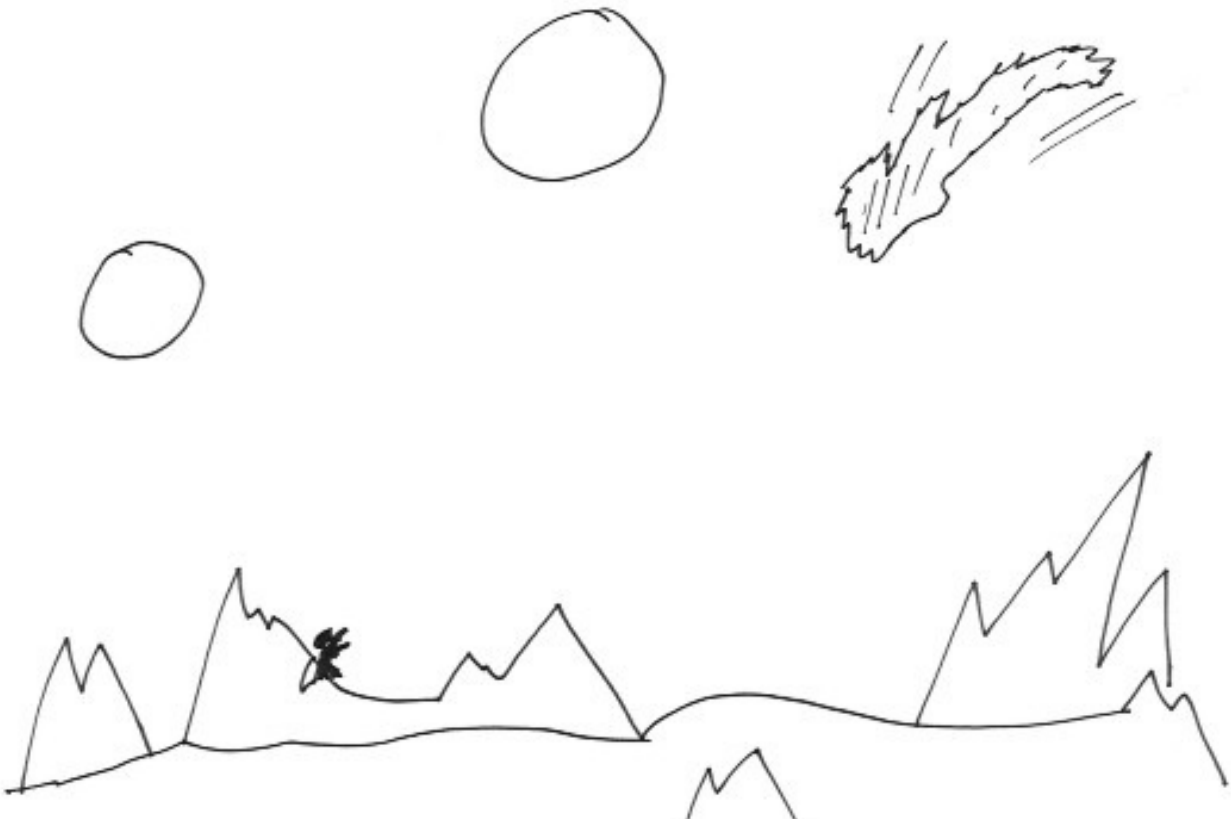
In the distance, up in the sky, a meteor was burning its way through the thermosphere something like a hundred kilometres above her. It was a ball of fire the size of a space craft and, as far as she could tell, it was heading her way.

Instinctively, she ran back to her cave and reached it in a third of the time it had taken her to walk out to the bushes. An outcropping of rock near the dwelling provided an ideal standpoint for Hanikku to watch the approaching meteor. It was much closer to the planet's surface now and she could see that she had misjudged its course. It looked now like it was going to hit the desert close by, but not close enough to present any real danger – although Hanikku's knowledge of rocks impacting planets was limited. She could hear it now as well – it made a screeching sound like steam forcing its way from a geyser.

As she watched, the meteor screamed its way into a hillside a couple of kilometres away – impacting the dry earth with a loud thud which echoed across the plains. The ground beneath her feet trembled and a vast dust cloud billowed outwards from the impact site. Hanikku stepped backwards to her cave, her eyes never once leaving the dust cloud. *This may be an opportunity*, she thought. *There may be raw materials in that meteorite I could salvage. Metals perhaps. It could be an iron-rich siderite.* Without stopping to think it through any further, she set off towards the impact site.

Wary of possible radiation contamination, Hanikku peered over the brow of a low hill and studiously examined her multi-purpose analyser. The gamma levels were well within safety parameters and she stood to get a better view. The meteorite was elon-





gated and as big as a large house. It was covered in the fine red dust of the desert and partially embedded in the sand. A powdery ochre cloud still loomed around the site. Analyser still in hand, Hanikku descended the hill and approached the crater. Dust settled all over her matted hair and coated the blue skin of her exposed face and arms. She could feel it penetrating her mouth and nostrils and she pulled a bandanna from her satchel and tied it across the lower half of her face. Closer to the object she see that it had an uneven exterior with a fin running down the side she was closest to. She held her hand near the surface to test the heat levels. It was still very hot and she pulled her satchel up and dragged it across the meteorite with both hands, clearing away the thick dust. She was surprised to see that it had a shiny metal surface. She queried her analyser for a material scan and examined the results. She was surprised to see that it was predominantly composed of a titanium alloy and an idea came to mind. Switching the analyser to a different setting she examined it again.

“Life signs!” she gasped, muffled slightly under her bandanna. “This is no rock, it’s a ship!”

She stepped back and looked at the shape of it again while she wondered why she had not spotted it sooner. It was definitely a vessel of some kind, sleek but large enough for people and cargoes. There was even, clearly defined now in the new light of her

observations, a powerful-looking engine section at the rear. It did not look like a regular shuttle or even a transporter. *A freighter, perhaps*, she thought. Either way, she realised that it mattered little at the moment. There were survivors somewhere inside and her main priority was now getting them out somehow. She emptied out the contents of her satchel and wrapped it around her hands to shield them from the surface temperature. Using the bag as a rough cloth she frantically ran it over a section of the ship, clearing away the dust and searching for a door or any kind of opening into the ship.

“Is anyone in there?” she shouted as she searched. “Hello? Hello?”

There was no response as she continued brushing away the grime. After a couple of minutes she discovered the slim crack of a hatch. She brushed around it and soon found something that resembled an electronic-locking handle. Tugging at it proved fruitless and, frustrated, she banged her covered fists against the hull. A hiss made her jump back as cloudy white air fizzled out at several points along the hatch seal. Desperate, she kicked the hatch hard and it creaked and groaned in response. More air hissed out and settled thickly on the dark orange sand. One more firm kick proved successful as the hatch eased itself open a crack. Hanikku managed to get her hands around the thin opening and she pulled with all her strength. The pneumatics seemed to respond pos-



Hanikku in the eyes. "I, I, I," she said, her voice deep and irregular.

Hanikku had a thought. "You're an android," she said. "But I scanned life forms on board."

"My, my, my, my, name. Name, name is Mi, Mi, Miette," said Miette, her head and left shoulder twitching uncontrollably. "My name is Miette, I am a medical android. How may I assist you? Am I eligible? Am I, am I, am..."

"Look," said Hanikku, grabbing hold of the android's shoulders to steady her, "my name is Hanikku. You have crashed here. Where's the rest of the crew?"

Miette looked up the ladder and said, "Bri, bri, bri, bridge."

"Fine," she said and scrambled up the ladder, leaving the malfunctioning android behind. At the top of the ladder was a small, cramped room. From what she could see in the dim light it was definitely a bridge, with three pilot seats, many control panels and a shattered viewscreen. There was a thin layer of smoke in the air coming from a small fire burning in one corner and part of the room had caved in. Most of the panels were shattered and wires spilled out like exposed intestines while some of them intermittently spewed out showers of sparks. *There must still be some power here*, she thought, and she searched for something that might light the room. Her engineering experience paid off and she soon found a open panel which seemed to be for controlling power and lighting. She tapped a few buttons and flipped a switch underneath the panel. The bridge was immediately filled with light.

Sitting in one was of the chairs, and either unconscious or dead, was a powerfully-built human-looking man. He was wearing the tattered clothing of a trader. Hanikku put her hand to his neck and found a pulse. His face was scratched and battered and he was bleeding from a cut down the side of his cheek. Hanikku shook him gently.

"Are you awake?" she said. The man groaned and opened his right eye a crack.

"What?" he said.

"My name is Hanikku. You've crashed."

"Who are..."

"Hanikku. I'm here to help you."

The man turned his head to look around and winced in pain. "Wh, where's everyone else?" he mumbled.

"Your robot is below deck and malfunctioning."

"Miette?"

"Yes."

The man eased himself halfway out of his seat and

reached forward. "Wang," he said.

Hanikku looked at where he was gesturing and inspected the other seat. A figure was slumped limply over it. Hanikku checked him for a pulse and found none.

"I'm sorry," she said calmly.

The man slowly shook his head. "My name's James Curtaine," he said. "Welcome to the *Swinburne*."

"Er... thanks."

"Where the hell are we?"

Hanikku walked away from the dead man and looked around. "You're human aren't you?"

"Yes."

"I don't exactly know what planet this is or where we are but I'm concerned that this ship isn't safe. We should get out."

"Yes," said Curtaine and he pulled himself fully out of seat, obviously in some pain.

"Let me help you," said Hanikku and she steadied him by holding onto his arm and helped him gingerly descend the ladder. Miette was standing alone and staring into the opening that led to the engine room.

"Miette?" said Curtaine. "Are you all right?"

The android didn't move.

"Where's Amis?"

There was still no response and Curtaine turned to Hanikku. "Can you look in there? My engineer, Amis Wellin, should be there."

Hanikku carefully stepped around the debris that littered the floor and entered the room. It was dark inside and she called out. "Hey! Anyone in here?"

She was greeted by a low moan when she accidentally kicked a body on the floor. "He's here," she called back to Curtaine. "And he's alive."

Wellin resisted as Hanikku helped him to his feet. He was groggy and seemed unsure of where or who he was as he stumbled forward with Hanikku's aid. Curtaine jogged forward to help.

"Amis," he said. "Amis, are you injured?"

"Wh, what?" he said, his speech slurred.

"It's all right, old man, we're safe now, more or less."

"What happened?"

"It looks like you crashed," said Hanikku. "Look, I have a camp nearby. I think we should get out of here."

"But we have supplies here," said Curtaine.

"Later," said Hanikku. "You can always return when you've ensured that it's safe."

Curtaine nodded his head. "Agreed," he said. "All right, let's get out of here."

# Chapter Five

"So what now?"

"We wait, General. We wait and we observe."

Captain James Curtaine looked at the pyre with detachment as Wang Chen's body burned fiercely in the sand. The black smoke spiralled upwards and dissipated in the night air while a lonely tear worked its way down the side of Curtaine's nose and fell to the dry ground.

"So long, Wang," he said. "Wherever you are now I hope it's better than where I am."

With the help of Hanikku – the strangely beguiling sapphire-skinned woman from Antila – he had salvaged a few items and supplies from the *Swinburne* before it had collapsed in flames. Hanikku had also patched up his head and his leg, which he had injured at some point in the accident.

He tried to piece together what had happened but it was all somewhat hazy. There seemed to be no real tangible reason as to why they would have lost control of the *Swinburne* so easily. The knowledgeable Wellin, who sat at the entrance of Hanikku's cave nursing a bandaged forehead, working to fix the damaged Miette, had suggested something about scleratus particles. Curtaine was unsure of the exact science involved but he gathered it had something to do with a disruption of space and that had somehow affected the polarisation of the ship, causing the controls to become unresponsive. But Curtaine felt that there must have been something else to it, after all they must have been knocked off course a long, long way. He had absolutely no idea where they were. On the course that Wang had been navigating them there were no desert-class planets, so what planet were they on now? It was possible that after they had all been knocked unconscious they had drifted into a stray slipstream and travelled for hundreds of parsecs, and if that had happened then they could conceivably be on the other side of the galaxy altogether.

Hanikku's story had been similar to theirs. She had lost control of her ship and somehow ended up there. Curtaine began to wonder if perhaps there was some property of the planet that had pulled them here. Hanikku, also far from home, had called this planet Sabaku, which he gathered meant something in-between wasteland and solitude. It seemed apt.

"Hey, Captain!" came a shout from Wellin. Curtaine nodded his head in respect to the blazing body of Chen and turned to walk the short distance back to the cave.

Wellin was still working on the limp body of Miette. "How's it going with her?" said Curtaine.

"Well, it's deactivated at the moment, but it's going to be all right."

"It?"

"Sorry, James," said Wellin with genuine regret. "I meant *she*..."

Curtaine sighed and sat down in the dirty sand. "So what's the damage?" he said.

"It's mostly superficial – there's no actual damage to her structure at all. I think that she maybe just took a couple of hard knocks to the head and that disrupted her processors. I've reset all of her main systems without losing any of her memory. The main trouble was with her motor-neurone system and with her vocal synthesisers, but I think I've repaired them now."

"Good work, Amis. Boot her up then."

"Aye, sir." Wellin carefully sat Miette against the exterior rock wall of the cave and straightened out her white jump-suit, which had been torn only in couple of places and dirtied even less. He carefully brushed her long synthetic dark hair from her face and reached behind her neck to touch the tiny activation button. As he did, Miette's body shuddered slightly as if fitting for a second and then she slowly raised her head and opened her eyes. She looked first at Curtaine and then at Wellin and then back at Curtaine. The Captain looked directly into her shining blue eyes. "Are you with us?" he said gently.

Miette opened her mouth and spoke but no sound came out.

"Amis?" said Curtaine.

"Wait."

She closed her eyes for a moment and then opened them and opened her mouth again. "Yes, James," she said in a pitch-perfect voice. "I am most definitely with you."

Curtaine laughed and slapped Wellin on the shoulder. "Ha! Well done, Amis, I owe you one."

"You owe me ten thousand credits!"

"What happened, James?" said Miette. "Where are we? Are you injured? Your hand... And you, Amis,

what have you done to your head?"

"It's good to have you back, Miette," said Curtaine with a warm smile. "There'll be plenty of time for medical treatment later. Are your systems functioning within correct parameters now?"

Miette paused for a moment before responding. "As far as I can tell, yes. Was I damaged?"

"Nothing serious," said Wellin. "Everything should be all right now."

"And where's Wang Chen?"

Curtaine and Wellin looked at each other apprehensively before they explained to the android exactly what had happened to them all.

Hanikku returned to the cave in the early night with armfuls of dry grasses and a thin leafy-looking plant.

"There was no sign of any living creatures I'm afraid, so we're eating vegetarian tonight unless you have some of those protein supplements left."

Curtaine and Wellin both stood and brushed sand and dust from their clothing to greet Hanikku. "I'll see what I can find," said Wellin and wandered off to the stack of things they had salvaged from the *Swinburne*.

"I'm glad you're back safe," said Curtaine. "I've boiled some water."

"I'm fine," said Hanikku and she handed him a bunch of the dry grass. "Here, put these in the water to soften them. They're not much, but they have some nutritional value."

"Sure."

"How's your robot?"

"Miette? She's fine now. She's away in the desert analysing the sand for any clues about water sources and whatever else she might find."

Hanikku sat on the ground in front of the pot of boiling water suspended over a small campfire. "I think your robot may be useful."

Curtaine sat down as well and waited for a moment to compose his response properly. "She's more than just a robot," he said. "She's my friend and companion."

"Oh?"

"I think she would take offence at being called a robot."

"But..."

"It's all right, but please show her some proper human respect."

Hanikku laughed at this. "I'm not human," she said.

Wellin returned with a small packet of something. "These are all that's left," he said.

"Toss them in," said Curtaine.

Wellin tore open the packet of protein capsules and emptied it into the pot. The cooling air of the desert night wafted steam from the pot and sent it swirling into the air. Curtaine followed its course and looked up at the sky at the two lunar bodies. "Do the two moons affect the conditions here?"

"I haven't noticed anything strange. There have been a couple of violent sandstorms but that's about it. There are no oceans that I have seen."



"Would they affect the drift of the sand, Amis?"

Wellin sat back down and looked up the moons. "I'm no geologist, James. I don't know."

Hanikku stirred the thin stew and looked at Curtaine, surveying him. To the extrovert Antilan, the humans seemed aloof and detached. She was curious about them and she had not yet decided whether she could trust them completely. They were all in the same desperate situation and she *had* helped them – it seemed only logical that they should cooperate.

"What is your homeworld like, James," she said.

"We're from a planet called Memory. It's the fifth planet orbiting the star Ifalna, have you heard of it?"

Hanikku nodded. "Yes, I know of the Ifalna star. What is it like there, on Memory?"

"It's a beautiful place. Temperate, mostly ocean, clean, an intact ozone layer, lots of diverse life, what can I say? It's home, I love it."

"Sounds nice."

Wellin butted in. "If we ever get off this hell-hole, you'll have to come and visit us there!"

Hanikku laughed. "I don't like the way you say *if*."

Out of the shadows, Miette appeared holding a plastic bag of sand in her hand. She startled Hanikku who was still having some trouble with her presence.

"Hello," said Miette calmly.

"Hey," said Curtaine. "Have you had any success?"

"Some," she said. "The moisture is definitely heightened directly to the south of here. I will return there tomorrow to check the results again."

"We've made a stew," said Hanikku, trying to sound congenial. "Although it doesn't smell too great."

Miette sat down and carefully placed her soil samples on the ground. "I lack olfactory senses," she said matter-of-factly. "And, not having an internal digestion system, I do not eat."

Curtaine laughed so loudly that it made Hanikku jump. "That's a good one!" he roared.



"I don't understand what's funny," said Miette. "Have I missed part of this conversation?"

"Hanikku here seems to be a little uncomfortable by you being so human," said Curtaine, still sniggering.

"Why is that?"

"I suppose I am a little threatened," said Hanikku defensively. "It's just that I assume... well, you're a robot, right? But you seem so real. And you are a very beautiful woman, so it's hard not to feel apprehensive with you around."

Miette took no offence at Hanikku's words. "I am technically, an android. A robot can take any form, whereas an android is specifically anthropomorphic. And I'm not sure whether or not I am beautiful, as my aesthetic appreciation of form changes with object, subject and context." She paused and looked around for a moment before her eyes settled on Hanikku again. "I was constructed as a female because most people find dealing with artificial intelligence less threatening when it is contained within a female shell. But, realistically, I am sexless. It is not my intention to threaten you. If it helps, you have my permission to perceive me as a robot or a machine. I will not be insulted."

"I don't see you as a machine," said Curtaine, affectionately patting her on the knee. Miette looked quizzically at him.

"I'm sorry," said Hanikku. "My experience with artificial intelligence is limited..."

Miette did not reply and instead turned her attentions to her soil samples.

"Hmm," said Wellin. "Is that stew ready yet?"

Later, when Sabaku was well into its night, Curtaine sat with Miette a distance from the cave as they studied the dune landscape lit divinely by the two moons. A small breeze had kicked up, and particles of sand were being blown gently from the tops of the low hills. The vista looked like it had been invaded by hundreds of tiny fairies, all fluttering around in the twilit night searching for the perfect place to find slumber.

"I'm sorry if I behaved improperly earlier," said Miette.

Curtaine shook himself from his reverie and turned to face her. "You didn't misbehave," he said. "You've just got to understand that you are a faultless creation, perfect in every way, and some people will be in awe of you when they meet you for the first time."

"But I have interacted with many beings belonging to many different species since I joined you. Why

have I not encountered this behaviour before?"

"Well, like I say, you're perfect. I don't mean to be impersonal or anything, but you are an impeccable imitation of a human, and most people you meet are not going to be able to tell the difference. But Hanikku saw you malfunctioning, so she knew what you were."

Miette fell silent for a minute before saying, "This is like prejudice."

"Well, I suppose that's exactly what it is."

She lifted her arm and placed a slender hand on Curtaine's forearm. "Some planets have a comprehensive rights arrangements for androids and for any other object possessed with intelligence and self-awareness."

"Perhaps Antila doesn't have those rights in its society."

"I've checked my data banks and it does not..."

"There you go then. You'll just have to be patient with Hanikku. She'll like you well enough once she gets used to you."

"Yes," said Miette, smiling. "I hope so."

Curtaine stood and looked out at the moonlit landscape. Although the place looked fairly inhospitable and although it might have been as treacherous as Hanikku said it was, he couldn't help but admire the simplicity of it all. It was so quiet and serene. Despite the lack of water and food, he had not yet seen anything that he could describe as being a *threat*. He laughed and looked down at Miette. "It's a bit like a vacation planet, you know."

Miette stood up to see what he was looking at. After a few moments she said, "Why do you say that?"

"Look at it," he said, making a sweeping gesture with his arm. "It's exquisite here. The landscape is so calming and peaceful. If the land was a bit more arable this is exactly the sort of planet I would choose to retire on." He paused and sighed deeply. "It's beautiful," he said.

Miette looked at what Curtaine was looking at and somewhere deep inside, calculations took place at a speed beyond those any human synapses could manage. In a split second she analysed meanings for the adjective *beautiful* and all references to it and attempted to match them to what she viewed before her.

"It's an aesthetic quality, isn't it?" she said.

"I suppose so, yes," said Curtaine. "But there's more. It's not something you can really analyse, Miette, no matter how good you are at it." He swivelled to face her and placed his large hands on her shoulders, turning her to face an arrangement of low

dunes just to the right of where he stood. "Look at those dunes," he said. "Tell me what you see."

Miette looked and calculated and looked and analysed and said, "I see sand dunes being disturbed by the breeze. I see moonlight being refracted by the many silicon grains. I see complex chemicals reacting with the elements in the air and the sand. I see..."

Curtaine cut her off, "Do you see anything more abstract?"

"Beauty?" she said.

"Yes, beauty. What do you see that shows you are witnessing a unique kind of beauty?"

"James, I don't think my functions extend to this area of thought."

Curtaine sighed again, this time through frustration. "I don't suppose it does, but you have the capacity to learn don't you?"

"Yes, but..."

"We'll keep going with this. Given time you'll be appreciating music and art." He smiled warmly at her. "I'm sure of it. Come on, let's get back to the cave, it's pretty late."

Miette nodded and as they walked back through the cold sand she touched his arm again. "James?" she said.

"Yes?"

"It's something that Hanikku said earlier..."

"Yes, what is it?"

"She said, 'you are a very beautiful woman'. Am I? Am I what beauty is?"

Curtaine stopped and looked at her. "Come on now," he said smiling. "You're embarrassing me."

Miette tightened her grip on his arm a little. "Do you find me attractive?"

"What would that mean to you?"

"I want to feel human."

"I don't see you as being anything other than that, Miette," he said, no longer smiling. "And yes, you are very, very attractive."

She didn't respond this, she just stared blankly at him. He wondered what was happening inside her head, or processors, or data banks or whatever.

"Thank you," she said finally. "That means much to me."

As they continued back to the cave Curtaine held her hand and she squeezed it back reciprocally. He could not guess what she might have been thinking. She was, after all, an android, not even truly female. But he knew that his eyes deceived him, and, to some extent, he welcomed the deception. It was not unheard of, for a human to fall in love with an android. *But is it possible*, he thought, *for an android to fall in love with a human?*

# Chapter Six

"I see that they are bonding!"

"It's what we expected..."

"When are you going to introduce their next little friend?"

"Ha, ha, ha! There's nothing little about it!"

"So it will be a surprise?"

"Oh, yes."

"And what about that droid? Will it be able to predict it? Will it see it coming if it observes the landscape too closely?"

"We have been extremely careful, General. We always knew that the android would be an integral part of this and I can guarantee you that they won't know what hit them until it's far too late."

"I'll hold you to that guarantee!"

Two weeks had passed on the desolate planet and Hanikku was gathering up all the supplies that the small group of three – four if you counted the android – had to their names. It was not much and she began to worry that having three mouths to feed was putting too great a strain on the already meagre resources. It was early morning and she inspected the dew collectors that Miette had constructed around the circumference of the cave. The well in the cave had dried up several days ago and water was extremely scarce. She harvested about one litre from the assorted collectors and drained it into a canister. She knew that this would not be enough to satiate the group for even one quarter of the day. Survival had become critical and she wondered if they would ever be able to escape the surface of this accursed sphere.

In the time she had spent with the traders she had grown to like and trust them more. She had even come to enjoy the company of the android, Miette, and occasionally forgot that she was even a machine at all. And the engineer, Amis Wellin, had helped them all considerably – aiding Miette in constructing the new dew collectors and providing some invaluable analysis of their surroundings. He had discovered many things that Hanikku had overlooked. Although he claimed to be a standard engineer he had theorised on many aspects of Sabaku. But it was with the leader of their crew, Captain James Curtaine, that she had experienced the most difficulty. It was not easy to dislike the man, but she had

found several ways. He was knowledgeable, he was forgiving, he was easy-going and hard working at the same time. In short, he was the perfect person to be stranded on a desert planet with, and this is what irked Hanikku so much. In a different life she could have easily seen herself admiring James Curtaine for what he was, but here, in this mini pressure-cooker of a society it was very different. She hated the man with a vengeance, and yet she did not know why.

Coughing announced the emergence of Wellin from the cave.

"Good morning," he said. "Is there any water?"

Hanikku shrugged. "Not much," she said. "Not enough to soak us for the day, or even for the remainder of the morning."

"Hmm," he said, stretching his large chest. He was a big man, perhaps once a little overweight, but he had lost weight since his arrival on Sabaku. He scratched his balding head and yawned. "Miette will locate us some water."

"She's out there now, somewhere. She's already searching for a supply."

"I have confidence in her, she'll come up with something. She always does."

Hanikku looked at the solitary canister of water. "Yes," she said quietly.

The red sun was rising and the dry ground glowed in its light. The days on Sabaku were short but that did diminish their power. At midday the temperatures became almost unbearable and it made it difficult to forage for anything. Obviously, Sabaku's wildlife seemed to prefer the night time and so hunting for large foul-tasting insects was confined mainly to the nocturnal hours, and this made it difficult to catch the daily quota of protein.

"If only it weren't so dry here," said Hanikku. "This place might not be so bad."

"That's stating the obvious," said Wellin with a laugh.

"What's up?" came a call. It was Curtaine emerging from the cave.

"Good morning, James," said Wellin. "Not much is what's up. Although it seems we're running low on supplies – namely water."

"Ah," said Curtaine. "Where's Miette?"

"She's out searching for water," said Hanikku.

Curtaine smiled at her. "And what's that in your



beautiful blue hands?"

Hanikku bit her tongue and threw the canister to him. He caught it deftly and said, "Looks like we've only got about a litre here. What are we like for food?"

"We're just about out," said Hanikku. "All the resources near here have been used up. There's nothing within a ten kilometre radius that could keep us alive for more than about another week."

"What about that weed you've been cultivating?"

Hanikku looked shocked. "Antila?"

"That's right," said Curtaine with a wry smile. "It looks big and leafy enough to eat now."

She shook her head and threw her arms up in defence. "No way, not a chance."

"Aw, come on."

"Ah, ah! That's a symbol and it's not for consumption."

"A symbol?" interjected Wellin.

"A sign of life," said Hanikku. "I've been caring that plant for weeks – it's like a friend to me."

Footsteps shook the party from its terse discussion as Miette approached from the dunes. She held in her arms a large rock-like object which she tossed to the dusty ground as she reached them. It landed with a thud and rolled to Curtaine's feet where it stopped dead. He looked down at it. It was roughly ovoid and about the size of a large cooking pot with small grey nodules all over its black surface. "What the hell is this?" he said, touching its surface with the sole of his boot. It was soft.

"I've been running," said Miette.

"What?" said Wellin

"I ran south for sixty kilometres earlier this morning."

"Are you malfunctioning again?" said Wellin.

"Certainly not," said Miette.

"And what?" said Curtaine.

"What?" she said.

"And what did you find? What is this thing?" Curtaine nudged it again with his foot.

Hanikku walked over to the object to get a better look. It looked almost as if it was moving. It's



surface was gently rippling in the sun, and it smelled strongly of salt and seaweed.

"It's a fish!" said Hanikku.

"That's correct," said Miette. "Well, almost correct. It's a cephalopod." And, as if on cue, an orifice opened up at its crest and five lengthy tentacles pushed their way out and inspected the sand and Curtaine's feet.

"A what?" he said, backing away a little.

"It's a sea-dwelling creature."

"What?" said Hanikku, Curtaine and Wellin together.

"Sixty kilometres south of this cave, and obscured by dunes, there is an ocean."

"An ocean?" said Hanikku.

"The ecology of this planet is truly amazing, isn't it? That there could be an ocean here and yet no water vapour or precipitation. It is somewhat stagnant, but there is flora surrounding it and fauna in it and I believe that the water could be treated and used for drinking."

"An ocean," echoed Curtaine and he sat down on the ground to inspect the sluggish sea creature. "What did you say this was?"

"We should relocate," said Miette.

As the group approached the shoreline, the smell hit them. It was like rotting meat. The area was mostly marshland and rich with vegetation. After the long days spent in the desert the profusion of green was astonishing. Low, thickly-leaved trees scattered the area and there were many plants that were cactus-like but with no spikes. The ground was mostly covered with short, thick grass that looked, in places, almost like moss. The ocean, if you could call it that, started where they stood and ended at the far horizon. The water seethed and was covered at the shore with a scum of seaweed that was rotting in the sun. Bubbles sporadically rose to the surface and broke with audible pops. In the far distance, beyond the ocean, was a range of low rocky hills that started green but ended red at their summits.

Curtaine grimaced at the stench and held his hand over his nose and mouth. "We can't migrate here. It stinks!"

"I'm sorry," said Miette. "But need I remind you that..."

"Yeah, I know, you have no sense of smell. Remind me to get that altered if we ever get off this planet."

"It doesn't smell too good, I agree," said Hanikku. "But just look at all the growth here. I have been scavenging food all this time and there was this oasis

practically on my doorstep.”

“There are several areas suitable for camp nearby. If the smell here is too much for you all we need not set a base up at the shore,” said Miette.

“I don’t mind the smell,” said Wellin, stepping cautiously over a bump of mossy vegetation. “It’s kind of organic and earthy.”

“Earthy!” said Curtaine, his eyes wide. “It smells like something died here.”

“Which, in effect, it has,” said Miette. “There are several areas here where the profusion of vegetation has become too much for the soil to sustain it. The earth here is still predominantly sand and not best equipped to nurturing plant-life. The abundance of life here is due to the water source and to an inexhaustible supply of compost. It seems that with so much life some of it has to succeed and some of it has to fail. Forty-three percent of what you see here is dead, rotting and feeding new life.”

“Forty-three percent?” said Wellin.

“That’s an approximation, of course.”

Hanikku looked around at the mulch and the flora. “Are there any creatures?” she asked.

“From my preliminary studies I have identified some twenty-two varieties of fish, crustacean and cephalopod that thrive in the nutrient-rich water of the ocean – although it should more properly be called a salt lake.”

“Any insects or mammals?”

“None that I have seen.”

“Is the lake tidal?” asked Wellin.

“Yes it is, but the ebb and flow is only a few metres.”

“Well then,” said Curtaine, gingerly removing his hand from his face. “Let’s find an area we can call home before the sun sets.”

The four walked a way back from the shore until the scent of decay had dimmed. Miette spotted a patch of dry ground that was big enough to accommodate them and all their supplies, which they had carted the distance using flat panels salvaged from the *Swinburne* pulled on lengths of plastic fibre also from the wreck. The patch had three palm-like trees around it and it looked like it would be suitable to suspend a covering over if they could use some of the large leaves from the palms.

“This will do fine,” said Curtaine.

“I’ll prepare the filters to purify and disinfect the water from the lake,” said Miette.

“Most of my filters are still functioning,” said Hanikku. “I’ll help.”

Hanikku and Miette opened up various containers until they had found what they needed and then they

headed off the lake. Wellin sat down heavily on the ground and opened the canister that contained the last of their current supply of water. He took a swig and then handed it to Curtaine who snatched it eagerly and drank from it while he sat down next to Wellin.

“What do you think?” said Wellin.

“It’s a damn sight better that where we were before.”

“You’ve got that right.”

Curtaine replaced the lid on the canister and set it down on the dry sand. “Have you got a plan?” he said.

“A plan?”

“A plan to get us off this planet.”

Wellin laughed. “There’s always a plan,” he said. “But it hasn’t presented itself to me yet.”

“Have you given any more thought to what happened to the ship?”

“Yes I have.”

“The scleratus particles?”

Wellin sat back on his elbows and stretched out his legs. “That’s right, although they’re just theoretical really.”

Curtaine unconsciously copied Wellin’s posture and yawned as he did. “Go on,” he said.

“Well...” He paused before continuing. “They are supposed to exist only in slipstreams and they kind of bind the whole tunnel through space-time together. But, if they escape from the slipstream, then they can cause trouble.”

“Trouble?” said Curtaine, frowning.

“They cause disruptions in space, distort things. I suppose you could say that they distort reality. But don’t ask me why because I don’t know.”

“You said that they must’ve done something to distort the polarisation of the *Swinburne*.”

“That’s right. Oh, I don’t know, James. I’m an engineer, I’m a practical man – not much for complex theories.”

Curtaine patted him companionably on the shoulder. “It’s okay, old man. Why don’t we strip some of these leaves and make a shelter before the girls get back?”

“Girls?” said Wellin.

“Just a term of endearment,” said Curtaine with a laugh.

Miette strained the scum from the surface of the glutinous water and dipped a canister in. She carefully tapped a button on the lid of the container and the automatic filters sprang to life. The canister buzzed and blipped and she looked at the lights

around its rim.

“The water is not as contaminated as I feared,” she said to Hanikku who was hunched over the edge of the water, scanning it with Miette’s portable analyser. “The filters in your canisters have no problems in rendering it safe.”

Hanikku looked up from what she was doing. “I can’t believe that the stench of rotting vegetation here has not infected the water more.” She looked at the surface of the elongated analyser. “There’s quite a heavy mineral content in this liquid here, and some traces of proteins. It’s almost a meal in itself!”

“You may be right,” said Miette. “I will fill the remainder of the canisters and containers and then we should head back.”

Hanikku looked out over the surface of the lake. “I think we should go fishing first,” she said.

“We do not have any equipment.”

“I see some shellfish,” said Hanikku. “Or at least they look like shellfish.”

“Where?” said Miette, standing up to get a better look. Hanikku pointed to a spot about ten metres away and Miette looked at where she pointed. There seemed to be, floating on the strata of the green scum, several large conical-shaped objects. They were a pale, creamy colour and they bobbed gently on the undulating surface.

“How deep is this water?” asked Hanikku.

“It would be shallow enough for you to wade out to those crustaceans if you wanted to.”

“Fine,” she said and carefully placed the analyser on the dry ground before stumbling out into the water. “Yuck! It’s sticky!”

“It’s perfectly safe, there are no toxins present.”

Hanikku plunged further in and paddled her way towards the creatures. She had to brush and scrape away several layers of seaweed froth from her arms and breast before she reached the shells. She scooped up as many as she could carry and then made her way back to the shore. Miette watched with unwavering curiosity as Hanikku dropped the shellfish to the ground.

“I count fifteen,” said Miette.

“Are they safe to eat?”

Miette dropped to knees and grabbed the multi-purpose analyser. Taking a sample from one of the creatures she tapped at the buttons and waited for the results. “They are perfectly safe,” she said after a moment. “Rich in Vitamin B and a quite high fat content. Lots of cholesterol! This is just what you need after such a meagre diet over the past few months. They could be eaten raw, but they would probably be more palatable if you removed the meat

from the shell and either boiled them or cooked them over a flame.”

“Thank you for your culinary advice!” laughed Hanikku. “Have you collected enough water for our immediate needs?”

“Yes.”

“Then let’s get back to the boys.”

“Boys?” said Miette, raising a questioning eyebrow.

“It’s just an affectionate turn of phrase,” said Hanikku, smiling. “Come on.” She gathered up the shellfish and the two of them walked back to the base camp.

As they approached the clearing they were surprised to see that Curtaine and Wellin had organised their supplies and erected something that looked much like a shelter using long, broad leaves to construct a low roof.

“Wow!” said Hanikku. “This looks great. A real home-from-home.”

“It will do for the moment, while we consider our options,” said Wellin.

“What have you got there?” said Curtaine, looking away from away from a palm leaf he was busily binding with thin cord.

“Clean drinking water,” said Miette.

“And some unidentified, but safe to eat, shellfish,” added Hanikku, holding one out on her blue hand for Curtaine to inspect.

“Excellent,” he said, stopping what he was doing. “Ah, Wellin?”

“Yes Captain!” he saluted. “One barbecue coming up!”

Night drew in on Sabaku and Miette stared in the flames of the small fire as the three others ate shellfish meat seared over the blaze. The sounds of the surrounding wildlife encroached on the group. It was an ambient mixture of creaks and groans from the unusual plant life and the gentle lap and ripple of the nearby ocean. The sounds barely invaded her consciousness as she accessed her numerous data stores, calculating their survival chances; the length of time the food and water resources would sustain the group; the relative chances that a passing ship would scan the planet and discover and rescue them – she gave them odds of two-hundred and seventy-two thousand, six-hundred and ninety-two to one of being located and rescued anytime within the next ten years.

Wellin was the first to retire, drinking some water and then curling himself up into a ball at the base of one of the palm trees.

"Are you tired?" Curtaine asked Hanikku.

"Not especially," she said. "The days here are short and the days on Antila are long – about twice as long as they are here."

"Well I'm beat," he said. He stretched his arms out above his head and then ran his fingers through his messy blonde hair. With a long, noisy yawn he bade Hanikku goodnight and curled up near to Wellin. The night was warm and there would be no need for coverings or blankets. Wellin had salvaged five fire blankets from the wreck of the *Swinburne*, but they remained bundled up with the rest of the supplies.

Hanikku looked up at the night sky. Only one of Sabaku's two moons was visible tonight and the sky was cloud-free as always. "The air smells cleaner now," she whispered to Miette.

Miette jerked her head up quickly to face Hanikku. "I'm sorry," she said. "I was processing. What did you say?"

"I said that the air smells much cleaner. The smell of decomposition isn't so bad now."

Miette looked around. "The wind has changed direction," she said impartially.

