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BOOKS

DOCTOR WHO

ATOM BOMB BLUES

ANDREW CARTMEL

Los Alamos, New Mexico, 1945. The Second World War is coming to its bloody conclusion, and in the American desert the race is on to build an atomic bomb.

The fate of the world is at stake – in more ways than one. Someone, or something, is trying to alter the course of history at this most delicate point. And destroy the human race. Posing as a nuclear scientist with Ace as his research assistant, the Doctor plays detective among the Manhattan Project scientists, while desperately trying to avoid falling under suspicion himself.

As the minutes tick away to the world's first atom bomb blast, the Doctor and Ace find themselves up to their necks in spies, aliens of the flying saucer variety, and some very nasty saboteurs from another dimension. . .

A new adventure featuring the Seventh Doctor and Ace, written by Andrew Cartmel, Script Editor for this era of the television programme.

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**DOCTOR WHO:
ATOM BOMB BLUES**

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

First published 2005

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ISBN 0 563 48635 X

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Cover imaging by Black Sheep © BBC 2005
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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*For Catherine Gang,
who redeemed America in my eyes.*

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Prologue

The Girl on the Sofa

The girl lay on the yellow leather sofa. She wasn't asleep, but she wasn't awake either.

Two men sat watching her, Professor John Henbest and Major Rex Butcher. John Henbest had an unruly shock of reddish hair shot through with the occasional strand of grey, giving a salt-and-pepper effect. He was somewhat young to have grey in his hair, having only just turned thirty, according to his dossier, which Butcher had read again this morning.

The Major was a burly man with black Brylcreemed hair that, like his narrow moustache, might have been painted on. His uniform was marked with streaks of mud and there were blades of grass dotted here and there on his clothes.

Henbest was the official psychiatrist up here on the Hill at Los Alamos. Butcher was in charge of security.

The girl they were watching – lying there on the sofa, motionless – was young, pretty, with long, gleaming dark hair. Her eyes were shut and her head was lolling back on a white silk cushion decorated with blue fleurs-de-lys. The girl wasn't moving but she was talking, in a low soft voice that seemed to drift like a subtle current of air between her still lips.

'We met a few years ago. He just showed up at a place where I was working and I guess we hit it off. So when he left I went with him.'

'Dirty rogue,' chuckled Henbest, taking out a thin silver mechanical pencil, adjusting it and scribbling a note on a yellow note pad. 'He sensed her vulnerability and swooped on her.'

'I don't think so,' said Butcher. He sounded impatient, annoyed. 'I don't think there's anything like that between the two of them.'

Henbest snorted. 'What would you know about it? Stick to your own line of work, the oxymoronic military intelligence. I'm the expert on the human psyche here.' At this, Butcher fell menacingly silent for a moment. Finally he said, 'This afternoon somebody took a shot at me.'

'I know, and I'm trying to help you find out why.'

'Then stop wasting time. The girl could wake up any minute.'

'Nonsense. With the injection I gave her she'll be semiconscious and, ah, pliable to suggestion for at least another hour or so.' He turned to the girl on the sofa. 'Tell me, Acacia...'

'Call me Ace,' said the girl, her eyes shut, her voice matter-of-fact.

'Very well, Ace.'

'Ask her how long she's known Ray Morita.'

Henbest frowned at Butcher's interruption but he repeated the question to Ace. 'Cosmic Ray?' she said. 'I never heard of him before I got here.' Butcher cursed under his breath. He turned away and stared out the window, towards the pond and the trees that fringed it. His face was taut with anger.

'Well then, tell us about the Doctor,' said Henbest. 'Tell us precisely who he is.'

'You'd never believe me,' said the girl in the trance.

Butcher came back from the window and sat down beside Henbest. 'I thought you said she'd answer our questions?'

'To the best of her ability,' said the psychiatrist.

'She's being evasive.'

'Not deliberately and not by her own lights. She is really trying to answer our questions as best she can. She means it when she says we wouldn't believe her.'

'I need to find out about this Doctor bird,' said Butcher impatiently. 'I need to know about his background. Where he comes from.'

Henbest leaned over towards the girl on the sofa. 'Where does the Doctor come from?'

'Now, that's a question,' said the girl. 'There's some people who think they know, but I think they haven't got the first clue.'

'How about you?' Henbest grinned slyly. 'Surely you have the first clue. Surely you know him better than they do. *You* must know where he comes from.' The pronoun was almost obscene in his mouth.

'No, but at least I know enough to know I haven't got the first clue.' A smile played around the girl's lips. 'Which puts me one up on you.'

'She's right.' Butcher lit a cigarette. 'We're getting nowhere,' he exhaled smoke. The girl's nose wrinkled.

'She doesn't like the tobacco. You'd better put that out, old man,' said Henbest cheerfully. Butcher flashed him a poisonous look and reluctantly stubbed out the cigarette in a heavy, green glass ashtray in the shape of a toad that squatted, gleaming and polished, on the professor's desk.

Henbest turned back to the girl. 'If you won't tell us where the Doctor comes from, perhaps you can tell us where he's been.'

The girl chuckled, a pleasant throaty sound. 'It would be easier to tell you where he *hasn't* been.'

'You mean he's been everywhere.'

'Pretty much.'

'And you travel with him.'

'Like I said,' said the girl, 'for the last few years.'

'So where have you been lately, with the Doctor?'

Butcher butted in. 'What was the last place they visited before they came here? Before they came to America.' Henbest frowned at him, but he repeated the question to the girl.

'The last place we visited?' she said promptly. 'The fishing station at Two Moons.'

Butcher glanced at Henbest. 'Where the hell is that?' he said. 'Alaska? British Columbia? Sounds like an Indian name.' Henbest ignored him. He leaned closer to the girl.

'Tell us about the Two Moons fishing station.'

'Well, it stank of fish,' said the girl.

'Now,' said Butcher ironically, 'we're really making progress.'

'Smelled like fish?' murmured Henbest. He eagerly plucked the mechanical pencil from a pocket of his mustard-coloured jacket and resumed scribbling on the yellow pad, his thin, hairy hand scurrying busily. 'Go on,' he said. 'Describe the place.'

'It was set in some beautiful countryside,' said Ace. 'Mountains and forest.'

'Tell me more.'

'All I remember,' said Ace in a bored voice, 'is the moons reflecting in the water.'

'The moon reflecting in the water?'

'The *moons*. The two moons.'

There was silence for a moment in the small room. Then Henbest said, 'Two. I see.'

'What the hell?' said Butcher.

'They call it the Two Moons fishing station because it's got two moons,' said Ace.

'Fascinating,' crooned Henbest, leaning close towards the girl. 'I've never seen two moons myself.'

'That's because you've never left this planet,' said Ace.

At this point Butcher took Henbest by the shoulder and dragged him out of the office. The two men stood in the corridor, looking at each other.

'Fascinating,' repeated Henbest.

'She's making a fool of you,' said Butcher. 'And she's making a fool of me.'

'She isn't capable of doing anything of the sort. She's in a highly suggestible and tractable state thanks to the injection I gave her.'

'This is 1944. We don't believe in rockets to the moon or little green men from Mars.'

'But we do believe in doomsday weapons,' said Henbest.

'Watch your mouth, Professor.'

At the moment Butcher said this, someone came around the corner and started walking straight towards them. Butcher cursed under his breath. It was the last person he wanted to see right now. But the small man was already cheerily lifting his hat in greeting.

'Gentlemen!'

'Ah yes, hello Doctor,' said Henbest. He moved hastily, trying to block the door to his office.

The little man joined them. 'Hello Major Butcher. How are you?'

'I'm fine,' said Butcher. 'I'm not the one who got shot this afternoon. I just got shot at. And missed.'

'It was a terrible incident,' agreed the Doctor.

'Did you come here to talk about it?'

'No I came here looking for Ace.'

'Ace?'

'I mean Acacia. My assistant. I left her here earlier. Is she still around?'

'No,' said Henbest.

And at just that moment the Doctor sidled past him and leaned casually on the office door, which had been left slightly ajar. The door swung open under his weight while Henbest was still in mid-lie, revealing the girl lying there on the yellow leather sofa. Butcher winced.

'No mystery there at all,' said Henbest hastily, in what Butcher had to admit was quite a nifty save. 'She's indeed here in my office.' Henbest addressed this remark to the back of the Doctor's head, as the small man moved briskly past him into the room and stood over the girl.

'Very understandable,' said the Doctor. The poor thing's fallen asleep.' He glanced around at the men, who had hurried back into the office with him. 'After all. She's been through a lot this afternoon.' The Doctor shook his head. 'I'll look after her. Come along, Acacia. You can't just fall asleep here in Professor Henbest's office.'

'No, Doctor,' said the girl.

'Come along now.' The Doctor insinuated an arm under the girl's shoulders and lifted her head from the pillow. Behind him John Henbest twitched as though he wanted to stop him, but thought better of it. Butcher just stood there watching.

The Doctor had the girl sitting up on the sofa now, her eyes still shut. 'Up-sadaisy,' said the Doctor, and he half-lifted, half-guided the girl to her feet.

She seemed to stand up steadily enough, and he took her hand and began to guide her towards the door, as though he was leading a sleepwalker.

He flashed a brief, lopsided grin at Butcher and Henbest. 'I do apologise for the inconvenience gentlemen. I'll see that Acacia takes her naps in more suitable venues in the future.' He led her out into the corridor, glancing back one final time to smile at the men in the office and shut the door on them.

'She was moving pretty good for a girl with her eyes shut,' said Butcher.

'Do you think he suspected anything?' whispered Henbest.

'He would have to be pretty stupid not to suspect something.'

'Well then why didn't he say anything? Accuse us? Confront us?'

'Because whatever we're guilty of doing, he's guilty of worse,' said Butcher.

'How maddening that he should turn up at just the moment when we were beginning to make real progress.'

'You call that progress? You could grow pretty good roses with that story of hers.'

Henbest blinked in puzzlement, his too wet, too intelligent eyes magnified by his spectacles. 'Grow roses? I don't understand.'

Butcher sighed. 'She was shovelling horse manure, Professor. And you seemed pretty eager to accept it, fresh and steaming.'

'Your rather vivid gift for imagery suggests some intriguing fixation with toilet training in your own no doubt fascinating infancy, Major.'

'My toilet training?' said Butcher in a dangerous voice.

'But that's neither here nor there,' added Henbest quickly. 'The real gist of the matter is that the girl, sedated as she was, was incapable of telling a lie.'

'Sure,' said Butcher. 'Two moons.' He turned and headed for the office door. Henbest seemed upset that the game was over.

'Where are you going?' he said.

'We have a bomb to build,' said Butcher. 'And I have a spy to catch.'

Chapter One

Three Days Earlier

Butcher decided he would drive down himself to pick up the newcomers. His role as security officer on the Hill allowed him the latitude to dress in civilian clothing when he chose. On this hot, pale desert afternoon he decided he wouldn't put on anything that might disclose his military identity. Just a tee shirt, a pair of jeans and an oily leather jacket. He was mortified to discover that the jeans no longer fitted him. Indeed, they were so tight around the waist that he couldn't even attempt to fasten them.

It was all the chilli and beer. They served a surprisingly good chilli locally and Butcher had succumbed to it. Kitty Oppenheimer's cook was a Mexican girl and she was the chilli wizard. Butcher had become so thoroughly addicted to her creation that he had bribed the girl to prepare an extra portion every time she cooked it for the Oppenheimers and to sneak it out the back door to him.

Of course, the Mexican girl was also a useful source of information on Oppy, and Butcher's visits to her gave him an excuse to snoop around.

But the chilli had done its damage. Butcher sighed as he surveyed the benign curve of his burgeoning pink belly. He discarded the jeans and instead put on some sun-faded dungarees. He finished dressing and gazed at his battered, exasperated face in the polished steel mirror over the sink and, as an afterthought, added a pair of aviator's sunglasses he'd picked up in Formosa. The black lenses stared back at him from the mirror, revealing nothing.

Perfect.

Butcher collected the car and set off to meet the new arrivals. He found them waiting on a lonely stretch of desert road, peering anxiously into the distance, watching for any passing vehicle. Butcher's was the first they'd seen in several hours, from what he could glean by their conversation.

The newcomers sat in the back seat as Butcher drove.

They were a man and a woman. The woman was actually more like a girl really. She was wearing a belted white raincoat, or what locally was called a duster, since dust storms were more common than rain storms in this part of the world. She had dark hair, dark eyes and some nice curves.

The older guy was some kind of bigwig physicist from England, coming over

to join the programme. He was wearing a Panama hat, a chocolate brown suit, a white shirt and an indigo bow tie of some strange iridescent material. His papers identified him as Dr John Smith. The girl was called, improbably enough, Acacia Cecelia Eckhart.

Butcher looked at them in the rear-view mirror as he drove. He wondered just how important the little man was. He hadn't exactly arrived in VIP style. But sometimes that was how the top brass liked it. The more important the egghead, the more low-key their arrival. There were all kinds of geniuses up on the Hill at Los Alamos, some of the most important brains in the world.

And, from what Butcher could glean, some of the most dangerous.

Still, the big shots tended to turn up with somewhat more ceremony than this dusty, weary couple, standing woebegone at the roadside where the bus had dropped them, waiting for Butcher to rescue them. They certainly hadn't been travelling in much luxury, from what they were saying.

'Why did we have to get that bus?' said the girl. 'Couldn't we have caught the train?'

'You've forgotten, Ace,' said the little man. 'We did get a train, as far as we could, from Chicago to Lamy. From Lamy we had no choice but to travel by bus.' He said it to the girl as if reminding her of a fact she'd been taught in a lesson.

Butcher filed that away. He watched them in the mirror. He had a good view of them, which meant they had a good view of him too. But thanks to his sunglasses they couldn't read anything in his eyes as he listened and evaluated.

As he drove on the long dusty road back to Los Alamos there was a lengthy silence and Butcher began to wonder if he'd wasted his time by posing as their driver. Then suddenly the little man spoke up.

'Don't forget to take your capsule.'

'Yes Doctor,' said the girl wearily. She opened the beaded purse she had on her lap, depicting a map of the state of New Mexico in red, white and pale blue beads, and took out a small silver box like the kind you keep expensive eyeglasses in. It was curved at the edges and had an odd, dull glow. It was more like pewter than silver, Butcher decided. He couldn't see any hinge on the box but the girl ran her thumbnail into what must have been a hairline slit and opened it up.

A bright glow spilled from the box as though it was lined with mirrors and reflecting the bright desert sunlight, shining on the girl's face. She took out a small, dark, shiny capsule about the size of a plump red grape. The girl made a premonitory wince and popped the capsule in her mouth. She swallowed it with her eyes shut. Then she opened her eyes and looked at the little man. 'Happy?'

‘Come on,’ he said. ‘It doesn’t taste that bad.’

‘I don’t see you taking any.’

‘I don’t need to,’ said the small man smugly.

Butcher’s eyes left the mirror and returned to the road in front of him. The sparse scrub of the desert landscape was opening up into a valley and centred in that valley was Los Alamos. From this vantage point it was clear why everybody called it the Hill. Beyond it, in the distance, was a jagged blue line of mountains. The Jemez Mountains. And, further removed, the Sangre de Cristo.

‘Now are you sure you’re clear on everything?’ said the man in the back seat.

‘Sure,’ said the girl. ‘What’s not to be clear about? It’s another caper like the one with Dr Judson.’

‘I’m not sure I approve of you using the word caper,’ said the small man. Butcher filed the girl’s comment away in his mind, along with the name Judson, for further evaluation and investigation.

‘Although hopefully it will rain a little less here,’ said the man, peering out at the passing desert landscape.

The girl was suddenly sulky. She said, ‘Well I’m not going to be dressed suitably, no matter what kind of weather we’re having, am I?’

‘I think you look splendid,’ said the man.

‘Thanks for that but we both know I look like Bozo the Clown.’

‘Really Ace.’

‘Acacia.’

‘Really Acacia, you look perfectly fine.’

‘Everyone is going to laugh their heads off.’

‘Everyone will think you look very pretty and striking.’

‘Not unless they’re blind in both eyes. Really, Doctor.’ The girl looked downcast. Butcher wondered what all the fuss was about. He couldn’t see what the girl was wearing under that white rain coat, but he doubted it was anything that would shock the hard-bitten military personnel or the cynical academics who populated the Hill.

‘I told you where we were going,’ said the man.

‘I know but I thought you said *the Alamo*,’ said the girl.

‘The word has the same derivation. It means the poplars.’

‘Stuff the poplars. I’m going to be a laughing stock.’

‘I’m sure everything will be fine,’ said the little man complacently. Butcher hardly heard these last words, though. He was too busy trying to puzzle out the meaning of the girl’s comment about the Alamo. Butcher himself had never felt moved to visit the historical fort in Texas, but he doubted there was any special dress code in force in its vicinity.

The little man suddenly leaned forward and spoke over the white-and-brown leather of the car seat. 'Excuse me driver. Will you be taking us directly to see Major Butcher?' His elfin face peered quizzically at Butcher.

'Who's Major Bulldog?' said the girl.

'Butcher, Ace,' said the small man. He was still leaning over the seat, still looking at Butcher and smiling. Butcher decided he had run the ruse as far as it would go. 'Actually I'm Major Butcher,' he said.

For a moment there was complete silence, except for the smooth hum of the car's powerful engine and muted thud of its tyres on the rough road surface. Butcher knew that his passengers were swiftly reviewing everything they'd said in his hearing and wondering if they should have said it. The sort of things you let slip in front of a flunky like a driver might be very different from the things you'd say to the head of security of the atomic bomb project at Los Alamos.

It was the little man who broke the silence. 'Forgive us. We assumed you were a driver sent by Major Butcher. Not the Major himself.'

'It was my civvies that threw you,' said Butcher. 'I like to be comfortable on a long drive. But don't worry, you'll get to see me in full uniform soon enough. When I'm acting in my official capacity.'

'But surely it's high treason to take off your uniform, especially in a time of war,' said the little man.

'If I was behind enemy lines I could be shot,' said Butcher lightly.

'But the Doctor's right,' said the girl. 'It's against regulations, isn't it?'

'There are exceptions,' said the man she called the Doctor. 'I imagine such unconventional behaviour is permissible when you are acting as a plain clothes detective.'

'Detective?' said Ace.

'The Major here used to be with Pinkertons, America's premier private investigation firm.'

Butcher glanced at the man in surprise. Or, he would have glanced at him, but the Doctor had suddenly subsided into the rear of the car again. Butcher had to search for him in the mirror. When he got a look at his face, the little man was smiling. 'How did you know that?' said Butcher.

The Doctor chuckled and looked at the girl beside him. The Major here is accustomed to reading dossiers on people and it must be an alarming thought for him to imagine someone else reading a dossier on him.' He leaned forward and spoke over the back of the seat again, as if imparting a confidence. 'Actually it's nothing so sinister Major Butcher. Or should I say Rex Butcher. I'm a fan of yours.'

'A fan of his?' said the girl. 'What are you on about?'

'The Major here is a writer,' said the Doctor.

Butcher was annoyed to note that the girl seemed astonished. 'Him? What kind of a writer?' The Doctor laughed, apparently amused by her scepticism.

He said, 'What kind do you think? He's a detective, so he writes detective stories. Novels, in fact. And very accomplished novels at that.' Butcher tried to repress a warm glow that spread across his heart at these words. He knew the man could be trying to manipulate him, but it was hard for an author to entirely shut himself off from praise of his work.

'Really?' said the girl. Annoyingly, she still seemed astonished. Butcher suddenly wondered if he should have shaved this morning after all. But he'd been deliberately cultivating the Neanderthal grease-monkey look for his feint as the driver. Now the girl was acting as if the proverbial bear had stood up after doing its business in the woods and begun reciting poetry.

'No, really,' said the Doctor hastily, as if sensing Butcher's displeasure, 'I'm a great admirer of yours Major. I think your experience working as a real detective informs your work while not circumscribing it.'

'Oh yeah?' said Butcher.

'By which I merely mean that what you write is better than reality, more organised and concise and dramatic. And yet it conveys the tang of reality with it.'

'Which ones have you read?' said Butcher. He'd be amazed if the little bastard had read any of them.

The Doctor frowned and considered. *I've got him there*, thought Butcher. But then the little man spoke up as if reciting a list, '*Yellow City, Hell's Inheritance and The Falcon of Gibraltar.*'

'*The Hawk of Gibraltar,*' said Butcher immediately, then he bit his tongue. But he couldn't help it. The man had got the name of his book wrong and putting him right was a reflex reaction. But reflex reactions like that, which betrayed a man's feelings, could end up getting him killed.

'Yes, sorry, I stand corrected,' said the Doctor. '*The Hawk of Gibraltar.*'

'Never heard of any of them,' said the girl.

'Really, Ace,' said the Doctor. 'Have a little consideration for the feelings of the poor writer who laboured to pour out all those hundreds of thousands of words.'

'Well, I *haven't* heard of them,' said Ace. 'Or read them.' She glanced up at Butcher in the mirror and added, 'But then I'm not a big reader,' as if to mollify him. Despite himself, Butcher was stung by her remarks. He remembered a girl in New Orleans, a pretty girl, to whom he'd made a gift of his first novel. He'd asked her what she'd thought of it and she'd been lavish, though unspecific, in her praise. When she wasn't looking he'd pulled the book off her shelf and checked. The twenty dollar bill he'd placed in the book was still where he'd left it, between pages ten and eleven. And she wasn't the type to

leave money lying unspent. There had only been one conclusion. The shrew hadn't even read as far as the middle of the first chapter. Butcher's experiences as a detective had left him amply cynical about human nature, but in his new role as a writer he seemed to have reacquired his gullibility, like sensitive skin growing over a callous. He had cursed himself as roundly as he'd cursed the girl (whom he promptly stopped seeing) and, spending the twenty dollars on whiskey, he'd resolved never again to trust anyone as far as his writing was concerned. It was a precept he'd honoured. For example, he didn't believe the Doctor had read one word of his work. The man had perhaps memorised the titles of his books, and managed to parrot them more or less correctly. But that was as far as it went.

Even as Butcher was thinking this, the Doctor leaned forward and said, 'I particularly enjoyed *Yellow City*. I thought it was not only a gripping thriller but a devastating portrait of labour relations in America.'

'A portrait of what?' said Ace.

'Labour relations.'

'Sounds like something that goes on in a maternity ward.'

'Well it was a birth, in a way. But it was the birth of a social movement. Or, you might say, a socialist movement. The 1920s saw the rise of organised labour in America, the unions.'

'Oh, like strikes and that.'

'Correct,' said the Doctor. 'And it was a violent birth. The vested interests of American industry didn't take kindly to workers demanding their rights. And dynamite, axe handles and shotguns were liberally employed in presenting the employers' counter arguments.'

'Violence on the picket line, eh?' said Ace.

'Indeed. And the Major's novel was a brilliant portrait of a corrupt town at the centre of just such a labour war. Both sides of the argument are presented with stark, cynical detachment and the effect is devastating.' The Doctor grinned at Butcher. 'I thought the anarchist bombing of the casino was particularly inspired. And the internal dissension amongst the Wobblies was splendidly portrayed.'

'The Wobblies?' said Ace.

'A nickname for the Industrial Workers of the World.'

Butcher grunted. All right, maybe the little bastard had read his books. Or at least one of them. From the back seat the Doctor said, 'But his finest work is probably *The Hawk of Gibraltar*.'

'Is it an animal story?' said Ace.

'Hardly. The hawk in question is a jewelled statuette on which a number of nefarious parties are attempting to get their hands.'

Butcher decided he'd had enough of the literary discussion. He said, 'What was that capsule you gave her?'

There was a pause in the back seat. 'I beg your pardon?'

'You reminded her to take her capsule. She got it out of her purse and swallowed.'

'Oh that,' said the Doctor. 'Fish oil.'

'It tastes *revolting*,' said Ace.

'But very good for the brain,' said the Doctor.

The winding road took them up onto the mesa above the broken shadows of Los Alamos Canyon. The MPs at the checkpoint recognised Butcher at the wheel of the car and waved them through. 'Well, here we are,' said the Doctor.

The Hill was a dusty, uninspiring place with the makeshift look of a civilian resort that had been requisitioned for military use.

'We're on the Parajito Plateau, are we not, Major?' said the Doctor. Butcher just grunted. He was getting sick of playing chauffeur and tour guide, even if it was a role he'd volunteered himself for.

'Why would anyone want to come here?' said Ace.

'Well, this project is the brainchild of Robert Oppenheimer, and Oppenheimer has fond memories of this place. This mesa.'

'We call it the Hill,' said Butcher.

'Indeed. Anyway, Oppenheimer came here to convalesce when he was a teenager. His parents thought the New Mexico air would do him good.'

Butcher squinted suspiciously at the Doctor. 'How do you know all this?'

'Oppy and I have corresponded a number of times over the years,' said the Doctor. 'Although we've never actually had the pleasure of meeting face to face. An omission I'm hoping to correct today.'

'You and him wrote letters to each other?' said Butcher.

'Yes.'

'This was before the war?'

'Yes.' The Doctor turned to Ace. 'As a young man Oppy often enjoyed riding in this rugged country.'

'I'll bet he did,' said the girl somewhat ambiguously.

They passed the glinting water of what looked like a miniature lake. 'That's Ashley Pond,' the Doctor informed her. 'Named after the founder of the school.'

'Whose name was Ashley?'

'Whose name was Ashley Pond,' said the Doctor.

'Marvellous,' said Ace. 'I'm glad somebody has a sense of humour. What is that school you mentioned?'

'The Los Alamos Ranch School. That's what this place used to be.'

‘What, like a dude ranch?’

‘Indeed,’ said the Doctor. Ace brightened somewhat. ‘Maybe I won’t look like such a total clown after all. Do I have to watch out to not step in any horse crap?’

‘Sadly the horses are largely gone now. Though there are plenty of other things around here we’d be well advised to avoid stepping into,’ the Doctor’s eyes grew bleak for a moment. ‘All of them considerably less safe than horse droppings.’

They passed a large, handsome wooden building with log walls. A small second storey to the building was tucked in under the sloping shingled roof. ‘That’s the Fuller Lodge,’ said Butcher. ‘That used to be the main building of the ranch school. Now it’s the hotel and main dining room. It’s where you’ll be billeted. Or at least *you* will,’ he glanced at the Doctor. ‘The girl goes in the women’s dormitory.’

‘Oh great. The girl goes in the women’s dormitory,’ said Ace.

‘Should we perhaps get out of the car and unpack?’ said the Doctor tentatively. Butcher shook his head.

‘Oppenheimer wants to see you right away. Matter of fact, he’s throwing a party in your honour.’

‘A party?’ said Ace, her mood improving.

‘They’re probably hitting the booze already,’ said Butcher.

The Oppenheimers’ house was at the end of a dusty road known affectionately as Bathtub Row. The house looked like a log cabin with a boxlike veranda built onto one side of it, surrounded by sparse grass, crazy paving, trees and flowerbeds. Ace and the Doctor walked up the crazy paving as Butcher drove back down Bathtub Row to park the car. There was a subdued buzz of voices coming from the open door of the house. They paused a few yards from the threshold, in the shade of a poplar tree.

‘Well, he was a bundle of laughs,’ said Ace.

‘Don’t underestimate Major Butcher.’

‘Did he really write all those books you were banging on about?’

‘Of course.’ The Doctor smiled. ‘Do you doubt my word?’

‘No, but he doesn’t look like he could manage the quick crossword puzzle in the *Sun* let alone write an entire book.’

‘Looks can be deceiving.’

‘You’re telling me.’

‘His novels are actually very good. I wasn’t being insincere or disingenuous when I praised them. He really is a very talented man. You should read one. I’ve got copies in our luggage. I can lend them to you.’

‘No thanks,’ said Ace. ‘I’ve got better things to do. Like picking fluff out of my belly button. And speaking of our luggage, what happened to it?’

'I'm sure it will be safe with the Major.'

'I'm not sure at all. He's probably going through my knickers right now. What did you make of him pretending to be our driver?'

'Rather a clever ruse. We should have been more careful about what we said in front of him, or rather behind him.'

'Does that mean he's suspicious of us?'

'Major Butcher is in charge of security here. It's his job to be suspicious of everyone.'

'Well it's a good job I didn't mention the TARDIS.'

'Yes,' the Doctor grinned. 'That was rather fortunate. Though I imagine it would mostly have served to confuse the poor fellow.' He glanced towards the open door of the house. The sound of voices had grown steadily louder and more festive and now music started to play. Ace didn't recognise the tune but it was something boring and classical. The voices rose louder still, in competition with it. She frowned.

'Did we really have to leave the TARDIS in Lame-o or whatever that dump was called?'

'Lamy. Yes, I'm afraid we did. The military presence here made it problematical to bring it any closer to Los Alamos. And then, of course, we had to explain our arrival. We couldn't just turn up out of the blue.'

'Out of the blue box, you mean,' said Ace. There was the distinctive sound of an ice shaker from inside the house, and laughter contending with the music. The party was beginning to seem inviting.

The Doctor said, 'In fact, I'm not so sure that turning up at Lamy and getting the bus from there was sufficient to allay the Major's suspicions.'

'What about our forged ticket stubs?'

'They're not forged, Ace. They're perfectly genuine. I collected them myself, and filed them away for future use.'

'You've been planning this caper for some time then.'

'I told you, I'm not deeply enamoured of that word. And I'm not sure that the tickets alone are enough. Even though I've clipped them with the correct implements.'

'I should hope so.'

'I wonder if we should have caught the train from Chicago after all. To throw Butcher off our scent, as it were.'

'What, and leave the TARDIS in Chicago?'

'Precisely. That was the quandary. It would have been a long way off if we needed it.'

'Well it's not exactly dead handy where it is now. What if we suddenly need to get to it. Do we ask Major Bulldog to give us a lift back to Lamy?'

‘Major Butcher,’ corrected the Doctor. ‘No. If it comes to that we shall ask a friend of mine to help us.’

‘We’ve got some back-up?’ said Ace. ‘That makes a pleasant change.’ She looked at the inviting cool shadows of the house. ‘Someone here?’

‘No, someone a very long way away.’

‘Sounds useful,’ said Ace. Inside the house, someone walked past the door and she got a glimpse of the red-and-white fabric of a woman’s dress. She remembered her own outfit and felt her face go hot with embarrassment.

Perhaps sensing her mood, the Doctor spoke up. ‘Now, are you sure you understand the situation?’

‘I know I’m not going to the Alamo to join the fight with Davy Crockett, if that’s what you mean. I have managed to absorb that fact.’

‘Yes, well I’m sorry about that little misunderstanding. But it’s important that you are clear on everything else. Our hosts the Oppenheims, for example.’ The Doctor nodded towards the house.

‘He’s some kind of boffin, right? Like Dr Judson.’

‘Yes, but several orders of magnitude higher. He studied at Harvard, Cambridge and Göttingen.’

‘Göttingen? That’s in Germany isn’t it? I thought that lot was at war with our lot. I mean, is at war with our lot.’

‘Indeed so, but this was before the war. And Oppenheimer brought back vital knowledge from Germany.’

‘What kind of knowledge?’

‘Physics. The work of men like Pauli and Heisenberg. Oppenheimer came back and taught at Caltech and Berkeley. When the war started he was brought into this project, the Manhattan Project, to calculate the critical mass of uranium 235.’

‘Uranium?’ said Ace. ‘So the Manhattan Project wasn’t about renovating the architecture of New York?’

The Doctor shook his head. ‘Regrettably not. It was about building the atom bomb.’

A butterfly fluttered past, a darting, small, black-and-orange shape. Loud drunken laughter rang out from the house. Ace looked at the Doctor. ‘The atom bomb?’ she said.

‘Yes.’

‘What have you got us into this time?’

Butcher parked the car outside his quarters, popped open the trunk and dragged the luggage inside. He got a beer from his ice box and sat down and inspected the stuff. Two large steamer trunks, both ocean blue with bright brass fittings. One was stencilled with the initials JS PhD. The other had ACE

on it. Acacia Cecilia Eckhart, thought Butcher. So that's where she got the nickname.

Both trunks were sealed with heavy, formidable-looking padlocks. It took Butcher just under thirty seconds to open them with a bent hairpin. He searched the girl's first, to get it out of the way. It mostly consisted of clothing, including many pairs of shoes and an amazing amount of underwear – some of it of astonishing brevity. The only item of any professional interest to him was a used train ticket for the journey from Chicago to Lamy.

Some of the suspicion eased off Butcher's mind, like a rucksack coming off his shoulders after a long day's forced march. He relocked the girl's trunk and delved into the Doctor's. Here he found another train ticket from Chicago, more clothing, an umbrella, thankfully only a few pairs of shoes and the most ordinary of boxer shorts, numerous letters, which he took out, spread on the floor and laboriously photographed, a large number of books on physics, which he found incomprehensible but leafed through nonetheless (remembering the girl he had once known in New Orleans and the twenty dollar bill), finding nothing. Some of the textbooks were in German, but that was only to be expected. At the bottom of the stack of books he found two hardcovers with lurid jackets and a dog-eared paperback. The three books were *Yellow City*, *Hell's Inheritance* and *The Hawk of Gibraltar*, all by Rex Butcher.

Butcher stared at them. They were all well thumbed and had been read numerous times. Of course, he told himself, they might have been purchased second-hand. He opened the books and found the name John Smith written inside each one in distinctive angular handwriting. That didn't necessarily mean anything, either. The Doctor could still have purchased them second-hand, writing his name in afterwards. It certainly didn't mean he'd been devotedly reading and re-reading them. Butcher flipped through the novels just as he'd done with the physics texts, looking for concealed papers. All he found were a number of underlinings and marginal notations, all very obviously in the same angular handwriting as the name at the front of the books. The passages marked were all pieces of prose of which Butcher was himself particularly proud. Indeed, they represented a keen selection of what he regarded as his finest writing. The comments written in the margin were things like *Excellent. Vivid. Sharp. Hilarious! Wickedly subversive! Concise and beautiful. Verging on the profound.*

He hastily snapped the books shut and returned them to the trunks along with the texts, the letter and the clothing. As always, he placed everything back in the reverse sequence to taking it out, ensuring that the original order of packing was restored. He had done this so many times before it was second nature. But he had never done it with quite the nascent sense of shame he felt now.

Butcher re-locked the Doctor's padlock and dragged both trunks back outside. He smoked a cigarette, gathering his strength, and then put the trunks in the car again. He went back inside, took the film from the camera and locked it in his desk to be developed by one of the technicians on the Hill that night. He would read the content of the Doctor's correspondence at his leisure tomorrow. He'd already recognised the handwriting on at least one letter – Oppenheimer's. So the Doctor hadn't been lying about that either.

But then, Oppenheimer had been involved with some very dubious characters over the years.

Butcher shaved and changed into his dress uniform before taking the car to the Fuller Lodge and dropping off the trunks. From there he drove up Bathtub Row to the Oppenheimers' party.

Chapter Two

At the Party

By the time the Doctor and Ace joined the party it was in full swing.

The Oppenheimers' small wooden house was invitingly rough hewn and rustic, decorated with Indian artefacts and handicrafts. The doors and windows were all open and the warm breeze from the mesa blew through, thankfully dispersing the incredible toxic miasma of cigarette smoke that greeted Ace, causing her eyes to water. She repressed the urge to cough as she followed the Doctor inside.

The sitting room had whitewashed walls and dark wood spanning the high, beamed ceiling. It was jammed with people, most of them a good decade or two older than Ace and all of them, men and women, smoking like there was no tomorrow. A group of men stood around leaning on the stone mantelpiece of the big open fireplace (thankfully with no logs burning on this hot summer evening), arguing about something. They had glasses in their hands and looked fairly drunk, with flushed red faces.

All the people were drinking from martini glasses and the woman in the red-and-white print dress she'd glimpsed earlier was circulating with a brimming pitcher, making sure they all remained well topped-up.

They all looked like normal people. But from what the Doctor had said they were getting ready to build a bomb that would be used to incinerate thousands of Japanese men, women, children and babies. Ace had seen a documentary about Hiroshima once at school and she hadn't been able to eat kebabs for nearly a year afterwards.

Everybody looked at her and the Doctor as they came into the room. The place didn't exactly fall silent, because there was still the record player in the corner, a genuine old antique blasting out some kind of depressing classical garbage. But the volume of conversation definitely dropped. Everybody seemed to be looking at them. The Doctor smiled cheerily and swept off his Panama hat. 'Good evening,' he said brightly. There was a ragged chorus of response from the party guests, the sort of thing you got when people wanted to be polite but weren't really certain who you were.

A man hurried across the room, grinning, to seize the Doctor's hand and shake it. The man had a lopsided narrow face, a long nose, a wide sensual

mouth, dark brows and a dark uneven hank of hair. His face was flushed and his eyes bright with drink. He was standing so close to Ace as he pumped the Doctor's hands that she could smell the cigarette smoke, sweat and cologne emanating from his tweed jacket. Who could wear a tweed jacket in weather this hot? Mind you, thought Ace, she couldn't point a finger at anyone.

She still had her raincoat tightly belted shut. And with a bit of luck it would stay that way all evening. . .

Ace realised that the Doctor was talking to her. 'This is the man you've heard so much about,' he said. 'Our host Robert Oppenheimer.'

'Call me Oppy,' said the man, taking Ace's hand and shaking it. His grip was limp and sweaty and he dropped her hand almost immediately, turning back to the Doctor. 'Let me introduce you to the boys,' he said, leading the Doctor across the room with a hand over his shoulders. The Doctor glanced back at Ace, smiling and shrugging helplessly.

Ace was left standing alone in the middle of this smoky room full of drunken strangers. For a moment she felt like crying. The music was blaring and the voices of the packed room were a blur of strident joviality. Ace considered making a run for it. But then she saw the woman in the red-and-white dress making a beeline for her. Ace looked at the door, checking her escape route, but it was too late. The woman joined her.

'Let me take your coat,' she said. It was the moment that Ace had been dreading. She forced a smile.

'No thanks. I'm fine,' she said.

'Oh come on now. Just because Oppy insists on sweltering in that ridiculous jacket of his doesn't mean you have to.'

'Well it's just that, er, I'm not really dressed for a party.'

'Oh fiddlesticks. We don't stand on ceremony here.'

'No, really -'

'Come on now. Oppy's only wearing those smelly old tweeds because he's too drunk to get out of them.' The woman giggled and plucked at the belt of Ace's raincoat. Ace realised that the woman was also drunk. She had hold of the belt now and before Ace could stop her, she'd unbuckled it and thrown the coat open.

The conversation in the room stopped again, with just the record player wailing away in the silence, as everyone stared at Ace. Everyone except the Doctor, who shrugged and smiled apologetically again. Ace could feel all the blood gathering in her cheeks as she went bright red. With the raincoat spread wide, everyone could see what she was wearing. Which was a tasselled leather skirt with gold trim and big silver stars, a broad snakeskin belt adorned with silver dollars, a western style shirt in bright red cotton with black shoulder

patches, mother of pearl buttons and deep pockets in a virulent shade of blue. Over this she wore a sleeveless suede vest decorated with beads.

In short, she was dressed like a cowgirl.

A fat, oriental-looking man with a goatee blundered drunkenly past Ace. He was wearing a beret, shorts and a brightly coloured shirt decorated with a strange abstract zigzag pattern. 'Dig Annie Oakley,' he said loudly as he lumbered towards the fireplace and scooped a martini glass off the mantelpiece. A red-haired man frowned at him and tried to take the glass away.

'That's my drink Morita.'

'I don't think so, Henbest.'

'It certainly is.'

'Forget it man. You're just projecting.' The fat oriental man chuckled. He lurched away, grinning and pouring the drink into his mouth so hastily and clumsily that half of it ended up running back down his shirt in a broad dark stain. He didn't seem bothered. The red-haired man cursed succinctly but inaudibly behind his back. Ace was grateful for the altercation. It had taken everybody's attention away from her. She looked at the woman who had opened up her raincoat. She was smiling at Ace and gently eased the coat off her shoulders. Ace didn't resist. The woman took the coat and folded it carefully, as if it was something precious.

'You must have been sweltering under that thing,' she said. 'What's that vest made of? Suede?'

'Hey,' said Ace. 'I know I look like a complete idiot.'

'You look wonderful!' The woman didn't seem to be lying, but then she was drunk as a skunk.

'The thing is,' said Ace, hearing a quaver of emotion in her voice and feeling tears begin to gather in her eyes. 'I thought he said we were going to *the Alamo*.'

The woman saw the tears and heard the quaver and swiftly guided Ace out of the room, down a cool hallway and into a big tiled kitchen, where a young dark-skinned woman was busy at the stove, black hair tied back in a bun and a sheen of sweat on her smooth forehead. She was stirring a pot of some reddish concoction, which smelled so good that Ace's mouth watered and she forgot all about crying.

'Let me fix you a drink,' said the woman who was still carrying Ace's raincoat. 'My name's Kitty, by the way. Kitty Oppenheimer.'

'What's that cooking on the stove?' said Ace, speaking loudly enough to cover the eager rumbling of her stomach.

'Speciality of the house,' said Kitty. 'Chilli con carne. We'll be serving it up soon, to stop those jokers next door from getting too drunk. Would you like some?'

'Yes, please,' said Ace. Kitty was selecting a martini glass from an assortment that were drying on a white towel spread beside the sink. She took the glass over to a brown ceramic bowl half full of a strange gelid-looking yellowish mixture. She dipped the glass into it. 'What's that?' said Ace.

'Lime juice and honey. Another speciality of the house.' Kitty carefully smeared the rim of the glass with the mixture then took Ace by the elbow and guided her back down the cool hallway to the room full of smoke and heat and noise. 'Have courage,' said Kitty. 'Once more unto the breach.'

Back in the living room she collected the pitcher she had been wielding earlier and used it to fill Ace's glass. She picked up her own glass and held it up to Ace. 'Bottoms up,' she said, clinking glasses. Ace took a sip. She had never been big on gin, especially warm gin, but the honey and lime mixture made it quite palatable. Kitty winked at her and chinked glasses again.

Ace sipped again. With the third sip she felt her lips go numb and thereafter the music and voices of the party seemed to be buzzing away pleasantly like a fly beyond a sheet of glass. Kitty introduced her to a lot of people whose names Ace promptly forgot, or at least promptly forgot to whom they were attached, though a lot of them sounded strangely familiar. Names like Fermi and Feynman and Fuchs. At one point the fat oriental-looking man in the beret staggered past and lurched into her, almost spilling her drink. Kitty stared daggers at him as he retreated.

'Who is he?' said Ace.

'Cosmic Ray.'

'Cosmic who?'

'Ray Morita. The big clown. Look at those ridiculous shirts he wears. Word is he has some of the local Indian craftswomen run them up for him. They must be knocked out on some kind of Indian bug juice to come up with those designs.'

'I think they're quite nice,' said Ace. 'Jazzy.'

'Oh for Christ's sake don't mention the word *jazz* anywhere in his hearing.'

After a second and third round of martinis, and three bowls of the utterly delicious chilli (which did surprisingly little to ameliorate the effects of the booze), Ace found herself experiencing alternating drunken and lucid intervals. In one lucid interval she found herself in a corner decorated with wall hangings, having a heart-to-heart with Kitty about her relationship with the Doctor. Kitty Oppenheimer was prying in a salacious, gossipy, good-natured way. 'I understand,' she said, her eyes gleaming wickedly. 'He's like a father to you.'

'No. More like a combination of best friend, teacher and comrade in arms,' said Ace. She enunciated each syllable with great care and when she finished speaking reached up what seemed a terribly long way, to touch the side of

her own numb mouth and make sure there wasn't a copious quantity of drool flowing out of it.

'Well,' said Kitty sighing, evidently disappointed by the lack of scandal, 'I can't point a finger. I was married three times before I got to Oppy.'

'Three times?' Ace's sluggish mind got to grips with the arithmetic. 'He's your fourth husband?'

'Yes,' said Kitty, grinning sardonically. 'I can see what they said about your mathematical gifts is true. Anyway, I saved him from that Tatlock bitch.' A note of genuine venom, as opposed to mere conversational malice, surfaced in Kitty's voice. 'She nearly ruined Oppy, dragging him down with those types she used to cavort with.' She looked at Ace, her eyes cold, then looked past her. 'That Tatlock woman is one reason we've got all these cloak-and-dagger-types skulking around here.' She nodded at a handsome-looking man in uniform who was standing nearby with his back towards them. He shifted to let a drunken party guest stumble past him and Ace was shocked to see that the man in uniform was Major Butcher.

'You know what he did?' said Ace, feeling drunken outrage well up in her. Kitty smiled at her.

'Who?'

'Major Bulldog Butcher.'

'Bulldog? I like it. What did he do, darling?'

'He pretended to be our driver. When he picked us up. So he could eavesdrop on us. Eavesdrop. That is a word isn't it?'

'It certainly is. But I shouldn't be too upset, dear. You might as well get used to it. I imagine the Major is eavesdropping on us right now.'

'Is he?' said Ace. 'Then he's a -'

But before Ace could vocalise the terse Anglo Saxon epithet that sprang to mind to characterise the Major, a shadow loomed over them. It was the shadow of the fat drunken oriental man Ace had noticed earlier. He was even more drunk now, swaying noticeably. 'Hello ladies,' he said.

'Hello Ray,' said Kitty, in a cool, noncommittal voice.

'What's a couple of hip chicks like you...' Ray paused, evidently losing his thread, his large face nodding like some kind of novelty candy dispenser, before he suddenly focused on Ace. He grinned at her and stared at her, a long appraising gaze that moved from her forehead to her toes and back up again. This would have been offensive enough if he had merely been assessing her sexual attributes, but somehow the knowledge that he was actually surveying her bizarre garb made it even worse. 'Hey, Calamity Jane,' he said, leering.

'I thought I was Annie Oakley,' said Ace.

'Calamity Oakley, Annie Jane,' muttered Ray. 'That's quite some get-up.'

