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DOCTOR WHO

TO THE SLAUGHTER

STEPHEN COLE

The solar system is being spring-cleaned, to improve its feng shui and attract big business back to the long-abandoned seat of Earth's empire. Celebrity *decoratiste* Aristotle Halcyon is heading the campaign of controlled demolition. Having swept away the Asteroid Belt and the Oort Cloud, he now plans to make Jupiter more aesthetically pleasing by removing scores of 'unnecessary' moons.

But the ancient satellites hold deadly secrets, as the Doctor, Fitz and Trix soon discover. With eco-terrorists plotting sabotage, corrupt officials lining their own pockets and sinister forces acting on their own agendas, only the Doctor sees that millions of innocents have been set on the fast track to bloody, unbridled destruction. . .

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

DOCTOR WHO

TO THE SLAUGHTER
STEPHEN COLE

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DOCTOR WHO: TO THE SLAUGHTER

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For my Grandad, Dave Russell
1924–2004

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Chapter One

Tinya froze. Something had brushed against her left leg beneath the board-room table.

She tried to keep her face carefully neutral as she glanced across at the director. Falsh was clearing his throat, ready to address his executives. Had he meant to touch her leg with his own, or...

There it was again. Tinya feared for a second she might actually break her habitual cold composure and blush. Up till now, Falsh had never outwardly shown the slightest interest in her – beyond her abilities as his personal PR liaison executive – and that had suited her fine. His face – well shaped and lined attractively with experience, not age – was impassive as ever, and yet... Yes! There it came again: *a deliberate brush Just below her knee!*

She frowned. She'd both dreaded and daydreamed about this moment. Falsh's power alone made him attractive, and for such a devious man he had a straightforward reputation – what he wanted, he took.

Tinya looked out of the window, hoping the familiar splendour of Saturn and its rings would soak up her messy thoughts. Not a chance.

Falsh leaned back in his chair. In his impeccable black suit, only a shade darker than his unblemished skin, he drew all eyes without even trying. Now he studied briefly the dozen expectant faces gathered before him (avoiding her own gaze, she noted) – before letting his honey-coloured eyes rest on the holo-minuter.

'Minuter off,' he instructed, and the text bubble obligingly popped. 'Emergency symposium of Falsh Industries Select Executive continued at 16:47. I'm aware that our celebrated *decoratiste* will be arriving shortly. But before he arrives, I felt it prudent we discuss the accidental demolition of Carme. Just to set the record straight among ourselves.'

A few knowing smiles and smug expressions blossomed around the table.

'A lamentable incident,' lisped Piers to her right, Falsh's operations analyst, oily as ever in his pinstripes. 'Our contract with Blazar Demolition Services has been terminated.'

'I should hope so,' said Hoon, sat opposite. He was something high up and dull in Accounts. 'Inevitably, Falsh Industries has been made to appear incompetent by association with Blazar.' He tilted back his head and peered at Piers over the handlebars of his prodigious moustache. 'Damage to Falsh

share value is higher than you predicted, Piers.'

'Marginally higher, I'll agree.' Piers gave an exaggerated shrug. 'It will recover once all this has blown over.'

'Tinya has issued a full statement to NewsCorps,' said Falsh. He looked at her coolly but there was no mistaking the warmth of his leg against hers.

Her senses were tingling. Should she reciprocate? The idea of this vain, power-crazed man wanting one of his execs was quite intoxicating. But could she risk endangering her position now, after sacrificing so much to get here?

With a jolt she realised the others were looking at her expectantly, and ruffled. 'Copies of the statement were distributed,' she said. 'It includes a statement from Blazar's CEO accepting full liability for destroying the wrong Jovian moon and exonerating Falsh Industries from all blame.'

Hoon raised a weighty eyebrow. 'Faked?'

'Oh, it's genuine all right. After a little persuasion.' Tinya cast a sly glance at Falsh, but he wasn't looking. 'The activities of Blazar's JoveSpace outpost have been suspended pending a full inquiry.'

'Which will never come to pass,' said Falsh flatly.

'And if the truth about Carme gets out, what then?' This was Kameez, the little woman with the big mouth from Subsidiaries Acquisition, piping up from the other end of the table. 'Blowing up an uninhabited lump of rock is one thing, but –'

Tinya gave her coldest smile, the one that stretched her face tight over her enhanced cheekbones. 'The truth will never get out,' she said, discreetly kicking off her shoe. 'Steps are being taken.'

As she spoke, she reached out her leg and caressed her foot against Falsh's calf. She would risk it. Why not? She would never have got this far so quickly if she hadn't taken chances.

The brief contact sent a thrill through her. He glanced at her, his eyes unfathomable. But was it her imagination or was that the ghost of a smile on his full lips?

'We've leaked some faked documents to a PressSat,' she went on, 'allegedly from Blazar's operations base on Thebe. They prove conclusively that we requested demolition of *Callirrhoe*, a useless speck of rock not among the Ancient Twelve.'

'Excellent,' murmured Falsh with a smile.

She reached out again and squeezed the raw silk of his trouser leg with her toes. He frowned and she pulled away quickly.

Bastard. What was he doing, just playing around?

Falsh only ever played for keeps, as he never tired of telling you.

'I've prepared a new demolition contract,' Piers announced. 'Awarded this morning to one of our hidden subsidiaries, NewSystem Deconstruction.'

‘About time,’ Kendor said from further down the table. ‘I’ve been directing them on this job for weeks already.’

‘Share value will rise considerably as a result.’

‘Have to make up for the shortfall in those figures somehow, eh, Piers?’ smirked Hoon, his moustaches twitching.

Piers glowered at him. ‘Simply ensuring that the proposed demolition of Jupiter’s unnecessary satellites will continue on schedule.’

Falsh gave him an irritated look. ‘Of course it will.’ He moved his leg out of Tinya’s reach. ‘While our tame *decoratiste* is lending his name to the programme, we will always have the President’s endorsement.’

‘Not so tame right now, is he?’ Hoon snorted. ‘Losing Carme has ruined his “grand orchestration”. He’ll have a thing or two to say when he arrives.’

‘And he’ll swallow them back down when he sees the gifts I’ve had transported here,’ said Falsh. ‘A most generous gesture from myself and my board. Should have Halcyon purring again.’

Tinya’s wristpad chimed. She looked down and checked the message. ‘He’s arrived now. His ship’s docking –’

She broke off as she felt a furtive pressure on her *right* leg. Someone was caressing her thigh! But Falsh was sat to her left, how could he. . .

With horror, she realised Piers had a sweaty smile all over his face. ‘You were saying, Tinya?’ he purred.

With an involuntary yelp she turned in her seat to escape his grip. As she did so she brushed against Falsh’s leg once more with her bare foot.

He rounded on her. ‘Tinya, what is the matter with you?’

The words were like a smack and she flinched, flushing. But a second later the entire table burst out in a confused babble of accusations. Hoon was staring incredulously at the woman beside him, who had just smacked his face. Three seats down, two men from Takeovers were waving their hands in the air, hotly disputing something with Subsidiaries.

Falsh was staring round at his executives with a face like a time bomb, ready to blow.

‘There’s something under the table!’ shouted Hoon.

It was a man. He scrambled out from his hiding place and stood awkwardly before them.

For a split second, all argument ceased and hush descended on the board-room.

Then the screaming and yelling started.

‘Look, I’m sorry, OK?’ shouted the newcomer. ‘Everyone just stay calm!’ He was tall and bony with a long, angular face and scruffy dark hair, and he was dressed in bizarre clothes. Had to be an agitator. Something was clutched in his hand and he was waving it about.

'He's got a gun!' shrieked Piers.

'That's not a gun,' Tinya realised. 'It's my shoe!'

'Security,' Falsh snapped into his wristpad. 'Boardroom, now.' A few seconds later an alarm started up, buzzing and insistent.

'Look, I'm sorry if I've messed up your meeting,' the intruder shouted over the fuss and noise. 'I didn't mean to touch your legs. I was hoping to stay hidden till you'd gone but it's quite cramped under there...'

'Restrain him, somebody,' Falsh ordered.

'No need for that!' the man protested, white faced and staring round anxiously. Falsh's executives seemed to agree, and remained dithering in their seats.

'How did you get in here?' Falsh demanded.

'Through the door,' said the agitator meekly. 'It was open, and the view through the window... well, it's pretty damn cool isn't it? Kind of grabs the attention.'

Tinya rose from her seat in the hope of further intimidating the intruder. 'Who are you?'

'Fitz.'

'Fitz? What do you want here?'

'Nothing!'

She shook her head. 'You're an agitator, aren't you, Fitz? An Old Preserver!'

'I'm a Londoner!' he protested. 'Look, love, we came here by accident, landed in a loading bay or something and we were just –'

'“We”!' gasped Hoon.

'I!' said Fitz, looking awkward. 'I was just having a –'

'He said, “We”!' Hoon insisted. 'There's more than one of him!'

'Oh no,' came another voice from under the table, prompting fresh executive horror. 'There's only one Fitz, I assure you.'

And suddenly, little loudmouthed Kameez was rising up into the air. Another outlandish figure was balancing both her and her chair on his shoulders – clearly he was stronger than he looked. In his long dark coat, wing-collared shirt and waistcoat he looked like he'd leapt from a historical reconstruction.

'Everyone remain calm and still, please.' This second intruder sounded altogether more cultured than Fitz. He glanced upwards. 'Especially you, Mrs Executive. I'd hate to drop you.'

Drop her, Tinya willed him.

Piers found his voice. 'Another agitator!'

'You're jumping to conclusions,' said the man. His features were strikingly classical: proud and clear, yet determinedly melancholy. 'You might be agitated, but that doesn't make me the agitator. I'm the Doctor, as it happens. If you weren't such a fidgety bunch we'd have stayed happily hidden until you'd

all pushed off back to your no doubt charming offices. Do they all enjoy so lovely a view as this one?' He looked round at them, apparently genuinely interested, and Kameez squeaked as she nearly fell out of her chair, clinging on for dear life. 'I'll bet *your* office does, Mr Falsh. Would you call your security guards, please, and tell them it was a false alarm?'

Falsh raised his eyebrows. 'Or you'll do what – bang Kameez's head on the ceiling?'

Do it, thought Tinya. Do it, do it!

'You think we'd come in here defenceless?' He took a few wobbly steps towards Falsh, Kameez still teetering alarmingly above him. 'We have far more than a chair, a woman and a shoe in our arsenal,' he said gravely. 'Now, call off your guards.'

'Security – code six,' Falsh reluctantly told his wristpad. 'Stand down.'

'Thank you,' said the Doctor. As the buzz of sirens died away, he gently set down the stunned and dishevelled Kameez in her chair and scooted her back to her place at the table. 'I must apologise for disturbing your secret meeting.' He patted her on the head and smiled over at Tinya. 'Give the lady her shoe back, Fitz.'

Fitz tossed the shoe on to the table, and mouthed 'sorry' to Tinya.

Falsh slowly got to his feet. 'You've made the big show.' He put his fists together. 'Now, no more bull. What is it that you freaks want?'

'Actually, some mercury would be very useful right now,' said the Doctor. 'Does anyone have a little they could spare? It's for the fluid links, you see. . .'

The table remained stunned and silent.

He sighed. 'Well in that case, we want to leave you in peace, so you can get back to your secret schemes and subterfuges and *decoratistes*. It's none of our business, is it? My views on wanton vandalism are neither here nor there.' A distant, distracted look came to his face. 'Although I remember Carme being discovered you know. . . Late 1930s, wasn't it? And Lysithea discovered the same year. . . ' He blinked, shook his head as if to clear it. 'Destroyed, you say? That's so sad!'

Fitz was giving his odd ally a pleading look. 'Not now, Doctor. . .'

'They heard everything,' hissed Hoon. 'They can't leave, they know too much!'

'Far too much,' muttered Tinya.

'Nonsense,' cried the Doctor. 'I know a fair bit, it's true, but Fitz here knows next to nothing – right, Fitz?'

'Mind like a sieve,' Fitz confirmed, as the Doctor steered him towards the door. It whooshed open as they approached.

'Bye-bye!' called the Doctor. The door slid shut behind them.

For a few seconds, a dumbfounded silence filled the boardroom. Then Kameez started crying. Most of the other men rushed now to comfort her.

Tinya turned to Falsh in disbelief. 'You can't mean to let those two stroll straight out of here?'

'I told Security, code six.' Falsh sat down, looking pensive. 'Those two intruders are going nowhere till I find out what the hell is going on.'

'That was so embarrassing!' Fitz smacked his hand to his forehead as they ran outside on to a spotless white walkway. Just a quick look round while no one's looking, he says. And we wind up playing footsie with a gang of crooked businessmen.'

The Doctor shrugged. 'Even so, it *was* a beguiling view, wasn't it?'

'Oh, yeah, lovely,' he sighed. 'We go out looking for mercury and we get Saturn! Trix had the right idea staying in the TARDIS.'

'Which is useless until we can find some mercury,' the Doctor reminded him. 'There must be some about, or the old girl wouldn't have landed us here.'

Soon they came to a crossroads in the corridor, and Fitz favoured turning left. 'This way back to the cargo bay, wasn't it?'

The Doctor licked a finger and held it up to the junction on the right. 'No, this way.'

'Doctor, it was definitely *this* way!' Fitz set off along his chosen corridor, and the Doctor tagged along. They had got at least five feet before the sound of heavy, running feet came rumbling towards them.

'Oh dear,' said the Doctor. 'I have the unpleasant feeling that a code six report to Security might translate as, "Keep on coming but do it quietly". Hardly a crack outfit though, are they? Terribly slow response time.'

Eight men in black jumpsuits charged around the corner, wielding chunky silver handguns.

'They look fast enough to me,' said Fitz. 'We'll go *your* way.'

The two of them turned and ran back to the crossroads. More guards were thundering towards them from the direction of the boardroom.

'*This* way!' Fitz and the Doctor cried in unison. And they ran off in different directions.

'You're kidding me,' gasped Fitz, as he ran pell-mell down the corridor. 'We've split up! That's the first rule – never split up!'

He ran on, swearing and cussing. He was running deeper into the sterile white heart of an interstellar office block, where he would doubtless be shot for knowing too much.

One thing he *did* know – this was absolutely typical.

Chapter Two

‘Halt!’

Fitz heard the holler the moment he ran into the loading bay, but it took him a moment to spot the guard among the chrome crates and high-tech sarcophagus things littering the place.

Suddenly Fitz was running at full whack towards the barrel of a gun. He skidded and skittered on the gleaming floor, raised his hands.

‘Halt!’ the guard bellowed again.

‘I can’t!’ shouted Fitz. ‘Your mates are right behind me!’ He raised his arms higher, gave the guard a pleading look. ‘If I stop now they’ll catch me!’

For a moment the guard’s face clouded as he processed the argument. A fraction later Fitz brought down his fist in a wild punch.

Grabbing the man’s gun, Fitz crouched behind a silver crate for cover and looked about for the TARDIS. He was sure this was the place where they’d landed – all burnished bright and vast, more like an exhibition space than a loading bay whatever the signs said. And with the fluid links knackered, the ship couldn’t take off anywhere without a fresh supply of mercury. So where...?

The four guards who’d been hot on his heels thundered into the bay. Fitz’s heart raced, his finger tightened around the trigger of his...

Hang about. There *was* no sodding trigger!

Fitz looked at the gun in his hands, turned it around looking for a switch or a button or something that would fire the bloody thing. He squinted down the barrel, tapped it against his hand...

He was so busy wrestling with the baffling blaster, he failed to notice his cover drifting away. The chrome crate he was cowering behind was slowly rising up into the air, apparently of its own accord.

Fitz finally noticed and stifled a squawk of alarm. Even the boxes were against him in this place! He rolled backwards – a quite passable action-hero manoeuvre, he felt – and scrambled behind another high-tech tea chest.

‘We know you’re in here,’ shouted one of the guards, though actually he didn’t sound all that certain. ‘There’s no way out. Give yourself up now, and we...’ He trailed off. Was he reading this warning off a card or something? These guys really were out of practice. ‘We assure you, you will not be mistreated.’

The guards were fanning out, paying the floating crate no heed as it moved along steadily at waist height. Fitz saw a chunky disc hovering above it, humming with power, gently coaxing the crate into its slow flight towards a set of sliding doors in the wall. This must be how they loaded things round here – robot magnets. Cool. Kept the floor free of scuffmarks if nothing else.

‘Room for one more?’ Fitz muttered, stuffing the gun into his jacket pocket.

‘Attention.’ The guard’s voice seemed suddenly muffled – must be wearing a mask. ‘We are going to throw gas grenades unless you surrender at once.’

Fitz decided he wouldn’t. It could be a bluff.

A second later there came a quiet crack followed by a nasty hissing noise. As the floating crate hovered past his hiding place, Fitz scrambled out and clung on to the side hidden from the guards. The crate barely dipped, the magnetic disc easily holding his weight. He held his breath as the gas began to swirl around him. It helped hide him from the guards while he disappeared into the darkness beyond the double doors.

The moment he was out of sight, he dropped down with catlike grace – albeit a three-legged cat recently smacked on the head with a frying pan – and as he got back to his feet he congratulated himself on his quick thinking.

‘Seal off Halcyon’s ship,’ came a gruff voice. ‘We don’t want to gas his crew. And Falsh will flay us alive if the intruder gets on board. Finish loading when we’ve got him.’

A low whirring noise started up. The darkness grew absolute.

Fitz bit his lip. Figured. If that was a loading bay outside, this must be some kind of space freighter or something, being loaded up with cargo to go. And now he was part of the goods. What if it left right now, with him on board? He started pacing about in the darkness, wringing his hands. He’d he cut off from the Doctor, from Trix and the TARDIS and –

Fitz yelped as he walked straight into something hard. Hard and rectangular, he realised, feeling it out. Ridged with a door and windows, faintly humming with power.

He stretched his arms around the TARDIS and hugged it. The magnetised disc must have brought it in here; it wasn’t strictly speaking metal, but then it wasn’t strictly speaking a wooden police box.

‘Trix?’ he hissed, tapping on the TARDIS doors. He searched through his pockets looking for his key, but no joy. Surely he hadn’t lost it? ‘Trix, it’s me, Fitz. Open up!’

No answer.

After the TARDIS had ground to a halt, Trix had agreed to mind the store while he and the Doctor went out looking for mercury. That had been a while ago, and Trix had a famously low boredom threshold. Had she gone after

them? Or was she just sat on the khazi with a good book or something, oblivious to all?

He couldn't go back outside now, even if he could get the loading doors to reopen – the guards would have him in a moment. But maybe Trix had only left the TARDIS once it was taken in here, and had gone off to investigate. If he could find her, maybe between them they could find a way to go back and rescue the Doctor – before this spaceship shot through, leaving them lost in space and him stranded.

Fitz took out the useless gun and pressed on into the shadows.

At that very moment, Trix was being shown over to the largest buffet she had ever seen. Meats, fish, pastries, little wriggling tentacled things – the table was as long as a bus and piled just as high with food.

'Put your eyes back in,' said the kitchen manager, a potato-faced fatty. He looked at her grumpily. 'God in heaven, why does the agency saddle me with you silly slips of girls?'

'Please don't shout at me, sir,' Trix said meekly, hanging her head with shame. 'I'm sorry you weren't told I was coming. To be honest it was news to me, too.'

There – who said she always told barefaced lies? The Doctor would've been proud of her. When he and Fitz hadn't come back, she'd gone out for a quick shufti herself. Then the alarms went off, and Trix had ducked into the nearest doorway to avoid a bunch of guards. That had led her into the kitchen stores. No mercury there, of course – only some waiter-type who discovered her skulking about. He'd kicked up a real fuss until she'd conked him on the head with a ladle.

She'd barely had time to hide his body and slip on his uniform – right down to his oversized white shoes – when this space-aged Antony Worrall Thompson wobbled in, mistook her for a temp and press-ganged her into service. He was surly and arrogant and very, very large.

'Why today,' sighed Chef. 'Two staff off sick, Johnson just vanished and Aristotle Halcyon to feed...' He shook his head. 'Well, the alarm's shut off now. You'd better take this lot to the boardroom, we're late already.'

'Do you know what the alert was about?' asked Trix. Like she didn't know. She sensed a one-woman rescue coming on.

Chef looked her up and down. 'I hope you can contain yourself around celebrity, miss! Don't want you flinging your knickers at him over the vol-au-vents!'

Trix blinked innocently. 'But I'm not wearing knickers, sir.'

That shut up the bullying pig. He looked at her face for signs of insolence. Finding none, his cheeks turned red as fresh-cut steaks. 'Yes, well. Perhaps

you should show me what you can do.' He nodded to the table. 'Come on. Carve the chigcock.'

Trix blinked at him. That had sounded like a particularly unpleasant euphemism.

'The chigcock, girl!' He rolled his eyes to heaven and handed her a long, buzzing knife and a two-pronged fork. 'Carve it!'

Trix scanned the table, trying to stay unflustered. Luckily there was only one thing on the table that appeared remotely carveable; it looked like an engorged roast turkey but without wings or legs.

He watched her critically as she set about the cold, pale meat. It was easy – the flesh was so tender it practically parted itself before the blade came close. She got a whiff of pork and seasoning, though the meat was a pure chicken white.

'Very good.' Chef looked her up and down a little more wistfully now. 'You're presentable enough, too. Where's your staff tag?'

'Oh, heavens. It was here, I tucked it in my...' Trix looked doe-eyed. 'I'm sorry – I must have lost it.'

Grumbling, her new employer crossed to a cabinet and pulled out a white card threaded on a chain. 'Temp,' he spoke into it. 'Level One access.' He handed it over to her with a scowl. 'There. And just remember, if I get a single complaint about you, I'll be on the vid to your agency giving you the biggest roasting you've ever had.'

Pleasingly apt metaphor, thought Trix. 'I won't let you down, I promise.' She looked him in the eye, just impertinent enough to be sexy. If she had his measure, he'd be easily won – and an ally might prove useful. 'I fought off four girls at the agency for the chance to work your kitchens. I really am very experienced, Chef, and I so want to please you.'

'Yes, well...' He smirked, his face sinking into his chins. 'Maybe we'll discuss how you can do that later. Off you go then, take it away.'

She turned back to the table and frowned. How was she supposed to shift this lot? The table wasn't on wheels, although there was a small screen and a kind of handle at the end nearest to her...

She grasped it and at once the table raised itself smoothly off the floor. Then it tugged her gently along, like a dog pulling on a lead.

'The table's pre-programmed with the route to the boardroom,' said Chef. 'It'll take you straight there, and lead you back when the meeting's over.' He paused, fiddled with his fingers. 'Report to me in the kitchens, immediately you return. I'll want to debrief you.'

'Like I said, that could prove difficult,' she smiled. As the floating table led her away, Trix heard him rub his hands together with a greasy little chuckle. She did her best not to throw up on the buffet.

Then again, from the smell of those horrid little wriggly things, maybe no one would notice if she did.

The Doctor put down his continued liberty to the presence of this temperamental *decoratiste* Falsh had mentioned. Warnings over the tannoy that dangerous intruders were on the loose would hardly impress VIP guests – especially ones in filthy moods to begin with.

He'd given Security the slip and was hiding in a kitchen store of some kind. It was piled high with implements and tablecloths and crates of foil-packed food, and while a stock of mercury was unlikely to present itself here, he searched it diligently all the same – all the while hoping that Fitz had made it back to Trix in the TARDIS.

A tramping of boots outside alerted him to a possible patrol approaching. There were two other doors in the storeroom, one to his left and one to his right. He went left, teased open the door. It gave on to a small antechamber, the white walls either side festooned with surgical smocks. A large inspection hatch straight ahead invited his attention, and he stepped forwards.

He stared, dumbfounded, his skin prickling at the sight of a herd of bizarre creatures. There were about forty of them, wingless and apparently headless, no fur or feathers, all tethered to treadmills. They trudged in lines on juicy pink pig legs, their fat rumps wiggling from side to side as they did so.

The Doctor pressed a button beneath the inspection hatch and the whole wall rose upwards. There was no animal stench here, only a herby, synthetic sage-stuffing sort of smell. The creatures made no noise, no snuffling. Pipes stuffed into the fat, puckered flesh gurgled softly, fed them with fluid and drained the waste away. The only other noise was the quiet hum of the treadmills, the padding of soft, fleshy feet... and a low moan behind him.

The Doctor turned to find a bald man dragging himself out from a rustling chrysalis of smocks, rubbing his head. Underneath he was dressed only in his underwear.

'I'm not sure I want to know what you're doing here,' said the Doctor.

'Girl,' he muttered. 'Not seen her before... Knocked me on the head.'

'A girl?' The Doctor noticed a glint beneath the smocks, crouched and pulled out a silver ladle. 'She hit you with this?'

The man nodded painfully.

'Petite, blonde, becoming if you care for that sort of thing?'

Again, the man nodded, and the Doctor checked the bump on his crown. Nothing serious.

'What are those things in there?'

'In where?' The man frowned. 'Door's opened. Has something got in with the chiggs?'

‘Chiggs?’

‘The chiggocks.’

‘Oh, *chiggocks*. A pet name? Or a term for a dubious exercise in vivisection and low genetics?’ The Doctor scowled. ‘Why do you keep those poor things walking? They’re trained to trot into the oven, perhaps?’

Now the man came to look at him properly. The Doctor counted the emotions lurching across the man’s face: puzzlement first, then suspicion, realisation, fear and finally. . .

‘Help!’ the man cried. ‘Help me, someone!’

With a sigh, the Doctor hit him on the head with the ladle again.

The man groaned and slumped forward on his face.

‘Chiggocks,’ the Doctor muttered, as he squeezed a blob of arnica from a tube in his pocket and rubbed it into the man’s bruise. ‘Chiggs. . . Chickens and pigs?’ He snorted. ‘And bullocks! Yes, nice bit of topside, most assuredly. How efficiently farmed. How practical.’ He shut down the sliding wall. ‘Butchers as well as vandals.’

Pulling on an oversized smock and a sterile mask, he ventured back out into the kitchen stores. He had to move fast, find some mercury and round up his friends – before it was too late.

The signs of the Doctor’s intrusion grew more obvious as Trix neared the boardroom. Various vapid-looking business types were walking shakily in the opposite direction. One petite woman was in tears, shrugging off the attentions of would-be comforters.

‘They’ll catch them, Kameez,’ said a particularly oily stringbean in pin-stripes. ‘Don’t you worry.’

So, thought Trix. They were still on the loose. And probably heading back to the TARDIS now, hopefully with pockets full of mercury. She had to get back there herself – as soon as she’d dropped off the nosh she’d sneak away. No point in drawing attention to herself by dumping the buffet right here.

She paused to let a moustachioed man inspect her white card, then the articulated table turned itself through an impressive-looking doorway, and Trix guessed they had arrived. She walked through and found that a huge glass window was set into the wall. Then she registered the view.

It was staggering.

Fringed by blackness and stars was a planet. It looked like Saturn, but it was so big, it was like she was staring through a telescope the size of Belgium. It hung within its glittering rings like a colossal fruit, its myriad moons a cloud of lazy flies drifting all around.

The Doctor had said they were in the future. She wondered when exactly. What was this place?

‘You’re new here, aren’t you?’ said a firm, female voice.

Trix started, turned away from the window. A woman with black flapper hair and a youthful but dispirited face was watching her from the far side of a very long table. Her cheekbones looked sharp enough to wound. She was putting on a shoe.

‘It’s obvious,’ the woman went on. ‘They’re all like that when they first see the view.’ She smiled icily. ‘But do try to remember it’s our view, not yours. Gawp like that again and you’ll be reprimanded.’

Trix nodded and gave a little curtsy. I’m gobbing on *your* quiche, she thought.

A tall, broad-shouldered black man walked in. From the way the flapper stiffened he was someone important. Now that she came to look, his fine suit, dark and silky, his imperious gaze, the impressive rings stacked on his fingers like he was trying to outdo Saturn, all told the same story: this man was the boss.

He glanced at Trix for a moment, then snapped: ‘Get the food ready to serve.’

Trix nodded meekly and started steering the table over to the back of the room.

‘Tinya, do you have the revised rough cut for the infomercial?’ the boss-man asked. ‘Halcyon will be arriving any moment. I want to check it myself.’

‘Right here, Falsh.’ The slapper with the flapper smugly patted a credit-card-thin keypad, and a sort of bubble flickered into life above it. Quiet, scratchy little noises started up. Trix was intrigued to see more, but a trim little man with an elfin face and eyes too wide apart was waiting anxiously for her at the back. From his black-and-white uniform, he must be a fellow waiter.

‘Thought you were never going to get here,’ hissed the waiter reproachfully.

Contrition had never sat well with Trix; by now she was terminally bored with apologising. ‘Well, you know, with the security alert and everything... I’ll just leave you to it. See you!’

‘Very funny,’ he hissed. ‘Fix a chigcock salad for Falsh, and I’ll prepare a plate for Halcyon.’

‘It’s a buffet. Can’t they help themselves?’

‘Where’d they ship you in from?’ The waiter’s look made it clear that while Falsh could doubtless help himself to most things, a buffet wasn’t one of them. Then he became conspiratorial. ‘You know, I’ve served Halcyon before.’

Poached or scrambled, thought Trix. ‘Oh yes?’

The waiter preened like the news made him cock of the yard. ‘He likes everything perfectly arranged. Well he would, wouldn’t he – an artist like him.’ He had a distant, lovelorn look in his eye, which swiftly startled into a sharp focus on the doorway. ‘Oh! He’s here!’

Trix turned to see a bizarre figure walk in through the doors, escorted by two guards and a pear-shaped redhead. Bedecked in a peacock-blue trouser-suit in raw silk, complete with a black sash and a conquistador's cape, he looked like some outrageous cavalier. He had a shaved head, and his scalp glittered with tiny gemstones of every hue. His features were slightly flattened and gave him a vaguely oriental look; Trix couldn't be sure as his eyes were hidden behind a pair of slim dark glasses.

Trix returned to the challenge of chiggock salad before she burst out laughing and wound up having to apologise all over again.

'Halcyon,' said Falsh warmly, rising up to greet this bizarre apparition. 'So good to see you again.' He smiled at the redhead. 'And Sook.'

'Greetings, Mr Falsh.' Sook smiled demurely and shook his hand. She wasn't pretty – her features were sharp and too big for her face, and her red bob was so super-neat it looked more like a round helmet. 'And Tinya.'

'So good to meet with you both again,' said the fake-smiled flapper.

Sook pulled out a chair for Halcyon, who said nothing to anyone as he sat down at the table.

'I hope your journey here was comfortable?' Falsh inquired.

Sook spoke for them both. 'Perfectly.'

You had to hand it to Falsh, thought Trix. Two lunatics popping out from nowhere, hellbent on executive stress, and here he was playing the perfect host like nothing had happened.

Halcyon smiled wanly. 'We heard the alarms,' he said softly in a neutral accent.

'Just a drill,' said Falsh. 'I hope you weren't troubled.'

'A drill. A practice run.' Each word was distinct and measured, but weirdly quiet for a man whose whole appearance screamed 'loud'. 'So, you believe in training your staff, then, Falsh?'

'Of course.' Falsh remained urbane and attentive, but Trix noticed Sook and Tinya brace themselves.

'A pity, then, that your training does not extend to your demolition contractors.' Halcyon's face was stony. 'The demolition of Carme does not simply represent gross negligence and incompetence on the part of Falsh Industries –'

Tinya couldn't let that lie: 'Blazar Demolition have accepted full responsibility for the error –'

Halcyon raised a hand. 'Error? You have blown apart one of the Ancient Twelve. Part of the very heritage upon which the *Restore the Wonder* campaign is to capitalise.'

Falsh frowned. 'Surely, though, Halcyon, all these rocks came to exist at the same time?'

‘Rocks?’ Halcyon turned to Falsh, his lip curling down. ‘These *planetoids* were not *discovered* at the same time.’ He spoke slowly, as if explaining to a child. ‘The KanYu philosophy describes the observation of forces between the heavens and the earth. The knowledge that a body exists lends it heightened influence. As awareness of an object grows, so does the hold it exerts on the mind – and so the KanYu formulae are affected. . .’

‘Are you not done with that salad yet?’ hissed the waiter.

Jolted away from Halcyon’s bizarre lecture, Trix saw the waiter had created a beautiful, decorous dish for Halcyon – while she had only managed to pile up some weird kind of lettuce around a few slices of chiggock. She plopped a green tomato on top. ‘Finished.’

Halcyon was still gassing on as the waiter presented his dish. He failed to react at all. Trix placed her sad salad in front of Falsh, and while Tinya gave it a funny look, Falsh’s attention was elsewhere. She and the disappointed waiter retreated discreetly back to the buffet table.

‘What about the other two?’ whispered Trix. ‘What are they having?’

‘They’ll eat when their superiors have eaten!’

Unlucky, thought Trix. It didn’t seem likely that Halcyon would finish any time soon.

‘. . . and now you expect me to recalculate the environmental formulae,’ he complained, ‘when I had already achieved the perfect balance for the Grand Orchestration!’

He paused for breath and Tinya jumped in. ‘NewSystem Deconstruction are setting charges to demolish the remaining moons even as we speak. And they are, undertaking a feasibility study into reshaping some of the retrograde moons into a new planetoid, one with mass equivalent to Carme.’

‘An artless imposter. . .’ Halcyon looked grave. ‘Carme has been a fixed point in Earth’s heavens since its discovery almost 400 years ago!’

‘In 1938,’ said Tinya knowledgeably, ‘with Lysithea discovered the same year.’

Sook raised an eyebrow at her, and even Halcyon paused.

‘Indeed,’ he said icily.

Trix felt a moment of disorientation. So this was the year, what, 23-something.

‘A man named Seth Barnes Nicholson found her,’ said Halcyon, staring off through his shades into the middle distance. ‘He waded for weeks through stacks of primitive optical slides until there she was: a tiny point of shifting light. . .’ He was getting louder, carried away. ‘Named for Zeus’s lover! Mother of Britomartis!’

‘We take your point,’ said Tinya bravely, ‘but we did design and construct a new Mercury.’

Halcyon harrumphed. 'Well the old one was somewhat irretrievable.'

'And surely there are hundreds of smaller agglomerations up there created in just the same way.'

Halcyon stared at her. 'So, you propose to lump that clutter together to create a convenient replacement to spin in Carme's orbit?' He shook his star-studded head. 'An imposter rock squeezed from a hundred base histories, usurping one of the Ancient Twelve? There will be negativity! It's inevitable!'

'It's rock, sure,' said Falsh. 'But like Tinya says – they're all rocks. Carme had been mined to death in any case, like the rest of them. Who will really know the difference?'

Sook chose this moment to step in and soothe matters – perhaps eyeing Halcyon's untouched plate and guessing her own wouldn't be filled in a hurry. 'We could think of this as an opportunity Halcyon,' she said, placing her hand on his arm. 'You could reshape Carme. Sculpt her. Create a whole new compass of positive arcs to outweigh the negativity.'

Halcyon shrugged off her grip. 'I don't see why this test detonation was even necessary,' he grumbled, his voice falling to barely more than a whisper. 'Neptune's and Uranus's clutter went decently enough. It's given the agitators further fuel for protest before we've even begun on Jupiter.'

'There was nothing of cultural or historical value on Carme,' said Falsh with another sly glance at Tinya. 'So the Empire Trust will have no legal comeback for its destruction. And I assure you there will be no more mistakes.' He grinned broadly, his teeth shark-sharp and white as pack ice. 'Meantime, I trust the antiquities I have acquired for you will be of some small personal compensation?'

'They may perhaps lend me balance me as I rework the orchestration,' Halcyon agreed without pleasure. 'Are they being loaded aboard my flyer?'

'As we speak,' said Tinya. She glanced at Falsh, who nodded. 'Perhaps now's a good time to go over the infomercial? We've arranged synchronised primecasts on all channels – there's not a soul in the system who won't be aware and watching.' She stabbed daintily at her keypad. 'As you'll see, the President has already recorded the opening links as scripted in the first draft, but if you're not happy we can edit her right down...'

The virtual screen popped out from the keypad, larger this time, a huge sphere of light. The infomercial was heralded by music from nowhere, deep, sonorous bass and pitch-perfect treble.

This time, Trix could enjoy the show.

A minute or so later, she felt the waiter's elbow in her ribs; her mouth was hanging open and she'd been warned once about gawping.

Chapter Three

Fitz had wandered through the darkened corridors of the ship and found no one. Perhaps it was night-time and everyone was asleep.

The rooms were weird. Some of them were really big, empty save for occasional concentrations of furniture. Others were smaller and still more Spartan – a couch, a mirror, a weird sculpture, maybe. None of the rooms seemed to have much point. Fitz deduced they must be some form of art.

Suddenly he glimpsed movement in the next room along – fleeting shadows on the wall. Trix, maybe? A googly-eyed monster? Cautiously he investigated.

Whoa. The walls *themselves* seemed to be moving. Each was a slow spin of colours ranged around a white, hovering chair in the middle of the black-tiled floor. The colours bled into patterns both soothing and unsettling, beguiling the eye. Fitz approached the wall. He felt like he was tilting, falling, his mind rushing with the ever-flowing colours.

He reached out to touch them.

‘Ick,’ he said, and snatched his hand away.

It was bright and shining. Glistening. Fitz swallowed hard. His skin was seeping colour like thick sweat. Without thinking, he wiped at it with his other hand. Now that one was smeared and pulsing with the unearthly light.

‘Oh *sod*.’ Fitz staggered out of the room, feeling giddy and sick. Never mind finding Trix. He needed to find the Doctor. Or a doctor – anyone, really.

He needed help.

He’d caught space lurgy from an alien wall!

The Doctor, aware his luck may well not hold, had decided to push it to the limit. He’d head for Falsh’s office. With Falsh currently out schmoozing his VIP, perhaps the Doctor could fake an email from the boss to the supplies manager, demanding ten millilitres of mercury be brought at once to Docking Bay Two...

Disguised in his smock, studying the ladle in his hands with professional fascination, the Doctor reached the station’s highest floor unchallenged. A man like Falsh would doubtless need to place himself above everybody else, and as a matter of course would require the best view in the place – magnificent Saturn, of course. So that view didn’t slip, it seemed logical that the station would be orbiting in synchronous rotation, presenting the same face to the

planet at all times. The Doctor therefore stuck to the general area above the main boardroom.

He was right: soon he discovered that Falsh had an enormous portion of the third level given over to his own private domain. The Doctor knew he was getting warm when carpeting suddenly appeared, azure, deep-pile and luxurious. The clincher was when the walkway ended in a big locked door saying:

ROBART FALSH

DIRECTOR'S SUITE

The Doctor studied the locking mechanism, and was just pulling out his sonic screwdriver when the door slid open. He dived aside out of view, as a young man walked out at speed cursing under his breath. 'Why does she have to send me? Why do *I* have to go?'

The door started to close behind him. The Doctor threw his ladle into the gap between door and wall – it landed on the carpet without a sound – and when the door hit the obstruction it obligingly opened again.

The Doctor held his breath, but the man didn't look around as he stomped off out of sight. Thanking his lucky stars – a couple of red dwarves in Pavo – he retrieved his ladle and crept into Falsh's sanctum.

Inevitably, it was big. There was an orderly workstation presumably belonging to the young man (whose name was Nerren, judging by the virtual memos glowing in his in-tray), positioned in-between various works of minimalist sculpture. At the far end of the room was another massive door, this one made of teak by the look of it. There was a handle but it wouldn't turn without a whirr of the screwdriver.

The door opened smoothly. He dropped the ladle, pocketed the screwdriver and went inside for a gander.

It was a vast rectangular office, the size of a playing field. On one long wall bubble-shaped screens clustered to create a massive compound-eye effect. They played newscasts, stock prices, sports, though the sound was muted now... Synthetic canvases had been mounted around the place; the half-dozen seascapes generated soothing sounds of surf and gulls. But it seemed that when Falsh sat at his massive mahogany desk his back was turned to all this. He sat facing the wall opposite: a long stretch of tinted glass looking out on to space.

The view was overwhelming in its expanse. Saturn loomed so close you could see great whorls and swirls in its striped custard clouds. The tip of the rings seemed to stretch right up to the window like a dazzling yellow brick road leading to some secret Oz out among the stars. Grey moons sidled past, their stark, devastated faces unsettlingly beautiful: Tethys, Mimas, ragbag Iapetus – and over there, the bashful orange fizz of Titan.

The Doctor tore his dreamy gaze away and turned to the bank of bubble-screens. Fitz and Trix needed finding, as well as the mercury. Surely some of these must offer internal feeds, they couldn't all be showing stock prices, newscasts and...

Oh.

The woman from the boardroom – Tinya – was standing in the doorway.

'I wasn't expecting to see you here,' said the Doctor.

Tinya came in and closed the door. 'I think that's my line.'

'Nerren's indisposed, I'm afraid.' The Doctor beamed at her. 'Can I make an appointment for you with Mr Falsh on his behalf?'

'Falsh is entertaining Aristotle Halcyon, Doctor.'

'How jolly. Juggling beanbags, perhaps? A touch of tap-dancing?' He paused. 'Are you going to scream for help?'

'No.'

'Then could I try?' He peered behind her. 'Ah, no need, here's Fitz.'

Tinya smiled coldly. 'He's not, you know. He ran into the loading bay and hasn't come out again, there's a lockdown in process. Security are searching systematically.' She took a careful step towards him. 'Make it easy on yourself and give up peacefully. I'll make sure you're well treated.'

'Very kind.'

'But you must tell me everything you have learned.'

'Very predictable.' The Doctor shoved his hands in his coat pockets. 'Your security people won't find Fitz now, you know. Our craft is there, he'll have got inside.'

'Your craft?'

'Mmm, big blue box. I'll show you if you like, and get out of your hair for good. Well, as soon as –'

'So now you're happy to leave, are you?' She smiled. 'That tells me you've got what you came here for.'

His voice hardened. 'Believe me, I've got precisely nothing from my visit here besides a pleasant view. All I'm after are a few drops of mercury. What do you think I came for? Proof of this conspiracy against – who were they, now – Blazar Demolition? Evidence of whatever it is you've destroyed on Carme?' He paused, suddenly thoughtful. 'You know, actually I *wouldn't* mind knowing a little more about that.'

'Why else would I find you in Falsh's office?' She sneered, her cheeks straining tight against the blades of her cheekbones. 'People like you will always try to stand in the way of progress.'

'Well, progress would be wonderful if only it would –' He pulled out his sonic screwdriver and pointed it at her – 'stop.'

She regarded it warily. 'Be reasonable, Doctor.'

‘Reasonable people adapt themselves to the universe; it’s the unreasonable who seek to change it.’ He gave her an apologetic smile. ‘And it’s often the raving idiots who try to stop them, but I find myself among their number. Now, I’d like to check the internal camera feeds – would you oblige?’

‘Do you know what I’m wondering, Doctor?’ Tinya said. ‘I’m wondering why you didn’t use that weapon in the boardroom.’

‘Back then I had a perfectly good executive in a chair at my disposal.’ Suddenly he saw over her shoulder and broke out in a grin of relief. ‘Ah! Perfect timing!’

Tinya looked at him almost sympathetically. ‘I thought we’d been through this, Doctor.’

‘You like private views?’

Tinya spun around just as Trix whacked her on the crown with the ladle.

‘Try *these* stars.’

Trix felt a slightly guilty relish as Tinya slumped to the floor, unconscious. She grinned up at the Doctor and waggled the ladle. ‘Just call me Aiken Drum.’

‘I call you borderline homicidal with that thing,’ said the Doctor, offering only a grudging smile. ‘Nice outfit.’

‘Nice *disguise*.’

He crouched to check Tinya’s pulse. ‘Probably looks better on you than on that feller you ladled earlier.’

‘No probably about it.’ The spacescape through the window had started drawing in her senses.

‘You’re not surprised I found him?’

‘Since when did you *not* find trouble?’ she murmured in a voice as small as she felt. She’d ignored the view at first; it was so big, it hadn’t even registered. Now she felt dwarfed. The hairs on her arms and neck were bristling. The enormity – the stark, boundless beauty – of the vista through the giant window was overwhelming. She felt afraid, an instinctive, childlike fear of being somewhere forbidden, and also the irony: for all her casual flicking through the universe, only now did she truly feel she was in outer space, when in galactic terms she was actually on home turf. She could probably pick out the Earth with a half-decent set of binoculars. And here was a whole set of weird-looking men-in-the-moon, looking stonily back at this tiny, timid girl.

Trix thought of all she’d seen and heard in the boardroom and shook her head sadly.

‘Hello? Earth to Trix?’ The Doctor was clicking his fingers in her face. ‘I said, why did you leave the TARDIS?’

She shrugged, snapped herself back into focus. ‘Got bored. Thought I might find some mercury quicker than you.’

‘And did you?’

‘No.’

The Doctor sighed. ‘How did you know where I was?’

‘I didn’t. I took a toilet break from silver service and followed this Tinya bint. She sneaked off from the conference with Halcyon early –’

‘Halcyon?’

‘Some Feng Shui artist type.’

‘It’s pronounced *Fung Shway*.’

‘Whatever.’

He pointed down at the sleeping Tinya. ‘*Why* follow her?’

‘Thought she could be persuaded to help me find you, Fitz and the mercury,’ said Trix. She searched Tinya’s body and pocketed her white card, swapping it for her own Level One pass. ‘Funny thing is, she told her boss she was off to check that this job lot of old antiques had finished loading on to Halcyon’s ship. But she didn’t. She went straight to her office, made a quick call telling someone called Nerren to do it, and then came up here.’

‘Nerren is Falsh’s assistant,’ said the Doctor, crossing to study the bank of bubbles shimmering down one wall. ‘Perhaps she wanted him out of the way so she could check the cricket scores on one of these. . .’ He trailed off, staring at one of the screens.

‘What’s up? Earth all out for a hundred and two?’

‘That’s the loading bay we arrived in.’ Trix crossed over to see. A man was arguing with some guards, pointing at the various crates lying around. ‘And that’s Nerren.’

There was no sign of the TARDIS.

‘It’s been loaded on board?’ she hissed.

‘Fitz couldn’t leave without us.’

‘Doctor, wait.’ She tried to tap the screen but her finger went straight through it, impaling the bright blue figure of Aristotle Halcyon as he came into view, gesturing rudely. ‘That’s our artist VIP. If he’s down there, the meeting is over.’ She tugged at his arm. ‘So we can expect red alert!’

‘Red alert is right!’ The Doctor pulled free and dashed towards the door. ‘We’ve got to get down to that loading bay!’

‘Calm down!’ Trix raced after him, grabbed hold of his kitchen smock before he reached the door. ‘More haste, less speed! Security will be looking for two blokes, won’t they? Only sleeping cheekbones in there knows about me – her and the kitchen bloke I biffed.’

‘What’s your point?’

She smiled. ‘Well, we may not be able to stand the heat, but. . .’ She passed him Tinya’s white card. ‘Perhaps we should get into the kitchen anyway.’

White cards easing the way, Trix and the Doctor found their way back to the catering store. Swiftly, she crossed to the little room where she'd dragged the kitchen boy.

'He's gone!' she gasped.

'No. He's just crawled under those overalls. In his sleep.'

'So he has,' said Trix, her eyes making sense now of the lumpy shape beneath the silvery overalls. She shut the door. 'Remarkably helpful of him. And speaking of helpful – see that trolley? It knows its way around. I think you programme it through the touchscreen thingie.'

The Doctor seized a large white tablecloth and gave her a wolfish smile. 'I'll climb aboard.'

Once he was lying down on the trolley Trix lay a couple of platters on his body to help disguise his shape, then whipped the cloth over him – just as Chef returned.

He gave her a lascivious smile. 'So how'd it go?'

'Thank goodness I've found you,' said Trix breathlessly. 'Absolute panic out there.'

Chef frowned. 'The intruders are still at large?'

She nodded. 'But they can't sound the alarm until Halcyon's gone. The guards think they've got them trapped in one of the loading bays.'

'Which one?'

Trix froze. *Bugger!* 'Uh...'

Two discreet taps sounded from the trolley behind her.

'Bay Two,' she said quickly.

Chef frowned at the lumpy cloth over the long table. 'What's all that?'

'The reason I needed to find you right away,' said Trix. 'Falsh told me to get some food to the troops down in Bay Two straight away.'

'He did *what*?'

'Yes. Er, apparently some of the guards are hungry and...'. She shrugged. 'He said they should have some food. I think he was showing off in front of Halcyon. Showing what a great guy he is. You know what he's like.'

Chef stared at her suspiciously. Trix turned her back on him and her attention to the touchscreen. It didn't take her long to realise its workings were beyond her. 'Now, how do I tell the trolley which way to go? If I take too long about this I'll get into awful trouble.'

He came up behind her, and his fingers flitted over the touchscreen. 'You've already collected the food, I see.'

'Thought I'd better. Tins and stuff. They're only guards.'

'Nothing wrong with helping yourself...'. He slowly slipped two flabby arms around her waist. 'Is there?'

She tried not to shudder. 'How long will it take me to drop this off and get back here?'

She felt his quivering chins press sweatily against the back of her neck. 'Less than ten minutes.'

She gripped the trolley, which hummed compliantly into life. 'Wait for me here,' she breathed. 'In that little room over there. Naked.'

An intake of breath. 'Naked?'

'When I get back, you can help yourself to everything.'

His piggy eyes glittered. 'Like a buffet?'

'All you can eat.'

He gave a hoarse little cry. 'All right,' he croaked and staggered out.

Trix gave a low whistle and let the trolley take her away.

'Five minutes,' muttered her buffet worriedly. 'Can't you move any faster?'

'I barely know the man and I've got him stripping. How much faster *can* I move?' Trix quickened her pace nevertheless, and found the trolley adjusted to her movements. Soon it was fair whizzing her along through the washed-out corridors. She could hear a low rumbling noise, like the world's biggest boiler starting up. The closer they got to the loading bay, the louder it grew.

Then the alarm started up, slinging jagged sawbones of sound all around them.

'That's not good news,' hissed the Doctor from under his cheesecloth shroud.

The alarm bells started ringing in her mind as well as in her ears when they found only a single guard on duty outside Bay Two, sporting a right shiner.

'I was told to bring some food for the guards,' she called. 'Where'd they go?'

'Cleared out to search the next section,' said the guard. 'No sign of the intruder, we think he sneaked out past us when we used the gas grenades. He's highly trained.'

She acted unruffled. 'He is?'

'Anyway, Halcyon's cargo's on board and he's ready for blast off, so it's check for Full Alert.'

'Blast off?' the Doctor cried, springing up from beneath his tablecloth. 'No, he can't! He mustn't!'

The guard jumped back and raised his gun. But the Doctor had rolled up the tablecloth and flicked it out like a whip, knocking the gun from his hand. At the same time, Trix brained him with a silver platter. He went down heavily.

'We have to stop Halcyon taking off,' said the Doctor. 'He's got the TARDIS! He's got Fitz!'

'And we've got problems,' sighed Trix. She picked up the fallen gun and studied it. 'No trigger.'

The Doctor took the gun, studied it briefly then threw it away. 'Probably recognises the user's palmprint. Very sensible. Come on.' He swiped the guard's white card and slotted it into a panel beside an enormous blast door. 'Let's see if it's too late to get aboard.'

The door rumbled upwards, and wisps of foul-smelling smoke wafted into the corridor along with an unearthly light. 'Doctor, what is that?' Trix wondered. 'Rocket exhaust?'

'A somewhat simplistic description for fission-based propulsion, but –'

'That's a blast door, isn't it? If it's closed, it's probably closed for a good reason!'

But the Doctor had dashed off through the smoke like an overeager contestant on *Stars in Their Eyes*.

The guard groaned, starting to stir. Trix crouched beside him. 'Want to save face?' she hissed in his ear. 'There's another intruder hiding in a little cupboard off the kitchen stockroom. Grab him and maybe you won't look so useless, OK?'

Her good deed done for the day, Trix bunched her fists and followed the Doctor into the bay. It was like running into a burning oven. For a moment, she couldn't see him through the thick smoke. The glaring light made her head throb, the fumes made her choke, and an insistent warning bleat from a siren overhead made her swear.

'It's no good!' the Doctor yelled. He was stabbing at some device built into the wall. 'Halcyon's ship is disengaging. We can't get on board.'

'It's taking off?' Trix yelled. 'We have to get out of here! Outside, quick!'

But the blast door had lowered firmly back shut. Trix produced her white card and waved it around the control panel. Nothing happened.

'Stupid thing's jammed!' The noise of the rumbling engines mixed with the shrill siren, and her head felt like it would split apart. She turned, cupping her hands over her mouth to yell over the din. 'Where's your card?'

The Doctor swept out of the thick white smoke, coat-tails flapping. 'It's no use. Safety override will have kicked in.' He pinched the bridge of his nose and screwed up his eyes. 'I can't believe they're just going to drive away with Fitz and the TARDIS...'

'Let's prioritise, shall we?' The smoke was getting thicker, engulfing them both. 'That ship's going to blast off at any moment and when it does, we'll be charred into crispy black crumbs.' She broke off in a coughing fit. 'So for God's sake, get that door *open*!'

The Doctor looked straight at her. 'I can't.'

Chapter Four

Falsh set off the klaxons as soon as Halcyon and Sook were sealed back on-board their ship. Then he marched off through the din to his suite. How could these intruders have stayed at large for so long? Unpleasant possibilities were running through his mind. The intruders had made no attempt to disguise themselves – and their amateurish spy tactics had almost paid off. But was this some kind of a smokescreen?

Two obvious threats to security running about. . .

Too obvious threats.

A dumb distraction while the real sabotage was done discreetly? Falsh reached his suite, having barely broken a sweat. He frowned at the ladle on the carpet. Then he watched speechless as Nerren burst out of his personal office with Tinya in his arms and dumped her on to the genuine antique Barker sofa.

‘What the hell is happening here? Why did you leave your workstop?’ He did his best to hide a shudder. ‘*Anyone* could have walked in.’

‘Sir, I just got back from Loading Bay Two,’ Nerren stammered, ‘checking Mr Halcyon’s flyer was fully loaded –’

‘That’s what Tinya was supposed to do.’

‘I – She – she delegated to me, sir. She’d come from your meeting, sir, so I assumed that you’d okayed it.’ Nerren was suitably deferential even when flustered and scared, and Falsh appreciated that. ‘When I got back I found her in your office, sir. Unconscious.’

‘Show me where.’ Falsh towered over Nerren as they entered his office. Some of the bubblescreens were on, but none of the restricted views. There was no sign of disturbance elsewhere. The seas shifted and stirred, untroubled. The glowing eyes of the planets and moons stared in through the golden glass. As always he made a mental note to learn which satellite was which some day.

Then a pixelated star on one of the bubblescreens caught his eye.

‘Security, sir,’ chimed Nerren helpfully. ‘Kitchens.’

‘On,’ Falsh snapped. ‘What have you found?’

The screen flared into life. Falsh raised an eyebrow at the sight of his head chef standing puce and naked beside a young man in his underwear, watched

over by an armed guard. Overalls seemed strewn at their feet with excited abandon.

'These men have come into contact with the intruders,' the guard reported.

'From the looks of them, I'd call it wilful collaboration,' drawled Falsh.

The guard's face was perfectly straight, but his eye was blackened. 'Both men are on shift and neglecting duties, sir.'

'First she hit me on the head, then *he* did!' moaned the pants-clad little man.

'I never hit you!' stormed Chef.

'Not you, the *other* man.'

'Wait a minute. *She?*' breathed Falsh. So he'd been right, there was someone else – a woman. 'Then there are three intruders at large that we know of. The woman must be the ringleader.'

'She is!' blustered Chef. 'She attacked me, clawed the clothes off –'

The guard sagged a little. 'She overpowered me also, sir.'

'Give descriptions to Central Security. A full investigation of your conduct will follow.' Falsh blacked the screen in disgust. 'Alarm mute,' he began, and when the screeching had subsided, spoke in his most calculatedly tough tones: 'All decks. This message is addressed to all personnel. There are intruders on this station, two males and a female. Likenesses will be posted shortly. These people must be hunted down. I want them within the hour.' He cut the link, and the alarm leaped back up to full volume. 'Find them, damn it, he whispered. 'That goes for you too, Nerren. Go.'

In his panic, Nerren almost trampled Tinya, who was swaying in the office doorway, rubbing the back of her head.

'The man, the agitator – the Doctor,' she said. 'I found him in here. Searching for something.'

Falsh regarded her. 'And why were *you* here?'

'The woman who served you in the meeting,' said Tinya, her amber eyes narrowed with spite. 'You recall her?'

'No.'

'She left after I did.' Her eyes looked clouded, troubled with memory. 'She held me at gunpoint and forced me to call Nerren, get him out of the way. Then made me take her here and hit me!'

'The ringleader was the girl who served me *salad?*' He clutched his stomach. 'I don't trust this. Sensors have picked up no ships in our sector. Station defences are operating fully; the sentinel network can't be compromised. So how did these people breach the station – let alone gain independent access to my boardroom?' He crossed to his spotless desk, checked the locked drawers. 'These people are laughing in our faces. And we don't even know what they want.'

'They're Old Preservers,' Tinya protested. 'Must be.'

'This organised?' He shook his head. 'Liaise with Security. Get descriptions circulated *now*. They must have shown on the 'corders sometime.'

Tinya nodded. 'Are you aware of *any* unlogged dockings or excursions from this station?'

Falsh stared hard at her. For so light a query there was suspicious weight to her voice.

'Since it seems I can trust nobody to do what I need them to,' he told her, 'I shall go through the records myself.'

She nodded before she left. Almost as if she'd expected that answer all along.

Trix was now skinning her knuckles beating on the blast door, just in case the guard the other side might hear. The fumes were starting to make her retch. Her ears must be bleeding with the din, and the air seemed so hot it was scalding.

Giving up at last she turned around but couldn't see anything through the smoke.

'Doctor?' she called timidly.

Well, she wasn't about to start screaming for help at the top of her lungs. She wasn't a screamer.

She'd just stand here by herself and roast to death when the spaceship left.

'*Doctor!*' she shouted. 'Where the hell are you?'

'Over here,' came his distant voice.

She stumbled towards it, through the weird luminous smog, she didn't know how long for. A ridge in the floor almost tripped her. Then she came up against something hard – a wall?

'*Here!*'

And suddenly a hand reached out from the blindness and dragged her into a cooler, darker place.

She sank to her knees, fighting back nausea, so relieved she could cry. Her eyes were streaming. 'Where are we?' she croaked.

The Doctor's face dropped down beside her with a manic bounce. 'Rather a stroke of luck. Another ship in the bay, fuelled up and ready to go.' He slapped her heartily on the back. 'Come on. We're hijacking it!'

'Oh God,' she moaned, and let him drag her along after him for a few metres. Then she pulled free. That was another thing she wasn't. A helpless trail-along-behinder.

Then again, how else was she going to find the cockpit? She settled for grabbing hold of his coat-tail. He didn't seem to take offence, just the lead as they legged it through long, black circular corridors.

‘Very sumptuous, all this,’ the Doctor observed. ‘A Rolls-Royce of the spaceways.’

This was news to Trix, still rubbing her streaming eyes on the cuffs of her tunic. ‘Well, unless you can fly this thing, we’d better hope the chauffeur’s on board.’

They were soon standing in a roomy cockpit, with three seats placed before a long, bare, black console. There was probably some black sky out there through the wide, wraparound window but it was buried under a thick smattering of shining stars. Distant moons managed to eclipse tiny handfuls here and there, their fixed faces half-turned in shadow.

Then a white metal curtain seemed to sweep across the vista. Trix gulped as she realised it was a spaceship, so close outside she could see the rivets in its hull. Slowly it swept through the starry silence, turning its rear to them with astounding grace. Trix shielded her eyes as a vent flared magnesium white. Once she’d blinked away the glare, the ship was a distant speck bleeding a faint golden trail in its wake.

The TARDIS was gone. Fitz was gone.

It bugged Trix that she felt the loss of both as keenly.

‘We need to get going as soon as possible,’ said the Doctor, already crouching beneath the console with sonic screwdriver and the guard’s swipe card. ‘While I get busy, tell me all you know about this *decoratiste* chap who’s kidnapped Fitz.’