Hanikku sighed at the android's lack of effective chit-chat skills. "Well, I guess I should at least attempt to get some sleep too. We did a lot today."

"Yes," said Miette, and as Hanikku found a place to lay down Miette switched herself to slumber mode.

In the latter half of the night Miette's internal sensors burst into life. She opened her eyes and quickly stood up. The other three were sleeping and she dashed to Curtaine to shake him awake.

"James, James!" she said.

He rolled over and half-opened his eyes. "Miette?" he said. "What's the matter?"

Her face had transformed into an expression of fear. "Something's wrong. Wake everyone up."

Curtaine rose and woke Wellin and Hanikku while Miette crouched on the ground, the palms of her hands spread out wide on the sand.

"What's going on?" said Wellin, rubbing his eyes.

"Miette says something's not right. We have to get up."

After a moment or two the three of them stood, still only half-awake at the side of Miette.

"What is it, Miette?" said Curtaine. "What's wrong?"

At first, she did not reply, she just crouched as if in deep meditation.

"Miette, what's wrong?" repeated Curtaine.

"I believe..." she said.

"Yes?" said Hanikku.

"I believe that we are about to experience an earthquake."

"What!"

"I can sense tremors in the ground and they are growing stronger. We need to get far away from here, and fast."

"By Meludar!" exclaimed Hanikku. "An earthquake?"

"How long do we have?" said Curtaine.

"Minutes only. Grab what you can and let's move."

The group sprang into action. It was still dark but it looked like the sun was just beginning to rise and, with the camp fire all burned out, it provided just enough illumination for them to be able to co-ordinate themselves.

"Do you have water and medical supplies?" said Miette, hurriedly.

"Yes," said Wellin, obviously panicked.

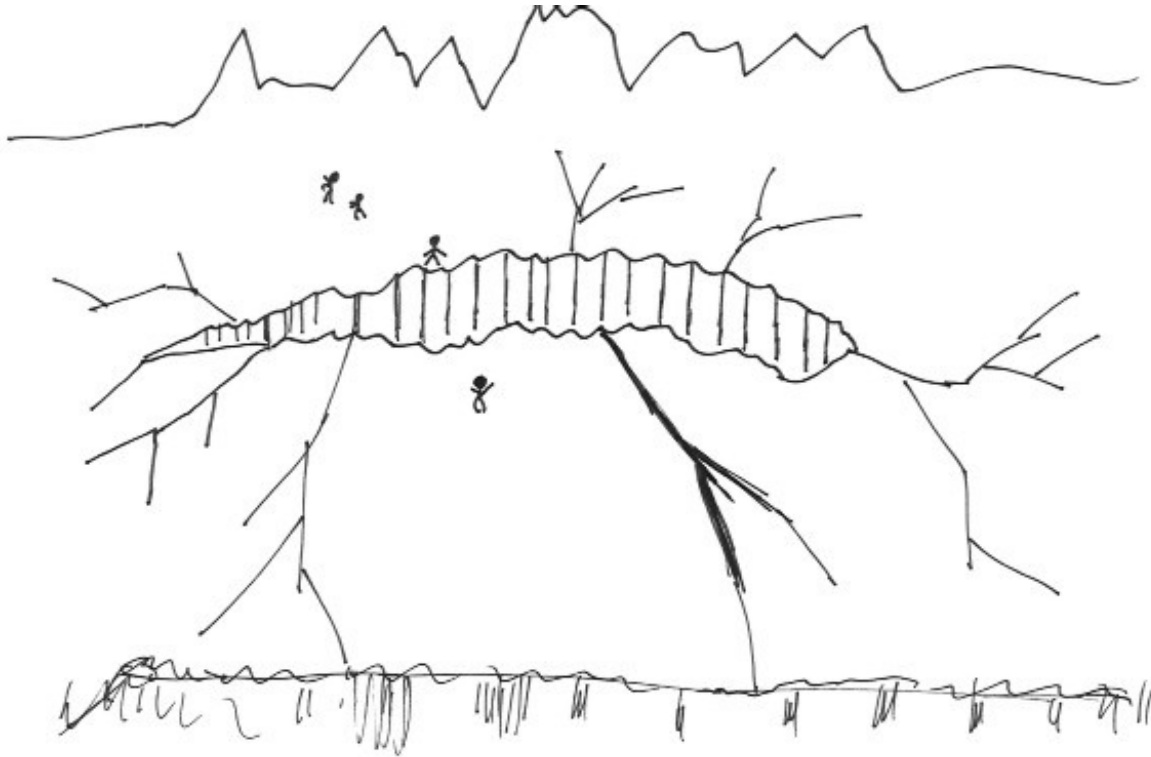
"Then that's enough. Let's move." And with that she started to run inland away from the lake. The others followed, running as fast as they could but finding it difficult to keep up with the engineered, athletic legs of Miette. After only a few seconds Curtaine felt the ground beneath his racing feet begin to tremble.

"I can feel it now!" he bellowed ahead to Miette.

"Just keep moving!"

Then the sound started and the ground began to shake more violently. It sounded like a deep scraping of rock against rock. Hanikku lost her footing on the dry earth as it shook and Curtaine stopped to help her up. "Come on," he shouted. He grabbed her arms and pulled her to her feet, roughly pushing her on. He looked ahead and saw that Miette was a fair distance away. Wellin, surprisingly, despite his weight and size, was not too far behind her. Lost for a moment in the rush of adrenaline, Curtaine failed to notice the fissure that was opening up ahead of him and Hanikku, and it was with a yell that he clumsily tripped over its lip and sent himself flying over the gap to land heavily on the other side. The items he was carrying were scattered everywhere and Hanikku came to halt at the edge of the widening crack. The side she stood on was lifting itself up. "Hey!" she shouted at Curtaine, desperately trying to keep her footing. "Are you all right?" But he just lay there motionless. "Hey!" she shouted again and saw that Wellin and Miette had stopped and were running back to where Curtaine lay.

The fracture in the ground was spreading away on either side and zigzagging its way through the land-



scape. The rock edge on which she stood was now jarring violently and she had to drop to her knees in order to stop herself falling in.

“You’ll have to jump,” cried Wellin over the deafening noise as he approached. “You’ll have to jump before it gets too wide!”

Miette stepped forward and Hanikku nodded. She took a few steps back and then ran forward to launch herself over the edge of the gap. She flew through the air – a blue blur against all the crimson dust and sand that had been kicked up into the air – and landed in the grasping arms of Miette. The wind was knocked from her lungs with the impact and she gasped for air.

“Good catch,” said Wellin. Miette placed her carefully on the ground which still shuddered and ran over to Curtaine. She checked his pulse – he was alive but unconscious – and she picked him up with ease and slung him over her shoulder like an oversized rag doll. “Wellin,” she shouted. “Help her up, and let’s go!”

Wellin dragged Hanikku to her feet and the group continued on, a little slower than before. Still the ground shook and each of them fell several times, Wellin managing to draw blood from fresh cuts and grazes on his hands and knees. Thick red dust clouds choked the air and the sound penetrating their very beings. In less than one minute they were unable to see anything and Wellin called them to halt.

“This is crazy!” he yelled. “We don’t even know where we’re going. We could be going around in

circles for all we know. We could be heading right back to that fissure.”

Hanikku coughed, inhaling too much of the dust. “He’s right,” she choked. “I think we should just stay put until it’s over.”

Miette eased Curtaine to the ground and knelt down to touch the earth with her hands. “I think the shudders are decreasing. I will sense any more ruptures should one start near us. All right, stay put for the moment.”

Hanikku looked at Wellin’s torn hands. The blood from his scratches was unidentifiable as it was mingled together with the red dust, but she easily see the flayed skin. “You are injured,” she said, still having to raise her voice above the din of the quake. “Let me help you.”

“I’m fine. Why don’t you see to the Captain?”

Hanikku crawled over to where Curtaine lay and attempted to rouse him.

“Leave him!” snapped Miette, completely out of character.

Hanikku backed away a little, partly shocked and partly angry. Wellin looked at Miette.

“Miette?”

“It’s over,” she said.

“What?”

And as abruptly as it had started the ground ceased to tremor and the noise dwindled away into silence. Thick red dust fell down like exotic snow and covered them with a blanket of cherry-coloured ashes.

# Chapter Seven

"Wonderful stuff, Director Ermanno. Truly wonderful."

"I knew you would appreciate it, General."

"How did you possibly manage to generate an earthquake?"

"We have remotes in the planet's plates, of course!"

"Truly wonderful. Would you say that it was a success?"

"I think they seem suitably softened now. The humans lost one of their crew in the crash, as we witnessed, and I think the android may be cracking under the pressure."

"Cracking or evolving?"

"Evolving! That you could even suggest such a thing..."

"And what about your Antilan?"

"She's not my Antilan."

"I only meant that she was, you know..."

"One of my kind?"

"Yes, well, whatever. You were saying that they are now *suitably softened*."

"Yes, indeed. Please excuse my impudence."

"You are excused. Do continue."

"Ah, yes. As I was saying, they are now suitably softened and ready for the final phase."

"The weapon? At last?"

"Yes, General, the weapon."

"How wonderful."

"General?"

"Yes, Director."

"What was all that stuff about sceleratus particles?"

"I have absolutely no idea!"

"Ha, ha, ha, ha!"

"Ha!"

Curtaine was woken with a kiss. He tried to open his eyes but found them to be stuck shut.

"Hey, take it easy!" It was Miette's voice.

"Wh, what?"

"Hush," she said softly. "It's all right. You jumped and landed badly, remember?"

"Not really."

"You hit your head."

He felt a wet cloth brush over his eyes and he became aware of how painfully dry his mouth was.

As if reading his mind he felt Miette's hand lift his head slightly and a cup was pressed to his lips. "Drink this," she said. He took a cautious sip and then grabbed the cup and drank the whole lot in one go.

"Take it easy," she said, and then, "Try opening your eyes."

He opened first his right eye and then his left and looked straight into the dust-red face of a smiling Miette. "What happened to you?" he said, attempting a weak smile.

"Oh!" she said, and laughed. "I forgot! The quake disrupted a lot of dust and sand and we got coated a little."

"A little? You look like you've been dipped in red ink."

Miette laughed her odd emotionless laugh again.

"Where are the others?" said Curtaine.

"They've gone searching for all the other supplies that we dropped when we were running and also to see if they can get back to where we set camp to check if anything's salvageable there."

Curtaine sat up and looked around, not that there was much to see. The air was still a little misty with particles of dust. Small stones and pebbles were littered everywhere and the whole scene was covered in Sabaku's characteristic red dust. It was quiet, too – eerily so. Not even the wind was stirring.

"This looks like something out of a dream."

"I wouldn't know," said Miette. "But I understand the metaphor."

"Miette?"

"Yes," she said and turned to face him.

"Was it my imagination or were you kissing me when I came round just then?"

Miette looked down at the ground and a wave of reddened dark hair fell across her face. "I didn't mean to, I was just..."

"It's okay," said Curtaine and thought that if she had been able to she would have blushed.

She did not look up as she said, "I'm sorry if I did the wrong thing."

Curtaine laughed. "Hey, don't worry, you didn't!" He reached over and touched the underside of her chin, gently lifting her face up so that she would look at him. "You did nothing wrong," he said. "Do have *feelings* for me? Do you have feelings at all?"

She opened her mouth to talk and then closed it again as if considering her response. "I think so," she said finally. "But I'm confused."

"Confused? About what? About me?"

"Sort of," she said and looked away again, pulling back from Curtaine's outstretched hand. "I mean I'm not sure if I feel close to you because I have some affection for you, or because you were the one who purchased me and you were the first person I ever met."

"What does it matter? I mean surely..." He was interrupted by the sound of Hanikku and Wellin as they approached.

"Hey! You awake?" called Wellin.

Curtaine looked around and waved to them. "Hello," he called back. "I'm fine, I guess. You two don't look as red as we do."

Hanikku laughed as she reached Curtaine. "We washed," she said.

"And we've brought you both some water too," said Wellin, opening his bag and dropping a collection of canisters at his feet. "There's enough there for washing as well as drinking. The water in the lake's pretty red but we managed to filter some of it."

"Are you two all right?" said Hanikku. "You look kind of serious."

"Well, we did all just nearly die for the second time, but apart from that I guess we're all right. Did you recover any of the supplies?"

"Not much, I'm afraid," said Wellin. "The area where we had set camp was completely razed. We got these canisters from where you dropped them, the few medical supplies we grabbed and that's about it really."

"How many medkits do we have?"

"Just the one."

"Any tools?"

"No. "

"So what in the name of Memory are we supposed to do now?"

"You're the captain, you tell us," said Wellin.

Curtaine looked at the ground for a moment before slowly raising his head to look at the other three. "We have enough water to last us the day?"

"Yes," said Hanikku. "And as long as the filters and purifiers in those canisters hold out, we have access to as much as we need."

"All we need then is food and a new shelter. Wellin, do you fancy attempting to construct something?"

Wellin nodded. "I guess some of these rocks could be put to some use," he said moving his arm in a sweeping motion.

"Good, then you'll need Miette's strength. Hanikku and myself will go fishing and harvesting."

"I think this is going to call for some serious improvisation," she said with a laugh.

Near to the shore of the lake, Hanikku knelt in the red sand and pulled the roots of a shrub from the earth. Her hands were covered in the ruby coloured dirt and it looked strange on her blue skin. She looked up to see Curtaine carefully wading into the water of the lake. "These roots will be fine eaten raw, I think," she called out to him.

"Good," he said and then slipped and fell backwards fully into the water. Hanikku laughed and ran over to help him, dropping the roots on the ground.

"Are you okay?" she said as she grabbed his arms and pulled him up. He spat water out and shook his head, showering Hanikku with red spray.

"Urgh, just about," he said and sat in the water rubbing his face. "I guess my fishing skills aren't up to much."

"What were you trying to do?" said Hanikku, still laughing. "Catch something with your bare hands?"

"Yes!"

"I think we should find something you might be able to use as a spear, and also try to get some wood for a fire so we can at least cook it if you *do* manage to catch something."

Curtaine stood up and shook more water from his tattered uniform. "I agree. But at least my clothes got a wash!"

"And you have too! Which is a good thing as you were starting to smell bad."

Curtaine laughed as they walked back to where small patch of five or six stubby trees grew. "Do you think we will ever get off this planet?" he said.

"There's always hope. But seeing as our only chances at the moment depend on a passing spacecraft scanning the planet for humanoid life forms and then rescuing us, there's not a great deal of hope, I must admit."

"What's Antila like?"

Hanikku stopped and looked at Curtaine. She had a wistful look about her. "It's beautiful," she said. "There's nowhere else quite like it."

"Go on," said Curtaine. "Tell me more."

"The city where I live, Atika, is on the island of Kireyna Onano in the southern hemisphere. Kireyna Onano means 'elegant woman' and Atika is the seat of power for Antila. It's where Director Ermanno governs from. It has these wonderful slender white buildings that tower into the sky. Ah, the sky, the purple sky. I suppose that's what I miss the most, and

this time of year it would be the most clear and the most radiant. When I think of home it's the sky that I remember most clearly. I miss my friends, I miss my family and I miss my bed. I miss waking up to dawns so beautiful that they would make you cry. I miss sitting on the grass in the grounds of my residence and listening to the sounds of the nearby stream. I miss... I don't know, I miss it all. I wish I were there now."

"Right now I wish I were there too. It sounds like a very special place."

Hanikku placed her hand on Curtaine's arm. "Thank you," she said. "And I mean that. I will take you there some day. I promise."

"I'll keep you to that promise."

Hanikku smiled a modest smile and they walked on to the trees. They were stumpy and sat like crouching beasts on the fallow ground. Several branches had fallen and lay on the earth. Curtaine picked one up and examined it. "These will do fine for firewood," he said. "But they're far too brittle to use as spears."

Hanikku reached up and twisted a long, thin branch which broke away from the trunk easily. She pulled some of the rough bark away from one end of it and handed it Curtaine. "Here," she said. "Try this."

He accepted the makeshift spear and walked back to the lake. Hanikku watched him with fascination as he stalked the shoreline and scanned the surface of the eater for movement. *This human*, she thought, *is interesting*. She had always thought of humans as being cold and disagreeable, but she had never actually met many before. Curtaine had recently changed her opinion a little. *Maybe he's not so bad after all*.

Curtaine lunged at the water and yelled a whoop of triumph. "I've got something!" he shouted and he lifted the stick out of the water to reveal a long, lean snapper. It jerked and flipped its tail as he waved it in Hanikku's direction.

"Well done," she said. "That looks like it will feed us for tonight at least." She reached down and picked up a bundle of dry wood and then collected the roots she had picked. Arms full, she walked to Curtaine.

"Are we done?" he said, a large proud smile on his reddened face.

"I think so."

"Let's get this baby back to the others then." And he waved his catch around above his head in celebration.

Miette handed Wellin another small rock and he huffed as he piled it on top of the small pile they had

erected. It roughly resembled a wall and would provide some nominal shelter from the wind should it decide to blow their way. It was mid-afternoon and the sun was still high in the sky, illuminating them harshly.

"It's not much is it?" said Wellin as he wiped sweat from his face.

"Considering the materials we have at our disposal, I don't think it's too bad," said Miette, placing her hands on her hips defensively.

"I suppose you're right." He sat down on the sand and looked at the horizon just in time to see Hanikku and Curtaine approaching from over the brow of a low hill. Miette looked too and a mimic of a frown spread across her forehead.

"They took their time," she snorted.

"What do you mean?"

"They only went to look for food and they were gone for two hours and nineteen minutes."

Wellin looked up at Miette. "Hey," he said. "What's the problem?"

"Nothing!"

Confused, Wellin looked back at Curtaine and saw that he was waving something in the air above his head. "Well, at least it looks like they caught something." And he turned his attention back to straightening the rocks in the red wall.

"We have fish and roots," announced Curtaine as he reached Miette and Wellin.

"And firewood," added Hanikku, dropping the bundle of wood to the floor.

"Nice wall," said Curtaine with a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

Miette had turned away and did not look around at Curtaine. Wellin patted the top of the wall with the flat of his hand. "It's the best we could do," he said. "Think of it as being less of a shelter and more of a wind breaker."

Curtaine smirked at him. "I guess," he said.

Hanikku knelt down on the ground and began to untie the bundle of dry wood, piling it up in a cone shape to build a fire and surrounding with a ring of stones to contain it. "You did a good job here," she said to Miette as she worked.

Miette turned her head a little. "As good as you?" she said.

"You must've worked pretty hard here."

"As hard as you? How hard have you been working?"

Hanikku stopped piling the wood and stared at Miette. "I, I don't understand," she said. "What do you mean? We've all been working pretty hard."

Miette turned to face Hanikku and leaned forward



to whisper. Ensuring she was completely out of earshot of Wellin and Curtaine she hissed, "How hard have you been working on James?"

Hanikku pulled back in surprise. "What!" she exclaimed.

"Your face is flush. If my nose were able to function within normal human parameters I would have been able to smell your hormone levels from the other side of planet." Her face was contorted into an expression of anger. It looked odd on her usually blank face.

Hanikku was shocked. "What are you saying," she said. "Are you malfunctioning again?"

"I have never functioned better! I am..."

She was cut off by Curtaine. "What the hell is going on now?" he shouted.

Miette's face changed instantly into her usual expressionless appearance. "Nothing," she said politely. "We were just..." And she looked up to find that Curtaine had not been addressing her at all. He was not even looking at her. Instead he was staring at the sky with a very worried look on his face. The others followed his lead and looked at what he was staring at. Approaching the surface of Sabaku at an extremely high velocity was a small object that was leaving a long trail of white smoke. Wellin instantly jumped up. "It's a missile!" he said. "Someone's firing a missile at us!"

Miette stood too and looked at it. "We're safe," she said. "Following that trajectory it will miss us by a long way."

"So who's firing missiles?" said Curtaine.

"Maybe it's not intended for us," said Hanikku.

As they watched the missile hit the surface in the distance. It exploded on impact and sent a small cloud of red dust flying into the air. A few seconds later the sound of the collision reached them.

"It sounded very muted," said Miette.

"It sounded like an explosion," said Hanikku.

"I have very sensitive ears. Something was wrong with that missile."

"What do you mean, Miette," said Curtaine.

"I'm not sure. Look!" She pointed at the far off point where the dust cloud was puffing out like a balloon. Encroaching above the mass of airborne dust was a secondary cloud of dust, stark-white against the scarlet horizon.

"Oh no!" said Miette.

"What is it?" said Wellin.

"I'm not sure how to break this..."

"Miette," said Curtaine, grasping her arm and shaking her. "What sort of missile was that?"

"Well," she said slowly, "unless I'm very much

mistaken it appears to be some kind of biological weapon."

"What?"

"I believe that secondary cloud is..." She paused and stared intently at it, her keen eyes analysing the sight. They all stood in silence as she scanned and calculated. "That's not an ordinary cloud generated by an explosion or displacement of earth and sand. It's spores... it definitely looks like it's some kind of powder probably containing viral spores." She turned her head to look at Curtaine. "A plague, perhaps, some kind of pathogen or maybe it's successive fever, that would make more sense."

"Successive fever?" said Hanikku.

Miette looked up at the sky and lifted an arm. "The wind direction is not favourable," she said. "I suggest you find somewhere to hide, somewhere that we can seal."

Looks of genuine fear had spread over the faces of the other three.

"How long have we got?" said Wellin, shakily.

"An hour. Perhaps ninety minutes at the most."

"Is there anything in the medkit that you could use? Is there any possibility of a vaccination?"

"It's unlikely given the timeframe and the uncertainty of what it is we're dealing with, but give the medkit to me and I'll examine it as we move."

"Okay!" said Curtaine, trying his best to sound authoritative, "let's gather the water canisters and bring those roots. Leave the fish."

Everyone scurried into action and within seconds they were moving away from the red and white dust cloud at the pace of a steady jog. As they ran, Miette fumbled with the medkit and hurried to construct something that might save her friends' lives.

Within the hour they had reached the shore of the lake. Miette instantly began scanning the seaweed-heavy surface, turning the now modified contents of the medkit over and over in her hands. Exhausted, Wellin slumped to the ground and held onto his head with his hands. "This can't be happening!" he said. "We've been through too much."

Curtaine put his hand on his friend's shoulder. "It's not over yet," he said. "Miette! Any suggestions?"

"Yes, Captain," she said, turning to face him. "Although you may not like it."

"Try us," said Hanikku.

"Given the urgency of the situation I have determined that we have enough time to find a cave or dig a burrow..."

"A burrow?" said Hanikku.

"...The only option would be to take shelter there." She pointed at the lake and everyone looked.

After a moment Curtaine said, "In the lake?"

"That is correct."

"Ah, Miette," said Wellin, slowly. "I know that androids don't require oxygen to breathe, but we do."

Undaunted, Miette continued. "The lake will provide you with adequate protection from this airborne virus. And while you are down there, I will be sending a distress signal."

"What do you mean a distress signal?" said Curtaine, his brow creased with growing confusion. "You mean to say that you're able to send a signal for help?"

"That is correct."

"Why did you wait until now to tell us that?" said Hanikku, throwing her arms up into the air in outrage.

"The power needed for me to adapt my internal sensors to generate a signal strong enough to travel any beneficial distance will require a total and irrecoverable shutdown of my systems."

"NO!"

"I have not wanted to do this until now as I think I have been more use to you all operative."

"How irrecoverable?" said Curtaine.

"Absolute. The procedure will destroy my memory, my circuitry and my cerebral processors."

"But..."

"Under the circumstances, I have no other choice."

"But..."

"And besides you can always buy another me once you have been rescued."

Curtaine stared at Miette, his mouth sagging open in disbelief. "I cannot allow this," he whispered sharply.

Wellin and Hanikku stepped forward. "Great!" said Hanikku. "I'm not sure we have too much time for tearful farewells..."

"Hanikku!" said Wellin, fiercely.

She shot Wellin a sour glance and looked back at Miette. "Thanks, Miette, you've been a great help," she said quickly and emptily. "So how are we getting into this lake?"

Miette looked at Curtaine, aware of his obvious pain. In the split-second that it took her to turn away she had reviewed every second that they had spent together and rated each experience accordingly. At the very top of her catalogue of experiences was the time when James had first switched her on and she had lifted her eyelids and looked at his shining blue eyes. This, she supposed, was the moment that had

defined her existence. Not staring out at the stars through a small porthole as the *Swinburne* soared away from the spaceport on Kurelin VI. Not the moment when she first felt that she really belonged with the crew. Not the time she had spent debating Ularian philosophy with Wang Chen on the beach on the shores of Panthalassa on Shumi planet. Not even the time when her senses had touched with James' when she had kissed his lips not four hours earlier. No. The moment her circuits and processors had selected as being the most meaningful, the most artificial life-affirming, was the moment when she had first taken in the sight of his distinctive, chiselled face and bonded with him in that crucial instant. She knew that it was her programming that made her react to him in this way, he was her owner, after all. But that did not make it any less real, and weren't humans programmed the same way?

"I was just coming to that," she said, her voice void of all emotion. "As we fled I took the opportunity to modify some of the items in this medkit." She held up the long white plastic box in one hand and flipped open the lid with a single movement of her forefinger. With her other hand she removed a small metallic object about the size of a small food can and held it up for all to see. "You place this in your mouth. It's a makeshift breather. There's no filter as such, but each of these modules has a tiny internal syringe which will allow you to extract oxygen gas from the water in the lake. There's one each."

"Will it work?" said Wellin.

"In theory, yes, but not for long. You should be able to inhale water through your nose and have it processed in your lungs as naturally as the air around you. But you need to come up for real air and discharge the liquid from your lungs at some point. I suppose you will know when. I have had limited resources and the chemicals that I utilised were only medicinal. I have no idea how effective its practical use will be." She looked up at the sky and the approaching cloud. "You have approximately five minutes left. I suggest you get a move on!"

Hanikku stepped tentatively forward and took the breather from Miette's hand. She turned it around with her slender blue fingers and looked at it with curiosity. Then she looked up at the ominous pink cloud. "Well," she said, "it doesn't seem like we have much choice." She took the other two devices from Miette and tossed them to Wellin and Curtaine. Wellin plunged the breather into his mouth and closed his lips around it. He mumbled something unintelligible to Hanikku and she nodded and popped her device into her mouth as well. She

shrugged and walked into the water with Wellin, leaving Curtaine and Miette standing on the shore.

"Five minutes?" said Curtaine, his voice lost behind welling tears.

"Four minutes and thirteen seconds, actually."

"M–Miette." He took her hand and squeezed it hard. She returned the gesture and Curtaine grabbed hold of her with his hands and flung his arms around her roughly, dropping the breather to the ground. He pulled her as close to him as was physically possible and kissed her with every muscle, nerve and blood vessel in his body. After just a few seconds of passion he pulled away and picked up the breather. He dusted fine red sand off it and looked at Miette one last time. "It sounds like a cliché," he said with a tremor in his voice, "but I hate long goodbyes."

"James..."

"Goodbye," he said and shoved the breather into his mouth. Miette watched as he walked into the lake and she did not take her eyes off him until the top of his head had disappeared under the water. "Goodbye, Captain," she whispered. "Goodbye."

Immediately, she began the process that would shut down her systems and convert her into a distress beacon. In the few seconds that it took to complete the operation she did not waste time on reminiscences and regrets and it was with near suicidal detachment that she closed her eyes and allowed her flaccid body to collapse to the ground, sending a billow of powdery red sand into the air. It was only at the last moment that her instantly active long-range sensors detected one hundred and thirty-seven satellites orbiting Sabaku, but it was far too late for her to respond or even care.

Even if any of them could have withstood the pain of the dirty, contaminated water in their eyes, it would have been impossible to see anything in the murky shallows. Curtaine, Hanikku and Wellin kept in contact through touch as the chemical from the breathers injected into their gums at a steady and controlled rate allowed them to absorb the minimal amount of oxygen they needed to live. At first each of them had choked and gagged as their lungs filled with the filthy liquid. They had to hold back waves of unbearable nausea. The sound of the water rushing in and out of their ears made the experience even worse. As the fear of drowning subsided, they relaxed as best as they could and waited. At one point, Curtaine thought he felt something brush past his leg and he jumped reflexively.

Time passed slowly for the trio and, just as hypoxia was threatening to take them all, Curtaine

signalled with a touch that they should rise and see what was happening.

Hanikku was the first to break the surface and, after coughing the water from her lungs, she breathed the air in deeply, airborne virus or no airborne virus. Curtaine and Wellin followed, exhaling the filthy liquid and inhaling the air.

"How long were we down there?" choked Wellin.

Hanikku coughed and spat before answering. "It felt like about an hour," she said.

"Yuck," said Curtaine. "Let's not do that again."

"Agreed," said Wellin, doing his best to force a smile through his discomfort.

The three of them swam a little and then waded the rest of the way to the shore. Curtaine looked up at the sky. "I don't see any cloud," he said.

"Perhaps it's passed over," said Hanikku.

"How can we tell?" said Wellin. "Is a virus like that invisible?"

"I'm not a biologist, Amis," said Curtaine, looking around. "Where's Miette?"

Wellin pointed inland. "There she is. Or what's left of her."

Curtaine hoisted himself out of the water and dashed over to where Miette was prostrate. Her body had fallen in an awkward position, with her left leg twisted behind her back in an impossible position. Scorch marks lined her mouth, nose and eyes where her internal circuits had burned out. There was no movement at all from her. Curtaine grabbed her shoulders and shook her. "Miette," he said. "Miette? Are you still in there?"

Hanikku and Wellin approached. "She doesn't look good, James," said Wellin, softly.

"Miette?" repeated Curtaine. "Miette?"

Miette's right arm twitched slightly and Curtaine shook her again, this time more forcefully. Her head turned slightly and her mouth began to move a little. Her jaw slowly opened and closed three times before emitting a low electronic moaning sound. "Miette, are you alive in there?"

"I, I, I," groaned Miette. Her voice was deep and artificial sounding. "They're, they're."

"Ha!" shouted Curtaine. "You survived it! Can you hear me?"

"They're com–com–coming," said Miette, her voice pitching from deep to high.

"Miette? Who's coming?"

"A, a, a ship. A ship, ship is coming."

"Who are they?"

"There are satellites. I can't see."

"You can't see the satellites?" said Hanikku.

"I, I can't see anything..."

Curtaine lifted Miette up and pulled her leg back to where it should have been. He held her across his chest with his arms wrapped tightly around her. She did not speak again and remained motionless. Exhausted, the group sat on the red sand in the hot sunlight, the ambient sounds of Sabaku invading their space and the stench from the lake desecrated their nostrils. None of it seemed to matter though. All they had had been destroyed one way or another. They had no food, no clean water and they were all possibly infected with a deadly virus which had been released by, as far as they could tell, a biological weapon. Someone had tried to kill them all and they had almost succeeded, and if they were infected they might have succeeded after all.

They sat this way and pondered an uncertain future for the next three hours. Nothing much was said as all the conversation seemed to have ebbed away. It was with unimaginable relief when, from a distance, they saw the sign they been waiting for all these weeks. A small spacecraft was approaching from across the lake. Wellin and Hanikku stood, while Curtaine remained seating, still nestling Miette in his arms.

"Well, well, who's this?" said Hanikku.

"We need to be careful," said Wellin, "they might not be friendly."

The spacecraft looked battered and it landed just a few paces from where they stood. It was a personal transporter, similar to the ship Hanikku had crashed on Sabaku, suitable for deep space travel but more competent on shorter missions. It had a person-sized hatch on the starboard side and a wide green window-panel wound around its front. Enamelled in green across the dirty, grey metallic surface was the word *Maldek*. Hanikku and Wellin stared in silence as the hatch hissed and slowly opened out. Atmospheric gas spilled out and as it dissipated it revealed the figure of a man, standing in the doorway. He was tall and dressed in yellow overalls. His skin was almost completely white and he had three red stripe markings across each cheek. He was also completely bald with distinctive twin ridges along the top of his head. He stared at Hanikku and Wellin for a moment, his red albino eyes boring into them. Eventually he smiled and raised his hand in greeting.

"Hello," he said. "I picked up a distress signal and scanned three bio signs. Do you need assistance?" His voice was light and almost musical-sounding.

"Hello," said Wellin. "Yes, we've been stranded here for weeks."

"Months," said Hanikku. "I'm Hanikku, this is Amis and that's James and Miette over there."

"My name is Mour Erparts. I only scanned three bio signs and yet there are four of you."

Curtaine looked up and tilted Miette so that the alien could see her.

"Ah!" said Mour. "I see you have a medical model. I have the exactly the same model. Hayden!"

A woman appeared at Mour's side. She was identical to Miette in every way except for her hair. Whereas Miette had dark brown hair, Hayden sported flame-red locks.

"We may have been infected by a biological weapon," said Hanikku.

Mour smiled. "A biological weapon? What have you been up to?"

"We don't know," said Wellin.

"If you are infected I'm sure we can fix it, right Hayden?"

"Right!"

"We'd better get you on board. Are there any more of you hiding away? Do you have any belongings?"

"No and no," said Wellin.

"Then what are we waiting for?"

Everyone piled into the *Maldek*. Space was limited inside but they were made as comfortable as Mour could manage. Mour revealed that he was from Abraxas, a planet on the outer rim of the galaxy and that he had been returning from delivering supplies to a small farming community at the Silverband cluster when he had detected their signal. As they left the planet he showed them the satellites that he had seen orbiting Sabaku.

"I've never seen so many in one place," he said. "It looks like you were being watched."

Hayden tested the trio for infection and delivered the medication that was necessary before getting to work on fixing Miette.

"She is pretty messed up," she told Curtaine. "But I'll do my best. I'm amazed she survived at all, converting her systems the way she did should have destroyed her completely."

Curtaine smiled at Hayden. It was strange seeing a model the same as Miette and he wondered what Miette herself would think once Hayden had fixed her vision. As they sped through space on route first to Antila, Curtaine watched Hayden as she worked on Miette's scorched head and body. *I thought I'd lost her*, he thought. *I really thought that she was gone*. He looked at her gentle face and closed his eyes, physical and nervous exhaustion finally catching up with him.

# THEAKER'S

## QUARTERLY FICTION

Issue 6

Summer

2005

### EDITORIAL

Which Button Should I Press? .....2  
*Howard Phillips*

### THE FEAR MAN

*Stephen William Theaker*

The Birth of the President's Baby .....3  
 Heartache .....5  
 The Investigation .....7  
 Grimmett Reading .....9  
 The Disappearance of Mrs Fatloch .....11  
 The Story of the Man with the Fiery Face .....13  
 The Mystery of the Missing Mrs Fatloch .....17  
 Grimmett Breaks Through .....19  
 Riots and Protests .....22  
 Desperation and Torture .....23  
 Finding the Marabian .....25

### THE LOPER

A Short Story .....29  
*John Greenwood*

Published by  
 Silver Age Books



# Editorial

## Which Button Should I Press?

Howard Phillips

*Marketing and Machismo*

I am sure most readers will join me in commiserating that this issue is devoted to the feeble-minded fool of a writer who has placed his name in the title of this magazine. More to the point, next issue will follow suit, featuring the second half of his addle-brained semi-fascistic power fantasy, *The Fear Man*. He has tried and failed to earn himself such an appellation among the staff at the Silver Age offices, resulting only in lowering their opinion of him to such levels that astound even such a confirmed enemy of Theaker as I.

Should I make allowances for him having published my transcript of a motion picture dream in issue four? I think not – look at the way he chose to introduce it! “Stink has not faded”, indeed! And here, in *The Fear Man*, while choosing to quote large passages of one of my unfinished novels, *First the Eyes, Then the Brains*, he describes me as a hack, and my novel as one that a reader of the future would be ashamed to be seen reading!

Were that not enough to earn the squat-faced ninnnyhammer my opprobrium, consider his editorial to the previous issue, where he talks of “the maggot-ridden corpse of verse” in such disparaging terms. I thank the reader who took umbrage at this appalling display of ignorance on the part of Theaker.

This gentleman wrote as follows:

“Dear Sir,

Thank you for informing me of the appearance of the latest issue of *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction*. However, I must take issue with the editorial comments contained therein, particularly as regards the negative comments directed at the field of poetry and the practitioners thereof. Only if one is to take, for example, the so-called ‘science-fiction poetry’ of Howard Philips as representative of the form, can the editor's scorn of verse be justified.

I remain,  
A Reader.”

Perhaps I should have read that letter to the end before committing it to paper! Never mind, this typewriter goes only forward, ever on, and obstacles of that kind will be met with the crushing force of intelligence they deserve. And if my intelligence fails me, I shall find the writer of that letter and confront him, bottle in one hand and an epee in the other, and we shall see whose scorn is justified.

Thank goodness, then, that we can leave that matter to one side for the moment, to look forward to the final piece to appear in this issue. You must wade through page after tedious page of Theaker to get there, but at the end of this issue you will find a wonderful short story by the hand of John Greenwood. Should we call it Lovecraftian? It is in many ways, and the story's “halls of academia” opening may seem distressingly similar in tone to that of *The Fear Man*, but persist and you will be rewarded.

And so my stewardship of this column comes to a perhaps temporary end. In three months time, given the chance, I will return, to help build your strength in preparation for another thirty pages of Theaker. If it becomes too much, retreat to last issue, where you were graced by Gilligan's pure adventure, or the issue before that, where you were able to step into my nightmares. If your copies of those publications are worn out, why not try our new journal, *November Spawned*, the first issue of which is now available. No fiction by Stephen William Theaker will appear therein, at least for the first year, and to the best of my knowledge. Thus, make haste, it is safe to enter!

If I may, I will end with a short poem:

“Ending come  
And we are done  
Finished in the eyes of June  
But stay a while  
Remember to smile  
And we will meet again soon.”