'Haven't you had enough to drink?' suggested Kitty in a sweet, reasonable voice.

'Hell man, no, no, no,' said Ray firmly, shaking his head again.

'Well then, hadn't you better go and have another martini?' said Kitty. Ace admired her adaptability. 'The pitcher's over there. Help yourself.'

But Ray just ignored her and kept grinning at Ace. 'Look at you. You're headed for the last round-up. Your spurs they jingle jangle jingle. You've got to throw a lasso. You got to bust a bronco. You're a lonesome cowpoke. You got to get along little doggie, get along. You, you, you...'

'Run out of cowboy clichés?' said Kitty. 'Maybe another little martini will help.'

Ray didn't seem to hear her. The look of alcoholic puzzlement that had clouded his face suddenly abated. He stabbed a chubby finger at Ace, stopping just short of her breasts, hovering there in drunken menace. 'It's time you were back in the saddle!' he chortled. Ace and Kitty exchanged a glance. The crude innuendo in the man's remark was abundantly clear.

Kitty Oppenheimer slapped his hand away from Ace's breasts and opened her mouth to give vent to what Ace fully expected to be blistering invective, and which Ace was rather looking forward to hearing.

Just then, though, the record player, which had fallen mercifully silent, began to blare again. Ace winced at the loud, loathsome pomposity of the classical music that poured from it. There was a simultaneous sound of wordless loathing from Ray, and Ace looked at him, surprised to see a look of disgust on his face that was identical to her own. 'What is that crap,' he moaned.

'Wagner,' said Kitty in a clipped, discursive tone. 'Tristan and Isolde. The Liebestod.'

'I know what it is, man,' said Ray, his face corrugated with suffering. 'But I mean, *why are they playing it?*' He glared at a tall, thin stick insect of a man who stood over the record player, nodding with satisfaction as the music keened and thrilled. A young man with a huge, domed forehead, tiny ears and a risible little lick of hair adorning his large curve of skull. The young man's eyebrows echoed the curve of the huge round spectacles that gave him a bug-eyed look. His Cupid's bow mouth was bracketed by the scattered trace of scarring from adolescent acne.

'It's Fuchs,' said Kitty Oppenheimer, half to Ace and half to Ray.

'Of course it's fucking fickle fucking Fuchs, baby,' said Ray. 'Making with the Germanic jive again. It's enough to make you puke, man. Puking Fuchs.'

'I agree,' said Major Butcher. He stepped over and joined them, smiling. Ace wondered what the hell the man was doing, suddenly being so friendly. But Butcher seemed sincere as he joined Ray in staring with contempt at Fuchs and the record player. 'That music ought to be banned.'

‘That’s right,’ crooned Ray. ‘Banned, baby, banned.’

‘It shouldn’t be played in here of all places. It’s the music of the master race. It’s Hitler’s favourite composer.’

‘Actually,’ said a familiar voice, ‘Hitler’s favourite composer was Franz Lehár.’ Ace looked up to see that the Doctor had also joined them. He smiled and tipped his hat at Kitty before turning to address Butcher again. ‘Lehár is a composer of light operettas. Musical meringues, so to speak. Much more to the Führer’s taste than the highly spiced meats of Wagner. I believe Hitler’s absolute favourite among Lehár’s works was *The Merry Widow*.’

‘You seem to know a hell of a lot about it,’ said Butcher truculently, staring at the Doctor.

‘Oh, I’m sure that’s because he was a personal friend of the Führer’s,’ said Kitty. ‘They probably got together and had nut cutlets while listening to *The Merry Widow*.’ Butcher snorted with disgust and moved off. Kitty turned and smiled at the Doctor. ‘Dr Smith, I believe. We haven’t been properly introduced. A pleasure to meet a man who knows about music here on this barren rock.’

‘Even if it’s the music of the enemy?’ said the Doctor, amusement dancing in his eyes.

‘Well you never said you *liked* it, did you?’ Kitty turned to Ace. ‘So how did you two meet?’ Before Ace could phrase an answer – any one of a dozen facile lies and semi-truths that she had been forced to develop over the years – they were interrupted by a gargantuan moan from Ray. The big drunken man was twitching, his face contorted with despair.

‘I just can’t listen to this stuff any more,’ he said, nodding at the record player from which the Wagner was still pouring. He turned abruptly away and lurched towards the door, people stumbling out of his path.

‘Well that got rid of him,’ said Ace. ‘So I guess that rubbish is good for something.’

The Doctor smiled. ‘I feel somebody ought to put the case for Wagner here. I think the Liebestod is some of the most beautiful music ever written.’

‘Oh God. Don’t you start,’ murmured Ace.

‘So do I,’ said Kitty Oppenheimer.

‘However,’ said the Doctor. ‘I also recognise it’s not the *only* music.’

Kitty smiled at him. ‘So do I. Now would you excuse me? I think my husband is gesturing to me desperately.’ Across the room Oppenheimer was indeed beckoning to her, and Kitty strolled over to join him, leaving the Doctor and Ace alone together for the first time since they had arrived at the party.

‘So are you enjoying yourself, Ace?’

‘Well, I like her. Kitty Oppenheimer. She’s been nice to me.’

‘Have you had the chance to make the acquaintance of anyone else?’

Just that big drunk.'

'I'm afraid, given the state of the guests at this party, you need to be a little more specific.'

'That big bloke with the beret. Looks Chinese or Korean or something.'

'Japanese.'

'Japanese?'

'Yes. Ray Morita, a third-generation Japanese-American physicist of some considerable genius, who appears to be in the process of destroying himself with alcohol.'

'He certainly does. But listen Doctor, if he's Japanese – I mean half Japanese or whatever – shouldn't they have him locked up?'

The Doctor nodded grimly. 'Indeed, that is the government's current policy. So perhaps it's not surprising he's drinking himself to death when you consider his entire family – loyal Americans all – have indeed been locked up in a detainment camp for the duration of the war.' He paused for a moment and gave Ace a curious look.

'What is it?' she said.

The Doctor smiled. 'Why Ace, you'd already heard about that, hadn't you?'

'Sure.'

'But how did you know about America's dubious policy of internment for its citizens of Japanese descent during World War Two?'

'There was a movie.'

'Ah, I see, excellent.'

'It had Dennis Quaid in it.'

'Good, good. Well in any case you're quite correct in assuming that normally Ray would be behind bars. But because of his special abilities in science he is needed here. In short, he is allowed his freedom because he is helping Uncle Sam.'

Major Butcher, who had returned to the room, drifted close to them just in time to hear Ace say, 'Who the hell is Uncle Sam?'

Before Butcher had a chance to consider Ace's anachronistic remark, there was the sound of angry voices from outside. Butcher immediately moved to the nearest open window of the house. Outside, on the lawn, Oppenheimer was standing talking to another man. Both men were gesticulating, hands waving and elbows jerking, their voices rising in growing fiery. It looked as if they might come to blows at any moment. Butcher recognised the man with Oppenheimer, and he just smiled and turned away from the window. He didn't notice who took his place as soon as he vacated it. Ace, with the Doctor at her side.

Ace peered out the window. The voices of the men arguing had grown so loud that they were clearly audible in the house, even above Wagner and the roar of party conversation. Yet all the party guests seemed oblivious to the quarrel blazing so close at hand. And they didn't seem to just be politely ignoring it, either. They seemed genuinely uninterested. Ace turned to the open window, listening and trying to catch the thread of the argument outside. The words hydrogen and atmosphere kept coming up.

The man quarrelling with Oppenheimer was heavy set, with dark wavy hair. He had a face dominated by thick black eyebrows, with a big nose, big ears and fat cheeks, all of which seemed strangely at odds with his narrow, tapering chin. Like Oppenheimer, his face was flushed with drink and rage.

'Who is that?' she said.

The Doctor smiled thinly. His eyes were cold. 'Edward Teller.'

'Don't tell me, let me guess. He's a physicist.'

The Doctor looked at Ace and his smile grew wider, his eyes less cold. 'Yes, one of many who escaped here to America fleeing from the rise of the Nazis in Europe. You do know who the Nazis are?'

'Sure, they're the guys that Indiana Jones hates.' Ace smiled. She felt drunkenly witty and loquacious. 'I'm just kidding. Of course I know about World War Two and the Nazis. And the Japanese. Did I ever tell you about that movie they showed us in school about dropping the atom bomb on Japan?'

'Yes,' said the Doctor impatiently. 'The takings at the local kebab shop dropped for a year.'

'OK, so I told you the story. Maybe I repeat myself sometimes. Bad Ace.'

'In any event, Teller was one of those fleeing the Nazis. He was born in Budapest so the country he fled from was Hungary, part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. Teller is Jewish and, of course, the Nazis made things very unpleasant for the Jews even before their policy of mass extermination got under way. Anyway, Teller wisely fled the noisome rising tide and came to America where he made a dramatic impact in the field of theoretical physics, especially with his work on crystal symmetry. The Jahn-Teller effect.'

'Oh, that.'

The Doctor smiled at her sarcasm. 'All you need to know is that it deals with the interactions between nuclei and electrons.'

'I don't even need to know that.'

'Such discoveries got him into the Manhattan Project and involved with Oppenheimer here at Los Alamos.'

'Involved is putting it mildly,' said Ace, staring out at the two men arguing. Oppenheimer looked like he wanted to throttle Teller, who stared sullenly back at him with bitter, scornful reproach. 'It's handbags at ten paces out there. What are they on about?'

The Doctor pursed his lips and frowned. 'Well, it's all somewhat technical, but as you know the plan here is to detonate the world's first atomic weapon.'

'Yes, I haven't forgotten that.'

The Doctor nodded at the two men standing in the garden. 'Well, our friends Teller and Oppenheimer are having a small disagreement about the consequences of detonating that weapon.'

'You mean,' Ace summoned up all her drunken rhetorical eloquence, 'like the political, social and economical consequences?'

'No,' said the Doctor. 'Oppenheimer thinks that when the bomb goes off the consequences will be a very large explosion and some nasty residue of radiation.'

'Well it's hard to find fault with that. What does Teller think?'

'That the explosion will set up a chain reaction that will devour all the hydrogen in the atmosphere and elsewhere, igniting it, like striking a giant match. A giant match that lights a giant fuse.'

Ace felt a cold thrill as she imagined the pile of explosive at the other end of that fuse. As if reading her mind, the Doctor said, 'Yes. Effectively it would turn the planet into one giant bomb. And thereby obliterate it.'

'It?'

'The planet Earth. In other words, destroying the world.'

'Not that old chestnut,' said Ace dismissively. But despite her bravado, she felt a strange rising chill in her solar plexus. She had faced Armageddon in a number of forms. But something about being here, on her home world, in a time that was almost her own, with the all too familiar threat of nuclear weapons at the heart of things, made the Doctor's words uniquely unsettling.

'Do they really think there's a chance of that happening?'

'Teller does and he's a very clever man. One of the top minds in his field.'

'But Oppenheimer doesn't take him seriously?'

'On the contrary, Oppenheimer takes him very seriously indeed.'

Ace looked out at the two men standing in the garden. They had fallen silent now, but they stared at each other with obstinate combative hatred, like two weary boxers huddled in their corners between rounds. 'Oppenheimer takes the threat seriously but he's going to go ahead anyway?'

'Yes.'

'Whew.' Ace stared curiously at Oppenheimer. The lanky figure looked strangely isolated, a man utterly alone in the world even as he stood here on the lawn of his own home, his wife close by and his colleague and antagonist standing a mere few feet away. Ace felt sorry for him. She tried to imagine what it was like having the weight of such decisions on your shoulders, and her mind shied away from the concept. She turned to the Doctor. 'But they didn't, did they?'

He was staring out the window. He didn't seem to hear her. 'They didn't, did they?' she repeated. He turned and looked at her quizzically.

'Didn't what?' he said.

'Set off a chain reaction that burned up all the hydrogen in the atmosphere.'

'And the oceans.'

'And the oceans. And blow up the whole world. They didn't do that, did they?'

She glanced around at the crowd of drunken people, merry or maudlin, talking loudly all around them. 'This lot managed to blow up an atom bomb all right, but it just went off in the middle of the desert and everything was all right except for any poor little blighters of desert animals who were in the blast zone, and they tootled off, I mean the scientists not the poor little blighters, and built another one and dropped it on Japan. On Hiroshima and that other city that nobody can ever remember the name of.'

'Nagasaki.'

'Nagasaki, yeah. They burned up all those Japanese babies and women and men. But they didn't burn the whole world, did they?'

The Doctor gazed at her bleakly. Ace felt a small surge of panic. 'Oh come on,' she said. 'I don't know a lot of history, but I know that much.'

The Doctor was about to reply, but before he could do so a loud outraged yelp echoed from across the room. It came from Klaus Fuchs, who was staring at the large, swaying figure of Cosmic Ray Morita coming back through the door of the living room. Ray had a large yellow leather bag swinging by a strap off one shoulder. The bag was an odd, square shape and had the word 'Cosmic' embroidered on it in jagged red lightning-bolt lettering. Carrying the bag, Ray swayed inexorably towards the record player.

Ever since he'd left the room, Fuchs had been tending to the record player, which seemed to Ace to require the disc being changed or turned over every three minutes or so. She was accustomed to the seventy minutes plus of a CD, so these weird, small black records here seemed to end almost as soon as they started. As much as she loathed the classical music and longed for it to be over, the constant interruptions made it worse.

Fuchs, however, seemed to enjoy the perpetual responsibility of feeding the music to the machine, and he'd been happily fussing over it, selecting discs from a large brown cardboard album.

Now Fuchs was standing among the physicists chatting at the fireplace, one casual elbow on the mantelpiece between the martini glasses, a debonair cigarette clamped between his lips. The cigarette dropped from his lips and he looked hastily around him, like a cornered animal. Ace realised his predicament. He was on the other side of the room, far away from the record player, which stood beside the door.

Ray on the other hand reached the record player in a few unsteady steps. Ace decided that although she didn't much like the big man, she liked his nickname. Cosmic suited him, with his spaced-out, otherworldly demeanour.

The Liebestod was still thrilling and thrumming and surging from the record player as Ray reached down gently and with great care and lifted the playing arm off the record. The music stopped instantly. Ray delicately moved the playing arm back and lifted the record off the player with one big hand.

In sharp contrast to his treatment of the playing arm, Ray handled the record itself with brutal negligence. On the far side of the room Fuchs let out another scandalised yelp. He was still trying to force his way through the crowd towards Ray. Cosmic Ray just gave him a lazy smile and let the record go spinning out of his hand like a small, clumsy frisbee. Fuchs screamed as the black disc went spinning through the air towards the white wall of the room. It struck the wall and shattered with a brittle sound, showering to the floor in a number of ungainly angular pieces.

Cosmic Ray's grin widened. 'I hate to do that to a perfectly good piece of shellac. But the music that was pressed into those grooves deserved to die. Now, hip cats and kitties, open your ears to some music that deserves to *live*.'

He opened the yellow leather bag and Ace saw why it was shaped like a cube. Inside was a box of funny black records in their square cardboard covers. With great reverence and enormous care, Cosmic Ray extracted one such record and placed it on the turntable. Fuchs, who had stopped halfway across the room when the Wagner record had broken on the wall, was watching with frigid contempt. He muttered with disgust something that sounded like '*Entarte* music,' and pointedly turned his back as Ray proceeded to fiddle with the tone arm of the record player.

Ray removed the needle from the arm and threw it aside with a look of cool contempt that matched Fuchs' own. 'Don't know what you're so cooked about, Klaus baby,' he said. 'That needle you were using was worn out anyway. It should have been replaced about ten records ago you dumb Deutsche clown. It was destroying the record. Killing the very thing you loved. *Very* Wagnerian.' Ray grinned as he bent over the record bag, fat thighs bulging from his shorts in a disgusting display of flab. He extracted a small yellow silk pouch, from which he took a new needle. He fastened the needle in the tone arm and set the arm on the record, standing back with a look of drunken rapture on his face.

'This is more like it,' he said as the needle rasped its way into the groove. 'Duke Ellington. Released two years ago. The 1943 Ellington band, baby!' His voice rose as the music began and Ace wondered why, if he so loved the music, he didn't just shut up and let them listen to it. But Cosmic Ray kept on spouting facts. Jimmie Hamilton on clarinet! And the great Ben Webster,

recorded just before he left the band in August of that year! “Jump for Joy” is the title, cats. It’s a hot little gem dreamed up by Ellington and Webster and some cat called Kuller. Originally written for a stage show which premiered at the Mayan Theatre in LA, City of the Angels, baby, on. . .’

He proceeded to detail the date in July 1941 when the song had first been aired. By now Ace was extremely irritated with his running commentary because it was preventing her hearing the music. Ace had always been partial to jazz, treasuring her personally autographed Courtney Pine CD, and responded to the Ellington tune immediately. She felt her hips sway and her feet begin to stir.

Ray finally shut up and began to listen to the music he had been espousing at such turgid length. And oddly enough, everyone else shut up too. A communal silence fell over the party, one of those odd synchronous moments when, as if by telepathic concord, the entire group runs out of things to say. It was a comfortable, attentive silence, as the hissing, spinning disc gave up its music. The song had a sardonic swagger in the muted trumpets and an infectious, joyous swing. Ace saw the first stirring of movement among the party guests, as if they were on the verge of breaking out into communal, tribal dance.

The vocalist commenced singing on the record. She enquired in a voice rich with hip irony whether the listeners had seen pastures groovy. Several couples began to dance. Even the Doctor was swaying. Cosmic Ray had his eyes squeezed shut and was listening in stunned rapture.

With silky, syncopated cynicism the singer belted out in conclusion that Green Pastures was nothing other than the title of a Technicolor movie.

Everybody in the room was dancing now with the exception of a sulking Fuchs, a dour and suspicious Butcher and, curiously, Ray himself. He stood utterly still as he listened. His eyes were shut, his countenance upturned as if the sun was shining down on him. His fat, goateed face was glistening and as Ace bopped across the Oppenheims’ sun-faded Navajo rug on what had suddenly become the dance floor, the Doctor squiring her with some swinging moves of his own, she realised they were the wet traces of tears.

‘Babies,’ said Cosmic Ray. ‘Little babies, dig this beautiful music. Like a big beautiful bubble blown by everything sweet and hip and groovy in the glowing heart of the cosmos. Dig the way that rainbow bubble shines so beautiful. But know this cats and kittens, if you only knew how fragile that bubble is.’

The Doctor had stopped dancing. He stood staring at Ray like a hound trained for a very special hunt, who had finally spotted his prey.

‘If only you knew, sweet groovers,’ said Ray, ‘how close this music came to not existing at all.’

The big man began to cry.

Chapter Three

Cactus Needles

The following day, Ace stood in front of a blackboard in a sunlit block of space, chalk dust rising around her, sunlight falling through it in a luminous veil. The sunlight came from a high window in a classroom in the old riding school. She didn't know if the riding school had ever had much use for blackboards in its day, but the jokers using the premises now certainly did. The rooms were assigned to groups of physicists, working in twos or threes, and the blackboards in every classroom were crammed with equations.

This particular room was shared by Ace and a science geek called Abner Apple. The guy was a professor, despite his youth. But that wasn't so unusual here on the Hill where it seemed everyone had a doctorate – with the possible exception of the Doctor.

In any case, Ace had never thought of the man as anything but *Adam's Apple* since she first saw him, due to the scrawny, knobbly jut of his neck. Professor Apple's big head swayed on top of that knobbly neck, a shining dome covered with just the finest fuzz of colourless hair.

Apple was an egghead. A young one, but just as set in his quirks as the oldest, most irascible professor. He was standing in front of the blackboard with Ace, surrounded by the smell of freshly rising chalk. She hated that smell. The school smell.

The young physicist stood there, his big eyes staring down at her from his big shiny head, like a bird watching a worm. 'Well?' he said.

Ace returned her eyes to the blackboard. It was crammed from corner to corner with a complex tangle of scribbled equations. Numbers and abstruse mathematical signs were dotted everywhere. It was a big, complex chunk of a much vaster scientific calculation that was taking place here at Los Alamos, the unholy equation of maths and physics and chemistry that would determine the possibility, the probability, the feasibility of fashioning a doomsday weapon.

It meant nothing to Ace.

She stared up at the dense mess of technical squiggles on the blackboard, the scattered mass of numbers, clumped here and there, some big, some small. And it meant nothing to her. Adam's Apple was staring at her as she felt her face get hot. Ace silently cursed herself. Why hadn't she listened to the

Doctor? He was always banging on at her about her remembering to take the damned thing.

Maybe she had deliberately not taken it, out of spite, or out of some subconscious spark of rebellion. That's certainly what Henbest, the psychiatrist on the Hill, would have said. The goatish man had bored Ace at the party last night for what seemed like hours. He had kept asking, with bad breath and cigarette smoke floating salaciously from his mouth, whether Ace had any interest in hypnotism. Like she would let that creep put her into a trance.

She could smell his breath afterwards for hours.

Still, she would rather be with Henbest now than with this scrawny young man, here in this classroom with the gleaming chalk dust floating around them. Apple was staring at her, waiting impatiently for an answer she couldn't give. Ace looked at the smeared, crowded figures on the chalkboard, hoping that the numbers would fall into some strange, numinous pattern rich with meaning.

It wasn't an entirely idle hope. It had happened before. But it wasn't going to happen now. 'Well?' repeated Apple. 'I thought you were supposed to be some kind of calculating prodigy. I'm not asking you to do any of the real labour, none of the actual physics. I just want your assistance with the *donkey work*, the raw calculation. The arithmetic.' He pronounced the last word with outraged, venomous contempt. 'It's the sort of work anybody can do.'

'Look, I'm sorry, but -'

He drew a circle around one group of numbers. 'It's the sort of work I could do myself if I had the time. If I didn't have more important matters to devote my attention to. That's the whole point. You are supposed to be the calculating prodigy. You are supposed to do this for me, to take the load off my back. That's the whole point of you. You're supposed to be here to help me.'

'I'm supposed to be here to help the Doctor.'

A tight, maniacal grin appeared on Apple's face. He was like the triumphant, voracious bird finally pouncing on the worm. 'But the Doctor isn't working here today, is he? He's seeing General Groves. For his security interview. So you're supposed to be assigned to me. You're supposed to help me. But you can't, can you?'

Apple suddenly turned away from her and threw his piece of chalk across the room. It shattered in the corner with a vicious whip-crack sound. He turned back to her, wiping the chalk dust off his hands. 'You can't,' he said.

'Of course I can,' said Ace. 'But...'

'But?'

Ace silently cursed herself again. Why had she ignored the Doctor's warnings? She had meant to take it. She had fully intended to take it, immediately

after breakfast. The problem was, Professor Apple had intercepted her the moment she left the table at Fuller Lodge. Breakfast had been pretty good, waffles and sausages and honey and white country butter. Ace had enjoyed it, with no premonition that doom was about to pounce. But doom had pounced, in the shape of Professor Apple. He hadn't given her a chance to go back to her quarters. He had marched her directly over here to the old ranch school and stood her in front of the blackboard.

'There's something I have to do,' said Ace. 'Back at my quarters.' It had turned out that the women's dormitory was full, so Ace had ended up moving into the WAC barracks, a very similar-looking soulless, long, low box of a building.

'What sort of thing?'

Ace had a sudden inspiration. 'Women's business.'

'What?' said Professor Apple. Then he fell silent as realisation dawned. His face darkened with embarrassment. 'All right. But make it quick.' He didn't have to tell her twice. Ace was straight out of the classroom, the door slamming behind her, her heels clicking and echoing in the hallway that smelled of lemon floor polish, walking past the other classrooms containing the busy, serious figures labouring over their own blackboards. She walked straight out of the schoolhouse and into the bright open air of the day and felt a tremendous thrill of relief.

Until she realised Professor Apple was following her. The relief melted away under a hot wave of shame. Ace knew she was a fraud and she knew she was about to be found out. Apple followed her down the curving road, making no attempt to conceal his presence. Ace began to feel irritated by his gooney pursuit and with the first stirrings of anger came a small return of confidence. What could he do to stop her? There was nothing. He couldn't follow her into the women's dormitory, to her bed, to the bag she had so carelessly left behind. (Or perhaps deliberately, to annoy the Doctor. That was what Henbest would say.)

But in any case Professor Apple couldn't follow her and he couldn't stop her getting her capsule and taking it. And if she took the capsule she wouldn't be exposed as a fraud and everything would be all right. Ace had just firmly decided that everything was going to be all right when, around a bend in the road and striding directly towards her, came Major Butcher.

Butcher's eyebrows jerked up as he saw Ace hurrying along the road with Professor Apple in pursuit. She dropped her head shamefully and hurried past him. If only she could get back to the WAC building... Butcher kept walking right on past her and she felt a moment of gratitude but then she heard him falling into step with Professor Apple. She didn't dare risk a glance back at them, but she could hear their footsteps and snatches of what they

were saying.

‘– be working with you at the school?’ said Butcher.

‘She certainly should. But it’s becoming evident she actually *can’t* –’ said Apple with venom. Ace kept hurrying towards her quarters, towards sanctuary. She didn’t look back. She increased her pace and tried to force a casual, carefree expression of innocence onto her face. It felt like the rictus of a cadaver.

‘– going now?’

‘Back to her quarters on some sort of women’s matter,’ Professor Apple’s voice dropped into inaudibility as he conferred briefly with Butcher. Ace kept walking. Then Apple’s voice rose again, with a note of vicious anger in it. ‘Calculating prodigy? She can’t calculate two and two. He hasn’t brought her here for that. She’s just his, you know...’

Ace flushed and increased her pace.

‘She’s pretending she can perform complex mathematical calculations,’ said Professor Apple. ‘When in fact she only has one use. She’s letting him put his hairy little hands on her and...’ Apple’s voice sounded about to break, like that of an adolescent boy. It was rising towards incoherence, growing ragged with spite and anger behind Ace as she hurried towards the WAC barracks.

The barracks was a hastily erected, long two-storey building with a low flat roof, numerous windows (which at least provided plenty of light but also provided a sense of being constantly watched) and tarpaper walls. The building was flanked on both sides by telephone poles and was anything but aesthetically pleasing. Ace hurried up the wooden steps. She raced into her ground-floor dormitory, stood for a near-swooning moment of disorientation as she tried to remember which of the many identical bunk beds was hers.

She found it, experienced a dipping moment of terror when her bag was not where she thought she’d left it. Then she remembered where she actually *had* left it, scooped it up, took out the metal case containing the capsules, opened it and quickly swallowed one, grateful for its loathsome oily flavour.

Once she had done that she felt an immediate profound sense of relaxation. There was no longer any need to hurry. She took her time using the loo then sauntered back out through the dormitory. As she was leaving, a hawk-nosed ginger-haired office clerk she’d noticed sitting next to her at breakfast came hurrying in. As soon as she glimpsed Ace, the girl looked away, completely ignoring her, and pretended to hurry to another bunk bed where she rifled amongst her own belongings. But it was perfectly evident to Ace that Butcher had somehow summoned the hawk-nosed snooper and sent her in here, to the women’s realm, to spy on Ace.

Ace walked out of the building and wasn’t at all surprised to find Butcher and Professor Apple waiting on the porch for her. ‘I understand you’re having

a little trouble,' said Butcher laconically.

'Not at all. Everything is fine.'

'Professor Apple here tells me that you've refused to perform any of the mathematical calculations assigned to you.'

'Then Professor Apple there is mistaken.' Ace smiled. 'I didn't refuse. I just couldn't.'

Butcher gave her a cold, appraising look. 'Couldn't?'

'Not at that exact moment. I was caught short. I had to hurry back here and get something. Women's matters. You know.' Butcher didn't say anything. 'Internal plumbing,' added Ace, wondering just how far she could push it.

Both men stared at her in glum silence. Ace calmly returned their gaze. Finally Butcher said, 'Then in that case you won't have any objections to going back to the schoolhouse and doing some work for Professor Apple now.'

'No objections at all.' Ace offered a dazzling smile to Butcher and then to Apple, and allowed them to escort her back to the schoolhouse.

Over the next hour, Ace was amused to note that Professor Apple's suspicion softened first into grudging respect and then into frank surprise, finally reaching its final transformation into outright dopey admiration. By this point they were alone in the classroom, Major Butcher having at last grown bored with watching Ace successfully perform preposterously complex equations with total accuracy. He had gone clumping moodily off to go and spy on someone else.

Now Professor Apple was standing rather too close to Ace, gazing at her adoringly, eyes moistly gleaming, and Ace began to realise with a sinking feeling that she might simply have swapped one problem for another.

To her enormous gratitude, the door opened at this point and the Doctor breezed in. 'Hello Ace, Professor Apple.' He hopped up on a desk and sat there, his small legs swinging, peering at the blackboard. Apple gawked at him in frank dismay.

'But you're not supposed to be here. You're supposed to be with General Groves.'

'Indeed. But it seems my security interview took less time than anyone expected.' The Doctor smiled. 'That's how secure a fellow I am.'

'The General let you go?' spluttered Professor Apple.

'Only after we had a pleasant chat. Fascinating fellow Groves. He built the Pentagon, you know.' The Doctor hopped down from the desk. 'Now Ace, you had better come with me.'

'No,' cried Professor Apple as if someone had offered to put a dagger in his heart. 'Where are you taking her?'

The Doctor patted him sympathetically on the shoulder. 'I'm afraid Ace will be working with me from now on.'

'But. . .'

'Sorry, old man.'

'But she's brilliant.'

'Yes, she certainly is.' The Doctor smiled at Ace.

'I've never met a woman with such a mathematical turn of mind.' Apple's voice was tremulous with emotion.

'Well, you've met her now,' said the Doctor, steering Ace briskly towards the door. Professor Apple stared forlornly after them as they hurried out into the hallway and bolted from the building.

'That was a close one,' said Ace.

'In what sense?' The Doctor glanced at her. 'The result of my security interview with General Groves was never in question. I prepared very carefully for our arrival here. I made sure I had the highest clearance, on the highest authority. So what do you mean by "a close one"?''

'Nothing,' said Ace hastily. 'Nothing.'

The Doctor peered at her suspiciously. 'You didn't forget your capsule, did you, Ace?'

Ace affected a carefree giggle. 'After all your nagging? Of course not. How could I forget?'

'This is no laughing matter. It's very important that you remember your oil capsules. When we went to see Dr Judson you were posing as a mathematical specialist. But you were that in name only.'

'I know, I know.'

The Doctor smiled affectionately. 'Though during that caper, as you might put it, your grasp of logic theory was impressive. This time, however, we have the ability to transform you into a bona fide mathematical specialist.'

'I know.'

'But you simply must remember to take the capsules.'

'All right, all right. Don't nag. I don't really mind taking them. It's just that they taste terrible, that's all.'

'They are very beneficial.'

'Not for the poor bloody fish they're not.' Ace remembered the bleeding bulk of the giant pink-and-grey fish lying in the phosphorescent surf on the rocky beach near the Two Moons fishing station. The fish had been an alien creature on an alien world, but Ace had still felt a twinge of empathy for it as the natives of Two Moons had merrily butchered it, laughing at its death throes and playing music, ceremonially removing its large tri-lobed liver, from which they extracted the oil that was sealed in the capsules.

The Doctor sighed. 'True. It's a shame that poor creature had to die, but the oils it contained are essential to the diet of the fishing tribe. It endows them with the large and efficient brains they need to calculate the trajectories for deployment of their lines and hooks and harpoons against the corresponding trajectories of fast moving schools of fish. They make these calculations with tremendous accuracy, from the most swiftly moving schooner. The oils that enable them to do this are similar to the omega lipids you find here on Earth, though much more powerful. In a human brain these alien fish oils stimulate the centres involved in abstract thinking, specifically mathematical calculation. Making you an indispensable asset in a world where electronic computers are only available in their most primitive and cumbersome form.'

'All right, all right, I promise to be a good girl and take my capsule every day. I can already see one problem, though.'

'Which is?'

'That Professor Apple had no interest at all in me when he thought I was the common dunce that I really am. But as soon as he saw me in action as a mathematical wizard he started giving me that look.'

'Which look? The one of awestruck adoration?'

'Yes, that one.'

The Doctor chuckled. 'Still, don't be too harsh on the poor fellow. He's been stuck up here on the Hill for months without much in the way of female companionship.'

'Well he isn't getting any companionship from me. Anyway, it's not really me he's interested in. It's just my turbo-charged brain when I'm under the influence of the oil.'

'Yes, it does seem to be your idiot savant aspect that thrills him.'

'Idiot savant? Thanks a lot.'

'Silly expression, forgive me,' said the Doctor. 'Now that I've rescued you from the good Professor I have a job for you.'

'More calculations?'

'No, not calculations. A mission.'

'Good. I was starting to get bored. I could do with a mission. What do you want me to do?'

'Actually, it's more like a diplomatic mission. I need you to make friends with someone.'

Ace paused and shot the Doctor a suspicious look. 'Who?'

'Cosmic Ray Morita.'

'Oh no.'

'Ace, please.'

'You should have heard what he said about my outfit last night. He was drunk out of his mind.'

'Well, there you go. Today he'll be sober, hung over and penitent. He'll be receptive to your overtures.'

'I won't be making any overtures. I'm not going anywhere near that big fat...'

'You like the records he plays.'

'But I don't like *him*.'

'Nonetheless,' said the Doctor firmly. 'I need you to go to him and get to know him. Make friends and let him start talking to you. And pay careful attention to what he says.'

'Why should I? Why can't you do it?'

'I have my own mission. I need to talk to Edward Teller.'

Ace felt a brief, disquieting chill, as though the sun had gone behind a cloud. 'The bloke who was arguing with Oppy? Mr Inflammable Atmosphere?'

'Yes Mr Inflammable Atmosphere. I need to convince him his calculations are wrong.'

'Thank gawd for that,' said Ace, feeling a tremendous rush of relief. 'You have no idea how worried I've been ever since last night. It's been in the back of my mind all day. The idea that the bomb they're building could blow up the entire world. Ridiculous idea, really. It was silly of me to even worry about it.'

The Doctor looked at her, saying nothing.

Ace felt the smile fading from her face. 'I mean,' she said. 'They did detonate it and it didn't blow up the entire world.' The Doctor still said nothing. Ace kept talking, hoping he might say something, something reassuring. 'And now, I mean now you're going to Teller to explain to him that he's got it all wrong. So everything's all right, isn't it?'

The Doctor didn't reply.

'Doctor please, you're scaring me.'

'Then help me lay those fears to rest,' said the Doctor. 'Go and talk to Ray Morita.'

Ray Morita's building resembled the WAC barracks in its basic plan, being a low rectangular dwelling two stories high, shaped like a stretched shoe box. But there were certain crucial differences between the two buildings. Ace's had a raw, unfinished look, with tarpaper walls, and was surrounded by an unsightly cluster of telephone poles. It was deemed an adequate dwelling place for the Women's Auxiliary Corps, who represented nothing more than a source of menial clerical labour on the Hill. More important personnel, eggheads like Ray Morita, got a building with beautifully finished wooden walls, surrounded by the pleasant shadows of oak trees.

Ace reflected on this bitterly as she made her way to the centrally placed entrance of Ray's building. This was reached by a low wooden staircase. Above

the staircase was a pleasant open balcony area where the two halves of the building converged and the privileged scientists could, presumably, loll and catch the sun. Above that, on the roof, were two symmetrically placed rectangular chimneys that no doubt kept the place warm and cosy throughout the long desert winter.

At the Oppenheimers' party, Ace had noted that the primitive record players in this period could only play music for about three minutes at a time. Then you had to reload the stone-age device. Therefore the music thundering from within Ray's apartment – some jaunty loping jazz – could only have been set in motion mere moments earlier.

So she knew he was in there.

Ace knocked until the music came to an end and paused in the sudden silence. Then she realised that this was the opposite of a successful strategy and hastily began knocking on the door again. Too late. A new piece of jazz commenced blasting from inside, absolute proof that Cosmic Ray was lurking within the apartment.

Ace cursed and increased the volume and frequency of her knocking. The music from inside grew, if anything, louder. Her knuckles were starting to hurt and Ace was considering stopping and waiting for this record in turn to end when the door suddenly opened in a surge of sour body odour and surly, outraged growling. 'Bringing me down, man! All that knocking's bringing me –'

Cosmic Ray stood staring at Ace. 'Down,' he said, then fell silent, a look of amusing poleaxed astonishment on his face. Ray was still wearing his red beret, but now he was wearing it with a baggy undershirt and capacious striped briefs. He had sneakers on his feet but no socks. He stared at Ace.

'Can I come in?' she said.

Ray stood aside wordlessly, his face still vacant with surprise, and let her walk into the apartment. The place was nice, a spacious, light and airy three-room flat with a lot of light from the window falling on wooden floors. There were rugs thrown here and there, bright Indian patterns, and the minimum of furniture. There was a bathroom, a bedroom and a generously sized living room. Most of the living room was given over to a record player and boxes of records, though in one corner space had been made for a large, bulbous metallic refrigerator that was almost big enough to step into. There were also at least a dozen potted plants, all of which, to Ace's surprise, were thriving, as plump and shiny in their green way as their owner. Plump Cosmic Ray, shiny with sweat, abruptly moved past Ace and scurried quickly across the room to a small table with several potted plants and a framed portrait on it.

He turned to face her as he did something on the table, fumbling behind his back. 'I know you. I met you that night at the Oppenheimers'. That night

they had the party.'

'That was last night, Ray.'

'That's right, that's right. I saw you there last night. So what,' he said, 'so what, so what brings you here. . .'

Ace had been pondering what kind of story she could tell him. It would have to be pretty good to explain her presence here. It was all very well for the Doctor to instruct her to go and strike up a friendship with the man. But it wasn't so easy in practice. She decided to lay everything off on the Doctor. 'The Doctor sent me.'

'Sent you? The Doctor? The little guy?'

'Yes.'

'Moved pretty good for an older cat. When he was cutting a rug last night. When he was, like you know, dancing, man.'

Ray suddenly seemed to realise he was standing there in his underwear. 'Excuse me a sec.' He darted into the bathroom and closed the door. There were gratifyingly frantic sounds as he washed.

Ace took advantage of his absence to snoop around the place and, specifically, to go over to the table and have a look at whatever it was he had tried so clumsily to conceal. A portrait frame of carved green jade, containing the photograph of a very beautiful woman with elegant oriental features. A flourish of handwriting bisected the photograph, just overlapping the woman's high cheekbones and slanting almond eyes. The writing, in a flowing feminine calligraphy in indigo ink, read, 'To Ray. With a world of love, Silk.'

Why hadn't Ray wanted her to see this? The woman certainly had a luminous beauty, and something in her eyes, lingering just short of utter depravity, hinted at a passionate nature. Ace suddenly wondered if this was the great love of Ray's life and if she was locked up in a detainment camp somewhere because she was a half, or a quarter, or one-sixteenth Japanese.

Ray emerged a few minutes later, clean and scrubbed, wearing a silk bathrobe with a lotus emblazoned on it. He went over and perched in a leather armchair beside the one Ace had chosen. The unpleasant smell of sweat, which at least had had the claim to being a natural smell, had now been replaced by the overwhelming synthetic reek of some cheap cologne that could have doubled as bug repellent. Unfortunately, Ray had drenched himself in it.

He had also trimmed his goatee, so Ace decided she at least had to give him points for trying. She found herself almost liking the big clumsy man. And then she remembered the terrible things he'd said about her cowgirl outfit. Thank God she'd managed to dress in something slightly more suitable today. Her jeans and black cotton shirt might still have seemed odd for the period, but at least they didn't make her look like part of a travelling freak show.

‘So this Doctor who sent you here, you’re sort of his human calculating machine.’

‘At least that’s a nicer way of putting it than idiot savant.’

‘Did he send you over here because he wants you to help me with my equations?’

‘No,’ said Ace. Then quickly, so as to change the subject. ‘You’ve got a green thumb.’

‘Green thumb?’ he asked, and Ace indicated the flourishing plants. Their fat shiny leaves jutted from painted pots that looked like the work of native craftspeople. ‘Oh, I got the knack growing *muta*,’ said Ray.

‘*Muta*?’

‘Yep. That’s how I learned to make plants thrive and now I’ve got the gift. Plants just love me now man.’

‘What is *muta*?’

‘You know, gauge, man... Muggles... Pot, baby, pot.’

‘You mean dope.’

‘That’s right baby, that’s right.’

‘Do you have any?’ said Ace, purely in a spirit of scientific enquiry.

‘No man, no. Shhhh!’ Ray lifted a fat finger to his fat lips and glanced around as if someone might be listening. ‘Don’t even say that. If Major Butcher got any notion I was growing or buying or *using loco weed* he’d have my ass shipped out of here and back to a prison camp so fast, baby, the breeze would part your hair, wartime necessity or no wartime necessity. I’m lucky I’m not behind bars right now.’

‘I know. It must be terrible about your family.’

‘My family?’ Cosmic Ray looked at her blankly.

‘Being locked up in some horrible camp just because their parents or grandparents were Japanese.’

Ray’s face suffused with gloomy rage. He shook his head. ‘That’s so terrible man. So terrible. These people are good loyal Americans and just because they look Japanese they’re put behind bars.’ He fell silent, then looked almost shyly at Ace as though to assess her reaction to his outburst. His rage had seemed entirely genuine, but suddenly Ace wasn’t so sure.

‘I don’t know about you, baby,’ said Ray quickly, as though sensing her unease. ‘But I need a beer.’ He turned to the refrigerator and opened it. Ace was expecting a light to come on, but the interior of the fridge remained resolutely dark. Cool air wafted from its shadowy silent depths.

Silent. Ace realised that the refrigerator was making no noise at all. ‘Is it on?’ she said.

‘Oh yeah, it’s on all right.’ Ray smiled as he came back with two rather inviting looking bottles of beer. The cool green bottles were frosted with dew. ‘But

it's silent, baby. Peltier effect. I rigged it up myself. Converted a conventional one.' He slammed the door behind him with his foot and brought the bottles back to the armchairs. 'We couldn't have refrigerator compressor noise in the same room as the *music*, could we baby? And speaking of music. . .' He had no sooner sat down beside Ace, both of them with beers in their hands, than he bobbed back up again and moved nervously towards the record player.

'Ray?'

'Yes, baby.'

'Call me Ace.'

'Ace baby.'

'Don't you think we could open the beers before we put on a record?' The cold bottle of beer in her hand had made Ace realise what a long hot day it had been and how thirsty she was. But the cool inviting glass neck of the bottle was sealed with a metal cap and Ace had already abraded a finger trying to twist it off with her bare hands. Ray darted into the bedroom and came back with a bottle opener. 'They call it a church key,' he chuckled as he clumsily but effectively popped the lids on their beer bottles. Ace politely waited for him to take the first sip, but Ray was blundering off doing something with a tobacco tin. He shook it, a look of satisfaction on his face. The tin made a curious rustling sound. For a moment Ace thought he'd been kidding about not having any dope, but then Cosmic Ray snapped it open, revealing a heap of odd-looking dry brown thorns. Ray saw her staring and said, 'Needles, baby.'

'What kind of needles?'

'Cactus. For the record player baby.' He went over to the machine and lifted its tone arm, replacing the needle in the same painstaking fashion he had used at the Oppenheims' the previous night.

'Does it have to be cactus needles?'

'Metal needles destroy the record, man. Only cactus needles are safe. Here I am, out here in the middle of the desert and can I get cactus needles? You've got no idea how hard these things are to find.'

'You've got hundreds of them.'

'I could run out at any time, baby, any time.' Cosmic Ray finished replacing the needle, reverently discarding the old one into a plant pot, as though it was a brave soldier who had served honourably, then bent his considerable bulk over a box of records. 'Now, hep cat, what can I play for you?'

There was a loud hammering at the door. Ray sighed and straightened up, rolling his eyes in exasperation. 'Oh man, what a drag. Who's knocking now? Excuse me.' He left Ace drinking beer in the sitting room and disappeared for a moment. She heard the knocking cease and the door open, followed by a swift conversation in low, muttering voices. Ace found herself straining to make out

what was being said, but from where she was sitting it was impossible. She needed to be at the living room door, adjacent to the corridor that led between bathroom and bedroom, through to the front door. Ace rose from her chair and took a step towards the doorway. At that moment the front door closed. Ace hastily sat down again as Ray came back into the room holding a large square envelope. He was staring at the envelope, lost in thought.

When he saw Ace, he made a ludicrous attempt to conceal the envelope, then became aware how ludicrous it was and simply went and set it down in one of the boxes of records. Ace suddenly realised why the size and shape of the envelope looked familiar. 'What's the new record?'

Ray almost jumped out of his skin. 'What do you mean, man?' Ace smiled. 'Oh, that,' said Ray. 'Sure. It was just some record I ordered. I've been waiting for it to arrive.'

'Why don't you play it for us?'

'Aw man, I need to clean it first and that's a drag. Let me play you this instead.' He took a cardboard album of records out of another box and selected a black disc. 'The Duke again, from his best band of all time, from the finest period ever committed to shellac, July '42 to December '44.' Ace wondered if he would ever get around to playing the record or if he was going to list every member of the band first. But Ray's soliloquy was interrupted by a peremptory hammering at the door.

'What now man?' Ray carefully placed the record on the turntable then shuffled wearily towards the door. He was back hardly a second later, walking backwards into the room with his hands held up tensely above his head. Major Butcher followed him into the room.

He was pointing a gun at Ray.

He said, 'All right. Where is it?'

Chapter Four

Lady Silk

Ace's first thought as she stood there looking at Major Butcher pointing a gun was bitter self-reproach that she hadn't managed to at least drink some of her beer. No doubt the opportunity for that was long past now.

'What's she doing here?' said Butcher, nodding at Ace. Ray shrugged as well as he could with both his hands held high above his head.

'Beats me, man. She said the Doctor sent her.'