Trix slumped in the nearest of the three seats. ‘He looks a bit like a skinny version of the baddie out of *Thunderbirds*. Only with worse dress sense.’

The Doctor’s first fiddling paid off as an array of virtual screens and buttons appeared on the bare console. ‘And is he a baddie, do you think? Or just an irresponsible vandal?’

‘Well I don’t think you’re going to like him much,’ said Trix, looking out at those myriad moons. ‘Not when you hear what he’s planning to do to your precious solar system...’

‘Go on.’

Trix rather enjoyed knowing more than the Doctor for a change. Her story wasn’t pretty, and she made no attempt to dress it up.

‘Two hundred years ago or whatever, we Earthlings went cosmic walkabout – you know all that part, the big stride out across space, building an Empire, all that.’

‘Yes,’ he said, clawing messily through a handful of glowing cables. ‘You’d messed up your own planet, it was time to get busy elsewhere.’

‘Earth’s mined out. Stripped down. Washed up. We all bugged off and left the leftovers to the Third World lot. They’re living pretty much the same as they always have done.’

‘With difficulty,’ the Doctor suggested.

‘Anyway, humanity’s the weevil, and the solar system’s been the biscuit. Everywhere’s been spoiled. Shafted. There’s pretty much nothing precious, rare or useful left. Just rock, ice, a few metals maybe – the scrag they could live without, which no one could be bothered to shift or dig up.’

He nodded stoically, taking the news on the chin.

‘Venus was used as a rubbish dump for a while,’ she went on. ‘Good for burning everything up. Toxic waste, CFCs, nappies. Nappies take hundreds of years to biodegrade, did you know? Anyway, it all went tits-up when they tried terraforming – the whole atmosphere boiled away into space or something. . . Hey, pity they couldn’t get old Welwyn Borr to help them out, isn’t it?’

The Doctor was looking grim. ‘Where does Halcyon come into this?’

‘I haven’t got to that bit yet,’ she chided. ‘I was lucky – his infomercial was a really handy story-so-far. He wants it cut back for the actual vidcast.’

‘Does he?’

‘Uh-huh, so I almost missed out on all this stuff.’ She leaned back in her chair. ‘Anyway – Venus couldn’t be used as a furnace any more, but they decided to keep bunging rubbish there anyway since it wasn’t good for anything else. And on Mercury too. Dump stuff on the hot side, and the Sun burns it up. Not such a bad idea. The iron miners took huge hauls out with them. But then they knackered its orbit somehow, trying to make it less ballistical. . .’

‘Elliptical.’

‘Just checking you were listening.’

‘Against my better judgement.’

‘So, anyway – whoomph! Mercury falls into the Sun. But it didn’t matter, ’cause by then they were already going through the asteroid belt and Jupiter’s moons, and, this lot out of the window there. . .’

The Doctor crawled out from beneath the ship’s controls and pressed some buttons, his face grave. ‘I get the picture,’ he said as an encouraging hum started up. ‘Earth’s system’s in ruins, plague of interplanetary locusts, blah, blah, blah. But that was all scores of decades ago. Humans must have an empire stretching out for light years by now. So why return to the ancestral seat? Why is sonic big business organisation here in orbit around Saturn? And why demolish Jupiter’s moons?’

Trix sighed and savoured the moment like a smoker’s first puff of the morning. ‘Halcyon and Falsh have already blitzed a load of littl’uns around Neptune and Uranus, you know. And the Asteroid Belt – that’s been properly unbuckled. Mined hollow and the bits left over swept away and sold off to aliens to use in their high-rises. . .’ She gestured out of the window. ‘He’s got his eye on some of this lot, too – all part of his Grand Orchestration. But Jupiter’s the showpiece. Over sixty satellites going up in smoke. Bringing down the

numbers to a nice, classical twelve. They've already started knocking out the smallest ones. . . '

The Doctor looked like someone struggling to be brave at a funeral. 'Please, Trix. Why?' he said quietly.

'This is the best bit,' she said. 'He reckons –'

A stern but slinky synthesised voice cut across her. 'Your attempt to disengage from this station is not authorised.'

She jumped. 'Jesus, who was that?'

'Ship's computer,' the Doctor reported, as the hum in the control room rose louder. 'Ignore her. Carry on, sorry.'

'Well,' said Trix, 'he's doing it so –'

'This craft is registered for the exclusive use of Robart Falsh,' the computer interrupted again. 'You are performing an illegal activity. Automatic control has been re-established.'

The Doctor tossed some loose wires on to Trix's lap. 'It hasn't, you know. She only thinks it has. The computer will tell us off for a while, but she's all talk.' As the ship lurched forward and listed to one side, the Doctor gave the sort of grudging smile a grizzling child might give when presented with a balloon. 'See?'

Trix gripped the seat's armrests as the ship began to accelerate. 'So, anyway: Halcyon. Basically –'

'This is an illegal operation,' stated the computer. 'Security forces have been informed.'

'They haven't really,' the Doctor told Trix candidly.

'Then what's that?' She pointed at a large point of light that was growing larger and brighter.

The Doctor squinted at the UFO. 'Some kind of robotic probe?'

The point of light resolved itself into a sphere. Then it flashed orange, and the cockpit shook with sickening impact.

Trix glared at the Doctor. 'That would be some kind of robotic probe sent by the recently informed security?'

He looked more affronted than sheepish. 'But I disconnected the main router!' He stabbed at a bunch of buttons and the ship shifted starboard. 'The computer must have been on stand-by, sub-linked to the station systems. Falsh had this ship set up to leave in a hurry.'

'How about we pick up where he left off?' said Trix, as the window burned orange and the ship shook again. 'They'll blow us to bits!'

'Ha!' cried the Doctor defiantly. 'It won't do them any good to threaten us.'

'It won't?'

'No. We can't hear them.' He pulled out the sonic screwdriver and started fiddling again. 'I broke the communicator when I cracked the flight protocols.'

Trix decided she would throttle him. 'Doctor!'

'Don't worry. They're only warning shots – it's Falsh's ship, they won't want to damage it.'

'They'll do more than damage us when they've caught us and towed us back to the station!'

The ship lurched violently as a miniature sun appeared in the cockpit window, blinding Trix with its intensity. Security had switched from wagging a finger to raising a fist. It couldn't be long now before it came crashing down. . .

'Are you sure they won't risk harming the ship?' she asked lamely.

'Fairly. But they may well have weapons designed to eliminate organic life while leaving the ship intact.'

'Had to spoil it, didn't you.'

The Doctor ducked back under the console. 'We need more power if we're going to outrun these probes.'

'Feng Shui!' she yelled.

'I'm sorry?'

'That's it! What Halcyon's doing it all for.'

The Doctor scrambled back out, a keen interest in his eyes. 'Feng Shui?'

'Yeah, you know. Move around your furniture, point ornaments north – all that crap the property shows were trying to flog us in my time. . .' Trix bit her lip as the ship rocked so hard she swore she could feel the floor buckle beneath her feet. 'He's rearranging the solar system, see? Clearing out the clutter, making it "spiritually pure" or something, a better place to live and work in. . .'

The Doctor just went on staring at her.

'He works out what aligns with what and where, and Falsh makes it happen,' she babbled. 'It's like inner-city development – tempt big businesses to set up back in the old neighbourhood, hold their meetings and Christmas parties in a Falsh orbiting-conference-podule thing, knock down the slums, generate more wealth, employment, blah blah blah. . .' She frowned at his trancelike state. 'Sorry, is this distracting you from saving our necks?'

He shook his head in a flurry of chestnut curls. 'No, no, no.'

'Well, could you maybe hurry up a bit and –'

'I mean: no, you're wrong.'

'I heard them talking!' she said indignantly. 'I saw the whole pitch on one of those bubble-TVs!'

'You're wrong about classical Feng Shui.' He disappeared beneath the console again, leaving Trix nonplussed. 'It's a philosophy. A serious study of how the unseen energies of our living environment affect us,' he called to her. 'Its proponents believe that through the arrangement and placement of rooms

and buildings we can interact with those energies in a way that promotes good fortune. First practised back in the Chou dynasty, around 210 BC.'

'Sounds about right.' Trix looked out helplessly at the starry blackness. 'Chou is French for cabbage, isn't it?'

The Doctor chattered on, the screwdriver whirring away. 'Most classical Feng Shui formulae were structured on mathematical calculations according to the science of the I-Ching, you know...'

She swore as another probe spun into view, speeding towards them. Halcyon was right – the knowledge that a body existed *did* lend it heightened influence. 'Doctor – there's another one!'

He didn't seem to hear her. 'Once students grasp how the theories are formulated, they can be taught how to apply them...'

Up close, the probe looked like a giant silver Malteser.

'...in innumerable ways under different circumstances...'

A giant silver Malteser with guns extruding.

'...to create optimum results!'

A thrum of power warmed the air, and Trix yelled as the ship tugged away sharply, as if yanked on a string. She was pinned back in her chair by the sudden acceleration. Her vision blurred. It was hard to breathe. Never mind G-force, this was somewhere nearer J or K. She was going to throw up. She was going to pass out. She was going to do both at once, and how messy would that be? And then...

...it was over. The ship gave one last, determined lurch, like a dog on a leash straining to bite a postman's ankle, and then seemed to stop still. The lights dimmed. The thrum of power shushed itself to a murmur.

'There are many different schools of Feng Shui,' came a weak voice from under the console. 'Ba Chai, for example. The schools of major and minor wandering stars. I studied that for a while in Peking during the roaring Twenties...'

'Just get back out from under there and steer this thing,' grumped Trix, clutching her delicate stomach. 'Are we out of trouble?'

'I burned a lot of fuel, there,' said the Doctor, dragging himself back into the pilot's seat with a heavy sigh. 'Enough to put us well out of range of the probes.'

'Thank God!'

'But I don't know if we've got enough power left to go where we're going.'

'Which is where?'

'I don't know.' The Doctor shrugged. 'I was hoping to follow the ion trail from Halcyon's ship. But I suppose we might have overtaken him by now.'

'OK,' said Trix, trying to remain calm. 'What if we run out of fuel?'

'We drift out of control.'

‘Until we hit something?’

‘More probably, until Falsh’s security forces pick us up,’ said the Doctor, sitting up straight. ‘And that would be a pity. Because I want to meet this guy, Halcyon. Does he honestly think he’s enhancing human heritage, making over the solar system like this? Or is it just a publicity stunt he’s doing for cash?’

‘Duh?’ Trix stared at him, appalled. ‘You mean you seriously have to *ask*?’

‘They’ve stolen the *Polar Lights*, Mr Falsh.’

Falsh stared at the cringing security chief on the bubblescreen. He drummed his fingers on the desk. ‘You let them get away.’

‘You’d left the ship primed and ready, sir,’ protested the chief.

‘Oh, so it’s *my* fault?’

‘The agitators broke through the immobilisers and had it away before the sentinels could –’

‘All right, all right.’ Falsh waved aside the explanation, his mind racing. These people were making a mockery of him. How could they be so well organised? ‘I want a second battalion of sentinels on patrol here. You *are* sending ships after them, I take it?’

The chief stiffened. ‘The agitators performed a fuel burn. The G-jump might have placed them anywhere within a two-hundred-million-mile radius. But the sentinels are sensor sweeping and Empirewide alerts.’

‘I want those agitators dead,’ said Falsh curtly. ‘The *Polar Lights* isn’t important. It must be destroyed on sight. In the meantime, get me another ship. Primed. Ready to go at once.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘And, Chief? Report to the Personnelbots at the end of your shift.’

He stiffened. ‘Yes, sir.’

Falsh pricked the bubble and spun around in his chair. He looked out over his corner of the System, at Saturn and her little worlds keeping pace.

But not for long. He couldn’t think straight with all those bald, accusing eyes looking in at him. And while the stars were cold and clear and static, Falsh kept thinking he glimpsed movement out there. Sentinels maybe, or sudships. Or maybe something else.

Something that could wave security aside with the codes Falsh had given it.

Something coming to call from out of the endless night. Coming for him.

Chapter Five

Fitz woke up with no idea where he was or how he'd got there.

He was looking up at a flawless white ceiling in a room entirely free of clutter. Some oversized oriental symbols had been daubed in black on the white walls like posh equations. There was just one piece of furniture in the room – an ancient chaise longue, upon which he was sprawled like some raffish buck.

A raffish buck with a luminous hand.

Panic clutched at his guts and squeezed. Now he remembered. He was still sick. He must have staggered out of the glowing room looking for help, come in here and dozed off. How could he fall asleep at a time like this? He was obviously dying. The end couldn't be far off now...

Suddenly Fitz could hear footsteps, hard heels clipping and clopping as if across marble. He sighed wistfully. Your oriental types, when they karked it their ancestors came to visit them, ready to guide them off to a happy-ever-afterlife. Maybe his old mum, kind and restored, was coming out to meet him. It would be so good to see her again...

But the clopping of the cruel heels suddenly shattered his poppy-pipe dreams. He sat up straight. Mum hated heels, she'd always stuck to her slippers. And this wasn't some celestial waiting room – he was trespassing on someone's spaceship.

He found the gun, shoved down the waistband of his maroon trousers, and his mind panicked with the awful possibilities of any sudden moves. Then he remembered it didn't work anyway. He pulled it out and hid it in his jacket pocket. *He* ought to hide. No, he should ask whoever it was for help. No, they would only gloat and laugh at him for falling into their trap, he had no one to blame but himself for –

'What the –' The woman with the heels noticed him as she passed by the doorway and jumped in the air. She had red bobbed hair and sharp, hard features – even in her surprise she held a dour and gloomy air. 'Who the hell are you? Where did you spring from, how –'

Fitz waved his arms in feeble protest at the onslaught of questions. This prompted one more:

'And why did you put your hand in that wet Halcytone?'

'Halcytone?'

'That paint!' An embarrassing penny dropped in Fitz's mind. He cleared his throat. 'Th... Let's take your questions in order.'

'No, wait.' She sighed, put her hands on her hips and looked very, very depressed. 'I get it. That's all we need. Another bloody art student.'

Fitz frowned at her. 'Eh?'

'When'd you sneak on board then? The convention on Umbriel?'

'Uh... Maybe.' He paused, studied his hand. 'Paint, huh. So I'm not going to die, then.'

'Oh, I wouldn't say that,' said the woman briskly. 'Depends on what mood Halcyon's in. The last thing he needs right now is some desperate groupie stowing away in a pathetic attempt to foist himself upon his staff.'

'I don't want to go anywhere near his staff, thanks,' muttered Fitz. 'Anyway, you're taking this very calmly, aren't you? I could be a dangerous saboteur, a deadly assassin... an old preserver, even!'

She gave him a look sharp enough to pop balloons. 'What's your name?'

'Fitz. Fitz Kreiner. Perhaps you've heard of me?'

'No. Where are you from?'

He shrugged. 'Around.'

'You can't have been on board Falsh's station...?'

'Can't I?'

'Were you?'

Fitz could feel the conversational undercurrents dragging him out of his depth but swam on bravely. 'Perhaps you underestimate me,' he said. He had to play for time – Trix might be around somewhere, just raring to come to his rescue.

'Sook?' A hushed, oddly fragile voice sounded from outside.

The woman reacted almost as violently as when she'd first noticed Fitz. 'I'm in here, Halcyon.'

Fitz heard a new set of footsteps approaching, slow, soft and steady, punctuated with the swaggering dandy tap of a cane.

Fitz bit his lip. 'What are you going to do to me?'

'It's no good, Kreiner. You're just going to have to confess.' She advanced on him, raising her voice. 'It's hopeless pretending. There's art student written all over you.' The woman's face softened in a smile. 'And for God's sake mind out with that hand. If you get paint on Halcyon's *Louis Quinze* he'll have you shot.'

Fitz looked rueful. 'Not quite the reception I was hoping for, Miss... Sook?'

'Salsa Sook. Halcyon's private assistant.'

Fitz did his best to look jealous. 'You have my dream job.'

'Dreams are romantic notions, Kreiner.' Sook's grey eyes were fixed on his own. 'You see an opportunity, you take it.'

'I'm a fantastic opportunity,' Fitz declared. 'Take me.'

A man appeared in the doorway. He had a scalp full of glitter, dark glasses, a gold-topped cane and was dressed like the campest of Ali Baba's forty thieves.

Fitz bit his lip and hid his glowing hand swiftly behind his back, but Halcyon regarded him quite calmly. 'Explain the situation to me, Sook,' he said, in a voice like posh chocolates unwrapping.

'Your latest would-be acolyte,' Sook informed him. 'Fitz Kreiner. Art student. Seems he bought his way backstage at Umbriel and on board the *Rapier*.'

Halcyon looked mildly revolted. 'Sook, this sort of thing really does happen with dreary monotony. He's been skulking around all this time?' He brought down his cane on the marble floor, and Fitz winced at the racket. 'I've warned you about security matters before. Must I take up that oaf Falsh on his offer of round-the-clock bodyguards?'

'I don't want to hurt anyone,' Fitz said quickly. 'I'm not here to make trouble either. I...' Sook was looking at him, urging him on. Finally he capitulated, head bowed with shame. 'I am an art student.'

'The route he has taken to meet you is unorthodox,' added Sook stiffly. 'But he showed me his vitaechip and I believe he could be of interest to you.'

Fitz looked at her worriedly. 'My what?' he mouthed.

She shook her head with a *not now* expression.

'Speak, then, Kreiner,' said Halcyon softly. 'How did you come aboard?'

Fitz surveyed his audience with a worldly air. 'Everyone has their price, you know.'

Sook looked at him thoughtfully. 'It was Anaseed, wasn't it?'

Halcyon glanced at her. 'The maid who displeased you?'

'I knew she was unhappy with the terms of her severance, but...'

'Oh, she was unhappy all right,' said Fitz, grabbing gratefully at this unexpected lifeline. 'And bitter! I should coco. Barely had to bung her a thing. But you know, despite her animosity, once she'd seen my vitaechip, she... well, she felt it only right to let me see you.' He paused, getting caught up in the story. 'You must, she told me. For the sake of art.'

'Listen to him, Sook,' said Halcyon, a smile spreading over his vaguely Eastern features. 'His voice is so deliciously rough! His manner so arcane.' He walked up to Fitz and placed a hand against his stubbly cheek. 'No run-of-the-mill wannabe here.' He inhaled deeply. 'Smell him! Smell him! He reeks of iconoclasm.'

'It's Old Spice, actually,' Fitz blushed and took a step backwards. 'The mark of a man.'

'There is something base and wilful and fresh about him,' Halcyon declared. 'What school are you a student of, Kreiner?'

Fitz was thrown for a few seconds. 'St Augustine's of Archway,' he said honestly, 'since you ask.'

Halcyon's disapproval was obvious in the scowl he showed Sook. 'One of these abstruse hybrid schools, I suppose, bastardising the classic philosophies. . .'

'Well, the path less travelled and all that. . .' said Fitz gamely, utterly bewildered and with hope fading fast.

'Should I test him, Sook?' he asked. 'I fear he may disappoint me.'

Sook seemed a little uneasy. 'You know how the most primitive notions can yield the highest perfections.'

'True,' said Halcyon. 'How long before we reach Callisto?'

Sook was calculating. 'If we stay in cruise mode -'

'Which we shall. I find fast travel so unsettling.'

'Quite. It should take us about seventeen hours.'

'Stay in cruise mode?' Fitz gave a small whimper. 'We're in flight?' Sook looked at him, puzzled.

'Have been for an hour.'

'Oh. . . That's just fab,' he muttered.

'Seventeen hours.' Halcyon seemed to make up his mind. 'Very well. It appears I have a small window.'

'I'll try not to break it,' said Fitz weakly.

'You're familiar with PadPad, of course?'

'How could I not be?'

'Well, as Sook says, since you are here, you may as well show us what you can do.' He smiled, a creepy kind of smile. Fitz had the unsettling notion that Halcyon was looking straight through him. 'I'll compile a template at once and give it to Roddle to implant. Sook, stay with Kreiner throughout the exercise and deliver the chip to me personally. I wish to experience his vision no later than eight in my cubicle.'

'Just as you wish, Halcyon,' she told him.

'Then you may set out Falsh's latest gifts in the level one gallery, laid out according to the six principles. I shall peruse them later.'

Fitz noticed Sook pull a face. 'Of course.'

'Trinkets and baubles to appease me. . .' Halcyon clasped his hands tightly together. 'I'm tense, Sook. Whatever Falsh says, we'll have the preservers out in force now Carme's gone. . .' He shook his glittering head despairingly. 'I shall have to entrust the computers to recalculate the chi equations. So little time. . .' He turned and walked through the wide doorway with a parting shot: 'Do try not to disappoint me, Kreiner. Discoursing with the Callisto authorities will be a dreary and unrewarding pastime. And I should hate to take Sook to task for her bad judgement as well as her laxity in letting you aboard. . .'

Fitz and Sook were left alone, watching each other. Fitz had the impression that something significant was being said by their silence, but had no clue what it might be. Maybe she just fancied him – she was only female, after all. His mind was racing. Every second was taking him further away from the Doctor, he had no idea where Trix might be and he was locked out of the TARDIS. And to add insult to injury, he was now stuck pretending to be a *student*. An *art* student!

‘Thanks for being so nice about this,’ he sighed. ‘You’ve been surprisingly understanding.’

‘I think I’ve behaved realistically enough.’ Sook wore a guarded look. ‘Halcyon believes your presence here is down to my incompetence. It’s clearly in my best interests to convince him that you might actually be an asset, whatever trumped-up school you’re a disciple of.’

‘Disciple?’ Fitz’s spirit was buckling under the weight of his ignorance as to what the hell was going on here. ‘Look, Sook. . . Could you just tell me, when are we going back to Falsh’s station?’ She frowned.

‘Why would you want to –’

‘Please. It’s important.’

‘But we’re not,’ she said, puzzled. ‘Next time we see Falsh he’ll be in the audience at the live vidcast the day after tomorrow.’

Fitz felt his throat tightening. There was no way back to the Doctor. He’d never see him again. He was trapped. He found his head was throbbing in time with his paint-smeared hand.

Sook was looking at him warily. ‘Kreiner? What is it?’

‘Nothing,’ he croaked. ‘I’m fine. Fine and dandy.’

‘OK. Because I think we need to talk, don’t we.’ She nodded to the hand behind his back. ‘But first things first. You’re prepared for the PadPad uplink?’

‘Uh, yeah. ‘Course.’

She looked at him warily. ‘Good. Well, before we get on with that, you’d better clean up that hand.’

You think the hand is a mess? Fitz shook his head. *Baby, you should see the rest of my life.*

Travelling through space was actually very dull, Trix decided, between catnaps in the *Polar Lights*’ minimalist lounge on a wafer-thin plastic couch. It looked great but was horrible to lie on. She surveyed the spotless, pale-blue-boarded floor and wondered if that would be more comfortable.

It would be exhausting living here without an army of cleaners, she decided. You’d mess up the place just by breathing. Not an ounce of clutter. Not a pinch of personality. Just clean lines and open space. The kind of look that was great

for selling show-homes but which went pear-shaped the moment you actually tried to live the dream.

A swoosh made her jump. It was the door sliding open to reveal the Doctor. He didn't look happy. 'I've lost Halcyon's ion trail,' he announced. 'We can't trace his ship. So we can't find Fitz or the TARDIS.'

Trix blinked. 'Thanks for breaking it to me gently.' She got up from the couch, stiffly. 'Hey, wait a minute. This is no problem. Halcyon's going to be hosting a live vidcast thingie. Live demolition of a bunch of Jupiter's moons.'

'Oh yes?' The Doctor looked at her sharply. 'When?'

'I don't know.' She shrugged. 'Sometime soon. But if we keep watching telly, we might see an advert for it, and that would tell us where he is! Tinya did say there'd be blanket coverage...'

The Doctor stuffed his hands in his pockets and considered. 'So the plan is, we sit and watch TV for several days?'

'What else is there to do? Provided Falsh has got a good stock of snacks in, we're sorted.'

'He's a powerful man,' the Doctor reminded her, suddenly cold and aloof. 'I've been looking through his files, getting a feel for the type of industry in Falsh Industries. Catering, civil engineering, electronics, experimental technologies...' He paused. 'That has an enigmatic ring to it, doesn't it? Experimental technologies...'

'In other words,' said Trix, 'he's big enough to come after us with everything he's got. Still, space is big. We can hide out, can't we?'

He shook his head. 'With the fuel we have left we might get halfway to Mars. Always assuming Falsh and Halcyon don't blow it up first.'

'Mars is safe,' Trix told him. 'Too many ancient Martian ruins. It's got an Empire Trust preservation order slapped on it.'

The Doctor nodded thoughtfully. 'Old Preservers, bringing pressure to bear...'

'Halcyon and Falsh aren't keen on them, for sure. Like those nutters who lay down in front of bulldozers, are they?'

'Falsh thought I was one.'

'That answers my question.'

'And Fitz too...' he sighed. 'Oh, Fitz, Fitz, Fitz. There's Falsh thinking we know too much, when really we know lamentably little.' The Doctor plonked himself down on the couch beside her. 'The destruction of Carme, for instance... What's that all about?'

'Yeah, Halcyon blew his glittery top over that. One of the Ancient Twelve... It was a keeper, in his book.'

'Ancient Twelve!' said the Doctor scornfully. 'By what criteria? What's he playing at? Even if he's going by order of discovery, there were barely twenty

years between Ananke in fifty-one and Leda in seventy-four.’

Trix scowled. ‘Why do you even *know* stuff like that?’

‘I have a splendid memory for facts.’

‘Anyway, what’s done is done. It was just an accident, Falsh said.’

‘That’s what he wanted Halcyon to think,’ said the Doctor. ‘No, he did it on purpose. He’s covering something up, and...’ He clicked his fingers. ‘Blazar.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘Blazar! Blazar!’ The Doctor was in full-on bridge-of-nose-pinching, working-out-difficult-sum-in-head mode. ‘The demolition company Falsh set up to do his dirty work... Where did Tinya say Blazar was based... Thebe!’ he roared, leaping to his feet.

‘Is that one of the Ancient Twelve?’

‘No.’

‘Then it’s going bang, and Blazar with it.’

‘Yes. Like Carme, there’s something there that Falsh doesn’t want anyone to see. “Steps are being taken”, Tinya said...’

Trix regarded him. ‘I sense my “watch TV” plan is going out the window. Right?’

‘We must get to Thebe ahead of Falsh,’ said the Doctor, doing the expectant-father bit and pacing the floor. ‘If we can get hold of the evidence he’s hoping to erase, we’ll have something to bargain with. We’ll force him to get us the TARDIS back and Fitz with it.’

‘Clever,’ admitted Trix. ‘In principle.’

He headed for the door, which whooshed open expectantly. ‘I’ll check the ship’s magnetic shielding and try to compute a course!’

‘Hang on, Doctor,’ she called. ‘This evidence – if we *do* find it – is bound to be of something heinous, appalling, or at least deeply unpleasant...’

He hesitated in the doorway. ‘Almost certainly.’

She looked at him sternly. ‘However bad it is, you are *not* to get us involved in putting things right. It’s a bargaining chip to get us back the TARDIS, Fitz, and a little mercury – nothing else. Promise me.’

‘OK,’ said the Doctor shiftily. ‘I promise.’

Trix noticed his hands were back in his pockets. ‘Hey! Are your fingers crossed in there?’

But he had vanished through the door now, and it had swept closed behind him.

Chapter Six

Sook was waiting for Fitz outside the bathrooms. He waved to her with a now-spotless hand.

‘Feeling better?’ she asked.

‘Surprisingly so,’ Fitz admitted. ‘Amazing what a bit of outrageous opulence can do for the soul.’ The bathroom was more like a marble palace, porcelain-white. In place of a sink a fountain gushed gently fragranced water, and the lotion Sook had given him made short, sudsy work of the Halcytone.

He wondered if he should go all the way and come clean to Sook. But he bottled it.

‘What’s with that paint, anyway?’ Fitz asked.

‘Halcyon has every room remodelled on a weekly basis. A fresh atmosphere, a fresh mind.’

‘No, I mean, what’s *with* that paint – the freaky glowing lightshows.’

She stared. ‘Excuse me? You’re here and you haven’t heard of Halcytone, the intelligent paint that’s FUN to watch dry?’

‘Well, obviously I’ve *heard* of it,’ bluffed Fitz. ‘But how does it work?’

She started leading the way down the expansive corridor, tracing her fingers idly along the simple, elegant symbols that scored the tasteful walls like über-Braille. ‘The patterns are generated by nano-optic particles in the paint base. They generate an infinitesimal current that changes the colour of the paint as it dries.’

‘Creating the patterns!’

‘And untold riches for Halcyon, naturally.’

Fitz frowned. ‘Hey, wait a minute. I copped a handful of those nano-optic things! Is that OK?’

‘Well, it’s not a good idea to bathe in the stuff. On contact with the skin that current *can* start to influence your nerve-endings,’ Sook admitted. ‘Only temporary, but you can get headaches, fatigue, nausea...’

‘Explains why I was feeling so sick and tired.’

‘Hey,’ she said. ‘You can *never* get sick and tired of Halcytone. The random-pattern generator continues to function when the paint is dry – and since the paint particles are constantly being revived and regenerated by the programmed current, the colours can never fade.’ She seemed almost bitter.

‘Gauche, but a good gimmick. It caught people’s imagination. Gave him the platform – and the finances – he needed to raise his artistry to another level.’

‘And upon that lofty peak, he met you.’

If Sook recognised his teasing she didn’t let on. ‘He applied himself to the Feng Shui disciplines, reinvented himself as the doyen of declutter. But you knew all that. Right?’

Fitz preferred to let his ignorance seep out slowly rather than in one great flood. ‘Well, higher levels or not, he’s obviously still got a soft spot for his pet paint if he’s splashing it about on his own walls.’

‘Not him. That’s Roddle’s job.’

‘Roddle’s a painter and decorator?’

‘Artist.’

‘Right.’

‘Halcyon insists we check the quality regularly. Since Falsh took over exclusive manufacture, they claim to have improved the formula. Upgraded the nano-optics and even made it self-repairing on minor chips or scratches.’

‘Old Falsh and Halcyon really are in each other’s pockets, aren’t they?’ mused Fitz.

‘It’s been a lucrative arrangement for them both, I suppose,’ she said. ‘Falsh’s distribution network has brought Halcyon recognition and royalties right out across the Empire Rim. And that profile boost has really paid off for Falsh. Since the President okayed Halcyon’s *Restore the Wonder* project, Falsh was first in line to take all those lucrative demolition and reconstruction contracts.’ She bit her tongue. ‘Sorry, I get carried away. I guess you know all that, and it’s kind of a sore point. . .’

‘Sore is right.’ He stopped walking and looked at her. Now his head was feeling clearer, he realised he had just one chance to turn the situation – and the *Rapier* – around. ‘Sook, you’ve been cool with me, but we both know that I shouldn’t be here at all. Take me back to Falsh’s station, please.’

‘What?’

‘And lend me some mercury too, could you? That is, if you’ve got any.’

‘You’re crazy, Kreiner,’ Sook said. ‘Why would you want to –’

‘Why would Falsh want to deliberately blow up Carme and put the blame on the poor sods who were only following orders?’

She frowned. ‘What?’

‘Blazar Demolitions or whoever. Falsh and his cronies have made them take the rap, when they were the ones who rigged it in the first place.’

‘And just how would you know that?’

‘Take it from me. I *know*.’ She opened her mouth to speak again, but Fitz raised his hand and shook his head. ‘Seems to me Halcyon should be having

words with Falsh. Don't you reckon? Before his reputation goes right up in smoke.'

'Along with the rest of the expendable satellites?' Sook's brow was creased. 'If we're to act on this, I'll need proof of what you say.'

'I don't have any. But I reckon I know how to get it – *if* you take me back.'

Her eyes hardened. 'This is all some big trick, isn't it? Falsh sent you here, you're trying to catch me out.'

'Not likely!'

'You're not likely full stop, are you?' hissed Sook. 'You appear out of nowhere and expect –'

'The worst, chiefly. And I'm usually right.' Fitz looked into the flinty grey of her eyes. 'So please, Sook, you have to help me.'

She threw up her hands angrily. 'I thought I already was!'

'Oh, and there's my big blue box in your luggage hold. I'll need that too.'

'Your *what*?'

Fitz turned his best puppy-dog eyes on her. 'Pretty please?'

'Kreiner, if you. . . ' Sook broke off. 'Am I completely wrong about you?'

'Depends,' he said. 'Who do you think I –'

But before she could say anything more, a door slid open and a slight, slender man sprang out like a jack in the box. Sook leaped about a mile in the air, and Fitz squawked in alarm.

The man grinned. 'It's PadPad time, am I right?' He had large, wild blue eyes, curly blond hair, and looked totally out of it in nothing but a black bodystocking and a smile.

'Roddle,' said Sook crossly, 'you're a damned pain when you score.'

'Halcyon had me load a new template for the thinkset.' Roddle looked at Fitz and giggled. 'For this one, is it?'

'Yeah.' Sook peered at his pinprick pupils like a disapproving mum. 'Maybe I'd better double-check the PadPad connections, dope-head. Don't want to fry Kreiner's brains – not any more than they already are, anyway.'

'Lighten up,' said Roddle, swaying about, dribbling a little. 'I've got stacks of the stuff. Six-hour comedown. Plenty left for you.'

'I *could* use it,' Sook sighed. 'How about you, Kreiner. Some H to get you in the mood?'

'H? You mean. . . ' Fitz did a double take. This, from straight-laced Sook? 'Er. . . no, thanks.' He felt the familiar urge to just run away from all of this. Stranded on a spaceship, his friends god-knew-where, locked out and alone, forced to take some dumb test he was bound to fail. . . and now he was casually being offered drugs hard enough to dent. Fair enough, Halcyon looked like he'd dressed himself while off his head somewhere, but this Roddle guy and Sook were being so. . . *blatant* about it. Surely this was the stuff of

clandestine deals and dark alleys? He cleared his throat, ever mindful of his cool. 'Not that I'm bothered about the law, or anything. . .'

'Law?' giggled Roddle. 'What, it's suddenly a crime?'

'What are you talking about now?' Sook gave him a despairing look and ushered him inside. 'Shall we just get all this out of the way?'

He gave a vague smile at the swaying Roddle and followed Sook through into yet another grandly minimalist room. Again, the walls were bare and white, save for an enormous crimson rectangle painted on the side opposite the door. Crouched before the big block of colour was a sculpted couch and a pedestal table upon which rested a small metallic headband and a grey box the size of a cassette tape.

'You mind an audience, Kreiner?' Roddle called, grinning and wiping spittle from his chin.

'Uh. . .' Fitz glanced uncertainly between Sook and the couch. 'What's he expecting us to do?'

Sook lowered her voice. 'You mean you *haven't* used PadPad before? What kind of an art student are you supposed to be? How did you expect to be taken seriously?'

'Stop picking on me, will you?' snapped Fitz. 'I'm not going to play the smackhead like Roddle just to be taken seriously!'

'You're so weird, Kreiner,' Sook complained. 'Can we get on? PadPad's a simple interior design programme. A mental sketchbook. Put on the thinkset and you'll see the template of an empty domicile in your mind. You fill the rooms.'

Fitz looked dubiously at the silver headband she passed him. 'And lust how do I do that?'

'Use your imagination.'

'Couldn't you just tell me?'

'Quiet!' Sook hissed, clearly losing patience. 'You use your imagination to furnish the domicile. Your choices are recorded on these cells and shot directly into Halcyon's visual cortex so he can image what you've been thinking, right there in his own head.'

'Did I mention I have intimacy issues?' said Fitz, slipping the headband on over his straggling hair.

'Relax,' Sook told him. 'The cells only record what you place in the room.' She tapped the headset and a spherical screen appeared above his head, like a thought cloud in a cartoon.

'Wow!' Fitz had to admit, it was pretty cool. And then he enjoyed a sudden moment of clarity. Of course! Now he could really convince Halcyon that he was an unpolished virtuoso worth cultivating. With a super-famous *decoratiste* as his ally, Fitz would have no problem getting back to Falsh's space station.

Then he'd just ask Halcyon to get the Doctor off the hook, rescue Trix from wherever she was. . .

Sorted.

He felt quite calm, despite a childhood phobia of examinations. He could do this. Halcyon clearly liked his décor like he wore his hair – less was more. Minimalism. Nothing to it. Chuck a table, a chair and maybe a pot plant in each room and he'd be all right.

'One more thing,' hissed Sook. 'Don't go for minimalism. Everyone tries that. Halcyon will only think you're taking the piss.'

'Terrific,' said Fitz, closing his eyes. A large, empty, rectangular room appeared in the cloud above his head.

Quick-draw Kreiner, against his better judgement, was in town.

'Oh. My. God.'

Trix hadn't been prepared for the view from the cockpit. When she'd last come in to check on the Doctor, a few hours back, Jupiter was just a stripy tack pinned to a black backcloth. An interesting sight, but not arresting.

Different story now. The wraparound window was thick with Jupiter. Trix stared at its immensity and felt a nauseating vertigo, like she might overtopple and plunge into the giant bands of whirling cloud. Like sitting in the front row of the cinema, she had to look all about to take it in. There were fat brown and orange stripes, spiralling with white like someone had just poured in cream; whorls of beige and almond, skimming the cloud tops; the staggering storm of the Great Red Spot, an evil eye fixed on them thousands of miles across. . . And here and there, moons like little bouncy balls caught in mid-air, casting little black spot-shadows over the planet's tumult. There was even a ring, a vast, dusty arch swung over the planet's bulging equator.

Not the view through some vast telescope. Not a projection on a screen.

Just outside, up close and personal.

Trix staggered back and fell weakly against a pastel wall. 'Are we there yet?'

'Almost. Another ten million kilometres to go. I've computed a direct course for Thebe.' The Doctor was sat at one end of the control console with his back to her. 'Interesting, isn't it?'

She went on staring. 'Interesting? Your mind's about the same size as that thing, and that's all you can find to say about it?'

He looked around at her, frowning in confusion. Then he saw where she was looking, and he laughed. 'Not Jupiter! This, here, on the monitor!' He pushed himself back on his high-tech chair, revealing he'd been crouched over one of the 3D-screens. 'Look.'

Trix dragged her eyes away from the window and walked unsteadily over. The screen showed a slim woman with a Louise Brooks haircut creeping

stealthily into a well-appointed room.

'Hang on, this must be a recording. That's Tinya, isn't it?'

'Correct.'

'And that's here, on board this ship. Falsh's bedroom!'

The Doctor blinked in surprise. 'How would you know?'

'I was having a poke about myself, earlier. He's got the most incredible bed...'

'Well, Tinya wasn't there to do his laundry,' the Doctor remarked. 'She's going through his things.'

'Well, she's his public-relations exec or whatever, isn't she? Probably getting something for him.'

'Or trying to get something *from* him – though she walks away empty-handed on this occasion.' He slyly tapped his long nose. 'She thought she'd excised this evidence, you know. She rigged a glitch in the camera systems and inserted a looped image of the empty room, so Falsh would be none the wiser.'

'Crafty cow. So how did *you* find it?'

'I was looking for any incriminating footage that could help us against Falsh.' He sighed. 'There's nothing on the extant footage, so I've spent the last few hours hacking through the systems and retrieving any deleted files.'

'Make me feel guilty for bumming around sleeping and playing with Falsh's hi-fi, why don't you?' Trix watched the screen as Tinya sorted through desk drawers and computer disks. 'Well, this behaviour could explain why she got the PA to check on Halcyon's ship back at the station instead of doing it herself.'

The Doctor nodded. 'She was getting him out of the way so she could go up to Falsh's offices and snoop around there in peace!'

'Elementary, my dear Watson,' said Trix. 'So you think telling Falsh that one of his execs might be a spy will get us a free pardon?'

'Not really.'

'Me neither.'

'But like I say – it's *interesting*.' He turned off the screen, and his eyes twinkled. 'It suggests a conspiracy within a conspiracy, wouldn't you say?'

Trix put her hands on her hips. 'What did I tell you about getting involved?'

He turned and stared out of the window now like he'd just noticed the view. Against the vast cloud belts that striped Jupiter's mass, a moon was looming ominously large. It looked a lot like the Moon, except its ground was darker, its craters snowy white.

'Close now. That's Callisto,' said the Doctor. 'First observed from the Earth in 1610.'

'There you go again!'

‘Look, with some people it’s train numbers or football fixtures,’ he said grumpily, ‘with me it’s moons, OK? You should test me on the Venteuse system, sometime. It’s got over a thousand satellites, all named after different flavours of jelly bean.’

‘What are they?’

‘Well, let me see, there’s Peach Ripple, Blackberry –’

‘No, Doctor, what are *they*?’

Specks of light were drifting around Callisto like slow-mo fireflies.

‘Other spaceships,’ said the Doctor, sitting up and taking notice. ‘Lots of them. Like flies round a rotten fruit.’

‘So Callisto’s inhabited?’

‘Didn’t Halcyon mention that?’ The Doctor tutted mischievously. ‘See for yourself. Those aren’t craters. Not any more. They’re conurbations. Must be mainly industrial complexes for that level of space traffic...’

‘Could be hotels. Those ships could be full of tourists...’

He scowled. ‘No one cares about the solar system any more, remember?’

She crouched down in front of him, blocking his view. ‘Here for the fireworks! If you’re getting rid of sixty-odd satellites... it’s going to make quite a show, isn’t it?’

The Doctor’s eyes clouded over. ‘Yes, I suppose it is.’

‘Maybe Callisto’s got the best view. Front-row seats.’

‘Maybe. We’d best stay clear.’ The Doctor brought up a new screen and made some kind of course correction. ‘Those ships could belong to Falsh’s new demolition company. They might be watching out for us.’

Trix felt the ship stir as if rocked by a wave, and watched Callisto slide out of sight. ‘Maybe. Could. Might.’ She folded her arms tight about herself. ‘I wish we bloody well knew *something* for definite. Aside from the fact that we’ve made ourselves space enemies number one, that is.’

‘We know something for sure,’ murmured the Doctor, eyes glued to the data on the screen. ‘This new course intersects a fresh ion trail.’ She clutched at the proffered straw. ‘Halcyon’s?’

‘No. A smaller ship. Smaller and faster – a very different drive system, in fact.’

‘A fresh trail, you say. Recent, then.’ With a sinking feeling, Trix asked the obvious question: ‘And it leads...?’

‘Straight to Thebe.’ The Doctor fixed her with a stony stare. ‘Someone’s got here ahead of us.’

To Fitz’s surprise, and despite the angst sweeping round his mind, he quite enjoyed his time in the PadPad thinkset.

A wise man once said that that all you needed to succeed in life was a good idea – and it didn't necessarily have to be *your* idea. On that basis he'd decided to base his mental designs on some of the more mental places he'd landed up thanks to the Doctor. If Halcyon was prepared to use this thing to mess with Fitz's head, then Fitz would return the compliment. Halcyon would gasp, he would wonder... He might even throw up. But he wouldn't forget Fitz in a hurry.

He started out gently, kitting out the first room like a dwelling on Mechta – a quite literally mental place where, nevertheless, he'd been happy for a while. He made the walls and floors whitewashed concrete, added in the raffia mats, the plain worktops... then spread a stylised mural of the imposing Mechtan pyramids over one wall. It had been a good home, there. While it lasted.

The next room resolved itself in the thought cloud as a large, shadowy space. Fitz squashed a slightly sanitised version of Il-Eruk's tavern on Yquatine into its contours. That should make baldy sit up and take notice.

The shape of the next template was almost cathedral like, putting Fitz in mind of the old TARDIS control room. He decked it out in brass and blue, a proper Jules Verne cathedral, and made the console itself into an occasional table at its centre. This was actually fun!

So it went on, each room getting wilder as his confidence grew and his mind got used to the technology. His parting shot, the *coup de grâce*, was a recreation of the Council of Eight's hourglass room, a crystal chamber with shelves and shelves of the twinkling timepieces – in an unsettling shade of mauve.

'Finished,' he told Sook.

'We both are,' she said, looking at him in exhausted horror. 'You've been in there for hours –'

'I have? It seemed like just a few minutes.'

'Of course it did! It's PadPad!' She switched off the thought cloud and removed his headset. 'Where did all *that* come from?'

'Impressive, huh?'

'That's a nice word, Kreiner. So is "ugh". So is "disaster".'

Fitz winced as he sat back up. 'You don't think Halcyon will like it?' His last hopes abruptly pricked like the bubble over his head. 'Um... Could I maybe have another go with it?'

'Even if there was time – what would be the point?' Her look of horror had twisted into one of disgust. 'Hopeless, pathetic amateur. You really thought you could just waltz in and busk it, didn't you? No training in the schools, the Forms and Compass, not a shred of research – not even the basics!'

'How was I supposed to –'

‘Don’t you realise everyone here is graded alpha-plus in eight disciplines? Halcyon insists on it!’ She took some deep breaths, dearly willing herself to be calm as she removed something like a tiny plectrum from the headset and surveyed it bleakly.

He clutched her arm. ‘You could do the templates for me!’

‘I told you, the PadPad projects directly into the brain. He knows the way I think!’

‘Then couldn’t you lose that thing?’

‘He’d only make you do it over, and I’d be piling incompetence on top of incompetence!’ She glared at him, grey eyes bulging like they were going to pop. ‘I’m Halcyon’s personal assistant! Don’t you see that if anything disturbs his safely ordered little world, it’s *my* fault? Like you just turning up with no warning in the middle of a contemplation chamber! I covered for you, Kreiner. I convinced him to take you seriously, gave you the chance to save both our skins. And you...’

She turned and stalked from the room.

‘Sook, wait –’

‘We’ll talk later. Oh, how we’ll talk later.’

Fitz watched her go. Then he got up from the couch. It looked kind of fragile and he wouldn’t want it to bend under the weight of his misery.

As he stood up, he felt something hard in his shoe. Frowning, he pulled off the scruffy loafer and, holding his breath, inspected it.

After one or two shakes, the TARDIS key plopped out into his palm.

He stared at it, dumbfounded, not trusting this miracle. His spare key! The one he’d decided to keep in a super-safe place – then promptly forgotten where that place might be.

‘Shoe-reka,’ he breathed.

‘Hey, Kreiner!’ Roddle had rallied, propped himself up on his elbows. He stared over, glassy-eyed and giddy. ‘Show’s over?’

‘Well and truly,’ he grinned, new life flooding through him as he stared down at the precious key. ‘And if you could just direct me to the loading bay, you’ll see what I do for an encore!’

Chapter Seven

Thebe had loomed large in the cockpit window, looking to Trix like a giant squashed doughnut. There was quite a bite taken out of it too – a huge impact crater radiating out over almost half its barren surface.

‘Miracle it wasn’t smashed to smithereens,’ she’d remarked.

‘Aggregate body,’ the Doctor murmured, ‘like a rubble pile. Good at absorbing shocks; the trauma of impact was confined to the local area.’ He looked pensive. ‘Speaking of the local area, I hope our shields hold out.’

Trix jumped. ‘We’re not under attack, are we?’

‘Oh yes. From that.’ He gestured at Jupiter’s fat, striped face beyond Thebe. ‘At this range its magnetic field is slinging out enough radiation to kill us both in less than a second. The ship’s generating a counter-field to repel it. I only hope the base is.’

The Blazar HQ was a sloping construction, built like a barnacle within a smaller crater. The landing pad was littered with small spaceships, but one craft towered above the rest, a dull silver arrowhead. A long flexible pipe joined the ship and the building together.

‘He’s nabbed the main docking tube,’ observed the Doctor, almost scratching the paintwork of the ships either side as he squeezed into a parking spot. ‘That’s the way in the crew would use, still, we’re not proud. The ancillary port for deliveries will do us.’

And here they were. Another giant ribbed pipe had unrolled like the mother of all condoms to fit snugly over Falsh’s airlock, stiffening with artificial gravity. Trix was trailing after the Doctor as they entered the base through the tradesmen’s entrance. She glanced around at the silver ribbed walls and shivered; she felt she was walking down some metal monster’s throat. At least it wasn’t transparent, reminding her that just outside was a super-enormous planet stuffed so fat with gas and iron and energy that it spent the whole time pumping out practically everything that was bad for you – except chocolate, typically.

‘So, that ship out there,’ Trix hissed. ‘Bad guys?’

‘A deputation of fixers,’ the Doctor surmised. ‘Fixing things for Falsh Industries so that no one here can tell the truth about what really happened.’

‘But, then, if we’re too late –’

'We may be just in time,' the Doctor countered, quickening his step. 'If we hurry.'

They reached a scratched, metallic bulkhead with a grubby keypad set beside it. In the time a slurred computer voice asked them to key-in authorisation codes, the Doctor had produced the sonic screwdriver and had got them in regardless.

The lights were low but adjusted themselves to a higher level as they entered a waiting area of some kind. Trix only hoped the temperature would follow suit – it was like a freezer here. The furniture – what little there was of it – was white, lightweight and plastic. The metal walls were bare save for one; SHIPMENTS was spelled out in large glowing letters above a doorway.

'I suppose the crew loaded up supplies from here,' said the Doctor, walking through into a well-stocked storage bay and gesturing around. 'Explosives, launchers, heat spikes...'

'Come again?'

A lot of the matter out there is superchilled ice, packed with dissolved metallic salts. So the best way to collect it is to warm things up and have a jar handy.'

'Come a long way since candles and pickaxes, haven't we?' said Trix, as she took in the chunky landscape of burnished metal crates, dotted about at random like a child's discarded building blocks. 'Don't think much of this storage system.'

'Stuff's arranged in a simple grid matrix for vertical lifting and transportation. All done by robotic drones, I'd imagine.' He stared up at the flat, featureless roof where a number of large silver discs were huddling silently. 'There you go. Magnetised I should imagine. Humankind is such a lazy animal.'

'Well, I don't intend to lounge around here,' Trix announced. The hovering discs gave her the creeps.

So did the faint whining noise up ahead. A door opening.

Someone was coming.

Silently she joined the Doctor in ducking behind one of the giant crates. Pounding footsteps sounded in a bewildering chorus of echoes, as someone swift but heavy traced an awkward path through the crates. Winding nearer and nearer.

The Doctor mouthed at her: 'They know we're here!'

She followed him as he crept away from their crate, moving without hesitation, turning this way and that as the silver maze zigzagged on all around them. Behind her she could hear the weighty sounds of their pursuer, matching them for pace.

'Where are we going?' she hissed.

'I don't know,' said the Doctor.

They turned a corner and found the way blocked by another crate.

‘Answer: Not far,’ said Trix.

The heavy footsteps were getting closer. Trix made to retrace their steps but the Doctor pulled her back. ‘It’s no good,’ he said. ‘They’re too close.’

Her eyes flashed at him as she yanked her arm free of his grip. ‘So what do you suggest we do?’

He cradled both hands together. ‘Bunk up?’

She stared up at the sheer silver monolith. It had to be ten feet high. ‘You’re not serious?’

‘From the sound of their tread, our pursuer hails from a world with significantly lighter gravity,’ said the Doctor, gesturing for her to put her foot in his makeshift stirrup. ‘So let’s take advantage of that!’

Trix stepped uncertainly into his grip and felt him propel her easily upwards. She scrambled up the sheer sides of the metal crate, gasping as her nails split or bent backwards. At last her fingers gripped the top of the box. The pounding of the bogeyman’s feet was tangled up in her heartbeat as she heaved herself up on to the top of the thing.

‘Done it,’ she gasped, jubilant for a second.

But from here she could see what was chasing them. It was just a stone’s throw away. And it could see her.

It wasn’t human. It walked on two legs, had two arms, was even wearing a kind of dark spacesuit. But its skin was grey, its face was broader, the features all bunched up in the middle. Its eyes were dead-looking, fish eyes. Its ears were more like gills, flapping where its cheekbones should be. As it saw her it nodded slowly and quickened its steps.

Trix peered over the top of the crate at the Doctor. ‘It’s an alien,’ she told him. ‘It’s seen me, it knows right where we are!’

‘Run,’ the Doctor told her. ‘Run and jump. Keep to the crate-tops, out of its reach.’

A bolt of white light shot past her head. She smelt burning hair and guessed it must be her own. ‘It’s got a gun!’ She reached out her arm. ‘I’ll pull you up.’ But she had to throw herself flat against the lid of the crate as another death ray whizzed past her shoulder.

‘Make for the other end of the hall,’ he said firmly. ‘I’ll meet you there.’

Another light-beam slammed into the crate she stood upon, sent sparks shooting up from the side.

‘There!’ said the Doctor, smiling. ‘Now I have a handhold, I’ll be fine! *Move!*’

Trix looked around for the next crate within jumping distance. She’d be able to cover more ground this way, but that thing would have her in its sights. . .

She jumped, landed nimbly on the next crate. Caught another coruscating flash of light behind her.

The thing was aiming at the Doctor now, and his coat-tails had just gone up in smoke. He shrugged off his heavy velvet coat, trailed it like a bottle-green flag behind him as he took a flying jump and skidded on to the next crate, losing his footing. It was just as well – another laser beam crackled through the spot where he'd been standing.

Crossly, the Doctor balled up his smoking coat and flung it at the creature, knocking the gun from its grey, meaty hand. Then he was up again and off, bounding over the crates with Tigger-like abandon.

Getting out of range, Trix realised, figuring it was time she did just the same. She started jumping again, more hesitantly. Each time she landed, the crash and thump reverberated around the storehouse, made her think the thing was shooting again.

What was it doing?

Nauseous with exertion, legs aching and her heart pounding halfway up her throat, Trix turned and swore.

The thing wasn't firing any more. Now it held some kind of electronic dooberry in its fat fist, and was turning a dial. One of the silver discs had bobbed away from its herd in eerie silence. . .

It halted high above the Doctor. And the crate he'd just leaped on to lurched beneath his feet.

'Jump, Doctor!' she yelled.

But he was already too high up. He'd break his legs, or his neck or something. And meanwhile, the disc was towing him gently back towards the grey, ponderous creature.

The Doctor stood balanced on the giant box like a surfer riding out a wave. Then he reached in his trouser pocket and removed the sonic screwdriver, waving it above his head.

Trix bit her lip as the silver disc holding the weight of the crate in mid-air made a sudden dip. The crate dropped with it, a full five feet or so, but somehow the Doctor kept his balance. The alien hadn't worked out what he was up to; it struggled with its little remote control, no doubt thinking the fault lay there.

So it didn't see the Doctor steer his magic crate down still further – until it smacked at speed into a whole stack of the things.

The noise was deafening; a dinning domino effect took hold as each crate toppled over and slammed right into another. The alien looked up, appalled to find itself in the path of this atrocious tide of massive metal crates. It tried to run for it back out through the maze, but the wall of boxes beside it teetered and fell, crushing it beneath the jagged pile.

'Woo-hoo!' cried Trix! 'You did it, Doctor!'

But the crate wavered alone in mid-air, the silver disc bobbing mindlessly about above it.

‘Doctor?’ she called, more anxious than jubilant now.

Then she heard something behind her.

It was the creature, dragging itself back down the narrow pathways between crates, limping badly. It was injured. And she imagined it was just a little annoyed.

Trix bunched herself up, like she used to as a child when she’d just seen a particularly big spider, as the creature neared its point of closest approach, just a row of crates away. But it ignored her, heading for the exit at the back of the hall, just as the Doctor had told her to.

Where the hell was he?

The creature staggered out through the swooshing door. A great, crushing hush descended on the cavernous storehouse.

‘Doctor!’ she yelled.

‘Not so loud,’ came the voice behind her. ‘I’ve got a headache.’

She spun around. There he was, leaning against her crate, looking up at her. There was a graze on his forehead, and his shirt and waistcoat were torn, but otherwise he looked OK.

‘You’re all right!’ Trix beamed. ‘You sod! Why’d you creep up on me like that?’

‘I was trying to follow our friend,’ the Doctor admitted. ‘But my little touch of interior redesign mucked up the maze layout. I got a bit lost.’

‘Well the way back to the ship is *that* way,’ said Trix with feeling. ‘Shall we?’

‘No,’ said the Doctor. ‘We’ve got to find out what that person was up to.’

‘Person? That *thing* was trying to kill us!’

‘It didn’t come all this way just to do that, though, did it?’

Trix threw up her arms. ‘I thought we’d already worked out that Falsh wanted this place wiped out so no one could say anything?’

‘So why not simply send a couple of his security sentinels to blow the whole place up?’ said the Doctor, looking thoughtful. ‘Why send an alien assassin into the base armed with a handgun?’

‘To check no one had left the place already, I suppose. Besides, there’s no shortage of explosives in here,’ Trix pointed out. ‘Maybe he was on his way here to nuke the place when he found us, just waiting to be taken care of.’

‘Maybe,’ the Doctor agreed. ‘Would you mind coming down from there? I’m getting a crick in my neck.’

Trix scrambled down from the crate, ignoring his proffered helping hand.

‘Did you see how badly injured it was?’ he asked.

‘Limping. Didn’t look happy.’

‘Probably back off to its ship. Maybe we can catch it up and ask some questions, hmm?’ The Doctor, limping a little himself, set off briskly. With a last disparaging look at the cloud of silver discs, she followed him.

It was difficult for Tinya, going through the motions at her desk, keeping on top of her mundane responsibilities. She kept going over her encounter with the Doctor, and that woman he worked for. . . The stinging lump on the back of her head nagged at her like an injustice. Tinya was used to paying people back, but with Falsh’s ship neither traced or recovered. . .

What were those agitators planning? She didn’t like the smell of this mystery. She didn’t understand –

Tinya’s screen chimed softly. She swore as she saw who was trying to get in touch; this was the last thing she needed.

‘Yes, Piers, what is it?’ she said, as his face burst out of a pink bubble on the desk. ‘I’m busy.’

‘Tinya,’ he purred, a particularly patronising smile on his face. ‘I thought I would see how you were.’

‘I’m fine, why shouldn’t I be?’

‘You were attacked!’ said Piers, adopting a scandalised tone.

Tinya raised an eyebrow, playing for time. How could Piers know what happened in Falsh’s office, unless Falsh himself –

‘They took your shoe! Those barbarians under the desk. Interrupting us like that.’

Tinya kept all trace of relief from her face. ‘It was highly irregular,’ she agreed. ‘Interrupting an emergency symposium –’

‘Interrupting *us*,’ he said, a chiding look in his eye. ‘And they’ve run off in Falsh’s own ship, I understand.’

‘Did Falsh tell you?’ said Tinya.

‘One hears word,’ said Piers smugly.

‘Piers, I really am *very* busy –’

‘It’s how they got aboard that’s the really worrying thing. No unexpected vessels docked, no hull breaches. . .’

‘Your security people won’t find Fitz now, you know,’ the Doctor had said. ‘Our craft is there, he’ll have got inside.’

‘Security’s running the surveillance tapes, of course, but since no alarms were triggered. . .’

‘Your craft?’ she’d echoed.

‘Mmm, big blue box.’

Piers smiled smugly. ‘Do you suppose they were ghosts?’

‘If they were,’ said Tinya, ‘you wouldn’t have felt the hairier one rubbing your leg beneath the table, would you?’

'Then it was him. . . ' Piers's smile lost a little of its oily enthusiasm. 'I see. Well, in any case, it's a pity they got away.'

She raised a mocking eyebrow. 'You were hoping the intimacy might have led somewhere, perhaps?'

He affected to laugh. 'It simply seems to me somewhat unfortunate that these. . . *agitators* are aware now that we deliberately destroyed the Institute on Carme for the insurance value.'

Tinya kept her face carefully neutral. *Is that really all you think it was?*

'I mean – it's only a matter of time before the word is plastered all over a NewsSat bulletin.'

'Have you shared your fears with Falsh, Piers?'

He gave a sickly smile. 'I'm sure he's well aware of the ramifications.'

'If anyone is, he is,' Tinya agreed, her tongue nudging into her cheek. 'Good-bye, Piers. Thank you for sharing your concerns.'

'Thank you for making your position so clear, Tinya,' said Piers, affecting an unbecoming frothiness. 'Adieu.'

She quit the link and leaned back in her chair. She felt oddly uneasy.

After a while she buzzed Security on her wristpad. 'Adan? It's Tinya, any word on my new passcard? Oh, that's good, you really are so kind. Hey, I understand you're reviewing camera footage for signs of the intruders' arrival. . . '

The dead bodies were in the crew rec room. Trix looked round a bit queasily at the charred corpses, all slumped together against one wall. What was left of their faces suggested they'd been terrified when it happened.