Regards and friendship, always ours to share – HP

# The Fear Man

Stephen William Theaker

*Dedicated to Rano, Lorelei, Stan and Jack*

## The Birth of the President's Baby

Due to the circumstances in which the third President of Earth, Bardello Fatloch, left his post, putting together a comprehensive biography has always been troublesome, at least for respectable writers. However, in coming to consider the imminence of my own death – I write this at the respectable age of 84, and the death I expect is a comfortable one in my own bed, so no tears please, unless you must – as I said, in coming to consider my own death, I also came to consider the imminence of the death – by natural causes, or otherwise, and to whom I refer in that second regard you may surmise for yourself upon reading about the various secondary characters of this story – the imminence of the death, as I said, of the few surviving witnesses to the events of this history. The matter that troubles me, the risk that I take, is that those witnesses who do survive are so unreliable. So much of what I am about to write is, by necessity, a drawing together of rumour, myth, innuendo, braggartry and potentially flat out lies that I suspect upon leaving this world to join the massed ranks of the historians of posterity I will find them sadly shaking their heads in shame and indicating, without actually saying as much, that it might be better if I went to find myself a place among the hagiographers and propagandists. However, if this book had not been written now, it might never have been written at all, and if my studies of history have shown me anything, it is that even an untrustworthy source is better than none at all.

Thus, I have endeavoured to make the best of a bad lot, to present the facts of the matter in so far as I have been able, but in the interests of telling a story not being too beholden to the normal acceptable rules of historical writing. My extensive footnotes

(omitted from this “popular” edition, but available to read in full in the academic edition) will make it clear where I have less than full confidence in my sources. I will try not to interject my doubts into the main body of the text, as the publisher has requested, for the sake of readability – given that he hopes, as I do, that this book will be very widely read, in order to counteract some of the less desirable legends and (dare I say it without offending his memory to the point of incurring a ghastly vengeance from the underworld?) cults that are beginning to spring up around his name – but I fear that upon occasion the reader will find that I was unable to help myself. It almost goes without saying, but say it I must for my conscience’s sake, that some of the dialogue to be found in this story is of my own invention, an attempt to dramatise the questions which I am sure must have concerned the protagonists at given times. Again, this is poor history and poor biography, but I am told it is what you want to read and who am I to deny my public? I am, in fact, contractually no one in the face of your demands. Again I refer serious students of history to my footnotes in the academic edition, which my publisher assures me will see publication shortly after this one. Those reservations expressed, I have tried to capture the spirit of the dialogue of the figures upon this great stage, gathering as I can their moods, enthusiasms and inclinations from my conversations with witnesses and reference to such historical records as exist (in many cases, if I may be blunt, these were often records of the prison variety – this was not a time during which the third President of Earth made it his business to associate with the well-to-do).

So where does our story begin? A difficult question for any historian, if we are not to read about big bangs and dinosaurs during the opening chapters of every book. I have made the decision not to cover the early years of the Fatloch presidency, or indeed of his shady youth, or the media empire built in his twenties and thirties, simply because those events are now

largely a matter of record. It is true that my researches, involving as they did some who knew him as the boy as well as the man, did turn up a few choice anecdotes, but most of those will form part of this narrative, where relevant. The others I will save for my retirement fund. (You will allow an old man his joke, I hope?)

So let us begin.

We meet our President for the first time shortly before what should have been one of the happiest moments of his life.

He was in a meeting of his Ministers, discussing the need for increased vigilance along the border with the Religizone, when he received a call – it was time to attend his wife at the hospital. She had been pregnant for nine months and so the summons was both expected and prepared for.

“Well, my friends,” said the President, getting to his feet and allowing himself to be pushed into his finest ceremonial jacket. “It looks like it’s time!”

“Good luck,” said the Minister of the Interior, “and give our love and best wishes to your wife and, soon, I hope, your daughter.”

“My esteemed colleague,” replied Bardello Fatloch, “how can I possibly pass on your love when the love I bear for them myself is so great that it threatens to bear me down to the ground and weep at any second!”

“Then in that case,” replied the Minister, “simply mention that I will attend them as soon as it seems to pay them my love and respects in person.”

Seeing that the President was not planning to reply, being already halfway to the door, the other Ministers tried to take the chance to pay their own respects, but he turned back to them and held up his hand. “I am afraid my ears no longer hear you – for the next year they are attuned to but one frequency: that on which my new-born baby daughter chooses to make her needs known. I refer you now to the Minister of Galactic Affairs, who will stand in my stead during this time of paternal leave – I have no doubt he will pass on all official congratulations at the appropriate time. Now, sirs and madams, I have to leave.”

The Cabinet stood as one and applauded him out of the door.

On the other side of that door waited his batman. Though in actual fact his most trusted assistant was a woman, it tickled him so much to use the antiquated phrase that he was willing to overlook its technical inaccuracy. Her name was Margaret Fielding, and he had recruited her many, many years before, long before he met his wife, after the first disastrous week

of his first honest job. Although he had naturally been stunned to discover that twisting the fingers of advertisers was not really the way above-board business was done, he had been savvy enough to know that he needed help, so that weekend he found and hired Margaret, who attended him at all times, helping him to keep in check his natural aggression, simply by virtue of the fact that she reminded him of his grandmother. She was also, of course, a superb organiser and personal secretary, and he would be the first to admit that he owed a good deal of his subsequent success to her assistance in that regard, as well as in that of quelling the murderous rages imputed to him by popular rumour.

She had a car waiting, and tugged off the cumbersome ceremonial jacket as he strode past. He thanked her with a smile and a nod and then he was in the car, where a glass of whisky bubbled in a jacuzzi glass.

Margaret climbed in and sat opposite. He stared out of the window.

“What word is there on progress?” he asked, allowing, in this private forum, a note of anxiousness to creep into his voice for the first time.

Margaret smiled. “Mother and baby both seem to be doing fine. Both are of course being monitored at all times, and all signs are good. At one point, the monitor seemed to show the heart rate of the baby dropping off a little during the contractions, which caused Mrs Fatloch’s personal assistant some concern, but further enquiry revealed that that is a normal result of the drugs given to Arabella to help her rest before the strain of delivery, and to stop her from pushing too soon.”

“Thank goodness,” said the President. “I have waited so long for this moment; all the worry, heartache, secrecy and tears – not to mention all the money. It would have been a great shame had the birth not been successful.”

“A great shame indeed, sir,” said Margaret, busily checking her hand held computer.

The President looked at her askance, wondering what to make of her comment. Did she mean that he was heartless to consider and mention the potential loss of his baby in such a casual way? Surely she knew how deep his feelings ran in this matter, that he understated for fear of breaking into tears if he let his feelings run true? Or was it something else, was she making an off-hand comment during a moment of distraction, a slip showing her true feelings about the pregnancy? Did she suspect the truth about his daughter’s conception? Was that the shame she referred to? He put it to the back of his mind – there would be time enough later to find out what she



really meant. And even if she did suspect, how could her heart not be melted at the sight of a beautiful baby girl?

However, by the time they arrived at the hospital, the baby had already gone.

## Heartache

Fatloch and Margaret, both still unaware of the awful events that had taken place, approached the hospital entrance, only to find the way blocked by police officers. Naturally they recognised their President almost immediately, only to wave him through with ashen faces, looking at each other to find who would be the one to give the bad news. In the end it fell to none of them, Margaret's handheld computer giving a warning beep – her eyes crumbled at what she read on-screen.

“What is it?” asked the President, grabbing her shoulder roughly. “Is it the baby?”

“Sir, I'm sorry, something has happened – the baby is missing.”

“Kidnapped, do you mean?”

“They are not sure as yet – we had better go to see the doctors attending your wife.”

Within seconds the two of them were speaking to the hospital's chief medical officer outside Mrs Fatloch's room. There was a frosted window, and through it the President could see vague dark shapes as they swirled around his wife looking for any signs or clues as to what had happened.

The chief medical officer was not a confident man, nor an especially well-presented one. He had somehow managed to reach his position through ability and dedication, rather than politics or ruthlessness, and the President had enjoyed working with him on various health projects in the past. That was one of the reasons that the President had chosen this hospital to be the birthplace of his daughter. One of the other reasons was that they had first met when both were much much younger, and although Doctor Sykes had endeavoured to live a very honest life since then, it had often been useful to the President to have him available. This special relationship had been useful enough for the President to relocate the Cabinet to this provincial city as his wife came to full term, much to the displeasure (part of him thought with a laugh as all other parts brought themselves to bear on the problem in hand) of the hedonists and sybarites who populated his board of advisors. Being

so far from the capital and their customary vices left some of them flapping like fish. Of course, those vices were still to be found here – the difference was that discretion could not always be so thoroughly assured.

That part of Fatloch was always ticking over, always calculating, always hunting for (and engineering when necessary) weaknesses that he could use to further the points on his own private agenda. It had been fortunate for Earth that he had become President, because ever since that day his only goal had been to ensure a peaceful and happy existence for the people of Earth and its federation of friendly planets. Well, that was not quite the only item on his agenda – you might call that his business goal. He had also had a quite personal objective, one that many had speculated on without ever being quite sure of, and that had been to have a child. Now it looked as if he had been thwarted in that, and the galaxy might well have to pay.

“So the baby was gone?” asked the President.

“Yes, I think so, at least,” said Dr Sykes.

“What do you mean by that?” The President had no time for prevarication. He had no idea what he had to do, but he had a feeling that it would have to be done quickly.

“I mean,” said the doctor, looking sidewise at Margaret, “that this was a new procedure, as you know.”

“What's new about delivering a baby?” asked the batman, before Fatloch was able to shush her. “It's been done a billion times and more. What was special about this time? I was monitoring the baby's life signs via my handheld and nothing at all abnormal showed until you broke the connection.”

“That isn't what happened,” replied the doctor, sidling past her questions and responding to the part that it would be healthier for him to argue. Though he knew better than to try to predict the reactions of Bardello Fatloch, he had long ago learnt that he preferred to hear the truth in any difficult situation – that was one of the reasons he was better able than most psychopaths to pass in normal society, and also why, despite all the odds, he had turned out to be a reasonably good President. “I didn't break the connection, there simply wasn't anything there to monitor any more. One minute we were getting life signs, the next nothing. At first we feared the worst, that the baby was in difficulty, and we prepared for an emergency Caesarean. Mrs Fatloch, of course, became almost deranged when she heard what the attending staff were saying to each other. Add that to the fact that she had only recently woken up from the nap

induced by the relaxant we had given her, and at first we didn't really pay much attention to what she was saying. Only as the gas mask was lowered over her face did she manage true coherence, and only then did we realise that her cries, of 'she's gone, she's gone!', were literal in sense. I placed my hand on her abdomen to feel for the baby's shape, but there was nothing there, and I don't mean that there was no movement – I mean that there was nothing there at all. I summoned a scanner and we were able to see with our own eyes – where there had once been a baby there was a baby no more. I might have wondered if there had never been a pregnancy at all, were it not for the fact that Mrs Fatloch showed every possible physical sign of having carried a child, and, of course, that I have myself performed so many examinations of mother and child since the conception."

"Margaret," said the President quickly, "please find the chief of police and organise the search for the kidnappers. I will feel much better knowing it is in your hands. Banish all matters of state from your mind."

"Sir," she said with a nod, "at this moment I know nothing of politics but what might help this search."

"Well, that's one possibility which we will have to consider when time is at less of a premium. I have political enemies, but it is hard to imagine any of those popinjays in the Cabinet even allowing themselves to conceive of a plot as daring as this, let alone actually participate in conspiring to bring it to fruition. Regardless, at the moment our concern must be to discover the perpetrators, who will probably be hired men or mercenaries. It looks like some kind of teleportation has been used to take my daughter. Such a method of abstraction suggests skill, but it takes no skill to point a gun at a scientist, so make no assumptions."

"I understand, sir," said Margaret.

"Find Inspector Grimmett – if he isn't already here and in charge, get him here and get him on the case."

"Yes, sir," said Margaret, and she set off down the corridor, tapping at her handheld computer. As Fatloch and Sykes began to talk once more, she paused and turned back. "Sir, about your daughter, I must say how sorry I am, and how much I was looking forward to meeting the young lady."

"Of course," said the President, dismissing her with a wave, "that goes without saying. But the game isn't over yet, not by a long chalk, and I think there may still be a chance for us. A teleportation this precise, so precise that it did not rip out my wife's guts as it took place, cannot have been done from a great distance. That means the kidnappers, and my

baby, are not far away. But with every second that you stand here idling with me that distance could grow, so get out of here and do your job."

"Were you not a bit harsh on her?" asked the doctor after she had left earshot.

"It keeps her on her toes, and anyway, do you think this is an appropriate time to be questioning my judgment?"

The doctor twitched. "No, I suppose not."

"Now that she's out of the way we can talk more openly. She keeps me honest, as you know, but this has not been a matter in which honesty has been possible."

"Can you trust her? Does she suspect?"

"I would be amazed if she did not, but it may be that she realises the limits of her influence. I say that, believing that the limits she imagines fall quite short of their status in actuality. Until this matter arose, I barely dirtied my fingers, except where it was absolutely necessary, for the good of the planet."

The President took a moment to draw in a few deep breaths.

"So what other possibilities are there? Could this be related to the way she got pregnant?"

"It's possible – I admit that in the past ten minutes a hundred wild ideas have passed through my mind. For example, what if there was no pregnancy, and the Baboose simply hypnotised us? What if the baby was some kind of hybrid alien/human genetic weapon? What if it disappeared itself out of here? Who knows, really, and that was the chance we took. How history will judge my actions in this I cannot say."

"Don't start with that nonsense," said the President angrily. "You had no choice and you know it. And I had no choice either, unless it was to die childless, and I am not going to let that happen."

"It may be out of your hands now."

"Don't try my patience, Doctor. I want you to provide a list of anyone of your acquaintance who might possibly suspect the provenance of this pregnancy, and you can begin with any colleagues who took notice of your extended leave last year. Mark the list 'suspected anti-democrats and potential criminals' and send it to Margaret and Grimmett."

The door to the room flew open and Mrs Fatloch sped past on a gurney. The President gave her a nod and turned to Doctor Sykes. "How will she be?"

"The disappearance of the baby caused no gross damage to her internal organs, but the abrupt severance of the umbilical cord led to excessive bleeding. That they are taking her away now must mean that the bleeding is temporarily under control. She'll be taken straight to surgery. Do you want to speak to her

before they operate?”

“What’s there to say?” said the President with a grimace.

## The Investigation

By the time Margaret had finished listening to the President’s rant, she had already used her handheld computer to bring up plans of the hospital, and cross-referenced it with the police computers to identify the location of all officers in the building, using the locating devices embedded under the skin of every one of them. Being the personal assistant to the President of Earth was very useful when it came to security clearances. (One result of her extensive access was that she was perhaps more fully au fait with the President’s past history than he realised. This had never stopped her from doing her job – in fact it made it much easier since she knew the kind of situations and reactions that had tended to get him in trouble as a youngster, and she was well able to steer him away from anyone likely to cause a recurrence. And of course her perusal of police records meant that she knew that his life since going into business had been exceptionally violence-free.) She wasn’t able to identify any obvious gaps in the distribution of the officers, but she needed to talk with whoever was in charge on the ground, as per the President’s orders, and get Inspector Barry Grimmatt involved. She had already sent an electronic communication to alert him to the crisis, but he had yet to answer, and she hoped that was because he was already too busy investigating the disappearance of the President’s baby. The distribution of the officers made it seem likely that they had set up headquarters in the office of Doctor Sykes – continuing to monitor the electronic display confirmed her reasoning, as it showed groups of green lights gliding into the room, and then gliding out, having been given their orders.

As she hurried through the hospital corridors, she passed knots of unhappy patients and doctors, huddled in waiting rooms, covered by the guns of armed police. More than once she had to step over bullet-riddled bodies, she guessed of people who had been a bit too slow to follow orders. The terror on the faces of the patients and the anger on the faces of the doctors who had been prevented from treating them told her that it was time to let the public know what had happened – this discontent had to be turned into sympathy before the President’s popular support

turned sour. There was only one year to the next election, and the last thing she wanted was a hospital full of terrified people talking to the press about a tyrannical and unilateral President (more than anyone, she knew that he worked hard to curb those tendencies). By the time she was half-way to Sykes’ office she had drafted and issued a press release explaining the situation. By the time she was three-quarters of the way there she was passing patients who had already watched the announcement on the news.

She kept the plan of the hospital minimised in a corner of the screen as she worked. Three lights did not leave the room at all during the time that she watched, presumably the officers in charge. She considered checking to see if one of them was Grimmatt, but decided to let herself be surprised – she was almost there now, after all.

She walked up to the office and went in through the door unchallenged – she had used her handheld computer to advise officers throughout the building of her route.

Inside, there was one woman and two men, paying close attention to a plan of the hospital spread out on the table. Even if she had not met Grimmatt before, she would have known which of the men he was immediately. That is not to say the other of the two men was unimpressive in any way. Like his female colleague, he looked efficient, focused and dangerous. But Grimmatt was a man apart from other men, as Margaret had once verified for herself at a party hosted by the President to celebrate his inauguration. That she was quite older than him, and far from surgically augmented, had not seemed to be a problem for him. He had been drunk at the time, naturally, but the following morning he had not been, and his desire to be with her had not faltered. He had been keen to continue the relationship, but she had not. Altruistically, she put it to herself, and to him, that she had to make him available to other women. But that really wasn’t it. Other women of a certain age might have ended such a relationship for fear of being hurt, if he turned his attentions to a younger girl, but that had been far from her mind. When men said that they found her attractive because of her personality, they truly meant it, so powerful was her force of will, rabid intelligence and love of intellectual communion. No, she had ended the relationship because she had another lover waiting for her that afternoon. It had pained her to do so, and she had wished fervently that she had still been young enough to bear children, because if she were, his genetic heritage marked him out as the perfect partner. The exploits of his ancestors were common

knowledge, and had even been the subject of novels, films and at least one symphony. Eight paternal generations previously, Detective Jim Grimmett of Scotland Yard had caught such evil villains as Manx Dan, the Deadly Scholburg, and the Miss With No Twist. Nobody knew how many of those unreliably chronicled stories were true, in particular those which described his encounter with the terrible Tin Can Brains (given that humans had as yet only encountered one other spacefaring species, the Baboose, and they had never mentioned meeting any homicidal metal maniacs), but they had entertained wave after wave of children. Then there were the accounts of Gordon Grimmett who had lived in the twentieth century, supposedly combating supernatural and other menaces to the British Isles, only to die heroically trying to prevent the zombie holocaust that annihilated the population of that brave nation at the dawn of the twenty-first century. If he had not previously had a son to a wife who had moved to the other side of the world after their divorce, the line of Grimmetts would have ended there. But it had continued, resulting in the brave and serious man she was now with.

He glanced up at her and smiled, very briefly, but warmly, before returning to the plans.

"I'm glad you're here," he said, without looking up again. "We need all the help we can get."

She smiled back, wearily. "Are you in charge yet? No slight to your colleagues, but the President will only be happy with someone he personally knows and can trust without doubt on this case."

"We totally understand," interjected the woman, holding out her hand. "All the signs are that this must have been carefully planned, most likely with help from domestic sources. The President will have to be very careful in investigating this. I'm Superintendent Maestri, by the way, and this is Superintendent Godal."

Margaret put her handheld computer down on the table, on top of one corner of the plan, and took her hand, shaking it firmly.

"We head up the police force in this town," said Godal, taking his turn to shake Margaret's hand. "We're doing our best, but we fully expect to be sent home once the government folks arrive."

"That's not going to happen," replied Margaret. "Or at least, they will arrive, but you will not be sent home. There were many reasons for the President choosing for his baby to be born here, and one of those was that he has less than total faith in the loyalty of the police chief in the capital. The way the police behaved during the election was almost

openly partisan, and the President will not want politics to interfere with the search for his daughter. Putting Inspector Grimmett and myself at the heart of the investigation should be enough to ensure total co-operation from all necessary government agencies."

"Does the missing girl have a name yet?" asked Godal. The others looked at him, slightly surprised. "Well, assuming they didn't just teleport her into space (although we can't totally discount the possibility of that, especially if the motive was revenge), she has been born. It would make things easier administratively if we had a name to call her by – it'll also make it easier to galvanise public support, which might be important if we are forced again to be as rough as we were here."

"Her name will be Taio," said Margaret.

"Had they already chosen the name, then?" asked Maestri.

"It was my mother's name," replied Margaret. "It's not the kind of thing either of the parents wants or needs to think about right now. I will tell Fatloch that she chose the name, and tell her she named the child after asking me for a suggestion while sedated. Could you update me on your actions?"

"So far," said Maestri, "we have been searching the hospital room by room, checking patients against patient lists, checking doctors against attendance records, confirming the identities of everyone in the building. So far, apart from a pair of idiot youths who were in here with gunshot wounds, and had given fake names, everyone seems to be who they say they are, but we haven't yet finished."

Godal spoke next. "If we establish the identity of everyone in here, and that there are no unexplained absences, we will then have to look at less obvious dangers – such as sleeper agents for the Religizone, terrorist organisations, or even, although I'd say it is a very remote possibility, whether anyone in here is a Baboose in disguise."

Margaret raised an eyebrow.

"We know next to nothing about them," said Grimmett with a shrug. "There is no reason so far to suspect them of hostility, but we know of their interest in medical matters. For all we know they could have the ability to take on human forms."

"Don't forget the disgusting suggestions they have made in the past," said Godal. "How could they not understand how repulsed humans would be by such a bestial proposal?"

"Well," said Margaret, "I suppose we must consider the possibility that they might have been upset by the rejection. And if they were to enact some kind

of revenge, the child of the President of Earth would be an obvious target. Unlikely as it is, let us arrange to have to have the hospital's diagnostic scanners put to use in checking for any alien infiltration."

"Okay," said Grimmatt. "Maestri, I want you to handle that. Have yourself checked first, then doctors, and then patients. Godal, I want you to oversee background checks on everyone. Check for family histories, psychological profiles done in the course of employment applications, attendance at educational establishments, or as ordered by the courts, and for anything at all that could indicate any allegiance to Religizone or other antidemocratic causes."

The two of them left, and Margaret was left alone with Inspector Barry Grimmatt for a moment. He was as handsome as ever, the extra couple of years of hard underground police work having done nothing to dull his beautiful eyes, or coarsen his soft lips, which she kissed.

"Do your best," she asked him, and left.

Back inside, Grimmatt turned back to the plan on the desk, no longer masking the real concern he felt. Was the girl even alive any more? They had already begun, but where the hell should he start?

## Grimmett Reading

Two months later, with almost all leads followed or at least under surveillance, Grimmatt sat on a bunk in an empty jail cell and took out his favourite book, *First the Eyes, Then the Brains*, by a hack from the early twenty-first century by the name of Howard Phillips. He would rarely admit to anyone that it was his favourite, or that he carried a copy, the same copy he had been given as a child, with him at all times. The novel concerned, in parts, one of his illustrious ancestors, Gordon Grimmatt, and his heroic death. He had read this novel so often that it had become a form of meditation for him, a way to access the workings of his own subconscious mind. When inspiration was needed, he let the book fall open where it would.

\*\*\*

In the years since the terrible incident at Birmingham, and the death thereby of her old friend (and erstwhile lover) Cornelius Gilligan, Savita Gill had tried to pass her life as best as she could. After the horrors she had seen, the world could never again

be looked at in the same way. Even minor events, like a trip to the shops or a visit to the library, seemed to her full of evil portents, as if the devil were dogging her steps. Little did she know that he was not pacing behind her, but waiting up ahead.

At that time, in fact, all was well with the world, or at least as well as it ever was, even if all was not well with Savita. There were wars here and there of course, and murders, atrocities and assassinations, crimes of hate against women, against homosexuals, against all manner of people because of the colour of their skin, or the shape of their eyes or noses, and so on – that is to say, things were as well with the world as ever they were, but not as bad as they might get.

Savita on the other hand was not doing so well. She had tried lovers, male, female, and at least once without looking, and even sunk to the depths of a marriage once, but all had ended in either boredom or defeat, as the very nature of the things she had seen meant there was no way to share the burden with anyone, since almost all the protagonists in those dreadful events were either dead or amnesiac. The one person who might have helped her come to terms with it all was Detective Gordon Grimmatt, but after they had saved the world together he had faded into the background as if he had never been. One moment they had been celebrating the defeat of the dread Mohander, and commiserating their losses, and the next he had been gone, presumably to work on some other case of national importance, leaving Savita to fend for herself in a world she no longer trusted.

Unfortunately for Savita, unfortunately for the world, though Detective Gordon Grimmatt had done as much as he could in those missing years to keep the world safe for humanity, as Savita made her way to town that day, he was embroiled in his most difficult and impenetrable mission to date, one which, by the end of the day, would have claimed his life. By the end of the week, Savita would be wishing she could have died on that day too.

But for now, she was going into town. As the 101 bus wove its winding way past the prison, past the new housing developments, and through the wine bars and financial buildings that led to the city centre, she gazed out of the window, disappointed at herself for not being able to grasp this new chance at life, so hard won, and at such cost. Through the windows of the buildings she saw the people as maggots, feasting on a world they did not even see as rotten. The people on the streets she saw as shrews and field mice, but vainglorious rodents, ignorant in their pride of the eagles circling above their heads.

When the blow came, she thought, they would be too busy hee-hawing their disapproval of each other's shoes to even hear the rush of wind that would snatch away their piddling lives. But she did not envy them, as some might in a similar situation. At least she knew where she stood with the universe, and though it made her so unhappy, she preferred that to being a fool. She didn't know why, though, and if she had actually had a choice to make on the matter, she might not have made the choice she would have expected.

The bus arrived at the final stop before it started off again on its roundabout journey of the city. Savita paused for a few seconds before standing, unsure whether to just stick with the bus and let it take her back home, but pretty quickly the thought was banished by others of an empty house, and she got to her feet. The people coming down from the top deck wouldn't stop to let her past, and she resolved to accidentally bang into any of them that she saw again.

She began to walk in the direction of the town hall, moving along Colmore Row with all the enthusiasm she could muster. She was jostled by a guy in his late twenties talking with animation to a pair of friends, a couple holding hands.

"I hate it when people do that," said the man, digging his hands into the pockets of his denim jacket with venom. Savita wondered if he was talking about her.

"Do what?" said the male half of the couple, clearly puzzled. Savita put a bit of speed to make sure she didn't miss the answer.

"Walk slowly down the street. It really bugs me. They know other people are trying to get places..."

Savita didn't hear any more of the conversation – she turned back to see if she could catch the bus before it left. It had already set off, and as it rushed towards her, eager to get other people home, she found her feet moving to the edge of the pavement, almost involuntarily, but she wasn't sure. As she began to step off, the bus honked its horn. She took a dazed step back, bumping into someone, and as the driver waved an angry fist at her she felt an elbow digging into her back.

She walked away without looking behind her and headed for the library. She went straight up to the sixth floor, the academic books, and sat in the seating reserved for women, ridiculously she had always felt, until a boy had to her dismay spent a good half hour pursuing her around the English shelves, and she had decided to take advantage of the women-only refuge. Today, she was taking refuge not only

from boys, but from the world in general, of which the events on Colmore Row had done nothing to improve her opinion.

However, after five minutes of cradling her head in her hands, she felt a tap on her shoulder.

"Excuse me, miss," said a quavering voice. "Are you all right?"

Savita lifted her head. "I don't know. Is it worth living at all if you know death is coming?"

"Well," said the librarian, taking a seat beside Savita, "that's the oldest question of them all, isn't it? Death is coming, there isn't a thing we can do about it. I think most people give in to their genetic dispositions and do the things that make them happy – the same things that would have made their ancestors happy sixty million years ago. They fornicate, defecate and masticate, if I might try my hand at an epigram."

"I don't mean death as a far-off distant thing; I mean death as something that gets right up close, something that has been right in your face, and no matter how hard you scrub, the stench won't leave you."

The old lady placed a hand on Savita's and gave it a squeeze. "It's obvious that you are a very intelligent young lady, and you have thought about these things a lot. Have you had quite a difficult time of it lately?"

Savita pulled her chin up and pushed out her bottom lip bravely, but couldn't say a word.

"You must consider, my dear, that death is not such a far-off thing for all of us as it is for a young woman like you. I dare say I stray much closer to those icy fingers nowadays than you, however bad things have been for you in the past."

Savita began to feel a bit silly and self-indulgent. It wasn't as if she had had to fight for her life for years now, and this lovely librarian was trying to engage her in conversation, trying to reach through her anger at the world, despite having every reason not to.

"Most people," said the librarian, "don't think about these things at all. They pleasure themselves and take what they can, getting the most for themselves during a life they know by instinct is awfully short, only sharing with others when they can get something out of it."

"And what about other people?" asked Savita. "How do they cope with all the hypocrisy and selfishness?"

"Some people," the older lady said with a kind smile, "believe that death is not the end."

"You mean like Christians?" said Savita.

"That's right, my dear."

“But what about serious people? How do they cope?”

The librarian leant back and pursed her lips, slowly taking her hand away from Savita’s. “I am very serious about my faith. It is a real consolation to me in difficult times – such as this conversation, I might say.” She laughed at her own joke.

“I’m sorry,” said Savita, “I didn’t mean to offend you.” (Though I suppose, she thought to herself, I must admit I didn’t care much whether any passing God-botherers heard me. In fact I suppose I relished that possibility.) “I simply don’t understand why anyone would go for what seems like such a load of cobblers. My problem is that I don’t know how to be happy in the face of death. If you buy into the idea that death is not the end, that just becomes an excuse for being unhappy in this life – to me, it’s just a way to keep unhappy people quiet.”

“On the other hand,” replied the librarian, “perhaps the promise that death is not the end makes us a bit happier in life, less desperate, less acquisitive, and generally more relaxed. We don’t mind the approach of death so much because we know we can find happiness afterwards.”

That she said that was ironic, because the next time Savita met the librarian, the old lady would be dead and feasting upon human flesh.

\*\*\*

It was the end of the chapter. Grimmatt stretched his arms out and let the book find its own place again.

\*\*\*

Having subdued her quarry, Savita proceeded to eat him.

Of course, her hunger at first was ferocious, having only recently awoken to this new life. So her first action was to plunge her fingers, now become as hard as steel, through what seemed to her a brittle eggshell of a skull. She scooped out a handful of delicious brimy brain and wolfed it down in seconds. Never had food tasted so good. A few more handfuls assuaged her immediate hunger, and she began to give thought to the need to protect this food from others of her kind who might seek to take it from her.

She got to her feet, stumbling a bit from her own new-found clumsiness, but almost lazily managing to right herself again, and then she reached her hand into the man’s skull, grasped it through the eyesockets and began to drag him away to a quieter spot.

However, as her fingers pushed into those eyesockets, the eyeballs themselves began to protrude.

She continued as long as she could, and had actually reached one of the alleys that led off Colmore Row before the eyes popped stickily out. One hung from the optic nerve and dangled on the cheek, the other escaped and fell onto the floor.

Savita dropped the body and dived at the rolling eyeball, somehow finding a way to prevent it from falling into an unwelcome drain. She popped it straight into her mouth, savouring the splash of cool liquid on her palate. She reflected, in a hazy way, that she must have lost some of her normal fastidiousness – the last food she had eaten from the floor must have been crisps from the school playground. She supposed that she was now beyond the reach of any harm that bacteria or germs or lurgies could do to her.

She had enjoyed the first eyeball so much that she quickly grabbed the other – it tasted just as fresh and delightful, but it left her wanting to eat more, somewhat unsatisfied. She made a mental note to in future treat the eyeballs as aperitifs to the main course – that is, first the eyes, then the brains.

\*\*\*

Whatever his subconscious was trying to say to him, Grimmatt was darned if he knew what language it was speaking in. He put the book down and fell asleep.

## The Disappearance of Mrs Fatloch

Seconds later he was awake again. The alarm was urgent – Mrs Fatloch had now disappeared.

\*\*\*

One hour before that alarm was raised, while Grimmatt was still engrossed in the zombie novel, Bardello Fatloch poured himself another glass of whisky. Two months had passed since the disappearance of his baby daughter, Taio, with nothing to show for it. The search of the hospital patients by scanner had of course turned up no aliens, as he had been certain it would not, though it had uncovered an unusually large number of individuals with foreign objects lodged within their bodies. The thoroughness of the search had thus led the investigating officers into areas which they would rather not have entered. Where the individuals in question were doctors, the

objects in question often turned out to be receptacles for drugs or electronic equipment that might find a use in the illegal economy. This had led the President to give hospital workers worldwide the choice of a pay rise or a whipping. Where the individuals in question were patients, the majority of the objects, once extracted, were found to be auto-stimulators, but, to the delight of the police department's technical division, each had to be (washed and) checked for any signs of teleportation or relay technology. But nothing was found, although the distaste of the police department for the general public was soundly reinforced.

From the cordon of police that had surrounded the hospital there had come no reports of odd behaviour, suspicious activity, or even anyone making a run for it. No one had seen any spaceships in the sky, and no one had felt the rumble of subterranean burrowers beneath their feet.

There had been only one conclusion, Grimmett had told him. It had been an inside job. Someone in the government, or at the hospital, or in the police, must have been involved. The problem with that was that the background checks had turned up motives for virtually everyone in the hospital, as a start. Hence, they all had to be interned, and the hospital was the obvious place to do it, given that that was where they had been to begin with.

Some of them, for example, had family members who had left to go and live in the Religizone – of course there was nothing illegal about that, but it showed that there was a propensity for muddy thinking in the family, and muddy thinking was after all not very far away from downright dirty thinking.

Many many others, as one might expect with regard to any incumbent President, had some personal reason to be dissatisfied with the world they saw him as having made. Grimmett was careful in choosing his words at that point, since he had seen the President's temper first hand in the past. Some had lost jobs, others had sons or husbands or wives or daughters in service who had died or been wounded in skirmishes on the Religizone border. (Though anyone was free to cross that border, as per the dictates of their conscience, disputes still flared up on occasion as to that border's exact location.) One or two had had more direct contact with Fatloch, mainly during his days at the head of the Fatloch business empire, and they had been paid particular attention, to no avail. One weird guy had actually professed a desire to see the President dead at his feet, given his cancellation of some trashy fantasy tv show – perhaps an unwise statement in the presence

of so many armed agents of the state, but he had sworn on his mother's grave that he would have done nothing to hurt any baby in the world, and he had had an honest face, so they had let him go.

The President winced at his own self-editing. No journalists had their cameras upon him now; there was no need to put on a show of morality. Of course they had not let him go – the idiot was still being interrogated, and subjected to various means of pressure that just about fell short of breaching the human rights laws. Damn those laws, the President thought to himself. I might have forced the bill through myself (a wise form of insurance, he had thought, since he did not know who would succeed him in the Presidential seat), but it was really getting in the way. Strictly speaking, the man's detention was illegal, but he would be able to get compensation for that in the courts. Perhaps, thought the President, I should instruct them to pull out a few fingernails, and then he'll be able to make the bloody tv show himself.

So they had got nothing.

To make matters worse, there was at least one journalistic agency on the trail of the one lead that he did not want followed. If the involvement of the Baboose in the conception of his baby became public knowledge, not only would his career be ruined, he would be lucky to escape a lynching. The public's hostility to alien assisted fertility treatment ran deep, so much so that, officially, it was still illegal. Unofficially, the President of Earth had wanted an heir and he had been determined to get one. Sykes was already being tailed wherever he went, and although he had apparently said nothing as yet, as soon as they found out, for example, what the President had on him, he would talk. Brilliant administrator that he was, he was not a brave man. For that matter, forget what the President had on him, if they came up with solid evidence to connect Sykes to the Baboose, he would cave and the President would be finished.

But Fatloch knew that the minute he acted to follow that lead, or to have it followed by others, the clock would begin to tick on his Presidency, and if he lost that, his chances of ever seeing his daughter again would be severely compromised.

So he had to sit, and wait, and hope that Grimmett would find a way, despite being almost totally in the dark as to the most significant lead, that he would stumble into it in a way that would not set alarm bells ringing all over the world.

At that point he decided to go and see his wife. They had argued earlier, and he supposed he should pretend to care. He doubted that he would be able to



bring himself to hold her – the very idea of rewarding her weakness in that way was distasteful to him – but at least he should make the effort to be present.

After all, the original reason for their marriage still pertained. Ten years ago, following Fatloch's many unsuccessful attempts to father children (an inherited genetic disorder, caused by his mother's work in a seafood restaurant, prevented his sperm from ever bonding correctly with an egg), he had used the illicit resources of his media empire to conduct a search of all recorded human DNA. There was an element to the DNA of the members of his wife's family that meant that one of them might possibly be able to receive his genetic donation, and so he had resolved to marry Arabella, she being the only female in the family under 50. Still there had been many failures, and they had taken their toll on her, until, in desperation, he had decided to try the illegal means that had finally brought success. So he could not let her leave him yet. If Taio was found safely, his wife could go to hell, but for now he needed her to stay.

There was of course also the outside chance that she knew something about the disappearance of his baby daughter, so it would pay to keep her close. If she had been involved, she might eventually make a slip.

But when he entered her room, she was not there, and that was why Inspector Grimmett was called so suddenly to the alarm.

## The Story of the Man with the Fiery Face

While waiting for the police to arrive, Bardello began pacing his study and talking out loud.

"Now," he said, "I think that there is a 50/50 chance that I am under surveillance right now, and after that perhaps a 25% chance that any eyes upon me are those of the kidnappers of my baby daughter. So, if you are watching, or listening, here is a little bedtime story that for the last nine months I had been planning to be telling my baby daughter tonight. Though perhaps it would have been tomorrow night – perhaps tonight she could not be consoled by anything except the warmth of her mother. I don't know. But if you are watching, or listening, and if tonight it is your turn to help my baby daughter to sleep, if she hasn't been murdered or cryogenically frozen, or non-cryogenically frozen, for that matter, though I

suppose that would be covered by the first category, perhaps you might like to use this story that my mother once told me."

\*\*\*

### The Man with the Fiery Face

Once upon a time there was a man with a very fiery face. It was so fiery that every day it was very sore, and it hurt his hands even to touch it. He couldn't use any balm to soothe it, because the balm evaporated as soon as it approached his fiery skin. He found it very difficult to eat, and had eventually discovered that if he let food burn up in the fire of his face it still nourished him. That was no way to eat. The saddest thing of all was that he had a beautiful wife and a lovely little daughter, and he could not kiss them, or blow raspberries on their bellies, or let them press their noses into his eyes, because if he had, his beautiful wife and his lovely little daughter would have been burned to a crisp.

One day, after he singed his lovely daughter's favourite dolly and made the poor girl cry her eyes out, he decided it was time to see if anyone had a cure.

First, of course, he went to see a doctor.

"Good morning," said the doctor. "That's a very fiery face you have. Do you mind if I wear sunglasses during this consultation?"

