BBC

INTERFERENCE BOOKONE



LAWRENCE MILES

Five years ago, Sam Jones was just a schoolgirl from Shoreditch. Of course, that was before she met up with the Doctor and discovered that her entire life had been stage-managed by a time-travelling voodoo cult. Funny, how things turn out, isn't it?

Now Sam's back in her own time, fighting the good fight in a world of political treachery, international subterfuge and good old-fashioned depravity. But she's about to learn the first great truth of the universe: that however corrupt and amoral your own race may be, there's always someone in the galaxy who can make you look like a beginner.

Ms Jones has just become a minor player in a million-year-old power struggle... and as it happens, so has the Doctor.

Both of him, actually.

Featuring the Third and Eighth Doctors, INTERFERENCE is the first ever full-length two-part Doctor Who novel.



### INTERFERENCE

Book One: Shock Tactic

Lawrence Miles



### Published by BBC Worldwide Ltd, Woodlands, 80 Wood Lane London W12 0TT

First published 1999 Copyright © Lawrence Miles 1999 The moral right of the author has been asserted

Original series broadcast on the BBC Format © BBC 1963 Doctor Who and TARDIS are trademarks of the BBC

ISBN 0 563 55580 7 Imaging by Black Sheep, copyright © BBC 1999

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Mackays of Chatham Cover printed by Belmont Press Ltd, Northampton

## Contents

FOREMAN'S WORLD: MORNING ON THE FIRST DAY	1
WHAT HAPPENED ON EARTH (PART ONE)	9
1: Gibberish (introducing Mr Llewis and all his neuroses)	11
2: One of the Good People (how Sam Jones got to be where she is today)	23
Travels with Fitz (I)	37
3: A Day in the Life (18 August, somewhere a long way from London)	41
4: Four Rooms (running around, getting captured, escaping, etc.)	55
Travels with Fitz (II)	69
5: Unfortunate Episodes (Sam finally gets into television)	73
6: Dog Out of a Machine (six characters in search of some exits)	89
Travels with Fitz (III)	103
7: The Smith Report (getting to the bottom of things, the old-fashioned way)	107

8: Another Day in the Life (19 August, somewhere a long way from London)	121
Travels with Fitz (IV)	135
9: Definitions (Sam learns a thing or two about the Remote, while Alan Llewis just gets the picture)	139
10: Nowhere is Better than Here (at last, Anathema)	153
Travels with Fitz (V)	167
11: One Girl and Her Ogron (the beginning of a beautiful friendship)	171
12: Faster than the Speed of Dark (Ancient Gallifrey: The Mini-series)	185
Travels with Fitz (VI)	201
13: The Last Day in the Life (20 August somewhere a long way from London)	205
FOREMAN'S WORLD: AFTERNOON ON THE FIRST DAY	219
WHAT HAPPENED ON DUST (PART ONE)	223
1: Moving Target (it's always High Noon somewhere in the universe)	225
2: Explain Earlier (how times change)	235
3: Patterns in the Dust (the Doctor takes coffee while history unfolds)	245

4: The Show (Sarah Jane Smith is not amused)	255
5: A Fistful of Meanwhiles (what everyone was doing just before the big fight started)	265
FOREMAN'S WORLD: EVENING ON THE FIRST DAY	275

#### Author's Foreword

*Interference* is, for the most part, a political thriller. But 'political' is a loaded word, especially here in the *Doctor Who* universe. Let's be honest, everyone expects us former New Adventures writers to be left-wing right down to our DNA. 'Political' usually means that Sam's going to spend the book lounging around in a Greenpeace T-shirt, that Ace is going to start sharing her childhood memories of the Miners' Strike, and that Prime Minister Thatcher is going to be revealed as the Valeyard in a wobbly rubber mask.

So here's my personal disclaimer. *Interference* doesn't have a left-wing agenda, any more than it's got a right-wing agenda. And neither have I, come to think of it. My handy desktop dictionary tells me that 'politics' means 'the complex of relationships between people in a society', and, as you'll soon be finding out, that's what *Interference* is all about: the systems that hold our culture together, regardless of who we're supposed to be voting for. (That said, a lot of the political background to the Earthbound parts of the book is based on fact. Even though the people/companies I've mentioned are fictitious – well, mostly – there's a lot of truth worked into the plot, but I know the BBC lawyers wouldn't be happy if I told you exactly what's real and what isn't. Let's just say you'd be surprised at some of the things that go on behind the scenes. I know I was. I mean, if you thought Global Chemicals was a shady business interest...)

H.G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* – the book that pretty much invented twentieth-century science fiction, remember – was meant to be a satire on Britain's foreign policy in the 1800s, and even *The Time Machine* was written as an allegory on the British class system. We're so used to the old stories that we've started to forget what they were actually about, and to forget the fact that SF has always been the perfect medium for parables. In a nutshell, what I'm saying is this. *Interference* may not be a manifesto, but it isn't exactly escapism, either. It's about us. All of us.

I think the word I'm looking for is 'fable'.

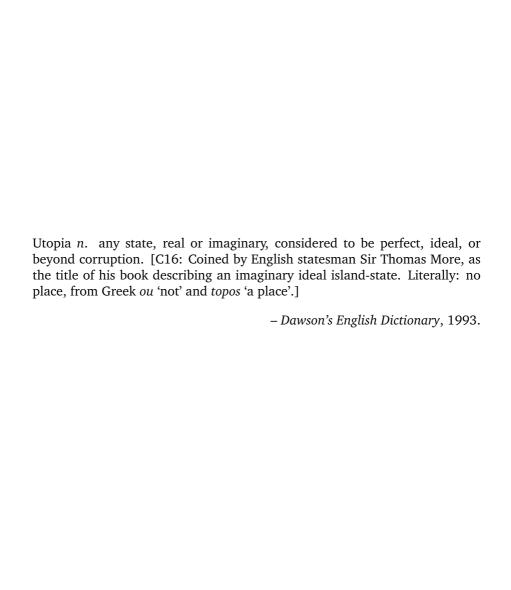
#### **Editor's Note**

It's a big, nasty Universe out there. A storm's been building in the life of the Eighth Doctor, and in the story you're about to read, it begins to break.

The next few books in the range of Eighth Doctor adventures are linked a little more closely than usual, as the nature of things – of far-reaching things – gradually becomes clear.

In the meantime, we forego normal service in favour of Interference.

– Steve Cole, Consultant Editor May 1999



Marshal McLuhan once said that some day there'll be so much information in the world that our culture will collapse in on itself and become a single ultradense unit of human experience. J.G. Ballard once said that our lives are so ruled by fiction, by advertising culture and television politics, that original thought is no longer possible and anything we might say or do will already have been pre-empted by the media. And James Stewart once said that his best friend was an invisible six-foot rabbit in a suit. But he was an actor, so he was allowed to say things like that.

This book is dedicated to anyone who wants it to be dedicated to them. Especially Andrew Vogel, who changed the whole direction of the plot with one carelessly chosen sentence.

## FOREMAN'S WORLD: MORNING ON THE FIRST DAY

It might have been an imaginary story, because stories like this quite often are. But if any of it could be called real, in a continuum where parallel universes and alternate states of being were ten a penny, then it would have started something like this:

I.M. Foreman was sitting on the grass at the top of the hill, where the breeze was strong enough to blow through her hair, but somehow not strong enough to carry the smell of the animals up from the fields. She was resting her back against the tree she'd planted there, with her legs crossed underneath her, while the most valuable object in the galaxy (arguably, anyway) nestled in the grass nearby. Right now, however, the most valuable object in the galaxy didn't interest her much. There were more important things happening in the world, and they were happening down in the valley.

There was a woodland down there, past the fields at the bottom of the hill, past the rows of corn that I.M. Foreman knew full well wouldn't ever be harvested. There were trees from fifty different ecosystems growing in the woodland, but the planet had made sure that they matched each other perfectly, at least from an aesthetic point of view.

So the thing that had materialised at the edge of the woodland stuck out like a sore thumb. I.M. Foreman knew it had to be a TARDIS, even before it had finished wheezing its way into the world. And the man who finally stepped out of the vessel, sniffing the air with his chest puffed out and his hands behind his back, just had to be the Doctor. A quick look at his biofields told I.M. Foreman that, even though he didn't look anything like the man she remembered.

Either he's regenerated, she told herself, or my memory's worse than I thought.

She sat back, letting her head go limp against the bark of the tree, and watched the Doctor get his bearings. He spent the first few moments peering around the valley, shading his eyes from the early-morning sunlight before he finally spotted her on the hilltop. I.M. Foreman couldn't see his expression from here, but she got the distinct impression that he liked the look of the place. Which didn't surprise her at all, really. Blue skies, green fields, the birds and the sheep muttering in the background...

God, he could be a sentimental old bugger sometimes.

So she closed her eyes, and waited for the Doctor to climb the hill. She could have gone to meet him halfway, of course, but she didn't see any reason why she should make his life any easier. After all, his body looked a good deal younger and fitter than hers did.

She opened her eyes again only when she felt the Doctor's shadow falling over her. He was standing just a few feet away, with his big fuzzy head blotting out the sun and his hands still safely tucked away behind his back. She got the feeling he had more limbs than he knew what to do with.

'I seem to have done quite a lot of hill climbing recently,' he said. 'If this carries on, I'm going to have to turn into someone with longer legs.'

I.M. Foreman raised a lazy eyebrow at him. She didn't bother saying anything.

'New body,' the Doctor said, doing his best to jump-start the conversation.

He wasn't talking about himself now, I.M. Foreman realised. She glanced down at herself then looked back up at him.

'You can talk,' she said.

'Ah. Yes. There's been a lot of water under the bridge since... the last time. Actually, I haven't seen you in five regenerations.'

'Mmm. Well, I'm glad you've kept yourself busy. Personally, I've been sitting here the whole time.'

The Doctor's face creased up. 'Really?'

'Not on this same spot. I've been sitting in lots of places. You wouldn't believe how much I've enjoyed the rest. I was starting to forget how...'

She didn't bother finishing the sentence. Three words into the paragraph, the Doctor had spotted the most valuable object in the galaxy (maybe), lying there in the grass between them. He was staring through the glass of the bottle now, watching the stars and planets dancing around inside. The frown on his face was very nearly big enough to split his head open.

'Oh,' he said. That was apparently the best he could manage.

'I made it myself,' I.M. Foreman told him. 'What do you think?'

The Doctor looked up at her, then down at the bottle again.

'Is that what it looks like?' he asked.

'It's a universe-in-a-bottle,' I.M. Foreman said. 'I think that's a "yes".'

'Ah,' said the Doctor.

I.M. Foreman reached out for the bottle, and stroked the surface with her hand, watching the galaxies inside ripple and quiver at her touch. Speeding up the red shift for her own amusement. 'I was experimenting,' she explained. 'Seeing how well I could put together ecosystems. Seeing if I could make myself a whole self-contained environment. I mean, I was only planning on making a galaxy in a bottle, but...'

'Things got a bit out of hand,' the Doctor suggested.

'More or less.' I.M. Foreman leaned forward a little, and squinted into the bottle, focusing on one particular event on one particular planet. 'Funny thing is, the people inside the bottle have made a universe-in-a-bottle for themselves. I hadn't expected that. Which means the people inside their bottle could have made a bottle of their own, as well. I've got this horrible feeling it goes on for ever.'

The Doctor followed I.M. Foreman's lead, leaning forward and peering through the glass. The view inside the bottle suddenly changed, as it picked up on the Doctor's thoughts and showed him what he wanted to see.

'That's me,' said the Doctor. 'Look, there under the glass. It's me. The way I was before. Only shorter.'

You could hear the surprise in his voice, and it almost made I.M. Foreman want to giggle. 'I should think so. There's always been a version of you in the micro-universe. There's probably even a version of me. I haven't had the nerve to look.' She watched the bottle-Doctor for a few moments longer, seeing him go through the motions of some adventure or other. 'Believe me, there's been a lot of interest in this thing,' she went on. 'I had a couple of visitors from the High Council a few days ago. They wanted to buy the bottle off me. Said it was unique. Don't know what they thought they could give me for it, mind you. Still. I told them I'd keep them in mind.'

'What do the High Council want it for?' the Doctor asked, although he didn't take his eyes off the micro-universe when he said it.

'I think the Time Lords are after some kind of escape route,' said I.M. Foreman. 'They're expecting trouble. Not sure of the details. They think the bottle-universe might be a good place to hide out, if things get too rough for them.' The Doctor didn't respond to that, even though she'd expected it to be big news to him. Too distracted by the things inside the glass, probably.

'The thing is, I think the High Council are going to get hold of the bottle sooner or later anyway,' she went on. 'I've seen things inside the microuniverse that aren't supposed to be there. Things I didn't put there. And I think they're Time Lords. Time Lords from the real universe. I think the High Council's going to evacuate into the bottle sometime in the future, and start exploring space-time there. You wouldn't believe the powers they've picked up, now they're out of their home continuum. I mean, their grasp of time travel inside the bottle looks a bit shaky, but in a lot of ways they're almost godlike, except that... you're not listening to a word I'm saying, are you?'

Suddenly, the Doctor's big soppy eyes were fixed right on her. The bottle, realising that it was no longer the centre of attention, went back to showing images of spinning galaxies and collapsing solar systems.

'Hmm,' said the Doctor, in what was presumably his best noncommittal

voice.

I.M. Foreman sighed. 'All I'm saying is, I think the whole future of your race is in this bottle somewhere. Which makes it the most valuable object in the galaxy, I'd say. I just thought you'd be interested.'

The Doctor nodded enthusiastically. 'Yes, yes,' he said. 'You're right. It's very important. It's just not really what I came here to talk about. My own future's a hard enough thing to deal with at the moment, without having to worry about the future of Gallifrey as well. Not that I should be getting involved in future events anyway.'

I.M. Foreman tutted. 'This isn't a social call, then. Didn't think so. All right, what is it you want?'

The Doctor stuffed his hands into his pockets. Turned away from her. Looked out over the valley. Turned back again. Five regenerations ago, thought I.M. Foreman, he would have just stood there scratching the back of his neck.

'Things have been happening to me recently,' the Doctor said. 'Important things. Worrying things. And I think... they're connected to what happened before. What happened between us. The last time we met.'

'So?'

The Doctor almost looked hurt. 'I wanted to talk things through,' he said. 'About our last meeting. About what happened on Dust. I think there's something I'm missing.'

'You mean you want to talk over old times.'

'Just to make sure I've got everything in the right order. Yes.'

I.M. Foreman nodded, then pulled herself on to her feet. She heard the joints cracking in her legs when she moved, and wondered how long it'd be before she'd have to rebuild this body. Or leave it behind altogether.

'Fair enough,' she said, doing her best to hide the strain in her voice. 'Shall we go for a walk?'

'A walk? Where to?'

'Doesn't matter. You're just not the type who likes to talk sitting down, that's all.'

The Doctor had to think about that for a while.

'You're right,' he said, eventually. Then he held out his arm for her. 'I feel like pacing. How about those woods?'

They got as far as the woodland's edge, close to the spot where the Doctor had left his TARDIS, before he looked back over his shoulder. He was gazing up at the top of the hill, where the morning light was glinting off the surface of the universe-in-a-bottle. I.M. Foreman had been holding on to his arm while they'd walked, so she could feel the muscles twitching under his clothes. He

wanted to turn round and march right back up the hillside, she could feel it. He wanted to go back to the bottle, whatever he'd said about not getting involved in the future. However hard he'd pretended not to care.

Typical Time Lord. Always trying to fiddle with the props.

'Is it safe to leave it up there?' he asked.

I.M. Foreman shrugged. 'Nobody's likely to steal it.'

'Not even the High Council?'

'They wouldn't dare. "Hell bath no fury".' She pulled at his arm, forcing him through the trees and into the woods. 'Anyway, things have been happening to you, that's what you said. Like what?'

The Doctor finally tore his eyes away from the hill, and started making 'umm' noises, obviously trying to work out where he should start.

'Earth,' he announced, in the end. 'I was on Earth. In the twentieth century. I met up with some old acquaintances.'

'You mean some old acquaintances from Dust.'

'I'm afraid so. It was a few months ago, on my timeline. Just around the time when I lost Sam.'

'Sam?'

The Doctor kept his eyes fixed on the woodland floor as they walked, taking care not to tread on any of the snakes that were nesting in the leaves there. I.M. Foreman got the impression he was doing his best not to tread on any of the leaves, if he could help it. 'Sam was a very good friend of mine,' he explained. 'Someone who helped me a lot, after my last regeneration. Someone I think I'm going to miss a great deal.'

'And this Sam person,' I.M. Foreman cut in, before he could start getting wistful on her. 'You think he's connected to what happened on Dust? Is that it?'

'She,' said the Doctor. "Sam" as in "Samantha".'

'Oh, I see. I'm sorry, I've just read *The Lord of the Rings*. "Sam" makes me think of little hairy people with funny accents.'

The Doctor stopped walking. I.M. Foreman stopped, too.

'The Lord of the Rings?' he queried.

'That's what I said. Is there a problem?'

'No. It's a bit of a coincidence, though. Fitz was talking about *The Lord of the Rings* the first time I... well, never mind. Not important.'

'Fitz,' I.M. Foreman repeated. 'Let me guess. Another travelling companion? You only had the one back on Dust.'

'Three heads are better than two. But it's so hard to find the staff. Do you read a lot of books these days?'

He hadn't changed that much, thought I.M. Foreman. His conversations were still all over the place. 'I'm starting to see the benefit in cultural experi-

ence,' she told him, trying to sound like she meant it. 'I've been concentrating on biology for too long. Building new bodies for myself is fine, but every time I get a new brain I have to fill it with something.'

'So what did you think?'

*'Lord of the Rings*? Too long. My attention span only stretches to about three hundred pages. I liked the last line, though.'

The Doctor frowned. Just the last line.'

'It's the details that make things interesting. Let's stick to the subject, all right? You were telling me about Sam. Sam-as-in-Samantha.'

The Doctor cast his eyes around the woods, and finally detached himself from I.M. Foreman's arm. He was looking for a clearing, she realised. He probably wanted a picnic.

'Time to sit down, I think,' he told the world in general. 'Now I've got all that pacing out of my system.'

I.M. Foreman tugged at his sleeve. 'This way. There's a good spot another hundred yards in. And in the meantime, keep talking.'

He didn't. He kept changing the subject while they walked, going off at tangents and asking her thinly veiled personal questions about life on Foreman's World. When they finally sat down, in the middle of a clearing where the branches kept out just enough light to make the spot both warm and dark, I.M. Foreman noticed two deer hovering between the trees nearby. The deer just stood there, watching the Doctor through their little wet eyes and ignoring I.M. Foreman completely. The Doctor started calling to them as soon as he was settled on his carpet of leaves, making kissy noises and beckoning with his fingers. The deer looked at him as if he were mad.

'Sam,' I.M. Foreman reminded him.

The Doctor gave up on the deer, and nodded. 'Sam was a schoolgirl from London. That was what she was supposed to be, anyway. You remember London, don't you?'

'Mmm,' said I.M. Foreman, hoping he'd interpret it as a 'yes'.

'Her timeline was altered,' the Doctor went on. 'Adjusted. By some very bad people with some very bad ideas. They shaped her into the perfect travelling companion, and planted her on board my TARDIS. Playing games with her timeline. Or maybe *I* was playing games with her timeline, and they were just the ones who made me realise it. It's hard to say for sure.' He paused for a moment or two, while the deer trotted off to find something more interesting to stare at. 'Of course, that version of Sam wasn't a bad person,' the Doctor concluded. 'Quite the reverse, in fact.'

'Oh dear,' said I.M. Foreman. 'This isn't going to be one of those stories where everybody meets versions of themselves from parallel universes, is it?

Only I've had enough of that kind of thing recently. What with the bottle and everything.'

'No no no. Nothing like that. By the time Sam decided to leave me, she was... the only version of Sam in existence, I suppose. The definite article. Dedicated. Vegetarian. Blonde. Naive, sometimes. But you've got to keep that one thing in mind. Whoever she was, however much I might have respected her, she only really existed because somebody *wanted* her to exist.'

'The story so far,' I.M. Foreman muttered.

The Doctor didn't say anything for a while after that. He tucked his knees up in front of his body, and rocked backward and forward in the middle of the clearing, with his eyes fixed on the dead old leaves in front of him.

'I want to tell you what happened on Earth,' he said, a full five minutes into the silence. 'Earth in 1996. Then we can go over what happened on Dust. I'm sure there's something linking the two stories together. Even apart from the fact that some of the characters are the same.'

'If you think it'll help,' said I.M. Foreman. 'It's not as long as *The Lord of the Rings*, is it?'

'No,' said the Doctor. 'It's not quite that long.'

## WHAT HAPPENED ON EARTH [Part one]

We can see everything from here. We passed London a few moments ago, so now we're looking down over the grass-and-motorway spaces between cities, heading out across suburban Britain at a height of well, the height doesn't matter. Just remember that, when we say we can see everything, we mean everything. Somewhere in the future, the Doctor's telling this story to I.M. Foreman on a grassy hilltop, but he's giving her only the edited version. Just his own memories, and the things he was told after it was all over. Us? We're seeing the bigger picture. All the scenes the Doctor never got the chance to appear in, and all the secrets he never managed to uncover. All the details he missed.

Now. Pay attention to that building down below, the big grey one by the side of the racetrack. We're a few miles out from London now, and this is the place where the story's due to start. It's a bazaar, really. They call it a fair; an exhibition; sometimes even a convention, when they want to sound particularly hard-edged and businesslike. They've put security people on the doors, security people on the roof, security people around every possible corner. They've cordoned off the building with bureaucracy, body searches, and – where necessary – threats, so the select few who are allowed through the metal-detectors and into the main hall are sure to come with smart suits and serious intentions. But it's still a bazaar, at heart, like one of those old marketplaces you read about in the Arabian Nights. The stalls are loaded with hardware, the hi-tech fruits of faraway lands, and the atmosphere's damp with a thousand varieties of male sweat.

There are guns that can fire off a dozen rounds in the blink of an eye, and suits of body armour specially designed to make those guns useless. There are riot shields that can send 40,000 volts through any dangerous animal or dangerous civilian who happens to get in the way, and surveillance devices that can do things with electronics the electronics companies like to pretend aren't possible. There are grenades, there are daysticks, there are handcuffs, there are water cannons, and there are stun guns. Hour after hour the cars make their way here from Heathrow airport, carrying delegates from countries that normally never even notice Britain's existence, all come to see the latest creations of what they like to call 'the internal security market'.

On the inside, they call it COPEX. The Covert and Operational Procurement Exhibition.

On the outside, they try to make sure nobody talks about it at all.

]

# Gibberish [introducing Mr Llewis and all his neuroses]

Extract from the transcript of the BBC 2 documentary Seeing Eye, first broadcast 3/2/97. Programme title: 'Voodoo Economics'.

[The programme opens with footage of an office building, evidently taken with a small portable camera. We see a car pull up in front of the building, and its single occupant climb out of the driver's seat. This footage is obviously fly-on-the-wall, taken without the subject's knowledge.

[The man drags an enormous suitcase out of the passenger seat before he closes and locks the car door. The suitcase is of the ultrahigh-security variety, the kind you need two keys and a passcode to open.]

REPORTER [voice-over]: This man works in a perfectly ordinary office building in London's Barnes Road. He's a thirty-eight-year-old businessman, with a wife, one child, and a home in the suburbs of Twickenham.

[The man crosses the pavement and heads towards the office, not once looking in the direction of the camera.]

REPORTER [voice]: He also happens to be an international arms dealer.

[As the man vanishes through the office doors, the view changes. We're looking at the same building, but now the camera focuses on the first floor up. We can't see through the window; it looks like it's tinted, maybe some kind of one-way glass.]

REPORTER [voice]: In this building, tucked away between a pizza restaurant and an office-supplies shop, he and his colleagues buy and sell technical equipment the British government doesn't even like to admit exists. Over the next three weeks, we'll be revealing evidence which proves, beyond any reasonable doubt, that the people in this office have been involved in sales of military hardware to countries such as China and Iran, sales which are not only illegal under British law, but also in breach of every European code of human rights.

[The camera zooms in on the window.]

REPORTER [voice]: But what's disturbing isn't the fact that the dealers are operating from a location as innocuous as this one. Nor is it the fact that our subject, and others close to him, are also responsible for selling instruments of torture to countries as diverse as Algeria and Colombia, countries well known for their appalling civil-rights records. What's disturbing is that this office is just one part of an entire underground subculture of illegal and morally suspect technology, at work right in the heart of suburban Britain.

[Scene change. We see the reporter, standing in front of the House of Commons, facing the camera.]

REPORTER: This is a story of corruption, deceit, and hypocrisy. It's not exactly the story of a conspiracy, but it involves the complicity of the British government, not to mention the involvement of several paramilitary organisations under the control of the United Nations. And at the centre of it all is a clique of people so secretive, it can only be described as a cult...

**COPEX:** 18 August 1996

'Ghana,' said the greasy man.

Llewis couldn't remember the man's name. He'd introduced himself when he'd oozed his way up to the bar and taken the next stool, but it hadn't taken Llewis long to work out that he wasn't anyone important. The man was a rep working for one of the companies that specialised in riot foam, which, in Llewis's view, marked him out as a loser right from the start. Nobody cared about riot foam, not at COPEX. The buyers here wanted heavy-duty hardware, big sleek pieces of matt-black plastic that could fire bloody great bolts of electricity and looked good in the sales brochures. Nobody gave a toss about nonlethal weapons. Nonlethal weapons were what governments bought to keep the civil-rights people happy.

'See?' the greasy man went on, nodding at something outside the bar area. 'Ghana. You can tell.'

Llewis grunted, and turned. Sheer bloody-minded Englishness, that. Not twenty yards away, people were selling sniper rifles to Turkish secret policemen, and Llewis was embarrassed about telling this idiot to get lost.

The bar area was set to one side of the exhibition hall, raised above the rest of the floor, so you could get a good overview of the stalls while you were having your vodka and coke. The fair was as busy as it got, the strip lighting beating down on the sweaty foreheads of the reps as they shuffled from stand

to stand, swapping jokes and collecting sales literature. Llewis didn't see anyone he recognised. Of course, Peter bloody Morgan at the office would have been able to identify every single one of them like a shot. Blindfold, probably.

The greasy man was still nodding. Llewis peered across the floor. About fifteen yards from the bar, a gaggle of fat black men were hovering around the Hiatt's stall, inspecting the quality of the handcuffs.

'You'd think the Ghanaians would have enough of 'em by now, wouldn't you?' the greasy man chirped in a voice that reminded Llewis of George Formby, for some reason. 'Iranians.'

'What?' said Llewis.

'Iranians. There.' Llewis realised the man was nodding in a completely different direction now. 'Look at 'em. They're after surveillance tech. Can't get enough of it, the Iranians. Makes you wonder who they need to spy on, eh?'

'Nnn,' Llewis told him.

'British.'

Now the man was nodding at a couple of anxious-looking men in suits who were drifting between the stalls, apparently more interested in the customers than the merchandise. They both looked like Iraqis to Llewis.

'British?' Llewis asked, then wished he hadn't.

The greasy man gave him a greasy grin, and tapped the side of his head with a greasy finger. 'British intelligence. Got to keep an eye on things, the old MI boys.'

'They don't look British,' Llewis murmured.

'Don't want to draw attention to themselves. Always use wogs when they come to COPEX. Same as last year.' The man kept nodding, but Llewis got the feeling it was supposed to be a wise and all-knowing kind of nod now. 'Been coming here since '92. You get to know the layout, after a bit.'

'Nnn,' said Llewis again.

'This your first time, is it?'

'No,' Llewis snapped, but even his voice sounded like it was swearing. It wasn't entirely a lie, mind you. His company had been here before. Except that it was usually Peter bloody Morgan who got to come to COPEX every year. Except that Llewis wouldn't have been here now, if Morgan hadn't come down with that case of food poisoning, and *I hope he dies, I really hope he dies, I hope it hurts him like hell and he throws up his guts and then the big smug idiot dies like a bloody dog* –

'Tricky one,' said the greasy man.

Llewis stopped hyperventilating. The man was squinting out across the hall again, with a confused look on his stupid, greasy, self-assured face. Once again, Llewis found himself turning to see what the rep was looking at.

Halfway across the floor, there was a group of people Llewis hadn't spotted before. There were three of them in all, and they were pretty hard to miss. For a start, two of them were about seven feet tall. Security, thought Llewis. Hired muscle. The security men were black, both wearing suits that didn't quite fit them properly even though they'd obviously been specially made for the occasion. Both had pairs of dark glasses resting on their piggy noses, the lenses much too small for their huge faces. They were looking around aimlessly, clearly not understanding anything that was going on. Probably didn't even speak English, Llewis guessed.

The third figure, flanked by the bodyguards, was shorter. Much shorter. He was young and white, and his hair was short and black and spiky –

Llewis coughed, and felt a great big bubble of spit, coke, and vodka forming at the back of his throat. Some of the saliva lodged itself in the prickles of his beard.

'White guy looks American,' the greasy man said. 'Don't know about his gorillas, though. Can't be government. Must be a private party.'

Llewis turned back to the bar, and reached for his briefcase, the sweat welding his shirt to his body as his beer gut pressed against the bar top. He flicked the clasps on the top of the case, stuffed his fingers into one of the envelope compartments inside. He had to unload half a dozen promo brochures before he found the folder.

'Got to go,' he muttered to the greasy man. Then he stuffed the folder into the great damp space under his arm, and hurried away from the bar.

Llewis flipped the folder open as he crossed the floor, not taking his eyes off the party of three ahead of him. He stumbled into some Saudis on the way, and accidentally trod on the toes of someone who was discussing electric-shock weaponry in an Eastern European accent, but he doubted that stepping on someone's foot was a capital offence even for the Russian Mafia.

His hands were still shaking when he plucked the photoportrait out of the folder. Young, white, black spiky hair. Llewis's eyes flicked between the picture and the man up ahead, the figure's position marked out by his huge bodyguards even when he was obscured by the crowds of passing suits.

Yes. Yes yes yes. It was him. It was definitely him. Right.

Now listen up, Alan Llewis. This is important. This is the big one. The sods back at the office are putting money on your messing this up, just like you messed up last time, so keep cool, and keep calm. You know they'd have sent Peter bloody Morgan if they could have. Just remember: this man's an important contact, but we don't know a damn thing about him, so make sure you keep it polite. We don't even know what country he's from. No jokes

about sex or getting drunk, all right? He may be white, but he could still be a Muslim, or a Jew, or –

'Rrrrruh,' went one of the bodyguards.

Llewis jumped, but bit his lip, and thus stopped himself making a startled 'wuuuuh' noise. It had taken him less time than he'd hoped to cover the floor between the bar and his target. He still hadn't finished giving himself the pep talk when the bodyguard had loomed over him, like a bloody great mountain of facial hair and bad tailoring.

He looked up into the bodyguard's face. God, the man was ugly. Piggy nose, bad teeth, and almost completely bald. True, Llewis himself was going a bit thin on top, but the bodyguard looked as though his forehead had actually rebelled against the idea of hair, and scrunched itself up until there just wasn't any room there for anything except wrinkles.

'Hello?' said a voice.

Llewis tried to catch his breath. The contact, the man in the photo, was staring at him. In all honesty, he was just a boy, not a man at all – eighteen, nineteen, no more than twenty. His face was round, but stopped just short of being pudgy, although his eyes did look sort of sunken in, as if his face had been made out of a big white piece of dough, and the eyes had been pushed into the surface Mr-Potato-Head style. Llewis wasn't sure, but he thought he noticed traces of black make-up around the boy's eyelids, and there was a sizeable hole in one of his earlobes.

He looked like a punk. Or a Goth. Or whatever they called little poofs who dressed up these days. Admittedly, he was wearing a suit, but he didn't look happy in it. Probably the son of some company director or other, Llewis guessed, sent here by his dad in the hope of getting him interested in the family business. You got a lot of that in this line of work.

'Mr Llewis?' asked the boy, in his pony Home Counties accent.

'Huuh,' said Llewis, not quite remembering how to breathe properly.

'You're Mr Llewis, yeah? The one we're supposed to be meeting?' 'Huuh.'

The boy just blinked at him. Just blinked. That was all.

Oh God almighty Christ Jesus bloody hell. You've blown it already, Alan Llewis. Is this what Peter bloody Morgan would do? Is it? No, I don't think so. He wouldn't stand here like a fat, sweaty idiot, huffing and puffing and calling his contact a poof. No, he'd be right in there with a smile and a wink and a...

And a good excuse. Right.

'Out of breath,' Llewis huffed. 'Sorry. Been... been rushed off my feet... all morning. People to see. Deals to do. You know.'

'Oh.'

Llewis tried to ignore the way the bodyguards were staring at him. 'Not... not in the best of shape, right now. You know how it is. Stuck on the phone all day. In an office. Need to... to work out more. Pull a few weights. Build up the old muscle tone.' He finished by giving the boy a Peter-bloody-Morgan kind of friendly wink. Then he realised how this might look, and prayed to God the boy wasn't really a poof.

Fortunately, the contact took no notice. 'We're a bit early,' he said. 'Guest... Mr Guest's still back at the hotel. He'll be here soon.'

'Mr Guest?'

'Our... um, managing director.'

'Oh, right. Right, got you.' Yes. Yes, this is it. You've done it. You've bloody done it, Alan Llewis, you little wonder. You're in.

'Code?' said the boy.

Llewis froze.

Code. Oh God. Nobody had said anything about a code. A last-minute security measure? Why hadn't he been told? Why was he never told? Why was he always the one who had to figure things out for himself? Code. Code. What could it be? What could it possibly...

He suddenly noticed that the boy was holding out his hand.

'K-o-d-e,' the boy added.

Slowly, Llewis raised his hand. The boy shook it.

'That's your name?' Llewis blurted.

The boy-poof-Goth-whatever stared at him for a moment, as if it were a stupid question. Then he nodded.

Llewis breathed out, and the breath was much louder than he'd meant it to be. He found himself peering at the boy's pass, the slab of yellow plastic pinned to his jacket. Searching for a name, just making sure he'd got it right. But of course there were no names on the passes. Not at a get-together like this one. Only an ID number, and the words COPEX '96 in big chunky letters. No names, no questions.

It was more or less at this point that Llewis realised he'd left his own pass back at the bar. It was pinned to his jacket, and his jacket was still slung over the bar stool. He imagined the greasy man going through his pockets, nicking his matches, his phone book, the cards he'd picked up from the local telephone kiosks, the decoder key for the satellite TV in his hotel room. He wondered if he should go back for it right away. He might have panicked, if he hadn't already been panicking.

Mr Kode was speaking again. Llewis realised he'd completely missed the beginning of the sentence. '...through this way,' the boy went on. 'We've hired a kind of side office off the exhibition hall. Mr Guest'll join us when he's ready.'

Mr Kode motioned towards the far side of the hall, and the bodyguards lurched aside, their sheer presence opening up a pathway between the other reps. Llewis started moving before he even knew what he was doing.

'This is all new to me,' said Mr Kode, as they made their way towards the side office.

Right, thought Llewis. You and me both. 'Oh yes?' he said, trying to sound nonchalant. 'It's an institution, COPEX. It's like the first day of Ascot. Everyone likes to dress up for it.'

He was quoting Peter bloody Morgan there, of course. It was what Morgan always said, every year, the day before the fair. Llewis suddenly felt he should add something of his own to it.

'Or Cruft's,' he said.

Instantly, Mr Kode stopped moving. The bodyguards stopped moving, too. 'Cruft's?' asked Mr Kode.

Llewis nodded dumbly.

'Oh,' Kode said. And he started moving again.

'It's an event,' Llewis babbled, this time trying to quote Morgan word for word. 'That's what I'm saying. It's like... like the first day of Ascot.' Damn. He'd already said that, hadn't he? Damn damn damn. 'That's why they hold it here. At a racecourse. Not Ascot. Obviously. I mean, I don't know if that's really the reason. I mean, I couldn't swear to it, but... it's an event.'

'Yes,' said Mr Kode. 'It's important, within any trade-dependent society, for a coherent trading culture or subculture to develop. Possibly involving elements of national pride and ideals of personal achievement. Um, I think.'

Llewis let his jaw wobble for a moment or two. He had no idea where that little pearl of wisdom had come from. He'd have guessed the brat had got it out of a textbook, but he'd said it with all the smugness of an Open University lecturer. Until he'd gone 'um', anyway.

Mr Kode stopped at a door, set into the wall at the edge of the exhibition area. There were a couple of official security guards hanging around nearby, leaning against the wall with their arms crossed, but they didn't ask Kode for any ID. Either they knew him by sight, or they couldn't be bothered arguing with his hired help.

'Best in the world,' Llewis went on, trying to ride out the conversation. 'COPEX. You know. There are COPEXes all over the place, but... but Britain's got the best one. Everyone knows it.'

'Really?' Llewis was having trouble reading Kode's expression, but the boy looked puzzled. 'Why?'

'Well, er... I mean, the last German expo had to be cancelled. By the government. Banned. I mean, where's the free trade in that?'

Llewis had been told that the words 'free trade' made contacts' eyes light up like nothing else on Earth, but Mr Kode didn't respond. Llewis tried a bit harder. 'Civil-rights problems. You know. Amnesty International. The candle-burner brigade. Not that, you know, not that I'm saying anything bad about 'em. But let's be honest, they don't have a clue, do they? No idea about business. No idea about *free trade*.'

He practically shouted the words that time, but Mr Kode still didn't respond. The boy was just looking at him, blankly. Llewis was reminded of the computer systems back in the office, the way they'd just sit at the desk staring at you, waiting for you to punch the data into them. Smug little sods.

'Banned,' Kode repeated. Without much feeling.

'Er. In Germany. But our government's, er, pretty good with things like that. Hiding things under the rug and what have you.' Llewis decided to keep talking, in the hope that the conversation might reach some kind of natural end. 'A lot of the hardware you can pick up here gets made by the Royal Ordnance, so, you know... the PM's not likely to kick up a fuss, is he? I mean, it's Ireland. Let's face it, we've practically got a civil war going on over there, so our people know a thing or two about, you know, about civilian-control gear. What with the RUC and... and what have you. As long as we keep quiet about it, the DTI's happy to let us buy and sell what we like.' There, thought Llewis. That'd be the end of the discussion, surely?

'DTI?' queried Kode. He sounded like he was trying to evaluate a threat.

'Department of Trade and Industry,' Llewis said. God, the boy was thick. 'Look, what I'm saying is...' He suddenly realised he didn't know what he was saying, but he made something up anyway. 'What I'm saying is, Britain's a world leader when it comes to the internal security market. World leader.'

Kode looked over his shoulder at the suits milling around the hall behind him. From this angle, the rip in his earlobe looked horrible.

'I thought this was an arms fair,' he said.

Llewis clenched his teeth. For a moment, he entertained the possibility that someone was winding him up, that any minute now the others from the office were going to jump out from behind one of the stalls and start laughing at him.

Just for a moment. Then he cleared his throat, realising slightly too late that he couldn't politely spit out the coke-and-vodka-flavoured phlegm. He had to mutter the next sentence with a mouth full of glue. 'We, er, don't like to call it that. We're all dealers in "internal security" here. You know. Nothing illegal. Nothing out of order.'

Mr Kode nodded. Llewis got the feeling the boy had completely missed the point of what he'd said. 'OK. We'll only sell you "internal security" stuff, then. We don't want to break any of the local laws or anything. Within any capitalist

infrastructure, adherence to native custom is essential for the smooth running of any transaction. Yeah?'

Llewis forced himself to swallow the phlegm.

'Well, you know,' he said. 'Don't be shy. Give us whatever you like, as long as you don't let the candle-burners find out about it.' He tried to laugh, but it came out as a kind of throaty gargle.

'Yes,' said Kode, flatly. 'We'll watch out for the candle-burners.' And with that he opened the door.

The office felt familiar even before Llewis had finished walking into it. The smell of air conditioning and squeaky plastic furniture. A small room, with the blinds drawn, just to make it clear that what went on here was supposed to be ultrasecret and ultrasecrous.

Those were the impressions he got as he stepped over the threshold, anyway. But he tripped before he could take in the details. There was something on the floor just beyond the doorway, some kind of metal box, judging by the sound it made when he kicked it, and by the damage it did to his toes. He pitched over the box, feeling it scrape his knees as he tumbled towards the carpet. Behind him, he heard the bodyguards grunting to each other. The sound was very nearly subsonic.

Then his face hit the floor.

There was a long pause.

Mercifully, nobody started laughing.

'Oh, I'm sorry,' said a voice Llewis didn't recognise. 'That's my equipment. I should have left it somewhere a bit more out of the way.'

Llewis raised his head, his arms flapping wildly. He probably looked like a beached whale or something, but he tried to concentrate on the owner of the voice.

It was a woman. That, in itself, was unusual – the only women he'd seen in the building so far had been decorations for the stalls, salesgirls with openneck blouses and too much make-up. But this one was about the same age as Llewis himself, dressed in a smooth green jacket and skirt, and a shirt that looked like it was kept rigid by several layers of starch. She sat on one of the squeaky chairs on the far side of the room, legs neatly crossed, half a smile stapled to her face.

She stood as Llewis winched himself to his feet. He didn't bother turning to see exactly what he'd tripped over, but he heard it buzz behind him, and he hoped to God it wasn't going to explode. The woman was still almost-but-not-quite smiling as she extended a hand in Llewis's direction. Her face was pale and round, making her look fatter than she actually was, and her hair –

blonde, cut straight over her eyes, trimmed into a perfect shoulder-length bob – only helped to make her look overweight.

She wasn't unattractive, mind you. Llewis decided to take an instant dislike to her anyway.

'Bland,' she said, as Llewis shook her hand. 'Ms Bland. IPS.'

Damn it. IPS. He'd heard that name before, somewhere around the office. He didn't say anything, in the hope she might elaborate.

He wasn't disappointed. 'International Procurement Services,' the woman went on.

'Yes,' said Llewis. And he nodded. Sagely.

The woman's smirk got a bit smirkier. 'You might have heard of us. We specialise in getting the right hardware to the right people. By any means necessary.'

Llewis stopped resenting the woman for just long enough to actually work out what she was telling him. He turned to Mr Kode, who was hovering nearby, looking blank.

'Hang on,' Llewis protested, trying to sound like he meant business. 'You said you were only going to be dealing with us. Exclusive rights. Wasn't that what you said?'

'Exclusive rights in most territories,' the woman corrected him.

Mr Kode looked vaguely embarrassed. 'Nothing's been agreed yet. Ms Bland's here to represent one specific client. In the, er...'

'Gulf states,' "Ms" Bland said.

'Gulf states.' Kode sounded like he had no idea where or what the Gulf states were, the little snot. 'She got in touch with us just after we got in touch with you. Erm. Competition is an essential element of progress in any economically oriented society. Listen, there's time to work out all the details later. The ship won't be here for weeks yet.'

'Ship?' Bland queried.

'Look, I don't think my company's going to be happy about this,' Llewis cut in. 'I mean, you told us –'

'There's nothing to worry about,' Ms Bland cooed. 'Your company can still have rights for most of the world. And for most of the equipment. We're just looking after the interests of one country, that's all.'

'Which country?' Llewis asked, automatically.

Bland looked taken aback. 'Um, let's just say it's a country that's got a big interest in surveillance and counterespionage technology,' she said.

Llewis remembered what the greasy man had said at the bar. Iran. The Iranians wanted surveillance gear, didn't they? IPS must have been bargaining on behalf of them. Well, that made sense. Iran was one of those countries the candle-burners wanted everyone to protest against, lots of secret police

cells and electroshock batons and the like. Nobody was supposed to sell them anything, and the DTI had special guidelines on how to get around the sales restrictions without anybody noticing. Getting involved with Mr Guest's company through a third party like IPS might have been a smart move, politically.

'Ms Bland's only interested in our surveillance hardware,' Mr Kode added. 'I don't think there's any, er, conflict of interests. All disputes within the capitalist infrastructure should be dealt with diplomatically, and with expediency. Apparently.'

'Good,' said Bland, smiling in a way that Llewis found utterly repellent. She reminded him of some kind of children's TV presenter, and dungarees would have suited her down to the ground. 'Now. Mr Kode was going to tell me what his counterespionage products are capable of, weren't you, Mr Kode?'

Kode looked ever so slightly uneasy. 'I think maybe we should wait for Mr Guest. He's got the full, erm, presentation package. Look, don't worry. You won't be disappointed. Believe me.'

'Top-of-the-range stuff, is it?' asked Llewis. It was a pointless question, but he wanted to sound like he was paying attention.

Kode just nodded. 'You won't have seen anything like it,' he said. 'Not on Earth. Not even here. Not even in Britain.'

## 2 One of the Good People (how Sam Jones got to be where she is today)

Now

From a certain height, people tend to look like ants.

Sam lay on the roof of the tower block, stomach flattened against the concrete, binoculars pressed against the skin around her eyes. The binoculars had, like every other useful piece of equipment in her life, been supplied by the Doctor, who'd pulled them out of one of the TARDIS wardrobes the day they'd arrived back on Earth. 'The very latest in surveillance technology,' he'd said, somewhat drily. 'As recommended by the military. Fight fire with fire, that's what I've just decided I always say.'

'Which military?' Sam had asked.

The Doctor had looked puzzled. Then he'd checked the stamp on the bottom of the casing. "Made in the Filipino Protectorate. Imaging software copyright 4993." No, doesn't ring a bell.'

The rooftop was ringed by a fence, a wire-mesh job designed to stop suicides and glue-sniffers going over the edge, but this wasn't a problem. Sam had programmed the binoculars to ignore any solid objects between her and the target, so the imaging system was filtering the mesh out of the picture, focusing on the terrain around Sandown Park. The tower block was a quarter of a mile away from the racecourse, but that didn't matter, either. The binoculars knew full well what Sam wanted to look at, and they weren't going to let a few intervening buildings get in the way.

The racecourse itself was deserted, the rain turning the ground to mud and nibbling the paint from the empty spectator stands. Much more interesting was the building, the great grey lump of cement and steel railings that squatted by the side of the fields, looking somehow content as it basked under the big black rain clouds. Sam swept the binoculars from right to left, making sure she'd covered all the exits. There were people at the doors of the exhibition centre, chatting as they left COPEX '96, flipping through promotional brochures on their way back to the car park. Some of the darker-skinned representatives were looking up at the sky as if they'd never seen rain before.

Sam raised the binoculars a little, and a bunch of tiny pink hieroglyphs materialised before her eyes, the imaging systems telling her how many human targets – yup, these were military issue, all right – were in visual range. The symbols also told her that many of them were armed.

Which was true, of course. There were men on the balconies of the exhibition centre, big men in big suits. Like Sam, they were tooled up with binoculars; unlike Sam, they also had guns. You could tell. It was the way they kept slipping their bands into their jackets, making sure the firearms were still there, tucked away under the cloth.

Private security. Sam had been told that most of the men were paratroopers, on hire from the British military. Visitors to COPEX were the kind of people who demanded top-level security. She'd heard there were British Aerospace people trying to hock machine guns inside the exhibition hall (for defensive purposes, natch), and she wondered how long it'd be before they put a few emplacements up on the roof (for defensive purposes, natch). There were already a couple of helicopters buzzing over the area, and Sam had no idea what kind of armaments they may be carrying.

Army-trained aerial forces, thought Sam. Not really the kind of thing you expect to see, twenty minutes from London.

Suddenly, one of the security men looked up, and pointed his binoculars right at her. Just for a moment, Sam panicked. Then she remembered.

'Can't see me,' she muttered. 'Nyah nyah nyah-nyah nyah.'

The man looked away after that, scanning the ground below him instead. Sam followed his lead. There was a barbed-wire fence around the whole of Sandown Park, the kind you almost expected to be plugged into a mains socket. The setup was pretty secure anyway, but just to be on the safe side the COPEX organisers had called in the police, and the police had formed a human cordon near one of the entrances in the fence, to push back the protestors whenever they got too close.

Oh yes. The protestors. There were probably about a hundred of them, and they looked exactly as Sam would have expected them to look. Most of them were young, a lot of them had anoraks, and a frightening number were wearing their hair in dreadlocks. There were a handful of old people on the fringes of the crowd, and they were generally the ones wielding the placards. STOP THE TRADE IN DEATH, the protestors were saying, in big black felt-tip letters. SAY NO TO THE TORTURE BUSINESS.

Now, there was a funny thing. The demonstrators were, by Sam's usual ethical standards, Good People. They were more or less the same people she'd marched with in the ANL rallies, back in the early nineties, when she'd been twelve years old and the only demonstrator in town wearing wellington boots, Paddington-bear style. The Good People were the ones who noticed

the injustices in the world, who wanted to change the status quo, who tried to turn everybody else into a Good Person with nothing more than the power of free speech and the spirit of public unity...

So why did the protestors suddenly look so ridiculous?

Because the ANL marches hadn't achieved a thing, maybe?

Because Sam had held in her hands, in her very own nonmetaphorical hands, the power to affect the destinies of entire solar systems? Because she knew full well that it was possible for one person to create a revolution, but that it had nothing at all to do with mass rallies in Trafalgar Square?

Because, after all she'd been through, people who carried placards and shouted at passing cars seemed so weak by comparison?

From a certain height, people tend to look like ants.

The binoculars told her that several new targets were emerging from the building, coming into range through the main entrance. Sam guided the imaging systems across the police cordon, then across the car park. There. There, walking out through the doors, nodding to each other. Two men. One of them was quite young, quite short, very nearly cute, if you could ignore the oversized suit and the stupid spiky hairstyle. But the other...

'Gotcha,' said Sam.

The men were talking. Sam brushed the keypad on the side of the binoculars' casing, telling the systems to lip-read for her. The systems did their best, and displayed the results of their analysis in fluorescent green letters across the bottom of the picture.

[???] WON'T BE LONG NOW I [?I'VE] MET SOME OF [???] FACE TO FACE I [?I'VE] GOT A BETTER IDEA OF WHAT TO EXPLODE FROM THEM

"'Explode"?' Sam mumbled, to the binoculars. 'God, you're obsessed. You're not in a war zone now, y'know.'

The shorter of the men spoke: ARE WE GOING STRAIGHT BACK TO THE HOTEL. OR [???] WE [???] COMPASSION TO LOOK AFTER [???] COLD HERE.

Sam clicked her tongue. The systems weren't making much sense of this. Still, she'd caught enough of the conversation to give her something to go on.

The man had said 'hotel'.

She switched off the binoculars, and got to her feet. She was going to track them back to their lair. She was going to do the job she'd been brought here to do. Just like the Doctor would have done it. Probably.

#### Earlier

Somewhere in the TARDIS, a telephone was ringing.

Sam had been in the corridor outside her quarters when the noise had started, so she'd been the one to notice it. She'd followed the sound for a good five minutes, and made at least a dozen turnings on the way, all the time wondering how the ringing managed to carry so well through the passages. The TARDIS, she'd concluded, did funny things to acoustics, the same way it did funny things to dimensions.

And now she'd found it. The room with the telephone. 'Room' being a relative term, of course. There were several parts of the TARDIS that pretended to be outside, where artificial skies had been stretched across the ceiling, or where the walls were set so far apart that they vanished over a makeshift horizon. This was different, though. There was no ceiling, but Sam got the feeling it was because somebody had forgotten to invent one, not because they'd wanted to make an impression. The TARDIS was, according to the Doctor, modelled out of pure mathematics, and here you couldn't help but feel that someone hadn't finished their sums, that they'd got halfway through the equations and then scrawled 'oh, about five' in red biro at the bottom of the page.

So. No ceiling, no walls. A sky the colour of the roundels in the 'old' part of the ship. And, in the middle of it all, the hill.

The hill was made of rubbish, there was no polite way of putting it. A heap of detritus, of old machinery and half-finished artwork. There were computer terminals, there were washbasins, there were Greek statues that seemed to have been split right down the middle. There were typewriters, telegraph poles, steam engines, hat stands, and chaise longues. There were clocks, lots and lots of clocks, whole assemblies of watch faces and LED displays, all melding together on the slopes of the hill, the mound levelling out at the edges of the room before vanishing over another one of those imaginary horizons. There was rubbish, just rubbish, but all of it looked shiny and new, and all of it was exactly the same colour. Off-white. The default TARDIS colour.

And on top of it all, at the very peak of the mound, sat a big red telephone box.

'Indoor hiking,' Sam told the TARDIS. 'Another great hobby from the people who brought you home scuba diving and kitchen rambling. Just don't let it stop ringing before I get there, OK?'

So she started to climb, finding the rubbish solid under her feet, as if the hill had been welded into a single unit. The TARDIS was made from mathematics, she reasoned. Mathematical patterns, put together the way the Doctor saw fit, the whole ship made out of whatever default units had been programmed into the TARDIS databanks, or whatever they were called. This wasn't a room, then. It was an information dump, a memory storage area for the patterns that weren't currently in use. And, this being the TARDIS, you could clamber

over the numbers as if they were solid.

Pleasantly, the phone was still ringing when Sam reached the box. It was a perfectly normal telephone kiosk, the kind you could have seen anywhere in London before British Telecom discovered the joys of transparent plastic. The kind you still saw on postcards for tourists.

'Red,' Sam told the box. 'You're red. How come you're the only red thing here?'

Unsurprisingly, the box didn't answer. So Sam picked up the receiver, and held it to her ear.

'At the third stroke, it will be seventeen minutes past midnight on the eighth of August, 1996. Precisely.'

Sam frowned. Just in case anyone was watching her.

'At the third stroke, it will be seventeen minutes and ten seconds past midnight on the eighth of August, 1996.'

Bizarre. Sam inspected the telephone a little more closely. There was a dial, rather than a push-button panel, and in the centre of it were the words: OPERATOR, 777.

Naturally, she couldn't resist it. She dialled the number.

There was a pause. A click.

'Hello?' said a voice at the other end of the line.

'Doctor?' said Sam. 'Where are you?'

Another pause. 'Well... I'm in the console room.'

'Yeah? I didn't know there was a phone in the console room.'

Yet another pause. Then, quite quietly, 'No. Neither did I. Where are you?' 'I'm up on a hill. In a phone box.'

'I see.' Sam could have sworn she actually heard him nodding. 'You'd better stay there. I'll be along in a moment.'

He arrived at the bottom of the hill two or three minutes later. Sam watched him clambering up the slope, occasionally stopping to point at some piece of rubbish or other and look surprised. Finally, he reached the box, pretending not to be out of breath. Sam put the receiver back on the cradle, and let the Doctor answer it for himself.

'Well?' she asked.

'Ah,' said the Doctor.

'Ah what?'

'Ah. It's apparently twenty-four minutes past midnight on the eighth of August, 1996.'

'Precisely?'

'Precisely.' The Doctor held the phone away from his ear, and stared at it. 'Which is odd, because we're in flight. Not in any time or space at all.'

Then, suddenly, there was that old 'alert' look on his face. He slapped his forehead with his hand, but unfortunately forgot to drop the receiver first, and almost concussed himself.

'The space-time telegraph,' he whispered.

'The what?'

'On Earth. When I was stranded there back in the 1970s. Or was it the 1980s? I left a space-time telegraph with the UN. A way of calling me back in case of dire emergency.' He dropped the phone, and let it dangle from its cord. 'I'd forgotten. The receiver was expunged from the console when the TARDIS refitted itself. It didn't use to look like a telephone box.'

'Yeah? What did it use to look like?'

'Well... a telegraph. That's why it was called a space-time telegraph. Why would anyone give it such a stupid name if it didn't look like a telegraph?'

Sam fluttered her eyelashes at him. 'Say "expunged" again. It's cute.'

'No.' The Doctor clapped his hands together, then set off down the hill at a trot. 'Right. No time to lose. It's already, oh, a quarter past midnight, I should think.'

And then, Sam suddenly realised what he was saying.

'Doctor,' she said.

'Yes?'

'Wait.'

So he did. He stopped dead, on the side of the hill, his arms spread wide to stop himself losing his balance.

'You mean, you're taking us back to Earth?'

The Doctor didn't move. Well, he waved his arms a bit, but only because he had to.

'Yes,' he said, eventually.

Sam didn't say anything else. She could tell the Doctor was waiting, hoping she'd take the initiative. But she didn't have anything new to tell him.

Finally, he turned around to face her.

'This is goodbye, then,' he said. Lamely.

Fortunately, he slipped on a half-finished copy of the *Venus de Milo* at that point, and tumbled down the hill on his backside. Which kind of made up for things.

#### Now

Getting into the hotel wasn't hard. Sam just pretended she owned the place, and strolled right through reception. The hard part was nonchalantly hanging around near the lifts for ten minutes, trying not to be noticed until the targets turned up. This was the closest hotel to COPEX, tailor-made for the grubby

businessmen of the world, and the foyer was littered with newspaper stands, to give the impression that the people who stayed here liked to be kept well informed. Tellingly, hardly any of the papers had been touched.

'I'll tell you what's wrong with it,' Sam heard an ugly man in a suit telling the receptionist on the other side of the floor. 'It doesn't bloody work, that's what's wrong with it.'

'If you're having trouble with the reception -'

'Reception? The whole set's knackered. Half the channels look like *The* bloody *Exorcist*.'

Finally, the targets walked into the foyer. And headed straight for the lifts.

Sam sauntered towards them, trying to look as though she'd been heading the same way herself. She made sure the binoculars were tucked under her arm, where they wouldn't be noticed. The men stopped in front of one of the lifts, the short one glancing up at the floor indicator, the tall one staring straight ahead.

"... thing called the DTI," the short one was saying, as Sam manoeuvred herself into position next to him.

The other raised his hand, in a 'shut up' kind of way. He still didn't turn his head. Sam took the opportunity to study him in close-up.

The man was black. Bald. Tough-looking. Like one of those people you used to see in news items about African guerrillas, thought Sam – soldiers with shaved heads and leathery skins, fighting jungle warfare in countries nobody English could ever remember the names of. Sam wondered whether that was deliberate, whether the man had made himself up to look like some kind of veteran. There were heavy muscles under his suit, though, and his movements were slow, controlled. The sheer size of him gave his limbs a kind of inertia that would've been scary in a fight. Slow, yes. But slow the way icebergs were slow.

And his face was hard. Smoothed-at-the-edges, computer-aided-design hard. Like he didn't have any expression until he decided to switch it on.

The man from the promo video. Guest. No doubt about it.

Then he turned to face her.

Sam felt her mouth plop open, but she didn't have anything to say. Guest just stared at her, his eyes not even flickering, as if he'd already worked out which part of her was the most important and didn't have to look any further.

Wait. Wait wait wait. He shouldn't know her, should he? They'd never met before, he'd never seen her –

But Guest knew things. Sam had found out that much at the UN briefing. He'd talked to people. Read files. Got involved in local politics.

Oh God. Her picture was in a file somewhere at the UN. Wasn't it? Wasn't it?

Finally, Guest turned away again. The lift arrived.

The men stepped into the lift. Sam followed them, grinning inanely, the way innocent bystanders were supposed to. The shorter, paler of the two pressed the button for the third floor, and looked at Sam, expectantly.

'What a coincidence,' said Sam, trying not to spit through the grin. 'That's my floor, too.'

#### Earlier

The agreement they'd reached was quite simple. It had to be, seeing as they'd reached it without actually speaking to each other, more or less.

Sam was going to leave. Sam wanted to leave. Sam had decided to leave. Not one of those slow, creeping realisations, but an actual big, hard, no-backing-out decision. She'd drawn the line in the sand, she'd made up her mind, she'd written it in her diary, and yes, the diary in question contained only one entry and that was it, but it was the thought that counted.