'Shot in the legs first, then the head or chest,' the Doctor reported after a cursory examination.

'Tortured?'

'Yes. It worked its way down the line. Looks like it was trying to get them to speak first.' He tenderly closed the staring eyes of the nearest poor bastard. 'But what was he trying to get them to say?'

'Perhaps to see if they'd told anyone else about blowing up the wrong moon?'

'Seems a little tenuous to me,' said the Doctor, straightening up.

'Who cares?' Trix complained. 'I mean, in a way it's quite good for us, isn't it? If Falsh has arranged all this, it's not going to reflect well on him if it gets out, is it? He'll do whatever we want.'

'Shall we take some photographs?' the Doctor inquired acidly. 'Or perhaps drag one of the corpses back to our ship and take it to the press?'

Trix rolled her eyes. 'I'm just being practical. I know it's upsetting but you want Fitz back, don't you? You want the TARDIS back?'

'Shhh.'

'Typical, start an argument, make me out to be the bad guy and –'

'Quiet!' the Doctor hissed, crossing to the doorway. 'I heard something.'

'What?'

'Movement. Somewhere up ahead.'

Trix listened too. Just the sound of her heartbeat, of her own breathing.

'There!' he whispered, ear cocked like a spaniel. 'One... two... three, four, five.' He looked at her grimly. 'Once I caught a fish alive.'

'I'd sooner it was battered.'

With a last, unwise look at the corpses, she followed him out to see.

Chapter Eight

Fitz found Roddle a willing guide, but a useless one. He kept leading Fitz into dimly lit rooms and looking at him kind of suggestively. Fitz, in return, kept smiling nervously and saying, 'Not sure this is the one either,' before hurrying back out. Roddle would follow him out, unsteadily, and the cycle would continue.

It was so frustrating – the key felt red hot in Fitz's hand, he was itching to get inside the ship. He realised he was harbouring the pathetic hope that Trix might still be inside, oblivious to the absence of her fellow travellers, doing her hair or something. After all, time had as little meaning in the TARDIS as it did for girls in the bathroom, so combine the two. . .

'Let's rest for a moment,' said Roddle, staggering into another thinkspace and collapsing on an awkward-looking sofa.

'Let's give it a rest, shall we,' muttered Fitz. 'Roddle, we'll go through this one more time.' He spoke like he was addressing a senile elderly aunt: 'Docking bay? Where – is – docking bay?'

But Roddle had crashed out again.

'Come on,' he hissed, gently slapping the sleeping man's gaunt cheek (right, upper).

Roddle's eyes prised open with infinite effort, then snapped back shut.

His comedown wasn't due yet. But Fitz couldn't afford to hang around. By then, Halcyon would have realised that Kreiner the great artist was useless, Sook would be ready to brick him and he'd be dumped in a police cell on Callisto to rot until the end of his days.

So he'd just have to find it himself – unsupervised. It was risky – he'd probably run smack into Halcyon, or Security, or manage to fall in a whole vat of Halcytone. And then Sook would get even madder, the bricking would be more painful and prolonged, and. . .

No more than he deserved. He'd probably got the poor cow the sack as it was.

She'd be better off with him off and gone. How hard could it be to find the cargo hold, anyway? He'd managed to find his way *into* the ship from there, for God's sake. . .

Cautiously, he started exploring the rest of the *Rapier*.

* * *

Trix felt a moment's flush of fierce relief. They hadn't been trailing the fish-thing after all. Peering into some kind of control room, white and unfussy as everything else, she could see only a man in grey coveralls, his back to the door, crouched over a control panel busy with tiny bubblescreens. He had a large pink bald spot in his grey hair with a hairy mole at its centre; it looked like a big, hungover eye in the back of his head.

The Doctor cleared his throat, and the man spun round in surprise. He was maybe mid-forties, had a gaunt, determined face, his high forehead half-hidden by spidery grey hair. He yanked a metal tube awkwardly from his belt holster and waved it uncertainly between them.

'It's all right,' said the Doctor quickly, 'we're friendly. I'm the Doctor, this is Trix.'

'Where did you come from?' the man hissed. 'Everyone's dead.'

The Doctor nodded at the metal tube. 'That's a sub-space distress flare, isn't it? You're really not supposed to use those things indoors.' The Doctor was holding very, very still. 'You could blow up half the base.'

'Why are you here?' demanded the man, undeterred. The loose overalls he wore gave his name as –

'Chief Supervisor Torvin, we're glad we've found you,' said Trix officiously.

Torvin narrowed his dark eyes and pointed the tube directly at her. It looked like a light sabre might shoot out from it any second. 'Who *are* you people?'

'We're investigators,' she told him. 'Investigating the accidental demolition of Carme.'

'Accidental?' snorted Torvin. 'That was no accident. Falsh Industries sent explicit orders for the total vaporisation of that whole moon.'

Trix eyed the Doctor slyly. 'Do you have papers that prove this?'

Torvin frowned at them from beneath neatly tapering eyebrows. 'Papers?'

'Documents, then.'

His hand tightened on the tube. 'Perhaps I could see your identification?'

'Perhaps we could see yours,' Trix retorted.

Torvin clearly didn't trust either of them a millimetre. But finally he sat back down and lowered his blasting pack. Trix was slightly unsettled by the intensity of relief on the Doctor's face.

'I don't suppose it matters who you are,' Torvin muttered. His overalls hung about him loosely, lending him a wizened appearance, though he could only be in his fifties. 'Not after this.'

The Doctor crouched down beside him. 'What happened?'

'That thing came and started...' Torvin shrugged, kept his eyes down on the floor. 'I don't know what it was after. I was hiding.'

'Weren't you meant to be supervising?' asked Trix bluntly.

‘Mining operations, yes, or ensuring the crew are at their stations, but when that *thing* appeared here. . .’

‘You left them to it and got the hell out?’

The Doctor gave her a warning look and patted Torvin sympathetically on the shoulder. ‘Question is, where is that alien now?’ said the Doctor. He glanced around the equipment jammed into the room, and his eyes lit up at one particular piece of bric-a-brac. After a spot of tinkering, a section of the white wall slid back into the ceiling to reveal either a large scanner or a window overlooking the landing pad. Silently, the silver arrowhead was making its way skyward.

‘Gone,’ said the Doctor, stroking his chin. ‘Not very thorough, is it?’

‘Maybe you wounded it worse than we thought,’ said Trix. ‘Hope so.’

‘Another mystery. . .’ The Doctor’s nose had started twitching. ‘And another. What’s that smell? Putrefaction?’

Torvin looked shift. ‘So now you know where I was hiding. The waste chute.’

‘Listen, Torvin,’ said Trix. ‘I mentioned the possible existence of certain documents earlier –’

‘All in the system files here, eh?’ The Doctor was grinning through a huge bubble screen he’d conjured up.

Torvin shrugged. ‘The capabilities are there, but the crew didn’t always bother.’

‘As chief supervisor, isn’t it down to you to be sure they did bother?’ asked Trix.

‘Might I have a word, *Investigator*?’ The Doctor looked forbiddingly at her as she approached, and lowered his voice. ‘Perhaps we could tread a little more softly? Friend Torvin is more than likely in a state of shock, he’s probably feeling somewhat guilty about letting his crew die while he hid in the rubbish, and he happens to be holding a very large explosive indeed.’

‘I take your point,’ said Trix meekly.

‘Why are you so bothered about Carme, anyway?’ Torvin called over. ‘Who are you investigating for?’

‘We have reason to believe that Robart Falsh is involved in a high-reaching conspiracy,’ said Trix, crossing to join him at the bank of controls. ‘We think that there was valuable evidence on Carme he wanted destroyed.’

Torvin looked up at her, a steely keenness in his eyes. ‘Falsh?’

‘Falsh.’ She held out her hand like a stern schoolma’am for the blasting pack. ‘The same man who sends aliens to kill every possible witness.’

Torvin stared at her hand doubtfully. Then he duly handed over the silver tube. ‘You think *he* sent that monster?’

‘It makes sense,’ said Trix.

'Who's ordered this investigation into Falsh?'

'We're not at liberty to say.'

'Then why should I –'

'Torvin, is this the last datascan Falsh Industries sent to you?' The Doctor was looking intently at an image on the bubblescreen.

'When's it dated?'

'Two days ago. I can't find anything else recent, only. . . ' The Doctor turned to look at him sympathetically. 'I'm sorry, but would you mind having a look?'

Torvin got up and ambled over. 'That's Carme all right. Those figures there, see? Right mass, retrograde orbit. And that's Falsh's. . . ' He trailed off, looking at the screen.

'Falsh's what?' Trix prompted.

'Call up another Falsh scan. Should be in the same folder.'

The Doctor touched an icon and it spilled its virtual contents into the haze.

'There. You see the idents?' Torvin gestured. 'They all match because they were put through the proper channels. Some computer clerk in contracts, probably. But the Carme notice comes from a different router.'

'You can bet your life it's from some sleazy exec's desk back on the Falsh station,' said Trix, clapping her hands excitedly. 'More evidence!'

Torvin gave her a funny look.

'Trix loves her job,' the Doctor explained. 'Tell me, Torvin, what's this?'

He was pointing to something northward on the bubblescreen's image of Carme, which was somewhere between a schematic and an X-ray. It looked like a filled tooth, a big carbuncle on the little moon's surface, extending blocky roots down beneath the crust.

Torvin stared at it, blankly. 'Abandoned business park.'

'That's what the scan says, I know. But did any of your team check that for certain before the demolition?'

'Why would they do that?' snapped Torvin.

'Well, if you're going to be vaporising an entire moon, surely they'd scout it out first and –'

'You think profit margins stretch to checking out every target we're given?' Torvin looked at him derisively. 'The boys were given a job and they did it. That's all. Now they're all dead, so if you're finished, I'm getting out of here. While I still can.'

The Doctor shook his head. 'We'd rather you stayed. We still think you can help us in our enquiries.'

'Look,' shouted Torvin. 'How long do you think it will be before that alien thing comes back here with some friends to finish us off?'

'I don't think it *is* coming back,' the Doctor shouted back in sudden temper. 'It's done enough – or *had* enough, perhaps.' He closed his eyes and pressed

his palms together as if trying to calm himself. 'I'm sorry to shout. I know you've just come through a terrible ordeal. But we would value your help.'

'I value my life. I don't know how big this thing is,' said Torvin. 'Can't risk going to the authorities... But I've got friends in JoveSpace. They'll take care of me.'

'Er, Torvin,' called the Doctor.

He turned, shaking his head. 'What is it now?'

'Did you oversee the demolition of Carme?'

'No.'

'Did you view back the probe cams covering Carme's demolition?'

He folded his arms. 'That would be a waste of time.'

The Doctor gave him a puzzled smile. 'You know, I don't mean to be rude, but as chief supervisor, what is it you actually *do* supervise chiefly?'

Apart from your own welfare, thought Trix. Not that she could blame him for that.

'I wasn't on shift when Carme came under the hammer,' Torvin said calmly.

'Well, come here and enjoy the rerun. It'll help take your mind off things. Mysteries are like that, aren't they? Marvellous distractions.'

He waved an arm and the bubblescreen grew bigger, so Trix could see it clearly from across the room. 'Textbook stuff, it really is – right up until the point that the abandoned business park takes off into space.'

Torvin suddenly stiffened. 'What?'

'See for yourself.' The film of the demolition progressed frame by frame. 'The heat spikes go in – wham! Wham! Fifty of them – all different depths and latitudes, melting the ice, weakening the rock, readying Carme for vaporisation.' He jabbed a bony finger at the screen, freezing the action. 'But look here, at the base of this installation. Three small plumes of incandescence.'

Torvin shrugged. 'The start of the vaporising reaction.'

'No. That doesn't kick in for several seconds.'

Trix wandered over. 'Then what are they?'

The Doctor looked at Torvin. 'I think they're propulsion units. This business park of yours took flight like a startled pigeon, out into space.'

'That's ridiculous, said Torvin.

'“Wonderfully absurd” would be my choice of words.' The Doctor waved at the area around the business park. 'Look. This whole section of the crust and mantle fragments away...'

Trix, like Torvin, wasn't entirely convinced at first. It all happened so fast – yes, there was a flare-up of some sort beneath the building but to her untrained eye it looked like simply the hors d'oeuvre to a particularly big blowout. She flinched as the rest of Carme lit up from within, and shattered, all in the space of a second. By the time the luminance had faded, there was

nothing left of the little world but a light show, thousands of sparkling, dancing filaments of light slowly dying away into the void. You could see why people were coming in to get a good view. It was a staggering thought, to think that something so big, so solid, had been reduced to absolutely nothing, just like that.

Torvin was unmoved. 'The moon was demolished as ordered, its cells annihilated in a controlled, anti-matter particulate reaction.'

'Oh, indeed, it has ceased to be,' the Doctor agreed, 'it is an ex-moon.' He lowered his voice to a confidential level. 'But look.' He ran the footage again, paused it just as the shattering light exploded, and traced a circle around a small blob of matter in the screen. 'Enlarge by fifty.'

The blob resolved itself into a blocky building. 'There, you see? Those propulsion units allowed it to break away at a velocity high enough to clear the main mass of the moon before your clever little reaction could take hold of it.'

'It's just debris thrown clear,' Torvin insisted.

'Why would anyone do that?' asked Trix quietly. 'How many buildings, or complexes or whatever, have rockets built underneath them?'

'The incredibly important ones! The incredibly well-prepared ones!' The Doctor threw up his arms in despair. 'What's the matter with you both? Obviously Falsh is trying to destroy something truly extraordinary, something so threatening or significant it warrants going to all this trouble. It stands to reason that there will be those who are willing to go to equal lengths to preserve it.'

'Preserve it for how long?' said Torvin dourly. 'If that chunk did somehow survive destruction, it'll be spinning through space on some random trajectory. Sunwards, or out towards the outer planets – or more likely flying into Jupiter.'

'Let's see.' The Doctor started riffling his fingers through the screen, turning pages of soft light. 'We must be able to track the fragment from here, you have systems that are –'

'This place is finished,' said Torvin flatly. 'I'm taking a ship and making for an unfinished FILOC-P outside the orbit of Pasithee.'

Trix frowned. 'FILOC-P?'

'Falsh Industries Luxury Orbiting –'

'Conference Podule,' she concluded. 'Bit risky, isn't it? If Falsh is the one who set this whole –'

'You think he's likely to show up at a half-finished podule?' Torvin raised an eyebrow, and a curious smile sneaked on to his face. At that moment, Trix could see that the heavy lines etched into his forehead and around his eyes had been shaped by a life spent laughing more than worrying. 'Besides, I have friends. I can reach them from there. They'll take care of me.'

She watched him go. 'Lucky sod.'

'Got you,' said the Doctor triumphantly a few minutes later. 'That fragment's going Joveward, Torvin, just as you. . . ' He turned and looked around, baffled. 'Where did he go?'

'He's gone,' said Trix.

'A most unhelpful man,' said the Doctor vaguely.

'I almost went with him! He's got the right idea – getting out while he can.'

'We need more on Falsh if we're going to blackmail our way back to Fitz and the TARDIS,' he reminded her. 'I'll just load this evidence on to a chip and we'll be on our –'

Without warning, an earthquake bucked through the complex. About a billion-point-one on the Richter scale as far as Trix was concerned. She was pitched forwards on to her face, her bones jarring with the force of the tremor.

'What was that?' she yelled.

The Doctor picked himself up from the floor, and helped her to her feet. 'I'm not sure. A lump of rock like this can't be geologically active, so –'

The whole room seemed to roar as a further tremor knocked them to the floor. Trix landed on her back this time, winded. A huge, black, jagged split opened up in the ceiling, a cartoon monster's smile spitting dust down at her face.

'We're under attack,' she realised. 'The alien?'

'Look,' said the Doctor, pointing through the observation deck.

Resolving themselves from the endless points of light came a couple of silver spheres. But these weren't just single-minded sentinels like the ones minding Falsh's space station. They were *sponsored* sentinels – NewSystem Deconstruction was stencilled in ever-changing colours around their circumference.

'Looks like we're due for demolition.' Again, the Doctor clambered up from the ground. 'NewSystem are Blazar's successors, they're a Falsh subsidiary.'

'So he's finishing what he started?' Trix got up and staggered over to the doorway. 'That alien guy reported back, and now Falsh is bringing in the big guns?'

'Not guns.' The Doctor was up and hopping about like he needed the toilet, his injured leg either forgotten or healed by now. 'Heat spikes. They're softening us up ready for vaporisation!'

Chapter Nine

The *Rapier* was a hell of a lot bigger than Fitz had imagined; a labyrinth of spacious corridors and grand, echoing halls, really it was more like a deserted palace than a spaceship. He wondered how many people were aboard. He'd not met anyone else yet, and nor did he want to. How long before Sook found he'd wandered off? How long before the alarms sounded, and he was exposed as an imposter?

If he could just find a stairwell... The cargo hold was bound to be on the ground floor, wasn't it? But there were no stairs to be found – maybe they'd been abolished this far in the future. Using his head for a change, Fitz deduced from this that one of the endless 'thinkspace' rooms he kept passing must actually be a lift – only the buttons were doubtless so minimalist he'd overlooked them.

He hit paydirt in the end. What he'd thought was a lightswitch turned out to be a switch from which you dialled your floor, and luckily for him, it wasn't coded. So he rode the room to the bottom floor, ready to work his way right up to the top if he had to.

Of course, what he'd do once he actually found the TARDIS was a moot point. He could get inside – but then what? He couldn't actually *work* the thing. With the fluid links out of action she couldn't even work herself.

But the TARDIS was more than just a time-and-space machine. She liked him, Fitz knew that. Long ago, she had done what all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't do for Humpty Dumpty – put him back together again when one especially nasty misadventure had left him a different person. There was a bond between them. Maybe the TARDIS would help him out.

Of course, that could be entirely wishful thinking on his part.

On the ground floor he found a room whose walls glowed with Halcytone. He was close; this was where his wandering odyssey had begun. He recognised the passageway leading to the large double doors, smirked in triumph...

And found them locked.

He swore.

Then a chime sounded behind him and a voice barked out of hidden speakers. It was Halcyon.

'Sook! Your wristpad is not responding. Come to the nearest comets point,

please.’ He sounded agitated. Fitz wondered if his visions had brought on a seizure in the old boy. ‘Come at once.’

Fitz was still recovering his scattered wits when the cargo doors swished open with a speed that belied their width and size. He winced and pressed himself flat against the wall as Sook hurried out, blinking rapidly and looking extremely nervous. She was so wrapped up in her worries she didn’t notice him at all. Fitz stepped smartly into the darkened hold. Why hadn’t she had the lights on?

There was a noise from somewhere up ahead. A scuff, maybe a foot catching on something.

You’re imagining it, he told himself.

He glanced around for a lightswitch, but of course there was nothing obvious. Composing himself, he pressed on in search of the dear old blue box.

There she was!

He hurried towards her, chuckling giddily. The key slipped into the lock and turned smoothly. As the door opened he pushed in and felt the usual heady dizziness as he crossed from wooden police box to impossible interior. Everything was still and quiet, and the lights seemed a little dimmer than usual. There was a sense of quiet anticipation in the air.

‘Trix!’ he bellowed.

The lights rose just a little, but there was no other response.

‘Nobody here,’ Fitz murmured. He’d known it, really, all along. But it hurt as it hit home.

Silly as it sounded, the TARDIS seemed sad too. The console hum was a quiet keening. The steady flash of its lights and indicators marked slow, lonely time. The scanner hung dark-faced from its improbable mounting somewhere in the ceiling.

The ship must know that she’d not only lost the power of flight, she had lost her captain.

‘We’ll get him back,’ Fitz declared, a little self-consciously. ‘And we’ll get you going again. You’ll see.’

Again, no reply. Scratching his head, he turned and walked back out into the darkness of the hold.

His one pathetic hope remaining was that the scuffling sound he’d heard wasn’t, in fact, a googly-eyed monster waiting to eat him, but Trix.

Yeah, perhaps Trix had finally finished shaving her legs and gone outside – but she’d had to hide from Sook when Sook had come in, and then when *Fitz* had come in she’d thought it was maybe Sook coming back and –

And something tripped him up.

He hit the deck hard, and cried out. Before he could move, someone sat on him. A large someone, by the feel of the thighs wobbling against his lower

back. And before he could protest, he felt something dig into the back of his neck. Something like a gun barrel.

‘Don’t move,’ hissed a woman’s voice in his ear.

‘Who wants to move?’ gasped Fitz. ‘This is fun.’

Then a man’s voice, reedy and grave, started up somewhere close by. ‘Who are you?’

‘Fitz Kreiner, art student,’ he croaked. ‘I was just taking a constitutional in search of my muse, when –’

‘Kreiner! It’s him!’ hissed the female on top of him.

‘Falsh’s spy,’ said the man.

Fitz gulped. ‘What about Falsh’s pie?’

The woman leaned forwards and spoke menacingly in his ear. ‘Make out you were one of us, would you?’

‘I’m sorry,’ Fitz gasped. ‘Are you from the student union?’

‘Don’t play clever with us.’ She paused, sounded a bit lost. ‘What are we going to do with him, Gaws?’

‘You’re going to break my spine if you don’t get off me,’ whimpered Fitz. ‘No offence, love.’ He was lying on something too, that wasn’t helping; something digging in painfully to his ribs.

The man paused. ‘Get off him, Mildrid.’

The pressure on his back eased, as did the digging in his ribs. ‘Thank you,’ said Fitz weakly. ‘May I get up, now?’

‘No,’ the man instructed. ‘And no more clowning. What are you doing down here? Gathering evidence for your paymasters?’

‘That’s right,’ said Fitz, looking up at the dim blue monolith so tantalisingly out of reach. ‘I’ve got loads of evidence. Tons, in that blue box. I could show you!’

‘He thinks we’re simpletons, Gaws,’ hissed Mildrid.

‘How could I think that?’

‘We need to think this through properly,’ said Gaws. ‘You could be of great value to us, Kreiner. Get up. But no tricks.’

No, no Trix, Fitz thought. That was the problem. He pushed himself up on to his knees and panted for breath. He could see something of his captors now in the weak light; Mildrid was large and voluptuous, every yard a woman, with short dark hair. Her eyes were large and soulful – you’d expect her to be reading *Country Life* in tweeds in the saloon bar, not throwing herself on unsuspecting fugitives. The man, Gaws, looked like a strategically shaved ferret, with the weakest chin Fitz had ever seen. He looked like a stiff breeze would knock him down; probably why he operated with the divinely chunky Mildrid, who would make a dependable windbreak.

'Come on, on your feet,' she ordered. She was wielding some kind of truncheon, and actually looked dead sexy with it. 'Move!'

'All right, all right,' Fitz grumbled.

As he got up, he rubbed his bruised ribs – and suddenly realised he'd been lying on the useless gun he'd taken off Falsh's guard back on the station. Craftily, his fingers crept into his inside pocket. . .

He yanked out the weapon. 'Nobody move!' he cried in a broad Bronx accent. 'It seems the tables have turned!'

But then Mildred lashed out with her leg. She kicked the gun from his hand! It was a cool move, and left Fitz staring stupidly after the gun as it sailed off into the gloom.

'Grab him, Mildrid!' Gaws shouted.

Fitz turned on his heel and ran off. If they chased after him he could maybe lose them and double back round to the TARDIS. . .

No worries on the first part of the plan. He could hear a thunder of footsteps behind him, most of them doubtless Mildrid's. As for doubling back round – perhaps he could make them think he'd left the bay altogether. . .

But even as he approached the exit, the heavy, steel doors started to slide open. He skidded to a halt – only to find Sook standing in the doorway.

'What are *you* doing here?' she demanded, wide-eyed, baffled and cross.

'Never mind me,' he gasped, 'there are some proper loonies in there! I don't know if they came on board at Miranda, or. . .'

Sook pulled a gun from her own pocket and aimed it at his head.

Fitz grimaced. 'You know them then. Friends of yours?'

'Not exactly.' She advanced on him, the gun unwavering. 'The voice of conscience, shall we say?'

'If you like,' Fitz replied coldly, 'since you've got the gun.'

'And you, Kreiner, have either got the luck of the devil, or the talent of a prodigy, or. . .'

 She shook her head. 'I don't know. I really don't.'

'Perhaps,' said Mildrid behind him in a low, sultry voice, 'we should all sit down and have a little chat.'

'Falsh can't blow us to kingdom come!' said Trix petulantly, trying to keep up with the Doctor as he dashed for the exit, heading back the way they'd come. 'The main action wasn't meant to kick off until Halcyon's vidcast!'

'They'll pass it off as another test detonation,' said the Doctor. 'NewSystem's first. After all, plenty more rocks where Thebe came from.' Another warning rumble started up and he scowled. 'We haven't got long. We must get back to Falsh's ship before it's too late!'

'Speaking of which,' she panted as they tore through the trembling corridors, 'I thought you said Falsh's lot wouldn't want to damage it!'

'If NewSystem's supervisors are as diligent as Torvin, they probably haven't noticed *any* of the ships out there. Or they'd be taking them off for salvage.'

Another explosion, more distant this time, rumbled up from deep down inside the planetoid, tripping them as they ran. Trix was up first, helping the Doctor to his feet, then off they flew again.

They made it as far as the storehouse, and found that the tremors had hit hard. It was like a gang of giants had been playing dice – dozens of the huge metal crates had toppled over, spilled their heavy-duty contents, or rattled closer together as if huddling for safety. There was no path across to the deliveries entrance the other side – no way through to the ship.

The Doctor looked pensive. 'These supplies are ruined! I do hope Blazar had adequate insurance.'

'The disc things!' cried Trix. 'They can move the crates!'

'The alien took the remote,' the Doctor reminded her. 'It's buried in that lot somewhere!'

'Sonic screwdriver?' she yelled over another terrifying crash, thundering beneath the plastic floor.

'If I can match the frequencies...' He looked up as an ominous creaking, groaning noise started up. 'Oh, no.'

Trix swore in terror as the roof dipped down at the far end of the huge storehouse. Then it began to collapse – not in pieces, but in a single swathe of moulded plastic the size of a football pitch, a giant boot brought crashing earthward.

She and the Doctor hared back out through the exit as the enormous roof smashed down on top of the crates. The noise was like a sonic boom fed back through a planet-sized amplifier. Laying on the floor, Trix felt her ears gingerly, expecting her fingers to come away bloody.

'You're all right, Trix. Come on, we have to...' The Doctor trailed off, then turned back around to face her, beaming with joy. 'Praise be for cheap, pre-fabricated space-dwelling materials!'

Trix came to see, and marvelled in amazement.

The white plastic roof could only have been an insulating layer or something, masking off a vaulted ceiling that buzzed and sparkled with weird aurora. It had fallen in a single piece like an enormous chopping board, covering over the uneven, impassable silver landscape with broad white indifference.

They had their path across to the other side. Providing the real roof didn't follow suit. Or...

'Doctor?'

He'd started singing as they scabbled across: '*Like a bridge over crumpled orders...*'

‘Those glowing lights and stuff up there – it’s our protective shield against Jupiter’s field, right?’

‘That’s right,’ he said cheerily. ‘Charging ions and solar particles in the atmosphere to keep us safe.’

A loud, unhealthy buzzing started up, and the lights started flickering like something out of a David Lynch movie.

The Doctor quickened his step. ‘If it fails, we’re dead!’

‘I know, I know, in a second.’ From somewhere Trix found the strength to put on an extra spurt of speed, but they were running out of convenient roof. A good fifty metres of crushed crate landscape stretched jaggedly ahead between them and the doors.

‘We’ll use them as stepping stones!’ he said, like it was a sacred vow rather than a desperate last-trick-in-the-box suggestion. He leaped from the end of the roof like it was the galaxy’s biggest diving board and landed squarely on the nearest crate. From there he picked his way over a mound of disgorged equipment to the next big box, lying on its side.

Trix stepped where he stepped, followed his every move wordlessly, thoughtlessly. All she could think about was the way the lights were buzzing and sparking, the dreadful sound of massive generators running down, the way it was getting colder. The systems were failing here. The moment they did...

Her clothes ripped on sharp edges. Her shins and arms throbbed from where they’d banged against twisted metal, she had a mean stitch in her side. How did the Doctor keep up this pace? Too exhausted to scramble up the side of another mini-mountain of mining gear she tried to squeeze through a tiny gap between two crates. She couldn’t get through. She was wedged halfway. And now she could hardly breathe.

Trix started rasping for breath, slapping at the sides of the crates, furious at herself, furious at everything and everyone. People were supposed to find great strength in times of crisis, weren’t they?

The lights fizzed and dimmed to nightlight level. A sheen of frost was forming on the sides of the crate.

Christ, was this ever a crisis.

She heaved with all her strength.

And the crates fell away.

She stared at her hands, disbelievingly.

Only as the crates rose up into the air did she understand what must have happened. Or rather, who.

‘I found it!’ The Doctor waggled the little remote control in her face. ‘I’ll bet my coat’s around here too, perhaps we could –’

But she was already haring for the tradesmen's exit. The floor became a comforting concrete beneath her feet, solid and dependable as she pelted through reception.

A gash opened up beneath her like a fat black snake slithering through the stone, but the docking tube was in sight now. Swearing with every step she took, she wound up running the last few metres with a foot each side of the widening chasm. Finally, she threw herself forward on to the hard plastic ribbing of the tube, clinging to it and gasping for breath.

The Doctor yelled out behind her.

She turned to find him doing the splits, straddling the divide, and couldn't help but break out into hysterical giggles.

He flipped himself forward, one arm each side of the split, and crawled along like Spider-Man scaling a building until he could drag himself on to the tube beside her. It looked like he was giggling too.

Then his face hardened. 'We're not clear yet.'

Dragging her up, he tugged her along into a last staggering run to Falsh's ship. Their breath clouded out in steamy gasps. A rime of frost was coating the insides of the docking tube; the lighting was a grey shadow.

Then finally their destination came into sight, the airlock door obligingly open. Together they climbed into its welcoming warmth, and the Doctor shut the inner doors.

'We made it,' panted Trix.

'Not yet,' said the Doctor. 'Thebe's about to be vaporised. We have to get clear of the particle containment area!'

He pelted out of the airlock, heading for the cockpit.

Chapter Ten

‘That’s it.’

Tinya sat up in her chair triumphantly. Never mind she’d been up all night. Never mind her eyes felt like someone had poured grit into them. She had found the moment. The moment the agitators came aboard.

It seemed the Doctor hadn’t been lying to her about his craft – the big blue box.

There, in Loading Bay Two. One moment it wasn’t there, the next... with a wheezing, groaning sort of a noise... it was. Half hidden by crates, but there it was.

Security had noticed nothing. Why should they be watching a sealed loading bay? Besides, the *Polar Lights* was the only vessel berthed in that bay at the time. They’d arranged for the antique sweeteners to be delivered there, ready to be loaded aboard Halcyon’s ship when it arrived. They’d known the place was empty.

No one had any defence against a box that could appear from nowhere.

It was all really rather interesting.

The men came out first. The advance guard. The distraction tactics.

Fifteen minutes later, the woman followed.

The mastermind.

Then the box was dragged by drones into Halcyon’s ship along with everything else. Including, eventually, the first of the agitators to reveal himself. The one called Fitz, who’d seemed so perfectly stupid.

Halcyon hadn’t contacted Falsh yet, as far as she knew. Had Fitz taken off once aboard? It seemed more likely than Halcyon involving himself in anything so crude as a break-in, even if he did suspect Falsh’s motives in destroying Carme. Then again, relations had been strained between the two of them for some time...

This byzantine business was shaping up into something perfectly delicious. And, perhaps, highly profitable.

Security should be shown this tape at once. If Falsh hadn’t laid off the security chief, she’d never have been able to view it ahead of them. But the lad deputising was like putty in her hands. She smiled. One flick of her black fringe and he was ready to move mountains for her.

Security should be shown this tape at once.

Once she'd edited out the offending sequences and made it seem like that most interesting little box had been there all along.

She smiled to herself. Halcyon was clearly a dark horse. He would have to be watched very closely.

In the *Polar Lights's* airlock, a kind of awful calm drifted across Trix, even as the most violent tremor yet started up. She knew there would be nothing she could do to help the Doctor clear the vaporisation field. It was out of her hands. If they didn't make it, they didn't make it.

She lay on her back, still fighting for breath, looking up at the alien architecture of a spaceship 500 years in her own future, wondering if she would live or die.

Then slowly, slowly, the ship thrummed with power and her stomach shifted as they took off. A tear escaped her right eye, dribbled down her cheek and into her ear. She wiped it away crossly.

Trix didn't know how long she lay there, getting her breath and her wits back. At length, she got up stiffly and padded through the soft pastel walkways in her grimy kitchen overalls, found her way to the cockpit.

The lightshow through the window was breathtaking. In the epicentre, lights of every colour flashed and sparked around a dense cloud of debris. Further out, eerie ethereal glows and skeins of brightness threaded the distended belly of peach-brown Jupiter to the blackness of space.

The Doctor was sat in the pilot's chair, watching Thebe's destruction in stony silence.

'Do you think Torvin got away?' she said.

He shrugged.

'He was right about that place being finished. But, hey, what a beautiful finish.'

'Thebe was beautiful.'

'It was only a rock, Doctor.'

'A rock of ages.' The Doctor sounded husky. 'Just the very possibility of Thebe's existence inspired people to search the skies, night after night in the hope of finding her. *Voyager* found her in the end, stumbled upon her by chance. Still, she gave up her secrets so slowly over the decades, teasing and alluring, inviting so much comment and theory at her spectacle in the sky...'

'And then it was put to practical use. That was good too, wasn't it?'

He gave her a you-don't-understand-anything-puny-human look and she shrugged. She was too exhausted to argue with him over a rocky doughnut in space.

'What about this fragment of Carme you're chasing?' she asked.

‘It’s been powered into a degrading orbit around the south tropical zone. In a few weeks it’ll plunge into Jupiter and burn up.’

Trix shook her head. ‘What would anyone have to gain by turning a lump of moon into an ejector seat just so the whole thing could go up in smoke a few weeks later?’

‘To buy a little more time?’ the Doctor suggested.

‘Time to do what?’

‘I don’t know,’ he said, before performing the spaceship equivalent of stepping on the gas. ‘But I intend to find out.’

Chief Supervisor Torvin. His eyes flicked over his name badge and he gave a derisory snort. What a joke. He looked at his discarded overalls, crumpled in a heap in the little silver bathroom.

He’d survived. He’d come through. A new life would begin today.

Naked, he walked from the bathroom to the little adjoining cabin and lay on the bed. He’d set co-ordinates for the podule. It would take a little over six hours to arrive. He would take a little trip in the meantime.

He took the first of several tablets laid out on the dresser, washed it down with water, then picked up a second and waited, cradling his head in both hands.

The backs of his legs were hit first, then the back of his neck. Gratefully he drifted into a blissful, disassembling heat. The carnage and horror of the day peeled away from his mind like flesh from burning bones.

‘You?’ Fitz took a sip of his drink and stared at Sook dumbly. ‘*You* are an Old Preserver?’

‘I’m co-operating with them,’ said Sook distantly.

Mildrid smiled wickedly. ‘We wouldn’t stand a chance of stopping Halcyon without her.’

They were all sat around a crate in the cargo bay, nursing cups of excellent coffee from a dispensing machine. It seemed Gaws and Mildrid had come aboard in a sudship; these were largely automated cleaning vessels notorious for zipping out of space to give passing ships an unasked-for scrub-down – the cosmic equivalent of those annoying gits that clean your windscreen when you stop at traffic lights. Halcyon liked a clean vessel, so while the sudship went to work, Sook secretly entertained its passengers.

Fitz kept peering into the dingy distance to try to spy his own transport. All this intrigue, these local politics, they were nothing to him. He should bugger off and hide out in the TARDIS the first chance he got, work out how the hell he was going to get Trix and the Doctor back without getting snared up in this nonsense.

Except...

He found himself genuinely curious to know what was going on.

At least Sook's earlier weirdo behaviour made sense now. There was him thinking she had either a soft spot or the hots for him, when really she'd simply assumed him to be another Gaws or Mildrid.

'Falsh thought I was an agitator, as well,' mused Fitz, not sure quite how to take this typecasting.

'And now Halcyon thinks you're a genius.' Sook looked at him, her sharp features caught somewhere between incredulity and real admiration. 'His mind's still recovering from the projections. He said the computational basis of those rooms you came up with was like nothing he'd ever experienced, not in any of his studies of any of the schools.'

'Schools, schmools,' said Fitz. 'I just copied places I've been and squished them into the template.'

'You can't fake those kinds of equations,' Sook assured Gaws and Mildrid, who both wore polite *'oh really?'* expressions. She glanced back at Fitz. 'Unless you've got a computer standing in for your brain.'

Omigod, thought Fitz, grinning weakly. The TARDIS... when recreating him, she'd modelled him on the Fitz she remembered through her telepathic circuits – but at the end of the day she wasn't truly alive, not in the way he was. So some stuff she'd guessed at; some stuff she'd probably improved without even meaning to. His dreams all made sense for one thing. Plus he almost never forgot what he'd come into a room to fetch, which back on Earth had used to drive him crazy.

And clearly, unbeknown to him, his thoughts now had a deeper structural underpinning which machines like a PadPad could recognise and appreciate. The grin became a little more concrete. He'd always resisted change, but sometimes... he guessed it could be good.

'So you're well in favour with Halcyon,' said Gaws. 'That must suit your own purposes very well, Kreiner.'

'Well, it is what you came here to do,' said Mildrid brightly, 'isn't it?'

Sook was watching him closely. 'But on whose authority? Are you a Falsh agent? Sent to keep tabs on us?'

'Would I admit it if I was?' Fitz pointed out. 'Not that I am, obviously.'

'Then who *do* you work for?' asked Gaws.

Everyone was watching him like he'd just come out of a coma, waiting eagerly to hear his first words. Certainly, now they knew Fitz was in favour, Gaws and Mildrid were taking an altogether friendlier interest in him. They thought he could be of use to them, he supposed. Well, he'd just play it cool and consider his options.

‘Enough about me,’ he said airily. ‘How are you planning to get at Halcyon and Falsh, then?’

‘Halcyon is asleep now, isn’t he, dear?’ said Mildrid worriedly.

Sook nodded. ‘He won’t rise till seven.’

‘We’re going to stage a stunt,’ said Gaws. ‘Cause maximum disruption. Blow his vidcast out of the water.’

Fitz looked curiously at Sook. ‘You’re letting this happen?’

‘We couldn’t do it without her,’ said Mildrid. ‘Sook’s been leaking information to us about his activities for over a year now, allowed us to get protesters to key spots, send out newsblasts. . .’

Gaws puffed out his measly chest. ‘Do you realise we ferried eight thousand agitators out by cargo thruster to save the Oort Cloud?’

‘The what?’

‘Big bunch of rocks at the edge of the solar system,’ said Sook distantly. ‘Where long-term comets come from.’

‘And did you save this cloud?’

‘Well, no,’ Mildrid admitted.

‘Halcyon and Falsh had arranged tow fleets,’ said Gaws bitterly. ‘Captured each rock in a gravity field and dragged them out to the frontiers. *Sold* them! To the Kilomons, Draconians, pretty much anyone.’

‘Who kept the cash?’ wondered Fitz.

‘After deduction of operational expenses and a nominal fee for both Falsh and Halcyon, EarthCentral pocketed the lot,’ said Sook. ‘Helped fund expansion.’

‘Pieces of Earth’s heritage, flogged off to her rivals, her enemies. . .’ Gaws took a disconsolate swig of coffee. ‘Not right. Not right at all.’

Fitz supposed it was like Japanese millionaires buying up old English castles and shipping them out stone by stone. ‘But will anyone miss this cloud? I mean, if it’s full of rocks. . .’

‘Like your head!’ Mildrid chided. ‘The Oort Cloud was once pure conjecture, a holy grail of science and astronomy. Then it was discovered. . . Then the probes went. . . Then the *humans* went. . .’

‘Yes, they went there all right.’ Gaws took up the tirade, which was probably a set text in the old preserver handbook. ‘First they mined it out. Then the first colonists used it as a stopping-off point on the long way out to the stars. When the long-haul ion drives came in, its strategic value was ended.’

‘And it became a hazard to traffic,’ Sook added. Gaws glared at her. ‘Well, it did!’

‘It’s senseless, pointless destruction,’ said Gaws, his face turning meaner and grayer. ‘But it’s so trendy, isn’t it? Halcyon is the President’s darling, so of course everything he does is lapped up and fêted and celebrated all over

the Empire. They'll be tuning in in their billions to see him strip Jupiter bare, rushing out to buy the holovids. . . ' By now his moustache was bristling like it was about to take off from his face. 'It's purely about egos!'

'And being trendy,' Fitz reminded him.

'Halcyon showing the Empire what a big man he is,' Gaws railed on, 'demonstrating his mastery over the elements!'

Sook sighed, an I-wish-I-could-let-this-lie-but-you're-so-wrong-I-can't sort of sigh. 'None of the sites are of cultural importance,' she said wearily. 'The demolition notices were posted on every satellite relay -'

'How could you debase your craft this way, Sook?' said Mildrid, tutting like a Christian to a fallen woman.

'And so we come to the point of my being here.' Sook gave Fitz a sour look. 'I used to be one of Halcyon's teachers in Feng Shui.'

Fitz gave her a puzzled smile. 'You *taught* him?'

'Yes.' She rubbed her eyes like she was tired. 'I taught him corrective, constructive and predictive formula in the Xuan Kong, the Xuan Kong Fey Xing, the sixty-four hexagons method. . . '

'Those disciplines are thousands of years old,' chimed Mildrid.

'So how'd you become the hired help?' Fitz asked.

'Come on,' said Sook. 'I don't have to spell it out to you, do I?'

'The money,' said Gaws bitterly.

'No, it *wasn't* just the money.' She glared at him like a rebellious daughter. 'It was the opportunity. I agreed to work with him because of what I knew I could achieve through him.' She turned back to Fitz. 'Halcyon popularised Feng Shui, if you like. He brought his own interpretation to the philosophy, adapted it and created a new spin which caught the public imagination.'

'New spin, indeed.' Mildrid turned up her nose like there was a turd on her lip. Fitz imagined the word 'new' was one she found generally upsetting.

'But Feng Shui concerns the rearrangement of rooms or buildings,' Gaws protested, 'even conurbations at a push. But to rearrange the *solar system*? To treat its priceless jewels as mere ornaments, furniture!'

'Halcyon has worked to widen the scope of the equations for the celestial environment,' said Sook. 'He believes in what he's doing!'

'That devil took your teachings and twisted them round and about!' Gaws insisted. 'The very celestial objects that influenced the classical architects of the KanYu are being. . . tampered with. Reworked. Altered.' He leaned towards her, his weasly face even uglier in the throes of his passion. 'He has betrayed your beloved philosophy.'

'He should have stuck to making novelty paint,' muttered Mildrid, lemon-lipped.

Sook said nothing, eyes downcast.

‘And that’s why you’re helping the Old Preservers?’ asked Fitz quietly. She nodded.

A disconsolate silence settled over the tea party.

‘Well, in any case,’ Gaws added, ‘we’re saying no more about our plans until you, Kreiner, tell us about yours.’

‘Mine?’

The moustachioed agitator nodded. ‘You’ve gone to great lengths to get close to Halcyon. Why?’

‘And you practically begged me to take you back to Falsh,’ added Sook. ‘Why? You implied that Falsh had deliberately destroyed Carme.’

‘It wasn’t an accident?’ gasped Mildrid.

‘It was covering up something dirty.’ Fitz straightened in his chair, drained the dregs of his coffee. ‘I’m a private investigator, see. Part of a triad working on the Falsh-Halcyon case. My friends and me, we infiltrated Falsh’s HQ. . .’

Gaws and Mildrid gave a mutual gasp of admiration.

‘So that was how you found your way here,’ breathed Sook. ‘From the station!’

‘We were uncovering some pretty shocking stuff, but –’

‘How did you infiltrate Falsh’s HQ?’ Sook wanted to know. ‘Wait, I get it. . .’ She looked at him, keenly. ‘You knew Falsh was shipping all these valuables to his station. You also knew he doesn’t know the first thing about art. So somehow you managed to get your blue box on board Falsh’s cargo thruster with the other antiques, and you all hid inside it.’

Gaws smiled appreciatively. ‘Getting yourselves safe passage direct to a loading bay. And knowing you’d have safe passage out again once you were loaded on to Halcyon’s ship.’

‘I see you’ve found me out,’ said Fitz. He was enjoying this.

‘Clever, Kreiner,’ said Sook. ‘I’ll give you that. Except things went wrong, didn’t they?’

Fitz sighed. ‘Things kind of blew up in our faces. I had to leave my buddies stranded there. I’ve got to get back to them.’

Mildrid was checking her watch, a red digital affair. ‘And we must get back to the sudship, Gaws. The rinse cycle will be finishing shortly.’ She looked at Sook. ‘You’ll pay our usual fee for the cleaning?’

Sook sighed. ‘How else could I maintain my cover?’

Gaws sighed too. ‘And how else could Old Preservers cover their administration costs?’

But Mildrid – perhaps self-conscious about her sighs – was ignoring them both and frowning at Fitz. ‘This “shocking stuff” you uncovered. Do you and your friends know what was hidden on Carme? What Falsh was so desperate to keep hidden?’

Fitz turned a brave smile on her. 'If I know my buddies, wherever they are – they're working on it.'

Chapter Eleven

‘I sense a pattern developing,’ said Trix, as she surveyed the corpses.

The Doctor had steered their stolen ship to intercept the fabled Lost Chunk of Carme. It was a surreal sight; just as soil clings to an uprooted weed, red-brown rock hung beneath the bulk of the business park. There was barely enough space to land there, and no helpful docking tube this time. They had to wear spacesuits, thick and bulky, generating their own magnetic field; there were four on board for emergency use, but none of them really fitted Trix. She looked rumpled and crumpled, a Michelin Man gone to seed.

There had to be an easier way to get the TARDIS back.

She would never forget the journey across to this high-tech castle, with bright black space spread behind her and the terrifying mass of Jupiter dead ahead. The industrial park itself was a vast trelliswork of red metal and white plastic, and although just a stone’s throw away, it took an age, to get there. The suit was walking by itself, shuffling her along with minute steps.

‘No centre of gravity on this tiny chunk,’ said the Doctor, ‘and indeed, very little gravity at all. Take a single step forwards, you could land up half a mile to your left.’

‘There is no half a mile to my left.’

‘That’s why the suit computes the walking.’

Put that way, she supposed it made sense. She endured the ride, vertigo clawing at her senses, desperate to get inside the place so she could shut out the insane horizon of pastel stripes and stars.

And of course, once inside and back in control of her spacesuit, she wished she was right back out on the minuscule surface again; such was the trade-off between weak gravity and weak stomach. The moment the Doctor had got them through the airlock and into the dark main building, they’d found the corpses.

The powerful torches in their suit helmets picked out the bodies in uneasy glimpses. Ripped and bloody uniforms. Gashed flesh rimed with frost. Some of the corpses were piled up against the main doors, like they’d been trying to get out. Others were lying at their feet as if trying to pull them back.

The Doctor located some kind of emergency power supply and soon a soft fluorescence filled the grisly reception area. As they walked through into the next section – some sort of vast, open-plan windowless laboratory – they

could see more mauled bodies, piled in groups of three or four, the limbs intertwined, or scattered under metal desks.

‘Did –’ The sound of her own voice crackling through her suit’s speakers made Trix jump – ‘Did that alien fish-thing do this?’

The Doctor was crouching over a huddle of bodies. ‘If it did, it didn’t use its gun.’

‘Then what?’

‘Anything that came to hand. Equipment stands. Table legs. Glass beakers...’ He rose up, and she saw him shake his head sadly through his helmet. ‘From the position of these corpses, they were herded into groups.’

‘By what?’

‘Killers,’ he said simply. ‘Either something got in...’

‘Or something got out? Out of control.’ A shiver tingled along Trix’s spine as she stared around at the carnage. ‘An experiment, maybe? What is this place? I mean, I can see it’s a lab, but...’

‘Let’s find out.’ The Doctor crossed to a desk crowded with clutter and unearthed a keyboard.

‘Can I take off this helmet?’

‘Safest to leave it on. This place clearly generates its own gravity, and there’s probably still air, but I don’t know if the shields are functional.’ He called up a bubblescreen, but its light was sickly, the sphere couldn’t seem to form fully. He tried another keyboard close by. The sphere formed weakly, but leaked colour in a hazy vortex and then died. ‘Clearly, the computer systems aren’t.’

‘Perhaps they were damaged when this place ripped away?’ suggested Trix.

‘No. Central data store’s been wiped. And judging by the damage to these terminals, in a distinct hurry.’

‘Falsh?’

‘Well, I suppose he’d stand to benefit.’

He wandered off, casually inspecting bits of equipment, pressing things, peering at read-outs, like this was Vegas and he was playing the slots. Trix sighed. ‘You just fart around like there’s all the time in the world,’ she muttered, wishing she could take off her helmet and rub her temples. ‘I’ve got a splitting headache.’

‘Falsh has some painkillers on board the ship.’

‘I’m not in a hurry to make *that* journey again.’ Trix saw a doorway in the far wall at the end of a long gangway between workstations and headed off to investigate. Her space boots crunched in icy puddles of blood as she stepped over more bodies, frozen together into sick sculptures.

There was a nameplate on the locked door. ‘Arnauld Klimt,’ she read, ‘Institute Director. Hey, Doctor! I need a lockbreaker, can you oblige?’

He crossed the big room to join her, and went to work on the door with the sonic screwdriver. It proved stubborn. Trix looked around as she waited, uneasy and apprehensive in the charnel atmosphere.

‘Finally,’ the Doctor grunted as the door slid petulantly open.

It was just another drab office: bare white plastic walls, a desk scattered with little white tablets, a computer – and a corpse in one corner, sprawled on its front. Above it hung a large glass cylinder which, like a futuristic flue, stretched into the ceiling.

‘I wonder what *that’s* for,’ said the Doctor staring up at it. ‘A kind of rungless ladder? Cushioned air?’

Trix gingerly approached the corpse. ‘Do you think this guy locked himself in? Or was he shut inside by the others?’

‘How should I know?’ The Doctor patted her on the helmet. ‘But that’s good analytical thinking.’

‘Gee, thanks!’ she said with exaggerated pleasure, but the sarcasm was lost on him as he wandered over to inspect the computer. This one had a little more life to it, its bubble pale but holding its form.

‘I wonder...’ He started muttering under his breath as he fiddled about, but Trix could hear every single word loud in her ears. That was the trouble with these spacesuits: the microphones were so sensitive it was a wonder they didn’t transmit your inner monologues to everyone in the area.

Warily, she crouched beside the corpse, half afraid it might roll over and bite her. It was a man, but his body wasn’t rolling anywhere. Blood had pooled from the head, freezing it to the floor like glue.

Giving up on trying to turn him, Trix tugged at his cream jacket for signs of ID. Once she’d wrestled it off she found a name branded on to the chest like a logo. ‘It’s the director, Klimt,’ she reported.

‘Is it now?’ The Doctor seemed intent on something in his bubble.

‘He’s not been gouged to bits like the people out there, though. From the look of things, he fell.’

‘Mmm.’

‘Fell quite a way. But from where?’ She stood up underneath the cylinder. Then, with a yelp, she was sucked up it like dirt at the business end of a Dyson.

‘Trix!’ The Doctor’s yell almost deafened her through the helmet’s loud-speakers.

But she had already come to a sudden yet gentle halt. She stepped out, shaking, through a hatch in the glass cylinder and stumbled on to a darkened gantry. ‘Doctor?’ she called. ‘I’m all right, it’s just an express lift. I’m in some sort of viewing gallery. Quite a view.’

Once it must have been a vast lab, far bigger than the one they’d just crossed through. Now it was a burnt-out shell. The silver discs sat in familiar clusters

up near the flat ceiling, giving Trix the creeps and a touch of déjà vu. All they needed now was for old fish-face to come striding through, gun at the ready...

The Doctor appeared at the top of the tube. 'Compressed air chute,' he said thoughtfully, squeezing through the hatch in his bulky spacesuit to join her. 'Must be a reason for the speed of ascent... Dampening particles in the air, perhaps? Effective decontamination in moments...'

'Makes sense,' she said distantly. From the futuristic facemasks on the piled-high corpses, this was clearly once a sterile area. Half the lights were broken or flickering, so it was hard to see where charring stopped and shadows began. Up near the ceiling were patches of warm, unearthly colour, glowing like embers – fibreoptics, she supposed, leaking energy like the holospheres as the lab slowly froze over.

'This must be a testing area,' said the Doctor.

'For what? What do they *do* here?'

A long pause, a heavy sigh. 'From some of the key topic names I unearthed – range, focus, yield...'

'They were testing weapons?'

'Destructive capability...'

'They were testing weapons.'

'It seems probable.' The Doctor gestured to what looked like miniature bank vaults lining the room. 'You see those secure chambers? For containing something unspeakably hazardous, I shouldn't wonder.' A succession of holospheres feebly inflated as he waved a hand over some sensors in the gantry wall. 'And there you go. Camera links. These must have offered the inside view to any observers.'

'Dead now,' Trix noted. 'Like everyone else.'

'I imagine Mr Arnauld Klimt would come up here to oversee his staffs efforts. Perhaps with VIP guests, anxious to know how the work was going.'

'And what happened – something went wrong? The weapon went off early and they all died?'

'Perhaps,' agreed the Doctor. 'Or perhaps the weapon, once perfected, was removed, and everyone connected with it killed so the work could never be replicated.'

'But we'll never know for sure,' sighed Trix, 'because all the evidence has been completely trashed.'

'Well... not *completely*.' He smiled slyly. 'A data bomb in the network wiped the files far more effectively than Tinya managed on the *Polar Lights*, but there were a few scraps extant. And in the absence of any other leads I trawled through for any mention of Falsh, and bingo.'

'Oh? And how many mentions of bingo were there?'

He looked at her gravely.

‘Sorry. Well?’

‘Falsh’s name was a match. He must have involvement here.’

‘That’s all you know?’

The Doctor shrugged. ‘I could only restore fragments, and most of those seem to be encrypted. But he seems somewhat anxious about an “investment” in one memorandum. . .’

‘Ha!’ said Trix. This was more like it. ‘So he’s funding this place!’

‘It’s possible.’ The Doctor sighed. ‘I’ll take copies and see if the ship’s computers can make anything of them.’ He flicked off the sickly holospheres. ‘It’s probably the usual thing: Falsh secretly creating the ultimate weapon, breaking a thousand military treaties, blah blah blah. . .’

‘You know,’ said Trix, ‘I can understand Falsh wanting to nuke this place to hide the evidence, especially if he’s got what he wanted and it’s all very naughty. . . But why would Falsh go to the trouble of wiping out everyone here *before* he blows them up along with the rest of Carme?’

The Doctor considered. ‘Certainly he made no mention to his executives of taking action prior to Carme’s “accidental” demolition.’

‘Then again,’ Trix realised, ‘if he *was* funding this place, he’d know about the way it could hit the ejector seat if it came under attack, wouldn’t he? So if he wanted to make off with the weapon and cover all tracks, he’d *have* to be certain everyone was dead before he blew up Carme. You know, to be sure no one got away to blab about it.’

‘Except. . .’

‘Except what?’

The Doctor smiled faintly. ‘He *did* blow up Carme – and this place *did* take off, whether or not everyone was dead at the time.’

‘We saw its rockets start up just ahead of the explosion,’ Trix remembered. ‘Could that have been an automatic defence thingie? You know, triggered by the shockwaves of those heat prongs being fired into the heart of Carme?’

‘It could well have been,’ said the Doctor. ‘Either that or someone saw what was coming and hit the eject just ahead of the big explosion.’

‘In which case, where is that someone now?’ Trix looked around, a little spooked. ‘And did they survive whatever happened here?’

‘Or did they cause it?’

They mused on this in silence for a few seconds before they heard the noise. A metallic scuffling and scraping.

They both turned. It sounded like someone, or something, was dragging itself along the shadowy far side of the gantry.

The Doctor placed himself in front of Trix. ‘Who’s there?’

Trix indignantly stepped out from behind him and took a few bold steps into the halfflight. ‘Yes, who’s there?’

The Doctor squeezed past her, squaring up to the shadows himself. ‘Show yourself!’

The scuffling and scraping grew faster, more urgent, as whatever it was scuttled out from the freezing darkness.

It was six o’clock in the morning, and the station lights would soon be rising in simulation of the old Earth dawn. Falsh still sat at his desk, unhappy and alone. He didn’t like missing his sleep. It was a sign of age, but he didn’t care. As a kid he’d always imagined that when he was really stinking rich, he would never sleep at night, only play. But he had come to prize sleep now as one of life’s luxuries.

Getting old, yes. And he’d like to get older.

While the rest of his executives retired to their luxury podules and slept in comfort, he had been awake here. Because the location of his own luxury podule was known to the Agent. And Falsh didn’t want a face-to-face meeting. Not until he was properly prepared. The boys at the lab had prepared what he needed. It was being installed today. Later, he would test it.

He jumped at the sound of the computer chime. Damn it, why so nervous? ‘I am bigger than this situation,’ he said quietly. ‘I am in control of my fear.’

Falsh remembered the golden days when spouting that motivational crap to his reflection had actually made a difference.

The computer chimed again.

‘What is it?’

‘Incoming vessel detected,’ the computer declared in its supposedly slinky cybernetic drawl. ‘Transmitting recognition codes. Codes Falsh personal. Codes accepted.’

Falsh whirled around, stared accusingly at his magnificent king-of-the-castle view. But, as ever, he couldn’t tell stars from ships from distant moons.

He couldn’t have that stinking thing dock here and come aboard. With security increased, someone might see this time... And this business was messy enough already.

He ran from his office. He wasn’t unfit, he worked out a little. Panting, he called for the elevator. It took him down and down and down to the lowest level, where he headed for the dock.

There were two guards posted at the boarding hatch. Falsh composed himself, dried his clammy hands on his tunic, and marched up to the doors of his new ship. They stood aside without question.

The layout was identical to the *Polar Lights*, and he soon found his way to the cockpit. All systems had been left ready to go – so he went. Impulse power

only, but enough to get him clear of the station and its security.

‘Message incoming, Falsh,’ purred the computer.

Falsh waited a few moments before calling up the screen. Like he was relaxed about it. Then he called up the sphere.

The Agent’s loathsome face appeared, fat and grey, its dead fish-eyes staring. ‘Are you running from us, Falsh?’ it asked softly, its voice like worms curling around old bones.

‘I was headed home,’ said Falsh calmly. The Agent’s gill-ears quivered with each syllable as it processed his words; he hated that. ‘It’s been a long night.’

‘Indeed.’ The Agent stared on, unsettlingly still. ‘We want what you promised us, Falsh. We have invested heavily. We want a return.’

‘You think I’m happy about losing out on this deal?’ Falsh allowed a little anger to creep into his tone. ‘You think I *wanted* Carme blown to pieces?’

‘Yes,’ replied the Agent with unsettling calm. ‘I discussed the situation with the Blazar crew on Thebe. They all insisted the order for its destruction had come directly from you.’

‘Lies,’ said Falsh flatly. ‘Trying to cover up their own incompetence.’

‘Was it incompetence that prompted NewSystem Deconstruction to destroy Thebe soon afterwards? An attempt to destroy further evidence of your treachery?’

Falsh held himself still and straight, trying to mirror the Agent’s own body language. ‘I resent and refute your allegation.’

A little smile seemed to hook up the ends of its tiny mouth. ‘Others came looking on Thebe.’

‘What?’

‘A male and a female. They came in your ship.’

Somehow, Falsh kept his face neutral. ‘They’re my agents. I sent them to investigate Blazar because, like you, I was furious at their incompetence.’

‘In your own, personal ship.’

‘Yes. It is my own personal business, after all.’ He cleared his throat. ‘My executives know nothing of this deal – you know that.’