'Well forget her and forget the Doctor.' Major Butcher kept his gun aimed at Ray. 'Where is it?' There was a pause as Ray seemed to be formulating an answer. 'And don't try asking me what I'm talking about,' added Butcher in a dangerous voice. 'You know what I'm talking about.'

Ray shrugged his shoulders again and said, 'Over there in that box.'

'Over where in which box?'

'Can I put my hands down, man?' said Ray. Butcher gestured impatiently with the gun and Ray lowered his arms, went over to a box of records and took out the big square envelope he'd only just placed there.

'Open it,' said Butcher. 'Play it.' Ray shrugged once again, then tore open the envelope and extracted a record in a cardboard sleeve. He carefully took the Duke Ellington record off the turntable and lovingly restored it to its sleeve. 'Get on with it,' said Butcher.

Well at least I'm finally going to get to hear some music, thought Ace.

Ray took out the new record, which had a blank red label, and put it on the turntable. He switched the turntable on then lowered the tone arm and suddenly the room was full of music. Fast-moving boogie-woogie with an ethereal, insinuating female voice singing lush syllables above it. The voice was extraordinary, smooth and smoky, immediately catching and commanding the listener's attention. But before Ace could begin to make out the words being sung, Butcher barked, 'Turn it off!'

'Play it, turn it off,' muttered Ray. 'Make up your mind, man.' But he took the record off the player and returned it to its sleeve. He looked at it uncertainly for a moment, then reluctantly offered it to Butcher. The Major gestured with his gun for Ray to set the record down on a chair. Ray did so and now Butcher gestured for him to step away. Only when he had done so

did Butcher step forward and pick up the record, which he tucked under his free arm.

'You're stealing his record?' said Ace. She was unable to contain herself any more. 'You barged in here at gunpoint to steal his record?'

'I'm confiscating it,' said Butcher.

'Why?'

'That woman you heard crooning on that record was Lady Silk. A Japanese propaganda singer.'

'She's American,' said Ray.

'She's a traitor seeking to subvert and undermine morale on the home front,' said Butcher. 'And it's a criminal offence to be in possession of one of her recordings.'

'But she's got a great set of pipes, man.'

'It's illegal to play that record?' said Ace incredulously.

'To play it or own it,' said Major Butcher.

'But why?'

'I told you. Lady Silk is a saboteur in the pay of the Japanese. A sinister seductive siren warbling to America through the long night of the war. Trying to lead this country off course.'

'Sounds like the sort of tripe you put in one of your books, Major Butcher daddy-o.' Butcher flashed Ray a look of hatred at this insult, but the gun in his hand remained steady.

'I'm taking this record away for security analysis. What action will be taken against you for attempting to obtain it, you'll learn at a later date.'

'Baby, I can hardly wait for that later date. I've also got an autographed photo of Lady Silk, you know.'

Butcher grinned crookedly. 'I know. But that's not against the law. It's just her records that are banned. You can look as much as you like. Just don't let me catch you listening to her.'

Ace considered asking if they could hear some Duke Ellington instead, but decided against it. However, she did attempt to surreptitiously lift to her lips the beer bottle that had nestled cool and ignored for so long in her hands. Butcher immediately pointed his gun at her. 'Put that down and get out.' Ace sighed, set down the beer bottle and left.

She had closed the door behind her and was halfway down the corridor when she heard loud jazz begin to blast from the apartment. Ace listened for a moment. It was the Duke Ellington after all. Ace grinned and wondered how Ray had talked Major Butcher into letting him play it.

Ace was on the way out of the building, down the wooden stairs underneath the balcony, when she saw a familiar figure bustling towards her. It was the

Doctor, and he seemed to be in a hurry. He was halfway up the stairs, moving in a brisk athletic lope, when he looked up and saw Ace. 'Ah,' he said. 'I was hoping to catch you here. How did your interview with Cosmic Ray go?'

'It was going just fine until Major Bulldog turned up.'

'Butcher? Here? What did he want?'

'To confiscate a record by some Japanese-American singer called Lady Silk. She's a real looker and Ray says she's got a great set of pipes.'

'How baffling. Where's Butcher now?'

'Still inside, interrogating Ray. But Ray's giving as good as he gets, if the volume of that music is anything to go by.' The sound of jazz blasted from Ray's apartment, echoing through the hallway. Ace and the Doctor turned and started down the steps below the central balcony, back out into the daylight. The Doctor had just reached the bottom step, moving slightly ahead of Ace, when there was a sudden sharp crack of sound.

'Get down!' shouted the Doctor. He threw himself on Ace and they both hit the ground a few yards from the steps, in the grass at the foot of an oak tree. Ace was winded but didn't resist as the Doctor pushed her behind the tree. He sheltered there with her, waited for a moment, flashed her a look and then poked his head out. He stared at the balcony of the building. It was a sunlit, empty space. The music from Ray's apartment had stopped. The day was silent except for a rustling stir of breeze in the oak leaves above them.

Nothing moved in the quiet sunlight. 'What is it?' said Ace finally.

'Gun shot. Somebody was trying to shoot us. From up there. The Doctor indicated the deserted balcony. Ace stared at it for a moment, then started brushing herself off. She had blades of grass all over her blouse.

'Well, they're gone now,' she said. There was a clatter of racing footsteps from inside the building and Major Butcher came running out, still clutching his gun. He paused halfway down the stairs and stared up at the balcony. Then he looked at the tree where Ace and the Doctor were hiding.

'You two. Come out of there.' He lifted his gun.

'No need for weaponry, Major. Really.' The Doctor stepped out from behind the tree with Ace behind him. Butcher lowered his gun and squinted at them.

'What were you doing there?'

'Looking for an earring. Ace lost an earring. Didn't you Ace?'

'Yes,' said Ace, touching one of her earrings. 'But we found it. Thanks.' Butcher stared at them in silent disgust. It was clear that he didn't believe them, but he seemed disinclined to say so.

'May I ask why you are brandishing a gun?' said the Doctor.

'I thought I heard a shot,' said Butcher. He holstered his pistol and went back into the building without a backward glance. Ace and the Doctor looked at each other.

'I don't understand,' said Ace.

'It's all fairly clear,' said the Doctor. 'Somebody tried to take a shot at me. Or you. Or both of us. Major Butcher heard it – he must have good ears to have done so over the sound of Ray's music, but then I imagine he's heard gunshots before and recognises them. So he came dashing out, just too late to be of any use to anyone.'

'No, I understand all that,' said Ace. 'What I *don't* understand is why he just left us here. If he's so suspicious of us and if there're records being smuggled in and gunshots going off, why isn't he interrogating us?'

'Clearly he's pursuing an investigation that began before we came on the scene and he knows we're not connected with it.'

'Are we not connected with it?'

'Not yet.' The Doctor smiled. 'Now can I buy you dinner? I know that being shot at gives you an appetite.'

Dinner consisted of steak, baked potatoes and a tomato salad served at the dining room in the Fuller Lodge. Ace was just sitting back to enjoy digesting it, with the Doctor sitting across from her, eating a banana and jotting notes on his napkin, when she looked up to see that someone had joined them.

It was Professor Apple. He was holding a bunch of red roses wrapped in paper and Ace felt a terrible sinking feeling. The perfectly cooked piece of rump steak suddenly became a lump of dead meat nestling in her stomach. Apple thrust the bunch of flowers at her, ignoring the Doctor completely. 'Acacia. I just wanted to see that you're all right.'

'Why shouldn't I be all right?'

'I mean working with him.' Professor Apple nodded at the Doctor, taking account of him for the first time. 'If you find you're in any way uncomfortable or unhappy, or if he makes any demands on you you're not entirely at ease with... I hope you'll do me the honour of working with me. I've never seen anyone perform complex calculations with such...'

'Yeah, yeah, yeah,' said Ace.

Her obvious impatience and irritation didn't seem to give Apple pause. He simply changed tack. 'Do you like the roses?' He juttied the bouquet at her again, letting go of it, so they fell onto the plate where her steak had rested a little earlier, their red petals nodding gently.

'Yes, the roses are beautiful,' said Ace in a weary, rote, singsong voice.

'They're for you.'

'Thank you very much,' said Ace in the same singsong voice. Professor Apple beamed at her for a long moment during which neither the Doctor nor Ace said anything to him. Specifically they didn't invite him to sit and join them. At length Apple realised that the invitation was not forthcoming, and

withdrew, still beaming at Ace. When he'd left the dining room Ace looked at the roses, then at the Doctor, who was smiling wryly.

'You were rather short with the poor fellow.'

'He narked me off. The way he treated you as if you weren't there.'

'I notice you didn't make him take the roses back, though.'

'Nope,' said Ace, studying the bouquet. 'Just wait until the girls back at the barracks see these. I suppose I'd better put them in some water.' Some water and a container – an empty Coca Cola bottle fashioned from green glass – were duly found and the WACs at the barracks were suitably impressed or envious, or both, though Ace made damned sure none of them found out that it was Professor Apple who was her benefactor, attributing the flowers to a mystery admirer. The only WAC who didn't take any interest in the bouquet was the ginger-haired girl with a hawk nose, whom Ace suspected of being one of Butcher's flunkies. Ace thought she spotted the girl watching her as the lights went out and she rolled over in her bunk bed.

The following day she dutifully took her fish oil tablet as soon as she awoke, which was just as well since the Doctor put her to work immediately after breakfast. They had been given their own classroom in the schoolhouse and the Doctor had a blackboard full of his own equations, which generated a lot of numbers for Ace to apply in calculation. 'Sorry about this,' said the Doctor. 'But it's our first day here and everybody's going to be watching us.'

'Especially Butcher.'

'Especially Major Butcher. And since I am supposed to be a world-renowned physicist and you're my walking computer, we should attempt to live up to our billing. Now can you solve this simultaneous equation for me?' Ace and the Doctor threw themselves into the work on the blackboard and it was lucky that they did. In the course of the next few hours they had a steady stream of visitors, including an amiable Oppenheimer, a sceptical Fuchs and a fuming Professor Apple, who peered at the blackboard for a long time, shot a venomous glance at the Doctor and then went out again.

During one of the intervals when they were safely alone, Ace said, 'I didn't think you liked interfering with history.'

'I don't.'

'But you're helping them to build the atomic bomb.'

'Not really.' The Doctor stared at the smudged blackboard, crowded with formulae chalked in his distinctive, eccentric handwriting. 'All this is just a kind of smoke screen. I mean, it's all very well as far as it goes, but I don't actually *add* anything to the project here. I'll simply offer them solutions they were coming to anyway, just a little before they would have made the discoveries for themselves. And sometimes a little bit after.'

'So you won't look too perfect,' said Ace.

‘Yes. For the same reason I will sometimes deliberately put mistakes in my equations.’

‘Not in any of the calculations I did for you, I hope,’ said Ace. ‘I have my reputation to think about.’

They worked a long, arduous day, not finishing until well after the sun had set and the other classrooms were dark and empty. ‘That ought to do it,’ said the Doctor, clapping his hands to remove the chalk dust. ‘It’s always sensible to make a good impression on one’s first day at a new job.’ The darkened hallway of the schoolhouse was echoing and spooky as they walked out. The cool dark desert night was fragrant with the smell of woodsmoke and blossom, and the sky was studded with the precise, bright, infinitely intricate gleam of the stars. Ace’s stomach rumbled.

‘Sorry to spoil a beautiful moment,’ she said.

The Doctor chuckled. ‘Not to worry. I knew you would be hungry after your mental excursions. The brain burns an astonishing number of calories. So I’ve arranged a late meal for us.’

‘But isn’t the dining room at the Lodge closed?’

‘Certainly. So I contracted with the Oppenheims’ cook, Rosalita, to provide some of her famous chilli.’

‘Wicked. I loved that chilli.’

‘Yes, you did seem to enjoy it at the party. Now if you don’t mind a walk on this beautiful night we shall go to the Oppenheims’ and collect our supper. I believe it is just a pleasant stroll away, down the road locally known as Bathtub Row.’

‘A stroll along Bathtub Row in the moonlight? You certainly know how to treat a girl.’ In fact, the curve of road leading to the Oppenheims’ house was quietly beautiful in the moonlight, handsome rows of houses with trees and lawns. ‘It’s lovely here. Why do they give it that stupid name?’

‘Because the new buildings hastily erected for the project only provide showers. If one wants the luxury of lolling in a bathtub, one needs access to these fine dwellings along here.’

When they reached the house they found the lights in the front room on and the curtains open, affording a view of Kitty Oppenheimer sitting on the sofa with her feet tucked under her, reading a magazine. She seemed so absorbed and content, like a cat curled up happily there, that Ace felt reluctant to disturb her. But in the event the Doctor didn’t knock at the front door. Instead he skirted the flowerbeds and went around to the back of the house. The windows here were dark and there was no sign of life. But when the Doctor tapped discreetly on the kitchen door, a light instantly came on and the door opened a crack. A dark eye glinted in the crack and then the door swung fully open.

The small Mexican woman the Doctor addressed as Rosalita smiled at them, her teeth pearly and perfect in the darkness. 'Come in,' she whispered. 'We don't want to disturb Mrs Oppy.'

'No, we certainly don't want to do that,' said the Doctor, stepping over the threshold. Ace followed him into the cool darkness of the tiled kitchen. The smell of cooking lingered in the room, garlic and onion fried in butter, sweet and hot peppers and meat and cinnamon. Ace's stomach started rumbling again and she cleared her throat loudly to cover the sound. Rosalita ignited one of the gas burners on the big stove and the kitchen was illuminated by the pale blue glow of the hissing flame. Shadows pulsed gently on the wall, moving in amiable caricature of the people in the room. The little Mexican woman moved to a large brick-red ceramic casserole sitting on the table. She patted it affectionately. 'Here you go.'

Ace touched the side of the ceramic pot. It was still warm. Rosalita smiled at her, dark eyes glinting with tiny dancing reflections of the gas flame. 'You eat it pretty soon, huh? While it's warm.'

'You bet,' said Ace. She lifted the lid of the casserole and inhaled a sweet, spicy, complex fragrance, rich with the smell of cooked beef and a hint of something unidentifiable. Rosalita playfully swatted at Ace's hand with a wooden spoon and firmly placed the lid back on again. 'Keep it nice and warm, huh?' She turned and opened the wooden door of a cupboard set into the whitewashed wall. 'I'll get you a basket to carry it away in. You can bring me the basket and pot back tomorrow, huh? Or whenever. No hurry.'

'We shall return everything promptly,' said the Doctor. 'Thank you for preparing this feast for us.'

'My pleasure.'

'I'm sure we shall all enjoy it.'

Rosalita paused in her search for the basket. She emerged from the cupboard and looked at the Doctor. 'All? You sharing the food with someone else?'

'Indeed we are. Do you know Ray Morita? Cosmic Ray. I'm sure you must do. He certainly made quite an impression at the party last night.'

Rosalita straightened up so quickly that she banged her head on one of the shelves in the cupboard. 'Careful,' said the Doctor. Rosalita emerged from the cupboard, rubbing her head with one hand and clutching a large wicker basket with the other. It might have been the shock of the blow to her head but Ace noticed that Rosalita's hand holding the basket was trembling.

'Sure, I know old Ray,' said Rosalita abstractedly. 'He's sure got an appetite, that boy. You wish him good health from me, huh?' She went to the table and lifted the heavy casserole clumsily while trying to slide the basket under it. The casserole trembled in her grip.

'Here, let me help,' said the Doctor, moving swiftly towards the table. But he was a fraction too late. The big ceramic pot slid out of Rosalita's grasp, off the edge of the table, and crashed to the floor, hitting the unforgiving tiles and shattering with a sound like a bomb going off. Ceramic fragments and greasy gouts of chilli splattered across the kitchen. Ace looked on, appalled. There was a splash of chilli on the toe of her shoe. She inspected it with dismay. This had been her dinner.

'What a pity,' said the Doctor.

Rosalita looked on the verge of tears. 'Never mind. I have some left over from the party. This I cooked for you especially, but the leftovers are good too. I pack some of that for you, huh?'

Kitty Oppenheimer appeared in the kitchen doorway, holding a magazine in her hand. Ace noticed that it was a copy of *New Yorker* with numerous ring stains from wet glasses on the cover. 'What on earth was that noise?' She peered at the Doctor, Ace and Rosalita. 'It sounded like the gadget being detonated prematurely.'

'Sorry Mrs Oppy. I drop something.' Rosalita was already busy with a mop, swabbing the shards of casserole and dollops of chilli into a neat pile in the centre of the kitchen floor.

'Why are you standing here in the dark?' Kitty flipped a switch and the electric lights came on. Ace winced in the sudden brightness. Kitty smiled at her. 'Hello Ace. Hello Doctor. What sort of clandestine activity is this?'

The Doctor smiled and doffed his hat. 'Merely a clandestine chilli-purchasing activity I'm afraid. Nothing very exciting.'

'Oh, Rosalita's chilli. Sometimes it seems she's feeding half the Hill. And earning a tidy profit thereby. Anyone would think we didn't pay her enough.'

'Ah, now, Mrs Oppy,' said Rosalita with a tight smile. She set the mop aside and used a fragment of the broken pot to scrape the heap of chilli and other shattered crockery into a dustpan. 'You're ribbing me, huh?'

'I'm going to start asking you for a cut of the takings,' said Kitty. 'Oppy doesn't provide me with enough pin money.'

'She's ribbing me,' said Rosalita contentedly, emptying the dustpan into a large metal garbage can that stood just inside the door. She shut the can, gave the floor a final mopping, then bustled to the sink and carefully washed the dustpan, the mop and her hands. While she did this, Kitty turned and looked at the Doctor and Ace.

'Why in heaven's name didn't you come in and say hello.'

'We didn't want to disturb you,' said Ace.

'You looked like you were still recovering from the party,' said the Doctor.

'Well, come on through now. Oppy's out working and Peter is asleep.' Peter was the Oppenheimers' four-year-old and he seemed to Ace to have an

admirable capacity for slumber. He'd even managed to sleep through the cacophony of the previous night's party. 'I'm all alone out here except for Rosalita,' said Kitty, mock wistfully.

Rosalita dried her hands and turned to the stove. She reached for a large black metal saucepan and dragged it on to the gas flame that still flickered and hissed on the range. 'Now I warm up some of last night's chilli for you. It'll be just as tasty, you see.'

'Come and visit with me while it's warming up,' said Kitty. 'Rosalita, fix us some coffee.'

'Yes, Mrs Oppy.'

The Doctor and Ace spent half an hour in the sitting room chatting with Kitty and then left with their chilli, safe in a new ceramic casserole snugly secured in a basket. Ace carried it, swinging the braided handle in her fingers as they walked down Bathtub Row. 'Mind you don't drop it,' said the Doctor.

'Don't worry. I'm not going to lose my supper again. As it were. Doctor...'
'Yes?'

'Last night Kitty kept going on about a woman called Tattle or something.'

'Tatlock. Jean Tatlock.'

'She really seems to hate her guts.'

'Hmm. Yes, well Jean Tatlock was a rival for Oppy's affections when they first met.'

Ace strolled along beside the Doctor in the dark. There were trees overhead and the moonlight came through the leaves in gently swaying patches as the branches moved in the breeze. 'An ex-girlfriend. Yeah, I sussed that. But she said something about this Tatlock woman – I think she said bitch, actually – being one of the reasons that Major Butcher is snooping around.'

'That's correct. You see, Jean Tatlock, Oppy's old flame, was deeply involved in radical politics and under her influence Oppy drifted into similar circles. Since his marriage to Kitty, however, he has foresworn any such associations. Fortunately for the US government.'

'Why fortunately?'

'Because they don't want their atomic weapons being made by a man who is politically suspect. Which in the current climate translates as communist.'

'You mean they think Oppenheimer might be a spy for the Russians?'

'Ridiculous as it seems, yes. Although Major Butcher would be better off devoting some of his time to snooping around some of the other personnel on the Hill. Our friend, Klaus Fuchs, the Wagner buff, for example.' But Ace was hardly listening. She hefted the basket, feeling the warmth coming off the container and smelling the chilli inside.

'Where are we going to eat? In your room?'

'No. I'm afraid in this period people would look askance at your presence in my room, to say the least.'

'Then where are we going to eat?'

Cosmic Ray Morita looked up from the large earthenware pot they had set on one of the small tables in his front room. 'This is very groovy of you cats,' he said, holding his face in the aromatic steam that rose as he tilted the lid. 'Sure smells good.'

'You're sure you haven't eaten already?' said the Doctor politely.

'Oh I've eaten already,' said Ray. 'But so what, daddy-o, so what?' He patted the comfortable swell of his paunch, then dug out some chipped bowls and spoons. Ace discreetly polished hers on her shirt-tail and made certain she got a large serving of the chilli right away. This proved to be a sensible manoeuvre, as Ray proceeded to devour the bulk of the pot with gluttonous speed and gusto. The Doctor only had a token serving, sitting and watching the others.

Finally Ray wiped his face on his shirt sleeve, put his bowl aside, and lurched over to the record player. He set about the laborious business of changing needles on the tone arm. 'Are those cactus needles?' said the Doctor, as Ray opened the tin.

Ray grunted an affirmative as he concentrated on fitting the new needle. 'How fascinating.'

Ray finished with the tone arm and set about selecting a record from his large collection. The Doctor inspected the tin of cactus needles. Ray regarded him benignly, as though he was a fellow enthusiast. Ace decided that a belly full of excellent chilli, at the Doctor's expense, had a lot to do with that benign expression. Ray said, 'And you can only use each one just one time, baby.'

The Doctor lifted his eyebrows in polite surprise. 'Really?'

'Really man.' A hunted expression crossed Ray's face. 'Out here in the middle of the desert and can I get a cactus needle?' He took the tin from the Doctor. It's unbelievable, baby.'

'You seem to be doing quite well,' said the Doctor.

'But I might run out, daddy-o, I might run out.' Cosmic Ray's eyes glittered anxiously. 'I might run out at any time.'

'Ray,' said the Doctor. 'Do you mind if I ask you a question?' Ray shrugged, his back to them, as he put on a record. 'Transblucency' by Duke Ellington. The music blasted and surged. When it was over, Ray turned to the Doctor and spoke as if the conversation hadn't been interrupted.

'What question, man?'

'Why did Major Butcher go to all the trouble of appearing here in person yesterday, brandishing a gun, just to confiscate a record by Lady Silk?'

‘Well it’s like this. Butcher baby is a stickler for the rules and the rules say that it’s against the law to listen to Silk sing. She might subvert us or convert us or divert us. From our appointed task. She’s in the employ of the enemy, so listening to her is disloyal and un-American and all that jive.’

‘But even so, that hardly justifies turning up with a gun in his hand. Wouldn’t his time be better employed looking for spies?’

Ray lifted the tone arm, discarding the old cactus needle and inserting a new one. Ace could see a sly grin on his face. ‘That’s exactly what he thought he was doing.’

‘But even if he suspects you of being a spy, why should he be concerned about what music you listen to?’

Ray’s grin widened. ‘He thinks they’re sending me coded messages.’

‘Coded messages?’

‘That’s it baby, in the songs. The songs Lady Silk sings. Butcher thinks Jap high command is sending me messages in the songs.’

It was after midnight by the time they left Ray’s apartment and the moon was high over the mesa, shining on the distant mountains, its white light detailing the unearthly landscape. The Doctor and Ace walked along carrying the basket with the empty casserole in it. ‘You know what Ray said,’ said Ace. ‘About the songs having coded messages in them?’

‘Sounds like a classic paranoid delusion, doesn’t it?’

‘It does a bit. Does that mean that Major Butcher is a nutcase?’

The Doctor sighed. ‘I keep telling everyone not to underestimate Butcher.’

‘But he thinks Oppy is some kind of Russian spy, doesn’t he? And that’s not true at all, is it?’

‘No,’ said the Doctor. ‘Not at all.’ His voice was strangely sad, and after a moment he went on. ‘But despite successfully building the atomic bomb for them, our friend Oppenheimer never wins the trust of his own government. In a few years’ time he is going to be brought to trial over his security clearance. And guess who will be testifying against him. I’ll give you a clue. You’ve already seen him having a furious argument with Oppy.’

‘Teller?’

‘Yes. Edward Teller. He and Oppenheimer will become mortal enemies.’

Ace looked up at the fragments of moonlight falling through the trees. A cool breeze wove past them and she suppressed a shiver. ‘But I thought they were only disagreeing about the chain reaction.’

‘Just the small matter of whether the world is going to blow up, yes.’

Ace glanced at him but she couldn’t make out his face in the darkness. ‘Did you talk to Teller? Did you manage to convince him his equations are wrong?’

'Yes and no. Yes, I spoke to him. No, I couldn't convince him. But I will persist in trying. It won't be easy. He's a complex fellow, Teller.'

'You did a lot of research on these people before we came here.'

'Yes I did,' said the Doctor. 'And I discovered some startling facts.'

'For instance?'

'For instance, discovering that in the early part of his career Raymond Morita was a mediocrity with a poor academic record and showed no promise whatsoever.'

'You could say the same thing about Einstein.'

'Why, Ace,' said the Doctor delightedly. 'Yes, indeed you could. Cosmic Ray was teaching in a high school. Then something happened to him. He turned into one of the brightest stars in the field of advanced physics.'

'Maybe someone gave him some of your fish oil capsules.'

'No, I suspect something else is going on.'

'Why?'

'Because the old Raymond Morita was what they call a south paw. The man we saw here tonight is right-handed.'

'You're saying he's not really Ray Morita?'

'Sadly, it's nothing as straightforward as that.'

Ace turned and looked at the Doctor. They were now approaching the WAC barracks where she was staying. The rows of dark windows glinted in the moonlight and Ace suddenly realised that it was long after lights out and she was going to have trouble getting inside. But at the moment this was the least of her worries. She peered into the shadows of the Doctor's face, trying to discern his expression.

'Doctor, what the hell is going on? Why did we come here?'

'Because someone, or something, is trying to tamper with history at this most delicate point. And thereby destroy the human race.'

They came to a stop by the front steps of the WAC barracks. 'Well thanks for that,' said Ace. 'I'm really going to get a good night's sleep now.'

Chapter Five

By the Pond

The next day Ace was stuck in the classroom at the ranch school with the Doctor again, laboriously working through calculations. A constant stream of visitors meant that they hardly had a moment to themselves and Ace wasn't able to ask any of the questions that were burning inside her. Instead she had to sit, silent and bored, but also frightened, as the Doctor argued matters of physics with an endless series of distinguished visitors. Occasionally she was called upon to do some work and, since she had taken her capsule that morning, she performed each computation with breathtaking speed and complete accuracy. The visitors, who included Teller and Fuchs, were duly impressed with her efforts, but Ace derived no pleasure from them. She felt like she was on display in a freak show.

Things got much worse when Professor Apple turned up. Under the pretext of getting Ace to help with some calculations he passed her a folded piece of paper, then hastily retreated from the room. Ace looked at the folded scrap of paper in her hand, then at the Doctor. He raised his eyebrows quizzically. 'From Professor Apple?'

'He passed me a note,' said Ace.

'So, what does it say?'

'I don't dare look at it. Here.' She passed the paper to the Doctor. 'You read it for me.'

The Doctor took it, unfolded it and peered at it. Ace could see that the paper was densely packed with minute handwriting in peacock-blue ink. The sinking feeling she'd experienced when Apple passed her the note suddenly intensified. She repressed the urge to ask the Doctor what it said. He seem to be taking an inordinate amount of time reading it.

Finally he looked at her and said, 'Hmm. He goes on rather at length but, to synthesise, he wants to take you to the movies.'

'What movies? Where?'

'Apparently they show films here on the Hill on a regular basis. He wants to take you to the next screening.'

Ace repressed the urge to ask what was showing. 'What else does he say? That can't be all. He's written a letter half the length of *War and Peace*.'

'As I said, he goes on somewhat. But the gist of his rather prolix screed is that he wants you to go to the movies with him then join him for a meal and drinks in his quarters afterwards.'

'Yeah, like that's going to happen,' said Ace. 'What else? He must say something else with all those words.'

'Hmm. Yes. Essentially he goes on to say that he feels an enormous, shall we say, *rapport* with you. You're the first woman he's felt any sense of deep connection with in his entire life. A deep spiritual connection. He is immensely grateful to have met you, you've changed his life, you've awakened him, he always thought he'd be alone, half a creature looking for its lost other half, his missing soul mate... shall I go on?'

'No,' said Ace emphatically. She felt like her ears and cheeks were on fire. What made it worse was that she'd heard some of the girls talking in the WAC barracks, comparing the men on the Hill, and the subject of Professor Apple had come up. They'd all dismissed him, regarding him as some kind of sexless walking brain. He wasn't even considered relevant in the discussion of eligible males. Apple was regarded as a man totally devoted to his work, a gelding. Yet Ace had awakened something in him.

The Doctor was studying her. 'I take it you're not likely to be accepting the Professor's invitation any time soon.'

'Any time ever. What is that bloke's problem?'

'On the basis of this letter,' said the Doctor, handing the folded paper back to her, 'I would say unrequited infatuation.'

'But he doesn't have any right to be infatuated with me. He hardly knows me. He was with me for half a day and most of that he spent being horrible to me. Now suddenly I'm the only woman in the world for him.'

'Well he does feel a deep spiritual connection with you,' said the Doctor dryly.

'And that's another thing. He only feels that because he thinks I'm some kind of calculating whiz. If he knew the real me he wouldn't feel any kind of spiritual anything.' Ace took the folded note and threw it viciously into the far corner of the classroom, exactly as Professor Apple had thrown the chalk on her first day here.

'Never mind,' said the Doctor. 'We have plenty of other matters to preoccupy us.' He glanced at the blackboard. 'Do you feel like abandoning our research in favour of some detective work?'

'Please.'

As they made their way back up Bathtub Row, Ace said, 'All right. I've kept quiet this long. But now I've got to ask, what are we looking for?'

The Doctor was frowning intently, keeping his eyes on the path ahead. 'Did you notice anything unusual when we visited here last night?'

'Let me think. Oppy wasn't here, but Kitty said that was usual. She wasn't drinking, she was just sitting there quietly reading a magazine, which I thought was a bit unusual because after that party I reckoned she was the type to hit the bottle every night. But maybe I was wrong.'

'Anything else?'

'Not that I can think of.'

'Who else did we see?'

'At the house? Rosalita. There was nothing unusual about her. She just made us chilli, and that's her speciality.'

The Doctor said nothing. They came in sight of the Oppenheimer house now, just in time to see Oppy himself appear around the corner holding a shovel. He had a glum expression, which changed to something resembling embarrassment when he caught sight of the Doctor and Ace. He looked like a little boy caught in a shameful act. Despite this, he paused in a sociable fashion and lowered the shovel and greeted them politely. 'Acacia. Dr Smith. What can I do for you?'

'As a matter of fact, it was your cook I was hoping to see,' said the Doctor. Ace glanced at him in surprise. This was the first she'd heard of this. Why was the Doctor interested in Rosalita?

'Sorry I can't help you there. She's got the afternoon off.'

'I see,' the Doctor frowned. 'What a shame.'

'As a matter of fact, it is.' Oppy picked up the shovel. 'I could do with her help right now myself.'

'Really?' said the Doctor. 'With what?'

Oppy shrugged, his lanky frame shuddering. 'Nothing, I guess. It's a man's job really. We just get spoiled having Rosalita around to do the dirty work.' He rested the shovel on his shoulder and glanced at the house.

'Perhaps it's something we can help you with.'

Oppy shrugged again. 'If you really want to. But maybe Acacia ought to stay here.' He and the Doctor started for the rear of the house, leaving Ace in the front yard. She stayed there for all of five seconds, then followed. She found the two men standing by the kitchen door. Oppy was saying, 'Kitty called me home. She was having a conniption fit and I can't say I blame her. It's only a trivial little thing, but I see why she's upset.'

The two men looked up as Ace joined them. They were standing by a metal garbage can that stood just outside the kitchen door. The lid of the bin was half open and on the ground in front of it was a long brown shape. It took Ace an instant to realise that it was a dead animal. A dead rat, to be precise. The animal was lying on its back, its belly exposed, small paws jutting in the

air, tail askew and buck teeth protruding forlornly from its mouth. Ace felt a shudder of disgust. 'Yuck,' she said.

Oppy smiled at her. 'That was pretty much my wife's reaction. I guess we all know that there are things like rats around. We just don't want to be reminded of the fact.'

Ace watched while Oppy and the Doctor buried the rat under a tree. When Oppy went to put the shovel away, the Doctor hurried back to join her. 'It's time we were going.'

'Where?'

'In search of Rosalita.'

'Why?' Ace found herself hurrying to keep up with the Doctor.

'I asked you before if you noticed anything unusual. What about now?'

'A dead rat, I suppose.'

'What do you suppose killed the rat?'

'Poison?'

'Good guess. Only the Oppenheimers haven't put out any poison for the local vermin.'

'Perhaps someone else did.'

'Perhaps so.'

The Doctor was moving so quickly that Ace almost had to run to keep pace with him. 'Where are we going?'

'Oppy said Rosalita is down at Ashley Pond.'

When they reached the pond, there was no sign of Rosalita. But Ace saw something else instead. There on the fringe of the water, beyond a cluster of trees, was an old wooden bench with three men standing beside it.

'Doctor, look,' said Ace. One of the men was Major Butcher and another one was Ray Morita. The third, Ace didn't recognise. He was a young man in army uniform. He looked extremely frightened. As Ace followed the Doctor, hurrying over towards them, she saw the reason for the young man's frightened expression. Butcher was pointing his gun at them.

The Doctor sighed with exasperation. 'Not the gun again, Major.' Butcher wheeled and pointed his weapon at the Doctor and Ace before dismissing them as a threat and turning back to the other two men, whom Ace now realised were his prisoners. The young man in army uniform, who was clutching a rucksack, only looked more miserable at the sight of the newcomers, but Ray seemed delighted to see them.

'Ace, Doctor, man am I glad you're here. Old Butcher's really bringing me down.'

'Not as far down as you're going to be when I'm finished with you,' said Major Butcher. He reached in the pocket of his jacket with his free hand and

took out a pair of handcuffs. 'Put those on,' he said. He threw them onto the ground between Ray and the soldier. Ray peered at the handcuffs.

'Me or him, man?' said Ray.

'Both of you,' said Butcher. 'Handcuff yourselves together. I'm taking you in. You're both under arrest.'

'Under arrest?' said the Doctor. 'For what?'

'You stay out of this,' said Butcher.

'With pleasure,' said the Doctor, 'but I suspect Oppy will want to know why one of his key scientists is under arrest.'

'I caught them both,' said Butcher. 'In the act.'

'In the act of what?'

'It's all just one big mistake, man,' said Ray.

'Shut up,' said Butcher. 'In the act of passing on subversive material.'

'What subversive material?' said Ray.

'You know exactly what,' said Butcher. 'It's in Private Dobbs' rucksack there.'

'No sir. It's not true, sir,' said the soldier.

'Shut up Dobbs,' said Butcher.

'Permission to speak sir,' said Dobbs.

'Permission denied.'

'You've got this all wrong, baby,' said Ray. He looked at the Doctor and Ace, as if asking them for help. 'Just look in the rucksack man.'

'Shut up and get those cuffs on.'

The Doctor stepped a little closer to the men and Butcher immediately turned his gun on him. 'Oh come now Major, really. Is there any need to point that thing at me? I'm merely going to pick up this rucksack.'

'Leave it alone.'

'But what harm can it do? Let's just look inside.'

'I know what's inside,' said Butcher. He glared at Ray. 'It's the latest recording from Lady Silk. Another copy to replace the one I confiscated.' He looked at the frightened soldier. 'I've been waiting a long time to find out who was smuggling in this contraband. The source of supply.'

'You've got it all wrong man,' said Ray, shaking his head mournfully. The Doctor moved forward and, before the Major could stop him, he had picked up the rucksack.

'Put that down,' said Butcher.

'Not until we've tested your theory, Major.' The Doctor calmly opened the rucksack and began to empty it. 'I'm a scientist and that's what scientists do. We test theories.' He spread the contents of the rucksack on the grass. It consisted of clothing, some magazines with pictures of girls in bathing suits on the covers, and a large brown paper bag. For all his protests, Major Butcher watched the emptying of the rucksack as avidly as everyone else.

The Doctor finished taking things out and held the rucksack up to show that it was empty. 'That's all, Major. No subversive music.'

'What's in the paper bag?' said Butcher. The Doctor bent down and opened the bag and peered inside. He looked up and grinned. 'What is it?'

The Doctor reached into the bag and took out a handful of small brown thorns. 'Cactus needles.'

'What?' said Butcher.

'I tried to tell you, man,' said Ray. 'That's why I was meeting Dobbsy here. It was a business transaction, baby. He was helping me out. It was nothing to do with Lady Silk.'

'I don't buy it,' said Butcher stubbornly.

'That's what he was doing Major,' said the Doctor. 'Can't you see? He was buying cactus needles. He needs them.'

'He needs needles?' said Butcher.

'That is correct. He needs them for his record player.'

'That's right, man,' said Ray.

'It isn't a crime, buying cactus needles, is it?' said Ace.

Butcher looked at her, then he looked at the others. He lowered his gun and reluctantly holstered it. 'Give me back the handcuffs.' Ray handed them to him and Butcher returned them to his pocket, then he kicked at the pile of belongings on the ground. 'Pack these up and get out of here, Private.' Dobbs instantly fell to his knees and scrabbled on the ground, scooping his possessions back into the rucksack, along with several fistfuls of grass that he uprooted in his haste.

'Leave the needles, though, man,' said Ray. Private Dobbs left the bag of cactus needles on the ground, shouldered his rucksack, and turned and fled. 'I'll send payment to you, Dobbsy,' shouted Ray at his retreating back. He turned to Major Butcher and looked at him reproachfully. 'You scared old Dobbsy off, man. My best cactus-needle connection and you've gone and scared him off.'

Butcher squared his shoulders and got ready to offer a blistering response, but before he could say anything Ace heard a strangely familiar cracking sound and felt an odd, humming breeze whisper past her face. Then she felt the Doctor grab her and throw her to the ground. As she registered a sense of *déjà vu*, Ace realised what was happening.

'Someone's shooting!' yelled the Doctor. 'Get down!'

'Shooting, man?' said Ray. Butcher threw himself on Ray and dragged him to the ground. Ace heard another cracking sound – a gunshot – then another one. She saw a spurt of dirt jet up from the ground just in front of her and realised that the gunshots were aimed at her, or perhaps the Doctor, who was lying on the grass next to her. Then there was another gunshot, followed in

racketing succession by half a dozen more, all extremely close at hand. It took Ace an instant to recognise that these shots were coming from Butcher's gun. He was lying on the ground, blasting away at the distant clump of trees by the water's edge. The gunshots that were kicking up the dirt near Ace and the Doctor seemed to be coming from those trees. Ace thought she saw movement among them, a dark figure stepping between the shadowed trunks, but she wasn't sure.

Then, as abruptly as it had begun, the shooting stopped. 'Got him,' said Butcher with satisfaction. He rose to his feet and started quickly towards the trees. The Doctor got up swiftly and followed. Ace was left lying on the grass, staring at Ray. The big man was on his belly, his arms over his head, staring back at her. They regarded each other for a moment and then Ray said, 'I'm out of here, man.' He lurched to his knees, then to his feet and set off clumsily running away from the pond. Then he stopped, hesitated for a moment, and came back.

For a second Ace thought he was coming back to gallantly help her, but instead he scooped up the bag of cactus needles, stuffed it into his pocket and set off again in an ungainly run. Ace got up and brushed the grass off her clothing. The Doctor was coming back from the copse of trees. He had something in his hands. He hurried over to Ace and showed it to her. It was a large square envelope of a kind Ace had seen before.

She said, 'Where –'

The Doctor interrupted her. 'Please. Just hide it for me.' Ace took the envelope from him, untucked her blouse, and slipped it inside. The envelope was angular and uncomfortable against her skin, but the folds of her blouse concealed it effectively enough. 'Thank you,' said the Doctor. He turned and headed back for the trees. Ace followed him.

Butcher came out of the stand of trees. His face was white and he was wearing a strange expression. In fact, he looked like an altogether different man from the one Ace had come to know. The ruddy, bullying, antagonistic Major Butcher was gone. This man was pale, drawn and uncertain. He looked at Ace and then looked away, his face haggard and tormented. Ace stepped into the cluster of trees and he made no attempt to stop her.

The Doctor was standing there. At his feet was a figure in a leather jacket and dungarees. But it wasn't a man. It was a woman. It took Ace a moment to recognise her face, because the hair and the clothes were so different.

'Rosalita,' she said. The Doctor looked at her and nodded. Ace struggled to understand what was happening. 'The gunman shot Rosalita?' she said. The Doctor shook his head sadly.

'The gunman was Rosalita.'

* * *

Ace emerged from the stand of trees. Major Butcher was standing there, exactly where she'd left him. He looked like he might remain standing there for the rest of his life. The Doctor came out of the trees and went to Butcher. 'Did you get her firearm, Major?'

Butcher vaguely touched his pocket. 'It's in here. A .38. She was getting pretty good accuracy from it at that distance. She was a good shot for a woman.'

'Major,' said the Doctor distinctly and firmly, 'there was nothing else you could do. You did what had to be done. She was shooting at us. She was trying to kill us. You saved our lives.'

Butcher shook his head. 'I know all that,' he said. 'But it doesn't make me feel any better about shooting a woman.'

'You had no choice. Now if you don't mind, Ace is understandably upset by this terrible experience. I am going to take her away.' Ace thought this was just a ruse by the Doctor. Then she realised that she was upset by the terrible experience. Her knees began to tremble and her stomach felt loose and queasy.

Butcher smiled thinly. 'Sure, you clear out of here. I've got to tell the Oppenheimers that they need a new cook.'

Ace waited until they were out of Butcher's sight before she took the square envelope out of her blouse. The paper of the envelope was soaked through with her sweat. 'Do you want to look at this?'

The Doctor took the envelope from her. 'Not really,' he said. 'In the words of Major Butcher, I know what's inside.'

'A record by Lady Silk,' said Ace.

'Yes.'

'So Rosalita was smuggling in the records to Ray. She was the source of supply.'

'Yes.'

Ace made a sudden connection. 'So that day when I was in Ray's apartment, she was the one who delivered the record to him. Which means she was also the one who took a shot at us from the balcony.'

'Yes.'

Ace paused and looked at the Doctor accusingly. 'You knew it was her.'

The Doctor shook his head. 'No. I merely suspected, and only since last night.'

'Why did you suspect her?'

But the Doctor had fallen silent. A man was hastening towards them up the dusty road, waving to them. Although he was moving quickly, even at this remove the man appeared relaxed and smug and full of himself. He was dressed

in a mustard-coloured three-piece suit and highly polished black brogues that were already succumbing to the dusty Los Alamos road surface. He didn't have the demeanour of a man hurrying to them because of the shooting. And, judging from the fact that he was approaching from the opposite direction, Ace concluded that he wasn't yet even aware of the incident up at the pond. As the man drew closer Ace recognised him as Professor Henbest, the Hill's psychiatrist; the man who had cornered her at the party and seemed so unwholesomely interested in making her a subject for hypnosis.

'I've been looking everywhere for you two,' said Henbest cheerily.

'Really?' said the Doctor. 'Why is that?'

'Your psych profiles.'

'Our what?'

'Psych profiles. Interviews. Everyone who joins the project above a certain level has to have one. An evaluation. A psychological evaluation. You can't work here without one. And you're both overdue. So let me show you immediately to my rather pleasant office.'

Henbest's office was in one of the prefabricated huts that looked like a section of giant corrugated pipe split in half lengthways then set on the ground. But, inside, the place was indeed quite pleasant. There was a window that afforded a view of the water glinting peacefully on the pond and the trees waving gently in the breeze. At this distance the scene looked peaceful, a rural idyll. The office walls were bare metal but were hung with French impressionist masterpieces. These were reproductions, of course, but the oddments of pre-Colombian pottery that littered the office were real enough. Some of these unique small masterpieces were in active use as ashtrays.

The floors of the office were carpeted and there was a bulky wooden desk placed diagonally across it, isolating an alcove of bookshelves, a sort of miniature library area. There were two floor lamps glowing in the alcove, another one beside the desk and one each beside the modernist yellow leather sofa with brown trim and the two matching brown armchairs with yellow trim. The armchairs looked very comfortable to Ace, who was fed up, had sore feet and generally felt like crying. She had been shot at, seen a dead rat and received a mash note from a detestable boffin all in the course of the same day.

Now she was facing a psychiatric evaluation.

But at least she was facing it in a comfortable armchair. The Doctor was sitting in the matching chair beside her. However, instead of slouching back luxuriously like Ace, he was leaning forward, tense and ready, like a greyhound bristling to start a race. John Henbest sat behind his desk in front of

them and shifted restlessly back and forth on a swivel chair. He kept swiveling in the chair for a few moments before settling in comfortably and saying, 'Prefatory to giving you your individual interviews I'd like to talk to you briefly together.'

Ace wondered if they were in for a lecture about the rapacity of venereal disease, but her speculations were interrupted by the ringing of the telephone on Henbest's desk. He leaned forward and answered it. 'Yes. In fact I'm – What? What? What? My God. Really? My God. I'll be there right away.' He hung up the phone and looked at them excitedly. 'I have to go. Somebody apparently took a shot at Major Butcher up by the pond.'

'How extraordinary,' said the Doctor.

'Well, what do you know?' said Ace.

Henbest hastily clattered out of the office, leaving the Doctor and Ace sitting there in a peaceful silence. The Doctor eased back from his position of athletic readiness, slumping in his armchair, and turned to look at Ace. 'It seems our psychological evaluations are to be postponed.'

'They can't be postponed long enough for my liking. Did you hear what he said? Someone took a shot at Major Butcher. Not a word about us. And it was us she was shooting at.'