Going. Definitely going. Going going going.

The question was, how was she going?

The Doctor had never wanted to talk about her departure from the TARDIS, not in all the time they'd been together. He'd probably hoped she'd find a new home, somewhere along the line. He'd probably hoped she'd fall in love with someone...

... with someone convenient...

... and spend the rest of her life on a nice quiet planet just off the edge of the Hubble telescope. Every now and then he'd acknowledge that she had a family waiting for her in her own time, but he was evidently doing his best not to let it bother him.

So. Sam had made her decision, and the decision, by its very nature, necessitated her going back to Earth. Which was where the agreement had started.

She wouldn't ask the Doctor to take her home. She wouldn't ask him for anything. She'd just wait, until the TARDIS took them back to Earth in her own time, as it always seemed to in the end. If they materialised somewhere close to home – somewhere in the British Isles, maybe – then she'd say goodbye to the Doctor there, and take the train home. If they turned up in, say, Australia, she'd use the TARDIS one more time, a short planet-hop back to her own country. Then she'd say goodbye.

These last few weeks, the TARDIS hadn't gone anywhere near Earth, or even near Earth's solar system. Sam had no idea whether the Doctor was doing it deliberately. It was going to be tough on him, it wasn't hard to see that, especially now he had so many other things to think about. For one thing, the TARDIS had been acting up lately, messing around with its interior spaces and

turning up in places that the Doctor had no interest in at all. Probably trying to tell him something, thought Sam, not that he wanted to acknowledge it. Also, the Doctor was still missing his shadow, and that must have been playing on his mind.

His shadow had vanished. After all the things Sam had seen, after all the laws of nature that had been violated for her amusement and education, that was still the oddest thing she'd had to deal with. It had started a couple of months earlier, when they'd run into Faction Paradox in twenty-first-century San Francisco. One minute the shadow had been there, the next... pop. Gone. No reason given, no technobabble from the Doctor to explain the science behind it.

You could always tell when he didn't want to talk about something. Apart from anything else, he started humming a lot. So there'd been performances of entire hum-operas in the Ship's corridors over the last few weeks.

As things turned out, the TARDIS materialised at exactly the same moment that Sam joined the Doctor in the console room. She hadn't bothered packing – there was no hurry. The Doctor was hunched over the controls, probably pretending to be doing some fine tuning. Fitz hadn't crawled out of his room yet, Sam noted. Probably just avoiding the emotional trauma.

'Didn't take long,' she said.

'No.' The Doctor stood up straight, but he kept pretend-fiddling. 'It never does. When you're enjoying yourself.'

Sam just reached out and pressed the door control.

'Last one back to their home world's a lousy kisser,' she said. Then she stepped out of the TARDIS for what was absolutely and positively going to be the second-to-last time.

She found herself in an office, which, all things considered, had to be called a disappointment. It was like any other open-plan office on Earth, although the windows were conspicuous by their absence. More striking was the red telephone box parked in the corner opposite the TARDIS, and more striking still were the two uniformed men with guns who covered Sam the second she stepped out through the doors.

Standing behind them was a man in a grey suit. Military grey, civil-service grey. He looked like he was in his late thirties, his face apparently crumpled up by the sheer weight of his eyebrows. One hand was stuffed nervously into his trouser pocket, while the other held a sheaf of papers, clumsily stapled together at one corner.

The man looked at Sam. Then he looked at his papers. Then he looked at the TARDIS. Then he looked at Sam again.

'Oh, Christ,' he said. 'Don't tell me you're a woman this time.'

Sam was the first one out of the lift. Technically, she should have waited. She should have stayed back, to see where Guest went, to make a note of his room number. But the journey to the third floor had felt like it'd taken up half her lifetime, and she'd jumped when the lift had juddered to a halt, thinking Guest and his friend were getting ready to pounce on her. And the idea of being pounced on by someone as big as Guest, or as wet and spongy as his friend, was not pleasant.

Come to think of it... wasn't there something familiar about Guest's side-kick? Not his face, not his shape. Just the little things, the tiny hiccups in his voice, those bits and pieces of body language you couldn't ever pin down properly –

Later, thought Sam. Think about it later. She hurried out of the lift and along the passage, past the ceramic plant pots and the Athena prints on the walls, not looking back at the lift. Hotels always made her feel claustrophobic, for some reason. The carpet-cleaner-flavoured air, the radiators humming like nasty little goblins, that horrible sensation of good taste everywhere. No wonder I'm panicking, she told herself. I feel like I'm being stalked by the wallpaper.

Once she'd turned the corner at the end of the corridor, she pressed her back against the wall of the next passage, and listened. She wasn't sure what good pressing her back to the wall did, but it felt right.

There were soft footsteps. Mumbled voices.

'So, the DTI...' said Guest's friend.

'Local governmental organisation,' Guest said. His voice was deep, but smooth, just like on the video. He would have made a pretty good baritone. 'It regulates trade to, from and within this nation-state. At least, that's what I've heard.'

'They're supposed to have rules...'

'The DTI's purpose is to facilitate trade. The regulations are there for the sake of appearances. For political reasons.'

'Those protestors...?'

'Yes. People in this line of business don't make a habit of checking their contacts' credentials. That's why we're able to move with so much freedom.' There was the sound of tumblers turning in a lock. 'The DTI has access to local tax funds. They pay for business expeditions to foreign territories. Mr Llewis mentioned South America. Possibly the Lebanon. He didn't seem certain. Provided no illegal security or interrogation equipment touches British soil, the DTI are happy to facilitate. I don't see why the organisation shouldn't help us as well. After all, we are representatives from a foreign territory. Of a

kind.'

Sam took a deep breath. They were going into one of the rooms. She had to find out which.

Right. One. Two. Three.

She stuck her head around the corner. Guest and his friend were standing in front of an open door, and there was obviously a third figure on the threshold. Aha. Guest hadn't unlocked the door, then. It had been opened from the other side.

There was an electronic ping, then a painful grating sound. The lift doors were opening again, Sam realised. No, wait – it was the other lift, the one they hadn't used. Sam ducked back around the corner.

More padding footsteps. A pause. Then a voice. Female. Sam didn't recognise it.

'Mr Guest,' the voice said. 'Fancy meeting you here.'

'Ms Bland,' Guest said. He sounded surprised.

Sam very nearly choked.

Bland? As in, Sarah Bland?

'What a coincidence,' Ms Bland said. 'This is my floor, too.'

Damn, thought Sam. That's my line.

'Then I'm sure I'll be seeing a lot more of you in future,' said Guest, diplomatically.

'I'm sure you will.'

More footsteps. Getting closer to the corner. Sam weighed up the options. It was probably Ms Bland, on her own, but there was no point taking risks. She looked up the corridor. Yes – stairwell at the end. She could wait there for a while, come back later when the coast was clear, maybe use the binoculars to see into Guest's room.

Sam turned, heading for the stairwell, and tripped over the pot plant at her feet.

She didn't swear – although it was tempting – she just threw out her hands, landed on the carpet with a little 'oof' noise that the Doctor probably would have found incredibly funny. The binoculars slipped from under her arm, and she heard them crack against the plant pot. Something broke. Sam wasn't sure what.

She didn't hear anything as she scrambled to her feet. She didn't know whether the footsteps were getting faster, whether Guest and his friends were coming to see what the noise was, whether anybody even cared. She just moved. Sprinted. Threw herself against the stairwell doors, and slammed them shut behind her.

Unwisely, she left the binoculars behind.

#### **Earlier**

The man's name was Coldicott, although there didn't seem to be a rank attached to it. Sam didn't bother telling him that she wasn't the owner of the TARDIS. She waited until the Doctor followed her out, and let the man figure it out for himself.

Coldicott spent a few moments flipping through his papers, and Sam saw him peering at a number of photographs, comparing them with the Doctor's face. The Doctor, meanwhile, busied himself by inspecting the red telephone box in the corner. There was a tangle of broken metal around the base of the box, although Sam didn't immediately figure out what it was.

'Right,' Coldicott said, after much paper-shuffling. 'So, you're the Young Edwardian version.'

The Doctor looked up, but only briefly. 'I can't help feeling you people know far too much,' he said. 'You're so casual about things these days. There really is only one of me, you know.'

'Then how come we keep having to print up new ID cards for you?'

'I'm deliberately sabotaging the bureaucratic process. That's the whole point of regeneration. Didn't you know? Now, this really is interesting.' The Doctor tapped the side of the phone box. 'I wasn't expecting the telegraph to have changed state at this end as well. The TARDIS must be stronger than I thought. She's not bad, for her age.'

'We kept the telegraph in that filing cabinet,' Coldicott explained, indicating the heap of twisted metal. 'Did a hell of a lot of damage when it morphed.'

"'Morphed"?' said the Doctor. Sam had never heard him sound so offended. 'Why don't we just talk about the emergency?' she suggested.

'Right,' said Coldicott.

Ten minutes later, they were sitting in a darkened VCR suite on another floor of what was, apparently, a UN base at a top-secret location somewhere in Britain. ('Is it Swanley?' the Doctor had said, when Coldicott had told him. 'It smells like Swanley.') They'd managed to wake Fitz up by that point, so he was sprawled out in the seat next to Sam's, looking for all the world like a pile of old denim that had somehow developed the ability to sweat. Coldicott's briefing didn't make a lot of sense, as the TARDIS's language banks were translating it into English from the man's native Bureaucratese, but luckily there was a video recording that was supposed to explain everything.

'So there's no emergency, as such?' the Doctor queried.

Coldicott shook his head, but looked as though he didn't want to risk saying 'no'. 'We're not being invaded, if that's what you mean.'

'But there are aliens?' asked Sam.

'And they've been in touch with the UN?' added the Doctor.

'Yep. This is all ultra-high-level, OK?'

'Oh, do we have clearance?' mumbled Fitz, becoming semisentient for the first time that day.

Coldicott shrugged. 'You're with the Doctor. It doesn't matter whether we give you clearance or not, he's going to drag you into this. So we might as well play let's pretend.'

'Cheers,' said Sam.

'Let me see if I've got this right,' the Doctor cut in. 'A group of alien life forms – who've decided not to give you the name of their species, or any kind of background data – has been in contact with the United Nations. And now you want my services as... what? A "consultant"?'

'Not as a consultant,' said Coldicott. 'As a diplomat. We'd get our scientific adviser to do it, but she's vanished.'

'Vanished?'

'Yeah, vanished. She does that a lot. She'll probably be back in a couple of weeks.'

'Nice security arrangements,' Sam noted.

'A diplomat,' the Doctor repeated. 'So the aliens want to negotiate?'

Coldicott shrugged again. 'Let's face it, this is the first time any ET intelligence has wanted to meet us over the conference table. So –'

'Apart from the Axons,' the Doctor pointed out.

'We don't talk about that.'

'And the -'

'Apart from them,' said Coldicott. 'Look, maybe it's not what you call an emergency, but this is big-league stuff for us, OK? If everything works out, we might even tell the public. Maybe.'

'First-contact situation,' Sam offered.

'Don't be flippant,' said the Doctor. 'What is it they want?'

'Good question,' said Coldicott. 'They say they want to open trade negotiations. They make a pretty good pitch.'

Sam couldn't help but notice a dark look cross the Doctor's face. Even given that it was already pretty bleeding dark in the room. 'What are they offering?'

Coldicott just cleared his throat.

'Weapons?' the Doctor enquired.

'Not exactly. Call it security equipment.'

'I see.'

'Look, you don't need me to explain,' Coldicott said. Just watch the video. It's their sales promo.'

Sam waited a full half-hour on the stairwell before she headed back towards Guest's room. But it was a crisis half-hour, which was probably about five minutes in normal time.

The hotel corridor was quiet now. No voices around the corner, no signs of trouble. The first thing Sam did was hurry to the corner where she'd dropped the binoculars. If anyone had followed her, they probably would've taken them, but it was worth a shot.

The binoculars weren't there. There was a shattered ceramic plant pot, and that was all. Sam swore.

This wasn't going well. Not well at all. When Sam had been with the Doctor, accidents had happened, but they'd always been 'happy' accidents. They'd stumbled across clues, been conveniently captured and told the plot before managing to escape again. Without the Doctor, there was no pattern to anything. When Sam messed up, she just messed up, and everything got slightly worse.

Still. He was gone now. Missing, presumed not coming back. Fitz was somewhere in Geneva, and hadn't been in touch for a week, so either he'd ended up in prison or he was busy shagging his way through the UN's typing pool. The point was, Sam was on her own now. She wasn't just going to walk around the corner and bump into either of them.

Then she walked around the corner, and – as if to prove the point – bumped into someone else entirely.

'Hello again,' said Ms Bland, not quite holding the smile away from her face. Sam looked down, at the binoculars cradled in the woman's hands.

'Oh,' said Sam.

'I think these must belong to you,' Ms Bland concluded. 'Fiftieth century, aren't they?'

# Travels with Fitz (I)

#### Geneva, 1996

There weren't any windows in the room. That was what really got to him. The UN obviously felt that windows were a security risk, and they'd built a huge TV screen into one of the walls instead, as if filling the room with five-footwide adverts for Coca-Cola would be a good substitute for a view. So Fitz lay on the bed, surrounded by tacky beige furnishings and polite air-conditioning vents, watching the news on one of the few channels where the broadcasters still had a reasonable grasp of English. The reporter was describing a court case involving a company called Microsoft, and on the screen a pale, anxious-looking man in glasses was saying that he was very, very sorry about any loss of life his software may have caused.

Fitz still wasn't sure what 'software' was, although it couldn't have been *very* soft if it'd killed someone. He saw the news report through to the end, then hauled himself off the bed, went to the door and poked his head out of the room.

The guard was still standing out in the corridor, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed. Fitz wasn't sure if it was the same man who'd been there yesterday. They all looked pretty much identical, which made him wonder whether the UN had made some kind of breakthrough in cloning and not bothered telling anyone. Padded suit, dyed-blond military haircut, dinky little UNISYC insignia on the shirt pocket. The usual.

'How do you turn the TV off?' Fitz asked.

'Big switch at the bottom of the set,' the man told him, in his French-but-clearly-taught-English-by-Americans accent. Then he added, 'Sir,' just to be on the safe side.

'Right,' said Fitz. And he shut the door again.

It was a stupid question, natch. But Fitz made a rule of annoying the guards as often as possible. It was the only kind of resistance he had left, seeing as UNISYC wouldn't let him out of the building.

Security, they'd said. When the Doctor had gone swanning off on his own, he'd left Sam in London to look after things there, and dropped Fitz off in Geneva to keep an eye on the UN. However, the authorities evidently didn't like the idea of letting the Doctor's spies run loose on their territory, which was why Fitz had been stuck in this room for the last week. For 'your own protection'.

They hadn't given him many home comforts, either. Apart from the TV set, the only source of entertainment was the bookcase, which had been stocked up with half a dozen sad-looking paperbacks. He already knew the titles off by heart, and he had the terrible feeling he'd be memorising the ISBNs before the end of the week. The only remotely interesting item he'd found on the shelf was called *Theoretical Monsters: A Credibility Test*, which came stamped with various UNISYC seals that marked it out as being solely for the eyes of security-cleared personnel. Plus friends of the Doctor, presumably.

As far as Fitz could gather, the book was given to new UNIT and UNISYC recruits as soon as they'd signed the Special Deterrents Act. Every wipe-clean page was headed with the name of a different extraterrestrial species, under which was a small photo and a brief description of the species' outstanding features. However, some of the races were figments of UNISYC's imagination, and the photographs were of men in rubber suits rather than actual alien corpses. At the bottom of every page were two boxes, one marked CREDIBLE and one marked NONCREDIBLE, which the recruit had to tick according to whether he thought the species was real or not.

There weren't any answers at the back of the book. Fitz doubted that the recruits were ever told the truth, or even told what kind of score they'd racked up. The book was a test of character more than anything else, designed to probe the limits of the soldiers' credulity. The really gullible ones probably ended up doing 'special ops' for the generals, obeying UNISYC without question, because if you were ready to believe in the Xxxxxxxxxxlanthian mind-chewers from the Fifth Universe you were ready to believe anything they told you.

In all honesty, it wasn't the fact that UNISYC was keeping him here that got to Fitz. It was the diplomacy he couldn't stomach, the way he'd been given so many good, sound, logical reasons for being kept away from the outside world. He hadn't been given a phone, he hadn't been allowed to get in touch with Sam, and he hadn't seen anything with XX chromosomes in days, apart from the surgically altered women on TV who were apparently supposed to be attractive in this decade. Plus – and this was the real clincher – there was now an advert on the seventy-two-inch screen that Fitz had already seen thirteen times this morning, and that made him seethe like nothing else on Earth. So he resolved to annoy the guard again.

He turned, opened the door, and stuck his head out into the corridor.

Where the guard was lying on the floor, with his back still pressed against the wall, an enormous bloody bruise across his jaw.

Where two lithe, black, plastic-skinned things were rushing towards the door, babbling something in a language that didn't sound entirely alien, waving the chunky, blunt-nosed weapons that had obviously been used to smack

the guard in the face.

Where there was a great rectangular window hanging in thin air, through which the two creatures had presumably arrived.

Fitz tried to slam the door shut, as if an inch and a half of wood substitute would be enough to hold the attackers off. But they were already on the threshold, close enough for him to see their faces. They were just people – he could see that now – with black plastic respirators over their heads and panels of sticky-smooth body armour strapped to their bodies. Fitz opened his mouth, to shout the first thing that came to mind. However, the first thing that came to mind was the pointless question he'd been intending to ask the guard.

Which didn't do him a lot of good, all in all. The nearer of the men raised something white and shiny to Fitz's face, and pressed the little plastic tab that was almost certainly the thing's trigger.

### 3

# A Day in the Life

## (18 August, somewhere a long way from London)

Where were we?

Oh yes.

We were here. Well, never mind. Let's try not to dwell on that. Where were we before we were here? Say... oh... a couple of weeks before, that should be long enough.

In a darkened room. With the scent of cheap furniture. Air that's been conditioned so many times, you can hardly taste the oxygen. In a darkened room, with the man called Coldicott.

The promo video ended. The screen in the corner of the dark room filled up with static.

The Doctor blinked a few times.

'That was horrible,' Sam said.

The Doctor folded his hands in front of his face. 'Really? Why?'

'It was an advert. It was just a great big advert. Only with aliens in it.'

Fitz yawned which was presumably his way of agreeing. Coldicott coughed just to remind them he was still in the room. 'We think the big black guy's their leader. Guest. He's the one who talked to our people in Geneva. The one who wants a face-to-face.'

The Doctor thought about this for a while.

'Two points,' he said in the end. He stuck out a single finger, then pointed to it with his other hand. 'One. They're lying. They're not interested in trade.'

'What?' In the darkness on the other side of the room, Coldicott shuffled his feet. 'How can you... d'you recognise them or something?'

'Shh. Listen. Trade-dependent races are quite common in this galaxy. The Selachians are always trying to unload arms on planets like this one. The Mentors are even worse. And the Arcturans would sell their own souls, if they had any. But you heard the way the man in that video was talking. What did he say? "Transcultural interpersonal relations are always of benefit in an efficient free-trade environment"?'

'What's wrong with that?' asked Coldicott.

'It's gibberish,' said the Doctor.

'Uh.'

'That isn't the voice of someone who knows anything about interplanetary trade relations. It's the voice of someone who's swallowed too many books on interplanetary trade relations, and hiccuped them out with all the indexes missing.'

'Good metaphor,' drawled Fitz.

'Thank you.'

Sarcasm? Hard to tell, with him. No, no, that isn't important. Keep thinking. Keep thinking through.

'OK,' said Coldicott. 'So what's the second point?'

The Doctor stared at his outstretched finger for a moment, trying to remember what it meant. 'Oh yes. Point two.' He stuck out the second finger. 'They're not aliens.'

'What?' said Sam.

'What?' said Coldicott.

'What?' Fitz tried to say, although he gave up halfway through the word and just made a little whirring noise to himself instead. Sam muttered something to him that sounded like 'Are we keeping you up?'.

'They're humanoid, certainly,' the Doctor went on. 'But I'd go further than that. I'd say they're actually human.'

'That doesn't make sense,' Coldicott protested. 'They gave their, uhm, credentials to the UN in Geneva...'

'Credentials?' said Sam. 'What, you mean they buzzed the place in a big UFO?' 'Kind of. Look... how d'you know they're not aliens? If they look humanoid -'

'Syntax. They speak like humans.' The Doctor held up his hand, to stop any-body picking holes in his nice clean argument. 'That's not unusual in itself. Any decent high-grade culture can invent an automatic translator. But translators leave glitches in syntax. Little cultural gaps in their messages. You have to know what to listen out for but they're there.' He nodded towards the static on the screen. 'Now, I think they were using translator technology to turn their words into twentieth-century English. But even if the words needed translating, the syntax didn't. The sentence construction suggests human thought processes. I'm talking about their casual conversation, not the bits about economics.'

Was that it? Was that the whole of the speech? There was more to it than that, surely? An almost surgical analysis of Guest's grammar... or maybe not. Sam wouldn't have sat still through a lecture like that, and Fitz probably would have dozed off completely.

What did Sam say next? Think. Think.

'Then how come they didn't look totally human?' said Sam.

 $\mbox{'Ah.'}$  The Doctor nodded. You mean, the way they look  $\mbox{-'}$ 

'Like they've all been computer-enhanced. Yeah.'

'Well, they're culturally human, certainly. Whether they're genetically human, I couldn't say.'

Coldicott let some sigh-flavoured air out of his lungs. 'OK. Some people who aren't spacemen want us to think they're spacemen, just so they can sell us some security hardware, even though they're not salesmen. You want to try explaining any of this to Geneva?'

A millisecond later, the Doctor was on his feet, feeling up the cloth of his lapels. Let me put it this way,' he said. 'I accept your kind offer of employment.' 'Oh, good,' droned Coldicott.

'I accept your kind offer of employment.' That was it. Those were the exact words. Yes.

Perhaps that had been a mistake. Tactically speaking.

Bearing in mind everything that had happened since.

#### Dawn

Badar opened his eyes. At least, he thought he opened his eyes, but the nerves to his eyelids felt like they'd been severed, so it was hard to say for sure. When his eyes were closed, he could see the blood cells inside his head, big red blotches huddling together for safety. When his eyes were open, he could see much the same thing.

Really, there'd been no reason for them to use the electric batons on his eyes. It didn't hurt any more than any other sensitive part of the body. But it was the idea that had made him scream, when he'd realised what they'd been planning. That was ridiculous, wasn't it? The pain was the same whatever they did, but the thing that had forced the noise out of his lungs had been the idea.

Perhaps ideas were the only things that mattered. He'd been thinking that more and more these last few days. What happened to his body seemed... irrelevant. Parts of it would burn, parts of it would prickle, parts of it would twitch and shake when he didn't want them to, where the guards had done terrible things to the nerve connections under the skin. It hardly seemed to make a difference which of his organs ceased to function next. On the other hand, what went on inside his head seemed important. Untouchable. Sacred, almost.

They should have left his eyes alone.

Beyond the blood cells, he could see a smear of grey, the dull wash of the room's ceiling. He tried moving his head, and the smear wobbled from side to side, until he could almost make out the angles in the corners. It was difficult, sometimes, to work out the difference between the things that happened in the cell and the things that happened in the dreams. He seemed to remember

the guards standing over him in the night, the skin running down their faces like candle wax, turning black and peeling away until he'd been able to see the bone underneath. Well, that had probably been a dream. There had been voices, too, the sounds of men shouting, banging doors and making threats. That had probably been real.

Banging doors. Sometime during the night, long after the guards had gone away, the door had opened again. There'd been a shuffling in the cell. Breathing. Heavy breathing. And Badar didn't think it had been his own.

He turned his head, so his eyes were facing the rest of the cell. The angles of the ceiling lurched horribly, and he was very nearly sick.

There was someone else here. You could tell. A square of yellow appeared in the middle of the grey, the window that looked out on to the courtyard, and there was a lumpy thing framed against the light that had to be, *had* to be, a human head.

Another prisoner. No, but that wasn't possible. The other prisoner in Badar's cell had been executed. His head had been sliced away from his shoulders. He couldn't be here now, not if he was dead. Could he?

Wait. Maybe the other prisoner was a different other prisoner.

Oh yes. Of course. There were plenty of prisoners. There were more than five people in the world, Badar was starting to forget that. He never saw more than four guards at any one time, and, even though their faces kept changing, they always seemed to be exactly the same people. If that made any sense.

'Fmf rfm's sdfshl dn,' the floating head said.

The man had spoken. Badar was surprised by that. The guards always shouted, so he had to listen very, very carefully to make out what the man was saying.

'What?' Badar said. That was his intention, anyway. But he wasn't sure whether his voice was working.

'I said, the sun's coming up.'

There was silence after that. Badar didn't know how long it lasted. He remembered drifting back to sleep at least twice.

The next thing he knew, he was staring at the ceiling again. The lumpy head was floating over him, although he had difficulty telling whether it was attached to a body, or whether it really was the severed head of the old prisoner. He caught sight of eyes in the head, big blue smudges against the pale skin.

'What did they do to you?' the head asked.

'Hurt,' Badar said.

The head bobbed up and down. 'There's no scarring, if that's any consolation. Electric-shock weaponry, I'd guess. There are a few bruises around your hands and feet. Cuffs?'

Badar fell asleep. A while later, he woke up, and remembered what the voice had asked him.

'Yes,' he said.

The head seemed satisfied. It floated away, faster than Badar could follow. There were the sounds of footsteps on the brick floor of the cell.

'I see they've given us a room with a view,' the man said. 'It looks like there's some kind of courtyard out there.'

'Execution,' Badar croaked.

'Execution?' There was a long pause from the other side of the cell. 'Yes. I see. A place of execution. That kind of view. Well, so much for civilisation. How long have you been here?'

The question made no sense to Badar at all, so he ignored it.

There were more footsteps after that. By now, Badar was sure enough of the shape of the cell to judge that the man was walking over to the door. There was a hollow tapping sound. 'Basic lock,' the man muttered. 'Crude, but heavy going. Do you know how many guards there are?'

'Four,' Badar told him.

'Only four?' The man sounded surprised.

'Four. Their faces...'

'Yes?'

'They keep changing.'

'I see.' More tapping. 'Never mind. I'm sure we can cross that bridge when we come to it. For now, let's see what we can do with the lock.'

Do? With the lock? What was that supposed to mean?

'Open?' said Badar.

'Sorry?'

'You can... open? The lock? Door?'

'Oh, I should think so.' There was a patting sound, something Badar couldn't identify. He turned his head, and this time the room didn't lurch quite so much.

The man was standing by the door. Badar could see his silhouette, although parts of his body were still blotted out by the blood cells. There was a lot of green. Green clothes. And the man was running a hand over them, searching the pockets.

Badar looked at the man's other hand. It was hanging limply against his body.

'Hurt?' Badar asked.

The man stopped patting himself. 'I'm sorry?'

'Hurt? You?' Badar tried to remember the words that joined the ideas together. 'They-hurt-you?'

The man cleared his throat. Did he sound... embarrassed? Was that it? 'Oh, don't worry about me. I'm used to this sort of thing.' He turned back to face the door. 'Now. It looks like the guards have cleaned me out. Not even a safety pin to my name. We'll just have to think of something else, then.'

'Arm broken,' Badar told the man.

The man looked down at his right arm. 'Just a snapped ulna,' he said. 'Nothing to worry about. My people are really rather good when it comes to healing.'

'Your skin,' Badar pointed out. 'Not my race.'

The man cleared his throat again. 'It's not all a question of skin tone. I do have a certain... biological advantage... when it comes to torture.'

Badar stared at him. Waiting for him to explain.

'It's not important,' the man said.

Badar kept staring.

'Two hearts,' the other prisoner mumbled.

Badar had nothing to say about that. So he went back to sleep.

#### Noon

When Badar woke up again, his vision had cleared. There were still speckles in the corners of his eyes, little gashes that may have been wounds in his eyeballs, but for the most part he could see the cell around him quite clearly. Unusually, the guards hadn't been in to see him during the morning. Not that he could remember, anyway. Judging by the light from the window, it was midday, maybe early afternoon.

His neck was turned towards the window wall, with his cheek pressed against the dirt. So the first thing he saw, once he'd worked out that he could see, was the other prisoner.

The man wasn't moving. He sat curled up in the corner, his arm drooping across the floor by his side.

'How are you feeling?' the man asked. Quietly.

'Can see,' Badar told him. He experimented with the sentence a little. 'I-can-see, See.'

The man smiled a little. 'Good. You were talking in your sleep, you know. I didn't think it was a good idea to wake you.'

'Talking.' Badar tried to nod, but his head was in the wrong position, and besides, moving his neck was too much like hard work. 'Who. Who-are-you?' 'Friendly,' said the man.

'New prisoner? New?'

'Yes.' He looked around the cell. 'New to this place, anyway. Quite an old hand at being in prison.'

'Escape? You said. Open the lock. Escape.'

The man nodded. 'We'll do it. Don't worry . I could escape for England.' He thought about that for a moment. 'Or Scotland. Or Wales, at a pinch. It's all a question of timing. Don't forget, we have the advantage.'

'Two hearts.'

'Ah. Did I say that?'

Again, Badar failed to nod.

'Sorry,' the man said. 'Well, yes, that is an advantage. Not one that'll help us much right now, though. What I meant was that we have technical expertise on our side. The guards are hired thugs. They don't know anything about locks. Or the probability of breaking locks. And they certainly don't know as much as I know about countersecurity measures.'

'Two hearts,' Badar repeated.

The man didn't seem to know what to say. 'Yes. Well. Maybe you'd better forget I said that. It'll make things easier.'

'Want to know,' Badar said.

'Really?'

'Idea.'

'Erm...'

'It's-an-idea.'

The man frowned. Against the blur of his face, the frown stood out as a sharp black line. 'I'm not sure I understand.'

'Ideas. Matter.' Badar tried to get up, to pull himself off the floor and lean against the wall. He wasn't sure if he succeeded. The room spun, turning into a jumble of grey walls and yellow light. 'This. Body. It hurts. Ideas matter.'

'Ah,' said the other prisoner. 'I see. You've been here a long time, haven't you? Nothing but this cell, the guards and the courtyard. The sun comes up. They hurt you. The sun goes down. That's all you can think about right now.'

'Hurts,' said Badar. Meaning, 'yes'.

'Ideas matter. They can do what they like to your body, but they can't stop you thinking.'

'Hurts,' Badar repeated. Again, meaning 'yes'.

'All right. Yes, I've got two hearts. And I can stop myself breathing for several hours at a time, as long as I don't move about much. And my normal body temperature is thirty-six and a bit degrees. Is that enough for you?'

'Advantage?' said Badar.

The man didn't seem to know how to answer. Badar forced some more words out of his lungs.

'Two hearts. Advantage? Two hearts. Twice as much. Twice as much hurt.'

'You mean twice as vulnerable? You could say that, I suppose. On the other hand, you could say I'm half as vulnerable. Biology's like any other science. It's all relative.'

'Can be in love with two women,' Badar said. 'Two at once.'

The man looked startled. 'Good grief. Do you know, that had never struck me before? I've never even thought about being in love with one woman, let alone two. Well, not much.'

'Advantage?' Badar insisted.

The man nodded vigorously. 'Yes. Yes. Any advantage, no matter how small, is an important advantage. One tiny genetic improvement can put you in control of everything.'

'Two hearts? How?'

'Well... evolutionarily speaking. In the long term.' The man leaned forward, as if he were about to impart the most important piece of knowledge in the world. His snapped arm dragged along the floor when he moved. 'It's all about knowing how to use your advantages properly. Supposing you had a... a super-power. A special skill. A special gift. It doesn't matter how small. Say... say you could become invisible. No, no, that's too big, too obvious. Say... you could turn things pink. At will. Just by thinking about it.'

For a while, Badar didn't speak. There was nothing outside the cell, outside the courtyard. There hadn't been anything outside in some time. And suddenly, the pale man was building whole worlds, putting entire universes together as he spoke.

Suppose you could turn things pink, just by thinking about it.

There was a pain in Badar's chest, where one of the guards had once run several thousand volts through his ribcage, and very nearly stopped his heart. There were red slashes across his vision, where his eyes had been damaged. There was a prickling in his legs, where the batons had been run all the way from his crotch to his ankles.

But supposing you could turn things pink. At will.

The idea was too big to even consider properly.

'Think of the havoc you could cause,' the prisoner went on. 'Colours can have profound effects on the humanoid subconscious. On the humanoid neurosystem. You could cause huge shifts in the psyche of the human race. Or any other visually orientated species, come to think of it. You could change the way your people perceive the universe around them. Affect, even manipulate, the thoughts of everyone else in your society. And they wouldn't be able to resist, because you'd be the only one who could do it. It doesn't sound like much of an ability, does it? But it is. If you knew what you were doing, you could take over the whole world that way.'

The world is pink, thought Badar. Not the cell, not the courtyard, but this world. This new world the prisoner was building. Everything was pink.

Then it occurred to him. The flaw in the logic of this infinitely wonderful pink universe.

'We can't turn things pink,' he said. His voice was slurred, his lips still numb where the batons had been used on his facial muscles, and he ended up screaming. 'We-can't-turn-things-pink!'

The pale man put a finger to his own lips. 'No. But it was just an example. We do have other skills we can use.'

Badar stared at him for a moment or two. Eventually, he remembered what the man had said. 'Technical expertise?' he asked, although the word 'expertise' came out as nothing but a mumble.

'Yes. More than anyone else on this planet, I should imagine. Not that I want to show off.'

'Then you could... take over the world?'

'Good grief, no!' The man practically shouted it, and Badar jumped. Actually jumped. He'd thought nothing could shock him now, not after so many surprise torture sessions with the guards, but somehow the other prisoner had managed to hit exactly the right nerve.

They stared at each other for a while. The man looked uncomfortable again. 'Well, all right,' he said. 'Yes. Yes, I could. But I wouldn't.'

'Whv?'

He didn't seem to have an answer ready. 'Because... it'd be incredibly irresponsible, for a start.'

'Could *I* take over the world?'

The man spent a few moments thinking about that. Maybe he was just working out the logic of the question.

'We'll see,' he said, in the end.

#### Dusk

The guards came into the cell only once that day. They didn't bring food, and they didn't empty out the bucket by the door, but they didn't hurt Badar much, either. They hovered over him, screaming that he was an animal, that he'd broken all the most sacred laws of his people, that he was the son of a whore, and so on and so on. They even kicked him, once or twice. But they didn't use the batons.

The other prisoner was fair game, though. Badar couldn't see him, not with so many of the guards squeezing into what little space there was in the cell, but he could hear the crackling noises. He wondered which parts of the prisoner they were using the batons on. Not the eyes, he hoped.

The man didn't scream, although he made a few grunting sounds. You were supposed to scream, the first time they used the shock batons on you. You were supposed to thrash around and empty your bowels.

When the guards had gone, and the door had been locked behind them, Badar tried to focus on the prisoner again. The man lay sprawled beneath the window, breathing heavily. Badar couldn't quite make out his expression. His chest was rising and falling rapidly, his broken arm stretched out at an awkward angle.

'Breaking me in,' he said. His voice was cracked, but he was trying to hide it. 'They don't want anything from me. They don't want information. They just want me to know who's in charge.'

'Yes,' said Badar.

The man raised his head. 'This is what they did to you?'

'Yes.'

'Then timing is everything. If I stay here too long, I won't be able to concentrate. We have to leave.' He tried to stand, but obviously couldn't manage it. 'Soon,' he added.

'Why are you here?' Badar asked. It was a sentence he'd been saving up all day.

The man let his head sink back down to the floor. 'You mean, why did they lock me up? Oh, the usual reasons. Because I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Because I was nosy. They were involved in certain dealings they shouldn't have been involved in. I wanted to stop them. They found me before I could find them.'

'Police? Religious police?'

'Possibly. I'm afraid I don't know enough about your culture to say for sure. They came out of nowhere. Some kind of short-range teleportation device, I'd guess.'

'Their advantage,' said Badar.

'What?'

'Device. Their device. Their advantage. Technical expertise.'

'Oh, I see what you mean. Well, I wasn't expecting it, it's true. But teleportation isn't that advanced a technology. You should see the TARDIS.'

'TARDIS,' repeated Badar. It was a good new word. It was an idea word. The kind of word you could build worlds out of, pink or otherwise.

'My advantage,' the man said.

'TARDIS,' Badar said, again.

The man paused, as if wondering how much to say. 'T-A-R-D-I-S. It's a spaceship. A power source. A small-scale model of the universe, if you know what corners to look in. But mostly it's a time machine.'

Time machine. Yes. There was an idea. Somehow, though, it didn't seem as feasible as being able to change the colour of the world.

'Turn back time?' Badar asked.

'Not exactly,' said the man.

'Take over the world,' Badar persisted. 'Easy. With a time machine.'

'Hmm. "You can't rewrite history. Not one line."

'Rewrite?'

Just something I once told a friend of mine. It's not true, of course. The lines are easy to change. It's making sure the grammar's consistent that's difficult.' Finally, the man managed to sit upright, putting all his weight on his left arm. Badar got the feeling the prisoner was staring at him again, although his face was still blurred, especially with the sun glaring through the window. 'It just occurred to me. We haven't been introduced.'

'No,' said Badar.

The man held out his one good hand, and somehow managed not to fall flat on his back. 'How do you do? I'm –'

'No,' said Badar.

'I'm sorry?'

'No names. Not here.' Badar raised his arm – the first time he'd moved any of his limbs in a long, long time – and pointed at the window. 'Dead soon. No names.'

The man lowered his hand. And his eyes. 'If we don't have names, it makes life easier for them.' He nodded towards the door. 'They want us to lose our sense of individuality. Our sense of being. It's a standard technique. All part of the process.'

'Doesn't matter. Guards do. Guards do what they want. Dead soon. Makes no difference. No names. No names. Please.'

'All right. But can we still talk?'

Badar tried to smile at him, but the effort made the muscles in his face crackle and tear. 'Where are you from? Not here.'

'Ah. I come from... a lot of places. Via Swanley.'

Badar hadn't heard of it, and said so.

'No. You wouldn't have.' Once again, the prisoner seemed to be considering the possibility of getting to his feet. 'What about you? Why are you here?'

So Badar told him. The man actually looked shocked by the answer.

#### Midnight

There was a tapping sound, and it wasn't getting any quieter. Badar must have been half asleep, because there were candle-wax people standing over him again, and he imagined they were the ones making the sound, rapping their skeleton fingers against the brickwork. He felt urine dribble down his leg, his crotch stinging as what little liquid he had left passed out of his body. It wasn't fear that made him do that. It was just that his flesh felt the urge. He no longer had control over his bladder, or, indeed, of anything below his waist.

The wax men stopped tapping. There was a sigh, and the sigh blew them away like dust.

He moved his neck again, until he was facing the door. There were spots of light somewhere outside the window, lamps lit by the guards in the court-yard, burning pale-yellow patterns on to Badar's eyes. The other prisoner was standing by the door, that much was clear, even if Badar had no way of telling what his face was like, or what he was doing with his one good hand. Badar surmised that, here in the waking world, the man had been the one doing the tapping.

The man sighed again. Then moved forward. Possibly leaning against the door, possibly collapsing against it.

'I can't do it,' he said.

Badar didn't answer him. He was probably talking to himself, anyway.

'I could escape for England,' the man said. 'Or Scotland. Wales, at a pinch.'

A loud banging sound, then. As if he'd punched the door with his fist.

'I can't think of anything,' the man went on. 'I can't get out. What's different? What's different this time?'

'Time machine,' said Badar.

The man stood bolt upright. Suddenly alert. 'What?'

'Time machine. Your advantage. TARDIS.'

'Oh.' Was the man shaking his head, or was Badar imagining things again? 'I'm afraid I didn't bring it with me.'

'Turn back time.'

'No.'

'Why?'

'I said no.'

'Why?'

'You don't know anything,' the man told him. He sounded angry, the first time Badar had heard him like that.

Badar wasn't going to give up, not now. He'd almost built himself a whole new world out of the TARDIS idea, but the man seemed to want to stop him completing it, and he couldn't work out why. 'Turn back time. Your advantage. Don't be captured. Don't let me be captured.'

'Not possible.' Then a pause. 'I was in a prison before. About a year ago. Ha'olam. They put an implant in my head, so they knew every idea I had even before I knew I'd had it. But even then...'

Badar waited for him to finish.

'But even then, at least I had ideas,' the man concluded. 'Not now. I can't concentrate.' There was a longer pause. 'Maybe Ha'olam broke me. Wore out my escape circuits.'

'Can't turn back time? Not even here?'

'No. Not even here. Can I ask you a question?'

'Yes,' said Badar.

'Do you believe me? About having two hearts? About having a time machine?'

The question confused Badar. He didn't see what believing had to do with anything. He was building with ideas, because ideas were the only things that mattered. Everything on the outside hurt. On the outside, there was just the cell, and the courtyard. The inside was bigger. The inside was where the TARDIS idea lived.

'Don't understand,' said Badar.

'No,' said the man. 'Of course you don't.' Then he was moving, a shadow folding itself up in the darkness, sliding into the corner.

'Goodnight,' the man said.

'Goodnight,' said Badar. And he fell asleep again.

### 4

### Four Rooms

## (running around, getting captured, escaping, etc.)

Room 3.06

'What is it?' the girl asked. Which was a reasonable question, all in all.

The video player hadn't been part of the hotel room's fixtures and fittings. Sarah had gone out and bought it from a local TV shop when the interference had started, putting It on her MasterCard and hoping she'd be able to reclaim it as expenses someday. The machine was on freeze-frame, the TV displaying the first of the 'interesting' images she'd found in the recordings.

The first time you saw it, the screen looked dark, except for the bits that were speckled with little white dots of static. Then you saw the shapes. Vague outlines, shadows on the picture, which Sarah's subconscious didn't seem to want her to get a proper grip on.

Faces. Dozens upon dozens of faces, their mouths wide open, screaming out of the TV set. It was like one of those Magic Eye pictures in a way. You stared and stared and stared, until suddenly the full horror of it just popped out at you. Some of the faces were bigger than others, and some were half formed, as though they were growing out of the screen, the freeze-frame catching them before their skins could finish growing over their skulls. Some of the faces grew out of others, blooming from eye sockets like sores.

It was like looking down into hell, and seeing all the lost souls there crushed together in the darkness, howling up at you. Every so often, you got the feeling the white dots on the picture were their teeth, jagged and uneven, pressing against the other side of the screen.

Perhaps they were.

'I taped it two days ago,' Sarah explained. 'In this room. On this television. It was only on the screen for one twenty-fifth of a second. Took me ages to pin it down.'

The girl – Sam, wasn't it? – gawped at the picture for a few moments more, her eyes all big and dopey-looking. Surprisingly, the next thing she said was actually quite intelligent.

'Subliminal messages?' she tried.

'That's what I thought, to start with. But I don't think this was broadcast deliberately. There's been interference on all the sets in the hotel. The guests have been complaining about it for days. Ever since Mr Guest turned up.'

That got Sam's attention. The girl turned to look at her at last. There was definitely something familiar about Sam, as if Sarah had seen her face in some dream or other, but that wasn't too surprising. Sarah's dreams had been moving backward and forward in time for nearly twenty years now. Occupational hazard, probably.

'There are lots of different images on the recording,' Sarah went on. 'There's no pattern to them, though. And most of the images don't make sense anyway. I think the TV sets are picking up transmissions they shouldn't be. Like this one.'

Sarah had offered Sam a seat, but the girl had refused. She was nervous, which was understandable, but she also seemed dead set on proving that she wasn't, which was... unusual. So Sarah sat on the end of the bed, in front of the TV screen, having left the alien binoculars on the comfy chair by the door.

'What do you want me to say?' Sam asked.

Sarah smiled. 'There's more.' She stood, and stepped over to the desk under the window. The desk was grey and plasticky, and thus fitted the decor of the hotel perfectly. 'I had a friend of mine come over from London yesterday. He works in graphic design. I got him to bring one of those... what do you call them? Things that can print a picture straight from a TV set.'

Sarah opened the top drawer of the desk, pulled the manila envelope from under a two-inch-thick wad of COPEX brochures, and slid out the prints. She passed them to Sam without looking at them. Sam took them from her in a way that suggested she was expecting them to bark. 'The top one's a print of the picture you just saw, only with a couple of computer enhancements. You can see the faces more clearly.'

Sam grimaced. 'Yeah. Great.'

'Now look at the next one. There. It's a blow-up of one of the faces. I thought it might help. See? There's another face growing out of its eye socket.'

The girl peered at the picture. Then her eyes popped wide open.

'You can see it, can't you?' said Sarah. 'The little face has got more little faces growing out of it. Not just faces, either. You see that smear across the right-hand side of the face? The one that's covering the right eye? It looks like part of a wing. Like a bat's wing.'

Sam must have got the point, because she started shuffling through the prints at high speed. 'We sat here all afternoon, blowing up parts of the picture and then blowing up the blow-ups,' Sarah went on. 'It never stops. Faces growing out of faces. After a while, they stop looking like... well, like people.

They go all twisted. And there are other things, deeper in the picture. We couldn't figure out what they were.'

'That's stupid,' said Sam. 'You said these pictures were taken from a TV screen. There's only, what, a few hundred lines on a TV  $\stackrel{-}{-}$ 

'Six hundred and twenty-five,' said Sarah. 'I checked.'

'Right. So, after the first couple of blow-ups, it should lose all its – what d'you call it? – its definition. You shouldn't be able to see anything except fuzz.'

'I know. Scary, isn't it?'

Sam stared at her for a moment or two. 'So you're saying -'

'Whatever these transmissions are, they're not just nasty pictures. They're changing the way the sets work. The televisions in this hotel are mutating to suit the pictures. And that's not possible. Is it?'

Sam passed the prints back to Sarah. Sarah put them back into the envelope, and hid it in the drawer under a leaflet advertising something that was guaranteed to burn people's eyes out with the minimum of mess and fuss.

'I don't think I trust you,' Sam said.

Sarah smiled again, and indicated the bed. This time, Sam sat. Cautiously, though.

'Same to you,' said Sarah.

'Who are you?'

'I thought you said you knew who I was.'

'I know your name's Sarah Bland. I know you're supposed to be on my side.'

'Supposed to be?'

'Supposed to be.'

Sarah chewed her lip. 'And how do you know this, exactly?'

'A friend of mine,' said Sam. She paused after that, as if she hadn't intended to say anything else, but then had decided she was overdoing 'enigmatic'. 'He went away. He told me to look after things here. He gave me a list of people I could trust, if I ran into them.'

'Really?' said Sarah. 'Have you got it with you?'

Sam didn't say anything.

'You are supposed to trust me,' Sarah added.

Sam nodded, then reached into the breast pocket of her jacket. The jacket didn't suit her at all, Sarah noted. Neither did the serious-looking blouse, the grey knee-length skirt, the high-heeled shoes, or the blotchy make-up. In fact, the girl looked like she'd be more comfortable lounging around in a T-shirt and a good pair of jeans. Perhaps this was her idea of going undercover. Sarah briefly wondered if she'd looked anything like that, back in the seventies. Or was it the eighties?

Come to think of it, did she look anything like that now?

Sam produced a scrunched-up piece of paper from her pocket, and smoothed it out against her leg before she passed it to Sarah. Sarah squinted at the handwriting, absolutely determined not to let the girl know she was getting long-sighted.

There was, indeed, a list of names at the bottom of the note. Sarah recognised a couple of them, and at least one was someone she knew from the UN. Her own name – or at least the name SARAH BLAND (MS) – was the last on the list, overlaid with a dirty brown ring where someone had rested a coffee cup on the paper. Then she saw how the note had been signed.

'Why aren't I surprised?' she muttered.

Sam held her hand out. Sarah passed the note back to her. 'I've answered one of your questions,' the girl said. 'Now it's your turn. Right?'

'Right.'

'So. Who are you working for?'

Sarah considered this for a moment. Finally, she turned back to the desk, took out a business card, and handed it over.

'International Procurement Services,' Sam read. 'You mean, you're an arms dealer?'

'I mean, I'm trying to make everyone *think* I'm an arms dealer. Sorry, no. An internal security dealer. My mistake.'

'So it's a front? IPS isn't a real company?'

'Actually, it is. They specialise in getting stuff that's almost but not quite illegal to governments who are almost but not quite barking mad. Half the customers at COPEX want torture equipment. Electric-shock batons, that kind of thing. Electric weaponry's been banned here since the late eighties, but COPEX is a great place for them to make connections. I don't really work for IPS, though. And my name's not Bland. It's even more boring than that.'

Sam looked slightly puzzled. 'Explain something to me. Is this thing supposed to be an arms fair, or what?'

'COPEX? It's a security fair. They have to be careful about what they call it. Do you know where East Timor is?'

'Um... yeah.'

'The Indonesians invaded it,' Sarah said. 'They killed off a third of the population. A third of the whole population. It started about the same time I met the Doctor, and it's been going on ever since.' She shrugged. 'There were Indonesians at COPEX today. Nobody makes a fuss, because nobody cares. Hardly anyone knows where East Timor is, even. It's not like Kuwait, there's no oil there. Technically, Britain's not supposed to supply weapons to Indonesia. That means you can't sell them rifles. But you can sell them fighter jets, for "defensive purposes". You see what I mean?'

'What are they defending against?'

'God knows. It's all to do with PR, though. It's all image. The point is, the security business can only get away with this sort of thing by not asking too many questions. That's why I can pretend to work for IPS, and nobody checks my credentials. Not even Guest.'

'So who are you? Are you with the UN?'

'No. But I've got friends there. That's how I got involved.' Sarah looked around the room, and her eyes settled on the binoculars, still lying on the seat by the door. 'You know, I thought you were working for the aliens when I found those things in the hall.'

'That's a point,' said Sam. 'How did you know they were mine? You didn't see me with them or anything.'

'Oh, it was your face. When you saw me holding them. I've been a journalist long enough to know a guilty look when I see one. Anyway, I thought you might be with the aliens, but it didn't add up. You had to be a third party. No, I mean a fourth party. Or maybe a fifth.' Sarah started counting on her fingers. 'The aliens. The company that's trying to buy the hardware rights for the aliens' equipment. The UN. Me. And you. Tell me something. Why do you think the aliens are dealing with private companies, when they're already dealing with the UN?'

Sam shook her head. 'They're not, though. The aliens aren't talking to the UN any more. They arranged a meeting, but Guest didn't show up. Besides, the Doctor had already vanished by then, so he wouldn't have been able to negotiate even if they hadn't backed out.' Sam hesitated again, as if wondering whether she'd blabbed too much. But she kept talking, maybe in an attempt to gloss it over. 'So I got in touch with some of the people on his list. The trail kind of led me here.'

Sarah blew through her lips. 'I think we should find out more about these aliens. Don't you?'

Sam thought about it. 'Those binoculars... they can see through walls.'

'I know. I've been playing with them. I can't figure out the controls, though. Do you know where Guest's staying?'

'Just down the corridor from here, I thought.'

'Three doors away.' Sarah tried her best to smile brightly. 'So why don't we take a look?'

#### Room 3.03

Once Kode got back to the room, the first thing he did was put his receiver back in place. Guest had made him take it out before they'd left the hotel, saying it'd provoke too many questions from the natives. Kode had agreed, but only after going 'huh' a few times. There'd been a great big hole in his

consciousness all day, where the receiver should have been pumping raw data into his head.

The receiver hummed as he slipped it through the hole in his earlobe, the mechanism prompting the cell growth, so the skin sealed up around the plastic. The information started trickling in from Anathema, but slowly, much too slowly.

The hole needed filling. Now. Kode squatted down in front of the TV set at the end of the bed, and started fiddling with the controls. He still had no idea how the machine worked, but, as long as the set kept buzzing, he was happy.

'Again?' said Compassion. Snottily.

'Spark off,' Kode told her.

'Charming.'

'It's all right for you. You've had your receiver in all day. It's me who has to go native.' He looked back over his shoulder as he said it. Compassion was standing on the other side of the room, arms folded across her chest, leaning back against the wall. She was still wearing that stupid jacket she'd bought on her first day here. It was apparently the local version of a combat outfit, covered in splotches of brown and green, ostensibly as a basic form of camouflage, although Kode still hadn't seen any part of this planet that was actually brown and green. Come to think of it, Compassion had gone overboard on the whole military aesthetic ever since she'd arrived. She'd even scraped her hair back over her head, and tied all the strands together at the back of her neck, in a desperate attempt to make herself look stern and severe.

It didn't work. She had too many freckles. Besides, her face wasn't the right shape. Not really fat, more like... what did they call those rodents around here? The ones with the big cheeks?

Compassion sniffed at him. 'It's not my fault they don't let women into the exhibition.'

'Then how come Bland got to go there?'

'They do admit women,' said Guest.

Guest was still standing by the door, his hands folded neatly behind his back. But then, everything about Guest was neat. He didn't so much move as resculpt himself into different positions. Which, combined with his height, his muscles and the way he stared at you as if you were the only thing in the world when he talked to you, freaked Kode out like nothing else in creation.

'Compassion would be... too noticeable,' Guest went on. 'In the circumstances.'

'There, you see?' said Compassion.

'Oh yeah?' said Kode. 'And what about those two thugs we've got working for us? Aren't they "noticeable"?'

'Standard security,' Guest told him.

'Where've they got to, anyway?' Compassion asked.

Guest stared at her, which gave Kode a moment's satisfaction. Deal with that, snotty. Hah. 'The Cold,' said Guest. 'We had to stage a demonstration for our business contacts. I'll retrieve them soon.'

Compassion looked down at her feet. Kode smirked for a couple of seconds, then turned his attention back to the TV. As ever, the transmissions running through the receiver in his ear were mixing with the local TV signals, causing brilliant flashes of interference across the screen. Better. Much better. The transmissions on this planet were still new to him, and the local signals still far too slow, but the interference was amazing. The local programme was some kind of emotional drama, all sex, betrayal and secrets. The data from Anathema modified the images, adding fluorescent streaks of despair and paranoia to the signals.

'There's more than one medianet here,' Kode mumbled, more to himself than anyone. 'How can you have more than one medium? There isn't even anybody regulating it all.'

'There used to be,' said Compassion. 'It was in the history transmissions. There was some kind of Marshal whose job was to clean up the television networks. McLuhan, I think his name was.'

But Kode wasn't listening. He was already tuning in to the images.

Deceit. (Flash.) Hope. (Flash.) Hopelessness. (Flash.) Broken marriages. (Flash.) Mouths opening to scream, but never making a sound. (Flash.) Trying to explode, trying to escape, but trapped under the skin of the darkness. (Flash.) Hope. (Flash.) Hopelessness. (Flash.) Hope...

'Kode,' said Guest.

Hope and hopelessness. The target had to be reached. Trapped under the skin for three billion years. Flash, flash, flash.

'Kode,' Guest snapped.

There was another flash. The TV set blinked off. Kode looked up, and saw that Compassion was standing over him, with her finger on the switch.

'Every time you do this, all the sets in the building go haywire,' Compassion said, looking down her nose at him.

Kode scowled at her. 'There's going to be interference whatever we do. We might as well make it interesting.'

'Be quiet, both of you,' barked Guest.

They both turned. Kode hadn't heard Guest snap like that in all the time they'd been here. There was something funny about the way he was standing as well. He looked tense, maybe alert, like he was listening for something.

Then Kode listened, too. And realised.

There was a sound inside his head, a low buzzing, shaking the neural connections at the base of his skull. Just for a moment, he caught sight of a new picture, scrawled in interference from the receiver. Two women, in a hotel room, almost identical to this one. One of the women was staring at a wall through some kind of viewing device.

Guest was being watched. Someone was using surveillance equipment, high-level surveillance equipment, to monitor the room. The receiver had picked up the telltale signals, and Kode had almost missed it.

'I'm going down to the other room,' said Guest, significantly. 'Does anybody want to join me?'

'I might as well come,' said Compassion, faking a yawn and stretching her arms. 'I *am* supposed to be the one looking after security.'

Guest nodded. Then, together, they left the room, shutting the door behind them. Kode thought he saw Guest scoop something up from a chair as he left, but he wasn't sure what it had been.

He didn't really want to know what was going to happen next. So he turned the TV back on, and tried to concentrate on the interference patterns.

#### Room 4.13

Llewis read the brochure again. There was sweat under his arms. There was always sweat under his arms, but this time it felt just about ready to gush out of his shirt and drown the whole room.

None of this was possible. Not even with the best technology in the business at your fingertips. And even if you believed what the people in the RUC had told him, about how C19 had 'black' technology they weren't ready to tell the rest of the world about, it still wouldn't have explained all this.

Back at COPEX, the man called Guest had shown him a promo video, explaining the full capabilities of the stuff his company was offering. It had started off pretty much the way Llewis had expected: lots of state-of-the-art espionage and counterespionage equipment, lots of computerised gizmos that could tap into data transmissions while whistling 'Whiskey in the Jar', the usual kind of thing. Then the video had described the company's antipersonnel material.

Which was when things had started to go off the rails.

According to Guest, their primary product was called Cold, and it came in little cans. Just like Mace. The video had demonstrated the substance with a scenario in which a man dressed in riot gear (obviously an actor) had confronted a man dressed as a comic-book terrorist (obviously another actor). The terrorist had rushed the soldier, the soldier had responded by taking out a canister of Cold, and spraying it over the terrorist's entire body.

And the terrorist had disappeared. That was what Llewis had seen, and the brochures backed it up, with a series of glossy, full-colour stills from the video.

Oh, the terrorist hadn't just vanished in the blink of an eye. That would have looked silly and Llewis would have thought it was some kind of special effect. No, the man had been eaten away. He'd vanished, piece by piece, a thick black skin forming over his body, taking whole chunks out of his flesh as it spread. There was no blood, no sign of injury. Just clean, effective removal. Finally, the skin had disappeared as well, eating itself into oblivion.

At one point, Llewis had thought he'd spotted shapes dancing across that skin. He'd been sure he'd seen eyes. Mouths. Teeth, chewing away the fat from the terrorist's bones. For an instant, the actor on the video had been a silhouette, a shadowy man-shaped corner full of skulking, snapping things.

Guest's voice-over had explained the technical details of all this, although Llewis hadn't understood the lingo. Most of it was repeated in the brochure, but it still didn't make any sense. The brochure didn't even mention a company name, just the name of the MD. The target, Guest had explained, had been taken out of existence, chewed up by the Cold and put into... what was the word? 'Stasis'? The target existed outside of normal circumstances, babble babble babble, could be retrieved at the user's discretion, babble babble babble, the implications for internal security were babble babble babble...

But that hadn't been the worst thing.

He remembered sweating in the side office at the conference centre. He remembered the Bland woman being cynical. He remembered Guest giving a close-up demonstration, reaching for the vial that hung around his neck, flipping it open and -

Llewis put the brochure down on the bed. Stood up. Sat down again. Reached for the telephone. Decided not to bother.

He could ring the office. There'd probably be someone there even on a Sunday, even if it was just Peter bloody Morgan, and he'd want to know about...

About what? What was it? What was this thing that just ate people away? A kind of riot foam? What?

'Implications for the internal security market', Guest had said. Good Christ! Llewis had seen two security guards vanish, before his eyes, chewed up by what looked like spray paint. How many people at COPEX would give their right arms for that kind of thing? The police would be gagging for it, for a start. The Home Office wouldn't give them shock batons, even though everybody knew how much the Chief Constables wanted them. Political liability, the Home Office said. But the Cold? Who'd mind the police carrying around something that harmless-looking? How many of their suspects could conveniently 'disappear' in police custody, never to be seen again?