‘I thought perhaps they too were investors. Acting on behalf of another power.’ The Agent was still smiling, and now it nodded. ‘I thought perhaps you had sought to sell this weapon to them too, Falsh. And that, like me, they did not believe your lies about Carme’s accidental destruction.’

‘For heaven’s sake –’

‘I imagined they had taken your ship against your will. Being human in appearance they could investigate more subtly than I.’ It held out its hands. ‘Whereas I must resort to force.’

Falsh licked his dry lips. ‘Did you kill them?’

‘Have they not reported back to you, Falsh?’ He snorted. ‘Then perhaps you did not tell them that NewSystem Deconstruction had been ordered to destroy Thebe. How negligent of you.’

‘Now listen, I invested heavily in that institute –’

‘As did we.’ A sickly yellow glint had come into its dead eyes. ‘And now its work is successfully concluded, you have a weapon you plan to sell for a higher price than you agreed with us – while we have nothing.’

Falsh brought the full force of his gaze to bear, a look that had drawn tears from even the cockiest execs. ‘If you are correct, and I do have this weapon,’ he said quietly. ‘Perhaps you should be conducting this conversation with a little more respect.’

The Agent regarded him coldly, but said nothing.

‘We shall meet in person,’ Falsh told him. ‘I have evidence that proves there is no conspiracy against you. I promise you, you shall be satisfied I am telling the truth.’

‘Very well,’ hissed the Agent. ‘Where can we meet?’.

Falsh pretended to consider. ‘There is a FILOC-P under construction outside JoveSpace. I’ll have the workers sent to Callisto to enjoy the demolition display tomorrow. The podule will be empty, and adequate for our purposes.’

‘I shall be prepared for treachery, Falsh,’ the Agent warned him. ‘And remember, my masters will be awaiting the outcome of our meeting with some anticipation.’

Once the Agent had uploaded the co-ordinates and killed the conversation, Falsh told the ship’s computer to steer him back to the station.

The man and the woman. Two of the agitators, at least. First they’d breezed straight into the heart of his Empire, now they had been snooping around on Thebe – and using his own ship to get there! What did they know, who was running them...?

But from what the Agent had said, they must surely be dead now.

Unsolved mysteries Falsh could live with. But no one must ever know the truth of what was created at the Institute.

Chapter Twelve

Trix felt her hackles rise as she caught a glimpse of movement along the gantry, about ten metres away. Scuffling, scraping, breathing hoarsely, the creature. . .

What the hell?

She stared in disbelief as a bizarre animal, looking like a fat bald turkey with bloated pig legs and a cow's rump, shambled into view. The parson's nose marked the spot where the head should've been.

'It's a chiggock!' The Doctor crouched down as if to meet it on its own level. 'Poor thing. Its back legs are broken.'

'I've served up one of those things in a salad!' said Trix. 'Where's its head – oh no! It's never shoved up its –'

'It doesn't have a head,' the Doctor said darkly. 'Just a breathing hole. It wasn't bred to look, or hear, or sense anything at all. It's a foodthing, alive only in the most technical sense.'

'So how come it's heading our way?'

'There must be neurons of some sort to keep the thing growing. Motor reflexes controlled from somewhere in its body –'

'No, I mean, if it can't sense anything, how does it know we're here?'

'It doesn't,' said the Doctor. 'It's just –'

The chiggock broke into a desperate limp and threw itself at him. The Doctor toppled over in surprise and the bizarre creature clambered up on top of him. He wrestled with it, but it was a heavy, meat-packed animal and he was hampered in the confined space of the walkway. For a few seconds, Trix was struck dumb by the sheer weirdness of the assault, unsure whether to laugh or scream.

'Help me, then!' complained the Doctor, loud and cross in her ears.

Suddenly the thing started bringing down its front trotters on the Doctor's visor, as if trying to break the glass.

OK, this had gone beyond a joke. She shoved at the creature and rolled it away. Its broken legs cracked nastily as it fell backwards. But moments later it was coming at them again.

The Doctor scrabbled quickly up. 'What was all *that* about!' he complained. 'I was sticking up for you!'

'Come on,' said Trix, seriously weirded out. 'If it wasn't brought on side by your touching compassion, what's it going to do when it finds out I carved up

its mother back at Falsh's station?

They backed away. The chiggock was still coming for them. As Trix reached the edge of the chute, a thought struck her. 'Doctor! We found Klimt at the bottom of this chute.' She leaned in through the hatchway, but no air rushed up to meet her, and no force seemed to be controlling her descent beyond gravity. 'Oh great! The chute's not working!'

The Doctor thrust her aside, peering about the chute himself. 'Oh dear.'

'Can you fix it?'

'No. Powerlines must be fractured on this level. That's why the lighting's so erratic. Coming up is one thing, but getting back down...'

The chiggock was getting closer. Then it paused, as if watching them with creepy imaginary eyes. She shivered.

'In our suits we're bulkier than Klimt was. We should be able to brace ourselves between the sides of the chute and work our way down gradually.'

'And what about *that*?'

The chiggock had started its advance again. The Doctor rushed swiftly forwards and grabbed hold of it. It kicked up its legs and struggled indignantly, like a bizarre maiden defending her honour in the arms of a brute. The Doctor's gasps and grunts tore through Trix's ears as he wrestled with the animal and finally managed to overturn it. It lay on its back, rocking from side to side and kicking its two working legs. The others just twitched, bloody and useless.

'Come on, quick,' panted the Doctor. He launched himself into the chute like a big silvery spider climbing down the waterspout. Gingerly, with her back pressed up against the glass, and her feet splayed against the opposite side, Trix tried to copy his swift, shunting movements. But the thought of Arnaud Klimt's frozen, bloodied corpse at the bottom of the chute kept slowing her down. Of course, if she slipped now the Doctor would give her a softer landing, but if she broke his neck it wouldn't exactly improve her chances of long-term survival. How far down was it now? She glanced up, hoping to gauge the height.

'Oh God.' Above her, at the top of the chute, a turkey's arse came into view. A fat leg tested the freezing air.

'What is it?' the Doctor's voice came crackling in her ears.

And then came the crackling-in-training.

Trix shrieked as the animal launched itself into the chute, braced herself. It used her as a safety net, landed in her lap. Then it was trampling its working legs into her ribs, nuzzling into her armpit. She slipped and slithered a short way down the shaft, barely able to support their combined weight. What if this thing tore a hole in her spacesuit? How would she get back?

'Drop down, Trix!' the Doctor yelled. 'I'm waiting!'

A trotter scratched against her helmet visor. She twisted around, trying to dislodge it. The chiggock scabbled at her but couldn't hold on. Finally it fell away, legs still kicking, landing with a heavy crunch.

Body trembling, breath shaky Trix determinedly worked her way down to the bottom of the chute. The Doctor helped her out.

She looked at the chiggock, lying on its front, legs splayed, beside Klimt's body.

The Doctor sighed. 'I couldn't save it.'

'Save it?' said Trix shakily. She forced a smile. 'That's the bloody secret weapon, that is! What the hell got into it?'

'Traumatised by whatever happened here?' the Doctor wondered.

'If it had this effect on an animal with no brain, then the poor bastards who worked here are better off dead,' Trix declared.

The Doctor looked pensive. 'Well, I'll just add these fragments to our growing stock of evidence against Falsh, then I think we should be on our way. Our fuel's almost critically low, we can't afford to burn it all up escaping Jove's gravity.'

'Doctor... ' She grabbed hold of his wrist. 'Do you think Falsh has got his hands on whatever they were building here?'

'I think somebody has,' he replied. 'The question is... what are they going to do with it?'

Trix waited for him to finish, watching the frost thicken on the plastic walls, the broken glass windows, the bloodstained floor. The heaps of bodies outside.

She didn't look back at Klimt or the chiggock when it was time to go.

But she did take Klimt's jacket.

On the long, slow autowalk back to the *Polar Lights*, she draped it over her helmet so she didn't have to see another goddamned star or another oh-so-bloody-awesome view of Jupiter. She wished Halcyon would blow the whole lot sky-high.

In her dark little world, shuffling along at a snail's pace, she grew crosser and crosser with herself for imagining that ridiculous chiggock was behind her, somehow trailing along on its shattered legs.

Tinya was in the Hub, thanking the new young security chief for his kindness and discretion, when she saw Falsh leaving on one of the bubblecams. She cut things short, said she'd see him sometime, adjusted her clothes and made tracks for Falsh's office.

Her beloved Director had been in a hurry. He hadn't locked up behind him. And at this hour of the morning, who would he be expecting to be around?

Not sure how long she had, she began to search his records. She'd been given clues what to look for, and trained in the technique. And while Falsh

had clandestine meetings in his ship, he didn't keep any of the details there; she knew that for a fact, she'd turned the *Polar Lights* upside down searching for them. Not that anyone would be able to tell. . .

With a low, ominous chime from the computer, she broke another protocol and prised open some files. The bubble buzzed and lost colour, but the detail was sharp enough. Razor sharp.

Here it all was.

She licked her lips. 'Got you.'

Fitz woke up and wondered where the hell he was. Bare blue walls, a stone floor, a weird wiry mobile in the ceiling. . . Arty but unfriendly.

Ping!

It was his very own room on board Halcyon's ship.

After Gaws and Mildrid had pushed off to plan whatever stunts they were up to, Sook explained that Halcyon wished to see him first thing in the morning.

'Then he's a brave man,' said Fitz, 'as anyone who's ever woken up next to me will testify.'

She gave him a narrow look. 'How *did* you swing it with PadPad? You been fitted with an implant or something?'

'Something,' he agreed. 'You can stay and try to beat the truth out of me if you like.'

She snorted. 'What do I care? I have enough to do.' So started a major league moan: the art treasures needed distribution around the galleries, though she'd at least agreed to leave the TARDIS where it was. The OPs were useless amateurs, coming aboard like that. She couldn't afford for Halcyon to get suspicious now – if she was sacked, she'd never be able to nobble him on their behalf, would she?

He'd slept well after that little lullaby.

The door slid suddenly open. Fitz started from his reverie.

'Rise and shine,' said Sook, now wearing a quite becoming blue catsuit.

'Don't you ever knock?'

'I doubted you'd know how to open the door yourself.'

She had a point. 'Have you brought me breakfast?'

'No. But I've burned your old clothes.'

'You did *what*?' He jumped out of bed, then realised he was naked and dived back for cover.

Sook appeared unmoved. 'Naturally I kept your belongings. But if you're to appear in public among Halcyon's retinue – and given the bee you've placed in his bonnet, that's pretty much inevitable – you'll have to look the part.'

'It's looking a part that I'm worried about,' Fitz grumbled, remembering Roddle's skimpy attire. 'Did you even dump my Cuban heels?'

‘There’s retro, Kreiner, and there’s retro.’

She placed some black coveralls and some funky black and white space shoes on his bed. She turned her back while he changed, and he found himself quite happy with the dark and austere look.

‘You’d better shave too,’ Sook added. She held out her hand.

Fitz scratched indignantly at his five days’ growth. ‘We don’t have to shake on it! If you can get me a razor, I’ll get on with it.’

She stared at him. ‘Huh?’

Now Fitz came to look, he saw what looked like iron filings in her hand.

‘You don’t know what they are, do you?’

‘Why all the fuss? I look good with a beard!’

‘And you don’t know about Halcytone, or PadPad. . .’ With a slightly wicked smile, she said, ‘I’ll bet you don’t even know where Callisto is.’

‘I know it’s got a count called Monte,’ Fitz blustered.

‘It’s a moon, Kreiner. Orbiting Jupiter.’

‘I’ve been to Jupiter before! This big space station called Farside, you must have heard of it?’

‘Yeah, that’s a weird little footnote in the local history. It was lost, like, three-hundred years ago!’ Sook walked towards him, eyes piercing. ‘Kreiner, who *are* you? Where do you come from?’

Fitz blushed lightly. ‘We could be here all day answering that one.’

She cupped his cheeks with both hands. He smiled. His man-of-mystery charm had done it again –

‘Aagh!’ he cried, as Sook snatched her hands away. There were no iron filings in her hands now, they were snagged in his stubble. And they were *chewing* it.

‘Get them off,’ he yelled, scrabbling at his face. ‘Get them off, they’re eating my face!’

‘They’re shaving you, you idiot. Right down to the skin, closest shave you can get. Halcyon uses them five times a day.’ She paused. ‘So it’s not an act, then? You’re really that ignorant?’

‘I don’t hold with these newfangled gadgets,’ said Fitz demurely.

‘They’re, like, a hundred years old.’

The tickling sensation had stopped. He brushed his cheek, and dead filaments fell away. His skin felt unbelievably smooth and moisturised.

‘Look, Sook. I think you only pick on me so we don’t dwell on *you*.’

She seemed amused. ‘Oh, yes?’

‘Yeah. You’re the one who thinks rearranging the furniture makes a difference to anything beyond the hoovering. Isn’t life a bit short to be doing sums every time you want to move a vase?’

She shrugged. ‘It’s an eight-thousand-year-old philosophy.’

'I say it sounds like an omelette.'

'My parents weren't Old Preservers, but they impressed the importance of the past upon me from the start.' Sook didn't bother hiding her bitterness. 'And of course, no learning cradles for me, no fast tracking. I was opted out of all of that. Instead, my mother taught me. Everything she knew.'

Fitz smiled. 'And made a star out of you, right?'

'Ha!' Sook narrowed her eyes. 'She made me a freak. She made me useless. Shaped so much by the past there was nothing of the present I could fit into.' 'She didn't teach you Feng Doo-dah, then?'

'Nope. She went senile and had a termination order placed on her when I was thirteen.'

'Um,' said Fitz. This was one can of worms he'd wished he'd left unopened.

'Dad had to get her away. Couldn't risk taking me with him so I ended up in a classical hostel – a home for rejects like me.' She shrugged. 'That's where I started learning about Feng Shui. The teachings, the equations, all of it. And I just... I just got it, you know? However dumb it seems, it made sense to me. I started teaching at what we jokingly called an academy out on the far edge of the Pacific Rim, light years from anywhere, you know. But when Halcyon turned up...'

'You were on the map.'

'When he first came to me, he said my teachings offered him a window in on a new beauty. A precise, orderly mathematical perfection.' Sook shrugged. 'It's quite intoxicating to mean something, Kreiner,' she said softly. 'Check?'

Fitz nodded. 'I think so.'

'Even when you can't help feeling it's all going to go sour...' She looked downcast. 'He made me an offer I couldn't resist, and I agreed to be his "assistant". It's been six years...'

'So why stop now on the say-so of some old squares like Gaws and Mildrid?' Sook looked oddly furtive. 'I guess it's Falsh.'

Fitz blinked. 'Falsh?'

'He's ruined the person Halcyon could have been.' She started pulling at her fingers distractedly. 'It was so exciting when everything started gathering momentum. A new school of study, presidential endorsements...'

'Money.'

'Lots and lots of money,' Sook agreed.

'Nothing wrong with that,' smiled Fitz.

'Are you crazy? It's wonderful!' She grinned back at him. 'I thought success would make everything easier. But you have to top yourself each time, make each new achievement bigger, better... Crasser.'

Fitz shrugged. 'So, it's less about the art and more about the money. That's true of any success story, isn't it?'

‘But there are eight-thousand-year-old principles at stake here,’ she said. ‘Halcyon pretends, he cheats, but he’s twisting the equations around to suit himself and Falsh’s schedule. It doesn’t work that way. And I’m just as bad. I’ve been going along with it.’

‘Well, why don’t you just persuade him to bust up with Falsh?’

‘That’s what Gaws and Mildrid’s great stunt tonight is supposed to achieve – with appropriate stirring from me. But it’s going to be painful, and it’s going to be messy. And Halcyon, he can’t see –’ She clammed up. When she looked at Fitz, her green eyes were more vivid than he remembered. ‘Oh, ignore me, Kreiner. I’m just tired. Tired of this whole business. I want it over.’

‘I wish there was something I could do,’ said Fitz, and he meant it.

‘You’d better go and see him, now. I’ll take you.’

Here we go then, thought Fitz. No matter how clean-shaven, suited and booted he might be, he still didn’t feel ready for his close-up.

Chapter Thirteen

Trix was propped up in Falsh's bed again, enjoying the feel of his silken sheets against her bare skin. Her appropriated kitchen uniform, not flattering at the best of times, was now so sodden and smelly with sweat that it could probably walk off without her, like the autosuit. She would just have to see what she could make of Falsh's onboard wardrobe. Even adrift in outer space, she had standards.

Her headache was still killing her. On the bed beside her was the contents of Klimt's pockets: a pencil, a sci-fi pager thingie that she couldn't make work, and a slim metal case filled with white pills. She'd hoped they were Nurofen or something but the Doctor had taken one look at the composition formula written inside the case and tipped them away.

'Never take other people's medicines,' he said gravely. 'Unless they're okayed by the Doctor.' He'd filled the case with identical little white tablets from the *Polar Lights*' pristine first-aid box and told her to take two at four-hour intervals.

She hoped the first dose would kick in soon. In the meantime she'd grab forty winks, and hope she didn't dream of giant chiggocks.

Like her, the ship was limping along on the last of its power. They were en route for the only safe haven they knew of: the Falsh podule under construction that Torvin had mentioned.

If the Doctor could only find it.

Fitz stood in Halcyon's office for inspection. It was probably the most opulent office he'd ever seen. In fact, 'office' didn't begin to do it justice. There wasn't even a desk.

There *was* an extremely impressive fountain at one end, gushing down with force over slick slates. The water spilled out into a great hemispherical pool, its boundaries marked by jagged rock. The walls and ceiling were a deep, soothing blue, while the floor was wooden; yes, genuine old floorboards by the look of it. A single egg-shaped chair beside an improbably tall and narrow occasional table – both carved from ivory or something like it – were the only other fixtures.

Halcyon rose from the chair. What a state. He was still wearing his shades; small wonder with the glare of his peacock-blue sari with gold hemming to

contend with. Completing the ensemble was a black buccaneer's sash, worn diagonally from shoulder to hip, and a white trilby hat perched atop his glittering bonce.

Fitz stood nervously as the great man stepped towards him.

'Kreiner. You stunned me last night.'

'I'm sorry, sir.'

'I mean, you moved me. The images... Such intensity in my mind. Such clarity.'

'Thank you, sir.'

'Such complexity... such blissful precision...' He smiled. His teeth were tiny but perfect, like baby teeth. 'Such intimate understanding of the grotesque.'

Fitz smiled weakly.

'You have known horror in your life, Kreiner. I scent the cold slash of its blade across your mind, bleeding intellect with raw instinct. You and I, Kreiner, we have confronted the darkness – and stepped back from the abyss. You are of my retinue now.'

'Cheers.'

Halcyon stood looking at him. Fitz felt suddenly conspicuous in his new gear. Conspicuous and a bit silly.

'Why demolish a lot of old moons?' he blurted.

'There is HEART in EARTH, Kreiner,' said Halcyon solemnly. 'My business has been to restart that heart. That means providing simple, classical models for the people of this mighty Empire – and those we would trade with – to latch on to.'

'Less is more?'

'You can see it in your mind like I can, eh, Kreiner?' He took a deep breath as if smelling a flower. 'Simplicity. Purity. Perfection.'

You're a nut, thought Fitz. But that wasn't the issue here as far as he was concerned.

'So it wasn't Falsh's idea, then?'

Halcyon frowned. 'Falsh?'

'Yes. I was only wondering because –'

'Falsh and I discussed it, of course, but the vision has always been mine. He is merely a tool.'

Takes one to know one. 'But he'd listen to you, right? As the hand that *works* the tool, I mean.'

'What is on your mind, Kreiner?'

Fitz took a deep breath and launched in. 'I'm honoured to be a part of your retinue, sir. Forgive my impertinence, but I was wondering if I now enjoyed your protection as a result. You see –'

‘Have you done something to offend Falsh, Kreiner?’

‘I – Some friends of mine may be in very serious trouble thanks to him.’ Fitz fidgeted awkwardly. ‘I mean to talk to him about the situation, sir. May I count on your protection?’

‘Wilful boy,’ said Halcyon softly, and reached out his hand to touch Fitz’s face, brushing his fingers against his cheek and chin. ‘Of course you may. Falsh will be attending the vidcast later today. Go to him and demand satisfaction.’ Halcyon let his hand rest on Kreiner’s shoulder. ‘I shall see that you are well served.’

Fitz pressed his own hand against Halcyon’s. ‘Thank you.’

Halcyon inclined his head graciously. ‘We shall be touching down on Callisto shortly. I shall remind Sook to requisition a room for you at the Hilton.’ He sighed. ‘Such an efficient assistant, and yet strangely distracted of late.’

Fitz mumbled goodbyes and thanks and took his leave. *Yeah, she’s distracted all right, mate!* he thought. *She’s working out how to drop you right in it!*

Bugger.

What if the OPs barged in before he’d finished speaking to Falsh? Sure, great, they’d cause their promised chaos – and Falsh and Halcyon would be left in one almighty flap. Who’d listen to his bleating about the Doctor and Trix then?

He had to find out more. Had to find out how Sook was planning to aid Gaws and Mildrid. That way he could steam in and talk to Falsh ahead of any disruption.

Or tell Halcyon exactly when he could anticipate trouble and let him deal with it. . .

No. He couldn’t do that.

Could he?

Sook sat slumped in her office chair, tracing her finger along the hand-stitched leather. It was real leather from a real cow, not from a hidehog. And the floor was real wood, the boards pressed into place with resins and nails.

I could give up all this, she told herself.

She was about to give into the tears prickling the backs of her eyes when her computer chimed: a low, foreboding sound that meant Tinya was getting in touch. All she needed. She could barely look Tinya in the eye any more, loathing what she represented so deeply.

‘Tinya,’ said Sook, settling a professional smile into place. ‘What may I do for you?’

‘Ah, Sook.’ Tinya’s smile snagged on her stupid high cheekbones, never reaching her eyes. ‘I trust you are well. And I do hope Falsh’s gifts have placed Halcyon in a good mood for tonight?’

'I've just had them distributed about the galleries,' said Sook. 'It was a very generous donation.'

'You know how much we all value Halcyon.' A brief pause then, enough to signal the end of the small talk.

Or so Sook thought.

'I wondered,' Tinya went on casually, 'what did Halcyon make of the blue box?'

Blue box? *Kreiner's blue box!*

Sook carefully kept her composure. There was more to Kreiner than he was saying, she was sure of that. But she wasn't about to sell him down the river for Falsh's sake.

'What blue box would that be, Tinya?' she asked flatly.

'Oh, just a . . . a magnificent old blue box. Very valuable, I understand.'

Sook called up a sub-screen. 'There was nothing in the cargo manifest about a blue box.'

'Oh. Well, I'm probably mistaken. I'll check the consignment details our end,' said Tinya, acting like it was nothing.

If Sook didn't know better she'd have believed her. Here was a chance to do a little snooping on Kreiner's behalf. 'Oh, Roddle was saying a funny thing, Tinya. . .'

'Oh?'

'He was speaking to one of the guards while they were overseeing the loading of the antiquities. Said something about intruders in the station. Agitators, trying to escape.'

'Did he?' said Tinya. 'Well, you should know Falsh by now, Sook.' She flashed the briefest of smiles. 'No one escapes.'

Sook's smile matched Tinya's for enthusiasm. 'Anything else I can help you with?'

'Oh, yes. The reason I called. Have you reached Callisto yet?'

'Parking orbit achieved. Landing in thirty.'

'Only I've arranged some extra publicity for Halcyon at eleven, in advance of tonight's vidcast.'

Sook frowned. 'Tinya, you know Halcyon simply will not accept these additional engagements, not if they're thrust upon him without notice.'

'I *have* given notice! I've been liaising with Roddle. He's helped arrange it, didn't he say?'

'No, he didn't.' Skull too mashed, Sook supposed. 'Tinya, I organise Halcyon's schedule. Roddle's an artistic advisor only.'

Tinya shrugged. 'You were unavailable. And Roddle *does* have powers of deputy, doesn't he?'

'What is this extra publicity?'

Tinya was all smiles again. 'I've had some animals imported from the Ganymede Zoo for a press-op.'

'Real animals? Tinya, why?'

'Restoring the wonder, Sook. Restoring the wonder.' Tinya's eyes were agleam. 'Halcyon's making the solar system a spiritually better place to live in, not just for humanity, but for all of our allies. We're saying: remember the animals. Remember old Earth's biodiversity! By placing these creatures with Halcyon, we're saying that Halcyon embraces that biodiversity! That the old is made new.'

'I can't see Halcyon happily posing with actual animals.'

'No, nor could Roddle. They'll be doped up, of course.'

'What sort of animals, anyway?'

Tinya snorted. '*Real* ones! You don't expect me to remember their names, do you? I only know it's going to be fabulous! Work on Halcyon, would you Sook?'

Sook sighed. 'I'm promising nothing.'

'I know you'll work your magic,' said Tinya briskly. 'Ciao. Oh, and Sook?'

You're going to ask me about the blue box again.

'Should that silly blue box turn up somewhere, you will let me know, won't you?'

'Check. *Ciao*.'

She killed the screen.

So, Falsh was well and truly wise to Kreiner and his means of entrance – clearly the investigators had been made to talk. Did Tinya now suspect her – or Halcyon – of being involved in their investigation? Of harbouring Kreiner? It was a logical conclusion to draw. Maybe *that* was why she chose to arrange this press-op with Roddle – to wheedle out some information? She'd never bothered with him before – not so far as Sook knew, anyway.

Then again, Tinya must know that Halcyon would never actively aid a criminal investigation into Falsh; he was too closely associated with Falsh for his image to emerge untarnished. That just left Sook as prime suspect. But then why did Tinya not try to rattle her by mentioning Falsh's captives, or intimating that Roddle had let slip something about a new member of Halcyon's entourage?

She had only asked about the box.

And then there was her reaction to Sook's lie that the blue box wasn't here. Sook had watched her closely. She had seemed disappointed, but *not entirely surprised*. Why was that?

There was a knock at the door.

'Come in, Kreiner,' she called, operating the door from her desk.

There he stood, gangly and glittery in his black outfit. 'How'd you know it was me?'

'You've got a passcard now, haven't you? Anyone else would have used it.' She gave him an appraising look. 'But you're not like anyone else, are you?'

'Well, it has been said...'

'No, Kreiner. Be serious for once. Nothing about you adds up.'

'Maths was never my strong point.'

'Shut up. You're full of muckwash, you know that? If someone hoped to make something of an investigation against a man like Falsh, they'd use someone assured and capable.'

He blinked. 'Thanks!'

'Come on, Kreiner! You're culturally illiterate, you've had no training in anything at all that might be useful to you on your so-called investigation, you seem ignorant of everything from Halcytone through drug legislation to the basics of personal hygiene...' She threw up her hands. 'And I just lied to Falsh's PR exec for you. I don't even know who you are!'

Now he looked at her. 'Lied?'

'She wanted to know about your blue box.'

She looked at him closely in the long silence that followed.

'Have I given you away so far?' she said quietly. 'You can trust me! If I only understood what's going on... maybe I could help you get back with your friends.'

Kreiner looked oddly shamefaced.

Then he nodded. 'OK. I'll show you.'

The Falsh Industries Luxury Orbiting Conference Podule looked at first glance like a silver cotton reel surrounded by layers of vacuum-cleaner hose.

'A bit *Blue Peter*, isn't it?' Trix's headache was better, and she was feeling much refreshed as a result. 'Still, I'm sure it'll look nice when it's finished.'

'Never mind what it looks like,' said the Doctor, as he got ready to dock. 'Let's just hope there's a friendly welcome waiting for us.'

'Is that Torvin's ship?' she wondered, spying a stubby, bullet-shaped craft.

'He made it, then,' said the Doctor, as the *Polar Lights* limped home on the last of its power. 'Jolly good. If one of his rescuers has turned up too we'll have a four for bridge.'

She looked wearily at him.

'You think I'm joking,' said the Doctor. The ship shook slightly as it nestled into the docking bay. 'We're pretty much out of fuel. Had to swing ourselves twice around Leda so her gravity could push us on to this point. We're not going anywhere else in a hurry.'

'Maybe Torvin will let us borrow his ship,' said Trix. She pulled Klimt's old jacket on over one of Falsh's silky-soft shirts and trotted towards the exit. 'Let's see what he says.'

He wasn't saying much, lying slumped over a table in some kind of cafeteria area. His bald spot with its hairy mole glared out at them from his grey tangle of hair. There was a half-finished chiggock meal and a selection of pills scattered in front of him.

'Torvin!' cried the Doctor, running across to check his pulse.

Trix stared around the clinical white surroundings, wondering if the fish-thing had got here ahead of them.

'He's in some kind of stupor,' the Doctor reported, cradling the man's head in his arms. He tugged open one of Torvin's eyelids.

'Drink?'

The Doctor picked up a pill, sniffed it, and tentatively tapped it with his tongue.

'What is it?'

'How on Earth should I know?' he muttered.

Trix folded her arms. 'T.J. Hooker, you ain't.'

'I'm glad you noticed.' He sighed. 'But from the state of him, it's likely he's taken a very powerful narcotic.'

'Drugs!'

The Doctor shrugged. 'Diamorphine, perhaps...'

'Hard stuff.' Suddenly his detached behaviour back on Thebe, his dereliction of duty, his disassociation from the bad stuff; it all made sense. Trix came over to see, a sort of ghoulish fascination compelling her. 'Don't see any needles.'

'I'm sure drug abuse has moved with the times like everything else.'

Trix picked up one tablet set apart from the others between finger and thumb. It had been placed beside a glass of water. 'He didn't take this one.'

'Show me.' The Doctor took it from her and studied it closely. At length he reached a verdict. 'Interesting.' Then he popped the pill in Torvin's mouth, threw back the man's head and poured some of the water into his gullet.

Trix stared. 'That might have been anything! Poison! You may have given him an overdose!'

'This is a labour-saving age,' he said briskly. 'If those pills I took from you are anything to go by, I've a feeling addiction isn't given much shrift around here.' Then he seemed to soften, and patted Torvin on the shoulder. 'Stay with him. I'm going for a look around. Check we're alone.'

Shoving his hands deep into his trouser pockets, he walked off down the gleaming corridors before Trix could open her mouth to protest.

But then, there was a saving grace to her predicament.

A HUGE telly stood in the corner of the room! It was superslim, barely a centimetre thick, and the screen was pretty much the size of a wall. Presumably the builders sat around and watched it all day instead of finishing the place.

She went over and hunted for an on button, but there wasn't a sign of one anywhere.

Suddenly it sprang into life. Some sporting event – men in bodysuits running around a purple pitch slinging balls at each other – bulged out of the set with frightening clarity, like it was happening around her. Trix jumped, took a few steps back instinctively.

And caught movement behind her.

She turned to find Torvin holding a tiny remote in his palm, that funny smile on his face.

'You made it then,' he said.

'We thought *you* weren't going to,' said Trix, collecting her cool. It was weird – suddenly he was alert again, bright. Apart from a weird kind of woodenness about his features, he looked perfectly well. 'You seemed kind of strung out, there. Feeling OK?'

'You gave me the pick-up,' he retorted with a yawn and a stretch. 'Was on an eight-hour comedown. Wasn't expecting company for a while.'

'Your friends are coming for you?'

'I sent a message from the ship.' He sighed, rubbing his eyes. Trix noticed his hands were shaking just a little. 'Arranged a rendezvous. Now, I've just got to wait. I hate waiting.'

'So you thought you'd get off your head?'

'Better than just... *thinking* about everything the whole time.' That haunted look came back into his eyes. 'You know, I wasn't expecting you to get off Thebe, let alone...' Torvin tailed off, staring at her chest. Trix was about to make a pointed comment when she realised it was the name badge on her jacket that had taken his attention.

'Klimt,' Torvin read. 'I thought your name was Trix?'

'Stylish, huh. Found it on that little piece of Carme your boys overlooked.'

'So it *does* exist.' He swigged from the jug of water. 'And what else did you find, Investigator?'

'Not much.' She watched him as he started to put away his stockpile of tablets. 'How does it work, Torvin? One minute you're completely out of it, then a swig of water and a miracle pill and you're back just like that.'

He was looking at her like she was winding him up. 'What stories have you been listening to?'

She refused to blush. 'The Doctor said that was diamorphine you were taking.'

'Very formal of him.'

'I thought that stuff really hit you.'

'You never tried it? *Everyone's* tried it!' His eyes looked just a little wild.

'You want to see now? While we're waiting?'

'No, thanks.'

'Thought you were an investigator.'

'On this occasion I'm only curious.'

'We're all curious. Why else are we put here if not to learn?'

'You're very calm about it all, I must say.'

'Not like there's a law against it, is there?'

Trix almost flung away her cool and asked, *Really? Drug abuse is legal in this century?* She reflected on how some of the guys back home would punch the air if they only knew. *The future's bright. The future's class C.*

'So what have you got here?' she asked.

'Let's line them up.' Torvin seized on the distraction and started sorting through his pharmacological arsenal, dividing pills from pills like Trix had sorted Smarties into different colours as a kid. 'This is your basic H pill. This, your chaser, is the most important – your SE-limiter.'

'Side effect, you mean?'

'Keeps the pleasure to the pleasure centre – no craving, no comedown. Only that makes you urinate, so you want the dry dose –' he tapped another pill – 'but that's a mean little pill, so to avoid the cramps you need to take a rehydration tablet to correct the imbalance. And to play double safe, if you need bringing around in a hurry, you have the pick-up handy.' He paused, the shadow of that smile on his face. 'But you know that bit. That bit you gave me.'

'And there was me thinking drugs were a recreational thing. Sounds too much like hard work to me.' Trix smiled. 'Unless you've got a gin-and-tonic pill on you?'

Torvin tutted. 'That stuff's incredibly bad for you, you know.'

'Guess I'll stick to medicinal purposes only.' She turned to watch the enormous TV. 'Do you like sport?'

'Not much,' Torvin murmured, separating his pills into the compartments within a neat pillbox the size of a fountain-pen case.

'Then let's flick channels. Hey, you don't know when that big Aristotle Halcyon special is coming on, do you?'

He stared at her, the slightly spaced-out smile back on his face. 'You haven't had enough of exploding moons?'

'Mine is a professional interest,' she assured him.

'Let's check the ten-one-one news.' Torvin started flicking channels. 'That's bound to be covering the whole circus.'

The Doctor wandered along empty corridors, wondering at which point in its construction a luxury conference podule became luxurious. There was little sign of it so far – just bare plastic bones and panels. It was like walking through the sunbleached skeleton of some vast monster adrift in space.

He had the uncomfortable feeling he was about to make a terrible discovery. Peering in on so many white, unfinished room-shells it seemed inevitable that one would be splashed crimson.

In fact, the largest room of the lot was splashed a good many colours. They pulsed and glowed as if the walls were alive, spelling subliminal messages through strange, glowing hieroglyphs and primal pictures. There was a small stack of empty paint containers in the middle of the room, and he read the labels.

‘Halcytone...’ He smiled. ‘By Aristotle Halcyon. Nice to know Falsh is loyal to his own.’

The patterns reminded him a little of the glints and glimmers of light playing behind the charred black walls of the ruined Carme Institute. Perhaps this stuff was all the rage.

To one side was a vast window looking out on to the stars. Once constructed, he supposed the podule could be piloted to anywhere that afforded a spectacular view.

The walls themselves were spectacular enough, but there was something about them the Doctor found oddly unsettling. He dabbed one with a handkerchief, and it came away damp and glowing. Still wet. Where *were* the builders? Perhaps Torvin would know.

Strangely unsettled by the endless, engrossing patterns on the wall, the Doctor wandered back out to continue his search.

In his office on the station, Falsh sat at his desk, contemplating his upcoming schedule. He had to be on Callisto for the vidcast, but there were several other matters vying for his attention too.

Suddenly his PA barged into the office.

‘What is the meaning of this, Nerren?’ Falsh asked coldly.

‘The newscast, sir,’ he babbled. ‘The discovery on Leda. Channel 313. You have to see this, sir.’

‘You’re telling *me* what I must do?’

Nerren fumbled with the tiny remote. ‘Yes, sir.’

Falsh watched as the report came up, all screens. A few seconds later he started swearing.

Chapter Fourteen

‘... Shock news of an apparently new form of alien life discovered on the Jovian moon of Leda...’

‘Doctor!’ Trix yelled. ‘Doctor, quick! You have got to see this!’

‘The creature, which resembles a slug crossed with a caterpillar, apparently has no need of air or moisture and has a body built to withstand the freezing vacuum of space...’

‘Doctor, you’re missing it!’

‘... Nicknamed the space slug, the new life form was discovered by Gaws Murphy, a known political agitator believed to be affiliated with the militant wing of the Empire Trust, known colloquially as the Old Preservers...’

Falsh couldn’t believe what he was seeing, what he was hearing. ‘What in the name of...?’

‘Early reports have already proved that the new life form is not robotic or simulatant in nature, and that the slugs meet all criteria necessary to be classed as living beings. The discovery has rocked the scientific establishment, with most dismissing it as an absurd hoax...’

‘It’s a hoax,’ croaked Halcyon. ‘Has to be!’

‘It *has* to be a hoax,’ said Roddle, biting on his knuckle. ‘But there still has to be an enquiry.’

‘It’s a trick!’ Halcyon whimpered. ‘Agitators trying to stop the Grand Orchestration!’

‘I’m sure the enquiry will prove that, and quickly.’ Roddle put on his gravest face. ‘I just thought somebody should tell you the news. When I heard about this I went straight to Sook, but...’

‘Where is she?’ he said, with icy quietness.

‘I don’t know,’ said Roddle. ‘I can’t find her anywhere. It’s like she’s just vanished...’

‘... The news may signal a reprieve for the tiny moon of Leda, due for vaporisation this very evening along with fifty-nine other minor satellites, leaving just the Ancient Twelve in orbit around the gas giant. The planned demolition is a spectacular highlight of celebrity *decoratiste* Aristotle Halcyon’s Unclutter project – known Empirewide as the *Restore the Wonder* programme...’

Falsh turned his back on the screen and stared out at the spacescape.

'Klimt,' he breathed, 'you son of a bitch.'

As ever he kept imagining movement out through the window. Little spaceships, no doubt, streaking on their way to Leda – fruitcakes and fanatics, so-called experts hoping to whore themselves out to the media for their opinion... The heavyweight journos who'd scorned the moon-blitz press junket as low-brow filler would be weighing up this story and streaking over in the time it took to set up an expense account.

'...If the hastily convened enquiry rules a moratorium on this evening's planned demolition of Jupiter's moons, it is Aristotle Halcyon – currently on Callisto preparing for his much-publicised live broadcast, and so far unavailable for comment – who stands to lose the most.'

'Wrong!' roared Falsh. *It's me!* he thought. *Me who stands to lose the most! Loss of advertising revenue, loss of publicity, loss of credibility...* 'They'll say we did no preliminary surveys!'

'...Criticisms have been made of the preliminary surveys allegedly carried out by Halcyon's sponsors Falsh Industries. The big question is – why weren't these space slugs observed sooner?'

He swung back round in his chair. 'Nerren. I want Phaedra's R and D team assembled immediately from the labworks on Titan. And contact Tinya. We're heading out to Callisto early. We're going to blow this sick joke out of the skies and then we'll do the same with those satellites as programmed.'

'...the recent accidental demolition of Carme – one of the Ancient Twelve actually marked by Halcyon for preservation...'

'Doctor!' Trix shouted. 'It'll be over by the time you get here!'

'...and the unscheduled demolition of Thebe – which NewSystem Deconstruction, the company responsible, has described as "a controlled test, routine and of no importance" –'

'Ha!' said Trix.

'...have both been damned by the Empire Trust. Halcyon – inventor of Halcytone and known favourite of the President – was to present a lavish four-hour spectacular tonight at the newly built Medicean Stadium on Callisto. The vidcast hinges upon the total destruction of sixty of Jupiter's satellites. The planetoids have been deemed to have no further commercial or creative value and marked for destruction. The Empire Trust has denounced the move to junk Jove's moons as short-sighted...'

Nerren peered through the tinted glass of Tinya's office. She sat at her desk with a slightly glazed expression. Mails were flooding in, her computer chiming for each new arrival like it was marking the seconds. Bubblescreens

inflated and popped from her trilling vidphone, and her cell was vibrating with message alerts and missed calls, slowly working its way along the desk as if trying to leave home.

Nerren burst in. 'Sorry to barge in on you, Tinya,' he yelled over the din, 'I couldn't reach you any other way.'

She looked at him. 'Have you come to take me away from all this?'

He smiled sympathetically. 'Falsh wants to get going.'

Tinya nodded. 'You've come to drag me into the heart of it.'

'...saying these satellites can still fulfil a useful role in the proposed repopulation of the solar system, and that Halcyon's proposed means and methods were "shortsighted solutions denying future generations access to these historically valuable artefacts"...'

Halcyon was petitioning the President by vidphone. 'Madame, you must understand I have a four-hour live vidcast planned, and to climb down at this stage would be so...' Her dreary voice dragged down his already-flagging spirits. 'Can hands so mighty really be so tied? Surely some of the moons at least can be safely blasted! You're aware that the projected advertising revenues run into trillions of dollars...?'

'...Experts agree that the chances against new life developing on Leda are incredibly remote. But the very existence of these space slugs, apparently thriving on a freezing, airless, low-gravity world, has excited the imaginations of the Empire's scientists who are clamouring to undertake their own investigations...'

'Sook, this is Roddle.' As he spoke into the intercom he heard his own voice echoing in the corridors outside. It was kind of a nice effect. 'You'd better report to your office. It's crisis time. Halcyon needs you. Sook, respond, can't you? Everything's messed up!'

'...Gaws Murphy, the discoverer of the space slug – or as some would hold it, the perpetrator of the most fantastic stunt this century – only came across the creatures by accident. His sudship made an emergency landing on Leda following an altercation with NewSystem Deconstruction sentinels in the process of building a force blockade around the moon...'

'Doctor, *quick!*' Trix turned back to the set as Gaws Murphy appeared, a grinning loon whose top lip was carpeted with a ginger 'tache.

'... "My guidance systems were malfunctioning; Leda was the nearest solid body to affect recalibration. The NewSystem sentinels were operating in Hostile Prime setting, in contravention of the spaceways code, but somehow I got

past their blockade. And when I touched down, I *swear*... these furry big brown slug things were burrowing out of the rock!”

Falsh turned off his wristset. ‘Get on to NewSystem,’ he told Tinya, as they made their way to the conference suite on board his flyer. ‘Draft a statement with their people, find out if those sentinels *were* placed on Hostile Prime.’

‘They were,’ Tinya said flatly. ‘You ordered NewSystem to keep out any stray space traffic – cranks and fruitcakes trying to grab a chunk of a Jove moon before it –’

‘So blame it on technical error,’ he snapped. ‘But they’re not to stand down, understand me? We have to be ready. Get a call through to Halcyon, too. Tell him we’re going ahead with the show. I’ll see if I can get through to the President. We’ve got eight hours. We can still swing this.’

‘We could maybe show reruns of the Asteroid Belt sweep,’ Tinya suggested.

‘The sponsors won’t stand for it,’ said Falsh. ‘We *have* to turn this around. Think about it – this news has woken up the whole Empire. Everyone – everyone in existence – will be tuning in tonight to see what’s going to happen. We have to be the ones who will manage expectation.’

‘But if we keep billions of people guessing and then the pyros are a no-show...’

‘The President must be made to see we need this broadcast. Too much is riding on the Unclutter project, we can’t put it into limbo for months and months on account of an outbreak of goddamned *space slugs*!’

Fitz followed Sook out of the TARDIS. She was shuffling slowly, like she was afraid that too big a step might see her walking away from reality for good.

‘It isn’t possible,’ she whispered. ‘You could fit a cathedral in there.’

‘I know,’ Fitz agreed. ‘Cool, isn’t it?’

‘Transdimensional engineering on that scale... it’s revolutionary, it’s a miracle! And it really travels?’

‘Yep. When it’s not run out of mercury, anyway. It’s how I came to be here.’

‘And you’re from another time, naturally.’

Fitz shrugged. ‘You said yourself, I don’t fit in.’

‘But the PadPad –’

‘Did I mention the TARDIS was low-level telepathic?’

‘Oh my...’ Sook gave a high, hysterical giggle. ‘But you can’t fly her?’

‘No.’ Fitz tossed the key in the air, held open his shirt pocket, and caught it there neatly. ‘She’s just an oversized cupboard until her fluid links are stoked and the Doctor’s at the helm. Obviously I have certain –’

‘Attention Sook, this is Roddle...’ The voice sounded anxiously from the speakers. ‘Halcyon needs you, the network’s jammed with calls...’

‘Something must have kicked off.’ Fitz pulled a face. ‘Gaws and Mildrid?’

She shook her head despairingly. 'They said they wouldn't kick off until it was too late to cancel the vidcast!'

Fitz felt like banging his own head against the wall. So much for grassing up Sook and her link to the Old Preservers. They'd got in ahead of him. So, Falsh and Halcyon would be in great moods now, wouldn't they? Nothing at all to think about besides Fitz and his little problems. . .

'I have to go. Roddle's lousy in a crisis. Halcyon must be going insane.' Sook had broken into a run, heading for the cargo bay exit. 'I'd better go face the music.'

'Typical,' said Trix as the Doctor finally showed his face. 'You just missed the whole thing!'

'Sorry I didn't hear you shouting,' he said. 'I was in the main conference room. Hello, Torvin. How are you feeling?'

'I'm all right.' Torvin shrugged. 'I like that conference room. Pretty walls.'

The Doctor lowered his voice. 'Pretty mysterious.'

'No mystery. It's only Halcytone. The paint that's fun to watch dry. Trade-mark.'

'Created by Halcyon.'

'And distributed by Falsh.'

'And they've both just been all over the TV!' cried Trix. 'You missed the whole thing! Wait till you hear what –'

'What?' The Doctor turned to her, suddenly intense. 'What did I miss?'

'Nothing,' Torvin tapped the remote. 'What's up, you investigators not got channel recall on your vidsets?'

'We don't have much time for television in our jobs.' Trix cleared her throat. 'Sorry, Torvin, do you mind watching all that again?'

'Come off it! Watching Falsh getting it stuck to him by a slug?' He pressed some buttons on the remote and gave his spacey smile. 'That gives me the warm fuzzies.'

The set went dark for a second then burst into life again. Trix watched the Doctor watching the report; his lips set straight and serious, eyes hard as stones.

The *Rapier's* engines thrummed and pulsed as she settled herself into the Medicean Stadium's private spaceport. Sook could feel the vibration in her feet. But the major shockwaves were coming from Halcyon, whose face was pressed up centimetres away from her own.

'How could you not respond? I needed you!' He grew silent for a few moments, took a step back and felt behind him for his leather chair. 'You know

how I depend on you, Sook. If our routine is altered, with people crashing in all over the place. . .’

How could she explain that she hadn’t been on the ship at all? ‘I’m sorry, Halcyon. I wasn’t expecting to be needed until we touched down on Callisto.’ ‘You weren’t in your office.’

‘I didn’t realise any incident had taken place.’ *Not yet, anyway*, she thought wryly. Her job now – as arranged with Gaws and Mildrid – was simply to stand back and let Halcyon’s temper take its course. He’d go public if she let him, insist his project was more important than the possibility of new life among Jupiter’s moons. . . Rant and rave that it must go ahead at all costs.

She had to let it happen. Let the Empire see him as the vain and selfish child he had become. Stand back and watch his image tarnish. . .

She felt sick at the thought of it.

‘Roddle was calling you for over twenty minutes. You didn’t answer.’

‘I *couldn’t* come to you, Halcyon.’

He raised his head to her. ‘Don’t take me for a fool!’ he barked. ‘I know the entire Empire will be doing so once it’s decreed the Grand Orchestration will grind to a halt thanks to some student prank, but after all we have shared. . .’

She looked at the leather on his chair. It looked just as soft and smooth and supple and glorious as that in her own office.

‘You spoke to the President?’

‘She won’t act for us. She says she must respect the wishes of the scientific community.’ He looked frail and small and she felt sick. ‘I wondered why she couldn’t be here in person for the show. Pressures of work? She was planning to stab me in the back all along!’

‘That’s not true, Halcyon,’ said Sook.

‘EarthGov is being petitioned to agree to a full inspection of all the targeted moons!’ he wailed. ‘It could take months!’

That was the plan.

‘Months. . .’

Where will we be by then?

She wished she could just yank the shades off his head and see the emotions pooling in his eyes.

‘This is what we’ll do.’ She crouched beside him, and the words fell from her mouth without her meaning them to: ‘Whatever Falsh says, you’ll have to make it known that you’re entirely supportive of the aims of the scientific community.’

Halcyon looked horrified. ‘Supportive?’

‘We can’t have you made into the bad guy in this.’ *We can! We must!*

‘You’re creating something timeless, something life-enhancing – restoring wonder to the solar system! You can’t be seen to be anti-life!’ She crouched

down beside him. 'We'll tell everyone that, naturally, you're happy to wait until this affair is over.'

He inclined his head towards her. 'Happy?'

'Halcyon, if there's a shred of a chance this life form is genuine –'

'It isn't!'

'Until that's proved. . .'

He laid a hand on her shoulder, a gesture of protection or ownership, she wasn't sure.

'Will the networks cancel the vidcast tonight?' he croaked. 'I couldn't stand it. I couldn't bear to be set back so. The humiliation. . .'

'You've come through worse than this in the past,' she cooed to him.

'But not failure on this scale.'

'It's not *your* failure, Halcyon.'

'It's Falsh's failure!' He screwed up his face. 'If he hadn't stirred up the Preservers, destroying Carme like he did. . .'

'Falsh has ruined us both,' said Sook suddenly.

Halcyon took his hand away from her shoulder. His voice was cold and quiet as the whisper of air from an opened freezer: 'What did you say?'

But it was what she found herself saying next that really scared the hell out of Sook.

Chapter Fifteen

Restoring wonder to the solar system had restored a measure of hubbub and wealth to old Callisto. The President had approved certain tax incentives to encourage industry back to the rejuvenated solar system, and Falsh had taken full advantage, insisting the head offices of several subsidiaries relocate there, sponsoring an urban regeneration programme... That in turn had brought other businesses setting up shop, and some serious Empire players among them. And of course, they would all take full advantage of FILOC-Ps to capitalise on the novelty of their location: a worn-out solar system, long-thought dead – now made new.

His diary chimed. An hour and he would need to be spaceborne again, ready for his meeting with the Agent.

‘No more screw-ups,’ he rumbled, like he could force fate into a promise. He’d got so used to saying something and it coming true.

Complacent.

Boy, was it ever coming back to bite him now.

Falsh looked out over the spaceport, at the teeming ships and airbuses hovering over the dark granite concourse, at the domed skyline of hotels, bordellos and casinos. The air held the tang of ozone, as the mighty biosphere-generators fed artificial sunlight into the captured air.

The view was peaceful and blue through the soundproofed tinted glass of the executive lounge. People from all over the Empire – and plenty of dignitaries from well outside it – had gathered here to watch the sky-show tonight at the vast, brand-new Medicean Stadium. Turning south he could see its three towers, an imposing black and red, reaching up over the horizon. They looked like giant gun barrels, big enough to pick the moons out of the sky one by one if all else failed.

It *couldn't* fail. You didn't pull the biggest crowd for a live event in centuries just to let them drift off home without a show. There were billions of dollars at risk in merchandise and advertising revenues. Hoon, efficient as ever, had already beamed over plunging stock forecast figures. Falsh wanted to weep at the sight of them. They *had* to turn this around.

The Empire was expecting a show. Big bangs and fireworks. More than that – *artistic* big bangs and fireworks.

Not footage of a goddamned slug.

'Klimt, your bones are gonna rot in hell,' he muttered for the millionth time.

Falsh couldn't afford to lose this one. Not when his plans for the Institute had all come toppling down, when his fleet of FILOC-Ps was so advanced in construction. Those little babies weren't for hire by cranks and naturalists. They were for big businesses only. He had to recoup.

He *needed* this.

Tinya swayed through the thin crowds to join him by the window. 'Still can't get through to Halcyon. His ship's docked direct at the stadium.'

'Keep trying,' he growled. 'He's not flaking out on me. That show is going ahead.'

'I don't see why we didn't park at the stadium ourselves.'

'Because I'm not through with the ship yet.'

Tinya accepted this without question. 'Well, maybe you can speak with him at the press-call at eleven,' she suggested. 'I've had these *awesome* real wild animals shipped over from the Ganymede Zoo –'

'Wild animals?' Falsh narrowed his eyes. 'I didn't approve that.'

Tinya faltered, pushed at her slick black hair demurely, her usual play-for-time gesture. 'But it seemed such a good opportunity. We're saying: remember old Earth's biodiversity?'

Falsh mimed a creeping slug with his index finger. 'Don't you think we maybe have enough unwelcome biodiversity around here right now? Speaking of which... ' He beamed some data from his wristpad to hers. 'Nerren's pulled together our Research and Development team. They're preparing the results of the EBE tests as we speak.'

'Without seeing one of these space slugs first?' She frowned. 'How will that convince anyone?'

'It won't. Which is why you've got to get the team access to one.'

'Me?'

'As of now, you handle their PR,' he informed her coldly. 'It's down to you to make them seem like an independent scientific study group.'

Tinya forced a smile. 'Who do I need to speak to? Who's leading the enquiry?'

'Military. According to Nerren, Pent Central have sent some hazard squad down there.' He clenched his fists helplessly; Jeez, he felt old today. 'They've converted a disused business unit into a base of operations. They'll be inundated with requests for private analysis.'

'And they'll say no to them all.'

'Except us.' He advanced on Tinya almost menacingly. 'We need to move fast. We need that access. Find out where Pent Central have set up and get our people in.'

Tinya considered. 'The President must be feeling bad for her precious Halcyon. Perhaps she can pull some strings for us on his behalf.'

'Yes, where is that son of a bitch? We have to get a hold of him!' Falsh mimed where he'd like to get a hold of him – right around the throat.

'We'll have the chance. My press-op at eleven.' She smiled at him. 'I told you it would be a fabulous opportunity. Just you wait.'

Fitz had always wanted to play Shea Stadium. To look out over seas of adoring fans, playing soaring leads or tender acoustic numbers... Didn't matter which; all anyone could hear were the hysterical screams of thousands of gorgeous teenagers.

Now Fitz was looking out at the deserted Medicean Stadium from its massive, minimalist stage. He'd figured it was best just to stay out of everybody's way for a while, so once the *Rapier* had nudged into land within an enormous hangar, he'd gone out for a walls. Wandered about in the bowels of the stadium, asked for directions, found a painted red line on the floor, followed it for half a mile or so, got lost, doubled back and somehow found himself here.

Or in other words: Went out. Got lost. Made mistakes. Felt dwarfed. A typical Fitz Kreiner day.

The Medicean made Shea look more like a drill hall in Maida Vale. Coloured black and red, divided into dozens of tiered levels, it was beyond vast – the far side was probably in a different time zone. And wide? Not many, Benny! You could park a dozen starships end-to-end across the crimson turf of its centre-space. The three towers, marking north, east and west of the stadium's perimeter, seemed to stretch up endlessly.

He sighed. It was so quiet. The sky above was pristine blue, fake but beautiful. It felt like a spring morning. Sook had told him to wait here for her while she went to Halcyon.

He felt for her. It wasn't easy, coping with crises of conscience. Finding yourself in a life cul-de-sac and realising the only way back out is littered with tintacks poised to pop your tyres.

He sat down on the stage and wondered what a capacity crowd would look like. Had everything gone to plan tonight, he would have seen for himself.

It was probably him. The big jinx.

Well, bad mood or not – a million other things to deal with or not – Fitz was going to damn well go up to Falsh and make his day worse with a list of demands. So long as Falsh needed Halcyon, and Halcyon played ball... .

'So here's where you got to.'

Fitz turned. Think of the devil: here was Sook now, a little red-faced and out of breath, like she'd run the whole honeycomb of corridors and dressing

rooms between here and the *Rapier*; the enormous loading bay alone had taken Fitz five minutes to cross in his usual scruffy stride.

'You'd better not be here at eleven,' she went on. 'Your old friend Tinya thinks she's arranging a press-op for Halcyon here. I'm sure she'd love to see you again.'

'It's OK. Halcyon said I had his protection.'

'Halcyon's going to be very busy preparing for tonight.'

'I thought tonight was off?'

Sook shrugged. 'We've worked out some alternative plans. There are other kinds of spectacular.'

'Such as?'

Sook stayed quiet for a while. 'I probably don't know what I'm doing,' she admitted, looking down at her feet as she shuffled closer. 'But when it came down to it, Kreiner, I couldn't just burn my boats and bridges. . . Just leave him alone to flail about in this mess, like I was meant to. . .'

She laid her head on his shoulder.

'So what are you going to do?' he asked a touch nervously, craning his neck to look at her face: angular, flushed and sad-eyed. 'And what are Gaws and Mildrid going to do to *you*?'

Sook leaned up and kissed him.

It was nice, but incredibly uncomfortable for both of them. She sort of wriggled around for a better angle, he leaned back on his hands to accommodate her. Her hand crept up his chest. He bottled out of doing the same.

She broke off abruptly. Her eyes looked sad but sort of shiny.

'Sorry,' she said. Then she scrambled up and almost ran across the stage, heading for the exit.

Fitz watched her leave. 'I never know what's going on,' he called.

'You will,' she threw back over her shoulder. 'Try not to hate me. OK?'

The sky was still perfect blue, the spring freshness held in the air, and there was no breeze at all.

Still, as the taste of her lips faded on his own, he felt a little colder.

Trix and the Doctor were taking a turn about the decks. They'd left Torvin asleep, slumped in front of the TV and gently snoring.

'It's so weird, when time travel throws up something like this,' Trix reflected. 'In my time, heroin is seen as one of the great evils – you know, one shot and you're hooked, your life is over, your skin goes bad. Here, it's not even illegal.'

'Alcohol's not illegal in your time. Nor are cigarettes. But neither are terribly good for you over a prolonged period.'

‘No, Doctor,’ said Trix in a tone equally as patronising. ‘But we’re talking Class A narcotics, here! Today, you can probably buy crack cocaine in Boots along with your inhaler.’

‘I doubt it. By this century, they’ve stopped selling medicine in Boots,’ remarked the Doctor.

‘Oh?’

He grinned at her unexpectedly. ‘It kept dribbling out through the lace-holes.’

She groaned.

‘There are some things a pill can’t clear away,’ the Doctor added. Trix waited for a punchline, but this time it didn’t come. ‘A powerful narcotic will always dig its hooks in the cells and viscera, even if it can’t get a hold on the mind in the same way.’

‘Admittedly, Torvin doesn’t look the happiest camper on the block for someone flying so high.’

‘Don’t forget the stuff is very effective at relieving pain,’ he said distantly. ‘It also suppresses coughs. . .’

Trix tugged on his sleeve. ‘You’re thinking about that space slug thing on the news, aren’t you?’

‘Patently, it’s arrant nonsense.’

‘No, don’t hedge. What do you really think?’

‘Leda’s environment is inimical to life. If a creature as evolutionarily advanced as a slug just happens to spring up there –’

‘– or slither up there –’

‘There’s unquestionably trickery afoot. So who’s playing the tricks, Trix?’

She spared him a brief glower. ‘The ferret’s lot are the obvious candidates. Those chumps you and Fitz got mistaken for, the Old Preservers.’ She shrugged. ‘But I suppose it could be anyone. Out for a bit of notoriety, or to get back at Halcyon.’

‘Or at Falsh. I wonder if Fitz could have had anything to do with it?’ The Doctor smiled fondly. ‘He’s a very resourceful boy.’

‘He’ll be all grown up if we don’t get to him soon,’ said Trix pointedly. ‘We can’t just hang around here. We should go to Callisto and find him. If Halcyon’s there, Fitz must be too.’

‘Aren’t you forgetting the evidence we need?’

‘Aren’t you?’

‘I’m still working on it!’ he protested. ‘I was setting something up when I got sidetracked by the TV! Look in here. . .’

The Doctor showed her into a side room. There was a small mountain of used plastic cups in one corner and a by-now-familiar keypad and holosphere in the other. The Doctor wagged a finger at it and the image rippled.

'What is it?'

'Those encrypted notes we took from the Institute. I'm trying to translate them.'

