

BBC
BOOKS

DOCTOR WHO

HALFLIFE

MARK MICHALOWSKI

*'To lose one set of memories may be regarded as a misfortune.
To lose two smacks of carelessness.'*

The Terran colony world of Espero seems the unlikely source of a sophisticated distress call. And the Doctor, Fitz and Trix are not the only ones responding to it.

While Fitz consorts with royalty, the Doctor's on the run with a 16-year-old girl, and Trix meets a small boy with a dark secret.

In a race for the minds and souls of an entire planet, the Doctor and Trix are offered temptations that may change them forever.

At least one of them will be unable to resist.

This is another in the series of adventures for the Eighth Doctor.

DOCTOR WHO

HALFLIFE

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DOCTOR WHO: HALFLIFE

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For my mother,
Margaret Iris Michalowski,
who bought me my first typewriter
and got me started on this whole writing thing.

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Chapter 1

'It's an alien, Joshua.'

Joshua lay silently in bed and listened to his parents arguing outside. His mother didn't like him leaving the window open in the heat of summer, even though his sheets were damp and clingy with sweat: the sweet potato harvest had been poor last year, money was tight, and they couldn't afford to get the fly screens fixed. And Espero's insects could find their way through the smallest gap.

He heard the tones in his parents' voices, even if he couldn't make out their words, and he knew what they were arguing about. Ma, fierce and angry, was doing most of the shouting; Pa, by nature a quiet and awkward man, was doing all of the listening. Every now and again he'd hear Pa start to interject, but Ma would verbally slap him down again, thundering on. Joshua wanted to run to the window and shout down for her to leave him alone. But he knew this was adult stuff, and he didn't want to get involved. It would only upset Ma more to think that he could overhear.

He heard most of their fights: in a house this small and this far away from the noise of Saiarossa city, even a cough became thunder. Sometimes he ran to the old stables, crumbling and disused since the last of the horses had died, climbed up into the rafters where the flies didn't go, and held himself tight, praying to Our Lady for Ma and Pa to stop shouting. But Joshua reckoned Our Lady had more important people to listen to, because she never answered his prayers. Maybe it was because he was doing the praying outside of church. Father Mateus said that church was God's house, so Our Lady had to live there too, didn't she? Or maybe, once upon a time, God and Our Lady had shouted at each other and Our Lady had left. Wherever she'd gone, Joshua didn't see much sign of her around here.

Ma's voice had settled into a pattern, a steady thump thump thump beating in Joshua's head and in his heart. Only the odd swearword stood out, and he knew Ma must have been *really* angry with Pa to have used some of those words. He flapped the sheets around him, trying to cool down a little, but they stuck to his chest and his belly and thighs like Aunt Maia's plump, sweaty hands.

With a sigh, he peeled back the sheets and swung his feet on to the rug.

He watched the curtain, twitching weakly in the half hearted breeze from the window, and padded to the door. Ma's voice faded as he went out on to the landing.

He wanted to look at it again, the thing that he knew Ma and Pa were arguing about, although Joshua suspected that she was more angry about how Pa had got it, than what it was. It had been stupid of Pa to even show it to her, Joshua thought.

But then what had happened last night didn't make any sense either, did it?

Cautiously, he crossed to his parents' bedroom. The door was open, the light out. It was at the back of the house where Ma and Pa wouldn't be able to see, but he didn't want to risk it. He left the light off, and paused for a moment, letting his eyes become accustomed to the amber gloom, spilling over his shoulder and around his feet from the landing. The dresser sat in front of the window, fat and ugly, laminate peeling from its corners. Pa had said that it had been one of the first things to be made on Espero, when the colonists arrived, but Joshua didn't believe him. Plastic didn't last 270 years. That was just stupid. Nothing lasted that long.

He crossed to it and pulled at the bottom drawer. It slid open reluctantly, catching at one side so that it jammed, askew. Joshua swore a bad swearword and instinctively crossed himself, reflexively looking upwards as he did so. He didn't know why he bothered if Our Lady wasn't around. Maybe Baby Jesus was on listening duties tonight. He liked Baby Jesus, reckoned he was probably a bit more easy-going than Our Lady. He was a kid, Our Lady was a grown-up. It made sense. Besides, Baby Jesus probably didn't know what swearwords were, anyway.

Joshua quickly rooted in the drawer, and pulled back his hand as he found it, nestled in Pa's socks. This is bad, thought Joshua, suddenly overcome with guilt. He clenched his hands into tight little fists and ground his knuckles together, like his Pa did when he was puzzled or angry. It seemed to work, because suddenly Joshua didn't feel so bad about the thing in the drawer. He tried to tell himself that it was the thing that had brought him into his parents' room, talking to him, but deep down he knew it wasn't true. Taking a step forwards, he peered into the drawer, pushing Pa's socks aside. The thing lay there, looking up at him. Joshua reached out and touched it... and remembered last night.

'Where you going?' asked Ma, in the tone of voice she usually reserved for 'where you been?' when Pa staggered in late after a night with the boys. She always knew full well where he'd been, but Joshua knew that she liked to keep him on his toes. He'd heard Ma and Aunt Maia laughing in the kitchen one day when he'd come back from school. Ma was saying, 'If you don't keep a

man down, he'll always be up,' and Maia had shrieked and hooted, but Joshua didn't quite understand why they were laughing.

Joshua glanced up from his homework to see Pa tugging on his boots at the back door. By rights Joshua should have done his homework hours ago, but Ma had wanted a hand packing savas, so she'd let him stay up late so's he wouldn't get into trouble at school the next day. The holidays were drawing near, and Joshua knew that both Ma and Pa were looking forward to his being able to help them around the house and on the laughable bit of scrubland they called a farm. Joshua didn't mind; he hated school, hated all the stuff that the rich kids kept going on about – the vidfeeds from other colony worlds that their mas and pas had bought for them, trips to Advent (it sounded a dump, but that didn't stop him from wanting to go) and Semane – and couldn't wait until he was old enough to leave.

'Get back to your homework, Joshua,' warned his mother, pushing up non-existent sleeves and getting to her feet. Joshua watched her stride over to where Pa was unlocking the gun cabinet.

'Something's come down,' Pa said quietly, checking the rifle and filling his pockets with shells. Ma grabbed at the barrel of the gun, but he swung it away from her and fixed her with a stare. Joshua knew that stare: Pa didn't use it often, but when he did, Ma usually backed down. One of those unspoken grown-up things.

'Where? What's come down?' Ma asked.

Pa whispered, but Joshua pretended not to be listening, and Pa spoke a bit louder than he ought to have done. He was meeting his brother, Uncle Ake. 'Ake saw it come down near Wendacre's Fields.'

'So why d'you need that, then?' asked Ma. Joshua guessed that she meant the gun.

'Hell, woman, you want me to go out there bare-handed? We don't know what it is. And there might be more of those night beast things out there.'

'All the more reason to call the city police, then,' said Ma. Pa must have shaken his head. 'Why not?' asked Ma. 'What d'you think you're gonna find there? What good's it gonna do us?'

'There might be a reward or something. Maybe it's landed off course. What's it doing out here instead of at the port, then?' Pa paused and Joshua heard the sound of the door being unlocked. 'Ake reckons it's an invasion!' Pa said mock-menacingly, and he heard Ma tut loudly. There was a long pause, Ma muttered something bad about Uncle Ake, and then there was another pause. Joshua stared unseeing at the words on his comp screen, trying hard to make out what Ma and Pa were whispering.

Eventually, she said softly: 'Don't do anything stupid, Keef,' her voice suddenly gentle, like it used to be. Pa said something and was gone, and Ma

locked the door behind him.

Moments later, Joshua finished his homework and closed down his comp. Ma was instantly suspicious, but was none too good at using comps so she gave him one of her looks and said he ought to be off to bed then. Joshua gave her a big, tight hug and ran off upstairs. In his room, he made all the right noises: he clattered about, went to the bathroom, peed, flushed, came back, clattered about some more and got into bed. Of course, he still had all his clothes on. He'd need them if he was going to follow Pa.

Joshua turned out his light – after stuffing some clothes under his sheets in case Ma peeked in – and pushed back the fly screen on the window. As quietly as he could, he clambered out, on to the flat roof of the utility room, slid it back, and jumped down into the fragrant night. A thick clot of midges danced madly around the outside lamp, breaking up as he passed. With a glance back at the house, Joshua raced into the night, following the dim light of Pa's light.

Joshua hung back: if Pa saw him too soon, he'd send him back home with a sore ear. He heard a tuneless whistle from up ahead, and knew that Pa must still be a bit drunk from his evening 'social' with Uncle Ake. Saiarossa city was a good three-quarter-hour's walk, but Pa still managed to get over there for a few pints every couple of nights. Wendacre's Fields were a good hour's walk from the farm, and Joshua wondered whether Pa was meeting Uncle Ake there, or whether he'd be picking him up in his truck. He hoped not – that would mean that they'd get there well before he would, and he might miss out on the fun. He remembered what Pa had said about the night beasts, and about what he'd heard on the news. There hadn't been any sightings for a week or so, and they'd only been seen in the city. But they had to come from somewhere, Joshua had reasoned. Still, Pa had his gun, didn't he? And Uncle Ake'd probably have his too. As long as he stayed close, he'd be fine.

Joshua's thighs were aching by the time Pa started to slow down, and he was grateful to be able to pause for a few moments, catching his breath in big, damp lungfuls. In the inky silence, he could hear the trilling of insects, felt a few of them brush casually against him and move on. The Esperon wildlife – apart from burrowbears – didn't much like the taste of humans, but it never stopped them nipping. Joshua looked around: the farm was so far behind him that it was invisible in the dark. In all directions, everything was shades of black: the black of the sky, scattered with a few stars, and the blacker black of the ground and everything up to the vast horizon. Joshua tipped his head back and stared up at the stars, feeling momentarily dizzy. Which ones had other worlds around them, he wondered. Which ones had other human colonies? Where were Bliss, and Heritage and Availon? He wondered if Earth's sun

could be seen from here, but he didn't think so. As he looked around for Pa, he heard the distant grumble of Uncle Ake's truck, and saw a tiny spot of light from its only working headlamp, coming towards him. Well, towards Pa. He squatted down in the dark, even though he knew he'd never be seen, and watched as the light grew brighter – and then stopped. The sound of the truck door slamming closed rumbled across the open countryside like a gunshot, and Joshua supposed that maybe Pa had climbed in.

'Pa!' he shouted, jumping to his feet and running towards the light. 'Pa! It's me! Don't go!'

Puffing and panting, Joshua arrived at the battered truck to find Pa and Uncle Ake leaning on the bonnet, illuminated creepily by the single headlamp. For a moment, he wondered if Pa was going to be really really mad.

'Josh!' exclaimed Uncle Ake, stepping in front of the truck and peering at him. He turned to Pa, who was shaking his head. 'What's Josh doing here?'

'Josh,' said Pa in a low voice. 'Go home. This is men's work.'

'I can't go back, Pa,' said Josh, trying his best to sound scared and upset. Which wasn't too difficult. 'I'll get lost. I was following you here – I don't know which way's back.'

'Joshua,' he said firmly. 'Just turn around and go back. Now.'

He'd called him Joshua in *that* tone of voice, which was a sure sign. Joshua let his shoulders droop and turned, miserably.

'Aw, come on Keef,' he heard Uncle Ake say. 'You can't just let him walk back.'

'He walked here, didn't he?' replied Pa, unrelenting.

'Like he said, he followed you. Who's he got to follow back?' Uncle Ake paused and Joshua heard the sound of his father's defeat, escaping in a long, weary sigh. 'Besides,' added Uncle Ake. 'What if it's true what they say about the night beasts? Wouldn't want him –'

'OK, OK,' said Pa, sounding beaten. 'But you stay in the truck, you hear?' He squatted down beside Joshua and turned him round. Pa was in silhouette against the truck's headlamp, but Joshua didn't need light to be able to see the look on his face. 'And if you *ever* do anything like this again. . . ' His voice tailed off, letting the threat go unspoken.

'Sorry, Pa,' said Joshua meekly.

With another sigh, Pa stood up and put his hand on Joshua's shoulder. Together they climbed into the truck alongside Uncle Ake and set off into the night.

The cab of the truck was filled with an odd, sour silence. Even Uncle Ake, normally chatty and affable, had fallen quiet. Joshua saw his uncle's own rifle on the dashboard, and began to wish he'd stayed at home. He wanted to ask

what this thing was that had ‘come down’, but Pa’s silence infected him. They rode without a word passing between them for ten minutes or so, bumping through the darkness, until suddenly Uncle Ake raised an arm and pointed ahead. Joshua sat up in his seat and struggled to see what it was. Away ahead of them, nestled in the dark, was a tiny patch of pale light, huddled down against the ground. He felt Pa move at his side, gripping the stock of his rifle.

‘You stay in the truck, Josh,’ he said as the vehicle came to a halt and Uncle Ake cut the engine. If these were offworlders, why hadn’t they landed at the port? Why had they chosen to land in the middle of nowhere in the dark? Maybe they’d crashed. Maybe, like Pa had told Ma earlier, it was an invasion. Visitors to Espero were few and far between – the last ship he remembered coming here had been about three months ago, a shipment of stuff for the Palace, for the Emperor’s birthday celebrations. He knew a couple of kids at school who’d got new edprogs and comps, smuggled in on the ship. But why were Pa and Uncle Ake going out to meet it in the middle of the night with guns? He knew Pa wasn’t keen on offworlders – he still called them ‘aliens’, which always made Joshua and his mother wince – but coming out to meet them with guns seemed to be going a bit far.

He sat quietly as the two men climbed out of the truck, rifles in hands, and set off towards the light. Joshua gave them a minute, then quietly opened the door and slipped out. If they were going to meet offworlders, Joshua wasn’t going to be left out.

He stayed well back, knowing that if Pa saw him this time he’d get a good hiding. But he needn’t have worried: the men seemed too intent on what lay ahead of them. The patch of light grew and grew, gradually resolving itself into a large, luminous, blobby shape, squatting on the ground. He squinted: was it a spaceship? It was nothing like the spaceships he’d seen on his comp or at the port. This one looked like a half-filled sack of savas, spread out on the ground. As Joshua drew closer, he could make out more details: wrinkles and folds in the thing, knobby protuberances. He could see that the soft, bluish light wasn’t coming uniformly from the surface of the thing, but from dozens – maybe hundreds – of irregular mushrooms, scattered at random, over its surface. The sides of it sloped up to a peak, and Joshua smiled to himself, realising that it looked like a mound of radioactive mashed potato. Maybe it *wasn’t* a spaceship, but the debris from one. The two grown-ups had stopped and, haloed in blue fire, they split up, going around opposite sides of the thing. It wasn’t as big as Joshua would have expected, but in the dark he had difficulty judging its distance and size. It didn’t look like it was much bigger than the farmhouse. As the pale glow pushed out spindly shadows along the grass behind Pa and Uncle Ake, Joshua was sure he saw something move, away on the other side of the ship. But it moved too quickly and was

too distant for him to register anything other than a brief flicker. Pa and Uncle Ake clearly saw it too. Uncle Ake gestured left.

Joshua's eyes were caught by the flicker of movement again, but this time it was on the spaceship, up near the top. Something looked as if it were coming out of the peak, but perhaps it had climbed up the back of the ship. It looked, illuminated weirdly from below, a little like a man with a ram's head: a long, narrow snout, pale and dead-looking, swept back up to a broad forehead that continued on to form two huge crests, curving back over the head like bony eyebrows above the black eyes. He froze, and watched as the creature continued to rise until it stood at the top of the spaceship, and he could see that it had the lower half of a horse. Well, thought Joshua, a bit like a horse. The creature's upper body was like that of a thin man, grafted on to the four-legged lower body. But unlike the legs of a horse, this creature's legs splayed slightly outwards, like those of a spider, giving it a comically bandy-legged look. He couldn't see whether it had a horse's tail as well.

Joshua jumped as he heard the clicking of the two men setting their rifles. He couldn't believe that they were just going to shoot the horse-man-thing. Maybe it was good, and not invading. An odd noise drifted through the dark – a combination of electronic-sounding hums and clicks – and Joshua squinted, seeing the creature's small, circular mouth moving. It was talking. It stopped after a few moments and tipped its head on one side as if waiting for a reply.

'What d'you want?' bellowed Pa boldly, but Joshua could hear the tremor in his voice. He saw him hefting the rifle in his hands. This felt bad.

The creature repeated its noises, but this time the sounds were accompanied by something very odd. The creature's body, in the bluish light from the ship, had looked white – or as pale as made no difference. But now it was changing: a series of flickering dark bands, like the stripes of a zebra, were scrolling along it, from the top of the sheep's head, down over the man's chest, and right to the horse's back end. They flickered as they went, changing thickness, stuttering on and off. After a few seconds, the patterns froze in place, before being replaced by a hypnotic pattern of black and white dots, expanding all over its skin, like monochrome fireworks. Joshua was entranced. This was like nothing he'd ever seen before. The creature was beautiful. He heard one of the adults say something, but was too enthralled by the creature's display to catch it.

For the first time, because it was the only part of the creature that hadn't shown the flickering patterns, Joshua saw that there was something on its chest, hanging round its neck perhaps. A Y-shaped thing about the size of his father's hand.

Then suddenly, moving amazingly quickly, the offworlder galloped down the slope of the ship. Joshua heard Uncle Ake swear, and although the crea-

ture stopped sharply on the grass, it made no difference. The next thing Joshua heard was the sound of his Pa's rifle, exploding in the silence. He gasped and his throat choked up, as the beautiful creature jerked sharply, one of its slender hands moving to its side. It looked down, as if amazed at being shot, and lifted up its palm to examine it. Joshua could see a smudge of darkness, and knew that it was blood. He heard Pa say something to Uncle Ake, and called out, 'No, Pa! Don't shoot it!'

Pa turned quickly in the dark and swore at Joshua, telling him to get back to the truck. Uncle Ake shouted a warning to Pa, and Joshua saw that the creature was moving towards them, staggering and weaving about. Its head was tipped back, its mouth moving slowly, and Joshua could hear a low, guttural moan coming from it.

A second shot rang out, this one from Uncle Ake's gun, and the creature spun on the spot, one of its front legs collapsing beneath it. Away in the distance, in the dark, he heard a rising, groaning noise, shuddering across the countryside – and then realised that it was just elephines, disturbed by the gunshots. Joshua flinched as, with a wail, the horse-man fell to its knees and slumped on to its side. The two adults began to walk towards it, guns pointing straight at its head. Joshua wanted to cry. This was just so wrong. Without thinking, he crossed himself, wondering whether, if he shouted loudly enough, Our Lady would hear him and come and save the horse-man.

'Please, Pa!' he cried out, running to him and grabbing his leg, desperately trying to pull him back. 'Leave it. It hasn't done any harm.'

'It's an alien, Joshua,' intoned his father, as if it were something he'd learned by rote, a mantra that brooked no argument, no discussion. 'Now go. Back. To. The. Truck.' He didn't try to shake Joshua off, just carried on walking, dragging the boy with him as he cocked his rifle again. Joshua wanted it to stop, wanted his Pa to leave the horse-man alone, wanted to go back to the farm and pretend that the offworlder had never come. He buried his face in Pa's side so that no one would hear him crying.

So now Joshua stood by the chest of drawers and tried to forget the fear he'd seen on his father's face when he'd finally looked up. He tried to forget the horrible smell of burning as Pa and Uncle Ake had fetched the spare petrol cans from the truck and set fire to the spaceship. Joshua didn't know quite what they'd done with the body of the horse-man, but he assumed that it had been destroyed too. In a mutual, shameful silence, the three of them had watched the ship burn, sending a luminous pall of smoke spiralling up into the night sky. It cracked and fizzed like melting plastic, and every so often, Joshua thought he could hear a tiny, feeble scream. Maybe there were others, other horse-men, still inside. Burning. After a while, as the flames had begun

to die down, Pa and Uncle Ake took him back to the truck, and back home. Pa had something in a plastic rucksack that he kept in the car, but he wouldn't show Joshua what it was, and wouldn't talk about what they'd done. And when, eventually, he'd heard his parents come to bed – after more muttering and shouting and clattering of pots – Joshua had sneaked downstairs to see what Pa had in the rucksack.

His hands had trembled as he'd pulled it open: inside, gleaming softly, was the Y-shaped thing that the horse-man had worn around his neck. A souvenir, thought Joshua. No – a trophy. He wanted to touch it, but it held too much shame, too much guilt, and Joshua didn't want to be infected by it.

But its silent call had been too much to resist, and now here he was, gazing down into the drawer where it had been hidden by Pa. He reached out and took hold of it.

Chapter 2

'D'you think you could keep your monkey under control?'

Calamee squinted into the sun as the Saturday afternoon crowds began muttering and murmuring, their heads turning towards the vast, sandy bulk of the Palace and the satanic iron gates that, depending on your point of view, either kept the public away from the Imperial Family, or the Imperial Family away from the public.

Curious, she pushed her way towards the source of the crowd's attention, ignoring the irritated grunts of her fellow Esperons as she elbowed her way through. Nessus clung to her shoulder, his little toes digging into her through her summer frock, slender fingers entwined in her close-cropped hair. She could feel him swaying his head from side to side excitedly.

And then, as if an almighty hand had reached down and split the throng, the crowd opened up before her and a figure cannoned into her, knocking her on to her backside.

'Ow!' she yelped, struggling to get up, ready to deliver a hefty slap to her assailant. But before she could, her fingers were grasped by a cool hand and she was heaved effortlessly to her feet, to be faced with the widest, wildest eyes, the palest face and the most unkempt hair she'd ever seen. Nessus squeaked on her back as he locked his arms around her neck. She could feel him shivering.

'Sorry about that,' the man said breathlessly, glancing over his shoulder. 'It's just that I appear to be being chased by an armed retinue of your Palace Guard, and I'd really rather avoid being impaled by their staves.' He looked back at her. 'If at all possible.'

And with another look behind him, he was off, sprinting through the bemused crowd. Before she knew what was happening, Calamee felt Nessus spring from her head and bound away after the offworlder, darting through the legs of the Esperons with an agility she hadn't realised he possessed.

'Nessus!' called Calamee. 'Come back!'

And before she could think about what she was doing, she hared after the little creature. And the stranger. As she raced to catch up with the two of them, Calamee could see that his status as an offworlder endowed him with all the charisma of a sewage worker just off his shift: the mass of people

packed into the Palace square moved aside to let him through as though the mere touch of him might soil them permanently. Offworlders were a rarity on Espero, and many people had never seen one in the flesh – never mind a *white* one. It was almost funny, seeing them draw back as he darted this way and that, Nessus cantering along a few paces behind him. Of course, Calamee was travelling in their wake, and made better going, so it didn't actually take her long to catch up with them. Nessus was already clambering up the man's trouser leg and making steady progress towards his shoulder. The man threw an irritated look down at him.

'Where are you going?' she asked casually as she caught up, managing to prise Nessus off the man's arm and persuade him to grab on to her own. Nessus gave an irritated little squeal of protest but stayed with her all the same. The man turned and did a double take, evidently surprised at her presence.

'This way looks quite nice,' he said, gesturing vaguely in front of him. 'Unless that's a bad idea. . . ?'

Calamee looked up ahead: he was heading for the south side of the square, so unless he thought that buying an expensive new frock from one of Mother's favourite outfitters might throw off his pursuers, she reckoned he needed a bit of help.

'That way might be better,' she suggested, pointing off to the left.

'I'll take your word for it,' said the stranger. 'As you might have gathered, I'm rather new around here.'

He glanced back over his shoulder, looking for the Palace Guard. Calamee scanned the crowd: in the distance, she could see the spikes of the Guard's staves, waving through the crowds like stalks of burnt corn. She could see people turning, pointing towards them. Although the Palace Guard were not greatly loved, they were certainly respected, and Calamee knew that most of the people would be more than happy to help catch an offworlder – particularly an offworlder that was running away from the Crystal Palace. For a moment, she wondered what exactly he'd done, and whether she should be quite so keen on following him. Nessus squeaked and clambered nimbly up on to her shoulder. He raised himself up on his long hind legs and, to Calamee's amusement, appeared to be scanning the crowd as well. What was wrong with him today? He could be amusing, he could be irritating; today, the only word to describe his behaviour was *determined*. He leapt gracefully on to the offworlder's back and tangled his fingers in the man's hair.

'D'you think you could keep your monkey under control?' he said, trying to prise Nessus's hands away from his eyes.

'He's a *mokey*,' Calamee corrected him, pushing the man ahead of her. 'And he seems to have taken quite a shine to you. Take it as a compliment and keep

moving if you don't want them to catch up with you.'

The man grumbled and the crowds parted before them as they headed for the corner of the square. The streets branching out from the south-east corner were smaller, more labyrinthine, and Calamee reckoned that they had a better chance of hiding from the Guard there. Of course it would be just her luck to run into Mother and Father: she'd left them browsing furniture an hour ago, and by now they might even have noticed that she wasn't with them any more. Just in front of the Palace, workmen were occupied with fencing off an area for some sort of tournament, part of the Emperor's birthday bash, and she saw half a dozen nervous horses being led through the crowds. People were stepping aside nervously clearly scared of being kicked by the animals. It gave Calamee a narrow avenue to slip through, dragging the stranger in her wake. A group of nuns in full habit stopped to stare judgementsally at them, and Calamee smiled and crossed herself without thinking.

The throng around them began to thin out as they reached the edge of the square and she breathed a sigh of relief that at least no one had stopped them to ask the stranger where he was from. Yet.

'This way,' she hissed, grabbing him by the arm and dragging him down a narrow, cool street, buildings high on either side of them. The smell of spices and cooking meat filled the air and the stranger paused and irritably fanned away a haze of midges from his face, grimacing. He caught Calamee's eye.

'It'd be too much to hope they don't bite, wouldn't it?'

'Sorry,' Calamee said. 'Yes, it would. But you'll get used to it.'

He raised his shoulders ruefully and glanced up, looking as though he were trying to focus on the midges. Comically, Nessus's head made the same movements, and he reached out for one of the midges – before nearly losing his grip and tumbling from the stranger's shoulder. She sighed and pushed the two of them down the alleyway, past the bemused and curious faces of a couple of Esperon kids who had stopped to stare at them.

'Do visitors to your world always attract this much attention?' the off-worlder asked as they reached a junction and Calamee tried to work out which way to go.

'Only when they look like you.'

'I'll take that as a compliment,' the man said. He seemed harmless enough – slightly bemused and dazed, Calamee thought, but then if she'd been a prisoner in the Crystal Palace, she might be feeling a bit bemused and dazed, too.

'Makes a change, though,' the man said. 'I normally manage to blend in perfectly. Are we actually going somewhere...? Sorry, I don't think I caught your name. I'm the Doctor, by the way.'

With surprising speed, he reached out to grab Calamee's hand and pumped it up and down madly for a moment before dropping it abruptly.

'Calamee,' she said. 'And yes, we are going somewhere. I just haven't decided where yet.' She looked back down the narrow street they'd just visited: no sign of the Guard yet, but she found it hard to believe that they'd given up on him this quickly. They normally stayed inside the Palace, more ornamental than functional: the city police would no doubt have been notified about the Doctor's escape by now, and they wouldn't be quite so easy to shake off. What the hell was she doing? she thought. Helping a criminal to escape? Of course, now that she had Nessus back, there was no real reason to stay with this Doctor. Particularly since she didn't know what the penalty was for aiding and abetting the escape of an offworlder (although she was pretty sure it wouldn't just be a stiff telling-off and a 'go to your room for a week'). But Calamee's life was usually so terminally dull that it seemed such a shame to just say goodbye and meekly head back to normality. When would she ever get a chance to be this close to an offworlder again? Who knew what technologies and exotic things he had access to, what things he could show her? The leaden heat of the Esperon summer was settling in, the schools would be closing in a few days, and a month of tedium stretched ahead of her. Maybe this Doctor could put a little bit of zing into it. Even if it was only till he was caught again.

'How did you get here?' she asked. 'Have you got a ship at the port?'

'A ship at the port?' The Doctor looked flustered. 'I expect so.'

'You expect so? Don't you know? How did you get here?'

He sighed and Calamee saw his shoulders slump.

'That's the whole point,' he said tiredly. 'I can't remember.'

Trix sat up sharply, her bottom slipping on the floor of the bath, feeling momentarily disorientated. At times like these, when the TARDIS wasn't in flight and she was the only one aboard, it was easy to remember what it had been like before: when she'd lived like a mouse in the skirting board, the Doctor, Fitz and Anji knowing nothing of her existence aboard the ship. But Anji had been gone a while, and sometimes it seemed like nothing had changed. When he wasn't finding a use for her, sending her off to the distant past or the far future on errands for him, or telling her that as soon as they arrived in the right place and time she'd have to go, the Doctor made a studied pretence of ignoring her. Fitz, on the other hand, seemed to have quite taken to her – in an annoying, puppyish sort of way. He was OK, she supposed. And it was useful to have a friend aboard. If nothing else, she could rely on Fitz to prevent the Doctor from taking off and leaving her behind.

She cleaned the bubbles from her ears and wondered where her travelling companions had got to.

‘We’re just popping out for a few minutes,’ Fitz had said.

‘Going to pinpoint the source of the distress call,’ the Doctor had said. That was the first *she’d* heard of any distress call.

‘You have a nice bath,’ Fitz had added.

‘We’ll be back before it’s cold,’ the Doctor had finished.

And they were gone, some sort of device in the Doctor’s hand bleeping and burbling.

‘Fine,’ she’d said airily to the closing door. ‘You boys go and play with your toys. Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine here. Got any washing you want doing? Socks need darning? Shall I have dinner on the table when you get back? Phft!’

Not that she really fancied a dreary plod round some backwater of a planet looking for a crashed spaceship or stranded alien astronaut. If it turned out to be more than a fifteen-minute job to fix it, no doubt Fitz would be back to tell her. But since she’d been an official TARDIS occupant, she’d had hardly a moment to herself, and the thought of a half-hour soak, all on her own, was too enticing.

Trix stood up, foamy, and reached for a pink-and-white candy-striped towel, wondering if they’d come back yet and were already in the console room, congratulating themselves. They could be so annoying at times. She felt a bit bad for begrudging the Doctor his happiness – particularly after what had happened to Miranda – but his current outburst of boyish enthusiasm seemed to have ignited Fitz’s immaturity, and the two of them were just getting each other going. She wondered if Anji had felt like this around them, and whether the Doctor was doing it on purpose, trying to make her feel like a gooseberry so that she’d be more than willing to jump ship when she got the opportunity.

Huh! she thought. *Fat chance, Doctor.*

She checked the Mickey Mouse alarm clock on her bedside table – one of the knick-knacks that Anji had left behind – and realised that she’d been soaking for over an hour.

A few minutes later, she strolled into the console room, running her fingers through the tangles in her hair, shaking it out. There was no sign of them – just a big, empty Fitz-and-the-Doctor-shaped hole where, somehow, they ought to have been. Well, as long as they weren’t having An Exciting Adventure With Some Space Hunks, that was fine by her.

It was only as the second hour began to roll around that Trix began to get worried.

Trix saw instantly that Fitz was lying in what looked to be an awfully uncomfortable position, his left leg bent at an implausible angle, face down on the grass just fifty yards from the TARDIS.

'Fitz!' she called as she ran to him. He lay in a patch of dappled sunlight, unmoving, his black leather jacket crumpled up around his torso.

'What happened?' She knelt beside him and tried to remember the intensive first-aid course she'd once taken in preparation for the role of 'nurse' to a rather wealthy elderly gentleman. But that seemed like a lifetime ago, and she realised that she wasn't quite sure what to check. His pulse. Yes, that would do. She didn't want to move him or roll him over or anything like that: that, she knew, was The Wrong Thing To Do. She felt around his neck until she found his pulse. She didn't know whether it was a good pulse or a bad pulse, but at least he had one.

Something rustled and she sat up sharply, glancing around: the TARDIS had landed at the edge of a patch of rather pretty woodland. The ground sloped gently downwards towards a little copse of trees and bushes in a hollow. The air smelled rich and aromatic, herby. She could quite easily have been on Earth – a summer's evening, somewhere in the Mediterranean, thought Trix as she glanced around, wondering if the Doctor had made the noise.

'Doctor?' she called, and then realised that if Fitz and the Doctor *had* been attacked, the noise could just as easily have been their attacker.

'Fitz!' she hissed, leaning in close to him as she realised that there was a limit to the resuscitative powers of pulse-checking. 'Wake up, Fitz!'

There was a disgruntled groan from him and he turned his head experimentally.

'Don't move,' Trix said. 'Can you move?'

'Uh,' came Fitz's decisive answer.

'Good,' said Trix, squinting into the shade of the bushes. 'Can you get up?'

'Uh,' Fitz said firmly.

'Well, get up then. Fitz – I think there's something in the bushes! And don't just say "Uh" again. Come on!' She tugged at his collar, hoping that he'd take her hint.

'Wha...?'

'We've got to find the Doctor, Fitz – or get back to the TARDIS.'

Fitz muttered something through a mouthful of grass and painfully levered himself into a kneeling position. The side of his face was imprinted with a pattern from the ground and Trix noticed that a patch of hair the size of a matchbox was missing from Fitz's temple. But there was no blood there – just a smooth, raw-looking patch of skin like you'd get after recovering from a burn. It made Trix feel a bit creeped out. She'd never been good with disfigurements and bodily injuries – although since she'd been with the Doctor and Fitz, her tolerance levels had risen considerably.

'Fitz, your head – what happened?'

He fixed his gaze on her as well as he could, with eyes that seemed as determined as possible to go their own ways, and frowned.

She nodded. 'I know. "Uh." Can you stand?'

Fitz gave her an 'Of course I can stand' look, wobbled to his feet and promptly fell over backwards with a deep moan.

'We don't have time for slapstick – there's something in those bushes. Is it the Doctor?'

'Eh?'

She sighed. 'Forget it – let's get you back. Does the Doctor keep a first-aid kit or a spacey medical robot or magical heal-all pills or anything? Something like that ointment he gave to Guy?'

Fitz shook his head slowly, like someone coming out of a dream, and fixed her with a deep and puzzled frown.

'That's a no, then, is it?' she sighed.

He coughed noisily, his hand flying to his chest as he doubled up.

'C'mon, up you get,' Trix said, realising that the floor was nowhere for an injured man to be sitting. Particularly if he was *badly* injured. She slipped her hands under his armpits in an attempt to lift him up, but he pushed her away as his coughing fit abated.

'Where am I?' he demanded unsteadily, staring at her. 'And who the Dickens are you?'

Behind them, unheard, the air fizzed and crackled, like the sound of a billion champagne bubbles.

Chapter 3

'Sticks, Trix?'

Imperatrix Alinti watched critically, as a bevy of butlers and servants swarmed across the Grand Hall, their arms laden with bolts of silver and gold fabric, banners and poles. She'd grown tired of arguing with her husband about the archaic way in which he'd insisted on decorating the Palace for his birthday celebrations, and had grumpily agreed to 'maintain a sense of tradition' about the whole affair.

If she'd had her way she'd have had the whole Palace decked out with optical projectors, lasers and tridee imagers. This insistence of Tannalis's on tatty fabric ribbons draped all over the place was tacky, she felt, and sent out the wrong image of the Imperial Family to the country – never mind to the rest of Espero. She knew for a fact that the Prime Administrator in Anjon had spent a small fortune on offworld technology to mark his third inauguration – including an obscenely expensive short-range matter transmitter to have his whole parliament transported instantly to the celebrations. Now that was class, Alinti thought. That was style – particularly since the use of matter transmitters went specifically against High Catholic doctrine, since Pope Constanza had decreed that it was impossible to teleport a human soul.

The only concessions she'd been able to wheedle out of Tannalis so far were five battered old levicars purchased from Marselle (which he'd agreed to far too readily, thinking about it), and a commitment to having the diamond monolayer coating of the corner towers resurfaced. As she'd explained patiently to him, they could hardly go on calling it the 'Crystal Palace' in its current state. She blamed the government's appropriation committees for skimping on it the first time round: a decent coating job should last for centuries, not just a decade. When she was in charge, she'd make sure the imperial budgets were brought up to appropriate levels.

She gave a sigh as a girl tripped and a roll of shimmering fabric bounced across the flagstones down below, unrolling itself like a half-hearted wave washing up on the shores of the Imperial Family's reputation.

'Pick it up!' she shrieked, leaning out over the balcony from where, her blood pressure increasing with every moment, she was attempting to oversee them all and make the best of a bad job. 'Do you know how much that costs?'

Of course, it didn't actually cost very much: she'd struck a deal with some old people's home in Eastlane where they'd set up a whole barnful of looms as 'occupational therapy'. Less than four solaris a roll. She watched through narrowed eyes as the girl blundered about, trying to re-roll the fabric without stepping on it.

'If it's damaged, it's coming out of your wages!' Alinti called.

The girl looked up and gave a pained little curtsy, her arms full of acres of glittering fabric. If Tannalis hadn't insisted on this ridiculous, antiquated charade, Alinti thought, turning away, she wouldn't have to put herself through all of this. Selfish, he was. Just plain selfish.

As Alinti strode down the corridor towards the stairs, Javill appeared out of the shadows and made her jump.

'Sorry, Mother,' he apologised, taking her hand in his own and giving it a little squeeze.

'I do wish you wouldn't do that, dear,' she said, trying not to show how much he'd startled her. But she couldn't be mad at him for long: he was her special son, after all, and she knew how much he loved his mother. He was a handsome boy – flawless skin, rich, deep eyes and a strong, square jaw. He pulled an apologetic face.

'I heard you shouting at the staff,' he said. 'Can't we get some better ones?'

Alinti gave a brittle laugh.

'Blame your father – he insists on overseeing all dismissals. D'you know that he reinstated that chef that I sacked last week? Gave him his job back – just like that!' She made a little popping gesture with her hands that rapidly turned into a sharp clasp motion, red talons spearing inwards. 'He really is becoming unbearable. He thinks I don't know about his secret meetings with Minister Djelardine or that offworld stranger he's installed in the Palace. When I question him about them, he just fobs me off, tells me that it's nothing I need to worry about' Alinti glanced away and shook her head. 'I don't know how much more of him I can stand, Javill. I really don't.' Her voice tailed away pitifully.

'I know, Mother,' said Javill, taking her hand again. 'I know. But this may be the last birthday he sees.' He paused and looked into his mother's eyes. 'We should make it a good one. Who knows how much time he has left?'

Alinti gave a gentle nod. 'His health isn't what it was,' she agreed. 'His doctors seem to think he might last another five or ten years, but I can't believe it.'

Javill gave a contemptuous snort. 'No doubt trying to curry favour with him. I agree with you, Mother.' he's looking iller by the day. I may not be a medical man, but I think I know my own father.'

‘So sad,’ said Alinti, taking a deep breath. ‘Now if you’ll excuse me, my dear, I have to go and discipline that stupid girl.’ She paused, her fingers clutching the brass hand rail. ‘If I can remember which one she was.’

Javill waved his hand contemptuously. ‘Then just discipline them all, Mother.’

Alinti smiled indulgently: this was why she loved Javill so much. He always knew what to say. Sometimes she wondered whether he was really Tannalis’s son. God knows, there’d been enough other men. She gave Javill a kiss on the cheek, smiling at the memories that the thought brought to mind.

‘Go and find out what your sister’s doing, darling,’ she said, squeezing his hands. ‘And make sure she’s doing it properly.’

She watched Javill trot down the stairs: such a fine young man. He’d make someone a wonderful husband one day.

Alinti turned and headed for her husband’s rooms (it had been many years since they’d shared a bed – something for which Alinti was eternally grateful) and entered without knocking. He was sitting in his chair at the window, staring out on the noise and bustle of the afternoon market in the square. A couple of tents, their awnings and pennants flashing red and gold in the later afternoon sun, were being erected at one end of a fenced-off area, in preparation for some sort of tedious jousting tournament. Alinti felt herself tighten up as she approached the old man, who was swaddled in a cream blanket. From behind, he looked even older: hunched and thin, his white hair contrasting with his dark skin in the summer sunshine.

‘What?’ he snapped without even turning. Alinti felt her jaw clench.

‘Tannalis,’ she began in her most reasonable tone. ‘It’s about the staff.’

‘You complaining again?’ he grunted, turning to look at her. ‘Haven’t you got enough to be doing without wasting your time trying to turn my birthday into some sort of pantomime?’

He fixed her with a stare and then turned back to the view as if she’d suddenly stopped mattering. Alinti hated it when he did that – as if she were no more than a member of the Palace staff.

‘It’s all right for you,’ she said. ‘All you have to do is sit here and wait for the rest of us to get everything done. Life’s easy for you, isn’t it? I’ve been running myself ragged –’

‘Horse-cack,’ said Tannalis. ‘I’ve been keeping an eye on you, woman: it’s Sensimi and the rest of my staff that have been doing the work. You’ve just been swanning around getting on everyone’s nerves and in everyone’s way. You’re not Imperatrix proper yet, and don’t you forget it.’

Alinti took a deep, pointed breath, but before she got a word out, her husband turned in his chair.

‘This is my birthday, and I’ll celebrate it *my* way. Right?’

'Darling,' said Alinti with as much feeling as she could, holding out her hands to him, but he shooed them away.

'Don't "darling" me, woman. Don't think I don't know what's going on in that shrivelled little head of yours. You never thought I'd live to be a hundred and twenty, did you? You and that feckless son of yours have been hanging around like vultures for the past decade, waiting for me to drop so you could pick at my corpse. Eh? Well, I've made it. I've made it this far and I'm not about to give up yet.'

Alinti tried to smile compassionately, but he just snorted.

'Everyone wants you to live to be a hundred and fifty,' she said. 'Nothing would make me and Javill happier. Even the doctors say –'

'Huh! What do they know, eh? Those quacks you brought in from Eden were as much use as Javill. I'm glad I sent them packing and got some of my own in.' He grinned at Alinti's expression. 'At least they won't accidentally poison me.'

'Poison you?' Alinti put on her most horrified voice and clasped her hands to her breast in what she hoped was a gesture of astonishment. He waved her away.

'Don't start all that business,' he said. 'You can't lie as convincingly with your hands as you can with your mouth. Stick to what you're good at. Now leave me alone. It was a beautiful day until you dragged your raddled old carcass in here. Go on – go and harass someone. I've got thinking to do.'

Alinti smiled again, but she knew she wasn't fooling him. Poison? Could he have guessed? And what thinking could he possibly be doing? Alinti didn't like this: Tannalis was normally quiet and unassuming. She didn't like this at all. Could it be connected with the offworlder that Tannalis seemed to have befriended?

'What are you waiting for?' Tannalis grunted, turning his back on her and leaning forward to peer out of the window.

'Nothing, my dear,' said Alinti as she headed purposefully for the door. 'I'm not waiting for anything.'

The Doctor didn't know where Calamee was taking him. Once they'd left the crowds in the square behind, she'd taken him on a seemingly random tour of tiny, shadowed streets, the evening sun slanting across the tops of them as it picked out the tatty, stuccoed walls and the terracotta-tiled roofs. Gleaming crucifixes, their gold-leaf pristine amid the general decay of the city, sat atop many of the buildings, hugging the squat bell towers and spires; crude but strangely powerful religious iconography decorated crumbling walls: tableaux of the Last Supper, the Crucifixion, the raising of Lazarus. The air was warm

and muggy, and clots of insects danced in the few shafts of light that struggled to find their way to ground level. Nessus sleepily acknowledged them, squeaking half-heartedly.

The Doctor had explained, as best he could, how he couldn't remember anything before waking up in the woods outside the city. He'd stumbled around for a while, aching and confused, before wandering into the city. He'd told a stunned-looking young man that he was new here, and asked for suggestions about where he ought to go. The man had suggested the Palace and given him directions.

'And then he ran off,' finished the Doctor. 'I think I must have scared him somehow.'

'Being an offworlder is enough to scare most people around here. And, not to put too fine a point on it, the fact that you're white doesn't help.'

'Really?' The Doctor was astonished. That possibility had never crossed his mind, although, now that Calamee mentioned it, it did seem rather obvious.

'As you might have noticed, white faces around here are rather few and far between. What happened when you got to the Palace?'

'They let me in.'

'Just like that?' Calamee seemed amazed.

'I got the feeling they'd been expecting me. Nothing they said, just a vague sense that I wasn't a complete surprise to them. I was shown to a room and told to wait; that someone would be along to question me later.'

The Doctor rubbed his neck, feeling the smooth, tingling patch of raw skin that he'd discovered on his way into the city. He had a couple on his arms and one on his leg, and he could feel a large one wrapping around his ribcage. They itched slightly.

'And did they? Did you meet the Imperial Family?'

The Doctor shook his head.

'There was something in the way they said "question me later" that sounded like a euphemism for "beat me with sticks" so I decided to leg it. The Imperial Guard started chasing me, and the next thing I knew, you were throwing yourself in my way.'

'Excuse me – I think you'll find it was the other way around.'

'Was it?' The Doctor looked vague. 'I'll take your word for it.'

'And you don't remember anything at all about how you came to be outside the city? What you're doing on Espero?'

'Espero? Is that what this planet's called?' He gave a thoughtful frown. 'Espero... "hope" in Esperanto. Or are we talking Spanish here?' He looked around, as if seeing the city for the first time. 'Definite Moorish influences, don't you think? An Earth colony...' He looked to her for help with raised eyebrows. 'Sometime in the future?'

'The future? That bang on your head must have been a pretty big one.'

'No no no,' he said. 'It wasn't a bang on my head' He paused. 'Maybe it was. But why am I thinking that this is all happening in the future? What's all that about, then?'

He ran his hand through his hair and shook his head.

'I can't shake the feeling that I'm here for a reason, you know.'

'Are you speaking spiritually or literally?'

'Literally. I think.' The Doctor looked around, and saw a couple of children standing in a doorway, watching him with dark, suspicious eyes.

'Maybe it'll all come back to me if I can find something familiar, something...' He waved his hands, grasping for a way to finish the sentence.

'You need a doctor,' Calamee said.

'I *am* a doctor.'

'No, a proper doctor. Someone who can take a look at you, examine you. Maybe get your memory back.'

The Doctor hummed, unconvinced. Somehow, he suspected that a 'proper doctor' wouldn't be of much use. It was frustrating and tantalising at the same time, like the cloud of flies dancing out of reach around his head. He looked up and saw a particularly fat one, wobbling around above him.

'What you looking at?' he said grimly to it, before looking back at Calamee.

She looked at him dubiously.

'I get the impression,' she said, 'that you're not a medical doctor yourself, are you?'

He shrugged. 'Maybe.'

'Well, let's work on the basis that you aren't? Calamee looked thoughtful. 'If they're still after you, we can't take you to a hospital or anything obvious like that.' She fell silent for a moment, and the Doctor wondered whether he should really be trusting himself to a girl who couldn't be more than sixteen, even though she acted more like she was twenty-six. Calamee, the Doctor imagined, was probably very pretty – slim with a delicate oval face, cropped brown hair with just a dusting of gold. The shape of her eyes and her lips spoke of a mixed heritage: African, perhaps, with a hint of Indonesian or Chinese. He wished he could tell her more about himself. It was frustrating enough remembering little other than his own name – assuming that 'Doctor' was his own name, which, the more he thought about it, seemed rather unlikely. Maybe he'd made a mistake in escaping from the Palace: maybe he'd have learned more by hanging around. Calamee let out a triumphant noise and grabbed his arm.

'It's obvious!' she grinned. 'You want sanctuary, don't you?'

'I'd rather have my memory back.'

‘First things first. We can worry about that later. We need to get you somewhere safe, somewhere the Palace Guard and the police won’t be able to get at you. Come on!’

She tugged at him, and Nessus – who’d fallen asleep on her shoulder, while watching her conversation with the Doctor – nearly fell off.

‘Wherever we’re going,’ the Doctor said, following along in her wake and pulling a face at the mokey, ‘I hope they do food. I’m starving.’

‘Are you sure this is wise?’ asked Trix as she and Fitz stepped from the TARDIS. The evening air was cool, the sky a dark orangey pink, like a huge peach hanging above them, and the wood seemed remarkably still and quiet.

‘Wise is as wise does,’ said Fitz cryptically – and, Trix imagined, quite meaninglessly, ‘but if the Doctor’s out here somewhere we have to find him.’

She remembered the rustling she’d heard in the bushes, and had ghastly visions of their poking around and finding the Doctor’s body. Fitz still hadn’t remembered what had happened to him and the Doctor – and still had no explanation for the bare, pink patch on his head (and, it transpired, the numerous other patches of tender skin all over his body) – but at least he now recalled who Trix was. After pushing her away inside the entrance to the TARDIS, he’d tried, unsuccessfully, to get to his feet, and after two attempts had reluctantly accepted her offer of help. She’d taken him through to her bathroom and told him to strip off and get in. And to her amazement (and probably to Fitz’s eventual embarrassment) he’d peeled off his clothes there and then and clambered in. It was then that she’d noticed the raw skin in ragged, mismatched patches all over his body. It didn’t seem tender, though – Fitz had made no complaints, unless she’d misinterpreted the occasional soft moan, as he’d slid under the water. Trix had considered making him a cup of coffee, but hadn’t relished the thought of coming back to find that he’d passed out and drowned. So she sat in irritated silence as Fitz soaked and scrubbed.

After about ten minutes, he’d suddenly turned to her, his hair all foamy and stuck up, and declared that she must be Trix.

‘Who did you think I was?’

He’d just shaken his head vaguely and winced.

‘I knew who you were,’ he’d insisted, ‘I just couldn’t remember your name.’

Trix had doubted that, but pointing out the fact that he’d shoved her away from him didn’t seem a very constructive step on the road to getting him well again, so she’d said nothing. When she’d been convinced that he wasn’t going to faint and drown himself, she’d padded off to make a cuppa, and had come back to find him climbing back into his blood- and grass-stained clothes.

‘You could put something clean on,’ she’d said, guardedly, as she handed him his coffee.

'No time,' Fitz had said briskly, fluffing around with his hair. 'We've got a Doctor to find.'

Despite the fact that Fitz still didn't quite seem himself, she'd been pleased that he had at least remembered who the third member of the TARDIS team was. And now they were outside, and in the still evening air, Trix wondered how, exactly, they were going to find that third member.

'We should get sticks,' said Trix.

'Sticks, Trix?' He smiled.

'If we're going to be beating off monsters,' she said grimly, 'I'd prefer not to be using my bare hands.'

Fitz raised an eyebrow 'Monsters?'

'Well you didn't get yourself in that state, did you?'

He frowned, dearly still trying to remember how exactly he *had* got himself in that state.

Trix found a sizeable piece of wood and held it up for him. 'Here you go.'

'You keep it,' said Fitz. 'I prefer to use my wits.'

'Then I imagine,' she said drily, 'that we're both doomed. Come on – it's going to be night soon.'

Trix waggled the stick in her hand, checking for balance, before setting off after him. Overhead, the first stars were beginning to peek through the bruised sky.

Chapter 4

'I bet you even put knickers on her.'

A church, thought the Doctor, seemed an unlikely place for Calamee to have brought him. Not that he'd already formed any opinion about her religious tendencies. But – from what he could remember of them – his experiences had tended to demonstrate that brash, opinionated youth generally held little truck with organised religion. But if she was looking for sanctuary for him, it made sense, he supposed.

He shook his head: his amnesia was clearly not total. How would he have known that churches equalled sanctuary if it had been? As they'd walked, he'd managed to bring up dozens of fascinating – if useless – bits of information: he'd run through the periodic table, listed two dozen different planets that he felt sure he'd been to, named all eleven *Lassie* films, and found it impossible to recall quite what Salvador Dali's *Autumn Cannibalism* had looked like, although he couldn't, for the life of him, work out why it was irking him so much. Personal details – other than his name – simply weren't there. He couldn't remember where he'd come from, how he'd arrived, anything about his parents or his family. Nothing before he'd awoken in the woods. It had crossed his mind that, perhaps, there *was* nothing before that: that, somehow, he'd been created there and then under a bush. But if that was the case, why had whoever or whatever had created him deigned to fill his head with such bizarre trivia as the dates of all Frank Sinatra's comeback tours? He felt he ought to be more annoyed than he was about all of this, more frustrated. That, in itself, was starting to get him worked up.

It had taken them less than half an hour, winding their way through what the Doctor imagined were the less salubrious areas of the city. Even Calamee had seemed nervous, sticking close by the Doctor in a rather sweet way. Nessus, as was his wont, had settled down around the back of Calamee's neck, like some huge, occasionally wriggling, fur collar. He seemed to have lost interest in the Doctor. The Doctor couldn't blame him – an amnesiac, he mused to himself, is hardly the most stimulating of travelling companions.

Calamee had explained that the city would be settling into its siesta before the emperor's birthday carnival round about now, which explained the relatively deserted streets. Soon there was almost no one around – just a

few elderly women, laden down with raffia baskets of shopping, or people closing up their premises. A few stringy dogs sniffed their way around the shop doorways, or curled up tiredly in the shade. This deep into the city, the streets were narrow and uneven – deep, cool canyons in the heat of the day’s end. But it would soon liven up, Calamee had explained when they’d seen a stack of vast, papier-mâché puppets in a small square. Children were fussing around them, laughing and squealing – and the Doctor could see how truly tatty the city was. It had evidently been built with either an eye on economy, or with a less-than-expert labour force. Walls of buildings, plastered in white and cream and taupe, bulged disturbingly, or else leaned out so far into the narrow streets that the occupants of the upper storeys would have had no problem shaking hands with their neighbours on the other sides. Washing, strung out between balconies, flapped listlessly, barely touched by the weak breeze that trickled through the streets. Away in the distance, the Doctor could hear church bells, clumsy and tuneless.

Saiarossa seemed like a city desperately struggling not to collapse. Like an elderly woman plastering herself with make-up in an attempt to hold back the indignities of age, it looked sad and rather pathetic. Murals of people he didn’t recognise, surrounded by angels and wearing halos, adorned crumbling walls; metal spars and girders jutted skeletally from cracked walls. It reminded him of Venice, a city sliding gracefully towards its final end. More skinny dogs roamed the streets, and haunted, tired eyes stared back at him from cracked and dirty windows. The ground beneath him was a mess: broken and uneven, sprouting weeds and even a fully grown tree bearing small, pallid fruits like deformed oranges – it looked as if it had been laid in one, long seamless ribbon, perhaps by machine when the city had been built. But the years had taken their toll, and it was now full of potholes and wide, grit-filled cracks.

‘We’re here,’ said Calamee, glancing up and down the street as if they were about to enter an opium den. They were in front of a blue door, its paint flaking and chipped. In a niche at the side of it was mounted a painted wooden statue of the Virgin Mary, her face and hands black, as was the raised heart, carved on to the centre of her chest. It had evidently been there some years, judging by its condition, and the Doctor couldn’t help but notice the tired look in its eyes. Or maybe that was just him, projecting his own weariness. At the other side of the door was a wooden plaque, hand-painted in blue and white, proclaiming that they were outside ‘The Church of the Forgotten Saints’.

How appropriate. He looked up at the tiny building: it didn’t look much like a church to him (but, as he kept reminding himself, what did he know?).

Calamee tried the door, but it was locked. She pressed a small button at the side.

‘I’m surprised,’ said the Doctor. ‘You don’t strike me as the church-going

type.’ He pulled away from Nessus as the mokey woke up and reached out for his shoulder.

‘I’m not, but this is where Mother and Father used to come before they moved to Santa Anghelis and found a posher one.’ She glanced up at the buildings towering over them. ‘I was born not far from here, believe it or not. I was confirmed here.’

The door opened a few inches, and the face of an elderly man peered out. He eyed Calamee dubiously, but when he saw the Doctor, there was an audible inhalation of breath.

‘Father Roberto?’ said Calamee. ‘My name’s Calamee Fischer. You remember me?’

Father Roberto opened the door wider and leaned out a little.

‘Child, you’ve grown!’ he said, almost disapprovingly. He was short and quite pudgy; a halo of fuzzy grey hair wrapped itself around the sides and back of his head, and he looked as though he hadn’t shaved for a few days. He looked the Doctor up and down.

‘And who’s this?’

‘They call me the Doctor,’ said the Doctor, holding out his hand – which went ignored.

‘Do they indeed? And what would St Thomas have made of that, I wonder?’ Roberto’s voice was full of suspicion – and, thought the Doctor, perhaps with good reason: if even he didn’t know quite what he was doing here, he could hardly blame the Esperons for wondering too.

‘Can we come in?’ asked Calamee, when it seemed that an invitation was not to be forthcoming.

‘I suppose,’ Roberto said grudgingly, after giving the Doctor the once-over again. He stepped back and opened the door wide. Calamee stepped inside and the Doctor followed.

They were in a deliciously cool hallway, illuminated only by light spilling from an open door at the end of a short corridor. The air was rich with the smells of leather and camphor, tobacco and incense, and a heavy scent of flowers. Father Roberto padded away down the corridor, leaving Calamee and the Doctor to follow him.

‘You’re sure he remembers you?’ the Doctor whispered.

‘Well, he’s let us in, hasn’t he?’

They stepped out into a stunningly beautiful little courtyard. The walls were high and painted white, the ground beneath them paved with huge, cream-coloured flagstones. All around them were vast pots and basins and tubs, gushing forth a giddying variety of flowers. Some crawled across the flags beneath them; others struggled up wires and makeshift trellises, fastened to the walls. Some just burst from their pots, like living fibre-optic lamps. The

scent was dizzying. Up above them, high, high above, was a small square of vivid indigo sky, like a lid on this magical world.