And the Chinese would love it. If they'd had the Cold, all that flak about

Tiananmen Square would never have happened, and the British would still be able to sell arms to them over the counter, without having to get the DTI's help to go by the back door. With Cold, they could make their dissidents vanish completely. No bodies. No proof.

God almighty. And Guest was staying in this hotel as well. Up on the third floor, the boy Kode had said. Somewhere in this building, there was more of the stuff. More of the Cold, sticky and wet and hungry.

So if Guest was in the building...

Llewis stood up. Sat down. Stood up again. Started pacing up and down by the side of the bed. That was a thought. He could go and see Guest, make the man explain it to him, properly this time. He'd ask politely, make sure he wasn't given another demonstration. The vial around the man's neck would be empty anyway, so it wasn't as if he had anything to be worried about. Was the stuff radioactive, though? Did it leave traces...?

No, this was stupid. Guest was a businessman. Llewis had to respect that. He had to do what Peter bloody Morgan would have done. Face the challenge. Get the details. Do the deal.

Even if he was crapping himself.

Llewis was out in the corridor before he could change his mind, leaving the door open behind him, not daring to turn round in case he lost his bottle. He headed for the lift, sweated himself dry while he was waiting, pressed the button for the third floor when it finally showed up.

The security guards had looked surprised when the Cold had eaten them. Llewis kept remembering looks of agony on their faces, but he was sure, absolutely sure, he was imagining that bit. They'd been surprised, not scared. Not hurt. Peter bloody Morgan wouldn't have been scared, would he? Big, smug, slimy-faced idiot.

The doors slid open. Llewis found himself facing the third-floor corridor. It took him a few seconds to focus on the people in the passage, the red-haired woman in the combat jacket, even the big black man in the suit.

Guest. Guest was standing out in the corridor, facing one of the doors. The redhead was standing by his side, looking up at him expectantly, waiting for instructions. They hadn't noticed Llewis, didn't even seem to have noticed the sound of the lift doors opening. Llewis realised he'd stopped breathing, but he didn't want to risk starting again, in case anyone heard it. Guest and his companion looked like they were miles away, like they were listening to something other than the background noise of the hotel.

Guest nodded to the woman. The woman raised her hand, reached for the vial around her neck...

Oh no. Not again.

'Won't they want us to pay for the damage?' the woman asked.

'Not important,' said Guest.

The woman popped the plastic stopper off the end of the vial. She made some kind of movement with her hand, like a policeman directing traffic. Llewis didn't quite follow it, but she must have thrown the contents of the vial at the door somehow. She must have, because all of a sudden there was a skin of black fluid over the surface, the tiny mouths chewing away the wood and the plastic.

Seconds later, nothing was left of the door. There was a flurry of movement, after that: a shape standing on the other side of the threshold, a girl, someone Llewis hadn't seen before. The girl froze in the doorway, realising that Guest and the redhead were in her way, that there was no chance of getting past. Another voice shouted something, and Llewis was sure it was Ms Bland.

Guest raised his arm, the one Llewis hadn't been able to see from the lift. There was a weapon in his hand, a grey plastic handle with a glint of silver at the snout.

Stun gun. Electrical discharge weapon. Llewis had spent enough time wandering around COPEX to know the basics.

'Ik,' he said.

It just slipped out, really. He hadn't breathed for what felt like hours, and the air was forcing its way out of his lungs, bit by bit. He hoped Guest wouldn't hear it, that the man would still be listening to whatever it was he'd been listening to.

But Guest did hear it. He turned his head, smoothly and calmly, until his eyes were covering the lift doors. The woman turned as well. So did the girl. 'Ik.' Llewis repeated.

And suddenly the girl was moving again, pushing her way past the redhead, shouldering the woman towards Guest. The girl sprinted away up the passage, and vanished around the nearest corner. The woman with the Cold looked startled, confused, until Guest handed her the gun. Then she started running after the girl, one hand still curled around the vial at her neck.

The next thing Llewis knew, the lift doors were sliding shut in his face, the mechanism obviously responding to a call on another floor. The last thing he saw, before the lift cut off his view of the passage, was Guest's face. Turning back to face him. Staring.

#### Room 1.16

They'd hired two rooms when they'd arrived from Anathema. They'd expected to need only one, but they'd soon worked out that there was no way they could share their living space with the transit threshold. The machinery kept picking up random signals from the local information networks, and the interference

was more than even Kode could stand. As it was, two rooms hardly seemed sufficient. Kode and Compassion were sleeping in the same bed, which made at least one of them deeply unhappy.

Guest was quite content to sleep on the floor, or even in a chair. Ready. Alert. In case they were attacked.

They'd be attacked soon, surely. Somebody would notice they were here, in this particular part of Earth, at this particular time. The transaction with the locals had to get the attention of the highest authorities. It had to.

Guest had taken the lift down to the room on the first floor, the room where they kept the equipment for generating the threshold. He didn't know where the man Llewis had gone, after he'd witnessed the assault on Room 3.06. He didn't know what effect the incident might have on their plans, either. Nor did he know why Bland had been spying on them. He'd left Kode to guard her, but he doubted the boy would be able to get any useful data out of the woman.

Perhaps this was it. The attack. Perhaps he should ask the local TV transmissions for advice. Whatever happened, though, they had to be ready. That was the important thing. Remember to stay alert, Guest told himself. And above all else, remember the co-ordinates.

Relative 101 by 4E.

Soon, the words would actually mean something.

The room on the first floor was much the same as the room on the third, although Kode and Compassion had shifted all the furnishings into one corner. The equipment had been set up in the middle of the room, the actual threshold indicated by a single line, drawn in chalk across the grey carpet. The generators had been arranged around the line, six mechanisms in a loose ring. Guest knelt down by the chalk, fingering the vial around his neck. Not much of the Cold left there, but enough for the retrieval. He unhooked the vial, and ran the plastic lip along the line, smudging the carpet with black.

The generators started to hum before he'd even finished standing. Guest had been able to hear the interference ever since he'd walked into the room, but now it was almost painful, the hardware picking up a thousand different local transmissions and trying to pump all of them through his receiver at once. The threshold became a doorway, the line stretching upward, turning into a solid rectangle of static. At least, that was how Guest saw it. The interference was already starting to make him hallucinate, though, so it could all have been a delusion.

'There are sound economic reasons for going ahead with this policy at this precise time,' Guest recited, moving his lips in time to the pulsing of the receiver. 'This is what we'll all be wearing in the high street next year. Things just keep getting smaller, had you noticed? The Prince of Wales has denied

everything. If you want, I could write it down. Have you ever wondered what happens to us when we die?'

And now there were shapes forming in the static, two great lumbering shapes, their dark skins shining in the television glare. The haze spat out the security guards, regurgitated their suits, vomited out their sunglasses. The guards were made whole again, piece by piece.

Coming in from the Cold.

### Travels with Fitz (II)

The Cold, no given time

He was...

... somewhere.

Well, that was helpful.

Fitz tried to remember where he'd been, on the grounds that it was as good a place to start as any. He had a sneaking suspicion he'd done this before, and gone over the memory so many times that his subconscious was inventing new bits just out of boredom. He didn't have anything better to do, though, so he decided to go through it all one more time. His memory was evidently in as many pieces as his body, but he found himself thinking of that book again, the Theoretical Monsters one that UNISYC had supplied him with in Geneva. He remembered lying on the bed in his room, ticking the boxes, CREDIBLE or NONCREDIBLE. Telling himself that the ones who looked like men in suits had to be real, and vice versa.

The Cybermen were obviously real. The Xxxxxxxxxlanthi were obviously made up. The Gel Guards? Like something somebody had invented just to take the piss, and therefore probably genuine. But his favourite aliens in the book, by a long way, had been the Kalekani.

Aggressive military species, the book had claimed, hailing from an oxygenrich pastoral world in the galaxy next door to Earth's. The Kalekani were apparently unique, in that they combined a warlike temperament with a love of idyllic natural beauty. According to the profile, they invaded worlds by terraforming them, eradicating entire cultures and turning whole planets into stretches of quiet countryside. But, instead of altering the victim-world with the usual hi-tech machinery, the Kalekani had developed a special terraforming virus, designed to take over the minds of the planet's natives. The locals would devastate their own world while they were under the influence of the virus, tearing up the biosphere until every inch of land was covered in slopes and flats of pure unsullied green. The virus had a thousand names, one for each world it had destroyed, but on Earth it was generally known as 'golf'.

A great big cross had gone into the NONCREDIBLE box next to that one.

The Doctor had developed his own system for remembering alien species, of course. He'd once demonstrated it to Fitz in the TARDIS console room, and it had involved his making wiggly alien shapes with the fingers of one

hand, then turning the hand upside down to make the same shapes in reverse. Presumably representing an entirely different species.

'Bad Mandrels, mad Bandrils,' the Doctor had explained. 'That's how I remember them, anyway.'

'You've got to have a system,' Sam had murmured.

No. Don't think about the Doctor, Fitz told himself. You'll just get grumpy. Concentrate on what happened to you in Geneva. On how you got here. Wherever here is.

He remembered the UNISYC building. Fact. He remembered opening the door of his room, to annoy the guard outside. Fact. He remembered the men who'd been out in the corridor, the weapons they'd been carrying, the hole in space they'd used to get into the security complex. Fact, fact, fact.

He remembered them spraying him with something. One of them had been holding a spray can, like an aerosol, only... more mean-looking. If a can could be mean-looking; that may have been one of the bits his subconscious was making up. But he definitely remembered looking down, seeing his body being covered with the stuff, all black and wet and sticky.

Then the stuff had winked at him.

Or had he made that up? The idea that the black stuff was growing eyes, just so it could see him, and growing mouths, just so it could bite him. He didn't remember any pain, but he was sure the mouths had started to chew away the skin, opening up holes in his flesh, letting him see the nerves underneath. Then the nerves had vanished. Then the bone.

He didn't remember seeing any more. Probably, he told himself, because the men sprayed some more of the stuff in your face after that, and it ate away your eyeballs.

Oh yeah. That'd be it.

So where was he now? And come to think of it, what was left of him?

Every now and then he felt other shapes in the blackness with him, other bodies, making ripples in the dark as they swam, struggled, and tumbled past. Other people who'd been eaten by the black stuff, he guessed. He tried talking to them, but the darkness poured into him every time he opened his mouth, and started biting into his tongue with its tiny little teeth. Besides, Fitz wasn't entirely sure that he had any lungs left. Or vocal cords.

Oddly enough, though, there was a brief period when he could hear another voice in the emptiness. He felt something pass close to him, a shape he was pretty certain qualified as human, although he wasn't sure which of his senses was telling him that. The voice was whispering, but not to Fitz. To itself, maybe.

'There's a word they've got in Haiti,' the whisperer said, as the body floated by. 'It's in your English dictionaries, but the people who write the dictionaries never understand a thing...'

Fitz had no idea what that was all about. He decided it probably wasn't important. This was obviously one of those extradimensional realms where nothing made any sense, so he didn't see why he should waste time worrying about it. Sooner or later, someone would come to get him out, and the odds were that it'd be the Doctor. Until then, he had nothing to do except think things through. Again.

Eventually, someone did come to get him out. But only after a very, very long time.

5

## Unfortunate Episodes (Sam finally gets into television)

Scene 1. The Hotel Room

[We assume it's a hotel room, although we can't make out much of the decor. Most of the room is in darkness, so we can't even see the walls. The impression we get is of a kind of void, with a small well-lit area at its centre; there's a swivel chair in the middle of the floor, and various pieces of incomprehensible equipment arranged around it, but, if we didn't already know we were in the hotel, there'd be no way of telling. The whole thing looks more like a stage set than a real place. It's all terribly expressionistic.

[SAM sits in the chair, her arms tied behind her back. Her head is bowed, suggesting that she's unconscious, or semiconscious at best. Another figure stands in the gloom at the edge of the visible area, the darkness obscuring his/her face.

[As we watch, SAM stirs. She seems to be coming to her senses.]

SAM [murmuring, probably delirious]: Don't you get it? It's tomorrow. I'm in the hotel, and tomorrow's the day it –

[Suddenly, she opens her eyes, and sits bolt upright in the chair. She scowls when she realises her hands are tied.

[Seeing her in close-up, we notice a small piece of technology pressed against her neck, stuck to the skin with ordinary masking tape. To our eyes, it's clearly one of the receivers used by GUEST and his people.]

SAM: Where am I?

[There's no answer, although SAM has presumably noticed the figure lurking in the shadows.]

SAM: I said, where am I?

COMPASSION: You're safe.

SAM: Oh yeah? What kind of 'safe' is that, then?

COMPASSION: Our kind of safe. Obviously.

SAM [looking around]: How did I get here?

[There's a pause. Then COMPASSION – as played by NICOLE KIDMAN (but with an English accent) – steps out of the shadows.

[Note that we're seeing COMPASSION as SAM sees her, so the woman's usual slightly superior attitude is going to be exaggerated in this scene.]

COMPASSION: You don't remember? We didn't think the weapons caused brain damage.

SAM: I was... running.

Scene 2. The Hotel Stairwell

[Flashback sequence, so black and white. We see SAM burst through the doors into the stairwell, and hurl herself down the stairs. A second figure hurries through the doors behind her.

[The sequence lasts only a second, before we cut back to...]

Scene 3. The Hotel Room

SAM: The stairwell. You were following me -

COMPASSION: Obviously.

Scene 4. The Hotel Stairwell

[Flashback, black and white. Fast-paced sequence, so lots of rapid cuts. SAM hurtles down the stairs, two at a time, finally reaching the stairwell on the next level down. She turns, to look up at her pursuer.

[COMPASSION holds GUEST's gun. As soon as we see her, she opens fire. Cut back to SAM as a metallic dart flies from the end of the gun, trailing a length of metal wire behind it.

[The dart plants itself in SAM's chest. She shrieks. There's the crackling of electricity.

[The moment she hits the ground, we cut back to the present.]

Scene 5. The Hotel Room

SAM: Ow

COMPASSION: Just a stun gun. From COPEX. We thought we'd use contemporary technology for once. They told us the guns go up to 150,000 volts, but we thought that'd be pushing it.

SAM: 'Contemporary'?

COMPASSION [sighs]: What I mean is, we thought we'd try out the local weapons. They do the job pretty well.

SAM [irked]: I know what 'contemporary' means. You're human, aren't you?

COMPASSION: Obviously I'm human. Why?

SAM: You don't look human. Guest doesn't, either. You look like all the wrinkles have been ironed out. Is that natural? Or is it just a PR thing?

[COMPASSION absent-mindedly starts stroking her own face.]

COMPASSION: It's the way it goes. The last Compassion looked more human than I did.

SAM: The *last* Compassion?

[COMPASSION stops stroking her face. Perhaps realising she's said too much, she doesn't answer the question.]

SAM: Come on. You've got me tied up. You can tell me everything now. Who are you? I mean, who are you really?

[COMPASSION frowns, then touches the receiver in her ear.]

SAM: What are you doing?

COMPASSION: Shh. I'm trying to figure out whether I'm supposed to be talking to you or not.

SAM: You're getting instructions? Through that thing in your ear? [SAM suddenly realises what's on her neck.] Wait a minute. I've got one of those things, too. Are you trying to...?

COMPASSION [irritated]: I'm not getting instructions. Don't be stupid.

SAM: Then what are you doing?

COMPASSION: Listening. To the transmissions. [Shakes her head.] Your planet's hopeless, you know that? The transmissions are so slow around here.

SAM: Hold on, hold on. What transmissions?

COMPASSION: The local transmissions. From your medianets.

SAM: You mean... television?

COMPASSION: Whatever you want to call it. I'm picking up a lot of radio waves, as well.

SAM: I don't get it. What are you listening to our transmissions for? What good's that going to do you?

COMPASSION [as if it were a stupid question]: So I can decide what to do. I don't know how I'm supposed to deal with you, all right? And I'm the one who's meant to be looking after security around here.

[SAM thinks about this.]

SAM: OK. Let me make sure I've got this right. You've got those... receiver things... in your ears all the time?

COMPASSION: Most of the time.

SAM: So you're always picking up signals. From anything that's transmitting anywhere near you. And those signals go straight into your head, right?

COMPASSION: Through the brainstem. Right.

SAM: And you do whatever the signals tell you? You just pick up anybody's TV or radio programmes, and do anything they say?

COMPASSION: The signals don't give us instructions. I told you. We just use them to make decisions.

SAM: Got it. So it's like using tarot cards. Or flipping a coin. You're just using random data to make your decisions for you. Except that the random data

comes from anywhere. Local radio, satellite TV, anywhere.

COMPASSION: Is there a problem with that?

SAM: Don't you ever think for yourselves?

COMPASSION: Does anybody?

[Something suddenly seems to strike SAM.]

SAM: Oh God. I've just realised. This place. It's a hotel room, isn't it?

COMPASSION: So?

SAM: But it looks like... oh, God. That's it.

COMPASSION: That's what?

SAM: Everything's wrong. The way this place looks. The way you're talking. It's not real. It doesn't feel real. It feels like it's been staged. Can't you feel it?

[COMPASSION just shrugs.]

SAM: It's the receiver. [She tries to nod at her own neck, and, not surprisingly fails.] This is what the receiver does to you, isn't it? It's not real. It's just like television. The way I'm seeing everything... the way I'm hearing everything... like it's been scripted...

COMPASSION: Could be the receiver. I don't know. Like I said, your transmissions are a lot slower than ours.

SAM [panicking]: Oh God. Oh God. It's not real. Everything's there, but the way it looks, it's –

[Another thought seems to strike her, and she stops babbling. When she speaks again, her voice is much quieter, much more calm.]

SAM: I've felt like this before.

Scene 6. The Attic of Sam's House

[Flashback, black and white. SAM, aged sixteen, sits curled up against the sloping attic wall. Three of SAM's FRIENDS – all girls, all about the same

age – sit around her. They're pretending to engage in casual discussion, but they're actually keeping a close eye on her.]

FRIEND 1: Mark Lessing in the fifth year says it's not as good as ecstasy. He says he's been taking it since he was twelve.

FRIEND 2: Mark Lessing's a lying turd. He'd say anything if he thought it'd make him sound hard.

FRIEND 1: He's smoked crack, he said. He said it wasn't as good as coke.

FRIEND 3: You mean, coke coke? Or just Coke?

FRIEND 2: How's it going, Sam?

[SAM, in the middle of all this, looks confused more than anything else. She's blinking wildly, paying close attention to the little details around her.]

SAM [panicking]: Oh God. Oh God. It's not real. Everything's there, but it's not real, it's –

FRIEND 1: She's not going to throw herself out of the window, is she?

FRIEND 2: Shut up, Ruth.

SAM: It's like being on television.

FRIEND 1: What did she say?

FRIEND 3: Are you seeing things? Like faces and stuff?

SAM: No, it's... it doesn't work like that. I'm not seeing things that aren't there, it's just... different. Everything's different. Everything's like television.

[We briefly see the scene from SAM's point of view. The camera angles are distorted, and the picture lurches from side to side. In her eyes, SAM's FRIENDS all seem to be wearing masks, and some kind of armour, but we cut away before we can make out any details.]

FRIEND 1: If she jumps out of the window, I'm going.

Scene 7. The Hotel Room

SAM: Everything's like television. Oh God. Take it off me. Take this thing off me. Now.

COMPASSION: Sorry. Can't do that.

SAM: Why are you doing this to me?

COMPASSION: We need to know more about you. That's all.

SAM: You're torturing me? You think I'll tell you stuff if you put me through this?

COMPASSION: No. We just want you to talk to us.

SAM [desperate]: Who are you?

COMPASSION: We're the Remote. It doesn't matter.

SAM: Why are you here? On Earth? In this time zone? You're time travellers, aren't you?You said 'contemporary'. That means you're from a different time. I'm right, aren't I?

COMPASSION [testily]: This isn't getting us anywhere...

SAM: Why are you here? Why are you trying to sell torture equipment? What's in it for you?

COMPASSION [again, testily]: We're not selling torture equipment. We're just selling equipment. If people want to use it for torture, that's their problem.

SAM: You're sick. I've seen your promo video. Some of that stuff you're selling –

COMPASSION: You can torture people by sticking matchsticks under their fingernails. Trust me, I know these things. You wouldn't have a problem if I tried selling you matches, would you?

Scene 8. Behind the Bike Sheds

[Flashback, black and white. SAM's point of view. Through her eyes, we see MARK LESSING, from the fifth year. As this is SAM's perspective, his face is

horribly twisted. He's smiling, but it's a gargoyle kind of smile.]

SAM: You're sick.

MARK: Who, me?

SAM: That stuff can kill people, you know that?

MARK: No it can't. Not unless you're stupid. Anyway, I only sell it. It's not my

fault if people are too stupid to use it properly.

SAM: You can't believe that.

MARK: It's 'cos of your parents, I bet.

SAM: What about my parents?

Scene 9. The Hotel Room

SAM: You can't believe that.

COMPASSION: Why? What's the difference between a matchstick and a shock

baton? I mean, apart from the fact that batons don't leave marks.

SAM: You're still sick.

COMPASSION: We want to know what you think. That's why we stuck the receiver to your neck. We want to be able to communicate with you properly. So give me an answer, all right? What's the difference?

SAM: Between a matchstick and a shock baton? You can't be serious.

COMPASSION: I'm serious. I want to know.

SAM: Why?

COMPASSION: Because we want to know if the transmissions are as important

to you as they are to us.

SAM: What's that supposed to mean?

Scene 10. The Attic of Sam's House

[Flashback, black and white. As before. SAM is staring into space, while the others are trying not to appear concerned.]

FRIEND 1: No, really. It happened. In America.

FRIEND 3: He ate them?

FRIEND 1: Yeah. Killed 'em all, and ate their bodies. All five of 'em.

SAM: Why?

[There's an embarrassed pause. It's evidently the first thing SAM has said in some time.]

FRIEND 1: Well... 'cos he was a psycho.

FRIEND 3: That's horrible.

SAM: Why?

FRIEND 1 [under her breath]: She's losing it...

FRIEND 3: It's just horrible. Just the idea. Being eaten.

SAM: Why?

FRIEND 2: What d'you mean?

SAM: Why's it horrible? They're already dead. Why does it make a difference what happens to the bodies? Why is it any worse if the man ate them?

FRIEND 1: Jesus. She's gone.

FRIEND 2: You're supposed to ask funny questions, aren't you? When you're... y'know. Out of it.

SAM: Why? Why's it horrible?

FRIEND 3: I don't know. It just... is. That's all. It's the idea.

SAM: The idea?

Scene 11. The Hotel Room

SAM [staring into space]: The idea?

COMPASSION: What?

SAM [snaps out of it]: Nothing. Just a flashback.

COMPASSION [impatient]: The point is this. I don't see any problem with what we're doing. I don't see any reason why we shouldn't sell the hardware to whoever we want.

SAM: You're selling torture equipment, for God's sake!

COMPASSION: You still haven't told me what's wrong with that. Why it's worse than selling matches. Or motor engines. Motor engines kill thousands of people around here. More than shock batons do. So what's so bad about what we're doing?

SAM: Because it's horrible!

COMPASSION: What?

[SAM realises what she's said. She doesn't reply.]

COMPASSION: So. You don't like what we're doing, because you don't like the idea. You don't like the image. You think it's 'horrible', is that it? It's got nothing to do with how much damage our hardware does, it's all to do with how it looks.

SAM [murmurs]: It's got nothing to do with how it looks. You're all mad.

COMPASSION: I think I know what the problem is here. You're still trying to fit everything into a kind of ... a kind of system. 'Morality', is that the word? You're trying to fit everything into a kind of morality. And you can't. There's too many contradictions. That's why my people are stronger than yours. We don't try to make things make sense. We don't need morality. We just listen to what the transmissions tell us.

SAM: You're zombies. That's all you are. TV zombies.

COMPASSION: So... you don't listen to your transmissions?

SAM: No.

COMPASSION: Then what are they there for?

Scene 12. Behind the Bike Sheds

[Black and white. SAM'S point of view. SAM is still in conversation with MARK LESSING.]

MARK: It's 'cos your parents are total do-gooders. They won't even let their kid drink Coke.

SAM: That's not true!

MARK: Yes, it is. They told you to say no to drugs, didn't they? And you went and listened to them.

SAM: I made up my own mind!

MARK: No one makes up their own mind. You're just picking up your parents' signals, that's all.

[A shocked pause from SAM.]

SAM: What are you talking about, Mark?

MARK: It's gibberish. All the signals are gibberish. You're just trying to turn them into principles.

SAM: Gibberish? [Pause.] That's what the Doctor said about -

MARK: You don't know the Doctor. You haven't even met him yet.

SAM [thrown]: No, I... look, I mean...

MARK: Face it, Sam. This is just like television.

SAM: What?

MARK: It's a flashback. You're twenty-two. Not fifteen. Remember?

Scene 13. The Hotel Room

COMPASSION: You listen to your transmissions, just like we do. Only we're more direct about it. We use the receivers. You let your transmissions tell you what's good and what's bad. They tell you matches are right and shock batons are wrong, and you believe them.

SAM: At least we can think for ourselves.

COMPASSION: Nobody thinks for themselves. We're more honest about it than you are, that's all.

SAM: We've got principles...

COMPASSION: We don't need principles. We've got the media. And we've got the Cold.

[SAM suddenly realises something. She looks around the room.]

SAM: Wait a minute. This makes sense.

COMPASSION: What?

SAM: This. All of it. The flashbacks I've been getting. There's a kind of story, it's like... I'm having the flashbacks in order. It's like the hallucinations are trying to tell me something.

Scene 14. The Attic of Sam's House

[SAM is staring into the distance. Her friends are leaning over her, looking more concerned than ever.]

FRIEND 2: Sam? You there?

SAM: They're coming.

FRIEND 3: Who're coming?

[From somewhere outside the attic, there's a crashing, splintering sound. The girls all jump. Except for SAM.]

FRIEND 1: What was that?

FRIEND 2: S'probably just her dad. Don't panic.

SAM [panicking anyway]: The Remote.

FRIEND 2: What?

SAM: The Remote. It's the future. This is the future, and they're breaking in. Don't you get it? It's tomorrow. I'm in the hotel, and tomorrow's the day it happens.

FRIEND 1: She's tripping her nuts off.

FRIEND 3: 'Nuts'?

Scene 15. The Hotel Room

COMPASSION: So?

SAM: So. I should be just picking up random signals, shouldn't I? I should have a head full of Sky TV and Radio One by now. If I was like you, none of this'd make sense. But I'm not. Your receiver isn't working on me. Not properly.

[COMPASSION moves in closer, and inspects the receiver at her neck.]

COMPASSION: Mmm. You're resisting it. Your subconscious must be trying to make sense out of the signals you're picking up.

**GUEST: Compassion?** 

[COMPASSION turns. Four figures have entered the room. At the fore stands GUEST, as played by WESLEY SNIPES (again, with an English accent). Behind him is SARAH, flanked by the two SECURITY GUARDS.]

GUEST: Well? Is she the attack?

SAM: Attack?

COMPASSION: I don't know. The receiver's not working properly. She says she's got too many principles. Me, I think she's just covering something up. [Indicating SARAH.] How about her?

SAM [hurriedly]: She doesn't have anything to do with this.

SARAH [quietly]: Sam -

SAM: She found my binoculars. She thought I was a spy. For another company. She tried to –

SARAH: Sam... it's all right. They know. They found my credentials.

SAM: Your credentials?

SARAH: My real credentials.

SAM: Oh.

GUEST: All right. [He nods towards COMPASSION.]

[SAM's point of view. COMPASSION reaches out, her hand growing larger and larger, until it fills SAM's vision.]

SAM: What are you -

[There's a painful tearing sound as COMPASSION rips the receiver away from SAM's neck. SAM yelps.

[Fade out.]

'What have you done to her?' asked Sarah.

It took Sam a while to get her head around the woman's voice. It didn't sound the way it had a few moments ago. Then, it had been forced. Scripted. Now it was just... talk.

Sam shook her head. Opened her eyes wide. She could see the walls of the room around her, the horrible fake works of art that had been hung there, the small furnishings that had been piled into the corners.

'The Cold,' she said.

'What about the Cold?' said Guest, suddenly looking nothing like Wesley Snipes whatsoever.

'It's where you get your signals from, isn't it? It's got something to do with that stuff in the vials. It's alive. It's a living thing. It's the thing that gives you your orders.'

'I told you,' said Compassion. Somehow, her voice wasn't as harsh as it had been when the receiver had been attached. And, if she looked anything like Nicole Kidman, it was a version of Nicole Kidman that had gained several pounds and lost all her sense of fashion. 'We can use any transmissions. Even ones from Earth.'

'But it's not where you get your really good ideas from, is it?' Sam insisted.

She saw Compassion clutch the half-empty vial around her neck. But the woman didn't speak.

'You're not people at all,' Sam concluded. 'You're just receivers. Walking receivers.'

'We try,' said Guest. 'We have fewer nightmares that way.'

Sarah politely cleared her throat. 'Can I ask something now, please? What exactly is going on here?'

'We're getting to the bottom of things,' said Sam. 'We're just doing it at gunpoint, that's all.'

### 6

# Dog Out of a Machine (six characters in search of some exits)

1:

Kode kept his hands on the steering wheel, and occasionally even risked turning it a fraction to the left or to the right. Whenever the vehicle turned a sharp corner, the wheel would twist under his fingers, and he'd bend in the appropriate direction, to make it look like he was the one doing the driving.

The computer was an inbuilt part of the car's design; autonavigation was something the local humans were just getting the hang of, apparently. Guest had beefed the software up a bit when he'd bought the two vehicles, so now the cars could practically steer themselves, but Kode didn't want the passengers to know that. The local transmissions informed him that people in these parts were impressed by nifty driving skills. Women, especially.

He adjusted the mirror above his head. The mirror was evidently some kind of navigational aid, but it seemed much more suited to a bit of short-range spying. The two women sat on the rear seat, looking bored more than frightened. One of the security guards sat opposite them, his gigantic spine pressing against the back of Kode's chair. The car was big, the kind of vehicle you expected to come fitted with its own bar and grill, but even so the guard had to curl himself up to fit into the passenger section.

'Where are we going?' the girl asked.

Kode didn't answer at once, mainly because he'd forgotten. He glanced down at the display screen on the dashboard. 'Er... Somewhere safe.'

The girl tutted. Loudly. 'There's that word again,' she said.

'We've got a base about sixty klicks out from the hotel,' Kode told them, determined to prove that he knew what was going on. 'Guest wants to get you as far away from COPEX as he can.'

'Really?' the woman (whose name definitely *wasn't* Bland) said. 'I'd have thought he could have got us a lot further away than that, if he wanted. Sixty kilometres, what's that in old money? Forty miles?'

'Good point,' the girl added.

Kode wasn't sure how to respond to that, so he cocked his head a little, and listened to his receiver. The signals were weak, though. The car was driving

itself along an open road, native fields on either side, its progress watched by nobody but the local fat, spotty grazing animals. The roads were lined with telegraph poles, the only sources of transmission within the receiver's range. There were no signs of sentient life, no houses nearer than the horizon. No other cars except for Guest's, a few metres up ahead.

The next thing Kode knew, there was a face at his shoulder. It was the girl, leaning forward, poking her head between the two front seats. The guard grunted at her, and clamped an oversized hand on her shoulder, but she didn't lean back.

'What's your name?' she asked.

'Who, me? Erm. Kode. K-o-d-e.'

'Kode. And your friend's called Compassion, yeah?'

'Um... yeah.'

'Tell me something, Kode.' Hello. This sounded interesting. Kode was starting to get a good buzz from his receiver. 'You people,' the girl went on. 'You're time travellers, aren't you?'

Kode furrowed his eyebrows. 'Of course we're not time travellers. We haven't been able to time travel in... I don't know... years.'

The girl slumped back in her seat, and exchanged glances with her companion. 'Oh well. That's my best theory out of the window.'

'We're abductees,' Kode added.

The girl leaned forward again, but this time the guard stopped her, and pushed her back. The guard's stated reason for doing this was 'nnnuuh'.

Kode caught the girl's eye in the mirror, and tried to look apologetic. 'Sorry. Hope you don't mind the guards. Not much class.'

'What, the Ogrons? Don't worry about it.'

Kode slapped the wheel with both hands. 'I knew it. I knew everyone'd know what they were.'

'I've seen Ogrons before,' said the girl. 'Not many other people around here would have done.'

'Present company excepted,' the woman (whose name still definitely wasn't Bland) muttered.

'Yeah, but they're so obvious, aren't they?' said Kode. 'Everybody uses Ogrons. Think of all the security hardware there is, you know?'

The Ogron rumbled. Kode wondered if it was agreeing or protesting.

When they'd finalised the arrangements for this business trip, even Compassion hadn't been sure about the Ogrons, although her reasons had been more practical than Kode's. There were no alien life forms on Earth, Compassion had argued. Not officially, anyway. The natives would obviously be able to tell that the Ogrons didn't belong on the planet, that something was wrong somewhere. But Guest, as ever, had claimed to know better. Most of the

people they'd be dealing with would be Europeans, he'd pointed out. And Europeans were useless at identifying anything that wasn't European. According to Guest, to the eyes of the average British businessman, an Ogron would look just like a large, ugly, dark-skinned man; in fact, exactly what they'd expect foreign labour to look like.

Compassion had been satisfied by that, although Kode had been cynical. He didn't see how a local human could be fooled into thinking an Ogron was one of his own species, just by making the guards wear badly fitting suits and dark glasses, or by shaving off their embarrassing facial hair. But, much to Kode's annoyance, it had worked. That morning, they'd strolled around COPEX with the two guards in tow, and, if anyone had spotted anything out of the ordinary, the locals had kept quiet about it. It was the local transmissions, Kode decided. The signals were so slow, they had no flexibility. The natives just assumed the Ogrons had to be ugly foreigners; they didn't have anything else to think.

'Can I ask something else?' the girl said.

Kode listened to the receiver. The signals from the telegraph poles were saying *it's good to talk*, so he decided to go with it. 'Yeah, if you like.'

'How old are you?'

'Total age?' said Kode. 'Twenty.'

'Total age?'

'Yeah. Standard base age of eighteen, plus two years since I was remembered. Twenty.'

The girl nodded. 'Right. What about Guest? He's a lot older than you and Compassion, isn't he?'

'Suppose so. Why?'

'I just wondered. Guest's your leader, and he looks like he's -'

'He's not our leader,' Kode snapped. He hadn't meant to sound so aggressive, but there'd been a spike in the signals, and it had started his skull buzzing, making the nerves jangle at the top of his spine.

'Sorry,' the girl mumbled.

Kode realised he was starting to hyperventilate. Panicking. His eyes flickered across the mirror, taking in the rest of the back seat.

The woman – the other woman – had something in her mouth. Something bright and silvery. Kode would have slammed on the brakes, if the brakes had been under his control. Instead, he just whipped his head around.

'What's that?' he yelped.

The woman froze, the silver thing jammed between her lips. 'Noffing,' she said.

The security guard grumbled at her, and tugged the thing out of her mouth. Kode wondered why the Ogron hadn't seen the object before. Once the guard had finished sniffing at the thing, he passed it to Kode.

It looked like a whistle. A little silver whistle. Judging by the interference it was causing in his receiver, it had some kind of electronic component built into it.

'It's my inhaler,' the woman said.

The girl sniggered. Kode ignored her. He turned the whistle over in his hands, leaving the steering wheel to its own devices. 'What is it?' he asked.

The woman sighed. 'Well, it doesn't matter, does it? Seeing as we're still sitting here in the back of your car with no hope of escape, it obviously hasn't worked.'

Kode thought about that.

'Fair enough,' he said. He put the whistle in his jacket pocket, and turned his attention back to the controls of the car.

'I think I've met these people before,' he heard the woman mutter. The girl muttered something back, something that sounded like a question, but the woman didn't answer. Then the girl leaned forward again.

'One more question,' she said.

'Yeah?'

'Why did you call off your deal with the UN? We've been trying to figure that out.'

Kode shrugged. 'We just changed our minds,' he said.

He thought he caught a strange look passing between the two women.

'Of course you did,' the girl murmured. 'The transmissions. I forgot.'

2:

The whistle was just a whistle. You blew through one end, and something sharp and spiky and ultrasonic came out of the other. But ordinary whistles didn't have much of a range, which was why the electronics had been added, tiny micro-micro-microtransmitters welded along the length of the metal. The very latest communications technology, as pioneered by the Royal Ordnance, and modified by the very unit the whistle was designed to communicate with.

And at that precise moment, the unit in question was being stored in a side office at Sandown Park, where Sarah had left it running surveillance. Taking the unit to COPEX had been a risk, of course: there'd been no way of knowing whether the aliens, or whatever they were, were capable of spotting a blatantly anachronistic piece of technology. But, as the unit itself had argued, logic dictated that the aliens weren't as familiar with local technology as they should have been. Besides, all the components of the unit were contemporaneous. It was just the design that belonged in the fiftieth century.

In the time it had been waiting, the unit had performed at least two dozen self-diagnostic scans, just to make sure the human called Llewis hadn't dam-

aged it when he'd tripped over its casing earlier in the day. That done, the unit had shut itself down for a while, to conserve its energy supplies. And to stop itself getting bored.

When the signal came, the unit automatically reactivated its secondary motor functions, then tuned its receptors to the frequency of the whistle. Slowly, the hydraulic systems at the front of its body engaged themselves, and the unit raised the artificial neural attachment that was, in some circles, referred to as its head.

'Mistress,' it said.

Nobody thought much of the object as it rolled out of the office. COPEX was full of technology nobody really understood, not unless you printed the specs on a glossy leaflet and told everyone the number of volts it could deliver. Some of the businessmen laughed at the thing as it trundled past them, while the foreign visitors just nodded, taking the machine to be another example of that curious British sense of humour they'd always been warned about. The consensus was that the unit was some kind of remote-controlled mascot, maybe something to do with Nikon, who were always going on about their state-of-the-art electronics. A couple of the attendees wondered if there'd be any brochures around advertising 'the twenty-first-century guard dog', then got back to the more serious business of selling manacles to Sri Lankan torturers.

Even the security men on the door didn't try to stop the machine. Their job was to stop people with dreadlocks getting into the building, not to stop the attendees' toys getting out. None of them really wondered why the thing didn't activate the metal detectors on the doors, possibly assuming that the machine was made of plastic, and certainly not guessing that it may be shielded in any way.

When the unit dumped down the steps and reached the car park, it did something really quite surprising. But, once again, nobody tried to stop it.

3:

In the driver's seat, Compassion was tapping her fingers against the steering wheel. It was a local superstition, Guest had been told, a ritual designed to speed up time.

Good. It was good that the others were starting to listen to the native signals. It was good to keep an open receiver.

Guest himself sat in the back of the vehicle with one of the security guards, keeping an eye on the rear window, watching Kode's car follow them up the driveway to the factory gates. Fifty years ago, there'd been a war here, or so Guest had heard. A war that had covered most of this world, that had

involved military deployment across each and every one of the continents. Back then, the factory had been used to create weapons, warheads designed to bring down the enemy nation-state. After the war had ended, the factory's owners had continued to produce their hardware, supplying countries across the planet, some of which the state of Great Britain had previously been fighting. The company had supplied international terrorists, too, although it had claimed this to be an unfortunate accident, probably something to do with a clerical error.

The company had left the factory now, gone somewhere to the north of this land, where it was apparently cheaper to hire worker units, and easier to avoid awkward questions. Guest had acquired the complex before Kode and Compassion had joined him on Earth, using what the natives liked to call 'credit'. The old signs still hung around the gates, though. Informing casual passers-by that this territory was guarded by policemen from the Ministry of Defence, ready to kill, if necessary, to protect the country's interests.

Guest had decided to keep the signs. They made him feel secure. He wasn't sure why.

The sun was setting now, vanishing over the tops of the factory buildings, turning the poles of the perimeter fence into spikes of pure black. Even the buildings were just silhouettes at this time of day. Compassion kept tapping away, waiting for the automatic systems to finish opening the gates.

The sun never sets on the British Empire, that was what Guest had been told. He had some idea of what it meant, as well. A century ago, this nation had ruled vast portions of the Earth, leaving a trail of torture and bureaucracy across the entire globe. And the trail still existed, even if the empire had – officially – fallen. That was why Britain was still the place to go if you needed tools of interrogation, why it was able to cover up its dealings with meaningless paperwork and treaties nobody really believed in.

The British Empire had survived. Passed on everything it knew. Made sure its methods had been taken up by the next generation.

The Empire had been remembered. The same way the people of the Remote were remembered.

The gates were open, at last. Compassion let out a grunt of relief, and pretend-steered the car towards the nearest of the buildings, heading for the warehouse section.

4:

'Tell me that isn't what it looks like,' said Sam.

The warehouse was big, aircraft-hangar big, the roof supported by dirty great steel girders, the floor nothing more than rough concrete. The cars had

been parked in the middle of the open area, and now the security guard was herding both Sam and Sarah out by poking them with a huge grey finger.

The merchandise was what had caught Sam's eye. There were stacks of cardboard boxes all around, open-topped, their contents covered only by a few thin layers of polythene. A couple of thousand boxes, in Sam's estimation. And, judging by the stack nearest to her, every one of them was full of little plastic vials.

'Cold,' said Sarah.

Sam caught her eye. 'What does it do, exactly?'

'It doesn't do anything,' said Guest. 'It's the Cold.'

Guest was climbing out of the other car now, as were Compassion and the second guard. Sam took a quick look around the place. There weren't any other people around, no guards on standby at the factory. That struck her as odd. The entrance to the warehouse was open, and unguarded. How hard would it be for someone to get in here and start nicking the vials?

But the Remote were supposed to specialise in security systems, weren't they? And high-level electronics. The cars steered themselves, the gates were self-opening. There were going to be plenty of automatic defences around here, then.

Sarah turned to Sam, and started talking as if the Remote people weren't even there. 'You said something about the Cold, back at the hotel. You said you think it's where this lot get their orders from.'

Sam nodded. 'Maybe the stuff in the vials is alive. Part of some larger gestalt entity.'

That little smile popped up on Sarah's face again. 'I can't believe you can get away with saying things like that. I never could.'

'It's a gift.'

'Watch them,' Guest told the Ogrons. The guards grumbled their way across the warehouse floor, until they were standing close enough to Sam and Sarah for their collective breath to be offensive. 'Don't let them touch any of the boxes,' Guest added.

Sam and Sarah exchanged glances. Compassion had opened the boot of Guest's car, and now she and Guest were rooting around inside it, muttering to each other. Meanwhile, Kode hung around in the background, looking like he felt left out of things.

'What d'you think they're going to do with us?' Sarah hissed.

Sam shook her head. 'They want something from us. Information. You heard what Guest said back at the hotel. He's expecting to be attacked. Maybe he thinks we're the advance party.'

'You think he knows about the Doctor?'

One of the Ogrons nudged Sarah then, and went 'ggrn'. It was presumably Ogron shorthand for 'shut up', but Sarah just stuck her bottom lip out at him.

'No,' Sam muttered. 'Why? Do you?'

'A thing or two. You said he'd vanished. Any idea what happened?'

'I think he went looking for Guest's home base. Wait a minute, I've just thought of something.' Sam cleared her throat, and called out across the warehouse. 'Hey, Kode! Tell me something else, all right?'

Kode turned, a startled look on his face. He glanced back at Guest and Compassion, but they were still busy removing whatever it was from the back of the car.

'This place you come from,' Sam persisted. 'Where did you say it was?' 'Anathema,' said Kode.

'Yeah. That. Is it on another planet, or what?'

'No,' said Kode. But he didn't elaborate.

'OK. Thanks.' Sam turned back to Sarah, and lowered her voice. 'Well, in that case, I haven't got a clue where the Doctor is. Just don't expect him to turn up in the nick of time or anything.'

Sarah looked back at the warehouse entrance. Sam followed her lead. From here, you could see the main gates of the factory complex, the empty road outside the fence, even the row of tiny houses off in the distance on the other side of the fields.

'Don't worry,' Sarah said. 'We might get lucky.'

'Now,' Guest announced.

His voice sounded muffled, and when Sam turned to face him she saw he was wearing a mask. The mask covered his entire face, with no visible holes for his eyes or mouth, the whole thing held in place by a single thick strap of plastic. Actually, the whole mask seemed to be made of plastic. Thick black plastic, with a kind of tacky, rubbery quality to it.

And the mask was moving.

'It's Cold,' said Sarah. She sounded surprised, for once. 'It's made from the same stuff that's in the vials.'

It was true. The mask was solid, but the surface was rippling like liquid. Sam couldn't see any of the tiny faces in the darkness, but she guessed they'd be there if she looked closely enough. She therefore decided not to look closely enough. Compassion was busy pulling another of the masks over her own face, the black material quivering whenever her fingertips pressed into it.

Kode looked nonplussed. 'Should I get mine? Only I've got it in the boot –' 'We won't be needing you,' Compassion said.

'Oh. Right. Thanks a lot.'

'You're always saying you don't like getting your hands dirty,' Compassion pointed out.

Kode just sulked at her.

Sam tutted, under her breath. 'I've definitely met him before somewhere,' she muttered.

'We're going to expose you to the Cold,' Guest told her. 'We feel it may break down your resistance to our signals.'

'How?' asked Sarah. 'Or don't I want to know?'

'The Cold can have... effects on the human brain. In the short term, it's not important. Long-term exposure can cause neural and genetic interference.'

Kode nodded. Hard. So everyone noticed him. 'That's why they're using the shadow masks,' he said.

Sam giggled. So did Sarah.

Guest stared at them, blankly.

'Sorry,' said Sam. 'It's just...'

'Shadow masks,' concluded Sarah.

Sam got the feeling that Guest was blinking at her, under the mask. 'It's the way he said it,' she explained. 'There are just some words you shouldn't use, you know? Not if you want people to take you seriously. "Shadow". It makes you sound like you're trying to be all scary and sinister.'

"Darkness", there's another one,' Sarah added.

"Blaster",' suggested Sam.

"Atomise".'

"Vortex".

'Really?' said Sarah. 'I always liked "vortex".'

'All right. "Sector".'

'Oh, that's a good one.'

'Have you finished?' Guest asked. Politely.

'Yeah, just about.' Sam squinted at him. 'Wait a minute. Those masks protect you from the Cold, right? But those masks are *made* from the Cold. Aren't they?'

'They're made from the skin of the Cold,' Kode said, apparently still desperate to get involved in the conversation.

'The shed skin,' Guest went on, indicating the boxes around the warehouse. 'The Cold itself is out of our reach. We can only collect its... spoor.'

'But you can put us in touch with it?' Sam asked.

'Perhaps it's telepathic,' mused Sarah. 'Whatever it is.'

'Contact with the Cold can create large-scale interference in any local transmissions,' Guest recited. 'This is why you're here. Away from the hotel.'

'Guest,' said Compassion. But her voice was so muffled, Guest obviously didn't hear it.

'We have faster methods of transportation,' Guest went on. 'But on this kind of planet there's always a question of reliability –'

'Guest,' said Compassion.

The woman's head was cocked at a funny angle. Listening to the receiver, Sam deduced. Guest noticed her, at last.

'Can you hear that?' Compassion asked.

Guest listened, too. 'The security systems,' he announced. 'Something's coming.'

Sam realised Sarah was looking over her shoulder, towards the warehouse entrance.

Compassion shook her head. 'No one can get in here, can they? The systems are tuned to stop anyone getting too close to the complex.'

Then Sarah laughed. Sam was sure she could hear the buzzing of an engine, somewhere in the distance. 'Anyone?' Sarah queried.

Now Guest was staring at the entrance, too. Sam finally turned, just in time to see the Land Rover plough into the factory gates.

They were wrenched out of position, the sound of twisting metal ringing off the walls of the warehouse, not quite drowning out the throbbing of the machine's engine. The Land Rover kept moving, with its tyres screeching against the gravel drive, crunching the broken fragments of gate under its wheels. Heading straight for the warehouse, on a careful, controlled course.

'Not possible,' said Guest.

'Uggh,' said one of the Ogrons.

'Out of the way,' said Sarah. Probably talking to Sam.

Sam threw herself to one side, following Sarah's example. She saw the Land Rover tear through the space where she'd been standing, and caught a glimpse of the two guards falling back on the other side of the vehicle, having stood aside mere milliseconds before being hit.

The other thing Sam got a glimpse of was the Land Rover's windscreen. There didn't seem to be anybody sitting behind it.

There was the sound of an impact. Loud, metallic. The Land Rover had scraped the side of one of the cars, shunting it to one side, towards the warehouse wall. Sam tried to get a grip on what was happening, but she'd fallen to the floor when she'd jumped out of the way, and she didn't have a good enough view of what the Remote people were doing. Kode was well out of it, having hidden behind a stack of boxes as soon as the Land Rover had appeared, but she couldn't see the other two.

'Come on,' said Sarah. And suddenly the woman was pulling at Sam's arm, dragging her towards the Land Rover even before it had stopped moving.

The vehicle collided with another pile of boxes. There was a shower of cardboard. The sound of snapping plastic. Sam stumbled, let go of Sarah's

hand, and found herself falling to her knees. Moments later, Sarah was at the door of the Land Rover, reaching for the handle. Sam scrambled after her.

Then stopped.

The front of the vehicle was smeared with black. Some of the vials had shattered on impact with the thing, and now the Cold was spreading across the bonnet, moving slowly, as if not quite sure how much of it to eat. The metal at the front of the vehicle, already buckled by the collision with the gates, was bitten out of existence. The wheel arch went the same way. So did the headlights. Sarah clambered into the Land Rover, not having noticed the fact that the machine's engine was now clearly visible. Sam opened her mouth to shout a warning.

Something black and oval-shaped appeared over the stripped-down front of the vehicle, bubbling in agitation. Compassion – or, rather, Compassion's mask. The woman stood up straight, and Sam saw her slide her hand into her jacket, reaching for the stun gun.

Sam found herself trying to shout two warnings at once, and ended up just gagging.

5:

It wasn't possible. Even given that nobody should have been stupid enough to ram the gates, the security systems should have taken the intruder apart before he or she was anywhere near the warehouse. Compassion had designed the systems herself, so she knew the way they worked better than anyone.

If any unauthorised life form came too close to the complex, the systems were primed to send a burst of sheer Cold at them. The systems weren't too smart, but they were good enough to identify anything even vaguely humanoid. If it had legs, arms or a heart, it shouldn't have stood a chance. And the native software wasn't good enough to let the vehicle steer itself, surely?

But even so, the machine was there, right in front of her. And the older woman, the journalist, was climbing up into the control section. Compassion was weighing up the options even as she drew the stun gun. The front window of the machine was cracked, probably as a result of the impact with the gates. There was a good chance the bolt from the stun gun would be able to fracture it, get to the woman...

No. She had a better idea.

Compassion knelt down, the vehicle's engine roaring and spluttering in front of her face. The Cold had eaten away the protective covering, but the engine was intact. Well, that could be fixed. Some of the vials had been shattered by the vehicle, so now the Cold was eating away the floor, making little

holes in the concrete. Taking care not to step in any puddles, Compassion found an intact vial in the wreckage, and scooped it up in her hand.

Then she stood, and drew her hand back, ready to hurl it at the front of the vehicle.

Something slammed into her side.

Compassion fell back, landing on a stack of the boxes, the stun-gun slipping out of her grip. She heard the sound of breaking plastic, and wondered if any of the material would be able to reach her skin, if she'd disappear before she even knew what had hit her –

But she stayed just where she was, lying sprawled out on the floor of the warehouse, the blonde-haired girl hovering over her. The girl was standing awkwardly, clearly not used to the heels on her shoes, or the way the skirt around her knees stopped her moving her legs properly. Compassion tried to strike out, but the girl's fist was already halfway to her face. There was a squishing noise as the knuckles sank into Compassion's mask.

The mask was solid Cold, kept in check by a restraining field, so it didn't take anything it touched out of the mundane universe. But the girl was pummelling it, clawing at it. The pain wasn't quite as bad as the thought of what would happen if she disrupted the field. Compassion tried to shout, to tell the girl to stop, but every time she opened her mouth the girl slammed a fist into it.

There was no option. The stun gun was long gone, probably eaten by the Cold on the floor, but Compassion still had one hand curled around the intact vial.

She flipped open the plastic stopper, and ordered the Cold inside to latch on to its target.

6:

Sarah had opened the door on the driver's side of the Land Rover. Which was inconvenient, as the driver's seat was already occupied.

'Mistress,' said K9.

Sarah clambered over him, trying to keep her head down as she squirmed towards the passenger seat. 'Oof,' she said, by way of greeting.

'Reversing, mistress,' K9 told her. There was the sound of grinding gears from somewhere beneath the cab.

Really, she should have used the back door to get into the Rover. It was linked to the vehicle's central computer, so K9 would have been able to open it from the inside. In fact, the rear door had a special locking attachment that allowed K9 to open it from the outside, as well; when the rear door

opened, the ramp would automatically lower itself to the ground, letting him roll straight in.

She'd bought the Land Rover four months ago, mainly because she'd been sick of having to load K9 in and out of her old banana-coloured roadster whenever she'd needed to take him anywhere. K9 had suggested that she might download his intelligence into a more portable unit as an alternative, but Sarah hadn't liked the idea much, partly because it was too much like cheating, but mainly because she hadn't been the one who'd thought of it. So she'd gone out and bought the Rover, choosing the model with the most sophisticated computer system available. 'The latest in safety software from I+sp2\*sp', according to the brochure.

Naturally, K9 had considered the software primitive. He'd spent hours talking to the vehicle, before concluding that it really wasn't going to say anything intelligent. Then he'd started making suggestions about how the systems might be improved. Sarah's cousin had brought him the hardware, and K9 had got his human servicers to do all the fiddly bits while he'd sat in the driver's seat, inserting his eye-probe-thingummy into the dashboard computer. Linking up with the machine's systems.

Sarah struggled into the passenger seat as the Land Rover reversed. In front of her, she saw the open floor of the warehouse, covered in scattered boxes and vials. She tried to concentrate on the people, the humanoid shapes sliding in the wreckage, but before she could work out who was who the Land Rover shot out of the building. K9 began to execute a neat three-point turn.

'K9!' Sarah shouted.

The land Rover stopped in mid-turn, the engine rattling to itself on the other side of the cracked windscreen. 'Mistress?'

'We can't go yet. We've got to get Sam out of there.'

The things-that-weren't-really-ears on top of K9's head swivelled a little. 'Query: Sam?'

'Um. Human female, about, um, twenty. She's a friend.'

More swivelling. 'Sensors detect no such person in immediate area.'

'What?'

'Sensors detect -'

'I heard!' In front of the Land Rover, the two alien security guards were running out of the warehouse, pounding across the concrete towards them. 'Sam. She's in there.'

'Negative. Sensors detect three life forms remaining inside warehouse area. None corresponding to twenty-year-old human normal. Suggest immediate retreat, mistress.'

Just to make the point, K9 revved up the engine. Sarah stared past the approaching aliens. 'But Sam... she was with me...'

'Extrapolation,' K9 chirped. 'Human female Sam no longer exists within the parameters of normal space. Suggest immediate retreat.'

Sarah bit her lip.

'All right,' she said. 'Go.'

## Travels with Fitz (III)

Augustine City, 2593

Fitz Kreiner woke up on the morning of his 626th birthday, and looked in the mirror.

'Looking good,' he said, with a lot more sarcasm than he'd actually intended. The apartment was big, by the colony's standards, but it still reminded him of the room he'd been given in the UNISYC building. Nearly six hundred years ago, Fitz reminded himself. Seemed like about six months, seeing as he'd spent most of the intervening time in the Cold. According to the colonists, you didn't age while you were in the Cold, because of some stuff about its being outside the normal time-space flow. But it had its own internal chronometry, so you still had to add the time you'd spent there to your total age. Fitz didn't know what'd happen if he just went around calling himself twentynine. Presumably some Time Lord or other would turn up and give him an official warning.

Which, not surprisingly, made him think of the Doctor. Which made him think of the twentieth century. Which was something he didn't want to do, not right now, so he went over to the TV wall and waved his hand over the big ON panel at the bottom of the screen.

He cycled through a handful of the eight zillion channels available, until he found a news programme smart enough to autotranslate itself into archaic English. He watched a lot of news programmes these days, and it was comforting to see how little had changed while he'd been out of action. The broadcast came from Earth Central, so the transmission was weak, and the set could give him only 2-D. The government was talking about cracking down on the outer colonies again, apparently, trying to bring the errant human republics back in line. The word 'empire' was being used in presidential speeches for the first time in half a century, according to the pundits.

What would they say? Fitz wondered. What would they say back on Earth, if they knew what was really going on out here?

'They'd crap themselves, wouldn't they?' he asked the newscaster. He hadn't switched the TV to 'interactive' mode, though, so the newscaster didn't give him an answer.

Fitz told the set to find a local news channel instead. It did. The colony medianet was reporting the same story, but in glorious 3-D, and this time the Earth government people were definitely the bad guys.

'Media bias,' Fitz told the screen. But then that wasn't surprising, was it? Bearing in mind who ran this planet.

The colony leaders were the ones who'd pulled him out of the Cold, all those months ago. As it turned out, they hadn't been expecting to find him there. The Cold was a brand-new invention, as far as they were concerned. The stuff had been around for centuries, they'd explained, but they were the ones who'd thought of turning it into an antipersonnel weapon. They'd sent some of their own people into the Cold as test subjects, and when they'd brought the guinea pigs back to reality, Fitz had popped out along with them. Having been forgotten by the universe for almost six hundred years.

'But I came from 1996,' Fitz had protested.

They'd said they believed him. They'd concluded that at some point in the future, some of the Cold would end up being taken back in time, and used on Fitz six centuries before its creation. Strangely enough, they'd seemed very blasé about the whole time-travel concept.

'Isn't that some kind of paradox?' Fitz had asked.

They'd said yes, and they'd all seemed very, very excited about it. So excited, in fact, that they'd decided to grant him citizenship. They'd shown him the apartment, given him a food allowance, and every now and then they'd even arranged for persons of the opposite sex to 'accidentally' wander into his life, presumably in the hope that it'd keep him happy and stop him asking questions. It hadn't worked, though. Well, not in the long term. And whenever Fitz had mentioned his own time, or talked about the possibility of finding a way back home, the colony leaders had done their best to change the subject. He'd been through this before, of course, when the Chinese had 'indoctrinated' him by shutting him off from his own culture, but the Communists had never been so bloody *polite*.

One day, he'd made the mistake of telling them about the Doctor. Which was when he'd found out who really controlled this colony, and why they thought Fitz was so interesting.

After that, they'd started to answer more of his questions. Even apart from what was happening on the colony, he still wanted to know what had happened to him in Geneva, and who'd sprayed him with the Cold in the first place. But nobody had been able to tell him. It hadn't been anything to do with the colony people, after all. When he'd asked how the figures in black could have turned up in the middle of a top-security UN installation, or how they could have even known that Fitz was there, the colony's secret rulers had consulted the historical records and discovered that twentieth-century UNISYC had been riddled with corruption. All sorts of people had wanted control over the organisation, they'd explained. All kinds of generals and marshals had plotted and conspired against each other, all trying to end up on

the throne of the UN's alien-research wing. It was quite feasible, Fitz's new 'friends' had told him, that one of these conspirators had wanted the Doctor and his companions out of the picture. That someone inside UNISYC had bribed the attackers to hit Fitz with the Cold.