Trix frowned. 'What's wrong with the *Polar Lights*'s computers?'

'Billion-bit encryption doesn't break easily.' He grinned sheepishly. 'But sadly the *Polar Lights*'s computers did while I was cracking the first part of the key. So I thought I'd better finish the job on the builders' computer. But it's very slow.'

'Its owners are builders, what did you expect? It'll probably start working on it next Wednesday.'

'Quicker to do it myself,' he grumbled, pulling a pen and a scrap of paper from his trouser pocket. But a test scribble proved the pen a dud. He threw it into the pile of crumpled plastic. 'Do you have a pen?'

Trix felt inside her borrowed jacket. 'I have a pencil.' She passed it to him.

'Now, it's an asymmetric key cipher...' Absentmindedly the Doctor started knocking it against his knuckles. 'Assuming the private key is...' He trailed off, still tapping the pencil. Then he held his knuckles to his ear, and tapped again.

'What are you doing now?' Trix sighed.

'Shh.' He scowled at her, kept tapping, kept listening. Then he smiled. 'It's a good solid lead. A fine pencil.'

'Bit of an anachronism for the twenty-fifth century, isn't it?' said Trix. 'A pencil?'

The Doctor chomped on the blunt end. 'Probably denotes a certain seniority on the part of the owner, as well as an individual streak. I imagine pencils like this are very valuable.' He snapped the pencil in two. 'But not indestructible...'

'I think you're the one who's snapped,' said Trix.

'Probably.' Shrugging, he started scrawling on his piece of paper with the stub. 'Now, assuming this is the key word...'

Trix leaned back against the wall and slowly slumped to the floor. Her bum had barely rested for a moment when the Doctor's jubilant shout sent her jumping back up.

'P... A... I... N. Pain.'

'You certainly are,' she muttered.

'That's the word on this encrypted fragment.'

'I suppose the ultimate weapon's bound to cause a bit of pain, isn't it? Comes with the job description.'

Suddenly a powerful vibration shook the floor beneath them. Trix flattened herself against the wall in alarm. 'Not again!' she cried. 'What was that? Someone softening up this place for vaporisation?'

'I don't know,' said the Doctor, already haring from the room. 'We'd better see!'

Trix just about kept him in her sights as he ran all the way back to the TV room. 'Torvin? Where are you?'

He came staggering from further down the corridor: hair rumped, eyes wide. 'Your ship...'

The Doctor didn't wait to question him further, just dashed off again. Trix braced herself for a lengthy pursuit, though in fact he soon skittered to a stop, in front of a small inspection window set into the corridor.

Bits of the *Polar Lights* were floating past the window, spiralling lazily out into space.

'Goodbye, old girl,' whispered the Doctor fondly. 'Thanks for the journeys.'

'Just what did you *do* to those computers?' Trix demanded.

'Not guilty,' murmured the Doctor, jabbing a finger towards the window. 'Which is more than I suspect we can say for *that*.'

A chill ran through Trix. There was a ship outside, performing a lazy manoeuvre to bring it down to the docking pad. It resembled a dull silver arrow-head, absorbing the cold glare of the distant sun and the stars it shot through.

'That alien fish-thing,' she whispered. 'It's come for us.'

'Why destroy our ship now? Why not on Thebe?' The Doctor answered his own question. 'I suppose it must have known Thebe was about to get blitzed – that's why it shot off when it did.'

'Never mind that! What are we going to do?'

'Ask Torvin for a lift in his ship?' suggested the Doctor.

But even as he spoke, there was a blinding white flash from outside. Seconds later, more debris was choking the view.

He sighed. 'Perhaps not.'

'Torvin?' Trix was already haring back down the corridor. 'How long before your mates pick you up?'

'It's that creature from Thebe, isn't it?' Torvin looked grey and haunted. 'He wiped out my crew, now he's come back for me!'

'He's come here for some purpose, certainly.' The Doctor's voice behind her made her jump; she hadn't heard him approach. 'But yes, now he knows we're here, he'll almost certainly want to kill us. So! Perhaps we should prepare some sort of barricade? Buy ourselves some time.'

'This podule thing is under construction,' said Trix. 'Surely we can find some building materials or something to put against the docking hatch?'

'Good thinking. Torvin, go with her and search.'

'And what will *you* be doing?' Trix asked.

'No barricade is going to hold that creature for long,' he said gravely. 'We need a second line of defence.'

And he walked off, briskly.

'Come on then,' Trix told Torvin. 'We can't have long. It'll be docking any minute.'

'Escape capsule,' he said, standing his ground. 'Conference centre of bigwig business types – there's bound to be an escape capsule! I can make it to my friends in that.'

'Brilliant!' Then her elation faded. 'But this place isn't finished. What if it's not been built yet?'

'Hey, Investigator.' He gave her that goddamned ghost of a smile. It was cute and creepy all at once. 'There's only one way to find out.'

'But the barricade,' Trix said with a twinge of guilt. 'We have to slow it down, buy the Doctor time to think of something.'

'Oh. Yes, I guess you're right.' Torvin nodded. 'A distraction *could* be useful, however small.'

With that, he punched Trix full in the face.

She staggered backwards and fell to the floor, cracking her head. Her eyes closed, and she didn't know how long it was before they opened again.

'A million and two ways to lose it.' She propped herself up on her elbows. There was a dull, thick ache in her jaw and she could taste blood at the back of her throat. Of Torvin, predictably, there was no sign. Bastard maniac.

Heavy, familiar footfalls sounded through the plastic floor. The thing was coming.

With nothing to stop it, it had just walked right in.

Chapter Sixteen

It was close to eleven, and Tinya's menagerie was assembled in the stadium ground; not just the zoo animals, but journos and shutterbugs from across the galaxy, waiting for Halcyon: the star attraction.

She looked at the wild animals. There were hundreds of them, no expense spared – with the size of the arena, anything less would have looked lost. And this was about wonder. For wonder, you needed scale.

It was a good selection – big grey things with tusks, flapping ears and long noses, side by side with big catlike animals, all stripes or spots and large teeth, bears, birds, fat snakes... Their keepers circled about the creatures warily with force wands. The animals had been doped, of course, so they weren't moving about much, and the really dangerous ones were in invisible force cages. That was doubtless the way everyone preferred it.

Her wristpad chimed, and she looked to see who was calling. She'd already heard from a resentful Pent Central representative; Falsh's team had been granted access to the space slug on the President's personal say-so. They were converting a shed in the newly appropriated industrial park into a presentable little facility. Perfect. Now Falsh could disappear happily off into orbit on his oh-so-secret business... and leave her free to go about hers.

An image of Halcyon appeared on the tiny screen. He didn't bother with pleasantries.

'I won't be coming to your press-op.'

'Oh?' She raised her eyebrows. 'Did Roddle tell you –'

'Roddle and Sook have related the details to me.'

'I think it's in the best interests of everyone –'

'I think it's a ghastly idea and not one I wish to be associated with at this time.'

'I see.' Tinya's enhanced cheekbones made it so much easier to hang a smile on her face. 'Well, thank you for letting me know. But I'm having the side stores here converted to a holding area. At the very least,' she said, allowing her voice to harden a touch, 'they will make good filler for tonight's vidcast while we await a final decision on the demolition.' She paused. 'I trust you will be present for vidcast rehearsals this evening?'

'Oh, yes.' He smiled thinly. 'The vidcast shall be going ahead, never fear.'

'I'll inform Falsh.'

'Do as you will. Until later, then...'

The screen cut out. Tinya looked at the blank image thoughtfully. She well recognised the look of someone with a winning trick up his sleeve; she'd rarely seen him so self-assured. She sighed. One more thing to keep tabs on...

In the meantime, really, Halcyon's no-show wasn't such a bad thing. It would simply fuel speculation about the nature of the vidcast tonight, tantalise press and public alike. At least he was doing the vidcast. That was good. There'd be a massive audience here, almost a million. All of them led here by the promise of the greatest spectacle ever witnessed...

And that was exactly what they'd get.

She checked the time. Better get moving. She had important visitors arriving soon.

'If I could have your attention, everyone?' She smiled as she turned to address the thronging press. 'There's been a slight change of plan...'

The time was approaching. Falsh reckoned the Agent would arrive at the podule well ahead of the planned rendezvous. It had told him it would be prepared for treachery.

Falsh smiled. 'You have no idea.'

Here on the ship he had the proper equipment to check up on the thing. He tweaked some controls on the new device with satisfaction. The boys had done well. Now he'd cleared orbit, there was no risk of signal chatter from Callisto's burgeoning industries interfering with the wavelengths. He set his ship on a direct course for the podule. He'd be there within a couple of hours.

'It's gonna work,' he told himself hoarsely, placing the translation visor over his eyes. A grainy image slowly resolved on the bubblescreen before him. It's gonna...'

He blinked.

'Him?'

Trix found the Doctor in the largest room in the place, with the best and biggest view. Somehow she'd hoped he'd have pulled off a one-man A-Team, and rigged up a bazooka from bric-a-brac lying around the place. But it seemed *he* was the one lying around, sprawled on the floor beside an eerily glowing wall. Had Torvin attacked him too? Was he –

'Doctor,' she began slowly, 'if you're dead –'

'Dead?' He craned his neck to look up at her. 'No. Looking for a trigger point – or some form of start-up mechanism, anyway.'

Her head hurt too much to try to decipher what he was banging on about.

'How'd you get on?' He sat up properly, suddenly concerned. 'And what happened to your face? Where's Torvin?'

Trix was distracted for a moment by a gleaming point of silver light swooshing away from the podule, dwindling to star-size and then swallowed up by the blackness. 'There he goes,' she said. 'He didn't like your plan with the barricade. Thought he'd find an escape capsule instead.' She stared out into space. 'He's bailed out on us.'

'Escape capsule!' The Doctor smacked his palm against his forehead. 'I wish I'd thought of that.' He jumped up. 'Perhaps we should go and look for another.'

'Too late,' said Trix woozily. 'Forgot to say. That thing's coming. Coming this way.'

'Ah.' The Doctor crossed to the big boardroom table that dominated the room. It was actually not plastic – teak or something. 'Help me with this. Perhaps we can block the doorway.'

'Then what?'

'Try to reason with the alien.'

Trix groaned as she gripped the side of the table and heaved with all her strength. 'That's our plan? Talk to it nicely and hope it goes away?'

The heavy menacing footfalls sounded again from outside.

'Hide!' hissed the Doctor.

They both ducked under the table.

The footfalls stopped outside.

Then the creature stalked inside the boardroom.

Trix held her breath and shut her eyes for horrible, agonising seconds that seemed to stretch on forever.

She heard a hiss, and felt a waft of fishy breath over her face.

Her eyes snapped back open to find the alien crouched beside the table, staring in. It pulled out its stubby gun and pushed it into her hair.

Falsh clapped his hands. The Agent had arrived and the agitators were waiting for him. It was all kicking off in there now. He wasn't sure quite *how* three of his problems had come together so obligingly to be dealt with. . .

But now he could begin.

Falsh stabbed a finger at the virtual switch and got things rolling.

The Doctor kicked out with his foot, knocked the alien's gun hand away. A blast fired off, incinerating one of the antique chairs close beside her. Then Trix felt herself being hauled from beneath the table, the Doctor's hands under her arms.

The alien had jumped up, was bringing its gun to bear on them again. 'Down!' the Doctor cried, diving to the floor.

But Trix was already running for the door. Maybe there was another escape capsule. They could shove it in and send it away. Or if it killed the Doctor then Trix could jump ship herself –

She stopped. She couldn't see properly, strange patterns were shrouding her sight. Unearthly colours, distorted shapes she couldn't even begin to describe, crowded in on her vision.

'Doctor?' she called.

Trix heard heavy footsteps staggering closer. She got on her hands and knees, tried to crawl away, but cracked her skull on the wall. The patterns were engulfing her now, reaching in, filling the dark sockets behind her eyes and swirling through her mind. The alien was coming closer but it was all right, here in the bright darkness with the colours, and the shapes, you could watch them like big cotton wool clouds blowing past a sunset. You could lose yourself in them and it was all right to lose yourself in them and...

Falsh stared through the translation visor at the three figures in the room, stopped in their tracks, like statues. He took a long, gloating look.

In an hour, he'd have them all.

He pulled off the visor. The room was starting to spin about him, and he was feeling kind of sick. He'd been warned not to wear the thing too long, but he'd have to have a word with the boys about fixing that up. Have them work on the resolution too. And that stupid light that flashed on and off when the receiver was within range of a signal. That was needlessly retro.

Falsh tore open the sterile solution they'd given him and dipped his fingers inside. The tips tingled in the cool liquid.

Slowly the flickering, pulsating paint began to ebb away into the solution, leaving bright little trails and sparkles as it dissolved.

The Doctor was holding on.

His fingers were clamped around the thick wood of the table, so hard he could feel the bones getting ready to snap. That was good, that kept him focused, kept his mind a fraction ahead of the obliterating swirl of colour.

He was holding on to the thought that Trix was still alive, and she needed him to get her out of this. And he was holding on to Fitz, poor stranded Fitz who had to be in heaven-knew-what kind of trouble by now.

He was damned if he was going to let either of them go.

Slowly, the colours started to drain away, like someone had pulled out a plug from behind his eyes. He fought against the flow, designed, he knew, to wash him away into helpless darkness. He was holding on.

And finally he could open his eyes and trust what they saw.

The alien was right in front of him, its cold, heavy-set face inches from his own. It was waxen, a statue, robbed of its will. Welts in the cheeks, dark blood trickling from the gills suggested it had harmed itself, fighting to hold on to consciousness. But its dead fish-eyes surveyed him sadly, the battle lost.

But a battle against what? The Doctor rubbed his eyes – they felt sweaty, itchy, like someone was brushing the back of them with a feather – and looked for Trix. She was slumped against the door, eyes wide. The walls had quietened back down to slow, glowing patterns now they'd shown what they could really do.

'P-A-I-N,' the Doctor breathed. 'Dots the eyes. Then cross the T.'

He looked at the blank paint tins and wondered. Was there some sentient energy in the paint with the power to control minds? Was that the ultimate weapon? It had been there, of course, glittering like the riming ice at the Institute, blackened by the same blast that had wiped out whatever experiment had taken place there...

'So what are you doing here in a partially constructed luxury podule, I wonder?' said the Doctor.

'I came to meet Falsh,' the alien replied sluggishly, as if the question had been addressed to him. 'This is our rendezvous point.'

The Doctor blinked. 'Is it indeed?'

'Yes,' it rasped. 'I suspected you of being representatives of rival concerns and sought to eliminate you.'

'That's extremely candid of you.' The Doctor snapped his fingers in front of its face. Nothing. 'Who are you, exactly?'

'I represent the Icthal. We invested in Falsh's Weapons Research Institute on Carme. We sought to purchase a weapon with sufficient destructive capability to protect our sector of the galaxy from further human expansion.'

'What form was this weapon going to take?'

'Unknown.'

'But with a serious destructive capability...' the Doctor mused. It couldn't be the paint, then, if that simply exercised a form of mental control over whoever was watching, leaving its admirers open to suggestion. 'So. You believe Falsh is holding out on you?'

'He insists the weapon is destroyed. We do not believe him.' The chilling voice was entirely free of emotion. 'We believe he seeks to sell the weapon to other powers for greater profits.'

'Paranoid. But probably right.' A thought struck him. 'Did you have any dealings with Arnauld Klimt, the director at the Institute?'

'No.'

‘Oh well. Just a thought.’ He looked at the alien. ‘Now then, I think I’ll tell you a thing or two...’

The Ichthal slowly cocked its head to one side.

Fitz was trailing Tinya through the labyrinthine passages of the stadium. He’d spied on her throughout her failed photocall from a safe distance – distance was one thing this place didn’t lack in the slightest. If Halcyon had turned up, Fitz would have seized the moment and confronted Tinya – *what have you done with my mates?* As it was, Halcyon hadn’t and Fitz had bottled it.

So now he was following her – Fitz Krei, Private Eye – in the hope of finding her lair. In the hope it would be the very place where the Doctor and Trix were locked up (they weren’t dead. No way were they dead). In the hope he might be able to get a signed statement from Halcyon saying Fitz was a genius artist, not to be harmed in any way and to be aided in the pursuit of his goals – the safe return of his friends.

Typically, the plan went all to hell when two little Chinese types with chefs’ hats came rushing out from a corridor and blocked his path, yelling and screaming.

‘They’re coming for us!’ one wailed.

‘Help us, help us,’ gabbled the other.

‘What is it?’ said Fitz, nervously.

‘Chiggocks!’ shouted the first.

Fitz saw the two men were being implacably pursued by a strange, bald animal. Headless, toothless, it shuffled along at quite a lick on its four trotters, its big bull’s bum wiggling, its plucked chicken body pale and puckered.

‘Where’d it come from,’ asked Fitz, ‘the zoo?’

‘The pantry!’ said the first chef. ‘It was supposed to walk into the oven but it’s trashed the kitchen instead!’

‘Now it wants to get us!’ added the second.

The chiggock quickened its pace. One of the chefs tried to hide behind Fitz. The animal piled into Fitz’s legs, knocking his feet from under him. He fell to the floor, and the chef tumbled down with him.

‘Get off me!’ Fitz yelled, both to the bizarre animal and the floundering chef. ‘This is daft, can’t you get it back in its cage or something?’

‘No cage,’ babbled the chef still standing. ‘No brain, no feelings, no trouble. No cage!’

The untamed chiggock wasn’t done. It delivered a cheeky kick to Fitz’s shin.

‘Why me? I wasn’t trying to cook you!’ Fitz said crossly. ‘Ow!’ The thing got him again. Fitz got hastily to his feet. The chiggock reared up on its hind legs and put two trotters around his thigh.

‘Get it off me!’ he protested, trying to shake his leg free.

One of the chefs got on the thing's back, trying to restrain it. He wound up riding it like a rodeo star as it backed away from Fitz and headed back towards the kitchen, its unwilling rider yelling for help, his mate scurrying off after it.

Fitz winced at the sound of a whole load of pots and pans crashing down from somewhere on high.

'Not my problem,' he told himself, and continued his pursuit of Tinya, with a slight limp.

Where the hell was she now? Clearly all the clamour had failed to bring her running. He'd lost her. Lost his best chance so far of getting back the Doctor and Trix.

'Fab,' he muttered, slapping his hand miserably against the wall. He felt lonely and forgotten, a little man in a big, alien world. Sook had gone all weird on him. And while Halcyon should have been going to pieces, he had sounded oddly assured on Tinya's little wrist gadget. . .

At least he had the TARDIS. Maybe he would go there now, sit in comforting surroundings and think out what he could do. . .

He felt for the key in his breast pocket.

It wasn't there.

He'd lost it. Must have fallen out when he'd fallen in that fight with the chigcock back in the corridor. . .

He retraced his steps. He could tell by the scuffmarks on the white tiles that this was where it had happened. No key. There was still a lot of clunking and clonking going on in the kitchen. Maybe one of the chefs had picked it up.

'Hello?' he called, moving cautiously along the passage. 'Got that thing under control? Or under the grill, for that matter?'

The short answer was no.

Fitz stared in horror at the carnage in the kitchen. One of the chefs was sitting up on a worktop, knees bunched up to his chest, rocking back and forth in a state of shock beside a big pan that had caught fire. The orange flames were licking higher and higher.

His mate was lying on the floor. About ten chiggocks were gathered around the man's head. They were bringing their trotters down on it in a dull, mechanical motion, like his skull was a big nut they were trying to crack. From the bloody mess they'd made of his face, they weren't far off succeeding.

Fitz felt his stomach churn, turned and ran. He had to find someone. Had to get help.

A silver disc wafted gently out from a side corridor to his right. Maybe someone had wanted something lifting. He took off in the direction it had come from: the dressing rooms. One door stood ajar, and his heart leaped at the sound of voices close by.

'Are you satisfied now?' It was Sook! 'You've been inside it all along.'
And Halcyon! 'Then it's really not a trick?'

'You felt all around it. How else could you have travelled from the cargo hold to your dressing room if not inside it?'

'Thank God!' Fitz yelled as he kicked open the door. 'You've got to help me, there's been some kind of attack. . .'

He trailed off.

There was Sook, staring at him like the proverbial kid with her hand in the cookie jar.

There was the TARDIS. Put down – by a robot disc-magnet, he assumed – square in the middle of the opulent dressing room.

And there was Aristotle Halcyon, standing in the open TARDIS doorway.

Chapter Seventeen

‘Kreiner?’ Halcyon looked nervous, unsettled.

‘What’s going on?’ Fitz demanded, the shock of his discovery displacing the horror of the strange assault he’d just witnessed. He saw the TARDIS key protruding from the lock. Remembered the feel of Sook’s hand on his chest as she kissed him. How quickly she’d broken off, leaving him sat on the stage alone, a rejected fool.

He’d been done over, smooth as you like.

‘I understand now why you went to such lengths to reach me aboard the *Rapier*,’ said Halcyon. He smiled, stepped forwards, arms open wide as if to embrace Fitz. ‘And I respect you for wanting to prove your artistry to me with the PadPad, but really, you should simply have shown me your box! It’s extraordinary, it is genius... its very absurdity is beautiful, Kreiner.’

Fitz couldn’t take his eyes off Sook. ‘Thanks.’

‘Thanks to you, Kreiner, we shall all of us break free from Falsh’s petty embrace.’ Halcyon sounded almost evangelical. ‘And it will start tonight. We shall demonstrate the Endless Cupboard in front of an audience of billions across the Empire. This warping of spatial dimensions, it’s so staggering a concept... can you imagine the demand there’ll be for a product such as *this*?’

‘I don’t know what the hell is going on here,’ said Fitz, crossing to the TARDIS and pocketing the key. ‘But it can keep. We need help fast. There’s a man been trampled to death by a load of chiggock-things.’

Now Sook found it in herself to look at him. ‘A man’s been what?’

‘Killed! These chiggocks were trampling him.’

‘What kind of a joke is this?’ she spluttered. ‘Killer chiggocks?’

‘Oh, ha, ha, ha,’ Fitz shouted in her face. ‘Yeah, what could I know? Someone as stupid as me. Well maybe you should just see for –’

An alarm went off, a high-pitched piping. Fire alarm, maybe.

Fitz turned and stormed out, a big black pit in his stomach. It wasn’t hard to find his way back to the kitchens – thick smoke was belching out from the side corridor. He heard feeble screams – perhaps the chiggocks had moved on to the other chef.

A clatter of feet behind him made him turn. A squad of security guards had appeared in the main passage.

Their leader grabbed Fitz by the shoulder while her team pushed on into the kitchens. 'What happened?'

'Know what?' He caught the foul smell of burning hair mingled with a delicious, herby scent of roasted meat. 'I don't think you'll believe me.'

Impatiently she let him go and followed her men. Fitz stood, lost in thoughts as dark and hazy as the smoke curling around him. Sprinklers kicked in, tepid water raining down and soaking his new, space-age clothes.

Figured. It always rained on him.

Fitz was so busy splashing about in his shower of self-pity that he didn't notice Tinya sneak out from the dressing rooms behind him and creep away down the corridor.

Falsh arrived at the podule to find the charred wrecks of two spaceships in the docking bay beside the Agent's own. He didn't waste time wondering what had happened. Soon he would hear the facts from the fish's mouth.

In the meantime he was due a call to Callisto. 'Tinya,' he snapped. 'Progress.'

Seconds later her expectant face bubbled out of his wristpad. Weird trick of the light: her black hair looked sopping wet.

'Yes, Falsh, I hear you.' She knew better than to ask where he was. 'The R and D team are fully installed and assisting Pent Central. They have priority access passes, and one of the slugs for study.'

'Good. No later than four hours from now I want them to present their findings to whoever's in charge there, and copy in the President. The data they've been primed with is legitimate. It proves irrefutably that those creatures are not genuine, that they were created artificially.' She was dying to learn how he'd come by that data, he could tell, but she'd never dare to ask. 'Once Pent Central have that, the President should get things moving and we'll be all right. She won't want to leave her precious Halcyon out in the cold.'

'He's acting up,' Tinya reported. 'Didn't make the press-op.'

'I'll talk with him when I get back,' said Falsh. 'He'll be fine. Have a word with the network heads and give them my personal assurance we're go for tonight.'

'Check.'

'Get on to NewSystem too. Make sure they keep standing by.'

'Check.'

'I'll be back with you by six. Do anything you have to but get Halcyon to the stadium for rehearsals.'

'Check.'

He smiled. He said it out loud, and it happened, like a wish come true. There was magic in life; it was called money.

One venture had failed. The next he couldn't afford to.

'Falsh out.'

The bubblescreen popped and Tinya vanished.

Fitz had stomped and squelched away from the chilling kitchen scene and the water. He didn't know or much care where he was going, and ended up in the loading bay. For a long time he just stared at the nacelle of the *Rapier*. It looked like a huge hypodermic pricking this plastic artery.

Then he became aware of Sook behind him.

'You were right about the chiggocks.'

'That makes me feel a whole lot better.'

'It's totally weird. They're bred brainless. They shouldn't be able to do anything.'

'I shouldn't be able to travel inside an "Endless Cupboard" but I do.' He snorted. 'Or rather I did.'

'Kreiner –'

'So that's how you converted Halcyon away from the axis of evil, huh?' He turned on her, accusingly. 'Gave him a new toy to play with.'

'I was thinking of you!'

'Of me?'

'You said that this Doctor, he's the only one who knows how this TARDIS thing works, right?' Sook shrugged. 'Well, Halcyon doesn't know it can travel. It's the dimensional interface that has him hooked.'

'You're confusing me with someone who gives a stuff.'

'You care about your friends,' said Sook firmly. 'Now Halcyon's got a real incentive to get them out of Falsh's custody, *whatever* else is going on. If the Doctor shares the secrets of how to fit the big box inside the little one with Halcyon –'

'He won't.'

'Why not? With Halcyon's name behind it he'll make a dimensionally transcendental shedload of money from mass production of those things –'

'He doesn't care about money!'

'This deal would be a good thing,' she said quietly. 'Like Halcytone is a good thing.' She looked at him hopefully. 'Life enhancing! Nondestructive profit making, not taking away, not cheating.'

'So, what, he'll abandon blowing up half the solar system now he thinks he can flog Endless Cupboards off a production line?'

'He's accepted the moratorium on the demolition,' said Sook. 'I can go on working on him, make him see that his future lies –'

'And you say Falsh has corrupted him!' he laughed. 'You've convinced yourself that if he goes for the money and doesn't pretend it's for any higher motive, then it's all right.'

'I couldn't just betray him!' she shouted.

'Oh yeah? So why'd you ever talk to Gaws and Mildrid in the first place?' She didn't answer him.

'Why didn't you just ask me for the key, Sook? Come to me and try to explain all this to me then.' Fitz's voice softened. 'Why make me think you. . .'

'Listen. It's not as simple as just taking Halcyon to your blue box and showing him how amazing it is,' she said wearily. 'It has to be presented to him in a certain way. . .'

'Bollocks. You just didn't think I'd agree, so you helped yourself.'

'I thought for the chance to save your friends it was worth –'

'Stop bringing them into this! For your information, Halcyon was going to speak up for me against Falsh, he said so. That's how I was going to get my friends back – with his support. But you know what? I was worried your Old Preserver mates would set him off on one, queer my pitch. So I thought about telling Halcyon you were involved with old Gaws and Mildrid. I did, I thought about it and I might well have done it.' He took a few petulant paces away and turned his back on her again. 'Except you told me I could trust you. And like the berk I am, I believed you.'

She came up behind him. 'Is it really so much to ask of your friend? His freedom. . . his life. . . in exchange for the principles of how that box works?'

'The Doctor would never do it, Sook,' said Fitz. 'Really.'

'Well. Seems to me all this talk is academic,' said Sook – the Sook of old: reasonable, practical, a little miserable at heart. 'Let's think short term. You can *tell* Halcyon that the Doctor will agree to sharing his big secret, and Halcyon will get him back for you. No more effort on your part.'

Fitz didn't answer.

'We can worry about everything else later.' She took another step closer to him. 'If the Doctor won't share, well. . . You can take off and fade away in your precious box, can't you?'

'What about you?' he said quietly.

'You can leave us to muddle our way through our own moral minefields.' Now she reached out to touch his shoulder. 'You're not really so cross about me stealing a kiss, are you Kreiner?'

He looked into her eyes. 'If you steal something, you should put it back.'

She stood on tip-toes, leaned up and kissed him, open-mouthed, just for a few seconds.

Then she turned and headed back towards the stadium. 'I'll tell Halcyon you agree. We'll let him talk to Falsh about it. I'll let you know what happens.'

Fitz watched her go, and found himself thinking about Trix. About the way she could wrap him around her finger.

Dimly, he suspected he'd been done over again. But brightly, he decided not to worry about it for now.

Falsh found himself actually whistling as he walked along the deserted corridors. He'd clear up this mess, get the Agent off his back for good. Then he'd see that the demolition of the Jovian moons proceeded as planned. That would usher in a new age, with the solar system a viable concern once more. Big business would lead the way, and smaller commerce would drag along in its wake.

The President would probably give him a medal for services to the Empire. He'd always wanted to get a medal.

He reached the double doors to the main conference room. Smiling to himself, Falsh went through.

The woman was in the doorway, and he almost fell over her. The agitator. Her friend was sprawled on the ground beside the flickering, pulsating wall. But they would keep; the Agent was his first priority. It was standing; twitching as if itching to move, dried blood caking its broad, white face, eyes dark and dull.

'Greetings, schmuck,' said Falsh casually. 'I want you to listen carefully to what I'm going to say. You're going to leave in your ship and go back to your people. You're going to tell them that Robart Falsh has been keeping nothing from them. You will exonerate me from any and all blame. You will believe all I have told you previously, and will actually recall evidence I have shown you that backs it up...'

He went on into the details. The Agent stared blankly at him, twitching a little now and again.

'Your departure time is thirty minutes from now. You shall remember meeting me here, and seeing the evidence I have described. You shall accept my offer of generous compensation for your lost investment.' He smiled. 'We shan't meet again.'

Now he turned his attention to the Doctor, lying unconscious on the floor. He prodded him with his foot. 'Who are you?'

The agitator's voice was high and ghostly: 'I am the Doctor.'

'Who do you work for?'

'The League...'

'League? What league?'

'The League... Against... Will-Sapping Nanotechnology.'

Falsh was just processing that when the Doctor sprang into life. He grabbed Falsh by both shoulders and shoved him over. By the time Falsh had scrambled

back up, the Doctor was training the Agent's gun on him.

No! he wanted to yell.

'Give me that gun,' Falsh hissed.

The Doctor seemed to consider this. Then he shook his head. 'No, I don't think so.'

'How did you resist the paint?'

'Perhaps I'm more of a wallpaper man. Or maybe it's just that I can't see violet.' The Doctor shrugged. 'But enough of me. We've been hearing so much about you! We've learned all sorts of fascinating things about the Institute, your weapons research, the mining facility on Thebe...'

'Who *are* you?' Falsh hissed.

'Blackmailers in training. We want our friend Fitz Kreiner back. You remember Fitz, of course?'

Falsh said nothing.

'Last seen hiding under one of those.' The Doctor fired the gun at the table. A huge scorch tore through the teak.

Falsh spluttered on a thick squall of black woodsmoke. 'I don't know where he is.'

'Are you sure? We've got enough evidence to bury you, Falsh.' He smiled. 'Although since you're here, and I have the gun, we could always try it for real.' He fired the gun again, this time scorching the floor at Falsh's feet. 'So I repeat: where is he?'

'I'm telling you, I don't know!' Falsh snapped. 'I thought he left the station with you.'

The Doctor looked stern, apparently considering. Then he sighed, deflated. 'All right. Well, I only hope Aristotle Halcyon will prove more helpful.'

'Halcyon?'

'He took away my TARDIS. Large blue box, about so big...' He gestured wildly with the gun, and Falsh did his level best not to wince. 'You've not seen it? Ah, well. Perhaps you could arrange an audience for us so I could ask him myself. Some mercury would be nice too.'

'Perhaps *you* could go to hell.'

'If hell is other people, I've a suspicion I'm already there.'

'Sartre also said that man was condemned to be free.' Falsh nodded to the gun meaningfully.

'Some of us are more free than others.' The Doctor smiled. 'Now that you've done what you came here to do, I suggest we leave for your ship and continue the conversation there. Once I've woken my friend from the influence of your clever colour scheme. Halcytone, isn't it? With one or two improvements made to the basic design by the distributors, I should imagine...'

'How *did* you break its hold?' Falsh demanded.

‘With difficulty,’ the Doctor confessed. ‘That’s quite a powerful weapon you have there. Developed at the Institute, I take it?’

‘I’m telling you nothing.’

‘What, nothing at all? Even though I’ve got a gun?’

Falsh righted an overturned chair and sat down in it.

‘All right. I’ll just take your ship myself, and leave you locked in here with your Icthal friend.’ The Doctor backed away to the door, still covering Falsh with the gun. He stooped and picked up the girl with his free arm. ‘I think you told it to leave in thirty minutes, didn’t you? I wonder if its seeing you here will make any difference to those posthypnotic suggestions you made. . .’

The door opened, and he ducked back through it. Once it slid smoothly back across, a high-pitched whirr sounded from the other side.

‘That was just me fusing the door controls,’ the Doctor called. ‘I’ll pop back later to see if you’ve changed your mind. . .’

Shaking with rage, Falsh sat down again. Behind him the Agent loomed like some malevolent statue; a memorial statue, perhaps, to Arnauld Klimt.

‘Klimt, you son of a *bitch*,’ Falsh cursed, and he went on cursing as the minutes ticked away.

Chapter Eighteen

Tinya was walking across town to the industrial park, drying off slowly in the warmth of the fake sunshine.

Tourists swarmed the sidewalks, spilling in and out of diners and galleries and holoshows and arcades. Music blared, parents yelled, kids screamed. The roadways were seemingly solid with vehicles; their antigravs thrummed in Tinya's ears, blew hot air about her ankles. Bars and restaurants, rushed into opening for just this reason, were full to overflowing. Security squads kept watchful eyes as they fended off requests for directions and occasional aggro from passers-by.

This was probably the most people Callisto had seen in over a century, and the city was barely coping. Tinya decided she could feel justifiably proud of herself. She'd promoted this event well. It had caught the public's imagination in a way few things did these days; nothing had caused such a stir since Halcytone. She was responsible, in her own small way, for restoring the wonder.

Of course, there were always people poised to hijack an event like this; opportunists setting up stalls on unguarded corners, flogging endless cash-in crap. She noted now that moonrock and Halcyon pennants had been subsumed by hastily prepared cuddly space slugs, T-shirts and jackets, scarves and stickers and ceramics – stupid souvenirs sold to stupid people. There was no shortage of volunteers to buy; disorderly queues were springing up practically everywhere you looked.

She made slow but steady progress, but the crowds didn't relent. Self-appointed experts hotly disputed the sense of a space slug in pavement cafés. Some suspected Halcyon had arranged the slugs himself as a joke on the Old Preservers. The OPs themselves were out in force; Tinya soon found out that the traffic was being disrupted by a march of protestors through the city, holoplacards screaming neon slogans in the air STOP SENSELESS DESTRUCTION... FOUR BILLION YEARS OF HERITAGE... Fathers eyed their stadium tickets nervously and assured their families the show would go ahead tonight, whatever happened.

She supposed everything would just keep on building towards the big moment tonight.

Halcyon was obviously hedging his bets. He was up to something, and

it had something to do with the mysterious big blue box; from what she'd overheard in the dressing rooms, it was supposedly bigger on the inside than on the outside, as well as being able to form itself out of thin air. He'd had it all the time, the sly bastard, and the agitator, Fitz, hadn't seemed happy about it. . .

There was a sudden furore as a crowd of people tumbled out of a restaurant, exchanging angry words with the manager. Something about a couple of chiggocks escaping the kitchen and running out into the dining area, knocking over chairs and tables. . . Onlookers started joking about the state of Callisto's kitchens if even the chiggocks wanted out. Apparently there was a place over on so-and-so street that had the same problem. Was that the diner on wherever? No, that was somewhere else, said a tanned old tourist sagely, but they'd had a chigcock escape there too at lunchtime. . .

Tinya moved on, shaking her head. Once she'd dealt with her current, pressing business, she would have to give that blue box some serious thought. It might present some extremely interesting opportunities.

Trix saw the light some way off. She knew she was supposed to make for it. The voice in her head was telling her.

It was the Doctor's voice.

What the hell was he doing in her head?

She started to peg it like billy-o for the light. She wasn't having him poking about in there. She needed to get him back on the outside where he belonged, soonest. The light was near now, and it was white, almost textured, glowing softly, and now she was there, she –

It was like rising up out of a bath when you've been holding your head under, submerged in weird echoey silence – a rush of sound and sensation. Happily she wasn't naked. Unhappily this wasn't her bathroom.

The image of the alien swirled round her head like thick, scalding water. 'Get it away from me!' she shouted.

'It's all right, it's taken care of.'

She stared around, momentarily panicked. The Doctor was kneeling on the floor in front of her, holding her up. Her head was pounding, stale blood souring the back of her throat.

'What happened?' she hissed, batting away the Doctor's hands from her shoulders.

'I've brought you back round. Finally.' He looked at her, concerned. 'You were put into a state of sensory torpor. Made malleable and primed for hypnotic suggestion.'

'Why?'

'Because that's what this Halcytone paint can do.'

‘Why?’

‘Don’t ask me.’

She paused. ‘Why?’

‘Because I’ve got Falsh locked up in there; you can ask *him*.’

‘Wow. That should improve the quality of our evidence.’ Her head felt like it was splitting open, and she closed her eyes. ‘Have you found out about Fitz?’

He grimaced. ‘Falsh isn’t being terribly talkative. And we need answers to a good many questions. Here.’ She opened her eyes as he pressed the alien’s gun into her hand. ‘You’ll probably be more convincing with this than I am.’

‘You’re very trusting,’ said Trix. ‘After what we’ve been put through I might be tempted to use it on him.’

‘That’s not the way,’ he said firmly. ‘Especially not here. Kill Falsh and we lose our access to Halcyon, NewSystem Deconstruction –’

‘– and Fitz and the TARDIS, I know, I know.’ She sighed. ‘I wasn’t thinking of killing him, for God’s sake. . . Maybe just a flesh wound or two.’

‘Come on. Let’s go and see if he’s feeling more co-operative. I’ve got him locked up with our alien friend, and I’d rather we were gone before it wakes up. I have a feeling it’s going to be in a very funny mood. . .’

Fitz and Sook made their way through the hordes thronging the Callisto streets.

‘It’s like a carnival!’ laughed Fitz. ‘All these people, so happy. . . and all because they think a load of rocks are going to be blown sky high!’

‘Nothing like a bit of carnage to make people perk up,’ said Sook drily. ‘Jeez. Just four hours to go.’

‘And here we are sneaking off!’ He looked at her hopefully. ‘So what’s so secret you couldn’t talk to me about it in the stadium? News from Halcyon?’

‘No,’ she said. ‘Halcyon’s been trying to get hold of Falsh, but he doesn’t answer.’

‘And no sign of Tinya?’

‘None. But keep your eyes peeled for Roddle. He’s taken that stupid flyer of his out for a spin around Callisto City.’

‘Sook, what *are* we doing here?’

‘Ask them,’ she said, gesturing to the café opposite.

Gaws and Mildrid were sat beneath a plastic parasol, sipping from bright beakers, smug smiles on their faces.

‘You didn’t need *me*, you needed an escort,’ Fitz complained. But she just smiled at him in a way that said, *it ain’t necessarily so*, and he let it pass.

‘My dears!’ said Mildrid merrily when she saw them. ‘Haven’t we done well!’ She got up and pulled out a chair for Fitz to sit next to her, while Gaws did the same for Sook.

'It's just an endless round of press for me,' said Gaws brightly.

'For the OPs,' Mildrid reminded him.

'Sixteen news-cats want interviews,' he laughed. 'I'm famous!'

'We couldn't have asked for a better platform, could we,' said Mildrid, fixing him with a stern look. 'Will you be having some food, dears?' She passed round some menus. 'Apparently the chigcock's off.'

Fitz looked grimly at Sook. 'If it wasn't, I soon would be.'

They ordered some drinks from a harassed-looking waiter, then Sook dived straight in.

'So you got the slugs to Leda ahead of schedule. Make my life easy, why don't you?'

'Our source gave me the green light sooner than expected,' said Gaws, unapologetically. 'And it took less time than I thought to run the blockade.'

'You were awfully brave, Gaws,' said Mildrid thoughtfully. 'Perhaps I should do your interviews with you, I could tell them that!'

'They *know* that, Mildrid.'

Sook interrupted. 'The plan was that the news should break *just* before the vidcast. So we'd be taken off and that would have been that!'

'I had to signal the news-sats at once before NewSystem could move me on,' said Gaws. 'Come on, Sook – that aside, it's worked like a dream! The demolition's off!'

'Where did these slugs come from, anyway?' Fitz asked.

Gaws finished the last of his tea. 'I can't reveal my sources, Kreiner. Now, tell me, Sook, how is Halcyon planning to fill his vidcast now?'

'Nothing you need worry about,' said Sook with only the briefest of glances at Fitz. 'Nothing destructive.'

'We'll trust you on that,' Mildrid muttered into her tea. 'And you'll be able to get Gaws into the stadium as unexpected star guest?'

'I'll arrange for an access door in the hangar to be opened,' Sook said. 'Number seven. The rest is down to you.'

Mildrid nodded. 'Fair enough.'

'Look!' cried Gaws, pointing into the street. 'That little girl's T-shirt. *God save our space slugs!* She was brought here to witness destruction, now she's telling others to preserve life!'

'Amazing how quickly you can change a mind, isn't it?' said Sook quietly.

'And every one of those moons could be a viable slug habitat,' chortled Gaws. 'The Trust will have legal grounds to sequester the lot.'

'Provided the slugs pass the life-test,' Mildrid pointed out. 'And provided we can get the funding.'

'Of course we'll get the funding! I'll launch an appeal in my interviews!'

'Excuse me.' Looking slightly sick, Sook disappeared off inside the bustling restaurant.

Using the loos, Fitz supposed. He smiled around a little self-consciously at Gaws and Mildrid.

'How's your investigation going, Kreiner?' asked Mildrid.

'I'm ready to confront Falsh any time now,' he said.

'You know a lot about us,' Gaws noted. 'None of which will make it into your finished report, I trust.'

'Course not,' said Fitz. 'We're all on the same side, aren't we?'

'It wouldn't be the first time Falsh has bribed people into switching.'

'Oh, use your eyes, Gaws,' said Mildrid. 'He likes the girl! He must know we can land her in hot water anytime we choose.'

Fitz frowned. 'Wanna bet? Halcyon thinks she's indispensable,' he said defensively. 'I don't reckon you could change that.'

'Perhaps we could if he ever found out how Sook turned over her parents to the lawmakers for trying to evade a senility termination order,' suggested Mildrid.

Fitz's throat dried up.

'Her academy was an Empire Trust building on Nereid,' added Gaws confidentially. 'She invited her parents to her graduation from the Eight Mansions school. The authorities were waiting for them.'

'An account of the whole business was kept in the archives. We found it, and presto.' Mildrid smiled benignly. 'Another drink?'

'No thanks,' said Fitz.

Sook came out again after a short while and took her seat. No one was saying a word. Fitz couldn't look at her.

'Who died?' she said.

I wish I didn't know, he thought.

Trix jabbed the gun in Falsh's back to propel him forwards as they reached the cockpit of his flyer, the *Polar Aurora*. It was more or less identical to the *Polar Lights*, and its stylish interior was a welcome change from the bare white of the unfinished podule.

'Now then,' said the Doctor, plonking himself in the pilot's seat. 'I imagine you'll have priority clearance through to Callisto. They've probably saved you a parking spot right next to your *decoratiste* diva, Mr Halcyon.'

Falsh said nothing. He'd stuck to silence since they'd let him out of the conference room, after a brief and fruitless attempt at bribery.

'Hey! What's this?' The Doctor held up some kind of weird visor perched on top of a small computer unit. 'There wasn't one of these on the *Polar Lights*.'

Falsh looked away in silence.

'Course already computed, is it?' The Doctor put down the visor set and examined the computer. 'It's such a bore, hacking through the command protocols. Are you going to instruct the computer to get us moving?'

Still, Falsh said nothing.

Trix placed the gun to his head. 'Pretty please?'

Falsh exhaled heavily. 'Online. Commence programmed journey.'

The computer seemed to sigh in sympathy as the ship's engines fired up. 'Message received from Research and Development Unit on Callisto. Would you like me to play it?'

'Play it, Falsh,' suggested the Doctor. 'If she can stand it, I can.'

'Play it,' Trix agreed. 'Then we'll round up the usual suspects.' She nudged the oily gun barrel against Falsh's temple.

'All right,' said Falsh, each syllable said with unconscionable suffering.

A keen-looking, heavy-set woman in her forties appeared in a large bubble-screen, her wild red hair clipped up in a tangled ponytail.

'Falsh, it's Phaedra.' She spoke with a slight American accent, easy and assured. 'We've taken the slug apart, it is artificial. Klimt's work all right – same genetic styling you have on file.'

'Klimt's?' echoed Trix, but the Doctor shushed her furiously.

'Trouble is. . .' A stray red lock fell over one green eye, and Phaedra blew it away. 'The damned thing meets all criteria needed to be classed as a genuine new species, even if it was created artificially. Legally it's entitled to its own biosphere – and Leda becomes the natural choice by default because that's where it was found. But OP lawyers could argue that every other moon in the sky's just as viable – this thing can live anywhere.' She shrugged. 'Klimt did a good job. Maybe we can fake some pseudolife evidence to fool Pent Cent short term and get nuking, but it's looking unlikely.' A young bloke showed her some kind of readout. 'Right,' she told him. 'Falsh – that capsule you sent from the podule. . . The authorisation codes are going through Pent Cent now. They'll let us know if and when we can land it. You've got some nerve, we're only just tolerated on their turf as it is. What are you springing on us now? We need to talk, so call me, check? Phaedra out.'

The bubble popped. Falsh's head sank forward into his chest.

'Looks like Torvin's coming their way,' Trix observed. 'His friends have missed their chance.'

The Doctor nodded. 'Could be embarrassing for you, Falsh; him being Blazar's chief supervisor and all.'

Falsh looked up at him sharply.

'Yeah,' said Trix. 'You didn't kill all of them.'

'He'll have quite a story to tell the authorities,' the Doctor observed. 'But right now it's your friend Phaedra's story I find interesting.'

'Yeah. So Klimt *made* those slug things?' said Trix uneasily. 'That means they're weapons, right?'

'What do you say, Falsh?' the Doctor enquired.

He smiled mirthlessly. 'I say, damn Klimt to hell.'

'Are they weapons? How do they work?'

Falsh didn't answer. Trix dug the gun barrel a little harder against his temple.

'Did you know what you were getting? How does the paint fit in?' The Doctor lifted the visor set. 'I think this allows you to use it as a spying device. And we witnessed for ourselves the way it can be used as a powerful hypnotic device.'

'But how does that square with space slugs, Falsh?' asked Trix. 'That paint is a tool, not a weapon, but how –'

'It's the only useful goddamned thing Klimt ever produced,' shouted Falsh. 'Billions and billions of dollars poured into that institute... and for what?'

The Doctor advanced on him. 'What do those slugs do?'

Falsh said nothing. He was sweating badly. The tip of the gun was making a bright point in his dark skin.

'Put that thing away, Trix,' said the Doctor curtly. 'Falsh, I'm not going to threaten you any longer. I really can't be bothered. And something tells me you *want* to talk about this.'

Falsh didn't react.

'Not easy, keeping the big, nasty secrets, is it?' the Doctor went on. 'The ones that eat a little of you away each day. The ones that nag and –'

'All right, I'll talk,' snapped Falsh. 'Anything rather than listen to this head-shrinking crap!'

The Doctor blinked, a little affronted. Trix smothered a smile.

'I'll talk on one condition. You let me put a call through to Phaedra.'

'I'll think about it,' said the Doctor.

'No call. No talk.'

'I've thought about it.' He rubbed his hands together like a gourmand before the feast. 'You're on.'

'You want to know what the slugs do?' Falsh gave a short, savage laugh. 'They do jack. They do nothing.' He laughed again, a savage, joyless sound. 'Absolutely nothing at all.'

Tinya breathed a sigh of relief as finally the crowds began to thin a little. There wasn't much in the way of attractions on the outskirts of town, and naturally no one realised that Pent Central had seconded the area for secret space-slug research.

Pent Cent security treated her like dirt. Falsh Industries' presence here was plainly endured under sufferance; they'd been allocated a small shed situated at the back of the compound, partitioned from the main hub of activity by a military checkpoint. The President might have wanted Falsh in on this, but the military didn't.

Once she'd made it unscathed through the leers and jeers of the squaddies at the checkpoint, Tinya walked on to the makeshift labworks. It was quiet and deserted, the rusted buildings like great tombstones. They had marked the end of one age; now they found themselves pressed into service to help usher in a new. She found the Falsh shed without difficulty: an escape capsule – a large, silver cylinder – was sat on the loading pad just outside, the distinctive Falsh brand picked out on its side in sparkling Halcytone.

Tinya marched up to the shed entrance and waved her passcard over the entry-panel. A desultory bleep told her she had no access. But a neat young man in a sterile mask swelled out of a bubblescreen, looking her over.

'Cinnamin Tinya, PR. Falsh Central Station,' she said primly. 'I got you in here.'

The young man raised his eyebrows, tugged down his mask and smiled. 'So we've got you to blame, huh?'

The door slid open and Tinya walked inside. She squinted – the light was brighter and harsher than the fake sunlight outside. Despite the glare, it was actually like walking into a freezer, the air-con rumbling out of an antiquated system high on the corrugated iron wall. A collection of workstations had been set up by the door, ringed in by portable equipment banks lining the wall. But most of the floorspace had been partitioned off and a sterile chamber erected – a diaphanous plastic tent suffused with light. Misshapen silhouettes loomed against the walls as staff milled about inside.

She waited for the man to come over to her. 'Where's Phaedra?'

He gestured to the sterile tent.

'Get her,' said Tinya. 'All right, everyone.' She dapped her hands, like a teacher bringing a kindergarten class into line. 'Gather round.'

A slim woman, anonymous in headscarf and sterile mask, emerged from the sterile tent. She freed her red hair from the scarf and looked at Tinya with a mixture of irritation and expectancy. This must be Phaedra. Her staff, all dressed identically, bobbed behind her like shadows.

'You've come to open the escape capsule,' Phaedra surmised.

'It won't open?' Tinya frowned.

'Requires code override.' She shrugged. 'I haven't the time or the manpower to spare, lady. Whoever Falsh put inside, they can stay there and rot for all I care.'

'Falsh put them inside?'

‘Turns out the capsule was transmitting his personal recognition codes. Once we set the beacon it touched down on automatic.’

‘Pent Cent gave you no trouble admitting it to land?’

She shrugged. ‘President told them to give us a free hand. So long as it stays on our side of the fence they don’t care.’ Phaedra’s eyes narrowed. ‘You’ve got a lot of questions, lady. I was figuring you were here to give us some answers.’

‘I’m here,’ said Tinya, reaching down the neckline of her tunic, ‘to give you these.’

She placed two tiny capsules in Phaedra’s hand.

Phaedra stared down at them, confused. She opened her mouth to speak – then the communicator chimed.

Tinya was already making for the door.

‘Call coded red maximum,’ the comms-voice informed them.

‘Falsh, and about time,’ said Phaedra.

The capsules burst open in her hand and a thin, evil-smelling gas steamed out.

The doors closed behind Tinya just as the screams started up.

Chapter Nineteen

Trix wasn't sure if Falsh was laughing or crying. 'Years of research,' he said. 'Billions of wasted dollars. High levels of foreign investment –'

'You mean fish-face chipped in,' said Trix.

'Shhh,' hissed the Doctor.

'And nothing but those damned slugs to show for it.' Falsh mopped at his forehead with the sleeve of his expensive suit. 'Oh, Klimt was a clever son of a bitch. Fobbed me off with plans and promises and prototypes... when all the time he was redirecting the finance into his own pet project.'

Trix looked at him doubtfully. 'Slugs?'

'The development of an entity that can flourish in any environment. An animal that can bring life to the galaxy's wastelands, dead areas.' Falsh shook his head. 'Turns out Klimt was a bona fide nut.'

'And that's why you wanted the Institute blown to bits,' Trix realised. 'Not to cover your tracks once you stole the weapon –'

'But to cover up the fact that the entire venture was nothing but a spectacular failure,' the Doctor interrupted. 'Why involve yourself in weapons research in the first place? Your portfolio was surely broad enough.'

Falsh looked at him as if he were mad. 'That's like saying a man can be rich enough. I'm a businessman, Doctor. I see an opportunity for profit and I'm not supposed to go for it?'

'Not if this is how things end up,' said Trix.

'Klimt misled you,' said the Doctor thoughtfully. 'But he gave you the paint...'

Falsh shrugged. 'Some offshoot of his crazy research.'

'How can it be an offshoot?' Trix pulled a face. 'I mean, paint and slugs don't really go together, do they?'

'But nevertheless, that doctored Halcytone's a useful tool,' said the Doctor. 'I see now why you're so keen for your conference podules to catch on. Paint them with that stuff and you've got eyes and ears in every company that happens to hire them out.'

Trix had to admit the simplicity of it was beguiling. 'Then you just sell on insider information or act on it yourself.'

'Wait,' said the Doctor. 'Halcyon's the President's favourite. She must use this stuff herself...'

Trix threw back her head and laughed. 'You're spying on the President?'

'You could spy on anyone who uses the stuff, in theory,' the Doctor agreed. 'Different batches could be made to transmit on different wavelengths – a simple tweak of the receiver could let you switch views. Range would be a problem but I'm sure the likes of Phaedra are working on that for you. . .'

Trix clicked her tongue. 'Falsh, you are such a naughty boy.'

'Klimt had to give me something to get me off his back,' Falsh said finally, as if this exonerated him from any personal blame. 'The Institute was conceived as a two-year project. It wound up dragging on for four.'

The Doctor nodded. 'And the Icthal were growing keen for a return on their investment. They wanted their promised weapon at a bargain price.'

Falsh looked at the ground.

'But it wasn't just the Icthal, was it?' breathed Trix. 'You were going to flog it to other people!'

'How else could you recoup your operational losses?' said the Doctor sympathetically.

Falsh responded to the comment, looked up almost hopefully as if he expected understanding. Then he saw the Doctor's sardonic expression and laughed it off. 'I had other people interested, sure. But I don't have to justify myself to you.'

'Nor the Icthal, it seems,' agreed the Doctor. 'You've convinced them that your barefaced lies on this subject are truth. People like you think you can get away with anything, anything at all. But we've gathered a little evidence on our recent wanderings to back up the stuff I heard under your table. We know you instructed Blazar to demolish Carme, and the Institute with it – then made out it was an accident.'

Falsh smiled. 'Is that so?'

'We know that you had Thebe demolished so that no one at Blazar could ever contradict you. To erase any evidence of your ever requesting the charges to be set.' The Doctor leaned in up close. 'Unlucky. We got hold of that evidence before Thebe went up. It led us to the chunk of Carme where the Institute still clung, like a limpet.'

Falsh didn't say anything, but his face had given away his surprise. Trix pounced. 'You didn't know about its little ejector seat, then?'

'Yes, clever old Klimt.' The Doctor smiled. 'The Institute blasted clear of your demolition work before it could be consumed by the charges.'

'That's a heap of crap.'

'Then where did I get this?' Trix moved in front of him, showed him her jacket with Klimt's name emblazoned over the breast like a logo. She saw Falsh's mask slip, saw something like fear in his eyes, just for a moment. Then the shutters came back down.

‘You could have got that anywhere.’

‘I got it from the Institute,’ Trix said loudly and clearly like he was slightly deaf. ‘We found Klimt and his staff all dead, and any evidence as to what had been created there destroyed.’

‘Not just dead,’ said the Doctor softly. ‘Torn to pieces. Still, they would have died anyway, wouldn’t they? When the charges went off.’

‘What about their families?’ said Trix.

‘Oh, I imagine the people who worked there had already discarded any official existence. . . . You could hardly have them on the Falsh Industries payroll, now, could you? Still, I’m sure they were well rewarded. While they were alive.’ He was looking deep into Falsh’s eyes. ‘Something terrible happened there, Falsh. But I don’t think it was your work, was it? A little gruesome for you – you only tried to blow up the place, and you failed. Yes, failure – *that’s* your style.’ He stuck out his bottom lip. ‘So who *did* wipe out the staff of the Institute?’

‘Fish-face?’ Trix suggested.

‘No. I spoke to the Icthal, and he was ignorant of whatever the weapon was. The creature who committed those atrocities we saw systematically removed all evidence. Whoever it was, they knew *exactly* what was there.’

The realisation hung oppressively in the air.

‘And then these slugs appear,’ the Doctor went on. ‘Apparently from nowhere.’

‘Klimt created them to survive in any environment,’ said Trix. ‘Perhaps they got wafted over to Leda by the shockwaves of Carme blowing up.’

The Doctor looked at her. ‘Or perhaps they were left there by Klimt himself.’

Falsh couldn’t let that one lie. ‘Klimt is dead. You said so yourselves.’

‘Extremely dead,’ Trix added, with a shudder.

‘We saw a corpse wearing his jacket,’ said the Doctor. ‘Klimt fell from a very great height, didn’t he? He landed with some force. Enough to break his head – but not the pencil in his pocket.’

‘Huh?’ said Trix.

He mimed tapping the pencil against his knuckles. ‘Broken pencils make a little springy sort of noise when you do that. The cracked section of lead is free to vibrate in the hollow channel drilled down through the wood.’

Trix folded her arms. ‘It’s the twenty-fifth century,’ she said patiently. ‘They’ve presumably learned to make indestructible –’ She broke off. ‘Except you snapped the pencil, didn’t you.’

The Doctor nodded, a little gleam in his eyes.

‘You’re trying to tell me Klimt faked his own death?’ said Falsh.

‘He’d already gone to a good deal of trouble to cover his tracks. Probably anticipating someone like our friend from Icthal would come visiting. But the

Agent was too slow... while we were just in time.'

Trix nodded cautiously. 'With everyone thinking he was dead, Klimt could move more freely. But why put space slugs on Leda?'

'Revenge,' said Falsh hoarsely. 'To screw up the demolition. To get back at me.'

The Doctor slapped him cheerfully on the shoulder. 'It does seem rather likely, doesn't it?'

'Well, the Scooby-Doo deductions are fine for passing the time on these little jaunts,' said Trix, 'but you did promise not to get involved, Doctor. We want Fitz back, we want the TARDIS back and we want to go somewhere altogether less crap.' She sighed and closed her eyes, wishing herself home. 'And we're so close, now! I can feel it!'

'Yes, we are,' the Doctor agreed distantly, crossing back to the computer screens. 'Five-hundred-thousand miles and counting.'

But Trix knew damn well his mind was somewhere else, sorting through the pieces of the puzzle, hoping against hope to make them fit.

The screaming in the shed had stopped now. Phaedra and her team were all dead, but the gas would take a few minutes to clear.

Tinya walked calmly around to the podule escape capsule that now stood at the back of the shed. She keyed in the override code. The silver doors slid open.

A man was inside, slumped over an unmarked crate. In one hand he gripped a phial of water, with a little white pill floating about inside. His high forehead was framed by spidery grey hair. The ghost of a smile sat on his gaunt face.

She crouched down to wait beside him. His body flexed as the comedown kicked in. His grey eyes flickered open, stared about. He put the phial to his spit-flecked mouth, an instinctive, automatic reaction. His breathing was laboured and unsteady, like he was just learning how to do it.

She smoothed back a tangle of hair from his clammy forehead. His eyes focused on her properly. His smile grew stronger.

'I hate waiting,' he croaked.

'The waiting's nearly over,' she whispered. 'It's good to see you, Klimt.'