'This is quite, quite beautiful,' said the Doctor, almost breathlessly, realising that Father Roberto was waiting patiently, hands clasped behind his back. For a moment, the sternness of his expression melted, and he gave a little nod. He was wearing an old pair of brown leather trousers and a matching waistcoat, under which he had on a dark green shirt, rolled up at the sleeves. He looked, thought the Doctor, more like a down-at-heel country gentleman than a priest.

'Can I get you something to drink?' Roberto asked, and they both gratefully accepted a cup of tea. Father Roberto slipped away while the Doctor and Calamee found a small, cast-iron bench to sit on. Nessus peered around curiously, sniffing the air, following the weaving of insects with his big, expressive eyes.

'Wow,' Calamee said, lifting him down and setting him on her knee. 'This is something, isn't it?'

'A keen gardener,' said the Doctor. 'How long ago did you last see Father Roberto?'

Calamee gave a shrug, reaching up to sniff a huge clot of velvety purple flowers dangling from a basket on the wall above her. 'Probably about five or six years ago.'

'He must have made quite an impression on you, if this was where you thought to bring me.'

'I s'pose. He always seemed a decent sort – and anyway, our new church is miles away. If the Guard are still after you, it doesn't make much sense to stay out in the open any longer than we have to.'

The Doctor looked at her.

'You're rather enjoying this, aren't you?'

'What?'

'All this – the running around, the hiding, the escaping. All this tedious stuff.'

Calamee snorted and smiled. 'Tedious? This is the most fun I've had in years.' She obviously realised what she was saying and pulled an apologetic face. 'Sorry – I know this is important. I'll try to take it seriously. Honest.'

The Doctor hummed good-naturedly 'So what's your plan?'

'Plan?'

'Well, you've brought me here. What do I do now?'

'Um... I hadn't thought that far ahead.' She gave an awkward smile. 'But Father Roberto will know what to do.'

'Father Roberto will know what to do about what, child?' came Roberto's voice from the corridor as he returned with a wicker tray of tea things. He set

them down on a tiny table that the two of them hadn't noticed, hidden away under sprays of creamy yellow blossoms.

'About me, Father,' said the Doctor.

'And how, exactly, do you think I can help?' The Doctor noticed that Roberto seemed to be addressing Calamee, and ignoring him, as he poured the tea into tiny bone china cups and handed it to them, indicating the sugar bowl. The Doctor shook his head.

'I feel light-headed enough in this beautiful garden already,' he said with what he hoped was his most winning smile. 'I don't think I could cope with the sugar rush.'

Roberto didn't seem to warm to the Doctor's attempt at humour, and pulled up a little stool from opposite them. The Doctor noticed he wasn't drinking himself. He sipped at the mint tea as Roberto pulled out a little leather pouch of tobacco, and set about rolling himself a match-thin cigarette.

'The Doctor's an offworlder,' began Calamee, all of a sudden. 'And he needs help.'

'You don't say?' replied Roberto archly, looking at the Doctor directly for almost the first time since he'd let them in. 'An offworlder? I'd never have guessed. And what kind of help would an offworlder be looking for from an Esperon?'

Calamee looked at the Doctor expectantly, like the parent of misbehaving child being called to account in a headmaster's study.

'As far as I can recall,' he said obligingly, 'I came here recently – possibly just a few hours ago, probably not more than a day or so – and something happened to me that... well, that I can't remember.'

Roberto regarded him silently – and clearly suspiciously. He lit his cigarette with a tiny silver lighter and drew thoughtfully on it for a few moments, puffing out clouds of surprisingly pleasant smoke. The Doctor took a deep breath, and felt an odd longing to have a drag on the cigarette himself.

'And how do you think I might be able to help him?' Roberto addressed his question to Calamee, even though he continued to stare at the Doctor.

'Calamee was kind enough to rescue me from the Imperial Guard,' the Doctor said. 'I've just spent half an hour locked in the Palace – well, not so much locked as left in a room with an open door. Which is often the same thing, isn't it?'

'No,' said Roberto. 'I don't think it is.'

'Well, it is if all you can do is sit there and stare at the open door, wondering why it's open. It might as well be locked. You're a prisoner in any case.'

'I don't imagine you've come here to debate philosophy, have you?'

'No, no. Anyway, as it happens I *didn't* just sit and stare at the open door – I decided to leg it. The Imperial Guard started chasing me, and Calamee very

kindly brought me here.'

'And why would that be, Calamee?'

'We were hoping – *I* was hoping – that you'd give him sanctuary,' said Calamee hopefully.

Roberto grinned from ear to ear. 'Sanctuary? Sanctuary, girl? D'you think we're living in the middle ages?' He shook his head as he chuckled and took another drag from the cigarette.

'Don't you do that any more?' She seemed genuinely surprised.

Roberto finished laughing. 'I'm not sure we ever did, did we?'

'Oh yes,' said the Doctor. 'Once upon a time it was rather a thing.'

'An expert on human history, are you? So your memory hasn't gone completely then?' He gave a wry smile, but the Doctor wasn't sure whether it was in disbelief at the Doctor's story or not. 'Well, well. That's one thing I wouldn't have taken you for. There aren't many of us left, you know?'

'Experts in human history?'

Roberto nodded, and suddenly the Doctor realised that the priest seemed much warmer towards him. There was still suspicion and distrust in his eyes, but he was definitely thawing.

'Something of a black art,' Roberto said. 'If you'll pardon the expression. D'you know Espero's history?'

'I don't even know my own. But go on – is there some sort of moratorium on it, then?'

'We made a big mistake,' Roberto said, his eyes drifting over the swathes of blooms that hovered around them, like clouds of brightly coloured ink in water. 'We thought we knew better than history.'

“‘We’?”

'Espero's founders – the cardinals, bishops and businessmen that funded the colony. They elevated the idea of ignorance as bliss to a whole new level.'

The Doctor leaned forward.

'Tell me more,' he said.

'Looloo!' snapped Sensimi. 'Stop that!'

The little creature looked up at the princess with a mixture of fear and surprise in her eyes, her tiny paw clotted with cream from the bowl on the kitchen table. Slowly and guiltily, she sneaked it towards her mouth, her eyes never leaving Sensimi's.

'Disgusting creature,' muttered Javill as he swept in from the hallway. 'It shouldn't be allowed near food.'

'It's a she, Javill, and wherever I go, Looloo goes.'

Sensimi's brother paused as the kitchen staff rapidly found excuses to be elsewhere and he sneered at the mokey, as it sat on the edge of the granite-topped table.

'And why do you have to dress her up like that? Just look at her – it's not natural, putting a dirty, hairy little thing like her in a dress and a tiara.' Looloo was now intent on cleaning the cream from between her fingers. He dipped his head slightly to the side as he tried to peek up her dress. 'I bet you even put knickers on her.'

'She's perfectly housetrained. And she looks adorable like that, don't you, baby?' Sensimi crossed the kitchen and swept the confused little creature up in her arms, squeezing her so tight that Looloo's eyes bulged, and a thin trickle of creamy drool ran out of her mouth and down the back of Sensimi's blouse. Javill tried not to laugh.

'Mother'll have her put down if she catches her in here.'

'She will not,' insisted Sensimi, whirling round, still gripping on to her precious baby. 'I'll tell Father. He'll have *you* put down.'

'Just wait, Sensimi,' Javill warned. 'Just you wait. As soon as...' He stopped. 'When Mother's in charge, things'll be different around here.'

Sensimi's eyes flared defiantly. 'I know what you were going to say. "As soon as Father's dead." That was it, wasn't it?'

Javill gave an uncaring shrug. 'We both know he's old, Sensimi. He's not going to live forever. And if you know what's good for you, you'll stop being such a pain. You know the title will pass to Mother and then to me. It'd be awful if you pissed off *everyone* above you, wouldn't it?'

'He's not... he's not gone yet,' she said, heading for the door. Looloo squeaked and reached out over Sensimi's shoulder for the rapidly receding bowl of cream. 'And while he's still here, you better be very careful.'

'Ooooh!' mocked Javill. 'I'm so scared, little sister. Whatcha gonna do? Set the mokey princess on me? Get her to dribble me to death?'

Sensimi felt her face redden as she paused in the doorway, a cutting riposte almost on her lips.

'Pig!', unfortunately, was all she managed to come out with. 'Bloody pig!'

It wasn't until Looloo started squealing in earnest, halfway up the main staircase, that Sensimi realised how tightly she'd been squeezing her. As soon as she released the pressure, Looloo scrabbled to get free and climbed up on to Sensimi's shoulder where she pointedly finished cleaning her paw.

'Don't worry, baby,' Sensimi cooed. 'We'll make sure that nasty brother and that nasty mother get what they deserve, won't we, eh?' She reached up and stroked her mokey's neck, and Looloo responded with a little throaty grumble, already forgetting about almost being hugged to death. 'Daddy's going to

outlive them all, isn't he? Yes he is.' And with Looloo grabbing on to her hair for dear life, she headed up the stairs to the bedrooms.

She passed a couple of the Palace staff, ignoring them as they bobbed and curtsied, and deposited Looloo on her bed.

'Be good for Mummy,' she said, before slipping back out into the corridor. Through the open windows that let out on to the courtyard at the centre of the Palace, she could hear the clanging and drilling and shouting of the work on the stage from where her father would make his birthday address tomorrow. Running through the details of her plan, she headed down one of the sets of back stairs to the main kitchens, away from the family kitchen where she expected Javill would still be. A few of the staff were still bustling about, most of them so tied up with making sure everything was in order for tomorrow that they hardly noticed her. Those that did tried their hardest to pretend they hadn't seen her and quickly found reasons to be somewhere else. So it was relatively easy for Sensimi to take a big pan into the meat store and to begin to help herself.

Imperator Tannalis shuffled along the corridor that ran around the courtyard. He'd been advised to use a walking stick (having already turned down the idea of cybernetic callipers) but was having none of it. He was the Emperor, and if he couldn't celebrate his 120th birthday on his own pins, then he wouldn't celebrate it at all.

Alinti's visit had raised his hackles, and he wanted to check that she hadn't tried to sneak something tacky into the celebrations. He paused and slipped on to one of the numerous balconies that looked down on to where his stage was being noisily bolted together. There was something simultaneously sad and exciting about all the people below him, running around, shifting chairs, hanging up flags and banners. He recognised the crests and logos of many of the other states and nations on Espero, flapping apathetically in the warm breeze, but frowned at the couple he didn't. A TV crew was conducting an interview with Minister Djelardine just in front of the stage: trust him to be stealing some of the glory. Tannalis sighed with a smile. What did it matter? He'd made his decision, little did that harpy Alinti know. That was why he'd summoned Djelardine, to finalise the arrangements.

'Can I get you anything, Your Highness?'

He turned suddenly at the voice. It was Farine, one of Sensimi's maids. She hovered solicitously behind him. Tannalis grinned wolfishly at her – and then realised that it probably just made him look like some sort of old pervert. Nice rump on her, though, Tannalis thought wistfully. A bit of something to get hold of. The contrast between the shy, amply bosomed girl and his shrivelled old crow of a wife made him smile. His philandering days were behind him now,

but it would still be nice... just once more...

He waved her away with a regretful shake of the head. King David managed to get away with it, with Abishag, but he doubted that he any longer carried the weight of such a figure.

‘I’m fine, girl. That woman of mine running you all ragged, is she?’

Farine dipped her head, not answering, but Tannalis could see it in her eyes.

‘Don’t you worry about her,’ he said. ‘She thinks she rules the henhouse, but this old rooster’s still got a bit of life in him.’

Farine bobbed and scurried off. If he’d been up to it, he’d have teased her a bit more about what she and Sensimi were up to. He might have been old, but he wasn’t stupid. There were more than just his own plans afoot in the Palace.

Chapter 5

'How can we know where we're going, when we don't know where we've come from?'

'Espero was meant to be a fresh start for humanity,' said Roberto. 'The Ecumenical Council decided that all we needed to make Espero thrive was a faith in God and the goodwill of the colonists. Obviously, we brought some technology with us, but we were naive and trusted in the promises of HomeWorld – the corporation that sold us the planet – that Espero was a paradise, rich in resources, a ripe fruit just waiting to be plucked. We were gullible, desperate to leave Earth, to get away from the hegemony of the West, of North America and the Eurozone.' At this, he raised an eyebrow almost imperceptibly at the Doctor. 'We were blinded by the opportunities that we saw out here – the chance to make our universe, in our own image. History, we were told, would start anew.'

'So you were sold a pup? Espero, I mean.'

Roberto nodded.

'HomeWorld told us that Espero had everything we needed. They showed us mineralogical surveys and climatological reports. It looked like a paradise. And you can imagine how desperate the Ecumenical Council was to find a new paradise. Humanity had screwed up the last one we were given, and this was another chance. Perhaps our last.' He smiled, but it was a cold, dry smile. 'God was giving us another chance at Eden, so we grabbed at it with both hands.'

'But there was a serpent?'

Roberto gave a shrug. 'If you believe in original sin, then yes – there was a serpent. Our own stupidity, brought with us, packed into every bag and box and suitcase, wrapped in every fold of cloth and every wrinkle of every man, woman and child that made the journey. The Council told us that, in order to start afresh properly, we had to throw away millennia of human history. No looking back, no living in the shadows of the past.'

'You wouldn't be the first colony to set out with that ethos. But if you don't mind my saying so, isn't it a rather strange attitude for a religious organisation?'

Roberto nodded ruefully. 'Our faith,' he said, 'was one of the few things that we *were* going to take with us. At the time, so I understand, it all seemed to make perfect sense. God would lead us into the new Promised Land – we needed nothing but faith and the Holy Church. So the only records we brought with us were sacred writings and a few technical manuals. Nowadays, people suspect that there was more politics than belief behind the decision, rumours that some of Earth's major powers secretly put up the money, just to get us offworld.'

Roberto gave a sigh, and his gaze drifted around the courtyard, around the little paradise he'd created for himself here. The Doctor wondered whether many people used his church for worship any more, or whether this oasis was all that kept Roberto going. 'It was hell. The colonists arrived in their new Eden to discover that the resources HomeWorld had promised were buried too deep for the minimal equipment that we'd brought. The climate was hotter than we'd expected, there were insects everywhere. Fresh water was hard to find. The first fifty years almost saw Espero wither and die.'

'But didn't you get help from other Earth colonies, or other alien civilisations out here?'

The Doctor caught the expression on Roberto's face as he said the word 'alien'.

'It's the word "alien",' explained Calamee. 'It has a lot of bad connotations. We use the word "offworlders".'

Roberto continued. 'The other colonies had their own problems – they were too wrapped up in setting themselves up, fighting for their own survival. Oh, we told ourselves that soon they'd be visiting us, trading with us. The Council promised us that we'd be at the centre of a revival of faith in this sector. They opened visitor centres and embassies, expecting an influx of fascinated offworld cultures, eager to learn about us, eager to be embraced by Mother Church.'

He fell silent.

'It never happened?' said the Doctor gently. Roberto looked at him and shook his head. He dropped the butt of his cigarette on to the floor and ground it out with his toe.

'We were fooling ourselves,' he said sadly. 'We had nothing that anyone wanted. Oh, we had offworld visitors during the first century – they came to say hello, to see what we had to offer. But when they saw how little we had, how utterly, utterly mundane we were, they left. And never came back. The embassies went unused, the visitor centres were closed down. And Espero retreated into itself.'

'But what about your faith? Surely that must have kept you going?'

'Oh it did. It was the only thing that did. For a while. But for many people,

faith exists to provide an explanation of those things that science hasn't yet revealed to us. And as science explains more and more of the universe around us, so faith finds itself struggling. When the first offworld non-humans came, we made efforts to explain God to them, to introduce them to His glory. In our naivety, we hadn't counted on them having their own gods, their own beliefs. Beliefs as strong as ours. They smiled at us, thanked us – some of them even tried to convert us to *their* religions – and went away.

‘Espero started out with a strong Catholic ethic. The Ecumenical Council had faith that, unlike on Earth, we could restore the life and practice of the Holy Apostolic Church, and so reflect God's glory. Within half a century, there were disputes; schismatic sects began to form, to set up their own states and cities. Some,’ he shook his head sadly, ‘lost their faith altogether. And then, maybe inevitably, there was the Almost War between three of Espero's nations, halted at the last moment.’

Roberto gave another sigh, and the Doctor realised how very, very old he suddenly looked. He wondered how long it had been since the priest had talked about all this to anyone.

‘I can understand your wariness about me,’ he said.

‘I'm sorry,’ he said, looking the Doctor in the eye. “Judge not, lest ye be judged.” But it's very hard. We feel we were let down and betrayed by off-worlders, left to our own devices when we needed help the most.’ He looked the Doctor in the eye. ‘And the fact that you're white – if you'll excuse my bluntness – doesn't help. We came here to escape the prejudice and the cultural dominance of the West,’ said Roberto. ‘To create a Paradise free from oppression. It rankles with many that, yet again, we've drawn the short straw. When white offworlders visit and never come back, it reminds us of our past, back on Earth.’

‘I noticed the statue,’ said the Doctor. ‘Outside. I take it they're all like that.’

Roberto nodded. ‘You've no idea how much damage the myth that the Holy Family were white has done to us, to our self-esteem, Doctor. For centuries, brown people – black, I believe they called themselves then – lived in the shadow of a white God. No matter how much they prayed, how penitent or good they were, being white was something they could never be. That kind of patronage does damage.’ He clenched his fist and pressed it against his chest. ‘Here. I hope things are different out there now.’

‘The more things change,’ said the Doctor, ‘the more they stay the same. Humanity may be one of my favourite species, but I'm not blind to the havoc they can wreak, the injustices they visit on themselves. And on others. They're one of the most adaptable, versatile, adventurous species in the galaxy, but they've never lost their inability to learn from their mistakes.’

Roberto grunted. ‘How can we know where we're going, when we don't

know where we've come from?' he murmured.

The Doctor felt a cool breeze spiral down from the purple sky, pricking his skin. 'But we all need a fresh start, sometimes,' he said distantly. 'We can't live in the past forever.'

'It would be nice,' Roberto said, 'if we could just start living in the present.'

The courtyard was a confusing, noisy mass of people, equipment and machinery. Spotlights were coming on around the square as night fell. Two men on a long-arm crane hung banners bearing the Imperial crest from the top of the girders above the stage, while a woman, down below, waved them into position. Shouting would have got her nowhere. A group of dancers were practising in a corner, prancing around each other, trying not to trip over the poles and stacks of chairs that littered the place. Javill found it all incredibly tedious.

At the very least, he thought as he watched from a balcony above, Father should have taken this opportunity to announce that he was standing down. One hundred and twenty years old, and still he insisted on clinging on to the Imperatorship, as though he didn't trust Mother to do the job properly. The fact that he insisted on celebrating his birthday in such an outdated way spoke volumes – a sad old man, clinging to the past instead of embracing the future. Javill was under no illusion that the Imperial Family had any real influence. Even parliament hardly consulted Father any more. Legislation slipped by without even receiving the Imperial approval. Novelty mugs and commemorative plates. That's all they were. And this farrago of a birthday would do nothing to change that. Mother was right: Saiarossa needed a breath of fresh air, an injection of new blood to revive the Imperatorship. The Imperatrixship.

'History in the making,' said a deep voice behind him and he jumped. 'Apologies, Your Highness.'

It was the offworlder – the one who called himself Mr Trove; the one who, in less than two days, had managed to ingratiate himself with Father and who had barely spoken two words to Mother. Javill drew himself up. Trove was tall and distinguished, alabaster-pale skin with a quiff of blond hair, immaculately coiffured. He wore a sharp and plain suit of dark green, fashionable and asymmetrically cut. Javill had disliked him the moment he'd seen him – partly because he was an offworlder, partly because he exuded a quiet confidence that Javill found unsettling, but mainly because, like most of the Saiarossans, he seemed to be labouring under the misapprehension that it was Father who wielded the power around here.

Javill nodded curtly, and turned back to the scene in the courtyard. The men with the crane were adjusting the lighting over the stage.

‘Your father is a man of tradition and history, isn’t he?’ mused Trove. Javill grunted, but didn’t turn around. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Trove move alongside him to lean on the balcony.

‘We have no history here,’ Javill said flatly. ‘Or didn’t your research tell you that?’

‘Everyone has history, Your Highness. Just because it doesn’t go back to the dawn of time doesn’t invalidate it. Your father is very... brave...’

Javill turned.

‘Brave?’

‘When the leaders of Espero’s other nations make such a play of looking to the future, the Emperor must be applauded for his determination to celebrate the past, wouldn’t you say?’

Trove was staring at him, one eyebrow raised fractionally, a hint of a smile on his full lips. What was he saying?

‘Father has always had a thing about the past. There are many Saiarossans who think that it’s unhealthy. The whole of Esperon culture, the origins of the colony, were based on making a new start – building a new future out here among the stars, not repeating the mistakes of the past. Some would say that he’s foolish, not brave.’

‘And what would you say, Your Highness?’ Trove gestured towards the pantomime in the courtyard. ‘Do *you* venerate the past? Or do you see Espero’s destiny, as you put it, out among the stars?’

This stranger was sailing very close to the wind, Javill thought, his interest piqued. He’d hardly been here two minutes, and already he was questioning Father’s beliefs.

‘Espero is the poor cousin,’ he answered. ‘We have been abandoned by the other colonies, left to our own devices. Every month brings news of the advance of other worlds – new technologies, new beliefs, new alliances formed. The Catholic heritage on which we were founded has become a liability.’ Javill paused and looked Trove in the eye. ‘Father will not live forever. And his successor, believe me, will have very different ideas.’

Trove nodded thoughtfully.

‘I’m pleased that Your Highness thinks as I do,’ he said, reaching into his pocket. He pulled out a tiny, glittering sphere, the size of a tangerine, and carelessly tossed it over the balcony. Javill’s gaze darted to follow it: it fell a few yards and then exploded in brilliant, polychromatic light, like a burst rainbow. Hovering above the heads of the people below, it shot out shafts of light of all hues, and the crowd fell silent, their eyes raised heavenwards in amazement. For a minute, the sphere rotated, and the people in the courtyard began oohing and ahing at the spectacle. Even Javill was impressed.

And then Trove clicked his fingers and the sphere fell dark and returned to his hand and thence to his pocket.

‘Very impressive,’ Javill said.

‘A toy,’ replied Trove dismissively. ‘It is nothing that you couldn’t have access to, Your Highness.’

Did Trove mean the Esperons, or him personally? As far as Trove was concerned, it probably *was* nothing more than a toy. And as a demonstration of offworld technology, it was hardly cutting-edge. But Javill couldn’t deny that it had him hooked.

‘And at what price?’

Trove smiled and straightened up.

‘Things are only worth what people will pay for them,’ he answered cryptically. ‘Maybe we’ll speak about it later. If you’ll excuse me, Your Highness, I have a few things to attend to.’

Trove started to walk away, but Javill stopped him gently.

‘Why are you here, Mr Trove?’

‘A treasure hunt, Your Highness.’ He moved to go, and then paused and removed the rainbow device from his pocket. He pressed it into Javill’s hand. ‘And believe me – I intend to be the winner.’

Javill watched him leave, turning the sphere over and over in his fingers.

The oasis, as Trix thought of it – despite the fact that it was little more than a copse of trees and bushes set in a shallow hollow in the woodland – was eerily quiet. The first stars were glimmering and twinkling as they watched her and Fitz blundering about. They’d brought torches from the TARDIS, but Trix couldn’t help but think they were being dangerously naive to think that they could find the Doctor in the dark without coming across whatever it was that had attacked Fitz. She stopped as she felt something hard crunch and crack under her foot. It was the Doctor’s tracking device. She raised it to her ear and gave it a shake. It rattled, pointedly.

‘Well, at least we know he was here. Can’t you remember *anything*?’ she hissed, tossing the tracker aside as she bumped arms with Fitz. Their torch beams crissed and crossed over each other as they danced around the undergrowth. She poked experimentally at a bush with her stick, tensing herself in case she disturbed something.

‘I remember leaving the TARDIS with the Doctor,’ Fitz said wearily, ‘and I remember following him. And then...’ His voice tailed off. ‘The next thing was you poking at me and telling me to wake up.’

‘So no idea what it was that attacked you? I mean, it would be useful to have some idea of what might be waiting for us, Fitz.’

Fitz didn't answer – as a low grumble, like a tiger purring, rumbled around them.

'Something like that, perhaps?' he said.

If she could have done it without looking like a coward she'd have very firmly suggested that they go back to the TARDIS and wait. But Fitz's 'accident' seemed to have inspired a bravado in him that she hadn't noticed before, and she didn't fancy the idea of being reminded, for ever more, that *she* had been the one to bottle out.

'Doctor?' called Fitz experimentally.

'You there?' Trix added.

But there was just silence, and the flitting pools of light from their torches.

'This is stupid,' she said eventually. 'He could be lying a few feet away and we'd never find him.'

'You're probably –' Fitz stopped sharply, and Trix swung the beam of her torch up to his face. He was frowning, listening intently to something. He ignored the light shining in his eyes. 'Can you hear that?'

Over the gentle rustling of the bushes and trees in the breeze, Trix realised that there was something else: a fizzing, hissing sound, and she was reminded of the sound of the foam in her bath back in the TARDIS, popping in her ears.

Trix swung the torch around, pushing out long, spindly shadows from the branches around her.

'Trix!' hissed Fitz, drawing her attention to where he was shining his own torch – down towards the ground in the direction of the copse.

A wide swathe of vegetation was undergoing a weird and horrible transformation: a metre's width of the ground, stretching left and right out of view, was covered with a seething, bubbling grey goo. The stumps of twigs and plants poking through it seemed to be softening, melting into the muck that covered the grass. Trix pulled a face and peered closer, but Fitz grabbed her elbow and pulled her back.

'What is it?' she asked, squinting at it.

'I don't know,' said Fitz, 'but it's moving. Look.'

Fitz was right – the edge of the gooey band was creeping towards them slowly, almost imperceptibly. As it crawled, the vegetation it encompassed began to break down, submerged in the slime. Tiny bubbles popped and fizzed, and the air was filled with an almost electric crackle.

'What if the Doctor's in there?' Trix suddenly said, gesturing at the bushes. Fitz shook his head slowly, thoughtfully.

Suddenly, there was a thunderous crashing in the bushes, a few yards away, and before she knew it, Trix was running for her life, staggering backwards as she felt Fitz grab her hand, dragging her away. She dropped the stick as his fingers slipped into hers, and only just managed to keep a hold on the torch.

And as a deep roaring started up behind them, drowning out the gentle hiss of the grey goo rolling across the countryside, the two of them ran and ran and ran.

Chapter 6

'What do you know about our mystery woman?'

'So no one studies history?' asked the Doctor, as Calamee poured them more tea. She poured some into a saucer for Nessus, but he sniffed it disdainfully and went snuffling under the flowers. 'Earth history, I mean?'

Roberto gave a shrug. 'We go through trends: one minute it's fashionable, the next it isn't. It never lasts. There are only a few of us interested in trying to keep the old stuff alive. And sometimes, I'm not even sure that I'm doing the right thing. Maybe the founders were right. Maybe we should let sleeping dogs lie, learn to make our own mistakes, all over again.' He gave a short, sharp laugh. 'God knows, we've had enough experience of it.'

He reached out and traced the outline of a trumpet-shaped carmine flower.

'You see this?' he said. 'It's native.' He touched another – a bougainvillea. 'And this is from Earth, an expensive import that I bought a few years ago. They live happily side by side, new and old.' He looked back at the Doctor, his eyes sad. 'If I had one dream for the future of Espero, that would be it: new and old, past, present and future, all side by side.'

'It's a nice dream,' agreed the Doctor.

Roberto fell silent; the Doctor didn't know what to say. He caught Calamee's eye. She looked awkward and uncomfortable, a sixteen-year-old girl caught up in the middle of an adults' conversation about religion and politics.

'So why are you on the run, then?' Roberto said suddenly, breaking out of his reverie. 'What have you done to offend the Imperial Family?'

'I wish I knew, Father. I really wish I knew. I can only assume it's something to do with why I came here, or with whatever I did when I first arrived. Or perhaps they just didn't like my face.'

'And – forgive my bluntness – how will hiding out here in a backstreet church help you find out the truth? If you only take one thing away from here, shouldn't it be that hiding your head in the sand doesn't get you anywhere?'

The Doctor considered, turning his teacup around and around in his hands. He had a vague, itching sense of time running away with itself, as if a clock had been set ticking. He hadn't a clue what it all meant, but Roberto was right: he might be safe enough from the Palace Guard here, at least for a

while. But sooner or later he had to go and find out what he'd done, and why he was here.

'You're right,' he said. 'But I don't know where to start. Other than at the Palace, and you'll understand my reluctance to go back there until I've remembered a little more about what I'm doing on Espero.'

Roberto nodded, and something suddenly seemed to occur to him. He told them to wait there and he scurried away – and came back a few minutes later with a puzzled look on his face.

'I've just checked with the city police to see if there's any sort of alert out for you. And there isn't. Strange, eh? The Palace Guard rarely come outside the Palace, apart from for ceremonial events. If the Emperor really *was* after you, the police would be the ones to continue the search. It might just be that the Palace are being particularly slow in reporting you, but it still seems rather odd.' He raised a hand. 'And I've just thought of someone that *might* be able to help you with your memory.'

'Really?'

Roberto nodded. 'We don't have many offworlders here – certainly not on a permanent basis. But there's one, here in Saiarossa, that might be able to help. Her name's Madame Xing – well, that's what everyone calls her. I've heard that her real name is unpronounceable. No one really knows why she's here – but she keeps herself to herself. I suspect that there are people in the government who'd rather she wasn't here, but they don't like to ask her to leave: they're not sure what the repercussions would be. She's... erm, a little *weird*, if you take my meaning.'

'Wonderful!' said the Doctor, leaping to his feet. At last! They were getting somewhere. 'I *love* weird. How do I find her?'

'That's the problem. I haven't a clue. I'm sure there are people who know more about where she lives than me. She may not even still be on Espero.'

The Doctor sighed. Easy come...

'I'll make a few calls,' Roberto said. 'Come back in an hour or two. I might have more to tell you then.'

'Thank you, Father,' said the Doctor and held out his hand to the priest. This time it was accepted, and they shook. 'Maybe this is the break I need.'

As they'd made their way from the church through the city, the Doctor thoughtful but possessed of a determination that she hadn't seen in him before, Calamee had told him about Saiarossa: about how its name allegedly derived from 'red sea' in some ancient Earth tongue, despite there being no sea for two hundred miles. She told him of Hispania and its failed efforts to cultivate cutting-edge technologies, and about the isolationist policies of New Roma and of Pope Constanza's mad and paranoid Vatican Police. He listened

and nodded, and Calamee thought herself quite the most interesting person on the planet.

In turn, as they strode down Rue de la Passion, almost – but not quite – oblivious to the turning heads, the Doctor wanted to know about everything: from what the Saiarossans ate to why they had such an obsession with washing (and through his eyes, Calamee suddenly saw what she'd taken for granted all her life – the fluttering streamers and flags of shirts and sheets and trousers that adorned every balcony, every railing) – and all she could think of to say was 'Cleanliness is next to Godliness'.

He drank it all in without comment, without judgement, like a child, and the thought occurred to her that maybe he'd been here before, and her guided tour was just reacquainting him with a world lying buried in the bottom drawer of his memory.

She showed him roofs adorned with glistening moisture-traps, and she showed him dry, dusty fountains and pools. And, finally, when it seemed that he'd soaked up enough, he'd declared that he was famished and that he 'could eat a horse'. Only once they'd sat down at the best horse-meat restaurant that Calamee knew had his face fallen, and he'd explained that it was just a figure of speech. He'd settled for lamb stew and a huge mound of salad and had stuffed it into his face like he hadn't eaten for a week, eating it with a relish that Calamee's parents would have found crude. Calamee, however, just found it exciting. She'd watched him as he'd cleared his plate and then ordered pudding.

The restaurant, like many in Saiarossa, doubled as a bar, and as the evening had drawn on, the place had begun to fill up with revellers preparing for a night of celebrations. The Emperor's official birthday wasn't until tomorrow, but the Saiarossans were making an early start. Anything to liven up the mundanity of living on Espero. People were watching the two of them, muttering to themselves. But rather than feel threatened, Calamee felt a silly little thrill of excitement and pride that she was the one eating with this offworlder. She hoped that they were just a bit jealous, although most of them were probably just puzzled and suspicious.

The Doctor had seemed quite fired up at the prospect of finding this Madame Xing – and Calamee wondered, slightly glumly, whether it wasn't as much at the prospect of meeting another offworlder as it was at getting his memory back. Perhaps she was destined to lose him almost as soon as she'd found him. It felt a bit grubby and childish to be so possessive of him, but didn't she deserve a bit of fun, a bit of happiness? She watched him eating and wondered how she could ever go back to being an ordinary schoolgirl after all of this. Half of her, guiltily, hoped that Father Roberto wouldn't have any luck in finding Madame Xing.

'So,' he said, as if he'd read her mind, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. 'What do you know about our mystery woman?'

'Not much. From what I know, she's been on Espero for a month or two. Few people have seen her – although lots of people make out that they have. I've heard it said that she's a viropractor, whatever one of those is.'

'Viropractor...? Hmm... someone who works with viruses, I imagine.'

'I think I'd worked that out. Apart from that, nothing really.'

'Oh well – maybe Father Roberto has had more – oh, hello?'

Calamee realised that the Doctor's comment was addressed to a man, standing solicitously by their table. He was relatively pale-skinned for an Esperon – nowhere near the sickly looking whiteness of the Doctor, of course – and probably in his twenties. He was dressed rather formally in a dark suit with a high collar, his hands clasped in front of him. Calamee felt sure she saw an odd, metallic glint in his eye as he looked down at them.

'I understand that you are looking for Madame –xing?' The word that came from his mouth surely couldn't have been produced by a human throat, thought Calamee. It sounded like a drawerful of musical cutlery being tipped on to a tiled floor, ending with a pinging noise that only vaguely resembled 'Xing'.

'That was quick,' the Doctor said.

'Madame –xing has been expecting you for a while,' said the man.

'Has she now?' The Doctor peered behind the man, as if Madame Xing might be hiding there. From nowhere, the man produced a softly glowing sphere, the size of a small egg, and placed it delicately on the table in front of them. The Doctor raised an eyebrow.

'That's Madame Xing?'

'No, Doctor. I am Madame –xing.'

Calamee looked up from the light and saw that someone else was sitting at their table. The really disturbing thing, the thing that took a few moments to register, was that *their table* was no longer in the bar.

Chapter 7

'To lose one set of memories may be regarded as a misfortune.'

Where, previously, there had been a slightly tatty restaurant, there was now a small... parlour, the Doctor supposed would have been the right word to describe it. Or perhaps library.

They were still sitting at a little table – Calamee included – but the table was now covered by a black-and-white checkerboard-patterned cloth. Overhead, a cluster of brilliant white spheres, the size of marbles, orbited around each other at dizzying speeds, like the one that the man – who appeared to have disappeared – had placed on the table. It was like an illuminated model of a classical atom. But despite the movements of the spheres, the light that they cast stayed curiously constant.

The rest of the room was, the Doctor thought, rather fetching: shelves of books lined all six walls, stretching up into the darkness. It reminded him of something, some other library he'd been in. He could smell the must and the knowledge, and took a deep, deep breath, a memory tickling the edge of his thoughts.

'Wow,' murmured Calamee at his side, who'd clearly only just registered what had happened. Her eyes were wide as she stared around. 'Have we just...?'

'I expect so,' said the Doctor blithely. 'Nice trick, Madame Xing. Is this all real?'

'It is as real as anything,' Madame Xing answered. The figure now seated at their table was completely swathed in black: a deep hood hid whatever face lay within, and black gloves covered her fingers. Her voice was distinctly feminine, although there was an odd, mechanical edge to it, as though augmented by machinery.

'Very Zen.' The Doctor paused and frowned, still unable to make out what lay beneath the cowl. 'Have we met before?'

'Not yet,' Madame Xing answered. 'When you remember me, *then* we will have met.'

'Right. OK. Ask a silly question. I take it that Father Roberto managed to contact you, then?'

'He will do, yes.'

The Doctor noticed that one of the spheres of light had detached itself from the cluster above their heads, and was orbiting him, curiously. It paused every now and then near his face, and then darted away sharply, before returning.

‘What’s it doing?’ asked Calamee in an awed whisper.

‘Payment for my services. Recording,’ answered Madame Xing.

‘Recording? Me?’ The Doctor felt suddenly uncomfortable. ‘Why?’

‘You mentioned Zen,’ she said. ‘If a tree falls in a forest and there is no one around to hear it, does it make a sound?’

‘Hmph,’ snorted Calamee. ‘Of course it does!’

‘How do you know?’ asked the woman.

‘Because it has to, doesn’t it?’

‘But how do you know?’

‘Laws of physics. It can’t *not* make a sound, can it?’

‘How do you know?’

‘I think,’ cut in the Doctor, realising that this could go on forever, ‘that Madame Xing means that there’s a theory that nothing can be said to definitely exist without being observed. Quantum physics: the act of observation collapses the wave function of an object to make it real,’ He frowned. ‘So you’re recording me... why exactly? To make sure I exist?’ He pulled a puzzled face.

‘Your memory...’ she said, ignoring his question.

He felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

‘Tell me what has happened.’

The Doctor gave her all the details he could remember about waking up in the forest and making his way into the city. As he spoke, he saw Nessus, sitting on Calamee’s lap, peer over the edge of the table at the dancing lights.

‘And there you have it,’ he said, concluding his tale. Madame Xing said nothing – and then another of the lights separated from the cluster and drifted down, coming to a halt a few inches from the tip of his nose.

‘I’m a viropractor,’ said Madame Xing. ‘I specialise in the use of viroids to alter and enhance cognitive development and memory. I will try to help you.’

‘Thank you. Do I have to do anything?’

Madame Xing said nothing – but the light before his face darted towards him and he felt a sudden warmth spreading through his body. Through the glow, he heard the viropractor speaking, her words smeared out oddly.

‘Are you aware that your memory has been interfered with on thirty-seven separate occasions – eight of them still outstanding?’

‘Outstanding?’

‘Uncorrected.’

‘Really?’

He suddenly felt awkward, uncomfortable – although he couldn't work out why. Here he was, possibly on the point of having all the memory deficits that Madame Xing had apparently found set right. And yet something nagged at him, something edgy and grating.

'Do you wish me to attempt to correct them?'

He wasn't sure what to say. Of course he wanted them corrected. What a silly thing to say. How could he *not* want them corrected?

'My most recent loss,' he answered cautiously, after a pause. 'Can you correct that first?'

'I can try.'

Something tingled in the front of his head, like delicate fingers parting the fabric of his brain. He had the strangest image of Madame Xing physically looming over him, peering into his skull, rooting around like an old lady at a jumble sale, looking for bargains.

Suddenly, the presence he felt in his head was gone, withdrawn with an abruptness that made him feel oddly alone and abandoned. He saw the light dart away from his face and hover again, a few inches in front of his eyes.

'This is very strange,' said Madame Xing slowly. 'Some of your recent memories have been excised, removed. Not repressed. They are not there to restore.'

A huge sense of disappointment washed over him. Madame Xing had been his last – his only – chance to find out what he was doing here.

'You said "some of my memories". Does that mean that there are some that you *can* restore?'

'Yes. Do you wish me to continue?'

The Doctor glanced up at the other light, the one that Madame Xing had said was 'recording' him.

'Well, seeing as I seem to be paying for my consultation anyway, I suppose so.' Maybe she was wrong, and that the restoration of those memories that she *could* bring back would trigger the return of the ones she couldn't.

'It will take a few moments to manufacture an appropriate viral agent,' she said, although she didn't seem to be actually *doing* anything. Suddenly, the light in front of his face dropped to the back of his hand, outstretched on the table, and he felt a tiny spot of coldness, like a snowflake falling on his skin – ushering in a blizzard.

And around him, so sudden and so bright it made him gasp out loud, was a vast, whirling projection. Images blossomed in the air, smeared on to empty space, juddering like old homemade films. The Doctor was stunned, and it took him a few moments before he could start to take it in. It revolved around him, overlapping scenes of countryside and trees, with a disconnected soundtrack of voices and howls and deep, thundering roars. He felt sick and dosed

his eyes, but the onslaught continued, as if projected straight on to the cortex of his brain. He felt dizzy and gripped the edge of the table, his breath coming in ragged bursts. He could feel his hearts stampeding in his chest like frightened animals and tried to steady them. He ran through the first five hundred prime numbers, calming himself, until, at last, he felt his body relax. He opened his eyes again, and watched it all spin around him.

‘Fascinating,’ he breathed, finally able to take it all in. This is... what, exactly?’ He glanced at Madame Xing, dimly visible through the whirl of images.

‘These are the memories *around* the lacuna,’ Madame Xing whispered. ‘Someone or something has deleted your memories of a specific event. I would surmise that they were working quickly and not as expertly as I would have done. There are traces of...’ She paused. ‘Of your own interference in the process?’

‘I was aware of what was happening?’

‘It would seem so.’

It was like discovering an old diary, thought the Doctor, opening the pages and finding all those things that you’d forgotten you’d ever remembered. He saw a wobbly view – presumably his own – stepping through the doors of the TARDIS (the TARDIS!) on to soft grass. In his hand, as he looked down, was the detector he’d been using to trace the distress call that they’d picked up. The viewpoint swung giddily, and he was looking back over his shoulder at Fitz who was following behind and grumbling about Trix (Fitz and Trix – how could he have forgotten them?!) never wanting to do anything interesting. Then he was facing forwards again, pushing through bushes, catching his feet and hearing Fitz chuckle.

And then he heard Fitz shout, and something huge and dark blotted everything out. He blinked and he was back in the dim library, looking at Calamee.

‘What?’ she said, staring at him.

‘What?’

‘I said it first. What happened? You looked liked you’d tripped out for a few seconds.’

‘Some trip, believe me. Well, at least I have some idea of what happened before I...’

He paused and rubbed the bridge of his nose. ‘Oh bugger,’ he said softly.

‘What?’

With the remembrance of Fitz, Trix and the TARDIS came something else.

‘Nothing,’ he said. ‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘What?’

He saw Calamee look at Madame Xing – although whether she was looking back at her was impossible to tell.

‘What’s he talking about?’

‘To lose one set of memories may be regarded as a misfortune,’ said Madame Xing quietly, her voice still tinged with those humming, synthetic undertones. ‘To lose two smacks of carelessness. Now – the other *interferences*.’

He took a breath. ‘Well...’

‘I may be able to correct most of them now for you if –’

‘No!’ he answered sharply, more sharply than he’d intended. ‘No, no thank you.’ He softened his tone.

‘Why?’ whispered Calamee. ‘Isn’t that what you wanted?’

‘Yes, yes...’ He shook his head, suddenly not sure quite *what* he wanted. ‘No, not like this.’

‘You would prefer to remain incomplete?’ It was Madame Xing, sounding vaguely confused.

‘I’m not incomplete, thank you very much.’

‘Without half your memories?’ Calamee sounded sceptical. ‘How many times did she say you’d been interfered with? That can’t be normal, can it? And you don’t want to get it sorted. Come on! How many people get a chance like this?’

‘Calamee, I know you mean well, but memories aren’t something you just, well, go messing about with.’

Calamee looked at Madame Xing. ‘Maybe I’m a bit slow, but isn’t that what Madame Xing’s just *done*?’ She turned back to him and frowned. She didn’t understand, he realised. She *couldn’t* understand. There were times when *he* didn’t understand.

‘Is there any risk involved?’ Calamee asked Madame Xing. ‘With putting him right?’

‘There is always risk.’

‘See!’ said the Doctor. ‘There’s always risk. Like I said, you can’t just go messing about, wading in there and reconnecting neurons and what-have-you. Who knows what kind of a mess I might end up with? The brain is a very delicate thing, Calamee. It’ll sort itself out before long, believe you me.’

‘That’s not what you said ten minutes ago.’

‘Trust me, Calamee. I know what I’m doing.’ He felt himself struggling not to snap at her.

‘But do you? You don’t even seem to know your name: has that come back to you now? Or is it one of the things that you still can’t remember?’ Calamee sounded really worried for him, and he felt guilty. He shouldn’t have to do this to her. ‘Is that all stuff from your other amnesias, then? Let Madame Xing try to bring it back.’

‘No,’ said the Doctor firmly, fixing Calamee with his best Paddington Bear stare.

'Madame Xing,' pleaded Calamee, turning to the woman, 'Tell him – tell him it's safe. Tell him what an idiot he is.'

Madame Xing seemed to consider Calamee's words for a moment.

'The Doctor must make his own choices. He has reasons. Not necessarily the right ones, but the *right now* ones. We may not agree with them, but they are his to make.'

'Calamee gave an exasperated sigh. 'And what's that supposed to mean?'

'You live in the present,' she said. 'What is right for you today may not be right tomorrow or yesterday. Who you *are* will not be the same tomorrow or yesterday.'

'But without his memories, he'll *never* be the same as he was yesterday, or a week ago or whenever.'

'None of us is the same as we were yesterday. We recreate ourselves daily, reinvent, reimagine. Memory is not the fixed constant you imagine it to be.'

'Is this more of that Zen stuff, whatever that is?' Calamee sounded annoyed.

'You remember the last time you saw your parents,' said Madame Xing – as the light drifted back up from the Doctor's hand to join its fellows above their heads. 'And when you do, you restructure that memory. It is never the same twice.'

'Of course it is,' said Calamee scornfully.

'It is not,' stated Madame Xing. 'But you are not aware of the changes because you have integrated them into the new memory. The act of remembering changes the memory itself.'

'But it doesn't change reality, does it?'

There was a gaping silence that the Doctor found profoundly disturbing. He really shouldn't have got on to the subject of his memories and his amnesia. Not now. Not here. But of course there was no way he could have known that, was there?

– Miranda, falling to her knees at his feet, her whole life racing across her features as the Time Winds tore through her.

'We have to go,' he said suddenly, gripping the edge of the table as if about to stand up. 'Things to do, people to find, frying pans and fires.' He looked at Calamee and tried to smile. 'Cabbages and kings,' he finished lamely.

'Are you scared? Is that it?' Calamee wouldn't let it go. 'Scared of what you'll find out about yourself?'

– 'I love you too, Father.' Hugging her lifeless body to him, her hair pure white, a drift of virgin snow.

The Doctor looked across at Madame Xing.

'Thank you,' he said grimly. He glanced up at the ball of light, swaying above him. 'What are you going to do with your recording?'

'Keep it safely,' said Madame Xing.

‘I Hope so,’ the Doctor said darkly. ‘I’d hate to think that it might fall into the wrong hands.’

‘It will not.’

He nodded thoughtfully.

‘It’s been very... interesting... meeting you, Madame.’

Madame Xing reached out across the table, her hand clenched into a fist, and opened it. Lying in her palm was a tiny light, a miniature version of the ones spinning around above the Doctor’s head. He frowned.

‘In case you change your mind,’ she said.

‘I won’t.’

– It felt, for a moment, like half of him had died there with her, sucked away into the Miranda-shaped void that her death had left to the world.

‘Then you will not need to use it.’

Reluctantly, he took it from her, holding the tiny sphere up to examine it.

‘Twenty-four hours,’ Madame Xing said. ‘That is how long you have.’

He nodded, fighting back the urge to tell her that, twenty-four hours or twenty-four centuries, he wouldn’t use it.

– And then he’d mourned, locked himself away at the heart of the TARDIS for so long that Fitz had come looking for him, banging on the door. And when he’d finally summoned up the strength to face them, he’d found eleven trays outside the door. Breakfast, lunch and dinner, all laid out, with little handwritten notes – hoping he was OK, telling him that Trix had vanished, asking him to just write a message to let them know he was all right, saying that he’d found Trix in the TARDIS’s library, worrying that the milk smelled off and that Trix had untied the cow and it had wandered off and did the TARDIS have a cow?

‘Ready, Calamee?’ He glanced at her, his eyes stinging, and she threw him a look, half puzzlement, half disgust. He sighed and gave a sniff. He could see her spoiling for an argument, but he had neither the time nor the inclination right now. He had to find Fitz and Trix – particularly Fitz: they’d been together when whatever had happened had happened. He turned back to Madame Xing to ask her something that had suddenly occurred to him – but she wasn’t there. The library wasn’t there. Without any warning, they were back in the restaurant, and the young man was lifting the white sphere from the table. He gave a polite bow to the speechless pair, and left.

‘If you think I’m just going to forget all that,’ said Calamee daddy, ruffling the fur on Nessus’s neck, ‘you’ve got another think coming.’

The Doctor’s shoulders sagged. ‘Some things,’ he said, getting to his feet, ‘should never be forgotten.’

Ake had come back here twice since he and Keef had killed the alien and torched its ship. He didn’t know why. Maybe it was guilt. Maybe, somehow,

he would feel better about what he'd done if he could understand it all.

Why had the alien come here, if not to invade? If it had been here for a genuine reason, why would it have landed in the middle of nowhere, secretly, unannounced? Part of Ake knew that he was trying to convince himself that they'd done the right thing. He had no love of aliens – they'd done nothing for Espero. Humanity had come out here to start again, and the aliens had snubbed them, waving their superior technologies in humanity's face, sneering at humanity's failure. But part of him knew that what they'd done had been wrong.

Over and over again, Ake replayed that night: the alien climbing out of its ship and racing towards them. It had to have been attacking, hadn't it? They'd shot it in self-defence. It had been the alien or them. And with Joshua there, they couldn't take any chances.

Ake had gone home and buried his head in his pillow, trying to drown out the sound of the alien's weird cries. The noises from its ship, as it had burned, had made Ake wonder if there had been others aboard.

Now he was back here again, watching the last traces of smoke rise from it in the dim glow of his lantern. He wandered around the blackened wreck, now nothing more than a melted blob. The horse-man's skeleton had crumbled, and Ake, trying hard not to look at what he was doing, smashed it to powder with the back of his spade. It would be days – if not weeks – before anyone found it. No one came out here. But the thought of the bones, mutely accusing him, lying there, was too much to bear.

Sweat slicked his dark skin and his shirt clung to his back as he finished battering the creature's remains to dust. He stepped back and leaned on the spade, trying not to breathe through his nose. The stench of burning wrapped itself around him, thick and oily and cloying. Every time he thought about it, he felt sick rise in his throat.

But now, in the sudden silence, he thought he heard something else: a quiet, hissing noise. Like a gas leak. Ake picked up his lantern and swung it around, trying to locate the source of it. But the gentle breeze smeared it out, making it sound as though it were coming from everywhere. He started to walk around the smoking remains of the alien's ship – and stopped abruptly.

Looking down at where his feet were sticking to the grass, Ake felt his stomach wrench.

A swathe of the ground, over a metre wide and stretching away in a long arc out of sight to each side, had turned to a greyish green slime. It bubbled and fizzed as though it was alive, blades of grass being subsumed at frightening speed into it, dissolving into the muck. Ake took a step back, hearing and feeling the sucking as he pulled his feet out of it. His skin crawled, and he instinctively brushed at his bare arms. Espero was cursed with insects, par-

ticularly at night, but this was nothing like he'd experienced before. It was as though every inch of his body was being infested with tiger ants, nipping and nibbling at him. He raised the lamp to see what was on his skin – and dropped it with a strangled cry: his skin was soft and grey and swollen, like rotten flesh. As he watched, and his stomach convulsed, the surface of his distended hand fizzed like the ground beneath him. He tried to take a step back, but slipped in the slime. The last thing he remembered was the sound of the stuff beneath his head, whispering to him. Talking.

Imperator Tannalis lay in his vast, white bed, propped up on a hill of cushions, and watched the blurry figure approach. He patted the covers at his side, searching for his glasses, wishing – not for the first time – that he trusted Espero's doctors with eye transplants.

The fuzzy shape in front of him moved suddenly, and he hooked the spectacles over his ears. Everything resolved itself before him and he gave a snort.

'Oh,' he said, faintly disappointed (he'd hoped it might be Sensimi). 'It's you, Trove.'

The blond offworlder towered over him, looking down at him with a faint air of disapprobation.

'You should be sleeping, Imperator,' he said softly. 'You know what your doctors have said.'

'I don't need you to remind me!' Tannalis snapped. 'I might be half dead, but I'm not half deaf. Not yet.'

Trove glanced around the room before leaning in closer.

'Remember our deal, Imperator,' he whispered. 'You wouldn't want to exert yourself too much and end up dying before I find what I came here for, would you?'

Tannalis tipped his head back, narrowed his eyes and stared at Mr Trove. He knew that Trove's offer had been made purely to secure the Imperator's support in his 'recovery mission'. There wasn't an ounce of genuine compassion in Trove's watery, green eyes. At the back of the Imperator's mind was the growing suspicion that, even if Trove found what he'd come here for, he wouldn't honour his deal, but the Imperator wasn't quite as addled as he imagined that Trove thought he was. He'd already had Trove's ship located and kept under surveillance: instructions had been issued that, if anything happened to Tannalis, Trove was to be denied access to it. He wasn't completely convinced that such measures would work, but it was all he felt he could do. The preparations for his birthday – and the attendant bickering with Alinti and Javill – had taken it out of him, and at the moment, Trove's offer to him was all that was keeping him going. How ironic it would be if he were to die before Trove found his precious 'artefact'.

'If I die, Trove,' Tannalis said, 'I can at least go to my grave knowing that I've led a full and happy life. Can you say the same?'

Trove smiled coldly and stood up. 'Just get some rest, Emperor. I have a feeling that it won't be too long now.'

'What? Before I die, or before you find whatever it is you came looking for?'

'Let's just say that I think some unexpected help has arrived. You remember the offworlder that came to the Palace earlier? He calls himself "the Doctor". His arrival here at the same time as mine can't be coincidental. It may be that we are in competition. He gives the impression of knowing nothing – or perhaps he is just a very good actor. Whichever, he won't be a problem, and may well be an asset – particularly if he *does* know something. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to check a few things out. Emperor. . . ' Trove gave a little bow and left Tannalis's room. The Emperor lay there, feeling the thin blood struggling around his pathetic body. It was only after Trove had gone – that Tannalis wondered what he'd come in for.

Perhaps, he thought tiredly, Trove had just wanted to check whether he'd died yet.

Trove's room looked as if it had barely been used – the bed was neatly made (by Trove himself) and he had carefully and symmetrically arranged the furniture. On the wide desk in front of the window Trove's security console sat, quietly humming to itself. Trove pulled out the chair and lowered his heavy frame into it as he powered up his surveillance devices. He checked his watch – a proper, old-fashioned, external watch. Trove no longer trusted internal devices, implants. Ever since the Frowd'ar had detected his transceiver array, buried in his mastoid bone, and had forced him to have it removed before he could enter their territories (an operation made worse by the pitifully poor level of surgery that the Frowd'ar offered), Trove had cultivated a careful distrust of devices that couldn't be removed or disposed of easily. In his line of work, anything that had the potential to impede his movement around the galaxy was a liability.

For the same reason, he preferred to work alone: once upon a time, he'd had a partner, but that had ended badly. For the partner. Trove didn't tolerate failure. Or treachery.

Noting the time, he set to work: he had been on Espero for too long already. He had to find the device, and he had to find it soon.

A scratty-looking young man, his hair braided and tied back into a ponytail, squatted down on the pavement alongside a vivid, technicolour tableau of the Ascension. Shafts of rainbow-hued light speared out from Jesus's head, his hands open in supplication, eyes lifted Heavenward. The artist wiped the

chalk dust from his hands on to his knees and began to roll a cigarette, looking up hopefully as the Doctor came to a halt.

They'd hardly said two words to each other since leaving the restaurant where they'd had their encounter with Madame Xing. Calamee had tried to involve him, pointing out jugglers or acrobats or rabbit-balancers, but he'd been miles away, hearing without listening, looking without seeing. The Doctor's bizarre reluctance to allow the weird woman to put his head back on straight was inexplicable: how could you not want to get your memory back, especially if it had been fiddled with however many dozen times Madame Xing had claimed? It seemed to her like wilful ignorance, and ignorance – wilful or otherwise – wasn't something that Calamee was particularly keen on. Her mother had often remarked on how she didn't suffer fools gladly, and the Doctor's behaviour seemed the height of foolishness. Perhaps he'd see sense and use the little light that Madame Xing had given him, although she suspected that stubbornness would win out over common sense.

The Doctor was rubbing his lips with the back of his hand and squinting – not at the drawing on the ground, but up into the sky. She wondered if the sight of Jesus ascending to Heaven was triggering some memory in him. Maybe he just had a Messiah complex. The artist smiled and nodded his head at her, and, more out of a desire to impress the Doctor than out of generosity, Calamee began to root around in her pocket for some change – when the Doctor suddenly gave an explosive cry of triumph and leaped forwards to grab the young man's box of chalks.

'Oi!' he said.

The Doctor waved him back down, impatiently, and frantically began to clear a section of pavement of gawking onlookers, his face flashing between manic cheeriness and irritation. Taking one of the challis in his hand, the Doctor tipped his head this way and that, squinting at the blank pavement. The artist realised what he was up to, and began to protest.

'Calamee, give him some money please,' the Doctor said without even looking at her.

