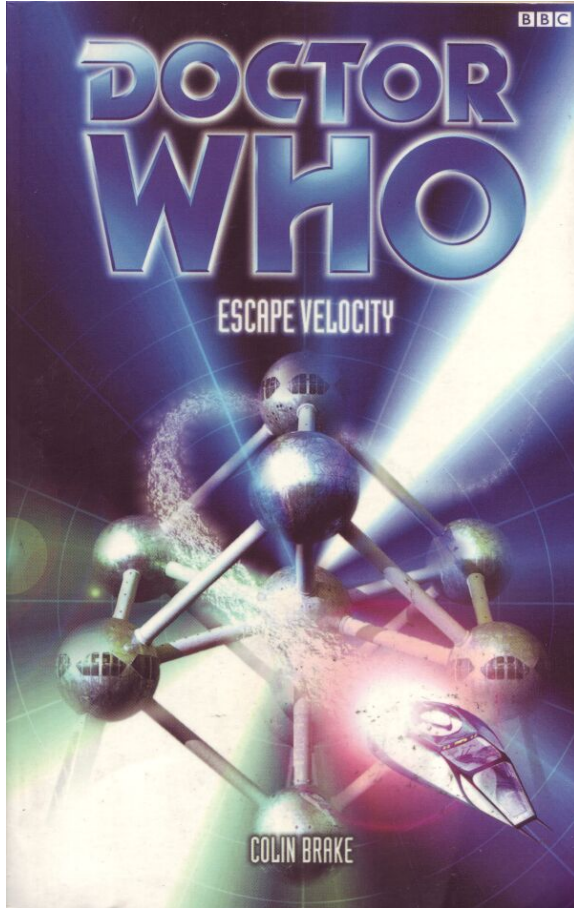


BBC

# DOCTOR WHO

ESCAPE VELOCITY



COLIN BRAKE

*'You know me then?' asked the Doctor, a little tentatively. 'You're the Doctor,' replied Fitz, a slight frown worming its way onto his forehead. 'Yes, yes, yes, the Doctor, of course I am.' The Doctor smiled, genuinely pleased to see a familiar face, even if for the moment he couldn't quite put a name to it. 'But, er, Doctor who?' he added hopefully.*

The Doctor and Fitz are back together at last, but the Doctor is not the man he once was - which is a shame, because Fitz has promised Anji Kapoor that his old friend is Anji's best hope of finding her alien-abducted boyfriend, Dave.

Soon the Doctor, Fitz and Anji find themselves involved in a desperate contest between Pierre-Yves Dudoin and Arthur Tyler the Third, each determined to be the first privately funded man in space. But not all the parties are playing fairly; members of an alien race called the Kulan are helping the Frenchman - and at the far reaches of the Solar System their battle fleet awaits. . .

Can the Doctor find Dave before the alien contact proves fatal? Who are the secret agents keeping tabs on the rival Space Race teams? Will the Doctor's mysterious blue box finally reveal its purpose? And does the Doctor, now truly a man without a past, have what it takes to stop the Kulan Invasion of Earth. . . ?

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



# Escape Velocity

Colin Brake

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*For Kerry, Cefn and Kassia, with love*

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# Chapter One

## Close Encounters of the Third Kind

‘Is that it?’

If it hadn’t been for the small crowd of bemused, camera-clicking tourists Anji would probably have missed it completely: a small, dark, bronze statue of a naked little boy, happily urinating into the air. The novelty fountain figure stood in an alcove in the wall of a building, protected by metal railings. Dave glanced at his fold-out tourist map of the city and nodded a confirmation to his puzzled girlfriend.

‘The Mannikin Pis,’ he announced, reading from the guide. ‘“Less than two feet tall, this charming Brussels icon was first cast in 1619, and gained his first clothes from Louis XV in 1747...”’

Dave watched carefully as Anji’s eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly, a sure sign of annoyance. He let his quotation from the pocket guide go unfinished and attempted not to sigh audibly, knowing that it would only make things worse. The short break was not going according to plan.

It had been a mutual decision to shake up their dull routine with a short, unplanned holiday; after the excitement and merrymaking of Christmas and New Year they had quickly fallen back into the rut their relationship had descended into the previous year. The first year of the so-called new millennium had been a rocky one for Dave Young and Anji Kapoor. It had started the previous New Year’s Eve when Dave had spent the entire evening pedantically insisting that the new millennium wouldn’t actually begin until 1 January 2001 and the next 365 days hadn’t been any better. After five years as an item, three living together, Dave and Anji had come to the conclusion that they were metamorphosing into some kind of off-the-shelf parody of a married couple long before their time. This year they had decided to do something about it, and their joint New Year’s resolution had been to do Wild and Spontaneous Things.

‘I’m really not sure Brussels was quite the right choice to be a Wild and Spontaneous Thing,’ moaned Anji, hugging her elegantly-cut designer coat tighter against the cold, drizzly wind. She started walking again, quick but small steps

taking her back towards the centre of the city. Dave hurried after her, speculating – not for the first time – as to whether his long-time girlfriend had hidden powers of telepathy.

They'd managed to get a good deal on a *Le Shuttle* crossing, an early Valentine's special, and Anji had driven through the night to reach Calais for breakfast. It had been there in the French port, Dave now realised, that things had begun to go wrong. Over croissants and coffee, Anji had pressed for Paris as their ultimate destination but Dave had argued long and hard for his own choice: Brussels, Capital of Europe, a city famous for some of the best restaurants in the world – and for a small statue of a little boy taking a piss. Dave hurried after Anji knowing that he had a hard task ahead of him to alter her mood now.

With his feet skating on the wet cobbles of the road, the desperate figure ran for his life through the glistening streets of Brussels. Behind him his pursuers followed with grim determination and lethal intent.

Names can be important signifiers but, to the tourists and citizens in the streets of Brussels, this chased figure was totally anonymous. He could have been known as Anton or Johann or Boris, or maybe they could have identified him by his profession: 'The Dentist', 'The Accountant', 'The Baker' or perhaps, to one of the people he pushed roughly aside in his mad dash for liberty, he was merely 'The Running Man', 'The Pusher' or 'The Rude Guy'. The two humanoids in hot pursuit of the nameless creature had their own nomenclature for him, to them he was merely 'The Target'.

Krzysztof Szemplinski was coming to the end of another incident-filled shift of taxi driving through the dangerous streets of Belgium's capital. Not for the first time he was thinking of Warsaw, remembering happier times. In Poland the cars wore dents and bruises because they were old; here even a new car could be expected to carry a mark or two, the inevitable result of the normal behaviour of the Brussels motorist. The prime characteristics of the natives' driving style seemed to combine a teenager's recklessness with a complete disregard for any traffic laws. As far as Krzysztof was concerned, it made driving in Brussels a more nerve-racking experience than driving in Milan or Paris, and his daily taxi-driving shifts became a nonstop gamble with death. And, if the drivers were bad, the pedestrians were worse. He slammed on the brakes as a figure hurtled out of a side street and dashed across the road in front of him. Behind him other vehicles screeched to a halt and Krzysztof heard the familiar tinkle

of broken glass as headlights embraced bumpers somewhere two or three cars back. An angry chorus of car horns filled the air.

Krzysztof looked on in amazement as the running figure crossed the six lanes of traffic on the Rue Adolphe Max and disappeared into another dark and relatively quiet side street. Behind him two other lunatics appeared from the same side street and followed an identical path as that of the running man, crossing at lights that were now showing a green man signalling that it was safe for pedestrians. As the pair crossed the road, walking rapidly, Krzysztof's foot squeezed his accelerator, making the engine growl as if impatient to move. One of the pursuers stopped and looked the Pole in the eye sternly, he pulled his coat back deliberately, allowing him to see that he was carrying some kind of weird-looking weapon. The taxi driver felt a sudden dread, a chill blade of fear that cut deep into his soul. Without conscious thought, he lifted his foot from the pedal and watched as the man with the strange gun moved on. A moment later the lights changed, giving Krzysztof, and the other drivers who had been held up by the lights, leave to move, but the yellow taxi stayed exactly where it was, its driver struck immobile by an inexplicable fear. A new cacophony of horns and angry cries in a handful of different languages now sounded, but the suicidal pedestrian and his two pursuers were too far away to notice or care.

Dave walked alongside Anji, trying gently to win her round and pull her back from her imminent black mood.

'It's probably raining in Paris, too,' he volunteered hopefully. She favoured him with one of her best withering looks, but his hangdog expression was too much for her and, despite herself, Anji found herself grinning at him. The smile transformed her completely: before, a slight scowl on her coffee-coloured skin gave her a petulant, spoiled-child look, but now a warm smile turned on a hundred-watt lamp behind her eyes, which both illuminated and animated her face. Dave, seeing his chance, pressed his advantage.

'It looks like the shops close late round here,' he said, waving a hand at the shops they were passing. 'Why don't we do a little shopping?'

'I thought we were looking for somewhere to eat,' replied Anji, a trace of suspicion in her voice – Dave hated shopping.

'We can look while we walk and shop...'

With a nod of acceptance, Anji let him take her hand and they continued walking back in a northerly direction, towards the heart of the city's shopping district. He fingered a small package he had in his pocket and wondered if it was worth playing his joker yet. Perhaps it could wait for a while. Dave

allowed himself a small smile of satisfaction – perhaps this holiday would work out after all.

The Target hurtled down an alley and round a corner, ducking into a darkened doorway to catch his ragged breath. From within the closed shop a Siamese cat glanced up at him dismissively. The cat saw the stranger, breathing deeply, his odd eyes lit by the neon of a restaurant opposite, his features subtly but defiantly alien. The cat hissed and bared its teeth, instinctively suspicious of the figure. Unsettled by the creature's alienness, the cat slunk back into the darker recesses of the shop.

Further up the alley, the two Hunters appeared and froze, as if trying to hear or maybe even smell their quarry. The taller of the two, illuminated by a street light, could now be seen to share some of the characteristics of his target; the other was a native, both of the planet and this particular city. His name was Jacques and he was an assassin. His alien partner, Fray'kon, shared his profession – and tonight his target. Perhaps his alien hearing was more sensitive than the human's, or perhaps he had other senses that led him on. Whichever it was, Fray'kon suddenly strode forward with renewed purpose. Jacques followed, his new toy – the alien-looking weapon – once again in his hand.

In the doorway the Target, Menhira, manipulated a lock-picking device – a semi-intelligent rod of some pliable plastic which, when inserted into a lock, reshaped itself into the exact shape of the key required. With a click the lock sprang open. Menhira quickly opened the door and hurried into the shop. Moments later Fray'kon and Jacques reached the doorway. Jacques – seeing the figure of their target disappearing into the dark jungle of antiques – raised his gun and fired through the display window. The toughened glass spider-webbed, then collapsed as easily as film-makers' sugar glass. Inside, an underinsured antique vase took the brunt of the bullet's destructive power. At the same time as his partner resorted to gunplay, Fray'kon took a more direct route – diving through the door to continue his pursuit on foot. However, the devastation caused by his partner's reckless shot had left his path treacherous and difficult. He clambered over the debris as quickly as he could, his powerful arms clearing a path.

Jacques followed, his face grim but giving away nothing. He'd made a mistake, an error of judgement, but he wasn't about to admit it. The two black-clad assassins hurried on through the shop. From a safe position in the far corner of the room, two feline eyes watched them disappear with a look of contempt.

The Siamese had recognised that the hiding stranger had been trouble all along. Stepping carefully to avoid the shattered antiques, the cat pawed his way back to his sleeping area and settled down, knowing that the humans would sort it out – they always did.

Dave was beginning to wonder if his use of the shopping card had been an inspired gambit or a waste of time. So far they'd managed to walk about a hundred metres and had already spent what seemed like hours in at least a dozen shops. He was beginning to run out of fake enthusiasm for this ring and that bracelet.

'Yeah, it's really nice,' he said on automatic pilot, seeing her face turned up at him expectantly. He realised his mistake instantly as her beautiful dark eyes narrowed and her mouth hardened.

'I asked if you wanted to look in that bookshop.'

'Sorry I was miles away,' he confessed.

'I noticed.' Anji's tone was neutral but Dave recognised the danger signs.

'I was trying to remember the name of some restaurant I was reading about in the guidebook that sounded really nice,' he insisted.

'And can you?'

'What?' Dave was already regretting his latest bit of thinking on his feet.

'Remember the name of the place?'

Dave looked around desperately for some inspiration. Unfortunately the only thing he could see that registered was a branch of McDonald's.

'La M'Dee,' he improvised desperately.

'What kind of name is that?' replied a suspicious Anji.

'A French one,' he answered, hopefully, putting on what he thought would be a winning smile.

They walked on, the rain easing into a light mist. Looking around her, Anji was amused to see familiar names and trademarks on many of the shops: McDonald's of course – not that one could wander into a near-deserted township in the wilds of Africa without seeing one of those these days – but also Body Shop, Marks & Spencer, even a Virgin Megastore. Casting her eyes up and looking at the buildings themselves rather than the shop fronts, she could tell she was in Continental Europe, but at street level she could have been anywhere.

In her twenty-eight years on the planet Anji had travelled quite a bit – after all, travel was listed as an interest on her CV – but mostly in Europe and North America. She liked discovering new places but always felt just a tad disappointed to find so much to be familiar, to realise that the new places were just

the same as the old ones. She couldn't make up her mind as to whether this was because London had become so globalised that little bits of everywhere could be found within its borders, or whether the rest of the world had gradually taken on elements of London. What she really wanted, she had decided recently, was to go somewhere further afield, somewhere truly different in every way. Somewhere really *alien*. She thought about broaching the subject over dinner later, to see if Dave could be persuaded to agree. Maybe they could plan a summer trip to somewhere truly exotic.