Fitz watched as a dozen dancers in next-to-nothing performed a very strenuous dance routine on the grand Medicean stage, while rubbish space-age music blared out of house-sized speakers. The girls were swinging sacks of rubbish about their heads. Suddenly a spotlight snapped on, revealing the TARDIS. Fifty screens around the stadium relayed the dramatic image. The blue doors opened. The dancers formed two lines. They took it in turns to hurl in their bags of rubbish, gyrating sexily as they did so. One after another,

the girls approached, the rubbish was slung, and off they went to pick up some more.

The TARDIS took it all. She was officially a Revolutionary Concept. Never again would you keep a cupboard in your house – you'd keep a house in your cupboard.

'What a load of rubbish,' Fitz sighed.

He'd spent most of the rehearsal trying to avoid Sook. She'd been up on stage with Halcyon and Roddle for a lot of the time, organising and helping out with the last-minute arrangements as showtime loomed. From time to time, Roddle would swan up and ask Fitz's opinion. Fitz would give it, Roddle would shake his head and do the exact opposite. So Fitz had retreated to the cavernous auditorium. His stomach was churning. Halcyon had spent most of the time on stage, fussing over this and that. Why wasn't he trying to contact Falsh, find out what had happened to Trix and the Doctor? He should collar Sook and ask her.

Except he was avoiding her.

The walk back from seeing Gaws and Mildrid had been horrific. He'd spent the whole time asking inane questions about Callisto to pass the time, then practically run away the moment they got here.

He'd passed the kitchens. They were closed. The crazy chiggocks had been put down. The caterers were trying to get food sent in from outside, but chiggocks were in short supply. The official reason was that the massive influx of tourist visitors had eaten them all. But this manager guy reckoned it was more than that; that there was maybe some screw-up in the breeding programme. . .

Fitz felt like a screw-up himself, over this whole business with Sook. She'd told him stuff calculated to win his sympathy. . . but missed out the stuff that made her a monster. Admittedly, it had to be ten, fifteen years ago. She'd been young, mixed up.

But to do that to your own mum and dad. . .

'This is getting ridiculous.'

He froze. It was Sook's voice; there she was, suddenly beside him. 'What? What's ridiculous?' he said quickly. *She knows something's up. She knows I've been avoiding her.*

'Falsh and Tinya. Both of them still missing. Halcyon's been trying to get hold of them. . .'

'How hard?'

'Hard enough, my trusting one. Haven't seen much of you this afternoon. Everything OK?'

Fitz almost snorted. 'Fine. Uh, how's everything shaping up for tonight?'

'I've had to promise the network we've got something incredible, something

spectacular, something that will distract from the fact we're no longer presenting the greatest show in the galaxy.'

'And what have you got?' Fitz smiled wryly. 'Roddle's dance routine and a magic dustbin.'

'It's all passé for you, Kreiner. Believe me, that box is real magic. *Real*. It's the most incredible thing...'

'People will think it's just a trick, a big hoax.'

Sook shook her head. 'Halcyon's a big star, his name's good. If he tells them something, they'll believe it.'

'Silly sods,' sighed Fitz.

'Especially when we ask up members of the audience to go inside and see it for themselves,' she added. 'It's the only one of its kind in the universe – just a prototype. But the means to mass-produce aren't far away...'

Fitz frowned. 'You sound like you really believe that. I've told you, the Doctor won't show him how it works – any claims he makes tonight will backfire on him worse than this whole moon shebang!'

'I hate to point this out, Kreiner,' she said, 'but your friend may not be coming back. Falsh isn't the only big-businessman in the Empire – with funding from a new partner we can learn how it works, take it apart –'

'Hey!' said Fitz, feeling events were slipping from his control. 'You can't take the TARDIS apart like she's just some machine, like she's got no feelings! No way!'

'Just being practical, Kreiner.'

'That's *not* practical, actually. She happens to be indestructible.'

'Indestructible?'

Fitz could practically see the dollar signs revolving in her eyes. 'Forget it!'

'Be reasonable! You made this deal to help your friends. If they're *beyond* help, then what? Halcyon will still have kept his side of the deal.'

'I – Look, how about we just wait and see what happens –'

Sook wasn't about to let up. 'You can't even make it work.'

'If you'd only give me some mercury –'

'Why? It's not like you can fly it anywhere, is it?'

'Maybe I'll learn! She's kind of telepathic, she can help me out... If she ever forgives me for letting you lot fill her full of bin bags!'

'Oh, fine. And I suppose we should let you stay rent-free on board the *Rapier* until that golden day comes to pass.' Sook rubbed her fingers together. 'That box can help you out financially. Right now. We *will* look after you, Kreiner.'

'My name is Fitz,' he said angrily. 'Will you stop with this whole Kreiner thing? Why the hell should I trust you, anyway? You shopped in your own parents to the law, just 'cause they thought being different was a good thing!'

She stared at him, shocked into silence.

‘Well didn’t you, when you graduated? Huh?’

The crap blare of the space music kept on. An insistent thud, like something had got stuck somewhere. Their conversation maybe. Whatever was between the two of them.

Sook turned quickly and walked away.

‘Hey, wait,’ Fitz began, wishing he’d kept his big mouth shut. ‘Listen. . .’

She ignored him. The music cut out. Fitz watched as Roddle burst from the wings and laid into the dancers, tried to show them how it should be done.

Two hours till showtime.

Falsh kept a surly eye on the scarred and cratered world looming ever larger outside the cockpit windows.

‘We’re approaching Callisto now,’ the Doctor announced. ‘Would you like to try Phaedra again, Falsh?’

Falsh inclined his head. Calmly. Slowly.

‘You’re an optimist, aren’t you?’ the girl observed. ‘No one’s answered the last twenty times, why should they now?’

She was right, of course. No way would Phaedra not answer unless something serious had happened. Something he needed to know about.

‘Let me call Tinya,’ he said.

‘You don’t want to waste your time on her,’ the girl said. ‘She’s a spy.’

He didn’t grace that comment with a response.

‘She was going through your things on the *Polar Lights*. And while you were schmoozing with Halcyon, she got your secretary out of the way so she could rifle through your desk.’ She slapped him on the shoulder. ‘You ought to thank us. If I hadn’t thwacked her on the head she’d have gone through everything like a dose of salts.’

‘What are you talking about?’ Falsh grumbled. ‘Tinya isn’t. . .’

But the Doctor had placed a file into the computer. A bubblescreen blew up.

There was Tinya. On board the *Polar Lights* like the girl had said, rummaging through his private stuff.

‘She excised the footage from the security cameras,’ the Doctor explained. ‘She’s very well-trained. Can’t trust anyone these days, can you?’

Falsh felt sick.

‘What do you think she was after?’ said the girl. ‘We thought maybe the same things as us – evidence.’

‘But evidence for whom?’ The Doctor half smiled. ‘You can call Tinya, Falsh. So long as we can eavesdrop.’

‘Contact Tinya,’ Falsh snapped. The computer dialled her code.

An endless pause.

‘No response,’ came the soft, synthesised reply.

'When is the vidcast supposed to be starting?' asked the girl.

'Two hours,' Falsh replied tersely.

'And you don't even know if it's going ahead! Must be kind of nerve-racking.' He didn't say a thing.

'Let's see the latest news,' suggested the Doctor. 'Acquaint ourselves with the facts before we arrive. Would you oblige us, Mr Falsh?'

'Screen ten-one-one,' Falsh growled.

'...rages over the nature of the creatures' true habitat...'

There was the image of some spacesuited guys floating around some rock gathering up slugs in boxes.

'Start of item,' Falsh ordered.

'Back in the solar system, doubts are still hanging over the planned demolition of Jupiter's moons,' came the newscaster's voice. 'With a four-hour spectacular just hours away, network bosses assured viewers – and the million people holding tickets to the live event, hosted from Callisto's Medicean Stadium – that presidential darling Aristotle Halcyon *will* be going ahead with the vidcast. However, they would give no indication of changes to planned content...'

And they won't either, thought Falsh. *Because there will be no changes.*

We're going ahead.

The screen blurred just a little. He must have something in his eyes.

We're going ahead.

Tinya and Klimt stood among the bodies in the shed, watching the bulletin's end.

'...the debate still rages over the nature of the creatures' true habitat. The Empire Trust is lobbying for the preservation of all Jovian moons as potential living space for the so-called "space slugs"...'

Space-suited Pent Cent types bounced balletically over Leda's surface, teasing the fat, wrist-thick slugs into metal boxes.

'...whereas many in the scientific community point to the plainly artificial origins of the species, and dismiss their deposition on Leda as a publicity stunt...'

'It doesn't matter what they say,' said Klimt, quietly. He turned, and walked into the sterile tent, looked down at the twitching body in the tray.

'Are you certain all the Pent Central specimens will be held here?' she asked.

Klimt nodded. 'It's procedure. When a level-seven first contact is made, specimens must be transferred to the nearest inhabitable outpost for analysis. In this case, Callisto.'

Tinya looked over his shoulder at the thick, grey lump, its thin fur coated in slime. She shuddered. It had been split down the middle but each segment writhed as if trying to twist free of its other half.

'I suppose they'll have blockades in place around Leda now,' she said.

'Yes. A quite glorious piece of misdirection, wouldn't you say?' He smiled down at the grisly specimen. 'While the Empire's eyes are on you, my friend, they won't see what's happening right under their noses...'

Tinya's wristpad chimed.

'Falsh again?' asked Klimt.

She nodded. 'He must be frantic.'

'I imagine he is. I presume he's been to the podule to deal with our friend from Icthal.' Klimt glanced back at her, half smiled. 'Will he be able to find this place?'

'He'll work it out. Though he'll have other priorities in a short while, wouldn't you say?'

'Just so long as he makes it. I'd hate for him to miss out on the finish.' Klimt had turned back to his slug.

The newsman droned on. 'But despite fierce speculation that Halcyon would withdraw from tonight's planned live vidcast spectacular, it seems the show *will* go on...'

'Good old dependable Halcyon.' Klimt straightened up, looked around at the corpses in the room. 'Clear these carcasses away. They'll only clutter our own little show.'

Tinya raised an eyebrow. 'Perhaps you'd help me,' she said. 'Partner?'

He glanced at her, smiled apologetically. 'I must get on and patch in the solid-state visualiser. Our visitors will be appearing shortly.'

Tinya blinked. 'Known hostiles tolerated this close to -'

'What's here for them to threaten, Tinya? A few old rocks long overdue for demolition?' He smiled again. 'They're simply in the vicinity for diplomatic reasons. Observers.'

'Well, they'd better be here to do more than just watch. Catch.' She exported a databubble from her wristpad and blew it over to him. 'The prices Falsh was asking. I managed to locate them in the end.' She looked at him steadily. 'It was quite a job.'

'I'm sure it was,' he said, catching the bubble.

'The contacts are code-named, I don't know who's -'

'I do,' said Klimt, eyeing the details. 'And I've made contact in Falsh's place. Well, well. I am glad you located these figures, Tinya. He was asking a higher price than I would have dared.'

She smiled. 'We have Falsh's ambition to thank for so much.'

Klimt popped the bubble. 'We'll request double those amounts.'

A lazy smile stretched over her face. 'Double?'

'Why not? They'll see it's worth every cent.' He rubbed his eyes. "Restless ambition, never at an end. How dost thou wear and weary out thy days."

Double those amounts! thought Tinya.

'The bodies, Tinya. If you wouldn't mind?'

She turned and stooped to wrestle Phaedra's stiff corpse over to the side wall. Klimt busied himself working on some of the computer banks lining the walls.

Then a sharp hissing, cracking noise rang out, and a sulphurous smell caught in Tinya's nostrils.

She looked up to see a shadow had swooped into the hard light of the shed. It was squat, muscular, with a broad head, and from its silhouette it seemed to be wearing some kind of armour.

'Bidder number one in our little auction,' said Klimt. 'Entirely punctual as predicted.'

'It won't be able to see the others?'

'No, nor hear them. They're only projections. The body of each will be aboard their spaceships, in orbit. But they'll each be able to see and appreciate what we have in store.'

The shadow peered about. Its hands were thick with wide, pointed fingers, like fat stars.

'Not long now,' said Tinya.

In its tray, the dissected slug went on wriggling and writhing.

Chapter Twenty

Fitz stood waiting in the wings, looking out on the immensity of the stadium. The Luxemburg-sized pink pitch had magically filled with seating – holograms projected on to low level force-shields, apparently. Whatever, they seemed to keep the punters' bums happy.

The same technology was used to create a number of virtual sets on the gargantuan stage. In its natural state, the stage itself was bare white while the backdrops were painted in Halcytone (what else?). But it seemed people's attention spans were as long as a mayfly's sex life these days – you never used the same set for more than five shots, that was the rule of thumb. Fitz had seen them at rehearsal, switching between styles and periods, transforming the scenery and layout in an instant.

To his surprise, at one point he saw an adaptation of his Mechtan layout being tried out as a backdrop – clearly PadPad must power the technology. But in the end, the director had decided against Mechtan, feeling it a touch insipid. *It's a bloody sight better than this place, mush*, Fitz felt like saying.

But there was nothing insipid about the way he felt looking out at the staggering sea of people out there. The atmosphere in the stadium was... well, it was... He shook his head. There were no words for it. For God's sake, there were literally a million people over there! A special sonic partition had been placed between stage and audience – without it, the artistes wouldn't be able to hear themselves speak over the deafening clamour, let alone hit their spots or remember to cue in the commercials.

He turned to see Halcyon swaggering towards him, impeccable in a seamless black suit piped with glittering blue and a dark, flowing cloak. He wielded his cane in a flamboyant manner, a demure deb's delight on one side and Roddle on the other. For some reason Fitz had imagined Halcyon would be massively uptight about going on in front of all these people, but he seemed surprisingly sanguine.

'Don't mind the crowds, then, Halcyon?' he ventured.

Halcyon gripped him fondly by the shoulder. 'I deal with them simply by pretending they aren't there.'

'Shame we can't do the same for the space slugs,' said Roddle. He looked flushed, his eyes were darting about all over the place. The sides of his mouth were flecked with spit. Fitz guessed Roddle had his own way of dealing with

the pressure of that kind of audience.

Fitz cleared his throat self-consciously. 'Sook not about?'

'She's in the control suite with that oaf of a director,' said Halcyon. 'Making sure I get my close-ups.'

'Oh. Right.' Wheeling high above the stage was a flock of silver discs with inbuilt cameras. They were a light show all by themselves; the brilliance of the stadium lights caught on their sleek housings and was sent coruscating into the crowds.

'No Falsh, no Tinya, no news. And therefore, no demolition tonight.' Halcyon brushed his hands together as if dusting something away. 'Still, we have your box, Kreiner. Your marvellous, impossible box!'

'Yes, you do.' Fitz nodded sadly. 'But you haven't managed to find out anything about my friends.'

'A little patience, Kreiner. I promised you my protection, and that you shall have. And since you have given us your support so freely, I give *you* my word that we shall find the fate of your friends.'

That sounded unpleasantly final to Fitz, but he let it go.

'Now, boys, you must excuse me. I have to prepare myself for my big entrance,' said Halcyon.

'As the bishop said to the actress,' said Fitz, watching the demure girl lead off Halcyon through the black velvet drapes to his starting position, behind a doorway at the top of an impossibly large flight of virtual marble steps.

The crowd were starting to clap and stamp in anticipation. The whole stadium began to shake.

'Not long now,' said Ruddle. 'Think I'll go and watch it on the box in my room. Want to come?'

Fitz pointed to the TARDIS. 'I think I'll stay and watch my own box, thanks.'

In the control suite, hovering high above the stage, Sook finished programming Halcyon's preferred angles into his personal camdroid. She didn't really need to be here – she'd only wanted to get away from the hellish hubbub below. But she hadn't banked on being squashed in with the network's announcer – a pyramidal mound of flesh who liked to be called The Voice – who gargled noisily with mintwater every other minute.

Boko, the director, dark, slim and competent, was sat ahead of her, tracing his long fingers delicately over the shot-screen, guiding the various cams in their fluid flight over the stadium. He barked out angles and crossfades, and the droids complied.

She viewed the feed from her camdroid, which was hovering beside Halcyon at the top of the scaffolding. He looked calm and well. She could see his

lips moving silently, recognised the rhythm. The calming mantra she'd taught him.

She thought of Kreiner, the look on his face as he'd shouted at her, and her own lips moved with Halcyon's in sympathy.

As Roddle staggered off, Fitz stared out again over the seething, teeming crowd. They looked like a big special effect – mirror shots, stock footage, somehow unreal. All those people, still stamping their feet and kicking up that tremendous vibration. It made him feel slightly dizzy.

When he turned back around he saw Falsh waiting in the wings.

First thought: his head had gone funny. He blinked, expecting the phantom to vanish.

But no, he stubbornly remained, impassive, his back to the velvet drapes. No retinue of guards, no Tinya. . .

Something broke inside Fitz. He bunched up his fists and strode up to Falsh, determined and purposeful.

'All right, you,' Fitz said, halting just in front of Falsh. 'It's time we talked. Where are my friends? What have you done with them?'

Falsh just looked at him contemptuously.

'There's nothing you can do to me, you know.' Fitz fought to keep his voice from wobbling. 'Don't think about setting your dogs on me. I'm mates with Halcyon. And. . . And I do judo, too, so you'd better watch it!'

Falsh didn't respond. There was a low snigger from behind the drapes.

'Who's that?' Fitz demanded. He assumed a kind-of Kung Fu position, hoping he could hold it without trembling. 'Come out of there, and no funny business. I can break your boss's neck with two fingers!'

The sniggering became a gale of laughter. Fitz recognised it at once.

'Trix!' he yelled, almost dancing for joy as Trix's blonde spiky head popped out through a gap in the drapes and peered over Falsh's shoulder. 'This is so fab! Where's the Doctor?'

'Shh. First things first, Hong Kong Phooey,' said Trix, composing herself. He saw she was poking a gun in Falsh's ribs. 'All right, Falsh. Get down on the floor. Face down.'

He didn't move.

'Do it,' she hissed in his ear, working the gun barrel between his ribs. Slowly, Falsh knelt down.

'All the way,' Trix insisted, her voice hard. She crouched beside him, jabbed the gun against the back of his neck. 'You've had this coming a long time, Falsh.'

'Trix?' Fitz felt his smile fading. He glanced around, hopeful of spotting the Doctor, but there was no sign of him, nor any guards, nor even any TV

people. The lights in the stadium were starting to dwindle, and the sound of the crowd with them.

Falsh, his face still impassive, eased himself down flat on the floor. The stadium fell silent, as if they could see this too, this crooked mogul in the half-light, lying in the dust. As if they were holding their breath. Once Falsh was down, Trix stepped on top of him; one foot on the small of his back, the other between his shoulder blades.

‘How does it feel, Falsh?’ Trix asked coldly. ‘How does it feel to have someone walk all over you?’

‘What are you going to do?’ Falsh muttered, face down.

Fitz looked at her. ‘Yeah, what *are* you going to do?’

Trix lowered her gun so it pointed at his head. Fitz opened his mouth to protest.

‘I’m going to do *this*,’ she said.

And standing on tiptoes on her makeshift step, she coiled her free arm around Fitz’s neck and gave him a surprisingly warm embrace.

Fitz threw both arms around her and felt like he’d come home.

‘This is a crazy, stupid time,’ Trix murmured into his neck. ‘I couldn’t believe it when I saw you just standing there. I’m glad you’re OK, Fitz. I’m glad I can depend on you.’

‘To be predictably dumb, you mean?’

She pulled back, and smiled in his face. ‘Yeah.’

Fitz grinned. ‘So, where is the Doctor?’

‘Are you through yet?’ Falsh complained.

‘No. Shut up.’ Trix turned back to Fitz. ‘Falsh doesn’t give good hostage. He got us past stadium security all right, but being the big man around here, everyone we pass just wants to stare at him. Not good news when you’re trying to discreetly hold a gun to his back. So, the Doctor left me with him backstage while he went snooping for you and the TARDIS. Then I happened to see you and. . .’ She broke off. ‘The TARDIS is here, right?’

‘Oh, yes, she’s here all right.’

‘Then we actually made it,’ Trix marvelled. ‘There were times when I never thought we would, but now we can just find some mercury and. . .’

Fitz sheepishly pointed upwards.

‘Huh?’ Trix craned her neck to see. ‘Oh. T’riffic.’

The TARDIS was held hovering in mid-air by a small fleet of discs, hundreds of feet above them.

‘Ready to be lowered down for her dramatic entrance,’ said Fitz sheepishly. ‘Revolutionary space-saving solution. Halcyon was going to make her a star.’

Trix looked at him doubtfully.

‘I had to get him on-side somehow, didn’t I?’ Fitz shrugged. ‘Anyway, it wasn’t really me who...’

Suddenly white incandescence snapped on from miles above, bathing the hushed crowd, stinging them back into noisy, frenzied bedlam. Fitz had to shield his eyes as the simulated stage lit up a staggering silver. Synthesised fireworks cracked and burst all over the stadium, a light show like nothing Fitz could ever imagine. He’d seen whole worlds go up with less fuss. He fumbled for Trix’s hand, found it and clasped it tight.

Then the loud, idiot-disco music started up, urgent, driving, ridiculously over the top. The make-believe marble steps suddenly sprung into life, one after another, from the bottom up – a stairway to heaven building itself brick by massive brick. Then the music climaxed vaingloriously on a calamitous chord, the lightshow reached its peak as a pair of vast, virtual doors swung open. Clouds of dry ice puffed out, lit from within by mysterious sparkles of blue and gold. The noise of the clamouring crowds was deafening, even through the barrier.

Fitz found he was holding his breath as tightly as Trix’s hand. It was the biggest moment. The biggest entrance in history. The most –

‘Wait a minute,’ said Trix. She snatched her hand away to point. ‘Fitz, look!’

Across the stadium, beyond the far end of the stage, there was a large white door. It was warped, full of misshapen bulges. Like something the other side had left deep dents in it. Another one appeared even as Fitz watched.

‘Ladies and gentlemen!’ The voice boomed from the heavens like a garrulous god addressing the multitudes.

Fitz turned back to Trix. ‘The door wasn’t like that earlier.’

‘Live... from the Medicean Stadium...’

‘Something’s trying to get out,’ Trix shouted. ‘Something big, and –’

‘Sponsored by Falsh Industries, Anghelic Systems, Chasric Interfaces...’

‘Oh bloody hell.’ Fitz looked at her. ‘Those animals!’

‘A night of marvels that no one shall ever forget...’

‘Huh?’

‘A load of tame zoo animals that Tinya had brought in –’

‘Now meet the man who’s coming to restore the wonder...’

‘I can’t hear you!’ Trix bellowed.

‘She brought a load of animals in for a photo shoot –’

‘Aristotle Halcyon!’

The lights went out. The crowd went insane. More sparkling smoke gushed from the void at the top of the staircase.

A huge, ringing clang of metal still carried. The floor began to shake. Frantic shrieks took up with the cheers and hollers.

A pillar of white light snapped on. The spindle-thin figure of Halcyon stood dramatically at its centre, his arms held out in triumphant greeting. Two dancing girls appeared dramatically beside him in plumes of virtual flame, spewed up from the darkness below.

In the crimson flicker, Fitz's jaw scraped the floor as he saw the animals stampede from their makeshift enclosure. Bull elephants crushed a path through helpless security guards into the screaming audience. Monkeys and apes waded artfully into the crowd, seizing limbs and hair and children. Tigers and panthers and cougars and leopards, already scratched and bloodied, powered ferociously into the crowd. Trampling. Tearing.

Feeding.

Chapter Twenty-one

Trix had preferred the pitch blackness. A wave of horrible chaos was rippling slowly through the blood-red arena, as people twigged that something bad was happening and made to make tracks – regardless of those in their way. So while the frenzied animals themselves were largely confined to the front rows, panic was proving a more effective killer further back in the cheap seats. It was like watching endless dominoes go toppling, the effect spreading further and further back into the shadows.

Halcyon held his pose, a fey triumph amid his tame flamestorm, seemingly oblivious to everything.

Falsh squirmed beneath her feet. ‘What the hell is going on?’

‘Shut up!’ Trix grabbed Fitz by the shoulder. ‘Please, tell me this is just part of the show.’

‘Naturally, this is just a *part* of our show,’ said Tinya, smiling in turn at each of the three silhouettes before her. ‘An overture.’

‘Preliminary evidence,’ Klimt added. He was gesturing to the bank of bubblerscreens which fair covered one side of the shed. Many were blank for now. Some showed the carnage in the arena – Klimt had tapped into Falsh’s camdroid feeds for uninterrupted viewing pleasure. Other screens showed whole herds of chiggocks slamming themselves against kitchen walls from earlier news bulletins. She listened to the stream of infosignals in her ear-filter, poised to turn on more screens as news came in.

The second of the bidders shuffled forwards on its rectangular base. High ridges at the shoulder flanked its barrel-like torso, and its head was a huge crystalline bud. ‘We will not comment until the demonstration is complete,’ it boomed.

‘We have been promised a weapon with widespread destructive capacity,’ fussed the third bidder, a tall humanoid creature festooned with dangling fronds. ‘This display is petty and meaningless. When will we witness the mass destruction of these humans?’

‘Patience,’ said Klimt. ‘The ultimate weapon is not simply one of spectacular force.’

‘It is,’ countered Bidder One, raising its starfish hand.

‘It is not,’ Klimt insisted.

'It is.'

'Anyone can fuse some atoms to make them go bang,' Klimt snapped. 'The weapon I offer you is a strategic one.'

'What do humans know of strategy?' the squat creature said crossly.

Klimt glared at Tinya. His voice was low and strained. '*You* speak to these imbeciles. It's why you're here.'

Tinya stepped forwards, assured, in control. 'We do not imply that we are greater versed in the ways of war than any of you. We only state with confidence that this weapon will ultimately annihilate any race you turn it upon.'

'Complete dispersal?' came Bidder Two's mournful boom.

'If you like.'

'Well, for how long do you expect us to wait around watching your tedious vidcasts?' complained Bidder Three.

Tinya smiled at the shadow. 'You *were* briefed that the full demonstration would be of several days' duration. But we assure you, you will soon become convinced.'

On the screens behind Tinya, dismissed and ignored, the carnage in the arena raged on unchecked.

'What in hell's name...?' The crazed animals were treading the pulped remains of the first dozen rows like squished grapes. Sook felt bile rising to sting the back of her throat.

'Hold on Halcyon and the light show,' Boko snapped.

The computer chimed. 'Transmission shutdown.'

'They've taken us off air,' Sook croaked. 'We've got to clear the stadium. Voice, tell them! Tell them to clear the area in an orderly...'

But The Voice was too busy vomiting into his lap.

'Look at Halcyon!' Boko breathed. 'What a pro. Totally unfazed!'

Halcyon's dancers had fled, but it looked like he was basking in the din of it all.

'Let me speak to him.' Sook took a slug of The Voice's mintwater and squeezed over to Boko's console. 'Halcyon? It's Sook. You've got to speak to them. Appeal for calm. Tell them they mustn't...'

She saw he was trying to keep the confusion from showing on his face. He must know he was in close-up.

'It's no good, we've lost the earlink,' Sook told Boko. She shoved the retching Voice aside and took his place at the microphone. 'Ladies and gentlemen, there is no cause for panic.' Her voice came back at her in great booming echoes, and she muted the mike as The Voice heaved noisily behind her. 'Please proceed to the exits in an orderly manner. You are not in danger!'

She saw birds, big, bloodied birds throwing themselves at the control-suite windows, eyes alight, talons and beaks striping the glass.

'I repeat,' she said, 'you are not in danger.'

'Nice thought, Sook,' Fitz muttered. Her voice was galing out around the arena, but the whole place was one mad, bloody scrum. Security must have been heaviest down the stage end – and those poor sods were probably among the first casualties.

The animals were still thundering about the arena, which seemed as thick with crushed bodies as a forest floor with leaves in autumn. Birds of prey were describing wild circles high above them, soaring and swooping down one after another into the huddling mass of prey, causing fresh pain and panic.

'What's got into them?' yelled Trix.

'I don't know, they were tame as you like this morning. Tinya thought they could be brought on to fill time on the show...'

'Making the most of their fifteen minutes of fame, aren't they?'

They looked away as an agitated gazelle pinned a man to the floor with its horns.

'We've got to do something!' Fitz cried. 'Falsh? Trix, maybe you could let him up now.'

Trix stepped off him silently, but kept him covered with the gun.

Fitz helped him up. 'This is your stadium, right?' he said hopefully. 'There must be alarms we can set off, hordes of security waiting in the wings to stop those animals?'

'I don't know,' said Falsh shakily; turning his back on the mayhem in the arena. 'My company funded this place, I didn't build it myself.'

'T'riffic.' Fitz wiped cold sweat from his brow. 'Well, someone must be coming to the rescue, surely? The police, the army...'

'The Doctor?'

Fitz spun around. 'You!'

'Yes, me!' The Doctor took Fitz's hand, kissed it delicately, then shoved him aside. 'Now, out of my way!'

Sook stopped her impromptu broadcast and stared out of the windows at the sea of screaming faces in the main arena. In the upper tiers, things weren't so bad and evacuation was under way. But in the thick of it, for every blue blob of security there had to be five hundred terrified people swarming in a confused bottleneck before each exit.

'Halcyon's frozen,' said Boko, as the camdroids zoomed in on the slight figure at the top of his impressive stage staircase. 'Get out of there man! Get out of there!'

'Oh, Halcyon...' Sook saw him swaying around on the top step, looking lost and helpless in the glittering smoke. Boko had killed his mic, but she could see he was shouting for Shanty and Provencale, his leggy escorts.

'They've run out on you, Halcyon!' she shouted. 'Move back off the steps! They've gone!' The suite lurched as some massive, feathered bastard hurled itself against a window. The glass cracked.

'We'd better get going too,' said Boko.

'Yes, get us out of here!' squeaked The Voice.

Sook looked back to the showscreen. Her breath caught in her throat. Where Halcyon had been standing, there was now only empty space.

'Head for the stage,' she told Boko.

Wait.' Boko squinted at the showscreen. 'Who is that *on* the stage?'

'Fitz!' The Doctor gestured up at Halcyon's staircase. 'What's generating these steps?'

'Uh...' leaving Trix to guard Falsh, Fitz followed the Doctor on to the stage, trying to shut out what was going on in the main arena. 'A thing called PadPad does the design –'

'No, no, no, not that!' The Doctor stared around, practically dancing a jig. 'Must be a kind of force generator powering these virtual steps – but where is it?'

'I don't know!'

'Think, Fitz!'

'I tell you, I don't know!'

He frowned. 'You're looking very smart, by the way, Have you shaved?'

'Yes, I have.' Distracted from thinking too hard, an image flashed into his mind. 'Hang on. I *did* see Boko and his crowd standing around something over there...'

'Well done!' The Doctor raced over to the far side of the stage to a block of stone. But when he rubbed his fingers over the side, the stone vanished, leaving behind a small metal box. In moments, the Doctor had it blowing out a big pink bubblescreen. He started jabbing it with his fingers like he was trying to make it burst.

'What are you doing?'

'I'm hoping to clear the force protocols.'

'Yeah, but what are you *doing*?'

The Doctor looked up. 'Have you been eating properly, Fitz? You seem to have lost a bit of weight.'

'Put it down to stress,' said Fitz.

'Hey, Fitz!' Trix called. 'Your mate's looking a bit wobbly up there!'

He looked up the virtual staircase and saw Halcyon was three steps down, shivering on his hands and knees, alone and forgotten.

'I'd get him down if I were you,' the Doctor advised. 'Rather quickly.'

Fitz nodded and sprinted up the steps. He wasn't one given to Big Thoughts in the usual run of things, but a Big Thought was filling his little head right now. When he was panicking about what to do in the wake of the wild animals, one particular idea *hadn't* occurred to him: *ask the Doctor*. OK, so he hadn't come up with anything more constructive in place of that, but it was still a kind of milestone moment.

Fitz Kreiner comes of age, he thought hopefully.

It seemed too ridiculous to contemplate.

'Halcyon?' Fitz crouched beside him. 'Are you all right?'

'Lost my balance,' he gasped.

'Did you fall?' Fitz helped him up, slipped an arm round him and helped him down the steps.

Halcyon practically clung to him. 'It's ruined,' he hissed. 'Everything is ruined. What's happening? What is *happening* out there?'

'The Doctor's here,' said Fitz, 'things will be all right now.'

As he spoke, the step vanished beneath them. With a strangled shout, Fitz fell about six feet to the floor. He landed on his coccyx. The pain jarred through him as he lay gasping for breath. The stage was suddenly bare, just Halcytoned walls as before. Halcyon himself was sprawled beside him, still breathing, but motionless.

A moment later, Trix was beside him, checking he was all right. 'Fitz? Can you hear me?'

'Not clearly,' he said. 'Try some sweet nothings.'

She cuffed him round the chops and he smiled weakly. He turned and felt Halcyon's neck for a pulse. It was pounding away like the drum in Fitz's head. That was something.

'Trix!' the Doctor shouted as he rushed over to join them. 'Where's Falsh?' He stamped his foot petulantly. 'He's got away! You've let him go!'

Trix looked behind her and swore. 'Well, who needs him, anyway? And what was I *supposed* to do? Watch Fitz drop and have a good laugh?'

The Doctor didn't answer. He'd removed Halcyon's shades, lifted an eyelid, and nodded thoughtfully. 'He'll live.'

Trix was looking out over the arena. 'Doctor, apart from nearly breaking Fitz's neck and killing Halcyon, what did *you* do?'

Fitz propped himself up on his elbows and saw that all the seating had disappeared. The arena was back to being a wide-open space the size of a small town. People and animals alike were caught wrong-footed and fell to the plastic turf.

'I thought a level playing field might speed up the evacuation,' said the Doctor.

'But it's levelled things for the animals too,' Fitz pointed out. 'Nice pink savannah to run in!'

'We have to distract them,' the Doctor cried, dashing back to his box. 'Give people time to get clear!'

Trix helped Fitz up. He felt winded and sick as he stared out from the stage. There were dozens of sick little scenes vying for his sight. A man on his knees, screaming as a lioness bore down on him. Two apes flinging round an old woman like a rag doll. Like kids at Christmas, the animals were tearing their way through human parcels, discarding the opened contents, the frenzied unwrapping all that mattered.

'For God's sake, hurry up, Doctor!' snapped Fitz.

'I noticed this sonic barrier partitioning the stage,' said the Doctor. 'What do you know about it, Fitz?'

'It dampens the sound of that lot.'

Trix shuddered. 'Imagine what the noise would be like without it.' A spike of sound drove through Fitz's brain. He yelled. Trix clasped her ears and looked pained.

The Doctor threw him a wild grin. 'What good imaginations you have! Hold on!'

A piercing, getting-home-from-the-noisy-club whine sounded in Fitz's ears. And grew louder and louder.

'What the hell are you doing?' gasped Fitz.

'Getting the animals' attention,' said the Doctor. 'If I can notch up the sonic frequency to a point that's tolerable to us but unbearable to them...'

Trix swore. 'They'll come charging after us!'

He pouted. 'Well, at least those poor people will have a chance to escape!'

'Wow, it sure is good to have you back, Doctor,' said Fitz sourly.

'Done it!' he cried.

The awful sound in Fitz's ears subsided. But suddenly, a collection of mangy, blood-spattered animals came tramping out of the gloom towards the stage, shaking their heads, roaring and hissing and chittering.

'Lions and tigers and bears,' said Fitz, 'oh, *fab*.'

Chapter Twenty-two

Sook gasped as the control suite filled with the piercing whine, clutched her ears. The whole suite seemed to spin and shake.

Boko screamed with pain. 'Cut speakers!' he yelled. 'Cut speakers!'

The noise went on. 'What's happening?' Sook shouted.

'Someone's tampered with the soundwall,' cried Boko. 'Massive feedback into the audio circuits. Speakers, *cut!*'

The noise shut off at last. 'It's him!' said Boko. 'That man on the stage, look! He's got at the stage controls. *He* did this!'

Sook could see the man now, with Kreiner and some girl. His friends! Somehow he'd got them back. And somehow, he seemed to be drawing the animals to him. They were leaving the panic-stricken people alone, and closing in on the stage.

She stepped over The Voice and squeezed in next to Boko. 'We've got to help them!'

'Doctor!' called Fitz worriedly. 'I have a nasty feeling that the rhino there has always wanted to take to the stage.'

A big white brute with a crumpled, bloody horn was edging ahead of the battered pack.

The Doctor was busy at his bubble. 'Rhinos can't jump, Fitz.'

A monkey jumped on to the rhino's back, using it as a springboard. Screeching like crazy it leaped on to the stage, arms outstretched for Fitz's throat.

'Get rid of it!' the Doctor snapped.

'The thought had occurred to me.' Trix grabbed it off him and swung it back off the stage. But more animals were coming. A tiger crouched, prepared to pounce; gibbons and gorillas were lumbering forward.

'Now!' the Doctor cried.

'Now what?' yelled Fitz.

'Faster!' shouted Sook. 'Zoom in overhead, maybe we can scare them off!'

'No!' The Voice had got back to his feet, and pushed his way forwards to join them. 'The birds will get us! Turn us around!'

'Go on, Boko!' Sook insisted. 'They don't stand a chance!'

* * *

Fitz and Trix screamed as the wild animals charged forwards.

And crunched into an invisible wall.

The other beasts piled up behind them, not understanding that the way was blocked, frustrated, desperate to reach their prey. Some tried to turn and escape back into the arena. But another see-through wall held them back.

Trix laughed with relief. 'You trapped them!'

'Poor things. I reconfigured the force generator. They're caught between what used to be the stage staircase on one side –'

'And the stadium seating on the other,' reasoned Trix. 'Only turned vertical instead of horizontal, right?'

The Doctor nodded, looking out sadly at the animals crushed up against thin air. Then suddenly, he ran to the edge of the stage. 'Stop! Get back, get back!' He was waving his arms about like a madman. 'Get back!'

'You're not Dr Doolittle,' Trix sighed. 'If the things are so set on killing themselves –'

Fitz swore. 'It's not them he's talking to.'

A small, silver flying saucer was droning towards the stage.

'Sook, no!' he yelled.

'Put us down on the stage, Boko,' said Sook.

'You're, crazy,' The Voice yelled, forcing himself in front of her blocking her view of the animals piling up around the stage, of Halcyon lying sprawled on his back, of Fitz and his friend signalling desperately for help. 'You're –'

They slammed into something hard. The walls sparked and then gave way, and *God The Voice could really scream when he wanted to* –

Fitz stared in horror as the control suite crashed into the force wall ricocheted back and performed a sick spiral downwards.

It hit the pink turf and rolled on its edge like a giant hubcap, over and over in a wide arc.

'Sook!' he yelled.

Finally, it ploughed into a wall and went up in flames.

Falsh ran through the cavernous underworld of stadium corridors, trying to push from his mind the horrors he'd seen in the arena. He had to reach Phaedra. He called her on the wristpad.

Nothing.

He tried Tinya. Zilch.

Nerren at least was still around. So he damn well should be. 'Get me the location of Phaedra's R and D team,' he snapped at the little bubblescreen.

'I – Sir, I don't know if I'll be allowed access –'

‘Do it!’ Falsh roared. ‘I need that information now.’

He killed contact. There was something else he needed – he’d have to stop off at the ship first. If Phaedra hadn’t answered, that meant just one thing. Trouble.

Falsh swore he would never let himself be caught unawares again.

Trix was trying to calm down Fitz. He was going mental over the smashed-up saucer.

‘Doctor, turn off the forcefield,’ he kept begging.

She waved at the bruised and bleeding animals, crushed in, screeching and roaring their rage, staring with bulging, hateful eyes. ‘If he does, those things’ll kill us!’

‘But I’ve got to get out there! I’ve got to go and see if Sook’s all right.’

‘Fitz, I wouldn’t get your hopes up,’ she told him firmly. ‘I mean. . . look at it!’

The control suite was just a flaming heap of squashed metal. The smoke or the heat had set off the stadium sprinklers, and suddenly an alarm was blaring and it was raining. At least it helped drown out the shrieks of the animals. You could see the forcefield around them now – a cheese-like wedge, with the broad end at the bottom. The water gushed down the straight side like a waterfall.

‘I found a side exit back there when I was scouting around,’ the Doctor told him, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. ‘Seems to lead to those side stores where the animals were being held. It should be safe to go there now – but please, be careful.’

‘Thanks,’ said Fitz. ‘I’ll see you soon.’

‘Fitz,’ Trix shouted as he ran off, ‘we’re finally all back together again and you want to just –’

‘Let him go,’ the Doctor told her, shaking his head sadly. ‘It’s his decision, and a brave one.’

‘The silly sod.’ Trix surveyed the devastation in the arena. Sure, the animals were under wraps now, but the people were still swarming around the exits, trampling each other to get out of there. ‘Hey, what’s with you, anyway – feeling under the weather? I would have thought you’d be right out there after him, doing your token bit for the wounded.’

He shot her an angry glance as he crossed to the bubblescreen. ‘First I need to make this forcefield stable. If any of those animals escape the cage. . .’

‘Help must be coming from outside soon, surely?’

‘I should think so,’ the Doctor agreed. He fiddled with the sonic barrier until both blaring alarms and bestial roars were quietened. ‘A military presence in the area should actually be of use in that regard.’

'What set the animals off like that, anyway? According to Fitz they were tame and harmless with Tinya this morning.'

'Tinya arranged this?'

'For a photo shoot or something.'

The Doctor merely grunted and performed further fiddles. The forcefield turned opaque and yellow. 'Sorry. I can't bear to look at them any more.'

'Don't apologise,' said Trix shakily. 'Tinya thought they'd make good filler for the show once the moon-boom was kaput. Instead, they stole the show.'

'Pacific animals turning into crazed, aggressive monsters. Remind you of anything?'

A shiver ran through her. 'That chigcock at the Institute.'

'And those kitchens we passed on our way here had been closed down...'

'Coincidence.' Trix frowned. 'Isn't it?'

The Doctor was already calling up channel ten-one-one. 'Three guesses what the big story is this evening,' he said. The screen showed the chaotic stadium exterior, piles of the dead around the gleaming golden gates, ambulances crammed with writhing masses of wounded. 'I don't suppose there'll be news of anything else -'

He broke off as an image of a chigcock suddenly filled the screen, with the caption, CALLISTO FOOD SHORTAGE. 'Compounding the problems in the aftermath of what's already been dubbed the "Callisto cataclysm" is an unexpected chronic food shortage, after Health and Safety officers decreed the destruction of a contaminated batch of chigcocks on the satellite...'

He flicked to the next news item. It showed scenes from a run-down testing lab on nearby Europa where animal subjects had apparently attacked and overrun their persecutors.

'Ouch!' the Doctor shouted, his hands flying to his head.

'What is it?'

'Things just slotted into place,' he announced. 'Things with very spiky edges. But they seem to fit.' He strode over and gripped her by the shoulders. 'Would you care to hear a disturbing theory?'

'Not really.'

'The space slugs. Planted by Klimt on Leda, yes?'

She shrugged. 'So the Scooby-Doo bit goes, yeah.'

'It wasn't just a stunt, an act of spite to ruin Falsh's big night-of-a-billion-bangs. It was the aiming of the weapon. It was the pulling of the trigger!'

'And this is the pulling of Trix's leg, right?' She looked into his hooded, serious eyes. 'What are you talking about?'

'The ultimate weapon. That's what Falsh wanted. But it's quite a tall order - there'll always be bigger and better firepower waiting around the corner, the same principle built upon and improved upon. And being a weapon, you'd

expect it to *look* like one, wouldn't you; a gun or a bomb, a device of some kind.'

'And so would your enemies,' said Trix slowly.

'Right.' The Doctor's grip on her shoulders tightened. 'So Klimt comes up with his space slug, a creature that thrives in any environment – even the wastes of space.'

'Oh God, I get where you're coming from. It's a *Trojan* slug!'

'The slugs are deposited somewhere where they'll soon be discovered. They're taken for study; found to be quite harmless.'

'Except they're not, are they?'

He shook his head. 'Somehow these slugs inflame and arouse the aggression in animal life.'

'How?'

'By giving off certain signals, affecting brainwaves? I don't know, that's all the clever-clever stuff.' He scowled, deep in concentration, thinking it through. 'Chiggocks have only a rudimentary brain, no defences. Easily overcome.'

'Creepy, but hardly the greatest menace to humanity,' Trix argued. 'Nor is a bunch of whipped-up animals.'

'Remember the corpses piled high at the Institute.' He was looking at her piteously; willing her to understand. 'They froze over while they were still fighting.'

She swore. 'It arouses and inflames aggression in *all* animal life.'

'Yes. Starting with the simplest.'

'First the chiggocks, then the beasts... ' She chewed her lip. 'And eventually, us.'

The Doctor gave a macabre smile. 'Klimt developed his ultimate weapon all right. He's got it working right now. And this is only the start of the demonstration.'

Chapter Twenty-three

Fitz made his way out of the darkened stores and into the artificial daylight. Cautiously, he looked out at the deluge in the arena. The animals had been veiled off by a curtain of crackling yellow energy. The crowds were beginning to clear, revealing in their wake the bodies of the dead.

And there, a hundred yards away, was the big squashed kettle of the control suite, smoking and hissing in the downpour. Bracing himself, he ran towards it. The cold water soon soaked him to the bone.

He seemed to reach it in moments. 'Sook!' he shouted. 'Hello? Anyone?' Finding the crumpled metal sheet of a doorway, he pushed against it. It wouldn't budge. His passcard, he must have that somewhere. . .

He waved the card all around the door and at last, with a grinding, grating noise, the metal split open. Evil-smelling fumes poured out into the sodden arena. He couldn't see for them.

'Sook!' he yelled again.

'Kreiner?' came the faint reply.

He burst through the smoke, eyes streaming, trying to find her. 'Hold on! I'm coming!' He took a few cautious steps, then slipped and fell on something soft.

'Ow! Thanks a lot.'

He'd landed on Sook. At first he grinned with relief. Then he saw the blood she was covered in. Her bobbed hair was plastered in it, her pale face was black with gore. The end of her sharp nose had been scraped clean off.

'You OK, Kreiner?'

'Yeah,' he said, gently climbing off her and shifting round to cradle her head.

'And Halcyon?'

'I think so. He took a fall, but he's safe, he's asleep. My friends are with him.'

'What happened? We were coming to rescue you -'

'You flew into an invisible wall. A forcefield, it's containing the animals.'

'Oh. Glad we got that straight.' Her eyes flickered closed.

'Hey, don't think you can just die on me now we've got that straight,' Fitz added quickly. 'Is anything broken?'

She swallowed with some difficulty. 'I think my Voice broke.'

'Huh?'

She pointed a broken finger weakly behind him through the thin smoke. Fitz turned and grimaced. A truly obese man was now scattered over most of the windows and the floor.

'As things worked out, my own personal airbag. Poor bastard. Is Boko OK?'

Fitz could see a sprawled pile of limbs beneath the crushed console, lying twisted and still. He cleared his throat. 'Let's check you over first.' He licked a finger and rubbed it tentatively against her cheek. To his relief the blood came away to reveal the pale skin beneath. 'I think a lot of this was this other guy's. You can't be as bad as I thought.'

'Can't I?' She coughed. 'Gaws and Mildrid had you thinking I was pretty bad.'

'Forget all that, it doesn't matter.'

'Yeah, it does.' She tried to rise up. Fitz had to manoeuvre backwards to accommodate the movement. She settled her head in his lap just as he realised he was kneeling in a lump of the big man's stomach.

'I want you to know, Kreiner... about my parents.'

'Uhhh... I don't care about that,' he said. It was tough being tender when you could feel someone's blood soaking through your trousers. 'Come on, let me try to carry you -'

'No, wait,' she insisted. 'I need to tell you this.'

'You do?' he said weakly, his own guts threatening to flip as his knees squelched on a gristly bit.

'It wasn't like the OPs told it -'

'Forget it, you were a kid, you didn't know -'

'Will you just listen?' She looked up at him. 'I did sell my parents. I sold them to graduate from Eight Mansions.'

Squish, scrunch. 'There'll be plenty of -'

'The Dean found out about my parents, and he was gonna flunk me. Never mind that I was good. Really good. He thought if word got out it would look bad on the school.'

'You honestly don't need to...' Fitz shut his mouth and resolved to suffer in silence. Maybe he didn't need to hear. But she needed to tell him.

'It felt like I was losing everything,' she croaked. 'So I signalled Dad, the emergency code. Begged him and Mum to give themselves up. Said I'd kill myself if they didn't.'

Fitz felt his legs start to cramp, and he was threatening a coughing fit from the smoke. 'Go on,' he spluttered. 'I'm listening.'

'They said they'd sort things out. Next thing I know, the Dean's telling me I could graduate. Big of him, huh.'

Fitz nodded, holding his breath.

'They came to my graduation,' she whispered, a tear trailing down her cheek, 'just so they could see me one last time. They knew the Dean had called the authorities. But they still came.'

'Right.' Fitz tried to shift position slightly, but it made such an awful squelching noise he had to stop.

'So you see, when it came down to it... I just couldn't sell out Halcyon in the same way.'

'Mmm,' he gasped.

'Are you even listening to me, Kreiner?'

'I am!' he protested, fighting a coughing fit. 'Of course I am. That's... You poor thing, it's...'

Her grey eyes stared up accusingly.

'Well, it's...'

He bent forward and kissed her lightly on the lips.

She blinked. 'You think it's...?'

Then she kissed him back.

'OK,' she said.

'Good.' He let out a hacking cough. 'Isn't this romantic? I never kissed someone with my bum parked in a pile of small intestine before. Can you walk?'

'Sure.' She propped herself up. 'I'm fooling you. I just wanted to get you back for being such a prat before.'

Fitz was taken in for a few seconds. Until he saw the dark wounds tapering down her side, and the way she could hardly move her legs.

We're in trouble, he thought.

'Come on, Fitz,' said the Doctor worriedly. He was lousy at playing the waiting game.

'And what happens when he does come back?' Trix fretted. 'What the hell are we going to do? I don't suppose there's a possibility that your charming theory is wrong, and that the slugs aren't causing this?'

'It's possible. But I imagine the weapon has been designed to capitalise on that uncertainty. Even with one of those slugs for study, it could take many days to find a correlation.'

'By which time everyone's dead.'

'Horrible thought, isn't it? Invisible waves of energy, slowly sweeping away the clutter of experience and rationality...'

'How long will it take? Are we already infected and just don't know it?'

'Actual *infection*'s unlikely, of course, since -'

'You know what I mean, Doctor,' she snapped.

He held up his hands in apology. 'I imagine the slug signals work through a cumulative effect on the brain. Resistance will vary from person to person.'

'So what we need to do is jam those signals.'

'Yes, somehow,' the Doctor agreed. 'But I've no idea if the damage already caused to the brain would be reversible.'

Trix felt sick. 'But the slugs are animals!' she protested. 'Why aren't they killing each other and putting an end to it themselves?'

'They're designed to survive in any environment, however extreme. Unkillable, even if we could find them all; always assuming death negates their powers. If the signals are powered at a cellular level –'

'All right, all right.' She looked up at the TARDIS, still suspended and hopelessly out of reach. 'Can't you get that down for us?'

'She can't fly without mercury, remember? And we could still be susceptible...'

'My head is killing me already,' muttered Trix. She reached in her appropriated jacket for the headache pills. Nothing there. They must have fallen out when she fell back on the podule. She felt like crying. 'And now I've lost your tablets too. The end of a perfect day.'

'It's not over yet,' said the Doctor, staring out into the speckling yellow of the forcefield. 'We'll think of something. *We must.*'

Tinya was watching Klimt with barely concealed unease. One minute he seemed fine, collected and in control, every bit the accomplished genius she'd been so swept up by; the man she'd trusted to pull this off. But the next he would seem to withdraw into himself, just staring into space – or else launch into some belligerent spiel, railing against how he'd spent his life fighting against fools.

Tinya had stepped in the last time, suggesting that the bidders remove their presence from Callisto until the test moved into the next phase. There was plenty of hard evidence to pore over, after all. And soon the next stage would begin. After that, there would be no doubt that Klimt's claims were truthful. That the weapon he could deliver was worth the price.

And *such* a price. Tinya nearly weed herself each time she thought of it.

Klimt didn't seem to be thinking of much. He was sat in a chair, staring at the corpses she'd clumsily hidden beneath a piece of tarpaulin.

'I hate the waiting,' he said, for about the hundredth time. 'I think I'd better take something.'

'Is that wise? What if the bidders –'

'I'm tired.' He looked at her, his grey eyes sunken in his face. 'You're the PR queen, you can cope, can't you?'

'Yes,' she said. 'I can always cope.'

He grunted and crossed to the back of the shed where he'd left his gear.

'It will work, won't it?' she called after him.

'Of course it will,' he snapped. 'You've seen our bidders, affecting desperate disinterest when really –'

'Not the auction.' She swallowed. 'The stuff we're taking to stay immune.'

He stopped, but didn't turn around. 'Yes,' he said. 'It'll work.'

'Halcyon!'

The cry of distress tore through Trix. She turned to find a thin man in torn black clothes with a mop of ratty blond hair, sliding forward on his knees, disco-style, across the stage. He carefully cradled Halcyon's punt face in his hands. Is he all right?

'He had a bump on the head,' the Doctor told him. 'Who are you?'

'Roddle. Artistic Advisor. Halcyon's my mentor.' He looked up at them. He had an eye as black as his tunic and a fat lip. There was something about his glazed expression and the slight slur to his voice that reminded Trix of Torvin. 'Where's Sook?'

'We, um, don't know.'

Roddle looked at her blankly. 'Is everything better now? I saw what was happening... couldn't believe it... Then some madman burst into my room!' He shuddered at the memory. 'This awful cleaner just threw himself at me! Tried to kill me! It was all I could do to get out of the room...'

The Doctor crouched beside him. 'Uncontrolled violence?'

'I met some soldiers back there. They've come here to put things right... They said there have been a few cases. Put it down to hysteria after – after what's happened here...'

Trix shot a look at the Doctor. 'Looks like it's starting.'

'One theory proved,' he sighed. 'Resistance *does* vary from person to person.'

'Hey, who are you, anyway?' said Roddle, his eyes focusing a little more. 'I never saw you at rehearsals.'

'We're friends of Fitz Kreiner,' said the Doctor confidentially.

'Kreiner?' Roddle grinned. 'I like ole Kreiner. He's kind of weird, but... Where is he, anyway?'

'He... He went looking for Sook,' sighed the Doctor.

'We need to find Sook,' Roddle agreed. 'She'll take charge. She'll sort things out.'

'I wish to God she would.' Trix folded her arms. 'In the meantime, can we get back to the slugs? OK, so they can't be killed. But surely they can be controlled in some way?'

'A more promising angle,' the Doctor agreed. He chewed on the stub of Klimt's pencil. 'After all, it might not be so convenient to kill absolutely everyone. You might want to force an unconditional surrender.'

'Or to spare a few slaves to clear up all the mess,' murmured Trix. She found herself staring at the Halcytoned walls, grateful for the soothing fluctuating colours.

'What are you guys talking about?' said Roddle, frowning. 'Slugs?'

'We need to get one of these creatures for study. The military must have some,' the Doctor went on, ignoring him. 'Falsh's Phaedra has one, of course –'

'Paint,' Trix said suddenly. 'Like I said back on Falsh's ship – slugs and paint, they don't really go together, do they? So how would this super-hypnotic Halcytone stuff just "arise" out of Klimt's slug research?'

The Doctor stared at her, thunderstruck. 'You think the two are linked?'

'Well, I don't know –'

'Of course they're linked!' He beamed at her and slapped her hard on the back. 'There were traces of Halcytone in the testing bay at the Institute, too. We know it soothes the human mind – perhaps in some way this doctored stuff has a similar effect on what passes for the slugs' psyche?'

Trix stared at him. 'He reared super-killer-art-loving slugs?'

'What have *you* been taking?' said Roddle enviously.

'It's all conjecture, of course,' said the Doctor. 'But think of it... Slugs with finer feelings! The understanding could help them obliterate those feelings in their prey!' He actually chuckled. 'Out-think your opponent, that's what Klimt's about.'

'Never mind the art appreciation, we've got to stop these things!' said Trix.

'How? We'd need a slug, paint for testing –' He went suddenly rigid, like someone had passed high voltage through him.

Roddle gulped. 'Is he all right?'

'Debatable,' Trix told him. 'Doctor?'

'"We're only just tolerated on their turf as it is",' hissed the Doctor.

Trix stared. 'What?'

'That's what Phaedra said!' He was gripping the bridge of his nose, his eyes tight shut – either having a brainwave or a nosebleed. 'Remember? The capsule Torvin took was touching down at wherever Phaedra was based – and she said they were on land claimed by Pentagon Central.'

'It could be anywhere!' Trix protested.

The Doctor smiled. 'I know how we might track it down.'

'The TARDIS?'

'Falsh's ship.'

'You can't just leave,' said Roddle nervously. 'What about Sook? And we've got to get help for Halcyon!'

‘Come on,’ said the Doctor. ‘I’ll help you carry him, we’ll go and find some soldiers. He’s a celebrity – ought to help him queue jump at the nearest field hospital.’

Roddle nodded. ‘We might even find Sook, right?’

The Doctor nodded decisively. ‘Mmm.’

‘And what about Fitz?’ said Trix quietly. ‘If he comes back and finds us gone –’

‘We can’t wait any longer,’ said the Doctor.

He helped Roddle lift up Halcyon, and led the way off stage.

Falsh picked his way through the mad streets. Ambulances screamed by, lines and lines of shell-shocked survivors clogged the pavements, huddling beneath foil sheets that threw back the blue siren-lights in brilliant coruscations.

His wristguide was leading him through these old, crumbling roads towards the installation. He had to find Phaedra, find out what the hell was going on.

It was more than that, he realised. He needed people to tell what to do. He needed to give instruction.

He needed to make things all right again somehow.

Trix reckoned she could feel something in the air as she traipsed along through the stadium labyrinth; something that didn’t belong with the quiet and the bright white lighting. A feeling of dread expectation had settled upon her, a sense that things would soon be kicking off.

The Doctor and Roddle carried Halcyon towards the hangar in a gloomy silence. There was no sign of a military presence, and they didn’t pass a single medic – presumably they were all trying to cope in the stadium proper.

Only when they reached the hangar did they see a single soldier staggering towards them, face twisted in anger and pain.

The Doctor and Roddle moved to one side.

But the soldier was heading straight for them with shambling, staggering footsteps, levelling his gun.

Trix stiffened.

But then the soldier collapsed to the floor. The back of his head had been blown open. Roddle gave a horrified croak and clung on to Halcyon, while the Doctor quickly crouched beside the soldier to check there was nothing he could do.

‘What happened to him?’ asked Trix.

A gunshot up ahead reverberated around the hangar. Suddenly Trix saw another soldier swaying drunkenly towards them, a thin coil of smoke bleeding from the nozzle of his gun. His eyes were glassy, like he hadn’t seen them.

‘Keep still,’ the Doctor hissed.

The soldier shuffled by. But then he stopped. He swung round to face them, raised his gun and pointed with it to Halcyon. Roddle squeaked.

'Is he dead?' the soldier demanded.

'Dead famous,' the Doctor answered. 'Aristotle Halcyon himself. Please put that gun down, he needs care. Perhaps you could help us find –'

'He's a tosser,' said the soldier. 'I hate him.'

His finger tightened on the trigger.

The Doctor jabbed his elbow into the soldier's chest. With a gasp, the man fell sprawling back down the corridor. Trix swiped his gun from him as he fell.

'What the hell's the matter with you, man?' said Roddle, still tumbling. 'You're a soldier, you're supposed to protect us!'

The soldier sat on the floor, tears streaking down his face. 'I didn't... I didn't *mean* to...'

'He's not in his right mind,' said Trix.

'Or rather, something else *is*. Lock yourself away somewhere safe,' the Doctor told him. 'Don't open the door to anyone, understand? Anyone!'

'For their sake as much as yours,' Trix added.

'Come on,' said the Doctor. 'There's nothing we can do for him. We have to get on.' He took the gun from Trix, yanked out the clip and threw both away angrily. Then he stormed off towards Falsh's ship.

'What's happening?' Roddle wailed, still clutching hold of Halcyon. 'What's wrong with everybody?'

Trix shouldered some of Halcyon's weight and led the way after the Doctor. 'You ain't seen nothing yet,' she said.