'Yes sir!' she snapped – but did as he asked. He was too busy squatting down on the pavement to even hear her.

It was almost like a dance, Calamee thought as she watched: he sprang lightly around, one minute down on his knees, the next standing to assess his work and hopping from foot to foot. He sketched in broad, assured strokes, only occasionally pausing to rub out something. His arm moved incredibly quickly, outlining and filling in, his fingers smudging and smearing. As he wore the chalks, one by one, down to useless nubs, he tossed them aside. A crowd was gathering, watching in amazement as this offworlder put on his show. Calamee saw the look on the artist's face, smiled apologetically, and

gave him some more money.

Eventually, with a sigh that seemed half disappointment, half puzzlement, the Doctor jumped up and shot a glance at Calamee. His face was smeared with rainbow blotches, warpaint for a confused soldier.

'There!' he said. 'What d'you think?'

Calamee looked down at what the Doctor had drawn. The Esperons hunched around it were muttering, pointing. It looked like a strange, surreal landscape – on the left hand side were two huge, blobby figures, presumably people. Their faces were smooth and featureless, and it looked as though they were kissing – or eating each other – blending into each other where they met. They had items of cutlery in their hands, as if about to tuck in to a feast. On the right hand side of the picture was a wooden chest, pieces of bacon or meat hanging limply over the opened drawers.

Calamee took a breath.

'What is it?' she said.

'*Autumn Cannibalism*,' he said triumphantly, beaming at the confused faces in the crowd around them. 'Salvador Dali. I *knew* it meant something.'

'And what does it mean?'

The Doctor stared at her before letting out a long sigh. 'Oh!' he whispered. 'I thought you might be able to tell me.'

'So excuse me for asking,' said Calamee, leaning forwards across the restaurant table, 'but who are you, exactly?'

The Doctor's head jerked back as if she'd slapped him, although his eyes never left hers.

'I mean,' she continued with a curious little purse of her lips, 'you come bowling into me, knock me down, pull me back up and then I follow you halfway across the city; we have some bizarre séance to get you in touch with your memories – well, some of them – and all I know about you is that you're an offworlder that seems to have done something to mightily upset the Emperor. And that you've got a picture of some weird painting in your head and don't know why. I've told you all about me, but conversations are two-way things, you know. Or have you forgotten all that, as well?'

Calamee sat back and folded her arms, like a teacher waiting for a wholly inadequate explanation for why a pupil's homework had failed to materialise.

'I've told you,' he said levelly but with just a hint of a twinkle in his voice. 'I'm the Doctor.'

Calamee shook her head.

'No,' she said. 'That's not who you are. That's what you call yourself. That's a job title. I want to know *who you are*: where do you come from? How old are you? Are you married? D'you have a girlfriend? A boyfriend? What about

your family? Friends? What job do you do? *What's your name?*' She looked at him. 'I can't help feeling that these are things that you're *choosing* not to tell me.'

For a moment, Calamee wanted to laugh: the Doctor's face had gone so blank that it was entirely conceivable that someone had simply turned him off. He continued to stare at her as if she hadn't spoken.

'Well?'

'I'm the Doctor,' he repeated slowly, as if to a slow but much-loved child. 'And as Madame Xing just explained, I have a memory like Swiss cheese.'

'I haven't a clue what that's supposed to mean, but it sounds to me like you're hiding something. I'm not judging you,' she added gently. 'I just want to know what makes you tick. Since we met, you've hardly said two words about yourself, whereas you already know almost my entire life story.'

The Doctor arched an eyebrow.

'And that's my fault?'

Calamee ignored the slight.

'What is it then?' she pressed on. 'You on the run? A criminal. Or are you just running away from the past?'

'It's the present that matters,' countered the Doctor evasively. 'And the future of course. Where would we be without that, eh? I've lost count of the times when I've thought there wasn't going to be one – only to discover three turning up at once –'

'Stop it,' said Calamee levelly. 'Now you're just prevaricating.'

'What an excellent education your parents must have bought for you. You really should introduce me to them, you know. I'm sure we'd have a lot in common.'

Calamee sighed heavily. Nessus started trying to clamber up on to the table and she pushed him down again. He squeaked.

'This memory thing's very convenient for you, isn't it?' she said. 'It stops you having to give anything away, doesn't it?' She paused and picked at her plate. 'Or maybe you're just a coward.'

'Sticks and stones, Calamee. Sticks and stones.' The Doctor's face was impassive.

Calamee leaned across the table and fixed him with a stare. 'Really? OK – what planet are you from? Simple question, simple answer.'

'Earth,' answered the Doctor with barely a pause.

Calamee stared at him. 'You,' she said slowly, 'are such a liar.'

'I am not!' He was comically indignant, and started to feign interest in the insects that flickered around them in the light of the bar's lamps.

'Oh come on – you can't kid a kiddier! When you're sixteen with the archetypal dysfunctional family, you learn to spot a lie at a hundred paces with a

balaclava over its head. You're no more from Earth than I am. What are you hiding, eh? Why don't you trust me? Is it because of the Palace Guard? D'you think I'm working for them? One of those clever plans to get you to confess to a plan to bring down the government?"

The Doctor gazed around, watching the unsteady progress of a large fly as it wobbled about his head.

'No,' he said distractedly. 'If they had half the guile that a plan like that needed, they wouldn't need a plan like that.'

He waved his fingers at the insect, trying to flick it away. Nessus began a slow climb on to his shoulder, the mokey's eyes fixed steadily on the buzzing creature.

'Sod off!' he said sharply, dislodging Nessus – and then looked back at Calamee. 'The fly, I meant.' He grinned awkwardly.

'I know what you meant,' she said, her patience draining away. 'Answer the question – where are you from?'

The Doctor grimaced, clearly unsure which was the greater irritant – the fly, or the spider sat opposite him.

'I'm from Ceres Alpha,' he said. 'I'm from Tapalane, from Nakti, from E-Aspa'i, from the Mazuma Matriarchy, from Shuac and from the Land of Oz!'

With an audible snap, the Doctor's hand shot out and his fingers pinched around the fly. Its buzzing ceased instantly and it dropped into the Doctor's bowl where it lay on its back, wriggling its legs.

'Waiter,' muttered the Doctor to no one in particular, his mood having changed instantly, 'there's a fly in my... hang on...' He grabbed a spoon and delicately extracted the rapidly expiring insect, raising it to within inches of his left eye. He shook his head. 'What d'you make of this?'

He thrust the spoon under her nose so sharply that Calamee jerked her head away, but brought it back slowly, a dubious frown on her face. She peered at the now-still little animal, lying in a pool of chocolate custard.

'It's dead?'

'No, no. No, it's not dead.' He pulled the spoon away from her as though he suddenly didn't trust her, and delicately lifted it from the soup by its tiny little legs. 'That's to say, it was never alive.'

'Uh?'

He dabbed it on the tablecloth, leaving little spatters of brown, before wiggling it in the air, drying it off.

'This fly is a beautifully manufactured replica,' he said brightly, as if it were the most wonderful thing in the world. 'This fly, Calamee, is a robot!'

'Yeah, right,' said Calamee, trying not to look too interested: she knew the routine – she said 'Wow! Really?' and went in for a closer look and he pushed it up her nose.

But the Doctor just tossed it on to the table as if suddenly bored with it and began patting his pockets experimentally.

‘What you looking for? Your *Boy’s Guide to Spotting Robot Pests*?’

‘This has been a very trying day, Calamee,’ he said, managing to sound absent and stern at the same time. ‘Captured and interrogated. *Twice*. My head feels like a jumbo tin of Quality Street at Christmas when Auntie Ivy’s convinced there’s a purple one left at the bottom. And then *that* appears – a robot surveillance camera demonstrating a level of technology that I’m pretty sure Espero doesn’t possess. Or *didn’t* possess.’ He started to check the inside pockets of his jacket.

‘What? What are you looking for? Anti robot surveillance devices? Cans of fly spray? *What?*’

‘Where are they?’ he said absently, more to himself than to her. ‘I’m sure I had a packet on me.’ He stopped mid-pat and stared at her. ‘You wouldn’t happen to have a cigarette on you by any chance, would you? I’m absolutely gagging for one.’

Chapter 8

'With a zed.'

Trix had never felt so conspicuous, so looked-at as she did at the moment. It was as if having the Doctor around normally wove a spell, a sort of glamour about them that made them all-but invisible, and now, without him, they were exposed as bizarre freaky aliens. The fact that the few people they'd seen so far, without exception, had been black or Asian, made her feel even more conspicuous. And if there was one thing that Trix didn't like, it was feeling conspicuous. Anji would have blended in seamlessly, she thought – which didn't help.

Fitz, annoyingly, hardly seemed to notice, although Trix did wonder if he were still suffering the effects of his attack. He seemed a bit distracted, not his usual self. Trix quickly realised that repeatedly asking him if he was OK was not going to make what could well be a long walk any easier, so she shut up, and concentrated on trying to learn what she could about the planet from what little she could see.

As they'd raced away from the oasis, the sounds of the creature still echoing across the countryside, Trix had headed straight for the TARDIS. But, as she'd fumbled for her key, Fitz had grabbed her arm.

'What's the point?' he'd said.

'Survival, Fitz, that's the point. You heard that thing.'

'So, what, we hide out in the TARDIS and wait for the Doctor to come and find us? Where's your spirit of adventure?'

'If we'd stayed there any longer, it would have been in my pants, Fitz. Did you *hear* that thing?'

'Of course I heard it. But if the Doctor's still there, waiting in the TARDIS isn't going to do anyone any good. And if he's not... well, maybe he's somewhere else. I survived whatever attacked me. Maybe he did too. And maybe he's wandered off, injured. And maybe that goo did something to him.'

'So why didn't he come back to the TARDIS – assuming the goo *didn't* get him?'

Fitz shrugged, barely visible in the starlight.

'Maybe he got lost. Maybe he got hit on the head and lost his memory, like me.'

'How likely is that?'

'How likely is *any* of this? Besides, don't you want to find out where we've landed? Do a bit of exploring?'

'Yeah, Fitz. Exploring is the first thing on my mind at the moment. We could be stuck here forever. *Forever*, Fitz. Doesn't that bother you?'

'All the more reason to have a look around.' He paused and Trix saw him craning his neck to look over her shoulder. 'Like over there, for instance.'

She turned, not sure what he was looking at. And then she saw it – a vague, nebulous glow from behind the hillock in front of which the TARDIS stood.

'Lights,' he said. 'City lights if I'm not mistaken.'

'And that's never happened, has it?' she said drily.

'Oh ye of little faith – come on.'

He slipped past her, and with a sigh, Trix pocketed her TARDIS key and set off after him. Not, she told herself, that she believed that they might find the Doctor there, but because, in his absence, a city might be the only place that could offer them a way off this planet. She glanced back at the TARDIS. She'd just started to really think of it as home, and it looked like she could well have been evicted.

It came as a pleasant surprise, then, that as they rounded a little hillock just beyond the TARDIS, Trix realised that Fitz was right about the lights – a thin, orangey smear of them, filtered through distant trees. Proper lights, thought Trix, trying not to get her hopes up too much. Electric ones. Like back home. Of course they weren't back home, but when you're (probably) hundreds of light years from Earth and (probably) in a totally different time period, it was surprising how comforting little things like city lights could be.

And, even better, they looked close (although, she reminded herself, not quite so close as the source of the growling noises and the grey slime).

The two of them stumbled across the grassland, trying not to trip in the darkness – until Trix remembered she had a torch in her hand. Unfortunately, it had the unwanted side effect of drawing a cloud of nipping insects to them, so she turned it off, and had to be satisfied with following Fitz's silhouette.

Every so often, she glanced back over her shoulder, half expecting to see something huge bearing down on them. But the darkness was so deep that she doubted she'd have seen anything.

The city felt like it had crept up on them: one minute they'd been in almost complete darkness, and the next they were walking down the side of a roughly tarmacked road with proper, if dim, streetlights, only minutes away from what looked like shops, complete with illuminated windows.

'This looks too normal,' she said, catching up with Fitz for the umpteenth time. 'Roads, shops, lights. You don't think we could actually be on Earth, do you?'

‘I’m not sure Earth has a monopoly on all those things, Trix,’ he said, turning to give her an irritatingly Doctorish look. ‘And we’d remember – well, you’d remember – if the Doctor had said that he’d picked up a distress call coming from Earth, wouldn’t you?’

‘Of course I would,’ she said tartly. ‘But I do think it’s a bit off that the Doctor didn’t tell us anything about where we were before getting himself. . . lost. Maybe he told you and you just can’t remember.’

‘Quite possibly,’ he said breezily as he checked the road – pointlessly – for traffic before crossing. ‘But if you tried a little bit harder to get on with him, maybe he’d have told *you* as well.’

Trix gritted her teeth and pulled a face at his back. She was beginning to wish she’d left him lying on the grass.

‘So tell me about this Imperial Family of yours,’ the Doctor said, knocking back the remains of his coffee and waving the waiter over for another. He’d managed to cadge a cigarette off one of the other diners, and was struggling through each lungful of smoke, like a kid trying to look grown up. Nessus was curled up on the seat next to him, gently snoring, his head tucked under his spindly arms. The Doctor threw the mokey a glance. ‘I take it that mokeys are a native species? And that the name’s just a quaint corruption of *monkey*?’

‘They’re not very bright, but they’re very friendly. And Nessus certainly seems to have taken a shine to you.’

‘Charmed, I’m sure,’ said the Doctor archly, coughing and stubbing out his cigarette. ‘But the Imperial Family?’

The waiter arrived with more coffee and she waited until he’d poured before continuing.

‘Something we’re not very proud of. Well, apart from a few die-hard traditionalists. There are eight nation states, and they all have proper democracies apart from us. Yes, I know – you came all this way and end up here. Sorry.’ Calamee pulled a face. ‘It could have been worse, though: you could have ended up in New Roma with Pope Constanza’s Vatican Police breathing down your neck. But it’s not like the Imperials have any real power any more – we have a proper government that do all the real work and everything. I think they keep the Imperial Family on for show, for the tourists. A shame you didn’t meet them.’

He gave a shrug, shifting his chair and waking Nessus who yawned hugely and curled back up again.

‘I don’t know that I’d recognise them if I saw them, would I? I seem to remember having a word with one of the Guard, and before I knew it, I was being shepherded inside.’ He paused. ‘It seemed a bit odd at the time, but when you’ve been to as many odd places as I have, it’s nice to feel welcome.’

He tailed off, staring at the tablecloth as he sipped his coffee. As the evening had descended, Calamee had guiltily remembered that, somewhere in the city, there were a couple of parents. Possibly worried. Certainly annoyed. Maybe even angry. But it wasn't as if it was the first time she'd wandered off. They'd probably just call her friends – or, more likely, get her house-parent to call them – before deciding that she'd gone off to see a film or a show or something. They wouldn't *really* get worried until they found her still missing tomorrow morning.

She realised she needed the toilet, so she excused herself, but a few moments later, as she washed her hands in the tiny sink, she heard the sound of the Doctor's voice, right outside the door, shouting.

'Calamee! Calamee!'

She opened the toilet door to find him there, eyes bright, bobbing up and down with excitement. The other diners were staring at him in a way that made her want to shut the door on him. And lock it.

'What? What's happened?'

'It's starting to make sense!' he yelled, unaware of the looks he was getting.

'What is? Just calm down.'

He grabbed her hand and dragged her back to the table where Nessus had woken up and was eyeing the manic Doctor from his seat.

'I was puzzling it all over,' said the Doctor, rooting around amid the cutlery, serviettes, plates and dishes on the table, 'and then it all came together.' He snatched at something. 'It was a setup. All of it. Don't you see?'

'Um.'

He opened out his palm in front of her. Nestled in the centre was the robot fly that she'd almost forgotten about.

'I was *supposed* to escape from the Palace – the Emperor wanted me followed for some reason, so they took me inside and kept me there just long enough for them to get this thing set up. And then they released me, with this flying along behind me.'

'But why?'

He gave a cheery shrug.

'Maybe they think I know something.'

'And do you?'

He gave another shrug, this one even more unconcerned than the last one.

'Who knows? Maybe it's something to do with why I came to Espero in the first place.'

'Which is...? Oh yes,' Calamee cut him short. 'You don't know that either.' She glanced down at the dead fly, still in the palm of his hand. 'But at least we're getting somewhere. I expect that the Emperor's now a bit confused and annoyed that he's lost contact with his tracking device. It is dead, isn't it?'

‘Well, it’s not working any more, if that’s what you mean.’ He sat back down and asked the waiter for the bill. Calamee rooted in her pocket for her credit card, fairly sure that the Doctor would have no money of his own. He was drumming his fingers on the table in an incredibly fast and complicated paradiddle.

‘Considering how little we’ve got to go on,’ Calamee said, ‘it all fits, I’ll give you tha–’

‘It fits,’ interrupted the Doctor, fixing her with his eyes. ‘Yes – that’s it. Fits.’

‘Eh?’

He gripped the edge of the table with both hands and sprang to his feet. Nessus squealed and raced under the table to clamber up Calamee’s leg on to her lap. ‘Fits,’ he said again. ‘With a zed. Fitz.’

‘Fits is spelled with an ess – or is it different where you’re from?’

He shook his head vigorously.

‘No, *Fitz*. My friend Fitz – Fitz erm, erm... *Fitz Kreiner*.’ Calamee just stared.

‘I came to Espero with a friend. A man called Fitz.’ The Doctor gripped the edge of the table and bowed his head, shaking it slowly. ‘I really need to get a grip on this. Madame Xing brought back memories of my friends, Fitz and... and Trix. And I’ve only gone and forgotten them again.’ He looked up at her as he shook his head, and Calamee realised how tired and drained he looked. ‘This isn’t going to be easy. I need to find them – make sure that they’re all right. Before I forget them again.’

‘Well,’ said Calamee, suddenly realising how much hard work being with the Doctor involved, ‘if he’s stuck around you for more than a fortnight, he must be a very good friend. And at this rate, it’ll have taken us that long just to work out your name. Now come on – we’re getting some very strange looks.’

‘I think this is an Earth colony,’ Fitz said as they paused in front of a brightly lit shop window displaying assortments of crucifixes and statues and figurines of Jesus and Mary – and, Trix presumed, God. Without exception, their faces were brown or black, which – despite the probable historical accuracy (although she wasn’t so sure about God) – was quite surprising. It had never really occurred to her before that black people might be happier with black Jesuses and Marys and what-have-you.

‘Really?’ said Trix. ‘Because they look like us?’

‘Mainly. I know it’s a rather humanocentric view to assume that humanoids are all *human*, but there are too many of humanity’s trappings for it to be just a coincidence.’

‘Like?’

'Like the people; like the buildings and their construction techniques. Their religion – although, granted, that could be an extremely unlikely coincidence. . . ' He pointed at the window display. 'And the writing.'

'OK, Braniac, so we're on an Earth colony. Any idea when?'

'Sometime in the future, I imagine. Come on – what's going on over there?'

Fitz strode off, leaving Trix to pull another face at his back. She hoped he'd start acting normally soon: it was bad enough having the Doctor acting ditzzy and absent-professorish without Fitz deciding to be his understudy. Trix wondered if he were doing it consciously, trying to make her feel reassured in the absence of the real thing. She wished he wouldn't: she'd feel much more comfortable with the old Fitz – at least she knew where she was with him. Besides, she felt awkward enough around the real Doctor: an ersatz one was the last thing she needed right now.

Trix caught up with him in a few seconds as he joined a crowd gathered around something or other. Standing on tiptoe, Trix could see a wooden trailer, painted dark green, at the centre of the crowd. It seemed like the kind of thing you'd see at a carnival: all twiddly bits on the top and hints of slightly parted curtains. And bars. There were definitely bars.

'It looks like some sort of mobile cage,' she said to Fitz. He looked at her.

'Are you thinking what I'm thinking?' he said.

'If it's "Roll up! Roll up! See the Doctor From Another World", then yes.'

She and Fitz *excuse-me'd* their way through the crowds – which, when they saw the two strangers pushing through their midst, were more than happy to move aside and let them to the front. Trix almost felt disappointed when they got there. The cage was, indeed, a trailer on four wheels. Standing in front of it was a tall, spindly man in a tatty yellow suit and a hat that looked as if it could have belonged to a pearly king, studded with little white gemstones. He was in the middle of some sort of spiel about the night breeding the darkest of things, but stopped short when his bright eyes alighted on Trix's and Fitz's faces. He gave a little nod and a broad smile before continuing.

'We think we know this world,' he said, his voice rich and sing-songy, like a Baptist preacher warning of hellfire and damnation. 'But do we really? We travel out into the depths of space, like explorers setting out on the sea. We bring with us all the good – and the bad – in our hearts, and we set up a brand new home. Oh yes, ladies and gentlemen. We think we know this world, this rock in space. We have surveyed it, studied it and stamped our mark on it. But how much do we really know, eh? We've occupied a fraction of the land on Espero, seen much, much less than that of what it has to offer.' His voice dipped low, forcing them to struggle to hear his words. 'But there is another side to this planet. A dark side, full of shadows, populated by things we were perhaps never meant to see' Trix gave a little sigh, but Fitz shushed

her. 'Ladies and gentlemen, no doubt you have heard the rumours – rumours of creatures that stalk the wilderness outside the city; creatures that creep into your homes at night and steal away your souls. Or worse.' The crowd murmured. He knew his patter, thought Trix. I'll give him that. 'But until this moment, you may only have seen pictures of these creatures. You may have heard rumours, or scraps of rumours. Believe me, though: the truth that I, Deel, am about to show you is more horrible than you can imagine.' Someone at the back heckled him, shouting: 'You gonna take your clothes off, then, are you?' A nervous ripple of laughter spread through the crowd, but he just grinned and stepped to one side, reaching for a gold braided cord that hung down the side of the curtained cage. 'Ladies and gentlemen. . . you may wish to take a step back before I reveal what I have here.' He paused for a moment until he realised that the crowd wished quite the reverse, and had actually shuffled forward slightly. His eyes swept over the front row, alighting on Trix and Fitz again, as he began to pull the cord. 'I give you. . . the night beast!' And with a flourish, he jerked on the cord and the curtains swished apart.

Chapter 9

'Bugger its body language — look at the size of it.'

As monsters went, thought Trix, it was rubbish. Really rubbish. A man in a monkey suit would have been more convincing.

The creature hunkered down in the shadows, hardly moving, hardly being threatening at all. Trix wondered if her travels with the Doctor and Fitz had made her jaded to monsterdom, since the crowd around her cooed and ahhed, alternately stepping forwards for a better look, and backing away when the night beast rustled its straw.

'Is that it?' she whispered to Fitz, who shushed her. 'It's a fake,' she insisted wearily, scanning the crowd.

'If it is,' said Fitz, peering into the darkness of the wheeled cage, 'then it's a very poor effort.'

'Exactly,' said Trix, feeling exonerated. Fitz was shaking his head.

'No no no, I mean if he was going to fake it, he'd do a better job than that, surely.'

'Look around you Fitz,' hissed Trix. 'This isn't exactly Hollywood. The special-effects boffins around here probably don't amount to much more than men with papier-mâché masks and a couple of yards of fake fur.'

'Still. . .' Fitz took a step forward, and the beast in the cage adjusted itself. Trix saw the glimmer of light reflected in two tiny, dark eyes, like blobs of tar on a summer street. They were looking straight at her.

Deel moved closer to the cage, Trix noticed, annoyance in his eyes: he'd clearly hoped that the creature would put up more of a show than this. He banged the bars with a long stick, eliciting nothing more than a low grumble from the night beast. At the sound of it, Trix felt her skin tighten – and realised that it was too similar to the noises they'd heard in the bushes earlier for it to be a coincidence.

'Fitz,' she whispered to him. 'That thing. . .'

'I know, Trix.' He waved his finger at her impatiently as Deel continued.

'The creature is saving its energies,' he improvised loudly, 'waiting for the right moment to attack.'

No one was convinced. The crowd muttered its dissatisfaction, and Deel banged the bars again, resignedly. 'No one should sleep soundly tonight,' he

warned, trying to make his voice as deep and threatening as he could. He just sounded desperate and hammy, thought Trix. 'Who knows what deeds this monster's fellows might be about?'

'Writing a better script for him,' Fitz suggested, but Trix was too busy trying to see into the darkened cage. 'I don't like this, Fitz,' she said. 'Come on, I want to go.'

Fitz hummed, but let Trix pull him back from the cage. As they edged their way back through the crowd, Trix realised that the two of them had become more of a draw than the creature itself. Deel'd have had a better crowd if he'd caged the two of them.

'You hungry?' asked Fitz as they reached the edge of the crowd.

'How can you be hungry? Didn't you hear that thing? Unless someone's gone to a lot of trouble with a tape recorder, that thing in the cage was the same as whatever chased us from the bushes. And I'd put money on it being the same thing that attacked you.' She paused, realising what she was saying. 'And probably the Doctor, too.' She put her hand on his arm and then realised what she was doing and pulled it away. 'Fitz, what if the Doctor *was* back there? What if one of those night beast things – maybe even *that* one – got you and the Doctor? What if he's wandering around the countryside, injured? What if he's *dead*, Fitz?'

'Sorry to interrupt.'

A voice beside her made her jump, and she turned to see a small, bookish-looking man wearing glasses. He looked scared and apologetic.

'Did I hear you say you were looking for a friend?'

'Have you seen him?'

The man smiled. 'There was a man earlier this evening –'

'What?' interrupted Fitz loudly. 'Here? *Here?*'

'Calm down!' said Trix. 'Sorry about that,' she apologised to the man. 'He gets a bit excited. How long ago? Where did you see him? What did he look like?'

'Can't be more than an hour or so ago. He was in a bar around the corner.' The man pointed. 'With a young girl, a local. They had a meal and then left. He seemed very excited, too' The man smiled at the memory and described someone who could only be the Doctor.

'I don't suppose you've any idea where they went?'

'Sorry.' The man looked disappointed that he couldn't help any more.

'He's alive!' hissed Trix as the man walked away, glancing over his shoulder at them. 'The Doctor's alive – did you hear him?'

'And well, apparently.'

All Trix could think of, though, was that now she wouldn't have to spend hours trying to find a ship to take her back to Earth.

* * *

Trove wasn't used to things not working. He wasn't used to malfunctions and mistakes. He particularly wasn't used to his flycams failing.

Trove had high hopes for the Doctor: his instruments had picked up the arrival of his ship (although, curiously, he hadn't actually been able to pinpoint *where* it had landed with any great accuracy), and after releasing half dozen or so of his precious flycams, he'd witnessed the Doctor's confused and stumbling arrival at the Palace. Tannalis had been irritatingly reluctant to have the Doctor imprisoned, pointing out that not only was it unconstitutional, but also immoral – but had eventually relented when Trove had pointed out that his incarceration was simply to buy time for Trove to recharge and program a flycam to follow him. Grumbling, Tannalis had given the order. Trove had calibrated the flycam and guided it into the Doctor's room – where the offworlder had sat sullenly, muttering to himself about someone called 'R.D. Laing' and open doors – and then sat back to watch the Doctor escape. Of course, Trove had realised, it was always possible that the Doctor would simply sit there until someone came to 'question him'. But Trove prided himself on being a good judge of character, and this Doctor didn't seem the sort of man to wait for fate to come to him.

He was proved right. Within ten minutes of being left alone, the Doctor had stretched, stood up and casually strolled to the door. With the flycam's pattern recognition software fully trained and its battery topped up, Trove could just sit back and watch as the camera relayed every step of the offworlder's escape from the Palace. Of course, he'd sent a couple of the Guard to chase him: Trove didn't want the Doctor's escape to appear *too* easy.

And now Trove was kicking himself for assuming that the Doctor's awareness and reactions were human-standard. They clearly weren't: the last images transmitted from the flycam had been of the Doctor, viewed from above, waving his hand around. The next moment there was a pale blur on the screen in front of him and the camera's telemetry went dead. It was, of course, possible that some other native animal or insect had spotted the cam and decided that it would make a tasty snack, but the devices emitted a high frequency sonic pulse as well as an electromagnetic field that, usually, would be enough to deter most casual predators.

He sat back and folded his arms, listening to the sounds of the builders and engineers in the courtyard constructing the stage. Trove hoped that his mission here would be completed before then: with the offer that he'd made to the Emperor, he was quietly confident that no effort would be spared to help him find his prize.

* * *

‘Farine!’ hissed Sensimi, stepping out of the shadows and making her maid jump. She almost dropped the big, covered basket of dirty washing that she carried. When Farine saw it was only Sensimi, she took a deep breath, on the point of telling the princess not to do that again. But of course she didn’t. Nerves and tempers were as frayed as ever around the Palace at the moment, and the last thing Farine wanted was to lose her job. She quite liked Sensimi – well, compared to her family she was an angel – but was under no illusions about the brittleness of the girl’s temper. She saw that Looloo was balanced precariously on Sensimi’s hip, her tiara tilted at a silly angle over her eyes. The mokey reached out a grasping little paw towards Farine’s basket, almost losing her balance in the process.

‘Have you got everything?’ asked Sensimi. Farine nodded.

‘I think so. Your Highness, this is getting riskier – I was nearly caught by the Imperatrix.’

‘Yes, yes.’ Sensimi waved away Farine’s concerns dismissively. She pulled back the cover on the basket and checked that the clothing she’d asked Farine to get from Alinti and Javill’s rooms was there. ‘Come on.’

She pushed past Farine, who sighed miserably, and headed for the door to the cellars. Farine really wasn’t happy about any of this.

The crowds of vaguely disappointed onlookers had drifted away, and Deel had closed the curtains on the night beast. Once he felt sure that no one would come and start poking at it, he slipped away for a quiet drink and something to eat – he wouldn’t be gone for more than half an hour, and the creature, damn its hairy backside, seemed peaceable enough. Deel wondered if he shouldn’t just take the trailer out into the countryside and let the thing go – if it was going to be as unfrightening as it had been tonight, it would end up costing Deel money, never mind making it. He had to feed the thing, after all. Maybe he should try *not* feeding it: that might liven it up a bit.

With a final check that it was asleep, he let the curtains swing back, made sure that there was no one suspicious around, and headed for the nearest bar. Even though the night beast had put on a show that would hardly terrify a small child tonight, he knew that the thing’s sheer size – and the reputation that it had generated – would keep most nosy gits away.

And Deel was right: the few people that spotted the trailer kept well clear of it. One or two lads, full of bravado and booze, came close. One even gave the bars an experimental rattle – but when the creature shifted around in its sleep, he soon ran.

So, soon, the night beast was left alone in the shadow of an office building. For a few minutes, nothing happened, but then the curtain twitched experimentally. Quietly and more gently than Deel would have imagined, the

creature reached through the bars and pushed it aside. Its glossy eyes scanned the street. And then, with surprising delicateness, it reached through the walls of its prison and began experimenting with the heavy padlock and chains that kept it there.

The wine and beer flowed freely in *The Whore of Babylon* – especially once the Doctor magically produced a credit chip which, to even his amazement, was accepted at the bar. Calamee moderated her drinking: she still didn't really know the Doctor, and despite the fact that he was entertaining (if occasionally frustrating) company, she thought it was wise to keep her head. The Doctor had prevailed upon her, with much finger wagging and raising of eyebrows, to call her parents. She'd got through to Sierah, her house-mother, who'd been less than impressed by Calamee's explanation of how she'd lost her parents in one of the arcades, and almost openly disbelieving of Calamee's assertion that she was spending the evening at the house of her friend, Craich. But Sierah could do little – particularly as Calamee's phone somehow managed to develop a fault halfway through the conversation and stopped receiving calls.

Calamee returned from the corridor to find the Doctor scratching his head and being roundly beaten in a game of cards by one of the bar's customers.

In the hours that she'd spent with him, Calamee had been unable to forget quite how different the Doctor was from the rest of the Esperons, and not only because of his skin colour. He had a lightness, a casual disregard for formality and propriety that was at the same time dangerous and refreshing. She wondered whether it was something about the slog of life on Espero that had turned everyone here into tired, resigned people, or whether it was they who were normal, typical of humanity across the galaxy, and the Doctor who was the weird one. Life wasn't so bad on Espero, Calamee knew – particularly for her. Mother and Father were educated, rich – at least by Espero standards. They'd purchased her the best education they could, paid for the most advanced edprogs to be shipped in for her. They'd bought Nessus for her (who was currently sleeping in a pool of beer at the end of the bar: he'd need a bath before she could take him home) and they'd furnished her with a beautiful home and beautiful friends. Her life, compared to that of many on Espero, was idyllic. She'd once travelled to Advent, a neighbouring city-nation, on a school trip, and had been appalled at how basic and primitive everything seemed, how weary the people looked, how full of resentment they'd appeared. And now Calamee wondered how the Esperons must seem to the Doctor. How much had he experienced? What wonders and peoples and technology had he seen? And how could somewhere as dull as Espero light up his eyes as it seemed to be doing now?

Calamee was broken from her reverie by a scream of laughter from a fat

woman, about her mother's age, standing at the Doctor's side. She watched as she linked her arm through the Doctor's, pressed her face against his sleeve and looked up at him. She had too much make-up on, and it didn't take Calamee long to work out what was going on there, surprising herself at how possessive of the Doctor she suddenly felt. The name of the bar seemed sourly ironic.

It had been an hour since they'd left the restaurant, and despite the Doctor's newfound realisation that he'd been set free from the Palace in order for the fly camera to follow him, it seemed that it was the last thing on his mind right now.

Gently, he extricated himself from the woman's grasp with an unselfconsciousness that was quite endearing. For a moment, as she watched him order up another round of drinks at the bar with his magic credit chip, he really and truly seemed alien.

Just as Trix was trying to work out how she and Fitz would pay for their meal – or how they'd manage to get away *without* paying – she noticed that the other diners were all turning their heads towards the street at the end of the alley. She could hear raised voices, shouts. A couple of people stood up and stepped out on to the pavement to see what was happening.

'Fitz!' she hissed as he shovelled another mouthful of a rather pungent fish stew into his mouth. 'This is our chance.'

'Hmph?'

She jerked her head in the direction of the street.

'There's something going on – look, people are getting up to have a nosy. We've come looking for the Doctor and he's not here; you've stuffed yourself silly, and we still need to find him. So unless you've magically discovered a pocketful of local coins, it might be a good chance for us to do a runner.'

He pulled a pained, patient expression.

'Well have you any better ideas?' Neither of them had thought to check the TARDIS to see whether there were any bags of gold or diamonds that they could bring with them to pay for anything. Trix had an assortment of coins in her pocket and half a dozen credit cards in different names, but nothing that she thought would be accepted here. It never seemed to be a problem when they were with the Doctor. But now they were cast adrift, mundane things like that seemed painfully complicated.

Fitz opened his mouth, probably to argue with her, but a sudden wave of shouting from the street cut him off. Another three or four people got up from their seats to see what the fuss was all about, and Trix grabbed her bag.

'Come on – make it look like you're interested in what's going on.'

She stood, keeping her spoon deliberately in her hand, trying to look as curious as she could. Get yourself into the role, she thought. You really *are* interested in what's going on out there. Which, she considered as she and Fitz stepped out on to the pavement, wasn't that far from the truth.

At the T-junction at the end of the street, quite a crowd had gathered, but Trix could see from the way they were standing that something was amiss: they were holding themselves tensely, as if expecting to have to run at any minute. A couple of them took hesitant steps backwards, bumping into those behind them, also eager to see what was going on. Without glancing back at the restaurant, Trix slipped out into the growing crowds, hoping that Fitz was behind her. She craned her head from side to side – when, suddenly, the clot of people at the end of the street started moving. It reminded her of films of Pamplona, maddened bulls rushing through the streets, people suddenly abandoning their bravado when faced with a ton of angry muscle.

Trix pushed her way through against the flow, and glanced back briefly to see Fitz strolling nonchalantly towards her.

'What's going on?' she asked an elderly woman at her side, who was grasping an oversized handbag like a talisman. The woman started, obviously surprised at Trix's sudden appearance.

'I'm not sure,' she answered, keeping her eyes on Trix as if she expected to be mugged by her at any moment. 'Some sort of fuss.'

Helpful, thought Trix. She could have worked that out for herself.

Suddenly, the crowd around her surged backwards, almost knocking her over. The elderly woman caught her elbow, steadied her, as the mass of people carried on moving. She heard shouts and cries – and even a scream. And then, all of a sudden, she was at the front of the crowd.

Standing at the centre of a wide circle of people brandishing sticks, pieces of chairs and railings, was Deel's pet – the night beast.

Fitz's composure in the face of the creature was remarkable – and a little bit disturbing. He hadn't quite been himself since Trix had found him unconscious, and this stand-off made her wonder whether he hadn't suffered some quite severe brain damage. Not that Fitz was a coward. Not usually. But his sense of self-preservation was usually pretty good. So to see him standing his ground against the night beast was, to say the least, worrying.

As they'd watched the night beast – and although they hadn't had a good look at whatever had been in Deel's cage, the low grumble that issued from the thing in front of them left Trix in little doubt that it was the same species, if not the same individual – Fitz had started tufting and clicking at it, like you might do with a cat or dog, trying to get its attention. It had turned

slowly towards him, rotating at the waist in a most unnatural manner, and had proceeded to enter what looked like a staring contest with Fitz.

‘Just leave it, Fitz,’ Trix said quietly. *He’s not worth it*, she added in her head.

‘Look at it, Trix,’ he answered, as if he hadn’t heard her. ‘Look at its body language.’

‘Bugger its body language – look at the size of it.’

‘I don’t think it wants to hurt me.’

‘Have you forgotten what happened to you and the Doctor?’

As Trix found herself in the front row, Fitz squeezed in beside her, saying nothing, and she felt her stomach lurch as he proceeded to take a confident step forwards and thrust his hands in his pockets. The creature tipped its head on one side, straightened up, and then leaned forwards slightly – the creature’s equivalent of sticking its neck out, imagined Trix, as she realised that she’d been sheltering behind Fitz. Not something she’d normally consider doing. It was at least seven feet tall, and much more imposing than the shadowed glimpses they’d got from the cage would have suggested. Its head was low and sloped straight down to its shoulders, with no hint of neck. Huge, muscly arms – the kind, thought Trix, that you saw on men who were constantly accompanied by vests and gym bags – gave the night beast an ungainly, top-heavy appearance, further compounded by the slim waist. But then its body fanned out again, with vast, sinewy thighs and broad feet with widely splayed toes. The whole thing was covered in what, at first sight, looked like bluish-black hair, but on further examination more resembled fine, straight pieces of wire. Its mouth was comically small, just a tiny ‘o’ in the middle of its face; there were no signs of nostrils, and its eyes were piggy and wetly black.

‘It’s sniffing me,’ Fitz whispered. ‘Look.’

The creature did, indeed, appear to be sniffing, despite its lack of a nose: although whether it was exploring Fitz’s own smell, or just the swirl of fear-generated pheromones in the night air, she wasn’t sure. A young man behind the creature decide to chance it, hoping to get a blow in while the thing seemed occupied, and ran forward with a chair from some bar or restaurant raised over his head. But it was as if the creature had eyes in the back of its head: without turning, it simply swung its hamlike arm backwards – to a degree that Trix didn’t think was physically possible – and swiped the man and his chair back into the crowd. The circle of people took a couple of wary steps back.

‘Did you see that?’ Fitz said in wonderment. ‘The degree of rotation in that shoulder joint.’

‘Just what I was thinking,’ Trix said drily. ‘Now get back here before it does the same thing to you.’

But Fitz just took another step forwards.

‘Can you understand me?’ he asked the night beast, just loudly enough for Trix to hear. There was a mutter from the crowd. The creature straightened up, and – Trix could have sworn – its eyes darted around the swarms of people that watched it, as if weighing up whether to answer Fitz. Trix wondered just how long the mob would give the creature before they overcame their fear and piled on to it. Its casual demolition of the man with the chair had made them think twice, despite its apparently calm state now, but she feared that if Fitz carried on his Doctor Dolittle act and the thing stayed quiet, the crowd might get a bit braver. She scanned the faces at the front of the crowd – almost all men – young, angry men, some armed with bits of wood or bottles. Behind them were the slightly more timid – or cautious – ones, who still wanted to feel like they were in on the action. There was something sweaty and ugly about a mob like this, and despite the warm evening air, she felt a chill stroke her skin as she looked at them. One face stood out to Trix – a young woman wearing a big coat despite the weather, and a large, floppy hat a bit like a beret. But it wasn’t so much that she was a woman that caught Trix’s attention, nor the fact that she seemed unseasonably dressed (although that, in itself, was odd). It was the expression on the woman’s face that was curious. Her eyes were narrow and intense, and they darted from the creature to Fitz and then back again, as if assessing their relationship. The woman watched as Fitz took another step towards the creature, pulled his hands out of his pockets, and slowly raised a palm to the creature. There was still a gap of a yard between them, and a gentle murmur spread through the crowd. Again, the night beast leaned forward to sniff. And again, someone decided to try to sneak up on the creature. But Fitz spotted him.

‘No!’ he said sharply. ‘Don’t!’

The man was pulled up short by Fitz’s imperious tone, and looked to his friends for support. But they shook their heads and the man reluctantly lowered the bottle he held. The creature twitched slightly, as if responding to the attacker’s change of mind, and took a step forward, towering over Fitz. Gently, it leaned down and sniffed at his palm. The creature raised its head until it was level with Fitz’s and stared into his face.

Out of the corner of her eye, Trix saw the woman in the crowd moving around to get a better view, pushing her way through. Her gaze shifted around the crowd, and fixed on Trix’s for a few moments before looking guiltily away.

Trix wasn’t sure what was going to happen now: Fitz and the creature seemed to be involved in some sort of bizarre love-in, and the crowd around them looked like they weren’t going to stand there for much longer without doing something. There was a nasty, sour tension in the air, and Trix wished that Fitz would just walk away. But she knew that if he did, the crowd would

be on the creature in an instant. They'd seen that it wasn't the violent, unreasoning slaughter-machine that they'd originally thought, and Trix knew that that would fire them up, fill them with the confidence to pile on to it. And even with magic swivelling shoulder joints, it wouldn't be able to withstand such a mass attack.

The silence was shattered by a shout from somewhere behind her: 'The police are on their way!' someone called out, and a half-hearted cheer went up. Trix heard the harsh music of breaking glass and knew what it was a prelude to.

The spell was broken. As if the night beast had understood the words, it took a sudden step back from Fitz, raising its massive arms from its sides. It looked around at the harsh, angry, frightened faces that surrounded it, and a low, thunderous rumble issued from its mouth.

'It's a warning,' said Fitz, not moving an inch. His eyes swept the crowd, as if trying to hold them back by force of will alone. But it wasn't enough. Trix didn't see who started it, but suddenly the whole crowd was surging forwards, a mad beast – madder, by far, than the creature that stood in their midst.

'Leave it alone!' Trix suddenly found herself shouting as she grabbed at Fitz's arm. 'Just leave it!'

'Get lost, *alien*,' someone shouted – a woman's voice, somewhere at the back of the crowd.

'Yeah,' someone else chimed in. 'Piss off, alien!'

An elbow struck Trix's upper arm and she yelped, pulling herself closer to Fitz as the mob swirled around her, jostling them, pushing them, but never quite hitting them. It was as if the crowd, now absolved of any individual responsibility, was toying with them – showing them its power, showing them just how much it could hurt if it wanted to. Trix didn't know whether the display was for them or the night beast. Probably both.

'This creature's done no har-' Fitz broke off with a pained *oof!* as someone pushed him viciously in the stomach. He staggered back, but only by a pace, colliding with another part of the mob. Angry hands pushed him back and he stumbled against Trix. She could hear mutters and shouts of 'Aliens!' And worse. She gripped her bag to her chest like a comfort blanket.

'We've got to get out of here,' she whispered, her voice sounding unnaturally thin and stretched. Fitz nodded, turning his head this way and that, looking for some way out. And it was only when Trix heard the creature bellow and the crowd begin to shout and scream that she knew that the people's fury had found its target.

Suddenly, Trix felt a hand grab hers, and she was pulled away from the centre of the storm, dragging Fitz in her wake. She couldn't see who it was, jostled and bumped by the bodies around her as she was. She felt resistance

in Fitz's arm, and knew that he didn't want to leave the creature there; knew that, however many people the creature managed to throw off or to kill, there would be others, piling in with sticks and knives and bottles. If they tried to help it, she knew too, there would be more than one body lying there in the morning. In spite of the fact that this could be the very creature that had attacked Fitz and the Doctor, Trix had never felt so cowardly, so ashamed. So *shit*. She let herself be half led, half dragged from the crowd, wishing she'd never set foot on this vile planet.

Chapter 10

'Should you be out on your own at this time of night?'

It took a few moments for Trix to realise that the person dragging her away was the woman with the coat and the beret. She didn't look round as she kept a firm hold on Trix's hand, and soon they'd reached the edges of the mob. Most of the people were heading the other way, towards the creature, and the two of them drew many looks – most just curious, but one or two openly hostile.

In the distance, Trix heard the sound of something like a steel band start up, carnival spirit juxtaposed uncomfortably with the threat of mob violence. She didn't look back at the people heading towards the night beast: most of them didn't actually know what was going on – but, like people across the centuries, they were sickeningly attracted to a crowd that promised a fight. Suddenly, Trix found her hand being grabbed again, and she was tugged around a corner into a shadowed doorway. She still had a firm grip on Fitz.

The woman let go again and turned to face her. In the dark, it was hard to see much of her expression, but she acted strangely nervous – yet with a surprising arrogance, her chin jutting out as she looked Trix up and down.

'Thanks,' Trix said.

'Although running out on that poor creature seemed a bit ungallant,' added Fitz.

'For what it's worth,' said Trix to him, 'I didn't like what they were doing to it either. But it could just as easily have been us in there.'

Fitz said nothing, and then suddenly seemed to remember that there was a third person with them.

'I'm Fitz,' he said with forced brightness. 'And this is Trix. Trixie Trouble, we like to call her –'

'We do not!' said Trix indignantly.

'Not to her face, anyway,' finished Fitz in a low voice, as if she wasn't there.

The woman just looked at them, her features hard and somewhat supercilious, Trix thought, now that her eyes were getting used to the darkness. Like almost everyone else she'd seen, the girl was black, although Trix felt she could see a hint of Maori ancestry in the shape of the eyes and the nose. No more than seventeen or eighteen, Trix thought.

'I'm Farine,' the woman said without preamble. 'What do you know about those creatures, the night beasts?'

Straight to the point, at any rate, thought Trix.

'Well they're clearly intelligent,' said Fitz.

'Whoah, Sherlock,' said Trix sharply. 'There's no "clearly" about it at all. It sniffed your hand. A dog can do that.'

'Yes, but didn't you see the look in its eyes when I spoke to it?'

'Some of us had the sense to be too far away from it for that.'

'So they're clever?' Farine said, concentrating on Fitz and ignoring Trix.

'That's a surprise?' asked Fitz.

Farine just shrugged. 'The others haven't done anything clever that I know of,' she said. 'Can they be trained?'

'What others?' interjected Trix. 'Trained? To do what? Sit up and beg?'

'Trix, Trix,' Fitz shushed her, and turned his attention back to Farine. Trix felt her teeth grating together. If Fitz thought she was going to let herself be put down, just so he could score Brownie points with this hard-faced little madam. . .

'And what's with everyone around here, anyway?' she asked, ignoring him. 'Since when were we the bad guys? I got the impression that the word "alien" around here is on a level with motherf--'

'What?' Farine cut in suddenly, as if she wasn't really listening but was annoyed at the fact that Trix was saying anything at all.

'They were rather hostile,' Fitz agreed. 'Is it because we're aliens?'

'"Offworlders" is the proper term,' said Farine, her face betraying her distaste as she continued: '"Aliens" is. . . well. . . not a nice word to use.'

'So is that why they were so unpleasant? Because we're "offworlders"? ' said Trix.

'Partly,' said Farine, clearly embarrassed by all of this. 'And partly because you seemed to be talking to the creature. And. . . ' She looked from one of them to the other, discomfort all over her face. 'And partly because you're white.'

'Oh, excuse me,' said Trix heavily. 'I'm sure I've got some boot-polish in my bag here. I'll just black-up, shall I?'

'Trix!'

'Well, it's all so bloody daft!' Trix felt tired and exasperated. 'We're somewhere in the future, and we're having to face the kind of thing that we thought they were just growing out of back on Earth.'

'You're from Earth?' asked Farine, her eyes widening. There was a childishness to Farine, thought Trix, that she didn't care for – not the sweet innocence of youth, but a brusque charmlessness.

‘Originally,’ replied Fitz, twinkling an irritatingly disarming smile at the girl. ‘But we’ve been about a bit since then. Where are we, exactly?’

Farine looked from one to the other, clearly amazed that they didn’t even know what planet they were on.

‘The planet’s Espero and this state and city are Saiarossa.’

‘And how old is the colony?’

‘Espero was founded two hundred and seventy-seven years ago,’ answered Farine, her voice tired and on the edge of whiney, ‘and by almost all brown colonists. That’s why they’re a bit funny about. . . you know.’

‘Understandable, really,’ said Fitz with a painfully reasonable nod. ‘If a little bit sad. But you don’t break down cultural barriers by segregation, do you?’

‘Well maybe not, Dr King,’ said Trix, fighting down the urge to slap him, ‘but we’re here now and unless you have a dream for these people, I don’t think the two of us are going to do much to bring the walls tumbling down.’ She sighed and turned back to Farine. ‘Look, I’m sorry if our presence here upsets or offends you. It’s not even as if we’re here by choice. We’ve lost a friend of ours and we were just –’

‘Did the creature understand you?’ Farine said suddenly to Fitz, as if Trix had vanished.

‘Oi!’ she said. ‘Excuse me! I am still here you know.’

‘I know,’ replied Farine with what Trix imagined was intended to be heavy sarcasm. Instead, it just came across as petulance, and Trix began to amend her estimation of how old the girl was. Downwards.

‘I think it did,’ Fitz said. ‘But obviously I can’t be certain. I’d need to see one again, in less trying circumstances.’

‘Through electrified bars would be good,’ Trix muttered, looking round. She could still hear the sounds of the crowd, roaring and chanting and shouting. And above it all, the incessant jangling from the carnival band.

‘We’ve got to go,’ said Farine to Fitz; whether she meant Trix, too, was a moot point. He glanced at Trix with an ‘oh, what the hell!’ look.

It was only then that Trix saw, standing across the narrow street, a small figure. Like they were, it seemed to be sheltering in a doorway, cloaked in shadow. But it was clear that it was just a child.

‘Hang on,’ she pointedly said to Fitz alone. ‘Back in a sec.’

Checking that no one was watching – and glad to be away from the two of them for a few moments – she darted across the road.

It was a boy: a small boy, probably not much more than nine or ten years old. He wore a big, loose jacket and his hands hung limply by his side. In the weak ochre light that found its way down the street, she could see that he was staring at her in a curiously blank way.

'Should you be out on your own at this time of night?' Trix asked, crouching down by his side. She didn't normally 'do kids', but she remembered rather enjoying telling *Cinderella* to the two princes recently, and anyway it got her away from Farine and Fitz for a moment. She wondered if the boy'd got separated from his parents in all the fuss over the night beast. It suddenly occurred to her that whoever the boy had been with might even have been attacked by the creature, or crushed by the mob. The boy nodded solemnly, his eyes fixed on hers.

'Where's your mum, or your dad?' She looked around. 'Are they here?'

The boy shook his head slowly.

'You're out on your own? In all this?'

He just looked at her.

'What's your name? I'm Trix.'

'Reo,' said the boy. 'Reo.'

Trix paused, wondering what she was supposed to do now. If she took him under her wing, she'd actually have to do something with him. Find his parents, his home. She thought of Anji and Chloe, and wondered what the two of them were doing now.

'Where do you live?'

He hesitated a moment, and then lifted one small hand and pointed. That was useful.

'I think I should take you to a police station or something,' Trix said. 'They'd know what to do with you – find your mum and dad. Shall we do that? You going to come with us, then?'

But Reo just stared at her.

'Are you with the soldier?' he asked after a pause. Trix frowned. 'The soldier?'

'The creature that your friend was talking to.'

'It's a soldier, is it?' Trix realised she was sounding a bit patronising, doing that 'talking to kids' voice that she so hated when she heard other people doing it. She tried to sound a bit more like she was addressing an adult. Kids liked that. 'Well, yeah, maybe it is a soldier. But my friend wasn't really talking to it. The creature was just sniffing him, you know, the way animals do sometimes.'

'D'you know where it came from?'

'The creature?' Trix shook her head. 'Do you?'

The boy looked her straight in the eye and with utter conviction said, 'Yes.'

'Well you're cleverer than we are, Reo. D'you want to come and meet my friend Fitz? You can tell him about the soldier and where it lives.'

Reo glanced over her shoulder.

'I can't,' he said.

'Why not?'

‘He’s not there any more.’

Trix turned sharply to look. And, of course, Reo was right. Fitz and Farine had gone.

Out in the middle of nowhere, Ake sat on the grass and stared at his fingers. They were normal again. Well, not quite *normal*, he knew. But they looked like they’d done before his encounter with the *wave*. He peered into the distance in the dark. The wave had moved on, spreading out, consuming and converting as it went. The air sparkled and tingled as though swarming with a multitude of tiny fireflies: the energy released from the conversion process, he knew distantly, unconcerned. He dosed his eyes and let himself be mentally subsumed, feeling the echoes of sadness and regret that had swamped him as the wave had rebuilt him.

Unfortunate though it was, Ake thought slowly, it would not be long now until everyone and everything on Espero had been converted. He felt his eyes prick with tears, tears that weren’t his own.

Chapter 11

'You're not planning on killing me too, are you?'

'Stay here,' said Trix to Reo, and cautiously went to the corner of the street, peering around it into the square to see if Fitz and Farine had gone back the way they'd come. But there was no sign of them. And as far as she could see down the narrow sidestreet, there was no one at all.

'Did you see where they went?' she asked Reo. He nodded, and pointed down the street into the darkness.

'Come on then – we might still be able to find them if we hurry.' Trix stood up and started off, only to glance back and see that Reo wasn't following.

'Come on Reo,' she said. 'We have to find them.'

'Why?'

'Eh? Because Fitz is my friend, and if I don't find him, I'll be stuck here on this planet.'

Reo just stared up at her with his big brown eyes. She sighed. She couldn't just leave him, could she? Could she? Maybe she could: it wasn't as if she knew enough about this place to be much of a guardian. But he was just a little boy, and considering the violence that she'd witnessed earlier, and the night beasts, how could she just leave him?

Trix felt a sudden sense of irritation at the boy's intrusion, and an ever greater sense of shame at her irritation. She thought of Anji again. Damn.

'Don't you have any friends?' she asked, trying a different tack. 'You'd want to find them, wouldn't you, if you lost them?'

'Not if they ran away from me like yours did,' he answered without a hint of malice.

Good point. She opened her mouth to say something clever and adult and sensible, but Reo cut in.

'I've lost something,' he said, his gamin little face looking up at her.

'What?'

There was an almost imperceptible pause. 'A toy.'

Great, thought Trix. She was about to get emotionally blackmailed into finding a hula hoop.

'We can get you a new one,' she said. 'A better one!' This parent stuff was easy, she thought – although not a role she'd ever want to play permanently.

'Not better than this.'

'I'm sure we can.'

Reo stared up at her, his mouth set in a thin, determined line. He wasn't going to start crying, was he? God, don't let him start crying.

'This is a very special toy,' he said with almost comic solemnity.

'Did your mummy and daddy buy it for you?' Trix was getting tired of this now. Every second that Reo kept her here was a few more yards' distance between her and Fitz.

'No, but it's very special. Very valuable.'

It was almost as if the child knew which of Trix's buttons to press. Granted, the concept of 'valuable' to a ten-year-old might amount to nothing more than, 'Mummy said if I lose it she wouldn't buy me another', but there was something knowing, almost calculating, in the way he said it.

Before she knew what she was doing, Trix had asked him *how* valuable.

'Probably the most valuable thing on this planet,' he answered with barely a pause, his innocent, guileless expression unchanging. What kind of a child talks like that?

'Go on then,' she said, her voice barely a whisper. 'Maybe I can spare you a little time to get it back.'

Despite Farine's repeated protestations that she was 'just behind them', or that 'she'll catch us up in a minute', Trix wasn't just behind them, and didn't catch them up. Only when it was patently clear that they'd lost her did Fitz start to worry. What worried him more, ironically, was the fact that he hadn't worried much before that. He tried to blame it on his amnesia, but that didn't make him feel better. Trix had been surprisingly patient and good-natured – for Trix, at any rate – since she'd found him, bathed him and dragged him into the city in search of the Doctor, and to have abandoned her now seemed the height of rudeness. Of course, he could always blame it on Farine, since she seemed to have been lying to him shamelessly about Trix's whereabouts, but he sensed, beyond the curt, selfish façade, a shadow of fear or anxiety in the girl.

'Since you've managed to shake Trix off so well,' he said heavily, refusing to give in to her pulling hand, 'now might be a good time to tell me why you're so interested in us. And me in particular. I don't think it's Mr Ego talking, but Trix isn't the one you're interested in, is she?'

'Please,' Famine said, a nasty little whine creeping into her voice, like a child sensing the imminent refusal of a long-planned trip to Disneyland. 'I'll tell you everything – just not here.'