So there it was. The reason why Fitz had been surgically removed from Earth, from the TARDIS, from Sam, and from any place he might have been able to call home. For purely political reasons. Because of a power play by some general who'd now been dead for centuries, and whose plans had all come to nothing anyway, judging by the history books.

Which left Fitz on his own. Which left him stranded on a world whose true rulers obviously wanted the pleasure of his company for some time to come, and who were currently doing their best to recruit him to their cause. Which left him with very little to do, except sit back and watch the news.

So that was what he did.

### 7

# The Smith Report [getting to the bottom of things, the old-fashioned way]

28 April 1996 (Research Notes)

Hiatt's still making cuffs in Birmingham. Check out address for article. Company claims to have been supplying leg irons since slavery; possible story angle? 'Slave-trade not dead'? Scratch that. Hard to find slaves these days. Torture victims, prisoners held without trial, police executioners. No slaves. Call Amnesty and check numbers!!! Maybe get map made up of torturing states. Black and red, double-page spread. Should be good attention-getter. IF I want this to go to Metropolitan.

Correction: NOT MAKING LEG IRONS ANY MORE. Leg irons illegal since 1983 (?double-check date). Technicality. Firms still making handcuffs big enough to go round legs. One way of getting past the export regs.

COPEX in August. Any way of getting in? Security meant to be tight. Have a word with some old friends.

Remember. Paul coming over tonight (not relevant, but will forget it otherwise). Staying in London to make documentary for Channel 4. Get food in. Lock K9 away somewhere. NO EMBARRASSING SCENES WITH DOG. Take him to Morton for weekend? (K9, not Paul.)

18 August 1996 (8.45 p.m.)

After a while, the Land Rover stopped working. Sarah managed to make it cough its way to the next service station, coaxing and cajoling it in the kind of squeaky, high-pitched voice that cars were traditionally supposed to find appealing. K9 protested, and claimed this was an irrational superstition with no basis in scientific reality, but Sarah responded by telling him that if he didn't shut up she'd have him fitted with Windows 95.

The service station was a big one, with its own miniature shopping centre and amusement arcade, so Sarah decided to take K9 out for a quick walk. The Remote people wouldn't be following them, she reasoned. Even if they were, they weren't likely to try anything at the Happy Driver Rest Stop.

The Remote. It was them, then. Even if their outfits had changed. The same race she'd met on Dust, back in the old TARDIS days, just before the Doctor had...

Odd. Why was that part of her memory such a blur?

She headed straight for the part of the complex that sold chocolate, K9 buzzing at her heels. The assorted customers and bored fourteen-year-olds hanging around the building gave the dog some funny looks, but Sarah was used to that by now. If anybody ever asked, she'd just tell them he was operated by remote control, and that he was the mascot for the latest appeal from Guide Dogs for the Blind. Amazingly, so far everyone she'd told that to had believed her. The same way people believed Ogrons were just grubby foreigners, probably.

'So,' she said to K9, as she tried to decide whether to go for the mint or the orange Tic-Tacs. 'What do we know for sure?'

K9 waggled his sensors. 'Current size of database twenty googolbytes. Figure inclusive of language and interpersonal protocol banks –'

'I'll tell you what we know,' Sarah continued. 'We know they're not aliens. They're not from another planet. They're not time travellers. But they don't come from Earth. Now, what don't we know?'

'Impossible to estimate parameters of unknown information, mistress.'

'We don't know what they want,' Sarah told him. 'We don't know why they're so keen on letting us have their technology. We don't know where Sam is.' She picked up the orange Tic-Tacs, on the grounds that they looked a bit like space pills. 'And we don't know where the Doctor is.'

'Affirmative.'

'So here's a theory. If we find the Doctor, he can sort out all the other questions for us. What's the probability of that?'

'Eighty-eight point nine per cent, mistress.'

'Excuse me,' said an old woman in a duffel coat, who'd presumably just popped into the station for the confectionery.

'Um, yes?' said Sarah.

The old woman nodded towards K9. 'You're from that television programme, aren't you?' She spoke the words carefully and precisely, probably hoping to impress Sarah with her BBC English. 'You know. With the dogs.'

'Oh, that television programme. Yes. Yes, we are.'

'Thought so.' The woman looked happy, nodded to herself inanely, and shuffled away. Sarah watched her go.

'What was all that about?' she asked.

'Unknown, mistress.'

'Fine. We'll ask the Doctor about that as well. When we find him.' She headed for the pay desk, K9 trundling along by her side. 'So what's the best

way to find the Doctor, K9?'

But K9 was already way ahead of her, his sensors doing loop-the-loops, his tail wobbling like nobody's business. 'Artron interference in local vicinity nil, mistress. No TARDIS detected.'

'Oh well,' said Sarah. 'We'll just have to think of something else. And quickly. Back at COPEX, Kode said something about a ship being on its way. If a whole battle cruiser full of business executives turns up, we'll really be in trouble.'

'Are you from that television programme?' the man behind the pay desk asked.

'The one with the dogs,' Sarah told him. 'Yes. Do you want my autograph? You'll have to tell me what to write, though.'

#### 2 May (Research Notes)

Scratch six-page article. Think big. Much more going on under the surface. Security fairs being used as cover for arms trade, trade in torture equipment? Metropolitan won't buy it. Publishers in with the government. Maybe try TV. ASK PAUL NEXT TIME SEE HIM.

Make copies of promo video ads from Hiatt's and Nova. Don't want evidence 'accidentally' disappearing. V. Important Fact: taxpayer's money used to bring torturers to Britain for COPEX, and guidelines on how to supply torture equipment to foreign states available from DTI. Going up against the government on this one. Make sure to change the locks on the doors.

Paul not phoned since Tuesday. Talking about new series for BBC 2, but all quiet at my end. Hard to concentrate with him hanging around at back of head. Must write memo and put on pin board: NO MENTION OF PAUL IN RESEARCH NOTES FROM NOW ON. Getting messy.

Be in central London tomorrow for meeting with DTI rep. Thinks I'm working for Iranians (ha ha). Pick up parts for K9 while there. Try getting latest components, see if he can do anything with them. Doctor's instruction manual (BIG JOKE) says any parts should be adaptable. Maybe give him a mouse?

Maybe not. Mouse might talk.

#### 19 August (11.30 a.m.)

It wasn't a traditional English pub. That was why Coldicott liked it so much. English pubs had wood everywhere: wooden bars, wooden panelling, wooden furniture. As if the locals were ready to point at a piece of oak at a moment's notice and go, 'Aye, that be from the same tree where they 'anged of Dick Turpin, that be.'

This pub was a plastic pub, where everything was smooth, shiny and black. The bar staff wore waistcoats, and there were prints of thirties European movie posters on the walls. If you could ignore the other drinkers, with their cagoules and bad haircuts and conversations about Luton FC, you could almost believe you were somewhere on the Continent.

'You're still here, then,' said a voice.

Coldicott's lips had been paddling in a Mexican lager, so he spluttered a bit when the woman spoke. She was standing over his table, smiling in her usual self-satisfied manner. Coldicott forced himself to ignore her stupid grinning face, and cast his eyes around the rest of the pub instead.

There was nobody here he knew. Nobody from work. Hardly surprising, seeing as he worked five and a half miles away.

Sarah sat down before he'd even finished scanning the place. 'You said you were going to Geneva,' she went on.

'I said I was trying to get reassigned to Geneva,' Coldicott scowled. 'Anything to get out of this bloody country.' He looked at his watch. 'You're late. I don't want to have to hang around here with you any longer than I have to.'

'I'm not late. You always set your watch five minutes ahead. Everybody knows that.'

Coldicott hoped to God he didn't look as startled as he thought he looked. "Everybody"?'

'Oh, you're famous for being an obsessive. So. Do you want to talk?'

Don't panic, thought Coldicott. Don't look nervous. Take another sip of the lager, sit back, and make her think you're relaxed. Ahh. Better.

'What is it you want to know?' he said. Good, good.

'Your latest bunch of aliens. The Doctor's involved, isn't he?'

Coldicott felt the muscles go tense around his ribcage. It was a standard response for someone in UN intelligence, when the word 'Doctor' was used in casual conversation.

'You didn't tell me,' Sarah added.

'What, you want me to tell you everything about every top-secret setup we've got going? There's no clause that says I'm your private hotline into Enoch-level files. You can blackmail me all you want.'

'Oh, can I? Thanks. So, do you know what happened to the Doctor?' 'No.'

'Sure?'

Coldicott slammed the glass back down on to the table, and quality Mexican lager splooshed over the art-deco beermats. 'He said he'd help us. He vanished before he bothered to do anything. He said he was going to try and get to the root of the problem, that's all I know.'

'Going to try to get to the root of the problem. Not and. Grammar.'

'Bloody journalist.'

'And what about Sam?'

'Christ.' Coldicott felt his hand tightening around the glass, and he started wondering what its tensile strength might be. 'What about her?'

'You've got files on her?'

'We have now. Just because his friends don't have clearance, that doesn't mean we don't care who they are. You know how big our files on you are?'

'Yes,' said Sarah. 'Did you send her to COPEX?'

'Sam Jones isn't our problem,' Coldicott growled. 'She's a free agent.' That irritating smile got slightly worse. Then Sarah stood, as if getting ready to leave.

'All right,' she said. 'That's all I wanted to know.'

Coldicott squinted at her. 'That's it?'

'You've given me everything I need,' Sarah said, cheerily. 'I'll let you get on with your drinking now.'

'Good,' said Coldicott. 'So show me some gratitude. Don't talk to me again. Ever.'

'We'll see.' Sarah turned her back on him. 'But you never know. I might move to Geneva one day, mightn't I?'

Coldicott responded with the rudest word he could immediately think of. As things turned out, it was in German.

#### 8 June (Research Notes)

Another phone talk with Coldicott. DEFINITE ALIEN INVOLVEMENT. Knew it'd be a big story. Magazine, book, or TV? Wait until Coldicott knows what kind of aliens. If non-humanoid, difficult making story fit for public consumption. Can't claim bad guys were just rogue CIA working undercover. Maybe turn story into SF novel? Political overtones. Claim it's allegorical.

Contact at ICL Tech says he knows Turks interested in COPEX. More govts on Amnesty's blacklist. Ultra-tight sec, but no official guest list for attendees. Does DTI care? (Stupid question.)

False identity set up, new fax machine installed under false name. Fake ID not a problem.

V. INTERESTING FACT #13. Saudi Arabia only outlawed slavery in 1963. Not sure what that means just yet, but bear in mind.

Things to do before next week:

- Think up decent false life history. Just in case.
- Buy blonde wig. Dye starting to kill hair.
- Talk Paul into spending weekend.
- Stop making notes about Paul.

- Stop thinking about whether to take it further.
- Stop moping.

Last night spent with Paul = embarrassing moments = not bad but with interesting bits. Probably thinks I'm a pervert. Not my fault!!! (Maybe time with UNIT. Alien fetishism? Ugh.)

Concentrate on story. Things getting big. Might have to get hands dirty. Don't want to get Paul involved with anything (semi-famous name, big target). Could end up breaking the law again. Love me, love my dog.

Didn't mean it like that.

#### 19 August (5:45 p.m.)

The house was ordinary. That was Sarah's first impression. An ordinary, detached, two-storey building, squatting on the corner of the street, with a newsagent's across the road and a dental surgery just round the corner. The house was big, for the area, but not quite big enough to mark it out as a target for burglary.

She'd parked the car on the other side of the road, and she'd been sitting in the driver's seat for about half an hour, waiting for the passers-by to finish passing by. There'd been some schoolchildren hanging around when she'd arrived, but they'd all moved on, obviously having found a new bus stop to deface. And now the sun was starting to go down. The best time for this kind of thing, in Sarah's view. Light enough to see your way around, dark enough for people not to be watching too closely.

'Time?' she asked K9.

'Seventeen forty-five and fifty seconds, mistress,' came the voice from the back seat.

Sarah unlatched the door. She'd rented the car that morning, when she'd gone to see Coldicott in his precious Euro-pub. As yet, nobody had phoned her and asked when she was going to collect the Land Rover from the service station, which was a blessing. K9 had scanned the house, and reported that there were probably life signs inside, but he'd admitted that it was hard to be certain, what with so many other traces coming from so many other buildings nearby.

'If I'm not back in half an hour, get help,' Sarah told him.

'Mistress?'

'Get help. Call somebody. Improvise.'

'No random matrix available, mistress. Improvisation impossible. Behaviour regulated by strict ordered protocols –'

'Stealth mode,' Sarah told him.

'Mistress?'

'Shush.'

She swung herself out of the car, slammed the door behind her, and hopped across the road. She kept walking as she reached the house, hoping there'd be somewhere to conceal herself at the side of the building, away from the eyes of any bystanders.

As it happened, there was. A small passageway, between the outer wall of the building and the fence that marked off the next homeowner's territory. Sarah aimed herself towards the passage, not breaking her stride. Don't look round, she reminded herself. Act like you own the place. Stop and inspect the roses in the front garden, maybe. Pull a face as if you think they need more fertiliser.

No, let's not show off. Better keep things simple.

There was a door at the side of the house, with a glass panel set into the wood. Sarah tried to peer in through the net curtains, hoping nobody would peer out. The kitchen entrance, she decided.

She tried the handle.

The door opened.

That surprised her, really. Of course, if there were people in, as K9 had suspected, there was no reason for the door to be locked. But Sarah had been banking on the dog being wrong about that. Who was going to be here? Friends of Sam's? Family even?

Surely not. The Doctor wouldn't have chosen her as a companion if she'd had family. Close family, anyway. He didn't work like that, did he? Even Batman only hired orphans as sidekicks.

Once Sarah had come back from the meeting with Coldicott, K9 hadn't had much trouble getting the address. Sarah had found out exactly what she'd wanted from her contact: Sam's surname. That was all she'd needed. Once she had that, K9 had been able to hack into the UN's records, and pull out all the appropriate files. He could have done the same job even without the surname, of course, but there was so much junk in the UN files that the process could have taken forever.

Sam Jones. Security clearance Netzach (the same, Sarah had noted, as her own). Known connection to the alien element code-named *Hanged Man*. Address...

Right here. In Shoreditch.

Sarah crossed the kitchen floor, as quietly as she could. She'd changed into something sensible, taken off her wig, and strapped some decent trainers to her feet, so she wasn't going to have any more trouble with the heels. The kitchen was as ordinary as the outside of the house: white tiles, an official 1996 Greenpeace calendar on the far wall, a threadbare dog basket stuffed under the pretend-pine table. Sarah frowned at the room as she passed through

it, and the room sulked back. You would have expected more, she thought, from someone who hung around with the Doctor and got on the nerves of the United Nations. It was all so drab.

Then again, her own kitchen was hardly fascinating, was it? A *Private Eye* cartoon about Martians stuck to the memo board, and an old *ET* clock by the sink, but other than that, nothing even slightly nonterrestrial. Clearly, you couldn't tell someone who'd spent a good chunk of her life travelling through time and space just by looking at the way she arranged her cooking utensils.

Sarah stepped through the doorway on the other side of the kitchen, poking her head around the frame first, to make sure nobody was in the hallway. Nobody was. There was the front door, the telephone, the stairs up to the next level...

And there were voices. Sarah listened. Yes: from the door at the far end of the hall. There was a warped-glass panel in the door, yellow electrical light shining through from the other side. Low voices, very low. Maybe a television.

Who, though? Who was watching it? Sam had looked like someone in her early twenties, so maybe she was living in student accommodation. When she wasn't off in the TARDIS, anyway. If there were other people in the house, they could have been her friends. A boyfriend, even. God, that'd be embarrassing.

When Sarah had come up with the idea of searching this place, it'd been in the hope of tracking down the Doctor. Sam hadn't known where he'd gone, but then again she hadn't been able to tell Sarah everything, not with the Remote listening. And the girl had known things about the Remote, too. She could have been guessing, of course, but she'd sounded pretty sure of herself. Sarah had tried to remember everything that had happened on Dust, but her memory was still a bit of a blur for some reason.

So, she had no idea what she was looking for here in the house. It was hugely unlikely that Sam would keep anything as handy as a notebook. Or an address book.

Or a phone book?

Sarah turned to the telephone. It was perched on a table in the corner of the hall, a fake-leather-bound book by the side of it. Well, so much for the student-accommodation theory. This place was too neat. Too suburban. There was a newspaper resting on the edge of the table, one of the 'serious' ones, and Sarah couldn't help scanning the lead story. Just in case something important had been happening while she'd been running around after alien arms dealers. A big cheesy photo of Bill Gates leered up at her from the front page, as the Microsoft court case went into what felt like its nine thousandth week. Dead news, thought Sarah. Gates was still apologising for 'that' little incident at the Festival of Ghana, despite insisting that it wasn't his fault the stupid robots had started killing people, even if it was his company that had

supplied the software.

The company wasn't ever going to recover. Sarah somehow managed not to smirk at that.

And it was while she wasn't smirking that she heard someone turning the handle of the door. Whoever had been watching TV in the other room was coming this way.

#### 17 June (Research Notes)

SUCCESS!!!!! Double underline, double capitals. Invitation to COPEX in my pocket. Came through contacts in ICL. Don't suspect a thing. Too busy looking down my front to ask questions. Dirty, sweaty old men.

But SUCCESS!!!!!

Haven't told anyone yet. Paul been here all week. Starting to get itchy for home? Wants to know what I'm doing. Won't tell him. Maybe not a good idea, but can't have him getting involved. Can do the worrying for both of us.

DON'T MENTION BIG FIGHT. NOT IN RESEARCH NOTEBOOK. Not professional.

COPEX = dodgy setup. Buyers want security and anonymity, so can get away with calling myself whatever I like, as long as I wear big black overcoat. (Humour.) Visit to contact's office interesting. Electroshock baton in storeroom; contact enjoyed playing with it. Says licensing them not a problem. Police connections. Believe him.

ICL contacts claim shock baton factory in Scotland, with police knowledge, so check out facts. Possible story title: 'MADE IN GREAT BRITAIN', next to photo of shock baton victim (ask Amnesty, again). Shock weapons illegal without licence, but police know about factory (says contact). Who supplies licences? Scottish Office? Who's in charge there?

Starting to get adrenaline rush. Better than running from Daleks. Don't know how aliens involved yet (not all a big hoax by Coldicott?), but hope to make contact at COPEX. Rumours in security underworld say 'Guest' asking questions, sounds like same man Coldicott described. Haven't told UN yet. Take me to your dealer, ha ha.

Aliens changing Earth history, maybe? Possible alien motivation? Might be bigger picture. Have to call in UNIT old guard, save the world again, hooray. Been nearly a year since I did that. Calling Interdimensional Rescue!!!!!

(With Doctor, not a problem. Without? How do I know what history's supposed to be like to stop aliens messing around with it? Do you notice, or do memories change too? Arrrrgh! How do you tell if history's been changed? Watch *The Rock 'n' Roll Years* and spot the mistakes.)

STILL DON'T MENTION FIGHT. Get it out of system before next week. Starting to get sloppy. Don't lose the buzz!!!

Could be love?
[Last word scribbled out.]

19 August (5:48 p.m.)

Sarah experienced a slight surge of anxiety as she threw herself at the stairs. Running away from the Remote was one thing, but this was, if anything, even worse. Aliens could capture you, torture you, threaten you... but they couldn't really embarrass you. When you grew up in a nice polite middle-class household in Croydon, you were taught that there was nothing worse than embarrassment, not even pain, not even terminal disease. Caught sneaking around someone else's house? Ugh. Terrible.

As she padded her way up the staircase, she heard the door open on the ground floor. Someone moved along the hall below her. There was a pause, then the sound of footsteps on hard tiles. They were in the kitchen, whoever 'they' were. Getting something from the fridge, maybe. Nothing sinister about that.

Why on Earth hadn't she just knocked? Anyone here must have been a friend of Sam's, surely?

No. She couldn't be sure of that. Besides, what was the point in being an investigative journalist if you couldn't do a bit of breaking and entering before teatime?

Sarah surveyed the upstairs hall, with her heart beating at a rate that was just plain stupid. Several doors, possibly bedrooms. A hatch in the ceiling. The hatch was closed, but there was a rope ladder dangling from the lip. Sarah chose a half-open door at random, and poked her head around it.

It was, as she'd expected, a bedroom. A lot less tasteful than she might have imagined, though, certainly less tasteful than the rest of the house. It was neat, but neat in a kind of careless, childish way, as if the owner had been forced to clean it up. There were various pop-culture images Blu-Tacked to the walls, a 'Save the Whales' poster that looked like it had been printed in the seventies, a big fractal pattern made up of tiny CND symbols, and some portraits of supposedly famous people Sarah didn't recognise. The bed was made, but several T-shirts lay scrunched up on the duvet. There was a TV on a plastic table at the end of the bed, surrounded by little wind-up plastic things. And a couple of Gonks.

Sarah wrinkled her nose. The room stank of adolescence.

Disappointing. That was the only word for it. She could easily imagine Sam supporting great causes, but the political material in the room was all quite

basic, the kind of thing you said you believed in when you were too young to know how grubby and nasty politics really got. She'd expected Sam to've been a member of some anarchist activist group, not the kind of person who painted little pictures of dolphins all over her furniture.

There was another noise. Muffled. It sounded like laughter this time and it was from somewhere nearby. Without thinking, Sarah stepped back out of the room, and glanced around the upstairs hallway.

Nothing was moving.

Her eyes settled on the rope ladder.

Of course. The hatch was shut, but the ladder was down. Someone was up there, up in the attic.

The laughter again. It was the kind of laugh you'd call loud and annoying if somebody did it in your ear. Female, certainly. And it came from the other side of the hatch.

Sarah looked around once more, just for good luck. Then she grasped the ladder, and started to climb. Just the first few steps, she decided. Just enough to be able to hear what was going on up there. She kept moving until the top of her head touched the hatch, and held her breath, listening to the murmurings. Girls. Girls talking.

'No, really. It happened. In America.'

'He ate them?'

'Yeah. Killed 'em all, and ate their bodies. All five of 'em.'

'Why?'

Odd. The girls sounded about fourteen, maybe fifteen. And if Sam lived here why would she be cohabiting with girls on the other side of the big hormone shift? Were these her sisters? Or had the UN computer messed up? If this is the wrong house, thought Sarah, I'm going to be really, really embarrassed.

Then something else occurred to her. The thought hung around at the bottom of her head for a while, not quite wanting to come up for air.

'Well... 'cos he was a psycho,' said the first voice.

'That's horrible,' said the second.

'Why?' said the third.

The first voice mumbled something Sarah couldn't catch. Then the second again: 'It's just horrible. Just the idea. Being eaten.'

'Why?' the third voice asked. There was something familiar about that voice, almost as if –

There was the sound of running water from downstairs. Somebody was making tea in the kitchen.

'What d'you mean?' said the second voice.

'Why's it horrible? They're already dead. Why does it make a difference what happens to the bodies?'

Sam. That was Sam's voice, no question. But Sam had been spirited away by the Cold, and besides...

Besides, this version of Sam sounded as young as the other girls.

'You're supposed to ask funny questions, aren't you?' someone was saying. 'When you're, y'know. Out of it.'

'Why?' Sam repeated. 'Why's it horrible?'

'I don't know. It just... is. That's all. It's the idea.'

'The idea...?'

Of course. Of course. Sarah had assumed that Sam had come from this time zone, that she'd been a native of 1996, the same way Sarah had stuck around her own time when she'd been with the Doctor in the UNIT days. But Sam came from the future. Maybe not far in the future, maybe only a couple of years, but nonetheless...

The UN must have looked into Sam's background. They must have realised the same thing, and left this house alone. They must have figured out that, in this era, the girl hadn't even met the Doctor yet.

From downstairs, there was a crashing, splintering sound. The girls in the attic fell silent. Sarah lost her grip on the ladder, and tumbled the short distance to the floor.

'What in the name of God –' someone shouted, from the kitchen.

Sarah jumped to her feet. Above her head, the hatch shifted. The girls were opening the attic entrance.

No. Sam couldn't see her. Not here. Not now. She launched herself at the stairs, hearing the hatch squeak open behind her. She didn't turn round. She vaulted down the steps, two at a time, finally reaching the downstairs hallway. The door at the far end was open, TV light spilling across the floral-patterned carpet.

Another crashing sound. Wood breaking. Smashing crockery.

Sarah stepped through the doorway to the kitchen.

The kitchen was a mess. The back door of the house was missing, having been pummelled off its hinges, the glass panel lying in thousands of tiny pieces across the floor. The table had suffered the same kind of fate. It was as if something horribly powerful had smashed its fist down on the surface, snapping one of the legs.

As if, thought Sarah. As if something horribly powerful had smashed its fist down on the surface. In fact, the thing in question was still standing there, swinging its head backward and forward to keep the whole room covered. The Ogron had lost its dark glasses, although it hadn't changed out of its suit.

And there was someone else, between Sarah and the Ogron. A man, probably in his early fifties, dressed in a rumpled shirt and rumpled trousers, as though he'd come home from work some time ago but hadn't bothered changing out of his business clothes yet. He turned as Sarah walked in. His face was framed with grey, a full moustache-and-beard set bristling around his mouth, wispy hair retreating across his big pink forehead. His spectacles were perfectly round, and made his eyes look tiny.

'Sam –' the man began. His voice was high-pitched and wobbly. Then his little eyes focused on Sarah's face, and, if anything, he looked even more scared.

Sam's father. He couldn't have been anyone else. He must have come home early from wherever he worked, been in the house even before Sarah had arrived. The girls in the attic probably didn't even know he was here.

The Ogron stopped moving, finally registering Sarah's presence. The creature raised one huge, heavy arm, and extended a blunt grey finger.

'Woman,' the Ogron bellowed. 'Want woman. Now.'

## 8

# Another Day in the Life [19 August, somewhere a long way from London]

Try not to be here. That's the best idea. Try concentrating on something else, somewhere else. Someone else.

Sam?

'There was once a man who dreamed he was a frog,' said the Doctor. 'When he woke up, he couldn't remember whether be was a man who'd dreamed he was a frog or a frog dreaming he was a man.'

'I thought it was a butterfly,' said Sam.

'What?'

'It's an old Buddhist thing, right? I thought he dreamed he was a butterfly. Not a frog.'

The Doctor finished scuttling around the TARDIS console, and came to a halt in front of the dematerialisation switch. At least it was a switch this week. It had been a lever until a few days ago. 'Well, I'm sure he told everyone it was a butterfly,' he flustered. 'He probably thought it sounded better. But I was there when it happened and it was definitely a frog. The important thing is...'

He tailed off, having forgotten what the important thing was.

'The UN,' Sam prompted.

'Oh yes. Thank you. The important thing is, you shouldn't get too close to Coldicott and his friends while I'm gone. The UN's up to its elbows in espionage and counterespionage. They've got triple agents who think they're double agents, and double agents who think they're quadruple agents. I wouldn't be surprised if Coldicott's superiors try to plant a few bugs on you. I'm sure their technical staff wouldn't mind keeping a closer eye on me.'

'I thought these people were supposed to be on our side.'

Yes. Concentrate on the flow of the conversation. Forget the pain. Ignore the break in your arm. The past is another country; everyone there is more ignorant than you.

The Doctor tutted. 'Sam, Sam, Sam. Let's not forget, the UN's only involved in all this because it wants to get hold of the hardware. We've got to expect these people to be ruthless. At this point in its history, the UN's busy setting up its own Security Yard project. Did I mention that?'

Sam crossed her arms. 'You know you didn't. Stop lecturing.'

'Ah. Well. It's not important. The point is, the UN's people are already starting to look into alien technology, and we don't want them getting their hands on any more. That's why I want Fitz to keep an eye on what they're doing in Geneva. There's a very delicate power balance in this century, technologically speaking. What with UNIT, UNISYC, the ISC —'

'So what's to stop them locking Fitz up and giving him the third degree?'

The Doctor paused, and did his best not to look guilty. 'I shouldn't think they'll go that far, Sam. Not unless UNISYC's entirely corrupt.'

Sam huffed at him. 'Let's stick to basics, all right? Where are you going, and how long are you going to be there for?'

'Let's just say I'm going where you probably wouldn't want to follow me. And I'll be back in a day or two. Hopefully.' The Doctor fished a set of keys out of his top jacket pocket, and held them out to her. Sam took them. 'The keys to the safe house. You've got the notebook?'

'Yeah. Listen, what do I do if you're not back in time for this COPEX thing?'

'Oh, I will be. I'm expecting Guest to put in a personal appearance there. Wouldn't miss it for the world.'

'So we're on the guest list?'

'I have friends in low places.'

Sam snorted. 'Can't we shut the place down?'

The Doctor tutted at her. 'Getting rid of the dealers would mean getting rid of a large portion of your country's establishment, Sam. The security market affects everything. The government, the economy...'

'Sounds good to me.'

'Sam! Don't try to interfere in local politics. Not while you're travelling with me.'

Then he paused, realising what he'd just said.

'Until you leave my company,' he added.

No. Don't think about that part of it. Sam's important. She's the only thing you've got left to focus on. Don't think about her leaving.

Leaving. What happens when she's gone? What do you do for a lifeline then? There's Fitz, of course, but Fitz is different. Not part of the same process. The TARDIS doesn't trust him yet, and he can feel it, you know he can. No way of telling which way he'll jump. No way of knowing who he'll side with in a crisis. He probably isn't even sure himself, not after everything he's gone through. The poor thing.

The conversation. Keep concentrating.

Just tell me something, all right?' said Sam. If you had to vote in an election, who'd you vote for?'

"None of the above",' said the Doctor. 'We're supposed to be apolitical.'

'There's no such thing as apolitical. You're either part of the solution or part of the problem.'

'Then I'm part of the solution,' the Doctor told her. 'But it's a very long-term solution. Now. Have you got everything you might need from your room?'

Sam saluted. 'Yes, sir. Can I ask you one more thing?'

'If you insist.'

'What's the point in having a time machine if you can't kick the crap out of politicians every now and then?'

'Don't ask me,' said the Doctor. 'I'm just a Time Lord dreaming he's a man.' Then he frowned.

'Or is it the other way around?' he said.

#### Dawn

They'd built a whole mythology together.

In it, there were men with two hearts, and attendant demons from a thousand worlds across the sky. Some boxes were bigger on the inside than on the outside, and those boxes were special, because they could take you backward in time, forward in time, sideways in time, even in and out of time. Those who possessed such boxes – such TARDISes – were truly blessed, given an advantage over all other beings. They weren't gods, but they were wise enough to make people believe they were gods. And the other prisoner? He was one of those Lords, but fallen, imprisoned here for crimes against darker things, against the powers that opposed the Lords' intentions.

Most of the conversation had taken place in the early hours of the morning. Badar hadn't slept well, and whenever he'd lost consciousness he'd dreamed of the new world-of-worlds the pale man had brought into the cell, of the Lords and the Ladies and the darkness and the stars. The black things had come to him as he'd dreamed, and hovered over his resting place on the floor of the cell, scraping their nails against the walls, making the brickwork crackle with electricity. More than once, the sparks had woken him up, and the dark things had dissolved into the blood cells of his eyes. Whenever that had happened, Badar had turned his head, towards the silhouette of the man under the darkened window, to ask another question about the world they were building. The man had always answered him, so Badar was starting to wonder whether the Lords needed sleep at all, or whether they spent their nights sculpting new ideas instead of resting.

In the morning, Badar found speech much easier than it had been the previous day. When he turned his head, the man was still there, cross-legged under the window.

'I don't understand,' Badar said. There were cracks in his voice, little gaps in the words, and his throat ached whenever he took a breath. Water. The guards hadn't left any water yesterday, had they? Or maybe they had, and he'd just forgotten about it.

'You should get some more rest,' the other prisoner said.

Badar tried shaking his head. 'Almost. It's almost finished. Our world. Almost makes sense now.'

The man sighed. 'If you insist.'

'You move through time in your TARDIS,' Badar stated.

'Yes.'

'You can change time in your TARDIS.'

'Well -'

'You said. Yesterday.'

The man paused, then nodded. 'Theoretically. Most of the time, I have to defend it. Not change it. Stop it being changed.'

'You said... there were other worlds. Colonies. Homes of humans. You said you'd saved them. From the dark things.'

The man nodded again. 'That's true.'

'Should they have... have been saved? Saving them. Saving them is changing time. That's what I think... you meant.'

'Ah.' The man had to think this over for a while. 'Well, that's true. I've saved a few settlements that shouldn't have been saved. I've changed history on some of the outer planets. Just one or two, but –'

'Changed time.'

'Technically, yes.'

 $\hbox{`Technically...'}$ 

The man seemed to be getting ever so slightly agitated. 'Time travel's an incredibly complex pastime. The equations governing causality wouldn't fit into the heads of all the mathematicians your species has ever produced. It's dangerous to make generalisations. But I've changed history on some of Earth's colony worlds, yes. A few thousand people here and there who should have died, but didn't.' He must have realised he was starting to sound uneasy, because he deliberately lowered his voice. 'It's against the rules, I know. As I said. Technically.'

'It's forbidden? Your people... your race...'

'Species,' said the man. 'I'm a different species from you, not a different race. It's a common mistake. You and Sam are different races. The same species, but different races. Both products of the human genetic process.'

Badar had heard the man mention this Sam before, but he hadn't gone into detail. Badar doubted she was important to the TARDIS world. 'Your people tell you not to change things,' he said. 'Then why do you do it?'

'Because I can.' Badar's eyes were healing this morning, so he was able to see the man frowning, almost looking shocked at what he'd heard himself say. 'Let me qualify that. Because I think I can make small changes without causing any major damage to causality. Mankind is always spreading outward, towards the edges of the universe. And the universe is a big place. If I change history on some of the outer planets, the ripples usually only spread outward. Into the void. If I change things on Earth, though...'

Badar nodded, hoping it'd keep the man talking. It did.

'If I change things on Earth, the ripples touch everything. Especially if I interfere in the twentieth century. The twentieth century was when the human species laid down the foundations of its empire. Any interference there could bring the whole thing crashing down around your ears.'

'To interfere... would be wrong?'

'Yes. Grossly irresponsible. I *counter* interfere, sometimes. I stop other people's interference. Even that's got its problems, though.'

'But to interfere on... on the colony worlds... that isn't wrong?'

'Well... no.'

Badar was starting to understand the truth, at last. 'But... what's the difference? You think one's wrong, and the other's right, but... but it's not true. Interference is... interference. I think... the reason you don't interfere on Earth... is because you can't. Can't get away with it.'

"Get away with it"?' queried the man. He almost sounded hurt.

'The Lords... the other Lords... your people. They'd notice. They'd see. You said... the reason you gave for doing what you do... "because I can". You don't think interfering on Earth is... is wrong. You know. You know you couldn't do it. Without being caught.'

The other prisoner didn't answer for a while. In the silence, Badar found the cell swimming in front of his eyes. He was ready to sleep again, he realised.

'Maybe,' the man said, after some time. 'But it's not just my people who'd take a dim view of it. There are other things in the universe. Bigger things. Things that wouldn't take kindly to my causing large-scale disruptions in space-time. Things you really shouldn't wake up.'

'Then... you're scared.'

'What?'

'The reason... you don't try to change time... on Earth... is that you're scared.'

Again, there was a long pause.

'Oh dear,' the man said. 'I have the sneaking suspicion there isn't any way out of this.'

Badar wasn't sure whether he meant the argument or the cell. 'We could interfere,' he said. 'Here. On this planet. We could change things. Stop the...

the religious police. Move through time. Stop them. Stop them hurting. Stop them being.'

'Tell me something,' said the man, obviously doing his best to change the subject. 'Why are you asking me all this? What difference does it make to you?'

That surprised Badar. Wasn't it obvious?

'The world we've made,' he said. 'It's got to make sense. You say you can change time, but... you don't. There are con... con...'

He had to take a deep breath then, his lungs still having trouble with the really long words.

'Contradictions,' he wheezed.

'The ideas are all that matter,' the prisoner mumbled. 'It's all an exercise in theory for you, isn't it?'

Badar nodded. Then gasped, as one of the muscles tore in his neck.

'Rest now,' the man said. 'We'll talk more later.'

#### Noon

The guards came in that morning. They brought water this time, and food, which they left in front of Badar's face. Badar tried to eat some of it, but it caught in his throat, and made him retch. He didn't feel hungry, for some reason. Maybe his body knew he wouldn't be able to swallow anything, and had shut his stomach off from his head. He'd starve soon, if that didn't change.

He wondered what he'd have done about that if his body had been part of the TARDIS world. Surely, the Lords would have had some way of feeding him without making him sick. If they could walk through time, they were sure to have decent surgeons.

The guards also brought in the shock batons, which they used on the pale man again. As before, the man grunted a lot, but didn't cry out. After the guards had finished running the batons up and down his spine, Badar saw his limbs twitching, and even his broken arm wouldn't lie still. His eyes were staring up at the ceiling, his face confused more than hurt, as if he couldn't understand why this was happening.

Once the guards had gone, Badar tried to talk to him again, although he didn't seem very receptive.

'Hurts,' the man said. He flapped his good arm around, the fingers jerking in strange patterns.

'We have to finish the world,' Badar told him.

The man stopped flapping, but his fingers still shook.

'Tell me,' said Badar. 'Tell me about the rules. The rules of your people.'

'What... do you want to... to know?'

Badar thought for a moment. 'Why did you come here?'

'To stop... to stop Guest.' The man's head was still shaking, so the words were broken, difficult to make out. 'He was trying to... supply equipment... to the British. Alien equipment. Torture equipment. The... Cold...'

Badar didn't know who Guest was, but he didn't ask. 'You wanted to stop him selling arms? To the British?'

'Yes. Arms. Stop him. Couldn't let it... couldn't let the British have... that kind of technology. Alien. Too much power. Too much power. Could have ruined... everything.'

'I understand. The British... their government... it's like my government? They torture?' Badar had heard about such things, but he wasn't too clear on the details.

'No. No. Not torture. They sell tools of torture. They don't... don't have many principles, I'm afraid.'

'They're corrupt?'

'Yes, I suppose they are. Corrupt. That's it.'

'Then you should stop them. You should stop them being.'

Badar heard a choking sound from the man's throat. He had to cough out his next few words. 'You mean... the TARDIS?'

'Your advantage. You should move through time. You should bring down this government.'

'Can't. Can't do that.'

'Why?' Badar asked. 'You said. The truth. You don't interfere, because you're afraid. But they're killing you, here. Nothing to lose. Not now.'

The prisoner laughed. A single laugh, almost lost in the middle of all the choking. 'Not very logical. If I could get to the TARDIS to change things... I could escape.'

'No,' Badar insisted. 'No, you're wrong. The ideas. The ideas are all that matter. Forget about escape.'

The next noise from the man sounded almost like a sigh. 'All right. Theoretically. You're asking me... you're asking why I don't bring down the British government. Or any other government, come to think of it. Is that it?'

'Yes. You've brought down governments before, in your TARDIS. On colony worlds. You said.'

'Yes. Yes. Terra Alpha. Varos. Proxima Two.' The man shook his head. 'Earth... is different. Britain is different. I can't... can't get involved in local politics...'

'The leaders on these colony worlds were politicians,' Badar pointed out.

'True. That's true.'

'They had... factions? Supporters? Opponents?'

'Yes. Yes yes yes.'

'Then what was the difference?'

'Can't interfere...'

'What?'

'Can't interfere. I have a friend. Called Sam. She asked me... if we could save other planets... if we could save Kursaal... why not Northern Ireland? Why not Israel? Why not Bosnia?' The man was nodding to himself now. 'Sam... she's like that. She's so... young...'

'And what did you tell her?'

'I said... it would be an abuse. Of power. Of the TARDIS. She... didn't understand... either.'

'You care about their politics,' said Badar.

'Care...?'

'You've spent time with them, yes? The British.'

'Yes. Years. Many years.'

'You think their leaders are special. Different. Not like the leaders of the other planets.'

'I told you. Earth is different... too sensitive...'

'You're lying!' Badar realised he was shouting, but he had no reason to care. 'You won't let the world make sense. You said it's no different. One leader is like another. Then why won't you move through time? Why won't you get rid of the British government? Or mine?'

For a while, there was nothing but the sound of the prisoner's breathing. Badar wondered whether he was thinking, or whether he'd gone to sleep.

'I don't know,' the man said, eventually.

Badar smiled. His lips cracked, but he didn't care. 'Tell me. Who's the leader of the British, now?'

'Oh... let me see.' The man raised his hand in front of his face, as if to count something off on his fingers. But his fingers wouldn't stay still, so he let his arm drop again. 'What's the year? 1996. Starting from the 1970s, how does it go? Let's see... Carter, Reagan, Bush, Clinton, Dering, Springsteen, Norris...'

He stopped.

'No. That's America. Wait. Heath, Thorpe, Williams, Thatcher, Major, Blair, Clarke... Major. Yes. Major.' He ummed and ahhd to himself. 'I think that's it. I spent quite a lot of time in the 1990s. When I was back in my first body. Don't talk about it much, of course. Not a... not a happy time.'

'You should move through time. Destroy Major. Destroy the leader. Stop the corruption.'

'Would it help?' said the man. 'Supposing I got rid of his whole cabinet. Supposing I could. Supposing I wanted to. What then? Another one would pop up in its place. A different party, the same order. Left or right. When you

can move through time, you can see how little difference there is between the factions. Human politics. The same rules always apply.'

'Then change the rules.' Badar wanted to make the man see how urgent this was, how important to the structure of the TARDIS world, but he didn't seem to be getting the point. 'Change the order. Move through time. Change everything.'

'No!' The man was shouting now, the first time Badar had heard him do that. 'The damage to the timeline... the ripples...'

'You don't care about the ripples!' Badar protested. 'If you cared, you wouldn't interfere on the other worlds. You only care about being seen.'

'There are things in the universe,' the pale man snapped. 'I told you. Terrible things. Waiting for opportunities. Waiting for their chance to return to this universe.'

He trailed off.

'Rubbish,' he concluded.

'What?' said Badar.

'I'm talking rubbish. Old Time Lord legends. Cautionary tales.' He flapped his arm around for a while longer, finally managing to pull himself up on to one elbow. 'That's what I told Sam, when she asked me. All the old stories. All the old excuses.'

'But me? You're not going to lie to me?'

'No.'

'Why?'

The man stared right across the cell, trying to make eye contact with Badar. But his eyes looked blurry, like they weren't focusing properly. 'Because you're here,' the man explained. 'Because they've hurt you. Tortured you. Because you're going to die, if I can't think of a way to get us out of this. I can't make excuses. Not to your face.'

His voice sounded raw. As if everything, all the intonations and little white lies, had been stripped away from it. Badar nodded, and felt the throbbing in his neck again.

'All the names,' Badar said. 'Thatcher. Major...'

'Blair, Clarke, Yes.'

'You should get rid of them. Move through time, and stop them. Get rid of the leaders. All the ones who sell weapons. All the ones who let us be tortured. Get rid of them all. Like you do on the other worlds.'

'Perhaps I should,' said the man. 'But I can't.'

#### Dusk

As the sun went down outside the window, the guards came back into the cell, and told Badar that he'd be going out into the courtyard tomorrow.

#### Midnight

Badar slept. He'd expected to stay awake, to spend the last hours of the day trying to finish the TARDIS world before the sun came back. But he slept, much as ever, drifting in and out of the cell, watching the dark things come and go across the walls.

At one point, there was a scratching sound. Not the scratching of the dark things' fingers, but a much softer kind of noise, from somewhere on the other side of the cell. When Badar turned his head, he saw the outline of the other prisoner, hunched over the handle of the door.

The man kept scratching away at it, tapping at the lock, twisting the handle. Badar realised he was using both hands. How he could do that kind of thing with a broken arm, Badar wasn't sure.

Eventually, the man stopped. Badar got the feeling he knew he was being watched.

'I can't do it,' he said.

Badar grunted. 'You said. Yesterday. No escape.'

'But I know why I can't do it.'

The man moved away from the door, then collapsed, folding up into a little bundle in the corner of the cell. Badar guessed he hadn't had much choice. You couldn't stand up straight for long, not after the guards had used the batons on your spine.

'I've been in prisons before,' the man said. 'I told you that, didn't I? Plenty of prisons. I escaped from most of them. Bargained my way out of the rest.' He let his snapped arm flop on to the floor by his side. 'Did I tell you about the Daleks?'

'No,' said Badar.

'Machine-monsters,' the man explained. 'Very important to that mythology of ours.'

'Dark things?'

'None darker. I've been kept in prisons by them, more than once. They use torture, too. But they're much more precise. Methodical. They have exact formulae for calculating when prisoners should be hurt. And for working out the optimum times for interrogation. In Dalek prisons, you settle into a kind of routine.' Badar saw the pale man's fingers tapping against the floor. 'In fact, most prisons I've been in have been like that. Regulated. They do everything

they can to destroy your self-will, but they do it by numbers. They use mind probes. Neural implants. Hallucinogenic drugs, sometimes. Everything done by the book.'

'No book,' said Badar. 'Not here.'

'I know,' the man said. 'That's the point. I escape so often I never stop to think about the way I do it. But I'll tell you the secret if you like. The way you escape is by slipping through the cracks in the routine. You work out how your captors operate, and you fill up all the holes in their schedules. You've got to turn yourself into a kind of skeleton key. Find the gaps in their system. Get into the workings of the lock. Turn the tumblers from the inside.'

The man sighed then. The sigh was long, forced and theatrical.

'But there's no logic,' he went on. 'No system. Not here. They didn't have any real excuse for locking you up. Your arrest was very nearly random. They don't even have any reason to torture us: they just do it when they feel like it. There's no routine, no order. Nothing you can adapt to. That's why I can't escape from this cell. I can't concentrate properly, because there isn't anything to concentrate on. There's just brutality. Pointless brutality. You see? This isn't like Ha'olam. There's no implant, there's no alien super intelligence stopping me from getting out. It's not an experiment. It's not part of some masterplan or other. It's real.'

'Move through time,' said Badar. 'Stop everything.'

'I can't. Even if I had the TARDIS, I can't turn back time. It's all in the equations. It's a bit like Schr'odinger's Cat. I can't erase this part of history, not now we've seen what's in the box. Maybe if we were in the middle of a timing malfunction, or... No. It doesn't matter. It can't be done. Not even by me.'

Badar wasn't sure what any of that meant, but he wasn't going to let it stop him. 'But if you escaped you could walk through time. Stop the future. Bring down the governments. Get rid of the Majors. The Blairs. The Clarkes.'

'Yes,' said the man, and he said it as if it were a confession. 'Yes, I could. I could rewrite the whole of British history from this point onward. And world history. And galactic history.'

'You could stop the British? Stop my people? Stop the torturing?'

'I could. But I wouldn't.'

'You stop it on other worlds -'

'I know,' the man cut in. 'We've already been through this. The answer to your question is, I don't know. I don't know why Earth should be different. I don't know why I don't sort out the troubles in Ireland. I don't know why I don't disarm Iraq. I don't know why I don't stop the genocide in Malaysia. Perhaps you're right. Perhaps I've become so attached to Earth, I'm scared to interfere too much. And yes, I know there's no difference between what

happens on Earth and what happens on Terra Alpha, or Varos, or Proxima Two. But I can't change things. I've made a decision. I've drawn a line in the sand. And if I cross that line I'll end up just like the Master. Meddling for my own purposes.'

'You do that anyway,' Badar pointed out. 'You bring down tyrants. You said. Just because... because you think they're bad. Bad people.'

In the darkness on the other side of the cell, Badar could just make out the prisoner's head bobbing up and down. 'Yes. It's got nothing to do with the laws of time. It's all to do with me. It's to do with the way I see things. I see people in need of help on the outer planets, and I tell myself it's a crusade. I see people in need of help in Africa, or Israel, or even in Britain, and I tell myself it's only local politics. I like to think I've got principles, but it's the way things look that makes me act the way I do, not the way things really are. It's true, what you said. I just do whatever I think I can get away with.'

He was babbling, Badar realised. Now the man was letting himself tell the truth, he could hardly stop talking. All this must have been bottled up inside him for a long, long time. 'The ideas,' Badar pointed out. 'The ideas are what matter.'

'Yes. Yes, they are.' Was that a laugh, or had Badar imagined it? 'It's amazing the perspectives you get, once you've been tortured half to death. It was the same on Ha'olam. It was the little things that mattered to me. Teddy bears. Jelly babies.'

'Help me,' said Badar.

He thought he saw the man cock his head. 'Help you? How?'

'Finish the world. Finish the world for me.'

'I'm not sure I know what you mean -'

'You know,' Badar insisted. 'You know. Finish the world. The ideas are all that matter. Make the world make sense. After they take me outside.'

'I can't -'

'They tortured me,' Badar said. 'They tortured both of us. My people. The British. All of them. They put batons in my eyes. They'll do the same to you, soon. Help me. Please. Make it make sense.'

The man fell silent. Badar waited for him to speak again. This time, he managed to stop himself falling asleep while he was waiting.

'All right,' the man said, eventually.

'Promise me.'

'I can't promise -'

'Finish it,' Badar snapped. 'Promise me.'

Another long silence.

'I promise,' the man said.

Badar felt himself relax. He hadn't even noticed he'd been tense, but now his muscles were going limp, the nerves unravelling in his limbs, his skin prickling where it had been shocked by the guards. They hadn't used the batons on him in... well, he couldn't remember how long, exactly, but the skin never forgot.

Still. It'd be over soon. It'd all be over.

'You can tell me your name now,' Badar said.

So the man did. But the name was very long, and Badar was asleep before he'd finished it.

## Travels with Fitz (IV)

#### Jumpstart Island, 2594

It was a stupid name for a settlement. When the humans had first come to the planet, and started planting hydrodome cities on the few available stretches of soggy land, this was where they'd built their chief spaceport, in what Fitz now recognised as the usual go-get-'em imperial style. And it was completely appalling. The spaceport building was a great big silver spire, as phallic as it was possible for a structure to get without looking downright silly, but covered in bumps and nodes that were presumably supposed to look like the engine modules of old spaceships.

The spire was pretty much hollow, the space inside crisscrossed with moving stairways, the walls lined with balconies full of tack shops and departure lounges. Everything – every wall, every railing, every supporting column – was made out of the same material, something that was obviously meant to look like sparkling crystal, but instead made the place look like the most tasteless shopping centre in the history of existence. Little fist-sized 2-D television sets pottered around the spire on their antigravity motors, so you could hear the chatter of the local channels wherever you went. If (God forbid) you actually looked at one of the sets, it'd notice, and start following you around. Trying to tempt you with the most interesting adverts in its memory.

Fitz let the stairways carry him up to the fiftieth level, feeling the sweaty warmth of the people on the steps above and below him, but somehow managing not to spit, scream or swear at them. One of the TV sets was hovering behind his ear, giving him a rundown of the latest headlines, insisting that Earth was only weeks away from sending its ships to introduce martial law on the outer colonies. The sweaty people behind him started mumbling when they heard that. Fitz didn't bother saying anything. He tried to look vaguely smug and cynical instead.

It wasn't Earth they had to worry about, was it? There'd be ships in the skies soon, but not human-built ones. Not that you'd expect anyone to notice what was really going on here, not with the media being so carefully stagemanaged. Of course, he did have a certain advantage, seeing as he'd met the people who actually controlled the colony.

Seeing as he was about to give in to them. Seeing as he was about to let them 'initiate' him.

Fitz moved along the balcony once he'd reached the top of the stairway, finding a spot where he had a better view of the chasm at the heart of the spire. Somebody dropped from one of the upper levels as he watched, and the floating TV sets went into 'emergency' mode, clustering together and spinning dinky plastic webs. Getting ready to catch the leaper before he hit the ground. A second group of TVs went into 'record' mode nearby, in case anything went wrong with the operation.

There were a couple of dozen lift shafts on the other side of the chasm, like shiny glass arteries, pumping all the tiny little people to and from the docking areas at the top of the spire. None of them would have any idea what was really going on here, Fitz reminded himself. None of them would have guessed that soon, very soon, this whole planet would be taken apart by the Time Lords.

By the Doctor's people. He kept telling himself that, in the hope that it'd stop him pining for the TARDIS. He wasn't really *missing* the Doctor, any more than he would've missed a thunderstorm or a forest fire or any other force of nature, but there were little things that he kept reaching out for and not finding, parts of his life on board the TARDIS that he still felt should be there for him. He kept remembering the Doctor, pottering around the console room the day before they'd got the call to Earth from the UN. The Doctor had discovered a switch on the console that he hadn't recognised, that had quite possibly only just grown there, and Fitz had watched him as he'd poked and prodded at it, just to see what it did. When he'd finally figured it out, the Doctor had taken a marker pen out of one of his pockets and scrawled the switch's name on the console in scribbly black lettering.

That was what Fitz had really been missing: the messiness of it all. You couldn't imagine anyone writing on the walls of Jumpstart Island, not without sixty-eight different alarm systems going off. And the people who really ran the place? They liked things that were black and spiky, things that made scary-looking shadows on the walls. Hard to imagine people like that driving Volkswagens, or keeping rooms full of butterflies on board their ships, or... anything much, really.

That wasn't going to stop him, though.

He moved on, heading around the balcony towards the lift shafts. Somewhere up there, hovering in the planet's upper atmosphere, was the warship where his new employers would be waiting for him. The warship was linked to the spire by a boarding tube, Fitz had been told, but the vessel itself had been shrouded to stop anybody noticing it from ground level.

It had to stay hidden, or the natives would have panicked. It was that kind of ship.

\* \* \*

The boarding tube was black and rubbery, a mile-long tentacle of slippery air-sealed plastic, with a terminal at each end where you could climb on to an atmosphere buggy and get whisked off to the other terminal in under a minute. When Fitz finally reached it, the warship turned out to be black and slippery as well. At least, those parts of it that didn't look as though they'd been built out of bone.

Mother Mathara was waiting for him in the opening of the airlock. She was in full Faction Paradox ceremonial dress, just as she had been the first time Fitz had met her. He tried not to concentrate on the mask too much.

'You've decided,' Mathara said, primly.

'I'm ready if you are,' Fitz told her. Which was a profoundly stupid thing to say, under the circumstances.

9

### **Definitions**

# (Sam learns a thing or two about the Remote, while Alan Llewis just gets the picture)

shadow mask n. a sheet of perforated metal positioned next to the phosphordotted screen in certain colour television sets, the holes positioned so that each of the three electron beams can strike the appropriate phosphor dot, resulting in the required mixture of colour in the image.

- Dawson's English Dictionary, 1993

'There's a word they've got in Haiti. It's in your English dictionaries, but the people who write the dictionaries never understand a thing, so according to them it's just another word for 'spirit'. But it means more than that, if you can read between the lines. And if you don't understand the word you'll never understand the Remote. Are you with me, Sam?

'The word is "loa". Lo-a. It's not hard to remember, so keep it in mind.

'You know about voodoo? No, maybe you don't. Where you come from, they teach you that voodoo's some kind of backward death cult, like one of those African religions you get in old RKO movies. Y'know. Where all the black men have got bones through their noses and stick pins in little dolls of people. You never get to hear about the history. How the whole religion started, how the Haitians needed something to hold their culture together when they were being ripped to bits by the Europeans. Voodoo was behind the biggest slave revolt in human history, did you know that?

'Shh. This is important. Wait and see.

'Voodoo's an active religion, that's the point I'm making. It's a political religion. Now, a lot of cultures believe in spirits, one way or another. But most of the time the spirits are on a different level from ordinary people like you and... well, like you. I mean, look at that Christianity thing you've got down on Earth. You've got your messenger angels, but they're stuck up there in Heaven. They don't mess around with humans unless there's a crisis on.

'The *loa*, though... the *loa* are different. The *loa* walk right next to you. They don't spit on you from up in the clouds, not like the angels do. Ever

seen a voodoo ceremony? No, you wouldn't have, a nice C of E girl like you. The way those voodoo people act, you'd think the *loa* were right there in the middle of things, dancing along with the priests and the priestesses. Well, maybe they are.

'The *loa* aren't your average bunch of gods-from-above, that's what I'm saying. They're not untouchable, and they're not infallible. They get drunk and they get angry and they have good days and they have bad days, same as the rest of us. They're real, but they're not-quite-real. They're here, but they're not-quite-here. Ready to get involved at a moment's notice, if you know how to get in touch with them. If you were a voodoo priestess, you'd be calling on the *loa* to help you break into animal-research labs and free the rabbits, or whatever it is you do. You don't worship them, not like you worship gods. You talk to them. Like friends. Like companions. And they talk back.

'No, I haven't forgotten about the Remote. I'm coming to that. Trust me.

'Thing is, the same patterns turn up all over space-time. Don't ask me why, but they do. I mean, I've heard of at least a dozen places where they think your friend the Doctor's the Devil himself, just because their life stories have got so much in common. Anyway, Earth isn't the only planet with voodoo cults, that's the thing you've got to remember.

'You know that already, though, don't you? There was that run-in you and the Doctor had with Faction Paradox, about... how long ago now? Four years? Five? And just a couple of months ago, in San Francisco. When the Faction's people wanted to get their claws into you, but the Doctor wouldn't let them. Not that you'd remember much about that. Let's be honest, you weren't yourself.

'So, you know the way the Faction's people operate. They're Time Lord voodoo cultists, that's what I'm saying. Now bear with me here, because this is where it gets interesting...'

The telephone was ringing again. Llewis responded by sitting on the end of the bed and staring at it.

He couldn't answer it. He couldn't. He'd spent the whole afternoon in the hotel room, reading and rereading the brochures, and there was nothing in his head now except the Cold, the bubbling faces and the snapping mouths. What could he say on the phone, for God's sake? He'd just start gibbering. Screaming, maybe.

But the phone kept ringing.

Llewis stood. Turned his back on the thing. Started pacing the room. The brochures lay scattered across the bed, and he tried his best not to notice them, not to look at the big, glossy pictures. He remembered what had happened in the hallway, Guest standing there with his gun, the Cold eating away the

door. So who'd been staying in the room? Had it really been Ms Bland? And if so why had Guest been attacking her?

Perhaps, thought Llewis, that was the way Guest's company dealt with business partners it didn't approve of. Ms Bland had probably disappeared now, gone for ever, never to be brought back. Llewis wondered if they'd notice her missing at the offices of IPS. They'd never guess. They'd never know. Ever.

God, he'd thought the Chinese would have loved the Cold, but who in the world wouldn't? Word had it that the police in Zaire liked to use electric-shock equipment because shock weapons didn't leave marks, didn't leave evidence their victims could show to the civil-rights people. But the Cold took things to a whole new level. No scars, no victims. And Europe? Now the left-wingers were taking away all the old toys, now the governments were scrapping the nerve-gas agents and talking about getting rid of the old Salamander missiles, the military had to have something new to play with.

Would they notice Llewis gone, back at the office? Probably not. He doubted Peter bloody Morgan would give a toss what happened to him. Maybe one day, in the canteen, someone might say, 'Oh, whatever happened to old Alan?', but that'd be it. If Guest didn't approve of him –

The phone stopped ringing.

This was stupid. Stupid. You couldn't just make your business partners vanish, Cold or no Cold. It wasn't professional. Guest must have had some other reason for what he'd done. Maybe it had been another demonstration. So he'd made a door vanish. So what? He'd probably already paid the hotel for a new one.

So why had Llewis spent the whole day in this stinking bloody hotel room, when he should have been back at the office by now? Why had he been scared to even stick his head out of the door?