'That suits our purposes, Ace. It's better if the Major believes he was the sole target. It helps us in the same way as concealing that envelope I found near Rosalita's body.'

'And remind me why we concealed that.'

'Because it would have constituted a clear connection between Cosmic Ray and Rosalita. But since Major Butcher didn't see the envelope containing the record, he only knows that Rosalita was the would-be assassin. He doesn't know she was also the local source of Lady Silk's subversive recordings. And since he also doesn't know she took a shot at us outside Ray's building, he can believe that he was her sole target. She becomes an open-and-shut case. I believe that's the expression. He uses it frequently enough in his books. In any event it signifies a crime that's solved as soon as it's discovered.'

'I know what it signifies. What I don't know is why you're protecting Ray. If he's involved with Rosalita and she was some kind of enemy agent. . .'

'And it certainly appears she was.'

'Then he must be some kind of enemy agent too.'

'Yes, Ace. But what kind?' The Doctor smiled grimly. 'That is what we must find out.'

'All right. Let's do that then, you and me, but working together as a team. No more keeping me in the dark.'

'Ace, I'm telling you as much as I can, as soon as I can.'

'No you're not. You're just stringing me along as usual, and hoping I'll be the faithful stooge who keeps her mouth shut.'

The Doctor chuckled. 'Well if that's my hope, it's certainly been a forlorn one throughout the long and eventful years of our partnership.'

Ace stared at him for a moment, then broke out giggling. 'All right,' she said. 'Maybe it is a bit. Listen, I'm just asking you to explain things a bit more.'

'Such as what kind of things?'

'Such as why you suspected Rosalita in the first place.'

'Do you remember the dead rat Oppy showed us? The poisoned rat?'

'Of course.'

'There was a rubbish bin beside it. Did that bin look familiar to you?'

'It looked like the one in Rosalita's kitchen. . . we saw it there last night.'

'The one in which she disposed of the chilli.'

'Yes.'

'Think Ace, think.' The Doctor leaned close to her, his extraordinary eyes blazing. Ace had to avoid looking into the unsettling depths of those eyes if she was indeed going to think. 'The chilli was in the bin,' his voice was relentless, forging links of logic, like links in an iron chain. 'The rat ate it and died. So the chilli was poisoned. Which implies. . . ?'

'That Rosalita poisoned the chilli. Because when she didn't manage to shoot me or you, whoever she was shooting at. . .'

'In all modesty she was probably shooting at me,' said the Doctor.

'So when she didn't manage to shoot you she tried to poison you. But I was going to eat the chilli, too. Just like I was in the firing line when she was shooting.'

'All right Ace, if it will make you happy, she was trying to kill *both of us*.'

'But she didn't give us the poisoned chilli. She dropped it on the floor.'

'Not a very convincing accident, was it?' The Doctor got up from his arm-chair and went over to Henbest's desk.

'Fooled me. So she dropped it on the floor deliberately. But why?'

'Think,' the Doctor sat in Henbest's chair. He swivelled around in it for a moment, apparently finding it to his liking. He began opening the drawers of the desk and pulling out documents.

'What are you doing?'

'Going through Professor Henbest's personal papers. Don't try and dodge the question Ace. I want you to think. What happened just before Rosalita dropped the casserole, spilling the chilli and thus saving our lives?' He shut the last of the drawers in the desk and leaned back in the swivel chair again, his arms folded behind his head.

'Nothing,' said Ace. 'No wait, you said something about Ray. I know. You said he was going to be eating the chilli with us.'

The Doctor swivelled in the chair, his arms behind his head. He nodded, silent, smiling benignly.

'And she didn't want to kill Ray. So she dropped the chilli. She didn't want to kill Ray because they were working together. They're both enemy agents. So tell me again why we aren't turning Ray in?'

'Is that what you want to do?'

'No, I personally like Ray. But with enemy agents, it's sort of the thing to do, isn't it?'

'We must learn more before we take any action. There's a great deal at stake here, Ace.'

'That's what worries me.'

'Very sensible. Now if you'll excuse me, I have an appointment with Edward Teller.' The Doctor got up from the swivel chair and came out from behind Henbest's desk. He moved towards the door of the office.

'He's a nasty piece of work, isn't he, Teller?'

The Doctor paused at the door. 'On the contrary, Ace. He's a human being, caught up in the inexorable machinery of history, like so many others. He and I are going to go over some figures together.'

'You're going to try and convince him he's wrong. About the chain reaction. About the world going up in flames when they detonate the bomb.'

'Correct.'

'Because it isn't going to, is it?'

'I have to be going,' said the Doctor gently. 'Can I walk you back to the WAC barracks?'

'No, I think I'm going to sit here for a moment.'

'Here in Professor Henbest's office?'

'He's got some very comfortable armchairs. This is the first comfortable chair I've sat in since I've got here. I've got sore feet and I'm going to sit here for a minute.'

'Very well. But you mustn't return to the barracks after curfew again. I've received the most emphatic reprimands about bringing you back there late.'

'So our reputations are at stake,' said Ace. 'I'll make sure I'm back well before lights out. I'm just going to sit here for a moment.'

The Doctor smiled. 'Because your feet hurt.'

'And because I saw a dead rat today... and everything else.'

The Doctor came back and perched on the arm of her chair. He studied her. 'Do you want me to stay with you for a minute?'

'No, actually I need to chill on my own for a bit.'

'Chill away,' the Doctor smiled again as he bobbed up from the chair. He closed the door behind him as he left. Ace was alone for the first time in what seemed like ages. After the empty splendour of the TARDIS, sleeping in

the women's barracks had seemed at first a pleasantly gregarious novelty, but Ace was now beginning to feel the lack of privacy. Also, the toilet paper was terrible. She leaned back in the soft embrace of the chair's bulging cushions and peered dreamily out the window, towards the pond and the trees.

The door to the office popped open and John Henbest stepped inside. 'You're still here. Good.' He bustled in. 'Where is the Doctor?'

'He had an appointment with Teller.'

'I see. Good. Then we can proceed with your psychiatric evaluation.'

Ace cursed herself. Why hadn't she left with the Doctor? Henbest came towards the chair where she was sitting. There was a look of sudden concern on his face. 'Wait a minute. What's that on your arm?'

Ace glanced at her arm. There wasn't much of it that could be seen, under the navy-blue sleeve of her blouse.

'It looks like some kind of rash,' said Henbest, leaning forward to get a better look. He took something from his pocket, a small, white, metal case about the size of a cigarette packet.

'What, where, I don't have any rash,' said Ace.

'There under your sleeve. You can just glimpse it.'

'There's nothing to glimpse. There's nothing there. No rash.' But now that she looked at her wrist, Ace couldn't be so sure.

'Please,' said Henbest, 'roll up your sleeve. It could be a radiation reaction. That happens sometimes. You must let me look at it.' He sat down on the arm of the armchair and leaned forward, bending his long body towards Ace. At the word 'radiation' she had begun rolling up her sleeve and now she was proffering her bare arm to Henbest. Now that he mentioned it, Ace thought she could see a certain flushing of the skin, the beginning of a rash... She looked up at Henbest.

'Hey, what are you doing?' she said.

Henbest had opened the white metal case and taken out a syringe. A yellowish liquid slopped in the barrel of the syringe. The needle caught the light as Henbest lifted it.

He leaned forward and plunged the syringe into her arm.

Chapter Six

A Warm Night

Ace saw her blood go back into the syringe and the yellow stuff from the syringe go into her arm. She was already reaching to push Henbest away, to get the syringe out of her flesh, but she was much too late. Henbest backed quickly away from her, dodging her blow, and leaving the syringe jutting comically from her arm. Ace stared at it. She reached down to touch it.

‘Careful,’ said Henbest. ‘Don’t break the needle. You’ll get an infection.’

Ace carefully pulled the syringe from her arm. Then she wondered what to do with it. Then it seemed too heavy to hold, so she dropped it on the floor. The syringe fell softly on the carpet at her feet. Ace sat back in her comfortable armchair and looked at John Henbest.

Henbest seemed to be moving away from her on a receding tide of light. He rose from his chair and fought the tide of light, slowly wading towards her. He bent over the sofa and grabbed her under her armpits and lifted her in a businesslike fashion, like he was shifting a sack of potatoes. Henbest moved her from the armchair to the sofa. He fussily arranged the cushions behind her head. At one point Ace’s head lolled back helplessly and she found herself staring deeply, helplessly into the tiny weave of the fleurs-de-lys fabric of a cushion before he carefully lifted her head again so she could see the room.

She saw him go to his desk and sit down and pick up his phone. Before he could speak into it, there was the sound of the door opening and then the sound of someone coming in. Major Butcher stepped into view. Henbest set the phone down. ‘I was just about to call you. She’s ready for interrogation.’

Henbest reached into his desk and took out another case, one coated in black rubber this time, as if designed to survive being dropped in the ocean. He took out another syringe. ‘The final ingredient in the cocktail that we want to mix in this young lady’s bloodstream.’

He came forward and gave Ace another injection. She didn’t resist. She couldn’t. As soon as she received the second injection her eyes began to drift shut. She heard Major Butcher say, ‘Shouldn’t you swab her arm with alcohol before you do that?’

‘Which one of us has a medical degree?’ said Henbest petulantly.

Then Ace's eyes closed and she was lost in a warm floating darkness, listening to voices echo around her.

Ace woke up to find the Doctor looking down at her. She knew right away from his expression that something was wrong. 'What is it?' she said.

'How much do you remember?'

Ace felt a twinge of pain in her right arm and looked down to see that the sleeve of her blouse was rolled up and there on the inside of her arm were two pink blotches and two tiny heads of dried blood. The pink blotches already showed signs of darkening into bruises. 'The bastard. He said something about a radiation rash. Then before I could stop him, he was injecting me.'

'And nothing after that?'

'Just a blur. What did he give me?'

'He would probably call it truth serum.'

'So I might have told him something.'

The Doctor chuckled. 'I imagine just enough to confuse them.'

'Them?'

'Major Butcher was there, too.'

'When you rescued me you mean,' said Ace, sitting up. 'Thanks for that, by the way.' Looking around, she was surprised to see that they were sitting in Cosmic Ray's front room. 'You brought me here?'

'It's the last place anyone will think of looking for us.'

'Except for me, man, except for me,' said Ray. He came in from the bathroom, followed by the liquid echoing roar of a flushing toilet. He went to the record player and embarked on the endless ritual of changing the cactus needle in the tone arm. Ace was beginning to see why he was so paranoid about running out of the damned things. 'Now that the kitten's awake, us cats can listen to some music.'

'Tell me, Ray,' said the Doctor. 'Did you know that Rosalita was going to be there by the pond today?'

'Yeah, sure I did. We made an arrangement. So I could pick up my Lady Silk record.'

'But you didn't know it was her who was shooting us?'

'Not until you told me, man. I just knew someone was shooting in my general direction and I got the hell out of it. I'm no war hero, daddy-o. Not on the battlefield, with bullets flying past me and stuff. I'm doing my bit here. With my physics.'

The Doctor smiled at Ace. 'Yes, while you were asleep Ray and I have been having quite an interesting discussion about physics.'

'Yeah man, your Doctor friend here is pretty fast about grasping concepts. Man, he's switched on. Hip. All I had to do was sketch an equation and he'd get what I was getting at, like right way.'

'Yes, well I'm glad I was unconscious during all that,' said Ace.

'So what you're saying,' said the Doctor, turning to Ray and adopting a gently persistent tone of voice, 'is that you were going to the pond to deliberately rendezvous with Rosalita.'

'Yeah man. I needed to get that disc. The record, Daddy-o. The song that old Butcher had impounded. Luckily Rosie brought in a few spare copies.'

'Were you the only recipient of these discs here on the Hill, or was she also distributing them to a number of other people?'

'No idea, man. No idea.' Ray put on a record and turned it up loud. The Doctor went over and turned it down again. Ray gave him a reproachful look but said nothing. Over the years he must have grown accustomed to people wanting to turn his music down.

'And the presence of your friend Private Dobbs –'

'Old Dobbsy man.'

'His presence there at the pond with your latest shipment of cactus needles, that was all purely fortuitous.'

'Eh?'

'It was coincidental.'

'No, no, no man. I knew I had to meet Rosie with the platter at the pond so I arranged to also meet Dobbsy there with the cactus needles. Two birds with one stone, baby. Two birds with one stone.'

'And you had no idea that Rosalita was going to pull a gun and start shooting at us?' said Ace.

'No man, I told you before. This is like listening to a stuck record.'

'Speaking of records,' said Ace.

'I'll turn this one up, baby.'

'That's not what I was going to say. I was going to say, what happened to the Lady Silk record? The Doctor found it before Barker did and he gave it to me to look after.' She looked at the Doctor. 'What did you do with it?'

'I gave it to Ray.'

'You did what?' said Ace.

'Now if you'll excuse me,' said the Doctor, 'there is something I must do.'

'You're not leaving me here with him,' said Ace. 'He's a spy.'

'I'm no spy, man,' said Ray, suddenly downcast.

The Doctor paused on his way out of the room, looking back at Ace sitting there. 'I suppose you could come with me.'

'Yes please.'

'But only if you feel well enough.'

Ace lurched up from the chair. She felt a trifle woozy, but otherwise all right. 'Anything is better than staying around here with him.'

'Sticks and stones, man, sticks and stones,' said Ray, resuming the Sisyphean task of changing needles on his record player.

The night air was warm and balmy but it helped clear Ace's head. She said, 'How could you, Doctor?'

'How could I what?'

'Give him that record. It's something the enemy was trying to smuggle to him, and you let it get through.'

'Well,' said the Doctor. 'In a sense you could say that Rosalita died trying to get that record to him. You could say that I was merely honouring her last wish.'

'Trust me, those are two things that I'm not going to be saying any time soon. She tried to poison us and she tried to shoot you. Me. Us. I'm not honouring any last wish of hers.'

'Be that as it may, I gave the record to him.'

Ace stole a look at the Doctor. 'I hope you know what you're doing,' she said.

'At the moment I'm very certain indeed of my course of action.'

'And what's that?'

The Doctor told her, briefly and concisely.

'Well, count me in,' said Ace when he finished explaining.

The Doctor sighed. 'It looks as if I'm going to receive some more reprimands about getting you back to your barracks late. Now the first thing we need to do is stop at the Fuller Lodge and collect my umbrella.'

'Why, do you think it's going to rain?'

'No,' said the Doctor. 'No, not at all.'

Moonlight was falling through the window of Professor Henbest's office in his prefabricated hut. Henbest was sitting at his desk, working late, writing up his notes on that afternoon's session with the English girl who was called Acacia but liked to style herself Ace. There was a noise in the darkened office. Henbest only had the light from his green-shaded desk lamp, which was directed at his papers, and the thin white light of the moon through the window. He peered into the shadows of the room.

'Is someone there?'

A small figure stepped out of the shadows. It was that Dr John Smith character. Like everyone else, Henbest seemed to have fallen into the habit of referring to him simply as the Doctor. The Doctor was standing there holding an umbrella. Henbest glanced at the window. It wasn't raining. While

Henbest was looking at the window, the Doctor sat down in one of the arm-chairs facing his desk. Henbest frowned at him. He didn't return Henbest's gaze. At length, Henbest cleared his throat.

'Can I help you?'

The Doctor looked up at him as if surprised to hear him speak. 'Help me? Yes, I believe you can.'

'Then I suggest you make an appointment and arrange to see me during proper office hours. I am finished for the day now. Quite finished.'

'Not quite,' said the Doctor. He stood up, though, as if he was about to leave. Then he turned to the desk and lifted his umbrella, pointing it at Henbest. There was a faint spitting sound and Henbest felt a sudden tiny pain in his neck, as though a mosquito had bitten him. He swatted his neck with his hand, but there was nothing there. The Doctor remained standing in front of his desk, watching him.

'He's ready now, if you want to join us,' said the Doctor. At his words, Ace stepped out of the shadows and sat down in one of the chairs. The Doctor set his umbrella carefully on the floor and sat down again in the other chair. Both he and Ace stared at Henbest as though he were some kind of animal in a cage, exotic but dangerous and also mildly distasteful.

Henbest tried to clear his throat and say something, but found that he couldn't. He must have made some faint sound, though, because the Doctor nodded and said, 'Don't worry. You're paralysed but the muscles which control your breathing will remain unaffected. If you just relax I think you'll find that you're reasonably comfortable. You may be wondering how I managed to administer a dose of a paralysing toxin to you. Earlier today you may recall that you used a syringe to perform a similar procedure on Ace.'

'Two syringes,' said Ace, rubbing the bruised flesh of her inner arm.

'But we had access to less crude technology. The toxin I used was contained in the hollow centre of a tiny gold pellet which I have just fired into your neck using this.' The Doctor nudged the umbrella lying on the carpet with the toe of his shoe. 'There are holes drilled in the gold pellet, allowing the toxin to diffuse swiftly into your bloodstream.'

'You should shoot him twice,' said Ace. 'Like I said, he used two syringes on me.'

'I'm afraid this device is only good for one pellet at a time, without a laborious and time-consuming reloading process.' The Doctor got up from his chair and paced the carpet. Sitting there paralysed at his desk, Henbest noticed for the first time the peculiar *aura* that surrounded the Doctor.

'You are now feeling the effects of that toxin,' said the Doctor. 'Just as the pellet mechanism is more sophisticated than your crude syringes, the toxin

I've given you is immensely more sophisticated than the crude concoction you administered to Ace.'

'That's right,' said Ace. 'And you're not going to like it one little bit.'

The strange aura was just discernible in the dim light of the room. As the Doctor stepped away from the desk lamp into a deeper patch of shadow the aura became more emphatic. It was a kind of swirling rainbow glow, like the rainbow slick you see on the surface of water contaminated with gasoline. It flowed around the Doctor's outline, gathering into busy roiling waves on his shoulder and, particularly, on the crown of his head.

'You drugged Ace so you could try and learn the truth about me,' said the Doctor. The rainbow aura actually spiralled up from his head like steam rising to fade into the darkness, or like smoke from a chimney. The rainbow smoke kept rising, lifting from the Doctor's head into the darkness of the ceiling.

'You're interested in the truth? Very well.' The Doctor stopped pacing and turned to face Henbest. Henbest noticed with a rising sensation of alarm that the Doctor's eyes had been replaced with two smouldering red coals that looked like they had just spilled from a roaring fire. 'I'll give you the truth.' The glowing red coal eyes seemed to be staring into Henbest's very soul. 'I am a creature quite beyond your imagining, Henbest's he said. The Doctor opened his mouth to reveal a vast number of extremely sharp teeth.

'I am a time traveller, a being from another world who can roam at will through time and space. I am possessed of almost godlike powers.'

'Tell him you can fly.'

'Ace, please.'

'Tell him you can fly. Tell him that we can both fly and that we fly around the universe fighting crime. And righting wrongs.'

The Doctor turned back to Henbest. The smouldering coals had gone and his eyes were back, and as far as Henbest could tell his mouth seemed to only possess the usual complement of teeth. But the rainbow aura flowing around the Doctor had intensified now, spilling upwards into the darkness in a steady stream. 'You heard, Ace,' he said. 'We can do everything she said, and more.' As the Doctor spoke, a number of small black things about the size of moths but shaped more like bats escaped from his lips and fluttered around the room before disappearing into the shadowed corners of the ceiling.

'Tell him I'm dressed like the devil, complete with horns and a pitchfork and I'm prodding him with the pitchfork.'

'Really, Ace.'

'It was me that got injected with drugs against my will. Twice.'

'Oh very well. Ace is garbed like the traditional image of the devil, presumably all in red -'

'All in red, right. With horns and a pointy tail and hooves.'

‘Yes, with the traditional horns and pointed tail and cleft hooves. And she is assailing you with a pitchfork as the flames of hell lick all around you.’ The Doctor glanced at Ace, ‘Should he be able to smell the sulphur and brimstone?’

‘You bet he should.’ They both paused to peer at Professor Henbest, the Doctor adjusting the desk lamp so that it shone into the man’s face. Sweat gleamed on Henbest’s forehead and, as they watched, several new beads of moisture gathered at his hairline and began the long crawl down his face.

‘Really, Ace, I’m not sure how effective this is. We don’t even know if the man’s a devout Catholic.’

‘All right. Tell him I’m a dolphin.’

‘A what?’

‘I’m a dolphin and he’s a tuna, or some other small game fish. And I’m on his tail and I’m about to eat him. But first I’m going to bat him around a bit in a painful, playful way with my other dolphin friends. We’re all swimming together in a school and... What’s the matter with him? Why’s he making that funny noise?’

The Doctor moved quickly to Henbest and examined him where he sat. ‘I think he’s drowning. Or at least, I think he *thinks* he’s drowning. In any case he seems to be drowning.’

‘But I said he was a tuna.’

‘Clearly he doesn’t know how to use his gills... I suggest we abandon the dolphin imagery. Under the influence of this medication, the suggestion he’s drowning might be powerful enough for his body to accept it and indeed kill him.’

‘OK, OK. We’re back on dry land and he’s not a tuna and I’m not a dolphin. In fact we’re in the middle of the desert and I’m an Arab princess and he’s my prisoner and I’ve got him staked outside my tent in the blistering sun and...’

‘And I suggest that we abandon this line of suggestion before he acquires a nasty sunburn. Do you think possibly that he has now atoned for what he did to you?’

‘Not even close,’ said Ace. ‘But you can go ahead and get down to business if you like.’

The Doctor turned to Henbest. ‘First,’ he said, ‘I want you to emerge from this experience with the strong conviction that Ace and I have both been fully interviewed by you and have emerged from our psych evaluations with flying colours.’

‘Flying colours,’ agreed Ace.

‘You will conclude that neither of us could possibly be any kind of a security risk and, indeed, that we’re both very nice people.’

‘Don’t push it,’ said Ace.

'And that is all you will remember.' The Doctor leaned closer to Henbest, who sat, silent and helpless, behind his desk. 'You will not remember any of the devil or dolphin business or any strange impression you might fleetingly have formed of me. Nor will you remember any of the questions which I am about to ask you.'

'Questions?' said Ace, sitting up in her armchair. 'I thought we were through here.'

'Not quite.'

'But he can't talk,' said Ace.

'He can now,' said the Doctor. He turned back to Henbest and said, 'Is that not the case, Professor?'

'Yes,' said Henbest.

'What do you know about Lady Silk?'

'Some kind of subversive Jap propaganda sex bomb. Major Butcher spends a lot of time chasing around trying to stop people listening to her broadcasts and her records.'

'And you think that's a waste of time?'

Henbest snorted. 'I think he's secretly in love with her. In any event, he has to do something to fill the empty hours of his day. Let him go around confiscating music.'

'What would you say if you knew that Major Butcher believes that Lady Silk's songs contained coded messages from enemy spies?'

'I would laugh heartily and I would underline what I said earlier about him having too much time on his hands. I might also add some unflattering remarks about him being incipiently paranoid.'

'Does the name Imperial Lee mean anything to you?'

'Imperial Lee? No.'

'And you know nothing at all about a group known as the Rising Sun Apocalypse Commandos?'

'I don't like the sound of that,' said Ace.

'No, I know nothing about them,' said Henbest.

'Very good.' The Doctor glanced at Ace. 'That's all the questions I've got. Is there anything you wanted to ask him?'

'Yes.' Ace rose from her chair and stepped towards the desk. 'Why are you such a bastard Professor Henbest?'

'Because I was hopelessly indulged and spoiled as a child as a result of my older brother's tragic death in a swimming accident,' said Henbest promptly.

They left Henbest sitting there at his desk, one lonely lamp burning in his darkened office. 'He'll come back to full awareness in a few minutes and have no memory of our visit,' said the Doctor. They made their way between

the giant half-pipe shadows of the prefab huts, heading back towards Ashley Pond, where moonlight gleamed on the dark water.

'Listen, Doctor,' said Ace.

'Yes?'

'You want to get Edward Teller to change his mind, don't you? About the chain reaction. About the world blowing up. That's one of our main objectives on this caper.'

'Mission, Ace, mission. Yes, that's one of our main objectives.' The Doctor was a vague silhouette, swinging his umbrella as he loped along.

'Then instead of arguing with him, why don't you just shoot him with one of the pellets from your umbrella? And tell him to change his mind. It's got to be easier.'

The Doctor stopped walking so suddenly that Ace almost walked into him. 'While it is true,' he said, 'that Teller is a very stubborn man, there is no way I would ever do anything like that to him.'

'Why not? You just did it to old Henbest.'

'Henbest was not a world-class brain whose special abilities are poised to be deployed at one of the most critical moments in human history. I would never dream of interfering in such a fashion. With Teller I am going to limit myself to trying to convince him through mathematical argument. Anything else would be a very bad idea. In fact, I don't think it was a very good idea doing what I did to Henbest.'

'Then why did you do it?' They were near the pond now and Ace could smell the water. She tried to locate the place where they had been fired upon, where Rosalita had been killed, but found that in the dark everything looked very different.

'I was angry,' said the Doctor.

Ace giggled and looked at the shadowy figure beside her, swinging his umbrella. 'Were you? Because of what he did to me?'

'Yes. Of course I was.'

'Good,' said Ace. 'I'm glad you were angry. I'm glad you've stood up for me. I've had a terrible day. I've been shot at, I've been drugged and interrogated, I had that awful Professor Apple write me that creepy note. ...'

'And you saw a dead rat.'

'Yeah, and that. So the way I see it, the least you can do is give me some straight answers.'

'Very well,' said the Doctor patiently.

'If changing Teller's mind about the chain reaction is one of our main objectives, then what are the others? The other objectives?'

'To keep a close eye on our friend Cosmic Ray. And I see that chiefly as your task. For the rest of our brief stay here I must devote most of my time to Teller.'

You will have to look after Ray.'

'No way.'

'Ace, please.'

'Not unless I know more about him. I don't know whether to like him and trust him or hate him and fear him.'

'It's a complex universe,' said the Doctor, with a note of amusement in his voice.

'Let's try and make it a little less complex, eh? Just tell me, is Ray one of the bad guys or what?'

'Ray is not one of the bad guys.'

'Good.'

'But Ray is *in league* with the bad guys.'

'Oh, what?'

The Doctor sighed. 'I said it was a complex universe. Ray does not mean anyone any harm. But he is being coerced by sinister forces who might just manipulate him into having a hand in an unimaginable catastrophe.'

'Coerced? Manipulate? So you think he's an innocent pawn in their game, kind of thing?'

'Precisely.' The Doctor reached the fork in the road that led to the Fuller Lodge, but he kept walking in the other direction.

'Where are you going?'

'To check on the aforementioned Ray.'

'But you said that was my job.'

'I thought you'd had a long day and were tired.'

'No,' said Ace, hurrying after him.

They found Ray sitting on the floor of his front room, fat bare thighs jutting from chequered black-and-white shorts, rotund torso shrouded in a red-and-black Hawaiian shirt depicting bamboo, a black beret on his head, which dipped and nodded in time to the music. On the floor he had pieces of paper on which he would occasionally jot a note. There was a deep blue stain under the pocket on his shirt, where he returned his fountain pen every time he stopped writing, only to retrieve it again a moment later.

It was a warm night and the windows were open. Ray, of course, was listening to a record, which he had put on just as they walked through the door of his apartment, apparently left open for the breeze. Ace recognised the sensual, sardonic voice of the singer on the record, even though she'd only heard it once before, and then briefly. 'Lady Silk,' she said. Ray looked up at her and the Doctor standing there. He didn't seem surprised to see them.

'Yeah, man,' he said. 'She's put new words to an old standard, and it's cool. Baby, I got to say it's cool.'

‘Major Bulldog would throw a fit if he knew we were listening to this,’ said Ace.

Cosmic Ray chuckled and shook his head. ‘Bulldog? I like that. But you know what the Major’s problem is? Lack of soul. He couldn’t dig this music in a million years.’ The voice on the record rose and fell in seductive song, caressing the listener, toying with every syllable.

‘You said she put new words to an old standard.’

‘Yeah man.’

‘What was that old standard?’

‘It’s called “Nagasaki”.’

Ace and the Doctor looked at each other. The music came to an end and the needle hissed in the groove. Ray got up and went to the record player, lifting the tone arm and removing the record. ‘I see,’ said the Doctor. ‘And what are these notes?’ He indicated the papers lying on the floor, covered with Ray’s blotchy sprawl in bright blue ink.

‘Those, man?’ Ray carefully returned the record to its sleeve. ‘Notes I took while I was listening to the song. It’s how they communicate with me.’

‘Communicate with you?’ said Ace.

‘Yeah, they’re sending me coded messages in the songs, baby.’

‘You mean Butcher’s crazy idea was right?’

‘It made my blood run cold when he said it, man. The other day when he was here. Like he’d seen right into my soul. But he hadn’t man. It was just a lucky guess.’

‘I’m not so sure. The Major is more shrewd than you think.’

‘The Major’s just a fink, man. A big fink with brass buttons. A major fink.’ Ray smiled. ‘Pardon me, cats.’ He went into the bathroom and shut the door. There was the sound of running water. The Doctor promptly squatted down and studied the papers on the floor.

‘What does it mean?’ said Ace.

‘No idea,’ said the Doctor. ‘It’s in code.’ He began to gather up the papers, folding them and putting them in the pocket of his jacket. ‘Ray isn’t a very good spy,’ he said. ‘He’s supposed to destroy the message after memorising it.’

‘I still don’t like the idea of us helping a spy.’

‘Ray is much more than just a spy. Do you remember I told you I had a long discussion with him today about physics? Well, I made a startling discovery.’

‘He’s a crap physicist.’

‘He’s a very good physicist. Much too good. Impossibly good. His knowledge is far too sophisticated for this period in history.’

‘Uh-oh,’ said Ace.

‘In fact it’s become clear to me that this Ray Morita is actually a particle physicist from the twenty-first century.’

'He's a time traveller?'

'No, a dimension traveller.'

'That's why you said "this Ray Morita" – because there's more than one of him.'

'Exactly. Very good, Ace. Only one of him in this dimension. The Ray Morita from this dimension lived in the twentieth century and was a schoolteacher and a mediocre physicist.'

'And left-handed.'

'And left-handed, indeed. His right-handed counterpart from an alternate universe lived in the twenty-first century. He was brought here when they removed the original Ray Morita.'

'They?'

'He's not the only one from another dimension.' The Doctor went to the box of records where Ray had placed the Lady Silk disc. He picked it up and inspected it. Before Ace could ask him what he meant, the toilet flushed and Ray stepped out of the bathroom, adjusting his beret on his head and tugging at his shorts. Ace smelled the powerful nose-singeing aroma of his cheap cologne, which he'd clearly splashed on for her benefit. She stared at him, this anachronism, this intruder from another world.

Ray peered at her uneasily. 'What's wrong, man?' Before she could reply there was a sudden violent hammering at the door. Ray cursed and lumbered towards it. As he did so, the Doctor stepped suddenly towards the open window and, with a snap of the wrist, sent the Lady Silk record spinning out into the darkness. Ace thought she heard the crash of the shellac disc breaking against a nearby tree, but she couldn't be sure because at that moment Ray came back into the room with Major Butcher.

Butcher looked even more angry than usual. 'All right, what's going on here?' he said. The Doctor smiled at him blandly.

'A late night discussion about physics between myself and Dr Morita. My assistant Acacia was kind enough to agree to help us out with our calculations.'

'Yeah, that's right man, that's right, that's right,' said Ray, who was nervously circling the room, apparently searching for the incriminating papers and the Lady Silk record which the Doctor had disposed of. For a moment Ray looked bewildered, then he seemed to accept that some miracle had intervened on his behalf, and turned to Major Butcher with a tentative smile.

'So what brings you here, man?'

Butcher regarded him with contempt. 'You were pretty quick to get away from the pond today.'

'I was being shot at, man. And like I was telling these cats, I don't like to be shot at. That's not my scene. No Normandy landings for Cosmic Ray. No man. I serve my country in different ways. They also serve who stay at home

and that's me, baby, that's me. Providing a vital part of a vital project here on the home front.'

'Is that so,' said Butcher. 'Is that what you're doing here?'

'Damn right. I didn't sign up to get shot at.'

'She wasn't shooting at you,' said Butcher. 'She was shooting at me.'

'No man, she was shooting at me,' said Ray.

'And me,' said Ace.

'She was shooting at all of us,' said the Doctor, in the tone of one placating a group of small children. The others turned to look at him with uniform affronted stares. 'I know a threat to our lives tends to personalise everything,' said the Doctor. 'But we must be realistic.'

'If you're being realistic, then Rosalita wasn't shooting at him,' said Butcher, looking at Ray. 'In fact he went there to meet her. They were in collusion.'

'Oh, hey, that's just not true man,' said Ray, brushing nervously at his goatee. 'I was just there to meet with Private Dobbsey and score some cactus needles. Speaking of which, that's my cue baby.' Ray went to the record player and proceeded to remove the needle from the arm and replace it with a new one.

Butcher stared at him, then turned to look at Ace and the Doctor. His eyes were cold. 'You don't fool me. None of you fool me. All of you are up to something.'

'You've had a long day, Major,' said the Doctor solicitously.

'Don't tell me what kind of a day I've had,' snapped Butcher. 'I've just come from Henbest.'

'Oh really? How is the Professor?'

'Working late. He said that you'd both been fully interviewed by him and had emerged with flying colours.'

'Excellent,' said the Doctor, smiling politely.

'He said that neither of you could possibly be any kind of a security risk, and that you're both very nice people.'

'How kind of him.'

Butcher grinned wolfishly. 'This is John Henbest we're talking about here, remember.'

'Perhaps he's turned over a new leaf.'

'He didn't turn over a new anything. You got to him.' He looked at the Doctor then at Ace, a slow, contemptuous glance. 'I don't know how you got to him, but you did.'

The Doctor smiled. 'Professor Henbest would say that you're being incipiently paranoid.'

Butcher grinned again. 'He already did. In exactly those words.'

'Just a coincidence of terminology,' said the Doctor. 'The point I'm trying to make is that we're not your enemies.' Butcher snorted and turned away and

started towards the door. 'That's a good idea,' said the Doctor. 'Go home and sleep it off. It's been a long day and you have killed a woman.'

Butcher stopped in his tracks. He had his back to them but Ace could see the tension in his shoulders. He turned back to them and said, 'What did you say?'

'Merely that you have every reason to be upset,' said the Doctor. 'Why don't you sit down and talk to us. Ray could offer you a beer, couldn't you Ray?'

'Sure,' said Ray uncertainly, his big frame bobbing towards the refrigerator without actually moving in that direction.

'I'm not sitting here drinking beer with you,' said Butcher.

'But we never finished our discussion about your work, your writing,' said the Doctor. Butcher came back into the room.

'What about my writing?'

'I told you how much I admired your first four books but I never mentioned your short stories. Small vivid classics like *The Woman in the Night*, *Tarpaper*, *Fire Escape*, *The Head on the Coin*.'

'I wrote those years ago.'

'Nonetheless, small classics one and all.' Major Butcher ignored him. He turned and walked towards the door. The Doctor called after him, 'And how could I ignore your other novel, the masterful *Shadow Man*?' Butcher said nothing, going out and slamming the door behind him.

'Hey man,' said Ray. 'Could someone open that door again. It's a hot night and we need some breeze in here, baby.'

Outside in the night, Butcher walked swiftly, trying to raise enough of a breeze to cool himself down. He was almost back at his quarters when he realised what the Doctor had said. He had mentioned a novel of Butcher's called *Shadow Man*.

But Butcher had written no such novel. He fully intended to do so, but so far the novel only existed as notes. Butcher's heart began to hammer in his chest. He felt himself sweating in the warm night. There was only one explanation.

The Doctor had broken into his quarters and found Butcher's notebook.

He hurried back to the prefab hut and unlocked the door. There was no trace that the door had been forced in his absence, but then a professional would leave no such trace. He left the door open behind him so that the fresh air from outside displaced the hot stale air trapped in the tin hut. He took off his shirt and poured himself a drink. There was no hurry now. He checked the lock on his desk and it showed no signs of being forced, but again that signified nothing. He took out the fat brown notebook and opened it at a

page marked with a braided black cotton bookmark. Here were his notes on *Shadow Man*. This is what the Doctor must have seen.

Then a disquieting thought occurred to Butcher. He went through the note book, checking every page. He felt the sweat gather on him again, despite the air flowing in from the night. Nowhere in the notebook had he written the title *Shadow Man*. He had only thought of it recently and hadn't yet written it in the book.

He hadn't written it anywhere. He had only thought it.

Chapter Seven

Into the Desert

There was the sound of weeping up at the Oppenheimer house.

Butcher had woken up that morning with a clear determination to get to the bottom of the puzzle about the Doctor. But the events of the day soon overtook him. First he had to deal with the first wave of the considerable amount of paperwork generated by the violent demise of Rosalita Gracia Cruz Tenebre, as he learned was the full name of the dead woman. That took all morning and well into the afternoon. Next he had to pay a call on Oppy. Although, of course, he'd already relayed the news of Rosalita's death, Butcher hadn't been up to the house in person and this was something he felt obliged to do. Oppy met him outside the house and diplomatically guided him around to the back door.

They went into the kitchen to talk. The kitchen was cool and dark, the tiles shining. Oppy told him she had washed the floor just before she had left, to take what he thought was an afternoon off work to be spent shopping. Instead Rosalita had taken the revolver she had kept in an oil cloth under her bed (Butcher had the oil cloth along with a typed report from one of his sergeants) and gone down to the pond where she'd tried to blow Butcher's head off.

Nevertheless, Butcher shared some of Oppenheimer's regretful nostalgia when he spoke of the dead woman. The kitchen still smelled spicily of Rosalita's chilli, and there was a small but genuine sense of inconsolable loss, somewhere deep in Butcher's stomach.

The sound of weeping that echoed from the living room was clearly Kitty Oppenheimer's response to the situation. Butcher noticed a bottle of gin, a jar of honey and a sliced lime on the kitchen table. Kitty was drinking martinis and mourning the loss of her cook. Dead drunk at four in the afternoon.

'Incidentally,' said Oppy, 'I've given Dr Smith some time off.'

'What?'

'And the Doctor's assistant Acacia and Ray Morita.'

'Why?'

'The Doctor is a keen amateur geologist.'

'I'll bet he is.'

Oppenheimer shook his head in amusement. 'I understand that you have a professional obligation to be suspicious, Major, but Dr Smith has written some very highly regarded papers about fossils. And while he's here in New Mexico he wants to examine the local geological formations. I can hardly say no to him, especially since his discussions with Teller seem to have got him off my back. And anyway it's going to be a working break.'

'What kind of a working break?' said Butcher. He noticed that the sound of crying from the living room had ceased. Somehow the silence was worse than the woman weeping.

'I told Ray Morita to go with him.' Oppenheimer shook his head affectionately. 'He and the Doctor share a very unusual way of looking at things. Their approach to physics is subtly different from everyone else's here. I thought it might be a fruitful combination if I threw them together.'

'And the girl is going along too? In case they feel the need to do some calculations while they're looking for fossils?'

'More or less, Major. That's right. Have you ever seen her in action? The girl is exceptional. A genuine prodigy. As you may know, we have some very sophisticated electronic computing machines here on the Hill. But this girl has them all beat. If we had twenty like her it would put this project on a whole new footing.'

'Yeah, it probably would,' said Butcher. His sarcasm was lost on Oppenheimer because Kitty chose that moment to emerge from the living room and come swaying down the short hallway into the kitchen. She gazed at Butcher for an uncomfortable moment without saying anything. Then she said, enunciating with great care, 'Murderer.'

Butcher turned away. He heard her go to the table and start fumbling with the gin bottle and the limes as he walked out the door. Oppy followed him into the yard and they stood in the dappled shade of the trees together, staring up into the hot blue sky. 'Kitty doesn't know what she's saying,' said Oppy.

Butcher cut off the apology. 'When are the Doctor and the others setting off on their little jaunt into the desert?'

Oppy consulted his watch. 'They left half an hour ago.'

Butcher cursed silently, suppressing his anger. He came to a sudden decision. 'I think I need some time off myself,' he said. 'After what happened yesterday.'

'Naturally,' said Oppy. 'The only reason I didn't suggest it was that I thought you'd refuse.'

'Just the rest of the day,' said Butcher.

'Of course.' When Butcher left, walking along the crazy-paving footpath, Kitty saw him from the living room window and swept the curtain shut. He hurried off down Bathtub Row, striding towards his quarters where he was

going to change into some more suitable clothing. And then he would requisition a vehicle from the motor pool.

Something suitable for driving in the desert.

Ace bounced along in the front seat of a jeep borrowed from the motor pool. 'Are you sure you know how to drive this thing, Doctor?'

The Doctor grinned at her. He was sitting in the driving seat, his hat off and the wind blowing through his hair. He was wearing a heavy tweed jacket like a country gentleman on an outing. 'It's no Bessie, but nonetheless quite an enjoyable vehicle to drive.' He peered out over the downfolded windscreen, at the desert landscape that came rushing towards them. 'I'm sorry if it's a trifle uncomfortable, Ace, but there's no roads hereabouts so the going is rough. And even if there was a road, these vehicles are not exactly designed with comfort in mind. The suspension in particular leaves something to be desired.' The Doctor kept on grinning happily as he shifted gears, steering the growling jeep across the forbiddingly rugged terrain.

Ace bounced up and down in her worn leather seat, her motion echoing the contours of the ground they were driving over. 'That's all very well, but my bum's going to be black and blue tomorrow.'

'What you need is more padding, man,' said Ray from the back of the jeep. 'You should be more like me. Have plenty of padding to sit on. That's always been my philosophy. A fat cat is a happy cat.'

'So long as you've got your music,' said Ace.

'That's right, man – a comfortable seat to sit on and music to listen to.'

'I'm surprised you didn't bring a portable gramophone with you,' said the Doctor, steering quickly and nimbly around a long shallow ditch that suddenly appeared in the ground ahead. The jeep lurched, regained its traction, and roared along, paralleling the ditch.

'No way, man. I wouldn't bring my music out here in the savage splendour of New Mexico. Dust is the enemy of the LP, baby.' Then Ray hastily corrected himself. 'I mean of 78s, I mean of shellac discs. Records.'

'I'll remember that.' Ace leaned back in her seat and took a deep breath of the racing wind. It smelled of a mixture of petrol from the jeep and wild desert sage. The sun shone benignly down on her face. Despite the bruising brutality of the jeep ride, she was enjoying herself. Or at least she would be if her hair didn't keep getting in her eyes, swaying with the motion of the vehicle. She brushed it aside and turned to the Doctor. 'This is all very nice, getting away from Los Alamos and all that. But I thought you were supposed to be busy arguing with Teller.'

'Apparently our last discussion gave him so much to think about that he wants all day to ponder it.'

'Good for you,' said Ace. She took a rubber band out of the pocket of her denim jacket and used it to secure her hair.

The Doctor peered out over the steering wheel. He hardly seemed to move the wheel, but he was keeping them clear of obstacles despite their high speed. He was obviously enjoying the drive. 'In fact it probably just means he's sick of me and wanted to avoid seeing me.'

'That Teller is one anti-social cat, man,' said Ray from the back seat.

'Nevertheless, tomorrow I shall renew my attack.'

'Attack?'

The Doctor smiled. He peered into the distance. 'Just a figure of speech.'

Events seemed to conspire to prevent Butcher getting away from the Hill. Receiving official permission had been the least of his problems. What should have been the simple business of delegating to his sergeants, for what after all promised to be only a few hours' absence, took a few hours in itself. And then, just when he was about to set off, he was ambushed by some last-minute additional paperwork concerning release of Rosalita's body to a civilian coroner. More hours proceeded to grind slowly by as he unravelled the necessary red tape.

Then, when he finally managed to get changed and get to the motor pool, he had endless problems with vehicles. The first jeep he chose had a flat tyre, the second a ruptured fan belt, the third some kind of untraceable blockage in the exhaust system. 'Don't any of your jeeps work?' demanded Butcher of Lisetti, the motorpool chief, a greasy grinning Buddha of a man, who had a monkey wrench in one shirt pocket and a bar of Red Indian brand chewing tobacco in the other.

'They tend to the temperamental, that's for sure. They're supposed to be built for desert work, but I find they never really perform good in all this dust and fine sand. But there's one vehicle that always runs real sweet. Never had a single problem with her.'

'Then give me that one,' said Butcher.

Lisetti smiled and spat a stream of tobacco juice. 'Sorry. No can do. Already signed her out. To a little English gent called Dr Smith. Had a girl with him and that big Chinese fellow.'

'Japanese,' said Butcher.

'Hey, really. You don't say. Why isn't he behind bars?'

'You might well ask,' said Butcher. He waited another half an hour on the endless business of the first jeep having its tyre changed, only to have it taken away from him at the last instant for use by General Groves' staff. That left Butcher with either the broken fan belt vehicle, or the one with the mystery exhaust problem. Two fan belts later he was finally driving down the Hill.

* * *

Ace's predictions about her bruised buttocks proved to be amply fulfilled by the time the Doctor announced that they were finally approaching their destination. He was steering the jeep towards a range of low hills that looked, to Ace, no different from the many other ranges of hills they had already passed in the repetitive desert landscape. The sun was now sinking behind the mountains in the west and the sky was painted with bright, garish, sunset colours. The Doctor skirted the base of the hills until he found a narrow track leading upwards that looked like it might give the most surefooted mountain goat pause. But he drove the jeep up it without hesitation, expertly shifting the gears and altering the engine's roar in an almost musical modulation as the engine laboured in various cycles of revolution against the steep incline. Dust boiled up off the track and Ace closed her eyes and held her breath. Then suddenly the noise of the engine died, the dust stopped, and the jeep came to a halt.

Ace opened her eyes. They were on the brow of a low hill with the slope of a higher headland rising in front of them. There were pine trees on the hillsides and these gave off a cool intense odour in the dying heat of the day. Ace wiped the dust off her face.