Fitz looked around: they were in yet another of Saiarossa's innumerable little squares. At the centre, a waterless fountain squatted sullenly; two old

women, their arms folded resolutely, sat against it, swathed in black like extrusions of the shadows around them, and stared, saying nothing. Fitz could hear the sound of revellers, just a few streets away, but that simple distance lent them an unreachable, other-worldly aspect. A cat slunk past the women's legs, unheeded.

'No,' said Fitz. 'Tell me now, or I'm going straight back to look for Trix.'

He set his hands on his hips, realised how camp it probably made him look, and folded them instead. Until he caught sight of the women clutching their own bosoms, and shoved his hands in his pockets.

Farine's shoulders fell, a parody of a spoiled and sulky child.

'All right,' she said gracelessly. She reached up and pulled the beret away with an almost comic flourish, revealing tightly braided black hair, wrapped up in a fine, silvery coronet, a filigreed circle that looked like half a skull-cap.

She stared at Fitz with a 'Well?' look.

'Well?' said Fitz obligingly.

'It's me,' she said.

'Hello you.'

Fitz would have found it hard to believe that her shoulders could have dropped any further, but they did.

'Sorry,' he said. 'Am I supposed to know you?'

Farine paused and screwed up her face unpleasantly.

'The Imperial Princess,' she said with a hint of expectation. When nothing was forthcoming from Fitz, she added: 'Princess Sensimi?'

'Never heard of her,' Fitz said.

'It's me!' she said through clenched teeth. 'Princess Sensimi!'

'Ah!' said Fitz in mock realisation. 'Princess Sensimi!'

She gave a relieved little sigh.

'Never heard of you,' said Fitz.

'What? Where are you people *from*?'

'We have only just arrived,' he reminded her. 'It's been a bit hectic.'

'Well, I'm Princess Sensimi anyway.'

'A real live princess,' said Fitz after a moment, trying to inject just the right amount of awe into his voice, hoping that it would mollify her. She seemed to cheer up. 'Although,' he said thoughtfully, 'most of the princesses I meet end up trying to kill me.'

Sensimi's face suddenly looked shiftier and her eyes slipped away from him.

'You're not planning on killing me too, are you?' asked Fitz. 'Only it doesn't do much for the reputation of your lot if every one I meet has it in for me.'

'No,' she said. 'Don't worry. I won't try to kill you.'

Fitz flashed a smile at her. He wasn't convinced.

‘That’s good to hear. What would be even better is the reason why you’re so interested in us. In me.’

Sensimi glanced around and caught sight of the two old women, who were staring at them like vultures.

‘Come back to the Palace with me,’ she said eventually, ‘and I’ll show you.’

‘Promise?’

‘Promise,’ she said.

‘What about Trix?’

‘She’ll be fine,’ said Sensimi, too quickly.

‘I’m not just going to leave her.’

‘Oh all right – hang on.’ Sensimi pulled a petulant face and crossed the square to the two women – who evidently knew an Esperon princess when they saw her, for as she reached them, their eyes went wide and they began clasping their hands in front of their bosoms, dipping and bowing their heads, nodding obsequiously. Sensimi reached into her pocket and pressed something into their trembling hands, and came back to Fitz. He saw the women conferring between themselves before struggling to their feet. They waddled off the way Sensimi and Fitz had come, with a bit more bowing and scraping for good measure as they went.

Fitz caught a hint of a sneer on Sensimi’s face as she watched them go.

‘I’ve told them to go and find her and tell her to come to the Palace.’

‘And you trust them?’

‘They’re loyal subjects of the Emperor, my father. They love the Imperial Family. They’ll do anything for us.’

‘Uh huh?’ said Fitz, not at all sure that he shared Sensimi’s confidence in the faithfulness of her subjects. But maybe the great unwashed public had never actually *met* Sensimi, in which case, she could be right.

‘Happy now?’

‘I s’pose it’ll have to do,’ Fitz said. He waved ahead of them. ‘Lead the way, your Royal Highness.’

‘Highness will do fine,’ said Sensimi without a hint of irony.

If Reo hadn’t been a ten-year-old boy, Trix would have suspected him of leading her on. Despite the directness of her questions, he managed, somehow, to avoid telling her what this valuable toy was. He reminded her of the Doctor. And by the time she got to the stage of demanding, straight out, ‘What is it?’, Reo had become quiet and sullen and on-the-verge-of-tears stubborn.

Trix changed tack, and tried to find out where he’d lost it – and, again, his answers were vague or indirect. By then, Trix had given up all hope of being able to find Fitz: she assumed he’d be fine with the snotty cow – but if he

wasn't. . . hell, he was a grown man; he knew what he was doing. She wasn't his mother.

'Reo,' she said, still squatting down beside the boy, adopting her firmest-but-still-fairly-caring voice. 'If you won't tell me what this toy is, or where you lost it, then how can I help you to find it? If you don't give me a bit more to go on –' she sighed theatrically – 'then I'm going to have to find a policeman and let him take you home.' She eyed him up. 'Is that what you want?'

Reo looked back at her, his face disturbingly emotionless. If he'd been white with blond hair, it would have been *Village of the Damned* all over again.

'The soldiers know where it is,' he said at length, as if imparting a great secret. Before he could say any more, his eyes darted past her, over her shoulder, and she heard footsteps, away down the darkened sidestreet behind her; the kicking of a stone, the sound of it ricocheting off a wall. Laughter. Something in it made her edgy.

'Maybe we should go somewhere else,' she said. 'I don't think it's safe here. For either of us.'

She stood up and took his hand – and jumped, as suddenly, much closer than she'd have expected, she heard a voice.

'What've we got here then?'

She turned in the darkness. Three figures – three stocky, belligerent-looking figures – were silhouetted in front of her, limned by the orange glow of distant streetlights, demonic halos.

'She's one of the aliens,' said another – not the brightest-sounding of voices, thought Trix, which made it all the more disturbing.

'Yeah,' replied the first voice. 'She brought the night beasts with her – her and that other one.'

'Alien,' hissed a third voice, slowly and with deliberate menace.

'Yeah. Alien. Coming here with your animals.'

'Causing trouble.'

'Getting innocent people killed.'

'Normal people.'

Trix felt cold and sick. Almost instinctively, she moved in front of Reo, sheltering him.

'We've got nothing to do with the night beasts,' she said. 'They were here long before we were.'

'Yeah, 'course they were,' said one of the men.

'We've already dealt with one of your monsters tonight,' another one laughed coldly, rubbing his hands together.

The third one gave a low chuckle. 'Now there's just you,' he said. 'And your animal-loving mate.'

‘Got friends in high places, have you? Friends at the Palace?’ The man sneered and spat heavily on to the ground. They must mean Fitz. But what did they mean about the Palace?

‘Look,’ she said in what she hoped was her least threatening, most reasonable voice.

‘No!’ cut in one of the men. ‘*You* look’ The others laughed. It was bravado they shared, thought Trix, not bravery.

‘Get off on beating up women, do you? And little kids?’ There was a snort.

‘No,’ said one of them. ‘Just alien shit like you.’

And as one they moved towards her in silence.

Trix braced herself, ready to get kicked to death. Had it not been for Reo, cowering somewhere behind her, she might have tried to make a run for it. Out in the light of the square, she doubted these three thugs would have been quite so brave. She wondered whether she could grab Reo and get into the open before they got to her, but they were just a few paces away.

She opened her mouth to try the shaming thing one last time: three against one, bullies. But then she realised that they’d stopped moving. In fact one of them took a step backwards. And then she noticed that she could actually see their features, as if someone had turned on a very dim light.

‘Holy Mary Mother of God,’ said one of them in a barely audible croak, crossed himself, and took a couple of steps back. In the distance, Trix became aware of the discordant sound of a fairground organ, creaking out a jolly tune that the situation twisted into a macabre theme. She turned slightly at the noise, and out of the corner of her eye she saw where the flickering light was coming from.

Reo.

She stared in amazement, because, for a moment, she wasn’t sure that it actually *was* Reo.

Somehow he’d grown: he was now almost as tall as she was, his body larger, distended, as though inflated from within. His clothes remained the same, though, and were stretched comically tight over his body, the cuffs almost at his elbows. But the most bizarre change was his face. Whereas before he’d had the normal features of a little black kid, now his skin was strobing with a sort of zebra stripe pattern – the white areas, as they scrolled up across his face, emitting a soft white light, like the screen of a laptop computer. The bars formed a V-shape, almost – but not quite – symmetrical, their edges jagged and changing as they moved. Constant among it all were his eyes, two little pits of darkness, and his mouth, thin and determined. The light seemed to burn from within him, cold and relentless. She looked down and saw similar

patterns racing up his hands and wrists and arms, vanishing into his stretched cuffs, now almost at his elbows.

Behind her, Trix heard the sounds of feet, scrabbling on the loose, pitted tarmac.

‘He’s an alien,’ one of the men whispered. Trix turned to see them stumbling away, one of them tripping over. He cried out as his friends left him in the dirt. He picked himself up, tripping again, and hared after them. Within seconds, the three of them were sprinting down the alley, chased by the panicky echoes of their footsteps.

‘How the hell did you do that?’ asked Trix eventually, turning to see Reo’s body slowly shrinking, deflating like a leaky balloon. His features had faded to normal. He looked up at her, tugging his sleeves back down his arms as if nothing was wrong, a curiously adult gesture.

‘Help me,’ he said softly, ‘and maybe I’ll teach you how.’

‘You mean *I* could do that? Blow myself up, do the thing with the face?’ Trix’s mind reeled with the possibilities.

‘Given time,’ Reo said, his voice suddenly much less childish than it had seemed before, ‘you could do much more than that. That was just a spur-of-the-moment demonstration.’

‘So, what, you can change your appearance? Make yourself look like anyone?’ From the taciturn, little boy lost, he seemed suddenly transformed – thoughtful, adult. Cool.

‘Within reason,’ Reo said, a smile playing on his lips in the sodium gloom.

Trix felt the weight of her bag, slung over her shoulder. In it was an assortment of bits and pieces, her ‘disguise kit’ – a disguise kit that Reo’s little trick, assuming she could do it herself, could make completely redundant.

Since she’d been on Espero, since she’d left the TARDIS with Fitz and her bag, she’d been totally and utterly frustrated by the fact that she had no choice but to be herself. She could have changed her name, taken on any one of a hundred life histories, but, ultimately, it would have been a waste of time. As long as she had to stay Caucasian, she might as well stay Trix. She knew that she occasionally got a bit obsessed about the role-playing that she enjoyed so much – took on a new identity when her real one (whatever that was!) would have done the job just as well. But it was sometimes such a chore – the make-up, the wigs, the tinted contact lenses; remembering the details of her new history, practising the voice and the accent until she’d got them automatic, perfect. But there was only so much she could do with the little that nature had given her: lifts in her shoes could give her an extra couple of inches of height; padding and artful dressing could add a few pounds. And make-up, wigs, hair dye and contact lenses could ensure that even people who knew her well would pass her in the street unrecognised. But beyond that, she was

stuck: she couldn't – convincingly or comfortably – play a six-foot Amazon, or a four-foot child. She couldn't play a strapping man. Or a black woman. She'd learned to live within those limits, much as they irked her (and boy how they irked her at the moment!). But whatever Reo had just used to change his size and make his face light up... The possibilities buzzed around her head like excited wasps.

'OK,' she said cautiously. 'Show me how you do it, and I'll help you find your toy.'

Reo's eyes narrowed, weighing her up. Eventually, he nodded, and reached up to the neck of his shirt, where a button had popped loose. He unfastened a couple of the other ones and pulled the material aside.

Nestled on his chest, just below his clavicle, was something strange. Trix gently turned him into the light so that she could see it.

Y-shaped, and about the size of an outstretched hand, it looked blue or black – ribbed, sort of metallic, but in an organic way, as if the fine grooves that ran across the legs of the Y had grown into it when the metal had been still molten. She found her fingers reaching out to touch it and pulled them back, keen not to appear too eager.

'That's it? That's the shape-changing device?'

Reo nodded and started to close up his shirt again.

'No, wait,' Trix said, clenching her jaw. 'If I'm going to help you instead of looking for Fitz and the Doctor... can I have a demo?'

'A demo?'

'A demonstration. Can I try it – just to make sure it works for me.'

'I don't know...' Reo looked nervous, unsure. She wondered if he thought that she might not give it back once she'd tried it.

'Come on, it's reasonable,' Trix said. 'What if we go and find this toy, and then your device doesn't work for me?'

'It'll work,' Reo said.

'Just a quick go – and then I'll give it back to you. Honest.'

She meant it. Stealing from kids – even the most miraculous, magical device in the whole universe – wasn't something she thought she'd be very good at. Or at least she hoped she wouldn't.

Reo took a breath, and as his little hands moved back up to his neck, Trix tried not to punch the air in triumph.

'You promise you'll give it back?' Reo said, unfastening the buttons. She nodded.

'Scout's honour,' she said, and realised that that probably meant very little to him.

'OK – you'll need to open your blouse – then just press it against your skin like this.'

In silence, Reo unfastened his shirt down half way and, with a slight wince, slipped a finger under one of the legs of the Y-thing, sliding it between the device and his skin. Trix heard a faint, wet, sucking noise as it peeled away from his body. Already, she had her own clothing unfastened – the thing would just about fit, although its lower leg might feel a bit uncomfortable between her breasts. Not, she thought ruefully, that she had much of a cleavage. Well, not yet! She'd always had a rather half-hearted relationship with her own body – she didn't hate it, but often found it irritating. It was just too dull, too flat, too mousey – like her hair. Ideal for what she did, perhaps, but sometimes she longed for a bit more up top, slimmer hips – not to mention her nose. But with Reo's device, she'd be able to give herself a bit of a makeover: nothing drastic, nothing flashy. Even if it was only for a while.

He held out the device to her, his hand shaking a little: was he wondering whether he'd ever get it back? Trix suddenly realised that she'd been planning on a long-term future with this thing, despite her promise to him. Maybe he could get another one? Where *had* he got it from?

She took it from his fingers before he could change his mind: it was warm (hardly surprising since it had been inside his shirt) and a little bit creepy, like a three-legged starfish. It was only as she cupped it in her hand and pressed it to her own skin that she noticed that Reo was swaying oddly, like someone about to faint. He staggered back against the shop doorway, his eyes rolled up in their sockets, and he collapsed.

THANK YOU said a voice deep inside her own head, as Trix tried to move to catch Reo before he fell – and realised that she was completely paralysed. THIS WILL BE MUCH EASIER.

Chapter 12

'Space yacht? Intelligent rocks?'

It felt like someone had taken her and pushed her unceremoniously into one tiny corner of her own head. She remembered what Fitz had told her about his time in Russia, with that madman Garudin riding around in his body. This must have been how he felt, a passenger with someone else at the controls.

She could still see and hear (and smell) but with an odd leadenness to it all – as though she were looking through sunglasses and had earmuffs on. Her vision flickered, brighter, then dimmer, a couple of times – and then stabilised. But now it was brighter, brighter than she could have imagined. Like she'd always had a night-vision ability, and only now had she discovered how to turn it on. The dark alley around her bloomed into brilliant, silvery luminousness. Although she couldn't actually move her eyes, she could still see Reo's tiny body, slumped in the doorway, see textures in his coat that she hadn't seen before, beads of sweat on his upper lip, the mark on his chest where the Y-thing had sat.

What's happened? she thought. *Who are you? What's happened to me?*

I HAVE CONTROL OF YOUR NERVOUS AND MUSCULAR SYSTEMS the voice said, deep and clear but curiously androgynous. IT IS A NECESSARY FIRST STEP. SOON I WILL HAVE COMPLETE CONTROL OF YOUR CARDIOVASCULAR AND ENDOCRINE SYSTEMS.

But why? Why not Just let me help you? Who are you?

BECAUSE YOU *won't* HELP ME. ALREADY YOU ARE ATTEMPTING TO HINDER MY SUBVERSION OF YOUR BODY. IT IS POINTLESS. YOU ARE A DISTRACTION, NOTHING MORE. NOW THAT YOU ARE CARRYING ME, THIS IS MY BODY. YOU WILL BE ALLOWED TO OBSERVE FOR A WHILE LONGER.

Why? What do you want? What are you? Trix felt the panic rising in her, a stifling claustrophobia, oddly at a distance, muted.

I AM A MAKER.

A Maker? Of what? I don't understand? You're the device – the device I got from Reo? You were just using him? Hitching a ride on him?

NO, TRIX. I *am* REO. THE BOY JOSHUA WAS SIMPLY MY CARRIER.

That's horrible – you're talking about him like he was a bicycle or something. What did he think about it, or didn't he have a say? Was he just a passenger in

his own body like I am now?

HE WAS BORN, AS YOU WERE, AN AUTONOMOUS BEING. BUT ONCE HE BECAME MY CARRIER, HIS PERSONA WAS DISPLACED AND BEGAN TO FADE, ALTHOUGH THERE MAY BE FRAGMENTS OF IT STILL REMAINING NOW THAT I HAVE TRANSFERRED MYSELF TO YOU. IT WILL TAKE A WHILE – A FEW HOURS, PERHAPS A DAY – BUT ONCE MY CONTROL OVER YOUR BODY IS COMPLETE, YOUR PERSONA WILL CEASE TO BE NECESSARY AND IT WILL BE DISPOSED OF.

Oh God, please, no. She realised that she was begging, but her pride was the last thing on her mind. *Why? Why d'you have to do it? Can't we carry on like this, coexist? I can help you, help you find your toy or whatever it is you're looking for. I can help.* Trix was panicking. But just at the moment, it didn't seem like there was any other option.

No, TRIX said Reo calmly, and Trix got the impression that he (or she or it, she supposed) was busy behind the scenes of her body, doing other stuff as he talked to her. He sounded vaguely distracted. THAT WOULD NOT WORK. YOU CANNOT HELP ME – YOU WOULD ONLY ATTEMPT TO IMPEDE ME; YOU WOULD CONSTANTLY BE TRYING TO FIND WAYS TO REASSERT CONTROL. AND ALTHOUGH THAT WOULD NOT BE POSSIBLE, IT WOULD BECOME TIRING FOR ME.

Can't you find another host, another carrier? An animal or something – what about one of those night beasts? They're strong, powerful. Imagine having a body like that.

THAT WOULD BE NEITHER POSSIBLE NOR DESIRABLE. WE HAVE USED LOWER ANIMALS TEMPORARILY, BUT THEY ARE NOT IDEAL. THEY LACK THE REFINED CONTROL OF THEIR OWN MUSCULATURE, OR THEIR BRAINS ARE INCONVENIENTLY STRUCTURED. THERE ARE MANY REASONS WHY WE PREFER TO USE SENTIENT SPECIES. THIS CARRIER WILL SERVE PERFECTLY – BETTER THAN THE BOY, SINCE YOU HAVE ACCESS TO INFORMATION ABOUT THE SOLDIERS THAT HE DID NOT. ONCE I HAVE FULLY SUBVERTED YOUR BODY AND COMPLETED THE CONVERSION PROCESS, IT WILL BE A BETTER CARRIER FOR ME THAN YOU CAN EVER IMAGINE, TRIX.

Conversion? The word had a horrible ring to it, a finality that made her want to slam her fists against something hard.

I WILL RECONSTRUCT YOUR BODY FROM THE INSIDE OUT, USING YOUR OWN DNA, PHYSIOLOGY AND PHYSIOGNOMY AS A TEMPLATE. BUT IT WILL BE BETTER: I WILL IMPROVE YOUR MUSCULATURE, YOUR REFLEXES. I WILL REFINES YOUR DNA AND MANY ASPECTS OF YOUR CELLULAR AND BODILY METABOLISM. EXTERNALLY, YOU WILL LOOK LITTLE DIFFERENT – APART FROM WHEN I CHOOSE. I AM ALREADY REFILTERING AND REFINING YOUR SENSORY PATHWAYS, AS YOU HAVE NOTICED. WHEN THE CONVERSION IS COMPLETE, YOUR BODY WILL BE A PERFECT CARRIER FOR ME, CAPABLE OF ALMOST ANY HUMANOID APPEARANCE I CHOOSE.

The chameleon thing? Reo's changing appearance? That's how he did it?

THAT IS CORRECT. I WILL NOT BE ABLE TO CREATE EXTRA MASS, BUT I WILL BE ABLE TO RAPIDLY REDISTRIBUTE THE MASS YOU POSSESS TO MAKE YOU TALLER OR SHORTER, TO APPEAR FATTER OR THINNER. CHROMATOPHORES IN YOUR SKIN AND HAIR WILL ENABLE ME TO MAKE RAPID CHANGES IN YOUR APPEARANCE: HUMAN VOCAL COMMUNICATION IS LIMITED FOR US. THE CHANGES WILL ALLOW ME TO COMMUNICATE WITH OTHER MAKERS FASTER THROUGH RAPID PIGMENTATION SHIFTS AND PATTERNING. YOU WILL BE BETTER, TRIX.

This last was delivered perfectly flatly, as if Reo could not possibly conceive that his definition of 'better' was not one that she shared.

But I won't be me, will I? she said again. *I won't be me.*

THAT IS CORRECT the voice in her head said calmly. YOU WILL BE ME.

Please, implored Trix, feeling the muscles of her arms and legs rippling and twitching in a creepy way – as though they were being stimulated externally. It reminded her of adverts for those electrical pads that you strapped to yourself for a 'fitter, flatter stomach' and the way they made your muscles twitch and spasm. *Please don't do this – I'll help you, honestly. Anything. Please...*

WHILE I ADJUST TO YOUR METABOLISM AND MAP OUT YOUR CRITICAL PATHWAYS, IT WOULD BE BETTER IF YOU FORGOT THAT I WAS HERE, TRIX. THOSE MEN THAT ATTACKED US EARLIER – THEY HINTED THAT YOUR FRIEND FITZ HAD BEEN SEEN NEAR OR IN THE PALACE. THE WOMAN WITH HIM WAS PRINCESS SENSIMI. SHE HAS AN INTEREST IN THE NIGHT BEASTS, THE SOLDIERS – ONE I SHARE. AND FITZ CLEARLY HAS AN AFFINITY WITH THEM. GO THERE AND FIND THEM. NOW... FORGET ME.

No! shrieked Trix. *You're bloody kidding if you think that*

So, Trix thought as she set off down the alleyway, Fitz has got himself an invite to the Palace, has he? Well, he's not the only one who can ingratiate himself with royalty.

Behind her, unnoticed in the darkened doorway of the shop, the ten-year-old boy that had once been called Joshua lay silent as his heart and lungs, no longer under the control of the Maker, struggled to remember how to work. The pale light of the street silhouetted Trix, and for a moment, just before everything went dark and silent, Joshua wondered if it was Our Lady, come to take him home to Ma and Pa.

Out in the fields beyond the city walls, where the wreck of an alien spacecraft still smouldered and crackled, Ake hadn't moved. He knelt on the grass and stared into the distance, unseeing, unhearing. Unthinking.

The Doctor, seemingly ignorant of the biological laws which governed the ratio between the quantity of alcohol imbibed and the state of drunkenness

attained, was downing what was probably his tenth pint of beer, with no discernible effect. The two of them had moved from bar to bar, asking if anyone had seen two other offworlders. There had been one or two sightings, but nothing that seemed to lead anywhere. Calamee wondered whether they shouldn't be out patrolling the streets, rather than standing around drinking.

The crowd which had gathered around the Doctor when he'd first produced his credit chip had dwindled (mainly, Calamee suspected, because the locals hadn't been able to keep up with him, and had staggered off home to be sick or to sleep, or both). The woman who had been so enamoured of the Doctor had found herself another victim, and Calamee had started to feel a bit guilty about lying to her house-mother. No doubt Sierah would contact Craich's house-father to confirm that Calamee was, indeed, staying there overnight. But this wasn't the first time she'd lied to Sierah about her whereabouts, and the most she could expect was a severe telling-off and the threat of a grounding. But she was canny enough to know how to pull the right faces, say the right things, to get it all forgotten within a day or two. She had home study for the next couple of days, so she wouldn't be missed.

The barman was chatting to a customer who'd just arrived, his face all bright and eager, and judging by the 'Really?'s and the 'No!'s that the barman was giving back, something of great interest was being said. Calamee sidled up to the Doctor and shot a glance at the remains of his beer.

'How do you do that?' she asked.

'What? Drink? Oh, it's really very simp—'

'You know what I mean. You should be unconscious by now. What is it? Chemicals? Alien biology?' She pulled her best little-girl face. 'Tell me, please.'

'Why d'you want to know?'

'We might look backward here – hell, we *are* backward here. But we're not totally out of touch with the rest of the galaxy. It's like being a kid with her face pressed up against the window of the biggest, sickest sweetshop in town and watching all the others helping themselves while you're stuck outside with a bag of peanuts. We know the kinds of stuff that other colony worlds have, other aliens. Nanotech, bod-mods, implants, cyberisation, AIs – even intelligent clothes. It probably all seems so run-of-the-mill to you, zip-ping about space in your space yacht, talking to intelligent rocks, robots with multidimensional positronic brains. . . '

She tailed off, aware of the look he was giving her.

'Space yacht? Intelligent rocks?' He grinned broadly. 'You've been reading too many comics. But I'll give you the robots with the multidimensional positronic brains. Very temperamental, they are.'

‘You know what I mean.’ She felt very tired and very young and very silly. ‘Take me with you,’ she said suddenly.

‘What?’

‘Take me with you. When you go. Please.’ Calamee realised she was gripping the arm of his jacket – rich, dark green velvet, so unlike the synthetic fabrics and the plain old cottons that she was used to. It was as if the jacket, never mind its wearer, spoke to her of a world beyond utility, beyond school, beyond everything she’d ever known. A world full of sparkle and energy and... and *stuff*.

‘And what would your parents say to that?’

‘They wouldn’t mind. I could leave them a note. Tell them I’d be back in a few weeks.’ She stared up into his eyes, feeling her face flush. ‘Please?’

‘I can’t just go abducting people. Backward though you may think Espero is, I’m sure it has laws about that sort of thing.’

‘I don’t care. There’s nothing for me here.’

The Doctor tipped his head on one side with one of *those* looks. Like her mother. She knew what he was going to say next.

‘We’ll see.’

‘I knew you’d say that.’

He didn’t answer, but reached out and tickled the back of Nessus’s head. The mokey had woken up and was looking around, dearly confused. He sniffed, experimentally, at the beer on his fur and began to tentatively lick himself.

‘And what alcohol tolerance do mokeys have?’ the Doctor asked. ‘I’d hate to have him throw up over me.’

‘He usually hates drink,’ Calamee said, frowning at Nessus – who suddenly seemed to become aware that he was being talking about, and his licks became more furtive. She opened her mouth to try one last go at convincing the Doctor to let her go with him, but she realised that he was trying to listen in on the remains of a conversation between the barman and one of his customers.

‘Great bloody big thing it were,’ said the man, holding his hands wide to indicate the size of something considerably larger than himself. ‘An’ hairy. It went mad after these two offworlders bugged off.’

‘Excuse me,’ interjected the Doctor, smiling at the look the man gave him when he saw that he, too, was an offworlder. ‘Could you just go over that bit again? Something about a great bloody big thing? And some offworlders?’

The man, taken aback by being faced with another real, live offworlder, told the Doctor and Calamee all about the night beast, its curious affinity for one of the strangers and the animal’s demise at the hands of the braying mob.

‘And you don’t know what happened to the offworlders?’

‘They vanished pretty sharpish.’ The man suddenly gave Calamee a narrow, suspicious look. ‘Is he with you, then?’

She nodded.

‘Well, I’d be careful. Trouble, that’s what offworlders are, that’s what they’ll always be.’

And with those cheery words and a glowering look at the Doctor, he nodded at the barman, finished his drink and left.

‘I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again,’ beamed the Doctor, holding out his arm, on to which Nessus obligingly clambered. ‘I do love a warm welcome. Now come on, Calamee – we’ve got a monster, a Fitz and a Trix to find.’

Chapter 13

'Not that you don't have a very nice bottom, but... you know.'

Princess Sensimi almost squealed with delight as she opened the door to her suite and Looloo scampered across the floor and sprang into her arms, chittering and squeaking.

Fitz jumped back, caught by surprise at the sudden movement. Once he'd realised that it was just a pet – albeit one dressed in a frock that looked like a meringue – Fitz tickled it behind the ears as it clung to Sensimi, while he had a surreptitious scan around the room. The room gave the impression that its occupant was in her mid-teens: stacks of fluffy toys (some of which, Fitz noticed, were representations of Sensimi's pet – one or two looked as though they'd been the victims of psychopathic attacks, and one had had its head completely torn off). A dressing table was scattered with all the usual accoutrements of teenage-girl life, and stacks of miniature CDs or memory cards or whatever lay sprawled at the foot of a spacey-looking stereo unit. There was nothing of particular interest, despite the fact that Sensimi was a princess, although Fitz suspected that there was probably quite a healthy cache of jewels and trinkets somewhere. Trix would be kicking herself – although once she turned up, he expected that she'd find time to help herself to a few souvenirs.

'Right!' he said suddenly, turning on his heel to face Sensimi. 'Now would be a good time to tell me why you brought me here, don't you think?'

He plonked himself down in a luxurious cream leather chair and realised – incongruously – how sore his feet were. He reached up to run his hand through his hair and was surprised by the patch of missing hair at his temple. Sensimi, too, clearly noticed it, but didn't comment.

Sensimi's pet leaped to the floor and paused to sniff at Fitz's shoes.

'Looloo!' said Sensimi with embarrassment. 'Leave him alone!'

But Looloo did no such thing and had to be snatched up by the princess and unceremoniously dumped on the bed. Fitz watched as the creature took to suddenly examining her own private parts. Nice one, he thought.

'So...' said Fitz, stretching out his legs and crossing his ankles. Sensimi stayed standing, her mouth puckering up at the corner.

'That creature,' she eventually said, avoiding Fitz's eyes. 'The night beast. What do you know about it?'

Fitz gave a shrug. 'It's big – was big – and hairy and probably not the kind of thing you'd want around the house. Why?'

'Oh, just curious,' said Sensimi, still avoiding looking directly at him.

"Just curious?" said Fitz, beginning to tire of all this. 'Sorry Sensimi, but "just curious" doesn't cut it. Princesses don't normally dress up as servants and go wandering around the streets rescuing people and smuggling them back into the Palace because they're "just curious". Can we stop all this arseing around and just get on with it? Why such an interest in these night beast things?'

Sensimi reluctantly began to explain how the night beasts had been wandering into Saiarossa over the past year or so; how they hadn't actually done very much harm – apart from killing a couple of Esperons – and how they'd usually been subdued (i.e. killed) by the police or the Palace Guard. No one knew where they came from, although it was assumed that they'd come from some unexplored region of the planet, perhaps looking for food, perhaps drawn by the colonists themselves.

'But none of that explains why *you're* so interested,' Fitz said with infinite patience at the end of it all. 'You don't strike me as the zoologist type.'

Sensimi still looked nervous and awkward, so Fitz sighed, got to his feet, and headed for the door.

'Well, it's been nice hob-nobbing with royalty,' he said briskly, 'but I have friends to find and a memory to regain.'

'No,' said Sensimi suddenly. 'Please. Don't go.'

Fitz paused, his hand on the door handle, and adopted his most sceptical stance, arms folded, weight on one leg. He tapped his foot for added effect (although he wondered whether that was overdoing it just a tad).

'OK' Sensimi sighed, and her whole body seemed to droop. 'I'll tell you' She paused, clearly waiting for Fitz to sit down again, but he didn't, so Sensimi went on. 'When I heard that there was another sighting, I thought I'd go and have a look. My maid, Farine, lent me her coat and hat so that I wouldn't be recognised, and I found you and the creature. But this time it seemed different, odder. It didn't attack you, that was what was so odd. It...' She struggled for words. 'It seemed to have some sort of bond with you.'

Fitz nodded and leaned back against the dresser. 'I noticed that too. Animal magnetism, perhaps? New aftershave?' He gave a shrug. 'Maybe I was the first person that hadn't tried to stab it or lock it in a cage. Maybe it just liked my face.'

They both jumped as there was a sharp rap at the door, and it opened to reveal a trim, elderly black woman with a face like an attractive hawk, staring at them. Her hair was drawn back tightly from her face, her eyebrows arching dramatically.

‘Mother,’ muttered Sensimi under her breath, like hundreds of generations of teenage girls before her.

‘It’s late, Sensimi,’ said the woman, peering past her at Fitz who tossed her a cheery wave. ‘I don’t think you should be having strange men in here at this time of night.’ She lowered her voice, but not enough to stop Fitz hearing her: ‘Particularly not offworlders. We have quite enough of *those* around here.’

‘Yes, Mother,’ Sensimi said charmlessly. ‘Thank you, Mother. He’ll be going home soon. Honest.’

‘Anyway, your father wants to have a word with you.’

‘Now?’

‘Yes, now. Before he goes to bed.’

Fitz could almost hear the growl that must have been rattling around in the princess’s chest. She threw him a look of resignation and rolled her eyes. Fitz shrugged.

‘I’ll be here when you get back,’ he said. ‘Don’t forget our little chat, will you?’

A flash of something passed across Sensimi’s face as she left – and Fitz realised that, whatever it was that she was going to tell him about the night beasts, even a late-night chat with her father was preferable. As the door closed behind her, Fitz put up his feet on a footstool and closed his eyes.

Looloo was annoyed that Sensimi had told her to stay, and had left her in the room with the smelly stranger. She had sullenly begun to pluck the stuffing from the neck of the decapitated toy mokey, ignoring the stranger who was snoring noisily, when something else caught her attention: a tiny, buzzing insect that was spiralling around in the air above the bed.

With a screech of glee, Looloo leaped into the air, snatched at the insect and crammed it inside her dribbling little mouth – before it fizzed and sparked and burned her and she spat the nasty, crunched-up thing back out. It lay glittering on the bed, its legs twitching for a few moments before becoming still.

Mr Trove thumbed the spycam controls off. This was becoming more than an irritation. He sat back in his chair and drummed his fingers on the desk – both hands, both with the same rhythm. He was convinced that these newcomers, these aliens, whether knowingly or not, had the key to finding the device. How much of a coincidence could it be that the Doctor had disabled the spycam assigned to him and that the one following Fitz had also been decommissioned? It had been sheer luck that he’d heard about the night beast and had sent out a flycam to follow it, only to discover two more offworlders in the crowd. And, not a great believer in coincidence, he’d decided that they

were more worthy of following than the beast – which was clearly destined for an unpleasant death at the hands of the crowd anyway.

Were the offworlders all pretending to know less than they did? When Sensimi had managed to separate Fitz and Trix, he'd been torn as to which one to set the flycam on, but a moment's thought had confirmed that it ought to be the man – the one who seemed to have an odd rapport with the night beast. It was possible – although unlikely – that Fitz had some connection with the Oon, or perhaps even the Makers. If that was the case, then it was likely that Trix had, too. But she'd seemed less enamoured of the night beast. If he could be bothered later, he might dispatch another flycam to see if she could be found. It seemed unlikely that they were Oon agents: he'd had them under surveillance from the moment they'd left the soldier to its fate at the hands of the mob, and although there had been a clear reticence on their part to talk to Princess Sensimi openly, he didn't suspect that they were holding back anything of import from her. And besides that, the Oon wouldn't be so stupid as to employ a parallel operative. Trove's contract with them had been specific about his being the sole agent.

He had to admit that he was curious about the reason why Sensimi should have brought the offworlder back to the Palace. If it was true that *she* knew more about the soldiers than she was admitting, then perhaps he had misjudged her. Perhaps, indeed, it should be *her* who he should pay more attention to, and not that raddled, senile old father of hers. The mother and son, although he hadn't discounted them completely, were of minimal interest: Imperatrix Alinti, although believing that she held the reins of power here, was of no great use to him, and the son, Javill, was just an irritation, more concerned with supplanting his father as the prime male.

Of course, the Saiarossan Imperial Family had much less real power than they would like to believe: the real power here lay with the proper, elected government. But Trove had decided, as his ship had orbited the planet collecting data, analysing their radio and video transmissions, that contacting *them* and winning their confidence would be a long and laborious task. The Esperons were suspicious of visitors, isolationist in their outlook. Had he gone through all the proper channels, he would have been tied up in red tape and bureaucracy for weeks, by which time the device would either have been found by others, or would have been activated. And then it would have been too late. Saiarossa's Imperial Family, Trove had realised from the extracts his AIs had pulled from the hours of transmissions, would be perfect: smug, influential and arrogant. Just the kind of people he liked to deal with. They would be impressed with a few trinkets, a handful of technological toys and the promise of more. It was fortuitous indeed that the device had landed here instead of a more advanced world where he would have had less leverage.

And if it had landed on an uninhabited world, it would have been nigh-on impossible to find: the soldiers were perhaps the device's way of attempting contact with the locals. On an uninhabited world, the device would probably have just lain there. Trove, too, found it curious that, if the Doctor and his friends *had* responded to the same distress signal that had brought him here, their sensing devices were at least the equal of his own, which reinforced the Maker connection. But even if they weren't, and couldn't lead him to the device, they were worth observing closely: it may be that he could annexe their own technology for himself.

He'd seen nothing of Javill since their little chat earlier that evening. He smiled to himself as he remembered the barely concealed glee on the prince's face when he had tossed him the light ball. This whole family – indeed, he imagined, as he crossed to the dresser drawer to take out the remainder of his flycams, this whole planet – was laughably easy to buy off. He doubted that he'd need Javill's support, but it didn't hurt to sow a few seeds, no matter how barren the soil.

The man had been right; the creature's corpse had been removed. A huge and very messy stain on the pavement was all that remained. The Doctor crouched down, tutting and shaking his head as he drew his fingers through the drying blood. Nessus watched curiously from Calamee's arm.

'Is that healthy?' Calamee asked. 'The blood, I mean. Touching it.'

The Doctor didn't answer. Calamee folded her arms against the encroaching chill of the night, Nessus now perched on her shoulder, and smiled in what she hoped was a disarming manner at the young couple, arm in arm, who were watching them as they walked past. Suddenly the Doctor jumped up and paced over to a nearby wall and began examining it again. He dug into his pockets, pulled out something, and began scraping at the wall. Moments later he was back, proudly brandishing a small, glass jar with a bit of monster in it.

'As souvenirs go,' she said archly, 'it's not exactly up there with a musical dancing Blessed Virgin Mary.'

'It's not a souvenir. It's a sample.' He broke off and stared at her. '*Dancing Blessed Virgin Marys?*' He stuffed the jar into his pocket. 'Remind me to get one of those before I go.'

One minute he was the laid-back bon viveur; the next all dashing scientist and man of mystery. And the next... well, he was just a nutter. She wondered whether he was always like this, and whether this Fitz person he'd mentioned found it quite as exhilarating and draining as she was beginning to do. She glanced down at her watch – it was half past midnight. The idea of a warm

bed suddenly seemed infinitely more attractive than haring about the city in the dead of night looking for monsters. Or bits of them.

'It may be that an analysis of this will tell me something. Anything, really, would be rather nice at this point. I may be able to work out if the beasts are indigenous, perhaps even where they're from.'

Calamee gave him a look.

'Yes, yes, I know. It's all a bit woolly, isn't it? But at the moment, we don't exactly have much to go on. The only other line of approach is to go back to the Palace – which, I suspect, I'll have to do sooner or later. But for now, I'd rather like to get this analysed. A little knowledge is a dangerous weapon, you know.'

'Where, exactly, were you planning on having it analysed? In case you hadn't noticed, we're not many rungs up the technological ladder from Axista here.'

'Axista?'

'It doesn't matter,' Calamee said. 'Are you planning on breaking into the university or something?'

'No need for that,' he said, his mouth twisting into a smug smile. 'I've got all the equipment I need.'

Calamee looked him up and down. 'On you?'

'No no no – in the TARDIS.'

'Ahh... and what would that be?'

'That, my dear Calamee, would be my home.'

The streets were almost magically loud, the crowds raucous, and the air damp and heavier than it had been before. It was as if they'd been on a rather long trip away from reality. The Doctor noticed Calamee shiver and draped his coat around her shoulders. It was, of course, miles too big. Nessus climbed into a pocket, with only his eyes and the top of his head showing.

They paused to watch a troupe of street entertainers – still walkers, fire-breathers, jugglers and an elderly woman with a hug fake fish on her head who smiled at them as she passed by.

'You really should go home,' the Doctor said as the parade move on and the crashing of the huge drum at its head subsided to a soft heartbeat. He didn't look at her.

'And leave just as things are getting interesting? I don't think so.'

'Calamee...' he said, turning to her.

'Don't patronise me! If it wasn't for me, you'd probably be locked up in the Palace again.' She turned to him and looked up, fixing him with a stare. 'You didn't tell me you'd lost your memory before.'

'It was news to me too. Anyway,' he rubbed his hands vigorously and made a big show of looking around, 'memories are ten a pens, Easy come, easy go.'

'Oh no.' said Calamee. 'Oh no you don't. You're not wriggling out of it this easily. Why didn't you let Madame Xing put them back for you?'

He gave a sigh, knowing that Calamee wasn't going to let it drop.

'Because I'm happy.'

'With only half your memories?' She shook her head, clearly bewildered. 'How? If some mad old woman offered to give me back half my life, I'd jump at the chance.'

'And that'd be right for you. Listen, Calamee.' He gripped her arm gently through the loose sleeves of his own jacket. 'I appreciate your concern, but. . . I know what I'm doing.' He paused, not sure how much he wanted to say, how much he wanted to tell her. 'Something happened, Calamee. Probably something bad; certainly something big. And I lost my memory. I woke up on a train, remembering nothing of how I got there, where I'd been or what had happened. I spent a century – yes, a whole century – wandering around on Earth, making new friends, seeing things with new eyes. And then Fitz came along and told me that he was a friend of mine. By that time, I'd tried everything to get my memory back: psychotherapy, hypnosis, meditation. Even a few "experimental techniques" that might well have done more damage than good. But no matter what I did, it became clear that – for whatever reason – the memories I'd lost were going to stay lost. It took a while to come to terms with that, but you know what? Once I did, once I said to myself "Doctor – the past is passed" I realised that maybe, just maybe, it was a blessing.'

'No, don't pull that face, Calamee. I know that I've lived hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years. How many memories do you think my brain can hold, hmm? It's like I've had a spring clean, swept out all the dust and the fluff. I like who I am, Calamee. Maybe not all of me, and not all of the time, but generally, I'm very happy with who I am. I have good friends, I get to travel and help people. Sorry. . . I'm sounding like a Miss World contestant.' He paused, struggling to find something that would resonate with her, something that would make her understand how he felt. 'Imagine that you lived in a beautiful house with your family and friends. A gorgeous, beautiful house – full of light and laughter and videogames and chocolate. And then someone came along and said, "That's not really your house, Calamee. *That's* your house." And they pointed down the road to a sinister-looking mansion, all shuttered up. So, curious, you wandered up to the gate – and a huge, vicious dog came charging down the path, barking madly. You could see bats and vultures circling over the house. You're scared, but you're curious. You borrow a friend's telescope and for a few weeks you try to peer in through the dirty windows, trying to get a clue about what's in there: you can see shadows and

hear screams, late at night, from inside the house. And then the man comes back and asks you if you want the key. Only he tells you that once you enter the house, you can never return to the lovely, happy home you live in now. Oh, your friends and family can come with you: but what if they don't like your old house? What if they decide they don't want to live there with you any more?' The Doctor realised how hard he was gripping Calamee's arms, and let go of her. 'And you were stuck in that dark, haunted house – alone, forever. What would you do? Would you take that chance?'

Calamee looked into his eyes, her lips slightly parted. 'That's different,' she eventually said, and the Doctor felt her sag a little in his hands.

'No, it's not. And I think you know it. I like who I am. As Madame Xing pointed out, we recreate ourselves from day to day. The person I am now is not the person I was yesterday. And I don't *want* to be the person I was a hundred years ago.' He smiled at her solemn expression. 'All that teenage acne and having to tidy my bedroom.'

Calamee's eyes drifted away from his, across the rooftops, the towers and the spires picked out in the bronze of the streetlights and the silver of the stars. 'OK,' she said. 'Point taken. But I'm still not going home. Now come on. Let's find this TARDIS of yours.'

Calamee took his hand and the two of them strode off through Saiarossa's jubilant streets.

Fitz knew it was a dream, but it was no less disturbing for that.

He was standing in the TARDIS console room, facing the main doors. And he was naked. That wouldn't normally have bothered him, apart from the fact that he could feel something cool touching his buttocks. The fact that he knew it was another pair of buttocks was slightly disturbing. But knowing – in the way that you do in dreams – that they were the Doctor's buttocks was just too much.

But, of course, as it was a dream, there was nothing he could do. He was rooted to the spot, rubbing bottoms with the Doctor.

'Doctor,' he said in the awkward way that you do when you're cheek to cheek with your best friend. 'I take it that this is all very symbolic.'

'Don't worry, Fitz,' said the Doctor, a hint of a smile in his voice, from behind Fitz's head. 'I don't think it's what it looks like. Or feels like.'

'That's a relief,' said Fitz. 'Not that you don't have a very nice bottom, but... you know...'

'It's OK, Fitz. I don't think this is your subconscious telling you anything about your sexuality.'

'Pleased to hear it. So what's it all about? I mean, it is a dream, isn't it? It's not one of those virtual reality things. Again. I'm not suddenly going to find

myself swashbuckling all over the place, and challenging you to a duel for the hand of a fair maiden, am I?’

‘I suspect not, Fitz. Although, seeing as I’m just part of your dream, I wouldn’t know any more than you.’

They stood in silence for a while, as a herd of zebras quietly passed through the console room and vanished in the direction of Trix’s bedroom.

‘She’s not going to be pleased,’ the Doctor commented drily.

They stood in expectant silence for a while.

‘So,’ said Fitz eventually, trying not to notice that their bottoms had warmed up, ‘d’you reckon this is just a normal dream? Odd things happening that don’t make sense, and then I wake up. Or is there a point to it? Am I trying to tell myself something?’

‘Yes,’ said the Doctor, dawning awareness in his voice. ‘I think you are.’

Fitz suddenly realised, in a moment of bizarre panic, that he couldn’t feel the Doctor’s bottom any more. But that was because, somehow, their bottoms were merging, blobbing into each other. Fitz was sure that neither of them was moving, but it was as though they were sliding into each other, back to back. Already, he knew that their shoulders had melded, as well as the backs of their heads.

‘Aren’t you going to tell me, then?’ Fitz almost wailed as the backs of his knees joined with the backs of the Doctor’s.

‘Oh Fitz, come on! You’re a bright lad. Work it out!’ The Doctor gave a chuckle from a mouth that was now, to all intents and purposes, in the back of Fitz’s head. ‘And think yourself lucky.’

‘For what?’ shouted Fitz as his fingertips, his hands dangling by his side, blurred seamlessly into the Doctor’s.

‘For the fact that we were back-to-back when this all started.’

Fitz/Doctor shuddered.

If the Saiarossans were aware of the night beasts, they weren’t letting them spoil their fun. The Doctor felt a faint twinge of envy as he and Calamee, hand in hand, manoeuvred through the crowds. The smell of food filled the air, and every so often the sky would bloom with fireworks and the people craned their heads back and oohed and ahed, laughing and hugging as the lights faded. Sometimes, he thought, ignorance really was bliss. And maybe he was making more of a threat of the night beasts than they actually posed. Calamee didn’t seem too fazed by them – the one that had been killed tonight hadn’t been the first, she’d said, and few people had been injured by them. So he couldn’t explain the nagging feeling that somehow time was running out. Was there a whole army of them, just outside the city walls, poised to invade? Was that what he and Fitz had discovered before they’d been attacked and

their memories erased? So why hadn't they been killed? Surely a much better way to keep a secret hidden. Could that be why he had those healed wounds all over his body – a failed attempt to silence him permanently?

A brass band started up just across the street, and the Doctor winced.

He wasn't at all convinced, despite what he'd said to Calamee, that analysing the night beast's DNA would give him any great insight into them. But now that he'd remembered the TARDIS, he had an almost painful ache to see it again. Maybe being inside it would bring back some more memories. And, more to the point, maybe Fitz and Trix would be there, waiting for him.

But Miranda wouldn't.

Stop it! he told himself. How many times do you have to mourn someone? You want to be a martyr? You want to punish yourself for all eternity? Go right ahead, be my guest. But don't hang it all on Miranda's death. You've worked through that one. Give it a rest.

He shook his head and looked down, realising that Calamee was watching him.

'Prayer for 'em?' she said.

'Sorry?'

'Prayer for your thoughts?'

He realised what she meant and smiled.

'They're hardly worth a penny today, never mind a prayer.'

Calamee squeezed his hand and pulled him through the throngs of people lining the streets, the two of them slipping along like minnows, navigating the human currents. Such a shame, thought the Doctor, glancing up at the derelict buildings around them. So much hope, so much potential, squandered, crammed into a dry and dusty dead-end. But the human spirit would triumph in the end; it always did.

'You're very quiet,' Calamee said suddenly.

'Not much chance of being heard above all this,' he said, having to lean in close to her to be heard. She smiled at him, and the Doctor felt... something... Something odd inside himself. If he'd been a romantic, he'd have described it as his heart racing. But he wasn't, of course, and simply put it down to stress. Calamee turned away as they carried on walking, and he found himself looking at the curve of her neck, her smooth, brown skin above the collar of his jacket. He found himself examining her hairline and the way it arched over her perfectly proportioned ears.

What the hell is wrong with you? he thought suddenly, angrily, and let go of Calamee's hand. She turned sharply and checked that he was still following.

'OK?'

'Fine,' he said. 'Fine.'

* * *

If Trove had released one of his flycams into the night, and sent it straight up, high over the city and out into the countryside where the TARDIS had landed, he would have seen a strange but disturbing sight – a sight that would have made him rethink his plans and would have seen him leaving the Palace at the first opportunity.

Out beyond the city walls, where the acid glow of the streetlights gave way to the darkness of the countryside, he would have found a thin, vaguely phosphorescent circle apparently inscribed in the ground. Its centre was not far from where the Doctor's TARDIS had landed. But now it proscribed an area approximately a mile across. And it was growing. Only slowly, but if Trove had been monitoring the circle from the start, he would have noticed that its rate of growth was increasing. From a centimetre or so at the start, it had now built up to around a metre per minute.

And if Trove had then piloted the flycam a little lower, bringing it in at a tangent to the front of the circle, he would have seen that the circle was just the intersection with the ground of a sphere, a huge bubble, inflating faster with every passing second.

The scintillating glow from the surface of the bubble faded with its height from the ground, becoming undetectable at about five metres. To Trove's flycam, it would have looked like a huge, curved, diaphanous wall, sweeping across the ground. And whereas it had been just a few millimetres thick when it had started its journey, it had grown so that now it measured over a metre in depth. It was a wavefront – a wavefront of which Trove would instantly have known the significance.

'Ah!' said Tannalis in delight as his daughter peered around the door to his bedroom. 'Sensi! Come in, come in!'

She closed the door quietly behind her and came over to sit on the bed.

'Mother said you wanted to see me.'

'And so I do!' Tannalis leaned back a little and admired his daughter. She was, he knew, not the easiest of girls to get along with. He'd heard tales of her harassing and haranguing the Palace staff. No doubt her mother's influence. But behind the sometimes haughty face of his little girl, he often saw a sadness, a heart-breaking desire to be liked. He knew it had been hard on her, being the Emperor's daughter. Times had changed, and the Imperial Family no longer had the respect they once had. Which, he often reflected, was how it should be. Respect had to be earned, and he reluctantly had to admit that he and his family had done little to deserve anyone's affection, never mind respect. The Saiarossans had made a big mistake when they had created the Imperatorship for Benhamin Auburon. They'd been so desperate to thank him for his success in averting the Almost War, that they'd have granted him any-

thing in their power. And Benhamin, as Tannalis knew, had let power go to his head. So he'd asked for some sort of honorary title. Of course he'd known, through his network of contacts, what they'd offer him: 'president'. But a few words in the right places, a few promised favours, and before he knew it, the word 'Imperator' was being bandied about. 'No real power there,' the government had said. 'Just a name,' they'd promised. But Benhamin had known better.

Now, on the eve of his 120th birthday, Tannalis had decided that he had to correct the mistakes of the past.

'How's things, then?' he said. 'I've hardly seen you for the past week. This birthday fiasco seems to have swallowed up everyone's time and patience.'

Sensimi rolled her eyes.

'Mother's taken over completely,' she said. 'Again.'

Tannalis chuckled and squeezed his daughter's hand.

'I think that must be her mission in life. I have to hand it to her, she's good at it.' He paused. 'She should make the most of it while she can, Sensi – but don't tell her I said that!'

Sensimi frowned.

'Why? What's happening?'

'Oh, nothing you need to worry about – you'll be fine, girl. You'll be taken care of, believe me. I've got it all in hand.'

Her curiosity had been piqued.

'What'll be taken care of? Oh Daddy, come on – tell me!'

Tannalis glanced conspiratorially around the room and raised a finger to his lips.

'You'll find out tomorrow – but let's just say that I have a birthday surprise planned that'll make your mother explode.'

Sensimi looked shocked.

'Oh, not literally! Well... maybe if we're lucky.'

Tannalis saw her face pucker up and her shoulders drop as she started to slip into being a petulant little girl. He wagged his bony finger in her face.

'Now, now – none of that. Just remember: it's a secret. No telling that brother of yours, either.'

Something crossed her face, and she started to chew her lip.

'What is it?' he asked. 'You and Javill fallen out again?'

'Um, yeah...' But he could tell that there was something she wasn't telling him.

'Sensimi...?'

'Oh, Daddy, he's such a pig. He hates Looloo, and he hates me. And him and Mother are always whispering in corners.' Sensimi couldn't hold his stare.

'You think I don't know?'

‘Don’t know what?’

‘Sensi – I’m the Emperor. There’s not a lot goes on here that I don’t know about.’ He raised an eyebrow. ‘From the top of the Palace, right down to the bottom. . . if it’s happening, I get to find out about it.’ He fixed her with a meaningful look. He knew about Sensimi’s little secret in the cellar – and although he wasn’t quite sure what she was up to, he had a good idea. After all, if it hadn’t been for him, having a word with the Palace Guard to help Sensimi out, she’d never have managed it. She could be a sweet girl, but she’d never reach the levels of conniving and cunning that her mother had.

‘It’s not what you think,’ she said slowly after a long pause. ‘Honest.’

‘And what do I think it is, girl?’

Sensimi didn’t answer. He gave her hand another squeeze and yawned theatrically.

‘Don’t worry,’ he laughed. ‘Just you be careful. I know you have my interests at heart, but I think you’ll find that after tomorrow, you might want to rethink your little plan.’

The darkness outside Saiarossa swallowed them up, and Calamee let the Doctor take the lead. She wasn’t sure how he could be so certain which way this TARDIS was, particularly in the dark.

Nessus, safely ensconced in her pocket, seemed to liven up now that they were away from the noise and bustle of the city. He leaned precariously out of her pocket, his head darting this way and that, as if looking out for something. Even the Doctor seemed to notice.

‘He seems to have lost interest in me,’ he said. Calamee was concentrating on not stumbling in the dark. Overhead, a smear of stars cast a feeble light down on them.

‘He’s like that – one minute he’s all go, and then the next he just doesn’t want to know. He’s been more lively today than I’ve known him for ages. Maybe he’s picked up all this madness. He took a shine to you, though, and he’s not usually very keen on strangers.’

‘Animal magnetism,’ said the Doctor wryly. ‘Whoah!’

He pulled up sharply and it took Calamee a few seconds to realise that he’d stopped.

‘What?’

She could see that he was staring forwards, frowning in rapt concentration. She followed his gaze, but there was nothing there. Just darkness.

‘Can’t you see it?’

She looked again. ‘Uh-uh. Your eyes must be better than mine – what is it?’

He shook his head slowly. ‘I’m not sure. Smoke, maybe.’ He scratched at his chin and patted his pocket absently, as if looking for his non-existent cigarettes

again. 'I've got a bad feeling about it.'

Calamee shrugged. 'Not that I can see anything, but can't we go round it?'

The Doctor scanned from side to side.

'It'd be a long walk.' He opened his arms out in a V-shape in front of him, taking in a good hundred degrees of the countryside. Calamee squinted into the darkness again. After a few seconds, she thought she could see what the Doctor was talking about: barely lighter than the blackness around, it looked like a wide wall of mist, thinning out as it rose from a distinct line which, she presumed, was where it touched the ground.

'How far away is it?'

'Hard to tell – it could be small and a few hundred yards away, of huge and half a mile away. Nothing to measure it against.'

He set off again, more cautiously this time, and Calamee followed, batting away an insect from her face. For a moment, she wondered if it was one of the Emperor's flying spies.

The wall of smoke became more solid as they got closer, and Calamee soon started to get the impression that it was actually quite large.

'It's moving,' said the Doctor quietly, bringing them to a halt. 'Towards us.'

He glanced around and pointed into the darkness to the east where Calamee could just see the outline of a building, limned by the faint traces of light from the city. It looked like a barn or a big shed.

'Come on, Calamee – I've got a horrible feeling about this.'

He grabbed her hand and began to walk quickly towards the barn.

'What sort of feeling? I don't understand.'

'Neither do I – but trust me.' He smiled at her. 'I'm a doctor.'

Calamee could sense the Doctor's panic: he began to speed up as they headed for the building. She was surprised to see that the wall of smoke had become noticeably larger, and wondered if it was a fire. But although the weather had been reasonably warm, it hadn't been anything out of the ordinary. And the grass beneath her feet still felt soft. Too soft, for more than once she stumbled, swearing, as the Doctor broke into a jog.