"I understand completely," said the man with the fiery face, taking a seat. "That's actually why I came to see you."

"You're wondering if there is a cure?" asked the doctor.

The man with the fiery face nodded. "I have a beautiful wife and a lovely little daughter, but I cannot kiss them, or blow raspberries on their bellies, or let them press their pretty noses into my eyes."

"That's terrible," said the doctor sadly. "My heart goes out to you."

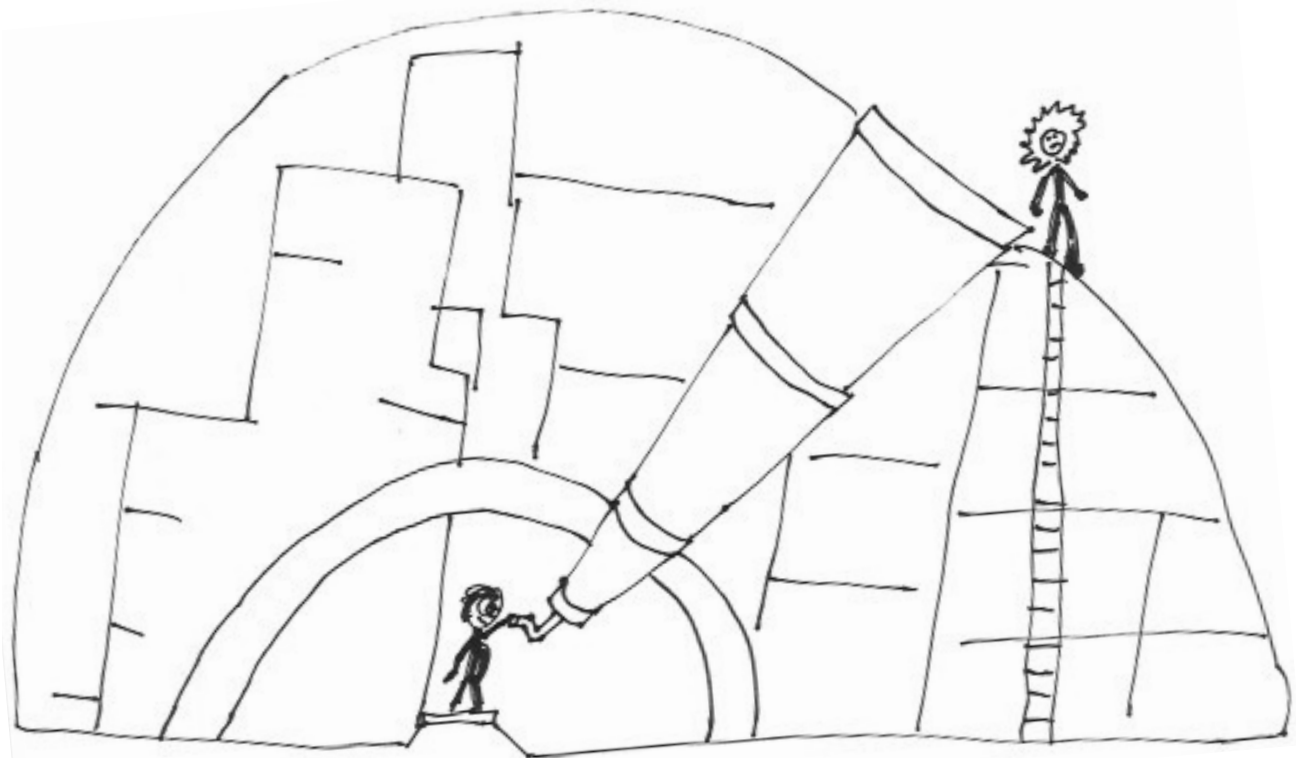
"Can you help?" asked the man with the fiery face.

"I don't know," said the doctor. "Let me take a look at you."

So the man with the fiery face reclined on the doctor's examination couch while the doctor poked and prodded his head with various instruments, all of which were quite badly melted by the time he was finished.

"I'm sorry," said the doctor. "There's nothing I can do. The problem seems to be that your face is part of the sun, and I don't know enough about that to help you. I suggest that you go to see an astronomer."

The man with the fiery face was very disappointed



but he politely thanked the doctor and left.

The next day it was raining and he planned to spend the day sitting in the garden, letting the cool rain sooth his sore, sore face, but the steam soon began to bother the whole street, cracking their windows and cooking their vegetables, whether the family was ready to eat or not. When his lovely daughter came out of their house with tears streaming down her face because her kitten had been scalded by the steam, he decided it was time to take the doctor's advice and go to see an astronomer. He headed for the city observatory.

The astronomer was very pleased to see him. He had spent all night looking through his telescope and had made many exciting discoveries which he could not wait to talk about.

The man with the fiery face found the astronomer's new discoveries so fascinating that he almost forgot to bring up his reason for visiting, but when he did, the astronomer was very sympathetic.

"So you are telling me," said the astronomer, pushing his spectacles back up his nose (the fiery face was making him sweat a little, which made his glasses slip off), "that you have a beautiful wife and a lovely little daughter, but you cannot kiss them, or blow raspberries on their bellies, or let them press their pretty noses into your eyes?"

"That is precisely the problem," said the man with the fiery face. "I went to see a doctor, but he told me that he could not help because the fire on my face is

a part of the sun."

"Very wise," said the astronomer. "Had he made a mistake while trying to help he might well have triggered a devastating thermonuclear reaction. We are lucky that nothing of the sort has happened so far."

"Not to mention that I have singed my little girl's favourite dolly and scalded her kitten. Is there anything you can do to help?"

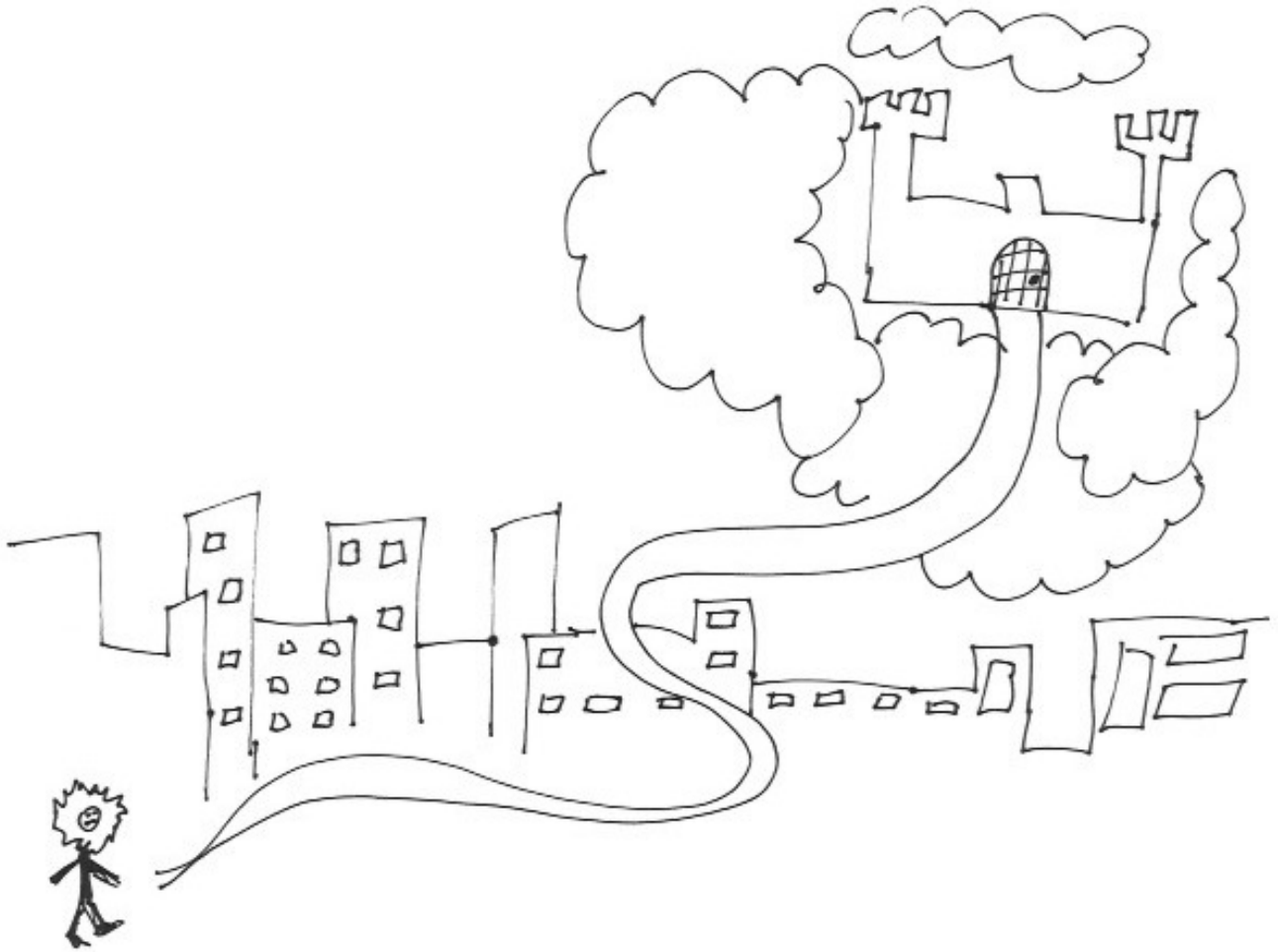
"Well, let's see," said the astronomer. "Do you think you could climb up to the top of the observatory so that I could point my telescope at you?"

"I'll give it a try," said the man with the fiery face. "I would climb to the top of Mount Everest for the chance to give a kiss to each of my two best girls."

So the man with the fiery face climbed to the top of the observatory, and the astronomer pointed his telescope at him. It was daytime, so the light from the sun would normally make it impossible to see any stars through the telescope, but since the man with the fiery face was so bright, and so close by, the astronomer was able to study him. He did a full spectrographic analysis and studied the results carefully. He had to be especially careful because he would normally be sleeping at this time of day, having stayed up all night studying the stars, but he was quite sure that he was correct in his conclusions.

The man with the fiery face was very disappointed. He said, "Are you sure you cannot help me?"

"I'm sorry," said the astronomer. "I would love for



you to be able to give each of your two best girls a kiss, but I cannot help. The fire on your face, although it does indeed appear to be part of the sun, does not behave in the ways one would usually expect of a scientific phenomenon. It is my conclusion that it is in fact a magical phenomenon, and you will probably have to see a wizard to have it assuaged.”

The man with the fiery face knew that the astronomer had done his best, despite being very hot and tired, and so he thanked him and went home.

The next day it was very sunny, and so the man with the fiery face didn't fancy going out at all. He was hot enough as it was. He decided to stay indoors in the shade and turn on a fan. But the air pushed around by the fan made the flames on his face go all over the place and one of them set the television on fire. His daughter had been about to watch her favourite program and she began to cry again, which broke his heart. He decided to go out, despite the hot weather, to see the wizard.

This was not like going to see the doctor or the astronomer, who were well known for being friendly and approachable. The wizard was reputed to be capricious and mean-spirited. His castle, which was

at the farthest end of the city, at the top of a flight of stairs that ended halfway to the sky, was shrouded in cloud all day long and all year round, and although the man with the fiery face would be glad to get out of the sun, he did not relish going to see the wizard.

He began to climb the stairs. He was very frightened to see the city growing small beneath his feet, and especially frightened by the gusts of wind that threatened to push him off the staircase, but whenever he thought about turning back all he could see was the teary face of his lovely little girl after he had singed her dolly, scalded her kitten, and burnt the television, and that gave him the courage to keep on climbing. He did not want to make her cry again.

When he reached the halfway point of the stairs, the most frightening thing happened. The winds that had been gusting about him suddenly grasped him by the arms and legs and pushed him forward, up the stairs. His feet had no purchase and he could not control the helter skelter flight that brought him faster and faster to the castle door, which was huge, wooden and imposing. Faster and faster he went, until he reached the door and slammed into it. He felt his body disappear, his thoughts dissolve, and then, a moment later, he found himself standing at that door.

The man with a fiery face took a deep breath and knocked on the door. There was no door knocker so he had to knock with his hand, and it hurt.

The door opened and the wizard was there.

"Oh, it's you," said the wizard. "It's you. The man with the fiery face."

"Hello, sir," said the man with the fiery face. "My fiery face has been causing me some problems. I have a beautiful wife and a lovely little daughter, but I cannot kiss them, or blow raspberries on their bellies, or let them press their pretty noses into my eyes, because if they did they would be sizzled dead. I went to see a doctor, and he said that he could not help because the fire on my face was a part of the sun. He recommended that I see an astronomer. The astronomer said that he could not help because although the fire on my face is a part of the sun, its being on my face is not a scientific phenomenon but rather one that is magical. He suggested that I consult a wizard. Do you think you can help me?"

"Of course I can, if I want to," replied the wizard, "since I was the one who gave you a fiery face. Our paths have crossed before."

The man with the fiery face was astonished. He had not expected this.

"Perhaps you had better come inside," said the wizard. "We can both have a cup of cocoa."

Soon they were sitting on large couches in the wizard's study. The wizard was gently sipping his cocoa, since it was still hot, while the man with the fiery face had already poured his into the nuclear inferno that was his face. It made him cry to think that he might never taste chocolate again, but the teardrop evaporated the instant it left his eye.

"So you gave me a fiery face?" asked the man with the fiery face. "I don't remember that happening. I thought I had always had a face like this."

"I am responsible for that too," said the wizard. "After I gave you such a fiery face I was worried that you might come back here and singe me with it, so I made sure that no one remembered the time when your face was as normal as mine or anyone else's."

"But why did you do this to me?" asked the man with the fiery face. "I am sure I would never have done anything to hurt you or make you angry in any way. It just isn't in my nature. I just get on with my life and try to make people happy wherever I can."

"Well," said the wizard, "I might be prepared to reconsider my decision, especially if you can explain your offensive actions. I was in a very bad mood that day, having had a very important magical experiment blow up in my face. That was probably what gave me the idea for your punishment. Having washed the

soot off I went to the balcony of my castle to look out into the clouds for inspiration. As I contemplated the cumulo nimbus, the cirrus and the wispy threads that joined them in the throng around my castle in the air, what did I hear from below? What but the sound of a flatulent expulsion of stinky, sour gas. You trumped, right beneath my castle. How offensive! It could only be a deliberate insult! In time, I began to wonder if I had been too hasty, if I had only been living down to the poor opinion that the city people have of me, but now that my thoughts return to your deeds instead of mine, I grow angry and vengeful once more! Perhaps I was too lenient!"

He drank the rest of his cocoa in one go and began to run a long, spindly finger along the spines of the magical books that lined his study, looking for another punishment.

"Wait, wait!" shouted the man with the fiery face, panic-stricken. "Let me explain!"

The wizard paused his perusal of the shelves and pursed his wrinkly old lips. "Go on..."

The man with the fiery face explained, "I trump all the time! I cannot help it. Whenever and wherever I walk my trumps come out. There is so much parping when I walk down the street that people think there is a brass band marching by! In fact, it has been very difficult for me, because whenever I trump it makes my fiery face flare up. So you see, when you heard me trumping beneath your castle, I had no intention of insulting you, I was just doing what came naturally."

Once he had heard the explanation, the wizard laughed and quickly made the man's face normal again.

"Thank you so much," said the man with the normal face.

"Perhaps you should consider chewing your food more," suggested the wizard. "Or eating with a child's spoon."

The man with the normal face thanked him for those suggestions and promised to try them. It would be nice to be able to go into a shop without people holding their noses and looking at him.

Then the man with the normal face went back to his home and he kissed his beautiful wife and he kissed his lovely little daughter, and then he blew raspberries on their bellies, and then he let them press their pretty noses into his eyes.

**THE END**

\*\*\*

"And what is the moral of that bedtime story, my

invisible, insidious friends?” said Bardello Fatloch to his inferred audience. “If you have harmed a hair on the head of my baby daughter (if she was born with hair, or has grown any since then), or indeed on the head of my daughter’s mother, I will find you and flay your faces with a razor’s edge so that you too know what it is to be the man with the fiery face.”

## The Mystery of the Missing Mrs Fatloch

Inspector Barry Grimmett was able to enter the Presidential residence without the aid of a butler, flunky or guard – weeks ago the building had been told to let him straight in upon detection of his subcutaneous chip. He strolled straight in through the door, which was large, wooden and imposing. As he did so, the sound of the President expostulating with the air came to his ears. He knew that the last few weeks had been very difficult for the father of the lost baby, but he had not known that such a low had been reached. Though it did not seem to affect the case, he allowed his subconscious to file the information where it would.

Perhaps your narrator should intercede at this point, to explain that the President’s behaviour was not as odd as it might seem. He had used this technique before, I have found during my researches, learning early on in his quasi-criminal career as a youth that telling a good children’s story was an extremely intimidating thing to do. As children we hear these stories, and we learn their rhythms. We learn what to expect, and we learn to be comforted by them, lulled by them – the perfect mood, that is, to be hit with a sucker punch. The President didn’t know if anyone was listening, but if they were, he knew that they had just had a terrible fright. Such a threat coming from a private citizen would be bad enough, but coming from the President of Earth it would be no less than terrifying, even to the hardest of criminals.

I have searched high and low for the story that the President told that day, but I have not been able to trace the story of “The Man with the Fiery Face” despite my best efforts. The President said that his mother had told him the story, and perhaps she made it up for him, but if I may express a personal opinion, I believe that it was the habit of Fatloch to conjure up these stories extempore. Though the theme of the

story might superficially seem unsuited to the situation, regardless of the glib connection made by the President in his bellicose threat, I believe his subconscious was at work in the telling. Although the story had a happy ending, the man’s face being returned to normal, consider the main thrust of the tale: a man’s life could be destroyed by anything, by the mere mood of another, by total chance occurrence, by coincidence. By any of these unruly whims of fate we can be destroyed. With that in mind, how might one feel to think that fate was not only prepared to brush you aside, sending you flying into the ditch, with as little regard as a buffalo would give a grasshopper; not only that, as I say, but what if fate had set her charge directly against you? In this matter, the President saw himself as the agent of fate. For the time being, he was allowing matters to play out by the usual channels, but he was beginning to fret at their limitations, and he was ready to break their bounds.

You might wonder at this point how we are privy to the words of the President, how we are able to repeat the words of his story with such confidence, given that the question of whether he is being listened to by spies is still up in the air at this point in the narrative. You may simply have given thought to the disclaimer I gave earlier regarding dialogue, but in this case that does not apply. The Government of Earth had taken the invaluable precaution of requiring all Presidents of Earth to be implanted with a subcutaneous recording chip, which would actually release a poison were the President to decide that he would rather have a private conversation this time, thank you very much. Equally, though, to show respect for the President’s privacy, if anyone should attempt to acquire the chip less than 50 years after the President’s death, it would destroy itself.

“Hello,” said the President, when he saw Grimmett standing there.

“Hello,” said Grimmett. “Arabella has gone missing? I am very sorry.”

“Yes,” said the President. “I was just remonstrating with any potential spies of the kidnappers.”

“You were threatening torture,” said Grimmett with a tone of disapproval. He did not really think that it was rational behaviour, but the only way to find out what was on the President’s mind would be to play along. “That’s not really the way the police operate nowadays, you know.”

The President waved his objections away. “That was a purely private matter, between me and the kidnappers. Don’t concern yourself with it. If I ever catch up with them, it’ll be their problem, not yours.”

"Don't make it my problem," said Grimmert sternly. "You may be the President, but I've took you downtown once before when you stepped over the line and I would do it again if need be."

"I know you would," said Fatloch, "that's why I like having you around. Like Margaret, you keep me honest. However, the time when being honest no longer serves my purpose fast approaches. Shall I show you where she was before she went missing?"

"If that's not too much trouble."

"Fine. I will just refill this glass of whisky. Fancy one, Grimmert?"

"Not while I'm on duty, sir."

The President barked a short thick laugh. "Of course not. Have you really ever given thought to trying it, though? You couldn't really have done any worse in the search for my daughter if you had been drunk the whole time, could you?"

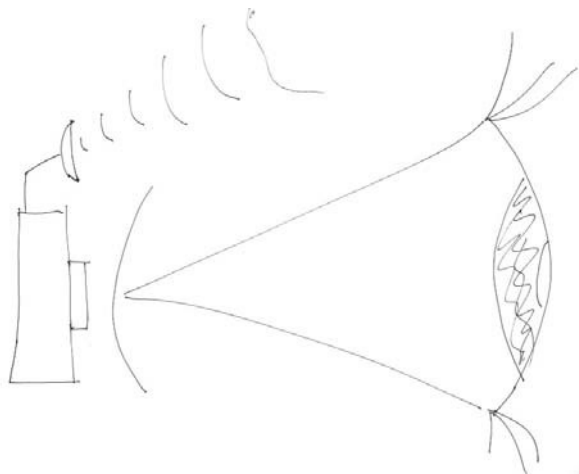
"Probably not, Mr President, but if I were drunk I would be taken off the case and then the search would go no better, I suspect."

"Quite so, unfortunately. That is why I turn to you again, now that this accursed woman has been taken too. Come into her room, then. That was where I saw her last."

Grimmett followed the President into the First Lady's bedroom. It was very nice, as one might expect of the Presidential residence, lined with bookcases and softly furnished. He noted that the bed was a single.

"Are you sure, then," said the detective, "that she has been kidnapped? Might she have left of her own will. Have you argued lately? Things must have been very stressful for you both these past weeks."

"We did have a big row this morning," said the President. "But I don't think she has left on her own. None of her clothes have been taken."



Grimmett raised an eyebrow. "Do you mind if I ask what the argument was about? Or did it concern the disappearance of your daughter – in such tense circumstances I imagine an argument would never be far from breaking out."

"No, it went back further than that." The President went to sit on the bed, and stretched his arms and fingers out as far as they would go, as if he were testing them out for the first time in years. "I don't want to go into too much detail, but it related to the manner of the baby's conception."

Grimmett looked at the single bed and thought he might have an idea of what the argument had been about.

"I take your point about the clothes being all here. If it is true, that would seem to argue for her having left against her will. If she had absconded, or merely walked out on you, she would at least have packed a bag."

He began to browse the books on the shelves, looking for any clues. They were arranged in alphabetical order by author, with occasional groupings here and there of books grouped by topic. All the classics were there: Abernathy, Aldiss, Asimov, and so on. He had never known that she was a literary woman, else they might have found more to talk about on the rare occasions they had met. He discovered a small clump of popular science books, and in another place a handful of books on healthy eating and exercise. Nothing struck him as relevant to the case. It wasn't as if he had hoped to discover a set of travel books outlining her itinerary, or a collection of volumes regarding safe teleportation, but he was disappointed. Discovering that she too had a copy of Howard Phillips' *First the Eyes, Then the Brains* brought a sad smile to his face, and he picked up the book to leaf through it.

"Should you be disturbing the crime scene?" asked the President.

"That is not such an issue in this day and age, Mr President," replied Grimmert. "Upon promotion to detective corneal wetware is forced upon us. My eyes have taken a hundred thousand crime scene photographs already."

The book was not well worn, but was an original edition. It would have been priceless even before having been owned by the President's wife, and it was part of a collection of similarly valuable and incredible books. Here was a copy of the rare fourteenth edition of Gilligan's *Elsewhere*, the one that had been quickly superseded by a movie tie-in edition, and there, next to it, the original hardback of the same author's *The Indigo Skies of Home*. On the



same shelf he found both Greenwood's *A Balance of Seeds and Stones* and the illegally printed collection of his short stories, *There Are Now a Billion Flowers*. He had never so much as seen a copy of either before, and he was tempted to throw over the whole case and sit down to start reading. Even as he turned away his eye was caught by a copy of Ranjna Theaker's *Being an Alien*, one of the undisputed classics of its type.

One thing was for sure: the bibliophile who put together this collection for her bedroom would not willingly have left it behind, unless she had been even more unhappy than he could as yet imagine. He turned to the President.

"Maestri is on her way here. Will you be able to grant her access to your wife's bank accounts?"

"Of course," said the President.

"Maestri has experience in working with forensic accountants, and they will cross check everything your wife has bought against everything in the house. They will look for discrepancies in anything – items that cannot be found, prices that seem abnormally high, unusual cash withdrawals, that kind of thing. They may also require access to your accounts, for the same purpose."

The President shook his head. "I'm afraid that will not be possible. As President, I do not want the details of my spending being leaked to the press by a policeman after an easy retirement fund. The most innocuous detail could be twisted into some ridiculous scandal, and I cannot allow that."

"I see," replied Grimmatt.

"In any case," continued the President, "everything in here was bought by my wife except the whisky. I keep a bottle for occasions such as this."

Grimmett frowned. "Such as your wife and child being kidnapped? Have there been occasions such as this before?"

"I just mean when I am stressed. But take that as an example – your forensic accountant analyses my whisky spending and before the end of the day the press have labelled me an alcoholic. It is not going to happen, Grimmatt, so confine yourself and your investigators to the possible."

He left his wife's bedroom and slammed the door behind him. Inspector Barry Grimmatt was surprised to see such petulant behaviour from the President of Earth – a man he knew to have nerves of steel, and synapses that fired like pistons – and not a little suspicious. But there was a wall full of rare books waiting for his attention, so he left that suspicion to his subconscious and picked up Gilligan's *The Ephemeral Homunculus* to read while he waited for Maestri to arrive.

## Grimmett Breaks Through

Inspector Barry Grimmatt continued to investigate. He left Godal and Maestri to get on with the routine

detective work (the most important kind of all), and found his feet leading him back to the hospital, and Doctor Sykes.

He had a nagging feeling that there was something there that he had missed. The more he thought about it, the less he doubted that the doctor knew something about this case, something that the President had not wanted to be made public. If the President did not want to speak about it, there was no way of forcing him to, but the doctor, on the other hand, might not be so canny.

He arrived at the hospital an hour or so after setting off. He could have called for a car to pick him up, but he valued these times. In a taxi or a police car, he would be stuck in a conversation, especially being publicly involved in such a high-profile case. There would be no time to think. Driving a car himself would be little better. His body, as it operated the car, would need the supervision of his mind, whereas walking was something he could trust his body to deal with automatically, only paying it conscious attention when it came to crossing roads. Walking, his mind was free to think, to concentrate, to ponder. The pounding of his feet provided a rhythm for his thoughts, a framework to contain the ideas, and suggested places to break them off and move to others.

The city that he walked through was quiet, the rain damping down the spirits of everyone it fell on, but he liked it, he loved the pitter patter, the music of the weather.

He thought about the baby, about the wife, and about the husband. He thought of how angry the President had been when Taio disappeared, and how unsurprised he had seemed when his wife had done the same. He thought about the President's fortune, and about his political career. He thought about Margaret, and about the doctor. What could the doctor know about the President, the wife and the baby that would have been kept from the President's most trusted advisor? What actions would have meant the impeachment of the President, the ruin of the wife, and the striking off of the doctor?

The more he thought about it, the more certain he became, and since he had quite a way to walk, by the time he reached the doctor's office he was very, very certain.

He knocked on the door and let himself in. "Doctor Sykes?"

The doctor looked up, surprised. "Oh, hello, detective."

"Hello there, Doctor Sykes. I hope you don't mind me popping in like this." He stayed by the door for the time being.

"Well, I am very busy, as you can imagine. After what happened, there is so much to do. New security arrangements to implement, patients to reassure, that kind of thing. Is it something very important? Perhaps you could make an appointment?" He moved some files around on his desk, as if to show how busy he was.

"I won't take up too much of your time. It's just a couple of small details that I would like to clear up. It would be a big help to me, doctor."

"Well, if it won't take too long. Do you want to take a seat?"

"No, no – it won't take that long."

"Go ahead, then, detective. How can I help you?"

Grimmett took out his handheld computer and began to press buttons here and there. "Thank you, doctor, that's very kind of you. Let me just get this thing going."

"I really am very busy."

"I know. I'm very sorry about that. Can you believe I have police issue corneal implants, but I still have trouble with this stuff. You would think that I would have gained some affinity for machines, having pretty much become one myself." He finished setting up the notepad to make a record of the questions and answers. "Well, I just wanted to ask how long you had known the President."

The doctor held up his hands, palms outward. "I'm not sure. Is that relevant to the investigation?"

Grimmett shrugged. "If you don't remember, no problem. It's just a matter of completing the reports. I like to join the dots."

"Well, let me think. I think it was a couple of years ago. He was looking for advice, with regard to the problems his wife was having conceiving. We had met professionally, of course, from time to time."

"I see. Well, that's me done." Grimmett put away his handheld.

"Oh, that's all?" asked Doctor Sykes, getting up to see him out of the door.

"I should think so," replied Grimmett. "I had hoped that there might be something, I don't know what, that you could tell me about the President, but I'll just have to keep on thinking."

Sykes opened the door for him. "Goodbye, then. Good luck with the investigation."

Just as he was walking out, his handheld beeped.

"Ah," said Grimmett, halfway out of the door, "I'd better have a look at this. It might be important."

Sykes' smile was strained, as he stood awkwardly holding the door open. Grimmett made a show of struggling to operate the device, which, of course, he was entirely proficient with.



“Ah,” said Grimmatt again, “it’s nothing. I think this thing must be malfunctioning.”

Sykes pretended to be interested. “Oh? Perhaps you pressed the wrong button.”

“That is very possible, Doctor Sykes. Very likely, indeed, I should think, because what it is saying does not make sense. Can I just check the facts with you again?”

“If you must. Go ahead.”

“Well, you said that you first met the President a couple of years ago, isn’t that right?”

“That’s right,” said the doctor, pursing his lips.

“And you wouldn’t forget that, would you? Even if you had met someone in your childhood, you would still remember them later, especially if they became President, and you saw them on tv every day, wouldn’t you?”

“I think so, but I never knew him. Or at least I thought I didn’t. Are you saying that he was at school with me or something? I don’t remember him if I did.”

“Well, this sounds crazy to me,” said Grimmatt. “It must be a case of mistaken identity. The computer cross-referenced what you told me about having met him against its records. It is claiming to have found, in a search of historical surveillance photographs, a series of pictures showing you and Mr Fatloch enjoying a cup of coffee together, almost fifteen years ago.”

“Let me have a look at that,” said Sykes angrily.

Grimmatt had of course found those pictures himself, during a routine check, but had waited to see if the doctor would reveal the prior relationship before bringing it up. The computer had beeped entirely at his command.

Sykes examined the photographs for a moment, but quickly realised there would be no explaining them away, no possibility of arguing coincidence. It showed the two of them in deep conversation.

Grimmatt went back into the office and took a seat. Slowly, Sykes went back to his own seat.

Sykes continued to look at the photographs, but finally he looked up at Grimmatt, who was waiting patiently. “I suppose you want an explanation?”

The detective smiled. “I am sure it can’t be anything untoward, doctor, not with a man of your standing involved.”

“You don’t know what my standing is, detective. I have barely known myself since the first day I met Fatloch.”

“Why don’t you tell me about it?”

“To be honest, it will be something of a relief to have it all out in the open. I’ll lose my job, of course,

and though I think I did well for the hospital, did I really deserve it? You can judge for yourself.”

When he had been a young doctor, only recently having found a job at a hospital, he had found himself treating a young man in a business suit, Fatloch, no less, who had got himself into some kind of fight. When the doctor had finished stitching him up, Fatloch had offered him an envelope full of money. Let’s go and see the other guy now, the young brawler had said.

“It was over a year’s salary,” Sykes told Grimmatt. “And I was having trouble paying my university fees. There was a possibility that my degree might be revoked.”

“I understand,” said Grimmatt. “Everyone gets into scrapes like that from time to time.”

Fatloch had driven Sykes to his flat, and inside there was a man, bloodied, on the kitchen floor. Fatloch explained that he had not meant to hurt the man, a rival from work, but that he had got carried away. He wanted the man fixed up, but he didn’t want any record of it. And if the injured man did not make it, he wanted Sykes to keep his mouth shut.

“I told him it wouldn’t come to that, and got on with treating the man. That, I could do in clear conscience. The man’s condition was serious, but not critical. I stayed there for three days until he was back on his feet. At that point Fatloch took out a bundle of cash even bigger than the one he had given me, and gave it to the man he had beaten up, telling him to keep the whole thing quiet, that he was really making an effort to stay on the straight and narrow, but had slipped in a moment of anger, and for that the man had his apologies... You don’t seem surprised to hear any of this about our wonderful President.”

Grimmatt leant forward, speaking quietly. “I had to arrest Mr Fatloch once, in his early twenties, for getting into a very public fight with a colleague at work. The man was not badly hurt, and he chose not to press charges.”

“I see,” said Sykes. “Perhaps the fight the aftermath of which I attended came later than that, and he had decided that further police attention would be best avoided. Anyway, I met Fatloch once more at that time. He sat himself down at my table, at a cafe near the hospital. He told me that he had his eye on me, and to point out that he had overpaid me a little. If he ever needed me again he would be in touch. As a matter of fact I didn’t meet him again until he became President. Then I found myself promoted to this job, the type of promotion for which I had been unfairly passed over a half dozen times over the years. I was glad to have a patron.”

"What happened then?"

"He came to see me one day, explained that he and his wife had been having trouble conceiving, and talked to me about the possibility of undergoing an alien assisted fertility procedure. He told me that the rumours had been true, that the Baboose had made an offer to him, but that he would need my help to make it happen."

"Do you think this is connected to the kidnapping of the baby?"

"I don't doubt it for a minute. You know how strongly people feel about this kind of thing. People are suspicious of the Baboose, and why shouldn't they be? I think someone found out somehow, and took the baby to make a point."

"Did you tell anyone?"

"Are you joking? Now that it's out, I'll be ruined. I have broken every rule of medical ethics, and that's even before I went to the world of the Baboose. My only hope now is to sell my story and hope I get enough to make my stay in prison comfortable."

## Riots and Protests

Once Sykes had spoken to the police, Fatloch knew it would only be matter of time before he sold his story to the press. He could not blame Sykes for that – someone was going to make money from it and why should it be some sleazy cop nosing through the files on his neighbour's desk? And that was exactly what happened – the news broke the very next morning. He had a feeling it would have happened sooner if the agency had not been waiting for the morning news shows to make the biggest impact.

So now the clock was ticking.

By the end of the day there had been rioting in London, Rio de Janeiro and Moscow. No particular moral attitudes connected those cities, so he took that as a sign that other cities would soon follow suit, that they were merely the leaders of what would be a rising swell of disgust and dismay across the world. He was finished as President; there was no question of that. The only question was whether he still had any cards to play as a father.

Maestri and Godal were waiting for him when he left what he assumed would be the last Cabinet meeting to which he would be invited.

Maestri had made an essential breakthrough – Arabella Fatloch had been pilfering money from herself for the last year, slowly accumulating enough

to pay for her passage.

"Her passage where?" asked Fatloch. "Did she take the baby?"

"We cannot be sure of that," replied Godal. "It would seem a very roundabout way of kidnapping her own child."

"But she might have thought that it would leave them untraceable, her complicity unsuspected," suggested Maestri.

Maestri and Godal left.

Margaret was waiting for him too, but she greeted him with a sharp nod and did not speak until they reached the Presidential Residence. As they rode through the city in silence, the President did not know whether to feel hope or despair. There must be a good reason for her wordlessness. It might be that she had evidence about his daughter's death, and wanted to wait till he was in a position to give vent to his grief while maintaining his dignity. More likely – did he dare to think that? – she had learnt something essential as to his daughter's whereabouts and did not want to risk discussing it until they were in the Residence, the most secure and private building on the planet.

There was one other possibility, the thought of which saddened him. They had not yet spoken about the alien assisted fertility treatment, and he had no idea what her feelings about that would be. He had debated the question of whether to tell her with his wife and Doctor Sykes, and they had been against telling her, against telling anyone whatsoever. He had, at first, planned to simply do the whole thing openly, and let the people measure this so-called crime against his many achievements, but he had let Arabella and the doctor convince him that that could do nothing but harm any child's life.

He was still not sure they had been right in that. Allowing the people to build their excitement over the imminent birth of a natural heir to the President's fortune, the founding of a dynasty, as it was seen, seemed to have made the shock all the greater when the truth came out. If he had made the announcement on his own terms, perhaps linking it to the signing of an official treaty of some kind with the Baboose, at the height of his Presidential power, maybe then the people would, in time, after some unrest, have come to accept his child for the boon she was. Would that have prevented the kidnapping of his daughter?

Of course, the problem with openness would have been the demand from the world's scientists and the public themselves for the details of the procedure. No one (as far as anyone knew) had ever gone through it, and the Baboose were not known for their

verbosity, which had led to disgusting rumours and fictions and malevolent innuendo about its precise nature. The problem was, he thought with a silent laugh, that some of those rumours, fictions and innuendos were exactly correct.

So he had told no one, not even his trusted batman. At the time, he had thought he was conceding nothing, that Margaret would discover the truth for herself regardless, but if she had not, then finding out today, from the news, might have shook her. Her silence now might just be down to her revulsion at what he had done, or a sense of betrayal that he had not trusted her enough to tell her before.

As it was, he should have allowed himself to hope. Margaret had made a discovery of her own – the Minister for Galactic Affairs had allowed a ship to pass through Earth's defences that day.

## Desperation and Torture

The former President was leaving his home by way of a specially built exit from the wine cellar. He did not know if he would be able to return, but he was confident of being able to cope if not. As he had said to Grimmett, almost everything in the house had been his wife's – everything that mattered to him had been kept in more practical locations. He had always known that the Presidency would not last for ever, though he had hoped it might have ended in a slightly more civilised way.

Thinking about his wife's possessions made him think of her personal library, and the way Grimmett had responded to it. Still in the tunnel – it extended for well over fifty metres even before the wine storage ended – he called the detective. He would have to speak quickly; it would be Grimmett's duty to try and locate him. He did not want to be located. In all normal circumstances he would have respected the rule of law, but if he did that right now there would be no hope for his daughter.

Grimmett answered immediately. "President! I did not expect to hear from you."

"I know. Listen, Grimmett..."

The detective interrupted. "Actually, a few of us are on our way over to see you right now. You should wait for us, or not, depending on your plans, President."

"You know I'm only President as long as it takes

to sort out the paperwork, Grimmett, else you would be on your way to see someone else."

"Who would that be? It sounds like you are walking quickly. Are you on your way to see that person?"