Anji sighed, not sure that it would be worth the effort. The last time she had tried to raise the subject of a holiday somewhere truly different Dave had just got excited about the idea of a holiday in space. She had thought he was joking – but he'd been completely serious. 'It's the next big thing – space tourism,' Dave had told her with enthusiasm. She had sniffed at the idea, pointing out the recent setbacks in both the American and the European space programmes, but Dave had refused to listen. In fact he had become quite passionate. 'They're the dinosaurs of space exploration. It's private capital that'll fuel the next phase. People like that Arthur Tyler or that French geezer, Dudoin.' Mention of the French engineer had made Anji frown.

'I thought he was trying to break some land-speed record, not fly to the moon.'

'Don't you read the papers?' Dave had asked.

'Yes, but the *FT* and *The Economist* don't have a comics section.'

It was a familiar argument between them, well rehearsed and oft-repeated. In fact, Anji remembered a couple of recent pieces in *The Economist* on the future of space exploration and development by private funding. She'd checked out one or two as possible investments for one of her more adventurous clients but had felt the long-term profitability of the exercise questionable to say the least. Anji knew better, however, than to go into details about the economics of the proposal with Dave, whose grasp of monetary and fiscal policy barely extended beyond knowing how large his overdraft was.

Menhira was tiring. The oxygen-rich atmosphere of Earth was too strong for his alien respiratory system and his breathing was now laboured. Both hearts were pumping dangerously fast, his limbs were shaking with exhaustion and his vision was blurred. He leaned against a wall, having eluded his pursuers for the moment, and reached into a pocket to withdraw a small object. About twelve centimetres long and cylindrical in shape, it could have been a tiny weapon of some kind, or maybe a futuristic ballpoint pen. Menhira looked at it

with reverence – knowing it and its contents were of much greater importance than his own continued existence. He knew it was vital to get it to a place of safety. Further down the street a commotion alerted him to the fact that the assassins were once again closing in.

Ignoring the angry screams of a *maître d'*, Jacques and Fray'kon ran through a display of fresh fish outside a restaurant, scattering *moules*, crabs, lobsters and ice all over the narrow alley. Jacques had once again drawn his alien gun. Suddenly Menhira burst from cover and raced for the nearby open space of the Grand Place. Jacques paused, aiming his weapon at a space a few feet ahead of his running target. His finger pulled the trigger.

Anji and Dave had also reached the Grand Place.

'It must be around here somewhere,' said Dave, still acting out his search for the nonexistent restaurant.

'Look out!' warned Anji, pulling Dave out of the path of a pale-looking man running, no, *staggering*, towards them.

At the entrance to a nearby street, Fray'kon reached across and lowered Jacques's arm, advising caution with a tiny shake of his head. Out in the open space of the Grand Place they could see that their target had fallen, victim of Jacques's precision shooting. From this distance, however, it was impossible for either to ascertain whether the injury was fatal – a pair of well-intentioned tourists had noticed the Target fall and were now attending to him.

'Don't get involved – he's probably drunk!' speculated Anji, but Dave was already on his knees next to the collapsed man.

'I think he's been shot!' he reported, seeing blood, thick and red, almost purple, which seemed to be pouring from a wound in the man's chest. Taking this on board, Anji went into practical mode. As ever, a problem was something that needed a solution, and Anji prided herself on coming up with calm, logical solutions to problems.

'I'll try to call an ambulance,' she told Dave, looking around for a public phone box, trusting that any public phone would display a number for the emergency services.

Dave started to loosen the man's clothing. Anji, scanning the square unsuccessfully for a phone booth, still managed to take in what he was doing.

'What do you think you're doing? You're not a doctor!'

'I played one once on *Children's Ward*,' replied Dave and, despite the circumstances, he found himself smiling briefly at the memory of one of his few small TV roles thus far in his decidedly non-stellar acting career. He tried to find a pulse but idled, so he leaned over and tried to listen for a heartbeat instead.

'That's weird,' he reported. 'He seems to have two hearts!'

'As if!' tutted Anji.

Dave struggled to remember the few lines he'd had in the show – something about the recovery position? Suddenly the man stirred and his eyes flicked open. He grabbed at Dave as if for support, using the action to cover slipping a small package into one of Dave's pockets – a pickpocketing in reverse. At the same time he activated a penlike device and pressed it against Dave's wrist.

'Ow!' exclaimed Dave, surprised.

The man's grip loosened and his eyes went cold. As he fell back from Dave, the small penlike device spilled out from one outstretched hand and rolled into a gutter, unseen. The death of the man completely distracted Dave from the momentary sharp pain he'd felt in his wrist.

The internationally recognisable combination of blue flashing lights and sirens announced the imminent arrival of an ambulance. While a stunned and confused Anji and Dave watched on – along with a small crowd of other interested bystanders – a pair of paramedics bundled the dead man on to a gurney and into their vehicle. Dave made an attempt to tell the paramedics what had happened, and about the strange double heartbeat that he had heard, but the two men completely ignored him. Anji had tried a little French, thinking the men probably didn't speak English but just got a couple of alien-sounding words in return, which may or may not have been Flemish. Or perhaps the guys had just been clearing their throats. Within sixty seconds of their arrival the ambulance crew and their vehicle left the scene, taking the dead man with them.

With the show clearly now over, the crowd began to disperse. Anji and Dave stood in silence, shaken by the unexpected incident. Anji was the first to find her voice.

'I'm not sure that I fancy eating now,' she murmured.

Dave nodded, sharing the feeling. Taking her hand gently, he led her in the direction of their hotel.

Neither of them noticed the silver device that still lay in the gutter where it had fallen. A few minutes later a teenager walking through the Grand Place spotted it, picked it up and then, dismissing it as some kind of broken toy, threw it into a bin.



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A few streets away from the well-populated Grand Place, the ambulance, now driving without sirens or flashing lights, pulled to a stop. The two paramedics quickly exited the cab and ran round to the rear door, which they pulled open. After checking that the street was indeed deserted the pair removed the dead man and bundled him into the boot of a nearby parked car. Removing their fluorescent paramedics' jackets, Jacques and Fray'kon climbed into the car and drove off.

In the back of the abandoned ambulance, two genuine paramedics lay stripped of their uniforms and unconscious, unaware that they had just had a close encounter of the near-fatal kind with an alien being.

## Chapter Two

### Speed

The desert was silent and hot, the arid air shimmering above the seemingly infinite expanse of dusty, cracked earth. The vast, open, inhuman space could have been an alien world, unpopulated and almost uninhabitable. The sun beat down relentlessly. Incongruously, a small circle of vehicles were hunched together, as if seeking each other's company in the huge openness, parked in a loose circle, like a wagon train camped for the night. But these vehicles were not horse-drawn: these were gigantic container lorries, four-wheel-drive jeeps, a couple of top-of-the-range Winnebagos. A twin-poled, open-sided tent had been erected over a small temporary block of raked seating, suggesting some kind of travelling circus. Clusters of satellite dishes on a number of the vehicles told the whole story – this was a media circus rather than a three-ring one.

Despite the Nevada heat, the site was a swarm of frantic activity. TV technicians ran miles of cable, tested their equipment, and desperately and repeatedly cleaned the all-pervading desert dust from their camera lenses. Others were setting up complex tracking equipment linked to computers, sophisticated enough to send a rocket to the moon, which were locked inside secure, airtight and climate-controlled trucks. Inside one massive container truck, a portable garage housed one of the stars of the event – a lean, dartlike super car dubbed 'Light Racer'. A small mob of engineers were busy tweaking every single element of the car ahead of its imminent attempt at the land-speed record. Meanwhile, the other star of the show was sitting calmly in the longest and most luxurious Winnebago: Pierre-Yves Dudoin was a man with a dream.

The trailer was empty, save for Dudoin. The Frenchman was a compact and darkly handsome man. Some people had noted his lack of height, and his Gallic determination, and made unflattering comparisons to Napoleon, but Dudoin was a more complex character than that simple allusion would suggest. One thing he did share with the one-time Emperor of France was a permanently worried expression – making him look like Chicken Licken waiting for the sky to fall in – and a legendary sex drive, at least according to his publicist. Rumour

had it that he had been known to smile; estimates averaged it at about ten times in the past fifteen years.

Today there was little sign of a smile on the cover-star features. His facial expression was blank, his breathing Zen-like in its control. His eyes were fixed firmly on a TV monitor showing a looped video recording of his favourite motivational aid.

Pierre-Yves Dudoin was about to attempt to become the fastest man on Earth, but his dreams were of outer space. He watched, for at least the thousandth time, the flickering black-and-white images that so inspired him. On the screen, the white-spacesuited figure hopped awkwardly down the short ladder of the lunar landing craft and set foot on the moon's surface. A small dust storm erupted in slow motion at the point of impact and, crackling through the immense distances of time and space, the familiar voice of the first man to walk on the moon spoke his famous overscripted, 'impromptu' speech one more time.

The degraded, thirty-year-old pictures showed the absurd Michelin-man figure bouncing around on the alien ground, kicking up more clouds of moon dust with every step. Pierre-Yves watched enthralled, seeing himself in the astronaut's place, venturing out into space, exploring new frontiers.

The space race had dominated his entire life, firing an interest in engineering and rocket science from almost the day he learned to walk. Professionally, that interest, and his subsequent specialisation, had led to a career in speed – primarily roller-coaster design and construction – and then to his ten-year programme to break the land-speed record.

'Are you rolling?' A nod from her cameraman gave her the answer she wanted and Charlene Tolliver began her piece to camera.

'The Light Racer. State-of-the-art, out-of-this-world technology from the cutting edge. But is it good enough for the ultimate test? No one save the members of the ITI group know exactly what goes on under the bonnet of this sleek beast but it's chief designer and pilot, Pierre-Yves Dudoin, claims it to be the fastest car in the solar system. Well, no rivals from Mars or Pluto have turned up here today, so it'll be a one-car race – a race against the laws of physics themselves – that we will witness today.'

A wrinkled nose and a cutting motion with her hand to her neck signalled to the cameraman to stop recording.

'That was great,' volunteered the technician.

'That was bullshit,' replied Charlene, annoyed. 'What we need is Dudoin himself or one of his team, not me waffling on over shots of the goddam car.'

Preferably him, of course.’ Although she had been hanging around his trailer, he had resolutely failed to take any interest in her whatsoever. At least, that was what she thought.

Behind the journalist there was a sudden rush of activity as members of the car team appeared and made the final preparations to the vehicle. Security men emerged from one of the tents to usher the various news crews towards the corral prepared especially for them to view the record-breaking attempt. Finally, anticipation and impatience were giving way to excitement.

Wearing designer overalls bereft of ugly sponsorship logos, save the familiar ITI planet symbol, Dudoin emerged from his trailer and approached his car. Charlene, watching him walk coolly through the desert heat, thought he looked like a rock star or an extra from some sci-fi blockbuster. She looked over at her camera operator, checking that he was rolling again as Dudoin climbed carefully into the tiny cockpit of his vehicle. He secured his helmet and, a moment later, two aides lowered the cabin hood into place and secured it.

‘Just look at that,’ said Charlene, to no one in particular.

Within the cocoon-like silence of the Light Racer cockpit, Dudoin was a man in his element – another superbly engineered part of the whole machine. In constant radio contact with his control team, he prepared himself for the trial ahead. And smiled. One of his dreams was about to become reality. And, after he had conquered speed on Earth, the next goal would be space.

In a London bar called, for reasons no one could fathom, ‘St Louis’, a barman called, for equally obscure reasons, ‘Sheff’ watched the satellite news broadcast of the land-speed record attempt with a vague indifference. Sheff could not figure out why someone would want to go faster than anyone else had ever driven before – how quickly could you need to be somewhere? It was beyond him. Wiping glasses as they came out of the dishwasher and replacing them behind the bar, Sheff allowed himself a small smile as the Frenchman’s first attempt ended prematurely.

Sheff’s mind began to wander, the events in the desert not being of sufficient interest to hold his gaze for long. He looked around the bar, empty at this stage of the day, and wondered, not for the first time, why it had to be renamed and themed like this. It had been quite successful as the Bar Galactic, with its sci-fi theme, and had enjoyed a regular, if slightly odd, clientele, but there had been a change of management and, as often happens with new brooms, other changes had followed. The staff, who had all – thankfully – been retained by the new regime, shrugged and hoped the new boss wouldn’t make the kind

of radical changes that could turn a going concern into a gone one, but their prayers were in vain. Now the bar was named St Louis', not because it was owned by someone called St Louis but apparently in tribute to a film musical no one Sheff had met had ever heard of.

In the first few months of its new identity, the bar had not been a success. So far no one had lost their job, but the way things were going it wouldn't be long before some, if not all, of the staff would be receiving their P45s and their less-than-golden handshakes. Sheff shook his head; just his luck to have 'his' bar – he was the manager, after all – taken over by a lunatic with no idea of a good thing when they saw it. The sci-fi crowd might be odd-looking but they were not without disposable income and Sheff had found, to his surprise, that he missed his old regulars. Still, he thought, looking up at the screen and seeing Dudoin failing again to get his record, you didn't have to look far to see that the world was still full of strange people.

Three hundred and twenty-six human beings were in the Nevada desert to witness Dudoin's heroic failure. Three hundred and twenty-six people who felt disappointment as a series of technical glitches conspired to thwart Dudoin's attempt. Three hundred and twenty-six people who shared his frustration. One watcher, however, was different. Different on two counts. First, he was pleased that Dudoin came close but ultimately failed, since it suited his own purposes to have him fail; second, because he was not human. But the alien was not an outsider at the event, just the opposite; he was a valued member of Dudoin's team.