Chapter Twenty-four

Fitz was carrying Sook in both aching arms, looking around madly for medics. She'd lost a lot of blood, kept slipping in and out of consciousness. He didn't want her to die. He'd only just met her; so many people he'd got to know vaguely just died in the course of his life with the Doctor. But not this one. Not Sook.

There was death all around him under that endless springtime sky, but he was buggered if he was letting Sook go the same way.

The alarms had stopped. The sprinklers were down to a drizzle, and soldiers were moving through the great arena now, brisk and smart in grey meshy uniforms, harbingers of order.

'Excuse me, mate,' he shouted at a pair of young lads marching between the harried crowds of survivors. Surely they should be at school, not in the army? 'I need help for this woman!'

'First-aid checkpoint out back,' one responded smartly, and pointed.

Some way off, Fitz saw a massive sprawl of tussling people vying to be seen. 'You're kidding! This is serious, she needs help!'

'Med-droids and stretchers are shipping in,' said the other soldier stonily. 'Till then, wait your turn. Lot of people hurt today.'

'Oh thanks, I hadn't noticed,' muttered Fitz. He turned back the way he had come. 'Better go see what my own Doctor can do.'

But as he approached the sickly yellow forcefield, he saw soldiers spilling out from the side entrance, erecting a blockade.

Wait,' he shouted, 'I need to get through there!'

'Proceed to any main exit,' a tired-looking soldier told him. 'You will be escorted to a place of safety.'

Fitz looked around wildly. There were still hundreds of people trying to get out. 'Please! We're staff! With Halcyon! We have passcards!'

The soldier shifted off with a look that said, *How many times have I heard that in the last hour?*

Fitz could feel panic start to prod at the back of his mind. 'Sook,' he whispered. 'Do you know a way back to the stage? Or a quick way out of here?'

She stirred a little. 'I thought you were trying to stop me taking the quick way out of here?' She stared around vacantly. 'There's a drone hatch around somewhere...'

'A drone hatch! Now you're talking.' Fitz sighed. 'I think.'

'You're so weird, Kreiner,' she whispered.

'Tell me what this thing looks like and I'll find it,' he told her. 'Promise.'

There was standing room only for Trix in Falsh's cockpit. Halcyon was slumped unconscious in one chair, Roddle sat in another, and the Doctor had the hot seat, riffling through pages in a bubblescreen.

'Sure you should be doing that?' said Roddle. 'This is, like, Falsh's ship.' A pause. 'What *are* you doing?'

'You're tracing Phaedra's call to Falsh, aren't you?' Trix deduced.

'Right. She routed that transmission through from somewhere. The actual information would have been encrypted, but in theory the location should be traceable.' He peered at the data on the screen, then smashed his fist down on to the console.

'Theory's hard to prove?' Trix ventured.

'The encryption's too complex. And if I push too hard, too fast, I'll crash the systems like I did on the *Polar Lights*.' A glowing 3D map appeared on the bubblescreen. The Doctor waved an arm to enlarge it. 'This is the general area.'

'Hey, that's southside on Callisto City,' said Roddle. 'I took my flyer for a spin around there this afternoon...'

'I've got a rough geographical fix, but it's *too* rough,' said the Doctor, intent on the screen. 'About a ten-mile radius.'

'Great,' said Trix. 'What do we do, cruise round the neighbourhood till we see a tank parked in the driveway, then knock on the door and ask?'

The Doctor whirled around to face Roddle. 'A flyer, you said? You have transport?'

'Uh-huh. She's amazing,' grinned Roddle.

'I'm sure she is. Can you show us? You could take Trix for a little ride!'

Trix almost choked. 'What?'

'I'll keep working on pinpointing the transmission co-ordinates. If you're out there already, and mobile, we'll find the place much sooner. Then I can come out and meet you.'

She nodded. 'OK. Halcyon's got a wrist-thingie and so has Roddle. We can keep in touch through them.'

'Hey!' Roddle complained. 'What are you hustling here? I'm not going anywhere! You haven't even told me what you're looking for!'

'Why, Sook, of course,' said the Doctor reasonably. 'Fitz went looking for her out there. The sooner we get Sook back, the sooner things can get back to normal.'

Trix raised an eyebrow, which the Doctor studiously ignored.

‘Sook went out there?’ Roddle seemed dubious. ‘Why?’

The Doctor looked into his eyes. ‘Because she knew that this place we’re searching for is very important.’

Roddle chewed on this piece of unlikely logic for a while. ‘OK,’ he said nervously, ‘I guess we can go take a look.’

‘Good man,’ said the Doctor. ‘Off you go southside, then.’

‘You’ll look after Halcyon till we all get back?’

‘I’m a Doctor, aren’t I? Goodbye, Trix. I’ll miss you.’

She blinked. ‘You say that like you don’t think I’ll come back.’

‘Just go,’ he snapped, hunched over his bubblescreen now like a wizard staring-into a crystal ball, trying to tell the future.

Trix decided that this was one occasion she’d rather not know.

Roddle’s flyer was like a Harley-Davidson crossed with a jet ski. It soared above the congested streets at a speed that bordered on terrifying, a total boy-toy for the obscenely loaded. Trix clung on Roddle’s skinny waist for dear life. He had seemed high enough before this unlikely jaunt and she found herself persistently screaming warnings in his ear – not just to alert him to upcoming obstacles, but to tell him what she would do to him if they crashed into one. Though he claimed the flyer had some inertia device fitted that would protect her from harm, she was taking no chances.

As they sped through Callisto City she saw a big brawl slopping messily out of a bar – the beginning of the Doctor’s prophesised madness, or just a booze-fuelled bust-up, no chiggock fillets lining the combatants’ stomachs?

It was easy to get paranoid. But just how long did they have? She closed her eyes, but the sight of all those dead at the frozen Institute kept prising itself under her eyelids. This city was rammed. If the crowds turned on each other, that carnage in the stadium would seem like the teddy-bears’ picnic.

They turned a corner, speeding on to a seedier strip. The bars were emptier. The crowds were thinning out here into couples and huddles: some watching the news bubbles, some trying not to. This was supposed to have been party night, the big fiesta. Now it was spoiled and rotten. The food had run out and that just left the booze. Things could get ugly even without some sinister slugs willing things worse.

‘This is southside,’ Roddle called. ‘You think I should just keep scooting around?’

‘Get as high up as possible,’ Trix told him, and gritted her teeth as the ship jerked upwards.

She heard a faint chime from Roddle’s wrist, and the Doctor’s voice: ‘What’s your location?’

Roddle rattled off some letters and numbers. They seemed to make sense to the Doctor.

‘I’ve narrowed the field to a three-mile radius. Bear east to this location.’

Trix’s stomach swept sideways as Roddle did as he was told. She looked down miserably as the streets whooshed past below.

And her eyes widened.

She could see a familiar figure striding purposefully down the street away from them. A tall, broad, dark figure.

‘Whoa!’ shouted Trix. ‘Stop, turn back around!’

Roddle did as he was told with unpleasant relish, tilting them almost to ninety degrees. ‘What’s up?’

‘Find yourself a place to park,’ she told him shakily. ‘And tell the Doctor he can take it easy. I think we just got ourselves a guide.’

Sook had got it wrong. The drone hatch hadn’t led to the stage. It was some kind of winding service conduit, dimly lit, cold and claustrophobic. God only knew where he’d end up.

Fitz’s arms felt like they must now stretch right down to the floor. They were buzzing with pins and needles and his chest felt so tight he could hardly breathe. Sook wasn’t conscious to notice any of this. He wished *he* wasn’t. Right now he could use some of Roddle’s happy pills.

He felt a wave of anger almost overwhelm him. Those smug, stupid soldiers. He ought to go back and shoot them in the legs. Tell them to crawl to the first-aid checkpoint. See how *they* liked it. See. . .

He stopped staggering for a second, shook his head. Fab. He was getting hysterical. That was really going to help.

The truth was, he should have done as the soldiers said instead of thinking he could do better. He could maybe have pushed to the front, claiming staff privileges. . . and Sook might have been treated by now. But as it was, the pair of them would probably cark it together in this –

A soft chime sounded in the gloom, made his heart jump. It was coming from Sook’s wristpad. The Doctor trying to get in touch? How would he know the frequency?

Hardly daring to hope, he lowered his head and spoke to Sook’s bloody wrist. ‘Who’s this?’

‘Mildrid.’ Her round face blew out like bubblegum, sickly pink and thick with static. She looked harassed. ‘Kreiner, Sook was supposed to leave hangar door seven open for us, but it’s locked!’

He scowled. ‘In case you hadn’t noticed, there’s no show to gatecrash.’

‘What’s happening?’

He sighed. 'Sook's badly hurt. We went through a drone hatch and now I'm stuck in a tunnel somewhere under the stadium. No idea where it leads –'

'I'm sorry, Kreiner, but I was thinking about the big picture,' she said. 'We've seen those animals on the vidcasts, poor things. . . Gaws is furious – his interviews have all been shelved.'

'I couldn't give a stuff for Gaws and his interviews!' hissed Fitz, staggering along with Sook, his arms crawling with cramp. 'The animals are under control. And there are soldiers here – supposedly helping out. Probably them who locked up your doorway –'

He broke off as his foot caught on something sharp in the dark, a box or something. He was suddenly falling, and twisted around awkwardly so that he landed on his back and Sook landed on him. He gasped with pain, winded, let his head fall back as Mildrid went on.

'We need more soldiers out here!' said Mildrid. 'People are turning crazy! Fighting for no reason! It's awful out here, and there's a lockdown at the spaceport, we can't get to our ship. We need Sook to get us into the stadium as arranged – where it's safe.'

'Safe? Stuff you!' shouted Fitz as he struggled to prop himself up on his elbows, cradling Sook's head. 'Right now, Sook needs you! And if she dies, your agent in Halcyon's camp is gone, finished, kaput. So how about you stop whining and worrying about yourself and find a way of preserving *her*!'

He lay there panting for breath. In the gloom, a low whine started up close by.

Mildrid looked baffled. 'But. . .'

The box he had tripped over was rising slowly into the air, ahead of him. He froze.

'But how can *I* possibly help you from out here?' Mildrid complained. 'You need to find –'

The box buzzed loudly, drowning her out. Strange, unpleasant-looking attachments started to protrude in his direction. He caught a whiff of bad air as it floated towards him.

'Hello?' Mildrid called, the screen static increasing. 'Are you still there?'

'Keep back!' stammered Fitz. The box hovered just a few feet away. Then it whipped out a flexible nozzle.

'...said you need to find yourself a *drone*, a service robot!' came the distorted voice from Sook's wrist. 'A drone can guide you to the hangar! Call me when you get there and let me in!'

Fitz realised he was looking down the wrong end of a wash hose.

'What would you like me to clean for you?' asked the box in a soft female voice.

* * *

This was the place. No doubt of it. Falsh surveyed the door. Those fools on the gate wouldn't even look at his passcard, not with a lockdown in process; no admittance and that was final. Well, it ought to work here.

Knocking out the guards had made him feel better. Stronger. In control.

He had one more gas cap left. Whatever lay waiting inside, he would be ready. He pulled his filter into place over his mouth and nose and waved the card at the lock.

The door slid open smoothly. It was dark inside.

He paused to let his eyes grow accustomed. There was a low whirr in the air – computers running. He could make out a big bank of bubblescreens, too, each one on standby, winking a green eye. There was power here, so why were the lights –

'Hello?' A high, piteous voice in the darkness. 'Who is that?'

'Tinya?' Falsh started forwards. 'Is that you?'

'Oh, Falsh, please... I can't move...'

Falsh took another step or two. He reached into his jacket's pocket for the gas cap. He didn't trust this.

And he was damn right. The lights snapped on. He was left staring at a pile of bodies covered in an old tarpaulin. Phaedra's eyes gazed sightlessly up at him. And sitting on the top of the pile was Tinya. She had a small gun and a big, big smile aimed right at him.

'What is this?' he hissed.

She nodded to the bubblescreens behind her. 'We saw you take out the guards. Gave us plenty of time to prepare a reception. Now, put down the gas capsule,' she said. 'Or I'll kill you.'

He didn't move.

'I'm sorry. I don't suppose you like taking orders from anyone. Least of all your Public Relations executive.' She shifted herself, moving off the corpse-pile. 'Why not consider it a friendly request? We don't want to kill you, Falsh.'

'How long, Tinya?' he said simply. 'I know you were going through just about every document I owned, but why?'

For a second, it showed that she was rattled. He took a measured step towards her.

'I knew all along,' he said, 'that you were up to something. And I knew that if I gave you enough rope you'd swing from it in the end.'

She appeared to consider this. 'Well, well. What a fool I've been. So you haven't simply walked into a trap?'

He smiled. 'I've simply walked into Falsh property, Tinya. You know how much I own – property, money, power. And you're ambitious too, I know that. So let's talk this thing through.'

'A deal, you mean?'

‘Whatever you’ve been offered, I can triple it.’

A new voice: ‘I don’t think so.’

Falsh froze.

‘Klimt.’

The Doctor had searched Falsh’s ship, but there was no sign of any paint, doctored or otherwise, on board. For want of something more constructive to do, he had laid Halcyon on a couch in the cockpit and given him a physical.

The results had been quite surprising.

Halcyon’s wristpad chimed. The Doctor grabbed his wrist and spoke into it. ‘Trix, have you found the place?’

‘Falsh led us right to the spot. He had some kind of nick with the guards, then gassed them. They’re out cold.’

‘So he just walked in?’

‘Without a hitch – as did we. Skeleton staff only by the looks of it – everyone must be over there at the arena.’

‘Where’s Falsh now?’

‘He’s gone inside the shed,’ she whispered. ‘Listen, Doctor, I think you were right. Big surprise I know, but there you go. There’s all this paint stacked up round the back! We should probably test it, don’t you think?’

‘Test it?’

‘I’ll paint you a picture.’

The Doctor frowned. ‘Just send Roddle back with the flyer, quick as you can. Sit tight. I’ll meet you out there.’

‘Sure,’ said Trix. ‘I’ll just wait for you to come and hold my hand and make everything all right.’

‘Good idea.’ The Doctor paused. ‘Trix?’

But there was no answer.

Trix started as Roddle snatched back his wristpad. ‘I don’t see Sook and Kreiner anywhere,’ he said.

‘Uh, they’re probably in there,’ said Trix, pointing to the grimy business unit.

‘You think I’m stupid, don’t you?’ Roddle hissed.

‘Of course I don’t! Look, Roddle, why don’t you go back to the flyer, pick up the Doctor, and –’

‘So I’m your taxi service, now?’

‘Trix?’ The Doctor’s tinny voice kept calling from the wristpad. ‘Come on, don’t sulk. . .’

Roddle threw the wristpad to the ground and stamped on it.

‘What did you do that for, you idiot!’

‘Taxi service!’ He shoved her backwards. ‘That’s all I’m good for, huh?’

Oh God, he's been sluggish. Trix stood her ground, held out her hands placatingly. 'Roddle, just take it easy.'

'Shut up!' His voice rose in anger, his black eye twitching with sudden rage. 'You people can't tell me what to do!'

'Quiet, you idiot,' she hissed, 'you want every soldier left in the place to come down on –'

But the sky came down on them first. In an instant, the springtime blue was banished by night. Jupiter appeared, dominating the horizon with its massive, terrifying presence. Trix gasped, heard distant cries of alarm and coos of awe from beyond the compound.

'Sky out,' said Roddle softly, staring up at the awesome sight and rubbing his temples. 'Yeah, it was scheduled. Round about now we were going to nuke the first moon. . .'

He seemed calm again, shocked out of his anger. 'Are you OK?' asked Trix shakily.

'I... I guess...'

'Then get back to the flyer and get the hell out of here,' she urged him. 'Halcyon needs you, OK? Get back to Halcyon and the Doctor as quick as you can, right?'

'Right,' he said, casting furtive little looks into the shadows. 'Take care. I'll see you.'

Trix swallowed hard as he crossed the compound a little uncertainly.

'Maybe,' she whispered.

Falsh fought to keep his composure as Klimt came out of the shadows at the back of the shed. His grey hair was spidery and wild. His eyes were bright but the skin around them was dead and waxen. He stalked out of that gloom like he belonged on the dead pile, patchy stubble gritting his face, spit-froth flecking his lips.

'You tried to kill me,' Klimt said.

Falsh attempted a smile. 'Direct as ever.'

'You paid me a salary worthy of a genius, but you took me for a fool.' Klimt seemed genuinely puzzled. 'I never really worked that one out. Not even with a brain my size.'

'You tried to make a fool out of me,' Falsh said. 'I give you four years, you give me a slug!'

'Nothing more than you deserved.' Klimt pulled back his fist and threw it into Falsh's jaw.

Falsh staggered backwards but stayed standing. 'I knew about the emergency launcher you had installed on Carme,' he said, tasting blood in his mouth. 'I knew that.'

'Like you knew Tinya had been through your files. And yet you did nothing about it?' Klimt shook his head, advanced on him. 'Not very thorough, Falsh. And you normally do thorough so well.'

Falsh took another punch from Klimt, but this time rolled with the blow.

'If you really *had* known about any of these things, I think you'd have acted rather differently,' Klimt went on. 'So I can only assume you've become wise after the event. How are the Doctor and Trix, Falsh?'

Falsh and Tinya both spoke at once: 'You know them?'

'I'm beginning to think they really are Investigators as they would have us believe.' He glanced at Tinya. 'You assured me you'd been so careful, so discreet.'

'I have been!' she insisted.

'The evidence is rather to the contrary, don't you think?'

'She's a weak link, Klimt. Don't trust her.'

'Shut up!' Klimt stormed. 'You can't play me for a fool, Falsh, I'm not a fool!'

So hit me again, damn it. Falsh had been watching Klimt carefully. If he advanced one more time he would block Tinya's line of fire. Falsh could tell that the danger hadn't occurred to her. *That* would be the time to act.

He could do it. His heart began to hammer. He could start turning all this around.

'Your problem, Falsh, was that you assumed that since I was a brilliant scientist, I couldn't possibly have your kind of ambition. You like simple definitions, don't you? Everyone and everything stamped and categorised and filed in a little box, waiting to become useful – and discarded when that usefulness is at an end.'

'I guess you could call me single-minded,' said Falsh.

'No, no, Falsh. That's what you could call *me*.' He smiled again, that slightly crazy, staring smile. 'It didn't take me long to work out that this weapon you asked of me was never intended for offer to our Empire. So naturally I deduced you would require me dead once the work was finished. So that the sale could never be traced –'

'And so you couldn't duplicate the work for another power,' Falsh agreed. 'Nothing personal. Your death was a requirement, stated in the Icthal contract.'

'As Tinya discovered,' said Klimt, 'once she'd finally tracked down your auction files. The contract showed they'd invested so much already they'd never agree to the new price that *I* have in mind.' He smiled. 'So I decided to exclude the Icthal from these negotiations and deal purely with the other potential bidders you'd lined up.'

Falsh glimpsed the funny side and smiled back, despite himself. 'Tinya was your mole from the start, wasn't she?'

'I approached her when she was still at Anghelic,' said Klimt. He nodded, clearly delighted that the penny had dropped at long last; this man could gloat for the Empire. 'Tipped for great things, was Tinya. If only she didn't bore so easily.'

Tinya said nothing, glum with the gun. The angle had changed. Klimt would have to move closer.

'Ambitious, efficient – I knew she'd soon be gathered to that cold Falsh breast. I reckoned on her reaching executive status within two years.'

'I did it in thirteen months,' she complained.

'And she's been telling you everything I have or haven't been doing since,' said Falsh.

'Especially the things you shouldn't have been doing at all,' Klimt agreed. 'You may as well have been moving in slow motion.'

'Still fast enough to run rings around you.' *Come on, come on...* 'Ambitious and efficient. That's Tinya, sure. But it's not you she's been acting for, Klimt. It's herself.'

'That's not true,' said Tinya sullenly, holding the gun with a little more spirit.

'She wouldn't have the nerve or the know-how,' said Klimt, swaggering closer, raising his fist once more.

Falsh tensed himself to move.

And then the thing came screaming out from the shadows, spraying them all with a thick and stinging venom.

Chapter Twenty-five

‘Trix? *Please* come in, it’s the Doctor!’

He sighed to break the persistent silence.

‘Where am I?’

The Doctor turned to find Halcyon had propped himself up heroically on one elbow.

‘You’re on Falsh’s ship. Please don’t fret, I’m the Doctor – a friend of Fitz Kreiner.’ Some white lies might make for an easy life. ‘He and Sook asked me to look after you.’

‘Where is Sook?’ Halcyon was rigid with fright. ‘I must have her here.’

‘I’m afraid she’s otherwise engaged,’ said the Doctor. ‘And no, Falsh isn’t here either, he had to, er, run. But Roddle should be back soon. I hope.’

Halcyon’s eyes widened behind his dark glasses. ‘What has happened?’

‘You may not have noticed, but there was something of an altercation in the stadium. Your colleagues are helping –’

‘The stadium! I should be on air!’ Halcyon spluttered. Then he clutched his wrist. ‘Where’s my wristpad! I need to –’

‘The vidcast was cancelled,’ snapped the Doctor.

‘After all that... all the last minute scrabbling about... it was *cancelled*?’ Halcyon crumpled back down on the couch. ‘What happened?’

‘You don’t remember?’ asked the Doctor lightly.

Halcyon looked away. ‘I asked you, what happened?’

‘You fell from the stairs and took a bump to the head,’ the Doctor told him more gently. ‘Try to relax.’

‘Now listen here, I don’t know who you are, but...’ Halcyon trailed off, cocked his head to one side. ‘Wait. Did you say you were... the Doctor? Kreiner’s friend, the inventor of the endless cupboard?’

‘Of the *what*?’

‘Your blue box! My dear fellow, I’m so glad you turned up – your friend was so worried about you.’

‘It’s mutual.’

‘He told me you’d be very keen to do business! You are, aren’t you? Tell me you are! We can solve the Empire’s housing crisis! How many immigrants do you think we could house in one of your boxes, hmm?’

‘Halcyon –’

'I was going to demonstrate tonight with a thousand dancing girls!'

'Halcyon, we are facing more pressing crises –'

Suddenly, the Doctor noticed the translation visor perched on the console. A little green light in the housing was blinking on and off.

He looked at it accusingly. 'How long have you been signalling, I wonder?'

Trix had crawled through the hole in the back of the shed with her big tub of paint. She'd sat in the shadows, quietly eavesdropping. Then, steeling her nerve, she'd burst into the light, howling, half-banshee, half-painter-and-decorator. The thick gloop splashed out of her tub in a hefty arc, taking in Tinya, Torvin – or Klimt, or whatever the bastard was calling himself – and even Falsh's shoes.

Tanya shrieked as her little black dress took a coating, dropped the gun. Falsh sprang forwards to tackle Klimt, head-charging the man and knocking him to the floor.

While they engaged in a macho sprawl, Trix raced for Tinya's fallen gun and snatched it up.

'That's enough!' she shouted. 'Everyone shut up and stay perfectly still. After the trouble you lot have put me to just lately, I'd happily shoot any one of you.'

Klimt and Falsh stopped struggling. Tanya froze, fixing Trix with an eloquent look of cool hatred.

'Sorry to gatecrash,' said Trix calmly. 'But some soldiers were coming my way on patrol, and I didn't fancy them finding me.'

Klimt gave her a withering look. 'How did you get into the compound?'

'Didn't you see Falsh gas the guards on your magic bubbles? I'm betting that you did – then you turned the lights out in here and got ready to throw your big surprise for him.' She shook her head sadly. 'Shame it didn't occur to you he might have been followed.'

'I imagined you were dead,' said Klimt.

The Doctor dashed over to the translation visor. 'Of course!'

'What is it?' said Halcyon warily. 'What's happening?'

'Some of your paint being put to good use, I hope!' As he picked up the small ceramic tray, a tiny amount of Halcytone welled into it. The Doctor threw back his head and laughed. 'Genius girl! That's what she meant about testing the paint and painting me a picture!'

The Doctor pressed his fingers into the oily, glowing smear, and a vague vision bled into his senses, washed on a wave of nausea. He was seeing something from multiple viewpoints. He caught a lurching image of faces and

forms that seemed oddly familiar. Torvin. Tinya. Falsh, too. Phaedra's red hair spilling out from a pile of bodies. And Trix, looming large, holding a gun.

The Doctor tried to separate the images. The translation visor must be set to the frequency of the paint on the podule. Which meant he must be seeing these scenes through the nanoscopic eyes of the doctored Halcytone, splashed out by Trix.

Torvin's escape capsule must have reached there – with a supply of the paint filched from the podule and stashed on board. Why? Was Torvin in cahoots with Klimt?

Then the penny dropped. As if from the top of the Eiffel Tower. Right on to his head.

He groaned.

'Are you all right?' asked Halcyon, worriedly. 'What's wrong?'

'Be right with you,' said the Doctor, trying to get the sound up. Torvin – or rather, Klimt – was speaking.

'I imagined you were dead. . . '

'A healthy imagination is a good thing,' Trix told him. 'Though imagining you were Torvin was possibly a fantasy too far. . . I suppose you needed a new identity after you'd killed yourself off at the Institute.'

Klimt didn't answer. Just trained a steady, catlike stare on her.

'See, I reckon Falsh moved before you were ready. Tinya gave you warning, sure, but you wanted to give your slugs the final test, didn't you? On the poor bastards who'd helped make them for you.'

Tinya looked at him doubtfully.

'Oh, didn't you know that, Tinya? You want to watch yourself. I've seen what he does to the people who work for him.'

'We're partners,' she said coolly.

Klimt said nothing, just went on staring.

'Once you'd packed up and destroyed all evidence there,' said Trix, 'you went off to Thebe, didn't you, Klimt? I reckon you wanted to destroy any evidence of your little ejector-seat scam. You knew that fishy thing would come sniffing around, or that Falsh would maybe send some investigators. . . '

'OK.' Falsh got up slowly. 'Give me that gun, Trix. *I'll* take things from here.'

'Don't interrupt me when I'm monologuing, Falsh,' Trix chided, training the gun on him. 'Where was I? Right. So, Klimt, you're on Thebe ready to trash any evidence remaining, but Mr Fish is already there, questioning the crew. You hide out – but then you see another ship land, and you think, "Uh-oh!" So you strip off one of the poor sods fish-face has already slaughtered and, presto! You're a chief supervisor. No awkward questions.' She tutted. Just

a shame you're not in time to stop the Doctor finding the evidence that you couldn't.'

'I'd barely started looking,' Klimt spat. Then he seemed to realise he was rising to the bait and fell silent again.

'You're looking rough, Klimt. You want to go steady on those pills. Can't be good for you.' She smiled around at her little audience. 'So, anyway, how did I do? Are you ready for me to start talking about the secret-weapon-slug now?'

Klimt turned to Tinya. Tinya stared at Klimt. Falsh, left out of the equation, stared at each of them in turn.

Trix was enjoying this. 'I could start by telling you how those slithering gits inflame aggression in all animal life – oh, nice touch, by the way, Tinya, bringing in those zoo beasts, must have spiced up your demonstration a treat. Or I could tell you how only the treated Halcytone paint can disarm them. . . ' She crossed to the white tray on its dais in the centre of the room, while keeping them covered with the gun. 'Or better yet, I could show you.'

She shoved the tray on to the floor. The two halves of the slug rolled out wriggling, suffused with soothing colour.

'Here's one I splashed earlier while you were gassing on.'

'You little idiot,' Klimt near-enough screamed. 'You've ruined it!'

We were right, Doctor! thought Trix. If she could only hold the fort till he arrived. 'Sorry, Klimt, was that slug a favourite of yours? Did it have a name?'

Klimt's eyes were slits. 'How do you know so much about my business?'

'Perhaps someone told me.'

'It wasn't me!' hissed Tinya, as both Falsh and Klimt stared at her. 'She's not human – she's alien. Some kind of agent. I don't know who she's working for but she has access to technology you won't believe.'

'Sounds to me like she's making excuses, Klimt,' stirred Trix, 'excuses for letting her big mouth slip.'

'They have some kind of travel device, technology beyond anything I've seen! I heard Halcyon and Sook talking about it in the stadium!' Tinya went on desperately. Did she know how daft she sounded? 'I saw security footage, the thing just appeared out of the air.' She looked at Falsh as if appealing for him to back her up. 'In one of the loading bays! I found out, that's how they got on board!'

'Sure it is,' said Trix. 'A magic travel box. Funny how you didn't tell them about this sooner, Tinya.'

'What does any of this matter, anyway?' Tinya said. 'She's ruined everything. The bidders are due to. . .'

She fell silent, presumably under a withering stare from Klimt.

‘Bidders?’ Trix felt a twinge of unease but decided she could brazen it out. ‘Oh, well, pardon me,’ she said, crossing back round to cover them, ‘I’m sure I didn’t mean to bugger things –’

A massive dark shape snapped into existence right in front of her, a barrel-chested monster with an oddly crystal-shaped head. She yelped and jerked back as it loomed over her.

In a second, Klimt had strode right through the shadow and twisted the gun from her grip. He grabbed her by the throat and pinned her back against the wall, while pointing the gun back at Falsh.

‘... up,’ Trix concluded lamely.

‘The effect is occurring.’ The looming shadow’s booming voice was as big as the room. ‘Outbreaks of aggression are reported on Callisto.’

‘What are these creatures?’ came another voice, husky and sinister. Trix saw two more shadows blink into existence behind the first, one with seaweed-like dreadlocks hanging down from its shambling form, the other, squat and dome-headed.

‘Evidence,’ said Klimt thickly, the froth at the sides of his mouth bubbling. ‘Clinical trials. The opportunity for each of you to study the effect of the creatures on the human brain.’ He dragged Trix by the throat and pushed her over to join Falsh. ‘It seemed a fitting fate for him since he wanted the weapon so badly. But I don’t see why you shouldn’t share in it.’

‘You saw the state of your slug,’ she croaked. ‘It’s not going to be winding anyone up in a hurry.’

‘It makes little difference. The ones on Leda will be weaving their magic. And Pentagon Central must be holding several samples on these premises.’ He gave her that chilling smile. ‘I wonder when you’ll feel them bite?’

Fitz was still staggering after the cleaning drone, Sook floppy and lifeless in his arms. He’d told it that the hangar was in dire need of a hosing down, and it had buzzed into enthusiastic action. A bit too enthusiastic – he had to keep yelling at it to slow down as it led him through the gloomy access tunnels.

Finally they came to a metal door thick with grease. Gritting his teeth with effort for a final push, he forced himself towards it.

The doors sucked open. ‘Yes!’ Fitz shouted, recognising a snatch of the gleaming white of the hangar. They were going to make it!

The wristpad chimed, made him jump. ‘Mildrid?’

‘No, it’s Gaws.’ Peering over Sook’s bloodstained thigh, Fitz could see his blurry image in the wristpad bubble. He was wide-eyed, with an ugly gash in his forehead. ‘Kreiner, are you there yet? We’re still waiting!’ he shouted. ‘People are going crazy out here!’

‘Crazy?’ Fitz frowned. ‘How do you mean?’

'Trying to kill us!' he gasped.

'All right, hold your horses for God's sake.' He turned to the boxy robot beside him. 'Drone,' he said, 'can you open doors?'

The drone was cagey. 'Do you have a door that needs cleaning?'

'Scrub Door Twelve, inside and out,' he said. 'Fast.'

Fitz staggered on while the drone swept off to what turned out to be one of the nearest doors.

He'd just reached the foot of the *Rapier's* ramp when the access door snapped open.

And Gaws led in a pack of bloodied, wild-eyed maniacs through the door. He saw Fitz and bared his teeth like a mangy, rangy rottweiler.

'Drone!' Fitz shouted. 'Clean the floors over here! Full power! Maximum wash! Soap and detergent and everything!'

Calmly the drone unleashed its aquatic arsenal – and how! Happily it wasn't programmed not to splash wandering personnel. Foam and suds shot out under tremendous pressure, turning the floor slick and slippery. The crowd began losing their balance, falling into each other – and then the warm water flooded out with fire-quenching force. Cries and gargles echoed around the hangar as the high-powered blasts knocked those maniacs still standing clean off their feet.

Fitz staggered up the ramp and laid Sook carefully beside the door. Then he pressed his passcard against the entry port. The door slid open. He sank to his knees. 'Made it,' he almost sobbed.

'Sook! Kreiner!' Fitz turned back around to see Mildrid, her nose bleeding and face badly bruised, swaying exhaustedly from behind the drone. 'Don't leave me! Please! Gaws has gone mad,' she wailed over the shouts and the torrent. 'He's joined a mob! They attacked me!'

Fitz looked back at her. 'I can't get to you!' he shouted.

'Look out!'

Fitz started at Mildrid's cry – and saw that, covered in suds and drenched right through, Gaws was dragging himself up the ramp. And he *had* gone mad. It was there in his eyes – or rather, nothing was. His gaze was blank and unseeing. But he went on dragging himself right up the ramp towards them.

Fitz lashed out with his foot, hoping to kick him off. But Gaws was too fast, grabbed hold of the flailing ankle and pulled. His grip was like handcuffs two sizes too small. Bellowing with fear and frustration, Fitz found himself dragged down the ramp towards the homicidal bathing party.

Chapter Twenty-six

Roddle stood halfway down the alley, his back pressed up against a wall, praying he wouldn't be found. Above the skyline, Jupiter's Great Red Spot glared down at him like an evil eye.

The noise in the main street was terrifying – baying, screaming, glass breaking. Roddle's clothes were soaked through with sweat. He'd been running for what felt like hours, trying to find his way back to his flyer. But his hopes that it might be where he left it – or even in one piece – were faint and forlorn.

As an artist he tried to avoid bland clichés – but here he was trapped in a nightmare. A massive mob was tearing through Callisto City. People were either screaming, or running as madly as he'd been, or else they were trying to kill each other. Old men, pregnant women, trendy teens. . . . They were attacking their friends to get to strangers. There was no reasoning with these people, no helping them. No stopping them. And yet there was such a desperate look in their eyes, even as they set about each other: uncomprehending, pained. . .

Roddle's mind kept clouding. He felt an insistent urge to run out into plain view and challenge them, to attack them before they could start on him. It would be madness, suicide.

But it was almost irresistible.

Moaning to himself with every step, Roddle dragged himself along the alleyway. There had to be others like him, terrified innocents, hiding away from the ever-mounting violence. He could join up with them perhaps. Strength in numbers.

They could fight back. Kill anyone who stood in their way.

The thought gave him strength, and he ran on through the bloodstained streets.

'Trix!' cried the Doctor, his head pounding as he tried to focus on the ever-shifting picture. 'Oh, dear, and you were doing so well. . .'

'Tricks?' Halcyon echoed. 'What do you mean? I'm not a performing animal!'

'Not now, Halcyon,' the Doctor snapped, his eyes tight shut, willing the pictures to sharpen. 'My suspicions have been confirmed – now I *must* find out more!'

* * *

Fitz struggled to free himself from Gaws's grip, but his limbs were still aching and cramped from hefting Sook all this way. He landed a good kick in Gaws's face, but it barely seemed to register. It was like the guy was too crazed to feel pain – his front teeth had been smashed, and he'd been left looking like a peculiarly pathetic vampire. His murderous undead mates were rising up from the suds too, some of them laying into each other, but a good few sending nasty looks his way. They'd rip him apart – then move on to Sook.

'Get yourself inside!' he yelled at her. 'Drone!' he shouted. 'Suds off!'

The hovering water-box spluttered to a stop. The whole hangar seemed knee-high in perfumed soapy water.

'Mildrid! Come on, quick!' He gasped, as Gaws twisted his ankle. 'Mildrid, for God's sake. . .'

Then she came – whirling through the soapsuds like a dervish. Like a size 20 Cathy Gale she high-kicked and finger-jabbed her way through the rabid crowd, working her way towards Fitz. With sudden clarity he remembered the way she'd kicked the gun from his hand and found he had a new determination in his fight against Gaws. If he could only hold on until she got here. . .

At one point she slipped over and vanished from view beneath the bubbles. He stared in horror. But hey, she worked a sudship – she could handle it. Like a super-submarine she soon resurfaced, dispensing deadly blows to anyone within reach.

Almost anyone. As she reached Gaws, panting for breath, she raised a iron fist to strike – then hesitated. 'What's happened to him?'

'What's happened to all of them!' gasped Fitz, still trying to break free.

'For such a weaselly man he's surprisingly strong, isn't he?' she reflected, a slight flutter in her eyelids.

'He's gone gaga, Mildrid!' he gasped. 'Sort him!'

As if awoken from a trance, she gave a short, sharp roar and brought her elbow down against Gaws's neck. His eyes rolled back and he slid slowly into the suds.

'He'll sleep for some time,' she said sadly.

'I'd say dreamland's the best place for him,' said Fitz, painfully collecting limbs and wits. 'Help me with Sook. We'll lock ourselves on board.'

'We must take Gaws with us!' she twittered.

'No way.'

'He'll be defenceless!'

'But clean and ever so fragrant.' Fitz was already tramping up the ramp. He paused to salute the valiant drone, then scooped up Sook and carried her over the threshold.

* * *

Trix looked down at the floor, trying to ignore the scary presence of the shadow creatures gathered around her. Unlike Falsh, who was courting them wildly.

‘We can make a deal,’ he said desperately. ‘I set all this up! It’s me you should be talking to!’

‘You do not possess the weapon,’ grated the massive one.

‘You tried to tell us it did not exist,’ added the shaggy one.

Trix waited for domehead to give his tuppence worth. ‘You are a worm,’ it said at length, ‘cowardly and pathetic. A fitting subject for demonstration.’

‘Hope you’ve all got a good book handy,’ said Trix. *Never let them see you hurting.* ‘Could be hours before we go gaga. Tell you what, let me go right now and I’ll give you a good show of mindless violence. Better than that rubbish on TV.’

Tinya had turned on an imposing bank of bubblescreens, all tuned to news stations, all showing scenes of violence. Street brawls. Soldiers opening fire on innocent crowds. The wild animals, lying dead and exposed in a horrible heap.

‘They keep showing the same bits,’ Trix said loudly. ‘There’s, like, three things that have happened, and they keep showing them. I reckon this footage has been faked.’

The shadowy bidders were unmoved, but Tinya wasn’t happy. ‘We should gag her.’

‘You *would* say that, Tinya. You know I’ve barely started telling them about you.’

‘Your pathetic attempts to intimidate me won’t...’

In the unexpected silence, Trix wondered what kind of a look Klimt was giving Tinya the other side of the shadows.

May as well press home the advantage. ‘You both know I don’t work alone. My assistant, the Doctor, helped me escort Falsh to Callisto.’ No one took her up on this gambit, so she pressed on regardless. ‘You want to know where he is? He’s...’ No, not on his way here. Not outside. That wouldn’t worry them unduly...

Inspiration struck.

‘He’s gone to blow up Leda,’ she said.

‘I told you we should gag her,’ muttered Tinya.

‘He has! He’s in space. He’s going to blow it to smithereens, it’s the only way!’

Tinya yawned. ‘They can’t be destroyed.’

‘And even if they could, Leda is currently guarded by a flotilla of military vessels, courtesy of Pentagon Central,’ said Klimt smugly. ‘Elegant, wouldn’t

you say? The military think they're protecting a new life form – but they're defending the very thing that will destroy them.'

'Makes no odds,' said Trix. 'The Doctor doesn't have to get anywhere near Leda. NewSystem was ready to blow every spare Jupiter moon to bits this morning – complete disintegration. And they're still standing by.'

Falsh looked at her, smiling, impressed.

'The entire moon and the surrounding area will go up,' Trix said fiercely. "Annihilated in a controlled, anti-matter particulate reaction", wasn't that what you told us, Klimt?'

'You told them this?' demanded the squat, nasty one with the fat pointy fingers.

Klimt took a deep breath. 'Tinya – did you warn them to stand down?'

'I don't have the authority to do that,' she said quietly.

'He's probably there by now,' Trix added. 'Keep watching those screens. There'll be a few fireworks tonight after all.'

'Is this female speaking the truth?' hissed the squat one. 'Are your creatures threatened?'

'Of course they're not!' Klimt snapped. 'She's trying to trick you! Are you really such a halfwit as to –'

The squat shadow rounded on him and reached out a hand. It went straight through Klimt, who started to snigger.

'You are an insolent fool,' said the shadow.

'I'm not selling you my weapon!' Klimt spat in its make-believe face, like a petulant kid. 'So! You are dismissed from the auction.'

'Your auction is an ill-organised farce,' the creature said. 'But I will not be dismissed by you. I shall confer with the Grand Marshal.'

The silhouette vanished. Now Trix could see Klimt looked red-eyed and wild. His mouth kept moving even when no words were coming out.

'What about the rest of you?' he snarled. 'Do you doubt me? Do you doubt the veracity of my claims?'

'I think,' said Tinya quickly, 'that we should perhaps take some time out here.'

'The proceedings are irregular,' rumbled the box-monster. The other one nodded.

Tinya's smile was desperate as she crossed to a bank of controls. 'We shall contact you shortly.'

The other two shadows snapped off.

The Doctor tore off the visor, gasping for breath, his vision swimming. 'She's right. It's the only way. I should have thought of it myself, not let my prejudices blind me.'

‘What are you talking about?’ asked Halcyon. ‘Please, Doctor –’

‘Cheer up! Your valiant efforts to vandalise the solar system may not be entirely wasted.’ He activated the ship’s computer. ‘You can help me arrange the demolition of a moon.’

‘What?’

‘Leda,’ said the Doctor. ‘Big explosion. The end. I shouldn’t think even a super-slug could survive total particulate dispersal, and I can’t think of another remedy. Not in the time we have.’

‘Time we have?’ Halcyon looked blank.

‘Odd business, time. Those rocks have endured for billions of years. To me, that makes them precious. Whereas human lives are over in a blink of an eye.’ He sighed. ‘And that makes them more precious than anything else. Anything. So, NewSystem’s base of operations in JoveSpace, where is it?’

‘In orbit around Sinope,’ said Halcyon, baffled, ‘clear of the disintegration zone.’

‘Just a few hours’ drive,’ said the Doctor. ‘You’ll have to come with me, Halcyon.’

‘Come with you?’ he said worriedly. ‘To Sinope?’

‘I doubt NewSystem’s people will listen to me. “’Tis not for mortals to command success” – but the famous can have a fair go.’

Halcyon brightened a touch. ‘That’s a misquote of Joseph Addison.’

‘I think you’ll find Addison misquoted me. But first things first...’ The Doctor jammed the visor back on to his face, and yanked down a small band he guessed was a kind of microphone. He focused hard, his fingers throbbing in the faint paint smears in the bottom of the tray, his senses starting to spin. ‘Start up the flight protocols, would you? I won’t be long.’ He gasped as the visions scudded back across his eyes in flecks and pieces. ‘*I can’t* be long.’

Now the bidders had gone, Trix felt an unnerving tension in the air. Klimt seemed to be losing the plot big time. Tinya was pale and silent.

And Falsh started chuckling to himself. ‘Klimt, my friend – what a performance. And you wondered why I never thought you had business acumen.’

‘Shut up!’ Klimt screamed.

Tinya was looking distinctly shaken. ‘Think she’s telling the truth, Klimt?’

‘Of course not! She’s a lying bitch!’

‘You’ll see,’ chimed Trix.

‘You’ve botched everything, Klimt,’ said Falsh, still cool and smiling. ‘That big genius head of yours has been stuffed so full of pills that it –’

‘I’ll shoot you, Falsh, unless you shut up now,’ Tinya snapped, her eyes flicking fearfully between the two men.

‘Where is the demolition company’s base?’ Klimt asked her.

'Between Sinope and Callirrhoe.' She checked her wristpad, jabbing at the small bubble it blew out at her with shaking fingers. 'Prograde orbital inclination 1.257 relative.'

'You're going there,' he declared.

'Me?'

'You're going to prove this is just fantasy.'

'How? I don't have a ship!'

He pointed at Falsh. 'Take *his*.'

'The Doctor already took off for Leda in my ship,' Falsh lied, so coolly that Trix could almost start to believe in her own stories. 'It's become a habit with him.'

'I can't go out there, Klimt,' Tinya protested. 'It – it's not safe!'

'Ha!' said Trix. 'Whose fault is that, then?'

'I'd go myself but I can't trust you not to mess things up here,' Klimt shouted. 'I can't trust anyone!'

Or anything, Trix noted with a thrill of realisation. The paint on the floor, on Tinya's dress, on Klimt's tunic... it was starting to glow, just as it had on the podule...

The cavalry was coming. Kind of.

'What's happening?' cried Tinya, brushing frantically at the mass of colour rippling across her body. She tore off her dress, flung it on the pile of bodies. But that only heightened its hypnotic effect, and she wound up standing there in her underwear, transfixed.

As for Trix, as the colours swirled and washed before her, she was more transfixed by Tinya's huge pants. How could someone so slinky wear such awful knickers? What a fraud!

Trix tore her eyes away from her. Falsh was fighting the effect, the sweat big and beading on his black brow. Klimt was struggling too. He was gasping and thrashing and gnashing his teeth, making for the door. There was nothing she could do to stop him. Tied to her chair, Trix could only grit her teeth and try to cling on to her senses as the maelstrom grew wilder. She tried picturing the light the Doctor had shown her to break the spell last time, but found Tinya's big knickers kept billowing towards her from its centre like a sail. The ludicrous image helped her hold on; hold on until...

'Trix?'

The Doctor's voice seemed to reverberate through her mind. It strengthened the light she was trying to shine there, and made the pants flap away.

'Trix, you may hear my words but you shall not be affected by them. The rest of you... You will remain calm and passive. You will do nothing whatsoever unless Trix tells you to. You will be no bother to anyone.' A pause. 'Thanks for proving my theory, Trix. Now I really must be getting off to Sinope...'

The light in the paint died away. Trix opened her eyes and found she felt wonderfully refreshed.

Then she realised that the door was open and that Klimt had gone.

Chapter Twenty-seven

The Doctor rubbed his eyes and put down the visor. He wiped his dirty fingers on his shirt. He'd done all he could for Trix. A clever girl, that one, and resourceful, too. Yes, she was coming along nicely. Together with Fitz. . .

Oh, Fitz.

'Right,' said the Doctor, trying to focus on the ship's controls. 'Sinope, I believe.' He paused. 'Halcyon, you've not set the drive systems in motion!'

'Let me off this ship,' said Halcyon. 'Please, Doctor.'

He sighed and readied the ship for takeoff himself with a few spoken commands. 'I'd have thought you'd *want* to come. We can discuss the terms of sale as we go!'

Halcyon looked at him warily. 'Really?'

'You'll find I'm a very reasonable man, Halcyon.' The Doctor's fingers flicked over the controls. The engines started to build.

'And you'll explain to me the principles of the dimensional anchoring?' Halcyon asked as the computer steered the ship smoothly, out of the stadium terminal.

'Oh, naturally. That should pass the first few minutes.'

'It's the gravitic shift effect I find it hard to get my head around,' he admitted.

'Well, I'm not surprised,' said the Doctor. He looked at Halcyon. 'Though to be honest, I *am* surprised you've even considered it.'

'I'm an engineer, Doctor,' said Halcyon softly. 'Or used to be.'

The computer chimed softly. 'Warning incoming from Orbital Flight Control.'

The Doctor leaned back in his chair. 'Put them through.'

'You're all bastards!' screamed a loud male voice. 'Ships! Ships up and down, all day and all night! You make my life hell!'

'That wasn't so much a warning as a diatribe,' the Doctor observed.

'Sentinel approaching,' the computer informed him.

The ship rocked as a blast glanced against the ship.

'Now that really *was* a warning,' said the Doctor. 'The effect is spreading.'

Halcyon was staring around wildly. 'What effect? What?'

'Doesn't matter. We can't be put off now, our journey's too important.' He waved a finger at some virtual buttons. 'Manual control!'

‘What are you doing?’

‘Not now, Halcyon.’ The ship banked steeply upwards. ‘I have to concentrate.’

‘Doctor! *Please*, you can’t just take –’

‘Tell me, Halcyon,’ he said gently, ‘your time as an engineer. Was it before you went blind?’

Halcyon started to say something. About half a dozen times. It let the Doctor get on with the business of keeping them alive long enough to reach Sinope.

Trix waved a hand in front of Falsh’s face. No reaction. Then she marched up to the zombie-like Tinya.

‘I’m assuming you’re protected from the slug effect?’

‘Klimt gave me pills,’ said Tinya.

‘Why does that not surprise me?’ she murmured. ‘Well, Tinya, Falsh and me need to take these pills too. Where are they?’

‘Klimt has them.’

‘Great.’ Trix sighed. ‘OK, we’ll just have to hope time’s on our side. Come on, you two, let’s get on with it.’

Trix felt like some cut-price pied piper as she led her sullen slaves out of the crumbling shed. The night was dark but the temperature mild, like Jupiter was a fat furnace burning in the black sky to warm them. Pity it was really just motors and magnetic fields and make-believe keeping Callisto alive. She knew that if she didn’t act quickly, the whole world would freeze over, Jove’s deadly radiation eating through a thick frost and into a million mutilated corpses buried beneath.

Well, the royal ‘she’ at any rate.

A force fence – rigged up to look like a real high-wire fence – demarcated the Pentagon Central part of the compound. Lights burned at a few windows in a few buildings beyond, but there was no one around.

‘All right, you two,’ she said, and Tinya and Falsh came to an obedient halt. Each carried a tub of doctored Halcytone. ‘We’ve got to get inside this place and blitz those slugs. While trying not to get shot. Are you with me?’

Neither Falsh nor Tinya said a word.

‘Good. Let’s look for the way in, then.’

There was a checkpoint built into the fence, a sort of sentry-box that housed the field generator.

‘See if there are any guards,’ she told Tinya, reasoning optimistically that a slip of a girl in her slip would arouse more curiosity than aggression in any soldiers still patrolling – despite the big knickers.

Tinya came to a halt beside a sprawling bundle of bloody limbs. Trix had an unpleasant flashback to the Institute.

‘Onwards we go,’ she said queasily. ‘Duck at the first sign of trouble, OK? And stay down. Chances are not everyone’s affected – and that they’ll shoot first and ask questions later.’

As they crossed the silent compound, Trix saw an ashen light somewhere off on the built-up horizon. A fire maybe. Distant shrieks carried through the still night air, distant shouts. . .

Roddle ran blindly, stumbling over bodies, whimpering, bile burning in the back of his throat, not caring where he was going. People who were quick enough to get out of his way scrambled aside, out of reach. Those who were too slow – the old, or the very young, chiefly – they paid for it.

He came to a sudden stop, dimly recognising the quiet street he stood in, puzzled by just how bloody his bruised, puffy hands had become. He was back where he’d parked the flyer. It had been overturned, pushed through a window, but it seemed sound enough. He would ride it high and far and away. He would ride it through the panicking crowds. He would kill loads more people that way.

Once he’d dealt with the man trying to free the flyer from the smashed window display.

This man wasn’t raving. He wasn’t screaming or trying to kill anyone. He had silver, spidery hair growing wildly around a big bald patch. His dark clothes were splashed with Halcytone – a man of discernment, then.

‘That’s my flyer,’ Roddle snarled.

The man turned slowly, fixed Roddle with a warning stare. He used; even in his confusion, Roddle could tell that at a glance. The man’s lined skin was grey, dead-looking. But the eyes were bright.

‘Thought you could help yourself to my property?’ Roddle sneered. ‘You’re crazy. . .

The user looked at him and gave him a strange, almost wistful smile. ‘I’m not crazy,’ he said. ‘I’m a genius.’

A sliver of glass glinted in the user’s hand. Roddle gasped as it was pushed into his stomach.

He fell, lay there on the hard pavement, clutching feebly at the wound with both hands. Felt the man going through his pockets for the flyer’s prime-key.

When he opened his eyes again the flyer was rising into the sky, yellow and sleek and angled against the grey and white urban sprawl. ‘Come back!’ he roared. He could hear the footsteps coming up behind him but he shut them out. Kept watching his sleek and graceful flyer get smaller and smaller until it dwindled to nothing. ‘Come back! I haven’t finished with you yet!’

He was still yelling and screaming his defiance as the first fists rained down on him.

The Doctor had out-manoeuvred the sentinels on his departure from Callisto space, zigzagging wildly over the city while the deranged threats of the orbital flight controller poured out from the speakers.

It wasn't the fear of destruction that stayed with him now as they sped on towards Sinope, but the terrible view of Callisto City his flight had afforded. Streetlights. Buildings ablaze. An ambulance, roaring up on to a pavement, mowing down brawling men, women and children.

For a facile moment the Doctor reflected that being blind had some compensations. But he kept the thought to himself.

Channel ten-one-one spoke of Callisto being in the grip of fierce rioting. Various extremist groups were getting the blame. Scenes of graphic violence recorded by camdroids were doubtless getting record ratings.

'So much for restoring the wonder,' said Halcyon softly. 'That was what I was here to do. As much for myself as for the Empire.' He paused. 'How did you know, Doctor? That I was...'

'I checked you quite thoroughly after you fell. Your pupils...'

'Sook's under strict instruction never to leave me unattended.' Halcyon looked pained and miserable. 'No one's meant to know. No one.'

'Well, Sook had problems of her own. Why such a secret?'

'Am I to be pitied? I, whose future was so bright?' He set his mouth in an unhappy line. 'I, whose very name is synonymous with colour and light... forced to endure an endless dark. How could people ever take me seriously?'

And this from a man with diamonds in his scalp and wraparound shades, thought the Doctor. 'How did you lose your sight?'

'Experimenting with Halcytone. I wanted to take it all so much further... Prove to my critics that my paint was no gimmick. It was art.'

The Doctor considered. 'So it's not *just* about the money, then.'

'I wanted to unlock patterns that could change a man, reveal such delicate blends of colour...' The Doctor watched, fascinated, as he pulled a small box from his cloak, filled with silver shavings. He applied some to the scarce growth on his cheeks and chin with an enchanting precision.

'Your experiments cost you your sight?'

He nodded. 'The optic nerve was overstimulated. It shut down. Permanently, the surgeons said.'

'For 'tis the sport to have the engineer hoist with his own petard,' the Doctor murmured. 'Is Sook the only one who knows?'

'She alone.' He brushed a fine metallic dust from his face with firm, precise strokes. 'When we met, I was at the edge of the abyss. She brought me back.'

She taught me.'

'Taught you Feng Shui?'

'Gave me a new way of seeing things. A new kind of sight. And in turn, I gave her direction. We are bound together, she and I,' he said, half sadly, half fondly. 'She is my eyes. But I... I am her *vision*.'

'So it was that new window on the world she gave you that enabled your great comeback. And now together you use those schools and equations as justification for your egocentric schemes.'

'Not schemes, Doctor. I have a *vision*. A new image of the solar system. A perfectly balanced, classical model, made *real*.'

'That's not vision, it's illusion,' stormed the Doctor. 'Ancient civilisations saw order in creation because they sought it in their own circumstances. They were fooling themselves. Tear apart the heavens all you like in your frustration – the order you speak of will never exist on a meaningful level.'

Halcyon seemed not to hear him. 'When I went blind... For a few moments only, as my eyes died... I glimpsed such a pattern, Doctor, in the *licht und blindheit*. Such a perfect, chaotic simplicity, it haunts me still. The teasing knowledge of its existence... Only through the equations of Feng Shui have I come close to experiencing such perfection again.' He paused. 'And were I to understand the mechanics of your beautiful, humming box...'

'Mathematics is a beautiful language,' said the Doctor. 'But as Milton said, "the mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heav'n of hell..." He smiled sadly. 'Or a hell of heav'n.'

'Better to reign in hell than to serve in heaven,' said Halcyon. 'Or so I once believed. Egged on by Falsh, and his money. His gifts. His promises. It can seem such an empty world, Doctor, one with no sight. I have done everything I can to fill the void.'

'With a particular focus on making money?'

'Why shouldn't I! Perhaps I *have* been exploited by my sponsors, manipulated...' He smiled proudly. 'But I am a personal friend and favourite of the President herself! My name is recognised in every corner of the Empire! I sell, Doctor! I say it unashamedly: I am big!'

'And the bigger you grow, the better your chance of glimpsing your greatness with those ruined old eyes of yours, is that it?'

'You would rather I had thrown myself into that abyss?'

'No.' The Doctor jumped up from his chair. 'The universe is a ghastly mess, Halcyon. It's wild and cruel. It's rarely pretty. But like the life that goes on within it, *in spite of it*... it's to be protected. It's to be treasured!' He gripped Halcyon's hands, leaned into his face. 'You talk of visions, Halcyon? I have one for you. Some are witnessing it as we speak. The people on Callisto, everyone in this sector of space – men, women and children alike – however

they feel about themselves, whatever they're looking for in this life, they'll share a nightmare. It will sweep aside the clutter of thought and experience, cut like a knife to the heart of them. It's already started, this nightmare, and it will grow more and more bloody, more and more terrible. These poor people will destroy each other. Destroy themselves. And I have to save them, whatever it takes.' He leaned in, breathed in Halcyon's ear: 'Will you help me?'

Halcyon was quiet for a while, his hands unmoving under the Doctor's own. 'Couldn't we talk about those dimensional anchors now?' he said.

So far, so good, thought Trix. Tinya had walked and kept on walking into the Pent Cent compound, and nothing had come running at her yet. Nothing had come fainting at her feet, either – although frankly, in *those* pants. . .

'Falsh, you check that building for signs of slugs,' Trix said, pointing the way. 'I'll check this one. Tinya, you –'

But she'd walked as far as she could, and had come up short against a wall with dusty windows. 'The slugs are in here,' she said, her voice alarmingly loud in the silence that cloaked the old industrial park.

'Shh!' hissed Trix, hurrying towards her and beckoning Falsh to do the same. 'There could still be soldiers inside there –'

The brickwork beside her smoked and chipped as gunfire smashed into the wall, and windows shattered. As one, the three of them dived to the ground, their paint pots clattering, and rolled for the cover of some nearby metal crates.

'Well, all right, there could still be soldiers *outside* too,' Trix peered around and saw two soldiers approaching, their guns raised.

'Whoever you are, throw down your weapons!' one of them called.

'Raise your arms and move into the open,' shouted the other one. 'Or we will shoot to kill.'

Trix swore under her breath. The men were clearly terrified, there was no chance of sweet-talking them. Could they be the only ones left unaffected here?

'I'd welcome suggestions,' Trix whispered. 'Oops, I forgot. You're my mindless slaves, aren't you. Terrific.'

Falsh produced something from his pocket, and showed her. 'Gas capsule,' he said.

Trix winced as a fresh round of gunfire blew the slug-shack's windows to pieces. 'I thought I heard Tinya confiscate that?'

'I grabbed it back,' said Falsh.

She stared at him. 'You're not my mindless slave at all, are you?'

'You can't play a player,' he smirked. 'That paint was developed on my behalf.'

'So you've got immunity.'

'But not against those slug things.' He took careful aim and tossed the gas cap over the crates. They shook under a fresh volley of gunfire, but the gas was already hissing out, overpowering the two soldiers. 'They'll send me crazy as quick as they will you. So I'm with you wanting them blitzed.'

Trix watched as the soldiers collapsed, clutching their throats.

Falsh put his hand on hers. 'When we've accomplished that, this truce is over.'

Trix half smiled, didn't remove her hand. 'When, not if? I admire your optimism.'

Falsh smiled back at her. 'If we don't accomplish it, nothing else will matter a damn. Now come on.'

Tinya just behind them, they climbed in through the shattered windows together.

Fitz had found the *Rapier's* first-aid room and under Mildrid's direction had manhandled Sook into some kind of intelligent couch. He glared at it as it went to work. At least he *hoped* it was working. The damned thing was so quiet it was hard to tell. But every now and then it beeped or boinked and he supposed that was good.

But why couldn't it just tell him she was going to be all right? Hateful bloody machine. . .

'S'all right,' said Sook faintly. 'It's giving me treatment.'

'It is?'

'It helps get rid of the pain.' She half smiled. 'You'll be gone any minute.'

'Ha, ha. I *will* be gone, too,' he said. 'Wasted away under the strain of carting your fat bum about.'

'If hers is fat, what hope for me?' said Mildrid, folding her arms in a surly fashion. She'd put some burn cream on her face and was looking quite frightening.