'Oh man,' said Ray, from the back of the jeep. 'I hope this was worth the trip.'

'I think you'll find it interesting,' said the Doctor, fastening the brakes and hopping out onto the hillside. Ace joined him, breathing the cool pine-scented air and enjoying the sensation of walking on her own two feet again after the hours of jolting and bouncing in the jeep. The Doctor took her arm and guided her across the rocky ground covered with a soft blanket of pine needles. 'Do you notice anything about that hill slope opposite us?'

Ace studied the area he indicated. It was a hill with trees growing on it, their shadows stretching like long black fingers as the sun went down. There were no signs of life or any indication that man had ever intruded on it. It was a primal scene that might have remained unchanged for millions of years. 'Nope,' said Ace.

'Do you see anything in those shadows among the trees?'

'Nope.'

'Look more carefully.' The Doctor sounded a trifle impatient. 'Some of those shadows are in fact the mouths of caves.'

'Caves?' said Ray, coming up behind them, his feet crunching on the bed of pine needles. 'Who lives in them, man?'

'Oh, no one,' said the Doctor. 'Not for many, many centuries.' His head suddenly jerked up as he looked past Ray, peering at something with an expression of bright interest. Ace followed the direction of his gaze and saw that three men had stepped out of the shadows of the pines behind them and were

coming down the hill, past the jeep, towards them.

They were all carrying guns.

'Which is not to say, of course, that these hills are uninhabited,' said the Doctor.

Butcher drove down the Hill along the winding rocky road, past the shadowed pines of Los Alamos canyon and the Omega lab, where Fermi maintained his reactor and performed dangerous experiments with plutonium.

By now the sun was declining steeply in the sky and the desert night was approaching fast. Butcher drove swiftly and efficiently but he couldn't outrace the setting sun. Soon the lengthening shadows of the broken landscape had swallowed him and the jeep whole.

Butcher kept driving, belting along in the desert darkness, with a growing sense of futility. He'd had a pretty good idea of the Doctor's initial route because he'd spoken to the MPs at the checkpoint who'd watched them leave. He'd even managed to find the spot where the Doctor's jeep had left the road. The tracks had been too fresh to belong to any other vehicle. Butcher had already followed them for about ten rough miles of broken terrain.

But now, caught in the darkness, the only way to make progress was to hazard a guess about the other jeep's direction of travel, drive for a half mile or so, stop, get out of the jeep and use a flashlight to check the ground and see if he could discern any tracks in the dirt. At first he'd got lucky, following them for another two miles. But then he'd lost the track and had to double back on himself, doing a sweep.

Now he'd lost the track completely. He was on the verge of throwing in the towel and heading back for the Hill, taking off his shoes, collapsing on his bunk and drinking half a bottle of whiskey. Then he saw the light in the distance, in the crevice of a line of hills whose dark bulk cancelled the stars hanging low in the night sky.

He pointed the jeep in the direction of the light, put his foot down hard on the gas, and drove towards it.

The men who appeared from the pines were wearing coats of rough woven material that looked like blankets. The bold patterns on the coats, thick red and black lines, emphasised the resemblance. Two of the men wore hats; one a baseball cap and the other what Ace thought of as a regular cowboy hat – the first she'd seen since her arrival here in what she still regarded as the Wild West. The third man had no hat, and his long, lank, black hair hung down to his shoulders. He was the oldest of the three, with a seamed, haggard face, and dark glittering eyes set deep in nests of wrinkles. The man in the cowboy hat looked like he was in his forties. His face was marked with a

purple scar that ran down his right cheek and curled onto his neck. The one in the baseball cap was little more than a kid, just out of his teens. They both shared the old man's dark skin, black hair and dark eyes.

The guns they were carrying were rifles. The weapons looked battered and well worn. The kid's had a stock that had split and been repaired with black tape. But they all seemed more than serviceable and the three men standing there, brandishing them in the last rays of sunset, looked formidable, not to mention menacing.

The Doctor smiled and, before Ace could stop him, he set off up the slope towards them, straight into the barrels of their guns. 'Hello, Black Eyes,' he said.

The old man smiled, the wrinkles on his face multiplying, and lowered his gun. 'I thought it was you, Doctor. Your body's different but your soul is still the same.' As he lowered his weapon the others followed suit and Ace started breathing again.

Standing behind her, Ray whispered, 'Who are these cats?' Ace just shrugged and gestured for him to shut up.

But the Doctor had caught the whisper. He finished shaking hands with the old man and turned back to Ace and Ray. 'Allow me to introduce Black Eyes, Scar and...' he paused, squinting at the young Indian, 'and this must be Black Eyes' grandson and Scar's nephew, Sun Runner.' The boy looked up at him with surprise and appreciation. 'How is your mother?' said the Doctor. 'Do remember me to her.'

'OK,' said the boy shyly. The old man, Black Eyes, set off abruptly down the hillside without a word, and the other two Indians followed him. Ace looked at the Doctor, who nodded, and they set off after the Indians. Ray waited for a moment, then followed the others.

'I repeat,' he said in a low voice, 'who are these cats? I mean, I dig their colourful ethnic names, but who *are they*?'

'They're my friends,' said the Doctor simply.

'But where are they from?' Ray sounded anxious to get his bearings in this new situation and Ace sympathised; she knew that feeling. She was glad that somebody else was asking the questions for once.

'Where are they from?' said the Doctor. 'Well, once they moved freely throughout this land, spending their winters south on the Rio Grande, following the buffalo across the plains in the summer. Now they are restricted to the Mescalero Apache reservation here in central southern New Mexico.'

'Apaches?' said Ray. He was impressed. So was Ace.

'Yes. The word Apache comes from a Yuma word meaning "warrior". The Mescalero designation refers to the fact that they were originally a hunter-gatherer people who harvested and ate the heads of the wild mescal plants.

The same mescal which is used to make a certain alcoholic beverage which is popular in these parts.'

'I've drunk mescal,' said Ace. 'It's got a worm in the bottom of the bottle. If you finish the bottle you're supposed to eat the worm.'

'Did you?' said Ray. He picked his way down the hill with a fat man's caution, stepping delicately among the rocks. They were following the three Apaches, who had almost reached the bottom of the slope, where it met the rising ground of the hill flank opposite.

'I never finished the bottle, fortunately,' said Ace.

'Hey, wait a minute man,' said Ray. 'Isn't that mescal a kind of cactus-type thing?' Ace sighed, sensing what was coming. 'Do you suppose these cats have got any cactus needles?' said Ray.

'The cactus that chiefly preoccupies them,' said the Doctor, 'is *Lophophora williamsii* – the hallucinogenic peyote cactus.' They had now reached the foot of the opposite slope and were starting up it, after Black Eyes, Scar and Sun Runner, none of whom seemed particularly inclined to wait for the laggards falling behind them. 'I'm not sure its needles would be suitable for your purpose, although you might find that its buds, or buttons as they are called, have a profound effect on the music you hear.'

'I'll bet, man, I'll bet,' chuckled Ray. The sun had now faded to a last red glare banked against the deep blue of the sky in the west. The air was fragrant and chilly in the slanting shadows of the pines. Ace was watching the three Apache men move through the shadows when suddenly they disappeared. For a moment she felt a thrill of fear, then she remembered what the Doctor had said about caves. They'd simply stepped into a cave mouth. The truth of this supposition was confirmed a moment later when the young man came out of the shadows back into view and began gathering fallen tree branches from the ground.

'Isn't that considerate?' said the Doctor. 'Sun Runner is preparing a fire for us.'

Major Butcher steered his jeep through the desert darkness towards the distant light. He had turned off his headlights as soon as he glimpsed it, not wanting anyone to see him coming. The going was rough, driving through almost total blackness, bouncing across rutted ground, and finally he had to slow down to a crawl. If he busted an axle out here it would mean a long walk back to the Hill and, worse, missing out on any chance of catching up with the Doctor and his cronies and discovering what they were up to.

The engine throbbed turbulently and the jeep lurched. Remembering the two changes of fan belt that afternoon, Butcher slowed down even more. The terrain under the tyres was sloping steadily upwards and soon he found

himself on the rim of a hill, driving around in a big circle. There didn't seem to be any way up onto the hill, at least no route big enough for the jeep, so he killed the engine and sat there, listening to the ticking and smelling the cooling of hot metal, pondering what to do next. There was a certain amount of moonlight now so Butcher got out of the jeep and walked carefully around, trying to get a mental picture of where he was in relation to the surrounding terrain. He was going to have to leave his vehicle behind, and he wanted to be able to find it again and possibly get out of here in a hurry. Securing a line of retreat was something he'd learned in the Pinkertons long before he'd joined the army. He considered leaving his flashlight on the hood of the jeep, switched on, as a beacon to guide him. But the batteries would burn out in a few hours and he might not be back by then. Then there was the fact that he might need the flashlight and, more importantly, it might reveal the position of his jeep to the others.

He set off somewhat reluctantly up the hill into the darkness, feeling cut loose in the night, adrift, as the shadows absorbed the jeep behind him. Butcher found the going fairly easy on foot, only occasionally bruising his shin on some rock or tree stump invisible in the intermittent moonlight. Now and then he turned on his flashlight, but sparingly, less to conserve the batteries than to conceal his position. The light at the top of the hill came and went according to the angle of his approach and the intervening terrain, but it always appeared again, a beacon.

Soon the flickering yellow light was close enough to be identified as the flames of a campfire high on the opposite hill. Butcher was staring at it with such fixity that he walked straight into something at waist level, something hard and unyielding, and was flung flat across it. He grunted with the impact and fumbled with his free hand, feeling dusty metal that still had some residual trace of warmth. It was the hood of a jeep. The Doctor's jeep. Butcher smiled with satisfaction. Even if he couldn't get down the hill and find his own vehicle, he had this one to use. Assuming he could drive it back down the hill without breaking his neck.

What's more, he now knew the Doctor and his party were close at hand. He wondered what they were up to with their campfire. Roasting weenies and marshmallows? He'd find out soon enough. Moving away from the jeep he found the ground grading downwards again and he walked carefully. He didn't dare switch on his flashlight, and a broken leg would be a hell of a lot more serious than a broken axle. Eventually the downward slope corrected itself, rising upwards again towards the shadows of a patch of pines, which seemed to throb and shift with the yellow light of the fire at their centre. Butcher moved up the slope through the cluster of trees, moving with exquisite care so as not to snap a twig, his mouth open wide so even his

breathing was silent. He made only the faintest stirring whisper in the bed of pine needles that clothed the slope.

Butcher saw that the fire had been built inside a cave on the brow of the hillside. He'd been lucky. If the angle had been slightly different the mouth of the cave would have screened the fire and he would never have spotted it. He was only thirty or forty feet away now, moving slowly upwards through the dark trees. He could see the Doctor and Ace sitting beside the fire. Where the hell was Ray Morita? Inside the cave on a radio talking to Tokyo, quite possibly.

He moved stealthily closer, more cautious about sound than ever, and he had just taken out his pistol and was wondering how he should finally announce his presence, when he felt a hard, cold ring of metal delicately touch the back of his neck. Butcher knew immediately what the ring of metal was and he cursed himself savagely, wishing he could somehow turn back the clock and do everything differently.

From the trees in front of him, two men stepped out carrying rifles. They didn't point them at Butcher. They didn't need to. Their friend already had one pressed to the back of his neck. They took his pistol from him and then the men turned casually away and started up the slope towards the fire. Butcher didn't need to be told to follow them. He started walking and the pressure of the gun barrel on his neck ceased, although he knew it was still there, hovering a few inches behind him. He felt a strange throbbing pressure on the flesh of his neck, which couldn't be explained by any momentary contact with metal. It was the spot where he imagined that the bullet would hit him if he tried anything clever.

Butcher didn't try anything clever. He walked up to the campfire, feeling its heat on his face and smelling the resinous smoke boiling off the burning pine branches. The face of the girl watched him as he came, looking serious and troubled in the fire light. The Doctor, however, was grinning. 'Hello Major Butcher. I thought you might wish to join us.'

'That's why you had them build the fire. Right here where I could see it from miles away.' Butcher was furious with himself. He'd walked into a trap. Been lured into it.

'That's right. We couldn't have you blundering around in these hills all night with nothing to go on. Why don't you sit down?' The Doctor patted a pile of blankets set on the ground near the fire. Butcher had nothing to lose, so he sat. As he did so he got a look at the man who'd had the gun on him. Like the two others he was an Indian, though this one was older and didn't wear a hat.

'Please meet Sun Runner, Scar and Black Eyes,' said the Doctor, as if he was presiding at a tea party. 'Sun Runner is the young fellow and Black Eyes is the gentleman who had the deer rifle at the back of your head. Scar's name is

self-explanatory.'

'Where's Morita?' said Butcher. His mouth was dry and his voice sounded strained. He didn't want to clear his throat because then they'd know he was scared.

'Cosmic Ray?' said the Doctor. 'He's in the cave, having a lie-down.

'Having a what?' Butcher's voice came out like a snarl. But at least it wasn't trembling.

'He's crashed out,' explained Ace. 'Too much mescal.' She lifted a bottle. The bottle had no label. It was half full of clear liquid, which glinted amber in the fire light.

'Why don't you have a drink?' suggested the Doctor.

'I don't think so,' said Butcher.

'Go on,' said the Doctor. He passed the bottle to the young Indian, who shoved it into Butcher's hands. All three Indians raised their rifles. Butcher realised it wasn't a suggestion.

'Don't worry,' said Ace. 'There isn't a worm in the bottom.'

Butcher raised the neck of the bottle to his mouth and tried to fake a swallow, but the young Indian stepped forward and tilted it steeply in Butcher's hands. Warm, harsh liquid flooded from the bottle into Butcher's throat. Butcher choked, the spirit burning in his nose and eyes and mouth. He coughed and spat and fought the bottle away from his face. The young Indian took it back and sat down on the other side of the fire. He was smiling faintly. His two elders were entirely expressionless. Butcher felt the liquor flood through his system with its mendacious warmth and comfort.

The Doctor leaned over and picked up a wicker basket. He set it on his knees, opened it and took out a sandwich. 'You mustn't drink on an empty stomach, Major.'

'I'm not hungry.'

'I'm afraid I must insist.' The Doctor handed the sandwich to the scar-faced Indian, who set his rifle aside and carried it around the fire to Butcher. Butcher accepted the sandwich and started eating it. He knew he didn't have any choice. He chewed and swallowed, hardly registering the taste of the bitter vegetable stuff between the two slices of bread. Butcher ate every scrap of it.

When he was finished the Doctor said, 'Would you like another drink?'

'No thank you,' said Butcher.

'As you wish.' This time the Doctor didn't get the Indians to force him. The bottle stayed on the ground, glinting in the flames. They all sat there for what seemed a long time. None of the Indians seemed to feel the need to say anything, the Doctor was entirely comfortable in the silence, occasionally smiling at Butcher across the fire. The girl's eyes drifted shut and she began

to sleep, snoring gently. The fire crackled and spat and the shadows danced.

Finally, after what seemed like an hour had passed, Butcher felt he had to say something. 'What are we waiting for?'

'The peyote,' said the Doctor. At the sound of his voice Ace woke up and blinked blearily.

'The what?' said Butcher. His voice was a harsh croak.

'The peyote. It's a naturally occurring hallucinogen found – where is it found Ace?'

'In the buds of a cactus called William something,' she said sleepily, half awake now.

'Close enough,' said the Doctor. 'It's a powerful intoxicant that causes visions and your sandwich was full of it. We are waiting for it to take effect.' The Doctor glanced at his pocket watch. 'Which should be happening any time now.'

'What the hell have you done to me?' said Butcher.

The Doctor smiled at him. His eyes looked uncanny in the light of the fire, a restless liquid gleam in them. 'Peyote is a sacrament to the Mescalero Apaches. The white man has tried to stamp out its use, but he has been far from successful. It is still deployed, sparingly because of its immense power, by certain shaman. Shaman such as Black Eyes here.' Butcher looked at the old Indian, who stared back at him as if he wasn't there.

The Doctor said, 'The Mescalero Apaches see the world as being an intricate web of forces. These natural forces act on human beings through the agency of the weather, the sun, the moon, animals or plants.' The Doctor's dark eyes seemed to be staring into the depths of Butcher's soul. 'Peyote is unique among these plants in being considered to be utterly evil. The only corresponding evil to be found among the animals spirits is the owl.' The Doctor fell silent and at that instant an owl called in the branches above them. It was an unearthly sound and Butcher felt a cold vibration shiver up his spine like electric current.

'Right on cue,' said Ace. She sounded impressed, suddenly wide awake again.

The Doctor smiled, but there was little warmth in the smile. 'Like the owl, peyote has power. The power to bring visions. Such visions are often accompanied by an ordeal.'

Butcher realised that the others, Ace and the Indians, were all staring up into the night sky. He looked up and saw, hanging there above the canopy of pines, a strange cluster of glowing lights. The lights moved around in a co-ordinated fashion, as though they were attached to some kind of aircraft. But there was no sound of engines and the slow floating motion of the lights didn't belong to any craft Butcher had ever seen or heard of.

The Doctor stood up. 'Are you ready for your ordeal, Major?'

Chapter Eight

On Board the Craft

‘Wicked,’ said Ace.

‘It is rather impressive, isn’t it?’ said the Doctor.

‘What the hell is it?’ said Butcher. He stared up into the night, his voice cracked and desperate.

‘It’s a craft from another world, of course,’ said the Doctor. ‘And you are going to have the extraordinary privilege of being taken on board.’

‘Are they going to probe him?’ said Ace eagerly.

‘Please, Ace. I’m sure the Major is frightened enough as it is without you planting unpleasant suggestions like that in his mind.’

‘But it’s the done thing, isn’t it, with UFOs?’

‘I assure you,’ said the Doctor, ‘there is nothing unidentified about this flying object. As a matter of fact, its pilot is an old friend of mine.’

Ace peered happily up into the night. ‘So do we get to meet this friend?’

‘Of course. We’re not going to let Major Butcher go all by himself. We will be taken on board with him.’

‘So how do we get taken on board?’

‘We merely ask.’ The Doctor took off his hat and waved it at the shape in the sky. Ace studied the glowing lights. They pulsed and changed colour in a way that made her think of something organic, a life form. She remembered pictures she’d seen of jellyfish that swam in the deepest part of the ocean, pulsing with colour. The slowly changing iridescence of the lights reminded her of these. And so did the slowly unfolding tentacle, transparent but streaming with rainbow colours, that descended from the craft and flowed around the Doctor, engulfing him. Ace saw the Doctor being sucked up through the swaying polychromatic length of the hollow tentacle. Then she saw another tentacle descending from the craft, towards her.

A third tentacle came swaying down towards Butcher and she heard him scream as it touched him. The scream was cut off as Ace was sealed in her own tentacle. It was soft and jelly-like, yet warm and dry. There was a flow of warm air coming from the top of the tentacle and it had a salty, spicy tang to it. She could see through the tentacle and outside, by the campfire, she saw the Apaches watching impassively as the third tentacle swallowed the

struggling and frantic Major Butcher. Then Ace felt a rush of air and she was suddenly moving upwards inside her own tentacle, its jelly-like circumference closing around her feet and gently but swiftly forcing her upwards in a peristaltic motion. As the length of the tentacle clenched shut behind her she was squeezed along it, propelled inexorably towards the glowing lights above.

Outside she could see Butcher being shot upwards in his own tentacle. She couldn't hear his screams, but she could see his frantic struggles, wild, flailing limbs convulsing in an almost hysterical panic. Ace couldn't work out what all the fuss was about.

After all, it was only a spaceship.

The interior of the ship seemed to be made of the same stuff as the tentacles, though somewhat more rigid to the touch. From what Ace could see, the craft consisted of a series of chambers that were spherical or oval in section. The walls were transparent, but seethed with colours that passed through them. The colours changed and pulsed like living light. The overlapping layers of the walls and the shifting waves of chromatic change meant that, for all their transparency, the walls became effectively opaque beyond a certain distance; Ace couldn't see much beyond the chambers immediately surrounding her, except for some vague shapes in a nacreous fog.

The Doctor was standing waiting for her when she arrived, delivered by the gentle clenching pressure of the tentacle through an opening in the floor of the ship. The hole closed under her, sealing itself so that she was standing on a solid surface. The Doctor smiled at her. 'Impressive, eh?'

'Beats the hell out of an escalator,' said Ace. They both stood and waited for Major Butcher to turn up. There was a hole in the floor that evidently corresponded to the entry point for his tentacle, but no sign of the Major himself. 'What's keeping him?'

'Poor Major Butcher. I imagine he's experiencing a certain measure of... culture shock, shall we say?'

'Yes, I think we shall say.'

'Instead of relaxing and allowing the delivery mechanism to do its job, he is no doubt resisting with every ounce of his considerable strength. And since the mechanism is designed first and foremost to bring living creatures on board unharmed, it is taking its time.'

Ace went and stood over the hole in the floor. Looking down into it she could see the struggling shape of Butcher, about twenty metres below, writhing and squirming in the pliant embrace of the soft transparent tube. At least he'd stopped screaming, though she could still hear frantic breathing, choking gasps of air that sounded like an exhausted dog panting after a long run.

‘Poor bloke,’ she said. ‘This really must be mind-blowing for him. And I bet the drug isn’t helping.’

‘What drug?’ said the Doctor, his face a picture of polite puzzlement.

‘The hallucinogenic drug you gave him. The peyote.’

‘I didn’t give him any peyote. I merely told him that.’

‘It wasn’t true?’

‘No, I just wanted it as a kind of get-out clause. In case he couldn’t deal with the experience of visiting this alien spacecraft. If he thinks it’s all a peyote vision it will allow him to rationalise it afterwards, if necessary, and preserve his world view intact.’

‘What was in his sandwich, then?’ said Ace.

‘Guacamole.’

There was an inarticulate cry from the open hole in the floor, followed by a rush of air, and Butcher came sailing up into the chamber like a champagne cork from a bottle. The tentacle mechanism had presumably finally lost patience with his stubborn resistance and simply shot him into the craft at high speed. Butcher hovered, scrambling and twisting in mid-air for an instant, struggling frantically, with an expression of loathing and lost horror on his face that Ace couldn’t help feeling was rather comical.

The hole in the floor sealed itself before gravity brought Butcher crashing down again, onto a smooth, solid, surface that shone with a mother of pearl iridescence. The man sat there for a moment, his eyes squeezed shut, cursing savagely in the most profane language imaginable. Ace turned to the Doctor and whispered, ‘Gordon Bennett. And I thought he was such a nice boy.’

‘I think it’s a very positive sign,’ said the Doctor. He didn’t return Ace’s whisper but spoke instead in a normal voice. ‘It’s certainly a lot more encouraging than that pitiful screaming and moaning.’

Butcher heard what the Doctor was saying – of course – and he opened his eyes. He stared at the Doctor and anger suddenly replaced the look of despair on his face. And this was, thought Ace, exactly what the Doctor wanted. ‘Who’s pitiful?’ said Butcher hoarsely.

‘Well you must admit it was rather shameful behaviour for a grown man.’

Butcher stared around himself, like a trapped animal looking for a way out. It was clear that he wasn’t going to find one. ‘Aren’t you going to ask where you are?’ said the Doctor. Butcher stopped twisting his head around and fixed his gaze on the Doctor.

‘All right,’ he rasped, ‘where am I?’

‘You’re on board a ship,’ said Ace.

‘A ship? Nonsense.’ Butcher wiped his hand across his face and studied the thick coating of sweat that came off on it. ‘We’re in the middle of the

New Mexico desert.' He uttered this last sentence like a child repeating its catechism.

'When Ace says ship, what she actually means is an aircraft.'

'Aircraft?' Butcher staggered to his feet. 'Nonsense.' He weaved around like a man who was drunk, or who had spent months at sea and was having trouble adjusting to dry land. 'This is no aircraft.'

'Not of the sort you're accustomed to, true,' said the Doctor. 'But perhaps you've heard of Foo Fighters?'

'What if I have?' Butcher made a visible effort to pull himself together. He stood still, trying to bring his weaving under control, and stared fixedly at the Doctor. Ace suspected that he was doing this because he didn't dare look around and acknowledge the reality of his surroundings.

She tried to catch Butcher's eye and give him a reassuring smile; she had begun to feel sorry for the poor bloke, who was obviously well out of his depth. But Butcher refused to look her way, and Ace got fed up with trying. Instead she turned to the Doctor and said, 'I thought the Foo Fighters were a band? Sort of a Nirvana spin-off.'

'Quite possibly, quite possibly. But before that they were the earliest precursors of the flying-saucer craze, first spotted by American aircraft during this war. In August 1944, for example, over the Indian Ocean, by the crew of a US bomber, and in December of that year over Hagenau in Alsace-Lorraine, Germany, by the crew of a fighter.'

'How did you know about that?' demanded Butcher. 'That's classified information.'

There now,' said the Doctor delightedly, 'that's more like it, Major. Just cling to that sense of bureaucratic outrage and institutionalised paranoia. It will make what is about to happen so much easier for you to process.'

'Why,' said Ace. 'What's about to happen?'

'We're going to meet the pilot of the ship,' said the Doctor.

At first Butcher refused to follow them. Ace and the Doctor started down the pearly curve of the corridor that led from the arrival chamber away into the depths of the ship. Butcher just sat down on the floor and wouldn't budge. 'What are you doing?' said Ace.

'I know my rights as a prisoner of war under the Geneva Convention.'

'You are not a prisoner and the Geneva Convention isn't really relevant. As far as we are concerned, the war has ceased,' explained the Doctor patiently.

'That's treason,' said Butcher.

'Oh please, Major. All I am saying is that we are on neutral territory, as if we were standing on Swiss soil.'

'We're not standing on soil and this isn't Switzerland.'

‘Don’t be so literal-minded Bulldog Bozo,’ said Ace.

The Doctor took her gently by the elbow. ‘Now, Ace. If the Major really doesn’t feel up to exploring the rest of this craft just yet then I suggest we honour his wishes.’

‘All right, we’ll leave the little baby in here to hide.’

‘Now, Ace.’ The Doctor led her out of the arrival chamber. The corridor spiralled through the nacreous mass of the ship, clouds of moving colours pulsing and changing in the transparent walls around them. The corridor was egg-shaped in section, broad at the bottom and tapered at the top. Ace reached out to touch the wall and it felt warm and sleek, but not smooth. She could feel a detailed roughness to the texture of it, almost like patting the sleek hide of some lithe marine creature, a seal perhaps.

They eventually arrived, after a long spiralling course, in a chamber sunk deep in the glowing pearly depths of the ship.

This chamber was lit by a strangely elegant-looking chandelier, a glowing light fixture that looked to Ace like some kind of curious alien jellyfish. The chandelier had long glowing tubes that radiated out across the flat ceiling, illuminating the dish-shaped chamber. The walls of the room curved down to a flat floor with a dimpled hemisphere in it. This concave hemisphere differed from the rest of the vessel in that it was more sharply transparent and no colours danced through it. ‘That’s the cockpit, is it?’ said Ace.

‘Very perceptive,’ murmured the Doctor. ‘Well done.’

‘Well obviously we were headed for the control room, so this must be it, eh?’

‘It must be,’ said the Doctor. He was looking up at the chandelier. The light from it was so bright he had to squint. The Doctor took off his hat and shaded his eyes with it. His shadowed eyes regarded Ace fondly. ‘Would you like to take a look through it?’

‘Good idea.’ Ace wandered over to the hole in the floor and stared down through the transparent dimple at the ground below. She could make out the dark slope of the hill, thick with the darker shapes of pine trees, and the bright flicker of the campfire with the shadows of the three Apaches sitting beside it. She also saw something else. ‘Doctor...’

‘What?’ The Doctor came over to join her. ‘Did you see something?’

‘That.’ Ace pointed at the tentacle jutting from the ship, waving gracefully high above the pine-clad slopes. It moved with the sinuous strength of a giant snake, an eerie rainbow of colours pulsating through it. ‘It’s like seeing the Northern Lights inside a jelly.’

‘Highly poetic, Ace. In fact, it’s the same kind of tentacle as those that brought us aboard.’

‘You, me and the cowardly Major.’

'You shouldn't be so hard on poor Rex.'

'Rex? Is that his name? He is a bulldog.'

'The poor man is in a situation which is utterly beyond anything in his experience.'

'He's a wimp.'

'Really, Ace. You should feel sorry for him.'

'I did, but he's so suspicious and hostile. He doesn't want to trust us. He doesn't like us.'

'That's his job. Not to like us or trust us.'

Ace watched the tentacle, as thick in section as an industrial chimney, snaking below them, a glowing shape streaming above the dark pine slopes, retracting its opalescent length back into the ship to the stern of them. 'Maybe, but he doesn't have to always behave like we're spies and he's the great detective whose going to find us out.'

'But in a sense we are spies. And he is if not a great then at least a very good detective.'

The tentacle was shrinking rapidly as it retracted. While Ace and the Doctor watched, the last few metres of its length disappeared silently back into the hull somewhere behind them.

'But, hang on a minute,' said Ace. 'If those tentacles bring people on board, and that one just arrived...' She turned and looked at the Doctor. 'Are we expecting company?'

'We're certainly not,' he said. 'Or at least I'm not. How about you?'

'No way. So then who just came up inside that tentacle?'

Ace received the answer almost immediately, as Major Butcher came scooting into the control room. 'Ah, welcome Major,' said the Doctor. 'I'm glad you could join us at last.'

'Anything to get away from that drunken fool,' snapped Butcher.

Despite her dislike of the Major, Ace felt relieved that he was back to his perpetually angry self. The helpless creature they'd left in the arrivals chamber had alarmed her more than she cared to admit.

'What drunken fool?'

'Major Butcher's talking about me, baby,' said Cosmic Ray Morita as he came loping down the corridor that led into the glowing chamber. 'Hey, man, this is really quite some place. A really cool pad, daddy-o.' Ray looked a little dishevelled, his lurid shirt stained here and there and his beret askew. He was clutching a sloshing and foamy bottle of mescal.

'So you woke up, Ray,' said the Doctor. 'What a pleasant surprise. I suppose you decided you couldn't just simply stay in that nice comfortable cave and sleep.'

‘How could I, with this thing hovering overhead, daddy-o? I had to take a look. I saw those things come down to pick you up. I was watching from the cave, baby. I’d been sleeping off the mescal. But the lights woke me up. Those groovy lights, man. I looked out of the cave and I saw you do this.’ He lifted his beret off his head. ‘And that thing came down and picked you up. So after I worked up my nerve, man, I came out and tried it.’ He lifted his beret again and grinned. ‘And it worked, man! And here I am.’

‘But where are?’ said Butcher. ‘That’s the question.’

‘We’ve already told you the answer Major,’ said the Doctor.

‘Some twaddle about little green men from outer space.’

Ray chuckled drunkenly. ‘But obviously it’s some kind of a ship, man.’

‘A ship?’ Butcher laughed. ‘That’s the same kind of nonsense they were trying to get me to swallow.’

‘It is. Look around you. A spaceship. Extraterrestrial craft, daddy-o.’

‘Crap,’ said Butcher.

‘Look at the floor,’ said the Doctor. ‘You see that large dimple in it. Go and peer out, or rather down. Go ahead Major. You can see the ground below. The hillside where you were standing just a little while ago.’

Butcher peered down through the clear dome in the belly of the ship. He stared down at the Apaches on the hillside. All he said was, ‘There are those bastards who got the drop on me. They wouldn’t have been so cocky without their rifles.’

‘I might have to disagree with you there, Major. But that’s not the issue at hand. Look at that structure you’re peering through. What does it remind you of?’

Butcher stared into the transparent hemisphere. He said, ‘Gun turret in the belly of a bomber?’

‘Precisely.’

Butcher grinned. Colour was returning to his face after a prolonged absence. His confidence seemed to grow with every word. ‘So, it’s like a B29 bomber for little green men?’

‘If you like, yes. Although less warlike analogies would be more appropriate. Luckily for us all, this craft is not dedicated to killing.’

‘Then where are the little green men?’

‘Zorg,’ said the Doctor. And for a moment Ace had no idea what this monosyllable might mean. Then the lights in the room started to flicker and everyone looked up at the ceiling where the chandelier glowed. The chandelier was twitching and curling, the long tube-lamps that spread across the ceiling were retreating and shooting back into the glowing centre of it. As they retreated, the uniform light in the room shrank to a glow on the ceiling, centred on the sphere at the heart of the ‘chandelier’. The tentacles were absorbed back into

it in a fashion that reminded Ace of something. Then she realised what it was. Like the transport tentacles that had brought them onto the ship.

The glowing ball in the middle of the ceiling flashed with coloured lightning and suddenly began to swell downwards. 'What's happening?' said Butcher in a worried voice. 'What's happening to the light in here?'

A blob of opalescent jelly was bulging down from the ceiling, shot through with scarlet and azure and piercing green. It was like wax melting, a flood of glowing gel that reached the floor and formed a large mound that stratified and solidified and took on a new shape utterly different from, yet strangely reminiscent of, the jellyfish chandelier that had been clinging to the ceiling. Finally the thing took on the form of a huge crablike creature, with soft, giant limbs that hinged in odd ways. It had a face, of sorts, in the middle of its stomach, and the face made a horrible attempt to smile.

'Greetings, Zoctor,' said the thing.

'Ace, allow me to introduce Zostrathnia Otocr Regus Gelb. Zorg to his friends.'

'Greetings Zace,' said the thing, shuffling its numerous limbs so its pearly, bulbous obscenity of a body was facing her. The thought of a crab that big, even a dazzlingly beautiful one with flashes of radiant colour, made Ace feel queasy. The disgusting pliancy of its limbs, the fatness of its torso. Ace had seen plenty of aliens, but if she wasn't careful this one would give her the heebie-jeebies. Maybe it was that horrid approximation of a face where no face should be. She decided that thinking of it as a kind of giant crab was at least better than the other thought that came to mind – a huge soft jelly of a giant tarantula, wobbling around full of venom. Ace very firmly put the giant tarantula thought away and concentrated on thinking of Zorg as the intelligent alien life form he – it? – so clearly was. It sounded like a he. Indeed when the creature spoke, its voice had a perfect command of English, in a pleasantly low-pitched masculine voice. It was a smooth and clear voice, yet there was something disturbingly unmodulated about it. Ace wondered if this alien blandness of expression came from the creature itself, or was a consequence of some kind of device it was using as a translator.

'And who are my other guests?' said Zorg. As it spoke, the thing scuttled around like a giant crab. It glowed with inner light, as though it had radiant bodily fluids circulating in its transparent shell. Colours flashed through the creature as they did in its ship, violet and green flashes of miniature lightning.

'Zorg,' said the Doctor, 'meet Major Butcher and Ray.'

'Greetings Zajor Zutcher, Zay,' said Zorg politely, bobbing before the two astonished men.

Butcher turned his head and threw up. The vomit hit the floor and was almost instantly absorbed, disappearing into the fabric of the ship in a minia-

ture storm of coloured light. It was a good thing too, because an instant later Ray also threw up. He watched sheepishly as the floor of the chamber cleaned itself again. 'Sorry about that, cats. It was just Butcher barfing like that. It set me off, man.'

'What is that thing?' said Butcher in a high shrill voice made ragged by hysteria.

'Hey come on Butcher, baby. It's obviously an alien. A thing from another world, man.' Ray spoke casually, dismissively. But for all his sang-froid, his hand trembled as he lifted the mescal bottle to his lips and drank with gurgling haste, as though to soften the impact of what he was seeing.

'A thing from outer space?' Butcher's voice still rang with a ripple of incipient hysteria. 'You mean we're being invaded? By monsters?'

'Don't forget the peyote, Major,' said the Doctor in a calm, reassuring, singsong voice. 'The peyote, the peyote, the peyote. You were forced to eat that sandwich full of that nasty peyote.'

Butcher's eyes shut, as if with profound gratitude. The note of panic evaporated from his voice, but there was a tremble suggestive of tearful relief. 'The peyote! Of course!'

'That's right Major, there's no need to be afraid of what you're witnessing at this moment. Because...'

'Because it's all just an hallucination. A fever dream brought on by that stinking Indian poison you fed me.'

'Stinking Indian poison, precisely Major.' The Doctor's calm voice was now becoming bored. 'The best thing for you to do is sleep it off, don't you think? Why waste time with any more of these absurd visions. This fever dream, as you so aptly put it, doesn't merit your attention.'

'I'm not going to waste any more time,' said the Major. 'I'm going to sleep this off.' He lay down on the warm glowing floor of the chamber, curled up in a foetal bundle and promptly went to sleep.

'That was very dapperly done, Doctor.'

'The power of suggestion, Ace, the power of suggestion.'

'Well we just lost another one,' said Ace, prodding with her toe the prone, snoring body of Ray. 'But in this case it was the power of mescal.' The bottle was cradled in Ray's arms, the last of its contents flowing steadily out to supplement the other stains on his shirt.

'I fear my appearance was a little too much for your friends, Zoctor,' said Zorg.

'Please don't be offended,' said the Doctor. 'Even though Ray had a twenty-first-century acceptance of the concept of an alien life form he couldn't come to terms with its reality. And poor Butcher, who didn't have the benefit of half a century of media acclimatisation to soften him up to the notion of creatures

from outer space visiting Earth. . . Well let's just say that I thought I'd better intervene with that peyote nonsense. Before his mind snapped.'

'Neat call, Doctor,' said Ace.

'Indeed it was neat,' agreed Zorg, throbbing across the room on his pearly chitinous claws. 'The Zoctor is a resourceful individual.'

'But try asking him to give you the big picture. He's definitely a need-to-know type. Only tells you what it's convenient for you to know at any given moment. Convenient for him, that is.'

The Doctor kneeled by Major Butcher, taking the man's pulse with his thumb and consulting his wristwatch. 'Come now, Ace. That's not entirely fair. I've explained everything to you -'

'You never told me we were going to be wafted off in a spaceship with these two stooges in tow.' She nodded at the recumbent Butcher and Ray.

'The stooges will not be in tow, Ace'. The Doctor moved to check Ray's pulse. 'Indeed they will have to be taken back to the arrivals area and sent back down in tentacles.'

'I'll take care of it, Zoctor,' said Zorg.

'Thank you, Zorg. Once they've reached the ground safely our Mescalero friends will know what to do with them.' He turned to Ace. 'To continue. . . We are not taking our friends with us. Nor are we going to be wafted off in this spaceship, as you put it.'

'But we're not going back to the Hill?'

'Not right away, no.'

'Good. I didn't like all that military chicanery. And there was a vibe there. Because they're all working to build that horrible thing. The gizmo or the gadget as they call it. Its not a very nice vibe.'

'Well you're about to escape it for a brief respite.'

'On that subject,' said Zorg. 'I shall show you where the device is being kept.' He waved a thick claw. Bright shards of colour pulsed through it like silent fireworks. A hole opened up in the wall, leading down a curving corridor.

'Thank you very much,' said the Doctor.

'Oh and by the way, Zoctor,' said Zorg in his smooth, inhuman voice. 'Would you and Zace like to hear some of my poems?'

'We'd love to,' said the Doctor. 'But not just at the moment.'

Of course,' said Zorg politely. 'You must have much to do. And I will help by seeing that your friends are returned safely to the ground below.' Zorg scooped up the sleeping forms of Major Butcher and Ray, slinging them across his giant translucent claws as if they weighed nothing. He scuttled out of the chamber carrying them. The Doctor moved to the wall where the hole had appeared. Ace hurried after him as he disappeared into the glowing curvature of the new corridor.

‘He said something about a device, Doctor. What device?’ Ace hurried around the curve after the Doctor and found that he was standing still. The corridor had ended abruptly in another opalescent chamber. She caught up with the Doctor and saw the chamber contained a reassuring tall blue shape. ‘Oh, that device. You brought it here.’

‘Zorg did. I told you I had a plan for retrieving the TARDIS. I believe you called it back-up.’

‘So Zorg was our back-up.’

‘Yes, an extremely nice, very helpful fellow. But if he ever offers to read you his poetry, do not under any circumstances allow him to do so.’

‘Because his poetry has a strange alien beauty that my mind wouldn’t be able to stand?’

‘No,’ said the Doctor, ‘because his poetry is terrible.’

Ace looked fondly at the TARDIS. ‘Does this mean our work here is finished?’

The Doctor’s smile disappeared. ‘Absolutely not. I’m sorry if I gave that impression. In fact, the most dangerous part of our mission is yet to come.’

‘And what part of the mission is that?’

‘We’re going to carry the fight to the enemy,’ said the Doctor.

‘About time.’ Ace smiled and walked towards the door of the TARDIS. Then she paused. ‘Are Ray and the Major going to be all right?’

‘Of course. Black Eyes and his nephew and grandson will see to that. They will put our friends in their respective jeeps and drive them back up onto the mesa as far as it’s safe to go. Then they’ll leave them there to be found by the authorities, dead drunk but otherwise unharmed. With a little luck, they’ll both be back at work first thing in the morning. No one will have a chance to miss them.’

‘But what about us? Won’t anybody miss us?’

‘Unfortunately they will, and we can’t allow that to happen. We need to retain a presence there and yet we must also do this. We are caught in a dilemma. There is only one solution.’

‘Build perfect robot replicas of ourselves and leave them on the Hill while we go off?’

‘All right. So there are *two* solutions.’

‘Time loop?’ said Ace.

‘Yes, exactly. We are going to have to pursue our mission, no matter how long it takes and what traumas it may deliver. And then we must return to Los Alamos, tomorrow morning, so that our presence there won’t be missed.’

‘All right, I’ll leave the logic of that to you. But I’m game. So what is this mission?’

‘As I said, we shall pursue our enemies and take action against them. In short, we are going in search of Lady Silk.’

Chapter Nine

Breakfast with the Duke

Butcher woke up to see two MPs staring down at him. He was lying in the driver's seat of his jeep, cold and uncomfortable and disorientated. The jeep was parked on the side of the road that wound up the mesa towards the MP checkpoint, about two miles distant from it. The Military Policemen must have had its presence reported to them by vehicles rumbling past in the dawn. They'd spotted the jeep and the figure slumped in it and notified the white tops, who'd come down here to investigate.

The MPs found Butcher curled up in the jeep asleep and, he realised now with some embarrassment, apparently drunk. There was an almost empty bottle of mescal on the seat beside him and another entirely empty one on the floor. His clothes stank of the liquor as if somebody had poured it all over him.

Somebody had. Those damned Apaches. But there was no sign of the Mescaleros now and no evidence to suggest that they had ever been there. Butcher suddenly checked his holster. They'd even returned his side arm. For a moment he felt a vertiginous doubt open under him, like the ground giving away in an earthquake. Had the Indians ever really existed? Had he dreamed the whole thing?

He forced himself to calm down. Of course they'd existed. It had been no dream. They had just covered their tracks carefully, that was all. They must have driven him here late last night, poured the mescal on him and left the incriminating bottles with him so that when Butcher was found he'd apparently be dead drunk, sleeping off a binge. When in fact he'd been unconscious, ever since, ever since. . .

Butcher shuddered, his mind shying away from the memory of that strange translucent room where the *thing* had come slithering down from the ceiling.

The two MPs registered the shudder and exchanged a look. They apparently thought the Major had the shakes after a heavy night's boozing. Butcher ignored them and forced himself to calm down. He told himself that the horrible thing, the transparent giant crab thing, with that face. . . it had all been a pipe dream. Brought on by that peyote stuff.

He still had the bitter aftertaste of it in his mouth. Butcher leaned out of

the jeep and spat, while the MPs watched him with barely concealed distaste. He wished he could rinse his mouth out with the last of the mescal, anything to get rid of the foul residue of the peyote. They'd doped him. He'd had no choice. He'd been forced to eat the stuff at gunpoint. The Doctor had forced him. That little limey weasel. Well, he'd deal with him. And the girl.

Of course, Butcher had the good sense not to mention any of this to the MPs. He simply grunted a thank you for the wake-up call and started to turn on the jeep's engine. One of the MPs reached in and switched it off. 'Might be a good idea if you let us drive, Major. You look a little... tired.' Butcher resisted the temptation to scream abuse at the man. His head was pulsing painfully, with a terrible aching hangover. Maybe those Indian devils had also poured mescal down his throat while he was asleep. Maybe he was too drunk to drive.

He stood up to get out of the jeep and only then noticed, to his horror, the dark stain at the crotch of his trousers. The MPs had seen it too, and though they didn't give anything away, Butcher could clearly sense their disgust as he sat humbly in the rear of the vehicle and let them drive him back up the Hill. He'd wet himself. Last night. When he'd seen that thing.

Only there hadn't been a thing. It hadn't been real. It had been the peyote. It was all the Doctor's fault. He would deal with the Doctor.

Butcher made it his first order of business to enquire about the Doctor, Ace and Ray Morita. He learned that Morita had driven the other jeep back to the compound in the early hours of the morning and while no one remembered seeing the Doctor and Ace come back with him, they must have done so because they had been observed at breakfast that morning and had then apparently gone to work in the school as usual.

Only when he'd learned where all the miscreants were did Butcher allow himself to clean up. He showered, scrubbing vigorously with harsh pink soap as if he could scrub away the ignominy of what had happened to him the previous night. Then he dressed in a clean uniform and marched down towards the ranch school to confront the Doctor. He found him in the classroom with Ace, sitting disconsolately in front of a blackboard full of figures. The Doctor looked haggard and Ace was wearing sunglasses. Neither of them seemed to acknowledge Butcher's presence as he stalked into the room. In fact, they seemed to stare right through him.

For an eerie instant Butcher felt as if he didn't exist, as if he was a ghost haunting this old schoolroom. He cleared his throat, and finally they looked at him. 'How may we help you, Major?'

'I don't know how the hell you pulled what you pulled on me last night -'

'Kindly lower your voice, Major Butcher. Both Ace and I have had rather a trying time.'

'Not as trying as what's about to happen to the two of you.'