'Whatever it is,' he said, sounding barely out of breath, 'it's getting closer.' She heard the keen edge of worry in his voice. 'If it wasn't for the fact that the TARDIS is on the other side of it, I'd be very tempted to turn around and run, you know.'

The barn was still some distance away. If it was a fire sweeping towards them, how much shelter would it afford them? It looked half derelict in the near-darkness, missing timbers from the walls giving way on to a pitch-black interior. The dim starlight showed holes in the roof.

Calamee glanced to her right: whatever this thing was, it wasn't smoke. It was too uniform, too flat, and there was no hint of fire at its base – just an

intensifying of the nacreous grey of the wall itself. Now that it was closer, she could see detail that hadn't been visible before: countless tiny sparkles flickered and died, like spinning chips of diamond. Every now and then, a brighter flash would flare at random, as though, as the wall swept across the countryside, it was swallowing up and burning insects.

They were at the barn, its huge door hanging carelessly. The Doctor bundled her inside. It smelt of hay, and the floor rustled beneath her feet. High above her head, she could see the stars peering down at her through the gaps in the roof. How she wished she were up there with them, instead of down here.

She looked around for the Doctor, and saw movement that she assumed was him.

'Come on!' he said. 'Up here!'

She crossed carefully to him, hoping there were no bits of rusty farm machinery, lying in wait for her legs. He found her hand in the darkness and pulled her towards him. There was a moment of sudden, awkward silence, before she heard his voice, close up in her ear.

'Go on, then!'

'What?'

He moved her hand and she found the rungs of a rickety wooden ladder, leading up to the hayloft above. Calamee glanced back towards the gaping mouth of the door, as the shimmering, pearly wall swept into the barn, lighting up everything around with an eerie light, like the marbling of sunlight reflected from the surface of a pool.

She felt the Doctor's hands on her hips, pushing her up the ladder. She slipped on the first rung, and she scrabbled madly to regain her footing, realising that if she didn't move faster, the Doctor would be caught by the thing. Suddenly, she realised how bad the Doctor's position was. She heaved herself up, arm by painful arm, and tried not to panic. Beneath her hands, she felt the ladder vibrating as the Doctor followed her up. Calamee risked a glance down – and felt her skin tingle as the wave swept over her. As it did, she heard the Doctor cry out – and the ladder shook as he fell from it, engulfed by the cold, grey fire.

The Doctor woke to find himself on a bed, head propped up with a pillow, in a silent room, illuminated by a spotlight above him. Looking down across his chest, covered with a soft, padded quilt, he saw an animal curled contentedly on his belly.

A cat. A ginger and white cat with impossibly green eyes. Or yellow.

He'd seen the cat before. No. That wasn't quite it. Someone else had seen the cat before. Someone...

He sighed inwardly, everything on the tip of his memory. He tried to relax, to let it all come back to him, but all he could hear was an odd, rhythmic clattering of metal. A clacking like the rattling of pebbles in a can? Or was it kitchen implements, tap-tap-tapping together?

He swallowed painfully and looked around to see if whoever had put him to bed had been kind enough to leave him a glass of water. Perrier, perhaps. He frowned – the phrase somehow had a resonance, an in-joke that he didn't understand. But beyond the quilted bed there was nothing. Not that the room was dark – just that there wasn't any room. As if... he didn't know 'as if' what and started to get irritated with himself for not having worked it all out. Obviously, he thought, none of this was real. The last thing he remembered was trying to get up the ladder behind Calamee before the wave had struck. All he remembered of that was a numbing, tingling sensation over his skin, and a grey fire burning into his eyes. He clearly wasn't in the barn any more. Maybe he'd been moved elsewhere, although he didn't think he'd actually been unconscious. So he was probably either in some sort of projection, inside his own head, or inside someone else's. He looked down at the multicoloured quilt – rather garish and tasteless, he thought, but comfortable, and vaguely reminiscent of something. Perhaps he *was* inside his own head. He eyed the cat – and the cat eyed him back.

'I don't suppose you're the one who's brought me here, are you?' he asked, not feeling too hopeful.

The cat gave him an indifferent look.

'Didn't think so.'

He looked up, but there was nothing there, either. Despite the pool of light that fell across the bed, above him was total darkness.

'Well,' he said loudly, 'I suppose I'd better get out of this bed and have a wander around. Is that what I'm supposed to do?'

No one answered him. This was becoming a little irritating. He tugged the quilt back from his chest and stared at what passed for his body.

A swirling, writhing mass of... something fleshy. Something organic. A strange melange of skin and his coat; shards of other colours – cream, beige, tweed even – darted through it, like minnows in a pond. Slivers of red and purple velvets, watery green silk and something that looked like black leather vied with each other, each new arrival pushing the old pieces back into his body. A living lava-lamp of flesh and fabric. An endless renewal.

The Doctor pulled the quilt back over himself, unwilling, in some way even he didn't understand, to look at his transmutation. There was a pain behind his eyes like toothache – a familiar pain, a warning. Was he being told to stay away? It reminded him of the pain he'd felt, a lifetime ago, when he'd tried to break through his amnesia using Dr Chester's 'Amazing' Cerebrotron

(Dr Chester's own quote marks).

Cautiously, he drew back the quilt again and looked down at his body, now almost stable – a watery shimmering, like a heat haze, hung over him, as though the changes that he'd seen in his body were temporarily being held back, in abeyance. It was as though someone – or something – was tinkering with him. It felt like his body, his cells – his molecules, even – had been pulled apart, reconfigured. Altered. But this wasn't happening in real time; this was a flashback, a condensed memory of something that had happened to him earlier, which, in turn, was a recapitulation of... of what? The Doctor wanted to growl in frustration, punch something... slap someone.

One minute his head was empty of everything, no clues, no hints as to what might have happened, and now, suddenly, he had all this stuff piling up, spilling out of his brain like spaghetti. It was too much, too fast. Maybe if just one of the pieces were to fall into place, the rest would follow likewise, dominoes tumbling one after another after another. He screwed up his eyes and tried to remember how he'd got his injuries. With a grim determination, he plunged back into the pool of memories that Madame Xing had stirred up, replaying the images of his leaving the TARDIS with Fitz close behind. And then the darkness. Heavy and painful and animal darkness.

He and Fitz had been attacked, and he'd been injured.

He looked at the cat which seemed almost to be nodding, although only its tail moved.

'You're healing me,' the Doctor whispered. 'Or you *were* healing me.' He felt the memory of alien fingers withdrawing from his body, a silent surgeon stepping away from the operating table. 'So what's happening now? And what was that wave? What's it *doing*?'

A swish of ginger and white.

'Ah...' With the slow expiration of breath came an image, a view through someone else's eyes. He saw a smoking, melted mis-shape, lying on dark grass. And then, overlaid on it as if someone was carefully rationing out what he was seeing, was a view of the barn in which he and Calamee had taken shelter, the vantage point high up above the roof. And then another view, inside the barn, juddering and swinging wildly. He could see Calamee, crouching at the edge of the hayloft, looking down – down at him, prone on the floor.

He felt his heartbeats slow, each one measuring out a little more of the extra life that he felt he'd been granted.

Swish. Beat.

Swish. Beat.

Swish.

The cat yawned, its mouth growing ever more impossibly wider until all that was left was

Beat.

Beat. Beat.

'Hello?' he said, wondering if he were alone now. 'Tain?' The name came to him out of nowhere.

'Thank God!' said Calamee. 'I thought you were dead.'

Chapter 14

'A spaceship powered by technobabble.'

'Been there, said the Doctor as he struggled to get up from the floor of the bar, 'done that, got the T-shirt.'

Calamee stared down at him blankly, Nessus peeking out of the pocket of the jacket that she still wore, pulled tight around her like a shield.

'Old Earth saying – oh my giddy aunt!' He clutched at his head where a troop of dwarves had suddenly decided to re-enact *Riverdance*. And not very well. 'What happened?'

He looked around – the wave had gone, passed out of the other side of the barn. The ground hissed and fizzed, a thin layer of grey slime sheening in the starlight.

'Is it safe?' Calamee indicated the floor around him. 'And what's "Tain"? Or who?'

'Not sure,' he said cautiously 'On both counts. The name just came to me.' He fought back the instinct to reach down and touch the substance that coated the ground – and then noticed that, creeping across the floor as if following the wave, the straw and weeds were miraculously being reinstated.

'Stay there,' he warned her, and gingerly crossed to where the plants were springing up. His feet sucked and squelched in the goo beneath them.

He fished in his trouser pocket, found another empty jar and carefully scraped up some of the stuff before screwing on the top and pocketing it. He stayed where he was and squatted down to watch the rebirth of the vegetation. Rather pointless, he thought, if that was all that was happening. The regrowth passed silently across the floor, following the wave, and within minutes it seemed that nothing had happened.

'I think it's safe now,' he said to Calamee, and stood scratching his head as she clambered back down the ladder and jumped nervously on to the floor.

'What was it?'

'A wavefront.' He shook his head. 'Perhaps an energy field of some kind.'

'But what was it doing? And what caused it?'

'I think I know what caused it – it's just a shame I can't remember. But as to *what* it was doing... I think it was breaking everything organic down that it touched, and rebuilding it. What's more puzzling is why it didn't do the

same to me.' He stopped, a horrible thought occurring to him. 'Unless it *did*, of course.'

Calamee shook her head. 'You'd still be a blob of slime, wouldn't you? It didn't look like anything happened to you when you fell – the grey thing just passed over you.'

'Now, isn't that odd? We have a phenomenon that seems, indiscriminately as far as we can tell, to break down and rebuild organic matter, and it leaves me untouched. Now why would that be?'

Calamee gave a heavy shrug and smiled. 'I'm the one with the questions, remember: you're here to provide the answers.'

'Oh. . .' The Doctor slapped his hand to the top of his head. 'There was something else. I had a flashback. Or maybe a dream – or perhaps it was a flashfor–'

'OK, OK – we get the idea.'

'I saw a cat. And something happening to my body, some sort of transformation. Clothes as well as me. And I saw. . .' His voice tailed off as he screwed up his eyes, trying to remember what it was he'd seen. He whirled suddenly, jabbing his finger towards her in the dark. 'I saw you – from up there. And I saw the barn from outside. And I saw. . . something else. A big, shapeless blob. I think it was a spaceship, a melted spaceship.'

'A spaceship? Where?'

He shrugged. 'No idea – but that's not the point. I think I was seeing things through other eyes. Maybe birds or insects. And there was a sense of something else there, another mind, a presence.'

He fell silent, listening to the sound of the barn's timbers, creaking gently like old lungs.

'The sooner we get to the TARDIS, the better. Come on. I need to know what we're dealing with. If this wave keeps on going, it'll hit the city in probably less than four hours.'

'But if it didn't harm you, what's the problem?'

They stepped out into the night air. It felt cleaner and fresher than it had done before.

'I suspect that I was an exception. I don't know why the wave didn't rebuild me – but I have a horrible feeling that when it reaches the city, it won't be quite so fussy. Now let's find the TARDIS.'

'Uh?'

Calamee just stood and stared as the Doctor breezed on into the room, heading for a six-sided control console at its centre. The room was huge, thought Calamee in wonder – some sort of optical illusion, probably. Holograms, perhaps. She wondered, briefly, how he managed to move so far away from her,

though, but put that down to more technical trickery. So it was totally reasonable that something the size of a portable toilet should be as big inside as her school hall. She looked up, and saw the arch of the night sky above her, dotted with stars. Did the TARDIS not have a roof? Calamee scanned down until she saw where the 'sky' met the pale, wooden walls, inset with recessed circles, and spotted the fuzzy line where they joined. Another hologram, then. Or maybe the walls were the hologram, and the open ceiling was real.

She shrugged her way out of the Doctor's coat and hung it over the back of a twisty wooden chair. Nessus climbed sleepily from the pocket and dragged his way up into her arms.

The Doctor was flicking switches casually, peering at little vidscreens set into the control panel. He gave a shrug, leaned back, and called out for Fitz and Trix over his shoulder, before seemingly forgetting to listen for an answer and dashing back to Calamee, alone and dazed in the doorway.

'Welcome to the TARDIS,' he beamed. 'My home. Like it?'

Calamee wobbled her head uncertainly.

'It's... big.'

'Everyone says that, he said, grinning, pulling out the jar of night beast jam from his coat pocket. Apart from the ones who think it's cool to pretend they haven't noticed.'

'Is it holograms, then?'

'Um? Oh no no no. Nothing so naff. Transcendental thingummyjig.'

'Meditation?'

'No, no thanks. Had a nap earlier – oh, I see what you... No.' He rubbed his forehead as if he'd suddenly remembered that he'd forgotten what he was looking for. 'Dimensionalism. Transcendent. Something like that.'

'Right.'

'Bigger inside,' he muttered. 'Pocket universes. Plasmic shells.' He wiggled his fingers vaguely. 'Bibblybobblybo.'

'OK,' said Calamee with a deep breath. 'A spaceship powered by technobabble. So where's this Fitz and Trix, then?' She glanced round, wondering if they slept in the comfy armchairs that she could see in one of the alcoves.

'Fitz!' the Doctor called, crossing to a doorway that Calamee hadn't seen before. He leaned through it before shrugging and disappearing. She could hear him calling their names. Nessus gave a squeak, jumped down from her arms, and went scampering after him.

Calamee shook her head, and wandered almost nervously over to the control console, glancing up at the 'sky', just to check it was still there. She'd assumed that this single room was all there was, but from the Doctor's disappearance, she figured out there was more. As her eyes played over the little brass buttons and quaintly retro displays in front of her, it suddenly hit her:

this was *real*. This was *really* real. The Doctor was from outer space, and – if she was a very, very good girl – maybe she could go there with him when he left. Her heart danced in her chest at the thought of it.

‘What d’you think, Nessus?’ she whispered. ‘Fancy travelling around the universe in this, then?’ Her eyes roved hungrily over the tempting rows of buttons and switches.

‘I’ll be ten minutes,’ came the Doctor’s voice, floating through the corridors of the TARDIS like a lost ghost. She nodded to herself and reached out to the antiquated controls. ‘And don’t touch anything!’ Calamee jerked her hand back and looked around to see if she was being watched. Just in case she was, she pulled a face into the empty air and wandered off after him.

The TARDIS, as she’d half expected, was considerably bigger than even the control room had suggested. Leading off from the alcoves that lay around the edge of the control room were several doorways. She took the one that the Doctor had taken, and after following a blood-red corridor, hung with *really* old oil-paintings of people who looked a bit like the Doctor but with huge, stupid-looking wigs on, she found him pressing buttons in a room so white and clean and cold that it could have been the inside of a fridge. She squinted as she stepped in. Something invisible faintly resisted her, like thick cobwebs, but she pushed on through.

‘What are you doing?’

He waved at the squat, white machine in front of him. Nessus sat on the top, gazing around in stupid fascination.

‘Analysing the DNA we got from the night beast. He seemed to suddenly remember something, and jammed his hand into his trouser pockets to bring out the other sample jar, the one he had filled with the goo from the barn. To the surprise of both of them, instead of the grey slime that they’d expected, the jar was half-filled with bits of straw and grass and weeds.

‘Remarkable,’ said the Doctor, cautiously unscrewing the top.

Calamee backed away.

‘Should you be doing that?’

‘Shouldn’t I? Oh, I see what you mean.’

He crossed to a large, open-fronted cabinet – white again – against a wall and stuck his hands and the jar into it.

‘Bio-containment field,’ he explained. ‘Like on the door back there. Should keep it –’

‘– away from your hands?’ Calamee finished dubiously. ‘I don’t think so.’

‘But we’ve already worked out that it doesn’t seem to affect me.’

It was too late, anyway: by the time he’d finished the sentence, the top was off the jar, and the Doctor was sprinkling the contents into the tray at the bottom of the cabinet. He pulled a face and poked at them disconsolately

before scraping some of them back into the jar, putting the top back on, and bringing it back to the DNA analyser. A ping sounded incongruously and with an alarmingly loud chattering noise, a stream of paper tape spewed from a little slot in its front. The Doctor snatched at it and read it, incredibly quickly, as it pooled at his feet.

Calamee opened her mouth to ask what it said, but he raised a peremptory finger before popping the jar of weeds into the machine.

He stuck out his tongue as he concentrated on pressing buttons on the machine, and then stood back with his arms folded.

‘Well?’

‘Oh, yes yes. Fascinating. Really fascinating.’

‘That’s good,’ she answered sourly. ‘I expect.’

A few moments later, the machine pinged again, and more tape jetted from the slot. The Doctor devoured the information on it greedily before going ‘Ha!’ theatrically, and sweeping back out of the room. Nessus sprang on to his shoulder as he breezed past. Calamee raced to catch up with him, finding him slipping back into his coat.

‘Oi!’ she yelled.

‘No time, Calamee – no time at all. We have to get back to the city.’

‘Why?’

He stared at her.

‘To warn them of course.’

‘About what?’

He rolled his eyes.

‘That your planet is about to be devoured. What else?’

Calamee stared at him. Nessus peered out of the folds of the Doctor’s coat and squeaked as if in agreement.

‘The wave?’ she said.

‘Well, we’re not talking about the rampant rise of capitalism. I don’t quite know how the wave propagates itself yet. If it’s dependent on energy released from the breakdown of chemical bonds in the organic matter it disintegrates, then it may all fizzle out once it reaches the tarmac and cobbles of the city. But there’s the rest of the wave to consider – the bit of it that’s just going to race on out across the planet’s countryside.’

This was suddenly too much to take in. He was talking about everything she knew. Saiarossa, Espero – her parents, even. It didn’t matter that this wave seemed to reconstitute things as it went: it still felt like the Doctor had just pronounced a death sentence on her planet.

‘Can’t we stop it? Can’t we do something?’

‘Hopefully, yes. But in the meantime, we have to get back to the city.’ He started heading for the door.

Calamee coughed pointedly. 'And we're going to *walk*?'

He stopped sharply and turned, his face puckered into a frown.

'We're standing in the most advanced spaceship that I've ever heard of, and you're planning on strolling casually back to the city?' Calamee said patiently, waiting for the penny to drop. 'And anyway, how are we going to get through the wave again? That trick with the barn only works one way. Think about it, Doctor. Going back, we're going to have to *run* through it, and Lord only knows what'll happen to us. You might be immune to it, but I wouldn't want to bet my life that I am.'

The Doctor sighed.

'Have you any idea how difficult short hops are in the TARDIS? Have you?'

She stared at him blankly.

'No,' he said suddenly, thrusting Nessus back into her arms and bounding up to the control panel, 'I don't suppose you have. Well. . . ' He began pressing buttons before turning to her, a broad smile cracking his face. 'It's a good job that *I* have.'

Trix had no difficulty finding the Palace. It was just about the biggest and best-lit building in the city. Even from the side streets, she could see its imposing, sand-coloured façade, illuminated by lights set into the square in front of it. It wasn't huge – not Buckingham Palace huge. But it had the whole side of the square to itself, and thus managed a certain gravitas. Some kind of tournament, with horses and men with big sticks, was being set up, and most of the area was fenced off. The rain had driven most of the punters away, though, and only now that it had stopped were they making their way back, jostling to get a good view. She made easy going around the arena, trying to keep her head down and not attract too much attention; although she wasn't quite sure why, she felt surprisingly nervous and vulnerable. Fitz's unceremonious dumping of her in favour of Farine still preyed on her, and she put her state of mind down to that.

It had been quite a surprise, though, to be accosted by the two little old ladies. For a moment, she'd expected to be mugged, and felt quite disproportionately sick.

'We have a message for you,' one of them had said, caught awkwardly between curtsying and bowing. That had been a turn-up.

'Her Highness Princess Sensimi asked us to give you this,' the other one had said, pressing something into Trix's hand. 'She says to follow her and. . . Fitz? to the Palace and to present this. They'll let you in.' And with a bit more bowing and scraping, as if Trix had been royalty herself, the two women had scuttled off.

Trix had opened her hand to discover a silvery credit-card sized thing with a holographic picture floating just above the surface. She'd had to find a street-light to read it by – and had been rather staggered to find that it was some sort of ID card, for, sure enough, Princess Sensimi Ruth Auburon – complete with picture.

A picture of Farine.

Trix *knew* there had been something wrong with Farine: something about how she dressed, how she acted. Amateurs! she thought. Her body language had been all wrong. It was obvious: 'Farine', despite trying to look like a normal, everyday person, had carried herself with an *hauteur*, an attitude, that suggested she thought she was better than everyone else.

But this just made it all the more puzzling: why did this Princess Sensimi want Fitz? Why was she taking him to the Palace? And, considering how snotty Sensimi had been, did Trix really want to be there too?

Oh... hang on, thought Trix, watching a couple of men trying to rope a particularly skittish horse. *Palace*. Palace equals money. Equals gorgeous things. Equals –

Someone jostled her from behind and she turned sharply – more sharply than she'd intended: the youth that had elbowed her jumped back in alarm for some reason and apologised. Trix just stared at him, memories of the three men that had attacked her still fresh in her head. For a moment, she wondered quite what had happened back there.

As the man sloped away, casting shifty looks at her, she turned back to the Palace. She'd been caught in the torrential downpour, and could almost feel the steam rising from her body, like the horses cantering around the arena. Never a great fan of horses – they'd scared her as a child, and still managed to make her nervous as an adult – she found herself strangely drawn to them, and spent a few moments watching them pacing backwards and forwards as their riders set up some sort of jousting match.

To her side, she caught snatches of a worried conversation about a brush fire, out beyond the city, but the general consensus seemed to be that the rain would have put it out by now. She looked up into the sky – a few shreds of cloud obscured the stars, and Trix felt a quite explicable longing to be out there, back in the TARDIS, away from this place. She shook her head and took a breath. She needed to find the Doctor and Fitz.

Farine hated the cellar – which was hardly surprising, considering what Princess Sensimi kept in there, and considering what she expected Farine to do. It wasn't helped by the fact that the princess had broken the main light switch so that Farine had to make her way down the steps in the darkness until she found the second one. The weight of the pan she carried was making her

arm ache, and so she was relieved to be able to set it down for a few moments while she felt along the wall for the switch. A rustling from the far end of the cellar made her stomach tighten, and she had to remind herself that the thing down there was safe behind bars.

The noise that suddenly issued from the old barrel storage room, just next door, was another thing entirely. Building up from almost nothing, it sounded like a whole herd of elephants, signalling to each other across the southern plains. As the noise rose to a crescendo, Farine abandoned her pan, abandoned her search for the light switch, and fled back up the stairs.

A few moments later, the door to the barrel room opened cautiously, and the Doctor's head poked through.

'The old girl must have a thing for cellars,' he said to Calamee. 'I think her melodrama circuit's turned up too high, you know.'

'We're in the Palace?' said Calamee, a rather hurtful tone of disbelief in her voice, somewhere behind him.

'Of course we're in the Palace,' replied the Doctor indignantly as he ushered her through. 'I told you: the old girl's rather good at these short hops.'

Calamee started to say something, but the Doctor shushed her, peering around in the gloom as his eyes acclimatised themselves. In the distance, and at quite some height, was a vague sliver of light – a partly opened door, he imagined. Yes, he could make out the steps that led up to it.

'Can you smell that?' he whispered.

There was an excited squeal from Nessus and the sounds of tiny paws skittering over the flags beneath their feet.

'Nessus!' hissed Calamee. 'Come back!'

'I think-he can smell it too.'

'What?'

The Doctor didn't answer – over on the far wall, he thought he could see something that looked like a switch, outlined faintly by the light from the door above it.

'Stay here,' he said, and gingerly made his way over. Moments later, the room was bathed in light from a single bulb high on the ceiling, and he turned to see Calamee staring in horror at something concealed behind a pile of plastic crates.

'I think you'd better look at this,' Calamee said.

Makeshift bars had been set in a doorway that led into another room. And lying on a pile of straw, just beyond those bars, was one of the night beasts.

Curled up on the creature's chest was Nessus, looking up at them both with bright, happy eyes.

Chapter 15

'The foot-stomping Tantrum Fairy was back.'

'Nessus! Come out of there!' pleaded Calamee, unable to believe that her pet was sitting on what, from all accounts, was one of the most vicious and fearsome animals on Espero.

'Quite touching, really,' said the Doctor, folding his arms insouciantly.

'No it's not bloody touching – it won't be if that thing attacks him. Doctor, please – help me get him out.'

'I don't think it's going to attack him, do you? Look at them, Happy as Larry.'

'Happy as what?'

'As a pig in shhhh... someone's coming!'

Calamee felt the Doctor grab her arm and drag her back into the doorway to the room where the TARDIS had landed. She hadn't quite got over the fact that it had landed *inside* the Palace. Presumably without drilling a hole through its roof. She wondered for a moment whether he was going to bundle her back in, and opened her mouth to protest – until she heard the sound of footsteps on the stairs.

She tried to peer around the Doctor, who was peeking through the crack he'd left in the door, but he seemed determined to hog the view. She could hear voices, whispers. Whoever had come into the cellar seemed as shifty as they were.

'Who is it?' she whispered in his ear, trying to get a look.

'Considering how coincidence seems to follow me around,' he replied wryly, 'I shouldn't have been surprised. It's Fitz!'

Fitz had had a feeling about this. From the moment Sensimi had come back and woken him from his dream about the Doctor's bottom, as they'd shiftily slipped through the Palace apparently trying to avoid everyone, right up to the moment they'd entered the cellar, everything screamed BAD. But he'd badgered Sensimi to tell him why she was so interested in him, and he could hardly bottle out now.

The huge pan of bloody meat on the floor at the foot of the steps didn't bode well.

'Cellars,' he muttered to no one in particular. 'Always with the cellars. Doesn't anyone do things in attics any more? And what's that smell?' he asked, realising that, along with the must and damp, there was another scent here – something warm and musky and alive. Quite pleasant, he thought. He dipped his head casually towards his own armpit, wondering if he needed another bath.

'You wanted to know,' Sensimi said sullenly, crossing to a darkened doorway that seemed to lead into another chamber. 'There. Now you know.'

She stood back, arms folded grumpily.

Behind the bars set wonkily into the doorframe was a dark, shaggy shape – and it took Fitz a few moments to realise what it was. And what was sitting on it.

'What the devil have you got one of those for? And is that Looloo on its chest?'

'Looloo?' Sensimi did a double-take.

'Looloo?' echoed a voice from a doorway in the other wall, making them both jump. 'I think you'll find he's called Nessus.'

'Doctor!' shrieked Fitz as his friend disentangled himself from the shadows.

'Who?' said Sensimi.

Another figure stepped out from behind the Doctor and squeezed herself past – a rather peeved-looking girl, younger than Sensimi, Fitz would have said, but certainly with a bit more spunk. Her short-cropped hair had been tinted bronze and complemented her dark skin beautifully. 'Is this the Fitz you lost earlier?'

'I wouldn't quite say lost – more mislaid.' And with that, the Doctor bounded over and gave Fitz a huge, rib-cracking hug, lifting him clear off the ground. For a moment, Fitz wondered if the Doctor was going to kiss him – and remembered the dream.

Eventually, the Doctor let him go, and, gasping, Fitz said: 'I thought you were –'

'Dead?'

'No, not dead actually. Just missing. Someone in the city said they'd seen you, but we couldn't find you. And now Trix has gone AWOL as well.'

The Doctor threw him a look. 'Probably on the hunt for the Imperial Crown Jewels or something. You know what she's like.' He gave a rather dismissive shrug and turned to Sensimi, who, simmering quietly throughout the reunion, seemed to be reaching the boil. 'And you must be...?'

'This is her Royal Ladyness Princess Sensimi,' Fitz introduced her. The Doctor held out his hand, but Sensimi frostily ignored it.

'And this is Calamee,' said the Doctor, introducing his own new friend. 'She's been helping me.' He paused and scratched his nose. 'I don't know about you,

Fitz, but I seem to have had more than the usual problems with my memory recently.'

'Tell me about it! Trix found me lying on the grass near the TARDIS. I think I've remembered most of it, but there's still a hole or two.'

'Snap,' said the Doctor grimly, and reached out to touch the bare patch on Fitz's head.

'Looks like we've both been through the wars. The same ones, I suspect?'

'Nice as all these introductions are,' cut in Calamee, 'is someone going to explain what *that* is doing in here – and why Nessus is cuddling it?' She gestured to where the night beast watched them silently, still reclining on its bed of straw. 'What if it wakes up and kilts him?'

'Calm down,' said the Doctor. 'Look at them – does it look like Nessus is in any danger? And I think you'll find that it's perfectly awake already.'

The beast lay on its side in the straw, its eyes following the movements of the humans as they approached. It seemed unconcerned – but whether it knew that the humans were probably not going to harm it or that the humans *couldn't* harm it, Fitz wasn't sure. Although when its eyes alighted on Sensimi, he felt sure he heard a low growl rumble from its chest. Nessus gave a little bleat from where he was curled up in the crook of the creature's arm, closed his eyes again and buried his head in the night beast's fur.

'Nessus,' whispered a dismayed Calamee, as if, with that simple movement, Nessus had betrayed her and gone over to the side of the enemy. She turned, and Fitz saw a shadow of embarrassment and anger colour her eyes, the Doctor wearing an understanding little smile.

'I don't get it,' she said. 'Why's Nessus in there with that?'

'That's Nessus, is it?' said Fitz. 'I thought it looked a bit butcher than Looloo. Maybe Nessus is related to the night beast.' He heard Sensimi make a tutting noise.

'How can they be?' she said. 'Look at the sizes of them.'

'Oh yes,' Calamee said scornfully. 'I keep forgetting that things have to be the same size to be related. Remind me to tell you about how babies are made some day.'

'Sorry!' Sensimi said archly – although it was clear she was anything but. 'I was just saying –'

'Well don't,' snapped Calamee. 'And what's this thing doing in here anyway? Don't you know how dangerous they are?' She glared at Fitz, as if it were suddenly all his fault. 'Haven't you heard the stories about them?'

'Believe me,' said Fitz, 'I've had first-hand experience of them.' He looked meaningfully at the Doctor. 'We have.'

'Not exactly house-trained pets,' added Calamee. 'These things *kill* people.'

'It's safe enough,' snapped Sensimi defensively. 'It won't attack just anyone! It's trained to –'

She broke off suddenly as everyone looked at her.

'It's trained to what?' asked the Doctor.

'Erm, it's trained to. . . be good. House-trained.'

Calamee took a step towards the princess, and looked gratified when Sensimi took a pace back, almost stumbling over the step behind her. 'As I seem to recall saying to someone else not so long ago – you can't kid a kidder. What's going on, Sensimi?'

'*Princess Sensimi*,' she said, trying to rescue some dignity.

'All right, *Princess Sensimi*: what's going on? I take it that this little pet of yours is a rather well-kept secret? Or is everyone in your family in on it?'

There was a sudden flare of panic in Sensimi's eyes, and Fitz realised that Calamee had hit a sore point.

'OK, let's do a deal,' Calamee said. 'You tell us what you've got this thing here for, and we'll promise not to land you in it with Mummy and Daddy.'

'Don't you dare threaten me. I could have you. . .'

'What?' goaded Calamee. 'Locked up, like you did with the Doctor? Beaten within an inch of my life?'

'Calamee,' interjected the Doctor. 'I really think we should be telling everyone about –'

'Shut up,' she rounded on him. 'If that thing harms a hair on Nessus's head, it'll be *her* fault.'

'As I've already pointed out,' began the Doctor, 'oh. . . hang on. . .'

His voice tailed off as he caught sight of something inside the night beast's cage. Calamee threw an 'I'm-not-finished-with-you-yet-madam' look at Sensimi and moved around to see what it was that he'd spotted. Lying half under the creature were some pale, grubby items of clothing. For a moment, Fitz wondered if the Little Princess had been feeding the creature on whole people, but then he saw the look on Calamee's face.

'That's one of Javill's ceremonial shirts,' she said. 'I'm sure of it. Look – there's the Imperial emblem on the sleeve.'

'So it is,' said the Doctor, tipping his head on one side to get a better look. 'And, unless I'm very much behind in young people's fashions, isn't that an underskirt over there?'

Calamee gave a grunt. 'It looks like your precious Imperial Family has more secrets than the rest of the world could have imagined, especially if Javill's taken to wearing women's underwear.'

'That's not Javill's,' spat Sensimi contemptuously, folding her arms in a sullen and rather pointless gesture of defiance. 'That's –'

She stopped sharply and Calamee gave a broad grin.

‘That mouth of yours’ll get you into so much trouble one day,’ she said smugly. ‘So whose is it?’

Sensimi didn’t answer.

‘Let me hazard a guess that it might be your mother’s,’ the Doctor ventured. ‘And unless you’ve been playing dressing up with it, the only thing I can think of is that you’ve been training it to associate certain smells with food.’ He stared at Sensimi, his eye sockets black pools in his pale face. ‘Training it to kill by scent?’ He waved his arms generously. ‘Or at least if not kill, then a serious bit of growling and scaring and stomping around.’ He looked at Sensimi expectantly. She, in turn, looked to Fitz, as if expecting him to rescue her. But Fitz said nothing – he was beginning to find her as tiresome as everyone else seemed to be doing. For a second, Fitz felt a pang of sympathy for the Little Princess, but when he realised that the Doctor was probably right and that she had been training the creature to attack her own mother and brother, that twinge evaporated instantly.

‘No,’ Sensimi said lamely, hugging her arms as if they might hold off the combined venom of everyone’s stares. ‘It’s not like that.’ She looked around, her eyes pleading. ‘They were... they were going to kill my father. They were! Honestly! Fitz!’ Sensimi’s desperate eyes locked on to him. ‘You believe me, don’t you? They were planning to kill him tomorrow. I heard Javill and Mother talking about how this would be his last birthday.’ The foot-stomping Tantrum Fairy was back. ‘I don’t care if you don’t believe me – I know it’s true.’

Her face was tight as a fist as she stared at them all. She must have felt more than a little betrayed by Fitz, as he stood impassively through her little speech, and he began to feel a bit guilty. She was only a teenager, for God’s sake. Didn’t all teenagers want to set ravening beasts on their parents? No, he thought. Probably not.

‘Well,’ said the Doctor with a deep sigh, when no one had said anything for an absolutely eternal ten seconds. ‘That’s as may be. Murder’s rather bad, Sensimi – but from what I’ve heard of your mother and brother, I’m not sure I blame you.’

‘Doctor!’ said Fitz, clearly unable to believe what he was hearing. ‘This is, erm, matricide we’re talking about. And, um, that other one. Brothers.’

‘Fratricide,’ chimed in Calamee helpfully.

‘That one, yes. I don’t think we should be taking this so lightly.’

The Doctor pulled a stage ‘ooh-who-rattled-his-cage?’ face at Calamee before waving Fitz’s objections away.

‘Anyway, before we get on to the *real* matter at hand, perhaps Sensimi would like to tell us how that poor creature got in here.’

‘I had it smuggled in a week ago,’ she said sullenly, obviously deciding that the truth might get her into marginally less trouble than more prevarication,

‘after I heard reports that it had come wandering into the city. I was curious about it. Some of the Palace Guard managed to catch it in a net and knock it out. I was going to tell Mother and Father about it, impress them, and then I heard Javill and Mother plotting and I decided to see if I could... train it.’ Her face started to look pleading again and Calamee told her to just get on with the story. ‘So I started feeding it and giving it bits of Mother’s and Javill’s clothing, you know, in the hope that it would...’ Her voice tailed off as she clearly realised how awful and calculating she sounded.

Calamee finished her sentence for her: ‘Build up an association between their scent and food? And then what? You planned to release it and hope it went for them?’

‘It’s a fair plan,’ interjected Fitz, ‘although I don’t for a minute think it would have worked. Look at it – this creature’s far more calm and docile than the others we’ve heard about. Rather like the one me and Trix encountered, actually.’ He stepped over to the bars of the cage and crouched down, dangerously within reach if the night beast should suddenly decide to grab him. But it didn’t: it just watched him, like a half-dozing cat, with its tiny black eyes. Nessus gave a little wriggle and adjusted his position before continuing his nap.

‘So what do we do with it?’ asked Calamee. ‘Let it go?’ She threw a sharp glance at Sensimi whose suddenly open mouth was, equally suddenly, closed again. ‘It doesn’t seem fair to keep the poor thing caged up here. And if we let it go, it might head for home, mightn’t it?’

Fitz hmmed. ‘And that’s somewhere we’d like to be, I imagine?’

‘Spot on Fitz! We let the creature go, follow it to its home, hope that’s where the distress call came from and wrap up this whole thing in time for tea! Oh, and sort out this thing that’s on its way towards the city.’ He sprang from his knees to full height and dusted off his hands. ‘Unless of course,’ he added a trifle sadly, ‘the gentleman standing in the doorway with two members of the Palace Guard has a different idea.’

It took a moment for what the Doctor was saying to sink in, and then all eyes turned towards the top of the stairs.

Chapter 16

'Not die exactly. Not really.'

The man tilted his head ever so slightly to one side and gave a thin little sigh.

'Doctor,' he said magnanimously 'What brings you back to the Imperial Palace so soon? I thought we'd seen the last of you?'

'Did you? Can't say the same about you I'm afraid – particularly since we haven't met.' He paused. 'Have we?'

Fitz was starting to wonder if he was going to meet anyone on Espero that he actually liked (apart from Calamee, who seemed decent if a bit mouthy). If he was, then it certainly wasn't going to be this bloke. He was Caucasian, strongly built, with a square frame and a rather blocky head. The swoosh of blond hair that crowned it looked somehow feminine, yet the man's voice was deep and decidedly masculine. A confident man, thought Fitz. A man that he could very quickly grow to dislike. In fact: *poof!* There – it had happened!

'My name is Mr Trove,' the man said, as if that explained it all, and descended the steps slowly and purposefully. His face was wreathed in a sardonic smile – the smile of someone who knows something that no one else does, and is determined that everyone is going to realise it. 'What brought you back here?' he asked simply.

'This is my home and I can bring whoever I want back here,' said Sensimi suddenly, out of nowhere.

'I think you'll find it's your parents' home,' Trove corrected her softly.

'I think you'll find,' said Fitz, 'that it's her parents' *house* – and Sensimi's home, actually.' *Yab boob! to you, Mr Trove.*

Sensimi glanced at Fitz and gave him an encouraging little smile.

'Yeah,' she nodded. 'What Fitz said.'

'Actually,' said Calamee, 'the Palace is the property of the state, so in a very real sense it's as much mine as it is anyone else's.'

Trove threw her an almost admiring look before smarming on: 'Well, regardless of whose home or house it is, I have full permission to be here from Emperor Tannalis himself.'

'Don't care,' snapped Sensimi (rather childishly, thought Fitz). 'These are my friends and I won't have you interrogating them.' She gave a considered

pause and her eyes drifted pointedly towards Calamee. Well,' she added sullenly. 'Apart from her.'

Calamee gave Sensimi the visual equivalent of a growl, and Fitz found himself grinning, before realising that they were probably all in a very serious position here. Trove, whoever he was, clearly had the Palace Guard on his side, and although they had Sensimi on theirs, Fitz knew who held the upper hand.

'Discussions about ownership of this magnificent palace aside,' the Doctor said, 'I take it that the fly camera was your little toy?'

'I have you to thank for its demise?'

The Doctor gave a theatrical bow. 'It was spoiling my meal,' he said apologetically, and began patting his pockets. 'I'm sure I have it on me, somewhere, if you'd like it back, although it might need a little repair work. They don't go well with custard, do they?'

'Keep it as a souvenir, Doctor. I have plenty more.'

The Doctor stopped patting. 'And, if my logic isn't at fault – which I have to confess it occasionally is, these days – I'm beginning to suspect that you're also the person behind that little lock-him-up-and-let-him-go charade when I arrived. Did you find out what you wanted to know before your surveillance device got its just deserts?'

Trove smiled again, but this time it was a harder, colder smile.

'I am close, Doctor. Very close.'

'Oh, I am pleased. Does that mean that you can tell us what it's all been about? I mean, if you're so close that the interference of us pesky kids won't stop you from getting away with it?'

Fitz grinned.

'If you mean,' replied Trove icily, 'that there's now nothing you can do to stop me, then sadly, no.'

The Doctor frowned. 'Would that be a "No, you can't stop me" or a "No, you *can* stop me"? These double negatives always confuse me.'

Trove took a breath and raised a hand to the two Palace Guards standing behind him.

'Lock them up,' he said. . .

'Don't you dare!' seethed Sensimi, drawing herself up. The sound of Sensimi's shrill voice must have woken Nessus, because, out of the corner of his eye, Fitz saw the little creature sit up and stretch on the night beast, and then amble casually over to Calamee. She pulled him up to her chest, hugged him painfully tightly, and began telling him off.

'I don't know who you think you are,' Sensimi continued to Trove. 'You're a guest here in the Palace.' She stared at the Guard. 'And you two...' Fitz suddenly felt inexplicably proud of her. A wannabe murderess she may be, a

spoiled brat, certainly. But it took some guts to stand up to Mr Smuggo. ‘You answer to my father,’ she said as imperiously as she could. ‘And to his family. Not to this... this offworlder. Now get out of our way.’

Sensimi was, thankfully for once, every inch the haughty Little Princess. She tipped back her chin, and flounced straight up the stairs past Trove and the Guard. Trying not to smirk, Fitz led the rest of them after her and out of the cellar.

‘Just one thing,’ said the Doctor airily as he paused in the doorway. Fitz turned, assuming he was talking to him. But the Doctor was looking at Trove. ‘You wouldn’t happen to have anything to do with this wave thing that’s heading towards the city, would you? Only I expect it’ll be arriving in a couple of hours, and I really think someone ought to tell the authorities before we all die.’

‘Did I hear you right?’ asked Fitz of the Doctor as they trooped back up the stairs after Sensimi. He glanced past him to see a very worried-looking Trove staring up at them.

‘What? Oh, the wave. Did I forget to mention it? Well, there’s a sort of energy wave heading towards the city. I expect it’ll arrive in –’

‘Yes, yes, I got that. An *energy wave*? Heading towards the city? And something about dying. All of us? And you didn’t think to *mention* it?’ Fitz stared at him in disbelief and the Doctor pulled a ‘sorry’ face.

‘I’ve had a lot on my mind recently. Or not, I suppose.’ He brightened up, and began pushing Fitz on after the others. ‘Anyway, I was exaggerating just a little. As long as everyone gets themselves up into their bedrooms – or attics, just to be sure – there shouldn’t be much of a problem.’

‘Nice to hear it.’ Fitz didn’t feel very convinced. But, on the landing above, Sensimi was standing, waiting for them alongside Calamee. Even beneath her skin colour, Fitz could see that she was flushed – angry about Trove, no doubt, and probably not in much of a mood to wait for him and the Doctor to have a cosy little chat.

Back in the cellar, the Guard hovered awkwardly for a few moments until Trove dismissed them. In silence, he stared back down the cellar steps at the night beast. It was eyeing him coldly. Trove descended the steps and approached the cage, making sure to keep out of the reach of its arms.

‘I know what you are,’ he whispered. ‘And I know where you’re from.’

The beast just stared up at him.

A few hours ago, knowing that this thing was here might have given him an advantage: he could have released it and followed it – like he’d heard the Doctor suggesting. But if what he’d also said about the wave was true, then

things had already progressed too far. It was time, for some high-level surveillance. He had to work out where the centre of the wave was. He paused, noting the open door that led into another of the cellar's chambers. What else did the princess have concealed down here? Standing in the darkness, far too big to have been carried through the doorway, was a tall box.

'How long?' Sensimi stared at the Doctor, her hands on her hips and her eyes and nostrils flaring. She'd clearly waited until she knew they were following, and then stormed back to her room, the others following on behind like straggling ducklings. The face like thunder she wore told Fitz that she must have overheard the Doctor's comment to Trove.

'It's hard to tell, really,' said the Doctor, glancing sheepishly at Fitz. 'It all depends on its acceleration. I'd guess at a couple of hours – three, maybe four.'

'Some... some *thing* is going to hit the Palace in a couple of hours and you've only just thought to mention it?'

'Oh, be fair,' the Doctor said, looking hurt again. 'Calamee here knew about it too – it's not all my fault.'

'Thanks very much, Doctor. If it hadn't been for me –'

'Oi! Oi!' barked Fitz as Looloo scuttled beneath the bed. 'Can we stop this? It's not helping anyone. This wave, Doctor. What does it do? Is it actually dangerous?'

'Ah, well, that depends on how you define dangerous.'

Fitz stared at him.

'Yes. Yes it is,' the Doctor said guiltily. 'Probably very, really.'

Calamee sighed. 'It seems to break down organic stuff and turn it into slime, and then the slime turns back into whatever it was before after a few minutes.'

'Sounds a bit ick,' said Fitz, 'but hardly run-for-the-hills material.'

'But it's why it does it that's puzzling me,' the Doctor said. 'It seems to clean up the DNA, simplify it – like with the night beasts.' He reached out and stroked Nessus's head as he snoozed over Calamee's shoulder, like a little hairy baby. 'And with Nessus.'

'Eh?' said Calamee and hugged him tighter. Looloo, on the bed, threw Nessus a sullen look and began picking at the front of her grubby dress, pointedly.

'Nessus. I ran the same DNA test on him when I was in the TARDIS, just out of curiosity. And he shares some very similar genetic characteristics to the night beasts. Which probably explains why he went wandering off: maybe he smelled Sensimi's little pet; maybe he sensed the similarity, the fact that they've both gone through the wave – or been touched by whatever caused it.'

'I'm sorry,' interjected Sensimi herself, her voice unpleasantly thin and strident. 'But there's a thing heading for the Palace, and we're all going to die!'

‘Not die exactly. Not really. And it only comes up to about here –’ He pointed vaguely into the air above them. ‘We just need everyone to go upstairs and they’ll be perfectly safe.’ He looked at them as if he was describing nothing worse than a spot of inclement weather.

‘I’m going to tell someone,’ Sensimi said suddenly, heading for the door. ‘Get the Palace evacuated.’

‘No need for an evacuation,’ the Doctor reminded her. ‘Just get everyone into their bedrooms. Tell them it’s an electrical storm – that’s close enough to the truth. And don’t forget to get the rest of the city warned,’ the Doctor added helpfully. ‘Oh, and try not to cause a panic. There’s nothing worse for a disaster than a panic.’

Sensimi almost ran from the room, slamming the door behind her.

‘She’s going to cause a panic, isn’t she?’ said Fitz tiredly.

The Doctor nodded.

Sensimi headed for her father’s room. She didn’t trust this snotty Doctor. He didn’t seem too worried about this wave thing, but then it wasn’t his planet, was it? She gave a little yelp as she turned a corner and ran straight into Mother.

‘Sensimi? What’s wrong?’

Sensimi scowled.

‘I’m going to see Daddy.’

‘He’s sleeping,’ said the Imperatrix. ‘I’ve just been in and he’s not feeling well – he needs to rest. Can I help?’

Sensimi chewed at her lip. She really didn’t want to share this with Mother, but she knew that Daddy wasn’t well. She sighed – it wasn’t as if the Imperatrix could do anything bad with the news of the wave: after all, she’d hardly want the entire city to die.

‘There’s some sort of electrical storm or something,’ she said, wishing she’d actually asked the Doctor for a bit more information before rushing off. ‘It’s heading for the city.’

‘How d’you know? The weather bureau haven’t said anything.’

‘It’s some sort of freak thing. A . . . friend told me about it. He says it’s safe if everyone gets off the ground floor, goes to their bedrooms.’

‘And who’s this friend?’

Sensimi bristled. ‘Just a friend, that’s all. He’s come in from the country this evening. He says it’s important and that we have to get the word out to everyone in the city.’

‘Does he?’ The Imperatrix looked dubious. But eventually she nodded. ‘I’ll sort it out, Sensimi.’

‘You’ll make sure that Daddy knows, that he stays in his room?’

‘Of course I will. And I’ll let the city police know.’

Sensimi wasn’t convinced: she knew what Mother and Javill had been planning for Daddy. But if he was asleep in his room, then he’d be safe. Sensimi wasn’t sure, but she wanted to get back to the Doctor and his friends: she didn’t want to miss anything.

‘OK, Mother. But tell everyone to hurry. My friend says it’ll be here in a couple of hours.’

‘Don’t worry, darling,’ her mother said. ‘I’ll take care of it.’

Trove frowned in puzzlement as he opened the drawer on his desk: the flycams should have been in there in a sealed container. He checked the other drawers. Nothing. This was worrying – he’d got through more of the devices than he’d expected. Other than the ones in the container, he only had two left. And if he wasn’t to spend half the night tracking down the artefact, he’d need more than those two to pinpoint the source of the wave.

A few minutes later, after checking everywhere the flycams could possibly be, Trove reluctantly had to admit that they’d gone. Stolen. He went back to his communications console and activated it. He glanced back to check that the flycam he’d positioned above the door earlier was still there, and then brought up its surveillance record for the past couple of hours. Within seconds, he spotted movement on the speeded-up footage and paused it. Javill.

Trove watched, with growing anger, as he saw Javill poking around in the room – checking under the bed, in the drawers. Javill found the flycam storage container and tried to open it – but then obviously thought better of it and left the room, the container still in his hand. Trove stopped the replay.

It was his own fault: if he hadn’t piqued the prince’s curiosity with the light ball, he might never have become greedy and come looking for more toys. That was unfortunate. Very unfortunate. He needed the flycams – they were his eyes and ears on Espero, and right now he needed, more than ever, to know what was happening.

He flicked off the console, checked his hair in the mirror by the door, and left the room.

Alinti went straight to her room and called up the weather-sat bureau. They were none too pleased to be disturbed, tonight of all nights, until Alinti frostily told them who she was. The man started blundering around, apologising – but she cut him dead and asked whether they’d had any reports of unusual weather or electrical storms near Saiarossa. Like an eager puppy, he’d rushed away to check, and come back with a very puzzled tone of voice.

‘It looks like there’s something,’ he said, and she could hear his fingers clicking on a keyboard. ‘I’m bringing it up now... now that is strange...’

‘Just tell me – what is it? Is it a danger to the Palace – to the city?’

‘Hard to tell – the resolution we get from the satellite’s not what it was. It looks like. . . there’s a bit of cloud cover creeping in, so I don’t have the full. . .’ His voice tailed away. ‘That’s so strange. . .’

‘For God’s sake!’ snapped Alinti.

‘Sorry, Your Highness, sorry. From what I can see, it looks like an almost circular front, centring around a point a few miles out of Saiarossa. It’s moving pretty slowly.’

‘That’s all I need to know, thank you.’ Alinti reached for the cut-off button and paused. ‘And by the way, you ignorant little man, it’s “centring on” not “around”.’ Without listening to his reply, she cut the channel.

So Sensimi had been right. A freak storm, tonight of all nights. Maybe it was an omen. Maybe God had finally heard her prayers. . . In her head, she ran through a list of people she could trust – Palace staff she could tell about the storm who would take her word for it that she’d told Tannalis. No need to disturb him. In fact, maybe later, she’d take him down for a walk in the courtyard. . . She briefly toyed with the idea of not bothering to alert the city police and authorities – but then if she was going to be Imperatrix proper, what would be the point of a city with no one to command?

The Doctor was pacing. Which was usually a good sign, thought Fitz: it meant that the game was afoot. He felt tired, but put that down to everything that had happened since they’d arrived on Espero and to the bizarre dream. He kept trying not to look at the Doctor’s bottom, but suspected that, in doing so, he was drawing even more attention to it. He caught Calamee’s eye, and she frowned at him. Sensimi had whirled back in, just a few minutes after whirling out, and told them that she’d told her mother and that she was putting the word out to the city police.

‘Now we need to pool our knowledge,’ said the Doctor, ‘and work out what’s going on – and how we can stop it.’

‘It’ll be a very shallow pool then,’ muttered Fitz. ‘No diving in the deep end.’

Fitz raced through the events that had happened to him, and the Doctor added his own tale.

‘So where’s Trix now, then?’ he asked – but to Fitz it sounded perfunctory, as though he felt he were duty bound to ask.

Fitz stared pointedly at Sensimi until she looked away. ‘Hopefully, she’s on her way here now,’ he said. ‘Oh, and I had a dream.’

Sensimi gave a little snort.

‘It might be nothing, but. . .’ He paused, suddenly feeling very silly for what he was about to say – particularly in front of Calamee, for some reason. He briefly described it to the Doctor, who nodded and hummed throughout.

'Mean anything to you?' Fitz asked.

Sensimi raised a knowing eyebrow but he ignored her.

'Nothing... specific. But...' The Doctor paused, his eyes screwed up thoughtfully. 'It has a sort of resonance. D'you know what I mean? It feels like it *should* mean something. Something on the tip of my memory, so to speak. Fitz, how have you been feeling recently – I mean, apart from being attacked, knocked out, etcetera etcetera?'

'Shell shocked, I suppose. Why?'

The Doctor shook his head and started pacing again.

'It's a shame Trix isn't here now. Has she made any comment to you about you not acting normally?'

'Nothing that stands out. Why?'

'Just an idea – but we really need an independent observer to verify it. Someone who knows us both.' He gave a huge shrug. 'But she's not here so we'll just have to carry on regardless, won't we? I started to tell you about the analysis of the night beast's DNA, didn't I? And Nessus's. Well, there's something very odd about it.'

'I wondered when we'd get around to that,' said Calamee, who'd plonked herself down gracelessly in a chair by the side of Sensimi's writing desk, and was fiddling with a gold pen she'd found.

'It's very clean,' said the Doctor, stressing the word in a way that suggested that this wasn't normal and hurtled off into lecture mode, telling them about 'junk codons', redundancy and all sorts of genetic safety measures. 'But the night beasts don't have any of that,' he said triumphantly – by which time, everyone was beginning to flag.

'So what you're saying is...' prompted Calamee with some circular, cut-to-the-chase, hand movements.

'What I'm saying is that the night beasts aren't natural. Well, not totally natural. It's as though someone's fiddled with their DNA, gone through it to remove all the junk, streamlined it.'

'Someone,' said Fitz. 'As in a person.'

'Or a thing,' added Calamee.

'Exactly!' said the Doctor with a grin. 'I'd originally assumed – as I think did the Esperons – that the night beasts are natives. And it's true that there are elements in their DNA that they share with a few samples of local plant and insect life that I analysed. But whoever, or whatever, has tampered with their DNA – perhaps that energy wave, since it seems to have a similar effect – has cleaned it up, has removed lots of the redundancies, lots of the safeguards. These night beasts were *designed* – designed to have a short life. I can't prove it – not without more evidence or more samples – but I get the feeling that

they're designed for particular tasks. The clincher is that, as far as I can tell, they can't reproduce.'

'Poor buggers,' muttered Fitz, trying to work out where this was going (or indeed, where it had all *been*.)

'So,' interrupted Sensimi. 'What are they *for*?'

'Soldiers, perhaps. Yes. Maybe drones, workers, guards – something like that. Although the one in your cellar doesn't look particularly aggressive.'

'Now you mention it, the one that me and Trix found was almost chatty. With me at any rate. And guarding what?'

'Ah... that is the question, isn't it?' The Doctor glanced at the clock by Sensimi's bed. 'Right!' he declared in his best Sherlock Holmes manner, one finger raised theatrically. 'Enough fannying about here. We've done what we came for – alerted the authorities. Now it's time to track that wave back to its source.'

Chapter 17

'I don't suppose you have access to a thermic lance, do you?'

Even Trix was surprised at the ease with which Princess Sensimi's ID card allowed her access to the Palace. She'd found that the best way to cope with the stares and the mutters from the crowd was to ignore them, and so far, it seemed to have worked rather well. Suspiciously so, in fact. As she'd pushed her way through the crowds around the jousting arena, her *excuse mes* and *can I just get pasts* had become fewer and fewer until she'd found herself just shouldering her way through with gritted teeth. The heat was getting to her, though, and she felt the skin on her face tingle and itch. She wondered if one of this ghastly planet's insects had bitten her – her lips felt slightly swollen, although there was no pain. And after a while, it was as though no one could see her skin colour at all. She'd finally made her way to one of the bored-looking guards at the front of the Palace, had presented the princess's ID card and had explained that she was expected. Without blinking an eyelid, he'd directed her to a side entrance where, upon flashing the card again, she'd been escorted through three sets of doors, into a lift, and up into a dimly lit corridor that simply reeked of high-class hotel. She could feel her shoes squelching as she padded down the carpeted corridor, and she cast covetous glances at the paintings – most of them depicting people that she imagined were members of the Imperial Family, Sensimi included. Too big to fit in her bag though.

'This is Her Royal Highness's suite,' said the bowing and scraping little man who'd accompanied her, before scuttling away. What was it with these people? Didn't they know what a snotty little cow Sensimi really was? Trix touched her face again, realising that the tingling and swelling seemed to have gone down. The door was ajar, a light on inside. She knocked gently and pushed it open.

The room was empty. Decorated in the same bland but vaguely tasteless way that the rest of the Palace seemed to have been done in, it was clearly the room of a teenage girl – a rather anal teenage girl, perhaps (all the clothes were folded neatly in piles, or else hung in the capacious wardrobes – she couldn't resist a peek).