Out of sight of the waiting news crews, Dudoin harangued his team. Not that any observer would have immediately gathered this from the way the Frenchman was acting. This was the distinctly private face of the French genius – cool, cold and completely unemotional. His complaints were a stream of precise technical observations rather than hysteria. This was the reason that his closest advisers nicknamed him 'the Alien' – a name used only when Dudoin was out of earshot, of course. Watching him now, ranting but in a calm and deliberate manner, his engineering team could easily believe him to be something other than human. His reaction to failure seemed to be that of a computer rather than a person. He rattled off engineering problems and split-second analyses of each of the three failed attempts at the record, as if reliving them in precise detail. His points made, Dudoin left his tech team and took a long

drink from a bottle of water. He headed for the press conference, plastering his public face back on to his features as he walked.

It was, therefore, a smiling Dudoin who faced the gathered journalists, despite the immediate bombardment with questions. Playing his part perfectly, he presented a bowed but undefeated demeanour, promising to be back to try again – and soon. As the questions began to get more technical, he began to say less. Choosing his moment, he took control of events by making an unexpected announcement.

‘Disappointed though I am by today’s events, I have to tell you, ladies and gentlemen of the press, that this minor setback cannot take away from my pride and excitement to announce here today that the Space Dart Project is about to produce results.’

A rustle of interest washed through the gathered journalists, as they sniffed the possibility of a potential front-page or top-of-the-bulletin story. Little was known about Dudoin’s hyper-secret reusable-spacecraft project, save for its name and some Internet speculation about its basic design.

‘Two full years ahead of schedule, we are now making final tests of the Space Dart’s engines and plan to make our first launch within –’ the Frenchman paused a moment for maximum impact – ‘seven days.’

He paused again while the significance of this news sank in, then he continued before any further question could be asked.

‘I may have failed to become the fastest man on Earth today, but in less than a week’s time I hope to become the first privately-funded individual in space. I think you could say that this puts today’s minor disappointment wholly into perspective.’

The announcement produced the expected flood of responses, but it was the TV woman – Charlene, wasn’t it? – who attracted his attention, by jumping up enthusiastically, so she was able to ask the question that was on the lips of all the journalists present. ‘M. Dudoin, how do you think your rival in the great space race will feel about this?’

‘Arthur? Oh, he’ll be gutted,’ Dudoin replied speaking the headline-friendly colloquial English his advisers made him practise.

The audience of journalists laughed. Everyone knew Arthur Tyler, one-time university roommate of Dudoin, and of his own efforts to develop the first non-government-backed space programme. Until a few minutes ago it had been assumed that Tyler’s team were the leaders in the race.

Dudoin allowed himself a small smile.

‘As you know, the Space Dart Project is linked to our extensive plans, in

association with the leisure group Mondo, to build and run a five-star luxury hotel in Earth orbit. I am, therefore, very happy to be able to announce that the orbital hotel EarthRise will open for business in five years' time.'

This new pronouncement provoked a further wave of camera flashes and questions.

'But what about Tyler?' asked a journalist from one of the stuffy English broadsheets.

'Arthur? Well, of course, I'll be reserving one of the hotel's best suites for his use on opening night.'

There was a pause before he delivered his punchline.

'By 2006, even Arthur's spaceship should be in service, I think.'

Under the cover of the subsequent laughter, Dudoin walked away, effectively bringing the conference to a close. But not before he winked at Charlene. He thought that a little diversion might be just the thing he needed to get his mind back on track.

Backstage, the alien observer fell into step beside Dudoin as he strode back towards his trailer. Without looking at his companion, Dudoin asked a simple question.

'I will get into space next week, won't I?'

The alien was not sure of the exact meaning of the words – surely the Frenchman knew the agreed timetable, so why the doubt?

'Of course,' he assured the human. 'If not sooner!'

'Then see if we can sort out this damn car before then,' scowled Dudoin reaching his trailer. 'I want that record.'

Dudoin caught sight of Charlene walking towards him.

'I've got some time if you'd like to speak to me on a one-to-one basis,' he volunteered, seeing her blush slightly. He left the alien, who was by now looking completely confused, and ushered Charlene into his Winnebago.

Humans, the alien reflected, were complicated creatures for a species living in such a primitive place. The sooner he could get off this peculiar planet the better. He had suffered his exile for too long; it was time to get back where he belonged: out there among the stars.

## Chapter Three

### Back to the Future

Fitz was fed up with the future. He couldn't work out if this was contempt bred of familiarity or a continued sense of disappointment. . . He'd been here in the twenty-first century for eight hours now and already it seemed an age. Compassion had dropped him in a Soho alley and given him a slip of paper.

'The Doctor will meet you here,' she announced confidently.

Fitz had a thousand questions, but something in the tone of her voice had made him bite his tongue. Nevertheless, the plan seemed doomed to failure: the Doctor had been dropped off some decades earlier to allow him to recover and, apparently, to allow his TARDIS to regenerate itself. It all sounded very flaky, to say the least, with so many variables that could go wrong. Still, he had a sizeable wad of British banknotes in his pocket, and his wits. If it did all go pear-shaped he would just have to try to build a new life for himself here in the twenty-first century. And – who knew? – the Doctor *might* just make the rendezvous.

'Do you think he'll be all right?' he had asked, worried.

Compassion had hesitated slightly before answering, enough to worry Fitz further. 'He'll be fine. He just needs. . . some time.' She managed to smile. 'Don't let the Doctor completely screw up your life.' Then she'd kissed him quickly on the cheek and, with a final wave of her hand she'd dematerialised, leaving Fitz open-mouthed in astonishment. That's the first time I've ever been kissed by a space-time machine, he'd thought.

In the hours since then Fitz had wandered around at a total loose end, taking in the details of this future London. He'd last been here in the nineties and he was fascinated at the advances in technology that had been made in the last few years. The shops in Tottenham Court Road displayed electronic devices that seemed ever smaller and ever more multifunctional. He half-expected to see a tricorder.

As ever, it was the display of televisions that most caught his eye. How the humble television set had developed since the small-screened wooden boxes



he had known in the fifties never ceased to amaze him. Now thinner, bigger and even in a new shape. Fitz found himself wishing he had one and, more importantly, a home in which to put one.

It occurred to Fitz, with a sudden panic, that he was technically homeless. He had the cash, thoughtfully provided by Compassion, but no work, no friends and nowhere to stay. Not for the first time he found himself wishing that the TARDIS – the Doctor’s original TARDIS – really did still exist, but Fitz found that hard to credit: it had been so comprehensively destroyed. Among the hustle and bustle of twenty-first-century London, the sight Fitz craved, above all others, was a forty-year-old blue police telephone box.

He looked at the crumpled piece of paper that Compassion had given him. At first glance it looked like some mathematical joke – some code using just four numerals – but then it resolved itself into something that made sense: ‘08/02/2001; 20.02. St Louis’.

Two minutes past eight in the evening of the eighth of February in the year two thousand and one. That film with the waltzing spaceships, the one Sam had shown him once – maybe Compassion did have a sense of humour after all.

‘It’s a bar,’ she had said, as if that explained anything. ‘The Doctor will meet you there.’ If he manages to recover from his state of shock, if he manages to keep hold of his own instructions for over a century. Fitz could think of a host of ‘ifs’ but Compassion had been so certain.

It was only after she’d gone that Fitz realised the most important question he had failed to ask her: then what? What would he and the Doctor do then? What if his TARDIS hadn’t got itself together again? What would they do? Head out for that house he had in Kent and grow roses? Steal a space shuttle and head for the stars? Hitch a lift on a passing flying saucer?

A quick investigation at a newsagent’s had revealed that Compassion had got her timings wrong – it was only Tuesday 6 February; Fitz was a whole two days early. It had been enough to set him off again worrying – if she could get this wrong how could he trust her to be right about everything else? For one paranoid moment he wondered if Compassion could be trusted – perhaps she was planning to pick up the Doctor herself. For all he knew, the pair of them had hooked up and headed off for new adventures without him. Fitz quickly dismissed the thought – he was pretty sure that Compassion was intending to travel onwards alone.

He turned his mind back to the Doctor. When they met – if they met – the Doctor would be a hundred or more years older. If what Sam had told him

was true, he may not even look the same. How would Fitz ever recognise him? Maybe he'd have to wander through the entire bar asking every bloke if he had two hearts.

With time to kill, Fitz explored some shops. He checked out a few clothes shops and picked himself up a new coat to replace the one he'd left with the Doctor. It was a simple black overcoat with lapels, but Fitz fancied he looked quite distinguished in it. He popped into a Burger King and treated himself to a massive burger for lunch and then returned to his window shopping, finding himself drawn once again to a display of gargantuan, state-of-the-art, wide-screen TVs. Many were tuned to a news channel and Fitz's eye was drawn to something on the screen – a computer graphic showing a spacecraft leaving Earth. Interested, Fitz stepped closer to listen to the commentary.

'It's the second great space race – and this time it's not countries competing: it's individuals. The American entrepreneur Arthur Tyler the Third has worked for years to achieve his dream of being the first privately-funded man in space and, until today, most experts thought that his innovative Planet Hopper spacecraft would make that dream a reality in a few years time.'

'However, his rival – the French speedster Pierre-Yves Dudoin – announced today that his ITI Corporation's Space Dart would be ready to launch within a week. A Tyler spokeswoman declined to comment.'

Fitz smiled to himself – one thing he had picked up from his time travelling was that, over the next millennium, it was often private capital that funded space exploration and exploitation. The origins of space flight on Earth were the exception that proved the rule – there was no place for communism in outer space.

The news programme had moved on to other items and Fitz found his attention wandering until a very pretty Indian girl appeared on the screen. The image was labelled Brussels and the item appeared to be about a mysterious death reported by two tourists – the Indian girl and her slightly wild-eyed boyfriend. The pair were answering questions in front of an Hotel Charlemagne, but it was the man's words that really shook Fitz to the core.

'It was like he had two hearts, I swear, two hearts,' the witness insisted.

A cold shiver ran down Fitz's spine as the man's words sank in. Two hearts. It would be just like the Doctor to be in entirely the wrong city, on the wrong day, and get killed for his mistake. Fitz remembered what he had been told about the miraculous power of regeneration – it wouldn't be the first time that the Doctor had been seen to die only to reappear again. The worry, though, would be that in his post-regenerative state the Doctor would need help and,

without his TARDIS, Fitz was probably the next best qualified to offer that help. All Fitz needed to know now was how to get to Brussels.

Actually, thought Fitz, not having had a great grasp of geography even before the disorienting effect of travel through space and time, the first question is: where exactly *is* Brussels?

## Chapter Four

# The Man Who Fell to Earth

Anji pushed her bowl of cornflakes away in disgust.

‘What is in that milk?’ she asked rhetorically.

Dave chose to remain silent. It wasn’t his fault that the only thing the hotel served to pour on cereal was a liquid that reminded him of the condensed milk of his childhood. However, he sensed that anything he said would automatically be taken for an admission of guilt. The holiday was not going well and Dave had still to confess the real reason he had pressed for Brussels over Paris. Taking another look at his girlfriend’s face, Dave decided that now was not a good time to raise that particular subject. Instead, he directed their conversation in another direction. He pulled from a pocket the package he’d discovered in his jacket last night, the package that must have been put there by the dying man. The man with two hearts. The one who had apparently disappeared.

Anji, seeing the package, immediately launched a pre-emptive strike, presumably not wishing to repeat an argument they’d already had twice, once last night and once this morning.

‘Just take it to the police,’ she insisted.

‘He gave it to me,’ Dave stated firmly. Anji raised a sarcastic eyebrow. ‘Like he had a choice! He was dying,’ she pointed out.

Dave indicated what appeared to be a phone number written on the packaging.

‘I think I should call this number,’ he suggested. ‘The guy was obviously some kind of courier. I think I should finish the job for him.’

‘Hello! Earth calling Dave! Can you take just one minute for a reality check here? Think this scenario through – a courier carrying a mysterious package is shot and killed. Doesn’t that suggest to you a certain degree of illegality?’ She was looking at him as if he was a four-year-old about to put his hand into a fire to see if it was hot. ‘You’ve probably stumbled into some kind of drugs ring. Although I am willing to bet that a Belgian prison is a lot nicer than a Turkish one, I’d really prefer not to find out at all, if you don’t mind.’

Seemingly satisfied that she had more than made her case, Anji stood and crossed to the hot buffet. She helped herself to some anaemic-looking scrambled egg and poked with a pair of serving tongs at what appeared to be grilled pieces of leather.

‘Excuse me,’ she said as she grabbed a waitress. ‘Is this supposed to be bacon?’

While Anji attempted to get something both hot and edible from the hotel’s kitchen staff, Dave continued to look at the package. It sat in the palm of his hand, cricket-ball-sized but weighing very little. Instinctively Dave knew that it wasn’t drugs and, furthermore, that it was important. Coming to a decision, he pulled his mobile phone from his pocket and began to dial.

On the outskirts of Brussels, beyond the reach of the two Metro lines, are the leafy streets of Uccle. Here large detached houses sit on huge plots surrounded by landscaped gardens. It’s a cosmopolitan area where many of the so-called Eurocrats, along with the elected representatives of the fifteen member states of the Union, their senior administrative staff and the lobbyists from various international organisations, make their homes.

In one of these villa-like houses, a man dressed in cut-off tracksuit bottoms and a faded Levi’s T-shirt worked out in his private gym, as he did every morning. Although he spent only a month or two in Brussels every year, his gym was fitted out with all the latest state-of-the-art exercise equipment, an exact copy of each of the gyms in each of his three American houses, his Caribbean retreat and his London penthouse. Arthur Tyler III was a man of many houses but no home, his entrepreneurial activities giving him a nomadic existence that fuelled his desire to make everywhere he stayed feel the same. It was a kind of security, and security was important to Arthur Tyler III.

Even here, in the relative safety of his own property, Tyler remained constantly vigilant and kept his personal bodyguard, Marshall Spear, with him at all times. Since the black ex-NFL linebacker doubled as a personal trainer, his presence in the gym served a second function as he directed Tyler through his rigorous fitness routine. Tyler’s blond hair was thinning and lines were beginning to form around the corners of his mouth and his eyes, but he was still a good-looking man.