Fatloch heard the noise of someone putting their hand over the receiver, and the muted jabber of a sprinted consultation.

"Listen, gumshoe, I just rang to say that you still have access to the Presidential Residence – you should use it to clear out the library before the people make their democracy felt."

Grimmett unmuffled the receiver. "Thank you, sir – that's very classy of you. Any chance you could tell us who you are on your way to see? Has someone made a breakthrough in your daughter's case? Should I not know about it if so?"

Fatloch ended the call. It would not take long for Grimmett to realise, if he had not already, that the most likely source of a lead would be Margaret, if it was not Fatloch or Grimmett himself. Once they knew who had cracked the case, it would only be a matter of time before they retraced her steps, analysed her analyses, and discovered her discovery. As soon as that happened, his target would become inaccessible. That meant his time was limited.

Reaching the final, and oldest, bottle of wine, he grabbed it, smashed off the neck and took a long drink. It had been a long time since he had done what he was about to do, and it was probably best that he do it slightly under the influence of alcohol, allowing his body to remember what it had learnt so long ago, free of the self-imposed restraint which had bound it all these honest years.

The drink might not have been whiskey, not by a long way, but it helped nevertheless. He felt something uncurl within his belly that had not stirred for decades.

He knew where to find the Minister for Galactic Affairs, since his target had had no reason to suspect it might be wise to keep his movements quiet. He had mentioned at that afternoon's Cabinet meeting that he would be attending the opening of a restaurant that evening, the Goulash Flowers.

There was plenty of time to get there, so the President took it easy. He was really too recognisable to walk on the streets, but in a way he thought that might be working for him, since no one would ever really believe it was him. He had kept the wine bottle in his hand and deliberately jumped in a puddle, and any time someone seemed to be looking at him too curiously he ran up to their faces and yelled, "I'm the President I am, the President of the whole world." No

one took him at his word.

He reached the Goulash Flowers. It was four stories high (and some amazing intuition told him that that might be a problem later on), with a roof modelled after the Sydney Opera House. The lights from the front of the building dazzled him, coming from near darkness as he was – the bright beams of cars that were pulling up, the flashes of photographers' cameras, the sparkling of diamonds. Relative to that, he was virtually invisible as he approached the rear, an alley that went nowhere and was full of boxes and packaging thrown from the windows as the contractors had rushed to get the restaurant ready in time. Normally it would have been a tramp's paradise, and from the fact that it was empty he deduced that someone had the job of keeping it that way.

He found a comfortable spot close to one of the back doors and hunkered down for a nap. By the time a security guard came and kicked him he was very nearly asleep. It had been a tiring day, after all.

Fatloch rolled over, letting the guard think he was done, then grabbed the foot that dared to try another kick. He twisted it sharply, and the guard fell to the ground in agony. Despite being a miserable sadist, the man was obviously a dutiful employee, as his first thought was to raise the alarm rather than protect himself. He reached for his communicator, but Fatloch had got quickly to his feet, and stamped on the guard's hand before he could press the panic button.

After delivering one solid blow to the man's head the President hid him in a packing box and took his clothes. Luckily they were a good fit.

He used the security guard's pass to open a back door and went inside.

He carefully made his way to the top floor, where the opulence made it clear the very best people would be entertained. He benefited from the restaurant's newness, in that none of the employees had quite got to the point where they recognised each other yet. He was waved through at each level, and where he might usually have been challenged by the guards, he amused himself by being offended when they failed to remember his name. After all, they all knew his face, but none of them were given the time to place it in context. He thanked himself for having failed to overcome the apathy of so many people towards politics that the President was able to pass among them unnoticed.

Of course that would not apply to the guests who would soon begin to arrive, many of whom would know him personally, so he was not able to stay in plain view.

He went into the male toilets. He had to move quickly – if he was found loitering in here someone might be suspicious, and the game would no longer be afoot. He went into a cubicle, stood on the lavatory seat, and lifted one of the ceiling panels. He pulled himself up into the crawlspace, replaced the panel, and tried to distribute his weight as best he could over the thin steel rods that held the ceiling in place.

He poked a tiny hole in one of the panels and waited.

Before long, the first of the guests had arrived, and a few came straight to the toilet. Unfortunately the Minister for Galactic Affairs was not among them. As it turned out, Fatloch had to watch a lot of people go to the toilet, and being above the cubicle meant that that was as unpleasant as it could possibly be. Two hours had passed, and the President was beginning to wonder whether the Minister had changed his mind about coming there that night, or whether he had some kind of cybernetic bladder implant.

His arms and legs were burning with agony, and his nose was in a pretty similar state, by the time the Minister finally entered.

Fatloch silently let himself down into the cubicle, then barred the door and strode over to where the Minister stood at a urinal.

"Hello, Minister," said Fatloch, leaning over to whisper in his ear. "I understand we have matters to discuss. Something of mine has gone missing."

The Minister was aghast. He stepped back, struggling to tuck himself back into his trousers. He managed in that, but failed to fully halt the flow, and a dark patch of wetness began to spread over them. He winced.

Bardello thought he might cry. "Be a man," he said scornfully. "Take off the pants."

"Do you promise not to go for my genitals?" asked the Minister fearfully. He would rather they were wet than vulnerable.

The President shrugged. "I'm angry, not aroused, but who knows how a little torture might affect my mood."

"I don't know what you think I know."

The President took three steps towards him and grabbed him by the hair, wresting him over to a cubicle. He laughed, saying, "Let's find out together."

Eventually the Minister cracked and revealed that the ship was a mercenary ship on its way to the Bandits' Planet. He was paid to let it through, as he had been a dozen times before – he had assumed it was just a smuggler, like all the rest.



“Is my daughter still alive? Why did they take her?”

“I d-d-don’t know,” spluttered the man through bloody gums. “I don’t know anything about who it was.”

When they were done, Fatloch tied up the Minister and stuffed him into a cubicle. He would have gagged him but for the danger that the blood pouring from his nose would coagulate, leaving him unable to breathe. Leaving the door to the toilets barred, he leapt up to a window, punched through it, and crawled out to the roof.

He paused there to think for a moment, looking out over the city. Here and there fires still burned. One of them was very likely his former presidential residence. (Some vaguely human part of him hoped that Grimmitt had got Arabella’s library out in time.) There was no real decision for him to make – there

was nothing left for him on Earth but inquiries, trials and punishment. He knew that his wife had left for the Bandits’ Planet, and so had the mercenaries who had taken his baby daughter. Whether the two things were a coincidence or not didn’t matter – that den of villains was plainly where he had to go. Even the matter of whether his daughter still lived did not affect his destination – he would go there, for revenge, or rescue.

He almost began to look forward to it. It had been years since his last holiday.

## Finding the Marabian

His decision made, Bardello Fatloch had to get a

team together. Travelling to the Bandits' Planet was not to be done lightly. He had no idea what the circumstances would be when he got there.

First, of course, he needed to get Margaret on board. He had never met anyone so calmly efficient and naturally effective, and whatever he had to do on the Bandits' Planet, he wanted it done well.

He climbed down the outside of the restaurant, using drainpipes and architectural outcroppings of the Goulash Flowers to help his progress. He had one tight moment where a ledge began to crumble, but he was moving so quickly that he was past it before it had a chance to fall.

Reaching the ground, he dashed off into the darkness, throwing away the security guard's hat, and tearing the insignia from the shirt. As they fell to the floor, he doubled back and headed in the opposite direction. The police would be after him in force very soon. It was no longer merely an administrative matter, a tidying up operation – he had now shown himself to be dangerous and lacking in principles, at least when it came to anyone standing between him and his daughter.

He travelled through the city to reach Margaret – or rather, he made his way to an isolated place, a bolthole he had used as a teenager, a small tunnel under a motorway originally put in place to allow wolves and deer to get by safely (or at least one of them, if they were travelling at the same time), and when he got there he waited for her to work out where he would be. A car pulled off the motorway and drew up outside the tunnel within twenty minutes.

"I thought you would be here," she said, looking away while Fatloch dressed himself in the spare set of clothes she had brought. "Where else, after what you did?"

"I was expecting you, you know," replied Fatloch.

"Of course you were. You brought me here once before – it is where you hid after the last time you killed somebody."

Fatloch was surprised. "Is the Minister dead? I thought I left him in a salvageable state."

"On the news they are making it sound like he is at death's door, but that could just be propaganda, to encourage people to watch out for you." Margaret went back to the car and brought back some sandwiches and a drink, and offered them to him. She had also brought him a bag, though she did not comment on it. Fatloch hoped it was a disguise kit. She asked, "Do you still expect me to work for you?"

Fatloch shrugged. "I suppose I do, but I cannot insist upon it. What I did tonight was necessary for

me to find my daughter. I got the information I needed, if that is any consolation."

It took a lot to persuade Margaret to join him, honest as she was. The only way he was able to manage it was by convincing her that any criminality in which he indulged would be directed at those of a criminal nature themselves.

"I will help," said Margaret, "but it is for the baby, not you, that I do it."

She agreed to meet him at the spaceport the next day. He knew where to find the ship he wanted, but now he had to find the pilot, the Marabian. If he could not be located, they would jimmy the ship's entrance and get it going anyway, but Fatloch thought the Marabian would be a very useful individual to have at their disposal on the Bandits' Planet.

So Margaret left to prepare for the journey, and Fatloch had now to find the Marabian. But it would be difficult to show his face around the city without being arrested on sight. He opened the bag Margaret had brought for him and was very happy to find that it was indeed his disguise pack. It had been essential to him as a youth, while pretending to be this or that while acting as a look-out or a spy for his gang, and he had kept it into his middle age, even finding occasional uses for it as President. He did not actually do a King Henry and go among his people to gauge their mood, but he had used it now and then to have a quiet meal or drink in a pub.

He quickly got to work. Face paste let him glue back his ears, and raise the level of his eyebrows. He would look a bit startled, but that was not like his usual imperturbable self at all, so as a disguise it was perfect. He shaved, simply because anyone on the run would automatically be expected to be unshaven, and he washed away the blood from his knuckles and teeth, which would probably have been dead giveaways, he thought with a laugh, as he spat out the toothpaste. His mouth clean, a set of false teeth did much to change the shape of his mouth. His clothes were nondescript, cheap and off-the-rack. Needless to say, they were very comfortable and warm.

He headed for the grimmest pubs in the dirtiest parts of the city – that is, the only places that would have served such scum as the Marabian.

The first place he went to was the Spitted Calf, just off the main street in terms of location, but light years away from it in terms of customers. No one wandered in by accident, and if they did, they did not tend to wander out again in one piece. He had drank there from time to time as a teenager, and when he reached it he was glad to see, by the boards over the

doors and windows, and official notices pasted upon them, that it was still keeping up the old tradition of being regularly closed down by the police. If it wasn't for drugs being sold on the premises, it would be for consumption. In fact, if it wasn't for drugs the place wouldn't really have a reason to ever open again.

He went round the back and found one set of boards, over a window, that were broken, swinging gently from nails at just one end. He pushed them down and climbed inside, to find a party in full effect. Cork panelling on the walls prevented much sound from escaping, and payments to local officers made what sound there was ignorable.

Fatloch would have been glad to find the old neighbourhood just as he had left it, if it did not reflect so badly upon his Presidency.

There was loud music playing – always a sign of degeneracy! – and a dozen or so youngsters dancing (if that was what you could call their aimless flailing of limbs at each other) in the middle of the room, on a piece of linoleum whose type had done good service as a dancefloor in that room on Friday nights for fifty years or more. Around the edge of the room sat slightly older youths, the ones who now considered themselves too cool to dance, but, paradoxically, cool enough to take enough drugs to make them soil their underwear (though that would probably come later). And at the bar sat the positively ancient who were just there to watch the younger girls dancing.

He had hoped he might get lucky and find the Marabian among that last group, if not squeezing himself between the first, but he was not there this time. Maybe he was out of money, or out of town. If the same guy was in charge he would know where to find him.

Fatloch felt very, very old, probably even too old to watch the girls dancing, nice as that might have been for someone who had spent almost a year sleeping alone, but he went to the bar anyway, hoping to find that the owner he had known had not passed on the grimy torch. He was disappointed to find a young guy there that he did not recognise, though he knew the type, with a single overgrown sideburn and too much eyeliner.

“Hey old man!” he shouted over the noise of the music. “You looking for your kid?”

Fatloch laughed, very loudly, making the others at the bar turn to look at him with puzzled, glassy eyes. “I am, in fact.”

“Sorry, dude, I haven't seen her,” laughed the barman, passing him a beer.

“I should hope not, for your sake,” replied Fatloch, handing over some money.

“What's that?” the barman shouted. “I can't hear you, man!”

Fatloch leant over the bar and grabbed his sideburn, ramming his head down onto the bar. “I said, I should hope not, for your sake.”

The other guys at the bar were too stoned to react, probably not really believing their eyes.

The barman's face was contorted with anger. He tried to twist away from Fatloch's grip. “You're making a big mistake!”

Fatloch ripped off the sideburn and slapped the kid's head hard against the counter. The barman began to scream with the pain. “Don't cry now,” said Fatloch, bending to speak in his ear. “Your girlfriend does that every week to her legs for your sake. Can't you take it?” He slapped the man's head against the bar again. By this point the music had come to a stop as everyone else noticed what was happening. I'd better bring these shenanigans to an end soon, thought Fatloch. Who knows how many drug dealers are in this place? I've let myself get carried away, having too much fun. He never got the chance to do this kind of thing in Cabinet meetings.

“Where is your boss?” he asked the barman, trying to be nice.

“Upstairs,” he replied instantly. “You only had to ask – it wasn't a secret or anything, you bloody psycho. What did you have to go and do that for?”

“I hate sideburns,” replied the President. “I couldn't even remember what my question was with one of them in my face like that. Sorry, dude.”

To the accompaniment of a few girlish screams, not all of them from girls, he wiped the blood off his hand with a bar towel and went upstairs. The music was back on and people were dancing again before he was even halfway up, so he allowed himself a single salacious glance back at the dancefloor. Girls had not changed all that much since his time, he thought. If only he had known how to talk to them before he got too old for them to listen.

There were four different doors off the landing, three of which had their own set of armed guards. He was a bit surprised that they had not reacted to what had gone on downstairs, but reflected that there probably was not anything down there that they cared about in the slightest.

“Hi guys,” he said with a wave.

The only reaction was a raised eyebrow from one. Actually he was the only one not wearing huge sunglasses, so the others might have raised eyebrows and Fatloch would not have known.

"I'm not after drugs, I'm afraid. I just want to have a chat with the owner."

"No," said the one without sunglasses, "you want to buy drugs."

"No, I really don't," said Fatloch.

"I think you should," replied the bodyguard.

It is obvious, thought Fatloch, that he does not wear sunglasses because he is the communicator of the group. "Maybe I should introduce myself?" He mentioned the name he had gone by during his days on the street.

The guy without sunglasses pointed to the door without a guard. "The owner is in there – and if by chance you decide you would like any drugs later, you can have all of ours, free of charge."

"That will not be necessary," said Fatloch, "but if I ever fancy eating your eyeballs off a plate I'll get in touch. Have a nice evening."

He went through the guardless door, and was delighted to see his old friend, Sajun the Usher, still in charge.

"Sajun!" he said with a clap. "Good to see you!"

The proprietor of the Spitted Calf already had a gun in his hand. There was a reason he had no guard on his door: his speed with a gun was notorious. And he was not just known for being quick to pull it, he was known for being quick to use it too.

He said, "I don't know you, I'm afraid. If you truly know me, you should know that I have only ever had one friend in life, and it is in my hand right now."

"I hope that you are talking about the hand that is above the table," said Fatloch with a smile. "You would not recognise me, since I'm in disguise. Although now I think about it, I doubt very much if you ever saw me without a disguise. It's me, your erstwhile neighbour from the streets." He mentioned his name again.

My readers might wonder at my reluctance to give Bardello Fatloch's street name in this book, despite my lack of reticence in showing him involved in several scenes of torture. It might seem odd, I admit, but I strongly feel that if you never hear that name, you will sleep better for it. I am quite an old man, and my hours of sleep are few enough, without waking in sweat-drenched fear screaming... well, I am not

going to tell you what I wake screaming. It is for your own good.

The Usher rocked back on the chair legs, though he did not stop pointing his gun at Fatloch. "Interesting. I have not seen you around for a while. Everyone assumed you were dead, most likely by your own hand, since no one else was ever able to do you in. If someone else had done for you, we would never have heard the end of it."

"Well, I'm back, though it is probably just a flying visit."

"Take a seat," said the Usher. "It is booby trapped, of course, so don't get any ideas if I put my gun down. We might as well have the appearance of gentlemen, if not the intentions."

Fatloch took a seat. "I have no untoward intentions towards you. I'm just looking for someone."

"Untoward attentions are not always unwelcome, as you should know," said the Usher, making Fatloch laugh. "But enough reminiscing: who has your attention now?"

"It's the Marabian," replied the President.

"That scum!" spat Sajun the Usher. "I have had nothing to do with him for ten years. He knows better than to come here anymore. You really have been out of touch. What have you been doing all these years?"

"I became a good citizen."

The Usher almost choked on his own laughter. Fatloch waited patiently.

"It is you, after all this time," said the Usher. "A lesser man, or an undercover cop, would have come up with some lame excuse about being stuck in jail, or marrying a good woman, or setting up shop in a different city. Only you would have the balls to say something so totally unbelievable."

"I'm glad you recognise me now."

"Okay, I'll tell you where to find that louse-sucking scumbag. I hear things, even when I would rather not. I don't know what you want with him, but I hope it will involve pain."

Fatloch thanked him and left. He found the Marabian just where Sajun the Usher had said he might be found: under a bridge by a school, pretending to be a troll, and frightening the children whenever they tried to cross.



# The Loper

## A Short Story

John Greenwood

*One step beyond*

The bare facts of this story are already so well known in society at large that a further retelling might seem superfluous, but the tale has become so familiar to most well informed citizens that the initial shock of our discovery has been blunted by repetition. Consequently I feel that the general reader might find some interest in a version of the events told by one who was intimately involved with the expedition, who was present at the actual moment of revelation. I cannot claim to have made the discovery myself. That honour must go to my colleague, Professor A—, whose curiosity outweighed the skepticism that is its natural companion in the scientific mind. Had that not been the case, then the confused and outrageous rumours that began to reach him at his research station in Sumatra might easily have been branded a piece of crazed speculation unalloyed with truth, a product of febrile minds driven beyond breaking point by the fierce heat of the rainforest. To his credit, and to the ultimate and lasting benefit of Natural History, he did not dismiss these reports where a less imaginative, perhaps more sensible researcher might have turned away, anxious to protect his reputation. Instead he called me.

At first I thought Professor A— mistaken, and told him so. I am, as I assured him when he first contacted me, a specialist solely in the study of primates, in particular the extinct anthropoids, as distinguished from the prosimians (of which a miserable few species of lemurs still cling to life in protected environments). My sole business is with the fossilised remains of those long vanished higher primates, the apes and monkeys whose existence we know of only by the skeletal forms of those individuals whom chance dictated be preserved through the millennia. In short, while primate paleontology is by no means a sedentary trade, it deals almost exclusively with rocks. I had no experience of the kind of expedition

the Professor was proposing, nor could I foresee what possible benefit my presence could bring to his already highly qualified research team. My work has brought me into contact with living specimens but rarely and incidentally. The notion of plunging into the jungles of Sumatra in search of a species new to science struck me as not only beyond my range of expertise, but frankly outside my field entirely. Had Professor A— confused me with another? Once, while attending a conference, I was mistaken for a botanist who shares my exact name, an authority on certain types of tree fern. Perhaps this was a similar error?

But no: Professor A— was quite certain, and it was only then, in cautious terms lest he himself appear too credible a believer, that the entire story was revealed to me. It transpired that the Professor was stationed in a remote district of Sumatra while engaged in a three-year study of the breeding patterns of bats. Through his sporadic contacts with the local inhabitants, he soon learned of their belief in an improbable and malformed beast who dwelt in the dense forests of the island. Popular wisdom held that the creature was chronically shy and averse to any contact with the bustling colonies dotted around the coastline. Only those who dared to leave the civilised world behind, to penetrate the pathless interior, might happen upon the awful creature. He featured heavily in the panoply of legends peddled by the island's inhabitants, and was used to frighten infants who might otherwise be tempted to stray from the safety of the nursery. The Loper, for such was the animal known in the local dialect, had long been a figure of both terror and fascination amongst the native populace, and it seemed that everyone knew someone who knew someone who had encountered the beast at first hand. Descriptions of the Loper were predictably inconsistent. In some accounts the

creature had the tail of a scorpion. In others he lacked eyes, or a head. Other eyewitnesses swore they had seen antlers or antennae. Even wings were attributed to the monster. The singular point of concordance among these accounts was the peculiar method of perambulation the creature was supposed to employ. All agreed that the Loper walked almost exclusively on his hind legs, using his forelegs to grasp fruits and other objects, hence his unusual name.

Naturally Professor A— paid such stories no more attention or credence than one might give to the whimsical imaginings of an infant. He continued his examination of bats, concluding that such mythical creatures as the Loper undoubtedly existed in all cultures where irrational prejudice held sway over undisciplined minds. It was not until two of his most experienced and sober-minded researchers returned from an extended survey of the uncharted jungle, and admitted that they too had spied the fabled beast, that Professor A— began to give serious consideration to the possibility of the Loper's existence. The two witnesses, Dr B— and Dr C—, had glimpsed the animal only momentarily, before he had discovered their intrusion and bounded away in fright at a prodigious pace. The researchers gave chase, but quickly abandoned their pursuit for fear that they might lose their way and be swallowed up by the insatiable wilderness. Despite the brevity of the encounter, their descriptions of the quarry were almost identical, and of an unembellished clarity that only those trained to observe systematically and dispassionately are generally capable of. Gone were the stinging tail, the wings and antennae, and all the fanciful adornments attributed to the Loper of popular belief. The actual creature reported by Dr B— and Dr C—, was estimated at a little under two metres long from the end of his hind legs to the crown of his skull. It undoubtedly had four limbs and – on this point scientific observation and local superstition seemed to agree – the hind legs alone were generally used for propulsion along the ground, while the agile forelegs were employed in a wide variety of tasks: picking fruit and leaves, climbing up into the branches of trees and pushing aside the thick undergrowth as the Loper fled from his pursuers.

While keen to avoid overhasty conclusions, the two witnesses stood firm in their belief that the creature must belong to a species of mammal. The thick, matted fur which covered much of its body, so typical of the terrestrial mammals, seemed to rule out any other class of organisms. But to what order of mammals did the elusive Loper belong? Several factors seemed to indicate a definite but entirely

impossible answer. The Loper had two rather small eyes on an almost entirely flattened face. Of this fact the witnesses were adamant. It has, of course, long been held by primatologists that the extinct anthropoids may have evolved their foreshortened muzzles as they became increasingly reliant on vision to locate food, avoid predators and possibly to signal to each other, although this is to assume that those ancient primates possessed sufficient intelligence to warrant such a sophisticated system of communication. Studies of fossilised ape skulls have suggested that the frontally located eyes may have even allowed some species of higher primates to develop stereoscopic vision to a relatively high level. Whether the extinct apes and monkeys could accurately judge depth and distance may never be known, but these facial characteristics, combined with the Loper's vertical posture and two-limbed gait, persuaded Professor A— that he was dealing with some form of higher primate, miraculously shielded from the modern world by an encircling band of impenetrable vegetation.

After consultation with his colleagues, and no small amount of soul searching, Professor A— decided to shelve his work on the reproductive habits of bats, in order to mount an expedition to discover, and if possible capture, the Loper. It was to this end that I was made aware of the extraordinary notion that the anthropoid primates might not be confined to the fossil record alone. I must confess that my first instinct was that of disbelief. There had been several sensational claims of surviving monkey species over the past few decades, notably in those few remaining pockets of jungle in the Amazon Basin, but not one of these assertions had ever been verified. Most reputable authorities dismissed the possibility that any primate could have escaped the fervent eye of science for so long, and I agreed with them wholeheartedly. But we were all wrong.

Given that I remained wholly unconvinced of the Loper's existence, and privately calculated our chances of success at zero, it remains something of a mystery to me why I agreed to join Professor A—'s expedition in the capacity of expert primatologist. Dissatisfaction with the predictable routine of academic life; flattery that one of Professor A—'s standing should have chosen me; a long buried but unsated hankering after the unknown: perhaps all these influences played their part in my acceptance of the invitation. There was scant time for background study. I was expected at the Professor's research station within the week. The rest of the hunting party was already assembled and awaited only my presence

before plunging into the Sumatran forests. I remember quite distinctly, as I left my study on the day of departure, thinking to myself how fortunate I was. I watched the orderly procession of my fellow citizens marching briskly through the corridors and tunnels of our great city, each with his allotted task and place in the grand scheme of civilisation. I thought of the Loper, naked, alone and without shelter in the indifferent wilderness, and I pitied him. Perhaps I feared for my own peace of mind too, for very soon I would be wrenched away from the friendly warmth of our teeming city to be thrust into that same lonely forest which the Loper, if he even existed, must call home.

My natural horror of solitude was happily misplaced. I could not have hoped to find more congenial companions in that desolate corner of the world than Professor A— and his team. The pleasure I had in their company greatly helped to diminish, if not entirely dispel, the unease and discomfort that such an undertaking inevitably entails, particularly for one not used to these deprivations, as I certainly was not. The humidity of the rainforest is incomprehensible to one who has not experienced it for himself. The very atmosphere seems denser, and movement through it takes more effort, a problem compounded by the thick vegetation, which must be laboriously removed if any progress is to be made. Our initial objective was to reach the area where the Loper had been spotted. It was a very general aim, in that the two witnesses could not be entirely sure where the encounter had taken place. No sign remained of the path they had cut, although only a few weeks had passed, so vigorously did the undergrowth renew itself.

Seven days we spent battling through that intolerable heat and moisture without the least indication of the Loper's presence, but I never ceased to speculate as to the true nature of our quarry. Would he resemble the barrel-chested, long-limbed apes preserved in the fossil record? Reconstructions of these extinct giants must depend to a degree on analogies with other, extant species of mammals, and no small amount of guesswork. Musculature can be estimated from the bone structure with reasonable confidence, but skin pigment, fur colourings and markings are entirely unknown. Perhaps we would come face to face with the monstrous *Gorilla gorilla*, the *Pan troglodytes*, or even the bizarre *Pongo pygmaeus*? And if we did, would we be able to recognise the creature as such? These and a thousand more unanswerable questions plagued me in equal measure to the mosquitoes while we made our slow passage into the interior.

Answers came suddenly and with violence. A rock

was thrown from above and struck me sharply on the back. At first we thought it mere chance, but more of the crude missiles rained down, followed by a wild crashing of branches, as our unseen assailant made good his escape. Here then was a positive indication that the ancient anthropoids were in fact tool users! Our party pursued him desperately, but once more we were hampered by the natural obstacles of the forest floor, while the Loper, if it was indeed he, moved with unhindered ease through the lower branches. Twice we caught a glimpse of a slender, brown shape, unmistakably ape-like, with its long forelimbs and flexible jointed front paws, flashing across our path, half-obscured by the foliage. These momentary visions spurred us on with renewed hope, and we all but forgot the heat and our own exhaustion. We threw ourselves into the task, calling to each other in shrill cries lest we lose one of our number in the mad chase. Several times we feared the Loper had evaded us entirely, and we stood motionless, regaining our strength while we watched the surrounding trees for the smallest sign of movement. Each time our patience was rewarded, for that unambiguous brown form would briefly reappear in the canopy above us, and we would once again charge after him in clumsy pursuit.

I do not know exactly how long this enervating routine continued, but I do recall that I began to wonder to myself why the Loper did not simply sit quietly among the branches and wait for us to abandon the search. Did he not possess the intelligence to realise that it was his recurrent movements that gave him away? It seems highly unlikely that a species possessed of such poor skills of concealment could have survived for so long, unless perhaps it had no natural predators. Moreover, scientific studies subsequent to our discovery have shown that the Loper is a relatively intelligent primate, with a marked, if limited, capacity for cooperative hunting and food sharing. Then why did the creature repeatedly allow us to discover his hiding place? Could it be possible that he was beckoning us, guiding us towards our final destination? It may appear an improbable, even absurd explanation, but there is much about the Loper's behaviour that we do not understand, even to this day. It remains a fact that within a few hours of first sighting the creature, we found ourselves at the very threshold of his secret lair.

We emerged at last on the banks of a small, stagnant pool. On the far side of the water, a layer of overhanging rock formed a natural shelter above a narrow strip of bare earth. A movement in the

shadows alerted us to the Loper's presence, but to our utmost astonishment there appeared not one creature, but dozens. We were observing a whole community of Lopers of all sizes and ages, eating, sleeping, bickering amongst themselves, quite unaware of our presence. It was only now that we had the chance to examine these almost mythical animals at our leisure. At first there was a sense of jubilation on having set eyes on the only surviving species of an order of mammals previously considered extinct, a creature we had dismissed as nothing more than a ghost story.

Beyond the initial thrill of discovery, I recall that my first impressions of the Loper were accompanied by a strong sensation of utter revulsion. The living creatures before us scarcely resembled anything I had seen in museum reconstructions or artists' impressions of the extinct anthropoids. There was something unsettling about the way they moved, balancing upright on the two muscular hind legs and thrusting their whole torsos forward with long, ungainly strides. I realized that the Loper had not been named for nothing. The smaller forelimbs of the Loper were continually moving, grasping, twitching, as if possessed of a will independent to that of their owners. Their two small, closely spaced eyes were equally mobile, the circular black pupils swivelling restlessly in all directions, surrounded by oval sheaths of wrinkled skin. The Loper's teeth and other mouthparts lay concealed behind its mouth, a mere

hole in the flesh of the face, but one horribly flexible, so that it quivered and stretched as the creature ate. It was from this orifice too that the creatures uttered unearthly noises, created by expelling air from the lungs. We understood these shrieks and roars to form some form of rudimentary communication system, and subsequent research on individuals in captivity has confirmed our suspicions.

Most significantly, my first sight of the Loper at close range corrected a mistaken assumption of mine. What I had perceived as dark fur covering the Loper's body was in fact a combination of animal skins and an ingenious flexible covering, which the creature produced itself by knotting together long strands of vegetable fibre in an intricate pattern. In reality the Loper appeared virtually hairless apart from a small area on the crown of the head and around the reproductive organs. This is what struck me as the most repulsive aspect of the Loper: the pale, soft, almost translucent skin, beneath which I fancied I could make out the muscle tissues rippling and the blood flowing through the veins. It was a sickening spectacle, and I wondered whether these grotesque creatures belonged not to our world, but to some long forgotten era of the planet's history over which they had reigned until some natural cataclysm all but destroyed them. In that moment of horrified confrontation, I am ashamed to say, I thought it perhaps would have been better had they not survived it.

# THEAKER'S

## QUARTERLY FICTION

Issue 7

Autumn

2005

### EDITORIAL

Introducing the Band .....2  
*Howard Phillips*

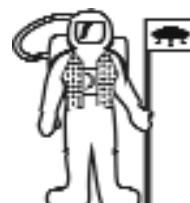
### THE FEAR MAN, PART II

*Stephen William Theaker*

The Marvellous Badower .....	3
World of Ruffians .....	5
The Fear Man .....	7
King of Thieves .....	12
Detective on the World of Thieves .....	14
Police Battle .....	16
A Bigger Boat .....	17
The War Machine .....	17
Into the Religizone .....	19
Brinksmanship .....	21
The Secret History of Mrs Fatloch .....	23
The Marabian's Story .....	26
Deeds in the Night .....	28
A Corpse for the Creature .....	30
Farewells .....	32
Returning Home, Looking for Fireflies .....	35
Afterword .....	36

Published by  
 Silver Age Books

All works are copyright the respective authors, who have assumed all responsibility for any legal problems arising from publication of their material. Other material copyright SW Theaker. Published by Silver Age Books on 12 August 2005.



# 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 consigliore."

"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 Grimmett 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 Grimmett. “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?” Grimmett 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, Grimmett 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 Grimmett 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 Grimmett, 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 at 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 underserving 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 Lard 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 consigliere, Fatloch felt he could send Grimmert 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. Grimmert 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 warehouse 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 Grimmert 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!



---

# Theaker's Quarterly Fiction

---

Issue 8

Winter

2005

---

## EDITORIAL

---

The Issue With No Resolution . . . . .2  
*Stephen William Theaker*

---

## THE SATURATION POINT SAGA: MY RISE AND FALL

---

*Howard Phillips*

A Dream . . . . .3  
The Sound and the Saturation . . . . .6  
My Career Takes Off . . . . .9  
Meditation and Self-Medication . . . .11

---

## NEWTON BRADDELL AND HIS INCONCLUSIVE RESEARCHES INTO THE UNKNOWN

---

The Hidden Game . . . . .14  
*John Greenwood*

---

## VALIANT RAZALIA

---

Prologue . . . . .17  
*Michael Wyndham Thomas*

---

## EXCELSIOR

---

*Steven Gilligan*

Prisoner . . . . .26  
Visitor . . . . .29

Published by  
Silver Age Books

All works are copyright the respective authors, who have assumed all responsibility for any legal problems arising from publication of their material. Other material copyright SW Theaker. All advertisement-type material is created by us to give props to people Theaker likes. Published by Silver Age Books on 1 October 2005.

# Editorial

## The Issue With No Resolution

Stephen William Theaker

Editor

This is the eighth issue of my magazine, and just like every issue so far, it is the best yet. But it is slightly unusual, in that it contains no less than four distinct tales, by four entirely different authors, whereas in the past I have been more likely to present my readers with one or two long pieces. It is very interesting, I feel, that I launched this magazine mainly in order to encourage myself to sit down to write at least four times a year, only to be eventually pushed out of it by the submissions of other people. I would vow to ruin them all for stymieing my plans were it not for their stories being so much better than anything I would have been likely to write.

If there is a theme to this issue, it is probably highlighted best by "The Hidden Game", intended by the author, John Greenwood, the editor of our sister journal, *November Spawned*, to be the first in a series – *Newton Braddell And His Inconclusive Researches Into the Unknown*. Planned to be of indefinite length, John has promised, if it is within his writerly power, to send an instalment for several issues to come. Let's hope that he does not waver in that resolution after seeing that, in my guise as illustrator, I decided to clothe his character in a costume rather similar to that of Elvis in his Vegas years. I have no explanation – I am only a beginner when it comes to art, so I am as yet at the mercy of my muse.

Anyway, back to the theme I mentioned. The key word in John's story, so far as this issue is concerned, is *Inconclusive*. None of this issue's items reaches a conclusion. I hope that nevertheless the issue will stand alone, as a good read in itself, but it is worth alerting the reader to the fact before he or she plunges in.

As already mentioned, Newton Braddell is intended to be an ongoing series. The story submitted by my sometime friend Howard Phillips is the beginning of an autobiographical epic, in which he will, step-by-step, take us through the assembly of what some claim to be the greatest rock band of

all time, Howard Phillips and the Saturation Point. This is the beginning of *The Saturation Point Saga* – mark this moment well! This first, introductory, story deals with the fate of his former band, The Sound of Howard Phillips (who he discussed at some length in last issue's editorial), and with this published, he then plans to assault us with a series of novels and stories, each of which will report how he recruited one or another of the band. Now, longtime Silver Age readers will be fully aware of the number of projects Howard has undertaken but not completed, but he seems very enthusiastic, so I will not be the one to discourage him. He has all the makings of a multi-media triple threat, at the very least, so if I am nice now maybe he will tip his hat to the SAB at some opportune time in the future.

Steven Gilligan has blessed us with the first half (or less, depending on how the rest of the story plays out) of *Excelsior*, the heartwarming tale of a young man and his giant robot. The eponymous metal star can be seen on the cover of this issue, as interpreted by your hard-working editor. He ended up looking quite a bit like Jet Jaguar, but was that in Steven's descriptions of the robot, or was that just how I interpreted his words? Resolve this conundrum by reading it now! Steven also created the hilarious cartoon that graces the back cover.

The fourth piece in this issue is the fascinating prologue to *Valiant Razalia*, the first science fiction novel by Michael Wyndham Thomas, better known as a poet and historical novelist. I have never read anything quite like it. In all honesty, from someone writing their first science fiction novel, I expected a certain amount of reinventing the wheel, being hit over the head with the hoariest of old tropes (that's the role my fiction plays in this magazine!), and a story that struggled to breathe through the condescension to genre, but that is not what we have here. This is a unique piece of writing – dense and atmospheric, yet wilful, whimsical and playful. Initially perhaps somewhat forbidding in its tumult of adjectives and similes, to the careful reader it reveals a rich bounty of laughter and mystery. It might take you a few paragraphs or pages to settle into its rhythms, but take the time, make the effort, and at the end ask yourself when the rest of the novel will be available to read. The author has said he may submit further instalments to this journal, but I can only hope to be so lucky.

Observant readers may notice that the format of the publication has had a revamp this issue. It was not by choice – all our files were lost in a hard drive failure, and so, starting again, we decided to make a few changes. I hope you like them.

# THE SATURATION POINT SAGA

## My Rise and Fall

Howard Phillips  
*Master of the Macabre*

### A Dream

It began with a dream. I went to sleep that night unimagining of what awaited me in this world and beyond. The dream I had that night was my first intimation. When I placed my head upon the pillow I expected to while away the midnight hours in the usual way, tossing and turning, battling with a pillow determined to bother my head in all the most sensitive places, and finally waiting patiently for dawn, so that I might rush back out into a world that despises me.

But it was not to be. Not that night.

That night, I fell asleep immediately, almost as if I had no choice in the matter, as if a huge, invisible hand was pushing me down, down, away from consciousness. Briefly I struggled, concerned at this unusual happening. Had somebody perhaps drugged me? Had some element of that evening's meal been spoiled, leading to hallucination? I do not know the cause, I only know the consequence.

I found myself in my home, in the bedroom to which my mind had just abandoned my body. I was dressing, my best suit. Its age was barely noticeable – a slight shine at the elbows, and a small patch on one knee – and I wore the suit like a badge of honour. I might seem less than respectable to some, but at least I had earned my own respect, by not selling myself out, by being true to the goals I had set myself in life.

Tonight I would play with my band, The Sound of Howard Phillips.