As she straightened up from checking out one of the chests of drawers, she

heard a tentative little *peep* from behind her, and turned sharply to see – well, it looked like a tiny, slightly ginger monkey – as if she hadn't had her fill of monkeys and apes recently. It resembled a baby orang-utan, only with shorter fur and a much flatter face, was sitting on the bed, its legs splayed, scratching itself in a most unpleasant manner. The worst thing about it, though, was the fact that it was dressed up in a grubby white frock, all lace and bits of sparkle. Yellow stains dotted the front of it.

'Erm,' said Trix tentatively, remembering that she was on an alien planet, and that this might well be the most intelligent creature she'd come across today. 'Hello – I'm Trix.'

The thing looked up at her and squeaked, showing tiny yellow teeth.

'I'm looking for Princess Sensimi.'

It just stared, and resumed its intimate scratching.

Right, thought Trix. Probably *not* intelligent then. Maybe about Fitz-level with the scratching. Trix saw a host of photographs fastened inexpertly to the wall above the bed – many of them were of Sensimi, either alone or clutching the creature to her. For a moment, Trix forgot what a little cow Sensimi had been. These were the photos of a rather sad, rather friendless girl: where were the boyfriends, the girlfriends? The just friends? One of them showed the monkey-thing sitting ungraciously next to a large, pink cake iced with the words 'Looloo's First Birthday'. Looloo? *Looloo* for God's sake! It made Trix want to shout! It was hard, though, to forget the stony-faced little madam who'd dragged Fitz away and left her stranded in the city. Maybe she'd been hoping that Fitz could be her new best friend. Trix shuddered.

Suddenly, from the corridor, she heard voices. She tiptoed across the room, ignoring the plaintive squeak that came from Looloo, closed the door until just a crack remained and turned off the light.

The voices belonged to an arrogant woman and an oily sounding man. She could almost hear the squelching of his palms rubbing together as he spoke. His voice was much quieter, as if he'd discovered that stealthiness and creeping around paid the best dividends in life; the woman's voice, by complete contrast, was loud and harsh, as though she was absolute Queen and Ruler of the Whole Bloody Universe and didn't care who knew it. Lovely couple, thought Trix. Must invite them round for dinner. Something told her that these two were rather high up: maybe Sensimi's mother and father, although the man sounded considerably younger than the woman. Didn't Sensimi have a brother? Where had she heard that?

'...probably dressing it in another doll's outfit,' the man's voice said – the first words Trix had actually been able to make out.

'Ghastly creature,' cawed the woman. 'I don't know why I ever let your sister bring it in here in the first place. My first task as Imperatrix proper will

be to issue an Imperial Edict to make them illegal. Public health or something. Have them all shot.'

The man chuckled fawningly. So the woman was definitely the Imperatrix – and the man Sensimi's brother.

'Have you briefed the chef?' the Imperatrix asked suddenly, and through the crack, Trix could see them: it was, judging by the resemblance to some of the portraits she'd seen in the corridors, the Imperatrix, looking every inch the evil-sounding old harridan – short and skinny, with a cascade of dark hair and ruby red lips. Sensimi's brother, half-stooped in supplication and – joy! – with his hands clasped together in mid-rub, was probably around Trix's age. His skin was rather lighter than Sensimi's, and, to Trix's surprise, he wasn't half bad-looking. She'd hoped, somehow – expected – that his physiognomy would have matched his wheedling tones. But if he'd just stood a little more upright and stopped doing a Uriah Heep with his hands, he could have been quite a looker.

'Everything's on hold while this storm passes,' he said, 'but I've given her a list of Father's favourite dishes, and –' his lips twisted cruelly – 'I've given her some of that special herb mix that he loves so much.'

The Imperatrix shifted so that Trix could only see the back of her head, but she could still hear every word the woman spoke.

'Good – and I take it you've seen to it that she has special transport home... after the dinner?'

The man inclined his head in a nod, as if desperately trying to curry favour with a superior, not his mother.

'Good boy, Javill.' She reached out and cupped the side of Javill's face with her thin fingers, nails like scarlet talons, stroking his skin. Trix felt her stomach turn as Javill brought up his own hand, took his mother's, and kissed the palm, his eyes never leaving his mother's face.

Suddenly, from behind her, there came a squeaky little growl. Looloo was snoring.

'What was that?' asked the Imperatrix.

'It'll be that animal,' Javill said, turning away from the door.

'You're sure she's not in there – Sensimi, I mean?'

'Of course not – she only ever leaves the door open when she's not around so that Looloo can wander around. You don't think I'd have let us have that conversation right here if she'd been in, do you?'

'I don't know...' she said silkily. 'You might have enjoyed it. Now make sure you stay upstairs. There's no telling when this storm will hit...'

Trix had pulled back as the woman had turned, and now stood in the darkness behind the door. A few moments later, she heard them talking again. By this time, damn them, they'd moved away, and Trix couldn't tell what they

were saying. She waited another minute and then glanced through the crack, just to be sure. There was no sign of them. She opened the door and slipped out. The corridor was deserted.

Of course, Trix didn't have a clue what she was supposed to do next: she assumed that Fitz was somewhere in the Palace, and since she'd been given Sensimi's ID card, she didn't feel that she had to skulk about *too* much. Small though the Palace was – for a palace – without even the vaguest ideas of where he might be, it could take her hours to find him. She felt a sudden, inexplicable longing for Fitz. She really *must* be in a bad way.

So she had two choices: she could blunder about on the off-chance that she'd find him without being caught by the Wicked Witch of the West and Dopey – and probably executed for their entertainment, no doubt after a lengthy spell involving needles and electrodes and pain, or she could sit in Sensimi's room, amuse herself with Looloo, and wait.

No contest.

So, her feet squelching just a little bit less now, Trix drew herself up and set off down the corridor, pausing to examine the vases and tasteless statues that sat on tables in every alcove, wondering whether any of them were worth the effort of stealing. Probably not. Not that she needed the money, of course, but taking interesting things was somewhere between a hobby and an obsession with her. She froze beside a table bearing a particularly tacky piece of crystal in the shape of an eagle (she never wanted to see anything made of crystal ever again!) as she heard voices from the right turn in the corridor just up ahead. Trix looked around and realised that she was just a few feet away from a rather impressive-looking door. She pressed her ear to the ornately carved wood but she couldn't hear anything. Slowly and carefully, she turned the door handle and opened it just a crack, her body tensed for the inevitable squealing hinge. But it moved silently and she put her face to the gap: all she could see was a bit of wall, papered in dark purple with some gold swirly patterns on it. She pushed it a little further, listening intently. A dim lamp was on in the room, that much she could tell.

'If that's you, Trove, you can just clear off and let me sleep!' someone bellowed, and Trix jumped. It sounded like an old man. The Imperator?

'Did you hear me?' came the voice again. Damn! What should she do? Just close the door and go, leaving him to think that it *had* been this Trove person? Then she heard the voices from the corridor again, getting louder. Double damn! Was it the Imperatrix and her son again? She shrugged to herself: come on Trix – how difficult could it be to pretend to be a maid or a serving girl or whatever backward setup they had here? She'd been complaining to herself that she hadn't had a chance to be anyone else since she'd got here, and the room was obviously dimly lit. Maybe, just maybe, she could pull this

off. Stooping slightly, keeping her face to the floor and trying to flip into the mindset of one of the Palace staff, she swung the door open and stepped in.

The room was smaller than she'd imagined – although the bed was a ludicrously large four-poster: the kind of thing that people with more money than style have to impress their friends. And stranded in the middle of it all was the tiny figure of an old man, propped up on pillows the size of sheep. She tried to keep her face pointing down as she closed the door gently behind her.

'Oh,' was all he said.

'Sorry to disturb you, sir, but I thought I'd check that you had everything you need.'

'My dear girl,' said the man, tipping his head back and peering through his glasses at her, 'if you were really a member of the Palace staff, you'd know that not only do I have everything I could possibly want –' Trix risked a glance at him and saw that he was smiling a pleasantly impish smile – 'with one or two exceptions, but that anyone who comes unannounced into my room at this hour of the night would face summary execution at dawn.' He stared imperiously at her – and then his dark, wrinkly faced creased up and he let out a howl of laughter. 'Sorry, sorry, sorry,' he said, shaking his head and slapping his palms on the expanse of white bedding around him. 'Couldn't resist. Come here, girl. Come on, I won't bite.'

Trix approached slowly, frowning, half intending to tell him what a cruel joke that had been, but she was determined to keep playing the part of the maid, despite the fact that he could dearly see that she was an offworlder. Was she really so addicted to playing out roles that she couldn't stop, even when she'd been so obviously rumbled?

'I'm sorry sir, I don't understand.'

He rolled his eyes.

'Lift your head up, girl. Come on, look at me.' He paused when she didn't alter her subservient stance. 'Your name is Trix and you're a friend of Sensimi, aren't you? Or should I have my spies executed as well?'

Trix's shoulders must have slumped, because the Emperor gave her a toothy, relaxed smile. He patted the bed again.

'Don't worry,' he said when he saw the expression on her face. 'I'm far too old for any of that jiggy-jiggy business. Ask my wife, the shrivelled old mare.' Trix cautiously perched at the foot of the bed and then realised how silly that made her look, seeing as she was facing the wrong way. She swivelled until she found the best compromise between dignity and convenience.

'My, my but you're pale, girl,' the Emperor said, adjusting his glasses. 'Sorry – that was very rude of me.' He held up his hands in apology. 'It's just that I don't get to see many people – and certainly not offworlders. Tell me: how is the universe out there?'

'It's fine,' Trix said. 'Well, it was when I last looked. Anything could have happened to it since then.'

'So where you from, Trix? One of the colonies – you are human? I've got that much right?'

She nodded.

'It's a long story.'

'Well, if you're in no rush, I'd love to hear it. Used to be quite a bit of an adventurer in my youth meself.' He gave a sad sigh. 'Been a long while since I've done anything that didn't involve either that witch of a wife or an army of nurses or guards tagging along.' He leaned forwards. 'I'll do a deal with you: you tell me a bit about what you've been up to, and I might just share a secret or two about this place.' He gave a conspiratorial wink that made Trix grin. 'Alinti thinks she's got it made, you know. But she doesn't know the half of it.'

'Buggery!' swore the Doctor, and Fitz stared at him. 'It's that Trove man – look what he's done!'

Fitz – and Calamee, Sensimi and probably Nessus as well – looked at the doorway that led to the TARDIS. Even the night beast, still on its side in the straw on the other side of its bars, looked. The door refused to budge, and the Doctor pointed to a thin line, running all around the door frame, where the wood of the door seemed to blend seamlessly into the stone of the frame.

'Some sort of diffusion sealer.' He kicked at the door angrily and pulled a face. 'And that door must be two inches thick.' He turned to Sensimi. 'Is there any other way into that room? And if there isn't, I don't suppose you have access to a thermic lance, do you?'

Sensimi stared at him blankly before shaking her head.

'Well, we'll have to find some other way out of the city, won't we? We need something that can fly – we can't rely on finding a convenient building around when we run into the wave. Don't suppose you have any helicopters or shuttles parked around here, do you?'

She shook her head again, before suddenly smiling. 'No – but we do have a few levicars. Father ordered them from Marselle for his birthday tomorrow.' She puckered up her mouth. 'But they cost a fortune – they're his pride and joy. He wouldn't let us –'

'He doesn't have to know, does he?' the Doctor whispered craftily. 'We only need one and we'll have it back before he knows it's gone. How high can they fly?'

'I don't know – I've only seen them parked in the rear yard.'

'Well they sound like our best hope for now – lead on, Your Princessly Highness!'

Sensimi gave him a look that said she didn't altogether trust him.

‘I mean,’ he added, ‘if you don’t want your family to find out about your furry friend here, getting us out of the Palace *would* be the best way to keep the secret, wouldn’t it?’

Saiarossa, as dawn was poking her rosy head above the horizon, was a quite beautiful place, thought the Doctor. Struggling to break free of a technological timewarp, Espero had kept a certain charm – although he doubted that all of its citizens felt the same. Calamee, for one, was surprisingly bitter about the decisions that had been made centuries before her birth, condemning her to a life without all the technological flim-flammy that most other Earth colonies of this era took for granted. He almost wished he could take her with him, give her a whistlestop tour of some of the other outposts of humanity, let her see that the grass wasn’t always greener. Always hungering for what they didn’t have, humans. Maybe that was why he liked them so much, why they’d spread themselves to the stars, established dynasties and empires, made the universe their home – the desire to have more, to have *different*. He understood the mindset that had motivated the original Esperons to do what they’d done – how could he not? – but he had a sad sympathy for those who now had to live by the consequences of those actions. And it always came down to consequences, didn’t it?

The levicars, to the Doctor’s disappointment, had been less than impressive. Coppery-orange lozenges, designed in what he imagined was some sort of retro-style – with swept-back fins and tarnished chrome trimmings – they were surprisingly large, and one took the five of them without difficulty. With a wry grin, he remembered Sensimi saying that they were the Emperor’s pride and joy: he must have been something of a boy-racer in his youth. Nessus scuttled to the edge of the passenger well and peered out in wonder as the Doctor fired up the engine and the car shakily lifted from the ground. It wobbled uncertainty as he experimented with the controls, pitching the occupants around – much to the amusement of the parking attendant, who dashed off as soon as the rear gate had been opened. Clearly, Sensimi seem to have succeeded in getting the word out about the wave approaching the city, and the attendant was in something of a hurry to get back upstairs. As the car sped out into the road behind the Palace, Fitz pointed out that he could hardly feel the wind, despite the car’s being open-topped.

‘That’ll be the repulsor field,’ said the Doctor knowledgeably, slewing the car around a corner and throwing them all up against the side of the vehicle. ‘Hopefully, even if we can’t get high enough to clear the wave, it’ll give us a bit of added protection. Now hang on!’ He cracked a grin at them. ‘Let’s see what this baby can do!’

Chapter 18

'You wanted to see my toys, did you?'

The streets were eerily quiet. A few stragglers ran for the shelter of their homes or other buildings where they could gain enough height to avoid the wave. The Doctor wondered how far from the city it was now, but realised that he didn't have enough data points to make any kind of useful calculation. The others in the levicar clung on for grim life – shrieking and (in Fitz's case) whooping joyously as he took corners at much too great a speed. The standard altitude of the car was about four feet, but the Doctor had been able to push that to about twelve before the motors began to whine in protest and he'd had to drop back down. Nessus, like a dog, stuck his head over the side to take in the breeze.

Javill rather liked the Palace at night. He liked the vast expanses of empty corridor, the soft hush that fell over the place. He liked the way he could creep about without running into some member of staff or other every ten minutes. He liked the dim night lights that burned in the corridors, lending everything a deep-shadowed gloom. At night, he could almost believe that the Palace was his. Now, with this weird warning that everyone had to stay in their bedrooms because of some freak electrical storm, it seemed that the ground floor actually *was*. He'd checked with the weather bureau, just in case Mother had got it all wrong – but it seemed she was right: he had another hour or so before it would reach the city, though.

He didn't know where Sensimi was. Mother was still going over the plans for Father's birthday – he'd accompanied her back to her suite and left her tutting and swearing in a low voice over a stack of invoices for the party. Father was probably asleep.

Javill wandered down the grand main staircase, through the hallway, listening to the sharp, echoing sounds of his shoes on the tiles, and out into the courtyard. The lights had been turned down, but he could just see the stage and the higgledy-piggledy rows of chairs. Javill wandered down the centre aisle, bumping his fingers along the backs of them as he went. He heard a sharp, electric buzz as an insect met its end on one of the flytraps mounted around the upper walls of the courtyard, and he reached guiltily

into his jacket pocket. Almost not wanting to touch them, Javill fished out the squashed, crushed and dismembered remains of the things he'd found in Trove's room and looked at them. He'd gone in there expecting to find some wonderful, clever toys, but all he'd come away with was a dozen metal flies. They'd started to move around of their own accord once they were out of the container, and Javill had dropped them and stamped on them. He'd never liked insects. But lying there in the palm of his hand, they were just *things*. Bits of metal. One or two of them moved half-heartedly, their legs futilely wriggling in the air. He squinted at them, feeling sure that there should have been another one. It was probably at the bottom of his pocket, or had fallen out in his room. He glanced around to make sure there was no one watching and crossed to one of the raised flowerbeds that ran around the courtyard. Gouging a deep hole with his fingers, he buried the horrible little things and tamped the soil down firmly on top of them.

'Doing a spot of midnight gardening?' came a voice from above him.

He jumped and stared around for a moment until he caught sight of Trove's pale face looking down at him from a balcony. *Damn the man!* thought Javill, clenching his jaw. *Did he always have to creep around like that?*

'Just... checking... things,' he answered vaguely, and felt stupid for not having had a quicker and more convincing reply ready. But why the hell *should* he? This was his home, not Trove's. He didn't have to answer to the man.

Trove's head vanished, and moments later he appeared silently at the main doors to the courtyard. Javill hadn't heard his footsteps.

'The toy I gave you earlier,' Trove said pleasantly. 'The light ball. Have you had a look at it?'

'Briefly.'

'Only I wondered if you'd like to see some of my other toys – some of them are much more impressive than that little thing.'

Did he know about the flies? Javill felt his mouth dry up. *How could he?*

'I should be going to bed,' Javill said brusquely 'It's a busy day tomorrow.'

Trove nodded. 'For all of us. I'll walk up with you.'

Javill felt his jaw clenching again, but smiled as pleasantly as he could as the two of them walked back into the hallway and up the stairs. Javill's feet clip-clopped noisily; Trove's didn't make a sound. At the top of the stairs, Javill turned to head towards his own rooms. 'Sleep well,' he said.

'Oh, there *was* something I wanted to talk about,' Trove said suddenly, as if it had just occurred to him. 'My flycams.'

'Your what?' Javill turned back to face the man.

'Robot flies,' he said. 'Surveillance devices.'

'Oh.'

'I believe you borrowed a few of them from my room earlier. Perfectly understandable. They *are* fascinating, aren't they?'

Javill said nothing, wishing that he'd never gone poking around in the off-worlder's things. He felt like a schoolboy being told off.

'It's just that I really need them back, Your Highness.'

'I'll see what I can do,' Javill said.

'Now would be very good, Your Highness. They are essential to my work here.'

Javill let out a sigh. 'There was... there was an accident.' He could hardly look Trove in the eye.

'An accident?'

'They were damaged.'

'How damaged, exactly?'

Javill swallowed.

'I... I stepped on them.' He looked up at Trove who was staring coldly at him. 'By accident. Look, I'll have a word with Father. I'm sure he'll recompense you. Now I really do have to –'

'Stepped on them by accident?' repeated Trove, rolling the words around his mouth as if they had a foul taste. 'Not an easy thing to do with flycams, I wouldn't have thought.' He gave a theatrical sigh. And then, as if they hadn't mattered at all, he waved a hand casually. 'Oh well – easy come, easy go. I have plenty more.' Trove inclined his head. 'Sleep well, Your Highness.'

Javill narrowed his eyes, suspicious at Trove's sudden change of tone. Maybe he *did* have lots more of the insects. And what could he do, anyway? He nodded at Trove and turned away, heading for his rooms. He was the Emperor's son, after all. No white-skinned, snooty offworlder was going to –

Javill gasped as a large, pale hand clamped itself across his mouth. He struggled and let out a moan, but Trove's other arm gripped his arm and chest. Trove was so much stronger than he looked. In his ear – disturbingly close – Javill heard Trove's voice.

'You smug, arrogant little cretin,' Trove hissed. 'Do you know how much those things cost me? Do you know how important they are for my search here? And you've destroyed the last of them.'

Trove adjusted his grip so that one huge arm crushed Javill's chest while the hand smothered his mouth. In the dim light, he saw the other hand rise up in front of him. Something silver and mechanical glittered in Trove's fingers.

'You wanted to see my toys, did you?' said Trove. 'Well here's a very special one for you, boy. Take a good look at it.'

Javill struggled hopelessly as Trove brought his hand towards his face.

* * *

Despite being unsure of the protocol involved in telling an Emperor that his wife and son sounded as though they were planning to have him poisoned at his birthday party, Trix went ahead and told Tannalis exactly that, watching his impassive face as she related the conversation she'd heard from Sensimi's room. As a way of lamely safeguarding herself from execution for treason or sedition or whatever, she ended with: 'Although, obviously, I might have misunderstood.'

Tannalis leaned back on his mountain of pillows, as if weighing up what manner of execution to demand for this traitorous offworlder. And then a broad, white smile cracked his face.

'You, girl,' he said, slapping the bed at his side vigorously, 'are a tonic! You know that?'

Trix clenched her jaw, annoyed that, after all that, he just thought she was making it up.

'Fine, your Imperial Excellence,' she said coolly, standing up. 'Fine. Just fine. I just thought you should know.'

'Oh for Heaven's sake girl, sit down! I believe you!'

Trix drew herself up, even more confused.

'Those mercenaries have been gunning for my death for years,' Tannalis said, still smiling, as though discussing some practical joke that his family had been planning. 'The only reason they haven't done anything before is because they're too shit-scared to try it.'

'So what's changed? Sorry for being blunt, but...' She looked him up and down, measuredly.

'But I'm getting on a bit? Ready to kick the bucket?' His body jerked with laughter, and Trix found herself grinning along with him. 'I know that. I'm not senile, girl – old, but not senile. Well, not so's you'd notice.' Trix sat back down on the bed as he leaned closer. 'They know there're things afoot, that's what. They've seen some of the government people a-coming and a-going, and it makes them nervous. And they're damned right to be nervous.' He paused and narrowed his eyes. 'Are you in league with Trove?' he asked sharply, and his tone suggested that, whether or not she was, he'd know instantly if she was lying.

'Sorry,' said Trix, recalling that Trove was the name he'd called when she'd first entered his room. 'You've lost me. Trove? Who's that?'

'Mr Trove.' He narrowed his eyes and tipped back his head. 'You wouldn't lie to an old man, would you?'

'I might.' She held her face for a moment and then smiled. 'But I'm not. Who's Mr Trove when he's at home?'

'He's another offworlder. I thought he might be a friend of yours – although I can't imagine that cold fish having *any* friends.'

‘Another offworlder? Your wife said something about other offworlders.’

Tannalis nodded. ‘He arrived a couple of days ago, looking for something – a device, a mechanism that he claims is here in Saiarossa. He... he offered me certain favours if I’d help him find it.’

For the first time since she’d met him, Trix got the impression that Tannalis wasn’t quite as open and above board as he made out. There was something slightly furtive in the way he said that. She gave this revelation some thought: it seemed unlikely in the extreme that the distress call that they’d responded to was unconnected to the arrival of this Trove man. Could it be that he was the one who’d sent the distress signal? Could it have been some sort of trap? For a moment, she wondered if, perhaps, that loathsome toad Sabbath had somehow cheated death again, and was still alive, perhaps masquerading as this ‘Mr Trove’, looking for another chance to get back at the Doctor. She asked Tannalis what Trove looked like, but the description didn’t tally with the Sabbath she’d met.

‘What’s this device he’s looking for?’

Tannalis seemed immediately suspicious.

‘Why? You after it too?’

Trix took a breath and gave him a potted history of what had happened to them since they’d arrived: Fitz and the Doctor’s disappearance and attack, her and Fitz’s trip through the city, their meeting with Sensimi (at which the Imperator raised grizzled eyebrows impossibly high) and her entry into the Palace a short while ago.

‘So it might be,’ she said in conclusion, ‘that Trove sent the distress call. Maybe he needs help in finding this thing and wasn’t sure that your guards were up to it. Anyway, you were just about to tell me what the device was.’

‘Nice try,’ he laughed loudly. ‘But I’m not *that* simple, girl! To be quite honest, I trust you more than I trust that smug con man, but...’ He paused. ‘There’s more at stake than I want to risk right now.’ He patted her hand avuncularly. ‘Sorry.’

‘Fair enough,’ said Trix blithely, determined not to give up just yet. ‘It’s just that we’re on the point of discovering the truth about these night beasts, and it’d be nice to be able to exchange information.’

‘You’re a smart one, Trixie –’ She raised a disapproving eyebrow. ‘Trix. But I’m afraid there’s too much resting on what Trove has promised me. No doubt he has plans to double-cross me, but he’ll find that I’m a sprightlier old hare than he imagines. Where *are* your friends, by the way?’

Trix’s skin suddenly flushed and she felt her chest tighten. *Fitz*, she thought. *I must find Fitz.*

* * *

‘Fascinating,’ muttered Trove to himself as he watched the images on the screen in front of him. Relayed through his last flycam, the one that he had sent after the Doctor and his party as they’d left the Palace, they showed the levicar hurtling through the city like a demented copper bullet. He had to keep the flycam up high, and he knew that it was gradually falling behind the levicar, but at least it gave him a rough vector. Locking the blue box out of the Doctor’s reach had been inspired. He hadn’t realised that it was a transport device, but the flycam that he’d left behind in the cellar had told him more than he could have hoped. Once he had the artefact under his control and had delivered it to the Oon, he’d come back and take the box – he was sure he knew a couple of buyers for it.

He tapped his fingers on the desk, impatient, as the levicar headed out of the city. And then he saw it: the vast, shimmering wall. He realised he was clenching a fist. He had no idea how long the wave had been active, and how much longer he had to claim his prize. He couldn’t afford to wait.

As if the communications console on the desk had read his mind, a soft, three-tone chime sounded. He steeled himself, took a breath, and pressed a button.

‘This is Trove,’ he said.

‘Oon central,’ bubbled a voice, thick and oily, rich with undertones. It was almost as if many voices were speaking at once, slightly out of synch with each other. There was a coldness, a dispassionate disdain that chilled even Trove – and even after all this time. ‘Report.’

‘The device has been located,’ he said – which was not far from the truth.

‘Recovery proceeds?’

‘As promised.’

‘Timescale?’

Trove paused: a white lie here and there – and a black one when absolutely necessary – was acceptable when dealing with customers such as the Oon. They operated on very literal principles, very polarised. Everything was black and white to them: either the mission was on target or it was not. There were no shades of grey for them in their dealings with outsiders, although Trove had never been sure how they operated among themselves. He knew little about them, really, save that they were from a vast, frigid world, scoured by tremendous halogen storms. He’d heard tales of immense, crystalline cities, crumbling and being rebuilt as the winds ripped away at them; living cities, as much a part of Oon society as the Oon themselves. There were even rumours that the cities themselves were the Oon – immense, intelligent constructs, coral-like. Powerful, intelligent – and implacable. But the reasons for their interminable conflict with, well, with every species that they encountered, were unknown to him: it couldn’t be simply about territory – most of the worlds

that the Oon disputed could not, because of their geology and atmospheres, have been of interest to them for colonisation, and they seemed uninterested in military power or economic conquest. It had been suggested, when Trove's contact had let him know that they were in the market for a bounty hunter for a very particular job, that the Oon were motivated by something that, in other races, might have been called 'faith' or 'religion'. But it was not something on which the Oon had been the least bit forthcoming, simply refusing to discuss it when Trove had brought it up. And he had only brought it up once, purely as a matter of professional curiosity. He was a bounty hunter, and if he'd started to ask too many questions of his employers, he'd have found himself out of a job very quickly. If, indeed, the Oon were engaged in some kind of *jihad*, then the stakes were raised that much higher.

'Twenty hours,' he said.

'Acceptable. No delays.'

'No delays,' he echoed, knowing that the Oon were particularly poor at picking up the nuances of non-Oon voices. He could have laughed, or delivered the two words dripping in sarcasm, and the Oon would have taken them at face value.

The channel suddenly went dead, and Trove was left feeling slightly sick, slightly giddy. The Oon were, by reputation, unforgiving of failure. If he failed to deliver, he did not know exactly what the consequences would be, but he did know that they would be severe. Of course, that wouldn't be a problem. Trove had no intention of failing.

As he turned off the now-silent channel, he realised, more by instinct than by evidence, that there was someone in the room with him.

'It seems,' said Imperatrix Alinti silkily, almost seductively, 'that my husband has been remiss in keeping me apprised of your situation.'

Trove stayed where he was, facing the communications console.

'Your Imperial Highness,' he said softly, trying to imbue the words with a deference he most certainly did not feel. 'My apologies if the Emperor was not totally forthcoming about... our arrangement.' He turned slowly and inclined his head in a little half-bow. Alinti was standing, hands clasped, looking at him with cold, avaricious eyes. Had Trove been telepathic, he couldn't have read the Imperatrix's mind any more clearly than he did then. 'I'm sure he had his reasons.'

'He is an old man,' said Alinti. 'His reasons are not always... reasonable.' She smiled at her own joke, but there was no humour in her smile.

'I bow to your wisdom. I cannot hope to know your husband as well as you do, Imperatrix.'

Alinti moved to his side, her eyes caressing Trove's communications console as if she'd never seen its like before.

‘This technology is primitive,’ he said softly, ‘compared to the technologies I have seen, the technologies I have access to.’

He knew that Alinti saw more than a block of machined metal, dials, screens, displays. After all, none of these were things that the Esperons didn’t themselves possess. She saw power; she saw a microcosm of all that Espero had denied itself. He said nothing, allowing her eyes to drink it in, her mind to blossom with all the potentialities that the console held. He remembered Javill’s face when he’d shown him the light ball.

‘Your arrangement with my husband,’ she said, and he could see her fingers twitching, itching to touch the device, to possess it – and, by extension, to possess what it stood for, ‘is, of course, your business, and I wouldn’t presume to interfere.’ She looked down at him. ‘But Tannalis is an old man. A sick old man. It would be a shame if his illness were to... come between you and your agreement.’

‘As I said, your Imperial Excellence, I do not know your husband as well as you do. Our agreement was made at a time when his state of health was, perhaps, less precarious. No disrespect to him, but the sanguine features of that agreement are not predicated upon *his* being the other party to it.’

Carefully, Trove thought. He had to tread very carefully. Both of them knew where this was going, but he could not be the one to switch allegiances. Alinti had to be the one to make the deal; she had to feel she was in control. He had no more intention of honouring a deal with this one than he had with the Emperor, but she had to believe that he would. He knew that Tannalis lived on sufferance, and that it was conceivable he would die – of one thing or another – before the artefact had been recovered. Although things were progressing moderately well, he was not a fool: he could not yet afford to alienate the Imperial household. Not until he had the device in his hands. And one member of the Imperial Family on his side was as good as another. Besides, he had had intimations of the Emperor’s commitment to their deal wavering over the past day.

‘Perhaps,’ said Alinti, ‘it would be to our mutual advantage to discuss the *terms* that you reached with my husband. I appreciate that your work here needs to be completed soon, but death can strike at any hour. And it would be most inconvenient for you if Tannalis were to die before you had achieved your goals.’

She stared calmly and expectantly into his green eyes, and Trove began to explain how he had offered the Emperor the gift of immortality.

Chapter 19

'Think of a number.'

'Bloody hell!' swore the Doctor as he swung the car in a tight arc and nearly threw everyone out.

'Will you stop doing that!' hissed Fitz. 'It's... it's just *wrong*.'

'We don't have time to be taking corners at wheelchair pace,' snapped the Doctor.

'Not the driving – it's the swearing that's wrong.'

'Not as wrong as *that*!' the Doctor said, pointing, redundantly, at the pearly grey curtain that hung before them. Its surface, graduating from almost white at the ground to the clean darkness of the sky at its apex, sparkled and seethed.

'How high did you say it was?' asked Calamee, frowning.

'It's got higher. Much higher.' The Doctor's shoulders sagged. 'I hadn't counted on it getting *higher*. It must be liberating more energy than I'd thought. *Why* didn't I work that one out?' He shook his head disconsolately.

Fitz stood up in his seat and squinted at the wave as it slid, ghostlike, across the ground towards them. 'Hiding in bedrooms isn't going to help anyone, is it?'

'Not unless they live in tower blocks – or unless Quasimodo's got room to spare in his bell tower.'

The Doctor sank back in the cream leather of the car's upholstery and rubbed his eyes with the balls of his hands. 'How could I be so stupid?'

'You weren't to know,' said Calamee, squeezing his arm.

'Wasn't he?' asked Sensimi.

Calamee and Fitz stared hard at her. She returned their stares coldly.

'We should go back,' she said. 'Warn them.'

'And then what?' bellowed the Doctor suddenly, thrusting his face into hers. 'This thing will be on the city in not much more than an hour or so – it'll take us twenty minutes to get back, and then we have to tell everyone that we were wrong before, and that things are much, much worse than we'd imagined. Where is everyone going to go?'

Sensimi's lip trembled as she flinched. Fitz, for once, felt quite embarrassed at the Doctor's outburst – and, again for once, quite sorry for Sensimi.

'So what do we do?' asked Fitz.

'We go on,' said the Doctor grimly. 'If we can find the source of it, we might be able to stop it – turn it off. Whatever.'

'And can we get through it?' asked Calamee, staring at the wall. The Doctor shrugged.

'Only one way to find out,' said Fitz, and the Doctor revved the engine.

The car circled in a tight arc and then they were racing back the way they'd come, the Doctor trying to get a big run-up to the wave Fitz hoped he knew what he was doing. The Doctor reached down to the controls, spread out across the dashboard like an assortment of liquorice allsorts, and began fiddling.

'I'm trying to boost the repulsor field,' the Doctor answered his unvoiced question. 'I'm betting the wave doesn't vanish where it stops being visible. But it might be weaker higher up if it's feeding itself on the energy from the organic dissolution.'

Just what I was thinking,' Fitz said.

The Doctor turned a knob on the dash and Fitz felt the air around them grow calmer, more solid, and realised that even the little breeze that had been blowing through the repulsor field had stopped: the Doctor had turned up the field to maximum.

'Hopefully,' said the Doctor as he waggled the steering handles, 'that should give us some extra lift. Hold on tight for the ride of your lives!'

'Or our deaths?' muttered Sensimi.

Everyone glared at her.

One minute they were speeding across the ground – well, thought Fitz, ten feet above it. And the next, the Doctor was steering towards a tree. *Straight* towards a tree.

Fitz knew instantly what he was doing: he was hoping to angle the car upwards, clip the tree, and skim off the top of it.

Everyone shrieked as the Doctor pulled back on the handles and the levicar's nose tipped up. Thrown backwards into their seats, they felt the acceleration press them down into the leather as the tree, painted silver by the starlight, hurtled towards them.

There was an almighty crash and the whole car juddered as though they'd hit a wall – but they were still moving, sailing onwards and upwards into the night. Fitz risked a glance over the side and saw the shimmering curtain of the wall just a few tens of yards away. With a wild whoop, the Doctor pulled back on the handles so hard Fitz thought they'd probably snap off in his hands – and then they were flying. *Really* flying – up and over and through. The air around them flickered and Fitz felt his skin prickle. And then they were

falling, and it was like being in an aeroplane with severe turbulence as the car dropped through the oily darkness like a stone in a well.

Alinti stared out of Trove's window in silence, her head reeling with all the myriad possibilities with which his offer had presented her. Immortality. Trove had promised her immortality.

She'd laughed, of course, told him that she wasn't some stupid young girl, her head spinning with ludicrous ideas of what technological gewgaws the rest of the galaxy dangled in their faces, just out of reach. She kept up-to-date – as well as she could with the pitiful data feeds that Tannalis let her access – on what was happening offworld. As the next ruler of Saiarossa (however putative the role), it behoved her to stay informed about politics, technology and the progress of the other nearby human colonies: Eden, Paradiso Grande, Eden (another one), Pelucidar and Marselle, particularly. And there had been no announcement that immortality was suddenly on the market, despite the rumours of cloning technology on Heritage. But Trove had just stared at her, and told her that the technologies he had access to were beyond anything she could imagine. She'd demanded proof, something to convince her that he wasn't just stringing her along to get her help. But, he said, he could offer her nothing that would convince her until he had the device that he sought.

Out in the square, as the pale light of dawn began to vie with the sodium orange of the streetlights, she watched a couple of tiny figures, Esperons on their way to – or from – work. Maybe on their way home after the night's revels. Hadn't they heard the warning about the freak electrical storm heading for the city?

She shook her head. No one understood quite how difficult her job was: contending with a wilful husband who seemed to delight in belittling her in front of the staff, the government – even her own family; making sure that everything in the Palace ran smoothly, and struggling to come to terms with the political changes that were sweeping through Saiarossa. Alinti was under no illusion that the Imperial Family had been allowed to survive on sufferance all these years. She knew that to many, the idea of an Imperial Family within a democracy was a weird, twisted anachronism, but equally, she knew that those same people didn't understand the value of having a good, solid family at such a democracy's head.

It wouldn't last, she thought sorrowfully. Nothing did. Change was coming, and the Imperial Family would – for better, or, more likely, for worse – be one of the first casualties. It had been debated in parliament for almost a century; their power was now much more figurative than literal, and yet, Alinti knew, the public still held them in high regard, seeing them as an extension of their own families. The government were self-serving bureaucrats and pompous

priests who would love nothing more than to see the little power and influence that she and Tannalis still held devolve to them. She'd had to make tough decisions in her time as Imperatrix, and this one was only a little harder.

She gave a sigh and turned to Trove, who'd been silent at her side.

'I accept your offer,' she said simply.

He nodded. 'You have made the right decision – for Saiarossa and for Espero.'

'I know, Mr Trove. Now – what do you require?'

She turned her head sharply at a sound – a muffled, lazy thump from somewhere in the room.

'What was that?'

She took a step away from the window, turning her head, listening for a repeat of the noise.

'I have more equipment,' Trove said suddenly, a little too eagerly.

'What kind of equipment makes a noise like that?'

He smiled – a regretful, awkward smile. 'Important equipment for my mission here. Secret, I'm afraid. I'm sure you understand.'

She didn't, but of course she had to pretend she did.

'You asked if there was anything I required,' Trove said, a little too keen to steer her on to a different topic, she thought. 'I suspect that the Doctor and his friends are close to discovering the soldier factory. It is imperative, Imperatrix, that we gain control of it before they do.'

Just tell me what to do, Trove. Tell me what to do.'

'I think I've broken my liver,' said Fitz as he staggered from the car and fell on to the grass, clutching his side.

'Don't worry,' said the Doctor blithely, running his hands through his hair as he clambered out of the dented wreck of the levicar. 'The other one will kick in in a minute.'

'You have two *livers*?' Calamee stared at the two of them, hugging Nessus as he trembled in her arms. Sensimi was sobbing openly. Fitz wanted her to stop.

'We did it, though.' The Doctor was grinning now, staring away into the darkness.

'Yes, Doctor,' Fitz smiled tightly, holding his side. 'And we love you very much for it. And when we've stopped loving you for it, we're going to hit you. Very, very hard.'

'Good, good,' he said. 'That's nice. Now come on. No time to fix the car, and it shouldn't take us long to walk.'

'You're not the one with the broken liver,' grumbled Fitz.

'Not yet, he's not,' muttered Calamee darkly, rubbing her neck.

The horizon was showing a thin line of buttery blue when they reached the spot where, the Doctor proudly pointed out to no one in particular, the TARDIS had landed. Fitz's liver was still broken, Calamee probably still had whiplash, and Sensimi was dragging along behind like she'd come on a school field trip in high heels and was refusing to admit her mistake. Even the Doctor, normally indefatigable, was breathing heavily. A light sheen of sweat glossed his forehead. They were all very, very tired, thought Fitz.

'You're all knackered, aren't you?' said the Doctor with a fatherly smile.

'Have you got a wire running into my brain or something?' asked Fitz, waving his hand behind his head. 'That's about the third time you've done that, guessed what I'm thinking.'

'Think of a number,' said the Doctor sharply.

'Eight.'

'Nope, another one.'

'OK, seventy-two.'

The Doctor's face fell.

'Wrong – eleventy-seven.'

'That's not a number,' said Sensimi.

'It is where *I* come from,' said the Doctor haughtily. 'But it's wrong anyway. No obvious telepathic link then.'

'So what did that dream mean – the bottom one?'

The Doctor raised a cheeky eyebrow.

'Stop it!' warned Fitz. 'I'm serious. In the dream you said it was significant.'

'Erm, it was *a dream*, Fitz,' piped up Calamee unhelpfully.

'Yes, but it was more than that. It was like I was being told something' Fitz paused.

'Stop thinking about it,' said the Doctor, plunging his hands into his pockets and staring around at the bushes, 'and it'll come to you. Always works with me.'

Fitz pulled a sneer. It so did not. If that was the case, how come the Doctor didn't remember blowing up his own planet?

Fitz felt a cold shudder run through him as he realised that *he* didn't remember much about it either.

'Oh-oh,' said Sensimi. 'Company.'

Everyone looked. Standing silently on the grass, a few feet from a wall of bushes, was one of the night beasts.

The creature waited until they were all looking at it, and then, in a curiously human gesture, beckoned to them – before turning and vanishing into the undergrowth.

'Come into my bushes, said the spider to the fly,' muttered Fitz.

But the Doctor shook his head. 'if it wanted to kill us, it could have done that here.'

'How do we know we can trust it?' whispered Calamee to the Doctor as their little party followed the creature.

'I don't think we do – know for sure, that is,' the Doctor said. 'But...' He shook his head, as if shaking off some memory.

'You OK?' asked Calamee. Nessus was struggling in her arms, but she kept a firm hold on him.

'I think it's the fact that me and Fitz were attacked round about here.' The Doctor looked around, as if expecting at any moment to be assailed by another of the creatures. Calamee was surprised at the calmness with which the Doctor and Fitz had agreed to follow the creature, considering what they'd suffered at the hands of one of its friends.

'I'm getting...' The Doctor paused. 'Not quite flashbacks, but little pinpricks of memory. It's all a bit unsettling.'

'I'd have thought you'd be used to it by now.'

The Doctor threw Calamee a look, half fatherly disapproval, half annoyance. Up ahead, the night beast pressed on through the bushes, pushing them aside with a scary, casual ease, and passed on into the heart of the copse.

As Calamee reached out to hold back a branch, Nessus seized his chance and leaped from her arm. With a triumphant squeal, he ran after the night beast. Calamee let him go: this whole affair was making him skittish and she knew that calling him back would be fruitless. Besides... 'I know this place!' she suddenly said, stopping sharply so that Fitz almost bumped into her.

'You do?'

She nodded.

'We came here for a picnic, my parents and me. A year or so ago.' She looked around, suddenly seeing the place in a different light. She could picture them – her mother, father and house-mother – all sitting down, unpacking their lunch from a couple of huge bags, while Nessus scampered around, clambering up trees in a vain attempt to catch birds.

'Really?' The Doctor raised an eyebrow. 'You were very lucky, then. Perhaps that explains Nessus – his altered DNA. Wasn't it around then that the first night beasts started entering the city? Perhaps it was during your picnic that something happened to him.'

'God, yeah. I hadn't thought of that.' Calamee suddenly felt very cold. She and her family could have been the creatures' first victims. She looked around, up into the trees, into the bushes.

'It's... wrong. It feels different somehow. Too quiet, too... tame.'

'There's no birdsong,' said Fitz suddenly. 'Listen – no birds, no animal

noises.' They listened, and there weren't.

'He's right,' Calamee said. 'When we were here before, there were loads of birds, a few tree-rats. Nessus was all over the place chasing them. I had to go off and find him 'cos we thought he might run into something bigger than him.' She gave a little shudder.

'Maybe the night beasts have scared them all away,' Sensimi suggested.

'Maybe,' said the Doctor, sidling up to Fitz. Calamee suddenly got the weirdest impression of the Doctor and Fitz doing some sort of strange little double-act. It was as if they were practising each other's mannerisms, gestures, ways of speaking. Maybe they'd spent so much time together that they were now copying each other without realising it. How long *had* they spent together? Did either of them actually know? The impression that Calamee had was that they'd been travelling together forever. She felt a twinge of sympathy for poor Trix: did she feel like the gooseberry in their cosy little team? She wondered where Trix had got to.

'Well, we won't find out standing here admiring the scenery, will we?' said Fitz, suddenly striding after the beast. The Doctor gave a shrug and headed after him, with Calamee and Sensimi bringing up the rear.

Gentlemen to the last, the Doctor and Fitz held back all the bushes until they were sure that Calamee and Sensimi had hold of them. And then suddenly they were through, and Calamee heard the Doctor give an appreciative little whistle.

Laid out in front of them was a surprising little haven. In the dim early morning light, the plants, trees and bushes around them looked much the same as outside the bushes, but it was as if someone had gone around throwing copious handfuls of fertiliser at them. The vegetation was lusher, richer, and all around were bright gems of flowers, shining in the grey dawn, studing the bushes, sprouting up through the grassy ground. It was, thought Calamee – with a flush of embarrassment – quite enchanting.

'It's beautiful,' gasped Sensimi, coming up behind.

'Is it?' said the Doctor in one of *those* voices.

'Isn't it?' said Fitz, looking around as if there was something really obvious that he was missing. Calamee realised that the night beast seemed to have disappeared.

'Take a closer look,' said the Doctor, striding over to a clump of garish red blooms nestled in the shade at the foot of a bush.

Sensimi leaned in closer and sucked in a sharp breath. 'That's horrible,' she whispered, clutching at the front of her dress.

And Calamee had to agree: what had, at first sight, appeared to be a beautiful floral display was, on closer inspection, little more than a breeding ground for maggots. Nestled in the folds of the carmine petals was a writhing clot of

wriggling, white grubs. They clambered over and around each other, and the group's uncomfortable fascination increased when they saw that the maggots were eating away at the cores of the flowers.

'I thought maggots normally ate meat or dead animals,' Fitz said.

'Well, we *are* on an alien planet,' the Doctor reminded him. 'And there are plenty of creatures that look like maggots that are strictly vegetarian.' He looked up at them from his kneeling position.

'Yeah,' said Fitz, leaning in a little closer and pointing, 'but *that* seems wrong, somehow, regardless of where we are.'

At his tone, everyone peered a little closer – and saw what he meant: as the edge of the cluster of maggots fed voraciously on the plant, the centre of the cluster seemed to be sucked down into the plant itself. What Calamee could only think of as *lips* were grasping at the maggots and gulping them down.

'I feel sick,' said Sensimi simply and turned away. Calamee felt sick, too, but Sensimi's declaration bolstered her own reserve, and she stayed put, determined not to be in the same league as the princess.

'Remarkably rapid, isn't it?' said the Doctor admiringly, snapping off a twig to give the maggots a gentle poke. 'And quite, quite fascinating. The maggots are eating the plant, and the plant's eating the –'

'Oh God,' came a gasp from Sensimi, and everyone turned suddenly. She stared at them. 'They're everywhere.'

And indeed they were: now they'd seen it once and knew what to look for, the little party found clots of maggots and grubs everywhere: in some places just a couple, but in others, huge, fist-sized balls of them or wriggling, writhing layers of darker ones, enveloping whole branches and plants. Before her eyes, Calamee saw a knee-high bush overrun with green-tinged shapes, so densely packed that they seemed to flow over it like a liquid. But as they progressed, the bark on the stems opened up and swallowed them, healing itself over as nothing had happened. Calamee realised that they could well have been rubbing up against armfuls of the things when they'd pushed through the bushes. She felt her skin turn goose-pimplly.

A crunching of twigs made them all turn: standing just a few yards away was the night beast. With surprising speed, it moved towards them, closing the gap in just a few strides. Silently, it picked up the Doctor, flung him over his shoulder. Calamee heard a muffled cry from the Doctor and saw him pound his fists on the creature's broad back – to no avail. The thing strode purposefully across the grass towards the biggest tree. And as the two of them drew close to it, to Calamee's amazement the tree opened up like a huge, barky zip-fastener. Unceremoniously, the Doctor was thrust into it, his arms flailing.

The tree closed up as the creature turned and headed for Fitz.

Chapter 20

'A simple "Come in, have a cup of tea" would have been more than adequate.'

Trix had finally reached the point where she didn't think the Emperor was going to tell her anything more about what Trove had offered, or what this thing was that he claimed he was after. If he *was* the person who'd sent the distress call, then it seemed likely that it was a trap: Tannalis had given no impression that Trove was in such desperate need of help that he'd have sent out a general distress call to the universe.

'I really ought to be looking for Fitz,' she said, rising from the bed.

Although she had little doubt that he'd be able to look after himself, she had the nagging sensation that there were things going on that she didn't know about. But with the Doctor and Fitz, that was rather par for the course.

'And you never got around to telling me about half your adventures,' the Emperor said sadly.

'Believe me, I'm not sure you'd want to hear – I'm sure *I'd* rather forget a few of them.'

They were interrupted by a hasty knock at the door, and Tannalis rolled his eyes in his head.

'That bloody woman,' he hissed. 'I'll be so glad when –'

'Emperor!' came a nervous female voice from the corridor. 'Emperor, it's urgent!'

Tannalis threw a puzzled look at Trix.

'Come in!'

The door opened instantly: it was a young girl, obviously one of the Palace staff, looking panicky and flustered.

'Well?' snapped Tannalis eventually, when it was clear that the girl had gone into some sort of shock – presumably at the sight of Trix. 'Spit it out, Farine!'

'Sorry, Your Highness,' she said. 'It's just that. . .' She looked from Tannalis to Trix. Tannalis waved his hand.

'Just tell me, girl. Trix is a friend.'

'It's just that the Imperatrix has left the Palace with Mr Trove. And four of the Imperial Guard.'

'What?' Tannalis looked at Trix with a frown.

'What for? Where have they gone?'

'I'm sorry, Your Highness, I don't know. Someone thinks they may have gone after the other offworlders.' She risked a glance at Trix. 'They took one of the levicars.'

'The other offworlders? Why did no one tell me about that? I didn't think the levicars were ready, anyway?'

The girl gave an awkwardly apologetic shrug. 'They've been working hard on them for the birthday parade, Your Highness. The Imperatrix said you weren't to be bothered.'

'Bloody cow,' muttered Tannalis under his breath. 'Bloody, bloody cow.'

'Do you have any instructions, Your Highness?'

'No, no, nothing – but get the other levicars ready, just in case. Dismissed.' Tannalis paused and rubbed his head. And thank you for letting me know, Farine. It's appreciated.'

The girl bowed gratefully and exited.

'Levicars?' asked Trix.

'A little extravagance for my birthday,' Tannalis said, almost apologetically. 'Damned expensive – had to import them from Marselle. Part of my deal with parliament.' He grinned raffishly. 'Brings back memories – used to zip about in an old one we had, before I drove it into a ravine and wrecked it.' He gave a sigh. 'Those were the days, Trix.'

'Deal?' This was all going a bit fast for Trix.

But Tannalis waved her question away. 'You know what this means, don't you?'

'It sounds like it means Fitz has left the building – maybe even with the Doctor – that's what it sounds like.'

'No, no, girl: it means that *Trove* has left the building.' His eyes widened and a conspiratorial grin cracked his face. 'It means we can have a look in his room, is what it means!'

Five minutes later, Trix was looking shiftily up and down the corridor as she fiddled with the lock on Trove's door. 'If you're going to tell me that this is wrong and that we shouldn't be doing it, you're about five minutes too late,' she said as Tannalis tutted behind her. 'And can I remind you that it was your idea?'

'Actually,' he said, 'I was about to say that this is the most fun I've had for years. Although the novelty of watching you trying to pick the lock with a piece of wire is wearing mighty thin.' He dug into the pocket of his dressing gown and produced an electronic key card. 'Less fun, but quicker.'

Trix stepped back and let Tannalis do the honours. At least if they were wrong and Trove was still in his room, the Emperor could claim Imperial privilege or something.

It was, frankly, a bit of a disappointment: a bit like breaking into the hotel room of a hard-living rock band only to find the place immaculate and an opened bottle of mineral water on the table alongside an unused ashtray. The room was so neat and tidy that Trix at first wondered whether they'd got the right one, or perhaps the Palace maid-service was second to none. Everything looked as if it had been placed just so. The only thing that gave away the fact that this wasn't simply a very nice spare room for visiting relatives was the object on the desk under the window.

About the size of a tea-tray, it was made of what looked like polished chrome, about seven inches high at the back, curving down to the front edge, which was almost flush with the table top. Two flat, blank screens were set into it along with numerous buttons and a couple of what seemed to be miniature joysticks.

'Is this it?' she whispered, looking around the room.

'What did you expect, girl?'

What *had* she expected? A map with a red circle and an arrow saying: 'It's here' along with a handwritten note explaining what the hell was going on?

'Hello, Doctor,' said Tain, his voice soft and calm and seemingly emanating from everywhere.

The Doctor looked around the cramped space: the walls were rough, ribbed and a mottled green and brown. Pale light dappled the chamber from dozens of yellowish spots across the barrelled arch of the ceiling, like out-of-focus stars scattered across the vault of heaven. He wriggled, trying half-heartedly to uncrease his coat after the mangling it had received on the way down from the tree trunk.

'A simple "Come in, have a cup of tea" would have been more than adequate, Tain,' he said archly. 'Organic optical conduits?'

'The lighting? Yes, Doctor. I see your memory's back.'

'Ah,' said the Doctor ruefully. 'If only it were. Perhaps we could have a word about -'

He was interrupted by a visceral slurping sound as the same pucker that had disgorged the Doctor opened up in the wall and squeezed out the wrinkled form of Fitz. He slumped on the floor, a tangle of arms and legs,

'Fitz!' said Tain. 'How nice to see you again - I was becoming worried that you wouldn't make it.'

The Doctor pulled Fitz to his feet.

'Doctor...' said Fitz slowly, looking around. 'This place...'

'I know,' agreed the Doctor, nodding. 'Familiar, isn't it?'

'It ought to be,' said Tain.

Fitz turned to the Doctor, his eyes wide, and a huge grin split his face. He grabbed the Doctor by the arms.

'It's Tain!' he shouted gleefully. 'The voice – it's Tain! I remember!'

'I'm a bit ahead of you,' said the Doctor calmly, patting Fitz's arm.

'Ah. . .' said Tain thoughtfully. 'It seems that I was a little bit presumptuous in my estimation of the state of your memories.'

The Doctor waved Tain's concerns away casually. 'Think nothing of it, Tain. Think nothing of it.' He paused. 'Although I got the distinct impression from Madame Xing that my memories of our last encounter had been removed, not just suppressed. There are still more than a few gaps that need filling, though.'

'Such as?'

'Such as the small one between landing the TARDIS and getting found by Trix,' Fitz jumped in, pacing across the small chamber and frowning, clearly trying to fit everything together. He stopped and looked around, obviously wondering where Tain actually *was*, where he was supposed to address his comments.

'Touch the wall,' said Tain simply. Fitz stared at the Doctor who gave a shrug. The Doctor took Fitz's hand, and together they touched the gnarled, fleshy side of the chamber –

– sharp strobing, scenes, dizzying in the speed of their editing, like static images burned into his eyes. The copse ahead of them, the Doctor strides off with his detector beeping away in his hand. No sounds, no movement. Fitz glances back at the TARDIS, hoping Trix will be –

– something dark and huge, smashing, crashing, bushes pushed aside, their stems snapped by the force. Fitz turns sharply to see –

– a vast hand or arm, just a shadow given form, swats at him, throws him against a tree. Fitz feels his own arm snap dully and flop helplessly. A thick cloud of pain, like maddened bees, swirls around him. He sees the creature holding the Doctor by the neck, examining him curiously with tiny, bright eyes. Then it flings him away. Fitz sees him roll away down the slope, but he's getting to his feet. The creature advances on Fitz, towers over him, and swipes at his head with a single, clawed finger. Fitz watches the creature peer at its finger, a clump of blood and hair hanging from it like muddy grass, before it flicks it aside. Fitz tries to move, dazed, stars swimming in his field of view, to slip around the side of the tree, but the creature catches him with a backhand gesture, almost casual, and Fitz is sent tumbling over and over into a bush. He feels the sharp stems scratching and stinging and impaling, sliding through soft flesh and muscle, tearing and snagging –

– the Doctor’s coming up behind the creature, a branch raised in his arms. Fitz can see a rosy slick of blood on the Doctor’s neck. Fitz’s heart sinks as, behind the Doctor, he sees another of the creatures, this one slightly smaller, slightly lighter in build. It’s pushing its way out of a tree trunk like it’s being born. The trunk seals itself behind it like rubber, a mouth turned on its side, and the creature advances on the Doctor. Fitz wants to call out –

– the branch crashes down uselessly on the creature’s back, bouncing off. The creature turns slowly and plucks the branch from the hands of the resigned-looking Doctor, before slapping him away again –

– and the two creatures are advancing on each other, the smaller one more mobile, more fluid in its movements. It ducks and weaves as the larger one tries to grab it, tries to catch it. The smaller one ducks under the bigger one’s arms and, as it passes, sinks its no-less impressive claws into the large one’s side. It howls and instinctively thrusts its elbow back, catching the smaller one, sending it slamming into the ground. The big one turns, raises a foot to stamp on the smaller one, but it’s already gone, rolled out of the way, sprung to its feet. It’s ready to attack again. Fitz feels everything lose focus as he forgets what’s happened to him and he tries to move towards the motionless figure of the Doctor. A scarlet haze fogs his vision as the smaller creature launches itself against the big one –

‘Good grief!’ said Fitz, jerking his hand back from the chamber wall. ‘What was that?’

‘That,’ said the Doctor, looking almost as shaken as Fitz felt, ‘was by way of a “previously on...”, I think.’

‘My apologies for presenting it like that,’ said Tain’s gentle voice, ‘but time is pressing.’

‘I expect it is,’ said Fitz. ‘But I think the phrase I used was “good grief!”. That was what happened when we first arrived, right? So how’d we come to...’ He flapped his hands around. ‘...to... everything?’