Llewis glanced back at the telephone. He contemplated calling reception, asking them if Ms Bland had been seen today. But he decided against it. He'd sound like a basket case. Besides, he didn't know if the Cold could move along telephone wires. He imagined it creeping along the phone line, crawling into his ear...

Stop it, for God's sake. Stop it. Peter bloody Morgan wouldn't panic, not even if the biggest leap forward in the history of security hardware landed in his lap. Peter bloody Morgan would have taken it all in his stride. This is a business deal, Alan James Llewis, so get a grip on yourself. Calm down, then walk straight out of the door and go down to reception. Ask if Mr Guest is still around. Conclude the deal. Forget the horror stories. Nothing strange is going on.

'- need just a hundred and one runs to complete their victory,' said a woman's voice.

Llewis screamed, turned, and knocked over the table by the side of the bed. The woman kept talking, describing the details of some cricket match or other.

The television. The television had switched Itself on. Llewis bent down and put the table back on its legs, carefully resting the telephone on top of the Formica. The newsreader was still talking, but something was wrong with the sound, and the voice was crackling, hissing, sometimes cutting out altogether. Llewis could have sworn the woman was saying one thing with her lips and something else with her actual voice.

The set must have been faulty. Typical, wasn't it? On top of everything else, even the TV didn't work. Interference lines sparked across the picture, brilliant flashes of black and white bursting across the newsreader's face. Snatches of other channels, all cut up and shuffled together.

Llewis reached out for the off switch. His finger was already hovering over the plastic button when he saw it.

Another flash. A big black flash. For a split second, the woman on the screen had too many eyes, and there were other mouths superimposed over her image, full of tiny teeth made out of static. The BBC globe behind her desk was staring out of the picture at him.

Llewis jumped. Took a step back. Fell over, and landed on the bed. When he pulled himself upright again, the faces had gone, but the screen was still flashing, images of people and architecture overlaying each other, interspersed with bursts of meaningless rubbish. Llewis felt his fist clench. His arm shot out, towards the screen, but he stopped himself at the last possible moment.

He'd been about to put his fist through the screen. Instead, he managed to steer his hand towards the buttons. He'd hoped to hit the off switch; instead, his knuckles cracked across the channel buttons, and the set tried to show him all the stations at once, forcing even more images through the screen. Llewis punched out again, hitting one specific button. He didn't know which. Anything would have been better than this.

The flickering stopped. There was a single image on the screen, solid and stable. A woman. A naked woman, lying on a bed. The picture was muddy, covered in scratches of static.

Llewis felt himself relax a little. The hotel's porn channel. He'd ordered it when he'd checked in, covering up his embarrassment by telling himself that every other businessman in the place would be doing the same thing.

It was over. The interference was over. Llewis took a deep breath, and tried to ignore the sweat as it trickled down from his forehead and into his eyes. Fast flashing images were supposed to affect the brain, weren't they? He'd heard the Chinese used it as some kind of psychological torture, one of their little interrogation tricks. Well, that was it. He was under stress. The TV had malfunctioned, and the flickering had made him hallucinate. That was all.

A second figure appeared on the screen, crawling over the end of the woman's bed. A big black man, Llewis noted. The same kind of thing you always saw in these cheap seventies skin movies.

The man's skin was rippling.

Because he wasn't black. Not the way Africans were black. He was dead black, jet-black. The flesh quivered across his head, the eyes and mouths running like liquid down his face, joining a dozen other displaced features on his torso. The black man crept towards the woman, his skin sticking to her body as he touched her, the blackness spreading up her legs, biting into her flesh. The woman thrashed on the bed, her mouth dropping open in either ecstasy or agony, the sound from her throat a scream of pure white noise.

And now there was a new signal coming through. A picture of a tower block, or maybe a TV transmitter. Something tall and sharp, puncturing the sky above a great grey city. The picture was flickering, cut with shots of men playing cricket and fragments of an American sitcom, but Llewis could still make out the basic shapes, the spires and the domes, the walkways and the pylons, slabs of silver concrete huddling under a sky the colour of burning coal. And other images, other scenes from around the city. People with punctured ears. Multicoloured zombies, staring up into the smouldering sky, sucking TV signals into their lungs.

Then the faces came back. They stayed a little longer this time, and there was a definite shape to the blackness. A sphere. And every part of it was alive, the faces trying to gnaw their way through the skin of the sphere, the limbs twisting as they clawed and thrashed, never quite strong enough to break the surface tension. The camera was pulling away from the sphere, until it was nothing but a dot in the darkness. The zombies were still staring up at the sky, but the sky was flickering, turning to static.

'Relative 101 by 4E,' gargled the newscaster.

The telephone rang. Llewis screamed again. This time, he wasn't quite quick enough to stop himself putting his fist through the TV screen.

So.

'Faction Paradox is a Time Lord voodoo cult, and it's just like any other voodoo cult in the universe. It all came together in the middle of a big cultural crisis, just like on Earth. The leaders of the cult got rooted out and hunted down, just like on Earth. And, just like on Earth, the cult started using symbols it knew damn well were going to upset the powers that be. The Time Lords were hung up on immortality, so the Faction started dressing itself up in skulls and dried blood. The Time Lords thought time was sacred, so the Faction did everything it could to mess up the continuum. Setting up paradoxes, punching holes in causality without giving a toss about the consequences. They played

with the time-travel equations the way they wanted to play with them. Are you with me so far?

'Yeah, I know. You must be thinking there's no end to all these ancient-and-terrible-secrets-of-the-Time-Lords, am I right? But it's all window dressing. The Faction's a political group, that's all. It messes around with the timelines for its own reasons. Political terrorism, the cultists call it. This is what you've got to remember. We're not talking about some mythical terror from the dawn of time here. They're terrorists, and they're fanatics, but they're not monsters.

'Never mind that now, though. I'm getting off the point.

'A couple of thousand years ago – in my timeline, anyway – Faction Paradox had a planet all to itself. The Faction had been around for a while, so it had started to get corrupt, the way these groups usually do. It'd got itself involved in some pretty sordid criminal operations around the universe: arms deals, slave deals, that kind of thing. The Faction's people must have thought they were safe. They must have thought the Time Lords were too scared of their blood rites to go after them.

'Wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong. The High Council didn't think much of the way Faction Paradox was peddling time technology to the other species, so it decided to take... what's that phrase? "Extreme measures". By wiping out most of the planet.

'The Faction was almost killed off. The survivors got off the home world just in time, and started setting up new colonies all over space-time, making sure they didn't draw too much attention to themselves this time. They still gave illegal time tech to the natives, but they were more careful about the way they did it. They set up cults, secret societies, that kind of thing. Told their recruits all the nastiest secrets of the Time Lords. Ever heard of the Order of the Rectangle? The Cult of the Black Sun? The Luminus? They were all down to Faction Paradox. I mean, being the Faction, there was always a kind of mystical feel to what they did. They didn't do anything as simple as handing over the blueprints for a TARDIS, God no. They dressed up the procedures a bit, slapped a few rituals on top. They let their followers build time engines that ran on pain, or on blood, or on fear, or...

'Oh yeah. I forgot. You've seen their "technology" first-hand, haven't you? All right, I'll move on.

'Now, one of the planets the Faction found was an Earth colony on the edge of human space. Sometime in the twenty-sixth century, I think. The colony was a long way out from Earth central, so it'd degenerated a bit since it had been set up. The people there had an information-dependent culture, based around some seriously primitive hardware.

'They watched TV a lot, basically. Well, not just TV. The planet was wired into one big medianet, and the colony's political system had already been

pretty much absorbed by it. And of course where there are mass media, there are celebrities. If there was one thing the colony was good at, it was making celebrities out of nothing. I mean, in a society like this one, the faces on the screen were figureheads for the whole civilisation. If one of these people went on the medianet and spoke out in favour of native animal rights, he'd *be* native animal rights. He'd be an instant symbol. These people weren't just famous, you see what I'm getting at? They were the icons that ran the culture. They were like gods.

'Or like *loa*. 'Get it?'

Lewis stared at his fist. His knuckles were covered in tiny little cuts, where the skin had been broken open by the glass, but the damage was... well, minimal. The moment his hand had gone through the set, he'd expected to be electrocuted, or burned at the very least. But no.

He looked up at the set. The glass was in pieces, some of the fragments lying inside the internal workings, some scattered across the carpet at his feet. On the other side of the screen, there was almost nothing. No electronic components, no cathode-ray tube, or whatever it was called. There were a few wires stuck to the inside of the casing, but most of them went nowhere, as if the set had been opened up and disembowelled even before Llewis had smashed it. At the back of the casing, something black and sticky coated the plastic, slowly dripping down on to the shards of glass.

And the phone was still ringing. Llewis reached for the receiver without even thinking about it. He'd spent the day ignoring the thing, but, now he had so many other things taking up his attention, he'd forgotten exactly why.

'Hello?' said the voice at the other end of the line.

'Huuh.' said Llewis.

There was a pause. 'Alan? That you?'

Llewis thought for a moment. Alan. Yes, he was definitely Alan. But the person he was talking to had to be...

'Peter,' he said. 'Peter bloody Morgan.'

Another pause. 'Christ, Alan, what are you doing there? We've been trying to get you all morning. Your wife told us you hadn't even got back from the hotel yet. What the hell's going on?'

Llewis looked back at the TV set. At the crumpled brochures on the bed. At the splinters of glass on the floor.

'Nothing,' he said.

'You talked to Guest?'

'Uhm'

Llewis focused on the splinters. Tiny fragments of the screen, still shining. He realised he could still see pictures moving across the broken glass.

He picked up one of the slivers, and held it in the palm of his hand. The sliver wasn't more than an inch or two across, but he could make out tiny points of light shifting across it. Stars, Llewis realised. Stars, moving against the night sky. And that shadow, there; part of something else? Something crossing the sky? A UFO, maybe?

He wondered if he could stick all the fragments together again. If they'd make a complete picture that way.

A sigh came down the phone line. 'I don't want to get funny with you here, Alan, but you sound like you're wrecked.' Yet another pause. 'Listen, I could come down and sort things out if you've messed up the deal or –'

'No,' Llewis said.

'Only you were supposed to be here this morning -'

'Peter?'

'Yeah?'

Llewis let the shard fall from his hand. It was funny, how calm you could feel once you'd done something stupid like punching out a TV set. 'You remember that man you said you'd met at COPEX last year?' he said. 'The one who said he used to be a soldier. The one who said he used to work for the UN.'

'Oh yeah. I remember him. Mr X-Files.' Peter bloody Morgan made a nasty snorting sound down the phone. 'Why? Don't tell me he's there again.'

'No. What did he tell you? About... aliens?'

'That settles it. You're pissed. I'm coming down.'

'No!' Llewis shook his head, not even caring that nobody could see him doing it. 'Listen. He said... he said the UN had got hold of some kind of alien stuff. Hardware. He said they'd been collecting it since the seventies.'

'Uh-huh. And?'

'You didn't... believe him?'

'Alan –'

Just checking,' Llewis snapped. Then he hung up.

The Cold wasn't possible. That was what he'd thought, when he'd seen the demonstration at COPEX. Not possible, even with the best technology on the planet.

And there'd been a city, on the TV screen. Not a real city. Not a human city. Not even Singapore looked like that.

The phone rang again. Llewis ignored it. It'd just be Peter bloody Morgan, insisting on coming down here to Esher, to take credit for everything Llewis had done. If he'd done anything. Well, Peter bloody Morgan could have it all. The brochures, the hotel room, the Cold, everything. Alan Llewis had

better things to do with his life than this. He was in pretty good shape, for an overweight forty-three-year-old. He'd find something else. Bus driving, there was a good, solid job.

For the first time in almost twenty-four hours, Llewis walked over to the door and opened it. It was time to check out. For good.

Guest was standing on the other side of the threshold, his hand raised, as if preparing to knock. He looked surprised when Llewis opened the door, as did his two companions.

'Mr Llewis,' said Guest. 'We were worried about you.'

'When Faction Paradox found the colony, they were... how can I put it? "Overwhelmed"? I mean, they'd seen TV before, but they'd never seen a culture that media-friendly. Just think. The *loa* are supposed to be all-powerful symbols, remember? They're supposed to be real and not-quite-real at the same time. You can't touch them, but you can pick up signals from them. And can't you say exactly the same thing about TV celebrities? About movie stars? About pop stars? About DJs, even?

'The Faction thought so, anyway. As far as they were concerned, they'd finally found a world on their own wavelength. A world run by the *loa*.

'A world of symbols. Perfect for them.

'So Faction Paradox started worming its way into the planet's media. Interfering with the local transmissions, planting its followers inside the medianet. Soon, the TV *loa* were supporting a whole new agenda. Inside a couple of years, the Faction's message had got into the minds of the whole population. The Faction hoped the Time Lords wouldn't notice, that was the point. The cultists thought that if the natives built their own time machines, without any over-the-counter help, the High Council wouldn't think anything was wrong. Besides, by then the Time Lords had got themselves involved in a war of their own, so they already had a lot on their minds.

'The Faction was wrong. Again. Even though most of the High Council's people were busy fighting the war, they still had agents keeping an eye on things around space-time, looking out for trouble. I mean, if anything, the war had made the Time Lords even dirtier than before. Even more paranoid. When they took action against the colony, it wasn't nice, believe me.

'So, the Faction moved on again. The cultists managed to get a few of their followers off the planet, and whisk them off to safety. Some of the colonists were sent out into space, to find new planets for themselves. But most of them were given a new home by the Faction, somewhere they knew the Time Lords wouldn't think of looking for them.

'The new home was called Anathema. It wasn't the voodoo paradise you'd have expected, though.

'There were hardly any of the original cultists left by now. Hardly any who really knew what Paradox was, or what the cult had been about. After a couple of years, all the real hard-core Faction people moved on again, and left behind a whole culture of zombies – that's another Haitian word, remember – who still carried all the cultural baggage of Faction Paradox around with them, but who had no idea what any of it meant. Anyway, it hardly mattered, not to them. They had their transmissions. That was all they needed.

'That's right. Once upon a time, the Faction thought these people were going to be their frontline troops. *Loa*-driven soldiers who'd bring down the whole High Council of Time Lords one day. But the truth is, even if the Remote still believe in what the Faction taught them, they can't remember why. I mean, they can't even remember how the time-travel rituals are supposed to work.

'That should answer all your questions, for now.

'What?

'You want to know who I am?

'I think it'd be better to ask *where* I am. And where *you* are, come to think of it. Listen to my voice. Anything strike you about it? Anything funny? No? Well, that should tell you something, for a start.

'You're on the threshold. Floating on the skin of the Cold. Stuck in the membrane between one world and another. Let's just say it's nowhere special.

'Me? The Cold? Is that what you think?

'I'm not the Cold. I'm not one of the Faction's people, either. Mind you, I talk through their shadows sometimes. No, don't ask. It's not important. I get everywhere, that's what I'm saying.

'Anyway, they're going to be pulling you out soon. Guest, and Kode, and Compassion, and all the others. You could try asking them about me. 'Maybe you could even ask them what it is they want from Earth. I'm sure that'd surprise you, as well.'

Guest and his friends had moved one of the chairs into the middle of the floor, and strongly hinted that they'd appreciate it if Llewis would sit there and stay still. So Llewis had done. Now he was staring at the door of the hotel room, wondering if he had any hope on Earth of making it out before Guest could shoot him.

Clearly, the answer was no.

'You're not human,' Llewis said, feeling the sweat forming on his vocal cords again.

'Our ancestors were human,' Guest told him. Guest was standing behind Llewis now, not making any kind of body contact, but threatening to put a restraining hand on his shoulder at any moment.

'But you're aliens,' Llewis protested.

'Is that a problem?'

Llewis had no idea how to answer that.

He heard a sharp intake of breath from the other side of the room, and turned his head. Kode was kneeling down in front of the TV set, staring into its workings. Or absence thereof. 'Look at this,' the boy said. 'It's been taken apart from the inside.'

The other alien, the woman with the red hair and the freckles, joined Kode at the end of the bed. 'It's the signals. They've started working over the local systems.'

Kode looked dubious. 'Whose signals?' Our signals?'

'Obviously.'

'The transmissions from Anathema,' said Guest. 'Our transmitters use block-transfer formulae. All part of the Faction's system. Some of the codes must have been sent through to Earth.'

Kode bit his lip. 'Messing up the local receivers? Is that possible?' The woman opened her mouth, so Kode kept talking to shut her up. 'I know, I know. Obviously. You think this is going to happen to all the sets around here?'

'It's possible,' said the woman. Then she put her hand to her ear. 'The longer we stay on this planet, the worse it's going to get.'

'Not important,' Guest told her.

'It'll attract attention.'

'Good.'

Llewis remembered the images he'd seen on the screen, the zombie people swarming through the streets of their city. They'd all had wireless parts through their earlobes, the same as these three had. Receivers, the woman had said. What that had to do with mutant television sets, Llewis didn't know, and he didn't precisely care.

'We are, in a sense, aliens,' Guest announced, turning his attention back to Llewis. 'However, interracial transactions are an inevitable consequence of a workable free-trade network, and therefore should not be shied away from.'

Llewis heard a faint buzzing when Guest said that, and he guessed it was coming from the man's receiver. The words hadn't sounded like Guest's own, so Llewis wondered if the sentence had been transmitted to him from outer space. Or maybe even from somewhere on Earth. It sounded like the kind of thing someone on *Question Time* might have said.

Maybe that was it. Maybe this was the media's revenge. Maybe the aliens were being used as mouthpieces for all the political gibberish the human race had pumped out across the airwaves over the years. Taking the double-talk and half-truths, and spewing them all back at their hapless victims.

Maybe he should just ask them what they wanted.

So he did.

'We want to supply you,' said Guest. 'We want to give you the Cold. Whoever has the Cold can govern the security of the free world. I use the word "free" loosely, of course. We were going to supply the UN, but –'

'We changed our minds,' Kode cut in. 'We thought about supplying one of your other nations as well –'

Guest held up a hand to silence him. 'The fact is, the Cold represents an enormous technical advantage. We've already moved a shipment to our warehouse facility. Ready to be sold off on Earth.'

'Why?' asked Llewis, hoping he still sounded reasonably lucid. 'Why do you want us to have it? What's in it for you?'

'It's about history,' said Kode.

The woman glared at him. So Kode shut up.

'We have an interest in the future development of this planet,' Guest explained. 'Needless to say, our motives are... political.'

'And you want me to help you?' Llewis squawked.

'That is the reason you came here, Mr Llewis. To do business with us.'

'It won't work!' Llewis gabbled. 'Nobody's going to want to deal with you! We can't do business with aliens. If anybody found out –'

'Nobody's going to find out,' the woman said. 'We've done our homework. A few years ago  $\mbox{-}$ 

'Done our what?' said Kode.

'Homework. It's an expression.'

'Oh.'

The woman rolled her eyes. 'A few years ago, your Prime Minister negotiated a sales pact with Saudi Arabia. An arms deal. According to our sources, a few thousand pieces of torture equipment were sold off, as well as legal weaponry. But the terms of this deal are an official... how d'you put it? "State secret"? Nobody knows, because the government doesn't let anybody know.'

'But aliens -' Llewis began.

'The same principle applies,' Guest said. 'Your DTI wants to facilitate all forms of trade, provided your country has the advantage. This is how we're going to export the Cold. Covertly. With the aid of the DTI, the Ministry of Defence and any other contacts we can make. The Ministry knows how to keep secrets. It's apparently quite good at making threats against people who ask difficult questions. Journalists, for example.'

'Shall I go down and start the retrieval?' Kode asked. Everybody ignored him.

'If anyone asks, deny everything,' the woman told Llewis. 'Half the companies at COPEX claim they don't make the equipment they obviously make. Doesn't matter whether it's electric batons or grenade launchers. That's what the man from British Aerospace told us, anyway. And the man from ICL. They've even got the audits to prove it. Remember, your DTI isn't answerable to anybody. Our contacts don't have to tell anyone anything. Not even if there are aliens involved.'

Guest finally clamped his hand on Llewis's shoulder. Llewis didn't even bother to jump.

'Now, Mr Llewis,' Guest said. 'Shall we get down to business? Or would you like us to repair your television first? I know how important your signals must be to you.'

### 10

# Nowhere is Better than Here [at last, Anathema]

Scene 17. The Attic of Sam's House

[Flashback, black and white. Hearing the crashing sounds from downstairs, SAM's FRIENDS jump to their feet. Only SAM remains seated, a confused look on her face.]

FRIEND 3: Bloody hell.

FRIEND 2: No way was that her dad.

FRLEND 1: Maybe he's gone off his nut. Maybe he knows what we're doing.

SAM: I'm in the Cold.

FRIEND 1 [panicking]: Shut her up!

FRIEND 2: Shh. You'll scare her. [To SAM.] Sam? It's all right. Everything's going to be all right.

[FRIEND 1, meanwhile, is busy opening the hatch that leads down out of the attic.]

FRIEND 3: Where are you going?

FRIEND 1: Out. She's losing it, look at her. I don't want to be around when she goes schizo on us.

SAM: Sarah. I mustn't see her. If I see her, I'll recognise her when I meet her yesterday. There'll be a paradox. Oh God. The Remote are part of the Faction, aren't they?

FRIEND 1: See what I mean?

SAM [suddenly snapping]: Don't-open-the-hatch!

#### [Fade out.]

Sam reached for her neck, and clawed at the skin there, but she couldn't feel anything. No receiver, no wodge of sticky tape attaching any alien hardware to her face.

She was almost disappointed.

The alien woman – Compassion – was standing in front of her again, framed against the light from the other side of the doorway. The light was red, and great stripes of shadow kept falling across the landscape outside, but Compassion was blocking Sam's view, so she couldn't see exactly what was going on out there. She assumed she was back in the hotel room, although the scenery seemed to have changed. A side effect of the hallucinations, maybe. Certainly, everything around here looked like another set.

When she'd first come to her senses, she'd assumed there were no walls around her, but now she realised there was actually one wall, smooth and curved and greyish-white, with no visible corners. She was inside a small dome, then, the doorway in front of her being the only obvious exit. Apart from the plastic chair under her backside, the only furnishings were the pieces of hi-tech hardware that had been set up around her. There were half a dozen of them arranged in a ring, each one a kind of bent silver claw, with the sharpened tips pointing towards the chair. The claws were smooth, each one moulded out of a single piece of whatever it was, almost looking as if they'd torn through the floor from somewhere on the next level down and were now trying to form a fist around her. They were more like sculptures than pieces of technology.

Sam kept prodding the skin around her throat, just in case. Compassion was looking at her in a funny way.

'Have you lost something?' the woman asked.

'The receiver,' Sam mumbled. 'Where is it?'

Compassion felt her own ear, apparently just a reflex action. 'What receiver?'

'I was in that place again. Hallucinating.'

Compassion nodded. 'I just retrieved you. You can pick up all kinds of signals, when you're moving between here and the skin of the Cold. It's normal.'

Sam narrowed her eyes. 'There's no receiver?'

'Not for you, no. We didn't think it was worth the bother. You don't react to it the same way we do. We're going to have to find another way to get what we want.'

Sam lowered her hand, satisfied. Then she realised.

Her hands weren't tied. Her arms were free, and she wasn't attached to the chair. Furthermore, Compassion seemed to be the only person around. Were

they getting overconfident, or had they just got their signals mixed up?

'And what is it you want?' Sam asked, trying to sound casual.

Compassion had to think about that. Or maybe she was just listening to the receiver. 'To start with, Guest just wanted to know if you'd come to stop us,' she said. 'He wanted to understand you properly. You know. Threat evaluation. But things have got a bit beyond that now.'

'Oh ves?'

'Yes. He wants to take you to the main transmitter.'

Compassion had put quite a lot of emphasis on those last two words, which didn't strike Sam as a good omen. The main transmitter was presumably where the Remote got their instructions from, the thing that beamed out the signals for the aliens' receivers. Promising, thought Sam. But then, if she'd started picking up signals even without a receiver, what was the main transmitter going to do to her? Would she still have a will of her own, if she got that close to it?

Probably not. Right. That meant she had to make a break for it. Take a look at the transmitter eventually, but on her own terms. Preferably from a distance.

'You're a first-generation product of an alien media-aware culture,' Compassion recited, sounding as though she hadn't rehearsed the sentence quite well enough. 'Apparently, there's still some useful cultural material in your head. Ideas we've lost over the generations. Guest thinks you might be able to add something to the transmissions.' She shrugged. 'Doesn't sound very likely to me. But we might as well try it, see what happens.'

'Right,' said Sam, nodding wisely. Then she threw herself out of the chair and lunged for the door.

As she'd hoped, Compassion was caught off-guard. The woman reached for the vial around her neck, but Sam slammed into her shoulder before she could flick it open. Sam let the momentum carry her forward, her body stumbling over the threshold, out into the red light on the other side of the doorway.

When she stopped moving, she found herself staring down at a city. A city whose highest buildings were a good fifty metres below her.

Sam froze. She stood there, still as a statue, and let her senses catch up with her body. She couldn't see the ground. Somewhere, a long way down, there was an expanse of pure black – sure sign of a bottomless abyss, that – but most of the blackness was covered over with buildings. Thousands upon thousands of buildings. Not little buildings, not houses that had been piled together over generations, but great big statements, vast works of modern architecture, crisscrossing one another in a way that suggested they'd all been designed at the same time.

Sam raised her eyes a little, to take in the cityscape ahead of her. The city stretched out as far as the eye could see, before vanishing over a horizon that seemed much too close for comfort. And everything was grey. Not dull, office-block grey, but a kind of bright, clean, futuristic grey. Space-Lego grey, so the angles and curves of the buildings almost sparkled in the deep-red light. Sam found herself focusing on the tallest of the structures, the great towers that were scattered across the city, sheer spikes of metal pushing themselves up out of the invisible ground. She remembered old movies she'd seen on BBC 2 before she'd left Earth, adventure stories made by the RKO film company, just like the voice in the Cold had said. She remembered the RKO logo, a stylised image of a transmitter tower, its peak burning with lightning. And she remembered the good old BBC news logo, too, another spire-transmitter, concentric circles around its tip to symbolise the TV transmissions it sent out into the air.

That was it. That was what the towers were like. Like abstract shapes, like icons, not like real pieces of architecture at all. They were too smooth for that, too free of dirt and detail. And the other structures around them, the low pyramids and the squat tower blocks, were the same. There were buildings that looked like domes, but were actually stacks of pale circular plates hundreds of metres across, each level slightly smaller than the one below it. There were cylinder-shaped blocks of housing, ringed by wide, flat, featureless balconies, cartoon radar dishes rotating on every rooftop. There were walkways strung between some of the towers, vast roadways that arced through the air, not supported by any visible pylons. Some of the structures evedapped the structures below them, making parts of the city look like enormous rock gardens, full of steps and valleys.

The city looked alien, but not for the usual reasons. Not because the architecture was vastly different from that of Earth, or because the buildings had been designed for anything other than humanoids. It was alien because it seemed to have been poured straight out of someone's head, without needing to be crafted by their hands at any point point. The cityscape made Sam uncomfortable, itchy, the same way she would have felt itchy if a complete stranger had sat next to her on a bus and started telling her all his dirty secrets. After the first few seconds, she realised it wasn't grey at all: there were a million colours on display, but the buildings were so precisely placed that the tones blended into each other, a kind of perfect uniformity created out of what should have been mindless, reckless individuality.

Then there was the sky. The sky was red – blood-splatter red, not sunset red – but smudged with patches of black, dirty great fingerprints of smoke and thunder. And some of the clouds were moving, or at least, that was how it looked. But Sam was sure she was actually seeing things moving around

inside the clouds, artificial shapes circling in the air overhead, making the whole sky come alive. Enormous shadows fell across the shine of the city, so you got the impression that the buildings were undulating, the surface rippling with black.

A seasick city. A city that shouldn't have existed, that looked like a deliberate insult to conventional architecture, to every accepted law of social engineering.

Anathema.

And Sam was looking down on it all.

Looking down.

Her eyes finally settled on another shape, some hundreds of metres away. A floating platform, hanging in the air close to one of the transmitter towers. A disc of transparent plastic, topped by an off-white dome, although it was impossible to get any idea of scale from here.

A floating platform. A dome on a disc. Sam remembered the shape of the room she'd come from, and slowly, very slowly, her consciousness figured out where she was standing.

She was on another one of the discs. She'd run straight out of the doorway and up to the edge of the platform, and now she was balanced on the brink, her heels on the smooth see-through surface, her toes treading thin air.

The moment she realised it, her balance went.

She tried swinging her arms. It didn't help. If anything, it made things worse. Now she was looking down, straight down, past the roadways and walkways, into the sheer black at the bottom of the city. She could see people on the pathways, little multicoloured splodges, none of them looking up, none of them even suspecting that a twenty-something alien was about to divebomb them from a great height.

In that moment of pure panic, Sam saw the pattern in the buildings underneath her. She found herself thinking of the concentric circles again, the rings around the BBC mast. She could see the same circles now, worked into the architecture, like ripples around the transmitter towers. As if the towers had sent out pulses, and the pulses had hardened into buildings.

Perhaps they had. Over centuries, probably. The towers had sent out their signals, and the people of the Remote had responded, marking out the places where they'd heard the transmissions, until a whole city had developed. No wonder it looked like it had all come out of the same head.

But this hardly seemed important, bearing in mind that she was about to fall to her death several hundred metres below.

Sam's heels lost their grip on the edge of the platform. She slipped, towards the drop, and she found herself wondering whether there'd be some kind of antigravity device to rescue her, maybe a protective force field around the platform. Somehow, though, that didn't seem to be the style of the Remote at all.

Just as she slid over the edge, she felt Compassion grab her collar. Sam wasn't sure exactly what happened next. In retrospect, she seemed to remember thrashing her arms and legs around, searching for something to grab on to. But the next fully conscious memory she had was of sitting by the dome's doorway, curled up into a ball. Compassion stood nearby, alarmingly close to the edge, with her arms folded.

'Where were you going?' Compassion asked.

She wasn't being sarcastic, Sam realised. She really wanted to know. Sadly, Sam didn't have a proper answer.

'This is is Anathema,' Sam said. 'This is your home, isn't it?'

'We weren't sure whether we should retrieve you here or back on Earth,' Compassion told her. 'We decided you could probably do less damage here. And obviously, this is where the main transmitter is.'

'How did I get here from the Cold? Is it some kind of transmat?'

Compassion looked confused, but only for a moment. 'We thought you were from Earth,' she said. 'You're not supposed to have transmats on Earth. Not in the twentieth century.'

'We don't. But we've got science fiction.'

'Oh.'

'Am I still in my own time? I mean, is this still 1996?'

Compassion nodded. 'We can't time travel. We haven't been able to for two hundred years. Didn't Kode tell you?'

Sam stood, then risked another look out across the city. The shadows were still rippling over the buildings, making her feel slightly ill. Of course, her stomach still thought it was dangling off the edge of the platform, so that wasn't surprising. A particularly heavy shadow passed overhead, and Sam looked up, just in time to see something flat, black and triangular move across the sky. There were more of the shapes up in the clouds, circling like vultures.

'Ships?' she asked.

'Obviously,' said Compassion.

Sam studied the cityscape again. Now she was looking for them, she could see plenty of moving things. Vehicles that hovered between buildings, floating discs that transported the tiny speck-inhabitants from one part of Anathema to another. Sam thought of those old SF magazines from the 1940s, where the artists predicted what life would be like in the year 1990 by painting flying cars and jet parks all over the place. The Remote had been Earth colonists once, the voice in the Cold had told her. Well, that made sense. Anathema looked like a computerised, smoothed-down model of a colony planet. A great big Scalextric set that people could live in.

But the black ships were different. Not like the other vehicles. Big. Predatory. Scary.

'They're fighters,' Sam concluded. 'Why do you need fighters over your city?'

Clearly, Compassion didn't really understand the question. 'They're ours,' she said. 'Part of Anathema.'

'Yeah, but what are they for? Who are they fighting?' "Fighting"?'

Sam clenched her teeth. 'If you've got fighters, they must be fighting something. Or getting ready to fight something. What I'm asking is –'

She never finished the question. It didn't seem worth the bother. There was a great wave of noise from somewhere off on the horizon, a plume of fire erupting out of the guts of the city and leaping at least two hundred metres into the air. Sam watched the flame scrape the sky, burning a hole in the clouds. There were triangular ships circling the area of the explosion, nothing more than seagull shapes in the distance. After a while, the flames died down. The ships seemed to get bored, and drifted away.

'Let's go back inside,' said Compassion.

Sam didn't sit down. She didn't trust the plastic chair, even if it didn't immediately seem to be fitted with any arm clamps. Instead, she circled the dome, inspecting the hardware. Not that she was likely to learn anything about it that way, but she felt she had to make an effort.

Compassion opened up a panel in the dome's interior wall, the surface sliding to one side at her touch, and revealing a set of cute multicoloured controls behind the grey. The control panel was a mess, like everything else in Anathema, but an incredibly well-ordered mess. The woman seemed to be punching a series of commands into a keypad, although for all Sam knew she could have been pressing buttons just for a laugh.

'That explosion,' Sam prompted.

'What about it?' murmured Compassion.

'Those fighters. You said they were yours. So why are they attacking the city?'

Compassion stopped punching, and looked over her shoulder. Her eyebrows were knotted together in the middle of her face. 'Because that's what they do. Obviously.'

'Stop saying "obviously". Nothing here's obvious.'

'Isn't it?'

'Not to me. Where I come from, the military don't generally blow up their own territory. Not deliberately, anyhow.'

'Only because they don't have to. Where you come from, there's more than one nation-state, isn't there? More than one cultural objective. You can have wars.'

'You're jealous of that? That we can fight each other?'

Now Compassion looked really confused. 'Of course not. Wars are pointless. Uncontrollable. Our way's much better.'

Just blowing up your own people every now and then, you mean?'

'What the fighters do is their business. Besides, the buildings that got blown up may not have been inhabited, for all we know. There are plenty of unoccupied areas in the city. There aren't more than a couple of thousand of us, remember.'

Sam wondered how she was supposed to remember something she'd never been told. Clearly, this was turning out to be one of those Alice-in-Wonderland days. 'But the buildings *may* have been inhabited. People *may* have been killed.'

'It's possible.'

'And you don't care about that? It doesn't bother you?'

Compassion sighed, and turned to face Sam head-on. 'I thought we'd cleared this up this back on Earth. When you had the receiver pinned to your neck. You can't care about every single one of your people, you'd go mad. You can only care about the ones you like the look of.'

'Bollocks,' said Sam.

'You're a political activist?'

'Sort of.' Sam wondered if the woman was trying to trip her up again. 'I'm on Amnesty International's mailing list. Not that I expect that to mean anything to you.'

'So you object to political torture? You object to alien governments killing off their opponents?'

'Well, yeah.'

'People die all the time,' Compassion pointed out. 'It's like I said before. Traffic accidents. But there's no organisation in your entire nation-state that believes in banning traffic. I know. I checked. You care about foreigners being tortured to death, because the image of them being tortured to death makes you uncomfortable.'

'Accidents are accidents. Not deliberate torture.'

'Driving's deliberate. There's one inevitable consequence of it, but people do it anyway, even though it isn't necessary. Isn't that right?'

'But people who drive aren't trying to kill anyone.'

'So that makes it all right? It's acceptable to kill millions of human beings as a side effect, but it's not acceptable to hurt a few dozen on purpose?'

Again, that chilling absence of sarcasm. 'You're missing the point,' said Sam. 'The point is, at least I care.'

'Only selectively. The images are everything. The signals you pick up are all that matter.' Compassion turned back to the controls. 'Like I said. What the fighter pilots do is their business. They act on the signals, like anyone else. It's no different from the way you do things on Earth. It's just as random. We're not hypocrites, that's all.'

'But it's completely pointless,' Sam protested. 'Why do they do it, if they don't have to?'

'Because things need to be destroyed. Violence is part of the culture. It's part of the media.'

'That's insane,' said Sam.

Compassion had evidently finished giving the floating platform its orders, because the dome shook and clearly began to descend, presumably navigating a path down towards the city. 'You seem to be under the impression that you need peace to build a utopia,' Compassion told her. 'Not true.'

'Where are we going?' Sam asked, hoping the change of subject wouldn't be too obvious.

'We're heading for the main transmitter tower,' Compassion said. 'We use the platforms for retrieval. It's hard getting anything out of the skin at ground level. Too much interference from the media.'

Sam thought about that. If they were getting closer to the source of the Remote's signals, would Compassion's behaviour change? Was there maybe some way of messing around with the signals, getting her too confused to act?

But even if there was, what good would it do? Where could Sam go, on this planet, or whatever it was? No Doctor, no TARDIS. No way back, except for the Cold.

Now, there was an idea.

'The skin,' Sam said. 'When I was in the skin of the Cold, I heard a voice. Was that the Cold talking? It told me all about the Remote. About the Faction.'

Compassion looked startled for a moment, but recovered herself quickly. 'Background noise. The Cold doesn't have a voice.'

Background noise? 'No, it can't have been. It was talking to me.'

'Your subconscious must have been making sense of the signals. Just like it did when you had the receiver on.'

'You mean, that was my voice? I was talking to myself?' Sam thought about the way the voice had spoken to her, the accent it had used. Suddenly, it clicked.

'Mark Lessing,' she muttered. 'I should've remembered.'

The dome shook again. It was different this time, though. The platform wobbled alarmingly, and it didn't right itself once the tremor was over. Sam

found herself sliding back towards the dome wall.

Compassion seemed disturbed by this. She paused for a moment, probably listening to her receiver, then turned towards the door and crossed the dome, clutching the frame to stop herself keeling over. She stopped in the doorway, staring at something in the far distance. Sam made her way across the sloping floor, and looked over her shoulder.

It took her eyes a few moments to adjust to the light outside the dome. Then she focused on three dark shapes, framed against one of the brighter patches of sky. Three of the fighters, at first tearing off in the opposite direction, but then looping, until they were facing the platform.

They'd flown right past the dome. The last shake had been the slipstream, or whatever you called it, the fighters' engines tearing up the air around the platform. Now they were heading back this way.

'What -' Sam began.

But Compassion was already turning, pushing her to one side. There was a blank look in the woman's eyes, as if she were suddenly acting on new instructions, instructions that had priority over everything else. Sam fell back against the wall, then watched as Compassion strode towards the open panel, and started punching at the controls again.

Sam peered back out through the doorway. The fighters were definitely getting closer, their trajectory slightly lower this time. On a collision course with the dome.

They were going to crash. Just for the hell of it.

'They can't do that,' Sam shouted. 'The Cold must want both of us alive. Why's it telling the fighter pilots to attack us?'

'Don't be stupid,' Compassion snapped. 'The Cold doesn't tell anyone to do anything. Haven't you figured that out yet?'

Sam heard the air cracking. The sound of flight, not quite supersonic, but still fast enough to give the atmosphere a few surprises.

The next thing she heard was the hissing of a badly tuned TV set. At the centre of the dome, surrounded by the ring of silver machinery, a doorway was opening up in the air. A rectangle of static, flickering with random images, presumably interference from the transmitters. The dome was still listing to one side, and the edges of the rectangle kept shifting, throwing the shape out of perspective.

Suddenly, Compassion was holding Sam's hand, dragging her into the middle of the floor. Sam caught sight of the doorway, and saw the three black shapes ripping up the red-and-black sky, their engines making the platform tremble under her feet before they were even anywhere near the dome. She let Compassion throw her across the room, then felt herself tumble forward, towards the doorway. The floor tilted again, so she had to grab one of the

silver claws to stay on her feet. The claw twisted slightly in her grip, and the rectangle flickered, turning into something that Sam vaguely remembered she was supposed to think of as a 'rhombus'.

GCSE maths. Nothing like it, was there?

'Bad luck,' she heard Compassion say, over the background noise of hissing static and quivering architecture. Just bad luck. That's all.'

The next thing Sam knew, something was pushing against her spine, propelling her forward, into the static. Her skin buzzed as it touched the surface of the doorway, every cell splitting into three component parts, one red, one blue, one green.

Look Mum, she thought, as she disintegrated. I'm on television.

I am television.

Scene 18. Behind the Bike Sheds

[Flashback, black and white. SAM's point of view. MARK LESSING still stands in front of her, leering.]

MARK: You're what?

SAM: I'm television. I'm being... um...

MARK: Transmitted?

SAM: Yeah. Yeah, that's it. [She thinks for a moment.] Am I going back to the Cold?

MARK: Nah. Not this time. Compassion punched a new program into the controls. You're being beamed straight down to the surface of Anathema.

SAM: They can do that?

MARK: Only if they're feeling suicidal. Too much interference from the transmitters. You try transmitting yourself anywhere near the surface, there's a risk of ending up scrambled. Let's face it, it's an emergency measure. Then again, you should be used to being scrambled.

SAM: Meaning?

MARK: You don't remember? The one and only time you got off your box. On what I'm about to sell you. You were up in the attic, and...

SAM: And?

MARK: Interference. You're there right now, staring into space while all your friends make a run for it. And there's an Ogron in your kitchen. And then there's James Stewart.

SAM: What's James Stewart got to do with anything?.

MARK: Nothing. Yet. Now, d'you want to buy some of this stuff off me, or not?

SAM: You're not really Mark Lessing at all, are you?

MARK: How d'you know?

SAM: You're mainly using complete sentences. And you're not slobbering.

MARK: Oh yeah.

When Sam came back out of the static, she found herself back in the dome. It took her a while to work out that it was actually a different dome, identical in every detail. Not that there were many details for it to be identical in, mind you.

Compassion stood just outside the doorway, looking up into the sky. Sam followed her out of the building, the static window folding itself up into nothing behind her with a little 'pfop' sound.

As soon as she stepped outside, she knew they'd reached the surface of Anathema. They stood at the edge of an enormous circular plaza, paved with flawless slabs of pale subluminous blue, the perimeter ringed by identical white domes. There were people crossing the plaza, moving between the domes, stepping on to walkways that curled around the edge of the area and linked up with the wider roadways overhead. The natives' clothes were just like the buildings. All different colours, all different styles, but somehow coordinated, products of the same basic culture.

Products of the same mass mind, maybe. Different, but inspired by the same transmissions.

So was this the way Earth looked, to an outsider?

Sam realised that, like Compassion, a lot of the passers-by were gawping up at the sky. She raised her head, and was just in time to see the explosion, as the first of the fighters collided with the platform a hundred metres overhead and about the same distance across the city. The fighter wasn't even scratched. The ships hung around for a while, circling the area until the wreckage had fallen to the ground, then shot away. Sam wondered if the wreckage would hit anybody, and if anyone would care if it did.

A few of the onlookers politely applauded.

'It's not possible,' said Sam.

Compassion's head snapped around to cover her. Her eyes were still blank, and she wasn't blinking half as much as she was supposed to be.

'Everything's random,' Sam told her. 'You can't have built a city this complex. Not if the signals are as meaningless as you say they are.'

'We're only human,' said Compassion. 'We've got the same drives as anyone else. We need to live. To form communities. It's all part of our neural hardware. You can't be that different from us.'

'But the transmissions -'

'Tell us how to develop our culture. You only need a few basic guidelines to build a civilisation.'

'Ants build anthills,' Sam muttered.

Which was when Compassion hit her.

It wasn't a proper punch, not one designed to do damage. More like a big slap. Sam wasn't quite quick enough to stop it connecting. Her face stung, and she staggered backward, back into the dome.

When she looked up, Compassion was just standing there staring at her. The woman didn't look as though she knew why she'd done it. She didn't look as though she cared, either.

'We'd better go,' Compassion said. It sounded like the closest thing to an apology she could manage. Then she turned her back on Sam, and started to walk away across the plaza.

She made no attempt to drag Sam along. There were no guards here, no security measures. Sam wondered what would happen if she ignored Compassion's request, and just went off on her own. Nothing at all, probably. She'd get lost, and that would be about the size of it. She'd wander around Anathema until something decided to kill her, purely on a whim.

So Sam followed. Maybe, she thought, this was how the Remote felt all the time. No coercion, no pressure. Simply following whatever leads they were given, because there was nothing better to do.

She might have expected more from a culture that thought war was a colossal waste of time. But maybe that would have been overly optimistic.

## Travels with Fitz (V)

The Faction Paradox Warship, 2594

All initiations were basically the same. Fitz had read enough of the literature to know the essentials, whether you were dealing with Freemasons, blackmagic cults or the Chinese Red Army. They put you in a dark place, and they took away all traces of civilisation, all contact with the rest of the human race. They wore masks, or they vanished from sight, and they left you alone in the blackness with whatever gods they were trying to sell you. They stripped you down, took away all your psychological armour, your clothes and your friends and your dignity.

Then they tried to scare the living crap out of you. Usually by pretending to kill you, if Fitz's research was anything to go by. They stabbed you in the heart with a rubber knife, or shot you in the head with blanks, or pumped you full of drugs and let you imagine yourself being eaten alive by the space pixies. They usually said it was symbolic, a ritual to make the initiate (victim?) feel as if he'd been born again. That was the polite way of putting it, anyway. On the other hand, it also left a neat little doorway straight into your brain, so anyone who wanted to brainwash you could slip in while you were distracted and vulnerable. Mao Tse-tung or the Lord of the Pit, the rules were pretty much the same.

When Mother Mathara had offered to initiate Fitz into the lower Orders of Faction Paradox, he'd spent a long time thinking things through before he'd agreed. The way he'd seen it, he knew all the tricks the Faction was likely to use on him. That meant he could go through the initiation forewarned and forearmed. The spirits of Paradox weren't real; the Doctor had told him that back in San Francisco, when he'd met the Faction for the first time. If the spirits weren't real, they couldn't have any power over him. Right?

But the initiation wasn't going quite the way he'd expected. It was all very well saying you didn't have anything to be scared of, but when you were on your knees in the middle of a room that had been built entirely out of skulls, with your hands tied behind your back and your ears full of a buzzing noise that seemed to come from somewhere inside your own head, you were bound to sweat a bit. The Faction's people had vanished as soon as he'd been led into the shrine, but for some reason he could still see their shadows, dancing in the light from the big black candles.

This is the place where the shadows are kept, thought Fitz. When the Faction's people offend time to such a degree that their shadows leave them, this is the shrine where the silhouettes make new homes for themselves. The Faction probably keeps its victims' shadows here, as well.

Was he just making this up off the top of his head, or what?

'Nothing wrong with making things up,' one of the shadows told him. It didn't have a voice of its own, obviously, so it talked through the receiver that Mathara had planted in Fitz's ear. 'Creativity is what makes the rituals work.'

Fitz opened his mouth to speak, then realised he didn't have to. Not with the shadow communicating through the receiver.

Am I hallucinating? he asked.

The shadow shrugged. Its hair was in curls, Fitz saw, and they bobbed around its head when it moved. 'Depends on your definition. Are you "hallucinating" when you watch television?'

Whatever, said Fitz.

'You're tuning in to the Faction's signals now,' the shadow explained. It gestured towards the skulls that lined the room, and when it stretched its arms it started to blend in with the other shadows hanging around the place. 'People criticise the Faction's style, do you know that? They say it's childish. They say it's the work of sad little time-wasters, trying to look all tough and scary. Oh, they're always ready to mock, these people. Then what do they do? They spend their lives hanging around with fluffy kittens and emotionally retarded schoolchildren. As if that's somehow morally superior to hanging around in bone yards. But I'm just a shadow, so what do I know?'

What's your point? asked Fitz. By this stage, he was starting to forget the fact that he was meant to be resisting the initiation.

'The Faction knows one thing for sure,' the shadow told him, and it folded its hands in front of its face when it spoke, so they vanished into the darkness of its body. 'The Faction knows that everything's aesthetics. There's no path of righteousness. There's no politics, apart from show politics. Sarah Jane Smith cried when she saw *ET*, but two hundred thousand people died in East Timor and it was all she could do to go "tsch". Aesthetics is how the Faction keeps control.'

'Who's Sarah Jane Smith?' asked Fitz, forgetting not to ask the question out loud.

The shadow ignored the question. 'You've made a mistake,' it said. 'You told yourself the spirits weren't real. You told yourself they couldn't touch you. You thought you could ride out the initiation, so you could keep an eye on the Faction from the inside. Isn't that right?'

That was when Fitz felt it. The fear was coming, building up inside his receiver, a kind of fear that he knew damn well had to end with a knife in

his ribs or a bullet in his head. He knew it wasn't real, but it didn't matter. The darkness was coming, and the shadows were moving aside for it, letting it into the shrine from its own realm of Paradox.

'The spirits aren't real,' the shadow went on, whispering through the static in Fitz's ear. 'But then, television isn't real either. That doesn't mean it can't change you.'

With that, the shadow shrank back into the darkness. Fitz stared at the patch of floor where it had been, and saw that there was a new silhouette there, the shadow of something solid, something that was standing right in front of him in the shrine. The last thing Fitz noticed, before the fear exploded in his ears and he looked up at the thing's face, was that the new shadow had only one arm.

### 11

# One Girl and Her Ogron (the beginning of a beautiful friendship)

Lost Boy pointed at the human woman. He couldn't read the expression on her face, but her eyes were open wide, and her jaw was dropping. Lost Boy wondered if that meant she was getting ready to bite him.

'Woman,' he said, trying to keep his voice low, so as not to disturb any of the other humans in the settlement. 'Want woman. Now.'

Lost Boy wasn't sure what the function of this place was. The floor was smooth, as floors tended to be in human places, and littered with furnishings that looked much too small to be comfortable. There were filings pinned to the walls, religious etchings and lunar charts Lost Boy didn't recognise. He'd pounded the table when he'd come through the door, to get the full attention of the human man, as was the custom. Oddly, the table had snapped. He wondered how anybody on this planet could hold a proper conversation when the tables were so fragile.

The woman edged away from him, towards the door on the other side of the room, but the man made no attempt to protect her, as Lost Boy had expected. The man's face was covered in little grey tufts of hair, though, so he was probably sick.

'You don't know what you're doing,' the woman said.

The man looked at her, then at Lost Boy, then at the metal sticks that hung on the wall next to the window. Lost Boy realised that some of them had been sharpened, so the man must have been searching for a weapon.

That wasn't acceptable. Lost Boy strode over to him, grabbed his arm, and snapped it. Surprisingly, the human made no attempt to snap Lost Boy's arm in return, as was traditional when you wanted a mutual disarmament. Instead, he just sank to the floor, making strange whimpering noises.

'Leave him alone,' the woman barked. 'We're not supposed to be here. The girl... the girl you know... she doesn't exist yet. She's from another time.'

Lost Boy didn't understand any of this. So he just grunted. 'Don't want girl. Want woman.'

The woman stopped backing away. 'You want me? You came here just for me?'

'Followed you. Found your machine.'

'My...?' The woman's eyes opened even wider. Lost Boy wasn't sure whether they were supposed to do that. 'The Land Rover? The, um, vehicle?'

'Used Remote's computer. Stole records from...' Lost Boy rolled the words around his head for a few moments before he said them out loud. '... Vehicle Registry Office. Followed you. From your house. Followed you here.'

'You can't have done! We'd have seen you -'

Lost Boy proudly puffed out his chest. 'Prize tracker. Won many skins, for following. Never been seen.'

'But you're an Ogron! And this is London, for heaven's sake!'

'Prize tracker.'

The woman was shaking her head, for no good reason. 'Wait a minute. If you tracked me back to my house, why didn't you come for me earlier? When I was at home?'

Lost Boy was surprised by that. What kind of animal did she think he was? 'Your home is your home,' he said, trying not to sound too offended. 'Not intrude. Bad. Wait until you come here. Come to human meeting place.'

'This isn't a meeting place! This is just someone else's house, you idiot!' 'Who are you people?' the man on the floor wheezed.

He was still clutching his broken arm, and rolling around on his back as if he had some kind of fever. When he spoke, the woman seemed to remember he was there, so she took a step towards him, then knelt down by his side.

'You're Mr Jones?' she asked him. 'Sam's father?'

The man stared up at her. Lost Boy knew the look on his face. He was a man who didn't want to tell anybody anything.

'Of course you are,' the woman went on. 'Sorry. Listen. It's very important Sam doesn't find out about this. It's not time. I mean... look. Sam's upstairs. I think she's on drugs, so she's probably quite vulnerable right now. Er... please don't be too cross with her.'

'Who are you?' the man asked. His voice was weak, even by human standards.

'Shh. Just listen. If anyone asks what happened here, tell them... I don't know. Tell them there was an accident. Tell them you were standing on the table, and it broke, and you fell and hurt your arm. Anything. Just don't let anyone know the truth. I know, everything must seem strange to you, but –'

'Government,' croaked the man.

'What?' The woman stared at him for a moment. 'You think we're... no, it's not like that. Look. It doesn't really matter who we are. As long as Sam doesn't get involved, that's the main thing. Trust me.' Then the woman seemed to go all limp and rubbery, and she sighed pitifully. 'What am I saying?'

she mumbled. 'There's a gorilla in your kitchen. Or guerrilla. Why should you trust me?'

Lost Boy was starting to get impatient. 'Come,' he said. 'Now.'

The woman shot him a look that, had it come from a male, Lost Boy would have interpreted as a death challenge. 'Don't you understand anything? We're changing history just by being here. Whatever orders the Remote have given you, they can't want you to –'

'Not Remote.' Lost Boy poked himself in the chest with one thumb. 'No orders. Came here myself.'

The woman did that jaw-dropping thing again, and got to her feet. 'You came here... off your own bat? I mean, you decided to come after me?' She stuck out her bottom lip. 'I thought Ogrons weren't supposed to have minds of their own.'

'Want talk. With you. Now.'

'Oh, this gets better. You came here just to talk to me?'

'Not here.' Lost Boy motioned towards the outer door, now dropping off its hinges. 'People. Big settlement. We go to quiet place. Then we talk.'

'Get out of my house,' the man on the floor was muttering. 'Please. Get out of my house.'

The woman sighed again. 'I'll call you an ambulance from the car, all right?' she told the sick man. 'I promise.'

And with that she left the house, keeping as far away from Lost Boy as she could when she crossed the floor.

There was an Ogron in Sarah's kitchen. Furthermore, he seemed to be trying to figure out how the toaster worked. There were many things Sarah had believed she'd never see in her lifetime, but – had she ever thought of it – this would have been somewhere close to the top of the list.

The creature had turned out to own a car, which it had parked just up the road from Sarah's, around the corner from Sam's house. When Sarah had returned to her own vehicle, K9's ears had been spinning like mad things, and he'd told her in no uncertain terms that there was an alien life form somewhere in the vicinity. To which Sarah had responded that, yes, there was indeed an alien life form somewhere in the vicinity, and it was coming home with them, and why hadn't he detected It before, eh?

So the Ogron had followed her back to Croydon, its black (rented?) limotype thing tailing Sarah's car through Camberwell and Dulwich, eventually pulling up on Elgin Road. And now the alien was in her kitchen, for the simple reason that she had, without really thinking about it, offered it – offered *him* – some food. Ogrons clearly weren't used to having food served to them, as he'd interpreted this as an invitation to take her kitchen apart piece by piece.

Looking at him now, Sarah had trouble believing the people at COPEX had accepted him as human. The Doctor had once told her that in the twenty-sixth century someone had tried to start a war by disguising Ogrons as agents of enemy powers, covering up their looks with hypnotic brain beams. Or something like that, anyway. But here in the 1990s? You didn't need brain beams to do the job. The culture had already hypnotised itself. The transmissions said foreigners were big and hairy and smelled of old meat, and nobody questioned the aliens' existence.

Sarah's kitchen and dining room were attached, separated only by a Formica bar, so she rested K9 on the dining-room table and pretended to talk to him while she kept an eye on her guest. The Ogron gave up on the toaster, and started searching the cabinets instead. It took him a while to figure out how to work the handles, but once he'd got his head around the technology, he spent many happy minutes rooting through the spare crockery and boxes of breakfast cereal.

'He's an Ogron,' Sarah told K9. Almost as an apology.

'Affirmative, mistress. Sentient simian species, home world co-ordinates 0110011 by C2. First discovery of Ogron planet by outside intelligences occurred in relative Earth year 1855. First official contact with human species, 2540. Ogrons used as servitor species by seventeen known galactic powers –'

'Uh,' said the Ogron in the kitchen.

'Affirmative,' said K9.

The Ogron pulled one of the cereal packets out of the cabinet over the sink, and sniffed at it. It was a half-finished box of Weetos, which Sarah had only really bought because she'd liked the look of the free gift.

'Plant?' the Ogron queried.

'Food,' Sarah replied.

The Ogron seemed suspicious, but nonetheless stuffed his huge hand into the packet, pulled out a fistful of chocolate-tainted hoops, and stuffed them into his mouth.

'So,' said Sarah, not really sure how to go about starting this conversation. 'So. You said you wanted to talk to me. And the Remote don't know you're here.'

The Ogrons spat the half-chewed mouthful of cereal on to the kitchen floor. Sarah took that to be a yes.

'Do you want to change sides?' Sarah asked. 'Is that it?'

The Ogron tried the next packet of cereal, so when he finally answered it was through a throat full of muesli. 'Hardware,' he said.

'I'm sorry?'

The Ogron nodded. 'Good,' he said, apparently in judgement of the muesli. He poured some more into his mouth before he went on. 'Hardware. Us.'

Sarah bit her lip. 'I'm sorry, this conversation's going to be hard enough as it is. Why don't you finish off that box, and we can talk later? All right?'

The Ogron wiped some of the cereal away from his big fat lips. Once he'd finished, he reached into the top pocket of his jacket, fished something out and tossed it in Sarah's direction. Sarah caught it with both hands.

It looked like part of an old radio. Or maybe an old TV set. The technology was chunky, but fairly complex-looking.

'It's one of those things your friends wear in their ears,' Sarah noted, holding the object in front of K9's nozzle.

'You wear,' said the Ogron. 'We talk better.'

Sarah looked down at K9. 'Is it safe?'

K9 sniffed at it, or whatever it was he did. 'Attempting to determine effects of receiver on human neurosystem, mistress.' He hummed happily to himself for a few moments. 'Analysis complete. Possibility of hallucinogenic effects even if used for short periods.'

Without warning, the Ogron banged his fist on the table top. The Formica cracked across. K9 automatically slid his blaster attachment out of his nose.

'Good fre-quen-cies,' the Ogron said. 'We talk.'

'Affirmative,' said K9.

Sarah looked between the dog and the alien. 'Sorry, am I missing something?'

'Ogron is communicating on frequencies undetectable to human senses, mistress. Receiver will facilitate communication.'

'It'll also give me a bad trip,' Sarah pointed out.

K9 wagged his tail a little more. 'Suggestion. Attach receiver to me. I will broadcast all relevant signals to you.'

'And filter out the other stuff?'

'Affirmative.'

The Ogron grunted his approval. Sarah sighed, as loudly as she possibly could.

'Shall I get the MIDI leads, then?' she asked K9.

Lost Boy didn't remember what had happened to his family. His brother, the other Lost Boy, claimed he could still see the day they'd died, as clearly as if it were yesterday. The other Lost Boy said the cave had been attacked. He said there'd been people in armour, taller even than the mother of the family, people who'd come down from the skies and filled the cave with fire. He said he'd been the one who'd saved the infant Lost Boy from the flames, that he'd burrowed into the ground, hiding them both until the aliens had gone away. The other Lost Boy didn't know who the aliens had been. Enemies of some

species the Ogrons had worked for, he liked to say, come to have their revenge on their rivals' instruments of war. Come to destroy the enemy's resources.