A musical trilling announced an incoming phone call. Spear – fulfilling his third unofficial role, as primary assistant to Tyler – reached across the room to pick up the receiver. For a moment there was silence as Spear listened to the caller. Tyler watched, interested, and slowed up his pace on the row-

ing machine. Spear finally spoke, a deep rumble that sounded like mountains shifting.

‘Hold the line a moment, please,’ he growled and, cupping one giant hand over the telephone mouthpiece, turned to his boss. ‘Some guy says he’s found a package with your number on it.’

Tyler climbed off the exercise equipment and crossed the room quickly, reaching for the phone. ‘I’ll take it.’ Surprised, Spear handed over the phone.

‘Hello. This is Arthur Tyler the Third,’ Tyler said evenly. ‘How can you help me?’

Fitz was not impressed by Belgium thus far. The train had been quite interesting and, despite all the fantastic things he’d seen in his travels with the Doctor, the idea of travelling beneath the English Channel had been exciting but, at the end of the day, it was just a train ride. And, although it had sped through the French and Belgian countryside at teeth-rattling speed, Fitz had almost despaired of the first part of the journey as the train crawled through the suburbs of south London and limped slowly down the ageing track towards Kent.

He’d been put into a bad mood before he’d even started on his journey, when the ticket office at Waterloo had pointed out that he needed a passport to travel to Brussels. Fitz had then had to queue up for hours to get one, and had been required to explain his battered and well-travelled birth certificate. ‘Of course it’s not 1935,’ he’d explained to the pedantic grim-faced official behind the glass. ‘Just look at me!’ Eventually he had managed to persuade the guy that the document was genuine and that what appeared to be a three was, in fact, a seven and had been issued with the necessary travel document. Even then he had nearly blown it by questioning the small red passport – surely passports were larger than that and blue in colour – but he’d wisely kept his doubts to himself.

When he finally arrived at Brussels some hours later he’d been rather disappointed. The British Eurostar Terminal at Waterloo had been quite modern and attractive but Brussels’ Gare Midi reminded him of the British Rail stations of his youth: dark, dirty and miserable. This one seemed to be in the middle of a building site, although whether the work was intended to modernise the station or just extend its dark warren of tunnels, platforms and half-hearted kiosks was not clear. At least the locals speak English, thought Fitz, terribly conscious that he was now deprived of the translation magic of a TARDIS. He had been concerned that he would struggle but, so far, both the French-and Flemish-speaking locals had responded to his enquiries in perfect, although accented,

English.

This had enabled him to quickly master the local geography and he had managed to identify the Metro station nearest to the hotel he was interested in. He looked up again at Gare Midi – a modern, glass-fronted construct built with little sense of architectural interplay between two much older buildings. Fitz had noticed an inordinate number of large cranes dotting the skyline of the city and speculated that Brussels might be a nice place if they ever finished it.

It was a strange city, Fitz thought. Much of it had that old European feel he associated with places like Paris, but alongside the older buildings were newer blocks, with a more modern appearance. The city seemed densely populated. Fitz passed countless apartment buildings that apparently had tiny lifts, since he had seen large items of furniture being delivered to an upper-storey flat from the outside via a giant lift. Fitz had stopped to watch as a massive side-board had appeared to float up on a tiny horizontal platform that rode up an alarmingly steep incline from the back of a lorry parked in the road. No one else seemed to find this at all unusual.

Now that he was here, Fitz realised that he needed a plan. He'd leaped rashly into action, upon hearing the report of a twin-hearted fatality, and now needed a more carefully considered *modus operandi*. Contacting the authorities might get him what he needed, but he knew his best bet was to speak to the English man he'd seen on the news. All he needed was a name, a credible story to cover his interest and some luck. Fitz walked downstairs to the required Metro platform, figuring that the first might come from the receptionist, the second he could improvise and the third... well, he'd just have to hope. Lady Luck wasn't always his friend, as he had discovered to his cost, but nevertheless he liked to be optimistic. These thoughts stayed with him all the way into central Brussels.

For once, luck seemed to be with him as he entered the opulent foyer of Hotel Charlemagne: he spotted the couple from the news broadcast coming away from the restaurant.

'Hello? Excuse me... ' he began tentatively. His obvious English accent was enough to make the pair stop. Fitz pressed on quickly. 'I wondered if I could ask you a few questions... about last night?'

'Are you a journalist?' asked the attractive but dearly suspicious Indian girl.

'Or a policeman?' added the man with a similar degree of caution.

Fitz decided to take a risk.

'No, neither!' He was pleased to see a hint of relief on both faces – he'd made the right guess. 'I'm just a guy with an interest in... odd occurrences, weird

phenomena, the unexplained,' he continued.

To Fitz's surprise this seemed to make sense to them – clearly something strange had happened to them the previous night. Fitz prayed to a God he'd never really believed in that his hunch was wrong and that it wasn't the Doctor whom this pair had seen murdered last night.

The Asian girl was nodding, sagely.

'You're one of his web buddies, aren't you? Another geek from alt. dot Alien Secrets, or whatever its called. . .'

For a moment Fitz found himself wishing for the TARDIS translation circuits again – alt. dot what? However, as was often the case, Fitz found that his mouth was operating ahead of his brain.

'Yeah – you got me!'

'Are you here for the convention?' asked Dave, suddenly animated.

'What convention?' asked the girl.

Fitz was grateful for her interruption. Something in her tone suggested that he would be well advised to let the other guy answer. Which was a bonus – since he could do with a few answers himself.

'It's Star Watch 2001,' began Dave, cautiously. Anji's right eyebrow arched, like a gun turret turning into position before firing. 'It's here in Brussels – this weekend. Didn't I mention it?' And now a fire seemed to light deep in her beautiful eyes. I'm going to get both barrels, he thought to himself, right between the eyes. 'I thought I might get a chance to pop along. . .'

'Pop along! I ought to pop you. We could have been in Paris, you git! But no – a bunch of paranoid UFO spotters want to sit around some draughty hall and compare notes, so we get to come to Belgium!'

Anji turned on Fitz and he had to work hard not to flinch.

'Do you do this sort of thing to your partner?' she demanded.

Fitz was finding it difficult to keep up.

'Well, actually, I find it difficult to keep relationships of any length. I travel a lot.' That's an understatement, thought Fitz. 'Well I used to. . .' he added, more honestly.

Again the blank canvas of the future stretched out in front of Fitz. With Compassion gone, and the Doctor possibly dead, Fitz's travelling plans seemed to be destined for more mundane transport than space-time machines. Fitz realised that the guy was shaking his hand.

'I'm Dave Young. This is my girlfriend, Anji Kapoor,' he volunteered by way of an introduction.



‘Fitz – as in “Cracker”,’ explained Fitz, grateful for Sam’s coaching in late-twentieth-century popular culture.

‘I thought the crackers were Ritz,’ punned Dave, wincing at his own joke.

‘Shall we find somewhere to sit and talk? I’ll buy you a coffee,’ offered Fitz.

‘If you can find something better than the stuff they serve in there,’ said Anji with a nod of her black-bobbed head in the direction of the hotel dining room, ‘you’re on.’

Arthur Tyler employed Marshall Spear for a number of reasons. First, his size and speed: despite his NFL-career-ending injury, the giant athlete could still outrun and outfight any assailant. Second, he was employed for his intelligence: although awarded a college scholarship because the football team needed him in the defence, Spear had studied as hard as he played and had graduated at the top of his year group. However, the third reason for Tyler to employ Spear was because, unlike the majority of the job-fearing yes-men who surrounded him, Spear wasn’t afraid to voice his own opinion and argue with the boss.

‘I just don’t think it’s such a great idea,’ he said simply. ‘We don’t know who this guy is. Or what he’s got. It sounds like a setup.’

Tyler nodded. ‘Sure – that’s why I’m sending you rather than going myself.’

‘But why alone? Let me at least take a couple of my men with me – stake out the area.’

‘No, Marshall,’ replied Tyler firmly. ‘Much as I appreciate your input on this, I want to do it my way – OK?’

If Spear was inclined to argue his case further there was no sign of it on his face. With a nod he left the room, leaving Tyler still fascinated about the phone call and what it might mean to him.

Anji did love Dave. Love, like, admire and, yes, she even still fancied him, but he had the ability to annoy her to a degree unmatched by anyone she had ever known, up to and including her mother. She was sitting at a table outside a café-bar in the Grand Place, trying not to get angry. Also at the table were Dave and the mysterious Fitz, chattering on like old friends. Around her the locals were going about their businesses, casually walking through the stunning architecture without a second glance at it. A few early-bird tourists stood in groups, necks craned to examine the intricate carvings on the various buildings. Anji’s eye was caught by a pair of what must have been Americans, slightly overweight, overburdened with multiple cameras and video cameras

and dressed in clothes that were too old, too small and too bright for them. The man was leaning backwards at an alarming angle, trying to photograph something at the top of the building.

Anji allowed her glance to rise too and, with a gasp of surprise, she saw the object of the American tourists' attention. It was a golden statue – seemingly tiny but no doubt much bigger in reality – glistening in the early-morning sun. Gold-plated, surely, thought Anji practically, not solid gold. The statue was of a dragon slayer, caught in the act, so to speak. The fallen Dragon was sprawled at the feet of the conquering hero. St George, speculated Anji to herself – surely he's one of ours? She smiled to herself, amused as ever when matters of cultural identity arose. So much for Tebbit's cricket test. Anji had been born and raised in Britain, a third-generation immigrant. Her voice bore no hint of an Asian accent. She rarely went to temple, never wore a sari and considered St George her national saint. And yet... somewhere, somehow, at the same time she knew that some core part of her, some inner self, was defiantly not British or English, but Asian, Indian. Anji was fine with the contradiction – it was not a problem, not even an issue, but sometimes, just occasionally, it niggled at her. How could something be two things at once, one thing from the outside but something completely different within? Anji didn't want to spend the day troubled by this old conundrum, so she assigned it to a mental pending file, removed her eyes from the troublesome statue and focused her attention on her two companions.

Fitz was enjoying himself. Dave was entertaining company: funny, likeable and bright. For once Fitz wasn't having to improvise a complex character: Dave took him at face value as a fellow seeker after the truth and Fitz's rather explicit direct personal experience of space aliens, other planets and other weirdness allowed him to play the part as himself. Fitz's calm acceptance that 'yes, aliens must exist' and 'of course they've been here' only served to bolster Dave's acceptance of him.

The pretty Indian girl was not such an easy convert. Fitz had flickered the odd glance at her, while talking to Dave, but she seemed to be off in a world of her own. She was decidedly attractive, thought Fitz, but not his type. Or maybe that was the other way round: *he* was probably not *her* type. He sensed that she was intelligent, very sharp and with hidden depths, a bit like the Doctor, perhaps. Thinking of the Doctor brought him back to the task in hand. Dave had already told him a slightly embellished version of the events of the previous evening and Fitz was now certain that that the man – or alien – who had died

was not the Doctor. He had considered the possibility that the Doctor had regenerated but he had never really believed what Sam had told him on that score. He could believe that the Doctor might look younger, rejuvenated, but a completely different face, a totally different body? Surely that was impossible. Nevertheless, Fitz listened to Dave's description of the victim very carefully before he allowed himself to be convinced; in the end it was the detail of the unusual purple blood that did it. Fitz had seen the Doctor bleed on too many occasions and knew that, for all his alienness, his blood was identical in colour to that of humans.

'But he definitely had two hearts,' repeated Dave emphatically.

Like the Doctor, thought Fitz, so another of his race, perhaps? Was that possible? After the recent events, on the now-destroyed homeworld of the Doctor, Fitz wasn't sure that it was, but he knew with time travel you could never be absolutely certain about anything. Fitz knew he still had some time before the scheduled rendezvous, and he didn't really want to spend the rest of the day worrying about either a reunion with the Doctor or the absence of one, so he suggested to his new friend that he accompany him.

'Great,' enthused Dave. 'You know, if that guy who died was an alien this could lead to us hosting our own panel at the next Star Watch – our own First Contact story!'

'Yeah,' said Fitz, trying to match his enthusiasm, but privately thinking that when it came to meeting aliens he was probably up to his 186th contact by now. 'So where is this meeting then?'

The Atomium is Brussels' third great tourist icon after the Mannekin Pis and the Grand Place. A 120-metre-high representation of an iron atom built 165 million times its actual size – its nine golf-ball-like spheres connected by enclosed stairwells and escalators – it was built in 1958 as the centrepiece of the Exposition Universelle et Internationale de Bruxelles of that year. Fitz remembered reading about it when it first opened – the black-and-white photograph in the *Daily Sketch* had captivated his imagination as a young man, and it had seemed to represent everything he had ever read or seen of the future. In his mind's eye he could see air-cars and men in rocket parks jetting around the silver metal construct.

Forty-three years later – for the building at least, much less subjective time for Fitz himself, of course – the same building had a completely different aura. Now it looked old-fashioned and quaint, an anachronistic vision of a non-future, as credible as the *Flash Gordon* serials he had once seen at the

Saturday-morning pictures.

Fitz looked at it with a certain sadness as he, Anji and Dave emerged from the Metro station. Its size was still impressive, but it was no longer the exciting icon it had been. Dave was just excited by the context of their visit rather than the location.

‘Come on,’ he urged, heading in the direction of the main doors to the Atomium. Anji shook her head and indicated the opposite direction.

‘You boys go and play your spy games – I’ll be in there.’

She pointed towards an area labelled Bruparck, an area of restaurants and entertainments, which included something called Mini-Europe, a model village of sorts, featuring the distinctive landmark buildings of the fifteen member states of the European Union. It was the one thing in the tourist information at the hotel that Anji had considered of any interest – the chance to walk around Europe in an hour or so amused her. After agreeing to meet back at the hotel, she headed off towards the attraction.