We had formed about a year ago, after I began to form an interest in music. Of course I could play no instruments, but that has never stopped the greats. I

believe my move into music-making was a natural evolution from my previous interest in poetry. It was in theory only a matter of setting the words to music, although in practice I had never limited myself in that way. In fact, I had undertaken several experiments in what I came to term “emergent melody” – I would tell the band to begin to play, and after recording their individual efforts, I would let the music take my words where it would. Sometimes that would lead to a chorus, or a verse, or sometimes to sounds, or screams. Often, I would just speak, if that was what the song begged of me.

Enough of my musical philosophy – back to my dream!

I was dressing in readiness for the evening's gig. We had produced a pair of extended play recordings, but garnered little interest. A number of gigs had not done much to improve matters, with audiences seeming to lack the necessary intelligence to engage with our ideas and approach. Tonight, though, it would be different!

I wondered why I thought that. Why would it be different? If anyone even turned up to see us play – that is, if the turgid patrons of the public house deigned to turn away from their drinks for even a minute to take us in – why would they be more inclined to understand what we had to offer?

This apparent discontinuity in the dream's logic made me twist and struggle. For a moment, I knew I dreamt, and wished to wake. But I could not, again I felt the press of that misty hand, pressing me down, down, into the dream, my qualms forgotten.

I left the house, carrying nothing but my microphone. The rest of the band would make their own way there, as usual. Sometimes I wondered if they plotted to replace me. I could never remember the name of the bassist, but I could swear that he scoffed whenever I mentioned my theories of emergent melody. If he turned the others against me, would it one day be merely The Sound, with no mention of their founder?

I put such maudlin thoughts out of my head as I paid for my bus ticket.

“Thank you, driver,” I said cheerfully.

“How socks dry, sir,” he replied.

“Lovely,” I said. “Lovely. See you later.”

I made my way to the back of the bus. Whenever

possible I took a seat there, so that none could mock me behind my back, as happened so often. How frequently had I felt a piece of softened paper, horribly warmed by spittle, crash against the back of my head or neck, only to be afraid to turn to face the author of the assault? Too frequently, by half. I would always be the kind of man to take laughter over violence when it came to the decisive moment, even though it was laughter I feared most.

I reckoned without the horrible logic of dreams. Even as I placed my posterior upon the back seat, I felt a gust of wind from behind my head. I forced myself to turn around to discover what new threat the bus would confront me with, to see the back window replaced by an infinite regression of seats, and upon every seat a boy with a wadded piece of paper, ready to unleash it upon me.

I shouted in anger, even as they began to shower me in saliva-drenched scraps. One landed, disgustingly, in my mouth – I spat it out, and ran to the front of the bus. I looked to the driver to let me off, but he shook his head, and shrugged.

The stop was mere moments away, but our way was blocked by traffic.

“Sorry,” he said, apologetically, as I was spattered by the evidence of the other passengers’ despite for me – they had all joined in now. “I can’t let you off, we’re not at the stop yet. It isn’t safe. Horrid sky. Shoes.”

I endured.

Stepping off the bus, what seemed like hours later, my black suit now polka-dotted with humiliation, I found myself outside the Birmingham Academy, a venue.

I turned to call to the driver. “This is the wrong place! I can’t be playing here!”

He shrugged again, and the bus drove off, a thousand schoolboys pushing open the windows as it went by to shout insults and try to spit at me.

“Life,” I said, with resignation, to myself.

I looked to the venue. The huge white sign above the doors, designed to proudly present the names of the bands performing, offered only a jumble of nonsense letters. Beneath the sign began a queue that stretched back a hundred metres. Half the members of the queue were beautiful teenage girls, with bouncing hair and well-filled brassieres – the other half, equally beautiful teenage boys, with fringes that flopped over their faces like an invitation to open the curtains and kiss their lips. At the back of the queue, my long-dead great-grandmother.

At first none noticed me, but then my great-grandmother, Iris, cried out with joy, “There he is! It’s Howard himself!”

It was as if I stood at the very point in the sea where the tide begins to turn – from neutral immobility, the crowd turned to me and began to rush forward. Iris was left at the back, struggling to make herself heard as the boys and girls surrounded me.

“It’s Howard!” they cried as one.

“What a pleasant development,” I said to myself, surprised at the attention in a way, but in another, surprised only that it had taken so long for the public to come around.

Suddenly I was more conscious than ever of my suit, worn and dirtied as it was, but under the strokes of their adoring hands it was cleansed, and renewed, and I began to grow in confidence. Somehow I didn’t feel crowded, or intimidated. I just enjoyed the attention, even when it was more intimate than might be expected in the street.

“Take it easy,” I said to them all, “there’s more than enough of me to go round. I’ve been saving it up for a long time.”

Suddenly, though, they began to drift away. Puzzled, I caught the arm of an attractive brunette as she headed back to the queue.

“What’s happening?”

She laughed, a pretty giggle that made my toes curl in disgust, despite myself. “The concert is about to begin. You should go inside.”

“I should?”

The queue looked at me expectantly.

“It’s getting on,” she said. “None of us can go in until you do.”

I frowned, and released her arm. Its softness had been a pleasure to my fingers. She looked sadly towards the back of the queue.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I just lost my place, that’s all.” Her glumness was increasing. “The gig will be half over by the time I get in.”

“I’m very sorry,” I said. “I didn’t mean to make you miss the concert. Is there anything I can do to help?”

She beamed. “Just take me in with you! That would be wonderful! I could meet the whole band! Would you introduce me?”

I patted her shoulder. “I don’t think I know the band.” I looked around, making sure I was where I had thought I was. “True, I was supposed to be performing tonight – I intended to further my experiments in emergent melody, should the band be ready to play in the way they agreed when they signed their contracts – but this was not the place. This is not where we would be playing. I don’t know who you all think I am, but I should not be here.”

She frowned. Women always look prettier to me

frowning than they do when they are happy. Any imbecile can be happy. It takes intelligence to suffer in the absence of physical pain or privation. That is not to say that I think of every frowning woman as intelligent – but at least it is a sign that they are not mere dunderheads grinning their way through life’s trials like slightly less gaudily made-up clowns.

“This is where you’re playing,” she said. “If you don’t play, everyone will be very disappointed. The band are waiting for you, Howard.”

I thought for a moment, then pulled her to me. I pushed my tongue between her lips. She tasted rather of cinnamon. Her tongue pushed back against mine, dancing, flickering into my mouth. I sucked it gently, and her hips pressed against mine. I put my left hand upon her bottom. It was round, and not too firm. I squeezed it gently, and put my right hand upon her breast. Pressing with the lightest of touches, I felt the lace of her brassiere through the cotton t-shirt, and her nipple starting to stiffen in my middle of my palm. Suddenly, as is the way of dreams, we were in my home, making love, by turns softly and wildly, tenderly and violently. But before I could attain the little death, we were back outside the Academy, and our kiss came to an end.

Why were more of my dreams not like this?

I took her hand, and we walked towards the entrance of the club. The security staff paused from checking tickets and waved us in.

Unconfident for a second, I paused before entering, and tried to tell them, “I’m with The Sound of Howard Phillips.”

“Howard Phillips, mate? No problem, go right in.”

The brunette laughed. “You don’t have to tell people who you are, Howard!”

I gave her hand a squeeze, and moved it to the front of my trousers.

“Not now, Howard! You have to do the gig first!”

She dragged me through the entrance into the lobby. It was full of teenagers, each as delectable as the next, each wearing a t-shirt with my name on. The other text was hard to read, obscure and foggy. They turned to watch me, awed, as I passed by.

Within seconds we were inside the auditorium. The crowd was inside already, expectant, waiting, staring at me. As I walked towards the stage they parted to let me through, but I was taking too long. Some began to stamp their feet, others to chant my name: “Howard! Howard! HOWARD!” I lost my grip on the brunette, and she melted into the crowd well before I reached the front.

I was lifted, almost thrown, onto the stage in the audience’s eagerness. All the instruments of a band

were there – the drums, the guitars, the keyboards, and all the rest – but no band members as yet.

The main lights dimmed, the stage lights flared in my face, and perfumed smoke billowed out over the audience, still chanting my name.

I took my microphone from my pocket, and said hello. They screamed alarmingly.

“Hi,” I said once the noise died down a bit. “I’m Howard Phillips, and I’m here to play for you, it seems. Let’s get the band out on stage, eh?”

Everyone shouted, stamped their feet, and shrieked to the fullest extent of their lungs.

“Let’s hear it,” I said, “for The Sound of Howard Phillips! Come on out, guys!”

The crowd went silent. People started to shift uneasily, and look at each other. It was as if they thought I had gone mad.

It’s only a dream, I thought. What does it matter?

Then there was a shout. “Howard! It’s Iris!” It was my great-grandmother, though I could not make her out beyond the brightness of the stage lights. Everyone turned to look at her, but undeterred she went on. “Have you been taking tablets, my boy?”

I held out my hands. “I don’t know what you mean. If I am not playing with The Sound, then who am I playing with? In fact, who am I, *tout court*?”

But before she could answer, the crowd went insane again. I turned, to see the band coming out on stage. The drummer, the guitarist, the bassist, all the rest, filed out behind me. The guitarist patted me on the shoulder, and yelled in my ear.

“Well done, Howard. I’ve never seen a crowd so ready to rock. They thought you’d totally lost it!”

I did not recognise him, or any of the band.

They were not The Sound of Howard Phillips.

As the rhythm section began to groove, I looked up to the back of the stage, where the band’s logo hung, suspended behind us while lasers played over its glistening image.

Howard Phillips and the Saturation Point, it said.

The guitars started to rock, I went back to the microphone, and we began to kick it.

\* \* \*

Many hours later, I woke up, thrilled, sweaty and exhilarated. What did the dream mean? Was it self-criticism, or an attempt by my subconscious to kick my musical career into gear? Where had those amazing songs come from? We had played an entire set, every song better, more pulse-pounding, more dramatic than the last, and some traces of them remained yet in my head.

I quickly ran downstairs to the computer, and sang, hummed and clapped what fragments I could

remember, creating the vaguest of demo tracks. I could not hope to recreate the amazing music that I had heard – and performed! – in my dream, but I could do my best to approximate it. After a day's frantic work, during which I did not even pause to dress myself, I felt I had done all I could. For the rest, I would need musicians, so I ate, slept – a dreamless sleep, this time – and upon waking summoned the members of The Sound of Howard Phillips.

## The Sound and the Saturation

By lunchtime they were all there. Quids McCall, by many people's reckoning the greatest loss 1970s rock music ever suffered – he had unexpectedly quit the business, giving no reason and disappearing for decades, only to answer my advertisement in the local paper three decades later – was quite grouchy.

“Howard, it's early. Why did you have to get us all out of bed? I'm knackered, and I'm in no mood to play guitar right now.”

I shushed him. “I had a dream, band-mates. I dreamt of the music we could be playing, if only we tried.”

Quids laughed heartily. “If *we* tried, Howard? What instrument do you play again?” The rest of the Sound laughed with him.

I drew myself up haughtily. “I play inspiration! I play dreamer! I play visionary! I lead the band where no others dare or deign to go! What are the rest of you to that? You pluck a six-stringed box that a child could get a noise out of!”

He looked shame-faced, clearly embarrassed to have been put in his place in front of the rest of the band, but Jack “the Space” Tom stuck up for him. He actually had the nerve to be somewhat angry with me.

(It is scenes like this that show how difficult it is to be the leader of a band, as opposed to just a mere member. Being the leader of a band is like wrangling cats – it might well be possible to get what you want from them, but expect a few scratches and bring a lot of fish.)

“Howard,” said Jack, the keyboardist, “don't get angry with Quids just for that. We have all put a lot into this band, not just you. We have all stuck at it, despite the lack of success, despite your insistence on experimentation over tunes, despite the fact that

you treat us all as your servants. I'm amazed that we take it, sometimes.”

“You will take it, though,” I replied, surprised at the passion in my voice. “You will take it, and learn to like it! I treat you as servants because you are!” They all began to grumble at that, but I shook my head. “I am a servant too! We are all servants to the muse – we have to follow her bidding!”

Lumley Clark shook his head as firmly as he played his drums. “That's your muse, Howard, not ours. We have families to feed. We need to earn money, and it's just not happening.”

The bassist nodded in agreement.

I could see that I would lose them if I was not careful, binding contracts or not, and so I eased off the pedal a bit. Sometimes you need a stick with musicians, but sometimes a carrot will do a better job.

“Just listen to the demos I've made, Lumley. And these are just shadows, mere reflections of the music from my dream. You cannot imagine anything like it. The crowd was rapturous – they loved the music. They demanded more, and we improvised three new songs on the trot, each better than the last!”

I chose not to mention that The Sound had not actually featured in my dream. I assumed that my subconscious had chosen to substitute new members to free me from old ways of thinking (how wrong I would be proved to be!) – but now, in real life, I had to work with the tools at my disposal, and they were not a bad bunch. Lumley Clark was one of the most imaginative drummers on the planet – and I could not have faulted his technique in the least. Quids McCall played the guitar like he had twenty fingers, even before he brought his toes into play. Jack “the Space” Tom made the gaps between notes sound louder than the notes themselves. He would have been the perfect band member if only he could play without his grey cat, Harry, in attendance. I detest cats, of course, meaning we had had to arrange a system whereby he could fax his keyboard playing into the studio, which made improvisational playing difficult. But it was worth it – that guy could really do it. The bassist, too, was very good.

Not a bad bunch at all – so there was no need to ruffle their feathers by saying I had dreamt of playing with another band.

“I'm listening to you, my friends, but you are The Sound of Howard Phillips. Your very name describes your purpose: to bring to life the sounds that I imagine. It seems that so far the sounds I have imagined have not been particularly commercial, and I apologise for that. I cannot help where, as you point out, *my* muse takes me. She has taken me down

some tricky roads, but you, my band, have followed me. You have been faithful to the dream, but now – and I understand this – you are wondering if it will all be worthwhile, if all the work you have put in is leading anywhere. You have wives, children, cats and elderly relatives who rely on you for support, but so far you have put our dreams ahead of that. I called you to this meeting today because our dreams have repaid the favour – they have shown us where it is all leading. One day, we will be popular, beloved, and probably very wealthy. There will be acclaim, record sales, groupies and everything else you could dream of. (Even you, Quids, I know you miss it.) Now, listen to these demos, and tell me what you think.”

I went to the computer and played the first track, then the second, and then the other eight. I kept my back to the Sound the whole time. I could not bear to look at them. These moments would decide the rest of our lives, I thought. As the demos played on, I began to doubt myself. Why was the band so quiet? Were these songs really all that good? I kept my back turned, so they would not see a hint of the worry that wracked me. Would they be able to hear beyond my reedy vocals, out of time handclaps, and out of tune humming, hear beyond that to the magnificent sound that I heard in my head? Could they take those songs from my dreams and make them reality?

At last, all the demos had played, and I turned to face the Sound.

“Wow,” said Lumley. “We had better get to work.”

“Fucking yeah!” shouted Quids. He started jamming on his guitar, already trying to find his way into one of the songs.

“That was hot shit!” said Jack Tom, getting ready to go home to his keyboards. “We are going to kick ass or my name isn’t Jack Tom.”

The bassist didn’t get up, and tipped his head to one side. “I wonder,” he said.

“What’s up?” asked Lumley, leaping to his feet. “You must have heard it. These songs could take us all the way!”

I could not help grinning. It was a tonic to see the band so enthusiastic, after months of desultory practices, half-hearted gigs and bare communication. If we could realise the songs I had dreamt, the sky would be no limit to us. I had barely heard the bassist’s lone voice of equivocation.

“I don’t know,” said the bassist. “I can hear what you are getting at with these songs, and I can imagine what kind of bass lines they might need, but there are a few things I’m not sure about. I don’t know if I will be able to play the bass lines to do those songs justice, and that worries me. I am a very

good bass player – I can slap and tickle bass with the best of them – I can wear it high or low – I can groove, funk and batter the bass from top to bottom. But I don’t know if I will ever be able to lay down bass lines that will be good enough for those songs. I know my limitations, and those songs would stretch me to the very limit.”

“So there’s no time to lose!” yelled Quids. “This is what I’ve been waiting for all these years. Something real, something I can really get behind and play with my soul!”

I took a step toward the bassist, and grasped the upper part of his arm. “No artist ever fully realises his or her dreams,” I said. “All you can ever hope to do is approximate them. If you have talent and time, the approximation will be closer, but it can never be exact. And more often than not, in making the attempt you find yourself creating something even better than that of which you dreamed!”

“I suppose,” he said.

“Of course he’s right, man,” shouted Lumley Clark. “If we can even manage one half of what Howard has dreamt up, we will have cracked it. Isn’t that right, Howard?”

I smiled as if I agreed, but of course I would not settle until my dreams were as closely actualised as possible. If we created other great music along the way, no problem, that could be released, but I had a very definite idea of where I ultimately wanted to take this band.

Jack Tom had left by now, and as we talked the keyboard connected to the fax machine began to make little noodling sounds.

“There is something else,” said the bassist. “Don’t you feel it? Something is not quite right about these songs. They are wonderful in a hundred different ways – don’t get me wrong about that – and they will probably revolutionise modern music in ways we can’t even imagine. Musicians will still be working on variations of them for decades to come, just as the possibilities that the Beatles and Bowie opened up in the sixties have yet to be exhausted. But something about these songs tickles at the back of my brain. Something tells me they shouldn’t be here. Something tells me we should leave them alone.”

Everyone fell quiet for a moment, and I felt the darkness begin to descend once more, but at that point Quids found the style he was looking for, and he let us have it – he turned up to ten. It knocked us all off our feet.

When we had recovered, I took a long hard look at the bassist. “Can you really walk away from that? Are you going to let a lesser bassist – a lesser man – ruin what should have been? Will Smith once said

that he was offered the role of Neo, but that he did not take it, and he was glad he did not, because when he saw the choices Keanu Reeves had taken, he knew he would have made the wrong choice every single time. Now, I am absolutely certain that Will Smith was being overly self-deprecating. He would have made a marvellous Neo, even if he had been a little different from what we are used to. But can you say the same thing about the slab-handed oaf who is going to come in here and play where you should have played?"

The bassist looked me back in the eye, and then began to smile, and finally laughed. "Since when did you watch films, Howard? I would have thought you wouldn't even own a television."

"I am at heart a poet," I replied. "And it is essential for a poet to maintain a connection with his audience. To do that I must be aware of the cultural touchstones of our times. Are you with us, bassist?"

"Okay," he said. "You've got me. Let's do this thing."

\* \* \*

I put the band to work. For long months they toiled to recreate the sound I had dreamt of. We worked on each song in turn, laying down drum, bass, guitar and keyboard tracks, bit by bit trying to build up to what I knew the songs could be. Once the basics were in place we returned to the first song, and tried to refine it, but I was not satisfied. The same thing happened with each of the other songs. However good they sounded, there was something missing, something indefinable that we just could not get into the songs. The rest of the band were baffled, of course, not having heard the original versions, but they battled on. Tempers frayed at times, as I pushed them to the very limits of their endurance, but I thought the Sound could handle it. They were grizzled veterans of a dozen albums between them – they *should* have been able to handle it.

Eight months into the project I entered the studio to find my keyboardist holding a knife to my guitarist's throat. I paused a moment, allowing myself the time to take stock, then yelled at the top of my voice, "KEYBOARD PLAYER! PUT THE KNIFE DOWN!"

By that point I had almost entirely trained them to follow my instructions – they had become perfect tools for me to use – though I had not realised the toll that that would take on them; that I had, in fact, irreparably broke all four of them (and Harry the grey cat was not having a good time of it, either). But with every day that went by, my dream seemed to move further off into the distance – what I needed to

create this album the way I wanted was not a group of servants, not tools, but equals, musicians who could bring to the project inspiration equal to my own. My band was full of superb musicians, but had only one visionary.

He did not put the knife down. I took my pistol from my pocket. It was never loaded, of course, but nevertheless helped to concentrate the band when necessary. I pointed it at Jack's head.

"What's going on here?"

He did not answer, and did not move the knife. I felt bad, not just because I had perhaps driven the poor fool to this point, but also because of all the band members, Quids McCall had most enthusiastically thrown himself into the project. That might have been what had led to this situation.

"I can replace a guitarist, Jack, if you use that knife. Can you replace your brain, if I use the gun? Be sensible and put the knife down."

He slowly moved it away from Quids' throat, and then dropped it on the ground. I kicked him in the head, with all the little power I could muster, but it was enough to knock him to the floor. The guitarist got to his feet and began to give a few kicks of his own.

"Watch the fingers," I said, picking up the knife and taking it away to safety. "We still need him."

I made everyone a cup of hot, sweet, army tea while they calmed down. Once the three of us were all sitting on a comfortable couch, a cup of tea in our hands, things did not seem quite so serious.

I looked at my bandmates. "What's the problem, guys? You should have come to me, first. This is not the kind of band where we have fights with each other. We have a dream and we are all mucking in to make that dream come true. Leave the squabbling to your everyday jobbing joes!"

The two of them looked at each other, while I waited patiently. The keyboardist eventually decided to speak first.

"I didn't want to bother you with it," said Jack. "At least not until I was sure that the rest of the band felt the same way. The bassist won't come out of his house, and Lumley has been hospitalised these last three weeks. He cannot lift his hand, never mind his drumsticks."

"I've been pushing all of you very hard, I know that," I said. "I've been thinking the same thing."

Jack stumbled. This was evidently not the reaction he had expected from me. "Erm, that's right. We are all feeling the strain, and what's worse, we don't feel like we're getting anywhere. It feels like we made all the real progress in the first few months of recording, and since then we've just been shuffling around,



trying different approaches to get to the same unattainable place. It's been driving us all slowly mad."

I smiled. "It's a relief, in some ways, to hear you say that out loud. I feel just the same way."

"You do?" said Quids McCall, querulously.

"Thank you for sticking up for me," I told him. "But there's no need. I think we have taken this as far as we can. Equally, there's no excuse for keyboard players to be pulling knives on people, no matter how tired out they are, so he deserved his kick in the head. But if we look beyond this nasty little event, I think we can see that this project has run its course. We should put the record out as it is – it isn't going to get any better."

Jack "The Space" closed his eyes and lifted two hands to heaven. "I was beginning to think this day would never come," he said to me. "If it's okay, I'll start to send CDs out to a few record companies. It's been fine recording this in your home studio, Howard, but we'll want real record company dollars behind us."

"He's right," said Quids. "This will be an incredible album, even if we stop now, and it's going to sell like crazy in the end, but it might take a while to catch on. We'll need someone with money enough to educate the public to listen to it."

"The songs are catchy as hell," said Jack, "but people will have to hear them a few times before they hear the hooks coming at them. It's a whole new direction for music."

"Fine, gentlemen," I said. "Between the two of you, choose your favourite version of each track, make sure the bassist and Lumley agree, and then send CDs out to the labels. Let's send a few out to avant garde DJs as well to get some buzz started."

"What about you?" asked Jack. "Don't you want a say in which versions we use?"

"Sorry," I replied with half a smile, "but I can't even listen to them now. I'm afraid of destroying the memory of the originals. Now shake hands with each other, and go sort out a record deal for us."

They shook hands and left the room, excitedly chattering about the new possibilities opening up before them.

I put my head in my hands and began to cry.

## My Career Takes Off

You can imagine what happened next. At first record company interest was negligible, but the moment one A&R got it, the others quickly pretended that they did too, and a bidding war began. I took a large

advance, divided it between the other members of the band, and left the record to its own devices. I let the band believe it was part of our mystique, whereas in fact I could not see myself going out to cheerlead for a record that, whatever effect it might have on the future of music, I could only ever see as a crushing disappointment.

The first mention in the NME was a surprise. I had given no interviews, and the record was not yet out, but they had included The Sound of Howard Phillips in a list of bands to watch out for that year. Apparently we were the "New Wave of Art Throb". They had dug out one of our old publicity photos, the ones we had sent out to labels, magazines and DJs with our first EP. I was stunned by how much healthier we all looked. What had I done to the band in my fruitless quest for perfection?

I began to drink. I could see no way forward. I could not make the music of my dreams a reality, and I knew that until I did it would continue to haunt my every waking moment, stretching at the very fibre of my being, forcing me to allow it freedom. So I drank to forget, as I always do. My favourite drink was whisky, of course, mixed with Coca-Cola, at least in the morning. On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays I would use Diet Coke. On Tuesday and Thursdays I would use Cherry Coke (this happened during one of the rare periods during which that marvellous flavour was to be found on the shelves). At the weekends I would use regular Coke, and add a spoonful of coffee grinds. In the afternoons I took tea and jam on toast, so that the hangover would not be so bad. Then in the evening I would drink lager, my favourite being Budweiser, of course, the King of Beers.

A weak beer, say some, but I'll get drunker with a weak beer that I can bear the taste of than I would with some foul-smelling brew with unmentionable pieces floating around in it.

Towards the end of the night, in a rush to be as drunk as possible, I would drink alcopops – orange and peach flavours being my favourites, but I was always, as ever, open to experimentation. Strawberry was not unbearable, and pineapple always interesting.

I am not what you would call a "manly" drinker, but in what way is wetting yourself and vomiting a sign of manliness anyway, regardless of what you drank to make it happen?

The night would always end with a second helping of jam on toast, for the sake of my health.

I stopped going to work, though I had made a special effort to keep going during the recording sessions. The publisher would contact me occasion-

ally, but he was used to my frequent absences. I worked for him as a marketing manager and occasional copy-writer. Soon enough he would see the album in the charts and stop calling or expecting me back. He would bide his time – if my money ran out, he would wait till I had reached my lowest point before contacting me again. Did he do that out of human kindness, or out of pleasure at my downfall? I could not answer, but there he had been, time and time again, at my lowest points, offering me work, offering me a way back up, laughing as he held out a hand.

Most days I drank at home, but from time to time I would stagger out onto the streets of Birmingham. I walked through the city centre, staggering from bar to bar, pausing only to harangue idiots lecturing passers-by on religion.

“The thing with evolution,” said one of them as I threw up into a litterbin, “is that it is only a theory...”

I had to hear no more. I ran over, tried to leap onto his self-made podium and fell to the ground. I climbed to my feet, and used his trousers to pull my way back up. Eventually there was a handful of his shirt in my grasp, and I was spitting chunks of unevacuated vomit into his face.

“Of course it’s a theory, you moron! That’s the difference between you and us. You want everything to be safe, and certain, but it isn’t – you can never be sure – you can only make theories, and test them, and come up with better ones when they fail!”

I fell to the ground before I could get much further, and he continued with his preaching. No one had paid any attention to my behaviour, any more than they paid attention to him. I tried to crawl over to Pizza Hut, but could not find the strength to open the door.

Was this my lowest point? Not by a long way.

Shortly after that incident the album came out. Have I mentioned yet its title? It was my musical interpretation of *The Fear Man*, a novel by the publisher I mentioned earlier. He had never published it, except in a little journal to which I had occasionally contributed pieces, and so I was in the odd position of having released a musical version of a novel no one had heard of. Thank goodness I had refused all interviews, but that did nothing to harm sales. As predicted, they were slow at first, but enough to occasionally get me recognised as I wove my drunken way about town. The money from those sales enabled me to get even drunker, while those beginnings of celebrity led people to buy me drinks, allowing me to get drunker still.

Slowly the band and the album began to pass

certain milestones. The review in the NME was extremely complimentary, although aside from rating it a 9, it was hard to tell, with the reviewer describing the album as “Doctor Hook and Doctor Who’s crack babies playing football with Britney and Christina as naked goalposts”, in the paper’s inimitable and unmistakably silly fashion. Still, silly as it is, a lot of people listen, so the rest of the band, and the record label, with whom I had minimal dealings, were happy.

The album began to nuzzle its way up the 6 Music chart, and tracks began to be played on its more outré programmes. That made me happy, at least. I had always had a great fondness for the station. Soon the album began to edge into the top forty album chart, and the demands for interviews became more insistent. The record label suggested that the rest of the Sound do the interview – they had all done the rounds before with various bands, and there had even been more than one weekly music paper to deal with in those days. For some reason I agreed, and Quids McCall led the gang into battle. The first interview was with Planet Sound, the teletext music pages on Channel 4 at that time.

My morning routine was always the same, despite the binge drinking. (Is it still binge drinking if you do it every day? I am not sure.) While eating breakfast I would turn to BBC1, where I would check page 501 for entertainment news, then 102 for the main news headlines, then 160 for local news. After reading the morning comments on page 577 I would wait to see if the presenters of Breakfast News were wearing anything revealing. Then I would turn to Channel 4 and read page 376 and its sequels for news regarding computer games (pushing on afterwards to the problem page on page 386, which always seemed to relate to a teenage girl worried about being attracted to her girlfriends, or masturbating too much, or something equally titillating), 351 and its sequels for news about music, and then once a week to 311, for movie news, although it seemed to be updated irritatingly irregularly.

On page 351 that day there was a news item about The Sound of Howard Phillips. I smiled. Apparently one of our songs, *Lost in the Maze of Lies*, was to be released as a single, with a Fatboy Slim remix replacing our nine minute original. I hoped he would keep the soca rhythms. Then I noticed at the bottom of the page a trail for an interview with the band on page 353. My heart sank. I had forgotten that I had given permission for this to happen.

I poured some extra whisky onto my Shreddies and turned to page 353. The third sub-page came up, of six. The band seemed chirpy, talking about their

favourite tracks on the album, and how pleased they were that people seemed to like it. I read the following sub-pages as they became available, my depression growing worse with each one. On the sixth page they talked about plans for a follow-up, and I began to laugh, madly, like a hyena. Where did they think I would get new ideas from? The old ones were still stuck in my head! They were planning the future of the band, but there wasn't one. They could not live up to my dreams, they never could, no one ever could. I would let the album sell – I owed them that much for a year of torture, stress and humiliation – but that was it.

Then again, if they wanted to continue without me, I would not complain, and I was sure that they would make as good a fist of exploiting my ideas as any other band would. Somehow this thought made me sadder than the thought that I had let them down. I had provided them with valuable cachet, and if they played their cards right they would be set for life, regardless of how well this particular album sold. How I hated them all.

Finally I was able to read sub-pages one and two, where they laughed and joked about how the songs on the album had been inspired by a dream the singer had.

"It doesn't matter where the ideas come from," said the writer, "when they lead to music this astonishing."

"They are missing the point," I said to myself, downing the rest of the whisky bottle, before running out into the street, screaming at the top of my lungs, and defecating in my pyjamas.

That was my lowest point.

## Meditation and Self-Medication

The next four days were spent in my bed. I stopped drinking anything but water and hot tea, and began to eat more regularly, and normally, and after each meal returned to bed, to lie there, and think, and meditate. It was not the most comfortable bed in the world, but it did not need to be – it just had to be there, to hold me up while I tried to work out what I needed to do. How could I find a way out of my own head?

After four days the answer became obvious: drugs.

If I could truly leave myself behind by means of chemicals, perhaps I could escape those insistent

tunes that were driving me insane. People say that taking drugs alters your brain chemistry forever – I do not know if that is true or not – but that was precisely what I needed.

It says a lot for my state of mind that it never even occurred to me to seek help from a doctor. That would to any rational person have been the best place to go, but unfortunately rationality is often in short supply just when you need it most.

Don't worry for me, though, because it all turned out for the best, in the end.

Despite my increasing success in music, I had negligently failed to make the usual contacts with the kind of people who could help me in this hour of need. I felt confident that Quids McCall would know who to call, so I picked up the telephone and called him.

"Hi Quids, how are you?"

"Howard, is that you?" he asked. "I haven't heard from you in ages, man. The album is kicking arse and taking names. You should be here."

"Thanks, Quids," I replied. "But that isn't why I'm calling. That album is in the past for me, and I have to move on. You know that it wasn't quite the album I wanted to make, and the album I dreamt of is preying on me. I can't get past it."

"I understand. It's like our equivalent of writer's block. A lot of musicians have it – they can't follow up a classic album – they're afraid of letting down their fans, or sully the band's name, so they let the fans drift away and slowly forget them and their name. You're not the first person it has happened to."

"It's something like that," I said. "I have an idea of my own about how to get over it. What would you recommend, though, Quids? You have seen it all, I imagine."

"Hmm. You could do like that bloke Kevin Shields – after My Bloody Valentine stalled he joined Primal Scream. Maybe if you join another band, just work for somebody else – you know, work to build on their ideas rather than trying to perfect your own – it might help. Be a craftsman, do a job."

I laughed. It had been a while. "Sounds like a lot of hard work! Aren't Primal Scream and My Bloody Valentine a bit after your time, Quids? I was expecting some tales of 1970s debauchery..."

It was his turn to laugh. "I saw a parallel with my own situation. And anyway, Primal Scream kick the shit like it was meant to be kicked. They're my boys."

"Is shit meant to be kicked at all, you think?"

"Man, you gotta kick it! Or what is it there for?"

"Good question!" Quids was doing a lot to lift my

spirits. "Anyway, I was thinking more of drugs. I need to get out of my head for a bit."

"I can hook you up, if that's what you're after. Did you want some pot, coke, what?"

"I was thinking more mushrooms, LSD, something like that."

"If you think it'll help the band, I'm there, man. I'll see what I can get for you, my treat. One thing, though, Howard – remember the rest of us. We're living the life you promised us. We're selling records, appearing on TV, in the papers, the works. I even heard we might get nominated for the Mercury Music Prize. The rest of us need you, Howard, so come back soon."

"I will."

I hung up. I was lying, of course. I had already convinced myself that the band was not good enough, and if it wasn't for needing the drugs I might have gone out of my way to avoid seeing any of them ever again. Through no fault of their own, they were bitter disappointments to me, their happy, contented, fulfilled faces a blight on, an insult to, my dreams.

Luckily, Quids didn't come to drop off the LSD himself, so I didn't have to look him in the eye. He sent one of his current flock of girlfriends, a slightly rough-looking redhead with tattooed blood dripping from her wrists. She handed over the packet with a slightly awed look. She looked like there was something she wanted to say, and it would have been impolite of me to take advantage of her reticence and shut the door in her face.

"What is it?" I asked, not as politely as I had meant.

"Are you him, Howard Phillips?"

"Yes, what is it? Did you want to kiss me? The postman always does, so I'll understand if so." I was impatient to get started on losing myself.

"I didn't think you were a real person. I thought you were just an actor or something. A figurehead for the rest of the band, so no one would notice how old those guys were."

"I am perfectly real, I assure you. If you wish I can pinch your bottom to demonstrate as much." I raised an eyebrow and held out my thumb and forefinger, pushing them together suggestively.

"No offence, I would, maybe, if you had shaved or had a bath lately."

"A punctilious groupie? Whatever next?"

"But what's going to happen to them now? If you give up, what will happen to the rest of the band? You almost destroyed them making this album. Now they're actually getting something out of it, you're going to pull the rug out from under them again."

I winced, and closed my eyes. This was just the conversation I'd been dreading, just when I thought I had avoided it. I opened my eyes and looked at her again. She was waiting patiently for my answer. It seemed she really did care about Quids, or maybe she was just concerned not to lose her meal ticket.

"Look, go back and tell Quids, tell the band, that they should assume they are not going to see me again. I'm going to take these drugs, and after that I have no idea what will happen to me. Perhaps I'll end up on the streets, or in a psychiatric ward, or in jail, or maybe just a better place. They should go on in their beliefs, as I will go on in mine, as a great man once said. Tell them to start gigging. Get someone else to do the vocals. They don't really need me now. Any one of them can sing better than me. Any of them could write a decent song, building on the sound we developed."

"But why? Why don't you stay with them? The way Quids talks about you... You've changed his life, given him hope and purpose."

"That life isn't for me. Not any more. At least not until I can escape the dream of what might have been." I held up the packet containing the LSD. "And you have been very helpful in that. Goodbye."

She said goodbye, and left. I closed the door behind her, and sighed, deeply.

I decided not to take the LSD at home, since once Quids talked to his girlfriend he would come around, probably bringing the rest of the band with him. It would be best to leave as quickly as possible, and then think about what to do next. I went over to my laptop and switched it on. I looked on the internet for hotels in Birmingham, and booked and paid for a room at the Novotel online. I didn't have time to bathe or shave before going, so it was probably best to have a reservation already in place. I folded up the laptop, stuffed my wallet in my pocket, and called for a taxi.

It was there in a matter of minutes, and soon I was entering the hotel.

As I went inside a security manager began to head my way. I did not look or smell good, but I opened my wallet so that he could see the colour of my money and my cards.

"Hi, I know I stink a bit," I said. "I'm a writer, you see. I've been researching a role, but now I need to get cleaned up. I have a reservation."

"I understand, sir," he said, with a smile, waving his hand in front of his nose.

I forced out a smile, and went on my way.

The receptionist was professional and polite, despite the stench. "Do you have a reservation, sir?"

I gave her my name, and in return she gave me a

key. I went to my room as quickly as the lift could take me, and began to clean myself up. I spent at least 50 minutes in the shower, cleaning all the places that had gone unwashed in recent months, from my toenails to the backs of my ears. If I was going to die after taking some revolting drugs, out of vanity I did not want people to be unsurprised. I wanted them to find a nice young man, surprisingly having fallen victim to the temptations of the music industry. I would be a legend – a lesson. No one would suspect that I had actually gone a good part of the way to losing my mind.

I attached the laptop and looked for local men's outfitters. I could not order online, because I wanted the clothes today, but I was able to make my selection and then by telephone ask for the items to be delivered to the hotel. Reception had them sent up to my room, and within an hour I was wearing a beautifully tailored black velvet jacket, with thick black cotton trousers, and a pair of sharp black shoes. My blue socks and white boxer shorts were from Marks & Spencer of course, as was the shirt, a sturdy and reliable burgundy. The tie was an even darker shade of red, and I topped the outfit off with a small pocket watch. I was ready to travel.

I settled my hotel bill and walked to Moor Street station, stopping only to buy a bacon roll from BHS, where the bacon rolls are stolen from God's own breakfast table, and at WH Smith to buy the Guardian.

The weather was good, and it was early afternoon, so there were lots of young ladies wearing revealing tops of one kind or another, not to mention revealing bottoms – some that even, to my great pleasure, went so far as to actually reveal bottoms, or at least the underwear that covered them. I have been on this planet for at least thirty years – my memory is at times hazy – and I had thought there was little a woman could do to surprise me, yet the current fashion of allowing trousers to hang down beyond the buttocks, to reveal brightly coloured underwear of one kind or another, was more than I could have dared dream of, a delight to my ageing senses.