But the other Lost Boy lied a lot. He lied about the number of aliens he'd killed; he lied about how he'd got the scars on his chest. Lost Boy had believed his brother's story of the family, once upon a time, but now it sounded like another one of his lies. Sometimes the aliens wore black armour, sometimes silver. Sometimes they were humanoid, and other times they were even Krotons, blown up to gigantic proportions. Why Krotons should want to kill Ogrons, Lost Boy couldn't imagine.

The first thing Lost Boy himself could remember was the big cave, the cave of the old women. They'd named him and his brother there. They'd both been given the same name, although Lost Boy was sure the old women had rumbled more deeply when they'd talked about his brother, suggesting that he was the stronger of the two, the one with the blacker skin and the longer arms. Lost Boy had always resented that.

Perhaps, he thought, that's why I'm here, in the settlement of the humans. Perhaps that's why I'm betraying the Remote. Because I'm the weakest of the dead family, the palest, the shortest-armed. The Remote aliens spoke Lost Boy's name in the original tongue, not translating it into their own language. They just said *Frayyt*. There was no feeling in the way they said it, no vibration in their stomachs. That, at least, was a consolation.

Lost Boy and his brother had been taken from the home world before they'd reached the mating age, which had made his brother angry, although Lost Boy himself had been thankful. He could still remember, in perfect detail, the day the buyers had come. The doorway had appeared in the middle of the cave, a rectangle of spitting, popping grey. It had made the younger Ogrons excited, and made the older ones rumble with annoyance. When the aliens had stepped through the doorway, they'd been dressed all in black, the armour plating slithering over their stunted limbs. Lost Body had loosened his bowels, thinking the monsters from his brother's story had come back to finish their work. But his brother hadn't been scared, and fortunately nobody had noticed the mess Lost Boy had made. Most of the old women had smelled far worse.

The old women had sold a bond-pack of the younger Ogrons to the Remote, and the Ogrons had gone willingly. It had been as it always was. The aliens left their payment, their food and their hardware and their special rocks, and the Ogrons gave up their fittest males, or at least those who weren't likely to be missed.

Sometimes, the aliens left other things. Potions, to be taken by the mothers while they were pregnant. The aliens said the potions would make the children stronger and fitter, more suited to the tasks the buyers wished them perform. Not all the potions worked – sometimes, the young were born blind,

or scarred, or with broken, half-finished faces – but over time, the old women had discovered how to use the substances properly, so each generation became a little darker and longer-limbed than the one before. It was what the elders called 'evolution'.

The old women had once told Lost Boy that, on the aliens' planets, everything could be bought or sold. Weapons, of the kind the aliens issued only to their most trusted followers. The word the women had used was 'hardware'. Hardware was changing all the time, becoming more complicated, more suitable for killing and torturing. The alien races were perpetually at war, each making sure it had hardware at least as good as that of its enemies. And Ogron males, said the women, were one of the best kinds of hardware, hardware that did whatever the aliens told it to do. That was what 'evolution' meant. The Ogrons had to keep changing their bodies and taking the potions, so they'd be the best hardware on what was called 'the market'.

The other Lost Boy – who lied a lot, of course – said that on some planets aliens changed their Ogron hardware themselves, fitting metal boxes into their servants' heads to make them 'more intelligent'. But it didn't do anything of the sort, according to the darker Lost Boy. The metal boxes just made the Ogrons forget how to be Ogrons. Lost Boy wondered if that was what had happened to him. The Remote had put something into his head, to let him understand the speech of anybody he ever met, no matter what planet they came from. And there were other changes, changes to what went on inside his head. The Remote had taught him how to use computers, how to 'hack into' information, how to 'process' data. Lost Boy had understood what to do, but he still didn't understand why he had to do it.

When they'd brought Lost Boy to Earth, he'd finally learned the truth of things. He'd been at a kind of market, the place they called COPEX, the settlement-with-a-roof full of humans who talked and joked and traded. And he'd realised, finally, that these were the same kind of people who'd come to the home world all those generations ago, the ones who'd thought up the potions and weapons in the first place.

When he'd been younger, Lost Boy would have expected them to be like gods, or at the very least like the big orange holy things that lived up in the hills of the home world. But the traders were men, small, pale-skinned, short-armed men, with sick faces and ugly clothes. It had been a shock, certainly. The Remote were weak, but at least they had the Cold behind them, the god thing that gave them their armour and their weapons. The humans at COPEX had nothing.

It was then that Lost Boy had made his decision. He saw no reason why he should obey orders from humans any more. It didn't really make sense, when you thought about it.

Hardware went wrong, sometimes. Weapons misfired. Security systems crumbled. Perhaps, thought Lost Boy, that's what I am. A piece of hardware that's gone wrong, that's decided to speak with the enemies of its users.

So he sat on the big soft chair in the house of the human woman, and tried to explain these thoughts to her. It was difficult, but, with the metal dog there to translate, he seemed to be getting the message across.

When he'd finished, the woman was silent for a while, staring down at the fluffy brown floor.

'You're revolting,' she said.

Lost Boy grunted a questioning grunt. The thing in his head didn't seem sure how to translate that.

'I mean, you're in revolt,' the woman said, hurriedly. 'You're throwing off your conditioning. They programmed you to be a weapon, but now you're trying to sabotage their plans instead.'

'Not a weapon,' said Lost Boy. 'A "security device".'

"Security". Well, that's a big word, isn't it?' The woman sat on the floor, her legs curled up underneath her, her rump resting on what humans called a 'cushion'. Lost Boy had already discovered that the things weren't edible. 'There's one thing I still don't understand.'

'Yes?'

The woman clicked her tongue. 'That's it. You see? I said there was one thing I didn't understand, and you said "yes". When you came in here, you would have said "uhhn".'

'Would it make you happier if I said "uhhn"?'

'No, no. What I mean is... all of a sudden, you've got a proper syntax. You can use proper sentences.' She leaned over to the metal dog, which had parked itself near Lost Boy's chair. 'Is that something to do with the receiver, K9?'

'Affirmative,' chirped the dog. 'Receiver picks up signals on subsonic frequencies, allowing in-depth communication with Ogron life form.'

'Subsonic?' the woman queried.

Lost Boy thumped himself in the stomach. 'We speak from here most of the time.'

The dog waggled its ears. 'Nature of Ogron diaphragm and chest cavity allow for use of subsonic language,' it added.

'The translator only translates what I say in proper words,' Lost Boy told the woman, tapping his fingers against his temples. 'Most of what I say gets lost. With the receiver, you can hear everything.'

'So the Remote can talk to you on your own level?'

Lost Boy shook his head. 'They don't. They don't care. They tune their receivers to filter out the subsonic words. They find my language... annoying.'

The woman sucked at her lip. 'The Doctor said... well, no offence, but he told me you weren't very intelligent.'

'You don't understand us,' Lost Boy told her. 'You don't hear most of what we have to say. We give you poetry, and you hear it as... as meaningless words about rocks.'

'Ogron culture is noted for its lack of technological sophistication,' the machine-animal pointed out.

Lost Boy slapped it on the back of its head. The head in question wobbled on its skinny neck, but stayed in place. 'We don't need technology,' he rumbled. 'We *are* technology. We're hardware.'

The woman nodded. 'So. You want to stop the Remote. Is that it?'

'There's something bad,' Lost Boy said. 'The Cold. I can't explain. Not even with the receiver. They want to change... the way things are.'

'History?'

Lost Boy nodded. He'd heard Guest use the word, although it didn't seem to translate well into Deep Ogron. 'They say there are people who can stop them. Lords. Masters of time.'

'Like the Doctor,' the woman suggested. 'And that's still got to be our first move. To find the Doctor. He'll know how to sort the mess out. Anyway, he still owes me ten quid from the seventies. Or was it the eighties?'

'The Doctor,' Lost Boy repeated. 'He's one of the Lords?'

'Affirmative,' said the machine-animal.

'Then I can help,' Lost Boy told them.

The office was in Barnes Road, southwest London, but Sarah somehow managed to make sure she went through Shoreditch on the way from her home, telling herself she was just bending space-time to her own will. She drove past Sam's house, and slowly. She wasn't sure why. The passers-by were passing by, just as they always were. From the outside, the house seemed perfectly normal.

Some part of her had been expecting the place to be surrounded by police cars and newspaper reporters. Maybe even UNIT jeeps. But there was nothing, nothing at all.

She couldn't go back. She couldn't check up on the girl, to see whether her father had kept shtoom, or whether he'd told her all about the ape man and the mad woman in the kitchen. It'd only make things worse. More damage to the space-time continuum, more mess for the Doctor to clean up when he finally got here.

And he would get here. Sarah was sure of that. Last night, Lost Boy the Ogron had told her everything. The Remote were expecting the Time Lords to show up and put a stop to their plans, whatever their plans might have been.

Guest had some kind of equipment for detecting the presence of a TARDIS; at least, that was what Lost Boy believed, although he'd admitted he wasn't really an expert when it came to the technical side of things. Lost Boy had finally left Sarah's house at a quarter past midnight, driving his oversized car back to the hotel.

The Ogron was going to steal Guest's equipment. To bring it back to Sarah's house. K9 would be able to figure out how to use it, and together they'd track down the Doctor. K9 doubted the Doctor would still be on Earth, but Lost Boy had said this wouldn't be a problem, not with the Remote's technology at their disposal.

It'll feel good, thought Sarah, to rescue him for a change.

She found herself wondering what he looked like these days. Whether she'd know him if she saw him. And how she was going to explain all this to Paul, if he came over this week and found the house being used as a base for a Time Lord and the entire Ogron fifth column. She wasn't sure which of them she'd feel more embarrassed for, Paul or the Doctor. What would the old sod make of her current bit of stuff, anyway? What did little human romances look like to someone who – the last time she'd asked him – claimed to be over seven hundred years old?

She wondered what it'd be like to have a love-life, if you could see things in all four dimensions. If you could lie in bed with somebody and see them as they'd look in forty years' time, when their bodies were coming apart at the seams and their hair was falling out. No wonder the Doctor had never had a relationship while he'd been on Earth.

Ugh.

Anyway. While the Ogron was busy stabbing his 'users' in the back, Sarah had a mission of her own to carry out. She'd seen the warehouse, the crates of Cold ready to be shipped across the world, and she knew how the Remote were planning to do the shipping. At COPEX, Llewis had given her his card, complete with the address of his office. He was the conduit Guest was going to use to supply the Cold to Earth, so he was, logically, the weakest part of the operation.

She had to sabotage the plan somehow. To stop the distribution process, or at least delay it until they rescued the Doctor.

It was midday by the time she got to Barnes Road. The office was a quietlooking place, a sign in the top-floor window the only indication of what the building was being used for. Getting past reception was going to be the hard part, Sarah decided. She fiddled with her wig as she crossed the pavement, making sure none of the darker, redder hairs were sticking out around the ears. When she finally walked into the building, she walked in with a big smile on her face, and deliberately didn't look at any of the cheap works of art in the lobby. Real businesspeople, she told herself, never care about the decor.

She gave the receptionist her name and company – not the real ones, obviously – and told the woman she was here to see Mr Llewis. The receptionist phoned the office upstairs, then casually announced that Mr Llewis wasn't in yet, but that Mr Morgan would be down to see her straight away.

Sarah met Morgan as he stepped out of the lift. A man in his late thirties, Sarah guessed, his hair black and thinning and gelled down to his scalp, his Concorde-shaped features making him look like some kind of vulture in a suit. Which, all things considered, wasn't entirely inappropriate.

Morgan insisted on shaking her hand. Hard.

'Peter Morgan,' he said. 'You're from IPS, right?'

Sarah nodded. 'I met Mr Llewis at COPEX. I'm also in negotiations with Mr Guest –'

'Fine.' Morgan started ushering her towards the lift, which made Sarah suspicious. He hadn't even asked for any ID. 'Alan hasn't come in yet. He's been busy the last couple of days. Heavy work schedule.'

Sarah got into the lift, without much confidence. Even the lift was shagpile-carpeted, she noticed.

'I'm kind of glad you showed up,' Morgan went on, once the doors had shut. Sarah thought he sounded nervous. Not the kind of nerves you got when you were running away from Cybermen, but the kind you got when you were trying to run a company and everything was falling to bits around you. 'We've been having trouble getting hold of Alan. Some kind of communications glitch between here and Sandown Park.'

Sarah got the distinct impression he was lying. 'Oh yes?'

'Yeah. We got the call from him yesterday afternoon, saying he'd finished the deal with Guest. Everything's go, right?'

He actually seemed to be asking her. So Sarah nodded.

'Right,' Morgan went on. 'Thing is, we haven't been able to get the terms out of him yet. We don't know how much hardware Guest's got to offer, or how much Alan's put us down for. Or how many others are in on the deal, even. So, you know, you'll have to bear with me. I don't know how deep your people are into this.'

Aha. Then Morgan thought she knew more about the deal than he did. Handy. 'Let's just say we've got an interest in some of the material,' Sarah told him, keeping things as vague as she felt she could. 'So, what else did Mr Llewis tell you?'

The office, when they reached it, was smaller than Sarah had expected, but otherwise depressingly familiar. There were a handful of desks, most of them unoccupied, covered in empty pizza boxes and sheets of fax paper. A Pirelli calendar hung on one wall, the date given as May 1995, so presumably the

men who worked here just liked the picture. Wet daylight dribbled in through the windows, highlighting the patches where cigarette ash had been trodden into the carpet.

Morgan oozed into the space behind his desk, and indicated the seat opposite him. Sarah folded herself into a sitting position, as primly as she could.

'Guest's already got the merchandise into the country,' Morgan began.

'In a warehouse,' Sarah told him. 'Near Newbury.'

'Right. Right. We've got our legal people working on this, trying to figure out whether it's safe to have the stuff on the mainland without anyone asking questions. There's no legislation on it, but you know what the Home Office is like. We want our backs covered. They're still kicking up a stink about Hiatt's selling shackles to the Saudis, and that's all meant to be above board. They've been giving us grief ever since the boys started coming back from the Gulf. Nobody gave a toss what the Saudis got up to in their prisons before. Right?'

Sarah gave him her most polite smile. 'You know what it is Guest's selling?'

Morgan put his arms behind his head, revealing hideous patches of sweat under the arms of his shirt. A wave of air conditioning and aftershave washed across the table, so Sarah was forced to wrinkle her nose. 'What, Cold? Alan gave us a couple of hints on the phone. Sounded a bit put out when he read us the brochure. You'd have thought someone was standing behind him with a gun in his back.'

'Really?'

'Yeah. First time Guest got in touch with us, he was just talking about surveillance gear. Sent us a couple of samples. Quality stuff, no rubbish. We're moving into that kind of field, now the heavy-duty market's crashed in South Africa.'

'That's nice,' said Sarah.

'It's the politics, yeah? Private security's the big market now. And maybe the foreign militia groups, but that's pretty much a nonstarter, unless you're one of the big boys. Let's face it, the Home Office people aren't going to start giving us licences to handle Cobra missiles. Not unless we can get half the national output of Colombia up their noses as a freebie.'

Sarah guessed that was supposed to be a joke. So she made a little 'ha ha' noise at the back of her throat, and hoped that'd cover it. 'And what... Alan... told you about the Cold. It doesn't surprise you?'

Morgan shrugged. 'Everybody's always overselling, aren't they? Alan gets carried away by the hype, he's like that. You know back in the eighties, when there was all that stuff about... "z-bombs", was that what the Americans were calling 'em? There was all that hype in the papers about how one bomb was going to crack the world open and everything. And Alan believed every word of it. Every bloody word. We were with BAe at the time, and he spent

most of '86 hiding under his desk. I mean, he's a good guy, he's got the right attitude, but... wouldn't want him around in a crisis, you know?' He slapped himself on the stomach. 'Would've gone down to COPEX myself, if the guts hadn't been playing up. Bad curry on Friday night. You know what it's like.'

'The hardware,' Sarah insisted, still smiling over the cracks in her voice. 'The samples Guest gave you. Could I see them, please? I think they might be quite important.'

### 15

# Faster than the Speed of Dark (Ancient Gallifrey: The Mini-series)

Scene 19. Anathema

[We see SAM and COMPASSION, crossing the plaza. The plaza seems to go on for ever, the paving slabs stretching out towards a horizon that isn't really there. Up ahead is the silhouette of the main transmitter, and the only word that accurately describes it is 'looming'. The perspective's distorted, so SAM is probably hallucinating again.

[Suddenly, she stops walking, and looks up at the sky. The red patches have been almost entirely consumed by stripes of black, great swathes of dark smoke with no visible source. Somewhere on the other side of the smoke, we can see stars, tiny points of light moving across the sky.]

SAM: They're moving. We're moving. [Turns to COMPASSION.] This city. It's a ship, isn't it? We're moving through space.

COMPASSION [under her breath]: I wish we could build ships that big.

[Then SAM looks back up at the sky, her attention caught by movement overhead. There are shapes emerging from the smoke, pushing against the fabric of space-time from somewhere on the other side. We see half-formed faces, screaming and twisting, embryonic hands trying to tear through the sky. The shapes are vague, but we can make out some of the faces splitting open, torn in two by their own screams. The stars are their teeth, puncturing the heavens.

[SAM gags.]

SAM: The Cold. It's coming.

COMPASSION [following her gaze]: Where?

[All around them, extras dressed as members of the REMOTE are crossing the plaza, all of them wearing the standard nonuniform of Anathema. But as SAM speaks, they stop, as one, and raise their heads. Their faces mirror the features pushing at the sky, eyes wide, mouths open. COMPASSION just looks confused.]

SAM: Can't you see it? It's...

[SAM breaks off, and looks around.]

SAM: Wait a minute. Everything's... scripted again. Oh God. I'm receiving. Why am I receiving?

COMPASSION: We're getting closer to the main transmitter. Don't worry about it.

[Suddenly, the REMOTE people begin to scream. Each of the screams is a perfectly normal human sound, but together they form a wall of solid white noise, a shriek of pure static. In the sky, the faces thrash and bite, trying to tear their way into the material universe.]

SAM: They're like mediums. That's what they are. They're mediums, and they're channelling the voice of the Cold.

GUEST: Media.

[SAM whirls around. GUEST is standing behind her, wearing not only his shadow mask but an entire suit of Cold-skin armour. Jagged, angular plates of writhing black matter have been strapped to every part of his body. He looks more like a machine than a man.

[N.B.: COMPASSION seems to have vanished from the scene, but Sam doesn't notice this yet.]

GUEST: The plural of medium is media. The people are the media. And it's not the voice of the Cold, it's the voice of the transmitters.

SAM: None of this is real, is it? It's just the transmissions. They're doing things to my head.

GUEST: But the transmissions are all that matter. Compassion told you that. Hang on a moment, this thing's killing me.

[GUEST's voice doesn't sound quite right when he delivers this last line. He starts to peel off his shadow mask, and we see a cross-cut of Sam's surprised face before the features under the mask are revealed. They're the features of MARK LESSING.]

MARK: That's better.

SAM: You're not Guest. You're not even real, are you? You're just... background noise. My brain's picking up the signals, and it's making you out of them.

MARK: So? Doesn't mean we can't be friends.

[SAM crosses her arms, defiantly, and turns away from MARK. When she turns, however, she realises that the scene has changed around her. The plaza has vanished, and in front of her there's only space, speckled with stars.]

Scene 20. A Gallifreyan Science Vessel

[We see that SAM is standing on the bridge of a ship, in front of a large viewscreen. She looks around, to take in the rest of this new environment.

[The ship seems to be made from solid gold, or at the very least something that does a good impression of solid gold. The floor is gold, the walls are gold, the elegant arched roof of the bridge is gold. Tendrils of gold have pushed their way out of the floor, twisting themselves into elaborate, almost sculptural, pieces of furniture. We don't see the other side of the bridge, but we get the impression that there are technicians at work there, no doubt fussing over solid-gold control panels.

[In the centre of the bridge are three golden thrones, but only the one in the middle seems solid; the other two look vague and insubstantial, like washed-out holograms. The right-hand throne is unoccupied, but in the left-hand throne sits RASSILON'S ENGINEER – in a funny hat – while in the central seat is RASSILON himself. As played by BRIAN BLESSED.

[GUEST/MARK/THE MEDIA still hovers at Sam's shoulder.]

SAM: What's happening?

MARK [sighs]: isten. Back on Earth, who invented TV drama?

SAM: Um... the BBC?

MARK: Pretty much. So, all the TV programmes you get on Earth have got a little bit of the BBC in them, right? Everything's based on the way the BBC did things, back in the fifties.

SAM: So?

MARK: So, this little scenario here is what the Remote media are based on.

You're from Earth, though, so you're seeing it the way the BBC would do it. Only with better special effects.

SAM: Hang on. That doesn't -

MARK: Shh. Rassilon's going to say something.

SAM [alert]: Rassilon? You mean, the founder of the Time Lords? *That* Rassilon?

RASSILON [to SAM]: When you're quite finished?

SAM [mutters]: Talk about interactive entertainment.

RASSILON: Thank you. [To THE ENGINEER.] All the ships are in position, I hope?

THE ENGINEER: Everything's ready. We're just waiting for the surface activity to calm down. The sun's still reacting to the probes, it shouldn't last more than a couple of minutes.

[SAM turns back to the viewing screen. Sure enough, there's a pale-yellow sun hanging in space directly ahead of the ship, bubbling in an agitated fashion. And it's surrounded by spaceships, corkscrews of perfect gold, presumably just like this one. The ships are actually quite small, but the special effects make them look bigger than they really are, so they're visible against the mass of the sun. Even so, there must be several hundred of the vessels arranged around the star.

[The ships look more like works of art than functional vessels. But from here, we can see their bows crackling with energy, as if preparing to open fire.]

RASSILON: Make sure the timing mechanisms are in synch. If any of them fire out of phase, we're going to have a stellar catastrophe on our hands.

THE ENGINEER [sarcastic]: Thank you, Mr Exposition. I'm glad you're here to remind us of these things.

[THE ENGINEER's throne, and THE ENGINEER himself, flicker out of existence. The implication is that his 'real' self is on one of the other ships.]

SAM: This is ancient history, isn't it? Back before the Time Lords were Time Lords.

MARK: Let's just call it period drama. [THE ENGINEER reappears.]

THE ENGINEER: All right. The sun's stable. The starkillers are ready. We can start whenever you like.

SAM: 'Starkillers'?

MARK: Shh!

SAM: Yeah, but 'starkillers'...

RASSILON [clears his throat]: I feel I should say a few words on this historic occasion –

THE ENGINEER: Oh, please don't. [RASSILON gives him a dirty look.]

THE ENGINEER: We don't even know if the process works. And even if it does, everything's so... complicated. Without a decent stellar manipulator, we're –

RASSILON [irked]: We can smooth out the wrinkles later. We just need to know whether the process is viable, that's all.

SAM: What are they doing?

MARK: Making a black hole. They need the power for their time-travel projects.

THE ENGINEER [sniffily]: Making a black hole is easy. Making the right *kind* of black hole –

RASSILON: You were the one who didn't want any speeches. Shall we get on with it, or not?

[THE ENGINEER nods, then vanishes. Slowly, and with great ceremony, RAS-SILON stands.]

RASSILON: What we do now we do for the future. For our children. For the sake of Gallifrey, and for time itself.

[He pauses, for dramatic effect.]

RASSILON: Fire.

#### Scene 21. Space

[Around the sun, there's the hum of building power from the Gallifreyan ships, which we seem to be able to hear despite the fact that we're in a vacuum. Then, from the prow of each of the vessels, there's a flash of black. We hear a howling, screaming noise, not unlike die cacophony back at Anathema.

[The sun quivers, seethes and collapses in on itself. Moments later, there's nothing but a sphere of solid black. Again, we seem to be able to see the black hole even though the laws of physics say this shouldn't be possible.

[Worryingly, the screaming continues.]

Scene 22. The Gallifreyan Ship

[A great wave of relief seems to sweep across RASSILON. He collapses back into his throne.]

RASSILON: Well?

[THE ENGINEER's throne reappears.]

THE ENGINEER: We've done it.

RASSILON: The hole...?

THE ENGINEER: Right through the continual strata. We're going to be the first ones to see what's on the other side, you know that? *If* we can get the probe through in one piece.

RASSILON [to himself]: All the power of the outer planes...

THE ENGINEER: Don't get too excited, will you? We've still got a lot of work to do before we can... Wait.

[THE ENGINEER vanishes again, then reappears a few moments later.]

THE ENGINEER: Something's wrong.

RASSILON: It's unstable. Tell the rest of the ships to –

THE ENGINEER: No. No, it's not unstable. There's... [A look of sheer disbelief crosses his face.]

THE ENGINEER: ...life-signs.

RASSILON: What?

Scene 23. Space

[The ships still surround the black sun, as if watching for movement. And there *is* movement. There are shapes in the darkness, pushing against the surface of the sphere.

[We realise they're the same shapes we saw in the sky over Anathema. Faces. Distorted features. Crippled limbs.]

Scene 24. The Gallifreyan ship

[The screeching sound continues, almost drowning out the words of the two men on the bridge.]

THE ENGINEER: They're screaming. The Faction... Rassilon, the Faction was right. There are things... Paradox creatures...

RASSILON: Quiet!

[Through the viewscreen, we can see the surface of the black sun bulging ominously.]

RASSILON: What are they doing?

Scene 25. Space

[And suddenly the black sun bursts open.

[Things flood out of the sphere. Vast, black shapes, their silhouettes barely visible against the dark background. Great leathery wings flap between the Gallifreyan vessels, sinewy limbs wrapping themselves around the prows of the closest ships. The scream seems to fill up the universe, the howl of something that's been trapped since the beginning of time.

[We focus on one of the ships, and on the thing that's attached itself to the vessel's infrastructure. We get a glimpse of a huge batlike head, raising itself on a scrawny neck and howling into space.]

Scene 26. The Gallifreyan Ship

[RASSILON is standing, staring through the screen as the flapping things swarm out of the black sun. There are thousands of them, literally thousands, all of them rendered in the best computer graphics the production can afford.]

THE ENGINEER: The Faction was right. The loa...

RASSILON: Those aren't spirits. Look at them!

[We see one of the things attack a nearby Gallifreyan ship, sinking its teeth into the hull and ripping the vessel open.]

THE ENGINEER: You don't understand!

[RASSILON turns to face him.]

THE ENGINEER: The readings we're getting... they're huge. The things on the other side of the hole... even bigger...

[RASSILON turns back to the viewing screen. We see one particularly large creature pulling itself out of the hole, flexing wings as large as cities.]

RASSILON: There! That's the swarm leader. If we kill that -

THE ENGINEER: No! You're not listening! That's just the biggest of their servants. The Faction was right, don't you understand? *The Faction was right!* 

SAM [shouts]: Wait!

Scene 27. Anathema

[SAM turns to MARK. The scene changes in mid-turn, though we don't immediately notice what's happening. We're back at the plaza, the REMOTE people still screaming up at the sky]

SAM: It's not true. You heard what he said. 'The Faction was right.'

MARK: Is there a problem?

SAM: You've already told me about Faction history, remember? Faction Paradox is just a political movement, you said. It's not really an old cult, that's just what it wants people to think. It didn't exist back in the days of Rassilon.

MARK: Yeah, well. It's historical drama. You've got to change the facts a bit if you want a good story.

SAM: This is the Faction's version of history. They've rewritten things to suit their image.

MARK: The image is everything, remember?

SAM: This isn't the way things really were.

MARK [nodding over Sam's shoulder]: Just watch the pictures and don't ask questions. It works for the Remote.

Scene 28. The Gallifreyan Ship

[SAM turns, and finds herself back on the bridge. She faces the viewing screen.

[Across the universe, we can see stars winking out of existence, collapsing in on themselves, becoming spheres of pure black. The screaming becomes louder with every implosion.]

THE ENGINEER [losing it]: We've made a dent in the continuum. It's causing a chain reaction. Stars, planets –

RASSILON: How wide is the area of effect?

THE ENGINEER: Does it make a difference? It's the end, Rassilon. We can't –

RASSILON [losing his temper]: How wide?

THE ENGINEER: I don't know! It could be the whole galaxy, or –

[Suddenly, something huge and black fills the viewing screen. The claw-hand of one of the things from the black hole scrapes against the other side of the screen, trying to tear its way into the ship. The bridge rocks. SAM yelps.]

RASSILON: We're under attack!

[On the screen, beyond the fingers of the monster, we see specks of black drifting from the holes in the other stars. More of the creatures, flocking across the galaxy. RASSILON seems entranced by the image.]

RASSILON: War.

[From outside the ship, there's an inhuman scream, the roar of the thing that's wrapped around the prow.]

RASSILON: We've started a war.

Scene 29. Anathema

[SAM looks up, at the things pushing against the other side of the sky.]

SAM: What was it? What was it controlling the monsters? The Cold?

MARK: You saw the drama.

SAM: Yeah, but I don't know how much of it's just lies. What's the Cold? I mean, what's the Cold for?

MARK: It's for not existing. Ask any scientist. Ask your physics teacher at Coal Hill. You know. The one you keep telling yourself you really, really, really don't want to get off with. He'll tell you. There's a thing called heat. It's a kind of energy, it's one of the fundamental forces. But there's no cold, not really. There's just the absence of heat. Cold doesn't exist, in this universe.

SAM: So you're saying -

MARK: I'm saying the Cold isn't a thing. It's an *anti*-thing. Typical of the Faction, that. Anything to mess up the fundamental forces. Look, there's another good example.

SAM: Look? Look where?

MARK [pointing at the sky]: There.

Scene 30. Space

[Cut from MARK's pointing finger to a new view of the galaxy. We're not focusing on the black sun any more. Instead, we pan across a kind of battlefield. From the left of the scene, the dark, half-seen things flap across the skies, possibly in their hundreds, possibly in their thousands. To the right is a fleet of ships, evidently of Time Lord design, perhaps adapted versions of the science vessels. There are huge spikes fitted to the prows of the ships, glittering gold in the light from the nearest stars.

[The two forces clash in the middle of our field of vision, the ships impaling the monsters on their spikes, the creatures ripping into the vessels with their teeth and claws. Huge, blood-drenched corpses float past the camera, as do fragments of twisted metal. We see several Time Lord bodies explode in the vacuum.]

#### Scene 31. The Gallifreyan Ship

[Both RASSILON and the hologram of THE ENGINEER stand before the viewing screen, observing the progress of the battle. SAM and MARK stand around in the background, SAM looking as though she can't remember how she got here.]

THE ENGINEER: We started it, you know.

RASSILON: So you keep reminding me. How far away are they now?

THE ENGINEER: A couple of light years. Maybe less. They won't get this far, though. There are only a thousand or so left. We've got enough bowships to hold them off.

RASSILON [scornful]: 'Bowships'. Whose idea was that, anyway?

THE ENGINEER: Yours, officially. Seen enough?

[RASSILON nods. The screen flickers, the image of the battle replaced by the scene directly outside the ship. In front of us is another black sun, surrounded by Gallifreyan science vessels. This sun is smaller than the first, perhaps the size of a typical MG-type planet.]

THE ENGINEER: There it is. Do you want to do the honours, or shall I?

RASSILON: Just get on with it.

Scene 32. Space

[From this angle, we can see the formation of the ships around the black sun. There's the hum of building power again, the ships preparing to activate their 'weapons'.

[Then there's a flash of darkness. The black sun quivers, as if about to explode.]

Scene 33. The Gallifreyan Ship

[RASSILON and THE ENGINEER watch the black sun through the screen. The surface of the object is still dark, but now it's perfectly smooth, and apparently made of normal matter.

[Across the bridge, we can hear a sigh of relief from the technicians.]

THE ENGINEER: There. That's the last one plugged. We've cut off their way in.

RASSILON: And their way out. We haven't found the swarm leader yet. Don't forget that.

THE ENGINEER: It's not the swarm leader we've got to worry about.

RASSILON: Meaning?

THE ENGINEER: The things on the other side of the hole. The things those monsters get their orders from. Whatever they are, they're intelligent. Probably more intelligent than us.

SAM: I don't believe he said that. That's Faction propaganda, or I'm Welsh.

RASSILON and THE ENGINEER [to SAM]: Shh!

SAM: Shush yourselves.

RASSILON [to THE ENGINEER, ignoring SAM]: Then we'd better hope your containment shells work, hadn't we?

THE ENGINEER [defensively]: They'll work. In a couple of thousand years, you won't be able to tell that from any other planet. [Indicates the black sphere on the screen.] The only risk is if someone blows it up. Those things have still got followers in this universe, remember. Half the Council still thinks they infected you.

[RASSILON rubs his neck. He looks uncomfortable.]

RASSILON: I prefer to think of myself as 'inoculated'. And we'll just have to look after this planet's wellbeing, won't we? The same goes for all the other shells. We'll make sure we keep monitors here. Get some of our agents to keep an eye on things.

[With that, he turns, and moves back towards his throne.]

RASSILON: Now. We should get back to Gallifrey. We've still got that manipulator of yours to work on. We'll try a supernova next time. Should be easier to predict the consequences.

THE ENGINEER: You still want to go ahead? After all this?

RASSILON: We don't have a choice. We have a responsibility to the future. What we do, we do for –

THE ENGINEER: I've heard the speech, thank you.

[RASSILON sits in his throne. THE ENGINEER stares at the 'planet' on the other side of the viewing screen.]

THE ENGINEER [to himself]: Let's just hope nobody ever tries drilling through to the core, either.

Scene 34. Anathema

[Exactly as we left it. MARK is still pointing at the sky. SAM takes a moment or two to find her bearings, then looks up.

[Two of the fighter craft tear past, leaving great red scars across the clouds. From ground level, it almost looks as if the sky's bleeding.]

SAM: The fighters?

MARK: What do they run on? Had you wondered that?

SAM: Um... no, not really.

MARK: Ask Compassion. Go on. Ask her.

[SAM looks around. COMPASSION stands at her side, screaming into the sky.]

SAM: Compassion? Those fighters. What do they run on? [The second she hears her name, COMPASSION stops screaming. She meets SAM's gaze.]

COMPASSION: What? Oh. Missing matter. Why?

SAM: Missing...?

MARK: You know what the scientists say, Sam. They're saying it even in your time. The universe is only a tenth of the size it's supposed to be. The mass equations prove it. Missing matter. The lost nine-tenths of the universe. It's a prized commodity around here.

SAM: That's ridiculous! There's no such thing as missing matter. It's just... matter you haven't found yet. You can't run things on it.

COMPASSION [shrugs]: If you say so.

MARK: Faction technology. It's a science based on the holes in other people's science. The holes Rassilon opened. The Cold, the zombie ships...

SAM: I don't believe a word of it.

MARK: And your science makes sense, I suppose? Do you think one human being in a thousand really knows how a microwave oven works? Or a video? Nobody here asks questions.

COMPASSION: We're here.

[SAM turns back to COMPASSION. We don't notice it straight away, but MARK has disappeared from the scene.]

SAM: What do you mean, 'here'? We haven't been moving. Have we?

COMPASSION [looking at her strangely]: We haven't stopped walking in almost an hour.

SAM: Oh. [She shakes her head.] The transmissions. I don't think I can deal with this for much longer.

COMPASSION: It'll pass. Once we're inside the transmitter building.

[Then SAM looks up, and sees the grand spire of the main transmitter, towering above her. It seems to fill up the entire sky, a smooth spike puncturing the clouds, the faces of the Cold rippling as it beams its transmissions into the air. [SAM hiccups. She just succeeds in stopping herself falling over.

[Abruptly, the REMOTE passers-by stop screaming, and continue crossing the endless plaza, as if nothing had happened. Immediately, the faces dissolve back into the clouds. Dull red light spreads across Anathema.]

SAM: I think I'm getting better.

COMPASSION: Lucky you.

SAM [still looking up at the transmitter]: This place... d'you keep all your prisoners here?

COMPASSION: We don't keep prisoners. We're not that kind of society.

[COMPASSION heads for transmitter building. SAM doesn't look as though she believes the woman.

[But she follows her anyway. [Fade out.]

## Travels with Fitz (VI)

Augustine City, 2596

The sky was in pieces. It was like a patchwork, like someone had torn fragments out of all kinds of skies – dark ones, stormy ones, angry ones, boiling ones – and sewn them together, letting them ripple and bubble, streaking the air with lightning as they fought for airspace. There was wind, too, a wind that burnt your face if you turned right into it. Across the planet, the masses were wailing and whining, threatening to lynch the weathermen, as if they were the ones responsible for the catastrophe. And why shouldn't they be? thought Fitz. That was the religion of the colony. Blame the icon. Kill the image.

All over the city, TV sets were pumping messages of reassurance out into the air; the screens inside the houses, the screens on the streets, the screens that floated over the public plazas were all repeating the same messages, the entire settlement chanting the same words. The city was saying, *Do not panic*. But the city wasn't listening to its own advice.

You could hear it even from here, even from the roof of the media tower at the dead centre of the planet's mass mind. Three hundred storeys up, so you could see all the way to the horizon if you stood on the edge. The roof was flat and tarmac-black, carved up by fluorescent lines and ringed with infrared marker lights. A private spaceport site, thought Fitz. And now two hundred media employees were standing in a circle around the landing zone, staring up at the heavens, letting the rain burn red-hot patterns into their eyes. Children of the Faction, all two hundred of them, waiting for salvation to come down from the clouds. According to the family's inner circle, the sky was burning because it knew, on some level, that the Time Lords were coming. It knew the planet was damned. The atmosphere could feel the ripples, the temporal fallout of an attack that hadn't even started yet.

Even if the Doctor had been here, could he have stopped this? If the Time Lords wanted something to happen, wasn't that the closest thing to 'destiny' you were likely to find in this universe?

Frankly, he wasn't sure what his standing was with Mother Mathara's people right now. He'd been initiated into the Faction, shown glimpses of how their techniques worked, but over the last eighteen months they'd told him next to nothing. He didn't even remember the initiation properly. He remembered the transmissions coming in through the receiver that Mathara had put in his ear,

and he remembered thinking he was talking to somebody's shadow, but after that it was all a bit of a blur, as if several hundred channels of information had been beamed into his head at once. He'd had to switch channels very, very quickly, and he wasn't sure he'd taken it all in.

He remembered seeing a man with one arm, although he was pretty sure it had been a hallucination. Grandfather Paradox himself had only one arm, according to Faction lore. The Grandfather had hacked off one of his own limbs, the stories said, to get rid of the monitor tattoo the Time Lords had carved into his shoulder. Then again, Mathara always said that the chosen of the Grandfather tended to cut their own arms off as well, just to make a point, so it still wasn't entirely clear who or what Fitz had seen.

After he'd got back to the real world, Mother Mathara had explained the rules to him. Fitz had been touched by the *loa*, by the transmissions of Paradox. He wasn't a fully fledged member of the 'family', not even a Little Brother, but the door would be open to him for the rest of his life. Whenever he wanted, he could open himself up to the Grandfather. It was as easy as giving up his shadow.

Fitz glanced down at the ground, where his shadow was currently melting into the shadows of all the other refugees. He was special, among all the people here. They were just blind followers, the Faction's shock troops in the event of a full-scale confrontation with the Time Lords. He was different. He was an associate, or an ex-associate, of the Doctor. He had the option of going deeper into the techniques, of becoming something else entirely.

Unless Mother Mathara had told everyone that, of course.

The sky flashed. Lightning from the future. A few of the refugees around Fitz yelped, then looked down at their feet, embarrassed. Fitz squinted through the rain, trying to focus on the figures at the far side of the circle. There was Guest, the big bald black man, coordinator of the entire evacuation. Somewhere in the back of his mind, Fitz remembered a briefing in a UN office, six hundred years in the past, the first time he'd seen the man's face. But it hardly mattered now, not after all this time. After Fitz had spent three years of his life systematically selling out.

Had he ever had a choice, though? Even for one moment?

And there, by Guest's side, Mother Mathara herself. She was already sealed into her Faction-issue spacesuit, the huge batlike head locked Into position over her face, connected to the life-support systems by veins of thick black plastic. The skeleton had presumably been augmented by the Faction's engineers, the ribs sealed together with translucent artificial skin. Fitz had no idea which bits of the outfit had been parts of the original corpse, and which were pieces of bolted-on hardware. He didn't know what kind of animal the bones had come from, either. He doubted it mattered.

Was the suit any more efficient than a normal spacesuit? Probably not, Fitz decided. More Faction fetishism, that was all. Mother Mathara was like all the rest, obsessed with technology, and with the limits of technology. Like any other cult, Fitz told himself. Hung up on its toys.

And suddenly there was light in the sky, a light that stayed constant, no matter how much the air shook, no matter how much the sky rippled. The lander was coming. Coming to take them up to the Faction's ship, up on the other side of the atmosphere.

The planet was dying. The media were getting out while they could.

## 13

# The Last Day in the Life [20 August somewhere a long way from London]

Where were we?

Oh yes.

Morgan hauled himself out of his chair, and headed for the locker on the other side of the office. Sarah followed him, making sure her skirt was pulled down over her knees as she got up out of her own seat. The locker looked as if it had been built to withstand anything non-nuclear, and Morgan opened it with a key from his trouser pockets, which he left in the lock.

There were shelves inside the locker, cluttered with small pieces of plastic hardware and old sheaves of photocopier paper. The largest item in the locker was a plastic shield, maybe three feet tall and two feet wide, so two of the shelves had been removed to give it the space it needed. The shield was curved, transparent, a pair of handles bolted to the rear side. Some kind of electronic system was built into the front of the plastic.

Wait. This wasn't right. This wasn't a memory. What was it?

Morgan had to take the shield out of the locker to get at Guest's hardware. Once he had his hands on it, he seemed reluctant to put down again.

'You seen these?' he asked Sarah.

'Um, sort of,' she said.

'Great, aren't they? Same market as the shock batons, but you don't need the full Section Five permit.'

Sarah took a closer look at the electronics. 'It's a riot shield?' she asked, then wished she hadn't. If she'd really been from IPS, she wouldn't have needed to ask, surely.

Sarah's point of view. This was what was happening to Sarah. Now, why on Earth should that happen?

Morgan seemed happy to be able to show the shield off. He stuck an arm through the handles, then started playing with the wiring on his side of the plastic. 'Latest model,' he said 'Only cost a few quid to make. Stand back.'

So Sarah stood back.

The air crackled in front of her. The two other men in the office stopped whatever it was they were doing by the filing cabinets, and watched Sarah's reaction with amusement. Sarah tried to look impressed.

'How many volts?' she asked, casually. It sounded like the kind of question Morgan was expecting.

'Forty thousand. You can take it all the way up to a hundred and fifty thousand if you feel like doing some permanent damage.'

'Impressive,' Sarah told him.

'Yeah,' he said as he switched the device off and slid his arm out of the handles. 'The police thought so.'

Sarah blinked at him. 'The British police?'

'The Met. Yeah.'

'You mean, they're thinking of using -'

'Not "thinking". They've already ordered a batch off us. For testing.' Morgan rested the shield by the side of the locker. 'They say they want to use 'em on "dangerous dogs".'

For some reason, that got a laugh from the other two men.

'Be fair,' one of them said. He was short, fat, bald and northern. 'They are testing them on dangerous dogs.'

Sarah wondered how much of this might be true. Morgan sounded like he was trying to show off, to make her think he was in with all the right people. Even with the police. 'Won't anyone check to see what they're being used for?' she asked.

'Do they ever? You know the game. People don't go looking for trouble; nobody wants to know who's got what.'

'And you've got Home Office approval for all this?'

'Put it this way, nobody's talking about prosecuting us. If this Cold stuff works, we're thinking of giving the police first refusal on it. There's enough people in prison they wouldn't mind vanishing. And some "dangerous dogs". Right?'

'Not a spy from the RSPCA, are you?' one of the other men added. And they all laughed again.

Sarah had no idea how to respond to that. Fortunately, she didn't have to. Before Morgan could turn back to the locker, there was a rattling, coughing sound from somewhere outside the building. An engine, but an old one.

'Sounds like Alan's back,' one of the men noted.

Morgan made a 'tsch' noise, and wandered over to the window. The other two turned away from Sarah, to get on with whatever passed for work around here.

Sarah waited until she was sure they weren't watching her. Then she reached into the locker, scooped up every small piece of hardware she could see, and stuffed them into her pockets. While Morgan still had his back turned she shut the door turned the key, and joined him at the window.

A car had pulled up on the pavement outside. It looked like the kind of car any flash executive might have been proud of. Or at least, he might have been proud of it when it had been new. But the car was an X-reg, its paint work dented by

tiny pockets of rust and worn down by bird droppings. Llewis was rolling his big bulky body out of the driver's seat, and the door was opening on the passenger side, too.

The passenger was huge. Ogron huge.

'Looks like I'd better get the coffee on,' mused Morgan.

Of course. Lost Boy had a brother didn't he? Another Ogron called Lost Boy, because Ogrons apparently gave themselves names based on family position, so if you were an orphan... Well, Ogron culture probably wasn't the issue right now.

'White,' mumbled Sarah. 'No sugar. Thanks.'

#### Dawn

The Doctor didn't look out of the window.

He'd been asleep all night. Actually asleep, rather than just resting. Letting part of his consciousness roll the numbers around at the back of his head, but letting the rest drift off and melt into the walls of the cell.

The Doctor still didn't look out of the window.

He couldn't ignore the shouts from the courtyard. He couldn't try to make them part of the background noise. The shouts were different, special. So were the footsteps, the boots on the sand, the bare feet shuffling in the dirt, as the guards dragged Badar away from the building.

The Doctor persisted in not looking out of the window.

More shouts. In the local language. The Doctor tried not to understand any of the words, but the TARDIS was still close enough to push the translations up through his spine and into his forebrain.

The Doctor managed to stay on the floor, his back to the wall, quite specifically not going anywhere near the window.

There was a sound so brief, most of the sentient population of the universe would never have been able to identify it. The sound of metal slicing through bone.

The Doctor gave up, and tried to stand, to at least look out at the aftermath. Ironically, it was only at this point that he realised his legs weren't working.

### Noon

The guards had come into the cell only once that morning, not long after the execution. The Doctor had already started scrawling the equations on to the floor by then, and he'd expected the guards to break his hands for it, but they'd just shouted at him and left him to his work. Still excited after what had happened at dawn, the Doctor guessed. Breaking bones just wasn't in the same league.

The equations were messy, but legible. There was nothing in the cell to write with, so he'd been forced to use his finger, pressing it against the cuts in his face to make the blood seep out. Once or twice, he'd found himself cursing the fact that he healed so quickly, and at one point he'd even had to scrape his cheek against the wall to open up the wounds a little. That didn't strike him as rational behaviour, but he tried not to dwell on it.

By midday – or what he guessed was midday – the equations covered about a quarter of the floor space. Just doodles, really. Distractions, designed to get himself in the right frame of mind for the great work. He wondered whether he'd manage to finish it before the guards stopped him. Of course, it probably didn't make much difference whether he succeeded or not, but he had to try.

He finished one particularly linear logic chain, then turned on his stomach and crawled back to the first clause of the equation, a cluster of blood scrawls in the corner by the door.

'Once upon a time, there was an ancient and unimaginable horror,' he said. Then he paused. 'Well, that's not true. There were plenty of ancient and unimaginable horrors. But one of them took a particular dislike to... to me.'

He cleared his throat, coughed a blob of red phlegm out of his lungs. He briefly considered using it to write with.

Oh, for heaven's sake.

'So this horror decided to take its revenge,' he said. 'It started to interfere with the timelines. To spread its influence through the genetic destinies of other beings, like humans. Quite a dramatic scheme, all in all. It must have worked out its own equations, when it started flipping people back and forth with all those time storms.'

The Doctor looked around the cell.

'The horror must have had a very big floor,' he concluded. 'But that's beside the point. One of the horror's victims was a girl. A teenage girl. The horror wanted to use her as a weapon against me. So it shaped her. Sculpted her. Fed her its own programme.'

He tapped the floor. 'It didn't work. Because I changed the temporal equation. Altered a few of the numbers myself. Subverted the mathematics of her destiny.' The Doctor smiled to himself. 'Subverted the mathematics of her destiny. Yes. I rather like the sound of that.'

Ahead of him, one of the equation's branches cancelled itself out, but the other kept going, finally tailing off when it reached the far wall. He didn't bother moving any further along the line. 'Ace didn't end up quite the way I'd imagined, of course. I could have used the TARDIS to work out the equations properly, if I'd had a year or two to spare. I did it all instinctively. No visible mathematics. But I did it, didn't I? I defeated the horror. I always do.'

With that, he pulled himself upright, resting on both of his elbows. His

broken arm still stung, but he could feel the bone twisting itself back into position, and a bit of pain would probably only help the process.

'I thought Sam was just like Ace, to begin with,' said the Doctor. 'But she's not. It took me a while to work out why she's not, but she's not.'

He pressed his hand against his cheek, and pushed at the skin, forcing a few more drops of blood to the surface. Not much there, through. He considered using his gums. The guards had done some damage to his teeth, and he could feel his fillings moving around uneasily at the back of his mouth. He'd had them fitted during his second lifetime, and they'd never really settled in properly, even though he was sure they kept regenerating with the rest of his body.

'Back to work,' he said.

Ten minutes later, he'd scrawled another equation on the floor. Only a small one, short and linear. He stared at it for a while, then frowned. It all seemed much too simple.

'One human lifetime,' he told his nonexistent audience. 'An overview, with all the interesting details left out.'

Then he began to draw a second equation below it. The same sort of length as the first, but slightly more complex, a rather tricky sub-equation stitched into the base algorithm.

'One human lifetime, plus one Time Lord's interference,' he said. 'That's you, Liz. Or you, Tegan. Or you, Polly. Or you, Sarah.'

Now, there was a thought.

'Sarah,' he said. 'What was it I had to remember about Sarah? Oh yes. She's looking into all of this as well. It was in the UN's records. I wonder how she's doing. Better than me, I hope.'

He stared at the second equation for a while, but it didn't give him any clues. Besides, there wasn't a simple mathematical symbol for 'tortured to death in a prison cell' or 'captured by alien arms dealers'.

Then he remembered the dream.

'Not a dream,' he said. 'The dream is part of the equation. The big equation. The one I haven't started work on yet. Sending consequences backward in time. Good! That means I'll succeed. Probably. Now, let's see.'

He smudged his finger with a little more blood, and began adjusting the second equation. 'Sam's timeline was changed,' he told himself, as he scribbled. 'By the Faction, I should think. Yes. That's it. She was supposed to live her life in London. Never meet me at all. All that went out of the window, didn't it?'

Of course. The 'real' Sam didn't exist any more. She'd been removed from history for good, as far as the Doctor had been able to tell. There was just 'his'

Sam now, the one who'd been fated to end up on the TARDIS. The simple one. The clean one.

Which meant that her timeline was tied to the Doctor's timeline. Thanks to Faction Paradox, her sole purpose in life was to be part of the TARDIS crew. Now she was going to leave the TARDIS, so...

So, the Doctor had no idea what was supposed to happen to her now. Perhaps she'd be a loose end, with no fixed destiny, existing outside the confines of history. Or perhaps she'd simply cease to exist altogether.

'I'm sorry, Sam,' he told the equations. 'I didn't want to have to interfere. Really I didn't. But I can't take the risk, can I? I have to give you a future. A life. Outside of mine.'

He looked over his shoulder. 'We'll have to be careful, though. We don't want to become a horror ourselves, do we? A second Ace is the last thing the universe needs.' He ran his hand over the equation, blurring the first few symbols in the sequence. 'Besides, I'm not the man I used to be. I doubt I could get away with it. So. One simple change. Not really a manipulation at all. The choice has to be Sam's, not mine. She gets to choose the life she wants.'

Then he turned, to face the rest of the cell, the parts of the floor he hadn't even touched yet.

The parts where Badar had lived. Never moving away from the wall, never going anywhere near the window.

'Beside the point,' the Doctor told himself. 'The alteration isn't going to be any use to me here. Concentrate. Think about Sam later.'

With that, he crawled into the middle of the cell, and began the great work. One drop of blood at a time.

#### Dusk

The guards hadn't interrupted him all afternoon. That had been a mercy, anyway.

The equation had turned out to be a lot more artistic than he'd expected. At least, he hoped it had just turned out that way. It was possible his subconscious had been at work, making him turn it into a work of art, embellishing it with meaningless numbers just for the sake of appearances.

Just like Badar, thought the Doctor. Building his own private world to keep himself sane. Or the closest he could get to sane, after the guards had finished with him.

But the great work was almost finished now. He'd been forced to cut his hands open on some of the sharper bricks in the cell, just to provide himself with all the blood he needed. Like a medieval sorcerer, mused the Doctor,

surrounding himself with bloody pentagrams and chalk circles. As it was, some parts of the equation were barely visible, and others overlapped the sequences he'd drawn at sunrise, when he'd worked out the numbers for the story of the little girl and the big horror. He hoped the overlap wouldn't have any unpleasant side effects.

No. That didn't seem very likely. The scrawls on the floor weren't important, not in themselves. They were just aids to his concentration. Ways to help him think through the equations in his head. Ways to make his neurosystem lock on to the details of the temporal mechanics, and... *trigger* them.

The TARDIS was modelled out of solid mathematics. That was no secret, of course. But whenever he told his companions that, they always assumed he meant just the physical material. They didn't understand the way these things worked, the subtleties of the Ship's engineering. The TARDIS was a complex space-time event. Its very existence, its very position in relation to the rest of the continuum, was just an intricate code series.

As was his. That was what Rassilon had done to his people, when the Imprimiture had been worked into the biodata of the Time Lord elite. When you had Rassilon's gift, you were mapped on to the vortex by the numbers, linked to the heart of space-time by an umbilical cord of pure mathematics. Just thinking about the formulae, just holding all the right equations in your head at the same time, was enough to trigger the connection and put you in a different time state.

Back at the Academy, trainee Time Lords would play games with that principle. Transmigration of object, they called it. Sometimes you could do it in a second, without thinking about it, but most of the time you had to concentrate for hours, maybe days, visualising the correct codes. Then you'd take an object, focus on it, and displace it. Use your fast line to the vortex to take it out of the continuum. It played merry hell with your biodata, the Cardinals said, but it had never stopped anyone doing it as a party trick.

It wasn't any use at all as an escape route. Everybody knew that.

The Doctor leaned over the etchings in the corner of the cell, where he'd had to wipe the floor clean, using his jacket to wash away the spoor Badar had left behind. A few more numbers, a few more subclauses, a few more embellishments...

He was just starting work on the last of the minor transpositions when the door opened and the guards came in.

The Doctor tried to ask them what they wanted, but his voice wasn't working properly. He wondered how he'd been able to talk to himself so easily. Perhaps he hadn't, not out loud. Two of the men were carrying shock batons, while those at the back of the little crowd were laughing, at the punchline of a joke the Doctor doubted he'd understand.

The men screamed at him as they kicked him across the floor. The Doctor didn't know what they were saying. The equations had already started to seep into his neurosystem, blotting out the language link with the TARDIS. There was no pain when his face hit the concrete, although he saw a few spots of blood splash across the floor in front of him. His face was numb from being squeezed so hard.

There was the crackling of electricity. The scent of electrified air. A ripping sound, as the guards tore through the back of his shirt with the business end of the baton. The Doctor felt his muscles loosen, and realised that his limbs were going into spasm.

More crackling, and more, and more, and more. There was a symbol hovering in front of his face, an infinitely complex sculpture of mathematics and Time Lord biomass. He stared at it as the electricity wrenched at his spine, trying to work out what it could possibly mean.

He realised it was a number. Eight. That was all.

And more numbers, sweeping away from it in a graceful arc of blood. Transmigration codes. Probability formulae. Biodata locks. The figures spiralled away from him, forming elaborate patterns, but from here he could see only part of the great work, and no sooner had one section been fed into his nervous system than another had slipped out again at the other end...

Something else moved into view. Dark and heavy, spitting out blue light. The end of one of the batons, moving across his vision, blotting out parts of the equation, opening up gaps in the numbers. The Doctor tried to fill in the gaps himself, tried to finish visualising the mathematics before the baton touched him –

A flash of red in his eye.

Blood

And something clicked inside his head, the pieces of the equation locking together, each set of numbers finding its rightful place in the great work. The pain lit up the symbols, turned them into fire. The fire spread, from subclause to subclause.

The baton moved away from his eye, but the numbers were already burning, and the guard was saying something the Doctor wouldn't have been able to understand even if he'd said it in his own

No Time At All

'Hello?' said a little voice.

He couldn't see out of his right eye, although the left one seemed to be pointing upward, towards what he took to be the ceiling. The ceiling was white, a pleasant, soothing kind of white. He imagined that someone had

spent years finding just the right shade, breaking down the humanoid visual system fibre by fibre until they'd worked out exactly how much cream went with exactly how much grey. From somewhere nearby, there was the sound of running water. The smell of greenery.

The Doctor turned his head.

'Oh,' said the woman. 'You must be one of the good guys.'

'How... can you tell?' the Doctor asked. He hoped the words were audible, but he couldn't hear his own voice for some reason, so he wasn't sure.

'Because you're covered in bruises.'

The Doctor considered this. 'I could be... one of the villains... who's just... been punished.'

'Don't be silly. Good guys don't punish bad guys by beating them up.'

The Doctor almost nodded. 'Hello, Sarah Jane,' he said.

He wondered if Sarah looked surprised. It was hard to tell, since he could see only her knees from here. Her body was crouched down by his side.

'You,' she said. 'It's you, isn't it?'

'I... think so. Let's pretend it... isn't, and see... what happens.'

'A.A. Milne.'

'Was it? Ah.' The Doctor managed to move his neck again, until his eyes were aimed directly at Sarah's face. She didn't look the way he remembered her, but then again he didn't know how much of this he may have been hallucinating. She was definitely looking apprehensive, though. The poor girl.

Over her shoulder, he could see a fountain, the same pale cream in colour as the ceiling. Clean water dribbled out of the mouths of not-quite-stone cherubs, which – if the Doctor wasn't mistaken – all seemed to be wearing armour.

Oh. Religious-military imagery. Early Rassilon Era. There were elaborate archways set into the wall somewhere beyond the fountain, and the Doctor wasn't surprised to see that they didn't actually go anywhere.

'What did they do to you?' Sarah asked.

'Torture. Should be... used to it. By now.'

There was a tickling sensation in his scalp. He realised Sarah was running her fingers through his hair. 'You know, I knew you were in trouble. I was going to come and rescue you.' Sarah looked around the room. 'But it looks like we've both been rescued. Haven't we?'

'What's the last thing you remember?' the Doctor asked her.

She clicked her tongue. 'I was in an office. Waiting for a man called Llewis. I was looking out of the window, and this Ogron had just climbed out of his car...' She trailed off. 'Doesn't really make a lot of sense, does it? Where are we?'

'TARDIS. Took myself out of time. This area... a catch-all. Anything that leaves the continuum... this close to the TARDIS... gets put here... for safekeeping.'

Sarah laughed. 'Let me guess. They just happened to leave enough equipment in your cell for you to make a taking-things-out-of-time machine.'

The Doctor tried to say 'no', but couldn't quite remember how to, so he shook his head instead. 'Did it myself. Took myself out. No... no? No. No equipment.'

'You took yourself out of time? What, just like that?' Sarah clicked her fingers. 'Wait a minute. How come you never did that when I knew you? I mean, I can think of a couple of times when it would've come in handy.'