Dave watched her go, scratching absent-mindedly at his wrist.

‘Are you all right, mate?’ enquired Fitz. Dave was looking a bit pale and his forehead was beaded with a fine sheen of perspiration.

‘Yeah. . . just feeling a bit iffy. We ate a bit late last night in the end. . . *moules et frites*. Maybe they don’t agree with me.’

Fitz looked blank.

‘Mussels and chips – it’s the local speciality,’ explained Dave helpfully.

‘Right, I knew that,’ bluffed Fitz. ‘Can be a right bugger, can’t they, chips?’

Dave glanced at his watch and announced that they were a good hour early. Fitz took a look round and spotted a nearby bar. Dave followed his gaze and grinned.

‘Have you tried one of their local beers?’ he asked, feeling a bit better already.

Spear had no trouble identifying his targets – the pair stood out like sore thumbs, their body language a complete giveaway. He had been watching them for half an hour now, as they worked their way through two bottles of Trappist beer each at the bar at the foot of the Atomium. All the time they had been looking around them, checking out their fellow tourists, making no attempt to disguise their interest. As the appointed hour for their meeting had approached, the pair had finished their beers, visited the gents’, and then wandered into the heart of the Atomium itself, riding up in the hundred-metre lift.

Leisurely Spear set off to follow them, unaware that he too was being watched.

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If Spear had known he was being observed he may have forgiven himself, for Fray'kon and Jacques were almost impossible to see. Hidden in the sea of tourists spilling out of the Metro station, the alien Fray'kon was using discreet but powerful binoculars disguised as sunglasses to follow the movements of the giant bodyguard. With a nod to his human partner, Fray'kon started forward through the crowd.

Inside the Atomium, Spear had made contact with the package holders only to discover that they were not, in fact, holding the package.

'What do you mean, you left it at the hotel?' rumbled the ex-linebacker angrily. 'You're meant to be delivering it.'

Their contact was obviously not happy. Dave and Fitz exchanged a nervous look, Dave taking a half-step backwards to allow Fitz to take the lead in responding.

'We... er... wanted to negotiate first... ' The man's expression remained impassive. 'For a finder's fee,' finished Fitz, wondering how he had managed to get involved with Dave's plan like this.

The black man was silent. He was flexing his giant hands. Fitz began to doubt the wisdom of their strategy 'Mr Tyler does not like to play games. But I do. I play football. Not your soccer. Football. The whole nine yards. Understand? You fancy your chances, Brit boy?'

Dave found some reserve of courage, or perhaps stupidity, and stepped forward. 'Mr Tyler... I know who your boss is. He's the space-exploration guy. And this package is something to do with the Planet Hopper programme, am I right? 'Cause if I am right, well, it must be worth something.'

'I'm not authorised to comment on that,' the man stated simply.

'See?' said Dave triumphantly to Fitz.

'But if you bring the package to this address -' the giant produced a business card from a pocket - 'I'm sure Mr Tyler will make his gratitude plain.'

Fitz took the card.

'But if you don't show within twelve hours you'd better run and not stop. 'Cause if you think I'm scary you ain't seen nothing compared to Mr Tyler's legal team. Savvy?'

The trio were having their discussion in one of the galleries housed inside the steel spheres. A display of comic-strip art filled the room, all depicting comic or heroic action set in, on or near the distinctive shape of the Atomium itself.

On the far side of the room, Fray'kon and Jacques appeared to be studying one particular illustration with special interest. In fact Fray'kon was using a tiny directional microphone to listen to everything that was being said. The two white men were saying that they accepted the deal, and that they would just head on back to the hotel, collect the package and would deliver it right away.

Fray'kon shot Jacques a meaningful look. Jacques nodded – and headed off to reach the hotel first. The black man had also departed now, leaving the other two alone. Following them Fray'kon reached for his weapon – these two idiots were innocent but they were also loose ends, and he didn't like loose ends. Things would be much tidier if they were dead. As he watched, the two Terrans stepped on to an escalator. Fray'kon followed after them and, with no one between him and his targets, he raised his weapon and took aim.

'Well, that went well,' Fitz said cheerfully, as they rode the escalator to the next gallery.

'Did it?' Dave was not convinced.

A tiny red dot of laser sight passed over Fitz's shoulders, all but invisible. Dave, however, did see it and, acting instinctively, he shoved Fitz forward and down as something flashed through the space he had just been occupying. A display in front of Fitz exploded in a shower of glass under the impact of the invisible projectile. Dave helped Fitz to his feet and looked back in horror, only to see someone approaching and taking aim again.

'He's shooting at us!' he exclaimed unnecessarily and with a certain amount of disbelief.

'Tell me something I don't know,' muttered Fitz as he dragged Dave on to another escalator. Fitz couldn't help but find the situation ironic: running for his life, being chased by some weirdo with a gun – suddenly things felt normal again. The only thing that was missing was the Doctor – and Fitz had a bad feeling about that. Without the Doctor around he was sure his chances of getting hurt in a chase like this were much higher.

Dave and Fitz ran for their lives, moving ever upwards. Fitz tried to calculate how near to the top of the structure they were, getting a horrible feeling in his stomach that they were about to run out of escalators. Behind them their attacker walked purposefully and speedily, letting off the occasional carefully-aimed shot, moving with the assurance of one who knows his quarry cannot get away.

'How about through here?' suggested Dave, pointing at a doorway. Fitz nodded. Dave opened the door and they hurried through, finding themselves

emerging on to the top of one of the nine spheres. A small walkway and handrail ran along the top of the sphere, to allow access for cleaning and maintenance.

‘This might not have been a great idea,’ Fitz opined.

‘Hide!’ suggested Dave.

‘Where?’ replied Fitz, waving a hand at the lack of obvious hiding places.

Dave struggled up behind the door, holding on to the door frame. He looked very vulnerable, but not nearly as vulnerable as Fitz felt, exposed on the walkway directly in front of the door. Fitz took a few careful steps down the metal path. The banging of the door behind him announced the arrival of their attacker and he dived to the floor as another shot rang out. The man took a step out of the door and Dave swung a foot down to connect firmly with the side of the assassin’s head. The assault took the assassin by surprise and he staggered, losing concentration for precious seconds. Dave kicked again and this time the man fell back against the guard rail and toppled over. To Dave’s amazement he managed to shoot out a hand and grab the rail to stop himself falling further. His other hand still held his weapon.

Fitz got to his feet and kicked out at the fingers gripping the guard rail. With the merest grunt of pain the assassin let go and fell – fixing his gaze on Fitz’s panic-stricken face as he went.

Dave and Fitz could only watch in horror as the figure fell to earth. It seemed to happen in slow motion, and in an unnatural silence. Without a hint of a scream the assassin hit the ground with a sickening thud.

‘God, he must have broken his back,’ commented Dave.

‘Call me old-fashioned but I find it hard to have any sympathy for anyone who tries to kill me.’ Fitz brushed down his coat. ‘And he messed my coat – this is hardly a day old.’

As they watched transfixed, the prone figure twitched a few times and rose to his feet – like a flattened cartoon character popping back to normal.

‘Jesus, it’s *Terminator 3*,’ muttered an impressed Dave.

In the distance, sirens announced the imminent arrival of the local police. The assassin hesitated for a moment, then jogged off and disappeared into the crowds.

Fitz and Dave just looked at each other – with the adrenalin rush now over, they could begin to take in what had happened.

‘Why did he want to kill us?’ Dave asked, still a little out of breath.

‘It must be something to do with that package –’ Fitz started. A sudden horrible thought hit him and Dave at the same time. ‘Anji!’

'If that guy goes looking for the package at our hotel...' Dave didn't need to finish the sentence. Fitz began to lead the way towards the exits.

Anji was bored. The model landmarks of Mini-Europe had been entertaining enough for a while – she had particularly liked the regular explosions of the miniature volcano – but the place had been thronging with tourists and small children and, after half an hour or so, she began to feel rather claustrophobic. In addition, the concept of walking around a small area and seeing all the major 'sights' of Continental Europe didn't do much for her growing sense of boredom with international travel. She yearned for something different. All she got, however, was more of the same and a snack from a Pizza Hut Express on her way back to the Metro had not improved her mood.

To try to cheer herself up, she wandered into a department store, and found, to her disappointment, that it was exactly like the department stores back home. She found a Swiss watch, at a sale price she could not resist, and decided she deserved a present. Purchasing the watch, she found, at last, something that made her aware that she was in a foreign country: the assistant asked her (in perfect English, of course, despite Anji having tried her A-level standard French on her) if she wanted the item gift-wrapped. Unaccustomed to having this option, aside from the few weeks up to Christmas, Anji had accepted the offer. She chose a plain brown gift-wrap, since it wasn't a real present to anybody, and left the store with a perfectly wrapped small package.

She'd found her way back to the hotel without further incident, noting with every stride the similarities between the streets of Brussels and those of London. Were all cities becoming mirror images of each other? She recalled her year in Boston, where the massive modern skyscrapers towered over nineteenth-century brownstones, where the little urban villages thrived in the shadow of corporate glass and steel statements. Was that any different from Ladbroke Grove humming along under the constant traffic rumble of the West Way, or the six-lane Rue Alphonse Max she found herself walking along in downtown Brussels, a few steps away from the local Chinatown?

Back in the blandness of her hotel room, Anji lay back on the bed and sighed. A glance around told her a familiar story: TV, trouser-press, *en suite* bathroom, it could have been a hotel room anywhere in the world. Much as she liked order, the relentless predictability of it was beginning to get to her. What she craved was something different, something exciting.

There was a noise at the window.

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Fitz ran. Again. Part of him couldn't believe he was running flat out for the second time in less than an hour, while another part of him was thinking that it was probably good practice for hooking up with the Doctor later. If he ever got to.

Single heart beating fast enough for two, Fitz dashed into the hotel reception, closely followed by Dave. Seeing no sign of a lift at ground level, Fitz headed directly for the stairs.

Anji made a mental note to be very, very careful about what she wished for in future. Keeping calm – at least outwardly – she held her hands in front of her, fingers apart, a universal 'Don't do anything hasty' gesture. The man with the odd-looking gun didn't seem to care, and advanced further into the room.

'Where is the package?' he demanded in an accent that suggested he was a local.

Anji's brain was working furiously, putting together possible responses, looking to assemble a strategy that would ensure both her survival and the man's departure. He seemed genuinely uninterested in her, so she wasn't fearing a physical assault, but she couldn't ignore the gun pointing at her. Perhaps if she just gave him what he wanted. . .

'I'll get it,' she offered.

He nodded. Moving slowly, she reached for her bag on the bed and withdrew a brown-paper package. Carefully, she passed it to him. He took it and began to fumble at one of his pockets. To Anji's relief he began backing towards the open window through which he had first appeared not two minutes earlier, keeping his gun trained on her the whole time, still trying to put the package into his pocket.

Anji tried to convince herself that he wasn't going to kill her. She even thought for a second of offering up a prayer to one of the gods, but decided that with her attendance record at temple she might just get laughed at. What she needed was a distraction.

Fitz and Dave piled into Anji's room. A swarthy-looking native was standing near an open window and Fitz noted with horror that he was armed. The intruder swung his weapon round in their direction and was about to fire when Anji shoulder-barged him. He fell against the window frame. His weapon flew out of his hands and shot across the room, while the package fell to the floor. Seeing that he was now outnumbered, the intruder grabbed the package and

dived out of the window. Fitz grabbed the gun and leaned out but there was no sign of the intruder. He'd already vanished into the streets of Brussels.

Dave was seeing to Anji – who was brushing aside his concerns and berating him for putting her in danger.

'I told you that package was dangerous!' she reminded him.

'Did you give it to him?' Dave asked, worried.

'Of course not. I gave him a watch I picked up at some department store earlier,' she told him, breathlessly. 'That's seven thousand francs you owe me,' she added.

Fitz came back from the window and threw the alien gun on to the bed.

'Why was he happy to take a watch?' he asked.

'It was gift-wrapped. It Just looked like a plain parcel.'

Dave beamed and kissed Anji. 'You're a genius,' he told her, delighted.

'Maybe but I want you to get rid of that package right away.' Anji seemed to have regained some feeling of normality. She looked Dave in the eye. 'It's too much hassle,' she told him.

Dave went to the bedside table and took the package out of one of the drawers. Slipping it into his pocket, he headed for the door.

'I'll go right away,' he told them, looking back at Anji with a concerned look on his face. 'Are you sure you're OK?'

Anji assured him that she was just fine and he left. Fitz realised that she was looking at him.

'Aren't you going to go with him?' she demanded.

'He didn't ask me to.' Fitz shrugged.

Anji was already marching towards the door. 'He shouldn't have needed to. That maniac might try again. Until we get rid of that stupid package we should stick together.' She yanked open the door and looked back at Fitz expectantly. 'Come on. . .'

After a quick backward glance at the alien gun, Fitz hurried after her.

Thirty seconds later the door opened again and a completely bald man in simple dark clothes entered the room. He went straight to the bed and picked up the gun, securing it in an inside pocket of his jacket.

He glanced round the room but nothing else caught his eye. Mission accomplished, he left as quickly and silently as he had appeared.

Fitz was having to half run to keep up with the fast pace of Anji's determined walk. Ahead of them they could see Dave ambling towards the Metro. Anji

wanted to catch up with him before he disappeared underground.

Suddenly a car pulled up right next to Dave. Seeing this, Anji and Fitz broke into a run, accelerating as they saw a familiar figure jump out of the car. It was the intruder who had attacked Anji at the hotel. Fitz shouted out a warning but it was too late: the intruder had already grabbed the unsuspecting Dave and pulled him into the car. Fitz and Anji were still a good fifty metres short of the incident when the car engine roared and with a squeal of burning rubber it shot off into the traffic, almost colliding with a tram and earning itself a chorus of angry car horns. In seconds it had disappeared into the back streets.