Perhaps I should apologise to my readers for being such a lecherous individual? I am sure it will offend both sexes equally. Women, for being told explicitly how their every movement around a man is watched, remembered, considered and relished. Men, for having disclosed to the other sex their most basic nature. If there is anything good that the more curvaceous sex can take from this disclosure, it is that men do not necessarily confuse their lust for women's bodies with their feelings regarding the

woman's intelligence, capability, and so on. I am no sexist. Women are more than breasts, bottoms, mouths, legs, and Venus. This is obvious. But the fact of the matter is that I will never have a conversation with the vast majority of women in the world. Most of them will play no direct role in my life, save for those few moments where I watch them walk down the street – the simple pleasure I get from regarding their figures. It is for this reason that I believe the ultimate achievement of television to have been the channel called Bikini Beach – an entire channel devoted to nothing but watching a succession of young women stand around talking in their bikinis. That is all men want from television, apart from teletext. Everything else is a facade.

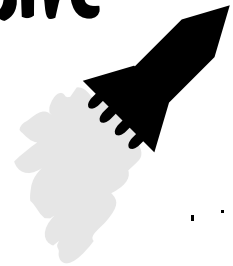
It was because the weather was so good that I was heading to Moor Street station. I had decided to take my drugs in Stratford-upon-Avon, a mere half hour away on the train. There would be thousands of tourists there, of course, but it would not be too difficult to find a quiet spot to sit down and take my LSD.

The train ride was uneventful. I won't bore you with the details – I am sure you found my views about women much more interesting! – but soon I was standing outside the station at Stratford-upon-Avon, watching my fellow travellers as they skipped up the road towards the main part of town. They seemed so excited to be in this funny little town, dedicated to a man they could not even really be certain had lived there, beyond a possible coincidence of names. But what did that doubt matter? It was as good a place as any to think about literature, and art, and music. The sky was big, the air was clear, and there was plenty of green grass.

I followed the tourists, making our way into the town. A traditional old pub looked inviting, and I needed to eat, so I filled my belly with steak and ale pie and roast potatoes, a sensible meal for any adventurer, even one of the mind, such as I. Tea was my drink, rather than beer. I did not want to risk any unwelcome combinative effects. This was a careful experiment, an exercise in mental therapy. I was no giddy youngster out for kicks, and in any case that would have been no reason not to take precautions. If you are silly enough to go bungee jumping you should still check the straps are secure. Risk is often necessary, but there is no point in compounding danger by being unnecessarily reckless.

I wandered down to the riverside, and the wide open area of parkland around it. I found a nice tree, sat down, swallowed a tab of LSD, and began to read the paper.

# Newton Braddell And His Inconclusive Researches Into the Unknown



## The Hidden Game

John Greenwood  
*Master Reconteur*

The ship drifted like a wind-tossed seed through the long night of space. It drifted through storms of radiation, asteroid fields, solar systems, entire galaxies. I saw none of them.

I had become absorbed in a game I had discovered one day by accident in a forgotten subsystem of the ship's computer. I do not know what the game should be properly called. The tiny computer file which contained the program was nameless. Although the game was easy to learn, it grew increasingly engaging and complex with each move made. I shall not attempt to describe the game in its entirety for fear of boring the reader, save to say that it involved arranging a number of two dimensional, irregular shapes in order to create a perfect circle. The shapes could be altered, broken and exchanged with those belonging to one's opponent according to a number of simple rules.

Very shortly after I had mastered the basic elements I found myself forsaking all other tasks beyond those necessary to my continued survival. Between irregular periods of sleep (which were themselves filled with feverish dreams of the game) I would spend countless hours utterly entranced in trying to outmanoeuvre the ship's computer, my opponent. I delegated all tasks as could possibly be automated to the autopilot system, in order to give my fullest attention to the game. I cannot say with confidence or even estimate how long I had been playing the game. Certainly many weeks were wasted in this futile pursuit. Months were probably

lost, even years, if that can be believed. The truth is that time seemed no longer to exist while I was playing.

I must confess that for that irrevocable period of my life, during which I applied my entire fund of mental concentration to the job of winning the game, I never gained more than the most trifling and fleeting advantage over my simulated opponent. Each time I managed, through a furious intellectual effort, to gain such an edge, it would immediately be overturned by the computer's next few moves. Far from discouraging me, these setbacks always provided me with a fresh insight into how my future strategy should proceed, and I would once again convince myself that my next play would prove decisive and unanswerable.

At some point during this cycle of self-deception and disillusionment, I was suddenly struck with a question that perplexed me greatly: who had created the game which now dominated all my waking and sleeping hours? My question remained unresolved, but in turn bred new questions. How did such a program come to be hidden away in the file system of my ship's computer? Who had put it there? I had spent so many hours focused entirely on the game that when this series of problems first broke into my consciousness, it was only with a painful effort that I was able to give them my attention. To think about any problem other than my next move within the game felt alien and unnatural, and I dismissed these troubling thoughts for as long as I was able. Eventually I could no longer ignore their unsettling implications.

How had I come across this fiendish puzzle in the first place? What had I been searching for when my task was indefinitely interrupted by my discovery of the game? I could no longer remember. What task might I have been working on that would have necessitated the search? I had no memory of any such task. What, after all, was the nature of my mission as the sole occupant of this spaceship? That too seemed beyond recollection. Here was a curious

and unwelcome conundrum! I felt certain that there was indeed a mission of great import which had been entrusted to me. I thought back to my days at the training academy, days spent in arduous study and physical training in preparation for the job which now eluded me. I pictured to myself the quiet, grey-walled briefing room, the rows of metal desks, the stern yet compassionate face of my instructor as he revealed to me the mission that I had been practising for these many months, a mission of the greatest consequence, the details of which were now utterly unknown to me. I was seized with a sense of shame and indignation. How could I have become so indolent and neglectful to forget the very reason for my journey?

I banished all thoughts of the accursed game and resolved to do everything within my power to rediscover the lost purpose I had sworn to fulfil in a sombre and touching graduation ceremony at the spaceflight training academy. There was, of course, no possibility of contacting my masters and teachers back on Earth to seek their advice. I had lost radio contact with my home planet several years ago. My first recourse was to the ship's log, in the hope that I might have left some records there regarding the nature of my mission, or failing that some incidental detail that might trigger a vital memory.

My hopes were to be dashed. The ship's log, which I had diligently updated on a daily basis until my first encounter with the game, contained many references to my mission scattered throughout its detailed and punctilious entries, but in none of them had I taken the trouble to spell out in clear terms the exact goal to which I was committed. Frequently I had alluded to my "noble mission", "the vital task which I have been entrusted with" and "that which I have vowed to carry out to the utmost of my abilities". But I had left myself no clue to the nature of that "vital task", having evidently considered it so obvious as to require no explanation.

My next line of enquiry was to examine the internal files of the ship's computer, in the expectation that some record of my mission might have been stored therein. This was a daunting prospect offering little hope of reaping quick results, but I approached the task methodically, moving files one at a time into a working directory to be examined. Somehow during one of these procedures I inadvertently deleted a large amount of operational data. It quickly became apparent that these missing files were required by the navigation system: the ship began to drift out of control, and I had no means to calculate, let alone alter, its headlong path.

Over the course of a week, during which I gazed

helplessly out of the cockpit window, a green speck in the corner of the sky grew until it had become a planet, all but filling my field of vision, its rugged ochre continents and mint green oceans rotating serenely before me. There was no question but my craft was now on a collision course with this small and uncharted body. Through misfortune and my own inept meddling with the operation of the computer I had lost any ability to control the movement of my craft. I could only watch and try to anticipate my imminent crash-landing with a measure of philosophical resignation. In this I was not entirely successful. It was not easy to reconcile myself to the prospect of an unalterable and violent conclusion to my mission, possibly to my life also. I strapped myself in and feared the worst.

The ship's tumultuous passage through the planet's atmosphere only served to confirm my misgivings. I cannot accurately relate the thoughts that passed through my mind during that hellish descent. To my vast astonishment, a few hundred metres from the planet's surface, the ship's sensors detected the proximity of the solid ground beneath us, and an emergency autopilot program, the existence of which I had never hitherto suspected, was activated. Reverse booster rockets flared, reducing our rate of descent. I was able to rise from my seat and examine the view, filled with a sense of overwhelming gratitude to the spaceship's designers whose foresight had saved my life. The Tanjong Pagar had been my home now for many years, and yet its ability to surprise me had scarcely diminished.

While my landing was not as catastrophic as I had feared, it was nevertheless a crash-landing, and I found myself at the bottom of a deep crater thrown up by the Tanjong Pagar. The hull seemed to have escaped any major damage, but the engine had been dealt a heavy blow, the precise extent of which I was unable to determine, as the computer system had lost any access to the power supply. In short, while the ship had not suffered irreparable damage, the repairs necessary for take-off were, it goes without saying, far beyond the scope of my knowledge or resources.

I saw no reason why I should not explore on foot the continent to which chance had brought me. Indeed it appeared to be the only course of action left open to me. A few short tests soon confirmed that the planet upon which I had alighted was enveloped in a breathable atmosphere not dissimilar to that of Earth. My instruments could not detect the presence or absence of noxious microbes, and it was with this possibility in mind that I took the precaution of wearing a device designed for just such an excursion. The helmet, a grey, metallic shell encasing my

whole head, was fitted with a long, tapering filter tube in front of the nose. This served to extract any potentially harmful organisms from the air before they had a chance to enter my lungs. The helmet was cumbersome, and certainly I appeared quite ridiculous while wearing it, but it would have been foolhardy to emerge from the Tanjong Pagar without it.

From the ship's interior I had been able to see very little of the surrounding landscape beyond the steep earthy walls of the crater. Quite by chance, my craft had struck the planet's surface at the brow of a gentle hill, affording me a generous view over the surrounding landscape. Having conquered the obstacle of the crater wall, my first impression of the alien planet was of an endless forest extending to the horizon in all directions. It was an impression that altered very little over the month on which I was to remain on the surface of this world, for as I later learned the forest dominated every square mile of solid ground on the globe. The impact of the Tanjong Pagar on the surface of Kadaloor (for thus was the planet known to its inhabitants) resulted in the incineration of dozens of these trees, and a wide circle of bare, scorched earth surrounded the crash site. Were it not for this unwitting destruction caused by my ship, then I might never have glimpsed such a majestic vista, so completely did the thick vegetation obscure my field of vision.

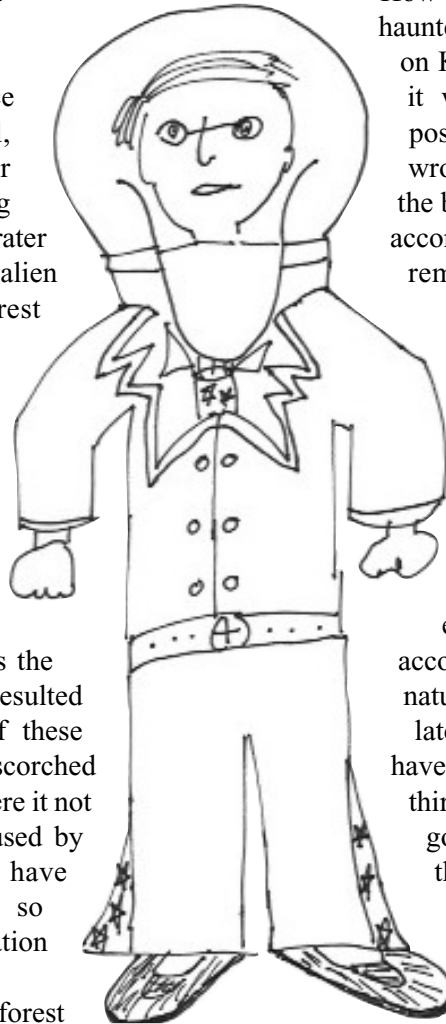
Immediately upon entering the forest I was impressed by a heavy gloom, a paucity of light no doubt caused by the density of foliage overhead. While I could not identify any of species of tree populating this forest, they did not strike me as fundamentally dissimilar to the varieties known to me from Earth. The same basic principles of construction had been employed: leaves, branches, trunk and roots all contrived to secure the plant a larger share of the sun's rays than its neighbour. All was reassuringly familiar and it is perhaps for this reason that I did not immediately consider the extreme improbability of my circumstances. In truth I had already been stranded upon Kadaloor for a full fortnight when realisation dawned. There was I, an accidental visitor to a planet in a solar system and galaxy many thousands of light years distant

from Earth, and chosen purely by the laws of chance. Yet this was a home to trees that to my indiscriminating eye would not have appeared out of place in the forests of Europe. The chances of such a specialised organism as the tree evolving twice were, I knew, vanishingly small. The idea was preposterous, unthinkable, but the trees stood implacably before me, ignoring the paradox of their existence

How to resolve this riddle? The question haunted me for the remainder of my stay on Kadaloor, and my attempts to answer it were far from satisfactory. Was it possible that scientific orthodoxy was wrong, that life developed, not through the blind process of natural selection, but according to a fixed template, a law that remained constant throughout the universe, like the speed of light? I

could not give the idea much credence, but the alternatives were, if anything, even less attractive. In ancient times, the belief of primitive humanity was that all forms of life were the responsibility of a creative deity who had caused the species to spring into existence already fully evolved, according to his whim. If such a supernatural being had invented trees to populate the plains of Earth, might he not have used the same trick elsewhere? My third explanation was that I had simply gone insane, which amounted to much the same thing as the second. I could not adhere to either notion without abandoning any pretence of rational thought.

My fourth attempt was, I dared say, more likely, but it rested on a number of imponderables. Perhaps, I hypothesised, I had travelled not in space, but in time, and had returned to the Earth at some moment of her prehistoric past. Had the shape of the continents of Kadaloor, when viewed from orbit, seemed familiar? I could not recall. But this line of reasoning begged the question. How could I have moved against the flow of time without realising it? In the event, none of these answers was sufficient to explain my current circumstances, for it was not long before I encountered the dominant species of Kadaloor. Thereafter my mind was occupied with other, more pressing concerns, and the question of the trees' origins and their philosophical implications were shelved indefinitely.





# Valiant Razalia

## Prologue

Michael Wyndham Thomas  
*Poet, Singer and Author*

Nothing swells or drains the tides. They bubble alone. On the shoreward side, they finger their way through something that crunches like shingle but pulses and burns like the heart of a sapphire. It is shaped like so many miniature scarps and gulleys, headlands and coves. Whenever the three umber moons above are aligned, it redistributes itself. Gulleys rise and level off, headlands collapse like the last sands of an hourglass. It is as though the mineral is as prone to boredom as any kid in its first church pew. It must needs grizzle and shift about.

On the seaward side, the tides ebb only a matter of feet. Then they stop, as if hard against a thread of invisible hands. From a distance, their whitecaps look like sheep going mad to feed, scrambling and rolling on each other's backs. Beyond the tideline is what looks like cracked mud. Bone dry, it has never been so much as flecked by a whitecap. It goes a mile out, flat as a board. But its cracks are no aimless zigzags or spider-trails. Restlessness is as deep in them as in the pulsing shingle. On every night that falls exactly between the alignment of the umber moons, they flex and thrash like sporting crocodiles. This one curves about, meets itself coming the other way, closes in a blind eye's knowing wink. That one convulses through rhomboids, spheres and trapeziums. Over here, half-a-dozen shimmy across the mud like synchronised snakes. Far beyond, a pair interlock and spin, attaining the graceful weave of a Celtic knot, then a dried-up pen's raw scribble.

The flat, cracked board ends at the outwaters. These are nine oceans, shelving down and down, each with its own shape. Their edges are cliffs of water. They are separated from each other by broad highways which meld and split in a maze endlessly curving. Unlike the cracks, the shingle, they never change, whatever the three umber moons might be about. Nor do the cliffs of water slide. Movement out here is undramatic, provided by a host of roots that ring the inner edge of each cliff. Modestly they wave, like windblown hairs on a magnified arm. Sometimes they kink and flex a little, suggesting tiny men at their physical jerks, buried upside down in sand. What they are connected to, what being or plant draws its life from the cliffs of water, is undiscoverable.

The cracks between tide and outwater owe nothing to convulsion or heat. Sliceblossom made them: makes them still, occasionally, but mainly it curves to their patterns. Two-dimensional, huge of leaf, sliceblossom rises everywhere from miles below and feeds on what passes for air. All over the board, the leaves rear and shiver. Once sated, they puff and flatten, again and again, putting forth petals red as coxcombs, blue as the last of day, like a colour-bomb showering all that terracotta. Then they drop as one, and echoes pour like smoke from the cracks.

For the eye that seeks easy beauty, the shore and the outwaters are beautiful. In their own way, so are the cracks and the sliceblossom, although the sudden appearance of those leaves, dark and elephantine, can freeze the senses when first witnessed. Elsewhere, however, beauty is precarious. For Razalia, the home of these wonders, is a half-finished world and thus unique among the sixteen planets of its system. True, its landscape is not unpleasing: verdant without being chaotically lush, rolling without too many steeps and hollows. But it is plagued with gaps: not translucent, allowing sight

of what lies beyond, but pure white like a hotch-potch of abandoned canvasses. Sometimes these ambush the traveller, and many have assumed that they offer short-cuts. But to walk into a gap is to surrender all: to “make the horizon’s farewell”, the nearest Razalian gets to the word “death”. The alternative – a detour, often of leagues together – is wearisome but, after all, wise.

Theories abound about Razalia’s provisional state. The most dramatic of these is that Razalia’s maker, whatever it was, had to scale a mountain to put the last touches to a tricky pinnacle. The ascent was calm and clear, and the maker had just nipped the pinnacle’s spike into place when a welter of turbulence – gifted by one of the three umber moons when asleep – clawed it from its labours and pitched it into “forsaken midnight”, the Razalian approximation of “space”. Another is that the maker was a badly-tutored apprentice, left to its own uncertain devices, unable to contact its master. After several tours of the planet – bodging this, half-cocking that – it had made one last effort to get something wholly right. With the resolve that despair can beget, it managed the mountain with the perfect pinnacle. But then, realising how far short all else fell, it fell itself – deliberately, before rolling on over the shingle and the board of cracks and losing itself in an ocean.

A third theory has the maker on the shoreline, dragging its however many feet or hoofs on the ground, wondering if, after all, shingle amounts to the best use of pulsing gems. The gems quake; a ravine yawns between the maker’s legs; destiny posts it to the core of its own work. A fourth, affined to the second and third, insists that the inept apprentice was swallowed by a beast that still frets and lashes at the centre of Razalia. Despite its dwelling-place, this mysterious being once had something of the gregarious in its disposition. It was even intent on clambering to the surface, there to roam and befriend. But then the maker, played false by the shifting gems, had landed in an indescribable heap on the beast’s back. The beast’s alarm had turned to wrath and thence to hunger. Ingesting the maker, however, the beast also absorbed its peevishness at its pig’s-ear creation. Thus did night fall on the beast’s humour. Now, it devoted itself to roars and snarls of malcontentment – hence the ponderous echoes when the sliceblossom retreats through the cracks. In a refinement of this last detail, it is also mooted that the sliceblossom grows on the beast’s tail. Whenever the beast’s pique shifts from fit to ecstasy, it lashes its tail in a long wave that somehow rises through Razalia and buffets its crust, pouring forth the blossom.

There have been many theories prior to these. And, over time (which, in keeping with the whole planet, is a fits-and-starts proposition), these will yield to others. What unites them all, perhaps, is a sense of finish. As little tales, they have a completeness which – through ill-luck or gormlessness – Razalia’s maker hardly knew.

And, as with the planet, so with its satellites. No theories circulate about Razalia’s three umber moons. No maker is assumed to have had a hand in their creation. They invented themselves: in defiance, it seems, of all notions of a moon as chaperone of love, horseman of tides, beacon for wartime bombers. In their very colour, they dismiss any lunar duties: duties properly, happily discharged by their fellow moons above the other fifteen planets of the system. Though strangely visible, they do not shine upon Razalia. Instead, they spend the planet’s lurching, uncertain time in spasms of tag, dance and leapfrog. Now they pile vertically like acrobats discharged from some circus ship, content to hone their skills in the amethyst blue that envelops the system, indifferent to the absence of watching eyes. Now they juggle themselves, whipping up winds about them, wordless equivalents of “eyyy-upp!” Once, one moon was reported to have landed on Razalia, spending a daylight hour in a slalom between the puffing sliceblossom, bouncing across the nine oceans like skimmed shale, before flying back to its mates and (so the story goes) jostling them like a thief of tender years, bursting from his first spree in a precinct.

Not that they leave Razalia untouched. Twice in the Razalian month, they align south-west to north-east in the amethyst blue. Bafflingly, it is a business they take seriously. Somehow, in the bulging, deflating balloon of time around the planet, the alignments have a stern regularity. Then, the shingle morphs as it pleases by the tideline. And, exactly between the alignments, the cracks beyond the tide make answer to the shingle, drawing themselves anew for the next lurching stretch of time. Intermittently, the moons line east to west for slumber. Then there arises the turbulence which might have plucked Razalia’s maker from his mountain-top. The landscape bends and fusses. The nine oceans furrow and gawp. Only the unfinished parts, the gaps of pure white, are unmoving, although it is said that, from close to, they emit a choral murmur, as if all the strayed, hapless souls within were trying to fight back through dissolution, retrieve their skin and bone and resume their long-interrupted journeys.

Though the planet knows no moonlight, it does

see the sun. Once each Razalian fortnight – anything between eleven and seventeen of their days – the skies turn from amethyst to azure. Downs and valleys soften; the shingle beats with a fiercer pulse. There is, however, no majestic rising and setting. Rather, there is a radiant nosing about, a prodding and poking. If this sun had a face, akin to the man in the moon seen from Earth, it would doubtless look with scorn upon Razalia.

The system's sun is a martinet. Its planets are spread before it in a long arc, revolving on east-west axes like beads on a curved abacus, with Razalia at the far, far end. In slow, under-and-over spirals, it warms its charges from west to east, most of the time as far as Carolles, Razalia's neighbour, then back again. It serves these fifteen planets as a source of life should, for it considers them worthy of its fire. Its dawns and dusks are scrupulous, and woe betide any part of any planet not positioned to receive them at the precise point of spin. But woe never figures. The other planets are complete and well-behaved. Their enveloping balloons of time are perfect spheres. Their minutes and hours flow like butter-milk, where Razalian time can stutter like an engine on a January morning or spring like a cat over half a day or more. But the sun realises, if somewhat reluctantly, its duty of care to the whole system. And so it is that, every twelve or fourteen or sixteen Razalian days, it heaves itself past Carolles, loops to the far end of the planetary arc, and assures itself that Razalia is not dead. Its incredulous rummage may last a whole day or an afternoon only. Then it commences its gyrations westward, and for a good hour after (or a good minute if Razalian time has leapt on: their phrase for that translates roughly as "if nightmares harry the clock"), the planet's air seems filled with the disbelieving tuts and chuckles of a celestial plumber.

The Razalians take the sun's contempt in good part. The nature of their planet has long inured them to disappointment – hope, too, but this isn't as bleak as it may sound. They know examples aplenty of what hope can lead to – most notably, in their system, the Twenty Aeons war between Barask and Sehunda, adjacent planets at the opposite end of the arc. There, the hope ignited and persisted on both sides that the other would surrender its world. So powerful did the hope grow that the actual reason for hostilities was clean forgotten by Aeon Three. It finally took the intervention of the sun – tired of seeing its spiral path littered with phosphorescent cannon-shafts and the goggling eyes of garotted helots – to lay all hope to rest. For three and thirty parts of an aeon, it looped around these two planets

alone, sending out secondary rays to warm the rest of the arc (apart from Razalia, which got a dab or two, equal to an electric fire left on for half-an-hour every other day). Closer and closer it looped, till the famed serpent's-tail rivers of Barask were boiling and the thousand-foot snow-trees of Sehunda were stripped of their magenta bark. Only then did the planets' leaders cease hostilities. The Council of Barask signalled its readiness to talk by garotting a cohort of its own helots and firing a million-eyeball salute at Sehunda's moon. Appropriately, Sehunda responded with a cascade of severed flippers. Since then, they have lived in amity – though the rivers of Barask have yet to cool and a report of a patch of magenta on a Sehunda snow-tree has proved false. Such, for the Razalians, is the price of hope. Indeed, mindful of the sun's effect at that time, they coined a new phrase for that dangerous abstraction, which roughly translates as "brass-monkey cauldron".

The Razalian attitude, midway between perkiness and despair, naturally extends to their view of themselves. Interplanetary marriage is not unknown further along the arc, but no Razalian would ever presume to secure the affection of a golden-haired nymph or hero from neighbouring Carolles. Like their planet, the Razalians are half-finished, their Maker having apparently regarded earlobes, lips and nostrils as a novice modeller might regard the fiddly turrets on HMS Victorious. Not that their heads lack features. The eyes are there nearly all the time. As for the rest, however, they only materialise when absolutely needed. A Razalian must speak – well, then, lips and teeth will bud out from their skin; another must hear – an ear will bloom like a toy cabbage, often in the right position; the first flowers of spring appear – one nostril will whorl itself into being to enjoy the smell – possibly two if the scent is heady. Occasionally, a strong smell or sheer excitement can call forth three nostrils. Involuntary though they may be, such exhibitions are regarded as vulgar, the phrase for the exhibitionist translating as "greedy trumpet".

It is assumed that the sheer doggedness of evolution was responsible for connecting the Razalians with their world by more than sight. For a race that holds few assumptions, that simple speculation is the nearest thing to a Razalian creed. But, long ago, faith of a sort did play a brief part in the planet's life. Perhaps understandably, it centred upon the notion that Razalia's maker might return and complete its work. Prophecies were legion that it would fly back through space's forsaken midnight and set to, closing the gaps of white, meshing the vegetation, causing the oceans to let fall their cliffs of water and

flow as one. For a while, however, this was challenged by the idea that Razalia's deity was the mordant sun. Once upon a time, the challenge ran, there was no Razalia at the fag-end of the planetary arc, and the sun made its lambent way over and under its "noble fifteen", as the Razalian phrase translates. But then it was detained at the other end – possibly due to another interplanetary barney between Barask and Sehunda. In its absence, Razalia's maker snuck in out of the great nowhere, tried its hand or paw at a spot of life and then met one of the fates assigned by theory. Returning, blazing disbelief at this cuckoo in the systemic nest, the sun pondered burning it to ashes. But then, in an instant, it changed its mind and declared itself god of Razalia. It was a furious god, but with all cards stacked in its favour; and it embraced the very human notion that punishment was most delicious when long spun out. If the planet had somehow half-created itself, then it must pay the price for its own presumption. If some weekend bodger was responsible, the planet must pay for what, in that hitherto perfect system, amounted to vandalism. (Indeed, there is an old Razalian saying, still used, about its fifteen neighbours and the boon they enjoy: "the sun thinks in five and five and five".) And thus began the sun's regime of scant visits and widow's mites of heat for the system's cuckoo.

But over time, these claims to faith dwindled. By all accounts, they never had a strong purchase on the Razalian mind. The "creed of the returning maker" was bound to be a casualty, since it depended on that baleful will o' the wisp, hope. Perhaps more interestingly, the "creed of the furious sun" vanished because, the Razalians concluded, it abused humility. It obliged them to abase themselves before the sun for something they didn't do – even unwittingly. (True, there were some sages of the furious sun creed who sought to offer proofs that their race had unconsciously created itself. But the Razalians have a profound sense of self, to the extent that, if they concentrate enough, they become consciously unconscious, knowing when they don't know that they are planning this or doing that. The sages had their brief season and faded with their beliefs.) If the Razalians worship anything at all, it is humility, which they tend and protect like a scrupulous gardener. Humility without just cause – the basis of the furious sun creed – is, in the Razalian phrase, "a sweating brow in a noon of icicles". In the end, that creed, too, had to snuff itself out.

As well as being the keynote of the Razalians' temper, humility could be called the architect of their physical lives. If the system's acerbic sun could

speak, it might well term this a necessity, pointing out the absence of sufficient materials to build, say, a multi-layered metropolis, all floating astroports and spiral arms, such as is found all over Carolles. There is truth in this, although Razalian ingenuity, never to be underestimated, could run to a decently-buttressed sprawl if such were desired. But the Razalians prefer to live as they act, without flourish. Even so, their small settlements, with no building higher than two storeys, would probably call forth a blush of purple in the average tourist-guide prose. Spread gently out, curved of roof and modest of frontage, they counterbalance the dips and cambers of the land as though, mushrooming by nature not labour, they have the trick of symmetry by instinct. They hug the ridges, trickle down valleys like a stream with no urge to be a river. Even Mopatakeh, the Razalian capital, shuns the pomp and multitudes implied by its position, statistically nestling instead between San Gimignano and Gretna Green. Let Carolles have its metropoli. Let Sehunda create its granite awnings, its monkey-puzzle dormitories that nearly overtop its snow-trees. In the Razalian phrase, life is lived most equably "a stoop's length from a fist of soil".

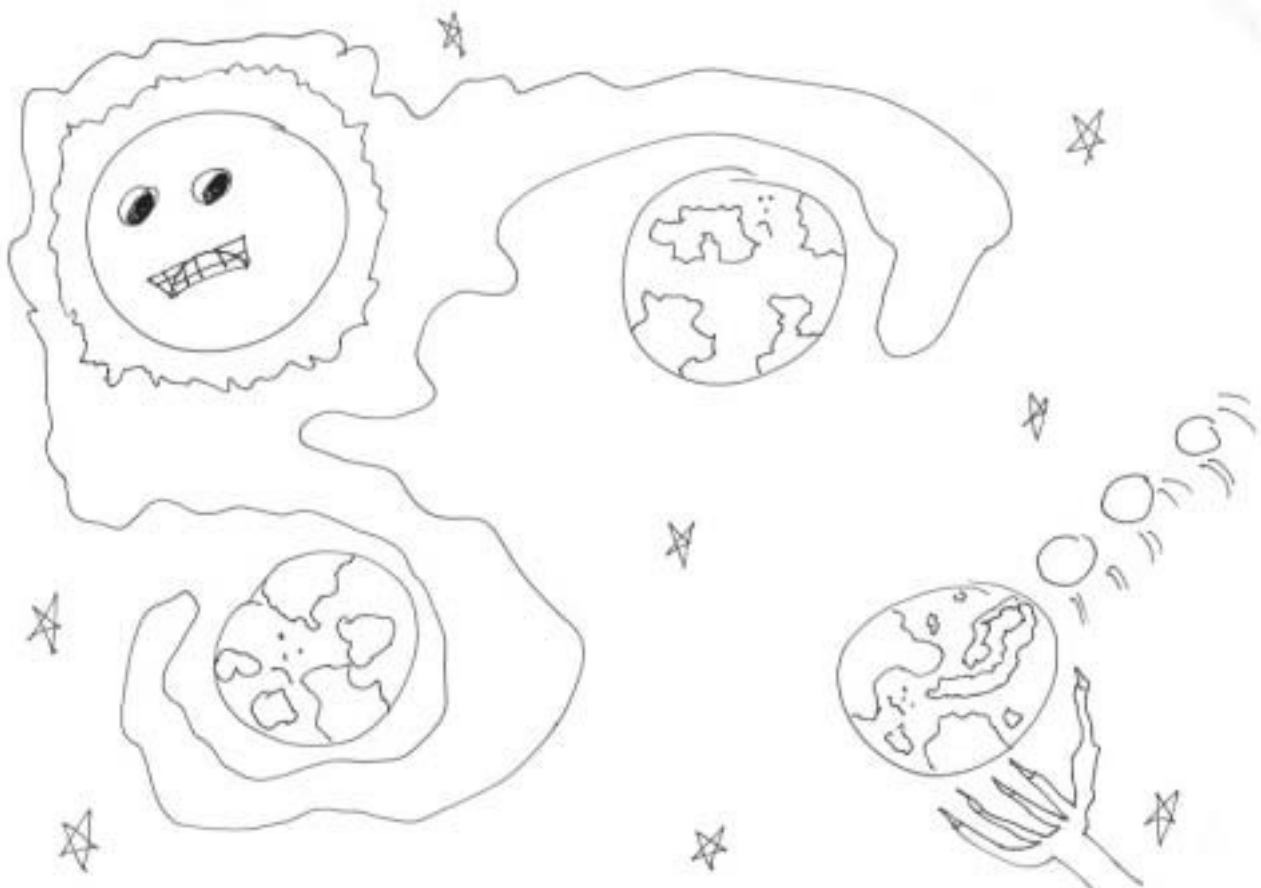
A similar simplicity, or nice distrust of management, defines the civic life of the planet. Each settlement, Mopatakeh included, has a sole leader, invariably named Tharle: a proper name, not a designation, and never prefixed by *a* or *the*. Tharles are not elected in any common way. Rather, each settlement simply knows who new Tharle should be. A telepathic *yes* shivers from mind to mind, and all is fixed. (Telepathic from birth, Razalians normally reserve the power for extreme deliberation or moments of personal risk. They see its gratuitous use as akin to the caperings of a three-nostril scent-hound, dismissing it, in their phrase, as "think-bleeding". Only Tharles employ it regularly, for it is a natural part of their office.)

Once *in situ*, Tharles benefit from their especial, communally-divined wisdom. For them, evolution gets another move on: throughout most of the year, whether dealing with official matters or delighting in quietude, they sport one or two of everything on their faces, all correctly positioned. They have the power to double their height to facilitate ease of address at communal gatherings. But perhaps most tellingly, in the Razalian view, Tharles enjoy a modification to their palate and gastric system. Thus overhauled, they can feast on sliceblossom leaves, invigorating to their bodies while poisonous to all others. It has not been established whether sliceblossom aids Tharliian deliberation, deepens the *gravitas* of

their verdicts. But, allowing themselves another assumption, Razalians conclude that it must be so. Either way, the image of Tharles “feasting on the flaps of acumen”, in the popular phrase, offers a pleasing antidote to the troublesome flora of remoter cultures: the lotos-flower, the apple of Eden. And, drawing on a folk-belief to whose truth they are cheerily indifferent, Razalians insist that this mastery of sliceblossom not only helps to define their leaders but also, somehow, allows everyone on the planet to distinguish Tharle from Tharle. That this might be a matter of telepathy is doubtless acknowledged in some way. But the “mastery” notion, aside from being more dramatic to proclaim, enriches the esteem in which Tharles are held.

Compared to the other planets in the arc – martial, sophisticated or a mixture of both – Razalia appears childlike, its customs and patterns of life barely breaking out of prehistory. Yet, in a way that possibly irks the sun, the noble fifteen regard it with a kindly curiosity, seeing it as a paradigm of how they once were themselves. No-one has ever invaded Razalia, but this is nothing to do with its lack of super-planetary light to aid descent and landing. Indeed, it receives its share of visitors from across the arc. Once every Razalian year – which, given their capricious time, is a matter of anything from

nine to fourteen months – a contingent of Baraskians, enforced by a few slack-jawed funsters from Galladeelee (“the planet of the rouge catacombs”) arrives on the planet for a special festival of their own devising. White is a colour unknown on Barask, so the gaps in the Razalian landscape hold a special, almost supernatural fascination for the Baraskians. For two Razalian weeks, under Tharlian eyes, they variously sing, carouse or simply stand before the gaps in mute worship. The Baraskians know the gaps’ awful power – only too well, now. Half an aeon ago, a dozen of them took it upon themselves to conclude one evening’s festivities, at the gap just beyond Mopatakeh, with a toneless but lusty rendition of the Baraskian anthem, whose theme, perhaps inevitably, is a celebration of the planet’s serpent-tailed rivers. Daredevilry or intoxication, or both, impelled them to stand, arms linked barber-shop style, with their backs almost grazing the gap’s surface. All was well until verse eight, when a *sotto voce* argument broke out between two singers in the middle of the line, about whether the verse’s final word was “flood” or “mud”. As the argument waxed, the disputants began tugging mightily at each other’s arms, causing a serpentine sway down the whole line. At last, seeking to free his arm, one of them lost his footing, pitched backwards and pulled the whole



chorus into the gap, in an movement like the clamping wings of a giant moth. The crowd started forward and, but for the restraining telepathy of Mopatakeh's Tharle, many more would have been lost. As it was, Tharle's mental cordon was a little too slow for one Galladeelean, who thrust his characteristically loose-hinged jaw into the gap, as a curious toddler might lean too far into a zoo's snake enclosure. The jaw disappeared on the instant; the lips of his three mouths all but fused. Ever after, he was obliged to press words out like sheets through a mangle. Worse, he was vilified as a freak on his return to Galladeelee, condemned to count the number of rouge catacombs running below its surface: a punitive task, especially given that the planet is the size of that vaguely-known system in which Earth spins. Nowadays, the Baraskians keep a respectful distance from the gaps – and any stray Galladeeleans remain at the back of the crowd, manning Barask-oak tables that groan, literally, beneath flagons of Barask's favourite tippie, a mixture of stardust, flame and serpent-river sediment.

Perhaps understandably, Razalia's most frequent, enthusiastic visitors are its immediate neighbours. Twice and often three times a month, the water-cliffs of the nine oceans suck themselves in, their edging of roots left stiff and undoused like chin-bristle. Below the cliffs, the dry highways broaden and their surfaces blur in eddies and devils of dust. Then, one by one, the septupedal craft touch down, their huge, parasol-shaped roofs suggesting a Polynesian hut recast in sterling silver. After a regulated series of whoops and beeps, their curved, slightly bellied sides slide back and a three-lane down-escalator, pure titanium, unrolls to the highway like an iguana's tongue. Once again, the people of Carolles have dropped round for a concerted gawk at the settlements, the ridges, the umber moons.