The Doctor sighed. 'And please Major, no threats. It's much too early in the day.'

'I just wanted you to know that you're not going to get away with it.'

'Get away with what, Major? I went on a nocturnal picnic with some friends. You insisted on joining us and we politely shared our food and drink with you.'

'Food and drink? You little bastard. They had their guns on me.'

The Doctor shook his head sadly. 'You rather startled my friends. Appearing out of the night like that, brandishing a weapon. They thought you were some kind of brigand. So naturally they gallantly leapt to our defence. They disarmed you. Nonetheless, we straightened everything out in no time and, if you recall, you were soon sitting beside the campfire with us, enjoying a snack and a drink. Indeed you enjoyed your drink so much that I understand you were found sleeping in your jeep this morning, rather the worse for wear.'

'You bastard. I'm going to get even with you for this.' He started towards the door, then thought of something. He came back and went over to the girl and took off her sunglasses. She didn't try and stop him. She had a black eye, a livid purple swelling high over her right cheek. He gave her the sunglasses back and she put them on again.

'Ace bumped into a door,' said the Doctor.

Butcher said nothing. He went out. His feet thundered down the corridor as he left the building. He was going to nail that little bastard good. As he stepped out into the daylight he almost ran into the lanky figure of Oppy hurrying in. 'Major. I need to talk to you.'

'I'm busy.'

'This is important. Ray Morita has disappeared.'

Butcher stopped in his tracks. 'I thought he came back this morning?

'He did. He returned the jeep to the motor pool and then went back to his quarters. But no one has seen him since.'

Butcher paused and considered. 'Someone must have seen him,' he said grimly. 'And I'll find out who. But first I need to deal with the Doctor.'

'Why? What has the Doctor done?'

Butcher turned to Oppy, opened his mouth to reply, and only then realised the impossibility of any explanation. What could he say? That he'd followed the Doctor into the foot hills, tracking him like an animal in the desert night? And then what? That he'd been disarmed by a trio of Apache braves, off the reservation and equipped with rifles? Where was the evidence? He had his gun back in his holster and he'd checked it. It was fully loaded and in

operational order. It had been carefully replaced in his holster before he'd been found this morning, disgracefully drunk and asleep in a jeep. He'd stunk of mescal and puke and his pants had been soaked with his own urine.

Butcher winced even to remember it. The word would be spreading around the base even now. He expected to receive a summons from General Groves at any moment, to be reprimanded and possibly even relieved of his duties. And what could he tell them? That the Doctor had somehow arranged it all? That Butcher had been doped and had the alcohol forced on him? By three armed Indians who had conveniently vanished into the night? No one would believe that. They'd laugh. He'd laugh himself, if he heard the same claim from someone else. No, he couldn't tell them what happened. He couldn't accuse the Doctor of slipping him a mickey and making him see monsters.

And with no accusations there could be no charges brought.

So, the Doctor would have to wait.

'All right,' he told Oppy. 'I'll look into this matter with Morita.'

'We have to get him back,' said Oppenheimer. 'He's crucial to the whole project. We can't afford to lose one of our best minds so close to Trinity.'

'We haven't lost him,' said Butcher. 'Not if I have anything to say in the matter.' He glanced back at the school, then reluctantly turned away and set off to contact the MP post and find out if anyone had seen Morita leave.

Oppy continued into the ranch school and went around the classrooms asking if any of the physicists had any idea where Ray Morita might be. After he'd spoken to the Doctor and Ace, and left them alone, Ace turned to the Doctor and said, 'He seems pretty upset.'

The Doctor nodded. He was standing holding a piece of chalk, studying his equations on the blackboard. 'Not surprising. As he said, Ray is a key member of the team and crucial to the project. More importantly though, if he's gone missing the immediate suspicion is that he might be a spy. That he might have been spying on the project all along, and that he's gone to report to his masters.'

'So there's going to be a real stink about him vanishing?'

'As you say, a real stink.'

'So why didn't we just bring him back with us in the TARDIS? We could have avoided all this.'

The Doctor smiled at her. 'Think, Ace. We could have done what you said. But think about the consequences.'

Ace frowned, considering. She took off her sunglasses and rubbed at the bruise on her cheekbone. 'Let's see. If we'd brought Ray back from LA with us, then he would have arrived here when we did, just after he left, and nobody would have ever known that he'd vanished.'

'And...?'

'And that means there wouldn't have been a stink, which is kind of my point.'

'And...?'

'And Major Bulldog Butcher wouldn't have gone off searching for him.' Ace suddenly fell silent. 'Oh.' She put her sunglasses back on.

'Indeed,' said the Doctor. 'Oh.'

'I see what you mean now. If Butcher hadn't gone off after him...'

'Yes,' said the Doctor. 'The consequences don't really bear thinking about.' He set down his piece of chalk and came over and sat beside Ace. 'By the way, I've been meaning to ask. What's that you're holding in your hand? You covered it up as soon as Butcher stepped in and again when Oppy appeared.'

Ace opened her fist. She was holding a piece of paper inside it. The Doctor glanced down and said, 'Ah yes. That could have been a bit tricky to explain. I suggest you get rid of it right now, while we think about it, so that there's no danger of it coming to the attention of Butcher later on.'

'What should I do with it?' Ace's voice was weary. Her eyes were invisible behind the dark lenses of her sunglasses.

'Burn it,' said the Doctor, handing her a box of matches. Ace took them and used them to burn the paper in one of the many ashtrays available in the classroom. It curled and vanished in the flames, ceasing to be recognisable as a train ticket.

'All tickets for Los Angeles, please. All tickets for Los Angeles.' The inspector moved slowly down the length of the observation car. The car had a kind of giant glass bubble on top that allowed the passengers to peer out at the passing landscape. Smoking was permitted here; encouraged even, by the presence of an ashtray for every armchair-like leather seat. The chrome ashtrays stood on graceful stems, like miniature tables, and had clamshell lids, which at least sealed off the stink of the smouldering butts and old ash inside. And at this time of day, in the late morning, the place was sparsely occupied. Ace had found that she liked the observation bubble. It reminded her in an odd way of the cockpit in Zorg's ship, though of course this one was much larger and was on the top of the vehicle.

The train rattled along in a dreamy rhythmic sweep through the landscape of the American west. 'Tickets for Los Angeles,' repeated the inspector as he worked his way along the observation car. He was a tiny, pale old man with a seamed face, wearing a black cap and a black uniform with brass buttons. He smiled at Ace as he took her ticket, his face sprouting new networks of wrinkles. 'We got ourselves some big names on the train today, miss.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'You English, miss?'

'That's right,' said Ace, truthfully enough. 'From London.'

'Terrible things those Nazis did to that city of yours. The bombing. Still they got theirs now. Berlin looks a heck of a lot worse than London ever did. Ha ha ha. Thanks to our boys.' Then he added hastily, 'And your boys too of course.' He squinted at her ticket. 'Going to Los Angeles on holiday?' He pronounced it *Loss Ang-galeez*.

'I've got some work to do there.'

'Well you sure picked a swell train to take you to the city. Like I was saying, some big names on board. We've got the entire Duke Ellington band here with us!' He leaned forward and spoke in a lower voice. 'They're all coloured fellows of course.'

'Of course,' said Ace.

'So naturally they've got their own Pullman car.'

'Naturally,' said Ace.

'Big names in music,' confided the man, finally punching her ticket and handing it back to her. Ace felt a warm sense of relief. She'd assumed that the tickets the Doctor had got for them were legit but you could never be sure, and the last thing she wanted was to end up under arrest here in California in 1945 for fare dodging. It was probably a hanging offence. Or did they use the electric chair in California? 'I used to be quite a fan myself,' said the ticket inspector. "'East St Louis Toodle-Oo" and "Creole Love Call". But not of their new stuff. The modern stuff. It's just *noise*. The kind of noise the jitterbugs go for. You're not a jitterbug, are you miss?'

'I certainly hope not.'

The ticket inspector chuckled. 'Of course you're not.' He moved on down the observation car. Ace waited a polite minute or two before getting up, so it wouldn't look like he'd driven her off, though in a way he had. In any case, it was time to rendezvous with the Doctor.

Their pre-established rendezvous point was the baggage compartment of the train, where the TARDIS had materialised when it had brought them here. Ace had followed the Doctor out of the blue police box carrying a huge roll of brown paper, some adhesive tape and a fat black pen. The hasty application of these materials had succeeded in making the TARDIS look convincingly like a large package of some kind – a very large package – complete with destination address and admonitions to handle with care.

Now Ace moved through the cluttered compartment to the tall brown parcel and stood in front of it. She tapped her toes and checked her watch. Either she was on time and the Doctor was late or she was running a little fast. Most likely the Doctor was late. She sat down on top of a large wicker hamper and had just begun to reflect on the irony of an unpunctual time traveller when the door at the far end of the compartment opened and the Doctor came bustling

in. 'Sorry to keep you waiting, but it took rather longer than I expected to do my reconnaissance.'

'They're in their own Pullman carriage,' said Ace.

'I beg your pardon?' said the Doctor.

Ace sat there on the hamper, swinging her legs and feeling smug. 'The ticket collector told me that the Duke Ellington band is on this train. And that they're in their own special carriage. Because they're coloured blokes, don't you know.'

'Yes.' The Doctor shook his head. 'One is often brought up short by the more ugly aspects of this era. But how did you even know I was looking for Duke Ellington?'

'Oh come on. The way Cosmic Ray kept banging on about his music it was obvious he's a pretty important factor in this whole operation. So when I hear he's on the same train you decided we should catch then I'm hardly likely to think it's a coincidence, am I?'

'Indeed not. Well done, Ace.'

Ace hopped off the hamper and joined the Doctor. 'So are we going to the Pullman car?'

'To the dining car, actually. I believe the Duke is just sitting down to his breakfast.'

'Breakfast?' said Ace, checking her watch. 'It's past noon.'

'Jazz musicians, Ace. Jazz musicians.'

Ace soon realised why they called him the Duke. He was a large, dapper man with smooth *café au lait* skin. He wore a beautifully tailored Prince of Wales check jacket, comfortably cut to accommodate his ample contours. He was a man with considerable flesh on him, and unmarked by any outward signs of hardship or suffering, he looked as sleek as a seal. His eyes were sleepy yet alert and a gentle smile played on his lips, coming and going as he sat at the table in the dining car – a small table further dwarfed by his bulk – discussing with the Doctor the ramifications of the departure of someone called Juan Tizol from the Duke's orchestra.

'You need three men just to replace him,' said the Doctor.

'Indeed,' agreed Duke Ellington, nodding graciously. 'Very true, very true.' He looked at Ace, who was sitting beside the Doctor. 'Your friend is an astute scholar of the swing combo.' He turned back to the Doctor. 'Three men indeed. Sweetpea to help with the composing, Claude Jones to play the valve trombone and good old Tom Whaley to help copy the parts. It was one of those challenges that the Good Lord likes to send my way now and then.' He smiled at Ace. 'I don't think He ever wants me to get too comfortable.' The smile warmed his lazy eyes and Ace realised that, with that smile, those eyes

and his beautiful manners, the Duke must be something of a lady-killer. Then, of course, there was also the fact that he was a wealthy music star. That would be quite enough to offset the matter of the Duke's considerable girth. He was a big man, and there was no mystery why.

When they had sat down to join the Duke, invited with a gracious wave of the hand after the Doctor had introduced himself, the Duke had been dining on scrambled eggs, smoked salmon, a dozen slices of hot buttered toast, hash fried potatoes, three muffins with jam, coffee and orange juice. In the course of their conversation he had managed to smoothly put most of this away without ever once talking with his mouth full or spilling a crumb on his immaculate clothing. He moved the knife and fork in his hands with the graceful dexterity of a world-class conductor waving his baton in front of a symphony orchestra. 'Tricky Sam still hasn't got over Juan's departure,' he added.

'And that terrible thing with Blanton,' said the Doctor as the Duke finished the last morsel of hash fries, set his cutlery neatly on the plate and proceeded to address the muffins. 'Such a tragedy.'

The Duke nodded, solemnly consuming the first of the three muffins. 'Jimmy was so young,' he said. 'He had so much music in him. It was a terrible blow have all that music silenced, but the Lord sends these trials now and then to test our strength, and our faith.' He dispatched the second muffin in a couple of swift but somehow unhurried bites and paused for a moment to look at the third muffin. It was the only piece of food on the table left undevoured, like the cornered, loan survivor of a massacre. 'I never knew anybody could make an upright bass talk like that. And I don't think anyone ever will again.' He paused, sadness heavy in his eyes for a moment, then fading as he comforted himself with the final muffin.

'And you've had some very interesting singers in the band over the years,' said the Doctor, shooting Ace a glance.

'Hmm, certainly. Very true, very true.' A white-coated black waiter came up to their table, beamed a smile, and began removing the Duke's plates. Ellington smiled back at the man and said, 'I'm ready now, thank you.' Ready for what? thought Ace.

'Ivy Anderson, Bing Crosby, the Mills Brothers, Herb Jeffries, Al Hibbler,' said the Doctor. 'And that girl who got into all the trouble.'

The waiter came back pushing a gleaming chrome steam trolley. He opened the lid to reveal two white plates stacked high with brown-and-beige pancakes, a block of butter melting atop each one, a large green bowl of sausages, and a white jug full of syrup. Using a napkin to protect his hands from the hot porcelain, the waiter transferred the food onto the table. The Duke smiled at the food, then at the Doctor. 'A girl singer who got into trouble?' he

drawled lazily 'I'm afraid you'll have to be somewhat more precise.' He chuckled. 'There's plenty of them and they all seem to find some way to get into trouble at one time or another.' He turned to the waiter. 'And some bacon, please.'

Bacon? thought Ace, staring at the mound of food on the table.

'This particular girl got into some very specific trouble.'

'Really?' said the Duke, his forehead wrinkling in a frown of sympathy as he poured a generous serving of warm maple syrup onto each of the tall piles of pancakes. He contentedly inspected the syrup dripping down the pancakes, like an artist pleased with an effect on a canvas. 'The poor dear.' He carefully speared one of the piles with a fork, holding it steady as he used the knife in his other hand, cutting like a surgeon. He removed a neat high wedge of pancake, layered like a prime archaeological site, compressed it carefully onto his fork, transferred it to his mouth, chewed and swallowed. He dabbed at his chin with a white napkin, removing a trace of syrup. 'Not too serious I hope.'

'Quite serious,' said the Doctor. 'Trouble with the government. About her sympathies. Or perhaps I should say her loyalties.'

'Ah,' said the Duke. 'That's the silken lady you're alluding to.' He shook his head and set to work carving out another wedge of pancakes. He cut, chewed, swallowed. 'Such a shame, a pretty little thing like that with such a daydream of a voice.' He addressed another wedge of pancakes. 'Then she had to go and get involved in politics.'

'I imagine she felt compelled to because of her background,' said the Doctor. 'Her Japanese blood.'

The Duke listened carefully as he continued eating. He had now finished his first plate of pancakes and pushed it aside, drawing the second one closer. 'Yes, you might indeed be tempted to think that, but when she was singing with my band I got to know Lady Silk quite well, and I have to say she didn't seem to have a political bone in her pretty little body. She just changed completely. Something changed her completely. Now they say she's making propaganda for the enemy And she's a fugitive from justice.' The Duke shook his head as he began to demolish the second stack of pancakes, pausing now and then to help himself to sausages. 'It's such a pity.'

'I believe Lady Silk sang with your band before the war. When you were performing in Los Angeles,' said the Doctor.

The Duke paused in his attack on the sausages. 'Los Angeles, Boston, Chicago, New York, New Orleans, Winnipeg. Across the entire atlas. But mostly Los Angeles. That's where Silk came from. Her home town.'

'So I understood,' said the Doctor. He was smiling and he had that look in his eyes that Ace knew well. The look of a hunter who has at last come in sight of his prey. 'I was wondering if you might have any recollections of places she

was especially fond of frequenting. Her old haunts, so to speak.'

The Duke finished the last of the pancakes and impaled a lone surviving sausage on his fork. He chewed the sausage, regarding the Doctor shrewdly. 'You wouldn't happen to be some kind of Fed, would you, my friend? A G-man as well as an aficionado of hot music?'

The Doctor grinned as if he had been waiting for this moment and took out a small wallet containing an ID card and a very large, very official-looking badge. Duke Ellington inspected it as he patted his lips with his napkin. 'Of course,' said the Doctor, 'I would entirely understand if you felt you were unable to help us out of a sense of loyalty to an erstwhile colleague of yours.'

Setting down his napkin, the Duke shook his head emphatically. 'Silk was a great vocaliser and I admired her artistry. She was also, when I used to know her, a very sweet person. But something happened to her. She changed. And became what she became. A tool for the enemy.' He looked at the Doctor, his eyes cool and assured. 'It grieves me to say it, but if I can help you put her behind bars, then I will. It gives me a heavy heart, friend, but my first loyalty is to Uncle Sam.'

'Most commendable,' said the Doctor. 'If we can locate her I guarantee she won't be badly treated. We'll handle her with kid gloves.'

'Not silk gloves?' said the Duke, with a thin, wry smile. Now that he'd agreed to help them he seemed wistful, almost regretful. Ace wondered if the band leader's relationship with the singer had been more than purely professional. The Duke carefully wiped his hands on the napkin, set it aside, and delved into the pocket of his jacket. He took out a notepad and a pen. 'I'll give you some addresses. Mostly music joints.'

'She's unlikely to be showing her face in public for obvious reasons,' said the Doctor.

The Duke nodded. 'I'll also make a note of several drinking establishments, some of them rather less salubrious than others. They're not exactly what you would call public places. And if you're going to visit them I suggest you approach them with a certain amount of caution.' He looked at Ace. 'Especially if you're taking a lady along with you.'

'I'm no lady,' said Ace.

Ellington chuckled. 'Of course you are darling, of course you are.'

'Ace merely means that she can take care of herself. Indeed, upon occasion she has had to take care of me.'

'A friend in need? You are a fortunate man, indeed.' The Duke stopped writing and contemplated the list. 'There is one other place. As you may know, California in general – and Los Angeles in particular – is a hotbed of cults and charlatans and purveyors of multifarious brands of snake oil. Something about the west coast seems to attract them, and they certainly have no short-

age of adherents.' The Duke smiled. 'Tricky Sam says LA is long on sunshine and oranges, and short on brains. Perhaps that's why. Anyway, some of these phoney religious cats operate what they call churches. Places I would never dignify with such a designation. But there was one that Lady Silk used to get a kick out of visiting. She attended it on a regular basis. I'll put that down too.'

'Would you?' said the Doctor. 'That's extremely helpful.'

'My pleasure,' said Ellington. 'Anything to help Uncle Sam.' He tore the page from his notebook, then reached into his pocket and took out two squares of green cardboard, which he wrapped in the notebook page. 'Tickets for our Los Angeles show tonight,' he said, handing them to the Doctor. 'I hope you and your charming friend will do us the honour of attending.'

'Thank you, that's very kind indeed.' The Doctor accepted the tickets and the piece of paper. The waiter came up beside their table, carrying a metal chafing dish full of crisp bacon. He looked crestfallen when he saw that the Duke had already polished off his pancakes.

'I'm sorry sir,' said the waiter. 'They were backed up in the kitchen, getting ready for lunch and I had to get them to fry up some special. I told them to get a move on. I told them if they didn't hurry they'd be too late.'

The Duke smiled. 'Never mind, my friend. There's only one solution. We shall have to have some more pancakes to accompany this delicious bacon.' He accepted the chafing dish reverently, setting it on the table as if he was placing a sacrament on an altar. Ace had to admit that the bacon did smell delicious.

'More pancakes,' said the waiter happily. 'Yes, sir!'

'And sausages and a bowl of cream of wheat I think,' said the Duke. 'And when you have a moment perhaps you could bring me the lunch menu. And I imagine you serve ice cream.'

'Yes, sir!'

The Doctor and Ace said their farewells and left the Duke happily contemplating ice cream. They headed back down the swaying length of the train, through cars full of troops who stole glances at Ace's legs, towards the baggage compartment. 'Any questions, Ace?' said the Doctor.

'Yes. I still want to know who the hell Uncle Sam is.'

Chapter Ten

Chapel of the Red Apocalypse

In the shadowy seclusion of the baggage compartment they tore away the TARDIS's shroud of brown wrapping paper and went back inside, where the Doctor, with the aid of a yellow and crumbling 1944 Los Angeles telephone directory, an equally yellow and fragile gas-station map from the period and a sophisticated computer the size and shape of a glistening black pearl that projected a detailed three-dimensional map of the city, set their co-ordinates.

'Which address on Duke Ellington's list shall we investigate first?'

'Well,' said Ace, 'as much as I liked the sound of those drinking establishments, especially the less salubrious ones, I think probably that church-type place.'

'I agree,' said the Doctor.

The sun was setting as they arrived, painting the Los Angeles sky in shades of salmon pink and scarlet. They materialised among a verdant patch of shrubbery in the grounds of a large Mexican-style house. The grounds were screened from the road and neighbouring dwellings by a white brick wall topped with curved red tiles. The air in the garden was clean and clear and full of the smell of flowers. 'I was expecting smog,' said Ace, sniffing appreciatively at the evening breeze. 'It being LA and all.'

'That particular ecological nightmare is still some ten or twenty years away,' said the Doctor, sealing the door of the TARDIS. There were trees and bushes all around, and these provided useful concealment for the incongruity of the blue police box. By the time they'd walked ten feet from it, the TARDIS was effectively hidden from sight. The Doctor studied the house. It was a cube-shaped dwelling with pink-and-white stucco walls, and elaborate arches over the windows and along a balcony that appeared to run around the entire second floor. In the centre of the flat roof was a curious domed structure.

The Doctor peered up at it. 'Astronomical observatory, by the look of it.'

'You mean they've got a telescope in there?'

'So it would seem.'

'For watching the neighbours undress?'

'Quite possibly. Now I suppose the thing to do is to cook up some kind of story to get us inside.'

‘Why didn’t we just land the TARDIS inside in the first place?’

‘Because then we would have had to cook up an even more elaborate story to explain how we’d got inside.’

‘I suppose you’re right,’ said Ace, following the Doctor across the neatly trimmed lawn, past lush flowerbeds shedding their delicate fragrances as the day faded around them. ‘It doesn’t look much like a church.’

‘This is California, Ace.’ They emerged from the palm trees fringing the garden onto a pink gravel driveway that led down in one direction towards a gateway in the white brick wall fitted with a black wrought-iron gate, and in the other direction up towards the front of the house. The Doctor turned and walked down towards the gate.

‘Where are you going?’

‘We just need to confirm something before we go any further,’ said the Doctor. He reached for the gate and took hold of its black iron bars and pulled on them. The gate gently eased open with the creak of rusting hinges. ‘Excellent,’ said the Doctor with satisfaction.

‘So the gate opens. So what?’

‘The gate is *unlocked*, Ace. We might have had some trouble explaining how we’d got inside if, say, it had been sealed with half a dozen formidable padlocks and a substantial length of chain.’

‘You could always say you were Harry Houdini.’

‘Right country, wrong period,’ said the Doctor. Ace followed him back up the driveway towards the house, the gravel shifting under her shoes. From somewhere nearby there was the somnolent splash of running water.

‘So what story have we cooked up?’ said Ace.

‘Hmm, good point.’ The Doctor checked his pockets. He took out the small wallet he had shown to Duke Ellington. ‘I still have this rather impressive-looking badge with me. It seems a shame to let it go to waste.’

‘Right, so a Fed it is. Or a G-man.’ The sound of water splashing was growing closer. It seemed to be coming from the side of the house to the left of the impressive black marble staircase. The staircase led up to a front door surrounded by an archway of black tiles. There was a large rectangular brass plaque on the wall beside the door. ‘By the way, what is a Fed or a G-man?’

‘Federal agent or government man. The terms are pretty much interchangeable. They allude to agents of the FBI.’

‘I always wanted to be in the FBI,’ said Ace. She could now read the plaque beside the door: *The Chapel of the Red Apocalypse*. ‘Blimey. Apocalypse? That’s cheerful.’

‘Doomsday cults have always exercised a peculiar appeal to a certain sort of mentality.’

‘Not just an apocalypse, mind you,’ said Ace. ‘But a red one.’ The sound of running water abruptly stopped and a small man came around the side of the building, dragging a length of garden hose behind him, rolling it up as he went. He was bald, with wire-framed spectacles, wearing neat black trousers and a white shirt open at the neck. Incongruously, he was also wearing a ragged and dirty pair of tennis shoes. He looked up at the Doctor and Ace and smiled.

‘Good evening,’ he said. ‘I thought I heard the gate.’

‘It’s a little late to be calling, I know,’ said the Doctor.

‘Heavens, no. Glad to have the company.’ The little man finished rolling up the hose and placed it inside a large red ceramic urn that stood beside a pile of neatly stacked lumber. He took a handkerchief from his pocket, meticulously dried his hands with it and then shook hands with the Doctor and Ace.

‘My name’s Albert. I’m the caretaker, gardener and all-purpose handyman around here. I’m looking after the place while the Storrows are away.’

‘The Storrows being the people who run the chapel?’

‘That’s right. Run it and own it. What can I do for you?’

‘My name’s Smith,’ said the Doctor, lying smoothly. ‘And this is my assistant Miss Eckhart.’

‘Call me Acacia,’ said Ace.

Albert bobbed his head thoughtfully, as though savouring the syllables. ‘Beautiful name,’ he declared, and suddenly Ace felt ashamed about lying to him.

‘We’re here on a matter of considerable importance,’ said the Doctor.

‘Not too important to discuss over a cup of coffee, I hope,’ said Albert. ‘Come on in. The Missus will have a pot on the go or I’m a Chinaman.’

The Missus turned out to be an enormously fat woman in a blue-and-white striped dress that put Ace uncharitably in mind of a circus marquee. Her name was Elina and she was huge; at least twice the size of her husband. Her cheeks were bright red and she fanned herself cheerfully with her hands as they were introduced. ‘You’ll have to pardon me,’ she said. ‘This slave driver here has had me chained to a hot stove all day.’

‘It smells lovely,’ said Ace. The house was full of the aroma of freshly baked bread.

‘Nothing like a home-made loaf,’ said Albert. ‘It beats that mass-produced stuff all to Hades.’

‘This place doesn’t look much like a chapel,’ said Ace. In fact it looked like a pleasant suburban home.

‘Oh, all that religious cult stuff is in the temple,’ said Albert, making a contemptuous gesture of dismissal with his hand, as if sweeping all such religious cult stuff away.

'And where is the temple?' said the Doctor.

'In the basement,' said Elina breathlessly. 'You should take a gander at it.'

'We'll show these folks around in a minute,' said Albert. The Doctor had shown him his badge and credentials outside and the man had seemed duly impressed.

'The things that went on in that temple,' said Elina, addressing Ace in the sort of confidential voice reserved for prime gossip. 'I couldn't begin to tell you. And the couple who run this place...'

'The Storrows,' said the Doctor.

'That's right. What a pair.' Elina raised her eyebrows. 'They're not right in the head. You know what I mean. Crazy.'

'Crazy like foxes,' said Albert. 'Look at all the dough they're making from this operation.'

'Fleecing the gullible,' said Elina.

'A fool and his money...' said Albert.

'Are soon parted. OK. But that's no excuse. And the sort of things those Storrows got up to.' Elina's eyes widened dramatically. 'You have to see the temple and also that observatory up on the roof. Those are the places where all the strange goings-on go on.'

'We'll show them around in a minute,' said Albert. 'But right now come on through.' He led the Doctor and Ace from the small hallway into the front parlour, a room full of antique French chairs and divans poised on their clawed feet on a thick white carpet. 'Have a seat, please. Could you rustle up some coffee for the folks, sweetie?'

Elina winked at Ace. 'See what I mean? Slave driver!' she bustled out as the Doctor and Ace looked for somewhere to sit. The furniture was all so delicate and fragile-looking that Ace was reluctant to put her weight on any of it. She could just imagine the crunching sound of a priceless antique breaking. Albert had solved the problem by sitting on a footstool. But it was the only one in the room. So when the Doctor chose a low silver-grey love seat, Ace perched on it beside him. This way if it broke at least it would be half his fault.

'Now, how exactly can we help you, sir?' said Albert.

'You said you're the caretaker here?'

'Me and my good lady, that's right. We've looked after this place ever since it shut up shop.'

'And when was that?'

Albert frowned. 'Must be coming up for a year now.'

The Doctor looked disappointed. 'This chapel has been closed for the last year?'

'Yes sir. The folks that run it, the Storrows, took off for Mexico on what they call an extended vacation. Seems like this war doesn't trouble some people.'

Doesn't stop them having their fun and taking their leisure.'

'I don't suppose there's any way of trying to trace any regular members of the, er, congregation who used to attend here frequently?'

Albert's face lit up. 'Now there I can help you.' He rose from the footstool and went over to an ivory-coloured escritoire and opened a drawer, taking out a large photo album with a marbled orange paper cover. He gave it to the Doctor, who opened it on his lap and began leafing through it. 'Lots of well-known folk used to come up here,' said Albert, returning to his perch on the footstool. 'You'd be surprised. Movie stars, singers, football players, jockeys, all kinds. The Storrows liked to keep photos of all the famous ones.'

'Excellent, excellent,' said the Doctor, leafing through the album. Ace leaned over as he stopped at a page. Gazing out at them from a stylish sepia photograph was the moody and beautiful face of Lady Silk.

'Bingo,' said Ace.

Albert hopped to his feet and hurried over to take a look. 'Her!' he said. 'That Jap-a-Nazi traitor! Is she the one you're after?'

'Indeed.' The Doctor nodded, studying the picture. It was inscribed in the same indigo ink and flowing female hand as the photo they'd seen in Ray's apartment. It read, *To a new day dawning*.

'Isn't that something,' exclaimed Albert excitedly. 'I'm tickled to hear it. If I can help you put that wicked female under lock and key I'll be only too delighted.' His wife came back in, carrying a tray with a coffee pot, cups, a loaf of bread and several plates. Albert looked at her. 'You'll never guess who these folks are after, Elina. That Lady Silk character. You know. The traitor. The singer. They're going to lock her up and throw away the key. And we're going to help!'

'Now, pumpkin,' said the big woman. She set the tray down on a low, frail-looking white table with ornate gilt trim. 'Don't get so het up. You know you have to mind your blood pressure.'

'To Hades with my blood pressure. We're going to help bring a traitor to justice.'

'A commendable sentiment,' said the Doctor. 'But I'm afraid this photograph on its own isn't much help. It merely confirms that Lady Silk once regularly attended this chapel.'

'Oh, we've got a lot more than that,' said Albert happily. He bounced up from his stool and went back to the escritoire. As his wife poured coffee and sliced bread, he tugged open another drawer and took out a zipped leather folder. The bulging folder was so large that he had to work carefully to extract it from the narrow drawer. 'Wait until you see this!' He came and plopped the folder down on the love seat between the Doctor and Ace.

'What is it?' said Ace as the Doctor unzipped it.

‘Correspondence,’ said Albert. As the Doctor opened the folder, envelopes began to spill out onto the love seat. ‘Letters from the poor fools who used to come here. Who knows, there might be something from that Lady Silk jezebel. It might be just what you’re looking for.’

‘It might indeed,’ said the Doctor, sifting through the growing pile of envelopes. They had all been neatly slit open and were all shapes and sizes and colours. The handwriting on the envelopes, addressed to the Storrows at the Chapel, was of an equally extraordinary variety and, to Ace’s mind, looked uniformly eccentric, as if only weirdos were involved. Then suddenly she spotted a pale lilac envelope addressed with blue ink in a distinctive script. The Doctor saw it at the same time. ‘Ah!’ he said.

‘Here’s another one,’ said Ace, rifling through the pile and plucking out another lilac envelope in Lady Silk’s distinctive handwriting.

‘Have you found something?’ enquired Elina. She sat down on a spindly chair near the love seat and Ace took note of the fact. If that enormous woman could sit on these things then Ace might as well stop worrying about damaging the furniture.

‘You bet they have,’ said Albert. ‘They’re going to apprehend a fugitive from justice and we’re going to help them.’

The Doctor had extracted Silk’s letter from inside the envelope and was thoughtfully perusing it while Ace searched for more envelopes addressed in her hand. ‘You know what else might be helpful?’ said Elina.

‘What’s that dear?’

‘Those ledgers. Those great big ledgers the Storrows keep.’

The Doctor looked up from the letter. ‘Ledgers?’

‘That’s right,’ said Albert excitedly. ‘Big huge volumes. The Storrows record details about business transactions, but also about their so-called clients. They have names, addresses, personal facts...’

‘Some *very* personal facts,’ added Elina, her fat cherubic face turning hot and red.

‘They’re like personal histories. I suspect the Storrows have some pretty unsavoury reasons for keeping them. In fact, I bet they use them to apply leverage.’

‘Leverage?’ said the Doctor. ‘You mean blackmail?’

‘I’m afraid so,’ said Albert. He went and stood beside Elina. The woman took his tiny hand in her huge one. ‘The Missus and I didn’t know what kind of people they were when we started working here. Then by the time we found out...’

‘Don’t castigate yourselves,’ said the Doctor. ‘You’re making amends now. And I would certainly like to see those ledgers.’

‘They’re upstairs in the office. I’ll go and get them,’ said Albert.

‘Oh but they’re heavy,’ said Elina. ‘And they’re up on that high shelf.’

‘I’m not a child, woman.’

‘They’re much too heavy for you to reach down.’ Elina rose ponderously from her chair. ‘I’ll come up and help you.’

‘Not with your veins you won’t,’ said Albert fiercely. ‘You know what those stairs do to your legs.’

‘I’ll help,’ said Ace. She rose from the love seat, leaving the Doctor to look through the envelopes as Albert led her from the room. The carpeted staircase rose upwards from the entrance hall into the cool, shadowy, quiet space of the second floor. There was a sweet, dusty smell of dying flowers in the air.

‘This is very good of you,’ said Albert. ‘I could probably wrestle those darn ledgers down by myself, but Elina’s right. They’re awfully big.’ He reached the top step and stood aside politely to let Ace go past. They were in a narrow corridor with framed photographs on the wall on either side. The photographs were similar to the ones in the album downstairs. Glamour shots of celebrities, carefully staged studio shots with immaculate lighting. It was amusing to Ace to note how many of the sleek men and women were posed with cigarettes, as though tobacco was an essential part of their mystique.

Some of the photographs were more candid shots, taken informally indoors and outside. In some she recognised the chapel in the background. Several featured Albert and Elina posing with the celebrities. Ace had just begun to wonder why movie stars and famous athletes would want to pose with the caretaker and his wife, when she came on one photo depicting a beautiful oriental woman flanked by the couple. There was no question of the woman’s identity. It was Lady Silk, and Albert and Elina were standing on either side of her.

That was weird.

Ace turned to Albert, who was following close behind her, to ask him about it. As she turned she saw Albert stepping away from her, pulling his arm sharply back, then lunging at her in a violent blur of movement. There was a look of vicious glee in his eyes. His fist slammed into her face, high on her right cheekbone, and Ace felt her head snap back. The pain was intense, as though the whole side of her face was collapsing, and the blow knocked her off her feet. She fell backwards, hitting the wall, dragging framed photographs down off it. One of the pictures, in a large heavy metal frame crashed down on her head and bounced off, the glass shattering. The blow from the heavy picture frame felt like it was pushing Ace down into deep, muddy water. She fought to retain consciousness.

All she could think was that she had to warn the Doctor. She opened her mouth and tried to scream, and Albert stepped forward and kicked her in the pit of the stomach. Ace heard the breath whoop out of her mouth and felt her

body hinge forward at the waist, a broken toy. Consciousness began to melt away redly at the edges. She distantly felt Albert continuing to pummel her, but it was all irrelevant now.

She stared at her feet as she blacked out.

'Ace. Ace.' The voice was a low, insistent whisper. It kept coming at her. It wouldn't leave her alone. The voice was familiar, but that didn't make her any more eager to listen to it. Ace tried to go back to sleep. She tried to roll over and pull the covers over her head. But she couldn't move. There were no covers. She wasn't in bed.

She was sitting in a chair with her hands tied behind the back of it. Ace raised her head and wearily opened her eyes. The Doctor was sitting opposite her, also tied to a chair. They were in a circular room with a spiral staircase descending through a well in the centre of the floor. There was a raised semi-circular platform at one end of the room with a telescope perched on a tripod upon it. The telescope was pointed at a wide curving window that revealed an expanse of sky, full of clouds stained with sunset colours. That was all Ace could take in. She shut her eyes again.

'Ace. Wake up. Please. You must wake up.' The Doctor was persistent, pleading, wheedling but she just ignored him. What was the point waking up when you were tied to a chair in some kind of observatory with a telescope? The only sensible thing to do was to go back to sleep and hope you'd wake up somewhere else.

'Ace!' The Doctor's voice was imperative, relentless. It was like trying to sleep while your neighbours were drilling the walls. Ace opened her eyes again. She was staring at the floor now, at her feet. They were tied to the front legs of the chair. Staring at her feet reminded her of something.

The last thing she'd seen before she blacked out. Sitting there in the upstairs hall with her back against the wall, broken pictures all around her and Albert beating the hell out of her. With the memory came fear and anger, but mostly anger.

'The little creep sucker-punched me,' she said. Her voice sounded strangely quiet, rusty. Her mouth was dry.

'Good girl, Ace,' said the Doctor fiercely. 'You're awake now. Stay awake.'

'Oh God. I feel sick. My head hurts.'

'They've been dosing you with chloroform every time you woke up.'

'The toerags.' Ace stared across the room at the Doctor. She tried to smile but her lips wouldn't move. She could feel the swelling of a black eye on her right cheek. It felt tight and hot. Then something the Doctor had said began to alarm her. 'Chloroform?'

‘Yes, although I think they might be using ether, too. In any case you’re all right now. Take deep breaths.’

Ace looked at the window. The sun hadn’t sunk entirely yet. It seemed to be only a few minutes after she’d gone upstairs with Albert. ‘How long have I been out?’

‘Almost twenty-four hours.’

‘Twenty-four hours?’

‘Yes it’s the night of the following day.’

‘So I guess we missed Duke Ellington,’ said Ace.

The Doctor smiled. ‘I’m afraid so.’

‘Pity. Why have they been keeping me unconscious?’

‘They obviously want us helpless while they decide what to do with us. They’ve also been dosing me, though the chloroform hasn’t had the desired effect because of my somewhat different metabolism. I’ve been pretending to sleep and waiting for you to come round.’

Ace shook her head, trying to disperse the thick clouds that seemed to clog it. ‘Albert and Elina. They’re not the Storrows’ caretakers.’

‘No, they’re the Storrows themselves. We should have suspected something. They were all too conveniently cooperative and eager to betray their employers. I should have suspected something.’ The Doctor smiled sadly. ‘I’m sorry I got you into this.’

‘It’s what I signed up for,’ said Ace. ‘So what do we do now?’

‘Actually, there are quite a number of courses of action open to us. I was merely waiting for you to wake up, because your assistance is required in all of them. Do you feel ready?’

Ace shook her head again. The room seemed to pulse and ebb around her before stabilising. ‘As I’ll ever be.’

‘Then I suggest we work our way across the room. It’s possible to move in these chairs if we’re patient, by rocking from side to side. We will work our way to that telescope and then, with your help, we will tip it over. This is the critical part. We must break it, break its lens, but without making too much noise. Between the two of us I believe we can manage that.’

‘And once we break it. . .’ Ace forced herself to concentrate. ‘We can use the broken glass. To cut the ropes.’

‘Yes. I suggest we begin immediately. Like this. . .’ The Doctor started wiggling in his chair, causing it to edge slowly towards the raised section of the floor where the telescope stood.

Ace said, ‘That raised bit of the floor. . .’

‘May cause us some difficulties, yes. But nothing insurmountable, I believe. With your help I should be able to tip my chair and rock upwards onto it.’

Ace forced a smile. 'OK, let's rock upwards.' She began to wriggle back and forth in her chair. At first she moved in the wrong direction, but soon she got the hang of it. She and the Doctor started to move towards the telescope, painstakingly scuffing their chairs across the floor as though competing in some kind of bizarre party game.

They'd gone about eighteen inches when there was the sound of footsteps coming up the stairwell in the centre of the room. Ace and the Doctor froze. A large shadow lumbered up the stairs, followed by the man casting it. The first they saw of him was his red beret rising through the hole in the floor.

'Ray!'

Cosmic Ray Morita came up the stairs into the room. He was carrying the square yellow record bag Ace had first seen at the Oppenheimers' party. His face had a mournful expression. He looked at Ace and the Doctor. 'Oh man,' he said. 'I'm so sorry this happened, guys.'

'Ray,' said Ace. 'What are you doing here?'

'Had to come to LA baby, to hear the Duke play. It meant going AWOL from the Hill but it was worth it. I can straighten things out when I get back. I had to hear Duke Ellington, live in concert. It was my last chance.'

'But what are you doing *here*,' said Ace.

'Yes, Ray,' said the Doctor coldly. 'What are you doing here in the Chapel of the Red Apocalypse?'

Ray shook his head glumly. 'I guess you know the answer to that. Otherwise you wouldn't be here looking for me.'

'As a matter of fact, we had no idea you'd be here,' said the Doctor. 'We didn't even know you'd gone AWOL as you put it. As far as I knew my Mescalero friends had returned you to Los Alamos safe and sound.'

'They did man, they did. Those Indian cats are all right. They don't say a lot, but they're OK. They dropped me back near the mesa and I drove the jeep up the Hill and returned it. But then I split for LA.' Ray regarded the Doctor gloomily in silence for a moment, as if working up his nerve to ask a question. Finally he said, 'If you didn't know I was here, why did you come, daddy-o?'

'We were looking for Lady Silk,' said the Doctor. 'So I suppose it should come as no surprise that you turned up as well.'

'Oh, don't put me in the same bag as them, man. That Lady Silk and Imperial Lee. They're fanatics man, they're fanatics.'

'And what are you, Ray?'

'Just a lost soul,' said Ray morosely. 'A long way from home.'

'That's a very sad story, Ray,' said Ace. 'Why don't you untie us while you tell us all about it.'

'Sorry Ace baby. I can't. I want to, but I can't.'

'Why not?'

'Because Ray is doing the bidding of the people who are holding us prisoner.' The Doctor stared at him coldly. 'Don't expect him to think or act for himself.'

'That's not fair man. You make me sound like some kind of flunky. I'm no flunky.'

'Then untie us,' said Ace.

Ray shook his head sadly. 'I'm sorry. I can't help. I never should have come up here. But I had to take a look. To see if it was you cats. From what they were saying, it sounded like you. I was hoping it wasn't, though.' Ray turned and walked ponderously back towards the spiral staircase.

'Wait,' said the Doctor.

'I told you, I can't untie you, man.'

'Don't untie us then,' said the Doctor in a calm, persuasive voice. 'But just stay and talk to us.'

Ray hesitated, his hand on the wrought-iron stair rail. 'Just talk, man?'

'That's right. Tell us about yourself. After all, you have nothing to hide now.'

Ray turned and came back into the room and stood between the Doctor and Ace. 'I'd offer you a chair,' said the Doctor. 'But there only seem to be two, and they're currently occupied by Ace and myself.' Ray shook his head and sat down on the raised section of floor beside the telescope. He took the record bag off his shoulder and carefully set it to one side.

'You want me to tell you about myself?'

'That's right, Ray,' said the Doctor soothingly. 'We just want to know a little more about you.'

'But you must know everything about me, man.'

'Not at all.'

'But didn't they send you after me? From back home I mean. Didn't they send you to try and stop me?'

The Doctor smiled. 'Not exactly, Ray. For a start, there is no "they". Ace and myself are free agents. No one sent us. And we didn't exactly come from back home. Or at least I didn't. Ace did.'

'What?' said Ace.

The Doctor turned to look at her. The angle of their chairs after their futile attempt to move across the room meant that he had to stare across his shoulder at an awkward angle. Nonetheless, he made an attempt to smile. 'You come from the same place and time as Ray.'

'But he comes from another dimension.'

'So do you, Ace. The same dimension.'

'But you said -' Ace paused. She forced herself to think. The Doctor and Ray stared at her as she sat there, fiercely silent, trying to put it all together in her head. 'No,' she said slowly. 'You didn't. You never said that this was our own dimension. Our own universe. I just assumed it was.'

'So you guys dig the multiverse theory,' said Ray. 'That's a relief. You understand there's an infinite number of dimensions, all of them tiny variations on each other, man. And the possibilities are exhaustive, baby, exhaustive.'

'Well, I'm exhausted anyway,' said Ace bitterly.

'What Ray means is that every imaginable possibility exists, every variation of the universe, all nestling together and even overlapping. Isn't that correct, Ray? Isn't that how you came to be here?'

Ray shook his head dolefully. 'I don't know any more, man. I used to think it was all physics. A matter of where the two dimensions overlap, and the probability of it. But now I'm beginning to think it's magic man, like black magic.'

'Clarke's law,' said Ace. The Doctor gave her an approving look.

'What's that, man?'

'At a certain point science and magic become indistinguishable,' said the Doctor. 'When technology is sufficiently advanced. And you were working on some very advanced technology, weren't you, Ray?'

'I was a particle physicist, working at the biggest, meanest particle accelerator ever built. And I was good, man. I mean, I was one of their top boys. Until my equations started getting too way-out for them.'

'Because you had discovered the possibility of interdimensional travel.'

'That's right. I was working on risk projection. Like, the possibility of the accelerator finding a rogue particle, man. The kind of particle that might destroy the Earth. . .'

'Like Teller's chain reaction,' said Ace. In her mind, facts were coming together, interlocking puzzle pieces, and she could feel a chill crawling up her spine. She was beginning to understand, and she wasn't sure that she wanted to.

'That's right,' said the Doctor. 'One of the little-known facts about such accelerators is that they might bring into being particles that are... highly volatile.'