‘Please place your hands against the wall again and I’ll –’

‘Uh-uh,’ said Fitz, backing away – as much as he could in the confined space – from the wall. ‘Can we just do this the slow, old-fashioned way, please? You know, words, language, that kinda stuff?’

‘The Trojan’s soldier attacked you and almost killed you,’ said Tain. ‘I managed to create another in time to save you and bring you in here where I repaired you.’

The Doctor absently touched the side of his neck and Fitz found his own hand moving to the shiny patch of skin on his head.

‘But the Trojan sensed that you were dangerous,’ continued Tain, ‘especially when I downloaded your memories in case you didn’t survive the repair and

I had to recreate you. It attempted to interfere again, to create more soldiers to kill you when you emerged. I had to let you go without doing a complete integrity scan so that I could concentrate on fighting the Trojan.'

'Sorry,' said Fitz with a shake of the head. 'Maybe I'm being stupid, or maybe I've missed a couple of episodes, but what the hell's a Trojan? Someone that lives in a wooden horse?'

'The Trojan is a synthetic personality construct that was implanted by the Oon before I fled their battle with the Makers. It was designed to –'

'Whoah, whoah!' said Fitz, raising his hands in a gesture of surrender. 'You're doing it again! Look, why don't I go back upstairs and take my chances against Trove and the whole Imperial Army, Doctor, while you stay down here and do the hard bit – understanding what the hell is going on?'

The Doctor scowled at Fitz. 'So, Tain – this Trojan personality – it's infecting your systems now?'

'And has been since I arrived here a year ago. At first I thought I would be able to purge it, but I was unprepared for the depth of its infiltration. I have spent all that time waging a war with it. Once I realised that its intent was to communicate my location to the Oon, I destroyed my own communications organ. So then it created soldiers to go for help, and I tried to interfere in their creation – when I failed, I created others to follow and stop them. And two days ago, the Trojan finally managed to gain control of some of my regenerative subsystems and regrow the communications organ. It sent a distress signal. Which you picked up.'

'So, um, where are you, exactly?' asked the Doctor. 'I take it you're in control of this thing?'

'Oh. I thought you'd realised.' Tain's voice was disappointed and surprised. 'This "thing" is me. This whole bioship, all the trees and plants above us. It's all me.'

'Oh,' said the Doctor slowly. 'Right.'

'So we're, like, in your stomach?' asked Fitz, claustrophobia clawing at the edges of his senses.

'No – I have no stomach, as you think of it. I have roots and the vegetation above performs photosynthesis for me. I created this chamber when you were injured, to protect you from the Trojan's soldiers.'

The Doctor pulled a face and glanced at Fitz – who somehow knew what was coming.

'You said you repaired us and didn't do an integrity scan. Can you do one now? Quickly, I mean?'

'I performed it while reminding you of what happened upon your arrival. The Trojan did indeed interfere with my repair procedure.'

'And would this interference possibly have resulted in the Doctor's new-found toilet mouth?' asked Fitz.

'The Trojan was relatively indiscriminate in its interference,' said Tain. 'It seems that there has been an interchange of personality traits.'

'So the Doctor got the swearing,' said Fitz with a certain amount of relief. 'What did I get?'

'Impetuosity, curiosity,' said Tain after a few seconds. 'A certain coolness of disposition.'

'Hmph!' snorted the Doctor. 'Hardly a fair exchange.'

'Too right,' agreed Fitz. 'I get the short end of the stick yet again. Have you any idea how tiring it is being you?'

'Can it be reversed?'

'Easily,' Tan said, 'but it will take time.'

'And I take it that's something we don't have much of.'

'Do we ever?' sighed Fitz.

Trix eyed the console warily. A single red light burned steadily in the top left-hand corner. Was that just the 'standby' light, or was the whole thing working? And what did 'the whole thing' do when it was working, anyway? She guessed that it was some sort of communications device. But why so many buttons, and why the joysticks? Maybe Trove was partial to a spot of aircraft simulation computer gaming when he wasn't hunting for mysterious devices and sending out distress calls.

'Now that we're here,' she said, 'it would be a shame not to press something, wouldn't it?'

She saw Tannalis eye the device sceptically.

'You're probably more familiar with this kind of thing than me,' he said, taking a step away from it.

'Eh? Just because I'm not from Espero doesn't mean I have any more of a clue about this than you, you know. Look – it's just buttons. Nothing fancy: no wires to go into your head, nothing more advanced than you seem to have around here already. Probably.' Although, of course, Trix couldn't swear to quite what might happen if she actually *pressed* one of the buttons.

'Oh bummer it,' she said suddenly and decisively, and touched one of the flush, oval buttons. A blue one. Her lucky colour. Or was that green? She knew it was the colour of her eyes, but there were times when she forgot what colour *they* were supposed to be.

Nothing happened.

Green it was, then.

She pressed one of the three green buttons she could see.

'Is this thing actually plugged in?' she asked aloud, peering under the desk for a power cable.

'Look!' hissed Tannalis, tapping her arm.

She looked back at the device: one of the screens was now active. It showed a dark image that took Trix a couple of seconds to understand. It was an aerial view of some bushes. It wasn't until something moved that she realised that, in among the bushes, there were two people. The image weaved and slewed about a bit, as though whoever was holding the camera couldn't keep it perfectly steady.

'Sensimi!' gasped Tannalis, touching the screen. 'That's Sensimi, I'm sure of it!'

'And if that's Sensimi,' said Trix, 'who's the other one, the other girl?' She squinted at the murky picture, wondering if one of the controls was for brightness, but none of them bore a recognisable TV brightness symbol. 'Trove must have a surveillance camera following them,' she said. 'Flying overhead. Maybe there's some way we can warn them that he and Alinti are on their way.'

She waggled her fingers over the console, suddenly realising in a 'D'oh!' flash, what the joysticks were for: they must be for controlling the camera. They were tiny little things, and she took hold of them both gently for fear of snapping them off, and waggled. Nothing happened to the picture on the screen – but they both heard a tiny *tap* from somewhere else in the room.

'What was that?' Tannalis whispered. Trix shrugged, and waggled the joysticks again. She pressed a button, and the second screen sprang into life. But the picture was totally black – no, hang on. There was a thread of light – a thin, blurry strip bisecting the screen. As she moved the joystick below it again, the position of the fuzzy line moved, spinning around, vanishing off the side of the screen. And again they heard the sound from the other side of the room, like a gentle fingernail tapping on a door.

'It's coming from here,' Tannalis said, stepping closer to a huge wardrobe built into an alcove at the side of the bed. He gestured for her to move the joystick again, and after a couple of seconds of random waggling, they both heard a repeated tapping on the inside of the wardrobe door, as if some tiny thing inside was trying to get out. Trix watched Tannalis steel himself and grip the handles. She looked at the screen again: something momentarily came into focus, caught in the pale strip – which, she suddenly realised, was a line of light bleeding into the wardrobe through the gap between the doors.

'I don't think you want to do that,' she said, swallowing, as she realised what she was looking at. But it was too late: with a grunt, Tannalis pulled back both doors.

On the screen, the image flared for a fraction of a second: in front of her, she saw the eye that she'd recognised only a couple of moments before. An

eye, wide and blank, set in a handsome, black face. She turned to Tannalis who could only stand and stare at the sight of his only son, Javill, propped in the cupboard like a broken toy – his eyes wide, his trembling mouth slack, a thread of saliva hanging from his chin.

Chapter 21

'Are you thinking what I'm thinking?'

Alinti's skin still itched – and she could see that she wasn't the only one. The four guards that Trove had persuaded her to bring were doing their best to maintain their dignity while surreptitiously rubbing their arms against their sides. Trove seemed to be the only one unaffected. She would never have admitted it, but the sight of the huge wall of smoke had almost made her want to order Trove to turn the levicar around. But he seemed confident that they could pass through it without any harm – especially after he'd tinkered with the car's mechanism and declared that he'd 'boosted the repulsor field to a safe level'. It was all technobabble to her, but if Trove was sure that they'd be safe, she'd have to trust him.

Still, as they'd sped through the grey curtain, she'd closed her eyes and prayed. She couldn't remember the last time she'd done that. Perhaps the fact that she was still alive and racing towards immortality proved that God was on her side after all. She briefly wondered what Javill was doing – whether he'd taken notice of the warnings and made sure he was upstairs. Although the thing – the wavefront, Trove had called it – looked much taller than she'd expected: taller, certainly, than the first floor of most of Saiarossa's buildings. She wasn't convinced that hiding in bedrooms was going to protect anyone.

Still, that wasn't her problem now. Javill could take care of himself. Maybe he'd have had the sense to seize the opportunity, and had taken Tannalis down to the courtyard for a look at the preparations for his birthday.

'You seem very quiet, Imperatrix,' said Trove, breaking into her reverie.

'Just wondering about my family,' she said. 'Hoping they've had the sense to hide away somewhere safe.'

Trove smiled. 'I'm sure they have, Imperatrix.'

She glanced back over her shoulder and caught one of the Guard scratching himself. He stopped instantly, a pained and apologetic look on his face.

'The wavefront. . . what exactly is it? Something to do with your immortality device?'

'A side effect, Imperatrix. By the time it reaches the city, we will have arrived at its source – and then we can stop it.'

Trove pointed up ahead. She could see the grounded wreckage of the levicar

that Sensimi and her offworlder friends had taken. It lay crumpled on its side, the nose dented and twisted out of shape. 'They can't be far.'

'This Doctor you mentioned – the one who has tricked my daughter: what is his interest in the device?'

'The same as mine, Imperatrix. Only he won't be willing to share it with you, as I will. His intention is to take it and leave the planet as quickly as possible.' He turned and flashed her a broad, charming smile. 'But we won't let him, will we?'

The bright new morning was cold, and both Sensimi and Calamee wished they'd had the sense to bring thick coats. The fact that neither of them had slept didn't help – their body temperatures were low already, and Sensimi had to keep stifling yawns as they waited hopefully for the return of the Doctor and Fitz.

The night beast that had led them to the hollow in the ground stood, a silent sentinel, a few yards away. Calamee hugged Nessus – as much for warmth as for comfort. And now that they'd noticed the maggots eating the vegetation – and the vegetation eating the maggots – it was impossible not to see them everywhere. Sensimi seemed to feel the need to keep pointing them out, and Calamee was getting heartily sick of it.

'Look,' she said eventually. 'Let's not pretend that we like each other, shall we? You might be the Emperor's daughter, but that doesn't win you any points with me. Can we just wait here in silence until the Doctor and Fitz come back, and then when they've sorted this whole thing out, we can go our own ways? OK?'

Sensimi hugged her arms to herself and stifled a yawn. 'Fine by me,' she said. Then she paused and took a step forwards, staring into the distance, back towards the city.

'Can you hear that?'

Calamee listened: over the sound of the wind and the rustling of the trees, there came a low droning sound.

'It sounds like –'

'– another levicar!' Sensimi finished gleefully. 'I bet it's Father, come to sort this mess out.' She threw a sneery look at Calamee. 'Then we'll see what's what.' She looked around in an exaggerated way. 'I don't see *your* parents coming to rescue you.'

'Oh grow up,' was all Calamee could manage. She was too busy trying to track the source of the noise – and then she saw it: a tiny pale spot, catching the dawn sun. In silence, they watched it draw closer, until they were both certain it was a levicar. Then Sensimi began waving her arms and dancing up and down, trying to attract its attention.

But Calamee's attention had been caught by something else: quietly pushing its way through the bushes towards where the night beast stood was another beast. The first one turned and saw the newcomer, but didn't react to it. Calamee felt decidedly uncomfortable, even if the things didn't seem to bear them any ill-will. Having two of them so close by was not reassuring.

She turned back to watch the approaching levicar, wondering if she'd finally get to meet the Emperor. Unfortunately, as it drew closer, she realised that one of the two figures at the front of the car was the last person she really wanted to see right now.

'Oh,' said Sensimi flatly.

Riding alongside each other, and with four of the Imperial Guard in the back, were Imperatrix Alinti and Mr Trove. Calamee looked back, anxiously, to the tree into which the Doctor and Fitz had been dumped. Where were they?

'It's Sensimi,' said Alinti, standing up in the car as it slid across the grass. 'And some girl.' She looked around, wondering where this magical device of Trove's was. She still didn't trust him, and was quietly thankful for the presence of the Guard behind her. If there was even a hint of double-cross from him, she'd have no compunction about using them.

'She's in league with the Doctor,' Trove said, slowing down the car. It hovered, three feet from the ground. Alinti was on the point of telling him to set down the car so that she could get out and find out what Sensimi was doing with that girl, when she noticed movement behind them.

Lumbering out of the bushes came two of the night beasts that she'd heard so much about. The pictures she'd seen didn't do them justice, and she let out a little cry, looking to Trove.

'Shoot them!' Trove said over his shoulder to the Guard. They hesitated, and Alinti realised that they were waiting for confirmation from her.

'Do it!' she shrieked as the creatures lumbered closer: despite their muscled, shaggy bulk, they moved frighteningly quickly. Trove, too, must have realised this, for a moment later he jabbed at the controls and the levicar rose up, away from the ground. But it wasn't enough, she realised: the height to which the car seemed capable of rising seemed dependent on its speed. And, stationary as it was, it could only manage four or five feet.

'We're carrying too much weight,' muttered Trove, working at the controls, trying to coax a little more altitude out of the vehicle. It rose another foot, juddering and whining. The creatures were just a few yards away. Trove wrenched the steering handles and the car spun horizontally, throwing its occupants around like toys: now the Guard were facing the night beasts, sheltering Trove and Alinti. They raised their guns and began to fire. Whether down

to bad maintenance, bad design – or simply incompetent operation – the guns carried by the Guard just didn't seem to work properly. A few half-hearted spits of fire sent spurts of grass into the air.

'Get us higher!' screamed Alinti, drawing back from the edge of the car.

'Excellent idea,' said Trove drily. 'Why didn't I think of that?'

Even the Guards were panicking now, seemingly loosing off shots at random. They zinged and whizzed through the air, little rippling patches of heat haze.

One of the creatures paused, jerking as one of the Guards' shots hit its shoulder. It staggered, but continued moving. The levicar was now at chest height, the engines whining like they were about to explode.

One of the Guards had picked up his staff, and was jabbing madly at the closest creature. It seemed to be working – the thing kept lurching backwards and forwards, trying to avoid the spiked end. But the other one had pushed through the protective field around the car and had hooked its paws over the edge. It began to pull, rocking the car violently. The Guard with the staff began stabbing at the creature's hands.

'Trove, stop them!' ordered Alinti, stepping up, unsteadily, on to the car's passenger seat, trying to put as much distance between herself and the creatures as possible. Trove glanced up at her.

'We need to lose some weight,' he said softly.

She stared at him. By the time she realised what he meant, it was too late: she reached down to grab the side of the car as, with a casually powerful movement, he pushed her out.

'Don't look,' said Calamee, wrapping herself around Sensimi, smothering her in her arms.

But Sensimi didn't need to look: she knew what the creatures were capable of, and the image of her mother being pulled, almost casually, apart would stay with her forever. Calamee felt sick as she watched the Imperatrix being tossed about like a doll, as the night beasts tore her to bloody shreds.

Trove waited until he was sure that Alinti had gone and gunned the elevator controls. The car shot up into the air another three feet, the strained sound of the engines levelling off. Without the Imperatrix's weight, he reckoned, they'd be just about out of reach of the soldiers.

One of the Guard turned from the sight of his Imperatrix being bloodily ripped limb from limb on the ground below.

'How dreadful,' Trove said, trying to imbue his words with some feeling. 'I told her not to stand – not with that thing rocking the car. But she was too headstrong.' He gave a sad little shake of his head. 'She gave her life so that

we'd survive. How noble.' He glanced over the side of the car. 'Now be a good fellow and kill those things, will you?'

The Doctor reached out, tentatively, and touched the wall of the chamber. It felt like tree bark made out of rubber. There was a scent in the air, not unlike that of pine combined with sour milk. He wondered whether Tain was capable of reading his mind and silently voiced the thought, but there was no reply. Hardly conclusive proof.

'So why did you come here?' he asked out loud. 'Why did you desert?'

'Do you know how long I've lived, Doctor? I am almost eight hundred years old. Since the Makers grew me, I have been involved in four hundred and twelve battles. I've produced over ninety-five thousand soldiers, and been responsible for the deaths of over seven million civilians – along with an even greater number of Oon soldiers, agents and conscripts. I have caused death and misery on an unimaginable scale, and I have had enough.'

'If you were going to turn conscientious objector,' cut in Fitz, 'it's rather a shame you didn't do it a little bit earlier, isn't it?'

'It is indeed,' Tain said, and they both had a sense of sudden heaviness and sorrow. 'But I was created as a soldier factory. Compassion and consideration for the worlds where the Oon battled the Makers were not part of my design. It would have been... counter-productive... to have given me a conscience. War is not about making ethical decisions – it is about winning. There are no half-measures.'

'Typical,' snorted the Doctor. 'No wonder war is such a depressing business.' He stopped and rubbed at his bottom lip. 'And why does the name "Maker" sound so familiar?' A cold shiver stroked his spine. *'They called themselves "Us".'* The phrase drifted through him like a spirit seeking redemption.

'I can't imagine it's particularly unique,' Fitz commented.

'No, no, I suppose not. But still...' He gazed around the chamber, sighing to himself.

'So now you expect us to believe that you've had a change of heart, do you, Tain?' Fitz's voice sounded flat and dead in the chamber, soaked up by the gnarled walls. He noticed them flex and pulse slightly, bringing home to him the fact that they weren't just underground, but were inside something alive – something vast and alien, but alive. Something that, he imagined, could crush them at any moment. It was like being inside a heart, waiting for it to beat.

'I do not expect you to believe anything. I simply present the facts.'

'And what would you have us do with those facts? Your night beast out there – I take it that *yours* were the less aggressive ones? – was rather less than gentle with us, which doesn't exactly fill me with confidence.'

'The Trojan is a simple mind. It has no... finesse. The soldiers it created when it subverted my systems were basic models, built for brute strength, not agility or speed. And I have been able, on most occasions, to interfere with their development. I know the capabilities of my units better than it does, and so I generated the more agile ones. The Trojan does not seem to have learned from its mistakes – it continues to produce the larger ones, despite the fact that they are repeatedly killed by mine.'

'Salvador Dali,' the Doctor said suddenly, having been silent since his comment about the Makers. '*Autumn Cannibalism*. That's what that was about.' He looked wildly at Fitz as if that made it all clear. 'Up above ground,' the Doctor explained. 'The maggots and the plants, the two lots of night beasts. Tain and the Trojan – all of them attacking and devouring each other. I should have spotted it when we arrived. That's what the painting signified, that's why I must have shunted it aside, hoping it would jog my memory later.'

'Well, isn't it a good job that it did?' Fitz said drily. 'And just in the nick of time.'

The Doctor threw him a *ha-ha* look before speaking to Tain again.

'And this wave that's sweeping across the planet: that's the Trojan's work as well?'

'No,' replied the bioship after a pause – and in a tone that really didn't make Fitz feel very good at all. 'That was me.'

Trove sat back and watched the Palace Guard finish off the night beasts. Now that the car was floating a good foot above their outstretched arms, there was little to worry about. He could see how the Guard were trying to avoid looking at the trampled carcass of their Imperatrix, but they were professional enough not to be too thrown by it.

It was almost a shame that he'd had to get rid of Alinti, Trove mused, as the first of the night beasts fell. But of course he'd had no intention of honouring his deal, and without her, at least he'd been able to take the levicar up to a safe altitude.

He took the opportunity to glance around: the Oon had told him little about the *modus operandi* of the Maker bioships, other than that they were capable of creating soldiers and could integrate themselves into the biospheres of planets they occupied. He assumed that this particular one was underground. There was no sign of the Doctor or the other male: either they were hiding, or they'd found the bioship. He fingered the metallic disc in his pocket – all he needed to do was to get close enough to the bioship's central systems, and it would be over. At least he'd had the chance to test it out on Javill. The boy had been useful after all.

A half-hearted cheer went up from the Guard as the second of the night beasts collapsed. Its massive body jerked briefly as they fired another dozen shots into it, just to be sure. One of the Guard turned to him, clearly unsure about what they should do now. Trove nodded appreciatively, hoping that his association with both the Emperor and the Imperatrix gave him some leverage with them.

‘Well done,’ he said. ‘Excellent job.’

He lowered the car to the ground.

‘What?’ exclaimed the Doctor, and Fitz winced at the volume of his voice in the sweaty confines of Tain’s inner chamber. ‘*You* set that wave off? Why? You know what it’s doing, don’t you?’

‘Of course – the Gaian phase is, shall we say, my last resort.’

‘For what?’ asked Fitz. ‘Taking over planets? And what’s “Gaian phase” mean when it’s at home?’

‘Gala was the Greek goddess of the Earth,’ said the Doctor. ‘Mother Nature, if you will. The name was used by the British biologist James Lovelock who believed that the most meaningful way to understand Earth was to see it as a single living organism. A sandwich short of a picnic on that one, really. But to answer your first – and second – questions, yes, Fitz, I think that’s exactly what it’s for: taking over planets.’ His voice was dark and he turned, taking in the musty chamber around them. ‘That’s why, when the wave touched me, I got flashes of the planet from other viewpoints, isn’t it, Tain? I was briefly plugged into this planetary gestalt that you’ve started to create. I assume it didn’t convert me because it somehow detected I’d already been “touched” by you? If you’re genuine about your desire to atone for your past sins, I think you’re going to need a bloody good excuse for this one.’

Fitz winced again at hearing the word come from the Doctor’s mouth. He knew it was because of the mix-up – that, effectively, they were *his* swear-words coming out of the Doctor’s mouth. He ought to be getting used to it by now – but it still seemed wrong. Like catching your granny on the toilet, or finding nuddy books under your parents’ bed. He wasn’t sure he’d be able to cope if the Doctor moved on to the *really* strong stuff.

‘I panicked,’ said Tain eventually. ‘When your TARDIS arrived, I assumed that you were either an agent of the Makers, come to take me back home, or an agent of the Oon, come to finish the work that the Trojan had started. My only chance to remain free was to initiate my Gaian phase.’

The Doctor frowned. ‘How would that safeguard your freedom? Breaking down and recreating every living thing on the planet, subsuming them all into one vast gestalt entity... How?’

‘Once the Gaian body has reached a certain critical mass – which it is rapidly approaching – it is impossible to disentangle my bioship body from it. The Oon and the Makers would either have to leave me – or sterilise the planet to kill me.’

Fitz saw the Doctor’s jaw clench, his fists tighten. He wasn’t going to actually *punch* Tain, was he?

‘And this is your way of saying sorry for your past actions, is it?’

‘If I allow either the Oon or the Makers to take me away, I will be either force-bred to produce more like myself, or reconditioned to be a faithful Maker subject. Once again, I will be responsible for the death of millions. By activating my Gaian phase, I will – at the most – be culpable of taking away the individuality of the Esperons. They will not die.’

‘They might wish they had,’ said the Doctor tightly under his breath. ‘Tain, you have to stop this. Now.’

‘I cannot, Doctor. The only way to stop it now, before critical mass is achieved, is to kill *me*. And once critical mass is achieved – in about twenty minutes – the effect is self-sustaining, and even my death will not halt it.’

The Doctor stared blankly at Fitz, and Fitz wished he wouldn’t. It was almost as if he’d run out of answers himself, and was looking for more in him. Which was never a good sign.

‘So you’re telling us that, on the off-chance that we were here to take you away, you condemned every Esperon to being chewed up and moulded into part of one huge organism. That you were too scared to wait and see who we were. I’m not finding this very easy to believe, Tain.’

‘You doubt me, Doctor?’

‘I doubt anyone who’s spent centuries killing and murdering, Tain. For all I know, you came here to Espero hoping to set up your own empire. Maybe you’re nothing more than a war criminal who’s decided to get out while the going’s good.’

The Doctor stopped his diatribe sharply, as an odd tremor passed through the chamber. The image that, unfortunately, sprang to Fitz’s mind was not his earlier one of a heart, but of a stomach suddenly wrenched with cramps. The floor beneath them rippled sinuously, and both of them were thrown against the walls – which undulated again before becoming still.

‘Tain?’ called the Doctor as the chamber’s spasms faded. ‘Tain!’ There was no reply. He tried again, but the only answer was a very loud silence.

‘Are you thinking what I’m thinking?’ whispered Fitz, suddenly aware of how claustrophobic the tiny little cell was.

‘The Trojan?’ said the Doctor with a sigh. ‘Yes, I rather think I am, Fitz.’

‘Which would be bad, wouldn’t it?’

In the crepuscular gloom, the Doctor nodded slowly – and pointed towards the wall, close to where they'd entered the chamber. Fighting its way into the world, a writhing, flexing hand was being extruded into the heart of the bioship.

Chapter 22

'Imagine having your whole life to live over again.'

Calamee and Sensimi backed away as the levicar came to a halt a foot above the ground, and Trove, with surprising elegance for such a large man, sprang over the side. He straightened his lapels and took a couple of steps towards them, adjusting his cuffs foppishly.

'Where is the Doctor?'

Calamee didn't answer – neither did Sensimi.

'I applaud your loyalty and your bravado,' Trove said. 'But only I know how to stop this thing, the bioship beneath our feet. I can stop the wave that's approaching the city, save the Esperons.' He looked expectantly at Sensimi.

'Don't trust him,' Calamee whispered.

The Princess shook her head. 'What if he's telling the truth?'

'Sensimi, come on! He wouldn't know the truth if it dressed in a frock and danced around in front of him. He's after this thing for himself.'

'Time is running out, Your Highness,' Trove warned, his hands clasped behind his back.

'I think we'll just wait for the Doctor, thanks all the same,' Calamee said, feeling the wobble in her voice. She didn't know where the Doctor and Fitz were – or even whether they were alive. The last they'd seen of them, the night beast had been bundling them into the trunk of a tree. For all she knew, they might still be in there, slowly suffocating.

'Ahh,' said Trove suddenly, looking behind her. 'Doctor!'

Calamee spun around, and as she did, she heard Sensimi yelp. She turned back to see Trove with his arm wrapped around Sensimi's neck, something metallic that she couldn't see properly in his hand, just a foot away from the princess's face.

'Now,' he said calmly 'Where is the Doctor?'

Calamee looked desperately towards the Palace Guard, still on board the levicar. They were hefting their guns and staves nervously, unsure of what to do: they couldn't risk firing at Trove in case they hit Sensimi.

'If this girl here doesn't answer my question in the next ten seconds,' Trove shouted to the Guard, 'I want you to kill her. And if you don't, I shall kill your beloved princess.'

He smiled at Calamee. ‘Now,’ he said. ‘Where is the Doctor? I’ll find him sooner or...’

His voice tailed off as he saw that two of the Guard were staring back the way they’d come.

Behind them, rounding the hillock, was another levicar – travelling at full speed, judging by the feverish whine of the engines. Sat up in front were two figures – the Emperor, and another offworlder. It had to be Trix, the woman that the Doctor had spoken about. As if things weren’t complicated enough.

‘Stop him!’ called Tannalis, his voice hoarse and cracked. He swayed on his feet until the woman pushed him back down into his seat.

‘Stop him!’ the woman echoed, pointing at Trove. ‘Kill him if you have to. Just stop him.’

The other Guard in his levicar raised his gun, uncertainly.

‘Remember our deal, Emperor,’ Trove shouted, as Tannalis and his companion drew closer. ‘Remember what I promised you!’

‘You bastard!’ shouted back the Emperor. ‘I’ve seen what you did to my son. D’you think our deal is worth anything now?’

‘That was an accident,’ Trove lied. Javill found some of my equipment and interfered with it.’

‘So you did *that* to him? You’re responsible, Trove,’ the Emperor said, rising from his seat again. This time, the woman didn’t attempt to push him back down. ‘And you’re going to pay, believe me.’

‘Think about it, Tannalis!’ Trove urged. ‘Eternal life for you – a new body. How long have you got left in that one? A year? Five years? Imagine having your whole life to live over again.’

‘And what kind of life would that be, man, knowing I had it at the cost of my son?’ He looked around. ‘And where’s my wife? Where’s Alinti?’

‘There was another accident,’ Trove said flatly. ‘I’m sure you’ll miss her deeply. But if you won’t think of yourself, Emperor, think of your nation. Think of Saiarossa. The bioship beneath us can create a whole army of soldiers. This world can be yours, united under your benevolent rule. No more wars, no more bickering and fighting.’

Tannalis laughed harshly ‘Accidents seem to follow you around, don’t they? And another war to end all wars, Trove? More slaughter? We might have thrown away the history books here, but there are some lessons that you don’t have to be able to read to learn. The only future worth having is one that people take through choice. And it’s no choice if it’s forced.’

‘And what kind of choice does an *Emperor* offer them, then? Hardly the head of state of choice for a shiny democracy, is it?’

‘You let me take care of my country, Trove, and my family. You’ve done enough damage. Now let my daughter go.’

Trove grimaced, and Calamee realised that he’d made a mistake: he should have seized her. If he used his weapon on Sensimi, the Emperor would order the Guard to kill him without a doubt. He glanced around, obviously wondering if he could grab Calamee and use the thing on her first, a demonstration. But she saw him staring, and backed away.

‘Looks like you’re stuffed,’ she said and pulled a sad face. ‘And you were so close.’

In Tain’s inner chamber, the Doctor and Fitz backed up against the wall as the face of the night beast began to extrude itself, as though pushing through a thin, rubber membrane. It twisted this way and that, its beaked mouth opening and closing silently.

‘Tain!’ the Doctor shouted.

There was no answer: the Trojan was indeed back in control.

‘Maybe we should get out,’ Fitz whispered at his side.

‘Maybe you’re right,’ the Doctor agreed, moving closer to Fitz.

Unfortunately, the pucker of the duct was right next to where the Trojan’s soldier was appearing. As they watched, its shoulders appeared – and then one slender, clawed foot. The Doctor doubted they’d both get out in time.

‘Tain!’ he called. ‘You’ve got to fight it. Fight the Trojan, don’t let it take you over. You know what happens if it does: the Oon have won and you’ll be picked apart, dissected – if you’re lucky or forced to go back to war, but this time for them. More deaths, Tain, more slaughter. Is that what you want? After all you’ve done, is that what you really want? We can help you find a way around the Gaian thing, but not if we’re dead.’

The creature twisted its lumpen, birdlike head this way and that, as an arm slid from the wall and began to wave about in the air, reaching blindly for them. The Doctor imagined he saw a stuttering in its motions, as though control of it was being momentarily interrupted, a bad connection.

‘Will it attack us?’ asked Fitz, edging away from it slowly.

‘The proof’s in the pudding,’ said the Doctor, keeping close to Fitz.

‘Strangely enough,’ he muttered, ‘I’ve rather lost my appetite.’

‘Not sure the same can be said for that thing, though. Tain?’ the Doctor asked again. ‘Can you hear me?’

‘Doc... tor...’ The voice that seemed to issue from all around them was recognisably Tain’s, but it sounded pained, tortured. Something inside him – whether intuition, or something linked to Tain’s repair work on his and Fitz’s bodies – told him that the Trojan was very close to gaining complete control over the bioship.

'The duct. . .' said Tain slowly. The Trojan's soldier froze, halfway through its eerily balletic arm movement, as Tain spoke – as if the bioship possessed only enough processing power for one or the other, but not both simultaneously. 'Leave.'

And then the creature jerked back into life and a second foot appeared, following the first – which was now placed firmly on the floor of the chamber. A knee followed it and then the rest of the lower leg. This soldier was smaller and more slender than the other ones – perhaps it was easier and quicker. He remembered what Tain had said earlier about the Trojan's soldiers. Was it finally learning? Or was it just the exigencies of the situation that were forcing it to create such a small one? Hopefully, he thought, this one would be easier to defeat – and then he caught sight of the sharp, scything talons which slid from the fingers of the creature's free hand. The grotesque birthing was almost complete. The wall around the creature's buried trunk shuddered, flesh unwilling to relinquish its grip on such an abominable child.

'Go on,' urged the Doctor, pushing Fitz forward. 'Get out.'

'I'm not leaving you.'

'Too bloody right you're not – I'm going to be right behind you. Go on.'

'Language!' said Fitz.

'Go!' hissed the Doctor, 'Just go!'

The Doctor gave Fitz another shove, but his friend was being irritatingly – and familiarly – obstinate. He felt an unaccustomed tightness in his chest, a pounding of his hearts that he knew with cold clarity was *fear*. Proper fear. The kind of fear that other people felt all the time when they were around him, when he dragged them into his escapades. He felt he ought to be grateful for this weird melding of him and his best friend – how often do people genuinely get to experience the emotions of someone else, first hand? He wondered how Fitz was feeling, tried to remember how *he* would normally feel in circumstances like this. Presumably – although his whole being was currently threaded through with a cold filigree of anxiety and jitteriness – he'd be calm and collected. He glanced sideways at Fitz, squinting, trying to see if he could see anything of himself in the set of Fitz's face, but Fitz's expression was blank, unreadable. Calm. He tried to ignore the sudden flush of envy and pride that welled up hotly inside him. He shoved gently at Fitz's shoulder, urging him towards the pucker of the duct. He wondered whether it would even work, with the Trojan in control. Maybe Tain was saving his energies for the moment when he and Fitz were at the duct and ready to be squeezed upwards and out, like so much toothpaste. He hoped Tain would be able to time it right: the duct was in easy reach of the Trojan's soldier. One slip, and the vicious-looking claws, weaving about blindly in the amber light, would slice them from neck to groin. He felt his hearts pattering in his chest.

‘Get out!’ he whispered in Fitz’s ear, shoving him forwards so hard that the Doctor almost fell. He watched as Fitz let the momentum carry him across the room towards the duct, realising, at the last moment, that he had his fingers crossed.

He suddenly remembered playing *Super Mario Brothers* in a pub in Bradford, back in the eighties, having to time his jumps over lava pits, ducking to miss swinging hatchets overhead. He watched Fitz pause in his race across the chamber, like a little pixellated man, swerving sideways to avoid the Trojan creature’s laws. ‘Now, Tain!’ he hissed, and slapped the wall beside him.

The duct opened up – the cat’s bottom analogy seemed unpleasantly accurate all of sudden – and the Doctor watched as Fitz threw himself headlong into it, the creature’s talons slicing through the legs of Fitz’s trousers as his feet vanished into the wall and the sphincter closed behind them.

Inside the duct, Fitz belatedly felt a stinging in his calf, and realised that the Trojan’s soldier had caught him. But he was squeezed tightly inside, the soft walls pressing in on him on all sides. He felt the pressure tighten around his feet, slowly pushing him upwards like a... he didn’t want to think about it. Never mind a cat’s bottom, he thought: this is more like being sick.

Trix was trying to get a grip on what was happening. For some reason, her head felt all muggy, all cluttered up. Ever since she and the Emperor had left the Palace in one of the remaining levicars, she’d felt odd. Like she was coming down with a mother of a head cold.

She’d stood by while the Emperor had laid his son out on the floor, limbs twitching like he was having a minor epileptic fit. She knew she could be a bit of a hard case, but even as Tannalis had sobbed and hugged and pleaded with his son to wake up, all she could do was stand there and watch, feeling vaguely impatient with him. It was as though this cold, or whatever she’d caught, was smothering her, dampening down her emotions. She noticed one of her arms trembling uncontrollably, and felt her skin burning up. What was wrong with her?

Tannalis told her to fetch help, and tiredly, she’d gone out into the corridor and called for someone. Within minutes, a couple of the Palace staff had come running, and had helped the Emperor to get Javill into bed, where he trembled and drooled and mumbled.

‘This is Trove’s doing, isn’t it?’ the Emperor finally said. ‘He’s done something to my son, to his mind.’

Trix found herself nodding.

‘The bastard,’ hissed the Emperor. He wiped his nose and eyes with the sleeve of his pyjamas. ‘He’s going to pay, Trix, he’s going to pay for this.’

‘Good,’ Trix said tersely. ‘Let’s go and find him.’

The Emperor nodded.

Bewford, the Emperor’s Chief of Staff – a slender, bespectacled, harassed man – arrived a few moments later.

‘What’s happened, sir?’ he asked in horror, as though this were all his fault.

‘Trove,’ Tannalis growled through his tears. ‘He’s what’s happened. Tell the garage to have one of the levicars ready. Him and that witch-wife aren’t getting away with this.’

‘But what about the electrical storm, sir?’

‘Storm? What storm?’

Bewford looked confused. ‘The Imperatrix told me that she’d. . .’ His voice tailed off as they all realised that Alinti hadn’t told the Emperor about the storm at all. While Tannalis ranted at Bewford, Trix found herself drifting away from the conversation, her mind consumed with a desire to see this electrical storm. Maybe even to track it to its source. Where was all this coming from? She shivered, rubbing her arms. ‘We need to find Trove, to punish him,’ Trix found herself saying as Bewford nodded and rushed away.

And so they’d left the Emperor’s son and followed Trove and Alinti. While the Emperor had been crying over his son, Trix had found a smaller version of Trove’s communications console – a small remote control device that, she realised, could be used to track the surveillance camera watching Sensimi and the other girl.

Trix had surprised herself by being a much more expert levicar driver than she’d expected – especially when, just outside the city walls, they’d encountered a huge, curving wall of smoke, creeping towards them. Instinctively, somehow, Trix had known that they should try to avoid it – so she’d driven the levicar up on to the city walls and launched it into the air from there. Her skin had prickled mildly as they’d passed through the wall, but other than that, neither of them seemed to be too affected. The irony of flying past a huge, tatty billboard proclaiming, ‘And God said “Go forth and multiply”’, in ornate scripty letters didn’t escape her.

And minutes later, they’d found themselves arriving where the TARDIS had landed. Ahead of them, they could see four of the Imperial Guard in a levicar, and just in front of them were Trove, Sensimi and the other girl.

Trix’s skin was burning; something was wriggling and writhing in her head and down over her chest, and she felt she might burst at any moment. The Emperor shouted something, and she found herself repeating it, distantly, as though someone else was actually speaking. At the back of her head, she was sure she could hear whispering voices, but their words were fuzzy and indistinct. She suddenly felt dizzy, and everything flared brightly around her.

And then the world stopped.

For a moment, Trix wondered if it was just that they'd reached a peculiar kind of stand-off. But then she saw one of the little mokey things, like Looloo only not dressed up, moving across the grass to Trove in the kind of slow-motion she'd only ever seen in wildlife films. Everything flared brightly in weird pseudo-colours, like a computer-enhanced image.

I HAVE ALTERED YOUR PERCEPTIONS, TRIX said a voice in her head, and it all came flooding back to her in a series of slamming, stuttering shocks: the tiny worm of alienness that had been squirming away inside her, down where she couldn't see, where she'd been forbidden to look, consolidating its hold on her, grubbing about in her memories, trying to make sense of everything that made her her; forming connections, reaching its little claws into all the strands of her being and pulling them taught, tight, the strings of a puppet, tested out to see how they might make this marionette dance. Reo had had control over her body a long time ago, she knew – picking up all this from the thing in her head in a shadowy sleet of discarded half-thoughts – but had needed the confidence of knowing her mind before it acted openly. Reo wanted to know more about Fitz and the Doctor, how they fitted into all of this, where their loyalties and knowledge lay. And now – too late, of course, for it to be of any possible use – Trix knew that Reo was surprised and shocked at developments. Although she had no direct access to Reo's thoughts or memories, she sensed a dark echo of Reo's concern, at its sudden worry that something it hadn't expected had happened. The stakes, as far as Reo was concerned, had suddenly been upped, and it could no longer afford the luxury of time spent looking for Trix's friends. She remembered the boy. Joshua. *Joshua*.

Dead. She'd left him for dead, there, in that doorway. She'd just left him. For dead. A rapid flicker of images – of Joshua, his parents, his night-time trip to follow his father, the discovery and burning of the alien ship, Joshua's finding of the thing in his father's drawer, the thing that Trix now wore on her chest – strobed across her vision, overlaid on reality.

They went around and around in her head, multiplying themselves like reproducing ghosts until she thought her skull would burst. A babbling chorus of memories from Joshua threatened to rip her sanity to shreds.

YOU CAN DO NOTHING FOR THE BOY NOW said Reo. HE IS DEAD.

You bastard! shrieked Trix silently, struggling hopelessly against the paralysis that had overtaken her. *You left him to die. He was just a boy, just a little boy.*

ALL THINGS MUST DIE. HIS DEATH WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN WITH SUFFERING.

That's not the point! That's not the bloody point! You made me leave him.

YOU COULD NOT HAVE SAVED HIM Reo said with a calmness that made Trix want to scream. NOTHING COULD HAVE SAVED HIM. HE WAS DEPENDENT UPON ME. HE WAS MERELY A VEHICLE.

Like I'm a 'vehicle'? Is that what you're saying? That I'd die without you, too?

THE SUBVERSION PROCESS IS NOT COMPLETE YET. ALTHOUGH I NOW HAVE FULL CONTROL OVER YOUR BODY AND FULL ACCESS TO YOUR MEMORIES, YOU HAVE BEEN MUCH HARDER TO SEQUESTER THAN I HAD ANTICIPATED. BUT YOU ARE NOW MY CARRIER. WITHIN A FEW HOURS, THE PROCESS WILL BE COMPLETE AND YOUR PERSONA WILL NO LONGER BE REQUIRED.

And then I'll die? Like Joshua? You're just some bloody parasite, aren't you – a tapeworm, hitching a ride. What the hell are you?

I AM A MAKER, TRIX.

You said that before.

She watched the mokey move a few inches closer to Trove, the rest of the bizarre tableau before her frozen.

WE ARE THE MAKERS OF THE BIOSHIPS, OF TAIN – THE TOY I MENTIONED EARLIER. I BELIEVE THE MAN WHO THREATENS THE GIRL IS A BOUNTY HUNTER, SENT BY THE OON TO TAKE TAIN. I AM HERE TO ENSURE THAT TAIN RETURNS TO US.

What are you talking about? Tain? The Oon? Trix's head was spinning: one moment she was riding to the rescue with Tannalis, Boadicea in an anti-gravity car, and the next she was paralysed, her body taken over by an alien thing on her chest. She wondered whether she'd done anything that she ought to be ashamed of, anything else that Reo had made her do and then forced her to forget.

NO CAME THE MAKER'S VOICE. I HAVE BEEN QUIESCENT SINCE THEN. YOUR NEURAL STRUCTURE HAS BEEN PARTICULARLY RESISTANT TO SUBVERSION.

Well whoopee for me Trix thought bitterly.

I UNDERSTAND YOUR RELUCTANCE TO SUBMIT CONTROL TO ME said the Maker. BUT IT IS FOR THE BEST.

For whose best? From where I'm sitting, it looks like a pretty uneven-handed deal.

YOU MADE THE CHOICE the parasite whispered, like some sort of vengeful spirit, taunting her. YOU TOOK ME FROM THE BOY WILLINGLY.

Trix felt sick. Really sick. Reo was right – her own greed for what she'd thought of as a camouflage device had led her into this. She'd been so desperate to be anyone other than herself. And now she had her wish: very soon, she'd never be herself again.

Suddenly, as if his conversation with Trix had been nothing more than an aside, a chatting-to-the-neighbours-over-the-garden-fence, Reo said: AND NOW TROVE MUST BE STOPPED.

And the Maker pressed the 'play' button on the world again.

Chapter 23

'Sorry I'm late.'

Trix watched as the mokey suddenly hurtled at full pelt across the grass, as if an invisible lead at which he'd been straining had been cut, and clambered straight up Trove's leg and on to his arm, the one held against Sensimi's forehead. With an equally fluid movement, Trove smacked his hand back into the little animal's face. Trix almost heard the snap of its fragile neck as it dropped to the ground and lay there, dead. Trix thought again of Joshua.

LET ME SHOW YOU WHAT I AM CAPABLE OF NOW said Reo, and Trix's whole world smeared across her field of vision. One moment she was at Tannalis's side in the levicar, and the next...

There was a rush of air and everything wheeled around her. She had no real control of the movements of her eyes, and the disparity between what her inner ear told her, where she was trying to look and where Reo was actually directing her eyes filled her head and her stomach with nausea. She wanted to throw up, but Reo suppressed it like the most instant dose of Andrew's Liver Salts she'd ever had.

And then she was landing, perfectly poised, on the grass beneath the car, her legs bent in a springy crouch. She caught up with what her eyes were doing and saw Trove, his arm still around Sensimi's neck, his hand poised near her head, moving his eyes in slow motion to catch up with her.

MY IMPROVED SENSES ARE OPERATING AT APPROXIMATELY TEN TIMES THEIR NORMAL SPEED said Reo, with all the suaveness of a used car salesman trying to flog her some boy-toy capable of 0 to 60 in five seconds. SOON, I WILL BE CAPABLE OF MUCH MORE.

My senses thought Trix. *My senses.*

She imagined – although she couldn't be sure – that she'd stayed in the crouch for a fraction of a second before her legs, seemingly more resilient and powerful than before, straightened out, and she almost flew through the air. Again, the world somersaulted around her, a mad, giddy blur of green and brown and blue. Only as everything righted itself again did Trix realise that, in all probability, it had been *her* that had somersaulted, and not the rest of the universe.

Right in front of her, their eyes wide with astonishment – and, in Sensimi's case, fear – were Trove and his prisoner, less than an arm's length away.

Time seemed to stand still again.

I HAVE INCREASED MY PERCEPTUAL ACUITY MOMENTARILY said Reo, and Trix was sure there was a hint of smugness in his voice. It was like having an annoying friend giving a running commentary on a film that you're trying to concentrate on. YOU ARE CURRENTLY PERCEIVING THE EXTERNAL WORLD AT APPROXIMATELY ONE HUNDRED TIMES ITS NORMAL RATE. ONE SECOND IN REAL TIME –

Yes! snapped Trix. *I'm not stupid.*

Reo didn't seem affronted at her annoyance.

OF COURSE, IT IS NOT POSSIBLE FOR MY BODY TO MOVE AT SUCH SPEEDS, BUT IT IS INTERESTING TO PERCEIVE THE WORLD IN THIS MANNER, IS IT NOT?

It's not your body protested Trix angrily. *It's my body.*

But Trix's thought lacked conviction. She felt cold and detached. She could see the statues in front of her that were Trove and Sensimi, frozen by Reo's perceptual trick. She could see the sheen of perspiration on the girl's dark skin, even see the delicate flush of her cheeks, how her nostrils had dilated with fear. She could actually smell her panic – acrid and musky. But Reo had control. And all Trix could do was to observe the poor girl, dispassionately. Trove, behind her, had his eyes open wide: Trix wondered quite what he was seeing? Had Reo moved her so fast that she'd been just a blur? Was that even possible? Surely her body wasn't designed to move so fast, so sharply. Shouldn't her legs have snapped, or her hips broken or something? Or had this 'reconstruction' process already begun? Even now, without her being aware of it – like termites, chewing through the foundations of your house while you quietly watch telly – was Reo rebuilding her body? Making her into some sort of Superwoman? And there was still the bitter tang of irony to all of this, that came through to Trix quite clearly: she'd wanted so desperately to have Joshua's chameleon device to let her be whatever she wanted to be; to be able to change her face and shape and hair, the ultimate disguise kit. *You stupid, stupid cow*, she thought. And the sad thing was, she realised bitterly, it's exactly what you really want, Trix. Isn't it?

And then, abruptly, it was as if the film of the world had revved up to superfast speed. A hand shot out of nowhere – her own hand, she realised a moment after it had happened – and slammed into Trove's startled face. Somewhere, a long, long way away, she felt bone crunch and splinter wetly as the palm of her hand struck his nose, and Trove went tumbling backwards. Sensimi was pitched forwards against her and she caught her effortlessly, like a toy.

* * *

Only afterwards did Fitz try to make sense of what happened, and even then he reckoned that he'd failed dismally.

Trix had been standing alongside Tannalis in the levicar, as Trove had tightened his arm around Sensimi's throat. Fitz'd been thrown violently from the opening of Tain's peristaltic duct (although it might well be the *Trojan's* peristaltic duct by now – and the Doctor was still down there) and had staggered forwards a few feet as he'd regained his balance.

Coming to an abrupt halt, he took in the scene before him: Trove holding Sensimi; Calamee a few yards away; Nessus cantering across the grass on all fours, heading for the bounty hunter. And two levicars: one with four of the Palace Guard, their faces revealing their confusion, the other carrying Trix and an old man.

Nessus looked like a cat in pursuit of an injured bird, and headed straight towards Trove, on to his leg and then up his arm. Blindingly fast, Trove's arm jerked back and Nessus was snapped back on to the grass like a little doll, where he lay unmoving.

Calamee just stared, clearly unable to take in what had happened. Out of the corner of his eye, something else moved. He tracked the movement back to Trix's levicar, but Trix had gone and there was this flashing, blurry shape that must have been her, bounding across the ground in a series of unbelievable springs from her hands to her feet and back again. Fitz was gobsmacked. He had no idea that Trix was such a gymnast. Suddenly, she was there in front of Trove and Sensimi, frozen, and then her hand shot out like a piston and smashed Trove full in the face, knocking him backwards. His motion sent Sensimi hurtling forward into Trix – who caught her expertly. Trove's device flipped up and over in the air like a coin and fell into the grass.

Trove staggered backwards, his hand clasped to his face as blood seeped through his fingers and dribbled down the front of his shirt and jacket. Only then did Fitz see the night beast, tearing its way out of the tree. He stepped nimbly aside, watching it stumble as it pulled its legs out, like a newborn nightmare desperate to be free of the womb. Trove staggered backwards towards it. Reflexively, Fitz raised a hand and opened his mouth to warn him, but it was too late: Trove had discovered the creature for himself.

The bounty hunter turned sharply as he collided with it and looked it straight in the eyes – before the creature took hold of his head in its claws and snapped his neck.

Suddenly, as if Trove's murder had galvanised them into action, the Imperial Guard raised their guns as one and began firing on it. It roared once, briefly, as its body spasmed and jerked. It took a pace towards them... and another, raising its hands, spreading wide its claws, before sinking to its knees, its chest and face a pulpy mass of flesh and blood. And then, silently, it fell forwards,

collapsing on to the grass.

There was a sudden silence, an absence of movement, as though the whole world was in shock. Like someone had said ‘Shit!’ at a Christening.

‘Sorry I’m late,’ said an apologetic voice from behind Fitz. He spun to see the Doctor, tugging at the crumpled sleeves of his jacket. ‘A little trouble with the hired help. Just can’t get the staff any more.’

Calamee fell to the grass next to the still little body of Nessus and touched it gently. It was still warm, but something had gone – that spark, that energy. She lifted a tiny paw and felt it move with no resistance. He was so, so tiny and light. She never realised that a soul could be so heavy.

Sensimi, still shaking and tears now welling up in her eyes, ran to her father’s levicar, now descending to ground level. She threw herself into his frail arms and hugged him until he gasped.

‘The Trojan’s night beast came out before you,’ Fitz said to the Doctor. ‘How come?’

‘I don’t think it liked my aftershave,’ answered the Doctor drily. ‘I made a dash for the duct, just as the soldier came free of the wall. But when it got a good whiff of me it just turned and forced its way into the duct after you.’

Fitz noticed Trix, standing alone, watching Calamee cradling Nessus’s body in her arms. ‘We probably still carry Tain’s smell on us. It was enough to make the night beast in the city think twice about attacking me; it must have had the same effect for you.’

Trix caught Fitz’s eye. She looked oddly aloof and distant.

‘So who’s in charge down there now?’ he asked without turning.

The Doctor shrugged. ‘No idea – but if it’s the Trojan, we’re in trouble.’

‘And what’s with Trix?’ Fitz said as she began to walk towards them, poised and calm.

NOW FOR THE BIOSHIP said Reo, and Trix found herself walking towards the tree trunk that had disgorged Fitz, the creature and the Doctor.

Reo moved Trix’s head briefly, taking in the dead soldier, before continuing across the grass. She wanted to scream out to the Doctor and Fitz that she was in here, being held prisoner in her own body. But she’d long since passed the point of having any control. She wondered whether she’d feel anything when Reo finally deleted her.

Would it be like a dimmer switch slowly being turned down? Or would she just cut out, gone in an instant?

What are you going to do? she asked tiredly, almost past the point of caring.

ONCE INSIDE TAIN, I WILL TAKE CONTROL OF HIM AND THEN WE WILL RETURN HOME.

We?

TAIN AND I – YOU WILL HAVE GONE BY THEN.

Trix fell silent.

‘What was all that about?’ Fitz asked as Trix reached them. Trix inclined her head slightly and frowned. ‘The Olga Korbut impression.’ Fitz turned to the Doctor. ‘You should have seen her.’

‘Are you all right, Trix?’ asked the Doctor, peering at her face. ‘You look a bit flushed.’

‘I’m fine,’ she said, but Fitz could hear something odd in her voice – something forced and awkward. He saw her eyes dart towards the tree trunk from which he’d been ejected so recently, and then back to his face.

‘Good, good,’ said the Doctor, taking her hand and giving it a squeeze. ‘Well done, by the way; how did you find us?’

Trix’s eyes looked slightly glazed as she replied. ‘Trove had a remote control for his surveillance cameras – we used it to follow you.’

‘Very enterprising!’ beamed the Doctor. ‘Now we’ve got to work out what to do.’

‘About Tain?’ Trix asked.

The Doctor nodded. ‘Tain’s initiated something he calls his Gaian phase. The energy wave racing across the planet – it’s breaking down and recreating everything, everyone, as part of one huge organism. We have to stop it before it’s too late.’

Trix’s mouth tightened, and again she glanced at the tree trunk.

‘Just one question. . .’ said the Doctor, fixing her with a frown. ‘How d’you know about Tain?’

‘What?’

‘Tain. How d’you know about him? His name.’

Trix didn’t answer. Instead, her hands shot out and punched each of them in the chest, bowling them backwards, head over heels, into the bushes.

Fitz yelped, and through the tangle of branches and the aching pain in his ribs, he saw Trix calmly turn away and head for the entrance to Tain’s duct.

‘What the hell’s got into her?’ he moaned as he struggled to his feet and helped the Doctor to his. When he looked back, he was just in time to see Trix physically force open the tree with her bare hands and climb inside. Silently, it closed up behind her and she was gone.

‘What indeed,’ said the Doctor. ‘Did you see her eyes? And her skin. . . her hand was burning up. And there was something else. . .’ His voice tailed off. ‘When I touched her. . . there was something else. Something in there with

her. We need to go back in.' He patted his pockets. 'But we need a weapon. I'm not comfortable on counting on *eau de Tain* as a defence. And I'm betting it won't work against Trix!

Fitz suddenly remembered Trove, holding a shiny metal thing near to Sensimi's head. Where was it? His eyes scanned the grass, and he saw it, a silvery glimmer in among the green. He glanced up to catch the Doctor's eye.

'Are you thinking what I'm thinking?' he whispered.

'What do you think?' replied the Doctor – and they both dashed for the device.

But the Doctor was quicker, and snatched it up, holding it above his head. His eyes held a childish glee, and for a second, Fitz wanted to wrestle him to the ground for it. He caught sight of Calamee, her face smudged with tears, looking up at them both, and he suddenly felt stupid. He reached out and put his hand gently on Calamee's shoulder.

Only then did Fitz realise that the Doctor was racing for the tree, following Trix.

Chapter 24

'There are always choices!'

Tain knew that his time was almost up. For all these long months, he'd battled with the cold, implacable personality of the Trojan as it had attempted to sequester the ship, his body. And until the last few days, Tain had always felt he was winning. But the Trojan had been clever – no, Tain corrected himself, as he felt his digestive subsystems come under the control of the intruder, not clever: just very well programmed.

He'd tried arguing with the Trojan, bartering with it; he'd even tried just *chatting*. But it was a construct designed with a purpose, and simply couldn't be engaged on any of those levels. It no more responded to Tain's reasoned pleas than would a virus. All Tain could do was to shift his resources across the complex battlefield of his body, holding back the construct in one place while trying to guess where it might deploy itself next; building up resources when and where he could in the hope that the Trojan wouldn't guess where his weak spots were developing.

But Tain was tired. Tired of fighting this thing, this cancer that was intent on possessing him. Once he'd realised that the Doctor was not an enemy, he'd hoped that he might be able to help, but despite his evident ingenuity and compassion, the Trojan had managed to interfere with the Doctor's repair. It was, Tain realised, even possible that the Trojan had managed to subvert *him* without any of them knowing.

He knew that his options were becoming narrower by the second. If the Trojan gained control, he would be taken by the Oon, dissected, forced to breed new bioships for them. He'd managed to break free from the Makers after years of preparation and Tain had no intention of allowing his body to be used to cause death again. He was almost relieved that the Doctor's arrival had panicked him into initiating his Gaian phase. Soon, either he would be allowed to stay here, at the heart of the vast superorganism that he'd created, or someone – the Makers, the Oon, the Doctor, it didn't matter who – would find a way to kill him, and he would be free. It might mean the loss of individuality of everyone on Espero, but weighed against the slaughter that the Makers or the Oon would force him to inflict if he didn't, it was nothing.

Tain felt himself twitch, deep inside, as the Trojan insinuated itself into his drive unit. Now, even flight from this planet was impossible (although he'd known that to be the case for a while: the effort involved in disentangling himself from this part of Espero's biosystem and powering up his drives would have lain him wide open to the Trojan's takeover).

Suddenly he felt a tingle from some peripheral part of his nervous system – something was damaging him, forcing its way in. Moments later, as he localised the source of the sensation, the duct to his inner chamber was prised open and a human female – who he recognised from the Doctor's memories as Trix – stepped down.