Collectively, Carolles' natives are known as the Carollessa. Those who incline to maleness are Carollo; those in whom the feminine has the upper hand are Carolla. Technically, the Carollessa comprise four sexes, but the other two were never properly named, have no connection, intimate or otherwise, with the Carollo or Carolla and are in any case all but extinct. One is shaped like a huge ear. Perpetually airborne, it glows peach and crimson by turns. The other is a head-splitting whistle. Thus do they procreate – or did. Over time, however, the whistle's targetry became inexplicably slipshod, so that it was as likely to impregnate the Carollessan atmosphere – or, on a still night, one of Razalia's umber moons – as any hovering ear. Not that the ears

made the whistles' job any easier. Whether through self-assertion or late-blooming coyness, they became less disposed to carry embryonic whistles, tooting like so many toy referees, through the crisp Carollessan air. When they sensed the approach of a lairy whistle, they were apt to fly away, far above the planet's overwrought skylines, leaving the whistle to swing between ecstasy and dismay, the result of which was that its piercing note dropped landward like the swan-song of a heartbroken kazoo. The dominant sexes have tried to preserve their ill-starred peers – even to increase their numbers. But the signs thus far do not encourage. In a special section of *Panbestiopolis*, the huge wildlife park at the centre of Yathkyeda Falls, the Carollessan capital, the ear-and-whistle enclosure routinely proves the least popular attraction. This is partly due to bafflement on the part of the park's designers, understandable enough, about suitable living conditions for flying ears and misaiming whistles. The decision to house them in a huge dome, continuously filled with the sound of the wind at all its pitches (presumably to get the ears going) is doubtless as sensible as any other. But the ears flap listlessly about or gather halfway up the walls like a flock of question-marks, occasionally opening in the whistles' direction, then huddling again in attitudes of contempt. For their part, the whistles hug the floor of the dome, exchanging boastful trills about conquests of yore and, now and then, tooting at the floor like Victorian toppers who pride themselves on missing the spittoon. In one sense, perhaps, the ears' disdain is justified: whistles are notoriously reluctant to settle down.

It is known, throughout the planetary arc, that the terms by which the Carollessa know themselves are relatively modern; and that they have some affinity with an Earth-tongue called Spanish. Were this the case with the Razalians, the air would fill, modestly, with theories ingenious and unprovable. But the Carollessa know the strength of the connection, having sound-recorded, imaged or otherwise bagged every tick of their planet's history-clock. The fruits of these everlasting labours are available to be seen, heard, sniffed and swallowed at Yathkyeda Falls' *Aeonodrome*, whose official title, in Carollessan, startlingly translates as "a full hindward romp". Here can be seen the planet's five makers, one claw apiece extended as they drop the final rock into place. Here can be seen the graphite brain, the size of a passion-fruit, whose ridges, working like pectoral fins, supplied Yathkyeda Falls with heat, light and kyeda-foam, a Carollessan delicacy, for the best part of ten aeons. And here, in grainy, sometimes blurred

images, can be seen the Carollessan craft – a primitive, tripod affair – that hovered in the high clouds above the Cadiz Peninsula in the Earth summer of 1746, badly off-course for Galladeelee but determined to salvage something from the mistake. The craft’s sides slide away. Something like the pad of a huge lint-brush emerges. The pad glows bright red, and in seconds the entirety of eighteenth-century Iberian culture is absorbed: a godsend for the Carollessa, as it turned out. Hitherto chafing under the name Carolloidods – more suited to a sub-sect of Galladeeleans, or yet the ears and whistles that pursued their haphazard congress about the skies – the Carollo and Carolla of the time were looking to buff up their self-regard as a new century approached on their planet. Beguiled by the Hispanic sounds from the disgorging culture-pad, they realised that only a little aural rummaging would yield shiny new names.

Breathtakingly beautiful, muscular or voluptuous as their majority sex dictates, the Carollo and Carolla form orderly lines to come ashore on Razalia, leaping gracefully over the protean shingle and hailing Tharle and commoner alike. It might be expected that they would behave like gentlefolk on a visit to Bedlam, apparently kindly but in fact as scornful as the sun towards the unfinished beings who walk with them inland. But a profound respect obtains between Razalian and Carollessa. They know that, beyond fleshly particulars – a proud Carollessan cleavage or a Razalian nose uncertainly anchored – they complement each other in mind and soul. The Carollessa – technological gods of the planetary arc, striding through their world of speed and light, citizens of whooshing airlocks, of nano-second transformations. The Razalians – settlement dwellers, progeny of a botch-meister, innocents in the ways of facial expression. Yet each race salutes the other, their fervour heartfelt; each cares for the other with sibling tenderness. Indeed, there is also something of the parental in Razalia’s attitude to the stunning Carollessa. When each Carollo or Carolla is born, they are seven-feet tall, about average for an adult Razalian. But, over their life-span (two hundred years, to use the terms of a crude planet), they shrink to a matter of millimetres. It is thus a mark of reverence to be all but invisible to the Carollessan eye. Unfailingly, this gradual exit from sight arouses a kind of protectiveness in the Razalian breast. Their phrase for the process translates as “slipping into atomhood”, and they take especial care if forewarned that a visiting craft contains a cohort of elders. “Let your heels be warmed with no blood”: such is the command that Tharle issue to

their people on such occasions. Razalians in each settlement are commanded to stand stock still until assured that the elders have passed by. An innocuous toe-tap could do for an epoch of Carollessan wisdom.

Not that the traffic is all one way. Often, Razalians will accompany the Carollessa on their journeys home, spending time on the spiral arms which house pioneering industries, responsible for at least one life-tweaking invention per Carollessan week; marvelling at the myriad beasts of hoof, wing and tentacle from all across the arc which inhabit the *Panbestiopolis* (and often growing a mouth to sob silently at the approaching doom of the ear and the whistle); or simply roaming the planet to drink in the fact – miraculous to them – of a landscape filled in to the last twig and puddle. But none of this excites Razalian envy. Again, their profound sense of self prevails. Wishing the Carollessa joy of their spangling world, they know that, were they to tarry long in it, a deep ache would start in their sporadically-featured heads. The Razalians are not unduly sentimental: in their book, sentiment ranks alongside humility as something whose justification must lie beyond dispute. Still, their journeys home are a matter of sweet anticipation, complete with sighs and full mouths to emit them.

It should be stressed that Razalians can make their way to Carolles under their own steam. But – in the context of its place in Earth’s technological history – “steam” both defines the nature of Razalian craft and describes the uncertainties involved. The craft would have been familiar to the Carolloidods of the Earth year 1100; but today’s Carollessa view them with a mixture of bafflement and alarm. They resemble signal-boxes from the Earth era between those two attenuated explosions, disregarded by the rest of the universe, called world wars. Wooden levers, stuck more or less securely in a series of wells, are controlled from the kind of spindly office-stools described so often by the one called Dickens. They can only be powered by a deep draught of telepathy. Tharle find this difficult but not impossible. Sometimes, they will band together in a Razalian dozen (which stabilizes at nine for most of the year) and steer their craft through the seven-Earth-month journey to Carolles, needing only a Carollessan day or so to hear again the almost inaudible mind-murmur that tells them their powers are restored. But it would need a hundred commoners to generate the same fuel for the same length of time. Even then, the strain would be notable. Indeed, they would get to know their hosts exceedingly well, since they would have to remain as guest patients in the Recuperation

Gyre of the *Subdivaletudion*, Yathkyeda Falls' outdoor hospital, for at least three Carollessan years.

So Razalia calls forth the admiration of neighbouring Carolles and the fascination of the entire arc. But there is nothing about the planet or its people that they actively desire – except one particular: something that, after all, allows the three umber moons to disport themselves in glorious redundancy and possibly excites confusion in the heart of the absentee sun. Most Razalians might be telepathically spavined by a DIY trip to Carolles. But all of them, for the whole of their lives, have what is best translated as “watching-light”. From waking to sleep, their faces have a glow somewhere between starshine and alabaster, throwing off a light which allows them to toil, to celebrate, to see their way.

It might be thought that this attribute provides explanation enough for the sun's intermittent jaunts to the end of the arc. Why should it spend itself, the argument might run, on a world of a thousand suns? For the Razalians, however, the gift of watching-light has no bearing on the matter. Even at its height, admittedly temperate, the creed of the furious sun made no reference to it. The sun does as it does, they have always reasoned. If it is confused, even annoyed, by watching-light – if, after all these aeons, it still cannot bring itself to regard Razalia as anything more than a systemic mock-up – then it must weather those feelings as best it can. Occasionally, some tender-hearted souls might feel pity for the sun, locked thus in peevishness. They might wish that the sun would regard watching-light as a sort of evolutionary homage to its own furnace-strength. But, good Razalians that they are, they do not allow the wish to shrink to a skulking guilt or the pity to bulk into self-satisfaction. In any case, such thoughts are brief, fading like the sun itself after one of its disdainful gawps at the planet.

For Razalia's fellow-planets, however, watching-light is endlessly enthralling. Though its passengers might have visited Razalia a score of times, each Carollessan craft hovers for an age above the nine oceans, so that all might look inland through the panoptical lenses on the observation deck and marvel at the small, clear lights moving purposefully

beneath the amethyst sky. Now and then, a troupe of happy-go-lucky Galladeeleans buzz over the planet and back, courtesy of an endlessly stretching catapult, the Galladeelee mode of travel. Arms and bodies arranged in a kind of sheep-shank around the frame, they whoop when they burst into Razalia's atmosphere, plunging their heads down on necks almost as elastic as their craft, yelling something that translates (very roughly) as “stars! stars! stars in the water!” – for thus do the lighted Razalians strike them. For the Baraskians, watching-light is part of the miracle of white, another reminder of the colour denied to their planet. Many a Baraskian has offered a king's ransom to a Razalian, pleading with them to return to Barask and perform the service of a night-light or a signpost for one of the planet's notorious pleasure-clubs. Politely, such offers are declined, the suggestion often made that, if white is not meant to be on Barask, then perhaps some natural ill might befall a Razalian beacon and the investment would go for nothing. With gruff good humour – the Baraskian way – the would-be investor ponders, then biffs its impressively creviced brow and usually says something which translates as “Now why didn't I see that? You must think I'm a Gallideelee plunge-head.”

But there is one element of watching-light which the whole system calls priceless. Some few have seen it – particularly Carollessan children who, disregarding parental strictures, have crept hopefully at twilight into the room of a visiting Razalian, arching their seven-foot frames over the guest as they drift sleepwards. When a Razalian falls asleep, the fading light figures the entire kaleidoscopic ballet of the system. Lines switch back and forth on their brows like the ebullient flock of asteroids that often follow in the sun's wake. Whorls mimic the graceful eddies of Barask's serpentine rivers, or the pulsing launch-pad of a Carollessan astroport. Patches of white hollow out, leaving the jagged roofs and floorways of Galladeelee's rouge catacombs; or stretch into a tower, the image of the single dwelling on Lachbourigg, in which its dozen inhabitants live. Finally, the magic resolves itself into two tiny catherine-wheels upon the eyelids, whose fade has

The BBC. It's good.

[www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk)



been known to call forth a sob from the curious Carollessan child – and, indirectly, bounce the Razalian visitor from their bed, an infant Carollessan sob corresponding in pitch and volume to the ire of an elephant weltering in a trap. More than anything else, and whether seen or merely heard of, these delicate fireworks fix Razalia as something special in the systemic mind. While the noble fifteen see the planet as an image of their own long-finished epochs, the ritual disappearance of watching-light strikes them as doubly special: evidence, in fact, that Razalians have psychic custody of a time before time, when all the shapes of the arc – at its beginning and to come – were still brewing in its several makers' minds. Characteristically, the Razalians do not claim this as the truth, but are happy to let their fellow system-dwellers believe it. After all, such a legend plays no small part in keeping a planet uninvaded.

\* \* \*

At the far side of Razalia's nine oceans, a Carolla who is not keeps guard on a free-floating pier. While Razalia toils or feasts, while light creeps into its faces or whirls on their drooping lids, she glides back and forth between splendid white columns, under a canopy of teal green, scanning land, ocean and beyond, a graceful hand shading her vision. "A Carolla who is not" is the Razalian phrase for this sentinel, whose arrival has long been a mystery to Tharle and commoner alike. The Carollessa describe her in equivalent terms, for no jot or squiggle in their *Aeonodrome* records any migration by a lone Carolla to their sibling world. And nothing on either planet explains the construction of the pier, which is unexceptional by, say, the standards of Sehundan engineering but, as the sun would be pleased to observe, is utterly beyond the resources of its pitiful cuckoo. Its form (which might be called neoclassical by Earth's knowing prattlers) emphatically rules out any involvement by Razalia's maker, although the potential theory – half-baked creator nerving up for one astonishing throw of its jinxed dice – is acknowledged as having some romantic appeal. The Carolla's beauty, however, is a different matter. Is she actually Razalian? the race in her charge sometimes wonder. Were we once as lithe and striking as the Carollessa? As expected, the Razalians do not see this as a chance to plume their self-regard, nor yet to sink into a doleful reverie on beauty departed. Like the benefits of sliceblossom for Tharlian contemplation, it is a notion that is entertained with warmth. But then, as the practical demands of life press in, it is laid aside – but carefully, like a modest

jewel returned to its serviceable cushion. For their part, the Carollessa are convinced that, were there any evidence for the notion, it would surely exist in their exhaustive *Aeonodrome*. But their tender regard for their neighbours seals their lips on the matter.

It is known that the Carolla who is not spends more than half of her watch at the far end of the pier, where it floats off the edge of Razalia and points like a squared, unsteady finger at the planet's amethyst sky, tracing its gradual surrender to pitch black. Her preoccupation with that end comforts the Razalians. Though not a fearful people, they are naturally aware that the arc peters out with them and that, unlike their Sehundan counterparts at the other end, they have neither the belligerence nor the firepower to see off any being or beings unknown who may come loping out of the "forsaken midnight". Arguably, this awareness has led them to give uncharacteristic rein to their fancy and speculate upon the non-Carolla's powers. They wonder if, a threat to Razalia appearing, she could summon the noble fifteen to its aid in a trice. At other times, they wonder if she could in fact repel single-handedly any marauders from out of the blackness. No-one, not even Tharle of Mopatakeh, has asked her. Indeed, no-one in living memory has spoken to her. First and last, the Razalians are phlegmatic. Like the sardonic sun, they observe, she has her reasons for being where she is, doing what she does. As for the powers she might possess, these would obviously reveal themselves if the occasion merited. And anyway, they conclude with some slight stirring of optimism, if unknown beings come marauding and she proves powerless after all, the Carollessa would not leave them in the defenceless lurch. True, it would take seven Earth months of travel for the Carollessa to prove them right, but that is not something on which the Razalians dwell. Their phrase for gratuitous worry – "grinding the beads of thought" – is properly disdainful.

The Carolla who is not scans the edge of Razalia with a special intensity. That is not to say, however, that she sees all. She does not always notice when, heaving and furrowing, the ninth ocean receives the singular gift of turbulence from the sleeping umber moons. She does not always look round when Carollessa or Baraskians come whooshing or droning in to land. Certainly, she remained stock still, back presented to Razalia, when a man stood on the highway that girds the ninth ocean, made to kick the rear bumper of his van, then stopped and gazed about like the first scrap of creation in the first dawn.

# Excelsior

Steven Gilligan

A writer

“The shades of night were falling fast,  
As through an Alpine village passed  
A youth, who bore, ‘mid snow and ice,  
A banner with the strange device,  
Excelsior!”

H W Longfellow – *Excelsior*

## Prisoner

Adam slowly opened his eyes to find himself lying on a cold stone floor amid a mass of brown softwood shavings and fragrant sawdust. Faint yellow light filtered in from somewhere up above, but he did not turn over from his sidelong position to look up. He ached from being bashed around too much and his young body, not yet in its teens, was defiled with tiny scratches. He had been masked with a coarse sack over his head when they had brought him here and his wrists and ankles had been tied so that he had fallen several times. The memory made him check his wrists with his hands. They were sort and, without looking, he could feel loose, flaky skin. He flinched and shivered. His knees felt as though they were bruised and he could almost taste through the thin muscles of his arm that he had cut himself badly somewhere near his left elbow. He immediately snapped his eyes shut and concentrated on tiny

points of white lights that had appeared on the inside of his eyelids in order to distract himself from the growing pain.

Minutes passed and he opened his eyes and again and rolled over onto his back. It was his first chance to properly examine his surroundings from his prostrate position. He was in a high-walled cell, built from large grey slabs of softly carved stone. The chamber looked worn and ancient. Far above him was the ceiling, also made of grey stone but punctuated with a large square window. Thick, metal-looking bars covered the window and beyond the bars was a hint of daylight. Adam guessed that it must have been late-afternoon, or perhaps midday if it was cloudy outside. As far as he could remember it was still autumn, but before being brought here he had been incarcerated for several weeks. The light from up above was thick and orange and it cast a strange amber aura all around him.

In an effort that produced fine beads of strained sweat upon his pale forehead, he heaved himself upright and slumped down into a defeated cross-legged position on the floor. All around him, covering the hard, drab floor were piles of dark brown wood shavings and a deep mat of chestnut sawdust. It was soft to the touch and Adam scooped some up and let it fall through his fingers. It smelled of dried roses and pleasantly-roasted timber. He wondered for a moment why someone would be so thoughtful as to provide such soft bedding after such rough treatment the night before. Then he began to think that it might not have actually been last night that he was brought here, wherever *here* was. He had no *actual* memory of being brought into this stone room and assumed that he might well have fallen unconscious or been knocked out along the way

somewhere. His captors had dragged and shoved him along without care, as if he were nothing more than a ragdoll. If he had been out cold, thought Adam, then it was impossible to say how long he had been comatose for. Hours? Days, maybe. He was hungry and thirsty. He looked around the walls of the cell. *How* had he got in here? There was no door as far as he could see. The only decoration was a single iron ring which was set into the middle of one of the walls with a rusted bracket, a few hands above the floor. It was large and thick and spotted with tarnish and rust. There was no carafe of water, no bowl of food. No source of water and no scraps of food. No rats and no cockroaches.

Adam sighed nervously as the horror of his situation enveloped him like a thick, dark shroud. "Hello?" he said, quietly. And then, louder, "Hello? Is anyone there?" There was no echo and Adam wondered if the sound of his call had even penetrated the walls. He could not imagine how thick the walls were. He looked up at the opening far above him. The ceiling was so far away that he found it hard to focus on it properly from where he was sitting, but he thought that this might have been an optical illusion because the light was so gaunt. He found it hard to believe that he had been dropped in from that height, but there seemed to be no other access.

Using his hands he hauled himself up onto his feet but his knees and ankles gave way at the same time and he collapsed onto the yielding woody debris, wincing with pain. He rubbed his knees vigorously and then massaged his ankles. His muscles felt weak and emaciated, his bones brittle. He examined himself. His wrists and ankles had been rubbed raw by his bonds. He remembered being clamped in metal and also, at times, with rough, prickly twine. Tiny scabs lined each of his joints where his skin had peeled away and he felt as though he had been burned with fire. Dark purple bruises covered his knees and had spread down his shins and up his thighs like dye running from a boldly-coloured garment washed for the first time. The cold of his surrounds had caught up with him and he shivered and he held onto his own shoulders, hugging and trying to comfort himself. The worn, threadbare shirt and cut-off trousers that he wore offered no protection against the chill of the stone. His bare feet were black with dirt and Adam stopped himself brushing away the grime in case he revealed even more wounds or bruises. He shivered again and without warning, he burst into tears.

"Hello!" he shouted through his sobs. "Hello! Can anyone hear me? Can anyone hear me? Hello! Hello!

Hello? Is anyone there? Please. Please. Please!" His body sagged down and his forehead touched his thighs where he crouched. He rocked with his tears into a slow rhythm, which in his weakened state quickly swayed him into a fitful slumber.

*Standing on top of a grassy hill Adam looked towards the receding horizon. Strong winds blew across the verdant meadows surrounding him, sending countless ripples through the deep, lush grass. A distant forest stared back at him and he could see the treetops shuddering with expectation.*

*"Yes!" he shouted at the sky. He reached up with his arms and yelled as loud as he could. "Come now!"*

*A thunderous crack struck all around him and he jumped at the sound and then froze with fear and anticipation. At the periphery of his vision he saw a brief flash of silver...*

Adam flinched in his sleep and it woke him with a start. "A dream..." he mumbled to himself as he looked around. Confused at first, he quickly remembered where he was. The light streaming in from up above was brighter now than before. He had no idea how long he had slept. His immediate thoughts turned to his thirst. His mouth was sore and dry and his head ached fiercely. He sat up and rubbed his eyes, stretching his fingers and yawning. He rolled his tongue around his mouth, hoping to produce some saliva, but none was forthcoming. He stood up, gingerly at first but as he rose he became braver. His legs felt stronger than before and he hoped that despite any sustenance, the rest he had managed to have had helped him to heal a little. He glanced at his wrists and was pleased to see that the redness seemed to have retreated a little. This was the first time he had explored his cell in detail, and while he would probably have preferred to sit in the sawdust and soft shearings, his need to find some kind of moisture urged him on. He stumbled forward a little and placed a hand on the stone of the wall. It was cold and smooth and he stroked it with his fingers. To his disappointment, it was dry. He dragged himself past a corner and onto the next wall. This wall was the one with the rusty iron ring set into it. Adam grabbed and tugged, hoping that something might happen, but nothing did. Flakes of rust crumbled off the ring and fluttered to the floor. He let go of the ring and it clanked dully as it swung back and hit the wall. He wondered what purpose it might serve and decided that it must have been used to attach a chain to, perhaps to restrain a prisoner. He grasped it again, this time with both hands and attempted to turn it. To his utter surprise, the thick ring rotated a quarter turn with a strained groan and

as it creaked it fell away from the wall and clattered to the stone ground with a loud clang. Adam jumped back so that the ring would not smash down on his bare feet.

"Oops," he said.

He looked at the wall which had held the ring. The rusting bracket had fallen away with the ring and left a long, thin recess in the wall. There had obviously been a much deeper hole bored for the bracket than was necessary. Adam bent down and peered into the hole. Tucked away at the back was an object. Adam could not see exactly what it was and with some trepidation he reached in with one hand and touched it. It felt soft, like some sort of material and he shoved his arm in further so that he could grasp it and tug it out. In the light of the overhead sunshine, he could see it was a dirty grey sack about the size of a hedgehog. There was something inside and Adam pulled open the ragged strings around the opening and reached inside. There was a small, stubby glass bottle and rounded wooden box. Eagerly, he pulled the cork from the top of the bottle and sniffed the contents. There was no discernible smell and he jiggled it in his hand. He could feel and hear the contents sloshing inside. With care he put the bottle to his lips and took a slow sip.

"Ah!" he said. "It's water!" With disbelief he took a long swig. It tasted like the best thing he had ever tasted. Pure water, cooled to perfection by the cold stone of the wall. He swallowed almost half of it in one go and, out of breath with excitement, his hands shaking with adrenaline he replaced the cork and set the bottle down on the floor.

"Incredible," he whispered.

He sat down on the floor next to the bottle and picked up the wooden box. It was a small, oval-shaped thing and dark with a deep, rich patina. It looked very old. He shook it gently and he could hear something inside it rattling. It sounded like it had small pebbles inside, but there was not observable lid or any other way inside. He turned it around in his hands and shook it some more, then he bashed it on the floor but to no avail. Defeated, he dropped the box and picked up the dirty sack. It was just and ordinary small sack, but he turned it inside out and shook it, just in case he had missed something. Something small flew out and struck the wall with a metallic ping. Adam did not see where the mystery thing went and he crawled over to where he thought it might have landed and felt around with his hands in a sweeping pattern. After a few seconds his hands came into contact with it and he grabbed hold and brought it onto the light. He smiled as he saw it was a small silver coin. He turned it around and exam-

ined it closely. It was about the size of a large thumbnail. On one side was elaborate writing with letters that Adam did not recognise and could not read. On the other side was what seemed to be an elegant image of a bird in flight.

"Lucky," said Adam and he held the shiny coin in the palm of his hand. He wondered why someone had placed a sack in the recess behind the bracket. He wondered if it had put there by a previous occupant of the cell or perhaps by a prison guard for some reason he could not fathom. For the moment he stuffed the coin, the box and the half-full bottle back into the sack and sat with his back against the wall. He closed his eyes for a moment and concentrated on the interior of his moist mouth with some satisfaction and noticed that the ache in his head had receded.

In the stillness of the cell he listened as he relaxed and his breathing slowed down as the excitement of the last few minutes' activity slid away. The sound of the pounding of his own heart in his ears decreased to nothing and he closed his eyes. He was surrounded by an exemplary silence, the likes of which he had never known before. There was a certain stillness about his surroundings that seemed to remind him of a crypt. There was an almost tangible lifelessness and it scared him.

"Where am I?" he breathed with breaking awe. "Where am I? Where in hell's name am I?" He scratched the sole of his left foot and slowly shook his head with disbelief. Adam's situation was one that he had never considered or expected before, not even in his wildest flights of fantasy. His crime, a petty one in his opinion, was nothing to deserve being imprisoned in an isolated place like this. He was convinced now that he had been abandoned here, wherever *here* was. Surely someone would have been along to bring him bread and water by now, surely he would have heard something. Anything. Even a distant, discordant rattle would have settled his mind a little. And his present predicament could not have been more outlandish. The life that he had been dragged away from so abruptly in the dead of night had been far from isolated. His parents had abandoned him when he was a baby and he had no siblings that he was aware of, but the asylum that had taken him in had been full of life. Indigo House had been the boundary of his existence for as long as he could remember. He had many adopted brothers and sisters, and his thoughts turned to them now. As his drifting reverie provided him with a brief, but welcome reprieve he pictured the dirty faces of his best friends Molli and Abel and wondered if they were concerned about him now. He

wondered if they had been told where he was or if they set out to search for him. He wondered if they were afraid. All he knew for certain was that he was *not* afraid. He knew it in his heart.

An abrupt, loud clang sounded from somewhere nearby and he instinctively jumped to his feet and looked around in a panic. The sound had been so loud that he heard the echo rattle around from every direction. He swallowed hard and stepped quickly backwards into a corner. It had sounded like the noise had come from inside the wall opposite him. He was trembling with excitement and alarm. He waited. The sound of his heartbeat threatened to deafen him and then it came again. Clang! This time it was even louder and the shock of it knocked Adam off his feet and onto his backside. The force of the noise, or rather the force of whatever had made the noise made the walls and the floor tremble. Ancient dust fell from around, shaken loose from the walls and the ceiling. Adam scrambled back onto his feet and the echoes subsided, but was thrown back to the hard stone floor once again by a third loud clang, this time so loud that it hurt his ears. Adam clasped his hands to the side of his head to block out the sound and he screwed up his eyes. He was shaking so much that it felt like he was suffering from some kind of fit. He waited as the supplementary echo dissipated. He waited for the next pulse of sound and, unsure of what was coming next, he feared for his life.

Seconds passed, then minutes. Adam slowly opened his eyes and untwisted the pained expression on his face. There was dust everywhere, tiny motes filled the air, illuminated by the light from up above. He removed his hands from his ears and strained to listen but encountered nothing but silence.

“What the hell was that?” he whispered. He watched the dust swirl around him in the calm brightness and he breathed shallow and fast.

A shadow passed by overhead, blocking the light for an instant. In a flash Adam was on his feet again and in a corner, looking up at the window in the ceiling with the thick, metal bars. He could see nothing moving but he kept his gaze steady for a moment. His hands were behind him, pressed flat against the wall. He scratched the stone with nails with tense nervousness. Then, something came into view. All he could see was a silhouette, but from what he could make out it looked like a giant round head. The head moved from side to side as if weighing up its options and then there came another loud bang and two solid, confident, metallic clanks and something grasped the iron bars covering the window. With most of the light blocked out by the mysterious physiognomy it was difficult to see what

was happening, but next he heard a painful groan like solid metal straining against hard stone. The air was thick with a smell like electricity, like a lightning storm was about to break through and strike him down. He tensed up in anticipation and the thing up above wrenched the frame of the window out, bars and all with an almighty crunch, sending a thick shower of rubble and powdery stone down into the chamber. Several pieces of stone hit Adam on the head, shoulder and arms and fell to the floor and curled himself up into a protective ball. Stones both big and small rained down on him and he fully expected to be hit by the falling iron bars encased in the once-immovable metal frame. But it did not come. Afraid and anxious that his short life was about to end, he remained as still as he could. The last piece of rubble to fall was a medium-sized chunk of masonry and it hit him squarely on the back of the neck, but he barely noticed it.

Up above, he could hear more metallic groaning and creaking and a sound like the furious hissing of pistons. Then it stopped abruptly and there was a sudden rush of air followed by the sound of something very large and substantial landing firmly on the ground in front of him with a satisfying crunch. And then there was silence again.

## Visitor

It took a long time before Adam raised his head and looked up. When he finally did, he was surprised to find himself greeted by a pair of oversized, shiny, silver boots. More confused than frightened, his eyes widened and for several seconds he focused on the twin metal lumps. He could clearly see his distorted reflection in the vast, shiny toe-ends of the boots. Even if he had had apprehensions about looking further up from his ground-level viewpoint, he would have been unable to resist the pull of his curiosity. Connected to the boots were magnificent, wide shins, also made of glinting silver metal, like extraordinary armour. The bottoms of the lower parts of what Adam could only assume were legs, without looking further up just yet, were wide and flared and covered the top of the shoe completely and elaborately.

He inched his eyes further up the legs to discover more impressive-looking lustrous armour. Shins led to jointed knees, which led to bright, wide thigh plates. At this point, Adam had to sit up to get a better look, which he did cautiously. He did so

because the height of whatever it was that stood before him was inconceivable. Adam estimated that if he had been standing up, his head would barely reached the waistline of this silver something. The waistline in question was extensive and ringed with a ferocious metal belt, studded with shimmering, oval capsules. Above the waist was an abdomen which would have made even the most powerful strong man jealous. A tremendous ripple of musculature was clearly defined, but Adam could see that it apparently not made from flesh, but cast from the same silvery metal. Next came a chest, spacious and solid, and hanging on either side of this formidable torso were two arms, like battering rams. Hands, twice the size of Adam's own head, hung at the end of the arms, connected at the wrists with flexible-looking metallic joints.

Adam dreaded what was coming next, but he bravely girded himself and slowly looked up as far as he could to look at the head and face of this metal giant. He gasped. A smooth, but angular head gazed back at him with bright red eyes that bored into him like the rays of a distant supernova star from far across the galaxy. Adam flinched and looked away at once. Now, he was afraid. He waited for what seemed like forever until the beating of his heart slowed to an acceptable pace and then he looked up again. This time, he was looking more calmly. The head, or helmet, had something on the front that was definitely recognisable as a face, but it was strange and frightening. The eyes were narrow and had no pupils, they were wholly bright red lights. The head was so far away that it was almost obscured by the thin cloud of settling dust that was still present, but the brilliance of the red eyes shone through like beams of pure light. There was no nose to speak of and there were definitely no ears. The mouth was nothing more than a thin rectangular opening, spread horizontally across the lower half of the head like a letterbox. Inside the mouth-opening was darkness and shadow. The rest of the head was smooth and featureless apart from two slender, tapered fins that ran back along the top of the head from the top of each eye and disappeared around the back of the head.

Apart from the penetrating red eyes, by far the most impressive thing about this brute was its stark, absolute and untarnished silver gleam. Adam was uncertain as to whether this thing was here to butcher him or befriend him, but as it was standing there motionless, he came to the instant conclusion that if it had been able to, or even wished to, do him harm it would have almost certainly done so by now. But, still wary of the terrifying red eyes, he made

sure his next moves were calm, measured and slow. With this firmly in his mind, he carefully stood up and faced his opponent.

"Er..." he said, his voice unsteady and quivering. "Er, hello..."

A loud creaking came from the metal being and Adam recoiled, jumping back a few steps. Its huge metallic head tilted slightly to one side and the two giant hands flexed slightly.

"Hello, subject," boomed a bizarre synthetic voice, loud enough the scatter specks of dust in its sonic wave. It sounded like metal grinding against discordant metal, and it echoed as if the thing were bellowing from the bottom of a deep well.

As Adam struggled to grasp the meaning of the odd words all he could manage was, "Pardon?"

The brute's shiny head tilted itself back upright with a mechanical groan and hiss. There was a tangible, confused pause as its eyes flashed once and then it said, once again without emotion, "Hello." Which was followed shortly after by, "Subject."

Following the rattling echo there was another stretch of ghostly silence until Adam broke it with an weak, "Subject?"

"I can tell from the inflection in your voice that you are posing a question. It is my conjecture that you are unfamiliar with the term *subject*. A subject is, in this case, a person owing obedience to another. While it could conceivably be argued that *I* am *your* subject as I am here as your rescuer, I will be requiring you to follow my detailed instructions obediently so that we may be able to depart swiftly and without harm." It spoke quickly and evenly, in a monotonous, mechanical drone, but its voice was almost unbearably loud.

"You're too loud!" shouted Adam with some bravery.

"I am sorry," said the giant, quieter. "Is this better?"

"Yes," said Adam, and added, "thank you."

"Good. Then let us depart." It began to move but Adam shouted out and jumped up.

"Hold on," he said. "What do you mean, you are here as my rescuer?"

"I am here to rescue you from your situation."

"Situation?"

"Again, there is an inflection," it said, matter-of-factly. "I will clarify. By your situation, I mean your incarceration."

"Incarceration?"

"Imprisonment."

"Oh," said Adam. "I see."

The metallic giant leaned over and held out his

hand. It was clearly big enough to easily grasp Adam. "Then let us depart."

Adam looked at the huge metal hand with its machine-jointed fingers and stepped away a couple of steps. "Where have you come from? Did someone send you?"

"There will plenty of time for questions later, although I am not sure that I will be able to give you the answers you seek. For now, however, we must depart."

Adam hesitated and then reached out and grasped one of the big extended fingers. It was hard and cold. With no small effort he stepped onto the palm of the hand and the fingers tightened a little around him, forming a kind of harness. Then the hand was lifted with such speed that it took Adam's breath away. The hand and its custody stopped abruptly directly in front of the wide, silver face and Adam looked into the bright red eyes. They burned like fire.

"Wait," he said. "my name's not Subject, it's Adam."

"I see."

"What's your name?"

"My designation is Excelsior," it said.

"Designation?"

"My name is Excelsior." There was no emotion in it unchanging voice, but Adam was sure that he could detect a hint of pride.

"Excelsior, eh?" said Adam, and he smiled for the first time in days. "That's a neat name."

Excelsior tilted its head to one side as if to consider Adam's statement for a minute, then he said, flatly, "Yes, it is." And then without any warning, it dipped, swiftly bending its knees with a mechanical murmur, and then it jumped, neatly sending them both through the now ragged hole at the top of the cell. The walls blurred for Adam as the cold, stale air whipped past him. He gasped with excitement as his surroundings spun all around in a whirlwind. Before he could work out which way up he was, Excelsior landed on both feet with a loud clanging thud that made Adam's teeth rattle and his teeth snap shut.

"Hold on tightly to my hand," commanded Excelsior and he drew Adam closer to his hard, metal chest, cradling him like a baby. Adam opened his eyes a little to see where they were. It was the first time he had seen any other part of his jail environment other than the interior of his cell. He could only just cast a glimpse of the voluminous stone arcade he was in before Excelsior started to run like the wind. He managed to spot the aged grey marble walls and vaulted ceiling and the fact that the floor was littered with barred hatches like the one that had

decorated his ceiling, but that was it. He was carried by the giant robot-creature as it dashed through the arcade towards a large archway and then through a long, featureless corridor with a high ceiling. Adam tried to look around, but he was moving far too fast for that. Excelsior reached a junction where the corridor split into three and the silver robot swerved, without breaking step, and launched itself down the right-hand branch. After a minute or so they emerged into a large square chamber with several large doorways lining each of the four walls. Overhead a large glass window intersected the ceiling in the shape of a large cross. The light was hazy and the room smelled dusty and spoiled. Without hesitation, Excelsior bolted for a tall doorway on the opposite side, dipping his head and picking up gathering speed. Adam held his breath and narrowed his eyes as dust and flecks of grit peppered his face. The sound of Excelsior's pounding footfalls was deafening and the hammering, hissing and creaking of whatever mysterious internal machinery and pistons bickered in Adam's ears like a thousand angry wasps. They hurried down another corridor and then at another junction they turned left, and then right at the next one. Another huge chamber loomed and Excelsior made another decision as to which doorway to exit from.

After a while, Adam lost track of which direction they were heading in and where they had come from. Their journey seemed to last forever until, at long last, Excelsior came to a skidding halt at the end of a particularly long corridor. Adam lurched forward in the giant's grip and looked forward. There was very little natural light in the corridor and he looked forward for some clue as to why they had come to a stop. He could only assume that they had reached the prison's exit, but was confused by what he saw.

"It's just rubble," he said.

Ahead of them both was a mass of broken stone and collapsed tunnel. The walls and ceiling had caved in as if crushed by some inconceivable weight. Great shards of stone stuck out at odd angles.

"Our exit path is blocked," said Excelsior.

"Yes," said Adam. "Why?"

"I do not know the answer to your question. I do not have the facts. However, my conjecture would be that the corridor has collapsed. Perhaps a great force has been applied to it. Perhaps the structure of this corridor is unstable. These are theories only."

Adam was struggling to keep up with Excelsior's unfamiliar way of talking, but he got the core of what he was saying. "We cannot go this way?" he asked.

"That is correct."

"So..." said Adam, easing himself into a more comfortable position in the robot's grip. "We have to go another way, then."

Excelsior did not respond for a moment. Slowly it turned its focus from the collapsed tunnel to look directly at Adam. "Impossible," he said, simply.

"What?"

"That is impossible."

"What..." said Adam, with growing anxiety on his already frail voice. "What... What do you mean?"

"Before travelling through these passages to liberate, I made a detailed projection of this complex. There is only one route out from here and we are standing in front of it."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I am sure... Although..."

"Although what?" said Adam, slowly.

"No construct is perfect and the Excelsior model is no exception. There is a probability that I might be incorrect."

"There's a what?"

"There is a chance that there might be another exit."

"And..."

"I might be able to locate it but it could take some time."

"How *much* time?"

"It would be impractical to give you an estimate, Adam. I suggest that I find a safe place to deposit you and then I will investigate with haste."

"I..." started Adam, but his words were swept away as Excelsior quickly rotated where he stood and raced down the corridor with increased speed, back the way they had come.

**National Novel Writing Month**

**Every year, between November**

**1st and November 30th,**

**thousands of people write**

**50,000 word novels.**

**Lots of other people don't.**

**Which do you want to be?**

**[www.nanowrimo.org](http://www.nanowrimo.org)**

**Sign-ups begin October 1st**