Gasping for breath, Fitz could only look at Anji. Anji turned on Fitz, as if he might have some answers.

‘What the hell do we do now?’

## Chapter Five

# Out of the Past

Christine Holland opened the door to her office and slipped inside. After dumping an armful of papers on the already overcrowded armchair, she sank into her desk chair and pushed off her shoes. Despite her regular start-of-term tidy-up, the office was already a complete tip. She grinned – it had been the same when she had first come to Oxford as an undergraduate. Back then she had a reputation for levels of untidiness and disorder unheard of even in student circles. She remembered how visitors would have to hunt through the room in search of dirty mugs to wash in order to get a cup of tea. It was different now, of course: at home she had the support of a regular cleaner, not to mention the attention of her own daughter, who, at eight, was already exhibiting worrying signs of not having inherited a single one of Christine’s slovenly habits.

There was a knock at the door and a fresh-faced girl appeared – God, how young they looked these days – with a slightly apologetic expression.

‘Sorry, Ms Holland, I just wanted to ask you something. . . about the lecture.’

Christine motioned for the girl to enter.

‘Find yourself a seat – just move that lot,’ she ordered, pointing to the mountain of papers. Gingerly, the girl picked up the pile and placed it on the floor. Christine took in the strangely juvenile twin plaits and the ever-anxious expression and managed to put a name to the girl – Holly, one of the brighter prospects among her first-years.

‘What’s the problem, Holly?’ she asked, curious – it was the first time she could recall Holly coming to her office outside of official tutorials.

For a moment the girl was silent, as if struggling to find the right form for her question, then she found her voice.

‘I was just a bit confused about what you were saying this morning. You were talking about control systems, yes?’ It was clearly a rhetorical question because the girl gave Christine no chance to answer before continuing. ‘The way we control our muscles and organs through signals carried by the nervous system.’

‘Chemical and electrical impulses.’ Christine nodded.

‘Yeah. Well I followed all that but then you seemed to go off track a little.’ Holly stopped, embarrassed at the way that had come out.

Christine raised an eyebrow. Ignoring her lecturer’s expression, Holly ploughed on.

‘You said we should be looking for ways to link our mental control of our own bodies to external systems...’ she continued.

Christine nodded again. ‘To gain physical control of objects by the power of the mind.’ She finished the thought for Holly. ‘Maybe I was being a bit poetic in my description but I stand by the basic concept.’

‘But that’s just a fantasy, isn’t it? I mean, it’s totally science fiction.’ Holly sounded appalled at the thought. ‘You’re talking about telekinesis or bending spoons or something.’

Christine hid a smile – amused that the girl was actually hurt at the idea of her scientific heroine harbouring such unscientific thoughts.

‘That’s not exactly what I said now, was it?’ she asked Holly with a smile.

‘But it’s the same thing.’ The student was quite adamant.

Christine shook her head firmly. ‘Not at all. All I was saying is that if we can understand the way our brains control our bodies we can learn to use the same tricks. Connecting our nervous systems directly to external devices like artificial hearts or limbs. It’s going to be the cutting edge for microelectronics and bioengineering in the next decade. If we get it right, the blind will see again, and amputees will walk again. I agree with you, it’s a fantastic concept, but it’s not a fantasy.’

‘But you always say we must base our science on facts, on observable reality, but this sounds like something out of *Professor X*.’ Holly was still clearly not convinced.

‘Hard facts, yes, but a little imagination can take you a long way, too. Sometimes you need a leap of faith, to take a jump in the dark. Look at Watson and Crick.’

The telephone rang, interrupting the impromptu one-on-one. Holly watched as her tutor’s face hardened as she identified the voice at the other end of the line.

‘I told you before, I’ve nothing to say to you,’ she said in a suddenly cold and even tone. ‘Goodbye.’

Christine put the phone down, hard, then immediately snatched it back and dialled a short preset.

‘Beverly, he called again. Please don’t put any more calls through from him. And tell the switchboard, too. Thank you.’

This time she put the phone back in its cradle more gently than she looked up at Holly, still perched on the armchair, surrounded by papers.

‘I’ve got to go,’ she explained. ‘But we’ll talk about this a little more at your next tutorial.’

Holly nodded and got up from the chair. She nodded in the direction of the phone. ‘Some bloke hassling you?’ she asked.

‘You could say that,’ her lecturer admitted ruefully.

‘Well if he gives you any more trouble give me a call. I’m a black belt, you know.’ Grinning broadly, Holly slipped out of the office.

Christine shook her head. How easily they bounce back into shape at that age, she thought. If only it was so easy as you got older. Dislodging another pile of unmarked papers, she grabbed her car keys, her mobile phone and her handbag, and left.

The pretty blonde-haired girl sat on the low wall swinging her legs, waiting. Not for the first time her mother was late. Pippa Holland thought for a moment of using the mobile phone that sat safely in her bag to call her mother but decided that would only annoy her. If there had been any serious delay she would have called herself. Another of her school friends disappeared into a giant people-mover and set off for home. Pippa waved to her friend as the car drove off. Most of the children had been picked up by now – the fleet of cars and parents had come and gone, leaving just a handful of kids hanging around the gates, waiting for slow-running parents or carers.

Another car pulled up and this time Pippa jumped down from the wall and ran across. Her mum leaned over to the passenger door to open it, and Pippa climbed in. While she fixed the seat belt, Christine started to apologise to her daughter.

‘I’m sorry, honey. The roadworks outside the college have moved again, I was stuck for ages behind this stupid delivery truck. . .’ She trailed off, seeing that Pippa wasn’t a bit concerned.

‘Don’t worry.’ Her daughter merely shrugged, used to her mother’s timekeeping. ‘I had to go to the computer room after school anyway to check my e-mail. I wasn’t waiting for long.’

‘Good,’ said Christine, relieved but still feeling guilty.

Christine started to drive home. She felt her daughter’s eyes on her. Although only eight, Pippa had a maturity about her, and an uncanny knack of seeing straight through her mother.

‘Is something worrying you, Mum?’ she asked after a time.

Christine shook her head and told her daughter that she was fine. She needn’t have bothered: Pippa didn’t buy it for a second.

‘Come on – something’s upset you. Is it... Dad?’ she asked tentatively.

‘No. Nothing like that.’ Christine kept her eyes on the road, not wanting Pippa to see that she was not telling the truth.

This was all the confirmation that Pippa needed. Christine had never been able to lie to her, even when she was a baby. Even when the divorce had come through and they’d moved back to Oxford. Pippa had been only three or four but she’d known exactly what was going on. Papa had no time for her and Mummy: he had his ‘career’ to concentrate on. Pippa had committed the day to memory – the day she stopped being Pippa Dudoin and became Pippa Holland.

She watched as her mother drove the car, noting the telltale signs of stress around her mouth and eyes. Should she tell her mother about the recent e-mails she had received from her father? It wasn’t as if she had no right to have contact with her own father after all, even though she rarely saw him.

‘Actually Mum, I had an e-mail from him today,’ she announced casually, watching her mother carefully for a reaction.

‘Who? Your dad?’ Pippa knew that tone of voice all too well and wished that she had stuck with her first instinct and said nothing: now her mum was annoyed.

‘Yeah. He does e-mail me quite often. At my address at school,’ she added, explaining why this was coming as news to Christine. ‘You don’t mind, do you?’ she asked hopefully, already knowing the answer.

‘Of course not, darling.’ Christine struggled to keep her tone light. ‘I just wish you’d told me before. It’s not nice to keep secrets.’

Pippa bit her lip. She considered pointing out the many secrets that her mother kept – or at least tried to keep – from her, but knew that this would only antagonise her. Best to let the matter drop. To Pippa’s relief, a ringing tone filled the car. It was her mum’s mobile. Pippa had bought her mum a hands-free kit for Christmas but, surprise, surprise, she hadn’t had a chance to fit it, so Pippa reached into her mum’s bag to get the phone herself.

‘Hello?’ She listened for a moment and then looked at her mum. ‘It’s for you.’

Ignoring the recent law change, Christine reached across and took the phone. Her face darkened as she recognised the voice.

‘How did you get this number?’ she asked angrily. ‘Never mind. Look, I told you already, I’m not interested. So stop calling me, please.’ She paused as the

person at the other end of the phone made another impassioned plea for her aid. 'No, I'm sorry, I don't care how special the project is, I'm not available. End of story.'

Christine jabbed at the red call-end button with her thumb and tossed the phone on to the back seat. Pippa looked at her coolly.

'Why don't you want to help Uncle Arthur, Mummy?'

Christine put her foot down, letting the roar of the car's engine cover her failure to answer. No matter how much she tried, she couldn't seem to escape her past. The three of them had been at Oxford together – a trio of outstanding students, all graduating in the same year. The local press had loved them, especially when the journalists had got wind of there being a love triangle going on. That had all been put to rest when she'd married Dudoin – if the two boys had been rivals for her love, the Frenchman had won. Then, after the birth of Pippa, the marriage had all but dissolved itself. The three of them had gone their own ways: Dudoin and Tyler had embarked on their separate efforts to get into space and Christine had allowed herself to fade from public life, eventually getting a lecturing post back at her old Oxford college.

Dudoin, Tyler and Holland – at Oxford they'd been an unbreakable team, the Three Musketeers of Contemporary Science, then fate had split them asunder. But now the Frenchman was making electronic overtures to his estranged daughter and the American was calling Christine day and night to come and help on his 'special project' and she found herself right back where she had been fifteen years ago. Caught between conflicting emotions and loyalties, between two charismatic and powerful men.

Christine guided the car on to a stretch of the Oxford ring road where she could floor the accelerator. Whatever happened, she wasn't going to let either of them dominate her life again; this time she'd do whatever was best for her. For her and her daughter. And sod the pair of them.



## Chapter Six

### Meet Me in St Louis

Anji took another sip of her coffee and tried to keep calm. Her instinct was that she should be doing *something*, but she had allowed Fitz to persuade her to take a moment to consider her options.

‘But someone’s kidnapped Dave! I have to report it,’ she had told him angrily. Fitz had just taken her back to a nearby café and brought her a cappuccino.

‘Look, whoever took Dave already tried to kill us both at the Atomium earlier. And they were probably the people who killed that guy last night. But you saw that weapon – that wasn’t any ordinary handgun. I don’t know who they are but they’re not your average criminals. Go to the police if you want but they’re not going to be able to help. We need a specialist.’

‘Like what?’ she said, sarcastically. ‘Mulder and Scully?’

Fitz ignored her and continued. ‘Look there’s this guy I . . . er . . . work with. He’s in England. He’s an expert in this kind of thing. Believe me – the weirder it is, the more at home he is.’

‘And this friend of yours will be able to help me find Dave?’ she’d asked.

Fitz assured her that he would. The Doctor was absolutely the man for the job. At least he used to be, Fitz thought to himself, remembering that there was no guarantee of the state the Doctor would be in when they met.

Anji finished her coffee. ‘Right, here’s the deal – we go back to the hotel, collect that weird gun, report the kidnapping to the Belgian police and then we’ll consult your friend – OK?’

Fitz agreed and they set off in the direction of the hotel. Fitz watched Anji with some admiration. At first he had thought she would get hysterical after the kidnapping but, once the initial shock had worn off, she had been calm and logical about it. Now she’d worked out a plan of action, she seemed almost oblivious to any danger Dave might be in, as if his abduction was just a problem requiring a solution rather than something to really worry about.

As they walked, Anji told him a little about herself and Dave. She explained

to Fitz that she had a job in the City – which he'd taken to mean something financial. In his day, the City had still been the preserve of chaps wearing bowler hats and carrying the *Financial Times*, but he assumed things had changed. He couldn't imagine Anji in a bowler.

'I'm a futures trader,' she said, but if she was expecting any kind of reaction from Fitz she was disappointed. The term meant nothing to him although he presumed he was meant to be impressed. 'Isn't that very –' he struggled for the right word – 'complicated?' he finished, hoping that he wasn't making a fool of himself. Anji shrugged. 'Not really It's all a question of keeping on top of the data and extrapolating trends. A bit like playing a hundred games of chess at the same time. I love it.' Fitz found playing one game of chess strain enough. He suspected the Doctor would like this girl.

He tried to reassure her that nothing very terrible would happen to Dave. 'They just want the package, remember? They'll probably get it off him and dump him somewhere. He's probably already on his way back to the hotel.'

Anji just shot him a look. 'So explain to me,' she said, with a hint of sarcasm, 'why were they trying to kill you both earlier?'

Fitz felt a complete prat – so much for reassurance.

'It's gone!' exclaimed Anji as they entered the hotel room. As Fitz followed her through the door, he could see that the alien gun had indeed disappeared. A quick search revealed that it hadn't merely fallen to the floor but had well and truly vanished.

'That's weird,' commented Fitz.

'Someone must have been here and taken it.' Anji sat on the bed, heavily, a gloom descending on her features. 'I guess that's put the tin lid on the idea of taking the evidence to the local police. Now they'll just think I'm a hysterical Brit.'

'They probably would have thought that anyway.' Fitz winced as Anji scowled at him, annoyed. 'That didn't come out the way I meant it to,' he added, hurriedly.

Anji didn't answer. She was stuffing her things into her suitcase.

'What are you doing?' he asked.

'Packing. What does it look like? Come on. If we're going to meet your friend let's get a move on.'

Fitz helped her pack up Dave's things and found a small giftwrapped present in the jeans Dave had been wearing the previous day. He read the label and handed it to Anji.

‘Looks like he had a surprise for you,’ he commented.

Anji took the package from Fitz. ‘I don’t believe it – he remembered our anniversary!’

‘You’re married!’ exclaimed a surprised Fitz.