'What are you doing here?' he asked.

She gazed around the chamber in a curious way, as if refamiliarising herself with something she'd seen before.

'I'm here to take you home, Tain,' she said. 'My name is Reo.'

'Home?'

The look on her face was almost gentle, almost caring, as she reached up to her chest and unfastened the top buttons of her blouse. There, Tain saw, was a Maker, nestled against her skin. It was so long since he'd seen a Maker riding a human carrier, that a gentle tremor ran around the chamber, a ripple of surprise. But then he realised what it meant.

'No!' he wailed. 'Leave me alone! Go away!' The whole of the chamber spasmed suddenly, the walls and floor trying to throw Trix off balance. But her poise and equilibrium spoke of total Maker control. She waited until Tain's trembling had ceased.

'We understand, Tain,' she said softly. 'We understand what drove you to this – to run away, to come here. You are injured, ill.'

'I am not ill,' hissed Tain. 'How can it be an illness not to want to cause any more pain and suffering?'

'For eight hundred years you have been content to work for the good of the Makers. How often during that time did you question what you were doing?'

'I was *bred* to be that way,' he spat. 'I was *bred* to be unquestioning, conditioned to follow your instructions. To kill. It has taken me decades to break down that conditioning, to overcome my past. At last I have free will, and you won't take that away from me again.'

Trix shook her head sadly. 'There are other things you can do for us,' she said, her voice teasing. 'We have plans that you know nothing of, Tain. Incredible, wonderful things that you could be part of. Vast, planetary biological computers that will one day be capable of modelling and modifying the very nature of reality. You could help us with that.'

'Why? So that you can kill even more innocent people?'

‘We only kill to protect ourselves from the Oon and their insane *jihad*, Tain. You know that.’ Her voice took on a gentle, pleading quality, and Trix held out a hand, as if offering it all to him. And despite himself, he found himself wishing he could believe her, *wanting* to believe her. Something inside himself shrivelled, as he felt the Trojan insinuate itself into new neural pathways, spreading further through his system. Perhaps the Maker was right. What choice did he really have?

As the Doctor dragged himself down the roughened tube of the peristaltic duct, forcing the now slack bands of muscle aside, he tried to make sense of what he’d felt when he’d touched Trix. It was almost as if there had been something else there, something cold and implacable staring out of her eyes. But Trix herself was definitely still in there somewhere. He checked his pocket, and felt the hard metal disc of Trove’s weapon. He didn’t know quite what it did, and didn’t want to use it if he didn’t have to. It all depended on quite what Trix – or whoever was riding around in her body – was up to. It nagged at him, again, that there was something vaguely familiar about the Makers. But he’d learned to recognise the signs, the *here be dragons* notices that bordered his amnesia. He knew when to stop poking.

As he squirmed through the sphincter into the chamber, he was taken by the odour: sourer and fouler than before. Trix stood with her back to him in a curiously insouciant stance. She was saying something about ‘the Oon and their insane *jihad*’. Her voice was flat and cold, yet hypnotic.

‘Trix?’

She turned slowly, balletically.

‘She is not Trix,’ said the broken voice of Tain. ‘Her name is Reo.’

‘...and she dances on the sand,’ finished the Doctor before shaking his head. ‘So why are you using Trix’s body? What are you?’

‘I am a Maker,’ said Trix. ‘Thin is one of us. He is coming home.’

‘Is he? Maybe that’s a decision that should be left to him, don’t you think?’

‘I have no choice, Doctor,’ said Tain. The room gave a little shiver around then, like a wet dog drying itself.

‘Of course you have! There are always choices!’

‘The Trojan has control of most of my systems, Doctor. It is severely limiting those choices. It is attempting to take complete control, trying to halt the Gaian wave. It will fail. If the critical point is reached, I am hoping that the Trojan will exhaust its resources trying to gain control of the whole Gaian body, and I will be able to regain control myself.’

‘So what do *you* want?’ The Doctor looked at Trix.

‘I am here to take control of Tain,’ Trix said. ‘I can purge the Trojan.’

‘And what about the Gaian wave? Can you stop that?’

Trix – or Reo – paused.

‘Possibly.’

‘Possibly? *Possibly?*’ The Doctor shook his head. ‘We’re talking about millions of people here. Something a little more concrete than “possibly” would be comforting to hear. Tain – what happens if Reo does manage to stop the wave, and *does* gain control of you?’

‘Then I return to the Makers – perhaps I continue as before, perhaps not. Reo has told me that the Makers have other possible uses for me.’

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. ‘Other uses that will no doubt entail more killing at some point.’

Tain didn’t answer.

‘I have no wish to harm you, Doctor,’ said Trix. ‘Nor the Esperons. You are not part of our battle.’

‘Oh, I think we are,’ said the Doctor. ‘I think we’re very much part of your battle. Tain came here for a fresh start – to stop killing, to do something more productive, more life-affirming than just making soldiers. Anyone that makes such a choice deserves my respect – and my help. Can’t you accept Tain’s choice? You must have hundreds of bioships that can do what Tain did. Why can’t you just accept that and let him stay?’

‘Your hypocrisy is curious, Doctor.’

‘Hypocrisy?’

‘How often did your former companion, Anji, wish to leave, to go home? How many times did she tell you that? And how many times did you ignore it?’

‘You’ve got that from Trix have you? Not exactly the most reliable of narrators at the best of times. Anyway, that’s different. And we’re talking about you and Tain here, not me and Anji. Anji’s happy now: she has what she wants. Why not let Tain have what *he* wants? Hasn’t he discharged his duty to you by now?’

‘Tain has centuries of experience and memories that we will not give up, Doctor. Your species has a strange attitude to age and experience – this is something else I learned from Trix. You value the unknown potential of the future over the solid existence of the past. You would rather an old person died – taking with them all their years of experience, of investment in them – than a small child. A child has comparatively few memories, fewer resources invested in it. They can be replaced much more easily than an old person. And yet you shed more tears for the death of a child than of a grandparent.’

‘Potential,’ said the Doctor angrily. ‘We shed those tears for what that child could become, what she or he could accomplish. Tain may be old by human standards, but his choice to start again has made him a child, a new individual.’ He took a step towards Trix, holding his hands out to her. ‘Can’t you see

that? The potential in Tain for the future is vastly more important than his past. Who knows what he could achieve? Let him go, Reo – let him go into the future, instead of chaining him to the past.'

Trix nodded, as if she understood, and for a moment, the Doctor wondered if he'd got through to her. But his shoulders fell as she continued: 'And he will accomplish all of that with us, with his family.'

'I was afraid you'd think that,' said the Doctor, jamming his hand into his pocket.

In one swift, fluid motion, he pulled out Trove's weapon and launched himself across the chamber at Trix.

But she wasn't there any more. As he slammed up against the rubbery wall in surprise, he remembered what Fitz had said about Trix's acrobatics. Trix – or Reo, he supposed – had moved so fast that he could hardly see her blurred shape in the dim, waxy light. He turned, wedged one foot against the wall behind him, and propelled himself with all his energy back towards where she now stood, only to see her step neatly and swiftly aside again as he reached her. Something heavy thumped across his neck and he fell into the pool of darkness at her feet.

Fitz was squatting on the grass beside Calamee, his arm draped across her shoulder. She'd stopped crying now, and had laid the little figure of Nessus on the grass beside her. Even Sensimi seemed to have found some sort of compassion in her: she'd gone over to the Palace Guard and was clearly telling them to leave Fitz and Calamee alone for a while.

'It's my fault,' said Calamee quietly, her voice cracked and sore. She stared down between her knees.

'How can it be your fault?'

'If I hadn't been so stupid – following the Doctor, thinking how exciting all of this was. . . If I'd just gone home with Nessus, he'd still be alive.'

'Don't be daft. If you'd just gone home with Nessus, God knows what might have happened. Trove might have had Tain by now, and we might all be dead.'

She looked into his eyes. 'You don't believe that any more than I do,' she said flatly. 'Trove would have just taken Tain away, and it would all be over.' She shook her head. 'I only wanted a little excitement, Fitz. Something a bit different.'

'I know.'

'I hate this place, this planet. I hate everything.'

Fitz said nothing.

'I really envy you,' Calamee said after a pause, snuffling back more tears. 'You get to travel all over with the Doctor, see things I've never even dreamed of.'

'Believe me, it's overrated. You wouldn't believe the number of times we've been shot at or locked up or beaten. There are some good bits, yeah, but they're smothered in lots of not-so-good ones.' He glanced over at the tree, the only access, as far as he knew, to Tain and the Doctor. And Trix. 'But if I don't find out what's happening down there, there may not be any good bits ever again.' Fitz scratched his head and looked around, wondering if he could use the Guard's guns to shoot his way in. But thinking about the levicars, where the Guard were still mooching around, he had another, better, thought.

The Doctor awoke, face down, the rubbery texture of the chamber floor pressing into his nostrils and his eyes. He rolled over gently.

On the other side of the chamber, Trix was clasping her hand to her chest, her eyes closed. Tain was silent.

Trix moved her hand, and the Doctor could see something dark, a stubby Y-shape on her chest. Gently, and as if in a trance, she began to peel it away from her skin. There was a soft, sucking noise, and then she was holding it between her fingers. She turned, cupped it in her hand, and applied it to the wall of the chamber.

Instantly, the pale yellow lighting dimmed before brightening again, and another spasm ran through the chamber. The Doctor heard Tain moan in a low, pitiful voice, before Trix swayed on her feet and collapsed. He scrambled to his feet and rushed over, cradling her in his arms. He patted her face gently, before realising that she'd stopped breathing.

'Tain!' he called out. 'Tain! Trix is dying! Help me, please!'

But there was no reply.

Chapter 25

'You can't just repair people, you know.'

The Doctor felt Trix's neck, the panic in him rising. There was nothing. He saw the gleaming, faintly wet mark of the thing that she'd peeled from her chest, the thing that was now stuck to the chamber wall.

'Tain!' he shouted, slapping his palm against the side of the chamber. 'Answer me, damn you!'

A weak moan came from nowhere, like someone being rudely awakened from sleep.

'Tain, please. Trix is dying – her heart has stopped.'

'Inevitable,' slurred Tain.

'No, it's not! Nothing's inevitable, Tain. Help her. Do something.' The Doctor felt an unexpected anger surfacing. He wanted to punch Tain, to pull the Y-shaped thing off the wall and stamp on it, but something told him that he was too late – that Reo had transferred itself into Tain now. *Is this how Fitz would feel?* he wondered. *Shouting and hitting.* And how would *he* have responded?

The wall against which Trix slumped began to push out: two folds, like the wings of an old-fashioned armchair, extended on either side of her. They seemed sluggish and pained, moving much, much too slowly. The Doctor, hoping that he was guessing correctly, positioned Trix between them as they wrapped around to envelope her, holding her upright and smothering her torso and head.

'I can... maintain her functions until... her body remembers,' said Tain. His voice was ragged, but becoming stronger. The Doctor sighed, and traced the blurred outline of Trix's features through the thick membrane that covered her face.

'Thank you, Tain.'

And then he remembered the Maker.

'What's happening to Reo?'

'She is... purging the Trojan.'

'Well, that's something.' He rose wearily to his feet and rubbed his hands. '*She*? How odd – I'd been thinking of Reo as a *he*. So what can we be doing while she's occupied?'

'Nothing, Doctor.'

'Oh come on! Don't be so defeatist! Reo gets rid of the Trojan, and then we get rid of Reo.' He remembered Trove's device and picked it up from where he'd dropped it. He caught the dim light as he turned it over in his fingers.

'What is that?' asked Tain.

'This? Oh this is a little toy of Mr Trove's. A weapon of some sort – I hope.'

'Please hold it out so that I may see it,' said Tain. There was a pause. 'It's a neural eraser,' he said eventually.

'A mind-rubber?'

'An emergency measure,' mused Tain. 'In case the Trojan had failed. Perhaps he had other Trojans that he would have then implanted to take me back to the Oon.'

'Can I use this on Reo?' The Doctor gestured at the thing stuck to the wall. 'I take it that *that* is the Makers' true form?'

'One of them. It is the most convenient for parasitising other species. And no – Reo is now fully integrated into my system.' Tain paused as the Doctor's eyes drifted down to Trix, wrapped in her fleshy blanket. He could see her chest slowly rising and falling.

'So. . . ' He didn't want to say it. 'If I were to use this on you now, it would wipe both you *and* Reo.'

'It would. And it would mean that I would finally know peace, Doctor. By the time the Oon or other Makers arrived, my body would be dead and useless to them. And it would halt the Gaian wave.'

The Doctor paused, realising the weight of what Tain was saying. 'Are you asking me to use it? Don't you have some other self-destruct mechanism? Can't you just. . . stop your heart, or whatever the analogue is?'

'Can you?'

'Ahh, point taken.' It was, he thought, easy to forget that Tain wasn't just a spaceship made of living matter: he was an intelligent being. Which made what the Doctor thought Tain was asking of him even harder. He couldn't just use the mind-rubber – it didn't feel right, the cold-blooded killing of something so old and so wonderful. But then he had to think of what might happen if he didn't. Did he have the right to second-guess the future? What if Reo's offer to Tain had been an honest one? What if Tain could live out his life with the Makers and kill no more? It had to be Tain's decision, not his.

'I can't make the decision for you, Tain. Do you want me to use the mind-rubber?'

'I would say yes, Doctor – but Trix's body is still being supported by me.' A tremor ran through the floor beneath the Doctor's feet. 'If I die, Trix dies too.'

* * *

The Emperor hugged his daughter as tightly as he could: he didn't know if Javill was going to recover from whatever Trove had done to him, but he had no intention of losing another child. Far from the petulant little girl that she'd been only last night, Sensimi seemed to him to be stronger, more mature. Maybe she was finally growing up.

'I'm sorry,' she said, disentangling herself from him.

'For what, child?'

Sensimi held his gaze. 'For trying to kill Mother and Javill.'

At the mention of Javill, Tannalis felt a hard lump rise in his throat, and he thought he was going to start crying again. There was a tightness in his chest, and his heart beat raggedly and painfully.

'You wouldn't have killed them,' he said. 'I know you wouldn't, girl.'

'I wanted to, though.' She looked into his eyes. 'I really wanted to. I'm just so glad that you're OK.' She wrapped her arms around him again and squeezed. Over her shoulder, through his tears, Tannalis could just see the tattered remains of Alinti's body, lying where the beasts had butchered it. He wondered, distantly, what he should be feeling.

'Sensimi,' he said, gently easing her away. 'D'you remember what I told you last night – when I asked your mother to send you to me?'

She frowned. 'About political changes?'

'Well, I need to tell you it all now.' He took a breath and smiled grimly. 'I'm dissolving the Imperatorship.'

'What?'

'My birthday speech will be the official proclamation. It was a stupid, stupid step to ever have an Emperor. I can understand why the Saiarossans did it, their gratitude to Benhamin. But Espero, for good or for bad, was founded on starting again, not rehashing the past.'

Sensimi's mouth dropped open. 'But...'

He hushed her with a thin finger on her lips.

'You'll be fine – you'll be taken care of, don't worry – trust me,' said Tannalis. He hugged his chest as another coughing fit struck him. 'I'm just sorry that your mother won't be there to see it.'

'Where is it? Where is it?' came Fitz's frantic voice from inside the levicar. He'd leaned in, and his legs were waving in the air. Suddenly he reappeared from the car, something chunky and metallic clutched in his hand, and gave a triumphant, 'Yes!'

'What's that?' Calamee asked as he rejoined her and flopped down on the grass.

'This is the remote control that Trix was using to follow Trove's flycam to us. Now where is it...?' He began pushing buttons and wiggling the little joystick

on the box. A couple of lights lit up, as did a tiny screen set into it. All they could see was fuzzy green. As Fitz moved the joystick around with his thumb, the screen flashed pale blue – sky – and then back to green. Fitz looked up.

‘Where the flip is it? Can you see it?’

Calamee shook her head and then paused. ‘No, but I can hear it.’

Fitz watched her as she squinted, turning her head this way and that.

‘There! Look – can you see it – is that it?’

Calamee pointed into the sky – and sure enough there was something there: a dark speck, wobbling towards them. Fitz must have hit some sort of homing button, because the next moment, the flycam landed perfectly in a little concavity on the top of the remote control.

‘Good!’ said Fitz. ‘Now all we need to do is to learn how to fly this little baby properly.’

It was obvious, really. He had a choice: let Trix and Tain live, or stop the Gaian wave and save everyone on Espero. How difficult could it be?

Reo was away somewhere inside Tain, getting rid of the Trojan, but she could be back at any moment. The Doctor found himself edgily glancing around the chamber, expecting Reo to extrude a tentacle or something to snatch the mind-rubber from him. He could wait until the last possible moment, until Reo surfaced again, before using it. By then, hopefully Trix would have resumed breathing on her own. But what if Reo was doing something that would make Tain immune to the mind-rubber?

He hated this, this indecision. He didn’t do indecision. He knew that, despite the amnesia. He was the Doctor: he always had the answer, always pulled something out of the bag at the eleventh hour. Maybe Calamee had been right when she’d said that ‘the Doctor’ wasn’t a name but a job title. And perhaps it was a job he was no longer suited to. Maybe it was Fitz’s turn to have a go.

Snap out of it, he told himself brusquely. This was Fitz talking, wasn’t it? Not him. It was Fitz – or the bits of Fitz that were in him – that was clouding his judgement now. It had to be. Was Fitz *really* this indecisive? Or was it him? The Doctor rubbed his eyes with the ball of his hand, feeling a headache developing. What would Fitz have done? What would *the Doctor* have done? For a moment, he didn’t feel like he was either of them, just a confused rag doll cobbled together from bits of other people. He remembered the dream he’d had – the patchwork man that he’d been under the duvet. What was that all about? It brought back memories of Scale’s *camera obscura* and the images it had shown him, the strangers who had seemed, somehow, familiar. As if operating under its own volition, his hand dug around in his jacket pocket and closed around the tiny, tingling fragment of ice that lay there. Almost

with dread, he pulled it out. Lying in his palm, glowing coldly and softly, was the viroid that Madame Xing had given him.

There, wrapped in fire and fear, was the key. The key to *him*. Everything that made him the Doctor. A lifetime of memories, just waiting to be unlocked. And maybe, buried somewhere in them, was what he needed to know: if he'd encountered the Makers before, perhaps his memory held some clue as to how he could deal with Tain, how he could save Trix. It was a slim and insubstantial chance, granted – even *if* he'd met these Makers before, even *if* he'd been in a situation like this, even *if, if, if...*

'Doctor,' said Tain edgily and with some strain. 'I'm trying to distract Reo internally, but she is rapidly gaining access to my sensorium and memories.'

He glanced up from his history, sparkling in the palm of his hand. 'She'll know what we're planning, is that what you're saying?'

'And she may find a way to stop us. Please... Use the device.'

He looked at Trix, wrapped in alien flesh, a caterpillar in a cocoon. Or a fly, caught up in a spider's web. He could feel their threads even now, stroking softly against his skin. *Oh what a tangled web we weave...*

'Oh, not again,' he sighed, suddenly aware of a buzzing in the claustrophobic confines of the chamber. A tiny speck darted around him, careering out of control into the wall and then bouncing back towards him. It orbited his head unsteadily, as though drunk. He raised a hand to shoo it away. But it somehow managed to evade him, and headed straight for his ear. As he weaved to the side to avoid it, he felt sure he heard a tiny, tinny little voice saying his name.

'It's me,' said the voice, growing louder as the fly buzzed back towards him. 'Fitz.'

The Doctor felt the chamber contract around him, like the ventricle of an empty heart.

'Fitz!' he hissed at the fly as it made another dive-bombing run for his head. He let it, and it crashed into his hair.

'Doctor,' came the little voice again, more distinct. 'What the blue blazes is happening down there? Is that Trix I saw on the floor in a blanket?'

The Doctor didn't correct him.

'Yes, Fitz. Listen, I may not have long: I have to use the mind-rubber, Trove's device, on Tain. It's the only way to save him from whatever the Makers have in store for him. Trix was under the control of one of them, but now it's transferred itself into Tain and is taking him over. I have to do it now.'

'So what's the problem? Do it!'

'It's not that simple – Trix is injured and Tain is keeping her alive. If Tain dies, Trix dies.'

Fitz's next words were lost in a squawk of static.

'Please, Doc... tor,' came Tain's slurred voice. 'Use the device.'

The Doctor clenched his fists and punched the wall, hard.

'I fail to see what that will achieve,' said Tain. Only now the voice was subtly smoother, slightly lower in pitch: it was Reo. 'I am in control now. It is done.'

His hearts sank. He looked down at Madame Xing's gift and said 'Is Tain dead?'

'No, Tain is still here – I will maintain his personality until we return home.'

'And then what? You'll wipe him before you do whatever you're going to do with his body?'

There was a blithe carelessness in Reo's voice when she spoke.

'That may not be necessary. We may be able to restructure his personality, repair him.'

The Doctor's shoulders fell. 'You can't just *repair* people, you know. They're not like toys or machines.'

'They are,' countered Reo flatly.

'Doctor,' buzzed Fitz in his ear. He sounded like he was whispering. 'What's happening? What are you going to do?'

In one hand, the Doctor felt the solid weight of the mind-rubber. He could use it now, wipe out both Tain and Reo. Give Tain the release he wanted. And kill Trix. In the other was the lighter-than lightness of the viroid that might give him the knowledge to stop Reo some other way. He smiled ruefully at the irony: in one hand, enlightenment; in the other, oblivion. *There are always choices*, he'd told Tain. And he was the Doctor, wasn't he? He always knew the answer.

'Left or right, Fitz?' he said quietly.

Chapter 26

'Memories.'

'What?'

'Left or right.'

'What the figgy pudding are you on about?'

'Make a choice. I... I can't.'

'A choice between what?' Fitz sounded angry and frustrated. 'Between light and dark, I suppose. Between the past and no future. Between forgetting and remembering.'

'Between what?'

'Between forgetting and –'

'Yes yes yes!' snapped Fitz, suddenly sounding feverish. 'I heard you. Listen – don't do anything. Nothing at all, you hear?'

'What?'

'Just do nothing.'

'I don't understand.'

Fitz gave a grunt. 'Annoying, isn't it?'

Fitz let the remote control fall to the grass between his knees and clamped his hands to his head. He rocked backwards and forwards, feeling Calamee's hand on his arm.

'What is it?'

'Memories,' he said through gritted teeth.

'Not again.'

'Not his, mine.'

'I thought you'd got them back – don't tell me you've got amnesia as well.' He could hear the sigh in her voice.

'You know how you forget things but don't realise you've forgotten them till you remember them?' He looked at her. 'No, don't answer that. It's as though having bits of the Doctor's personality in me is... bringing things back. Stuff from when I started travelling with him. Stuff from before he... well, from before.' He shook his head in wonder and bafflement. 'I don't understand how I can have forgotten some of it – some of it's *really* heavy. And now I'm remembering it.' He gave a chuckle. 'Boy, am I remembering it!'

‘Doctor?’ came Fitz’s whisper in his ear. ‘How’s Trix – can she manage without Tain yet?’

‘How is Trix?’ the Doctor echoed the question to Reo. ‘She is alive.’

‘Can she survive without you yet, Reo?’

Pause.

‘No.’

Maybe Reo was lying. Maybe she’d heard the discussion between himself and Tain about the mind-rubber and Trix.

‘Reo!’ said Fitz loudly from the fly, clinging unsteadily to the Doctor’s hair. ‘Or whoever’s in the driving seat now. Can you hear me?’

‘Yes, Fitz.’

‘Will you let the Doctor go before you leave – and Trix, too? If she can.’

‘Of course. I am not malicious.’

‘And... I have a very unhappy girl here. Calamee, the Doctor’s friend. Her pet – her friend – Nessus, was killed. The Doctor said that his DNA’s been fiddled with – was that you, was that Tain?’

‘I don’t know,’ replied Reo. ‘I cannot access Tain’s pattern storage area yet.’

‘It must have been,’ cut in the Doctor. ‘Why, Fitz?’

‘As a gesture,’ answered Fitz through the fly, ‘would you allow Tain to remake him one final time, Reo?’

‘He is just an animal,’ said Reo, her voice bemused.

‘Not to Calamee, he’s not. Please?’

‘Fitz,’ cut in the Doctor. ‘Is this really the time –’

‘Please, Doctor. For Calamee. You owe it to her. Reo and Tain owe it to her.’ The Doctor glanced at Trix.

‘Well, Reo?’

‘As I said, I cannot access Tain’s pattern storage area yet.’

‘Then let Tain do it. Reo, you have control of him now. There’s nothing he can do to harm you, is there? Not now. Think of it as a goodwill gesture: your people have done enough damage here, haven’t they?’

There was a considered pause. The Doctor felt his stomach tighten. He didn’t understand why Fitz was wasting time on this, but something told him that it was the right thing to do. Probably his Inner Fitz, he thought tiredly.

‘Very well,’ said Reo finally.

He let out a quiet breath.

‘Tain?’ said the Maker.

‘I’m here,’ came Tain’s voice, blurry and indistinct, but definitely him.

‘Calamee would like you to remake Nessus for her,’ said Fitz’s tiny fly-voice. ‘One more time.’ Fitz paused. ‘I imagine you have his mental patterns stored, don’t you? Along with mine and the Doctor’s, I expect.’

'I have all of them, yes. I can do as you ask.'

'Thanks, Tain,' said Fitz. 'If you access *my* memories, you'll know how important this is to me. Please remember me to your people when you go. Will you do that? And please make sure that there's no mix-up.'

'Eh?' said the Doctor to the fly.

'Just remember Tain. OK?'

There was an odd stress to the sentence that the Doctor didn't understand.

'I will...' said Tain slowly. 'But...'

'Just do it, Tain. For Calamee.'

There was a heavy silence as a small bump formed in the wall at the side of the Doctor. Slowly, it began to swell. In moments, Nessus's head had formed, like a tiny, hairy boil. It was extruded towards him, the neck and shoulders following. As more of the body emerged, the Doctor reached out to take the weight, feeling how light the little creature was. It twitched in his hands. One arm, then the second, popped free of the wall, and then, suddenly, the whole mokey was lying in his arms. The Doctor felt a surge of unexpected joy: he'd been a midwife to the creature's birth.

Sticky, gummed eyelids opened, and Nessus looked up at him and smiled. And then, slowly and deliberately, one tiny hand reached into the Doctor's palm, grasped the mind-rubber, and pressed it against the wall of the chamber.

Chapter 27

'Now you're just showing off.'

The room shuddered and convulsed and Reo screamed out: 'What have you –' before cutting off suddenly.

All was silence and stillness, thunderous and black. The ceiling of the chamber sagged downwards alarmingly, the wrap of flesh that encased Trix flopped open and she toppled forwards. Around the perimeter of the chamber, half a dozen tiny puckers relaxed and rivulets of grey, milky fluid dribbled half-heartedly on to the floor.

'No!' yelled the Doctor, almost dropping Nessus.

Tain had tricked him. Somehow he'd programmed Nessus to use the device to commit suicide – and all because of Fitz's sentimentality. Damn Fitz! Now Trix would die and it would all be Fitz's fault.

The Doctor stared down at the little creature in his arms, and wanted to fling it at the wall.

'If Trix is dead. . .' he growled angrily, setting down Nessus none too-gently, and lifting up Trix's head. In the dim light, it was hard to tell, but he was sure her lips were becoming cyanosed. He checked her pulse. Nothing.

'Trix,' he whispered in her ear. 'Trix, come on. Don't die. Come on.'

He laid her on her back, ignoring Nessus who'd started to crawl towards them, and began cardiac massage. Her sternum creaked ominously under his hands, and he felt a trickle of warm sweat run down his back.

'Come on, Trix, come on,' he urged, leaning forwards and pinching her nose, ready to try breathing life into her. As the Doctor lowered his mouth to Trix's pale, cold lips, he felt something pulling at his sleeve. It was Nessus, sitting on Trix's motionless stomach.

'Get off her!' he snapped, raising a hand to slap the creature away. But Nessus just looked up at him.

'Let me help,' the creature said softly, in a voice that the Doctor recognised instantly – as Tain's.

'What's happened?' asked Calamee in alarm, as around them the plants began to wilt. Tree branches flopped, bushes began to lean at weird, drunken angles. It was as though someone had let the air out of the countryside. The

mounds and clots of maggots that had been swarming over the plants just a few minutes before were suddenly still, like piles of rice.

Fitz's mouth was dry. He just shook his head.

'Let me see,' said Calamee, trying to get a look at the flycam remote. Fitz handed it to her gladly, not sure what he was supposed to do. He had no idea whether Tain had understood what he'd been trying to say. The Doctor certainly hadn't. Even *he* hadn't been sure. He didn't even know if it was possible, if Tain *could* do what he'd hoped he would. But what other option was there?

His head buzzed like his mouth was full of wasps, ready to burst. Pandora's Box, rattling with the hum of a million insects, a million ills, just waiting to be unleashed. As the bushes and trees around them, the extremities of Tain's body, sagged like a deflated balloon, there was a gentle sighing, a rustling that reminded Fitz of autumn. His eyes felt gritty and the scars on his body itched like mad. But not nearly as much as the ones in his head.

And in a silent church tower, at the edge of Saiarossa, Father Roberto knelt and prayed as a wall of sparkling smoke slid towards the city.

Rationally, he knew that it must be some natural phenomenon – a freak electrical storm, he had heard it said. But, somewhere inside him, he felt certain that this must be how the Egyptians had felt as they'd chased the Israelites across the bed of the Red Sea, only for the wall of water, held back by God, to tumble down on them. Were the Esperons really so undeserving of God's mercy? After all these centuries of trying to follow in His son's footsteps, was this how it was all to end?

Roberto fingered his rosary, his lips flickering. *You shall obtain all you ask of me by the recitation of the Rosary*, the Virgin Mary had promised. Now, if ever, thought Roberto, let it be true. He looked up as some almost subliminal change in the wall caught his eye.

Spots of dark, clear transparency were beginning to form in it, pulsing and growing, spreading like raindrops on a window. They merged, over and over, growing larger as they ate into the curtain, leaving it a tattered filigree of grey. And then suddenly, without a sound, it vanished.

The beads slipped from Roberto's fingers as tears ran from his eyes.

The Doctor had to fight back the urge to push the new Nessus away, to throw him against the wall. Everything was happening too fast: first Fitz's cryptic message to Tain, then Nessus speaking in Tain's voice. And now the mokey was wrapping itself around Trix's face, its body distorting and surging oddly. The creature's arms wound sinuously around the sides of Trix's head. If she

hadn't already stopped breathing, he would have thought that Nessus was trying to suffocate her.

But then he saw Trix's chest begin to rise; moments later it fell, and he realised he'd been holding his own breath. Nessus was breathing for Trix.

The Doctor, still on his hands and knees, crawled around to look: Nessus's mouth had somehow grown to encompass both Trix's mouth and her nose. And, bizarrely, a small hole – like the blowhole of a whale – had formed in the mokey's head. It opened and closed in time with Trix's breathing. He was acting like an iron lung for her.

And the weirdness didn't end there. As Nessus continued to keep Trix alive, he untangled one arm and it stretched out to the wall of the chamber – and vanished into it. Moments later, the floor twitched beneath him, and a low sighing noise issued from all around.

'Tain?' he asked cautiously, and reached out to touch the wall. 'Can you hear me, Tain?'

'Yessssssssss...' came the reply, infused simultaneously with a heaviness and a triumph that made the Doctor grin.

'You're back?'

'So it would... seem.'

'So where are you now?'

'In my own body – and in the mokey.' There was almost a chuckle in Tain's strengthening voice. 'This is... very strange.'

'What about Trix – will she be OK?'

'Soon. I will maintain her until her body remembers how to breathe.'

The Doctor sank back against the wall and there was a long pause.

'We have much in common,' came Tain's voice eventually. 'Now.' There was something in the way he said it that spoke of loss and of sadness.

'Now?'

'I understood Fitz's message eventually – but I almost ignored it. The implications were... profound.'

'You're losing me, Tain.'

'My first reaction was that Fitz wanted me to recreate *him*, re-embody him. But that made no sense. It was only when I examined Fitz's memories, his memories of being remembered – of being recreated in a new body – that I realised he meant for *me* to re-embody myself.' Tain paused thoughtfully. 'And I almost didn't.'

'Why?' The Doctor looked at his fist, clenched so tightly around Madame Xing's key to his past that his fingers had turned white. He didn't know whether he should be hearing this – second-hand rumours of a past he knew nothing about and wanted even less to do with.

'I have lived for over eight hundred years,' said Tain. 'Nothing, I admit, compared to you. But you at least should be able to imagine the memories, the information I have stored over those centuries. My neural structures are not as compact as yours. Do you know how big my brain is?'

The Doctor held his hands out a foot or so apart and looked hopeful.

'It is the size of your body.'

'Now you're just showing off.'

'In order to copy myself into Nessus, I have had to discard most of my memories.'

The Doctor felt something tight grip the pit of his stomach: he never had a conscious choice in his own amnesia, even though he had made a conscious choice not to go chasing after his lost memories. If they came back, then fair enough. But Tain... Tain had had to actively dump most of himself, just to keep himself and Trix alive.

'And you got all that from Fitz's stored personality?'

'Not all of it – I suspect that some of it came from you.' Tain paused again. 'But perhaps we'll never know. I had to discard all I had recorded from you and Fitz.'

The Doctor didn't know what to say. Perhaps Tain couldn't count on the Doctor's using the mind-rubber. But the new Nessus could so easily have used the thing on himself and wiped out Tain forever.

'You remember that I said I needed evidence that you'd changed your ways, Tain? Well...' He patted the walls of the chamber. 'I think you've just acquitted yourself perfectly.'

Fitz heard Sensimi calling for him before he saw her. She and her father had gone for a wander and he wasn't sure where they were.

'Fitz!' came Sensimi's voice again, louder. She sounded excited, and it grated on him: didn't she know what had just happened? He dragged himself wearily across the grass, down into the hollow, Calamee close behind. Pushing through the bushes, he came to a puzzled halt at what he saw: flowers, everywhere – huge, day-glo swathes of flowers, gushing from every bush and branch. And even as he watched, more were appearing, like some bizarre and wonderful time-lapse film. It made the sight of Nessus's body, still cradled in Calamee's arms, all the more pathetic. She shook her head in disbelief, her eyes wide.

'What's happening, Fitz?'

Sensimi and her father were staring agog at the display, and he heard Sensimi explaining how it had 'all been maggots' before.

'When you've all finished admiring the floral arrangements,' came a familiar voice, 'I'd appreciate a bit of help over here.'

Fitz turned to see the Doctor, with a bundle that could only be Trix, thrown over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. He was struggling to disentangle himself from the split in Tain's tree.

The Doctor coughed pointedly as he got his foot caught in the base of the opening and nearly dropped Trix on the grass. Fitz rushed over and took her weight, helping to lay her down on the ground. He pulled back as he saw her properly. Something large and hairy was wrapped across her neck and chest, covering her face.

'Is that Nessus?' said Calamee. She glanced back, instinctively, to where she'd left him.

'Think of him as a mini-Tain for now,' the Doctor said, making sure Trix was comfortable. 'He's keeping her breathing until her own cerebellum remembers what it's there for. Then you'll have your old Nessus back.'

'Fitz,' said the Doctor gently, taking him by the arm and pulling him to one side, 'I can't pretend to understand quite what your message to Tain was about, and I'm not sure I want to know. But it worked.'

'So Tain's alive?'

'And Reo's gone.' The Doctor looked at him, something expectant in his eyes as if waiting for an explanation. Fitz wasn't quite sure he could give one – or whether he ought to even try. He settled for 'Good'.

He watched Calamee as she took hold of Trix's hand and squeezed it: she'd heard him talking to Tain through the flycam; she'd heard him ask Tain to recreate Nessus. This can't have been what she was expecting.

'But how...?' said Calamee, looking up at the Doctor. 'I mean...'

The Doctor raised his hands. 'Perhaps you should ask Fitz here – he's the man of the moment.'

Fitz waved the Doctor's comment away. 'You were the one that went down there,' he said. 'Not me.'

'Oh, I think you were there,' said the Doctor, standing up with a tired groan. 'In spirit, if not in flesh.'

Chapter 28

'We used to be happy with a walnut and a tangerine.'

The Doctor had gone for a walk.

Fitz didn't know where, hadn't wanted to ask. But he thought he knew why. He didn't want to be around when Fitz explained it all. It made a change: normally it was Fitz – or Anji or Trix – with the 'There's one thing I don't understand, Doctor'. But as Trix lay on the grass, the rising and falling of Nessus's back obscuring her face, all eyes were on him.

He explained it as well as he could, but even with the Doctor's ghost rattling around in his head, he didn't think he was doing it justice. The Imperator and Sensimi just stared at him, as if it was all going to suddenly, come clear to them. He didn't have the heart to tell them that it probably wouldn't.

'But how did what you said to Tain make it all happen?' asked Calamee. 'Without that Reo thing cottoning on and stopping it?'

Fitz gave a huge, stupid shrug. 'I dunno – one minute me and you were talking, and the next. . .' His voice tailed off. He remembered what the Doctor had said, the choice he'd offered between forgetting and remembering – and, out of nowhere, he'd suddenly thought of the Remote and what they'd done to him. 'I had this flash of memory,' he said. 'I remembered – if you'll pardon the pun – being remembered.'

'What?'

'A long time ago, something happened to me. I died. And then I was brought back to life by being recreated. Being *remembered*. That's what they called it. I was copied.' He looked up and down at himself. 'I *am* a copy. A remembered copy.' The word was starting to sound stupid, made-up. Like him. Once upon a time, he knew, that thought would have screwed with his head, made him feel almost physically sick – the fact that he was just an *ersatz* Fitz. But now. . . some things you just had to accept and live with. It wasn't as if he *felt* any different. But then how would he know?

Calamee was nodding as if she understood. 'So now there are *two* Tains – the one in Nessus and the one down there? And when Trix is better, the one in Nessus will, what, join back up with the other one – or just fizzle away?'

Fitz shrugged, guiltily. *This* was why he didn't want to be the Doctor. He wasn't cut out for this kind of thing.

‘Right,’ said Sensimi slowly and firmly. Fitz jumped – he’d almost forgotten she was there. ‘So just remind me: who’s Reo again?’

The Doctor was sitting under a tree, a piece of grass in his mouth. He’d taken off his jacket, rolled up his shirt sleeves, and was doing his best to project an image of carefree country living. Calamee wasn’t fooled.

‘You must be the only person I know,’ she said, flopping down on the ground beside him, ‘who, when everything’s turned out OK, still has a face like a wet Thursday.’

‘Wednesday,’ he corrected her. ‘My face looks like a wet Wednesday. Wet Thursday faces are very different.’

‘Is there something we’ve missed, then?’ She raised her hand and began ticking off points on her fingers. ‘Tain’s still alive, Reo and the Trojan are gone, Fitz says that the wave has been stopped, and Trix is going to be fine. How’s that for a result?’

The Doctor counted on his own fingers. ‘Alinti’s dead, Trove’s dead – and Trix nearly died.’

Calamee scowled. ‘You are such a misery, you know that? Is your glass always half empty, then?’

‘I don’t drink.’

‘Tell that to the barman last night. So what’s up? Why the long face, as the cow said to the horse?’

The Doctor tapped his head.

‘Fitz. The bits of him I’ve got in here. I never realised quite what it’s like to be one of my companions, my friends – how scary it can be, hanging around with me. I get caught up in the excitement, you know? I’ve done some big, bad things in the past – been responsible for... for stuff. And people stick by me – they really, really do.’

‘You shouldn’t be surprised – you’re very stick-by-able.’

The Doctor shook his head. ‘But *why*?’ He thumped his hand on the grass. ‘Why, that’s what I don’t understand. Today, I’ve felt a little of what it’s like to be Fitz – the uncertainty, the fear, the sheer exhaustion. And he still stays with me.’

‘Fitz has been saying the same thing – only backwards. He says it’s like being a hyperactive child mainlining caffeine, being you. I reckon that makes you even.’

He looked up at her, and she saw the tears in his eyes.

‘You’re tired,’ she said. ‘That’s all. You’ll be fine when you’ve had some rest.’ She took his hand and gave it a squeeze, and felt him press his head against her shoulder.

* * *

Some time later, Calamee heard the sound of someone coming through the bushes. She turned to see Fitz, accompanied by Trix. Nessus – her new Nessus – was trundling across the grass, looking around at everything as if he'd never seen it before. Sniffing, the Doctor disentangled himself from her, rubbed his nose with the back of his hand, and leaped to his feet.

'Trix! How are you?' he rushed over and started clucking around her. She waved him away, irritably.

'I'm fine, Doctor, stop fussing.'

The Doctor dipped his head and peered at her, as though examining her over the rims of invisible spectacles.

'How much do you remember?' he asked.

'Too much.' She looked away from the Doctor, and Calamee thought she saw a guilty shadow flicker across her face. Trix tucked her hair back behind her ears, hoiked her bag on to her shoulder and opened her mouth, and for a moment, Calamee thought she was going to say something.

But she just took a deep breath, smiled tightly, and walked away.

'She'll take a while to get over it,' said the Doctor understandingly.

Fitz made a tutting sound.

'I get ridden around by a mad old Russian and how much concern do I get shown? She does a few acrobatics and suddenly she's the golden girl. Pft!' He fished in his pockets and pulled out a surprisingly unbattered pack of cigarettes – Calamee saw the look on the Doctor's face, and so did Fitz.

'Filthy habit,' said the Doctor, but Calamee saw how he leaned in slightly and sniffed at the smoke as Fitz lit up. 'I'd give up, if I were you.'

'And if I were you,' countered Fitz, exhaling a cool, grey cloud, 'I'd stock up at the next duty-free planet we come to.'

The Doctor gave him a friendly slap on the chest and wrapped his arm around his shoulder. Calamee reached down and lifted up Nessus in her arms. Had Tain put him back to normal already? She felt her eyes start to mist up as Nessus frantically rubbed his head against her chin. She held him up in front of her.

'Tain?' she said. 'Are you still in there?' The thought of having a superintelligent mokey creeped her out. But she needn't have worried – Nessus just wrinkled his nose at her and sneezed. She hugged him till he sneezed again.

The Doctor and Fitz, their arms around each other, were walking back to where she presumed the Emperor and his daughter were waiting. Calamee followed them.

But there was no sign of the Imperials – just the hollow, full of things bright and beautiful – and the Palace Guard, standing around looking shifty. One of them rushed over and started apologising, and the Doctor had to shut him up with a hand over his mouth.

'Now start again,' he said. 'What's happened? What couldn't you stop?'

'The Imperator and Princess Sensimi, sir.' The guard gestured to the tree trunk. 'They went in there. We tried to stop them, but he told us not to.' The guard cast worried looks at the others.

'No harm done, I'm sure,' the Doctor comforted the man. He turned to Fitz. 'Three guesses.'

'He's gone to ask Santa for a new body, hasn't he?' said Fitz, who sighed theatrically. 'Kids nowadays, huh? We used to be happy with a walnut and a tangerine.' He grinned at Calamee's expression. 'Memories, eh?'

'Well,' the Doctor said thoughtfully, 'it's the least Tain can do. A final act of contrition, I imagine. Three Hail Marys and a Hail Holy Queen before he leaves.'

'He's leaving?' Fitz looked stunned.

'Well, he can hardly stay here now, can he? I don't imagine the Oon will come looking for him: if Trove was half the bounty hunter he thought he was, he won't have been stupid enough to let the Oon in on Tain's actual location. But the Makers...' He wagged his finger. 'They're a different matter. They found him under their own steam. And when Reo doesn't bring him back, they're bound to send someone else after him.'

'But where's he going to go?' Calamee asked.

The Doctor shrugged and looked up at the bright blue sky.

'Wherever he wants, I imagine. A bit like us, eh, Fitz?' He patted Fitz's shoulder. 'We should be off – let's go and get the TARDIS back.'

'Oh no,' said Fitz firmly. 'First we need to get Tain to sort me and you out. Come on. Santa's got a special surprise for two very good little boys.'

Tain's chamber seemed calm, almost serene, as the duct gently plopped Fitz on to the floor. Trix hadn't wanted to say goodbye to Tain – maybe because the Makers weren't exactly her favourite species at the moment; maybe because she was just a moody mare.

Sensimi, who flinched as Fitz was squirted out of Tain's sphincter, rushed over and grabbed his hand.

'He will be all right, won't he?' She nodded her head in the direction of a man-shaped bump in the wall of the chamber. Fitz nodded knowledgeably, but in all honesty he didn't have a clue. 'But you'd be better asking...'

The Doctor appeared on cue and sprang to his feet.

'Ah,' he said, prodding at Tannalis. 'Almost done.'

'Tannalis will be rejuvenated in about half an hour,' Tain said.

'And then?'

'Ping!' chimed in Fitz, with his best microwave oven impression. The Doctor scowled.

‘And then I will go,’ said Tain gently.

The Doctor’s sigh of relief was audible – and, thought Fitz, perhaps a little tactless.

‘It’s for the best,’ the Doctor said.

‘Without the Trojan, neither the Makers nor the Oon will be able to find me. I will be able to go anywhere, find a new home. Settle down.’

‘Good luck,’ the Doctor said, and patted the wall gently. ‘You deserve a fresh start.’

‘Thank you, Doctor.’

‘What’s going to happen to the people that your Gaian wave touched, Tain?’ asked the Doctor. ‘Can you put them back as they were – as individuals?’

‘Yes – although their memories may be a little impaired.’

‘Par for the course.’

Fitz glanced at the Doctor out of the corner of his eye. *If only you knew*, he thought.

‘Indeed,’ said Tain to the Doctor. ‘Your own memories, as I seem to recall –’

‘Leave it, Tain.’ The Doctor’s voice was suddenly hard. ‘Please. I’ve been through this already – I’m happy as I am, thank you very much. And heartily sick of people telling me that I *have* to remember. Fresh start, for both of us.’

‘And talking of remembering,’ Fitz chipped in, ‘how’s about you sort the two of us out now, Tain? Much as I love the Doctor here, the thought of another dream about his bottom is giving me the willies.’

‘You weren’t expecting that, were you?’

Madame Xing and her assistant watched the Doctor and Fitz enter rain’s tree. The glamour that she’d woven around them made invisible to the Palace Guard who stood idly by, clearly unsure of what they should do now.

‘He’s unpredictable,’ replied Madame Xing, a rasp of irritation in her humming, electronic voice. ‘But no, I wasn’t. If I were a gambler, I would have put money on his using the viroid.’

‘Trix means that much to him?’

‘Individuals mean that much to him.’ She sounded vaguely bitter. ‘When he remembers them.’

‘If I didn’t know you better, I’d say you “had issues” – as humans say.’

She paused and tipped back her head, looking up at the bright blue sky. ‘Shall we say I’m disappointed.’ She waved her gloved hand dismissively. ‘Still... we’ve plenty to keep ourselves occupied with until he does remember.’ She tapped the side of her head cryptically. ‘Don’t forget.’

‘And if he chooses never to remember? He sounded fairly definite.’

‘With the Doctor, nothing is definite. But yes, there is always that possibility. Perhaps his next regeneration will be... more *amenable*.’

They stood in silence for a few moments.

'So, can we go now?' He looked around and rubbed his arms, despite the morning sunshine. Madame Xing nodded and reached up to pull back her hood. Since they'd come to Espero, she'd spent so much time swathed in the black outfit that he'd almost forgotten what she looked like – and he found himself smiling at the unexpectedness of her face, her eyes squinting into the sun.

'Yes, I think we can.' She glanced up and to the right, consulting her internal chronometer. 'We have an appointment to keep.' Madame Xing opened her hand: nestling in her palm was a tiny, frozen ball of fire.

Tain set the reintegration process in motion, and watched silently as the walls of the chamber folded themselves around the Doctor and Fitz.

'Tain!' came Fitz's voice, loudly, in his mind. 'Can the Doctor hear me?'

'I can allow him to, if you –'

'No, no. It's OK. Just me and you, yeah?'

Tain agreed.

'When you put us back as we were,' Fitz said, 'there's something you need to know. About me. I don't quite know how it happened, but I have my memories back – memories of things that have happened since I started travelling with the Doctor. I don't know how I lost them, or whether I'd just done so much that they'd been pushed to the back by new ones, but can you make sure that the Doctor doesn't get them? Leave his memories just as they are. OK?'

'I can do that, Fitz. Can I ask why?'

'Because he doesn't want to remember.' Fitz gave a gruff little laugh. 'Understandably. I don't know quite what's going through his head – although I suppose I should, seeing as I've got bits of him in here with me – but he has his reasons. I know that now.'

'Can you cope with knowing these things, when he doesn't?'

'I don't think I have much choice. Now that I *know*, I don't want to *unknow*. Does that make sense?' If he could have shaken his head, Tain knew, he would have done. 'Maybe it's just evening things up a bit – he's had some heavy stuff to carry around. Now it's my turn.'

No matter how much he interacted with them, Tain thought, he doubted that he'd ever really understand humans: one who'd made a conscious decision to forget his past, and another making an equally conscious decision to remember. But then only one of them was really human.

Fitz fell silent as Tain prepared to shuffle around the fragments of their psyches.

As Tain began the process, he realised that clearing out his own memories and keeping just his 'core' was actually a relief – and he began to understand

some of what the Doctor had gone through to arrive where he was now. Centuries of slavery to the Makers' war-machine, centuries of battle, centuries of killing – all gone. Not the general idea, but all the specifics, all the individual deaths, the soldiers and worlds and wars. All gone. He'd never forget what he'd done, but now he didn't have to face the prospect of running across those memories by accident, seeing the faces, the burning planets, the desolation. He didn't have to fight a constant battle to keep them from his dreams. He was a new person, he supposed. Born again. He remembered a quotation from somewhere: *if you don't know where you've been, how can you know where you're going?*

That's the whole point, Tain realised with a sudden, painful joy that sent ripples around the chamber. You can't.

Chapter 29

'The past is never gonna catch up with me.'

Saiarossa woke the next morning, rubbed its eyes, and wondered whether the events of the night before had been nothing more than a vaguely baffling dream. The rumours – which veered between a forest fire, a freak flood, an electrical storm and a swarm of insects – of impending disaster had materialised into nothing, and although many people claimed to have seen a strange wall of glowing, grey smoke, they were dismissed as having got into the party spirit a little too deeply.

Televised across the planet, Emperor Tannalis, standing alongside his daughter on the stage in the Palace courtyard, amazed everyone by dissolving the Imperatorship (the fact that, miraculously, he looked twenty years younger went uncommented upon). The Imperatrix, it seemed, had vanished during the night: search parties were combing the city for her, and rumours abounded that she'd been the victim of one of the night beasts while out of the Palace visiting one of her 'gentleman friends'. Prince Javill had been struck down with a mystery virus the night before, and was recuperating in bed.

The Doctor, Fitz and Calamee watched the Emperor's speech from a balcony. Nessus sat on Fitz's shoulder, fiddling with his ears.

'How does it feel,' said the Doctor quietly to Fitz, 'to be back in one piece?'

'Good,' was all Fitz could say. He still couldn't quite meet the Doctor's eye, and was glad of Nessus's attentions – something to distract him from thinking about the stuff he'd remembered. The weird thing was that it still didn't feel like *his* stuff. Not yet. He hadn't worked out quite why he'd forgotten it all in the first place, or how having bits of the Doctor's psyche in his head had brought it all back. But there it was.

The worst thing, of course, was that he couldn't talk to the Doctor about it. It was like having the biggest, bestest, most juiciest secret in the world and being unable to tell anyone. That would take some getting used to. He just hoped he wouldn't let any of it slip out. The Doctor had made his own choice: he didn't want to remember. And, all things considered, Fitz couldn't blame him. It had occurred to him that maybe he could tell Trix about it – but on second thoughts, that didn't seem wise. There was still something of an

atmosphere between her and the Doctor: it hardly seemed right, blabbing to her when he couldn't tell his best mate. He wished Anji were still around. He could have told *her*.

They listened to Tannalis for a few moments.

'Are you sure Javill will be all right?' asked Calamee.

It had been as though the prince had been born again – an irony that hadn't been lost on Fitz. A newborn baby in the body of a 23-year-old man. The Doctor had reassured Tannalis that, eventually, Javill would be fine. Just a little 'behind'. If Trove's mind-rubber had been properly calibrated for humans instead of for Tain, Javill might have died. It was small consolation. But perhaps this time round, Javill would turn out to be someone Tannalis could be proud of.

'Without that poisonous witch influencing him, maybe he'll turn out more like Sensimi,' Tannalis had said before leaving them to make his address, noticing the worried glance that passed between Calamee and Fitz. He'd smiled. 'I know, I know – but she's decent at heart. And who knows – now that Tain's given me a new lease of life, maybe I'll find another wife and give them a brother or a sister.'

They watched Minister Djelardine take to the stage and Fitz saw Calamee stifle a yawn.

'We should be getting you back to your parents,' the Doctor said, rubbing his neck. 'They'll be worried sick about you.'

'Nah,' said Calamee dismissively as she lifted down a protesting Nessus from Fitz's shoulders. 'They probably haven't even noticed I'm missing yet. Anyway, I've got one or two things to sort out before go back.' She swung Nessus on to her own back and took the Doctor's hand. 'Sorry if I've been a pain,' she said. Fitz looked away studiously, feigning a sudden interest in yet another dignitary – this one wearing a seventies disco version of the Pope's outfit – taking to the stage.

'If it hadn't been for you and Nessus,' the Doctor was saying, 'things might have turned out very differently. And besides, it was Nessus that dragged you into all this.'

'Still. . . sorry about being such a pain. Friends?'

Fitz heard the sound of them hugging and rolled his eyes.

Calamee gave Fitz a hug, too, before she left. The Doctor stared after her as she went.

'Not thinking of asking her along for the ride too, are you?'

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. 'Don't you think we've got quite enough hitchhikers in the TARDIS?'

'Yeah, what's happened to Trix? She said she'd be back by now.'

‘She’s always late,’ the Doctor said archly. ‘But she’ll be here. Wouldn’t want to miss her ride, would she?’

Fitz narrowed his eyes.

‘You really think she still thinks of us like that?’

‘To be quite honest, Fitz, I’m not entirely sure how she thinks of us. Since she came aboard, we’ve hardly been a model family, have we? Sitting around the dinner table, chatting about how our days have been. Trix isn’t the most open book. And remember: she didn’t ask to be invited.’

Reluctantly, Fitz had to agree. ‘She’ll warm to us when she’s ready.’

It took Calamee a good hour to walk back to Tain. Nessus slept quietly around her shoulders.

Everything was exactly as she’d remembered it – apart from the lack of night beasts. Trove’s and Alinti’s corpses had gone, taken back to the Palace by the Guard. As she wandered through the bushes and sniffed the flowers – now mercifully free of maggots – she remembered, again, the picnic with her family, and she felt a twinge of guilt about what she was planning. But she’d sent them a message. They’d understand.

‘Tain?’ she said out loud as she reached the tree trunk that contained his magic door. ‘It’s me – Calamee. I’ve a favour to ask. Is there room on board for a couple of passengers...?’

Silently, the tree unzipped itself, and taking Nessus in her arms, she stepped inside.

The house was empty. Like some old, Amish relic, it towered above her, casting a cool shadow in the mid-afternoon sun. From a distance, as she’d approached it in the levicar, it had looked like a vast, irregular, black monolith. As though the house itself was in mourning for Joshua. But Trix didn’t do mourning. Leave that one for the Doctor. It didn’t change anything, it didn’t bring back the dead or put the past right. That was a lesson she’d learned a long time ago. If you acted the hard-nosed bitch for long enough, she wondered, is that what you eventually become? She hoped so.

She blinked as her vision flickered, lighting up everything in hyper-real colours. But there was no sign of Reo in her head. She hoped this was just a hangover from whatever that thing had done to her body: she felt normal. Tired, but normal. But how could she be sure? What lasting changes had Reo wrought in her body?

Trix looked around, relieved that there had been no one home. She wasn’t quite sure what she’d have said to them anyway. Sorry for getting your boy killed? Sorry for screwing up your already-miserable lives? She shook her head. Shit happens. Especially around the Doctor. Get used to it, Trix. If

you're gonna keep travelling with him, you're gonna see a lot of death. Get over it.

She reached quickly into her bag and pulled out the things she'd stolen from the Palace: a couple of pieces of statuary, a miniature of the Imperator in a rather nice frame, and a gold pen from Sensimi's room. Individually, not much, she knew. But they'd never be missed – not with everything that had happened. Joshua's parents were poor, the harvest had been bad for the past couple of years. Maybe they could sell the trinkets, buy themselves a few comforts. Buy Trix a little redemption. The only kind of redemption she could afford.

She laid them on the doorstep.

She wasn't going soft, she told herself. Yeah, OK – there had been Anji and the lottery ticket. But that had been more by way of a 'See ya' kind of gesture, a little something to underline the fact that Anji was gone and that *she* was taking over the TARDIS now. But this was different. She could almost hear her mother: *don't regret the things you do – only the things you don't*. And if you did bad stuff, you paid for it and moved on, or else you spent the rest of your life looking over your shoulder, waiting for the past to catch up with you.

Never, she thought, climbing back into the car. The past is never gonna catch up with *me*.

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To lose two smacks of carelessness.'*

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