'Like they could destroy the Earth baby. And maybe blow up the whole universe for an encore. So that was my job, man. To calculate the probabilities. But it was wacky man. It was way out. What my calculations said... They said that the probability of a quantum catastrophe was directly related to the equations that predicted it.'

'What the hell are you talking about?' said Ace. The Doctor turned to her and smiled patiently, his eyes full of sadness, and forgiveness and understanding.

'Ray means that any equation that could predict a doomsday particle with total accuracy would be part of the process that brings it into being. It would, if you will, cause it.'

‘Cause and effect baby, cause and effect. All messed up at a quantum level. But the bigwigs at the accelerator didn’t want to know man.’ Ray’s face grew troubled. ‘But there were other people. People who *did* want to know. Lady Silk and Imperial Lee is what they call themselves, though they’ve got other names. They found out about me and they came to me. They said there was something missing from my calculations. They said what I needed wasn’t just physics, mathematics, science. They said I needed magic, man. Their own brand of hoodoo. Magic and desire.’

‘Desire?’ said the Doctor.

Ray looked like he was going to cry. ‘They were using me man. I didn’t know it, but they were using me for their own nefarious ends. Because my equations showed what happened when reality broke down at a fundamental level, the level where the infinite number of universes overlap. Silk and Lee thought that they could use my calculations to cross over, to break into another dimension. And they were right. But they said there was something lacking from my equations. Desire. And they were right about that, too.’ Ray looked at Ace and the Doctor. ‘Desire was the missing element. They told me if I cared passionately enough, if I wanted to cross over badly enough, then I could. We could.’

‘And what was it?’ said the Doctor. ‘What was it that you desired so badly that it enabled you to bridge the gulf between dimensions?’

The sadness left Ray’s face for a moment, to be replaced by blazing passion. His eyes shone. ‘Well man, you know about the recording ban.’

‘The what?’ said Ace.

‘The American Federation of Musicians’ recording ban,’ said Ray. ‘In the 1940s, the musicians’ union wanted more bread. So effectively they went on strike. All professional musicians were forbidden to make recordings. They could perform live, but no recordings could be made.

‘And talk about savage ironies, man.’ Ray’s face was suddenly animated. ‘The ban kept Ellington out of the recording studio from July twenty-eighth 1942 to December first 1944. And that was his greatest period, his coolest band! The best jazz music ever made, and it all just vanished into the air. No recordings, baby, gone forever. Lost forever.’

The Doctor nodded. ‘That’s what you meant by what you said at the Openheimers’ party. About this music coming so close to not existing at all.’

‘That’s right, man! Back home, in our world, it *doesn’t* exist. There weren’t any recordings. But here, in this alternate universe, there was no ban. They kept right on recording, all through the golden period. With the greatest band the Duke ever had.’

There was a momentary silence in the room. Then Ace spoke, in a voice that began softly but swiftly rose until it was almost a shriek, ‘You mean you

did all this to *collect a record*?’

Ray rocked back from her defensively. He picked up his record bag and clutched it to his chest as though it was a child in need of protection.

‘A whole bunch of records, man.’

Chapter Eleven

California Death Cult

‘I don’t care how many effing records you’ve managed to collect,’ said Ace. She was spitting out the words with such venom that saliva sprayed from her mouth, but she didn’t care. ‘You opened a portal between dimensions for *that*? You tampered with the fabric of reality just for *that*?’

‘Desire, baby.’ Ray seemed upset that she didn’t understand. ‘That was the key. The final piece of the puzzle. My equations only took me so far. Then Silk and Lee got their hooks into me and took me the rest of the way with their hoodoo. And, baby, it worked. I could cross over into a universe that had what I wanted. But they came too, man. Silk and Lee and their crew. They came with me. That was the deal.’

‘Or the pact,’ said the Doctor coldly. ‘You do realise that you’ve jeopardised this world? That with your twenty-first-century knowledge of physics you are in danger of destabilising the atomic bomb programme?’

‘I didn’t know it at the time, man. I knew there’d be a price to pay, but I didn’t know what it was. I didn’t realise what Silk and Lee were up to. They’re fanatics, man.’

‘And do you know what they’re up to now?’

‘They don’t tell me everything. But I’m not stupid. I know it’s not good.’

‘That’s a considerable understatement,’ said the Doctor.

‘It certainly is,’ said a woman’s voice. They all turned to look at the stairwell, where a figure was rising gracefully from the shadows. The woman was elegant and diminutive. She wore a green-and-white checked jacket, tailored to swell at the shoulders and taper sharply at the waist. Under the jacket she wore a top made of a single panel of clinging dark green silk with a circular neck. Her skirt was made of the same silk and under it her legs were bare. She wore black slippers on her small feet. Seeing her face in photographs had in no way prepared Ace for the reality of the woman’s beauty. Her skin was a shade of ivory and her eyes a deep green that matched her clothing. Slender sculpted black eyebrows echoed the curves of her high cheekbones. Her exquisite lips were a deep, bright shade of candy red.

Lady Silk came up the stairs and into the room, her slippers whispering on the floor. She walked past Ace and the Doctor, tied in their chairs, as if they

didn't exist. Ray Morita looked up at her as she came and sat down beside him on the raised semicircle of floor. 'I thought I asked you not to wander off, Ray.' Her voice was a gentle purr. Ray lifted his head to look at her like a cow raising its head to the man in the slaughterhouse who held the hammer. His expression was an odd amalgam of fear and tenderness.

'I heard that there were prisoners, Silk, and I had to see if they were my buddies. So I came up to take a look.'

Lady Silk adjusted her skirt to cover the pale curves of her knees, thereby drawing the attention of anyone who hadn't already noticed her bare, shapely legs. Ace felt a wave of hatred for the woman that seemed strong enough to tear her out of the chair, to rip apart her bonds. But it wasn't. Lady Silk looked up at her with a lazy amused smile, as if she sensed Ace's rage. 'And were they? Your buddies?'

'Yeah, man. They're my friends. So can't we let them go?'

'Sure, Ray. Why didn't you say so?' Lady Silk got to her feet and lifted her skirt high above one perfect thigh. There, strapped to her, was a knife in a sheath. She drew the knife and held it high. In the dimming light of the room its blade looked blue. She went over and stood behind Ace. Ace braced herself, forcing her chin down onto her chest so the woman couldn't get at her jugular.

A low chuckle came from behind her. 'The little woman thinks I'm going to cut her throat.' Ace felt her bonds go tight around her arms, and then suddenly loosen. There was a spilling, thudding sound as the cut length of rope fell to the floor. Lady Silk came around in front of her and kneeled before her as if in supplication. But she was busy with the knife again. The blue blade passed smoothly through the ropes that held her ankles to the chair, slicing the fibres apart.

Ace was free. But she found she still couldn't move. She had been tied up in the same position for so long that her body wouldn't function. Lady Silk rose to her feet and went across the room and cut the Doctor free. He didn't seem to have Ace's problem. He sprang to his feet immediately and seized Lady Silk's wrist. 'Ow,' she said. 'That hurts.'

The Doctor said nothing. He took the knife from her and put it in his pocket, then hurried over to Ace, who was beginning to feel the first hot agony of returning circulation. 'Are you all right?'

'I will be in a minute.' She tentatively put a foot forward and tried to apply some of her weight to it. She immediately buckled and had to sit down again.

'Don't try to move just yet.' The Doctor turned to Lady Silk. 'Don't you move either. In fact why don't you just sit down?'

'Certainly.' Lady Silk sank down into the chair and crossed her legs while she unbuttoned her jacket. 'May I smoke?'

‘No,’ said the Doctor. ‘This is a smoke-free zone.’

Lady Silk chuckled throatily. ‘You know, that’s one of the things I love about this world. You can smoke anywhere. Imagine that. Being able to smoke in a restaurant in Los Angeles. Hell, I can smoke in hospital if I want. I can smoke in the *children’s ward* of a hospital.’

‘And I’m sure you do,’ said Ace. She tottered to her feet as Lady Silk laughed appreciatively. Ace’s limbs felt like she’d slept on them, all four of them. They were slabs of dead meat. But sensation was slowly returning to them with a painful pins-and-needles prickling. She took a few steps forwards with the Doctor hovering behind her in case she fell. Ace felt like a convalescent taking her first steps after a long illness.

‘What do we do now?’ she said.

‘Hmm,’ said the Doctor. ‘Well we’re not doing badly. We have retrieved Ray safely, and taken Lady Silk captive.’

‘I always wanted to be taken captive,’ drawled Lady Silk. ‘Pity it couldn’t last.’ Ace and the Doctor looked at her and she nodded at something behind them. They turned to see the Storrows standing there. The couple had emerged silently from the spiral staircase, moving with impressive stealth, particularly in the case of the large Elina. They were bizarrely dressed in hooded white robes with big, bright red circles in the centre of their chests.

They were both holding Thompson sub-machine-guns.

Lady Silk reached into the pocket of her jacket and took out a pack of cigarettes. ‘I think I’ll smoke now,’ she said.

The Storrows hadn’t lied about the basement of the house being a chapel. It was a single large room with a high ceiling with a ring of electric bulbs glowing in the centre of it. There were also lights set in recessed sconces at intervals in the wall. The ceiling had been painted white as had the top half of the walls. There were rectangular windows set high in the wall, presumably at ground level outside, with milky opaque glass that prevented anyone seeing out, or in. Ace noticed that several of the windows were open. But they were high up the wall, about ten feet above the ground, too high to allow any easy escape. The lower half of the walls and the floor were uniformly covered with white tiles, except for a circular space in the centre of the floor that had been decorated in red tiles. This large red spot on a white background echoed the motif of the robes the Storrows were wearing.

‘It’s like the Japanese flag,’ said Ace.

‘Yes, the post-war Japanese flag, oddly enough,’ murmured the Doctor. Lady Silk heard what they were saying and smiled.

‘That’s what Lee said when he saw it. He said it was fate.’ She tapped ash off the end of her cigarette, a grey fragment drifting down onto the immaculate

white-tile floor. 'Imperial Lee is very big on fate.'

As they came further into the room, with the Storrows at their backs, pointing the Tommy guns, Ace noticed something. In the centre of the large red circle there was another circle. An opening in the floor. As she moved closer she saw that it led into a cylindrical opening that descended into the floor to a depth of about eight feet, like a shallow well. But the well was lined with the same red tiles as the broad surrounding circle, which made it hard to see.

'What's the well for?' said Ace.

'Oh, you know,' said Lady Silk, taking a puff on her cigarette. 'You can't have a proper California death-cult chapel without facilities for making sacrifices.'

'Death cult?' said Ace.

'Sacrifices?' said the Doctor.

Silk smiled at the Storrows. 'Sure. Albert and Elina made a modest start in that direction. What was it, Albert? Gophers and chipmunks? The occasional sparrow?'

'Cockerels,' said Albert Storrow tightly, 'roosters, rams, goats. . .'

'Oh, relax,' said Silk, exhaling smoke. 'I was just trying to get *your* goat. Anyway, the Storrows had made some humble moves in that direction but then we came on the scene and moved the whole thing up a level or two.' She smiled at Ace and the Doctor. 'As you're going to find out.'

Ray, who had been hanging back near the staircase, suddenly spoke. 'Oh, come on Silk, you can't be serious.'

'Serious about what?' said Ace. She was getting worried.

'Human sacrifice,' said the Doctor, making explicit the concept she'd been trying to avoid.

'It's crazy, man,' said Ray, coming into the centre of the room. He stopped at the edge of the red circle, as if afraid to intrude on it. 'It's just superstition. Hokum, baby.'

'Hokum, is it?' said Elina Storrow fiercely. 'Just superstition? Was it just superstition that we were sacrificing a black ram at the exact moment you appeared in the Well of Transition? Just as we shed its blood.'

'This is where you arrived when you crossed over?' said the Doctor. Lady Silk just nodded and puffed contentedly on her cigarette, listening to the argument that was growing between Ray and Elina.

'That was nothing to do with shedding blood or killing that poor ram, man. It was all to do with physics. With my equations.'

'And your desire,' said Silk, blowing a lazy smoke-ring.

'Physics and desire. No blood sacrifices, baby.'

'Maybe not at your end,' said Albert Storrow. 'You opened the portal in your dimension in your own fashion, while we opened one here in our way. But

both had to be opened to allow you to cross through.’ Elina nodded as he spoke, her plump pink face serious in her hooded white robe.

‘Synchronicity, man. Coincidence. That’s all it was.’

‘Maybe the synchronicity is part of the recipe. Maybe it’s one more essential ingredient.’ Silk dropped the stub of her cigarette to the floor and ground it out under the heel of her slipper.

‘Please!’ said Elina in a harsh voice. ‘Don’t desecrate the floor of the temple. Don’t leave that lying there.’

‘Okey doke,’ said Silk. She kicked the butt across the tile floor so it skidded across the red circle, reached the lip of the well and disappeared into it.

‘She’s profaned the Well of Transition!’ cried Elina.

‘Oh, just chill out,’ said Lady Silk.

‘Calm down, dear.’ Albert put a hand on his wife’s arm. He still held the gun steadily in his other hand.

‘There’s no need for bloodshed, man,’ said Ray. ‘That’s just primitive.’

‘But like the equations and the passion and the synchronicity, maybe it’s all part of the mix,’ said Lady Silk. ‘Maybe the blood is necessary. That’s what Lee would say. Wouldn’t you, Lee?’

Ace looked up to see a group of men coming into the room. They were all dressed similarly in shiny, garish baggy suits, with ludicrously long key chains dangling from the pockets, and wide-brimmed hats. Under the shadows of their hat brims, their faces were all impassive, oriental and disdainful. Their leader seemed to be the tall man in an electric blue suit.

‘Yes, I’d certainly say that,’ said the man in a soft voice.

‘Folks,’ said Lady Silk, ‘meet Imperial Lee.’

‘If I may say so,’ said the Doctor, ‘that’s a ludicrous sobriquet.’

‘Not as bad as Stanley Wainwright, which is what he’s called back home,’ said Silk, and the man shot her a look of annoyance.

‘I’ve left all that behind, Silk,’ said the man softly. ‘Like the boys here,’ he nodded at the trio of men, who remained standing a respectful distance behind him. ‘We’re all proud imperial Japanese warriors and we have adopted new names for our new roles.’

‘You don’t sound Japanese,’ said Ace.

‘Japanese-American, like me,’ said Silk. ‘If you want to be pedantic.’

‘No longer American,’ said Imperial Lee. ‘We have been reborn as sacred kamikaze soldiers for the cause.’

‘Kamikaze,’ whispered Ace to the Doctor. ‘I don’t like the sound of that.’

‘And what exactly is your cause?’ said the Doctor. He asked the question as if genuinely interested, as if he could take a detached view of what was going on around him. To Ace he seemed maddeningly calm.

'To bring the Japanese Empire to its proper and natural state of supremacy. To replace ignominious defeat with glorious victory.' Imperial Lee issued these pronouncements in a casual, conversational voice, as though they were familiar and reasonable facts that any sensible person should already be acquainted with. 'Above all, to eradicate the bloody stain of the atrocity perpetrated by America with its atomic bombs on the sacred islands.'

'So you're trying to sabotage the atom bomb project at Los Alamos,' said Ace. 'That's why you brought Ray here. To stop them building the bomb.'

'Oh no,' said Lady Silk, lighting a cigarette. 'The scope of our ambitions are considerably wider than that. You tell her, Lee.'

Imperial Lee took off his hat and studied it as he spoke. He seemed modest, diffident. 'We don't want to stop them building the bomb. We want them to build the bomb and successfully detonate it.' He suddenly looked up from his hat, straight into Ace's eyes, and she was jolted by the fanatical ferocity of that gaze. 'But we want to alter the outcome using Cosmic Ray over there.' Ray turned away, as if trying to shelter himself from Lee's words. 'With the help of his equations we are going to alter the fabric of reality and amplify the effect of the bomb. Once it detonates, the explosion won't stop. In fact it will propagate itself.'

'Propagate itself?' said Ace. She looked at the Doctor. 'Like Teller's chain reaction? They're going to blow up the Earth?'

Imperial Lee shook his head. 'Not just the Earth. But this entire universe.'

'Uh oh,' said Ace.

'You realise you are insane,' said the Doctor.

'You think so?' said Lady Silk. 'I think he's kind of cute.' She blew a cloud of smoke.

'Even supposing you could do such a thing,' said the Doctor, 'in the process you will wipe out the Japanese people who live in this dimension.'

'Like ourselves, they shall be kamikazes,' said Imperial Lee. 'It is an honour. Sacred commandos sacrificing themselves for the cause.'

'I see,' said the Doctor. 'And what cause is that exactly?'

'I told you,' said Lee patiently. 'The victory of the Japanese Empire.'

The Doctor tilted his head thoughtfully to one side as though he was standing in an art gallery, trying to make out a complex and baffling abstract painting. 'I'm confused,' he said.

'We're going to create a ripple effect,' said Lady Silk.

'I see. A ripple effect. Throughout the multiverse, you mean.'

'That's right,' said Imperial Lee. 'The energy liberated by the destruction of this universe will cause a wave of change to sweep the multiverse so that Japan will be swept to victory in every other dimension. It will alter history wherever it needs to be altered. In no scenario will the Empire be a beaten,

cowed underdog. She will be triumphant, supreme and serene and beautiful throughout every level of existence.'

'It's a bit ambitious,' said Silk, picking a flake of tobacco off her lips. 'But we think we can pull it off.'

'You're both insane,' said Ace, looking from her to Imperial Lee and back again.

'No,' said the Doctor. 'She's not. She's just along for the ride.'

'What makes you say that?' said Lady Silk.

The Doctor smiled at her. 'Do you intend to stay here when the atom bomb detonates? Are you one of the kamikaze commandos?'

Imperial Lee stepped beside Silk, as if to protect her from the Doctor's scepticism. 'She is a woman. She is not required to make the ultimate sacrifice. She will be returned just before the explosion at Trinity. Back in our home world she will find a new order, a better existence under the imperial Japanese flag as reality reshapes itself.' He kissed Silk on the cheek. It looked to Ace as if she merely suffered the kiss. 'She will return home safe and sound to a better world.'

'I get to go back, too,' said Ray quickly. 'That was the deal. I go back home just before Trinity.'

'Of course,' said Silk in a comforting voice. 'You go back home with me.'

'And I get to take my records with me,' said Ray, holding tightly to the bag slung over his shoulder.

'Of course.'

'Your *records*!' said Ace, her voice thick with disdain.

'Please, man,' begged Ray. 'Don't be like that. Don't look at me like that.'

'How do you expect us to be?' said the Doctor. 'How do you expect us to look at you, other than with contempt? You did all this so you could fill the gaps in your record collection.'

'But you must understand man. You dig the music too. This is the classic Ellington outfit we're talking about here. With Ben Webster, Ray Nance, Billy Strayhorn, baby. These aren't just any records we're talking about.'

'How many people are going to have to die so you can complete your collection?' said the Doctor. 'Besides ourselves of course.'

Imperial Lee stepped away from Lady Silk, smiling and shaking his head. 'Good point. We must proceed with the sacrifice. Thank you for reminding us.'

Ace flashed an angry look at the Doctor. 'Yeah, thanks a lot.'

Ray hurried over to Imperial Lee. He stood there, trembling with repressed emotion. 'There's no need to do this, man. We don't need to shed the blood, baby, just use the equations and the desire to cross over. That's all we needed before.'

'Not at this end,' said Imperial Lee. He nodded at the Storrows, who stood there looking increasingly redundant and ludicrous in their white robes. They were no longer pointing their Tommy guns at the captives but that offered no encouragement to Ace. She couldn't see any possibility of escape now that they were outnumbered seven to two. Eight to two if you counted Ray amongst the opposition.

'At this end we had the Storrows making their blood sacrifice when we arrived.' Imperial Lee patted Ray on the shoulder. It was meant to be a reassuring gesture, but it caused Ray to flinch. 'And now that we need reinforcements to join us here we must make another sacrifice so they can cross over from our home world.'

'But it was just a sheep before, man,' said Ray. 'They weren't making a human sacrifice. If you really want to do this bloodshed number then just use an animal.'

'He has a point,' said Ace quickly.

Lee shook his head wistfully. 'What would be the point of killing some poor animal?'

'That's pretty rich coming from a man who wants to blow up the universe,' said Ace.

'I imagine his point of view is that when you have an infinite number of universes, destroying one doesn't make a lot of difference,' said the Doctor.

Imperial Lee shrugged and put his hat back on, as if signalling a return to business. He looked at Ray and Lady Silk. 'The point is, these people are our enemies and we need to get rid of them anyway. Using them for the sacrifice is killing two birds with one stone.'

'How commendably parsimonious,' said the Doctor.

'All this chitchat is wearing me out,' said Lady Silk. 'Why don't we just get started?' She reached into the pocket of her jacket and took out a small box. She handed it to Ray. For a moment Ace thought she was offering him a cigarette, but Ray opened the box to reveal a dozen black crayons.

'Do I have to?' said Ray.

Lady Silk smiled indulgently, as if encouraging a child. 'Just think, you're going to be back home in no time, and with all these lovely records!' She took the record bag from Ray. He watched her with suspicion and alarm as she carefully placed it in a corner of the room. Only when the bag was obviously safe did Ray select one of the crayons and hunker down on his fat thighs and begin to write on the white tiles of the floor.

'What's he doing?' said Ace.

'Writing the necessary calculations.'

'The necessary *incantations*,' said Albert Storrow firmly.

'You say potato,' said the Doctor.

Just then an electric bell rang out, shrill and loud, echoing harshly and metallically in the big tiled basement. Silk and Imperial Lee exchanged a look, as did Albert and Elina Storrow.

‘Are you expecting. . .’ said Lee.

‘No one,’ said Albert Storrow tersely.

‘Then you’d better go up and see who it is.’ Albert handed his machine gun to Elina and hurried towards the stairs in his ludicrous white robe. ‘Both of you,’ said Imperial Lee. ‘Take their guns, boys.’ Two of the young men in suits went to Elina and took the Thompson guns from her as she turned to join Albert. The couple made their way swiftly and silently to the staircase in their flowing robes. The young men with machine guns turned to aim them at the Doctor and Ace.

Albert and Elina hurried up the stairs as the bell rang again.

Butcher stood at the door, pressing on the bell. He could hear it ringing deep in the confines of the house – or the chapel, as the plaque beside the door called it. A porch light shone above Butcher with moths fluttering around it. He wandered away from the front door, down the steps and out into the dark garden. He looked around the side of the house. There was a ceramic pot with a garden hose coiled in it and a pile of lumber with an axe beside it.

He went back around the corner and up the steps to the front door and rang again. The place seemed empty but there was a large car parked in the driveway and Butcher had checked the hood on it. The engine was still warm. Somebody was inside, all right. He waited a moment, then pressed the bell again.

Before leaving the Hill, Butcher had contacted some old friends at the Pinkertons detective agency. He could have gone through military channels, but that would have had the twin disadvantages of being slower and of alerting his superiors to the fact that one of Butcher’s charges had slipped away from the Hill. It had been a simple enough matter for the Pinkertons to issue a description of Ray Morita – a difficult man to miss in a crowd – and once it had been established that he was travelling towards Los Angeles, Butcher too had set off in that direction. Of course, there were any number of other places where Ray might have been headed, but as the reports continued to come in, LA looked more and more likely.

Then Butcher had spotted a newspaper advertisement for the Ellington concert and had put two and two together. While he was still en route to LA he’d wired his Pinkerton contacts to keep an eye on the concert hall and they’d spotted Ray and tailed him back to this house – or chapel – on a quiet tree-lined street in Bay City. He’d borrowed a car and driven out there as soon as

he arrived. The Pinkertons had offered to help with the pick-up, but Butcher knew that he might at any moment have to start acting in an official capacity.

Also, he wanted to apprehend the fat buffoon himself.

Butcher was about to ring the bell again when the door suddenly sprang open. A small, neatly dressed man with wire-framed spectacles peered out. His face was flushed. He smiled at Butcher. 'Sorry about that. The Missus and I were just busy in the basement.' He opened the door wide, revealing a shadowy, narrow entrance hall with potted palm trees and the glimpse of a staircase leading upwards. 'What can I do for you?'

Butcher showed the man his credentials. The little fellow took his time scrutinising them, squinting through his spectacles. Then he looked up at Butcher again, smiling uncertainly, his eyes catching a reflection of the electric light above the porch. 'I guess you'd better come in, Major.'

He ushered Butcher into a carpeted lounge full of antique furniture, turning on lights as he went. As he did so an enormously fat woman came up behind him. 'Who is it, dear?'

'It's a Major Butcher. He seems to be here on an important security matter. Major, this is my wife, Elina.'

Butcher nodded at the woman. He noticed that her face was flushed, too. He wondered just what exactly they'd been up to in the basement when he'd rung the doorbell. 'So this place is a chapel?' he said.

'Used to be,' said the man quickly. 'It hasn't been used for that purpose for some time now.'

'Why not?' said Butcher.

'Because the owners, the people who run the chapel, have left the country.'

'Where have they gone?' Butcher spoke to the man but he looked at the big woman hovering in the doorway. She smiled at him.

'To Mexico. For the duration, they said.'

The duration?'

'Of the war.' The man smiled. 'They're not exactly what you'd call patriotic.'

'And their names?'

'The Storrows. Major, can I ask what all this is about exactly?'

'A man has been seen in this area. He may be connected with enemy activities. We want to find him and question him.'

'A fifth columnist?' said the man excitedly. 'A Jap-a-Nazi traitor?' He looked at his wife. 'We'd certainly like to help you find him, wouldn't we, honey?'

'We certainly would, pumpkin,' said the enormous woman. The little man turned back to Butcher, his eyes guileless behind the lenses of his spectacles. 'But I'm afraid there's nothing we can tell you. We haven't seen anybody around here. I was out in the garden earlier, looking after the place, and there's certainly nobody out there.'

‘And I’ve been indoors all day, baking,’ said the woman. ‘So I know there’s nobody in the house. . . except us chickens.’ She smiled at her own small joke.

‘That sounds pretty comprehensive,’ said Butcher. ‘And the car in the driveway?’

‘That’s ours,’ said the man. ‘Haven’t been out in it in days.’

‘OK, well that’s about everything,’ said Butcher, rising to his feet. ‘Looks like this is a dead end. Thanks for your help.’

‘A pleasure, a pleasure,’ said the little man, guiding him towards the door of the room. The fat woman stood aside to let them pass and began turning off the lights behind them. ‘I’m only sorry that we couldn’t be more help.’ He ushered Butcher down the hallway to the front door.

‘That’s all right,’ said Butcher. ‘I’ll just keep working away along the street.’ He stepped out of the house into the warm night.

‘Good luck, Major,’ called the little man from the doorway, waving.

‘Thanks,’ said Butcher, returning the wave. The porch light went out behind him.

He walked down the driveway to the iron gate, opened it and, without stepping through it, closed it loudly again. Then he stepped off the driveway onto the lawn and made his way back, through the garden, towards the dark house.

Chapter Twelve

The Well of Transition

Butcher crossed the garden, invisible in the night, his feet silent on the grass. As he approached the house he realised that the place wasn't entirely in darkness. There was a narrow shimmer of light coming from near ground level. As he got nearer still, the shimmer gradually resolved itself into a series of rectangular basement windows glowing with light. Butcher got down on his hands and knees and crawled towards one of the windows. The glass was pebbled and opaque, like the glass you got in bathroom windows, revealing nothing. It was firmly sealed. He tried the next one, and it was the same thing.

He remembered the axe he'd seen around the corner with the pile of lumber and considered going to fetch it. But the third window was open a crack. As he bent close he could hear voices coming from within the basement.

Just no need for it, man!

It's a momentous business, travelling between worlds. Don't you think it requires a momentous gesture to initiate it? A gesture written in blood?

Butcher carefully eased the window open another few inches, lay down with his cheek pressed to the ground, and looked inside. He'd already identified the first speaker as Ray Morita, but he didn't recognise the second man. Peering in through the window he saw that it was a Japanese-American man in a bright-blue zoot suit. There were three other zoot-suiters, also Japanese-looking, standing nearby. Two of them had Thompson .45 calibre sub-machine-guns with the circular fifty-round magazines. The guns were pointed at a man and woman standing anxiously on a red circle in the middle of the white floor – the Doctor and Ace.

There was one other woman in the basement. Butcher's heart leapt when he saw that it was Lady Silk. He'd hit the jackpot. Butcher forced himself to quell his excitement and keep a cool head. There was someone else in the basement, too. Someone wearing a ridiculous hooded white robe with a big red spot on the chest. When the figure moved he glimpsed the man's face. It was the fat woman's husband. The fat woman herself was nowhere in sight.

The Jap in the blue zoot suit was still talking. 'We have no choice, we need reinforcements.'

'No you don't, man,' said Ray. He was kneeling on the tiled floor of the basement with a box of black crayons, surrounded by an elaborate scrawl of mathematical equations. He had worked his way across a white strip of floor and was now in the red central circle. To Butcher's untrained eye the equations looked like the same kind of mumbo jumbo the physicists were always scribbling on the blackboards in the ranch school.

'You don't need any more reinforcements,' said Ray. 'You just want some more foot soldiers because they make you feel important.'

Lady Silk laughed. 'He does have a point.'

The Jap in the zoot suit looked annoyed. 'Nevertheless, we have to dispose of these prisoners. We can't allow them to go free otherwise they will destroy all our careful planning. We must get rid of them somehow, so why not use them in this ritual, to open the gate between the worlds.'

'Blood isn't necessary, man,' quavered Ray, kneeling on the floor and scribbling equations. 'And you know that the bloodshed won't stop there. Once your goons come across we're going to have to find their duplicates in this world...'

'Which won't be difficult,' said the Jap. 'We've discovered that the duplicates are drawn to their otherworldly brothers. We don't even have to go to them. They will come to us. They will find us, just like my double did, and yours, and Silk's. Even if they have to escape a detainment camp and travel across country, they will do so, drawn inexorably to us by links of blood and energy and fate. Don't worry we'll get them.'

'Sure, you'll get them,' said Ray. 'And then what, man? That's what I was saying. More bloodshed...'

'The discussion is closed,' said the Jap in the zoot suit. He turned to Lady Silk. 'How is he doing with those equations?'

Lady Silk walked across the tiled floor to the patch where Ray was scribbling. 'Well I'm no genius like him, but I'd say we were just about ready here.'

'All right,' said the Jap. He turned to the other zoot-suiters. 'Drag them over to the Well of Transition.'

Lady Silk laughed. 'Honestly, the Well of Transition. That's a goofball name if ever I heard one.'

'Don't be disrespectful,' said the Jap. 'It works.' He followed his men as the two with the Tommy guns forced Ace and the Doctor towards the well in the centre of the red circle.

'Now, how shall we do this?' said Lady Silk. 'Gun or a knife?'

Butcher decided he'd heard enough. He didn't understand half of the gibberish that they were spouting, but it was very clear that if he didn't act now the Doctor and Ace were done for. He rolled away from the window, preparing to scramble to his fret. As he did so he looked up and saw the night sky,

full of stars. He also saw the fat, smiling face of the woman called Elina.

'We shouldn't have told you that last bit,' she said. 'That bit about the car. You could probably tell the engine was still warm. We went just a bit too far.'

Butcher had recovered from his surprise and was wondering what would be the quickest and most effective way of shutting the woman up and keeping her from interfering. Then she lifted her fat arms up high, holding something up above her head. The thing had a long handle that led up to a wedge shape that blocked a patch of the stars in the sky. Butcher remembered the axe by the lumber pile, and rolled away just in time. The big woman snorted with effort as she brought the axe down, driving it into the earth where Butcher had been lying an instant earlier. He leapt to his feet as the woman snarled and wrenched the blade out of the earth, turning and swinging it at him. Butcher dodged again.

He was being attacked by a fat woman with an axe. A lot of grotesque things had befallen him in his long career as a private eye, but this certainly ranked with the worst of them. It might have been funny if it wasn't so dangerous. The woman panted and swung again, slicing air. He could keep dodging until she ran out of strength. For someone her size it wouldn't take long. But then she might get it into her brain to start shouting, which would be much worse. If those Japs with the Tommy guns got into the game he'd be finished.

Butcher was in civilian clothes with a snubnosed .38 tucked under his armpit in a shoulder holster. He could shoot his attacker if he had to – and he might have to. But after the incident at the pond the other day he was in no hurry to kill another woman. And then there was the problem of the sound of the gunshot. Surprise was the only advantage he had, and that would be gone the moment the zoot-suiters in the basement realised he was here.

The woman kept swinging at him and Butcher kept backing away from her. She showed no signs of tiring yet, but at least she hadn't yelled for help. She was grunting and panting, brutally determined to cleave him apart with the axe. Butcher backed across the lawn, keeping his eyes on her, until he heard his feet grinding on gravel. He had reached the driveway. She kept stalking him, swinging whenever she got close enough. But by now Butcher had begun to formulate a plan of action.

The two of them edged across the driveway, the big murderous woman and the man backing away from her. They passed the front of the house and the black marble steps. They reached the corner of the house, where Butcher hazarded a glance over his shoulder. It almost cost him his head. The moment he looked away, the woman lurched forward and swung the axe again. He felt the breeze of it graze his earlobe and all the hairs on the back of his neck stood up.

But he'd seen what he needed to see. He dodged away from the woman,

reached down and scooped up the large ceramic pot he'd noticed earlier. And then he moved *towards* the woman. For a split second she was too surprised to react; she'd become accustomed to the notion that Butcher would only move in perpetual retreat. But then she recovered, grunted, and brought the axe chopping down.

Butcher raised the ceramic pot above his head. The axe head smashed into it, shattering it like a giant piñata. For a moment the axe was caught in the wreckage of the broken pot but, with a frantic wriggling of her big shoulders, the woman managed to wrestle it free and lift it up again for another strike. As the last fragments of broken ceramic rattled to the ground, Butcher was left holding the contents of the pot. The coiled garden hose.

He began to unwind the hose as he avoided the woman's next blow. Butcher soon had about three feet of hose swaying loose in his grip, with the brass nozzle at the end of it. He swung the length of hose in the air, like a lasso, spinning it in wide circles above his head. The woman didn't seem to understand what was about to happen. She was raising the axe for yet another strike when Butcher stepped forward, snapped his hand and sent the heavy brass nozzle of the hose thudding into her face. It hit her squarely in the mouth and he heard the ugly sound of something breaking. Butcher felt an evil surge of savage pleasure.

The woman dropped the axe, put both hands to her face and made an appalled small noise, for all the world like a child injured on the playground in the middle of a game that had got out of hand. But Butcher didn't stop playing. He couldn't. He swung the hose back and whiplashed it forward again, hitting the woman on the back of the head. She went stumbling clumsily to the ground, face first, and Butcher watched her warily. After a while she stopped moving and Butcher, standing over her holding his improbably vicious weapon, began to feel sick about what he'd done. One look at the axe, lying where she'd dropped it, restored his priorities, though.

He checked the woman. She was deeply unconscious but still breathing, wetly and noisily through her wrecked mouth. Butcher used the garden hose to truss her up, cutting lengths of it with his pocket knife. Butcher had a pair of handcuffs in his jacket pocket but he suspected that he'd have need for those later on. So he tied the woman up with the hose and stuffed his handkerchief in her mouth, knotting another length of hose around her head to keep it in place. He made sure she was still breathing through her nose, rolled her into a dark bed of shrubs, and started shakily up the marble steps towards the front door of the house.

Ace was looking at the Doctor. He was trying to tell her something and she was trying to work out what it was. If she didn't, they were both going to end

up dead.

But the Doctor couldn't say anything aloud or make any obvious moves because the goons with the machine guns were watching their every move. Ace desperately tried to read the look he was giving her. Ray and Imperial Lee were still arguing about their fate, but Ace had no doubt about the eventual outcome.

'I won't let you do it,' said Ray. 'These people are my friends.'

Imperial Lee grinned. 'You won't let us kill two of your friends but you're helping us wipe out an entire universe?'

'That's nothing to do with me, man,' said Ray.

Lady Silk chuckled. 'Ray's in denial,' she said. The Doctor was staring at Lady Silk, as though there was great significance in what she was saying. Then he looked at Ace, then back at Lady Silk. Finally back at Ace again. He made the tiniest of movements with his head, the faintest suggestion of a nod. He was trying to tell her something. But what? Ace felt like screaming with frustration.

'That whole chain-reaction business is just hoodoo man. It's never going to work. You're never going to destroy any universe.' Ray's voice was trembling with emotion.

Imperial Lee was calm and amused. 'Hoodoo? You mean like the hoodoo that opened a portal between the dimensions? The portal that brought you here? I suppose you're not standing here now?'

Ray shook his head, his plump face mottled with thwarted rage. 'That worked man. But all this destruction jive. That's just a crazy power trip. It's not going to happen. I ought to know, man. I'm the only real physicist here.'

Lady Silk cleared her throat. Everybody looked at her, including the Doctor. He hadn't stopped looking at her. Then he glanced urgently at Ace and made a nodding motion. Ace met his gaze and tried to read his eyes. What was he trying to tell her?

'That's very interesting, Ray,' said Lady Silk. 'But why don't you tell us what made you quit your job at the particle accelerator lab?'

'I didn't quit man. I was fired.'

'That's the story you like to tell,' said Lady Silk. 'But I've seen your files. I know what really happened. You resigned. Why don't you tell us why?' Ray stared at her, stubbornly silent. 'All right,' said Silk. 'I'll tell you why. You quit because you were scared. You thought that the danger of creating a rogue particle in the accelerator hinged on your equations. If you pursued your equations all the way to a solution then the rogue would appear. It would happen. And it would destroy the world.'

Ray stood there, slumped and silent staring at the tiled floor, which was scrawled with his equations. The basement was completely silent for a moment, then there was the sound of footsteps hurrying down the stairs. A white-robed figure came hurrying in. It was Albert Storrow. He paused and listened to what Lady Silk was saying.

'Your presence at the accelerator lab combined with the right calculations –' 'The right *incantations*,' said Storrow.

'Shut up, Albert.' Lady Silk turned to Ray. 'If performed in the proximity of one piss-ant particle accelerator your calculations would have led to the apocalypse.'

'Praise the apocalypse!' said Storrow.

'Shut up, Albert. So, Ray, what do you think will happen if you're performing calculations in the proximity of an atom bomb blast?'

The Doctor was staring fixedly at Lady Silk, then looking back at Ace and nodding. What was he trying to convey? She tried to concentrate, to ignore the argument that was flaring up again between Ray and Imperial Lee.

'Maybe you're right about some of this stuff,' said Ray. 'But not the blood. There's just no need for it, man!'

'It's a momentous business, travelling between worlds,' said Imperial Lee. 'Don't you think it requires a momentous gesture to initiate it? A gesture written in blood?'

The argument kept raging. The Doctor kept looking at Lady Silk, then at Ace, then nodding.

All too soon the arguing stopped and Imperial Lee said, 'The discussion is closed. How is he doing with those equations?'

Lady Silk studied Ray's crayoned equations on the floor. 'Well I'm no genius like him,' she said pointedly, 'but I'd say we were just about ready here.'

'All right,' said Imperial Lee. 'Drag them over to the Well of Transition.'

Lady Silk snorted with laughter. 'Honestly, the Well of Transition. That's a goofball name if ever I heard one.'

Imperial Lee said, 'Don't be disrespectful, it works.' He gestured to his flunkies and they closed in on the Doctor and Ace with their guns. Ace looked at the Doctor and he exchanged a desperate glance with her. He looked at Lady Silk again. As he and Ace backed away from the gunmen they moved closer to Lady Silk. The Doctor looked at her, then back at Ace, then nodded his head again, straining his chin towards his chest. Ace had the horrible sense that she was never going to understand what he was trying to tell her and they were both going to die here in this California basement.

'Now, how shall we do this?' said Lady Silk in a lazy voice. 'Gun or a knife?' But on the word 'knife' the laziness left her voice and a note of uncertainty entered it. Memory flashed into Ace's mind. The knife that Silk had worn

strapped to her thigh, that she had used to cut Ace's bonds, that the Doctor had taken from her.

The knife. That was why the Doctor kept looking at Lady Silk, then at Ace, then nodding. Only he wasn't nodding. He was pointing with his chin. At his jacket pocket. The Doctor had taken the knife from Lady Silk and put it in his pocket.

As realisation swept through her, Ace turned to the Doctor and he read her eyes. 'Behind me, please, Ace,' he said in a casual, conversational voice. Then he took a graceful step to one side, moving behind Lady Silk, reaching into his jacket as he did so. He brought out the knife and, as Ace darted behind him, he put it to Lady Silk's throat.

'Damn it,' said Silk. 'I knew I'd forgotten something.'

Butcher turned the handle and pushed gently on the front door of the house. It was unlocked. He stepped inside, feeling relieved that he didn't have to go back and search the unconscious fat woman for the keys. The house was quiet and dark, smelling pleasantly of baking. He stood in the small hallway for a moment, considering. Finally he decided to put on some lights. This might attract attention, but so would blundering around in the dark. Compared to knocking over a vase, say, it was the lesser of two evils.

He stood blinking in the sudden light. Ahead of him in the hallway was the staircase to the upper floor of the house. But he wanted to go down, not up. Where was the basement door? He left the hallway, going to the right, into the kitchen. Sure enough, there was a red wooden door. Butcher looked at it, trying to decide what to do. The Doctor and Ace were down there and from what he'd heard they were facing execution. Butcher was expecting to hear the mechanical chatter of a Tommy gun at any moment.

What had Lady Silk said? Gun or knife? Maybe they'd used a knife. Maybe he was already too late. He stared at the door. What was going on down there? Maybe he should go back outside, crouch down in the grass again and peep through the basement window, see what was happening.

But Butcher had the terrible feeling that while he was doing that he might hear the guns go off. He stood in the middle of the cool, pleasant-smelling kitchen, frozen with indecision. Then he saw it. Lying sprawled on the kitchen table. A ripple of white cloth with a big red spot on it. He held it up. It was a robe like the one he'd seen the husband wearing in the basement, and from the size of it, it was obvious who it belonged to.

Butcher felt a smile spreading across his face.

He went back through the hallway to the lounge on the other side and grabbed some cushions.

* * *

The armed goons hadn't dared to fire on Ace and the Doctor when they made their move because they were too close to Lady Silk. And now they were even closer, using her as a human shield while the Doctor held the knife to her throat.

'You know, it was very rude of you not to return that knife,' said Lady Silk. Ace couldn't believe how cool the woman was.

'You useless idiotic scum,' said Imperial Lee, his face dark with anger. He was looking at his gunmen, waving his fists in the air, as if he wanted to start beating the men. They stared back at their boss sheepishly. Ray had moved quickly towards the staircase, away from the centre of activity, and it had looked for a moment like he might flee up into the house, but Albert Storrow had stopped him. Now Storrow and Ray stood on the sidelines watching.

'You pathetic rejects,' spat Lee. 'Why didn't you shoot?'

'Leave them alone,' said Lady Silk. 'What could they do? Firing Tommy guns in a basement is a dumb idea at the best of times. Thank God they had the brains *not* to shoot, or I'd be lying here dead. The ricochets would have probably killed you, too.'

'They were going to put them in the well and *then* shoot them,' said Lee. 'There weren't going to be any ricochets. I'd thought it all out.'

'Well, that's a relief,' said Silk drolly.

Lee turned away from his cowed henchmen and took a step towards the Doctor and Ace, who stood huddled close behind their captive. 'Don't come any closer,' said the Doctor. Ace could see the elbow of his arm holding the knife and she was pleased to note that it was completely steady.

'If you harm that woman...' said Imperial Lee.

'Oh, he's not going to harm me,' said Lady Silk.

'I'm holding the point of this rather sharp knife directly against your jugular vein,' said the Doctor in a pleasant, conversational voice. 'Doesn't that indicate anything to you?'

'It indicates that you like to talk,' said Lady Silk.

'Don't antagonise him,' said Lee.

'Stop worrying Lee. Do I sound worried? I'm not worried.'

'They've got a knife to your throat!'

'Yes, that might be alarming in certain circumstances,' allowed Silk. 'But not when the knife is being held by a blancmange.'

'A what?' said Imperial Lee, confusion and rage and fear staging a three-way collision in his voice.

'Or a meringue or anything else soft and ineffectual.' Lady Silk tried to turn her head and look at the Doctor. 'You're just a little softy, aren't you?'

'Would you like to find out?' said the Doctor in a cold, hard voice that even gave Ace a chill. But Lady Silk just *laughed*.

‘Oh, I’m sure you can be a tough and remorseless fellow,’ she said. ‘In certain circumstances. But you’re not going to slice open the throat of a helpless woman.’

‘No?’ said the Doctor.

‘No,’ said Lady Silk decisively. ‘You’re just not the type. She sounded utterly confident and Ace felt a sudden sinking feeling. After all, the woman was right. The Doctor would never do such a thing.’

As if echoing her thoughts, the Doctor said, ‘You know what? You’re absolutely correct. How perceptive of you. Ace! Swap!’ The Doctor swiftly wriggled around behind Silk’s back, holding the woman as he passed the knife to Ace, who took it and pressed it hard to Silk’s throat. The Doctor traded places with her. Now he was standing behind Ace and Ace was holding the knife as she hugged Silk to her. She could smell the shampoo in the woman’s hair and her perfume and the sudden tang of her fear. Ace whispered in her ear.

‘Try me,’ she crooned. ‘I’ll gut you like a fish.’

‘I don’t like her,’ said Lady Silk in a voice like a frightened little girl. ‘I don’t like this. Lee, do something!’

‘Don’t worry baby,’ said Lee. ‘We’ll think of something.’

‘Do it fast.’ Ace could feel the panicked vibration of Silk’s throat under the blade of her knife. ‘Do it now. *I don’t like her.*’

Ace smiled and murmured, ‘It’s mutual.’