'No. Don't understand.' The Doctor took a deep breath, and it hurt. 'Not escape. Out of time. Soon... soon we'll be taken back. Back to where we came from. No escape. Not from here. This process... the equations... takes up time. Effort Energy. No real purpose. Gives us time, maybe. Thinking time. That's why... we don't use it. Pointless. Last resort.'

Sarah stood. 'But we're in the TARDIS, aren't we? We can just set the co-ordinates for somewhere else, and –'

'No. Look. Look around you.'

So Sarah looked. Then she put her hands on her hips, and walked around the fountain towards the far wall, where the arches were. She started circling the room, her high heels tack-tacking on the smooth floor.

'No exits,' said Sarah.

'This area... an emergency measure,' the Doctor told her. 'Catches things that... drop out of time... until the TARDIS can put them back. No doors. Too much of a... risk. Don't know what... might get on board...'

Sarah's face bobbed into view again. 'So why did you bother coming here if there's no way out?'

'Had to... do something. Running out of... of options. Thought... if I escaped at least for a moment... I might... might think of something...'

He realised his voice was fading. The left eye was clouding over, just like the right one. Everything suddenly seemed a very long way away.

'You mean, this was the best you could do?' asked Sarah.

'The great work,' the Doctor croaked. 'No other ideas. Sorry.'

Sarah tapped him on the forehead. 'If you're so clever, tell me this. How come I ended up here?'

'Good question. Must have plucked you out of time too. Your timeline must have been part... part of the equation.' He suddenly realised what he was saying. 'Yes. Yes. The timeline equation I drew... I was thinking of you... when I drew it. Must have been subconscious. Must have included you...

in the design. Shouldn't be possible, though. Not without some kind of... focus...'

'Hold on.' Sarah started rummaging around in her pockets, in a fashion the Doctor found strangely appealing. She plucked out a blob of black plastic, just the right size to fit into the palm of her hand, and held it in front of his face.

'Took it from the office,' she said. 'Any good?'

The Doctor nodded. 'Alien. Receiver technology. Must have picked up... the signal... the equation.' He let his head sink back, his neck exhausted. 'Yes. That's it. That would do it.'

Sarah absent-mindedly started curling some of her hair around one of her forefingers. The hair was blonde, strangely enough. 'So. If we're out of ideas and we can't get out of this room, what do we do now?'

The Doctor thought about that.

'They killed Badar,' he said.

'Who?' said Sarah.

'Badar. My... friend. Fellow prisoner. He was building a world. I promised to finish it for him. They killed him.'

'Oh.'

'They took him out. Out to the courtyard. Cut his head off. That's what they do. For heresy. Heresy.' He let the word hover on his tongue for a moment longer. 'Sounds so medieval, doesn't it? What they did... what they did in the days of the Spanish Inquisition. Or Galileo. We forget. Politics. Leaders kill heretics because they want to change... the way people see the world. The way they see their leaders. They have... religious police, did you know that? Heresy. Political crime.'

The Doctor felt his eyes closing.

'He was like you,' he went on. 'A journalist. Or something like a journalist. The religious police were watching him. He wrote something... asking about the validity of... of some of their customs. They watched him. Saw he had things in his home. Illegal things. Books. Not even things they'd care about, usually. But enough. Enough to have him put in prison.' The Doctor tried opening his eyes again, but they felt like they'd been gummed shut. 'Politics. It's all politics. That's what... what he wanted me to believe. You. You, Sarah Jane. You were a journalist...

'Still am.'

'Yes. Read your book. Good. Good work. Two MPs resigned, didn't they?' 'Three. They said they just wanted to spend more time with their families.'

'There. You see? All the time. You had your agenda. Political agenda. And I took you... all around space and time... letting you spread it. We're all politicians. All got agendas. Humans. Time Lords. Usurians. Martians. Kalekani. All of us.'

"There's nothing only about being a girl."

'I'm... sorry?'

Sarah was smiling, he suspected. 'Basic feminist politics. Something I told an alien friend of yours, once.'

'Yes. The same with Ace. The same with all of you. And I told myself... I wasn't political. Always asking to be a martyr for... whatever cause seemed like a good idea... at the time. Always thought I was doing it for the good of everybody. Not for myself. Always wanting to die... for the right reasons...'

Sarah's hand was on his brow, now. 'Doctor, you're not making any sense. What's Ace? What's this got to do with anything?'

'Made a promise,' the Doctor told her. 'Told Badar. Told him I'd... sort this out...'

Sarah said something else. Her voice sounded panicky. Louder than usual. But the Doctor couldn't make out a word of it.

'Fading out,' he said.

'... said, you're going all... –ing to vanish. Doct– ... tell me. Where are you? How can I... to you? What's...'

'Fading,' the Doctor muttered, although he doubted she'd be able to hear him. 'Going back. Funny. Thought I'd be here longer. Time to think. Must be you, Sarah. Must be your being here. Having an effect... on the equations...'

Without warning, the sound of running water stopped. So did the smell of greenery.

### Dusk

native language. The next thing he knew, there was a pain in his chest, where one of the guards had planted the toe of a boot. The Doctor felt himself roll over.

The fire had gone out. He could still feel the equations under his fingertips, sticky against his skin, but he couldn't remember anything about them. Not even the basic shape of the mathematics.

They tortured him for a good five minutes more. 'Torture' seemed the only word for it, although, in all honesty, what they did didn't seem that controlled. They kicked him, and they gave him electric shocks, but they did it simply because they had nothing better to do. Finally, they told him that the powers that be didn't really know what to do with him. He was to be considered a political prisoner – he could have laughed at the irony of that, if he'd had any breath left to laugh with – and would quite possibly be executed for espionage, eventually.

Once the guards had left the cell, the Doctor rolled over on to his front, and tried to examine the equations again. But even the parts he could see

didn't make much sense to him. Not enough energy left, he told himself. Not enough strength for his nerves to start soaking up the numbers, let alone to propel himself back into the rest room of the TARDIS. Besides, the great work didn't work. So what was the point?

'I wouldn't know,' he said, addressing his imaginary audience again. 'I'm just here to die for all the wrong reasons.'

## Midnight

After a while, he realised he was out of options, and settled down to sleep.

## FOREMAN'S WORLD: Afternoon on the first day

The sun was going down now. All morning, I.M. Foreman had seen the deer gathering in little groups at the edge of the woodland clearing, peering at the Doctor while he told his story. They probably thought he was there for their own amusement.

And perhaps they were right. After all, most Time Lords liked to think of themselves as gods when they were dealing with the lesser races. To a Time Lord, there wasn't much difference between a deer and a human(ish) being like herself. Why should she believe that she was the one the Doctor had come here to see, just because she could hear his words in her own language?

Then again, she was a lot more complex than the average human being. More complex than the Doctor, even. It was easy to forget a thing like that, when you were wearing a body as weak as hers.

But the Doctor had stopped talking now, and his eyes had settled on the ashes in the middle of the clearing. I.M. Foreman had lit a small fire there, purely for the atmosphere it brought to the place. You needed a fire to tell a good story. She wasn't sure where she'd got that idea from, exactly. Just one of the many cultural prejudices she'd soaked up over the years.

'I'm guessing this isn't how the story ends,' she told the Doctor. 'With you in a cell and Fitz in a completely different time zone. I mean, unless there's a really strange narrative device at work here.'

'We're about halfway through,' said the Doctor, in the softest of all his voices. The deer started blinking at him on the edges of the clearing.

'You want to carry on?'

The Doctor paused for a moment. 'It's hard,' he said, once he'd thought things through. 'I've never had to tell anybody one of my adv— one of my life stories before. Not in full. It's amazing how much detail there is.'

He didn't seem to want to add anything to that. Either he was tired out, or he'd just run out of words. So I.M. Foreman stood, and stretched, trying to ignore the creaking noises from the bones in her legs.

'I'll tell you the bit of the story I don't understand,' she said. 'It's that thing about you not having a shadow. When did *that* start?'

The Doctor lowered his eyes, quite possibly out of embarrassment. 'A few months before Sam went back to Earth. It was while we were in the twenty-first century. Another meeting with Faction Paradox, actually.'

'The Faction's people don't have shadows either, do they?'

'Some of them don't. I think it depends how close to Paradox they've been.' 'So if you don't have a shadow, then that means...?'

The Doctor shifted his weight from one skinny buttock to the other. A very human kind of discomfort, in I.M. Foreman's view. 'I don't know,' he admitted. 'Perhaps the Faction's people took my shadow away deliberately, just to worry me. It's the kind of tactic you'd expect from them. Nothing's more important to them than aesthetics.'

That had been the other reason for the fire, of course. I.M. Foreman had wanted enough light in the clearing for the Doctor to cast a good shadow, so she could see for herself what kind of state it was in. She wasn't sure whether the Doctor had seen her staring, but if he had then he hadn't said anything.

As it happened, he *did* have a shadow. But it looked sick, somehow. Too vague. Too thin. Every now and then, the shadow had copied the Doctor's movements half a second too late, as if it hadn't been strong enough or quick enough to keep up with him.

I.M. Foreman nodded at the ground, where the shadow was currently reclining across a pile of rusty leaves. 'You got it back, then.'

The Doctor glanced down, with a look of obvious distaste. I.M. Foreman was sure she saw the shadow cringe when he stared at it. 'Yes. It came back just after I saw Sam for the last time. At the end of the story. I'll come to that, though.'

'And you don't even know why you lost it in the first place?'

'We're getting ahead of ourselves,' the Doctor pointed out.

I.M. Foreman stepped forward, over the smoking remains of the fire, then held out her hands to help the Doctor to his feet. He looked up at her, but he didn't move.

'Come on,' she said. 'Let's go and find something to eat.'

The Doctor hesitated, then took her hands. The deer vanished back into the depths of the woodland as the two of them headed out of the clearing.

They went back the way they'd come, towards the valley between the two great green hills. The woods looked entirely different in this light. I.M. Foreman watched the webs of shadow that draped themselves across the ground, the way the branches seemed to tangle themselves around the Doctor's own silhouette, as if the woods had spotted how weak it was and decided to pounce on it as it passed by.

'My turn to talk,' said I.M. Foreman. 'Let's go over what happened on Dust. Back in the good old days.'

The Doctor didn't look convinced. 'I haven't finished my story yet,' he said. 'We'll get confused.'

'You mean you can't keep two stories in your head at once? Mmm. No wonder you look so confused all the time. Life must be much too complicated for you.'

The Doctor mulled this over for a while.

'All right,' he said. 'Let's forget about Earth for the time being. Forget about Sam. Forget about Fitz. New page, new chapter.'

'Where shall we start?' asked I.M. Foreman.

# WHAT HAPPENED ON DUST [PART ONE]

Of course, nobody could remember whether 'Dust' was the name the original settlers had given to the place, or whether it was just a nickname that had arrived on the planet one day and never found the energy to get away again. That was how most things on Dust had ended up there, so why should the name be any different?

Somewhere in the universe – maybe in a computer system that nobody used any more, or maybe in one of the archives that had been buried and built over once the empire had rolled over and died – there was probably a file that could tell you exactly when Dust had been found, who'd been the first to stick Earth's flag in the dirt, and why the empire had decided to settle the planet to begin with. But the people on Dust had even less time for history than the rest of the universe. History had been dragged down into the dust, just like all the dead things, Just like all the animal bones, Just like all the people and all the towns that hadn't been thick-skinned enough to go on living.

Ibis was what they called the Dead Frontier. This was the place where the leftovers of the empire had been left out in the sun to rot. The human species had come all this way, as far as the edge of its own galaxy, before it had realised that it no longer had any reason to go anywhere.

Most of Dust was desert, but even the word 'desert' gave the place a kind of dignity it didn't deserve. No rolling dunes on Dust, no brightly coloured lizards to bask in the sun, no hills or curves or contours in the sand. There were whole valleys of cacti that breathed poison out into the boiling air, but nothing moved out in the wastes except for the insects, and the carrion birds, and the people who let the dust storms blow them from one settlement to the next. Because the deserts were made out of dust not sand. A kind of dust that blew into every crack in every building, that bit into the skins of the locals and stripped the paint from the walls of the towns.

And there were plenty of towns for the dust to feed on. There'd been cities, hundreds of years earlier; but since then the desert had simply breathed the buildings back in, sucking the raw materials down into the body of the planet. The people who were left behind picked what they could out of the colony's teeth, mining the ground for nails and knives, drawing out their lives in a world where there was nothing better to do and no future to plan for. Like an Old West town where there was never any chance of the railroad arriving.

The settlements didn't talk to each other much, which was why the first thing any newborn town did was build a wall around itself, always making sure that there was only one way in and one way out. The townspeople surrounded themselves with the weapons they'd managed to save: the pitchforks and pickaxes and shovels, even guns when they could find enough metal for the bullets and summon up the will to use the forges. But nothing ever left Dust, because nothing ever had the strength. Besides, nobody had anywhere else to go. Nobody had any reason to do anything, except eat, and scratch, and pick the lice out of their hair, and sweat into the dirt. Every day on Dust was much like another.

With the exception of this day. This day, which began with two riders heading for one of the walled-off towns in the planet's western hemisphere, scratching a trail of horse dung and upturned dust across the desert. A day that, against all expectations, would see Dust become one of the most important locations in the galaxy.

Politically speaking.

1

# Moving Target [it's always High Noon somewhere in the universe]

According to the clock tower, It was just past eight o'clock in the morning when Magdelana walked out into the square. The satellite had woken her up as soon as it had seen the riders, screeching at her through the broken speaker in the corner of her room, talking to her in a computer language that the rest of the universe had forgotten a hundred years earlier. Nobody else was in the square when she limped towards the town gate, so she guessed the other locals had somehow seen the trouble coming and decided to let her deal with it on her own.

As far as anyone knew, the satellite was the only one on Dust. Nobody in town could remember seeing anything else like it, anyway. Magdelana didn't remember exactly where they'd found it, but the townspeople had broken it while they'd been trying to figure out what it did, so the things that were supposed to make it float didn't work properly any more. The townspeople had got round this problem by hanging the satellite from an old weather balloon, and tethering it to a rope that they'd tied to the top of the clock tower. It'd been a miracle, really, that the locals had found the energy to finish the job. Now the satellite spent its life floating in circles over the town limits, squinting through the dust that had stuck to its old glass eye, as though it could still see a moving target a couple of kilometres away. The monitor for the satellite had been left with Magdelana, seeing as she was already due to be the first in the firing line if there was trouble.

By the time she got to the gate, she could see the two riders on the horizon. Two black-and-grey smears, framed against the morning sunlight, with clouds of sand blowing up around the heels of their animals. The satellite picture had been blurry, because the lens had gone wrong while it had been in the air and nobody could be bothered to bring it back down to fix it, but Magdelana had been able to make out the basics. The animals were horses, real horses, and the armour the riders wore had made the camera crackle with static. Not a good sign.

It had taken Magdelana much, much too long to get ready. To get dressed, to squeeze her feet into her boots, to drag a brush through the dirt in her hair and tie it all back behind her head. She'd loaded the shotgun in under

a second, but it had taken forever to strap on the body armour and hide it under the cowhide of her coat. Armour that probably wouldn't be able to stop a bullet anyway. The nerves in her hip had been howling at her ever since she'd woken up, where her leg had been snapped and the surgeons had slotted the implants into her skin. The pain was slowing everything down, putting a distance of kilometres between her brain and her body. Making her feel like tumbleweed whenever she moved.

But now they were coming, the horsemen in black, the men who Magdelana knew full well must have been sent by the Remote. The sun was right behind them, so she could see the riders' silhouettes against the light, shadows that blurred and wriggled at the edges. Magdelana had already pulled the dust visor down over her eyes, but the visor was cracked right down the middle, and the electronics that were supposed to tint the plastic had been wrecked. She had to squint when she looked into the light, but even so she could make out the features of the two horses, the rubber masks that had been stretched over the animals' faces. She couldn't see the faces of the Remote people, but then, that was what you'd expect. If they were wearing full armour, they'd be wearing their masks as well.

They wanted the town. Magdelana didn't need to be told that. The Remote had been moving in on the other settlements ever since they'd come to Dust, ever since their ship had been pulled down into the desert like everything else on the planet.

She didn't aim the shotgun, not yet. She put herself in the dead centre of the gateway, right between the two rotten wooden posts that held up the arch. She stood with her legs slightly apart, the same old firing stance she'd been using since she'd been eight, planting her boots in the sand and keeping one hand near the trigger of the gun. She made sure she kept her head down, with her hat tilted so the shadow of the brim covered up her face. So the riders wouldn't be able to see her properly until they were inside spitting distance.

You don't know anything about me, thought Magdelana. You don't know who I am, and you don't know what I am. That makes me stronger than you.

The Remote didn't die. Or at least, you didn't usually see any of their bodies lying around. You could always find the remains of travellers out in the desert, convoys of wagons and horses that had been ambushed by God knew who and left at the mercy of the dust, but nobody bothered trying to ambush the Remote. Too tough. Too well armed. Too hard to crack their shells open.

In fact, Magdelana had only ever seen one Remote corpse in the years since they'd arrived on the planet. The body had turned up in the dust about a quarter of a klick outside the town wall, although nobody had ever found out how it had got there, and the locals wouldn't have spotted it at all if it hadn't been for the satellite. The few people who still bothered making guesses about things had guessed that the Remote man had been killed off by the other Remote; the rumours always said that the offworlders ate their own, and the Remote's leader was supposed to be so old and depraved that he could stay alive only by chewing the life out of other people. Must have been a shock to him, Magdelana had thought, to find himself on a planet like this one. A place that could suck him dry faster than he could get his teeth into his victims.

The Remote corpse had turned up about nine months ago, and it was the only time in the last year that Magdelana could remember the townspeople going anywhere in a hurry. Dust turned everyone into a carrion animal, of course. With the help of the satellite, Magdelana had watched all the skinny little people clawing and scratching at each other to get first pick at the body. They'd stripped off the armour first, maybe hoping it was some kind of metal they could melt down for nails and bolts and horseshoes (it wasn't, as it turned out). Then they'd ripped off the underclothes, picked the bullets out of the dead skin, and torn out the electrical things that had been planted in the man's neck. The townspeople didn't have any use for those bits and pieces, natch. They just felt they should take them.

Two weeks later, Magdelana had used the satellite to zoom in on what was left of the body. There'd just been bones by then, once all the flesh had been torn off by the birds and the wind. But the thing that stuck in Magdelana's mind was the fact that there'd been two skeletons there in the desert, one nesting inside the other. She still wasn't sure whether the Remote were built differently from other human beings, or whether the outer skeleton was really just the framework of the armour, all that was left after the metal had been stripped away.

Either way, it didn't give her much hope that she'd be able to stop the riders with a shotgun.

The first of the horses came to a stop just a metre or two from the gateway, and the second drew up by the side of it, wriggling and snorting under the weight of its rider. Magdelana still couldn't see the faces of the Remote, not with their heads framed by the sunlight. She could hear their armour buzzing to itself in the heat, sucking in air and breathing out dust.

She felt her fingers twitching inside her gloves, getting ready to pull the trigger of the shotgun. Not that she could risk firing. She'd get only one shot before the Remote had their own weapons ready, and it'd take more than a single cartridge of lead to crack the armour.

So. Either she was going to stare them down – somehow – or they were going to kill her.

You don't know me. You don't know me at all.

For the first few moments, the riders didn't move, but just sat there on the backs of their horses. Staring down at her as if they couldn't remember why they'd even bothered coming. Remote people did that, Magdelana told herself. Something to do with the receivers in their necks.

'You know who we are?' asked the first rider, eventually.

Magdelana nodded with the end of her shotgun. She made sure she kept it pointed at the man's chest plate.

'We've come for your settlement,' the man said, in a matter-of-fact kind of way.

Magdelana squinted at them through the dust-visor. Just two of you?' she asked. Trying to make her voice as deep and as scratchy as possible. Anything to stop herself sounding old, or tired, or half dead.

'We're here for purely symbolic reasons,' the man explained.

'You're an assigned defender of this settlement?' the second rider asked.

Magdelana took one hand away from the shotgun, and tapped the badge on the lapel of her coat. It was just a plastic ID card, so worn-down by the desert that all you could make out was the vague outline of the photo, but everyone who saw it knew what it meant. The badge had belonged to some imperial security expert or other, back in the days when people could still remember why Dust had been colonised, and it was his photo on the card. Probably the only symbol of law and order on the planet that had outlived the empire.

Magdelana's job didn't have a title, but everybody knew what she was here for. She was here to get shot before anyone else.

'We have instructions,' the second rider announced.

'The first assigned defender is to be executed,' the other man added. Again, Magdelana got the feeling she was listening to a manifesto instead of a human being. 'This will be considered a symbolic gesture by the other inhabitants. Full occupation of the settlement will follow. No further resistance is expected.'

Magdelana's free hand dropped back down to her shotgun. She tried to raise it, to point it at the man's chest plate again, but her fingers kept fumbling on the metal, and a bright spark of pain was leaping up from her leg and all the way through her left side. She heard the clicking noise, and didn't know whether it was the sound of the Remote's guns being cocked (did they even cock their guns, she wondered, or was it true that they still had electronic weapons?) or the implant in her leg gawping out of place. Something stabbed into her heart, not a bullet, not a gunshot of any kind, just a spike of pure shock, as she realised that, even if she could get her fingers on the trigger of the shotgun, she couldn't do anything useful with it before one of the men executed bee So why even bother trying?

She felt her fingers go limp around the shotgun. She heard the soft thump as it dropped into the dust.

Six weeks earlier, two new aliens had turned up on Dust. Magdelana had met them at the gate, because the town had apparently been the nearest settlement to the part of the desert where they'd landed. Magdelana didn't know what kind of ship had brought them to the planet, but she guessed it had probably crashed. Just as the Remote's ship had crashed.

The aliens had been too big and leathery to be human, although they'd spoken the native dialect without any problems. They'd traded for supplies, and for some reason they'd asked a lot of questions about the Remote. Magdelana had taken one look at the clothes the aliens had worn, the all-purpose survival gear and the full-to-bursting-point ammo belts, and decided that, if anyone could take on the Remote's soldiers, it was this new batch of offworlders.

Three days later, the satellite had found the two aliens out in the desert. They'd been crucified, nailed up on big wooden frames that had looked more like antennae than ordinary crosses. The satellite's camera eye had still been working properly then, so Magdelana had spent almost an hour staring down at the dead things, wondering how much damage they'd been able to do before the Remote had taken them out.

There was light in Magdelana's eyes now, and bloodspots, and salt water, and dust that had blown through the crack in her visor. She was staring up into the sun, and she could see that same shape burning in the middle of the light, the shape of one of the antenna-crosses she'd seen out in the desert, this time with her own body nailed to the wood. Her future. Killed and left out to dry by the Remote, turned into a 'symbolic gesture' instead of a human being. She heard the clicking noise again, and this time she knew for a fact that it was the sound of the riders' weapons, being readied for her execution.

'Excuse me,' said the man who was standing right behind her. 'Is this all real, or is it just for the tourists?'

It took Magdelana a while to work out where she was. She realised she was still standing in the town gate, but she was facing the other way now, into the square on the other side. She didn't remember turning. She heard the horses coughing and snorting behind her, and guessed that the Remote riders were still hovering outside the gate. They hadn't opened fire. The man must have turned up just in time, distracting them at the last minute, stopping them from carrying out the execution...

The man. Yes. Concentrate on the man.

The man was normal. That was the first thing that struck Magdelana. Normal height, normal build, normal everything. His clothes were so normal,

they almost looked perverse. A white shirt with puffed-out sleeves, but perfectly clean, as if the dust hadn't noticed it yet. Brown-leather boots, in the local style. A waistcoat pulled tight around his body. His hair was long, tied into a ponytail at his neck, like one of the cattle drivers who passed by the town from the settlements off east.

At first, Magdelana guessed the man was an offworlder, someone who'd copied the clothes of the townspeople and got everything so right that it was wrong. But that wasn't true, was it? The man knew he was going to stand out here, and knew he looked too clean and proper for a place like Dust, but he just didn't care. He was dressed like a parody of one of the townspeople, not an imitation. Like a showman, getting everyone's attention by being more like the locals than the locals were themselves. Even that blindfold –

Blindfold, thought Magdelana. She let the thought roll around her head for a while. The man was actually wearing a blindfold, a strip of red cloth that had been wound around his eyes and across his ears, but he seemed to know just where Magdelana was standing anyway. There were dark smudges on the material, although Magdelana couldn't tell whether the smudges were blood or dirt. The newcomer was blind, and somehow even the blindfold was a joke, like a parody of somebody's dust visor. The man was leaning against one of the big wooden gateposts, with his hands in his trouser pockets and his face turned towards Magdelana.

He'd walked right into the middle of the face-off, and casually saved Magdelana's life in the process.

Magdelana had no idea how to deal with that.

'Are you an assigned defender?' one of the riders asked.

The blind man raised an eyebrow. Magdelana watched it leap up from behind the cloth of the blindfold, then vanish again. She tried to work out how old the man was, but it was hard to tell anything about him with the blindfold there to distract you all the time. Definitely not one of the townspeople, except that somehow he'd ended up inside town limits. If he were an outsider – an offworlder, even – he'd have Came through the gate, and Magdelana would have heard about it. At least, that was the theory.

'I'm not anything,' the man said, and Magdelana didn't immediately realise that he was talking to the riders. 'I'm just passing through.'

Magdelana heard the sound of armour plates scraping together. Were the Remote people turning to look at each other? Scratching their heads? Aiming their weapons at the blind man?

She could have glanced over her shoulder, of course, but she couldn't – wouldn't – look into the sun again. Besides, the pain was running right through her leg and into the ground, rooting her to the spot. In front of her, the blind man reached into one of his waistcoat pockets, took out a gold-

edged pocket watch, and flipped open the lid. Every move he made looked casual, so relaxed it just had to be rehearsed. He bowed his head to look down at the watch.

'Noon,' he announced. His voice was slow and lazy, the kind of accent that sounded like it had been dozing in the sun for the last hundred years. 'Noon my time, anyway. Still, I've been running fast for most of my life.'

'You can't see,' one of the riders pointed out.

'I don't need to,' said the blind man. 'My watch doesn't have any hands.'

The man was looking – looking? – over Magdelana's shoulder now, fixing his attention on the riders. Magdelana wondered whether it was worth running, or even scrabbling in the dirt for the shotgun. She doubted it.

'Are you armed?' the second rider asked.

'Armed?' said the blind man.

'We have to evaluate you as a threat. Your intervention suggests you wish to stop us fulfilling our mission.'

'Oh, I see. No, I'm not armed. Primed, maybe. Not armed.'

'Then we have to execute you. In addition to the first assigned defender.'

The man in the blindfold started pacing then, slowly walking up and down between the posts of the gate, kicking up the sawdust under his feet. He had his face turned down to the ground, lost in thought, and Magdelana wondered why the Remote didn't kill him off straight away.

Eventually, he looked up. Smiled. Threw open his arms.

'Got it,' he said. 'If you don't leave us alone...'

He paused.

'Yes?' one of the riders prompted.

'You won't like it,' said the blind man.

'Carry on,' the rider insisted.

The blind man shrugged. 'I'll blot out the sun,' he said.

There was what may have been the most terrible pause in the whole history of humanity. In those moments of silence, Magdelana could almost imagine the dust creeping up her frozen leg, trying to drag her down into the guts of the planet now that it knew she couldn't move.

'Blot out the sun,' one of the Remote men repeated.

The blind man nodded. 'More or less.'

Another pause. Magdelana closed her eyes. She saw the sun again, hovering somewhere between her eyelids and her eyes. She saw her own crucified body against the light, and knew that, whoever the blind man may have been, he was entirely mad. And that was when she knew for a fact that she was going to die here, that nothing could stop the Remote now.

'Go ahead,' the first rider said.

You don't know who I am, thought Magdelana. And who I am is all that matters.

'Are you sure?' said the blind man.

Past the ID badge, or the fact that I'm the one who gets to use the satellite. Past all the things that make me what I am in this town. Only I know who I really am, and that's the way it's going to stay.

'We're sure,' said the second rider, in the same old matter-of-fact voice. We want to see you blot out the sun.'

'All right,' said the blind man. 'But don't say I didn't warn you.'

First assigned defender. First in the firing line. That's my place in this world now, and I only ended up here because I could shoot straighter than anyone else. Because my mother showed me how to stand still and pull a trigger, nearly half a century ago.

'Well?' said the first rider.

'Don't rush me,' said the blind man. 'I'm doing it.'

See what you did, Mother? I'm walking into the sun, and they're going to crucify me, and it's all your fault. But at least they never found out who I am. At least I kept that bit to myself. Dust drags all the life and soul out of you, but I managed to stay whole right up until the end.

'Here we go,' said the blind man.

The sun. Walking into the sun. It feels like the heat's inside me, but maybe that's just the pain. I don't know.

'There,' said the blind man.

The sun went out inside Magdelana's head.

There was no light. There was no pain. She opened her eyes, and suddenly the town square was made out of shadows. She could just make out the face of the blind man in the darkness, but suddenly he wasn't smiling, or talking, or overacting. Magdelana turned on her bad leg, and if there was any sensation there then she was too numb to feel it.

The sun had gone out. Something huge and dark had moved between the town and the light, something that turned the sun into a circle of sheer black. On the backs of their horses, the Remote men turned, and looked into the darkness on the horizon.

Then they turned back again.

'Told you,' said the blind man.

'Is that it?' asked the first of the riders.

She heard the blind man let out a slow-motion sigh. 'I said I'd blot out the sun,' he said. 'So I blotted out the sun. What do you want, blood? I can bleed for you, if it'll make you any happier. Stigmata's my speciality.'

'It's just an eclipse,' the rider said.

There was a shocked pause. Then a slapping sound. Magdelana didn't look up, let alone turn round, but she guessed that the blind man had just slapped himself on the forehead.

'You know about eclipses,' he said. He sounded disappointed. 'I'm sorry, I thought you people would've forgotten all about elementary astronomy by now. I thought you'd be impressed.'

The Remote were raising their weapons again. There was another spark of pain in Magdelana's leg.

'Of course, it *could* be just an eclipse,' the blind man went on. He still didn't sound as though he wanted to rush the conversation, even though he was seconds away from being shot in the head. 'On the other hand, I could have a stellar manipulator in orbit around this planet. I could have the technology to rearrange your whole solar system. You never know.'

Magdelana could see the outlines of the riders' guns now. Two blunt little snouts, shining in the darkness, both of them aimed at the blind man. Him first, then her. They saw him as the main threat, even despite his babbling and his stupid waistcoat. Magdelana would've been insulted by that, if she'd had the energy.

The blind man just cleared his throat. 'But if I did have a stellar manipulator, and I had used it to blot out your sun, then I'd have to belong to a species that's famous for its solar engineers. True?'

Everything went quiet. The Remote men froze, with their big armoured fingers on, the triggers of their weapons.

'Those masks of yours have got scanning systems built in, haven't they?' the blind man went on. He was still playing to an audience, Magdelana realised.

The Remote didn't reply. She took that to be a 'yes'.

'Read me,' said the man, with a kind of seriousness in his voice that Magdelana wouldn't have thought possible until that moment. 'Look at my DNA. Look at my biodata. Look at anything you like, then match it with your records. See what they tell you.'

And they were doing it, as well. Magdelana could hear the buzzing Under the Remote's masks, the signals being pumped in and out of their heads from whatever settlement they called home. She could tell something was wrong. The riders were shifting in their saddles, and the horses started stomping their hooves in sympathy.

Then the sun came back out. The black thing was moving away from the light, turning the riders into silhouettes again. The Remote soldiers were staring at each other, as if they were searching each other's face for new transmissions. Whatever they'd seen in the blind man's genes, it'd got them worried.

'Adjustment of strategy,' the first of the riders declared.

That was all either of them said before they turned their horses in a neat half-circle, and rode off into the desert.

For the next few minutes, Magdelana stood and watched as the Remote vanished over the horizon. When she turned again, the blind man was standing in front of one of the gateposts, plastering something over the wood. It was a poster, by the look of it. The man was putting up a poster.

She hobbled over to the man, and stopped at his side. He was whistling as he smoothed the poster over the gatepost, although Magdelana wasn't sure what was keeping the paper up.

'Saved my life,' she said. She couldn't think of a better way to start the conversation.

'Probably,' said the man. 'Is it important?'

Magdelana had to think about that.

'One thing,' she said, in the end.

'Oh yes?'

'We've got a satellite in this town. Keeps track of things for us. Keeps tack of the weather. Keeps track of the dust storms. Keeps track of everything.'

The blind man finished his work, and took a step back to admire the poster. 'And?'

'There was meant to be an eclipse today. About eight o'clock. Satellite said so last night.'

The man turned to look at her, as well as he could.

'Well, do I look like the kind of person who'd really carry a stellar manipulator around with him?' he asked.

Then he turned away, and strolled back into the square. Magdelana watched him vanish into the streets before she fixed her eyes on the poster. She was supposed to stop people walking straight into town, of course. She was supposed to stop offworlders getting past the wall, at least unless they could prove that they had stock to trade and weren't carrying any heavy firearms. That was the whole point of her being alive, as far as she could tell.

Somehow, though, she didn't think it was worth getting in the way of the blind man.

The poster was printed in thick black ink, on paper that looked as though it had been left out in the sun for a couple of hundred years. It turned out to be an advertisement for a travelling show. Magdelana didn't recognise the name at the top of the bill, but she guessed it belonged to the blind man.

"I.M. Foreman",' she said. For some reason, the name felt right at home on the end of her tongue.

# 2 Explain Earlier (how times change)

The door shouldn't have been there, the Doctor knew that much for certain. It wasn't really the fact that the door hadn't been there before that bothered him, seeing as the TARDIS quite often rearranged her interior spaces while she thought he wasn't paying attention. But even if the old girl's architecture wasn't exactly stable, he still had a good enough feel for her internal workings to know when something was wrong. You didn't have to be a doctor to tell when someone was sick, and you didn't have to have a triple first in blocktransfer mathematics to know when a door was somewhere it shouldn't have been.

He'd found the door in one of the more well-worn TARDIS corridors, just a couple of turnings from the console room. It had been small, and apparently made out of wood, which hadn't suited the rest of the decor at all. Perhaps, thought the Doctor, the force that had put the door there had known he wouldn't be able to resist a little brass doorknob. Certainly, his response to the door – opening it up without it second thought, and walking right into the darkness with his head held high and a tune from Gilbert and Sullivan on his lips – might have Seemed a little on the rash side, in retrospect. At the time, he'd told himself that, wherever the door led, it couldn't possibly have been dangerous. This was still the TARDIS, after all, and if you couldn't trust pour closest companion then who *could* you trust?

He was starting to have doubts now, though. Now he was a good ten lards down the passageway. At least, he thought it was a passageway, although the place was still in pitch darkness. He couldn't see any walls on either side of him, but he was sure he felt some instinct telling him to keep walking forward, and not to veer left or right at all.

Perhaps it's an initiation, he thought. This was the kind of thing Freemasons and black-magic cults did, to scare the living daylights out of new recruits. Put them in a pitch-dark tunnel, make them feel psychologically vulnerable, get them ready for a good brainwashing. Perhaps the Time Lords had put the passageway here, as a way of indoctrinating him into one of their little political cliques. There was probably an agent of the Celestial Intervention

Agency at the end of this tunnel, with a membership form and a ballpoint pen. Hoping he'd be scared witless enough to sign up.

As if.

It was quite clear where he was supposed to be going, anyway. He could see light up ahead, although it wasn't strong enough to illuminate the passage. It wasn't actually the light at the end of the tunnel, as such: It was some kind of object, glowing in the darkness, all red and throbbing. No, not exactly an object. More a sort of pattern, like –

The Doctor stopped walking, suddenly realising what he was looking at. He stopped humming, too.

The passageway ended in a wall, and the glow was just bright enough for him to be able to see that the wall was grey, more like concrete than the usual off-white of the TARDIS. The pattern had been smeared across the wall in a muddy phosphorescent red, as if it had been drawn with firefly blood instead of ink. The pattern was circular; more or less. There were lines connecting various points around the circle, forming equations in the centre of the shape, sums formed out of sheer geometry. It took the Doctor a while to recognise the pattern, because the memory of it was so old that it seemed to have been filed away in a part of his brain he'd forgotten how to use.

'Obviously, there's no such thing as magic,' said Cardinal Brabbajaggl, stirring in his chair the way all fat old academics did when they knew they were getting on to controversial ground. 'However, this doesn't mean that magic isn't a useful metaphor to employ when dealing with less advanced beings than ourselves. Supernatural concepts are used by many cultures as a form of code, with which they can describe the more... how shall I put it? The more complicated aspects of reality. In much the same way in fact, that we might use higher mathematics. If our mathematical constructs in any way resemble the rituals we find in magic-based or spirit-based cultures, then this is hardly coincidental...'

Excuse me, sir,' said Theta Sigma, raising his hand only once he'd already started talking. When are we going to get on to the good bits?'

"Good bits"?' rumbled the Cardinal. The interruption had obviously caught him off-guard, because his jaw had dropped and his chin count had very nearly doubled.

'Yes, Sir. You know. The bits about vampires.'

It was a time equation. The Doctor had sat through enough elementary geochronometry lessons to know that. A good old-fashioned time equation, painted on to the wall up ahead. He found himself trying to decode the pattern, to find out what it had been used for. He spotted some angles in the shape that suggested a transmigration program – ah, those were the days – and every now and then, parts of the pattern would suggest a stylishness that he found oddly familiar. But a lot of the lines were broken. The pattern was

incomplete. There were huge spaces in the centre of the circle, and it took him a ridiculously long time to realise the truth. The hole in the pattern was the same shape as a man, because –

The Doctor stepped forward, stopping only when he was mere feet away from the pattern. There was a man pinned to the wall, stuck to the grey concrete, as if he'd been crucified against the equation. A total stranger, here in the TARDIS. The Doctor wasn't sure what was holding the man in place, but his limbs were splayed out at peculiar angles, and by the look of him one of his arms had been broken.

Was this a warning? A dead body dumped on board the TARDIS by the High Council, as a way of telling the Doctor to stay in line? Was that the idea?

No. The man was still breathing. He seemed quite young, although there were wrinkles forming around his mouth, and patches of his skin had been scraped raw on his face. His hair was curly and brown, but matted with sweat and... was that blood? Possibly. The stranger's clothes looked positively Edwardian, not entirely unlike the Doctor's, although obviously nowhere near as stylish. The man's eyes looked as though they'd been welded shut, but at least his face seemed peaceful. Asleep, rather than unconscious.

Then he woke up. The Doctor took a step back.

'Hello,' the man said, as he opened his eyes. His eyelids were wet and heavy, and he tried to turn his head towards the Doctor as he spoke. 'What are you doing up there?'

The Doctor frowned. "Up" where?"

'Up there. That... floating thing you're doing.' The man's voice sounded as though it had suffered as much as his body, but you could tell he was trying to hide it.

'I assure you, I'm not floating,' the Doctor told him. 'I'm standing in front of you.'

The man paused, then shook his head. There was something familiar about him, no doubt about it. The Doctor got the feeling he'd seen the man before somewhere, but the circumstances had been so horrifying that he'd blotted it all out of his mind.

'Not possible,' said the intruder. 'I'm lying on the floor. Floor of this prison cell. So you must be floating.'

Lying? The Doctor examined the wall behind the man, and realised for the first time that it really *was* concrete, not some kind of TARDIS simulation. The man wasn't on board the TARDIS at all, then. He was in another space entirely, and somehow the two spaces had been knotted together here in the darkness. Yes, that was it: this passageway was a kind of neutral zone between the two spaces, and the TARDIS had put a little wooden door in front of it to alert him to its presence.

That was when the Doctor worked it out. When he took another look at the red lines on the wall, and finally recognised the hand that had drawn them, even though he knew that the hand in question must have regenerated several times.

'Good grief,' said the Doctor. 'This isn't right at all. You really shouldn't be here, you know.'

The man thought about that for a moment. 'Let's see. Third incarnation. That means... ah. Where are you? I mean... where's your TARDIS now?'

'We're in flight. We've just left Quiescia.'

The man from the future tried to nod. 'And before that... Peladon. I remember. Is... Sarah with you?'

'Of course.'

'Yes. Yes, that's it. I was... careless. When I drew the equations. Her timeline's mixed up with mine. Must have made a few links between time zones that... I didn't mean to make. I'm... sorry.'

He was obviously having difficulty speaking, although the Doctor wasn't sure whether it was something to do with what had been done to his body, or whether he just needed sleep. It occurred to the Doctor that whatever had happened to the man in the pattern was destined to happen to him one day, but he didn't dwell on it.

Suddenly, the man seemed alert.

'No,' he said.

'No?' said the Doctor.

'No. That's not it. It's not... it's not just me. There's something else.' The Doctor scratched the back of his head. 'Look, I'm sorry, old chap. You're not making a lot of sense.'

'There's something else,' the man in the circle repeated. 'Don't you see? There's some other force. Tying us together. You and me. Sam and Sarah. Something's forming links between us. Links that shouldn't be there.'

The Doctor considered this. 'Force' was a big word. He started sunning through all the possibilities, and he couldn't help putting the High Council at the top of the list.

'Faction Paradox,' the man said, out of the blue.

'I beg your pardon?'

'Faction Paradox. You... know them?'

The Doctor shook his head. 'Obviously something from my future. Perhaps we'd better not talk about this.'

'But that's it. Don't you see?' The man was getting excited now, flapping his one good arm and nodding his head like a lunatic. 'They change time. That's what they're good at. They change history. They even change their own.'

'I really don't think -' the Doctor began.

'You haven't heard of the Faction yet,' the man burbled. The Doctor could hear the bubbles in his throat, and hoped it wasn't blood. You won't do. Not until your next regeneration. That's when the rumours start coming in from Gallifrey. Except...'

The man broke off. The Doctor thought about saying 'except what?', but decided against it. Patience, he told himself.

'Except that I've just told you about it now,' the man in the circle concluded. 'You see? I remember going to Peladon. I remember going to Quiescia. But I don't remember this. I don't remember being where you are now.'

'Oh dear,' said the Doctor. 'These Faction people. You think they're interfering with our timeline, is that It?'

'I think so. Maybe not deliberately. Maybe just a side effect. Where's your TARDIS heading?'

'We're going back to Earth,' the Doctor said. 'Sarah's idea.'

'Good. Good. Make sure you get there. You might get... diverted.'

The Doctor started rubbing his chin. 'So they can divert TARDISes. That really is grossly irresponsible.'

'Not the TARDIS,' the man said. His voice was getting weaker now, and the Doctor wondered how long it'd be before the equation finished its work and this entire passageway vanished from the Ship again. 'You might get diverted. We might get diverted. Our timeline. Our... history. Don't forget.'

'I won't,' said the Doctor.

The man in the pattern finally managed to nod properly.

'Hold on to your shadow,' he said. Then his eyelids dropped down over his eyes, and his head rolled to one side, as he fell into sleep again.

The Doctor stood there for another minute or so, watching the man sleep. Then he turned away, and walked back along the passage, towards the point where he knew the little wooden door would be waiting for him. When he finally stepped through the doorway and back into the smoothness of the TARDIS corridor, the light didn't hurt his eyes at all, and he thanked the ship for thinking of these tiny details. He kept walking once he was back on board the TARDIS he knew, not even turning round to see whether the door was still there.

Which meant that he was already heading towards the console room when he heard Sarah screaming. A primal, animal kind of scream, the sound of an ape descendant seeing something her species had been afraid of since day one. A giant-maggot scream. A dead-body-in-the-cupboard scream.

And Sarah wasn't a natural-born screamer. A shouter, yes, but not a screamer. So that was when the Doctor broke into a run, and when he knew for certain that the man in the darkened passage had been right, that something really had been changed for the worse.

\* \* \*

There was blood on Sarah's hands. It was wet and it was sticky and she had no idea whose it was, even though she knew where it had come from.

Half an hour ago, the TARDIS had left Quiescia and the Doctor himself had pottered off into the depths of the Ship, warbling to himself in his usual cod-opera singing voice. Sarah had gone to her quarters, changed into the clothes she'd mentally labelled 'comfortable', and fifteen minutes later she'd been back in the console room. Peering at the controls, to make sure they really were heading back to Earth. Not that she was expecting the navigational panel to be in English, of course.

It was while she'd been standing over the controls that she'd seen the blood. It had just been a smear, in the middle of the shiny white floor by the side of the console, so at first she'd guessed that the Doctor had cut himself at some point and not bothered mentioning it. But the smear had started growing in front of her eyes, and it definitely hadn't been dripping from the ceiling.

Sarah had started to panic only once the patch had touched the base of the console, and she'd had to move around the floor to avoid it. She'd rested her hands against one of the control panels, then peered over the edge of the console, watching the way the blood spread. The puddle hadn't got any deeper. If anything, the floor had looked like a piece of blotting paper, with the stain spreading across it but never actually breaking through the surface.

That was when Sarah had felt it on her hands. She'd taken her palms away from the console like a shot, but by then the blood had already covered her fingers. She seemed to remember screaming at that point, although now she was starting to tell herself that it couldn't really have been a scream, that it had probably been more like a bit of a startled yelp. She'd moved away from the controls after that, watching the way the blood had formed in gooey patches across the console. It had been ugly, wrong and horrible all at the same time, like watching your favourite teddy bear going through open-heart surgery.

Suddenly, the room seemed a lot more pink than it had done. It was the roundels, Sarah realised. The roundels were all turning pink, as if the blood had been building up behind the walls, trying to burst through the access panels. Sarah kept her eyes on the walls, every now and then stepping back to get away from the puddle on the floor, so the was already staring in the general direction of the doorway when the Doctor hurried into the console room. Then stopped dead.

Sarah's first instinct was to apologise. She wasn't sure why. But the Doctor didn't look angry as he stood there in the doorway. His eyes were wide, as wide as they ever got, the same way he looked when some alien master fiend or other finally revealed its horrifying plan for galactic slavery. Appalled, yes.

Angry, no.

'Good grief,' he whispered. Somehow, he managed to make it sound like something other than ironic understatement.

'Doctor?' Sarah asked. She was going to follow it up with 'what's happening?', but it didn't really seem necessary.

He strode across the floor, carefully avoiding the blotchy patches, looking at every facet of the console without ever touching it. The rotor in the middle of the control panels stopped moving at that point. Looking back on it later, Sarah would realise that this was the exact moment when the puddles of blood stopped growing, but at the time she was too busy watching the Doctor to notice.

Slowly, and cautiously, the Doctor raised his hand. He pressed his fingertips against one of the bloody patches on the console, then took them away again. Sarah saw the look on his face as he stared down at his open palm. No emotion. Eyes like a hawk's. Nose like a hawk's as well, come to think of it.

It was only then that Sarah figured out exactly why she'd been so disturbed by all of this. Why the bleeding had made her scream, rather than panic in a more generic sort of way.

This wasn't the kind of thing that was supposed to happen on board the TARDIS. In itself, bleeding architecture was no stranger than, say, being menaced by an intelligent city, or finding a crashed spaceship in the middle of fourth-century Arabia. But the *style* of it was wrong.

This wasn't space opera. It was sheer horror. The Doctor was a Time Mechanic as much as he was a Time Lord, repairing the worn-out parts of history in the same way he'd fiddle with bits of old cars and hovercraft in the UNIT garages. He'd told her that he and the TARDIS were linked, somehow, so maybe it wasn't surprising that wherever they went they seemed to run into history's technical problems, that they kept ending up on planets where the natives were under threat from runaway machines or big clunky killer computers. Because the Doctor was an expert when it came to strange engineering, and somehow the TARDIS knew that, and made sure it went only where there were problems the Doctor could solve. Even if the Doctor thought he was the one in control.

But blood...

The Doctor looked up at her, his fingers still covered in patches of icky red. His face seemed softer than usual, even though the wrinkles were as deep and as well chiselled as ever. He was wearing his velvet jacket and his best green cravat, so he looked exactly the way he always looked, but there was blood on his hands and it wasn't supposed to be there. And he must have known what she was thinking, because he said, 'This really isn't me at all, is it?'

The next thing she knew, the Doctor was his old self again, concentrating on the navigational panels and pretending that the blood at his feet wasn't even there. Standing in the middle of all the horror, he looked as if he'd been added to the scene after it had been filmed. Like a bad special effect. All that was missing was the little blue line around him.

Sarah peeked over his shoulder. The readings on the navigational panel didn't mean much to her, but somehow she'd expected the co-ordinates for her home world to look much simpler than the ones she could see there.

'Earth?' she tried.

The Doctor shook his head. 'I'm sorry, Sarah Jane. I'm afraid we've been... well, diverted.'

'The Time Lords?'

He sighed. 'No. No, I don't think so. Wherever we are now, there's been some kind of temporal interference. The TARDIS has been drawn to it like a bear to honey.' He looked up then, at least acknowledging the blood on the walls. 'I don't think this is the sort of place she'd usually go. Poor old girl.'

'So you don't know where we are?'

The Doctor was obviously glad to have an excuse to look down at the panel again. 'Thirty-eighth century, give or take a calendar change or two. An old human colony world, by the looks of things. Right on the edge of the galaxy. On almost exactly the other side of Mutters' Spiral to Quiescia.'

He raised his hand to his face, and Sarah guessed that he was about to scratch his chin. But he stopped himself in the nick of time, spotting the splotches of red on his fingers. He stared at the mess for a few moments more, as if he had no idea what to do about it.

'All right,' he said, and Sarah wasn't sure whether he was talking to her or to the Ship. 'We'll get ourselves cleaned up, then we can go out and see what's happening. How does that sound?'

'This really isn't me at all, is it?'

The TARDIS had arrived in a narrow alleyway, between two dust-bitten wooden buildings that looked as though they'd been made out of scraps from older constructions, so the Doctor had to squeeze himself against the side of the TARDIS to get out through the doors. The sky overhead – what he could see of it in the crack between the buildings – was a sickly-looking yellow, streaked across with bands of black. The black parts definitely weren't clouds, but they looked natural anyway, as if the planet had seen the humans coming and decided to pollute itself before they arrived, just out of spite. The air was dry, and there were particles of sand in every breath he took. He guessed it was sundown, by the local clocks.

He felt the dust crunch under his shoes when he took a step forward, and somehow he knew in a second what he was walking on. He could feel the rubble under his feet, the remains of the older human settlements. The bleached bones of cattle and people. Native cacti spores, pushing their roots deeper and deeper into the buried foundations. A whole archaeological layer of bullets and lynching rope.

'Ugh,' said Sarah, somewhere behind him.

There was blood on the air, too, although some of the smell may just have been stuck in his nose after what had happened in the TARDIS. That was a terrible, degrading thing to see happen to an old friend. Not the sort of thing he'd wish on his worst enemy, let alone his closest companion. The man he'd met in the darkened corridor, on the other hand...

Yes. Blood and horror were very much *his* kind of thing, the Doctor guessed. After all, the man had clearly used his own blood to draw the equation on the floor of his prison cell.

Was that the Doctor's destiny, then? To be taken away from all the glorious machineries of history, and wallow in the offal of the universe instead? Was that why the TARDIS had bled, because it was sharing the trauma of an entirely new kind of life?

'Hey, Doctor,' said Sarah. 'Take a look at this.'

The Doctor turned. Sarah was at the other end of the alley, standing on the far side of the TARDIS. The alley seemed to lead out into some kind of open square there, which was why the Doctor had headed in the opposite direction. He didn't want to draw too much attention to himself, not on a world like this one. But Sarah had obviously found something interesting, because she was staring at one of the walls near the end of the alley, reading a piece of weatherworn paper that had been stuck to the woodwork there. A poster, by the look of it. From what the Doctor could see, there were more of the posters in the square, although he couldn't make out any details from here. He headed over to join Sarah.

Poor old TARDIS, he thought. Suffering for my sins again. Weeping tears of blood for my future self. But if that's true, then why now?

Because this planet is where the future's going to be made, perhaps. Because today is the first day of the rest of my life.

I feel as if I've walked into the middle of someone else's adventure.

Then he arrived at Sarah Jane's side, and cast his eyes over the poster. That was when he realised exactly how complicated things were about to get.

### I.M. FOREMAN'S ONE-SPECIES NONGENETICALLY-ENGINEERED TRAVELLING SHOW

Every act a reflection, every performer a cautionary tale. (All comers welcome, no refunds given.)

### Introducing:

MELMOTH The Map of Scars (each scratch a world of experience)	MR ZARATHUSTRA The Walking Brain (his very thoughts move mountains)	MOULD The Worm-Boy (must be seen to be believed!)
O'SALAMANDER The Dragon-King (Paramour of Fire, a breathing inferno)	JOHN SALT The Missing Link (the beast in every one of us)	THE GOOFUS The Living Armoury (every inch of skin a weapon)
<b>EZEKIEL</b> Master Aerialist (the Angel of the Pleiades)	QUEEN NITOCRIS Mistress of Serpents (see the creatures bow to her will)	THE IF What Is It? (freak of nature, or messenger of fate?)

AKA	MOHANDAS	
The Metamorph	The Geek	
(a hundred acts	(please leave all	
in one)	pets at home)	

N.B.: The Management accepts no responsibility for anything at all.

### 3

## Patterns in the Dust [the Doctor takes coffee while history unfolds]

At around nine in the morning, the two Remote riders who'd been sent to execute Magdelana Bishop finished the long ride back to the town they called Anathema. The settlement had been built around the Mains of the Remote's ship, and the town had been named in honour of one of the Remote's great cities, the Faction-built metropolis that had been lost to history nearly eighteen hundred years previously. Not that many of the Remote had even heard of the original Anathema.

Thanks to their transmitter/receivers, the riders had been in contact with the town throughout the journey, so the Remote knew what to expect. Even so, the horsemen made their report to the rest of the town in the usual fashion, just in case anything had got scrambled during transmission.

New alien presence, said the riders. Wearing a blindfold, for unspecified reasons. Apparently in control of a stellar manipulator. DNA recorded, and found to be Gallifreyan in origin, but with unidentified impurities. Not Time Lord-normal, possibly some new High Council biological weapon, like the two aliens who'd been crucified in the desert a few months ago.

Anathema II made its plans accordingly.

From the desk in the upstairs room, Magdelana had a pretty good view of the square down below. There was no glass in the window, not since one of the townspeople had got drunk on surgical alcohol and tried to blow her head off from ground level, but she could still see the people through the gaps in the boards. People. Past eight o'clock in the evening, according to the clock tower, and in the last five minutes she'd counted at least two-dozen figures shambling across the square and heading for the town gate.

The travelling show had set up shop just outside the wall, and it was making the locals move like nothing else on Dust. Even when one of the neighbouring towns had burned down about a year ago, and you'd been able to see the flames shoot a hundred metres into the sky from the town wall, Magdelana hadn't seen more than twenty of the people turn up at the gate to watch. The show was so unexpected, so downright new, that even the zombie families

who spent their days sitting on their porches and spitting into the dust had been pulled up off their backsides and dragged towards it.

Tonight, thought Magdelana, half the town's going to be outside of the wall. For all she knew, it was the biggest trap in the history of the colony. For all she knew, the man with the blindfold was going to kill the lot of them.

Except that he'd saved her life, of course.

'Look, I hate to pressure you, but do you think you could stop pointing that thing at me now?' said the man who was sitting on the other side of the desk.

Magdelana turned to face him, but slowly, just so he didn't think he was making much of an impression on her. She'd made sure his chair was a good two metres away from the desk, so he wouldn't think about making a lunge for the shotgun. The snout of the gun was resting on the edge of the desk, aimed right at the man's chest, with Magdelana's right hand hovering over the trigger. She'd put her feet up on the desk as well, and she let her free hand dangle by her side, to make it clear to the man that she could be very, very casual about killing him.

The man was another offworlder. He'd turned up in town about an hour ago, along with some girl sidekick who'd vanished without trace soon afterwards. The two of them had appeared out of nowhere in the streets near the square, and none of the locals had bothered getting in their way, or even asking them who they were. When the man had tried asking the townspeople questions, in his stupid affected old-dialect accent, they'd just shrugged at him and carried on with their lives as usual, squatting on their doorsteps and picking the recycled animal fat out of their teeth, or pulling the dirt out from under their toenails.

When word had finally reached Magdelana about the white-haired man and his girlfriend, she'd told some of the younger men to hunt the aliens down and bring them in. But she'd barely finished giving the order when the man had walked right into her home-cum-office, and politely asked who was supposed to be in charge. He needed help to find the girl, he'd said. She'd wandered off somewhere, apparently, and she hadn't found her way back to that big blue box they were supposed to travel around in. The other men had vanished after that, mooching off to the show like everybody else who wasn't too sick or crippled to get out of the gate, leaving Magdelana to deal with the offworlder on her own.

'You sure you're not with the travelling show?' she asked the man, keeping the shotgun trained on his chest.

The man looked offended, which Magdelana found funny, until she realised that it was probably all part of the act. 'I assure you, madam, I'm no such thing.'

'Mmm-hm. So you're not a side show freak or anything.'

The man made various noises of frustration at her. 'I see,' he said. 'And this is what you call civilisation in these parts, I suppose?'

Just seems kind of funny to me,' Magdelana went on. 'This many off-worlders turning up at the same time. The show turns up, then you turn up. And you get right into the square without anyone seeing you come through the gate, same way the blind man did. And you've got a stage name instead of an ID. *Doctor*.'

The visitor winced. 'Yes,' he mumbled. 'Yes, that is all rather difficult to explain. But believe me, I'm as interested in this blind man as you are.'

Magdelana leaned back in her chair, and let it rock backward and forward, all the time keeping her finger on the trigger of the shotgun. The man shifted uncomfortably in his seat, which had been the general idea.

'You going to tell me who you are?' she tried.

'My dear lady, I've already told you. I'm the Doctor. My travelling companion, wherever she's got to, is Miss Smith. Of Earth.'

'I'm not a lady,' said Magdelana. She suddenly imagined herself as an eightyear-old again, using an old Doreen to blow holes in the animal skulls her mother had lined up behind the house. Learning the firing techniques while she was still wearing her Sunday dress.

'Yes,' said the Doctor, eyeing up the end of the shotgun. 'I think that's becoming quite clear. Do you get many visitors on this planet?' The switch in the conversation happened so fast, Magdelana didn't even notice it until it was too late. 'No,' she said, without thinking. 'Nobody comes here. Not if they can help it.'

'Travelling shows can't be very common, then.'

This is the first, thought Magdelana. First from offworld, anyway. There were freak shows that passed by from the towns off east, whole convoys of people who'd been twisted up by whatever chemical weapons had been dug out of the ruins there, but they usually got turned away at the gate. They were only ever after the food stocks.

'Why're you asking?' she said.

'Rather odd, wouldn't you say? A travelling show comes all the way to a planet on the edge of the galaxy, where there's no wealth and not much chance of a good audience. Not typical behaviour at all.'

Magdelana shrugged. Then the Doctor moved towards her, and for a moment her finger tightened on the trigger of the gun, until she realised that he was just leaning forward to look at the poster on her desk.

The poster was one of the adverts the blind man had put up, and Magdelana had found it stuck to her door when she'd got back to the office that morning. She'd torn it down in a fit of irritation, having just been saved from certain

death by a blind man whom she didn't know and probably wouldn't ever be able to trust.

The Doctor carefully flattened out some of the wrinkles in the paper, then held the poster up in front of him. Magdelana watched his eyes flickering over the edge of the page. Annoyingly, he started to read aloud.

"All comers welcome, no refunds given",' he recited. He put on an evenmore-stupid-than-usual voice when he said it, all rolling r's and pumped-up vowels. Then he peered over the edge of the paper. 'I.M. Foreman. The blind man, do you think?'