Anji shook her head. ‘Of course not. But it’s five years since we started going out together. I didn’t think he’d ever remember.’ She smiled to herself, recalling the party her boss Darren had insisted that she had to go to, and her first sight of Dave, sitting in the kitchen arguing passionately with some guy that the new version of *Blade Runner* was superior to the original.

‘You see he’s a replicant himself, that’s what the unicorn meant,’ he had been saying. Foolishly, she’d interrupted, and asked him what on Earth a replicant was, so he’d explained and, because she fancied him, she’d let him. She thought he looked cute, arguing so emotionally about something so trivial, and they stayed with each other for the rest of the party, and then the rest of the night. And the rest was history. And he still hadn’t managed to get her to sit through the whole of *Blade Runner* – either version!

She opened the package quickly and pulled out a necklace with her name hanging from it. She was delighted. ‘Now this is what I call Wild and Spontaneous,’ she said, and put the chain round her neck. ‘I wish I could thank him,’ she muttered.

‘You’ll be able to soon. Let’s get my friend on the case and it’ll all be sorted before you know it.’

She thought he was trying hard to sound confident and reassuring, but nodded. They finished packing and checked out of the hotel. Anji’s car was parked not far away, a bright green Mercedes A-Class. Fitz offered to drive but Anji had turned him down point-blank. The car was only a couple of months old and not even Dave was allowed behind the wheel.

They set off, Anji slipping expertly through the busy streets and finding her way despite, rather than because of, Fitz’s efforts with the local equivalent of an A-to-Z to map-read, through the city to the E40 motorway. From here it was a straight motorway run out towards Ostend and then south, into France to the Tunnel terminus outside Calais.

Anji wasn’t sure what was happening to her. Less than forty-eight hours ago she’d been heading in the opposite direction with Dave in the passenger seat, setting out on their short break. Now here she was returning early, without Dave but with a new travelling companion she’d met only this morning. Not that she felt threatened by Fitz, far from it. He was a gentle character and, although he could be a bit of a prat, she felt instinctively that she could trust

him. And the way he spoke about the mysterious Doctor filled her with confidence, too. It was clear that Fitz hero-worshipped this guy, so she had to allow for a little exaggeration, but Fitz's faith in his friend, and his abilities, was so absolute that she couldn't help but be infected by it.

'Tell me more about this Doctor guy, then,' Anji urged. 'Doesn't he have a name at all?' she asked as they hurtled down the motorway at a something slightly faster than the 120-kilometre-an-hour speed limit.

Fitz wasn't sure where to start.

'I suppose he must have a name but he never uses it. He prefers to be just "the Doctor". He is a bit... eccentric,' he confessed.

'But what's he like?' she persisted.

I wish I knew, thought Fitz with a touch of panic. Trouble is, although I saw him just the day before yesterday, he won't have seen me for over a hundred years. Anything could have happened to him. He might even have lost that weird dress sense of his.

And as to his mental state... Fitz didn't even want to go there. The Doctor had destroyed his homeworld totally – not just destroyed it but completely removed it from history. Fitz knew how much it pained the Doctor to take just one life, even in self-defence or, in extremis, to save others, but what the Doctor had done to his own people was something far greater. How would he cope with having caused death and destruction on such a scale?

When Sheff had first been introduced to the man who had taken over the Bar Galactic his first thought was that he must have come straight from a fancy-dress do, or perhaps hotfoot from a fitting for a wedding, but when the man had turned up a second and third time in an almost identical outfit, he realised that this was just another aspect of the new owner's great and immeasurable weirdness.

It had been the electrician fitting the new neon sign who had first made the obvious comment. 'He's a bit like that bloke on the telly, your guv'nor. That Laurence whatsisface, the designer.' Sheff had seen his point immediately, and wondered why he hadn't seen it himself. The flamboyant green velvet frock coat, the waistcoat, the cravat – the new owner's wardrobe did make him look like the guy from *Changing Rooms*, and the long wavy hair just completed the resemblance. 'I should ask him if he fancies doing lookalikes with me. I reckon I make a pretty good Handy Andy,' the electrician had suggested, but Sheff had persuaded him not to pursue the idea.

Since taking the place over, the new owner had been an infrequent visitor to the bar, although today he had been there constantly, which unnerved Sheff. Was he here to close it down? Or to interfere in the running of the place? The other bar staff picked up on the unusualness of his presence and he was tiring of answering their questions, not least because his most frequent response was, 'I don't know.'

Seeing that the bar was relatively quiet, Sheff decided to meet the problem head-on. 'I'm going to have a word with his nibs,' he told Paul the barman. 'Keep an eye on things.'

Sheff made his way through the semi-lit bar to the corridor at the back, which led to the toilets. Here he took the door marked PRIVATE and climbed a short flight of steps. After knocking at the door, he entered the owner's office.

The owner was sitting at his desk, looking at a yellowing ancient scrap of paper as if it were the most important thing in the world. A glass of mineral water sat ignored near his elbow and a small metal sign on the desk read DOCTOR JOHN SMITH. Not for the first time, Sheff wondered what his real name was. And why he used such an obvious pseudonym. The office was simply furnished and, unlike the bar below, had hardly changed since the takeover. Except for one detail – the bizarre object in the corner of the room.

Sheff coughed theatrically and the Doctor looked up and took in his presence. He had a kindly face, youthful but world-weary, with sharp intelligent eyes of the most arresting shade of blue-green. In his few dealings with him, Sheff had found him to be a direct and honest man, fired by sudden enthusiasms but generally cautious and thoughtful. Although he didn't look much older than, say, forty at worst, there was something of a much older man about him, as if he'd seen and done things far beyond his years.

'Ah, Sheff, what can I do for you?' he asked kindly.

'Well, the lads are just wondering what your long-term plans for the place are,' he began tentatively. 'Things haven't been so good since the relaunch,' he explained.

'Haven't they?' The Doctor sounded totally surprised – didn't he ever look at the books?

'Not really Doctor,' the barman answered.

'Right, well it won't matter, will it, after tomorrow?' announced the Doctor vaguely.

The Doctor glanced back at the ageing piece of paper as if that held all the answers. Sheff frowned.

'What happens tomorrow?' he asked trying to keep calm. There had been something ominously terminal about the Doctor's statement.

'There's going to be another change of management.' Sheff heard himself sigh out loud: so that's it, he thought, here we go again.

'Any idea of who you're selling to?' he asked, fearing the worst: some property developer or someone else who would shut down the bar.

'I'm not selling,' explained the Doctor gently. 'I'm giving it away. To you.'

Sheff couldn't quite believe his ears. 'Are you serious?' he managed to say.

'Of course.' The Doctor smiled and Sheff felt a weight ebb away from his shoulders. 'This place will cease to be of any value to me in about...'. The Doctor glanced over at a wall clock. 'Eight hours' time.'

For Fitz, the journey seemed to have gone on for ever. The motorway from Brussels down to Calais had taken no time at all and they had got on and off *Le Shuttle* in a little over ninety minutes. Now they were driving into the outskirts of London not six hours after having left the Belgian capital, but for Fitz it seemed as if he had been sitting in the little Mercedes for six years.

It wasn't as if the girl was particularly bad company: far from it, she was attractive, amusing and very intelligent. Fitz normally felt nervous in the company of smart women, but Anji had a down-to-earth quality that made him certain that he would find it easy to spend time with her in normal circumstances. The fact that she was attractive was a bonus. Not that she was Fitz's type, whatever that might be, but she was very pretty and petite. She had the deepest brown eyes he could recall having seen, skin resembling a *café au lait* and immaculately coiffured hair, in spite of the stresses of the day. Although not much over five feet tall, she was, in Fitz's expert opinion, suitably shapely, curving in all the right places. Nevertheless, definitely not his type.

Maybe it was her intelligence that bothered him the most. After a few hours in her company, Fitz was in no doubt that Anji was more than just smart – she was quick, attentive and relentless. It was this last quality that had most contributed to the apparent length of their journey. The entire voyage had been a nonstop interrogation. Anji wanted to know everything – and Fitz had been forced to work harder than he had for a long time, piecing together half-truths and gross oversimplifications while trying to maintain an illusion of coherence.

Fitz was convinced that he had set upon the right course of action. For all her coolness it was obvious to him that Anji was worried, very worried, about her boyfriend and he half expected her to turn the car around at any moment and head back to Brussels. Not that it would have done any good: it was obvious

that some kind of alien force was active and Fitz had no trouble in making the assumption that kidnap by space aliens was something the Belgian authorities wouldn't have the first idea how to deal with.

And so Fitz had tried to keep her spirits up with highly-edited versions of some of his adventures with the Doctor. And that had been when the questions started. When it came to the unknown, Anji exhibited a degree of scepticism that bordered on the pathological. And, when he mentioned travelling through time and space, she looked as if she was about to stop the car and order him out. Finally, as a counter to her stream of questions, he had thrown back some of his own.

'Why are you so suspicious of things like this?' he asked.

Anji shrugged. She wasn't really sure herself. She had always been practical, she told him, even as a child. She needed to be shown why and how things happened; she was never one for faith. Perhaps that was why she had never taken to the religion of her parents: all those Hindu gods with their amazing powers and strange appearances had always seemed pretty unreal to her. Growing up, she had always found herself drawn to the sciences, to things that could be measured and tested. She'd never taken to the arts as well: all those things that were just made up – she could never see the point.

Fitz hadn't wanted to raise the subject of Dave, and the fact that he seemed so unsuited to be her partner, but Anji had mentioned him first.

'Opposites attract,' she had said, as if that explained anything. It was more complex than that, of course, but at heart the old cliché did hold true. Anji and Dave did come from very different worlds: not exactly Venus and Mars, more Earth and Planet Paranoid. But somehow they'd managed to find enough common ground to make the relationship viable. At least they had for a long while. But in recent months it had begun to flounder. It hadn't been helped by the arrival in London of her younger brother Rezaul, who had begun a course at one of the capital's universities last autumn. Although they had never been particularly close – the five years between them had ensured that – since coming to London, Anji, and Dave, had seen a lot of Rezaul and that in itself hadn't helped the state of their relationship.

To Anji's horror, she told Fitz, Rezaul and Dave had hit it off immediately. True, they were not exactly brothers-in-arms, but they shared a world view that took UFOs, psychic phenomena and other science-fiction nonsense as not only possible but, in defiance of logic and statistics, actually probable. The trio's regular nights out began to take on a nightmare quality, with the pair of them ganging up on her to talk a secret language about subjects she had neither

belief nor interest in.

When Dave had accidentally revealed that he had once appeared in the classic SF show *Professor X*, it had been the final straw. Rezaul was a complete X-ian, as the American fans on the show had named themselves, much to the horror of the older British fans, whose politely-named Professor X Appreciation Association had given way to the more aggressively proactive Internet-based fan organisations. Dave, although not a huge fan himself, knew enough about the show to know that his one-time appearance as a Cybertron, in one of the show's final serials, was considered to be a high point of the latter years of the show.

Anji, of course, had not been so excited, not least because she'd heard Dave's exhaustive account of his three-day shoot on the programme many, many times. She'd managed to annoy the pair of them by asking why, if this show was so special, it had been cancelled and all but forgotten for the last eleven years. Rezaul and Dave had launched into almost word-perfect unison, citing politics at the BBC, a witch hunt by a new controller of drama and stupidity of schedulers who had placed the programme in direct opposition to the country's most popular soap opera. That night, Anji had escaped the ensuing rant by the rather drastic measure of going to the bar, ostensibly to get a round, and leaving by a side door.

Fitz laughed as she told the story, which endeared him to her. He wanted to assure her that the Doctor was nothing like that, that he was down to earth, practical and straightforward, but he feared that he might find his nose growing at considerable speed. He checked his watch – still eight hours to go, thought Fitz, making a quick mental adjustment for the time-zone difference. Anji saw him checking the time and raised a curious eyebrow.

'Are you sure we can't meet up with this Doctor guy earlier? If he's going to find Dave, surely every second counts?'

'I've been out of touch with him for a little while,' answered Fitz, hoping his body language wasn't giving away the half-truth. 'I've got this long-standing arrangement to meet him at eight tonight.' Long-standing being an understatement, he thought to himself.

'In that case we'll head for home,' said Anji. 'I don't know about you, but I could do with some sleep.'

Fitz nodded in agreement – at least if Anji was sleeping he might get some respite from the awkward questions. Actually, now he thought of it, he was quite tired. He closed his eyes. By the time she pulled into the underground garage under her warehouse conversion apartment on the Isle of Dogs, Fitz



was snoring like a trooper.

It was the longest conversation Sheff had ever had with the new owner. Although still maintaining his air of mystery, the Doctor was being much more open than normal. He had been telling him why he had purchased the bar and why it had been so important to change the name.

‘You see I have this... rendezvous. A long-standing appointment. To meet someone here, at the St Louis’ Bar and Restaurant, tonight,’ he explained.

‘An old school friend?’ Sheff suggested but the Doctor had just smiled his most enigmatic smile.

‘Just an old friend.’ He hesitated, as if unsure who he was going to meet. ‘At least, I hope he is. The problem was that there wasn’t anywhere called St Louis’ operating in London, so I had to create one,’ he explained.

‘Are you saying you took us over and changed the name just because you had this meeting? Couldn’t you have put an ad in the *Standard* or something?’ Sheff was amazed. Talk about an elephant gun to shoot a mouse! ‘Wasn’t this a bit of an expensive way to go about things?’

The Doctor shrugged. ‘Money wasn’t a factor.’ Sheff knew that already, from the way the Doctor had been running the business: they’d been losing money hand over fist for weeks, although everyone had received a pay rise nevertheless. And the rumour was that the Doctor had paid cash for the lease on the bar in the first place. Clearly, even though the Doctor was a long way short of being the next Richard Branson, he was not short of a bob or two.

‘So are you excited about tonight? This great meeting?’ he asked, politely making conversation.