I didn't mean anything,' Fitz said quickly. 'Don't do any of those killer moves on me!' He paused. 'Where'd you learn that stuff, anyway?'

'I teach Kung Fu. Preserving the Wing Chung system.' She shrugged. 'Speed and style over physical strength. A system designed for and perfected by women over eight hundred years ago.'

'Something old worth preserving,' he said.

'Yes, it certainly is.'

He grinned and took her hand gently. 'I was talking about you. Thanks for what you did.'

‘Old!’ She pulled back her hand, waved it about dismissively. ‘I was an old *fool* to let down my guard with those maniacs out there. I just. . .’ The hand went to her bruised and sticky face, and there were tears in her eyes. ‘I just couldn’t believe Gaws could ever act that way.’

Sook spoke up from her couch. ‘Scary thing is. . . If it happened to him – to all those people. . .’ She looked up at Fitz worriedly. ‘It could happen to any one of us, too.’

‘Nice thought,’ said Fitz. ‘I’d better go back out, try to find the Doctor.’

‘Out there?’ Mildrid frowned. ‘Do you have a death wish?’

‘The Doctor may have an idea of what’s going –’

‘You’re going nowhere, Kreiner,’ hissed Sook. ‘Feel that?’

Fitz paused for a few moments. ‘What?’

‘This ship’s moving,’ said Mildrid slowly.

Fitz could feel it now, a vibration in his aching feet, a quiet rise in the background whine of the *Rapier*’s systems. Like the ship was leaving the stadium launchpad and taking off for somewhere in a hurry.

Chapter Twenty-eight

Trix looked around the warehouse. Tinya had been right, the slugs were here all right – in pieces, laid open on various scientific slabs with an exotic collection of electrodes sticking out from all the soft bits.

‘Let’s get redecorating, people,’ said Trix. Falsh was already slopping multi-coloured gloop over the specimens. Tinya snapped into life at her instruction and got busy too. They soon had every last slug sloshed and glittering with pulsing patterns.

‘As easy as that?’ Trix wondered. It was all a bit anticlimactic in a way.

‘Maybe not,’ said Falsh, pointing behind her. ‘We don’t know what’s in *there*.’

She turned and took in properly a large, cylindrical structure like a high-tech dustbin balanced between the pointy hits of three metal cones. ‘What is that, a centrifuge or something?’

‘Maybe,’ said Falsh.

‘Tinya?’

‘I don’t know what it is,’ she said.

Trix looked at the could-be-a-centrifuge. It stood at least five metres high, and there was no way of knowing what it contained. ‘Could there be more slugs in there?’

‘Who knows?’ said Falsh. ‘Maybe we’ve covered all of them. Maybe there are another half-dozen in that thing.’ He gestured around the large room. All around, in the shadows, corpses sat twisted in unnatural positions. ‘They’re the only people who could tell us.’

‘There must be a way of seeing inside that thing,’ said Trix, her already frayed nerves jangling with stress. ‘Tinya, bring up a bubblescreen, let’s see the controls.’

Tinya did as she was bid. The first thing the screen did was ask them for a classified ID code. They didn’t have a hope.

‘There’s another way,’ said Falsh. Trix followed his finger... upward?

To the rafters.

‘Approaching orbital target,’ breathed Falsh’s flight computer.

‘Any signal traffic?’ asked the Doctor. He’d been trying to contact NewSystem since they’d left Callisto orbit, with no success.

‘No signal traffic detected.’

'A communications breakdown, perhaps,' said Halcyon.

'The instruments are picking up ion trails in the vicinity. Spaceships have recently launched from this station.'

'Some sort of emergency evacuation?'

'I suspect that those crewmembers still able to run have done so,' said the Doctor unhappily. 'The rest are dead. Or in the throes of killing each other.'

Halcyon stared at him, agog.

'Would you like me to dock with target?' the computer enquired.

'With all possible speed,' said the Doctor.

Sook woke up and felt deceptively well – awash with painkillers, she supposed. She tried to move her head round, and cried out as stabs of pain went through her.

Mildrid appeared by her side. 'I shouldn't move, dear.'

'Will I live?' she asked.

'It was touch and go. You had a lot of internal bleeding and several fractures, but the couch is fixing that up. Your left leg's a real mess. Ideally it should be replaced.'

She grunted. 'Nice bedside manner you have, nurse.'

'You're lucky.'

'I know.'

'Lucky Kreiner came into your life.'

Sook regarded her. 'I'd say we both were.' She paused, licked her lips. 'Is Kreiner here?'

'He's gone to try and see who's hijacked the ship,' said Mildrid. 'We've been doing maximum revs the last hour.'

Aching through the tranqs and numbshots, Sook's stomach felt full of tin-tacks. The ordeal wasn't over yet. 'Where are we going?'

Mildrid shrugged. 'I don't know. Just try to rest.'

'Does our hijacker know we're on board?'

'How could they know?'

Sook looked up into Mildrid's scared brown eyes. 'If they came looking.'

Outside the control room, Fitz peered through an inspection panel at their newly designated driver. It was a man, an unimpressive sight, slumped forward over the control banks, his body rising and falling with uncertain breaths. Was he asleep? A large bald spot sat in his silvery hair like a big pink crater. Two bodies lay sprawled at his feet. The *Rapier's* pilots.

Murdered?

Fitz saw red. He had the overwhelming urge to find something heavy and blunt, and club the man over the head with it. He clenched his fists. It felt like

fat, boiling lumps of hate were dripping down his spine, charging his body with a sick energy.

He stalked round to the main doors, his mind uncluttered by fear or caution. The doors were locked from the inside but his passcard overrode that and they hummed open. The *Rapier's* décor being so minimalist, there were no handy wrenches or hammers lying around for him to bash out the man's brains, so he'd just have to use his fists. That was all right. That was no problem.

But the murdering bastard was waking, turning. Grey, watery eyes stared out of his startled face. They narrowed. Now Fitz could see there was a gun placed on the console, but the man grabbed something else, a tiny little pill or something, and pushed it into his mouth.

Fitz wouldn't give him a second chance to get the gun.

The man flailed and struggled but Fitz didn't feel his fists. He felt so strong. This must be how Bruce Banner felt before he turned big and green. He fixed his hands around the murderer's throat and watched them carefully. He felt so strong, they would probably turn green in a minute. Hulking. Incredible. Any minute.

The man, meanwhile, was turning blue, his bulging eyes filled with hate, hair standing up in cartoon shock. Fitz's nails were rimed with blood as the soft flesh tore beneath his grip.

Red. Blue. Green. This was all wrong. This was all messed up.

Fitz bellowed in pain, let go of the man's throat. He backed away, retching, staring at his bloody hands.

Too late he realised that the man had recovered, and was charging towards him. Fitz gasped as the breath was knocked from his body. As he was sent crashing into a bank of controls, the bloodlust washed through him again, the urge to fight back, to kill. There was a sort of metal box on the console and he grabbed for it, he could use it as a weapon. But it must have been plugged in somewhere – there were sparks and a big fizz of energy, and Fitz's body bucked and twisted as shocks blasted through him.

Finally the pain and the power passed. He fell to his knees. Dimly, still convulsing, he became aware of the man he'd just tried to kill standing over him.

'You know what I can't stand?' the man slurred, his breathing hard and shaky. 'It's the waiting. That damned waiting.'

Fitz toppled forwards at the man's feet and blacked out.

'Perhaps I should stay on the ship,' said Halcyon as the Doctor led him along the docking tube. 'I mean, what use can I be to you?'

'Celebrity is a healing power,' said the Doctor. 'If anyone is still alive here, then the chance to get your autograph should come as a welcome distraction.'

'You're mocking me.'

Just trying to raise our spirits.'

'If you see someone, if there's danger... you will tell me, won't you?' Halcyon grabbed hold of the Doctor's wrist. 'Only I shan't be able to cope alone...'

'You're blind, man, not helpless!' he exploded. But he lowered his voice as they stepped out on to the NewSystem reception. 'I'm sorry. Please believe me, I shan't abandon you, Halcyon.'

As back on Blazar, the reception area was followed by a cavernous white storage bay. Discs hovered far above, but there weren't many crates piled up here. Only a few bodies.

'Don't trip over the corpses,' the Doctor advised. 'We'll take it carefully.'

'Corpses?' Halcyon blanched with fear. 'The crew, you mean, affected by this... this bloodlust? How did they die?'

'Knuckles and makeshift clubs, by the looks of it. Since you ask.' Holding Halcyon's hand, the Doctor pressed on through the stunted forest of outstretched limbs and stiff forms. 'We're a way off from Leda. I'd hoped that the effect would be less advanced. Then again, with the slugs in greater numbers up here in space, I suppose it makes sense that the effect would intensify.'

'Quiet,' Halcyon hissed. 'Can you feel it?'

Now that the Doctor stood still, he could. A faint tremor was passing through the base.

'Another ship boarding?' asked Halcyon. 'A relief crew, perhaps?'

'That *would* be a relief,' the Doctor agreed. 'But I don't think we'd better take any chances.'

He led Halcyon just a little more quickly out of the corpse-strewn hangar and towards the control area.

'Docking procedure completed,' said the *Rapier's* computer. 'We have arrived. Disembark from exit two.'

Sook leaned heavily on Mildrid outside the inspection hatch, her teary eyes fixed on the hijacker – she couldn't bring herself to look at where the twisted bodies of Watts and Crossland lay beneath their precious flight controls, nor at Kreiner, stretched out and prone. The hijacker had stood over Kreiner's prone body for more than a minute, his head in his hands as if remorseful – or just very tired. Then the computer's voice seemed to stir him. He stared around as if waking up now, unsure of his surroundings, rubbing at his neck.

'I'll deal with him,' said Mildrid.

'No,' hissed Sook, clutching hold of her. 'Please. I can hardly move on my own, if something happened to you...'

Mildrid nodded. 'All right.'

They watched as the man moved away from Kreiner without another glance

and left the control room; heard the doors open around the corner and quiet footsteps rushing away.

The moment the sound had died, Mildrid helped Sook up and round to the main doors.

'Is Kreiner dead?' Sook asked.

'That maniac must have thought so,' said Mildrid.

'Go to him, quick.' She swallowed. 'I'll find out where we are.' She hobbled over to the controls, using one of Halcyon's canes as a makeshift crutch, the growing pain in her body keeping her focused.

'He's still breathing!' cried Mildrid, kneeling beside him, easing his head into her lap.

'And my head is very sore,' said Kreiner reproachfully. 'What happened? I saw stars. . .'

Sook looked stiffly across at him. 'You managed to unplug a PadPad on charge. Psycho-electric feedback. Not good.'

He blinked at her. 'Should you be walking?'

'Call this walking?' she muttered, easing herself into the pilot's seat. It was still warm, and she shuddered.

'What am I even doing here? I don't remember a. . . ' He blanched. 'Oh, yes I do. That guy. I was going to kill him!'

'Not from where we were standing, Kreiner,' said Sook drily.

'I'm telling you!' He looked up at Mildrid. 'I felt like Gaws looked back in the stadium hangar. . . Does that make sense? I was wild, my head felt like it would burst, I didn't care about anything except. . . ' He started to shake. 'Jesus, I'm going mad! I am!'

'It's just the shock you got,' Mildrid said soothingly.

'No, this was before.' Fitz nuzzled his head against her matronly bosom. 'Reckon it was the shock that stopped me.'

'Weird place to run to,' Sook announced. 'We've docked with NewSystem's mobile operations unit.'

'NewSystem?' Mildrid looked at her sharply. 'The company ready to destroy Jupiter's moons?'

'We have to warn them,' said Sook. 'There's a killer on the way.'

'Let him get on with it!' Mildrid declared. 'Do us all a -'

Her words were choked off as Kreiner grabbed hold of her throat and started to squeeze.

'Kreiner? What the hell are you. . . ?' Sook instinctively jumped up. The pain bucked through her body, her gammy leg folded beneath her and she fell to the floor. She hurt so badly she could barely stay conscious. Mildrid's face was red and contorted. Kreiner's knuckles were white.

'Stop it!' Sook screamed. 'Stop it!'

* * *

High in the dusty rafters, Trix tried to swing on to the main beam that would carry her over the centrifuge without spilling her supply of paint.

The floor had to be thirty feet below.

She'd tossed Falsh for the pleasure of this little mission, but lost. At least it meant *he* was the one left guarding the door with a rifle plucked from a soldier's corpse, defending the outpost from any passing homicidal maniacs.

Was the slug effect eating through her sanity even now – was that why she was up here? What if the Doctor didn't make it? Every time she felt a flash of anger or resentment at being up here risking her neck for maybe nothing at all, she winced, told herself to cool it. That burn of irritation might light the fuse in her brain, setting off the final countdown that would blow out all sense and leave her a mad, rabid animal. And could rabid animals hang on to dusty, creaking beams? She wasn't about to chance it.

She inched along the beam caterpillar fashion, gripping it with both arms and legs, raising her bum in the air and pushing it back down to propel herself forwards. The strap of the paint tin felt like it was cutting right through her fingers. She could see Falsh, broad and impressive in his paint-splashed shoes, standing guard at the window, looking out into the gloom, while Tinya stood silent, a pale spectre watching Trix's progress without emotion.

'Keep going,' Falsh called to her. He'd got very motivational all of a sudden. 'That's it! Come on, Trix. You're going to make it.'

'I know I am!' she shouted back. 'So keep your mouth shut before anyone left alive hears and comes looking!'

She was nearly directly above the centrifuge now. Soon she'd know. She could imagine the slugs piled high in there like maggots in a milkbottle, twisting, writhing, spreading their sickness. Her head felt like it was swimming – was that a touch of vertigo or a sticky slithering across her senses? She took deep breaths, held on tight to the beam, *don't look down, the dizziness will pass, you're so nearly there, hold on...*

She opened her eyes.

The centrifuge was empty.

Trix giggled. Then the giggles turned into full-blown gales of laughter. 'It's all right, no slugs!' she called. 'No slugs! Nothing at all!'

She looked across at Falsh.

He was aiming his gun at her.

'Falsh, you bastard!' she screamed. She twisted around as he opened fire, so she was hanging beneath the beam. The heat crackled past her fingers.

'Told you, truce is over,' he said, taking careful aim. 'And you know way too much about me now.'

'Tinya!' yelled Trix. 'Help me!'

Falsh shook his head. 'I believe you told her to duck at the first sign of trouble and stay down,' he said. 'But don't worry. She'll be dying with you.'

Trix's legs slipped clear of the beam. She clung on to the splintering wood by her fingers; not a sitting duck, but a dangling one.

Falsh couldn't miss.

With a quick prayer to anyone who might be listening, Trix let go and dropped down into the centrifuge. The blast from Falsh's rifle lashed past her as she fell, she felt its heat on her cheek even as she slammed feet first into the metal tub. Her whole body jarred with the impact, but she held herself still and silenced the whimpers of agony she felt building at the back of her throat.

'Trix?' called Falsh.

She held her breath for what seemed like an age, didn't make a sound. If he thought she was dead he might just turn around and leave.

The seconds ticked by. Nothing.

Trix bit her lip, closed her eyes and said a silent 'thank you' to the heavens. She had more lives than a cat!

There was a clattering noise as something landed beside her. A metal ball, a giant Malteser, clicking quietly to itself.

Falsh had taken more than just a rifle from the gassed soldiers. This had to be a grenade.

Swearing, Trix grabbed for it and threw it back out again. There was an enormous explosion. The centrifuge shook. The gloomy rafters above her lit up a brilliant magnesium white – then took fire. A succession of WHOOMPHs went up around her big metal bucket, telling her a proper big blaze was taking hold.

Trix stared wildly around. The metal walls around her were sheer and unscalable. And getting hotter.

Chapter Twenty-nine

‘Aha,’ said the Doctor. ‘This must be the control centre.’

He led Halcyon into a large, hexagonal room. One of the walls was given over to a giant viewscreen, a great window looking out on to the star-studded darkness of space. A chunky, rugged console was arranged beneath it, with seating for three. The seats were empty – though big, little and middle-sized bodies lay curled up on the ground, two men and a woman – and a large chunk of the thick plastic console had been split open, exposing the wires and filaments beneath.

‘What is it?’ hissed Halcyon.

‘There was quite a fight in here.’ The Doctor ran over to check the damage. ‘No major systems affected. . .’ He brought up a bubblescreen, flicked through some pages. Then he bashed his fist down on the console in anger. ‘The destructive charges are primed but the software’s damaged. I can’t call up selective detonation. The whole network of mined moons will need to be reconnected before we can start punching them out of the network.’

‘What’s that?’ Halcyon jumped at the sound of quiet footsteps close by.

The Doctor spun around to see, but no one was there. Then he realised his banging the console had called up a new set of bubblescreens, floating in front of the main viewscreen. They showed an array of static views of rooms and corridors – presumably fed from security cameras.

One of them showed a docking tube – and a man. It was *his* footsteps they could hear, as he moved along with a curious, jerky gait. He clutched a laser gun in both hands.

‘Klimt,’ hissed the Doctor, helping Halcyon to the pilot’s seat at the console.

‘Klimt?’

‘A man who’ll do anything he can to stop me blowing up Leda.’ He frowned. ‘You know, in this sort of situation, his role and mine are usually reversed.’

‘What are you talking about, Doctor?’ cried Halcyon, clinging on to both sides of the chair like he might fall out.

‘This whole madness is his design. The slugs are Klimt’s creation, and he’ll do anything to protect them.’

Halcyon started to quake.

The Doctor placed a hand on his shoulder. ‘Well, he’ll try, anyway. And *I’ll* try to stop him – or to buy you time, anyway.’

‘Me? Time to do what?’ He stared about helplessly. ‘Where am I?’

‘At the helm of this station. You’re going to have to instruct the computer to re-make those connections.’

‘I’m blind, you idiot!’ stormed Halcyon.

‘I know – and I can’t let you hide behind that any longer,’ the Doctor snapped. ‘The computer has verbal control. You used to be an engineer, man! In this day and age I can’t imagine you did much without one of these things. And most importantly, you know the names of all the satellites for the chop in your grand orchestration. You *do*, right?’

‘I . . .’ Halcyon stared sightlessly around at the systems. ‘I don’t know if I can –’

‘You must,’ said the Doctor simply. ‘Or we’ll all die. There’s no saying how long we have until we succumb to the influence of those creatures, blind *or* sighted. Do you want to die like these poor people around you? Like they’re dying in their thousands on Callisto? If left unchecked, that sort of stuff could seriously eat into your profit margins.’

‘Stop prattling, man, my mind’s a whirl already!’

‘Don’t talk to me,’ the Doctor hissed in his ear. ‘Talk to the computer. And give me your cloak.’

‘My cloak? Why?’

The Doctor yanked it off, snapping the thin chain that held it in place about his neck. ‘Because I’ve got to improvise.’ He paused in the doorway. ‘Don’t forget – the moment the charges are cleared for detonation, destroy Leda.’

‘Check,’ said Halcyon hoarsely.

Without another word, the Doctor ran from the room. He hadn’t noticed the body of the girl start to twitch and shiver, just behind where Halcyon sat in gloomy majesty.

‘Kreiner, no!’ Sook screamed, dragging herself towards him.

Mildrid’s struggles were weakening – kneeling down, Kreiner’s weight on her, she could use none of her skills to get free. But what could Sook do?

Nothing. And the moment he’d finished with Mildrid, he’d start on her.

The PadPad charger was hooked around the edge of the fallen trolley, close to Kreiner’s eye level. It was hanging by a smouldering wire. She yanked it out. The resultant sparks made him recoil, flail around on his back. Mildrid scrambled clear, making some terrible noises as she gasped for breath.

Already Kreiner was raising his head from the floor, eyes staring around wildly.

So she grabbed the thinkset, pressed it against his neck, slid it up behind his ear.

He convulsed, then fell still.

* * *

Trix was trying to scale the sides of the centrifuge, but it was no use. Even when she jumped up she couldn't reach the top of the circular wall. The metal was almost too hot to touch already.

Her heart was knocking like a pneumatic drill. She was going to roast to death in this thing, while Falsh walked casually off to freedom.

An awful cracking noise sounded above her. The rafters, consumed with flame, were giving way. The sky was falling in.

She let rip with an almighty shriek as a length of charred timber came crashing down on top of her. . .

It landed on its end, missing her by inches. Slowly, the length of flaming wood toppled and crashed against the lip of the centrifuge at an angle of 45 degrees.

She blinked in amazement, choked in the smoke. If she could climb the beam to the top. . .

Whipping off her stained jacket, she beat at the flames. That worked a little, but the smoke was getting thicker, she didn't have long. Turning the jacket into a pair of makeshift oven mitts to protect her hands, she climbed up quickly, unsteadily.

She reached the lip – but she was still a good fifteen feet above the ground. She hesitated, stared around at the inferno taking hold of the makeshift lab, at the blankets of black smoke blinding the air.

There was no choice. As distances went, it was a lot easier to fall than to climb. She swung herself over the scorching hot lip and dropped down. Her ankle twisted beneath her, stabbed with pain. She took a sharp breath – filling her lungs with smoke.

Eyes streaming, convulsed with coughing, Trix dragged herself towards the broken windows, hauled herself through them and collapsed the other side.

Done it!

Her skin felt hot, and her throat stung with smoke. Her ankle was sore, but it could hold her weight, just. She rubbed her watering eyes.

Tinya was standing in front of her.

'Hey! You got out, all by yourself,' said Trix, coughing. 'Well done.'

She blinked rapidly, frowning. Tinya was no longer modelling her unlikely lingerie – she was wearing a purloined soldier's jacket and trousers.

'And covered your modesty. All by yourself. Without me telling you to.' Trix's heart dipped in her chest. 'The hypnosis thing has worn off, hasn't it?'

'My mind's thrown off its control.'

'More like there wasn't enough paint spilled to hold you under for long,' said Trix, coughing again. 'But at least it was enough to wreck your little auction.'

'You've cost me everything,' Tinya hissed. 'Well. Almost everything.'

'You mean, you've still got your compassion and sisterly love?' Trix suggested brightly.

'Your transport,' said Tinya. 'Your blue box. The one that can float through walls. That's got to be worth something.'

'It's got great sentimental value.'

'I'm taking it.' Tinya pointed a gun at her. 'Lead me to it, give me its 'secrets' – and I may let you live.'

'It needs mercury,' said Trix quickly, 'or it can't move anywhere.'

Tinya nodded, unfazed. 'There'll be some in Phaedra's lab. Let's go.'

Fitz woke up suddenly in his old place on Mechta, before things turned bad. The day was bright and spotless, like the bedclothes. Warmth from outside was coming through the window. He would see Serjey today, maybe Anya. All his old friends. . .

Mildrid could breathe a little easier now. 'Sook, what did you do?'

Sook breathed a sigh of relief as Kreiner eased himself back on to the floor like he was tucking himself in.

'Put Halcyon's thinkset on him,' she said, checking the PadPad disc was secure behind his ear. 'Still loaded with Kreiner's own scenarios. He's somewhere he knows and feels comfortable, I guess, so he's calm again. For now.'

Mildrid helped her to her feet. 'What got into him?'

Sook shrugged, and winced at the pain it caused her. There was a thick tightness at the base of her neck. 'What got into Gaws and that mob on Callisto – and our hijacker?'

'And the rest.' Mildrid coughed and wheezed. 'The whole city seemed to be going insane.'

'It could be you or me next,' said Sook.

'You don't really believe that?'

Sook nodded. The base of her skull felt like it was caught in a tightening vice.

'So, what do we do? Lock ourselves in different rooms in case we start trying to kill each other?'

Kill, thought Sook, turning away from Mildrid to hide her smile. It seemed suddenly such a sweet and irresistible thought.

She turned back to the fat cow and threw herself forwards with an angry cry. But her prey was too fast, she rolled back out of reach.

'Sook!'

Sook tried to get up. Her body wasn't responding.

'No! Try to stay still, please, you'll hurt yourself!'

She dragged herself towards the wobbling bitch. She'd bite her ankle.

'I – I'll try to find help. I'll be back!'

The woman thumped off, and Sook gave a grizzling wail of frustration.

That just left the thin fella sleeping on the floor to kill.

Slowly, painfully, she started to drag herself towards him.

The Doctor ran back the way he had come. But by the time he'd reached the great white storage bay, there was still no sign of his quarry. He began to worry. Had Klimt dodged past him? Was he already entering the control room, dispatching Halcyon and destroying the controls, or...?

No. Klimt was there, leaning against a crate, lying in wait. His go-slow must have been a ploy to catch his aggressors off guard – and it had worked. The Doctor was now out in the open, with no cover and only a cloak to fight with.

Klimt brought up his gun and fired. The Doctor threw himself aside, launched himself into a forward roll and jumped back to his feet. The next blast almost blew his legs off. Weaving about desperately, he avoided a miniature blitz of blasts and reached the monolithic shelter of the largest crate in the place, panting for breath.

'You must have enjoyed the irony, Klimt,' the Doctor shouted. 'Taking the identity of a supervisor! You've been running this show from the start.'

'Naturally,' said Klimt. He fired again, a blast of energy ricocheting off the crate.

'But why, Klimt? What's it all been for?' The Doctor pulled out the sonic screwdriver. 'You can't cope with the world the way it is so you'll show others how to destroy it, hmm? Is that it?'

'All my life I've been building weapons,' Klimt shouted back. Again, he fired the blaster, as if to underscore the point. 'Now I've created the ultimate way to destroy, you expect me to hand that over to someone else, so *they* can profit by it?' He giggled, and his words started to slur. 'It's my scientific duty to see my work is placed responsibly. I must know its intrinsic value is recognised.'

The Doctor aimed the sonic screwdriver at the nearest disc. The remote on Blazar had sent commands on different frequencies, if he could mimic those... 'So, you arrange your own private auction with the scum of the galaxy, hmm?'

'They comprehend the value of my life's work.'

'Which is more than you do, deep down, isn't it?' Sluggishly the disc was responding. 'You're desperate for someone to hang a price tag around your neck, to prove to you that your life is worth something. But at the end of the day, you don't value life. Not even your own. Isn't that so?'

Klimt fired again. The blast echoed off the crate. He couldn't see that slowly, falteringly, the disc was circling round high over his head. 'Spare me the amateur psychology Doctor.'

'You're just a little man trying to mean something!' A little closer... that bald spot would make a tempting bullseye. 'But you'll never find meaning in destruction, don't you see that?'

'Is that a fact?' Klimt came out from the shelter of his crate. His eyes were pink and wild, his skin sweaty, his hair was practically on end. He started marching belligerently towards the Doctor's hiding place. 'What do you know about my life's meaning?'

'Are you so sure I'm not armed, Klimt?' The Doctor made frantic adjustments to the oscillations of the screwdriver. 'Stay where you are.' Hitting a sitting duck was a big enough challenge, but a moving target... 'I'm warning you!'

'No you're not, you're preaching,' Klimt shouted, firing again. 'I won't be preached to.'

'Take a look at yourself, Klimt,' the Doctor called. 'How much diamorphine have you pumped into yourself to fill the holes? To kill the time spent waiting. To keep yourself afloat.' The disc responded to the next tug too violently – it overshot, and the Doctor tried frantically to compensate. 'Look at the state you're in!'

'The effects are held in check,' he snarled, 'a perfect chemical balance.'

'Oh, your pills, yes, of course.' The Doctor lowered the screwdriver for a moment and gasped. 'Oh no. Those pills in your old jacket – that Trix said were missing. *You* took them, didn't you – took them for taking?'

'Really, Doctor, they *were* mine!'

'No, they weren't. I threw yours away.' He laughed mirthlessly. 'Oh great and mighty scientist. You've been blocking the effects of a concentrated narcotic with aspirin.'

'No!'

'Look at yourself, man,' he shouted. 'A wreck. Unfocused, uncoordinated, your chemical resistance wearing thin.'

'You won't stop me,' Klimt screamed.

A cue if ever I heard one, thought the Doctor, and with a twist of the screwdriver's housing, jammed all signals and brought the magnetic disc crashing down from the sky.

But it seemed to recover its electronic wits and jerked to a stop a good eight feet above Klimt's head. He never even noticed the danger.

'I'm going to kill you, Doctor,' he hissed thickly. 'Then I'm going to make sure you can't touch my creations.'

'Klimt, the junky god of slugs,' jeered the Doctor, fiddling desperately with the screwdriver. 'Is that the lofty pinnacle you've reached in life?'

Klimt fired the gun again. But the blast was feeble and small, the power-pack finally exhausted. He threw the gun away and ran full-pelt towards the Doctor's hiding place, his lungs emptying a demonic screech.

Chapter Thirty

Halcyon sat with every nerve on fire in this strange, unfamiliar darkness, trying his best to shut out the stench of blood and death. At least the computer was compliant and talkative, and gave him the option of cancelling any instruction he might give.

‘Begin third dynamical cluster,’ Halcyon said, picturing the Jovian system in his mind. ‘Link thirty-nine, Thyonie. Link forty Hermippe. Link forty-one, Aitne. . .’

‘Satellites linked in,’ said the computer.

There was a sudden noise behind him. ‘Who’s there?’

Silence. Only his blood thumping through his temples.

Then hands closing on his throat and a female hiss of triumph.

Halcyon cried out, wrenched himself back – and broke her grip by falling off his chair. He landed on something – *someone* – soft, and yelped in disgust. Straight away his attacker was back on top of him, but he had brought up his feet to protect himself, lodged them against her chest and pushed her away. There was a heavy bang as she hit something.

Trembling, he raised his voice, spoke quickly. ‘Link Eurydome and Euanthe, fourth dynamical cluster!’ He strained to hear a telltale sound from his unknown enemy that might give away her position, started backing away on his hands and knees. Hit something – the wall, the console? He was dazed, disorientated.

‘Link forty-four, Euporie,’ he stammered. ‘Link forty-five. . .’ His mind went blank. How this bitch must be laughing at him! ‘Orthosie! Link forty-five, it’s Orthosie!’

‘Satellites linked,’ purred the computer.

He heard the stamp of feet. The bitch wasn’t laughing. She was coming to get him.

As Klimt neared the crate, the Doctor burst out of hiding – then dodged aside matador-style and hurled Halcyon’s cloak over him.

As Klimt flapped about under the heavy fabric, the Doctor aimed a kick at him – but somehow Klimt saw the move coming, grabbed hold of the Doctor’s foot and twisted it up and around with savage strength.

Overbalancing, the Doctor hit the ground hard, the impact jarring the sonic screwdriver from his hand. He scrabbled for it – but Klimt kicked it clear of his reach.

‘You sought to stop me like this?’ he hissed, swaying uncertainly. He hurled the cloak contemptuously at the Doctor’s face. ‘Pathetic.’

The Doctor dragged it clear – and felt something sharp-edged inside. His fingers closed on it – Halcyon’s little shaving box.

‘Nothing will stop me, Doctor.’ Klimt smiled, scratching a sore on his lip. ‘I’m at the top of my game, can’t you see that?’

The Doctor used his elbows and feet to slide himself backwards across the smooth floor. ‘You’re off your face – I can see that right enough.’

But Klimt seemed not to hear, stalking after him. ‘Rising higher than anyone before me. While you – you’re dying.’ He lunged forwards, arms outstretched.

The Doctor gasped as Klimt gripped him by the hair and smashed his head down against the floor. He opened his eyes, saw the disc more-or-less overhead, the screwdriver on the floor just a few feet beyond his reach. He struggled to slide just a little further – but Klimt was straddling his waist, trying to pin him down, lifting his head again to bring it down – *Crack*. The Doctor’s vision blurred as his skull was smacked down against the floor again and again. But if he could get just a *little* further. . .

‘Let go,’ Klimt spat, his hands closing around the Doctor’s windpipe. ‘Death’s what gives life meaning, Doctor. And it’s *mine* to deal out.’

‘A hair-raising notion,’ gasped the Doctor, one outstretched hand closing on the screwdriver at last. With the other he opened Halcyon’s shaving box and emptied it over Klimt’s head.

Klimt yelled in alarm, clutched at his silvery thatch as the hungry nanites began to devour every hair.

And the Doctor switched off the screwdriver, killing its dampener field.

The disc throbbed back into full magnetic life. It pulled on the busy metal in Klimt’s hair, yanked him off his feet with the force of attraction; his head made a dull clang as it struck the disc’s underside. Kicking and screaming, he hung helplessly from the disc as it floated back to its default altitude, way up towards the ceiling.

‘I think perhaps you always knew deep down, Klimt.’ The Doctor stared up sadly at the struggling figure. ‘No such thing as a consequence-free high.’

The hair, like the dream, was gone. And the Doctor watched Klimt come crashing back down to earth.

The echoes of the impact died in just a few seconds, leaving the gentle shushing of the life support the only sound in the great chamber.

He got to his feet, dabbing cautiously at the back of his head. He had to get back to Halcyon fast.

Then he heard a thunder of feet behind him. He turned with some surprise to find a large lady adopting an aggressive fighting stance. Her nose and eyes were wet from crying.

‘Hello, I’m the Doctor,’ he said quickly. ‘I’d love to stay and chat but I need to rush off to the control room. There could be very little time.’

‘You’re a doctor?’ the woman relaxed her pose, looked overwhelmed with relief. ‘You have to help me. Everyone’s gone crazy, they’ve turned into demented killers! Even people I know!’

He started striding back the way he’d come. ‘Work’s in hand to stem the influence at source – at least, I hope it is. But I don’t know if the effect can be reversed, Miss. . . ?’

‘Mildrid,’ she said, rushing to catch him up. ‘Doctor, it must be reversed!’

‘Well, I’m open to suggestions.’

‘Could it be that some kind of electrical discharge can clear the mind temporarily?’ She paused. ‘Kreiner said he’d been affected and that the shock –’

‘Kreiner?’ The Doctor stopped to grab her by the arms. ‘Fitz Kreiner? He’s here?’

‘He tried to kill me,’ said Mildrid. ‘But he’s a sweet boy really.’

‘He’s affected but he’s still alive?’

‘I think so. He calmed right down when Sook placed a thinkset on him.’

‘A thinkset. . . Then the mind can still interface, it’s still responsive,’ reasoned the Doctor, ‘the power of thought’s not entirely swept away. There’s a chance these poor people under the slugs’ influence may recover. Come on, we must see if Halcyon’s succeeded!’

‘Halcyon – *here*?’ she said, slackjawed. ‘Aristotle Halcyon?’

‘Autographs later.’ The Doctor set off at a run. ‘Come on!’

Halcyon was trapped in a black corner of hell, kicking and slapping at a threat he couldn’t see. In his mind she was some hateful harpy, twice his size. He could feel her ripping at his flesh, her talons scraping down to his sternum. And still the computer was requesting commands with idiotic politeness.

‘I didn’t hear your last instruction,’ it said. ‘Please say again.’

‘Praxidike,’ Halcyon gasped. ‘Link fifty-one.’

‘Please say again.’

‘Link fifty-one!’ he yelled. The woman was drooling on to his face, and he thought he might be sick. ‘Link fifty-one, Praxidike! Confirm network linkage completion!’

‘Network linkage completion achieved. Destructive charges primed.’

‘Isolate link two, Leda!’ he spluttered, as the wretched woman’s hands pressed at his throat.

‘Please say again.’

'Isolate...' he croaked, weird speckles of colour balling at the back of his eyes as the pressure on his throat grew stronger. 'Isolate... Link...'

Sook had used the console as a ladder to haul herself back to her feet. She leaned heavily on Halcyon's cane, shuffled over greedily to where the thin man lay sleeping.

The Doctor was sprinting back to the control room, Mildrid hard on his heels. 'Halcyon!' he yelled as the control room came into sight. 'Have you done it, man? Well?'

The answer was, 'Not very'. Halcyon was lying sprawled beneath the console. A white-faced woman bleeding badly from a head wound sat astride him. Mildrid kicked the woman off. She rolled and got back up, hissing – and received a finger-jab to her throat. This time when she hit the deck she stayed down.

'Thank you, said the Doctor. He crouched beside Halcyon. 'Now then, are you all –'

Halcyon roared and butted him in the face. The Doctor fell back with a cry, and Halcyon pressed home the advantage, struck him on the jaw and sent him tumbling into the bubblescreen. It popped in a flash of filmy light. 'Mildrid! Stop him!'

She raised her arm to strike Halcyon, but he ducked aside and landed a blow to her shoulder that she didn't even seem to feel.

Mildrid shoved him back against the console. 'You've had this coming, Halcyon, you... you *vandal*!'

'Wait!' thundered the Doctor accusingly. 'Halcyon! You ducked!'

'I...' He stopped, leaned back against the console. His voice was tiny in the tense atmosphere. 'I can *see*.'

'Unexpected side effect of the psychic attack?' breathed the Doctor.

Mildrid stared between them. 'What does he mean, he can see?'

'The error of his ways?' said the Doctor, studying the damaged computer controls. 'You may not have to beat him up after all – shock's brought him round.'

She frowned. 'Like a shock brought round Kreiner...'

'Yes. A jolt to the senses, emotional whiplash. The brain jumps a groove!'

Another screen bubbled out of the console's cracked housing. 'Network linkage completion confirmed,' it slurred. 'Do you wish to commence demolition?'

'Is Leda isolated from the destructive sequence?' the Doctor asked.

'Network linkage completion confirmed,' it said again with still less enthusiasm. 'Do you wish to commence demolition?'

'Power's failing! We don't have long. Halcyon!'

'I... I *can* see!'

'Yes, and you can listen too, so listen to me!' he yelled. 'Did you isolate Leda from the network?'

Halcyon seemed preoccupied. 'I'm not sure about my suit, you know. What do you think?'

Sook stared down at the sleeping man. She knew him. Kreiner. His name was Kreiner.

Swaying a little, she raised the cane and placed its sharp brass tip against Kreiner's right eyelid.

'Focus, Halcyon,' the Doctor pleaded. 'Once more – did you isolate Leda?'

Halcyon swept his head slowly from side to side, staring around in wonder.

'Is that a no?' cried the Doctor.

'No!'

'So it's a yes?'

'No!' muttered Halcyon, staring at his gloved hands. 'No, I didn't manage it.'

'Good work. Computer, commence demolition!'

'What are you doing?' Mildrid shouted.

'Object link one: Taygete. Countdown commencing,' said the computer. 'One hundred. Ninety-nine –'

'No countdown,' snapped the Doctor. 'Demolition of all linked objects to proceed at once.'

Mildrid rushed forwards. 'You can't!'

'I have to,' the Doctor bellowed back, wiping tears from his eyes. 'Shock tactics – a jolt to the senses. We need a fireworks display those people on Callisto will never forget!'

'I won't let you!' She ran towards the Doctor.

'Computer,' he cried as Mildrid launched herself into a flying jumpkick. 'Activate charges! *Now!*'

Chapter Thirty-one

A giant, collective shout seemed to rise up from Callisto as the heavens exploded in spectacular light.

Trix stared, awed and terrified at the incredible patterns. *It's the magnetic field, she thought, it's bursting through the atmosphere, we're all going to be dead!*

Behind her, Tinya was staring up too in baffled terror. And people in the street, whether they were cowering or raging or chewing each other's ears off – they all broke off to watch, to wonder and to fear.

Trix recovered enough of her wits to knock the gun from Tinya's limp hand. The woman snapped back into life with a hard shout and a spiteful look – but Trix was already running full pelt.

The Doctor was knocked clear over the console as Mildrid's kick connected with his chest. He crashed against the huge viewscreen as flaring brilliant white engulfed it. He saw Halcyon staring, transfixed, Mildrid readying herself for another go.

Then, the first shockwaves crashed into the station.

Sook raised the cane, ready to plunge it hard down through Kreiner's eye socket.

She hesitated, wondering for a moment.

Then she used the end of the cane to push off his thinkset first. He should know what was coming.

As his eyes snapped open and focused on her, the ship tipped up and they were both sent flying.

If Trix had to die, she'd made up her mind it would be as far away from that bitch as possible.

But running through the bright streets was a weird, unsettling experience. The fighting had stopped. A beatific look had settled on the people. As the sunbursts of white light turned shimmering yellow and pale blue before the backdrop of endless night, people were weeping and shaking and holding each other. They were scrambling to their feet, or staggering out of hiding, or staring at their bloody hands, blank-faced.

A great rushing babble of mutters and whispers and heart-tugging wails started up; the sounds of full horror sinking in. People questioning, crying, asking for help, letting out their pain.

Aware. Repulsed. Disbelieving. Messed up.

Themselves again, and trying to cope.

Sook woke up on her back, shaken and shivering. Kreiner was on all fours, scuttling towards her. His eyes were wide open and staring.

He reached out for her and gathered her up into a hug.

'Are you OK?' he whispered.

'I won't be if you squeeze much harder,' she hissed, 'I'm only held together with plasters and glue.'

He started to sob. She held him as it all came out, and found she was crying too.

As the control room stopped pitching like a kayak in rapids, the Doctor raised his head cautiously above the console. 'Everyone OK?'

'I'm alive, if that's what you mean,' said Mildrid coldly.

'Well, that's a start, anyway,' he said, rubbing his aching chest. 'Halcyon?'

'That shockwave must have knocked us halfway back to Callisto,' groaned the *decoratiste*. He was staring at the screen, where carnation sprays of incredible colour were still blooming and bleeding. His dark glasses had cracked down the centre. Cautiously, he broke them apart, and blinked myopically in the brightness.

'For nothing,' said Mildrid, her voice worn and cracked. 'All Gaws and I did... All the planning and the skimping and sacrificing and the spaceship-cleaning – for nothing.'

'My grand orchestration,' breathed Halcyon. 'The likes of you called it a folly. And yet it has provided the means to save so many souls.'

'She's a forgiving old thing,' the Doctor remarked.

'I am *not*,' huffed Mildrid.

He half smiled. 'I was talking about the universe,' he said.

They watched the glittering colours spiral and spatter through the blackness of space.

'You know what?' said Halcyon flatly, rubbing his eyes. 'It's actually not anything *like* as impressive as I'd imagined it would be.'

Falsh stared up at the impossible flashes and charges in the sky, a grim smile of satisfaction on his face. That took care of that, then. The Doctor had done

it – and NewSystem would collect a small fortune for bringing off the largest-scale demolition in the solar system. A fortune Falsh would siphon off as a first step towards refilling his coffers.

He'd done it, pulled it off. He'd survived. The fire in the compound was still raging; no one could have escaped that. No one could hold him accountable now. If Klimt still lived he wouldn't risk his liberty coming after him. And the Doctor's evidence was circumstantial at best – any good brief could crush it in a single hearing.

Falsh smiled. It was like magic. No one could trace a thing back to him now.

Little glints of light drifted through the patches of night between the flares and starbursts. Were they part of the patterns, or little ships flocking to Calisto to clean up this unholy mess? Falsh didn't know. And he didn't care.

He'd hole up, contact Nerren, get a ship rushed over and get away scot-free.

Trix ran through the wreck-strewn streets, through desolate, sobbing crowds and happy reunions, through sandbanks of the dead. Heading for the colossal domes of the Medicean Stadium. The entrances were gaping wide, unguarded, thick with spilled blood.

She had to reach the TARDIS, drag it down from the sky somehow, get inside. Shut out all this rawness, this pain and emotion. Retreat, retreat and wait for Fitz and the Doctor to come back to her, if they could.

Only when she reached the dim and darkened space hangar did she pause for breath. An eerie sea of shin-height foam glistened and winked all around her. She hesitated, panting for breath. Perhaps there was another way through?

She turned – and saw Tinya creeping up behind her.

Swearing, she waded into the slippery foam, holding the phial of precious mercury high above her head.

'You're not getting out of it, Trix!' Tinya shouted. A blaze of light burned over Trix's head, a warning shot. 'I will have your blue box!'

'Well, come and get it, then,' cried Trix, skidding and slipping through the tepid water, using bodies for stepping stones. Once she landed on her bum in the scented suds, waited for the killing shot to hit home. But Tinya was having the same problems, splashing and squeaking as she fell about in pursuit. The two of them slithered improbably through the soapy mire and out the other side.

Trix scrambled out and into the emergency lighting of the long, long corridor that stretched to the stage. She heard Tinya's footfalls close behind. The bitch was gaining on her. She kept on, some last hidden wash of adrenalin pumping her legs harder, faster.

In a blur she realised she had reached the backstage area. She had to find a remote for the silver discs. She looked about her – there must be one about somewhere, surely? A back-up for emergencies or something. . .

Another warning shot whizzed past her head and she set off again.

Finally she found herself on the darkened stage, barely blinking at the corpses littering the arena, hardened to the death all around her. What took her attention now was the cracked control box device from which the Doctor had concocted his forcefield.

Lying beside it on the floor was a slim handheld remote like the one they'd found at Blazar.

Trix pounced on it, clutched it to her heart, wept over it. *Please let it work. Please don't let the batteries be flat.* She studied the controls for a way to get the TARDIS down, *fast. . .*

And jumped as the floor turned to splinters just beside her. She quickly hid the remote behind her back.

'Stay nice and still,' panted Tinya, covering Trix with the gun. 'Your blue box. Where is it?'

Don't look up now, thought Trix, tapping her thumb frantically on what she hoped was the right button.

'Tell me. Or I'll blow your left leg off.' Tinya took a threatening step towards her. 'Then an arm. Then the right leg. Until you tell me.'

'Maybe you should start with my fingers,' said Trix, raising two of them in Tinya's direction.

Tinya took careful aim. 'Very funny.'

'Usually brings the house down,' Trix agreed.

High above, the discs shut off and the TARDIS went into freefall.

Trix jumped back as, with a terrific crash, the blue box struck the stage.

She was shaken off her feet, landed flat on her back, winded. Desperately, she scrambled back up.

The TARDIS had crashed right through. Only its roof and light were visible poking through the hole.

On the other side, Tinya was staring, panting, agog with shock. She'd been millimetres away from being squashed flat. The gun lay forgotten beside her.

'I always was a lousy aim,' Trix admitted, picking up the gun and holding it to Tinya's head. 'But even I couldn't miss from this distance.'

'Why don't you just shoot?' said Tinya distantly.

'What, and have no one left alive to grass up Falsh?' Trix shook her head. 'Not to mention those shadowy playmates of yours back at the shed. No, you've got too many stories to tell, Tinya. And a hell of a lot to answer for.'

* * *

The Doctor showed up in the end. Tinya had fallen fitfully into sleep, and Trix was struggling not to topple after her. She thought she was dreaming at first – half-crazy with fatigue and her gun-arm nearly dropping off – as there was quite a crowd.

There was Fitz by the Doctor's side – bloodied, battered but still smiling.

Halcyon had lost his shades and was steering a floating stretcher – upon which lay Sook. The redhead had looked a lot healthier the last time Trix had seen her.

More surreally, there was a very large lady bringing up the rear, holding in her arms a drowned weasel of a man with wringing wet clothes. Trix blinked and realised he was the man from the news, the finder of the slugs. A few suds still stuck to his grotty 'cache.

Fitz looked at her. The Doctor looked at his sunken ship and sighed happily.

Trix got up stiffly, took a few steps towards them.

The three of them met in the middle, on top of the TARDIS roof, and had a long, close hug.

Chapter Thirty-two

The cleaning up was in progress, Callisto slowly starting to recover. All those who'd witnessed the great lightshow were lured out of their darkneses soonest. The unconscious or sleeping regained their wits too, more slowly, now the slug-signals had ceased transmission.

The numbing death toll was estimated to run into thousands. It would take weeks for the true scale and cost of the attack to be known, for the true facts to come out in the open. Tinya was being questioned by Pentagon Central. Klimt's corpse had been collected for verification and public disposal.

But lives had been saved, too; that was emphasised and celebrated. Aid-ships flooded in from all over the Empire and beyond, and welfare camps set up on the scattered handful of surviving moons.

The Doctor and his friends were recovering too. A day had passed resting and sleeping, and now they were sprawled in Halcyon's dressing rooms with warm champagne and wilted salads.

Halcyon and Sook were talking quietly Sook was looking peaky, and the news of Roddle's death had hit them both hard. But Trix caught her smiling once or twice. Now her boss's specs had come off, she couldn't seem to stop looking into his eyes.

Fitz was pretending not to care about their intimacy, throwing them little looks, knocking back his drinks and getting more than a little smashed.

To Trix there seemed something a little unreal about their cosy gathering. She thought of the chaos that had swept Callisto, the misery and bereavement that now gripped so many. But then the thought of all those lives saved, and the part she had played in bringing that about, made her feel that maybe she had earned a swig or two of warm fizz.

'Halcyon,' said the Doctor thoughtfully, after a deep draught from his crystal goblet. 'I trust that after all this you'll leave the rest of the universe alone? After all, you're the man who saved the solar system. It wouldn't do to whittle away any more of it.'

'You're taking no credit, then?' Halcyon asked keenly.

'Not likely!' retorted the Doctor, putting down his glass. 'Give your interviews and take the glory by all means. And use it well.'

'Won't Mildrid have something to say about that?' asked Sook.

'She asked me to say goodbye,' said Fitz. 'She and Gaws are retiring from the Empire Trust. He's realised that as the bloke who found the slugs, he could get the blame for setting up this whole, horrible circus. He's not so keen to give interviews now.'

'Nevertheless, Mildrid's standing by her man,' said the Doctor wistfully. 'Said something about developing their sudship business...'

Sook shrugged. 'Good luck to her.'

'Really, must we dwell on that fearsome woman?' said Halcyon. 'You talk as if you've known her for some time, Sook!'

'Hardly, Halcyon,' she said sweetly with a glance at Fitz.

'Well, in any case,' said the Doctor, quickly changing the subject. 'You may reconstitute Carme, Halcyon, but this Ancient Twelve aesthetic of yours won't hold for long. Something the size of Jupiter will soon drag in all kinds of old flotsam and jetsam. It's inevitable.'

'And this time, I suggest you keep that clutter,' said Trix, swigging back her last gulp. 'You never know when it may come in handy.'

'Well said, Trix,' said the Doctor. 'From time to time we may all come to resent the clutter of the past. The thought of clearing it all out can be irresistible – it can feel liberating to let it all go. You could say you're left with a blank canvas, a fresh start.' He ate the last sausage roll from his plate. 'Or you could say you're left with nothing at all.'

Halcyon bit his lip and nodded sagely, worried perhaps that the Doctor would change his mind about letting him hog the limelight. 'I was thinking, in fact, of turning my sights on old Earth... ' He smiled at Sook. 'Now, there's an awful lot of improvements we could make to that planet to bring business back to the heart of the Empire.'

'I'm sure the President will be supportive,' said Sook.

'Whatever your vision, Halcyon,' said the Doctor meaningfully. 'Keep it twenty-twenty, hmm?'

'He will,' murmured Sook. 'Whatever we do.'

Fitz winced slightly at the word 'we' and rose up abruptly from his chair. 'I'm just going to see if they've got the TARDIS out yet.'

'Oh, I took care of that, Fitz,' said the Doctor. 'The discs towed her out in minutes. And now Trix has got her hands on the mercury –'

He reddened. 'I think I'll just check anyway.'

The Doctor nodded, poured himself a little more to drink, let Fitz slip away with nothing more said. Trix clocked Sook watching him go.

'You're *sure* you won't reconsider my offer to market your blue boxes?' said Halcyon for what had to be the hundredth time.

He received the Doctor's hundredth dirty look for his pains.

‘You know what’s a shame?’ said Trix suddenly. ‘The thought that Falsh could get away with this.’

‘The authorities will catch up with him in the end,’ said Halcyon.

‘How many years will that take? And in the meantime, he’s free as a bird!’

‘As a lovebird,’ said the Doctor, a small smile turning up his mouth as he downed more of the flat champagne.

Falsh had decided to wait out in the fringes of the industrial area, away from the major casualty zones. He’d given Nerren the details of where he was hiding, and a ship was already on its way.

The rush and whine of engines close outside came sooner than he could have dared hope. He ran out of the derelict building he’d holed up in, chuckling, grinning, radiant.

And saw a large, sleek ship, shaped like a silver arrowhead, touch down.

Cold flooded through him. He skidded to a stop, turned and ran back inside.

Straight away he heard footsteps approaching. Looked around for some kind of weapon, anything he could use to defend himself.

But the Agent from Icthal was already coming towards him.

‘Stay back,’ said Falsh. ‘I sent you away. How can you be here?’

‘I intercepted your transmission,’ it said in that flat, dead voice.

‘I mean, how can you be here in JoveSpace? I sent you back to your system to report to your people!’

‘I love you,’ said the Agent, its gills quivering. ‘I must run away with you and make you mine forever.’

Falsh stared. ‘What?’

The alien advanced on him. ‘I must make you mine forever.’

It was speaking the words soullessly, but its blank eyes were alive and squirming with something like lust.

The Alien had been put under the paint’s influence on the podule – but the Doctor had shammed it.

‘Your head’s been messed with!’ Falsh shouted. ‘Post-hypnotic suggestion. Look at yourself, this isn’t rational!’

‘Love is not rational,’ agreed the creature, coming closer. Its tongue snaked out and flapped like a dead fish against his face. ‘I must run away with you and make you mine forever.’

‘No!’ screamed Falsh as the creature picked him up in its fish-stinking arms. ‘Put me down!’

‘Mine forever,’ sighed the Agent, content.

Sook knew it was goodbye time. The Doctor was ready to slip away, and Trix seemed more than happy to ride his coat-tails into the distance.

But what about Kreiner?

They'd already waved off Halcyon. He'd embarked on his long round of interviews and celeb spots on a hundred channels – solo. His profile was ready to rocket still higher.

Sook, at a loose end, had tagged along with the Doctor and Trix to the TARDIS on her floating stretcher.

'Sort of awkward, saying goodbye at this angle, isn't it?' the Doctor observed. 'Cheerio, Sook. Keep an eye on Halcyon for me.'

'It's him keeping an eye on me I'm more worried about,' Sook admitted. 'No more face-pulling unless it's behind his back.' She paused. 'Is Kreiner about? I'd like to speak to him.'

Trix eyed her suspiciously. 'Come on, Doctor. We'll fetch him.'

'Yes, of course,' he said. He paused for a moment to pat the dark blue box fondly before disappearing inside.

A few moments later, Kreiner emerged with a shifty look over his shoulder. He was carrying a heavy-looking bag stitched from real leather, cracked and worn with age.

'I wanted you to have this,' he said.

'A farewell gift?' she asked. 'Do you have to go?'

He looked at her, his grey eyes shining with sadness.

'A bag, huh? Well, I guess Halcyon won't need me nearly so much from now on, but I wasn't thinking of packing up and moving on just yet.'

'I know.' He put an arm around her, and helped her off her stretcher. 'But you may find it handy in any case.'

She watched in amazement, forgetting her aches and pains for a moment, as he opened the big bag and stuck the stretcher inside. All the way inside, vertically. It was just swallowed up.

'There's a pocket dimension stitched into the lining,' he explained. 'It's not quite an endless cupboard. But it is a big bag.'

She stared at him. 'And it's for me?'

'To do with what you will.' He smiled. 'I owe you for board and lodgings, after all.'

'Won't your friend be cross?'

'Furious, I expect. If he ever notices.' He paused. 'And if I'm still there when he does.'

She raised an eyebrow.

'I don't know.' He shrugged. 'Just feeling a little unsettled, I suppose.'

'You could stay,' she suggested. 'This could make us rich – you and me. We could retire on the royalties!'

‘To somewhere perfectly neat and tidy?’ He smiled but shook his head. ‘This is your time and place, Sook. It isn’t mine.’ He nodded casually to the blue box. ‘You could maybe...?’

It was her turn for the sad smile. ‘Your lifestyle’s just a little too messy for me.’

They stood awkwardly in silence for a while.

‘You’re looking a bit wobbly,’ he said. ‘Are you OK?’

‘Could I maybe have my stretcher back?’

‘God, sorry!’ he said, and produced it like magic from inside the bag.

‘That thing really works!’ she cooed, leaning on to the stretcher for support.

‘What will you do with it?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe you should peep into the future for me, come back and let me know.’ She paused. ‘It would be good to see you again.’

There was more warmth in his smile this time. ‘Yeah, it would.’

‘In the meantime, I’ll sleep on it.’

‘Just don’t sleep *in* it,’ he said severely. ‘It’s a big bag. You could get lost.’

‘You’re weird, Kreiner. Thanks. For everything. Check?’

‘Check.’

She blew him a kiss.

He winked at her, and walked into the TARDIS.

Trix was waiting for him by the doorway, an unexpectedly big smile on her face. ‘You came back,’ she said, and actually sounded relieved. ‘When I saw you with that bag –’

‘Shhh!’ he hissed at her. But the Doctor was too engrossed in fitting the fluid link into the central console to notice.

‘Couldn’t resist coming back to me, huh?’ she said, and stuck out her tongue.

He took hold of her hand. ‘Trix, you’re hard, devious, manipulative and you’re always trying it on. But at least with you I always know where I am.’

‘Gee, thanks.’

‘Anyway. Truth is, you’re right. I wouldn’t go without you.’

Trix smiled. ‘Is that a fact?’

‘You’ll see,’ he said, looking across at the Doctor, happily fussing about his ship. ‘One day.’

Author's Note

DOCTOR WHO: *I thought Jupiter had already been thoroughly studied?*

STEVENSON: *Yes, he's interested in its new satellite.*

DOCTOR WHO: *What? You mean there are now thirteen?*

The science of some *Doctor Who* TV stories stands the test of time better than others. But the Doctor's exchange with Commander Stevenson in *Revenge of the Cybermen* probably sets a record for being out of date even before recording began in November 1974.

On 14 September that year, a thirteenth satellite of Jupiter was discovered by Charles T Kowal at the Mount Palomar observatory and subsequently named Leda (not Neo-Phobos or Voga as *Revenge* would have us believe). Kowal, with Elizabeth Roemer, would go on to discover a further Jovian satellite in September 1975, but too few observations were made to establish its orbit and the object was subsequently 'lost'. It was not rediscovered until 2000, and was ultimately named Themisto.

It's always amused me that the Doctor should state so authoritatively in the far future that Jupiter had only twelve satellites – at the time of writing, 61 moons have been observed and there are bound to be many more waiting to come to light. So the basic premise of *To the Slaughter* was conceived in an attempt to save the Fourth Doctor's scientific reputation – and to set the record straight. I apologise for having no loftier motive in writing this story and yes, I know, I should get out more.

Enormous thanks are due to Justin Richards for his enthusiasm, support and patience during the troubled (and grossly extended) period in which this book was written. Also to Peter Anghelides for some helpful comments on the opening chapters... to Philip Craggs for soundtrack support... to Mike Tucker for beer... to Jason Loborik and Paul Grice for music... and to Jill and Tobey Cole, for everything.

NB: No Jovian moons were invented for this book; the less familiar names of more recent discoveries are all just as 'official', as determined and ratified by the International Astronomical Union's Working Group on Planetary System Nomenclature.

Stephen Cole
October 2004

About the Author

STEPHEN COLE lives in Buckinghamshire with wife Jill and baby Tobey. He used to edit books and magazines, including the BBC's range of *Doctor Who* novels. Now he spends most of his time writing.

As well as several *Doctor Who* novels and audio plays he has written all sorts of books for children young and old, including the *Wereling* trilogy of horror thrillers for young adults, published by Bloomsbury, and 'Essential Guides' to such movies as *Shrek* and *The Incredibles* for Penguin.

He has two original fiction series for kids due out in 2005: *Astrosaurs!*, published by Random House, and *One Weird Day at Freekham High* by Oxford University Press.

Another upcoming project is a novel called *The Monsters Inside*, tying in to the brand-new BBC TV series of *Doctor Who*.



The solar system is being spring-cleaned, to improve its feng shui and attract big business back to the long-abandoned seat of Earth's empire. Celebrity *decoratiste* Aristotle Halcyon is heading the campaign of controlled demolition. Having swept away the Asteroid Belt and the Oort Cloud, he now plans to make Jupiter more aesthetically pleasing by removing scores of 'unnecessary' moons.

But the ancient satellites hold deadly secrets, as the Doctor, Fitz and Trix soon discover. With eco-terrorists plotting sabotage, corrupt officials lining their own pockets and sinister forces acting on their own agendas, only the Doctor sees that millions of innocents have been set on the fast track to bloody, unbridled destruction...

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