'Maybe. Why?'

'I've heard that name before,' said the Doctor. 'Tell me more about these Remote people.'

At noon, the oldest of the Remote was sitting in his rooms at the dead heart of his spaceship-cum-town, surrounding himself with the trophies of two thousand years' travelling. Technically, the Remote weren't supposed to have a designated leader, but the Remote's transmissions had become so corrupted over the years that they were starting to revert to what they called 'basic hierarchical neural programming'. To all intents and purposes, it was the oldest who made the decisions, and nobody was going to bother arguing with him.

He'd already worked out that the stellar disturbance had been a natural eclipse, and that the Gallifreyan in the blindfold had been bluffing from the start. But it was best not to take any risks. He ordered – no, he *asked* – his people to unpack one of the two probe satellites that had survived the landing on Dust, and to program it to home in on Time Lord technology.

John Salt, the Missing Link. Melmoth, the Map of Scars. Ezekiel, the Angel of the Pleiades. Mohandas the Geek.

The Doctor had put the poster back down on the desk, the right way up for Magdelana to be able to read it. She was trying to tell the man about the Remote, but the words on the page kept grinding their way into her head and getting tangled up in her sentences. Freaks, Magdelana decided. The show was made up of freaks. That was all.

She tried looking out through the window instead, but it didn't help. Outside, the skinny dirt-people were still heading for the gate, the lifeblood of the town seeping out into the desert. She tried to make out faces through the cracks in the boarded-up window, to put names to the shapes that were shuffling and muttering their way across the square, but it was harder than she'd expected. Some of the names came to her in a second – the old men, especially, the ones who'd been in the town for so long that their names had started rooting themselves in the foundations – but most of the people were

just blurs. She spotted someone who'd been her love interest, three or four years earlier, and it took her nearly a whole minute to remember what he was supposed to be called.

She'd had a grand total of five lovers while she'd been in this town. All of them young. The first one had been a whole decade younger than she was, which had seemed like a big age gap, back when she'd been thirty. The last one – the one in the square – had obviously felt that sleeping with her was less bother than not sleeping with her. She'd made a play for him while she'd been drunk, a bag of dried-up skin and bones still acting like a sixteen-year-old.

Five lovers, and she couldn't remember how a single one of them had felt under her fingertips, or how any of them had smelled, or what kind of noises they'd made in the heat and the dark. Because Dust took everything away, didn't it? Names, faces, memories. The locals seemed to lose a little more of their identity every year, so Magdelana wasn't sure whether it was the people who were being eaten away or her own senses.

She remembered the men from the Clan, the ones who'd run her hometown back in the days when her skin had still been more white than yellow, and she hadn't felt as though the dust in her joints was the only thing holding her together. She remembered the Clan's masks more than anything. Sharp and red against the grey of the desert. She remembered the burning crosses they'd planted in the ground, when there'd still been wood left to burn. Crosses on the horizon, flaming in a hundred different shades of red and gold.

That was how far they'd had to go to keep themselves whole. That was what her own people had turned themselves into, just to stop themselves losing their souls to the desert. Or losing their identities, anyway. It was better to burn, they said, than to let the dust take you.

Sometimes, you had to hold on to the terror to keep yourself human.

'So the Remote only arrived here quite recently,' said the Doctor.

Magdelana forced herself to look away from the window. 'I can remember when they weren't here,' she said. 'If that's what you're asking. Does it matter?'

'Hmm. Then the two aliens you say were crucified in the desert. And now the travelling show. And myself.' The Doctor folded his long, bony fingers in front of his face. 'Doesn't it strike you that something rather odd is going on? Almost as if all these "offworlders" were being deliberately drawn here. Pulled together in one place.'

'What are you saying?'

'I'm not sure. I have a feeling the rules have changed.' All of a sudden, his eyes were fixed right on her, and there was the hint of a smile on his face. Magdelana shuffled in her seat, and made sure the shotgun was at the ready.

'How old are you?' the Doctor asked.

Magdelana squinted at him. 'You want to know...?' 'How old you are. If you don't mind my asking.'

'Why?'

The Doctor unfolded his hands and leaned back in his chair. 'You were obviously born here. You must know an awful lot about the way this planet works. I'd like to know exactly how much experience you've had of it.'

Sounds reasonable, thought Magdelana. Not a lot of damage you could do with a piece of information like that. 'All right,' she said. 'I'm fifty-three. Happy?'

'Ah. You've aged very well.'

Magdelana ground her teeth together. She hadn't aged: she'd just tanned. Like leather left out in the sun. All the fat had dropped away, all the flaps of skin she'd been born with had been pulled tight over the bones. Same as everyone else here.

'Have there been a lot of offworlders in that time?' the Doctor asked. Magdelana shook her head. 'Can't think of many. I told you. Nobody comes here.'

'Except for the Remote.'

'They crashed.'

'But they had to have a reason for being in this part of the galaxy. We're a long way from any other inhabited systems, I'd say.'

It was a good point. Magdelana had to admit that. So good, in fact, that she very nearly found herself caring about it.

'You want some coffee?' she asked the Doctor.

'I'd rather you put that gun away.'

'Nope. But you can have coffee.'

'Then coffee will have to do,' said the Doctor. 'Thank you.'

At five o'clock in the afternoon, the Remote's probe finally reached the spot where the man in the blindfold had appeared, and scanned the area for signs of Gallifreyan hardware. The probe lasted for only a few minutes after that, before the satellite that was tethered to the town's clock tower crashed into it, presumably acting on some half-corrupted homing instinct that had been programmed into its old memory core. Both of the satellites were rendered inoperable, but the vital data was transmitted back to the Remote anyway.

The probe revealed that, just outside the town, there were indeed traces of time technology that seemed to be Gallifreyan in origin, and in all there were thirteen – yes, thirteen – Gallifreyan life forms in the area. However, this technology didn't seem to be TARDIS-related, nor did it seem to have been engineered by the Gallifreyan military. The Remote consulted the files they'd

inherited from Faction Paradox, but the things the probe had located didn't seem to match anything on record.

The last visual signal the probe had recorded was an image of the blind man, standing in the desert near the town gate, 'looking' up into the sky and waving at the camera. Not at all put out by this, the oldest of the Remote announced that they'd just been presented with a way of getting off this planet, and began to put his battle plans into effect.

'What's a geek, anyway?' said Magdelana.

The Doctor looked up from the tin cup that Magdelana had poured his coffee into. She could tell he wasn't enjoying it, but at least he knew how to be diplomatic. 'I'm sorry?'

She nodded at the poster on the desk. 'Says there. "Mohandas the Geek".'

'Oh yes. It's an old Earth term – long before your time, of course. It dates from the nineteenth century. It's the name given to a side show performer who bites the heads from live animals. Or eats them. It took on quite a different meaning in the twentieth century, though.'

'Mmm-hm,' said Magdelana.

Nothing else was said for a good minute or so. The Doctor gently sipped at his coffee, not even complaining about the lumps of grit that were floating on the surface, while Magdelana rocked backward and forward on her chair with the shotgun still balanced on the desk. The sun had almost vanished over the horizon now, and there were smears of lamplight spreading into the room from the square outside.

'Now,' the Doctor said, once he'd drunk enough of the coffee to make himself look polite. 'There weren't alien visitors when you were younger. Whatever's attracting people here, it must be a fairly recent occurrence. That's a start, anyway.'

'I said I couldn't think of any,' Magdelana told him. 'Doesn't mean there weren't any. Things were different, when I was growing up. All of this was Clan land.'

The Doctor looked puzzled. 'I'm sorry. Clan land?'

Magdelana found her eyes drifting over to the window again, watching the last of the ragged little person shapes passing through the square down below. Word had it that the show was due to start at half past eight. Any second now, she thought. Whatever's going to happen, it's going to happen soon.

'I'm the first line of defence in this town,' she said. 'Anything turns up here, it goes through me before anyone else. That's my job. Has been ever since I got here.'

'It's a noble occupation,' said the Doctor. He meant it, too.

'Didn't always work like that,' Magdelana went on. 'Not when I was younger. All this was under the Clan. This town. The towns off east. Where I came from.'

She got the impression that the Doctor was suddenly frowning, although she didn't look straight at his face to check. 'This "Clan",' he said. 'It wasn't called... Faction Paradox, by any chance?'

'No,' said Magdelana. 'Why?'

'Just making sure,' the Doctor told her. 'Carry on.'

So Magdelana did. She told him how the Clan had started, as a bunch of cattle men who'd owned some of the land to the east where there was still grass left, who'd all grouped together to protect their herds from the predators and the raiding parties. She told him how the Clansmen had dealt with the 'criminals' they'd caught, how they'd flayed their victims alive and left them out in the sun for all the world to see. She told him how the Clan had started making its own rules, its own laws and codes and uniforms. If you could call them uniforms. A bright-red scarf around the arm of your greatcoat, a red cloth mask pulled down over your head.

In the end, she told him what she remembered about the Clan from the days before she'd even fired her first Derenna. The gangs of men who'd ridden into her hometown on horseback, in groups of five or ten or twenty, with masks over their faces and lynching ropes slung over their shoulders.

'Remember seeing people being hung up from the walls,' she said. 'Not sure if it happened how I remember it, though. Things look kind of bigger when you're a kid. Just remember seeing hundreds of them. Hundreds of bodies, all strung up. All these Clansman symbols carved into their backs with cattle knives. Probably weren't hundreds. Probably only a couple of dozen. Looked like hundreds to me, that's all.'

Finally, she turned back to the Doctor. He'd bowed his head, respectfully, and now he was nodding, slowly.

'People can be cruel,' he said. 'Very, very cruel. Especially when they're desperate.'

'My father was in the Clan,' Magdelana told him. 'Still remember him. Getting drunk. Dancing around the house with his mask on. Breaking stuff.'

'I understand,' said the Doctor. 'That's why you became what you are. You became the closest thing there is to law and order on this planet. Because you couldn't stand what life did to your father. What it turned him into.'

Magdelana thought for a moment. Then she put down the shotgun. She quite deliberately propped it up against the wall behind her, just so the Doctor could see that she wasn't thinking of shooting him. Once she'd done that, she leaned forward across the desk, and gently, very gently, took the half-full cup of coffee out of his hands.

She threw it in his face before he could even blink. The coffee had cooled down from boiling point, but it was still hot enough to scald, and she saw the flash of the Doctor's teeth as he turned his head away from her.

When she sat back in her seat, the Doctor didn't move. He was sitting frozen in his chair, head tilted to one side. Teeth clenched. Eyes shut.

'You don't know who I am,' Magdelana told him.

The Doctor didn't speak. Probably couldn't.

'Everyone knew the Clan were just butcher-men,' Magdelana went on. 'That's what my father was. He was a butcher and he was a crook, and I was happy when he got shot in the head, and I'm not going to say anything different. But that didn't stop me. Didn't change anything. I signed up with the Clan when I was fifteen, soon as they'd let me. The whole thing was coming apart anyway, so they were getting desperate. Desperate enough to let women in. Girls, even. Fifteen-year-old girls.'

Slowly, the Doctor began to open his eyes, to wipe the hot coffee out of his face. Magdelana kept talking.

'Don't make guesses about me,' she said. 'About what I am or why I do what I do. I'm not a butcher-man. Maybe that's the big reason I went with the Clan. Because I knew what people'd say, and I knew they'd be wrong. They'd see some butcher-man with a mask, and I'd be the only one who knew what was on the inside. Nobody was ever going to know what I thought, or who I was, and they could make all the guesses they wanted. That mask was the only way there was of keeping me whole. You understand that? The only way of making sure I stayed who I was, without the rest of the town knowing all about me and sucking me down into the dust like everyone else. This planet's not going to get my soul out of me, because it's never even going to find out who I am. That's all. 'Cause the truth of it is, sometimes I feel like I'm the only real human being left on Dust.'

'Why are you telling me this?' asked the Doctor. His voice was quieter than it had been, and Magdelana could see hot red blotches forming on the side of his face, where the coffee had burned the top layer of skin.

'Because I'm going to tell you what you want to know,' Magdelana told him. 'And I'm going to tell you how things are going to be. Far as I'm concerned, there could've been all kinds of offworlders turning up here in the Clan days, and I never would've noticed. The Clansmen would have killed them all off as soon as they set foot near any of the towns. They didn't trust aliens, so they killed them. We killed them. Never killed any myself, never even saw any. But that's the way things were.'

The Doctor opened his mouth again. Magdelana kept talking. 'Now tell you one more thing,' she said. 'I'm not going to let the offworlders take this town. I don't care whether it's the Remote, or the blind man, or anyone else. I'm

going to protect this place any way I've got to, whether it's worth protecting or not. And I'm going to do it how the Clan taught me to do it, because that's the way I've always done it and it's the only thing I know how to do. I'm going to trust you for now, that's what I'm saying. Don't know why, but I am. But if it comes down to it, I'll kill anything around here that doesn't belong on this planet. Anything I have to kill to make this place safe. You get the idea?'

The Doctor nodded.

'So,' Magdelana concluded. 'What d'you think of me now?'

'I think you're obviously a very intelligent woman,' the Doctor told her, keeping his voice low. 'And I don't understand you at all.'

'Good,' said Magdelana. 'Now, d'you want me to help you find that girlfriend of yours?'

'I'd appreciate that,' said the Doctor.

At eight o'clock in the evening – just as the Doctor was entering the home of Magdelana Bishop – the small town called Anathema effectively ceased to exist, as the ship at its heart lifted itself out of the dust for the first time since it had arrived on the planet. The ship was still quite capable of short-range flight, even if it couldn't make the big leap out into space, and the assembled Remote forces on board were already arming up for a pitched battle.

What nobody on board realised, not even the oldest of the Remote himself, was the fact that the ship had effectively been bugged. There were programs in the flight computer that had been planted there by Faction Paradox, centuries in the past, when the Remote had still been under the Faction's direct control. The programs had been careful to record all major events on Dust over the last twelve hours, and, at more or less the same moment that the ship tore itself out of the ground, the systems made the decision to send all the data they'd gathered back to the elders of the Faction.

They settled down after that, safe in the knowledge that they'd done their job to the best of their ability.

### 4

# The Show (Sarah Jane Smith is not amused)

The sky was going grey by the time Sarah reached the travelling show. Well, greyish-yellow, anyway. Which was probably as pretty and as picturesque as the sunsets got around here.

The show had been set up about fifty yards outside the town wall, so from the gate you could see it as a big dark lump against the desert horizon. It was a circle of wagons, Sarah noted. Covered wagons, like you saw in old Wild West TV shows, but covered with a kind of dull dirt-coloured tarpaulin that the local dust just didn't seem to want to stick to. There were about a dozen of them, although they were quite big, so the space in the middle of the ring must have been a good fifty yards from side to side. There was a wide gap in the ring, on the side facing the town wall, and it was through this that the walking dead of the town were shuffling, dragging their feet in the sand and mumbling to each other under their beards. Sarah shuffled with the best of them. She'd deliberately smeared some of the local dust over her dungarees before she'd walked out through the gate, just to blend in, but it was fairly obvious that nobody really cared who she was or where she'd come from.

That had surprised her at first. After she'd been separated from the Doctor – and for once it had been his fault, seeing as she'd just poked her head around a corner while he'd been gawping at one of the posters, and he'd wandered off by the time she'd turned back – she'd been careful to stick to the backways of the town, so as not to draw attention to herself. But whenever she'd passed anybody, they'd barely blinked in her direction. Every pair of eyes she'd seen had looked empty, or at the very least been gummed up with sleep.

The Doctor hadn't been back at the TARDIS. Sarah had decided that there wasn't much point going to the local authorities, so she'd headed for the travelling show instead. She was pretty sure the Doctor would find his way there in the end, bearing in mind that he'd been paying more attention to the posters than to her.

She wasn't exactly well equipped for this sort of thing, though. The local weather was already trying to rip the dye out of her clothes, and her shoes really weren't made for desert planets. She didn't have any money, apart from a wrinkly pound note in her back pocket which almost certainly hadn't

been legal tender for several hundred years, so she wasn't even sure she'd get into the show to begin with. Worse, she hadn't eaten in about twelve hours, and a short while ago she'd had to take a pee behind someone's house in the town. She doubted that anybody around here would have cared, even if they'd noticed.

Funny. For some reason, she'd never had to think about these little biological details on most of the planets she'd been to. But, as the Doctor had already made quite clear, this was a different kind of world altogether.

She stopped at the entrance to the travelling show, and watched as the people around her hauled themselves inside. To her, the words 'travelling show' suggested something slightly disturbing, a place for carnival freaks, pickled deformed animals, and (ugh) juggling amputees. But inside the ring of wagons, there was... a kind of calm, really. She could see the townspeople jostling against each other up ahead, forming a great mass of flesh that smelled of leather and dried sweat, but that was about as bad as things got. Sarah could hear a voice from the centre of the circle, somebody addressing the crowd, although she couldn't make out the words over the mumbling of the audience.

She took a deep breath and put her best foot forward. Nobody asked her for any money as she stepped into the arena, which was something.

The space between the wagons wasn't huge, but whoever had set up the show had obviously made the best of the land available. Half a dozen smallish tents had been set up around the show, too grey and grubby to look like circus marquees, although you could tell they were there for the purposes of showbiz. The tents had been set up so that the crowds had to move around them in very specific patterns, turning the people into a kind of architecture, like a living, breathing, sweaty labyrinth. Sarah guessed that there were well over a hundred locals on the site, which had to be about half of the town. In the end, she joined the nearest of the human corridors, and let herself be carried towards the middle of the ring.

"... but that'd be too easy," the voice from the centre was saying. It was ringing out over the heads of the crowd, bouncing off the sides of the wagons, every echo somehow sounding more dramatic than the last. "We could pick up species from a million different ecosystems, and parade them in front of you as a circus. But – again – what would be the point?"

Sarah came to a halt, largely because the people around her had come to halt. A single crowd was gathering near the centre of the arena, where the locals were gawping at something Sarah couldn't see. She was smaller than most of the townspeople, though, so she managed to squeeze between some of the taller men, trying very, very hard to ignore the scents of body odour and tobacco, until she found a spot that gave her a half-decent view.

There was a stage at the dead centre of the travelling show. She could see it all now. A circular platform, made out of wood, planted in the dust of the arena. It was only a couple of yards wide, and there were glassy-eyed locals gathered all around it, staring up with their mouths hanging open. Drooling, probably. The showman on the stage was making the most of his space, throwing open his arms and whirling around like a drunk, facing every part of the crowd in turn.

'No distortions here,' the showman told the crowd. He wasn't using any kind of speaker, but his voice was exactly the right pitch to carry around the arena, zigzagging to and fro between the columns of people. You wouldn't be able to hear all the words from the back of the crowd, but you could make out the rhythm wherever you were standing, the rattle and flow of his routine. 'No genetic sleight of hand, no biological cover-ups. No animals, and nobody born in a test tube. This is the one thing you're guaranteed of. Whatever we are, it's what we've chosen to be. All our mutations, all our kinks, all our quirks. We've developed them. Nurtured them. To show the universe what one single species is capable of. To show you all how far we can push our genetic envelopes.'

The man fell silent then, and swept his eyes around the crowd, with his arms still splayed out windmill-fashion. It was only when he was facing Sarah, staring right down at her, that she realised he didn't actually have eyes. The showman was wearing a blindfold, and even in the fading light she could see the dirty little spots behind the cloth. Suggesting that someone or something had poked his eyes out.

Then again, it could have been a prop.

'We're specialists,' said the showman. The crowd was still drooling at him, even though Sarah could tell that most of the locals weren't following a word of what he was saying. 'We've all chosen a path, and pushed ourselves as far along that path as possible. Every one of us has taken another step away from normality. Just look at Melmoth, the Map of Scars. He could almost be a normal human being, if you squinted at him in a bad light. Mr Zarathustra? The same goes for him, excuse the cranium. The Worm-Boy? Anyone would think he was just a freak of nature. But... but...'

He looked up at the sky then, pondering his next words. Whoever this man was – probably I.M. Foreman himself, by the sound of him – he knew how to time a dramatic pause.

'But nobody's yet been able to explain the If, apart from the If himself,' he said, lowering his voice. 'Or herself. Or itself. And of course, there's always AKA. The full-time metamorph.'

He dropped another pause into his spiel then, and smiled to himself, so everybody could see how much he was enjoying it. 'My own speciality's a little

one, compared to some. It's me who has to organise everything, remember. Somebody has to keep things running. Somebody has to sweat blood for the good of the show.'

With that, he stretched out his arms as far as they'd go, and tilted back his head to smile up at the stripy black clouds. Nobody in the crowd took their eyes off him, Sarah included. He reminded Sarah of some cut-price Christ figure, grinning up at the kingdom of God as he dangled on his cross.

Seconds later, there was a strangled gurgling noise from the audience. It took Sarah a while to work out why, because she'd been so busy watching I.M. Foreman's face, and staring into the halo of yellow-grey sunlight around his head, that she hadn't immediately noticed what he'd been doing.

He'd clenched his fists. Clenched them hard, so his knuckles were turning the colour of chalk. Now Sarah could see blood, trickling out from between his fingers. She guessed that he'd dug his nails into his palm, that he'd actually cut himself open that way, although...

Although that wasn't why the people had started gurgling. The surprising thing wasn't the fact that there was blood, but that there was so much of it. It was running in streams from each of his hands, thinner than any healthy being's blood should be, as if he'd just turned on a tap and let it all flood out. There was a heavy spat-spat-spattering sound as the blood hit the wood of the platform, forming dirty red puddles among the piles of sawdust.

Sarah could feel her throat doing something funny. The words 'heart in mouth' sprang to mind, and she wondered whether the various internal parts of her body were deliberately rearranging themselves, just to stop her feeling ill. A conjuring trick, she told herself. A particularly sick and icky one, but a conjuring trick anyway. There was no way anybody could have that much blood in his...

...oh dear.

I.M. Foreman was opening up his fists now, revealing the wounds in his palms, two identical holes in the surface of his skin. Perfect circles. Sarah waited for the smell of blood and sand to hit her nostrils, but somehow it never did.

'Stigmata,' I.M. Foreman explained, with his face still turned up to the sky 'My own field of expertise. Not much, I know, but it suits me. Blood's my business. Blood's what makes me different from everyone else, and call me a show-off, but I don't mind letting the world know it.'

Then he clenched his fists again. The blood stopped flowing in a second, and the crowd started breathing again, launching a wave of halitosis and gum disease across the arena. I.M. Foreman casually reached into one of the pockets of his waistcoat, removed a pair of shoddy white gloves, and began to pull them on. There were brown stains on the gloves, suggesting that this

was the pair he usually wore after he'd bled for his art.

'Don't worry about me,' I.M. Foreman told the crowd, although Sarah had difficulty imagining this audience worrying about anybody. 'Plenty of life blood left. Sometimes I think I must be bigger on the inside than on the outside. For now, though, my part's over.'

Satisfied, he cracked his knuckles, and the sound rang out around the arena. That done, he swept his dead eyes around the crowd again, and for some reason Sarah wasn't at all surprised when he ended up 'looking' right in her direction.

'Enjoy yourselves,' the showman said, in the most serious-sounding voice Sarah could possibly have imagined. 'And, if you can't enjoy yourselves, enjoy as many other people as you can. If you can't do that, just remember what you've seen here. It'll be important. Believe me.'

The next thing Sarah knew, the man was moving again, leaping into the crowd in a seemingly random direction. The people in his way made a variety of muffled grunting noises, but moved aside and let him land in the dust. A few moments later, he'd vanished into another part of the arena altogether.

Sarah was one of the last to drift away from the stage. She found herself gaping at the pools of blood I.M. Foreman had left behind, and wondering what might happen if she took a few drops of it back to the TARDIS, if she got the Doctor to do some kind of analysis. Whether it'd be as big an enigma as the blood that had seeped out of the console room floor.

There was, as Sarah had surmised, a definite architecture to the layout of the travelling show. There were the tents, there were the lines of people that made corridors between the tents, and just as importantly there were the empty spaces. Some of the show's performers were standing in those spaces, and the people were moving around them, giving them room to go through their routines.

And they definitely needed room. Lots of room. The first performer Sarah passed was blowing fire, which she thought seemed fairly tame compared with the things the posters had promised, until she noticed that (a) the man was setting light to large sections of his own body as well, and (b) he didn't seem to be entirely human anyway. She didn't stop to look at him, possibly because she was still feeling delicate after I.M. Foreman's staged bleeding, but she glimpsed the man's face for just long enough to see that one side of his body wasn't like the other, that one half of his head was perfectly human while the other was something harder, tougher and more... lizardy. The really odd thing – the really, *really* odd thing – was that, when Sarah thought about it afterwards, she couldn't remember which half had been which.

In fact, whenever she found herself wandering close to one of the spaces in the crowd, she usually ended up looking the other way. Which made her wonder why she'd bothered coming, all in all. She felt no desire to see John Salt the Missing Link in close-up, and the one brief glance she'd given to the Worm-Boy was enough to tell her that she didn't want to get any closer. In retrospect, the Worm-Boy almost certainly hadn't been as bad as she was starting to remember him, and she was fairly sure that his limbs couldn't have been as stunted as they might have seemed, even if he'd obviously been born without any... well, even if he hadn't needed a blindfold like I.M. Foreman's.

The one thing the show people had in common was that none of them ever spoke, not to the crowds, and not even to each other. No repartee, no hoopla. She got the impression that I.M. Foreman had already said everything that needed to be said, that all the other performers had long ago decided there was no point adding anything to his patter. Human, Sarah reminded herself. They'd all started out as human beings, or at the very least as things like human beings. She wondered about that. The Doctor had known the name 'I.M. Foreman', which suggested... what? That the show people were Time Lords, too?

Well, it made a kind of sense. There had to be hundreds of them floating around the universe, so if anything it was surprising you didn't run into them more often. For all Sarah knew, there could have been a gaggle of Time Lords interfering with the local culture on every planet in the galaxy. Already this week, the Doctor had claimed to be on speaking terms with Chairman Mao, and to have been the inspiration for the character of the Devil in Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*. (The Devil had owned a tiny little home with an infinite number of rooms, Sarah had remembered, which everybody else in the world had assumed was some kind of satire on housing in communist Russia. The Doctor had said it was the first time he'd been used as a political metaphor, and he hadn't been sure whether he'd liked it.)

Eventually, she broke away from the crowds and came to a stop next to one of the saggy grey tents, where she got her breath back and watched the locals stumbling past. Yes, this place was sick. Yes, she didn't want to have to watch any more of the star attractions, at least not without putting her hands in front of her face and squinting through her fingers. But it was alive, you couldn't argue with that. However disgusting some of it looked, and however badly the performers may have mutilated themselves, here in the desert the show actually seemed to mean something.

It was, in short, exactly what the townspeople needed in their lives. The horror was making them whole.

So what was in it for I.M. Foreman? Why had the show people come here, if they didn't even charge admission?

Sarah was so caught up in these thoughts that it took her a while to notice the obvious point. And the obvious point was this: hardly anybody was going near the tent where she was standing. Most of the tents had ugly little crowds forming around them, suggesting that this was one of those planets where people had never invented the noble art of queuing. But nobody seemed to be gathering here at all. Sarah watched the passers-by a little more closely, and saw that the few who stuck their heads through the canvas flaps slouched away again a few moments later, while those who were exploring the show in pairs looked at their companions and shrugged before they moved on. Whatever was in this tent, nobody around here understood it.

She might have found the rest of the show too grotesque to deal with, but there was no way she could resist a challenge like this one. She carefully threaded her way between the people around her, until she was standing right in front of the tent's entrance. She took one last look around, making sure nobody else was prepared to go first, then gritted her teeth and stepped through the flaps.

It wasn't hard to see why the tent hadn't appealed to the masses. There wasn't much to look at. The place was pretty much empty, with none of the ornaments Sarah had expected, none of the usual odds and ends that cluttered up carnival exhibits on Earth. There weren't even any signs to tell her what kind of services were offered here, or how much they might cost. Just plain, grey, canvas walls, the desert floor underfoot, and...

And one single object, sitting in the dust right in the middle of the tent. Sarah had no idea what it was, but it wasn't doing much. It was small and lumpy, shaped like a barrel about two feet high, with rubbery limbs sprouting out of its surface at peculiar angles and rooting themselves in the ground. It was a darker shade of grey than the tent itself; with a skin like blubber, and small scars across its framework that looked almost like the gills of fish. Beyond that, Sarah found it hard to concentrate on the details of the thing. The impression it left on you was so downright odd that it was hard to care about the specifics.

No wonder the locals hadn't been interested. It was impossible to make head or tail of the thing. Probably a piece of machinery, albeit weird and sticky alien machinery, left out in the open by mistake. Sarah had more curiosity in her left earlobe than the entire population of the town put together, but even she was on the verge of turning away when it suddenly struck her.

Limbs. Skin. Scars. Gills. Head or tail. All the words that had crossed Sarah's mind when she'd seen the thing were organic. Animal words. So did that mean...?

She felt herself take a few steps towards the object. Once she was within a yard of it, she finally noticed that it was breathing, with its bubbly grey skin

bulging in and out as she watched.

Alive. One of the performers.

No. There was no way, no way on Earth – or anywhere else – that this thing had started life as a human being, or even anything like a human being.

Still...

'Hello?' Sarah tried. 'Can you hear me?'

Then one of the slits on the thing's body opened up and breathed on her. The If told her its name, but that was all it managed to say before its breath filled up the air around her and took her to a different world altogether.

The CD jukebox in the corner of the pub was pumping out an utterly ridiculous techno version of the theme from Space: 1999. Sarah rested one elbow on the table in front of her, and started playing with the empty cigarette packet that had been left there by...

By who?

Or should that have been 'whom'?

In the seat next to her, Sarah's best friend – whose name she didn't seem to be able to recall – put down the Bacardi bottle, and wiped her lips with the back of her hand. Sarah found herself staring at the message on the woman's sweatshirt. PEDANT. FIRST CLASS, it said NOT CELEBRATING MILLENNIUM UNTIL 2001.

'He won't come,' the woman declared.

'Oh, come on,' Sarah heard herself say, even though she had no idea who or what the woman had been talking about. 'Even he can't miss a party that size, can he?'

The woman shook her head. 'He's already been to Earth on the last day of 1999. That's what he told me, anyway. He's not going to be in two places at once, is he?'

'He's done it before,' Sarah sniffed Then she became aware of the third presence at the table, sitting in the chair to her right.

'Is this one of those conversations I don't want to get involved in?' asked her husband.

Husband?

Sarah stumbled backward, not being able to remember whether she was meant to be standing up or sitting in the pub, and grabbed hold of the canvas of the tent to stop herself falling over. She tried to breathe normally as the smell of dust and leather crept into her nose.

The future. Was that supposed to be the future?

The grey lump – the If – had breathed on her, and she'd felt the hormones from its body sweep over her skin. Pushing her along her own timeline, then bringing her back again. That was it, wasn't it? The creature had raw time in its body. I.M. Foreman had said that each of the performers specialised in something different, and the If had obviously specialised in time, so...

... so that was silly. You couldn't change your body to make yourself breathe time. Even the Doctor couldn't do a thing like that. Besides, the thing in front of her wasn't, couldn't have been, human.

She found herself staring at it again. It might have stared back, if it had owned a face. Sarah opened her mouth to speak, then wondered if she'd be able to deal with an entire conversation, if a simple 'hello' from the creature had been enough to throw her that far into her own future.

So she started to back away, keeping her eyes on the little grey blob as she went. Absurdly, she felt like saying goodbye to it, as though it'd be rude to leave the thing's presence now it had started talking to her.

Oh, bother it. Why not?

'G-' she began.

There was a church hall, or something like a church hall. You could tell what it was just by the air, the smell of parquet flooring and old scoutmasters. Sarah didn't feel she was actually there, even though she could see the place. It was more like television than real life. Not that there were any cameras in the hall of course, not with so many 'sensitive' people around. Sarah couldn't focus on them properly, but she could sense their presences all around her. She got the feeling that a lot of them were UNIT staff while some of them belonged to... well, another organisation entirely.

Sarah tried to work out what that organisation could be. Not military, by the look of them. By the feel of them, rather. Part of some political movement, maybe? You could tell them apart by the little black seedlings they wore on their lapels, dark petalled flowers that had somehow been frozen in time just before they'd blossomed. What the seedlings were supposed to represent Sarah couldn't say.

There was a stage at one end of the hall. Someone was standing there, reading a speech to the crowd, although most of the people in the hall were staring at their shoes instead of looking dead ahead. Sarah realised that she knew the speaker, even though she couldn't put a name to the face. It was her best friend, the one she'd been talking to in the pub in 1999. The speaker was wearing one of those black seedlings, just like the people Sarah couldn't quite identify.

'I had more in common with Sarah than anyone thought,' the speaker told the crowd. 'And that includes the Doctor. The Doctor never really understood me properly. He thought I was just another messed-up teenager. He thought I wanted to tag along with him so I could spread my teenage angst all over the universe. He was wrong, though. It was only when I said goodbye to him that I think he figured that out. The bottom line is, whatever I said about saving the world, the real reason I wanted to see the universe was because I thought it was bright and funny and exciting. I was like a six-year-old who'd been let loose on the galaxy. And so was Sarah. That was Sarah exactly.'

Goodbye.

This was how the If said goodbye. It was showing her the big goodbye, using part of her own future instead of words. Difficult to miss the message, really.

Except that if she really had seen the future...

Sarah suddenly realised that her jaw was hanging open, and that her vocal cords had frozen up in mid-word.

'-oodbye,' she said, hurriedly. Then she turned her back on the grey thing, and rushed out of the tent.

This time, she headed straight for the exit of the travelling show. She didn't need to see anything else here.

There weren't any people on the streets of the town. Most of the locals were at the show, and the rest were generally too sick or too tired to leave their homes. So nobody saw I.M. Foreman as he strolled through the gate, nobody saw him head along the alley where the police box had materialised, and nobody saw him sit down in the dust a yard or two from the TARDIS doors, crossing his legs and turning his blind eyes towards the battered old paint work.

He couldn't see a thing, of course, not in the conventional sense of the word 'see'. But there were other senses he could use, and that was how he'd known about the TARDIS in the first place, how he'd found his way here from the safety of the show. He could see the structure of the craft in his head, not the actual physical details, but the mathematical formulae that held the box together. He spent some time examining the ship's equations, with no purpose other than pure enjoyment. He knew how much trouble the TARDIS and its owner might cause, but for the time being it hardly seemed to matter. It had been much, much too long since he'd seen anything like this.

'Beautiful,' he announced, after a while. Then he stood up, turned away, and headed back towards the show. Satisfied.

# 5 A Fistful of Meanwhiles (what everyone was doing just before the big fight started)

Meanwhile, on board the Remote ship that had until recently been a small town called Anathema:

Half an hour earlier, the command post had been a building. It was part of the vessel's original bodywork, not one of the wood-and-plaster structures that had been slapped on top of the wreck, but so much sand had stuck to the black metal shell that it had looked exactly like every other ruin on Dust. Now the slipstream was blasting the sand away, turning the tower into something sleek and sharp and evil-looking again.

But not on the inside. On the inside, the oldest of the Remote was standing with his back to the observation screen, trying his best to ignore the scenery. He'd felt rooted on Dust. Not that he liked the planet, any more than anyone could ever like it, but even nowhere was somewhere. The local culture had crept into his living space in the years since the crash, blowing into the corridors of the ship just like the sand had blown over the surface, until the post was cluttered with crates and shelves and writing desks, rotting antiques and chairs made out of sawdust. You could hardly see the sheer black of the walls now, not for all the shotguns and rifles that had been put on display in their cracked glass cases, not for all the ammo clips that had been hung on their hooks around the room.

Oh, and there was the Collection. There was always the Collection. The spoils of a two-thousand-year lifespan, although it wasn't until the ship had arrived on Dust that the oldest had thought about mounting the heads on one of the walls. It seemed to fit the aesthetic of the planet, somehow. All the heads had belonged to Time Lords, naturally – or to people who'd been close to becoming Time Lords, thanks to the High Council's tinkering with the lesser races – and the oldest had carefully wrapped them up in stasis bubbles as well as having them stuffed, just to make sure they stayed fresh. He'd collected the first of the heads during the twenty-second century, when he'd still been under the wing of Faction Paradox itself, but even that one was only just starting to show signs of wear and tear.

There were little wooden plaques under all the items in the Collection, although none of them were marked with names. Just numbers, the recognition codes that had been sewn into the Time Lords' DNA when they'd enrolled at the Academy on Gallifrey. There were far too many renegade Gallifreyans in the universe, everybody knew that, and the oldest felt he was performing a kind of public service by getting rid of them. Certainly, the dead old faces that stared at him from the walls of the command post were less than memorable. Only the Master and the Rani really stood out, although the oldest knew full well that at least one of those two heads had been taken from a clone, one of the High Council's little hatchling projects. A fake, then, but quite a pleasing one.

Naturally, it was his ambition to add the Doctor's head to the Collection, although he knew for a fact that it was never going to happen. The Doctor was far too big a target to end up in a menagerie like this one.

The oldest briefly wondered whether he'd still want to keep the Collection pinned to the walls, after the Remote had stolen the blind Gallifreyan's TARDIS and used it to get off this planet. Somehow, he doubted it'd have the same appeal once he'd left Dust behind.

#### Meanwhile, at the town gate:

The Doctor had to put his arm in front of his face to keep the dust out of his eyes, but he did his best to keep his head up as he pushed against the wind. Magdelana had offered him a dust visor, but he'd refused. He wasn't quite sure why he'd refused, actually. Probably something to do with his pride. His skin was still tender from where the coffee had scalded him, and the dust storm wasn't helping the wound much. Magdelana herself was walking in front of him, with her shotgun still cradled between her fat cowhide gloves, leading the way out through the town gate. She was limping, the Doctor noticed. She looked old when she moved, a lot older than she'd claimed to be. She'd almost seemed ageless when she'd been sitting in her office, as if she'd been carved out of the same kind of rock that littered the deserts.

It was this planet, he realised. All living things ended up as dust, but this was one of the few places he'd seen that wanted to remind you of it every second of the day.

There'd still been one or two people out in the square when they'd left Magdelana's office, fish-eyed locals with desiccated skin and too many missing teeth. All of them had been heading the same way as the Doctor and Magdelana, out towards the travelling show, but none of them had been in any hurry to get there. It was hard to imagine anything hurrying on Dust. It was hard to imagine there being a point. Even the clock in the main square

looked as if it was keeping time only out of a sense of sarcasm.

That was what disturbed the Doctor most of all. The way the dust took history away from you. Typical Time Lord, he told himself. Just goes to show what an Academy education can do to you.

Some part of him must have wanted to help this town, to save the people from the dust and the torpor and... and, well, just life here. But most of him didn't care, and he found himself rather disturbed by that. All of a sudden, he felt terribly, terribly old. He could feel the wrinkles cutting into his face, the greyness spreading down from his hair and into his veins.

This regeneration had been good to him. There'd been bad times, as there always would be – yes, he'd been stuck on Earth for far too much of it – but the truth was that in this body, he'd enjoyed himself more than at any time since the pre-Academy days. Driving Bessie around the UNIT training grounds, fiddling around under the bonnets of the Brigadier's personnel transporters just to see what happened, practising martial arts with innocent young recruits who he knew full well wouldn't understand the first thing about Venusian aikido (not that there'd been any such thing as Venusian aikido until he'd invented it, of course)...

Nobility. That was the word he was looking for. There'd been a nobility to the things he'd done in this incarnation, a sense of doing the right thing. The decent thing. The gentlemanly thing. Even when he'd been face to face with some of the most ridiculous megalomaniacs in history, it had felt more like a duel than a war. Maybe it was the clothes, he pondered. Ruffled shirts and smoking jackets, opera capes and velvet trousers. He'd adopted that style by accident, but for all he knew it had influenced this entire lifetime. He'd taken on the clothes of a romantic, and he'd ended up living in a romantic's universe. A noble universe. An infinity of swashbuckling.

But the TARDIS was bleeding. Terrible, degrading things were happening to his oldest friend. Hot coffee had been thrown in his face. He'd walked into a world that had been founded on pure brutality.

He shouldn't be on Dust.

And why on Earth was he thinking like this? Why was he acting like a man who thought he was about to die? Good grief. Stiff upper lip, Brigadier. Never say die, Jo. A tear, Sarah Jane?

No, wait a moment –

The dust was very nearly blinding him now, and the wind was getting worse by the second, so he didn't notice that Magdelana had stopped until he walked into her back. He could make out shapes through the dust clouds up ahead, and he got the feeling they were close to the travelling show. He opened his mouth, to say something reassuring to Magdelana (for his own sake more than hers, probably), but something else had already caught her attention.

There was a shadow in the sky. The Doctor couldn't tell exactly what it was, not through the dust, although he got the distinct impression that there were dark roots dangling from its underbelly, as if the thing had torn itself out of the ground and launched itself into the air. It was still some distance away, but the one thing the Doctor could tell for certain was that it was vast, nearly the size of the town itself. It was hard to get away from the feeling that the shape had caused the storm, that either its engines were tearing up the ground as it moved, or the planet was telling everybody exactly how it felt about something so big getting away from its grip.

Magdelana said something then, but there was a rumbling in the air that could have been wind, or could have been an engine, or could have been a combination of the two, so the Doctor didn't know what she'd said until she repeated it. It turned out to be an English swearword, which, etymologically speaking, had changed surprisingly little over the previous two thousand years.

#### Meanwhile, at the travelling show:

Sarah had been outside the circle of wagons when the dust storm had started. She'd crept out of the show, if you could 'creep' anywhere in a town where nobody really cared what anyone else did, and started moving around the circle. Peeking through the gaps between the caravans, making sure nobody inside noticed what she was doing. She'd heard the sounds of the show on the way, I.M. Foreman and friends swallowing fire and predicting the future for the amusement of the masses, mixed with bursts of sick-sounding laughter from the locals. If slugs could laugh, thought Sarah, then that was how they'd sound.

She'd inspected the wagons as she'd moved around them, just in case she'd been missing anything. All thirteen of them had been identical in design, but there'd been no clues as to what made the vehicles move, seeing that Sarah hadn't spotted any horses or engines anywhere in the area. The wagons had wood-and-metal frames, like those old caravans that gypsies were supposed to trundle around in, each with a single wooden door set into one end. On a couple of occasions she'd squeezed between two of the wagons to take a look at those doors, always making sure she wasn't being watched from inside the circle.

All the doors had been different. They'd been personalised, Sarah had realised, which suggested that each one belonged to a different act in the show. (Had there been thirteen acts? Maybe.) Most of the doors had been painted, although not with pictures that could in any way have been called attractive. The illustrations had looked personal, so personal that they'd been incompre-

hensible, as if the people who'd painted them had let their brains explode all over the wood. Icky, icky, icky. Every single one of the designs had incorporated a number, Sarah had noticed, although you had to stare at the patterns for a while before your eyes could untangle the knots of paint and make the numbers out.

The numbers had run from one through to twelve. When she'd eventually completed her circle of the show, and reached wagon number thirteen, it had turned out to be different from all the others. Mainly because it hadn't been painted. There'd been no pictures, no swirly vortices, no squiggles or noodles or symbols. Just that '13', in serious-looking black figures.

It was while she'd been puzzling this out that the dust storm had started. She'd heard squawking noises from inside the show, the sound of the townspeople complaining about the weather, and the ones whose skins hadn't yet been turned to leather had started drifting away from the site. Sarah had squeezed herself between wagons twelve and thirteen, squashing herself into a little ball next to the ropes that tethered the caravans together, partly so she wouldn't be seen and partly because she felt safer that way. Now she sat with her arm across her face, trying to peer into the middle of the circle without letting the dust get under her eyelids, telling herself that this morning's nomascara decision had probably been a good one. The dust storm was starting to blot out her view of the people in the show, but she could still see their shadows running past her, big black shapes limping out of the circle.

Terrific. There was no way she could get back into town without being cut to bits by the dust, and the townspeople seemed to be telling her that, if she stuck around much longer, the shelter of the wagons wouldn't be enough to save her bottom from the storm. She peered up, over the edge of her sleeve, and found herself looking straight at door number thirteen.

Well, it was risky. Technically trespassing. But then again...

'Wouldn't do it if I were you,' said I.M. Foreman.

'Why not?' asked Sarah.

'We don't let Number Thirteen out of his wagon. Not very stable. Happy enough if he stays still, but it's best not to get him excited.'

'Oh,' said Sarah. 'Um, how long have you been standing there, by the way?' 'Not long.'

'Mmm. And why wasn't I surprised when you started talking?'

She tried to look up at his face, but all she could see was his silhouette, a blur of brown against the yellow of the dust clouds. The showman was standing between her and the inside of the ring, stretching out his arms to the storm, playing to the weather like he'd play to any other audience.

'There aren't any surprises here,' he said, and the dust didn't make him cough or splutter at all. 'Haven't you noticed? This is the final frontier your

people were always waiting for. All the filth and squalor of life on the edge of civilisation. A whole world turned into the last outpost of the Old West. Just what the human race has been expecting all these years.'

'I'm sorry?' said Sarah.

'This is the very edge of your galaxy,' I.M. Foreman went on. 'As far as the human empire ever stretched. As far as human signals ever came. All those old transmissions about frontier life, about gun law and survival of the fittest. All those films and sketches and stories, buried deep down in your culture. All those ideas ended up in one place, and that place is here.'

'Er...' said Sarah. She wasn't altogether sure that now was the right time for this sort of thing.

'See the human race, transmitting its way across space and time,' rattled I.M. Foreman. Putting on his best showman's voice for the benefit of the storm. 'This is the Dead Frontier. The transmissions of a collapsed and corrupted culture. The legacy of the twentieth century. A world based on the principles your generation laid down. Men in black organic body armour instead of men in black hats. Congratulations.'

Sarah would have stared at him, if her eyes hadn't been so full of grit.

'My generation,' she repeated.

The silhouette shrugged. 'You're from the twentieth century. 1970s or 1980s, bard to be sure. They both smell the same. Early media age, whichever way you look at it.'

'Oh,' said Sarah. 'So you know.'

'I told you, didn't I? No surprises here.' He reached out with one hand, apparently offering to help Sarah up. Sarah didn't take it, mostly because she was worried that it may start bleeding again.

'We'd better get inside,' I.M. Foreman added. 'My wagon, I think.'

'Your wagon?'

'Number one. Just across the way. We're running out of time.'

He was looking up now, Sarah saw. Looking up through his blindfold, at the great big shadow that had fallen over the travelling show. Sarah couldn't tell what it was, but one look at it made her want to curl up into her protective ball again.

'Yes,' mumbled I.M. Foreman. 'Atavistic terror. I think that's the point. So, are you coming?'

### Meanwhile, inside the circle:

It was raining rubble. The big black cloud was right overhead now, blotting out the sunlight and moving over the walls of the town, until all Magdelana could think about was the blind man and his make-believe stellar manipulator.

It was the ship. The Remote ship. The rumours had always said that their settlement had been built on the wreck of their vessel, but she'd never expected to see it in the air. The ship had ripped whole chunks out of the ground when it had taken off, and it was still showering debris down on the world, fragments of rock and old architecture that had been buried under the dust for generations.

She was standing in the centre of the ring of wagons, trying to stay on her feet as the slowest and the heaviest of the townspeople stumbled past her. The Doctor was standing nearby, a spindly outline in the middle of the dust clouds, but frankly Magdelana couldn't care less what happened to him now.

Whatever her purpose was in this town, none of it mattered any more. She was supposed to be the first line of defence, and the Remote were going right over her head. The shotgun wasn't even going to take out one of them, let alone the thing in the sky.

She was amazed how little she cared.

'There!' shouted the Doctor. Magdelana could only just hear him over the roar of the ship, but he was facing the gap in the circle, the entrance to the travelling show. There were people there, she saw, and they weren't just slow-moving locals. She could make out two figures, with their hair and clothes flapping in the wind, hobbling towards the shelter of one of the wagons. One of the people looked like a girl, and you could tell by the way she moved that she wasn't used to the dust. As for the other...

The blind man.

The two figures paused in mid-stride. The Doctor was staring straight at them, even though his eyes must have been stinging like nothing on Dust. And the blind man was staring back as well. Like a baby, thought Magdelana, seeing its face in a mirror for the first time. Having said that, she wasn't sure which of the men was the baby and which of them was the reflection.

She saw the Doctor open his mouth to speak. Then the town in the sky reached out for the travelling show, with what looked like one enormous black arm, and the darkness came down on all of them.

Magdelana was running for cover before she even knew what was happening, although in the dust she couldn't be sure what kind of cover she'd been hoping for. The dark thing was a boarding tube, it couldn't have been anything else. Over the whipping of the wind, she heard the sound of an impact as the tube planted itself in the dirt. The travelling show shook. Magdelana's bad leg was already on the verge of giving up on her, so the vibration threw her off her feet, sending her tumbling forward with the dust sticking to her visor. She landed badly, twisting one of her arms and very nearly snapping the implant in her leg. There was pain, but the world was shaking so hard that she couldn't tell what was the pain and what was just the shock.

Pounding. Throbbing. Footsteps in the dirt. The Remote were pouring out of the tube, probably in their dozens, almost certainly kitted out in full body armour. And it was only then that Magdelana realised she'd lost the shotgun. She rolled on her back, flinging her arms in all directions, trying to find it again.

Now she could see the soldiers, as smears of shadow against the dust clouds. Great, fat, bulky outlines, clutching weapons that looked even clumsier than the men who carried them. Shotguns and rifles, Magdelana told herself. The Remote had only a limited supply of their electronic weapons, then. The rest had been given local-style firearms. She saw one of the men turning, raising the gun, pointing it at something in the distance...

Just for a moment, the dust clouds parted. Magdelana could see all the way across the ring of wagons, past the muddy grey tents that the Remote were just starting to tear down. She could see one of the wagons, with its door hanging open. She could see two figures hurrying into it, the Doctor helping his girlfriend up the step. The blind man was behind them, glancing over his shoulder, and for a moment Magdelana completely forgot that he didn't have any eyes.

There was a gunshot. She saw the blind man's head jerk back. The Remote soldier lowered his weapon.

A clean shot, straight to the head. The Doctor and his woman had vanished into the wagon by now, so Magdelana wasn't sure whether they'd seen it happen. She waited for the blind man to fall, for his body to sink down into the dust.

It didn't happen. Instead, the man just turned away from the Remote soldier, and followed the Doctor into the wagon. The soldier stood rooted to the spot, staring at his would-be victim, not sure whether he should try to get off another shot before the target vanished for good.

Magdelana's hand found the butt of her shotgun, lying on the desert floor nearby. She rolled over once she had the weapon in her grip, and started to crawl forward, heading for the cover of one of the other wagons before the Remote noticed her.

Not that the shotgun was going to do her much good. Everyone around here seemed to be bulletproof.

#### Meanwhile, in the Eleven-Day Empire:

The Eleven-Day Empire was the heartland of Faction Paradox, and to understand exactly where it was located, a brief history lesson may be necessary. So...

On 14 September, 1752, the country known as England – arguably the most important nation-state on Earth at that point in time – adopted the Gregorian calendar, the system of measuring time that had been championed by Pope Gregory nearly two centuries earlier. According to the Gregorian calendar, it was actually eleven days later than the people of England liked to think. Thus, in order to bring England in line with the rest of the world, eleven days had to be removed from the nation's calendars. Quite simply, the population went to sleep as usual on the night of 2 September, and when they woke up the next morning they found it was 14 September.

And the missing eleven days were occupied solely by the elders of Faction Paradox.

Naturally, a cynic would have said that this was pure nonsense. A scientific mind would have pointed out that no time was really 'lost' in the change at all, that only people's perceptions of time changed, not time itself. All of which would have been perfectly true, if It hadn't been for one thing: the Faction's agents specialised in temporal impossibilities. What would have been a metaphor to anybody else was solid reality to them. The fact remained that, even if the missing eleven days had only ever existed as a concept, any Time Lord who set the controls of his TARDIS for England in early September 1752 would have found himself lost in the darkness of the Eleven-Day Empire.

But of course no Time Lord would do anything so irresponsible. Only the Faction would have thought of it. Besides, it's questionable whether any self-respecting TARDIS unit would accept those sorts of co-ordinates in the first place.

The Eleven-Day Empire was a version of England tailored to the Faction's own needs, and there were no people there in the usual sense of the word 'people'. Apart from the Faction's own representatives, the only living things in the Empire were the ravens that had been let loose from the Tower of London, which were exempt from the usual rules of time for reasons that only the elders of the Faction really understood. London was the capital of the heartland, a cityscape where there were never any lights, and at the core of it all lay the Faction's central seat of power. The Houses of Parliament themselves.

In 'real time', the Parliament buildings wouldn't even be built until the nine-teenth century, but their impact on Earth's timeline was so great that their shadows stretched all the way into the realm of the Faction. The buildings would be the seat of government for centuries after their construction, and were destined to be many other things before their eventual collapse, from the home of a twenty-second-century arms dealer to a refuge for the veterans of the first Cyber wars. But between 3 September and 13 September, 1752, they were the sole property of the Mothers and Fathers of Faction Paradox.

The Mothers and Fathers sat only in the House of Commons. The House of Lords was reserved for other things, things the Faction's agents couldn't ever risk mentioning by name. But the House of Commons was home to the six hundred and thirty individuals who'd proved themselves most worthy of the Grandfather's attentions, those who'd risen through the ranks of the family to become the matriarchs and patriarchs of their own Faction bloodlines. Many were human, or things that had started out as human. Their clothes were mostly black, or black and red, and at least half of them insisted on wearing their ceremonial masks during sessions of Parliament, so from the centre of the great hall you could see nearly four hundred skulls staring down at you from their designated positions. Skulls of Time Lords, skulls of great batlike things, skulls of creatures that were important only in the mythologies of the people who wore them. And when the Godmother of the House announced the news from Dust, and described the data the Faction had received from the 'bugs' on the Remote ship, there wasn't a single individual in the building who stayed quiet. If the Parliament had been an entirely human one, the speaker would have called for order at that point, but in the Eleven-Day Empire the speaker's chair was always left empty, awaiting the return of Grandfather Paradox himself.

There was no debate in this chamber. There was no opposition. When the Godmother proposed sending one of the Faction's six surviving warships to Dust in the thirty-eighth century, representatives on both sides of the house began to murmur their approval. There was only one course of action that could possibly be followed.

Faction Paradox was about to become directly involved. In force.

# FOREMAN'S WORLD:

'I think I know what the Time Lords' problem is,' said I.M. Foreman.

They were back on the hilltop where they'd left the universe-in-a-bottle, looking down into the valley below. The Doctor had been casting nervous glances towards the woodland all afternoon, checking to make sure his TARDIS was still there, but now the night had swallowed up everything between the bottom of the hill and the horizon. The only light was that from the bottle, the constellations of microstars that were huddling together under the glass. It had been enough light to eat by, anyway.

She'd wanted the Doctor to try the local cuisine, such as it was, but he hadn't seemed too comfortable with the idea. I.M. Foreman guessed it was because he was still wondering what had happened to the other people on Foreman's World. He'd probably been expecting her to offer him baby paté on toast. Actually, she'd just been thinking of some kind of salad, but even so the Doctor had insisted on getting dinner from the TARDIS.

The remains of the meal were sitting on the grass between them now. The Doctor was mopping up thick orange pasta sauce with a piece of bread, or at least with a lump of matter from the TARDIS food machine that was pretending to be bread. The machine seemed to be quite a good cook, although in this body I.M. Foreman was having trouble digesting some of the material. They'd broken off from the story of what had happened on Dust, when it had become clear that the presence of food made the narrative incredibly messy as well as incredibly complicated. The first half of the story had ended on a cliff-hanger.

I.M. Foreman started to wonder whether this was the only galaxy-lit dinner the Doctor had ever enjoyed, or whether he did this sort of thing all the time.

'The Time Lords' problem,' mused the Doctor, pausing to mull things over before he popped the bread-stuff into his mouth. 'Well, from what I've learned so far, there's some kind of war coming. The High Council must be getting ready for the worst.'

I.M. Foreman shook her head. 'No, not that problem. I mean the problem of them being the most arrogant sods in this galaxy.'

'Oh, I see. That problem.' The bread stuff vanished into his mouth, but he kept talking anyway. 'Go on. Tell me.'

'Most races start out in life thinking they're at the centre of the universe,' I.M. Foreman explained. 'They think the whole of space revolves around the home world. They think it makes them the chosen of God. It's the most common belief system there is. For humanoids, anyway.'

'True,' said the Doctor. 'Very true.'

'Then they find out about astronomy. They find out they're not at the centre of things at all. They work out that their planet's just one more lump of rock floating in the middle of the red shift. Things change after that. They don't believe they're the masters of the galaxy any more.'

'I think I can see where this is going,' said the Doctor.

'Mmm. Gallifrey's at the centre of this galaxy. Maybe not the exact dead centre, but it's as close as you can get without ending up in a black hole. The truth about the Time Lords is, they never grew up. They worked out that they really were at the centre of the galaxy. Maybe not the universe, but the galaxy's good enough. So they never learned the same lesson as everyone else. They still think they're the chosen ones.'

The Doctor swallowed the last of the bread, and pushed his plate away from him. There was no point in doing that, seeing as there weren't any waiters around, but he obviously felt it was important to maintain a sense of etiquette.

'Can I ask you something personal?' he said.

I.M. Foreman nodded. 'I warn you, though. If it's anything to do with how I got this body, the details are going to be messy. You've never been a woman, have you?'

'I'm not sure I've ever even been a man. That's not what I was going to ask.' 'Go on.'

He leaned forward across the plates, and across the bottled universe that lay in the grass between them. His eyes were glinting again. Sure to be a bad sign.

'Are you still a believer?' he asked.

I.M. Foreman tried not to laugh. The Doctor must have seen the muscles twitching in her face.

'What's wrong?' he said.

'I never *believed*,' I.M. Foreman told him. 'Believing wasn't the point. The order's ideas were useful, that's all. Even back in the priesthood, they never taught us to believe anything. You should know that. You trained with the order as well. That's what you told me last time, anyway.'

'Not with the order, exactly. There wasn't an order in my day. Just a lone monk, out on his own in the mountains.'

'Doesn't matter. The message must have been the same.'

There was a long silence after that. I.M. Foreman guessed it was what people more human than herself liked to call an 'awkward pause'.

'Shall we get back to the story?' the Doctor asked. More to fill the gap in the conversation than for any other reason, I.M. Foreman guessed.

She shrugged. 'Which story?'

'Either. We might as well see where the past takes us.'

I.M. Foreman turned away from him then, and squinted down into the valley. She couldn't see a thing, of course, at least not through her eyes. But she could make out the patterns of life down in the woods, the interactions of plants and animals and micro-organisms inside their own little ecosystem. She could feel the way the undergrowth was reacting to the TARDIS as well. She could sense the Ship's presence in the earth, rooting itself in the environment, reaching out through the ground and searching for its owner. Trying to become one with Foreman's World, the way so many other things had.

She looked at the Doctor again, and found herself staring right into his gooey blue eyes. She could see the patterns of life inside him, too, and it was only then that she realised exactly how much he'd changed since the last time they'd met.

He smiled at her, but only weakly. I.M. Foreman smiled back.

'Do you want to spend the night here?' she asked.

To be continued in:

INTERFERENCE

BOOK TWO: THE HOUR OF THE GEEK

by Lawrence Miles

ISBN 0 563 55582 3