‘Do something,’ said Silk.

‘I’m thinking,’ said Lee.

‘Do something!’

‘I’m thinking!’

There was a sudden sound at the top of the stairs and everyone turned to see a white-robed figure descending into the basement. From the bulk of the figure it was obviously Elina Storrow. The woman had the hood of the robe up, covering her head, and she came down the stairs bent over at the waist, so her face was in shadow.

Albert Storrow looked up at her. ‘Careful, dear. We have a bit of a sticky situation here. Maybe you’d be better off staying upstairs.’ The woman ignored him and continued descending the steps. ‘Elina?’ said Storrow. ‘Are you all right, darling?’

The white-robed figure hurried into the basement, moving in an awkward, crouched run. ‘Darling?’ said Storrow anxiously. ‘Are you hurt?’

As the woman moved, something dropped from under her robe onto the white tiled floor. A cushion. The woman straightened up and Ace saw that it wasn’t a woman at all. It was Major Butcher. He raised one white-robed arm. He had a gun in his hand and the gun went off, the noise painfully loud in the confines of the basement.

One of the men with a Tommy gun was thrown to the floor by the impact of the bullet. Everyone stared in shock, then everyone began to react at the same time.

Lady Silk tried to wrestle free of Ace, but Ace held her tight, one arm clamped to her throat. The Doctor stayed close behind Ace, matching her move for move, like a single unit.

Albert Storrow launched himself at the white-clad figure he'd believed was his wife. 'Where's Elina?' he shrieked.

The second man with the Tommy gun raised it and began to fire at Butcher. Storrow reached Butcher just in time to take the full impact of the blast. He was flung to the floor and Butcher remained standing there, unscathed. Butcher took aim and fired again. He hit the Tommy-gunner, who crumpled to his knees and twisted at the waist, still firing as he went down.

Bullets sprayed wildly around the basement. The sound was unbelievable. 'Get down Ace!' shouted the Doctor over the blast of gunfire. Chips of stone were flying everywhere, spraying off the walls. Ace threw herself to the floor with Lady Silk under her, the Doctor at her side. Silk made no attempt to get free. Instead she squirmed further under Ace's body, so that Ace would take the impact of any stray rounds.

Across the room Imperial Lee also flung himself to the floor. Ray had already done so, as soon as the shooting started.

The only men left standing were Butcher and Lee's third henchman. The young man hurled himself towards the dead man on the floor with the Tommy gun, grabbed the weapon and stood up with it, just in time to be scythed down by the wounded gunner, who was subsiding to the floor, a patch of blood on the lapel of his shiny suit.

The man lay still. The gun stopped firing. There was a moment of incredible silence in the basement.

Ace looked up. Lee's three men were lying motionless, evidently dead, and so was Albert Storrow. Butcher moved around the basement, checking the bodies. There was blood on the tiles, splashed all over Ray's scribbled equations. Ace felt sick.

Underneath her, Lady Silk suddenly erupted into movement. She struggled, writhing free. Ace let her go. What was she going to do? There was nowhere for her to run to.

Butcher glanced at Lady Silk as she hastened shakily to her feet and he evidently came to the same conclusion. He resumed his inspection of the bodies on the basement floor.

Lady Silk stood there, trembling. She looked at Imperial Lee lying on the floor. He peered back at her.

'Baby,' said Silk. 'Let's do it.'

She turned and ran across the basement. Not towards the stairs, but to the middle of the room, the centre of the red tiled circle. Towards the well. Lee scrambled to his feet and followed. 'Stop them!' shouted Ray. Silk reached the lip of the well and jumped down into it.

Butcher turned in time to take a shot at Lee as he jumped into the opening after Silk. He hurried across the room and moved cautiously to the edge of the well, his gun held in front of him. He said, 'What the hell do they think they're playing at?'

'The Well of Transition,' said the Doctor softly.

'Oh, man,' said Ray helplessly.

'I fear we're too late,' said the Doctor, getting to his feet. He went and joined Butcher, who was standing looking down into the well. Ace followed him. Inside the well, about eight feet below floor level, Lady Silk was crouched over the motionless body of Imperial Lee. She looked up at Butcher and Ace and the Doctor staring down at her. Her eyes were blank with terror.

'Please,' she said. 'Please help me. I don't know what's happening to me. But they've been holding me prisoner.'

Butcher chuckled, though the sound came out more like a croak. 'Don't try that on me, sister. Or I'll leave you down there with that stiff.' He reached down and grabbed one of Lady Silk's upstretched arms, pulling her up out of the well.

Once she was out, Silk just sat down on the floor and began to sob. Butcher ignored her. He opened the cylinder on his revolver, his hands showing just the faintest hint of tremor now that the action was over, and began reloading. He removed the spent cartridge cases then went back to the well and dropped one of them onto the head of the prostrate Imperial Lee. The brass cartridge case bounced off the man's head but he didn't twitch. Butcher looked at Ace and the Doctor. 'He's a goner. I guess I hit him on the fly. Lucky shot.'

'You didn't hit him,' said the Doctor. 'I imagine he's been dead for days.' He jumped down into the well and knelt beside the man, his hand on the corpse's shoulder. 'Cold,' he said. He looked up at Butcher and Ace. 'Feel him if you don't believe me.'

'So he's cold,' said Butcher. 'So what? He's dead.'

'He is very, very cold, Major. As if someone has been keeping him in a freezer.'

'I don't know what you're talking about. And I'm sure as hell not climbing down in there with you.'

The Doctor sighed wearily. 'Then just use your eyes. This man is wearing a green suit, is he not?'

'A green zoot suit, sure. Like those other hoods. These gaudy punks like their zoots.'

'A *green* suit,' said the Doctor. 'Imperial Lee was wearing a blue suit when he jumped into this well.'

Butcher felt a moment's unease. Was the Doctor right? *Hadn't* the punk been wearing a blue suit? Then he crushed his doubts, shrugging them off. 'Hell, I can't remember. Anyhow the light in here can play tricks.'

The Doctor reached up and Ace helped him climb out of the well. He kept talking as he climbed. 'Then look at the woman, Major.' Ace pulled him over the rim of the well and he caught his balance, crossing the floor to Lady Silk, who sat there with her shoulders jerking as she wept quietly. 'Look at her,' said the Doctor gently. 'Her clothes are different, too.'

Ace realised that Lady Silk was wearing a deep blue jacket and matching blue skirt and blouse. Instead of slippers she was wearing high-heeled shoes. The Doctor turned to Butcher and peered into the man's face. 'What do you think happened? That she changed clothes in the time between jumping into the well and you finding her there?'

'He's right,' said Ace. 'That's not what she was wearing before.'

Butcher shook his head. 'I've got no idea what she was wearing before. I never notice women's clothes. I don't know what the hell you're talking about.'

'Then let me explain,' said the Doctor. 'The man lying dead in the well is not Imperial Lee. This woman here is not Lady Silk, at least not the one we know, the one who is a traitor and propagandist for the Japanese. Like Imperial Lee, that woman has successfully escaped.' He looked down at the sobbing Silk. 'This woman was their helpless prisoner.'

Lady Silk looked up, her frightened eyes full of tears. 'That's right! They took me. They took me away. But now I'm back.'

'Can it,' said Butcher brutally. 'You're not talking your way out of this, doll.'

'Listen to me, Major. The Imperial Lee and Lady Silk who were here moments earlier came from another dimension. Another world. One similar to this but different in many crucial respects. When they crossed over via the portal they discovered that they had doubles here. *Doppelgängers*, if you will. This was a nuisance for a number of reasons, not least because when in close proximity the doubles create a cosmic disturbance, one that threatened to send Lee and Silk back to their home world. So they corrected the balance by sending the doubles back instead. Lee's double was killed because presumably he proved troublesome. Lady Silk they kept alive.'

Butcher stood, staring at the Doctor. Ace felt a growing sense of embarrassment. The Doctor had hardly embarked on his explanation when she sensed its utter futility. He had achieved nothing except to make Butcher think he was a madman. Ray Morita lumbered over and joined them.

'Hey man,' he said in a quiet voice. Butcher stopped staring at the Doctor

and turned to look at him. 'Listen,' said Ray. 'It's all real simple. The Doctor and Ace were held prisoner here since last night. Those Storrow cats kept them doped with ether or chloroform or something, dosing them every time they woke up.'

Butcher looked at Ace. 'Is that true?' Ace nodded. After all, it *was* true. Butcher slowly began to smile. 'Well then,' he said. 'That explains everything.' He grinned at the Doctor. 'No wonder you're thinking crazy thoughts. I'm surprised you're not seeing little pink elephants flying around the room.' He began to chuckle. 'It's just like when your Indian buddies forced me to take that peyote and I started seeing little green men. Now it's your turn Doctor!'

He slapped the Doctor affectionately on the shoulder. The Doctor regarded him with disgust.

Butcher took out the pair of handcuffs he'd been saving and snapped them onto Lady Silk's wrists. The woman didn't struggle or try to resist. All the fight had gone out of her. 'I've got a car parked in the street. Let's get moving.'

'Wait a minute, man,' said Ray. 'First I've got to get my records.'

Chapter Thirteen

The Devil

Butcher was never quite sure how they did it, but the Doctor and Ace managed to give him the slip almost as soon as they left the chapel. He assumed that this was the last he'd ever see of them, but when he got back to the Hill with Ray, they were already there, waiting for him and looking innocent. As if butter wouldn't melt in their mouths. As if nothing had ever happened.

Butcher had other things to worry about. The paperwork was a nightmare, but not as bad as it would have been if the police had got involved. Keeping it a military matter, under the blanket of an intelligence operation, had kept the LAPD at a frustrated and angry distance and meant Butcher was only put through the wringer for weeks instead of months.

Theoretically he had broken enough rules to spend the rest of his life in a stockade. But Butcher had also rescued the missing Los Alamos scientists, smashed a spy cell and – best of all – apprehended the notorious traitor and propagandist Lady Silk. This alone would have pretty much guaranteed him a pass, although Butcher's pivotal role in the arrest was soon obscured as everyone else higher up the chain of command took credit for it, General Groves in particular being quick to get his snout in the glory trough.

Soon Butcher's involvement was almost forgotten, which was just as well considering the number of dead bodies he left at the Chapel of the Red Apocalypse.

There hadn't been too much trouble over the three Japanese zoot-suiters. All of them were petty hoodlums who escaped from, or avoided detention in, the internment camps. No one was sorry to see them go. The dead white man, Albert Storrow, could have proved to be a big problem. But he had clearly been shot down with one of the Tommy guns, by one of the zoot-suiters, so Butcher was off the hook for that. Storrow's wife, Elina, also considerably helped matters by getting herself diagnosed as a raving lunatic. The fat woman had evidently been unhinged by the death of her husband and after listening to a few days of her ravings, the Army handed her over to the civilian authorities to lock up in some California bug house.

Butcher had got out of it with his nose clean.

The only disturbing aspect was the missing body. Butcher had been busy

returning Ray to Los Alamos, so he hadn't been present when the Army intelligence team had swept in to secure the chapel. He only read about it in the form of telexes. The initial reports were somewhat confused and it was some days before he'd discovered that only three dead Japanese-Americans had been found at the scene. The punk called Imperial Lee, last seen lying lifeless at the bottom of the red well, was missing.

Everyone assumed that Butcher had just got it wrong. 'Anyone might make a mistake like that,' General Groves had said, offering Butcher a cigar. Instead of summoning Butcher, Groves had actually done him the honour of visiting him in the Major's shabby corrugated hut. Plus, a cynic might observe that by not officially ordering Butcher in for a briefing, Groves was keeping him well and truly out of the limelight.

The cigar was presumably to compensate Butcher for the General taking all credit for Lady Silk's arrest. 'You simply got the number of dead Japs wrong,' said Groves. 'Not so surprising when the bullets are flying.' In the General's tone and in his eyes there was also the implicit suggestion that Butcher was trying to make himself look like some kind of John Wayne hero, shooting it out with four of the enemy and getting them all. Even three was pushing it.

Butcher knew he wasn't mistaken. He'd got the numbers right, regardless of how many bullets were flying. But he decided to keep his mouth shut about it. He shared a beer with the General and that was that.

Imperial Lee couldn't do much harm now that he was dead.

What did it matter if his body had disappeared?

Butcher soon settled back into his routine at the Hill. Oppenheimer's team was frantic as Trinity approached and Butcher resumed the thankless task of keeping an eye on the eggheads. Klaus Fuchs' behaviour had begun to seem suspicious to him and he gradually rose to number one on Butcher's hit parade of surveillance subjects, although he could never seem to get anything concrete on the kraut. That was the worst aspect of this assignment. The scientists working on the Hill were considered so vital to the war effort that Butcher would have to catch one virtually in the act of murder to put him behind bars.

This fact had been hammered home when, unbelievably, Ray Morita and the Doctor and his female assistant were all allowed to resume work on the Hill as if nothing had happened. Butcher had been particularly looking forward to nailing the Doctor after that business with the Indians and the peyote. But it had turned out that the little weasel was some kind of undercover British agent. He had credentials that were verified at the highest level. Apparently he'd been assigned to Los Alamos to do virtually the same job as Butcher. And General Groves had known all about it.

Of course nobody had bothered telling Butcher.

Still, he told himself he could at least take comfort in the fact that the business was over now and, with Trinity looming, he'd soon never have to worry about Ray Morita or the Doctor again.

But the affair kept coming back to haunt him and, on the very eve of Trinity, with the 'gadget' already in place on its tall detonation tower at the isolated desert test site, he received the absurd news that Lady Silk was coming to Los Alamos. The arrest of the 'Japanese Songbird' had been big news and the Army decided that if she had been providing propaganda for the Japs she could now do the same for Uncle Sam, by being paraded as a captive, a shining example of Army efficiency. And naturally all the brass wanted to get their mugs in the papers, photographed with Silk.

So it was that, with the firing unit now attached to the gadget and mere hours before the thing was scheduled to be detonated, Butcher was told to expect the arrival of Lady Silk on the Hill to be photographed with General Groves. There was no suggestion, of course, that she be photographed with *Butcher*. He ground his teeth and finally convinced himself there was no point being bitter, although the publicity would no doubt have helped tremendously with the sale of his books.

Butcher would be responsible for security during Silk's visit. He had to make sure, for example, that the girl didn't spring up with a pair of sharpened chopsticks and assassinate the General by propelling them through his hairy ears into the centre of his swollen head. But it turned out that there was little danger of that. When she arrived, Silk proved to be a cowed, frightened little figure and despite her considerable natural beauty the photographers had to work hard so she didn't just look drab in the pictures. The lightbulbs flashed and Butcher stood on the sidelines and watched. When they had finished glorifying General Groves, they handed the girl back over to Butcher for safe keeping. As he left the General's quarters he heard Groves joking about the phone call he needed to make to the governor of New Mexico. He was notifying the governor that it might be necessary to evacuate the entire state, if the explosion was more 'successful' than they anticipated (Fermi was taking bets that all of New Mexico would go up in flames).

Butcher stepped out into the cool night air with the girl at his side. Lady Silk had been scheduled to reach the Hill at midnight but had arrived two hours late. This hardly mattered, since everyone at Los Alamos was now working around the clock and had pretty much given up any notion of sleep before the Trinity detonation. But it did mean that, with one thing or another, it had been three in the morning before the Groves' publicity circus got under way, and it was now after four o'clock, on the morning of Monday 16 July 1945.

He set off back towards his quarters with the girl at his side. Butcher took a

good look at her as they walked. The haughty figure he had glimpsed through the basement window was now gone. The Japanese Songbird had become a bedraggled little sparrow. Butcher wondered if this was the consequence of the weeks of interrogation she'd undergone. Maybe she'd cracked. But everything he'd heard had indicated the opposite.

Silk had stuck unswervingly to her story, that she had been kidnapped and taken somewhere and had never betrayed her country. The guys who'd questioned her said she was so convincing that they almost believed it. Or believed that she believed it.

Maybe she was another candidate for the laughing academy, like Elina Storrow.

In any case, he was stuck with her until about noon, when a jeep would be coming to pick her up and take her back into custody. He unlocked the door of his tin hut and ushered the girl inside. Butcher had no worries about her trying to escape. Her spirit seemed too comprehensively crushed for there to be any chance of that. His main worry was what the hell to do with her for the next few hours. His hut was sparsely furnished, with a narrow bed, a desk and two wooden chairs. Butcher growled at the girl to sit down on one of the chairs and he took the other one, behind the desk. He didn't want anybody sitting on the bed. It might give the girl the idea that she could pull some kind of a Mata Hari number on him, seducing him, and make good her escape.

But Lady Silk just sat quietly in her assigned chair, staring at the floor, making no move even to take off the raincoat she was wearing. Butcher sat in the other chair, his elbows on his desk, trying to look authoritative and businesslike and forget that he was locked up with a beautiful woman, traitor or no traitor, for the rest of the night. Silk's captors had made an attempt to doll her up for the General's photo session and they'd even gone so far as giving her some perfume to put on. The smell of that perfume was beginning to drive Butcher crazy.

He was grateful when the phone on his desk rang. He snatched it up before the second ring. 'Butcher here.'

'Major Butcher,' said a familiar voice, affable and sardonic and somehow always conveying the infuriating impression of effortless superiority. 'It's the Doctor here.'

'Isn't it a little late to be calling?' said Butcher.

'I understand that you were roped in for the General's photo session with Lady Silk, so I was fairly sure you wouldn't be asleep. Is she with you?'

'Is who with me?'

The Doctor sighed. 'All right, maintain the façade of official security if you feel it's necessary, even now that you know we're colleagues.'

'If British intelligence wanted me to co-operate with you they should have notified me through the proper channels.'

'Yes, that must rankle,' said the Doctor. 'As I'm sure must the General's mugging and posing with the famous fugitive that we both know *you* arrested. I don't imagine you were invited to appear in any of the photographs, were you?'

'Look, if you haven't got anything to say, get off the line,' said Butcher. 'I'm expecting some important calls.' He wasn't actually expecting anything.

'I have indeed got something to say. It's in the nature of an invitation, really.' 'An invitation.'

'Yes. We'd like you to come and join us. We're having a little gathering.'

'Who is we?'

'Myself, Ace and Ray Morita. We're in Ray's apartment. Why don't you pop up as soon as you can?' There was the muffled buzz of a voice in the background and the Doctor said, 'Yes, yes, of course. That's what I'm saying. Bring Lady Silk with you when you come, Major.'

'I'm not coming anywhere,' said Butcher, although he was tempted to accept the invitation just to get the hell out of the confines of this tin shack, where he was sealed away with a beautiful woman who was smelling better by the minute. Making a pass at a female who was in your custody was just about as low as it could get. But it was the middle of the night and Butcher was feeling weary and embittered and ignored, a lowly member of the team that was about to detonate a device that might just wipe out the greater part of New Mexico.

'I really think you ought to join us, Major. You would find it very interesting.'

'How's that?'

'Well, I imagine you've been wondering what happened to that other body at the Chapel of the Red Apocalypse.'

At these words Butcher felt an icy crawling sensation along his spine. He gripped the phone so hard his hand began to hurt. 'I'm talking about the missing corpse of Imperial Lee,' said the Doctor. Butcher said nothing. 'Are you still there, Major?'

'How did you know about that? And how the hell did you give me the slip and get back to Los Alamos before me?'

'All will be explained Major. Just come to Ray's apartment. And bring Lady Silk.' The Doctor hung up.

Butcher sat silently at the desk. He was inclined to ignore the call. Then Lady Silk crossed her legs and the raincoat slipped to one side, revealing a shapely calf. Butcher turned abruptly away from the girl. He unholstered his gun and checked it, making sure it was fully loaded and that the action worked smoothly. Then he holstered it again.

There was a rumble of distant thunder and then the sound of rain beginning to fall on the tin roof. Butcher put his slicker on and ushered the girl out, locking the hut behind them as they stepped into the cool, steady downpour.

The door of Ray Morita's apartment was half open, as usual, and the sound of jazz was throbbing from within, even though it was four-thirty in the morning. Butcher led Lady Silk inside, past the closed door of the bedroom, into the living room where they were all sitting around the record player. Ray and the Doctor and Ace.

Butcher shook moisture off his coat. The storm seemed to be passing over the Hill, and the rain was now easing up. He noticed that the Doctor had brought his umbrella with him. It was resting between the small man's knees as he sat in an armchair. 'I know why you wanted us to come here,' said Butcher.

Ray and Ace and the Doctor exchanged a worried look. Ray had a pile of papers in his lap and was clutching a pen. His hands and face were stained with ink. 'Really?' said the Doctor quickly. 'Why?'

Butcher threw his wet coat over the back of a chair. 'Because Ray here wants to see the beautiful Lady Silk again. A last farewell. For old time's sake.' The girl beside Butcher said nothing, but she began to unbutton her coat.

'No,' said the Doctor.

'Why, then?' said Butcher. He was trying to decide if he should help Lady Silk off with her coat – she was, after all, a traitor – when he heard the sound of a door opening behind him. Before he could turn around he felt – for the second time in a matter of weeks – the cold pressure of a gun on the back of his neck.

'I'll tell you why I wanted you to come here,' said a voice behind him. 'Because of her.' A hand reached down beside Butcher's waist, fumbled with his holster, unbuttoned it and took out his gun. Then a sudden shove caused Butcher to stumble into the centre of the room. He caught his balance and turned around.

Standing there in the doorway was Imperial Lee, the Japanese punk, last seen lying at the bottom of the red well in the basement of the chapel. 'Dead,' said Butcher.

'Not me,' Imperial Lee grinned. 'I'm alive and well.'

'I saw you,' said Butcher. He turned to the Doctor. 'You touched the body yourself. You said he was dead and cold.'

'That man was,' said the Doctor. 'But that man was not Imperial Lee. He was merely his double from this world.'

'No,' snarled Butcher. 'Not that double talk again.'

‘He’s never going to believe you, Doctor,’ said Imperial Lee. He seemed very amiable and talkative, for a man with a gun in his hand. ‘Why don’t we just show him?’ He gestured for Butcher to sit down and turned to Lady Silk. Butcher was surprised to see that the girl was looking at him with genuine loathing and fear. He reached out and touched her cheek and she flinched. Lee grinned.

‘How can anyone *not* believe in parallel worlds?’ he said. ‘Parallel worlds and magic and synchronicity. What else but synchronicity could bring her here,’ he touched Lady Silk again, and again she moved away from him, ‘at the exact same time as me? It was fate. Destiny. The curve of binding energies.’

‘Don’t try and talk physics, Lee,’ said Ray, with contempt in his voice.

‘How did he get in here?’ said Butcher. ‘Los Alamos is the most secure military establishment in the entire United States.’ He had got over his astonishment at seeing a dead man brought back to life, and was now puzzling over ways and means.

Imperial Lee smiled. ‘Ray brought me here.’

Butcher turned to Ray. ‘I told them they should have locked you up. How did you manage it?’

‘With his equations,’ said Lee. ‘Or what our late friend Albert Storrow would have called his incantations. It’s probably easier if you just think of it as magic.’

Butcher looked at the pile of ink-stained pages in Ray’s lap. He laughed, a hoarse, savage sound. ‘You can point a gun at me. But you can’t make me believe that.’

‘You’ll believe it in a minute whether you like it or not,’ said Lee. ‘Because Ray’s magic was strong enough to bring me over, but not strong enough to bring Silk too. But now that her double is here,’ Lee nodded at the frightened girl, still standing there in her raincoat, ‘nothing is going to stop us.’

‘You’re talking gibberish,’ said Butcher.

‘Show him, Ray,’ said Lee. Ray Monta sighed and began scribbling on a fresh piece of paper. After a few minutes he stopped writing and got to his feet. ‘Don’t try anything cute,’ said Lee, moving his gun back and forth so it pointed in turn at everyone in the room. Any of you.’ Butcher realised that the Doctor and Ace – and perhaps even Ray – were not Imperial Lee’s accomplices. Rather they were prisoners being held at gunpoint like himself.

Ray gave the piece of paper to Imperial Lee. He took it and offered it to the girl. She was reluctant to accept it, but Lee pointed his gun at her and she reached out and took it. The moment her hand touched the paper her entire body jerked and her face suddenly came to life. She smiled and crushed the paper into a ball and threw it playfully across the room. Her eyes were bright with malice and mischief and she began to chuckle. It was hard to imagine a

more total contrast with the frail, beaten figure who had been standing there in the drenched raincoat.

In the raincoat. . .

Butcher suddenly realised that this girl wasn't wearing a raincoat, or indeed the sober black two-piece suit that Silk had been dressed in for the photographs with the General. Instead she was in a black sweater and tight black trousers, with white tennis shoes on her feet. She saw Butcher staring at her and she chuckled again.

'Major Butcher is impressed with my apparel. It's the blowing-up-the-universe look, Major. It's all the rage.'

'How did you do that?' said Butcher. 'It's some kind of illusion. Some kind of trick.'

'No,' said the Doctor wearily. 'It's just a case of two different women existing in two parallel universes. They just swapped places, that's all.'

Imperial Lee went to Lady Silk and kissed her. 'I'm so glad you could make it, babe. I thought you weren't going to see the fireworks.'

'I wouldn't have missed it for the world,' said Silk, and they both laughed. 'How long have we got?'

Imperial Lee glanced at his watch. 'Trinity is due for detonation.'

Butcher felt the bottom fall out of his world. 'How does he know that? How does he know so much about it?'

'It's all in the history books, Major,' said the Doctor. 'You see, Imperial Lee comes from the future.'

'And another dimension,' said Ace.

'Let's not confuse the Major, shall we Ace?'

'Due for detonation at five twenty-nine and forty-five seconds on Monday the sixteenth of July 1945,' said Imperial Lee.

Butcher said, 'But -'

The Doctor cut in immediately. 'Don't interrupt when the madman is making his big speech,' he said.

Imperial Lee gave a hard bark of laughter. 'I'll show you who the madman is, when first this planet, then this solar system, then this galaxy, then this entire universe goes up in one vast explosion.'

'There will be time to get clear, won't there?' said Lady Silk. 'I mean, I want to watch the big fireworks start here, but then I want to get home again safe and sound and snug.'

'I thought you were kamikaze commandos,' said Ace.

'That's Lee's big thing,' said Silk. 'He says he wants to stay and go up in the big bang.'

'It will be an honour to sacrifice myself for the New Empire,' said Lee.

‘That’s right, sweetie,’ said Silk. ‘You do that. But personally I suspect that the apocalypse would ruin my complexion. So I’m ducking out as soon as the show starts.’

‘Me too,’ said Ray hastily. ‘And I’m taking my records with me, man. That was the deal, wasn’t it?’

Ace gave him a steady look of disgust, as though he was something unpleasant she’d found adhering to the underside of her shoe. ‘Your records? Is that all you care about?’

‘Don’t worry, Ray,’ said Silk. ‘You and I will go back together. Just make sure you have the necessary equations ready to open that portal.’

‘Speaking of equations,’ said Imperial Lee. ‘Take a look at the work he’s done ready for the blast. I want to make sure he isn’t going to double-cross us.’

Lady Silk went and perched on the arm of Ray’s chair, taking one page at a time from the pile in the big man’s lap and scrutinising each one with care. Finally she said, ‘It all looks pretty kosher to me. Not quite complete, though.’

‘What the hell are they talking about?’ said Butcher.

The Doctor cleared his throat and looked at Ace. ‘Would you like to explain?’

‘All right,’ said Ace. ‘Ray here is a big science brain. His equations –’

‘Or incantations,’ said Imperial Lee.

‘Or incantations,’ said Ace wearily, ‘are so powerful that they will have an effect on the atomic bomb when it goes off. They’ll amplify the blast. Amplify it so much that this entire universe will be destroyed.’ She looked at the Doctor. ‘Is that about right?’

‘Not bad. You covered most of the salient points, although you rather glossed over the crucial matter of probability, the way that Ray’s mathematical prediction of an event interacts with that event at a quantum level to bring it into being.’

‘Anyway,’ said Ace to Butcher. ‘You get the gist.’

‘You’re all insane,’ said Butcher.

The Doctor shook his head sadly. ‘No, just Imperial Lee.’

Lady Silk laughed, but Lee looked angry. ‘I’m getting tired of you saying that about me.’ He raised his gun and aimed it at the Doctor. It looked as though he was going to use it. Butcher braced himself. If the punk started shooting he was going to try and jump him. It might be his last chance.

‘What are you doing, Lee?’ said Lady Silk in a calm, stern voice. ‘I thought we agreed that all this bloodshed and human sacrifice nonsense was just tacky. All we need is the equations and the desire.’

The barrel of Lee’s gun wavered, and then he slowly lowered it. He looked at Silk. ‘We’re not short of desire,’ he said. His voice was low and thick, and

Butcher realised that he really believed in all this. Believed it and wanted it to happen. Wanted to see the world blow up like a hand grenade. 'But what about the equations?'

Lady Silk shrugged, 'Like I said, not quite complete.'

Imperial Lee looked at his watch. 'There isn't much time left.' He turned his gun on Ray. 'Get to work. Finish them.'

'All right man,' said Ray, quickly picking up his pen and a sheet of paper. 'Take it easy. I'm almost done.'

'Finish them except for the very last figure,' said Lady Silk. 'Then you can write that in at exactly the right moment.' She smiled at Lee. 'We'll time it to perfection.'

'OK, baby, OK.' Ray scribbled a few last lines of calculation, then lifted his pen and chewed at the end of it. He studied the paper, sighed, set the pen down on the arm of his chair and said, 'It's all done. I just have to write in a final term.'

Imperial Lee nodded excitedly. 'It's now five twenty-five. At five twenty-nine I will begin a countdown. We will try and coincide precisely with the detonation at Trinity, in the Jornada Del Muerto desert to the south of here. So I will start counting at forty-five and work backwards to zero. I will say, "Forty-five, forty-four, forty-three. . ."'

'I get the picture man, I get the picture,' said Ray.

'You will put the finishing touch on your incantation, or equation,' said Lee, 'at precisely five twenty-nine and forty-five seconds, which is when they will detonate the bomb.'

Butcher glanced at the Doctor, who shot him an urgent look, as if to say to keep his mouth shut. Imperial Lee went over to Lady Silk and handed her his gun. 'Keep an eye on them. The safety's off. If they even stir, shoot.'

'With pleasure, love,' said Lady Silk. 'But where are you going?'

'Just over here.' Lee strode to the living-room windows and threw them open. Cool, rain-scented night air spilled in, chilling the sweat on Butcher's face. He watched Silk intently, but she seemed to know how to handle a gun and her hand was steady. Lee paced impatiently. He looked at his watch. 'Five twenty-six and thirty seconds.'

'Now,' said Lady Silk. 'You do have our getaway equations ready, don't you Ray?'

'Yeah, man, they're right here.' Ray patted the pile of papers in his lap.

'Because we don't want to be hanging about, do we?' Silk smiled above the gun barrel. 'What with the universe going up in a chain reaction and all.'

'Hey, that reminds me, I got to get my records ready.'

'Stay put,' said Imperial Lee tightly.

Lady Silk raised her eyebrows. 'Oh for heaven's sake, let him get his records.' She nodded to Ray, who scuttled from the room and scuttled back in with his yellow record bag. He threw himself back into his chair and sat clutching it tightly to him.

'Five twenty-eight,' said Imperial Lee. Then the room was silent except for the sound of the wind sighing through it. The first light of dawn was beginning to show in the dark east. The oak trees outside the window creaked and shifted in the wind, moving their branches against a sky full of retreating storm clouds.

'Five twenty-nine,' said Imperial Lee tensely. He began his countdown in a strained, cracked voice. To Butcher's eye he looked like he was on the verge of a complete breakdown. It was a pity he'd handed the gun to Lady Silk. The girl was a much cooler customer. Butcher couldn't sense any weakness in her.

'Twenty,' said Imperial Lee. 'Nineteen. Eighteen.' His voice was like two stones grinding together.

'Wait a minute, man,' said Ray suddenly.

'What?'

'Do I do it on zero or one?'

'On zero!' spat Imperial Lee. 'Zero! You do it on zero, you fool!' Lady Silk laughed. Lee frantically checked his watch.

'Four. Three. Two. One. Zero.'

Ray hunched forward and wrote briefly on the piece of paper in his lap. Everyone stared at the window. The sky was growing imperceptibly lighter with the approach of dawn. The branches of the oak tree stirred. A restless breeze circulated into the room, bringing chill air with it.

'Well?' said Lady Silk, her eyebrows high.

'Wait,' said Imperial Lee tensely. Sweat was dripping from his brow, down his face, off his chin. 'Wait, wait, wait. It's happening.'

'If it's happening then shouldn't we get going? I mean, Ray and me?' There was a note of nascent scepticism in Lady Silk's voice.

'Wait!' said Lee.

'But maybe it's not safe to wait, darling,' said Silk. 'We were all expecting fireworks but maybe there won't be any. Maybe we won't notice anything before it's too late. So Ray and I had best go now. Better safe than sorry. Ready, Ray?'

Ray didn't reply. Instead – strangely, thought Butcher – he turned to look at the Doctor, as if expecting something from him. 'There's no need to go anywhere,' said the Doctor calmly.

Lady Silk snorted. 'Come now. I for one am not hanging about to find out what the end of this universe looks like. It's already a couple of minutes after Trinity and...'

'No it's not,' said the Doctor with a shade of what Butcher thought was smugness in his tone.

Both Lady Silk and Imperial Lee were now staring at the Doctor. 'It's not what?' said Silk, virtually spitting out the words.

'It's not Trinity,' said the Doctor. 'The Trinity blast isn't scheduled until tomorrow.'

'Monday July sixteenth,' said Imperial Lee, like an automaton with a recorded message. 'Five twenty-nine and forty-five seconds.'

'Not in this universe,' said the Doctor. 'Here Trinity is scheduled for detonation on Tuesday July seventeenth at five am precisely.'

'What?' said Imperial Lee, his face glazed with sweat, his mouth hanging open.

'Details, Lee, details,' said the Doctor, smiling. 'The devil is in the details.'

'Oh, for God's sake,' said Lady Silk. 'I can't believe you've screwed this up.' She turned to Lee, her face tight with rage. '*Can't you get anything right?*'

'We can always try again tomorrow,' said Imperial Lee feebly.

'I think not,' said the Doctor. He lifted his umbrella from between his knees and pointed it at Lady Silk. There was a sharp puff of compressed air and Silk suddenly went limp and dropped the gun. Ace had already leapt to her feet and, in what looked to Butcher like a carefully rehearsed move, scooped up the weapon and pointed it at Lee.

'It's all over, Lee,' said the Doctor.

Butcher had to admit that it was neatly done. Whatever the business with the umbrella signified – Butcher suspected it had shot some kind of poisoned dart – Lady Silk was now standing frozen like a statue. Maybe it was curare or something, thought Butcher. A paralysing agent. The only part of Silk that moved was her eyes, desperately searching the room. Imperial Lee, however, still had the power of movement. He turned and sprinted across the room. Not towards the door, but to the window. Ace aimed the gun at him but the Doctor shouted, 'No, Ace. Let him go.' Lee reached the window.

And jumped.

Straight down. Two stories.

Butcher and the others, except for the motionless Silk, all rushed to the windows and peered out. Imperial Lee was lying there at the foot of an oak tree, his body still, his head twisted at an impossible angle. 'He killed himself,' said Butcher.

'That was the plan all along,' said the Doctor. He turned to Butcher, his eyes bright and intense. 'You witnessed it Major. You saw it all.'

'I'm not sure what the hell I saw.'

The Doctor smiled crookedly. 'But now you have your missing body. The last piece of the puzzle. You can report to your superiors that the case is well

and truly closed. The last of the spy ring has been brought to justice, thanks to you. It will only redound to your greater glory.'

'What about you?' said Butcher. 'Why don't you report to your superiors? Why don't you take the credit?'

'Well, of course I could, being a top British intelligence operative.' The Doctor winked at Ace. 'But I'm willing to let you have all the kudos. On one condition.'

Butcher said nothing. He just stared suspiciously at the small man. The Doctor shrugged and said, 'I want you to let Lady Silk go.'

'Impossible.'

'I don't mean set her free to be a fugitive from justice. I mean, clear her name.'

'No chance.'

'On the contrary, I think there is every chance. You have the true leader of the spy ring now.' The Doctor nodded at the broken body lying below the window. 'You can make the case for Silk just being an innocent dupe who was in his power and terrorised by him. After all, it's the truth.'

'Is it?' Butcher turned and looked at the frozen woman standing across the room. Her eyes met his. She seemed to be taking in everything, understanding what was happening but helpless to take any action.

'Show him, Ray,' said the Doctor. Ray took a sheet of paper from the stack in his lap and carried it over to where Silk was standing. He peered at her helplessly for a moment.

'She's paralysed, man,' he bleated.

'Oh, for God's sake,' said Ace. She went to Ray and took the paper from his hand and carefully tucked it between Silk's frozen fingers. As soon as Ace let go of it, the woman twitched and came to life again. But she was no longer holding the piece of paper.

And she was wearing the raincoat again. 'Please don't send me back there,' she said. 'Please let me stay here. I don't care if you put me in jail. Don't send me back there again.' The Doctor went to her and put a hand on her shoulder. He looked at Butcher.

'Of course you can stay here,' he said. 'And if Major Butcher acts on what he's seen tonight, what he knows to be true, then you won't have to go to jail. In time you'll even be able to resume your singing career, as if none of this ever happened.'

Lady Silk began to cry, folding herself against the Doctor like a broken blossom. Ace rolled her eyes. 'Here we go,' she said. Butcher looked at her.

'I don't understand,' he said.

'What else is new?' said Ace.

'That umbrella-gun the Doctor had – he could have used that at any time.' Butcher stared at Ace. 'Why didn't he just shoot Imperial Lee as soon as he turned up?' She just shrugged and didn't reply. Instead she looked at the Doctor. Butcher looked at him, too. The Doctor gently disengaged himself from Lady Silk and turned to them.

'There would have been very little point shooting Lee as soon as he turned up, since I specifically asked Ray to perform the calculations that enabled Lee to turn up.'

'You brought him here?' said Butcher.

'I needed to put paid to the threat that Imperial Lee represented to this world. To do that I needed Lee to fail and I needed Lady Silk –' he nodded at the woman who stood close to him drying her tears '– not her, but the *other* Lady Silk, to witness his humiliating failure. And then return to her home world where she spread news of the debacle to any other members of their kamikaze movement. Which I fully expect her to do in her home dimension as soon as the effects of the paralysing pellet wear off.'

'So,' said Butcher, cursing himself for even falling into discussion of this nonsense, as if any of it was real, 'is the threat over?'

'As over as it ever is,' said the Doctor.

Epilogue

Trinity

Ace said, 'So how did you know that the atom bomb would be detonated a day later in this universe?'

'I didn't,' said the Doctor. 'In fact, it wasn't. It was originally scheduled to take place on exactly the same day, at exactly the same time, as in your universe.'

'What happened to change it, then?'

The Doctor just smiled and said nothing. After a moment, Ace said, 'You mean it was you?'

The Doctor shrugged modestly. 'Through rather clever manipulation of my calculations I managed to cast some doubt on the exact geometry chosen for Kistiakowsky's explosive lenses, which are used to detonate the fissionable material.'

'Just enough doubt to delay them by one day?'

'Exactly. Kistiakowsky was very annoyed.'

Ray Morita came up behind them. 'Hey cats, Zorg says we're in position now.' The Doctor and Ace turned and followed him down the winding transparent corridor to the spherical chamber that was the control room of the ship. Here the obscene crablike form of Zorg crouched over the transparent hemisphere of the cockpit. Below, Ace could see the tiny toy-geometry form of the hundred-foot tower with the 'gadget' suspended on it on the desert floor below.

'Is it safe here?' said Ace.

'We are hovering in dense cloud cover,' said Zorg. 'With just our cockpit protruding at the cloud base. They cannot see us, and their instruments can't detect us.'

'No,' said Ace. 'I meant, are we safe when that thing goes off?'

'Fear not, Zace,' said Zorg. 'We are sufficiently distant to be unaffected by the physical impact of the blast, and our radiation screens will cut in at the exact instant of detonation.'

The Doctor took out his pocket watch and scrutinised it. 'Which is... well, more or less *now*,' he said. They all gathered around the cockpit and stared

down. There was a blast of white light. To Ace it looked like the flashbulb on God's camera going off.

The transparent dimple of the cockpit suddenly darkened, like those sunglasses that change in bright daylight. Ace looked at the Doctor. Was that it?' she said. The Doctor nodded. Ace kept staring down, as the painfully brilliant light faded and the mushroom cloud built itself in tiers in the sky. After a few minutes she became bored even with the Luciferian majesty of this terrifying spectacle and turned away. The Doctor followed her as she wandered from the cockpit, leaving Zorg and Ray staring down through it.

'So, no chain reaction, then,' she said to the Doctor. 'Teller was wrong.'

'Unfortunately, yes,' said the Doctor. Ace stared at him, appalled, and the Doctor chuckled. 'Honestly, the expression on your face,' he said. 'You should see yourself. Obviously I didn't mean that it was unfortunate that this world wasn't destroyed by the bomb. What I *did* mean was that it was unfortunate that Teller clung tenaciously to his wrongheaded view, right up until the very end.'

'You never managed to get him to change his mind, then?'

'No,' said the Doctor. 'Not for all my arguing and reasoning. I made no impression at all.'

Ace shrugged. 'But what difference does it make? He was wrong, and the Earth survived, and that's all that matters.'

'Unfortunately it's not as simple as that. Because being wrong will have a profound effect on Teller. He will feel humiliated that he was wrong, that he argued against detonating the bomb. And, as a result, he will undergo a one hundred and eighty degree turn in his ideology. Effectively, Trinity was his experience on the road to Damascus.'

'Road to where?'

'It means a complete change of heart. From being anti-bomb to pro-bomb. He will become America's most influential advocate for nuclear weapons. He will stifle and discredit Oppenheimer. Teller will become the "father of the hydrogen bomb", building ever bigger and more terrible weapons and setting America – and the world – walking along the tightrope of proliferating nuclear arms.' The Doctor sighed. 'And I hoped all that could be avoided.'

'If you could have changed his mind?'

'Yes, if I only could have convinced him his chain reaction was impossible, then he would have abandoned his argument and he would have been spared the bitter humiliation of being proved wrong. Which in turn might well have stopped him over-compensating and becoming the apostle of nuclear annihilation.' The Doctor shrugged again. 'That was my real mission here... And I failed in it.'

‘Your real mission? What about stopping Imperial Lee from blowing up this entire universe?’

The Doctor smiled a melancholy smile. ‘I was never entirely convinced that such a thing could have been achieved.’

Ace stared at him, more appalled than before. ‘What do you mean? We saw how they used Ray’s equations.’

‘To travel between dimensions, yes. But I am far from certain that they could have used their peculiar blend of physics and magic to enact such a grandiose doomsday scenario.’

‘Well if you didn’t think they could pull it off, why did we try so hard to stop them?’

The Doctor’s smile was warmer now. ‘Because, unlike Oppy, I decided we couldn’t afford to take the chance. After all, there was an entire universe at stake.’

‘A universe that we saved,’ said Ace. ‘Quite possibly.’

‘Yes, quite possibly. Luckily, we will never know.’ The Doctor wandered to the far end of the control chamber where a familiar tall blue shape stood waiting for them. ‘It really was very good of Zorg to look after the TARDIS for us.’

‘Are you changing the subject?’ said Ace.

‘Yes, I suppose I am. I’m also broaching the new subject of our leaving. Because it’s time we did just that.’ Zorg overheard this and came scuttling over on his big fat transparent claws.

‘Truly, Zdoctor. Must you go?’

‘I fear so.’

‘But perhaps you could linger just a few moments longer to hear a little of my poetry?’

The Doctor looked at Ace. There was a glint of mischief in his eyes. ‘What do you think?’

Ace shook her head. ‘Sorry Zorg. We have to breeze.’

Ray hurried over to join them. ‘Did I hear you cats say you’re going now? And am I right in remembering that you’re offering me a lift back to my own dimension?’

‘Yes, Ray,’ said Ace wearily.

Cosmic Ray Morita hesitated, holding his yellow shoulder bag tightly to his chest. ‘And can I bring my records with me?’

‘Yes, Ray,’ said Ace, even more wearily.

The big man loped towards the TARDIS, tears of gratitude in his eyes.

About the Author

Andrew Cartmel was the influential script editor of **Doctor Who** during the Sylvester McCoy (Seventh Doctor) era. He has also worked as script editor and lead writer on the cult sword and sorcery TV series **Dark Knight** for Channel Five. He wrote the *War* trilogy (*Warhead*, *Warlock*, *Warchild*) in the Virgin **Doctor Who** New Adventures series, and *Foreign Devils*, a **Who** novella (which featured a guest appearance from William Hope Hodgson's Carnacki the Ghost Finder). His other books include *Script Doctor*, a memoir about his days on **Doctor Who** at the BBC and *The Wise*, an original novel. His stage thriller *End of the Night* had a successful run in London in 2003. He has recently had a screenplay optioned and is currently working on film scripts and more novels.



Los Alamos, New Mexico, 1945. The Second World War is coming to its bloody conclusion, and in the American desert the race is on to build an atomic bomb.

The fate of the world is at stake – in more ways than one. Someone, or something, is trying to alter the course of history at this most delicate point. And destroy the human race. Posing as a nuclear scientist with Ace as his research assistant, the Doctor plays detective among the Manhattan Project scientists, while desperately trying to avoid falling under suspicion himself.

As the minutes tick away to the world's first atom bomb blast, the Doctor and Ace find themselves up to their necks in spies, aliens of the flying-saucer variety, and some very nasty saboteurs from another dimension...

*A new adventure featuring the Seventh Doctor and Ace,
written by Andrew Cartmel, Script Editor for this era of the
television programme.*

ISBN 0-563-48635-X



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