The Doctor thought about the question for a while, as if it was the most difficult thing he’d been asked in years. ‘Excited? Not really, but I am looking forward to it. I have been for... a long time. I’m hoping to get some answers to some matters that have been troubling me.’ A confessional look came to his features. ‘I’ve had some... memory problems. A touch of amnesia.’

That explains a lot, thought Sheff, like the fact that you dress like someone who’s forgotten what year it is.

‘This old friend, the one you’re meeting tonight. He knows you from way back?’ The Doctor nodded. ‘So you could say he knows you better than you know yourself?’

Sheff had intended the remark as a joke, but the Doctor nodded seriously. ‘Yes, that’s it exactly. I’m rather hoping he does.’

An awkward silence filled the room. The Doctor's mood seemed to be hovering on the edge of a broody depression, held back merely by a sliver of hope for the forthcoming meeting. Sheff decided it was time to make his excuses and get back to the bar. As he walked to the door of the office he stopped and looked back at the Doctor, still sitting at his desk, contemplating Lord knew what.

'Can I ask you something?' he heard himself saying, much to his surprise. The Doctor looked up and his vivid blue-green eyes seemed to light up, as if being asked questions made his life worth living.

'Of course,' he said, with a smile.

Sheff gestured to the replica blue police telephone box that sat, incongruously, in the corner of the room. 'I know people who have got old BT phone boxes, the red ones, but why have you got one of those in here?'

The Doctor smiled and stood up. 'Let me show you,' he said, opening the door. Inside the blue box stood a wooden coat-and-hat stand, on which hung a green velvet frock coat. The Doctor reached into his strangely decorated cupboard and took the coat. 'It's just somewhere to hang my hat.' The Doctor slipped on the coat and frowned. 'Not that I have a hat,' he confessed and looked puzzled. 'I used to, I think. . . ' He patted his head, trying to remember. 'A floppy felt hat, something like that. . . No, it's no good, it's gone.'

So have you, thought Sheff as the Doctor wandered off, still muttering about hats. He looked at the police-box wardrobe and shook his head. There was something odd about it, something. . . alien. Curious, Sheff stepped across the room and reached out to touch it. At first it felt cold and inanimate, like any piece of wood, but then, as he pressed his hand against the woodwork, he began to feel the very slightest tingle of something, some kind of energy, like the very gentlest throb of a distant engine. For a moment it even felt *alive*.

Sheff removed his hand and shook his head. His imagination must have been playing tricks on him. It was just a cupboard. A cupboard with a weird paint job but still just a cupboard. He hurried back down to the bar.

Despite having travelled to many weird and wonderful places, there was one thing Fitz always looked for in each new port of call: a decent shower. He'd been amazed that some of the most advanced civilisations that he had seen had managed to produce showers that were underpowered and badly designed. He rated the power shower in Anji's apartment as at least an eight out of ten, not as good as the peculiar but wonderful zero-G shower he'd once found in the TARDIS, or as invigorating as the sonic shower he'd used on the Vega Station,

but, nevertheless, good temperature, easy controls, great water pressure – all in all, an excellent shower. The only downside was having to climb back into his dirty clothes when he was finished. He really should have picked up some more new clothes when he'd had the chance. A new coat had been a good idea – some clean underwear and a shirt or two would have been even better.

Anji had also taken the opportunity to catch up on her sleep, which gave Fitz the chance to explore her luxury apartment. It was big, with high ceilings and a minimalist décor that suggested either that Anji liked living simply or that she just never got round to spending half the money she earned. Fitz had found a wonderful reclining chair and a large-screen television (larger than any he'd seen in Tottenham Court Road the previous day) and spent a happy couple of hours channel-hopping.

Anji had finally emerged a little after six. Fitz noted that she had also taken the chance to shower and change and that, incidentally, she looked terrific. He had no doubt that the casual top and slacks carried a designer label and a price tag to match, but the simple outfit was subtle rather than in-your-face. Anji might be a tad stuck-up, by Fitz's standards, but she wasn't going to rub his nose in it. Anji was impatient to get going. It was now over a day since Dave had been snatched and it occurred to Fitz that maybe she was beginning to think she'd done the wrong thing to trust him the way she had.

The St Louis' Bar and Restaurant was in the area between Holborn and Covent Garden, a little too far from the theatre district and the West End proper. They had tracked it down through *Talking Pages* and, when they walked in, Anji recalled having been dragged there one night by Dave when it had been in its previous incarnation as an SF theme pub.

She hardly recognised the place now. The bright colours, neon lights and SF movie memorabilia had gone, replaced by a lot of off-the-shelf Americana: US state number plates, metal Coke signs and pictures of baseball stars. Anji thought privately the whole kit and caboodle had probably been shipped from as far afield as a warehouse near Swindon; she seriously doubted that any of the supposedly American knick-knacks in the whole place had ever seen America.

The stripped-wood floor and high stools at the long bar were an attempt to make the place look as if one could be in New York or New Orleans, but the beer pumps, offering Courage Best and Directors' Bitter, rather gave the game away. It was all fake, and Anji had spent enough time in the real USA to find it mildly offensive.

'Any sign of your friend?' she asked as Fitz returned from the bar with their

drinks. He shook his head and indicated the clock on the wall. 'We're a little early.'

The place was not exactly busy. A few after-work office groups, drinking Happy Hour cocktails ahead of their journeys home, meant that there was a certain amount of noise, but there were plenty of empty tables too. Fitz had located one halfway into the room, which offered a good view of the main door. As they waited he kept constant watch, leaning forward excitedly every time the door opened. The clock ticked ponderously on. Tick, tock. Eight o'clock. Fitz realised that he was holding his breath and forced himself to breathe normally and relax. The minute seemed to last forever. The door opened once, but only to admit a pair of giggling girls who had clearly already started their own private Happy Hour at some other establishment.

The clock hand moved again: 8.01 p.m. – one minute to go. Anji, seeing how tense Fitz was, gave him an encouraging smile. Another sixty seconds dragged by and then it was exactly the time on the piece of paper. Fitz didn't realise that he was looking the wrong way. Anji glanced around the room and saw the barman lifting up a flap in the bar to allow a man who had come from some back room to enter the restaurant.

Later, Anji would remember this moment with great clarity – the first time she had encountered the Doctor. At that moment she had no idea, of course, who the man in the fancy dress was, but some instinct made her tap Fitz on the shoulder. 'Is that your friend?' she asked quietly. Fitz spun round so quickly she feared he would fall off his chair. He looked in the direction she indicated and a huge grin exploded on to his features. In one swift movement he was on his feet and moving forward, one arm outstretched in greeting. Anji noted with interest and some curiosity that the Doctor – for surely now there was no doubt who the stranger was – didn't seem to share Fitz's enthusiasm. It was almost as if he didn't recognise him.

'Doctor!' exclaimed a delighted Fitz, shaking the slightly bemused Doctor's hand and then, much to his embarrassment, drawing him into a hug. Anji watched as the pair broke apart – the Doctor apparently pleased, if a little surprised.

'You know me then?' he asked, a little tentatively.

'Of course. You're looking... good. Really good.' A lot better than the last time I saw you, thought Fitz: pale and half dead.

'So you know who I am?'

'You're the Doctor,' said Fitz, a slight frown worming its way on to his forehead.

‘Yes yes yes, the Doctor, of course I am.’ The Doctor smiled, genuinely pleased to see a familiar face, even if for the moment he couldn’t quite put a name to it. ‘But, er, Doctor who?’ he added, hopefully.

Just “the Doctor”. As always...’ Fitz laughed nervously as the Doctor sat down at their table. ‘And this is Anji... Anji Kapoor,’ he said. ‘She needs our help.’

The Doctor took Anji’s hand and smiled charmingly. ‘You must forgive me: I’ve been having some memory problems recently.’

Fitz thought he could take a guess at the cause of those: wiping out your homeworld and all its people could probably do that to a person. Denial on a cosmic scale. Still, thought Fitz, a Doctor with a dodgy memory is better than one driven mad with guilt – or no Doctor at all, come to that.

‘You don’t remember... our last meeting, then?’ asked Fitz, carefully.

The Doctor studied him, concentrating. ‘Not exactly. We were travelling, weren’t we? You, me and...’ He broke off, as if a name were being stubborn and refusing to come.

‘Compassion.’ Fitz helped him out. ‘You, me and Compassion. Yes, we were travelling, but Compassion had to go on alone, and you and I were to meet up, remember?’

The Doctor was nodding, as if something were coming back to him. He took a tatty piece of paper out of his pocket and looked at it, speaking almost hesitatingly. ‘And you... well, you must be Fitz.’ He looked up, and Fitz nodded. And then the Doctor gave a shout of pure triumph, ‘You’re Fitz!’

Suddenly animated, the Doctor was on his feet again and this time he embraced Fitz properly and it was Fitz’s turn to be surprised.

Anji coughed gently. Fitz and the Doctor returned to their seats. Anji gave Fitz a cold look.

‘I thought this lunatic was going to help us. Sounds to me like he’s the one who needs help!’

The Doctor looked Fitz in the eye. ‘We’ll talk over *all this* later,’ he said significantly, and then turned to give Anji his full attention.

‘You need my help? What’s the problem?’ he asked.

‘Aliens,’ Fitz answered for her. ‘Here on Earth. Aliens who have kidnapped her boyfriend.’

‘Really?’ The Doctor was clearly interested. ‘Tell me all about it.’

The police-box coat cupboard hadn’t helped. Even underpopulated as it was, the bar was beginning to get noisy and, when the Doctor had suggested that

they retire to his office to talk, Fitz and Anji had readily agreed to move. Anji had actually begun to think that maybe the Doctor was going to be everything Fitz had promised, despite his eccentric manner. He had listened in the bar to their account of their adventures in Brussels, and not batted an eyelid at Fitz's explanation that some kind of alien invasion force were involved. But unlike Dave, or one of his paranoid conspiracy online friends, the Doctor hadn't begun to spout obscure theories about 'greys' and abduction patterns, but had just asked for clarification of the details of the story. For a moment, Anji had felt like one of the clients in a Sherlock Holmes story, as the Master Detective asked a few pertinent questions before revealing some amazing deduction.

But now, as they entered the office, her new-found faith in the man was being seriously shaken by the strange blue police box, not least because of the way Fitz was reacting to it.

'The TARDIS!' he yelled enthusiastically, before running over to it. 'Compassion was right – it *has* regenerated itself.' He yanked open the door and then seemed stunned to find a hat-and-coat stand. Anji watched, horrified, as he poked about inside, past the hat stand, banging on the far wall of the box.

Finally he came out, looking like a child who'd discovered a gold coin only to find that it was chocolate. 'It's the same size inside as out!' he complained.

The Doctor nodded. 'Yes. I'd noticed that.' He frowned, and shook his head. 'Something not quite right about that.'

'Maybe it needs more time,' said Fitz optimistically.

Anji began to make her excuses, certain now that she had made a terrible mistake. Fitz and this Doctor person were as bad as each other, nutty as fruit-cakes.

'Look, I'm sorry your cupboard isn't what you expected, but this isn't really helping me, is it? My boyfriend was kidnapped! I don't know whether it was by aliens, or special agents, or some half-crazy terrorist group, but I do know that standing here talking to you two isn't going to get him back.'

Fitz, probably realising how odd his reunion with the Doctor must look, said, 'No, wait. Please. The Doctor can help. Can't you?' He looked desperately at his old friend.

The Doctor nodded. 'Of course. I'm sorry. It's just been so long since I last saw Fitz. Please forgive me. What we need is a plan of action.' He led Anji to a seat, and to her amazement she found herself sitting. The Doctor was very persuasive but in a gentle way. Once again she found herself feeling positive about his involvement.

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‘It seems to me that there are two elements here. First, the package that your friend Dave intercepted. Destined for Arthur Tyler, whose Planet Hopper project is based here in England, I think?’

Anji seemed impressed. ‘You know about that?’

The Doctor smiled. ‘I’m very interested in space travel. I try to keep up to date. In fact, I had a chance to take a close look at an American space shuttle a few years back.’ He looked at Fitz and grinned. ‘Amazing machine, but a real pig to fly!’

Fitz refrained from asking the obvious question. If the Doctor had been stuck on Earth for the last hundred years he was sure he had a whole stack of stories to tell. He hoped he’d get the opportunity to hear them soon.

‘Are you up to speed on the current space race, Fitz?’ asked the Doctor.

Fitz shrugged and told him what he had picked up about the two rival commercial bids to start a new space age: Tyler’s Planet Hopper and the ITI consortium’s Space Dart. He felt rather pleased with himself that he was able to give such a comprehensive answer, having been on Earth only a couple of days. The Doctor, of course, knew more about it all.

‘If the package was intended for Tyler I’d bet a small fortune it has something to do with that spacecraft development programme,’ The Doctor postulated thoughtfully. Then, ‘I suggest that Anji and I visit Tyler tomorrow at his Oxford base.’

‘Do you really think a man like Arthur Tyler could be behind the kidnapping of Dave?’ asked an incredulous Anji.

‘It’s possible,’ said the Doctor. ‘But, from what I’ve read of Mr Tyler, unlikely. But we should ask him directly I think, don’t you?’

Anji was nodding.

‘And what do I do?’ Fitz had a nasty feeling he knew already.

‘You, my dear Fitz, are going to look at the problem from the other end. There are two rivals in this space race. I want you to check out the other lot.’

‘Dudoin’s mob?’ Fitz asked.

The Doctor nodded. ‘Ingenierie, Technologie, Innovation,’ he added in a perfect French accent. ‘The ITI group have their headquarters on the continental mainland.’

‘Let me guess,’ said Fitz heavily. ‘They’re based in Belgium!’

‘If you hurry, I believe you can still catch a Eurostar train tonight,’ said the Doctor helpfully. ‘But when you get back we’ll have that little chat, eh? I suspect we have a lot of catching up to do.’

Fitz looked into the Doctor's eyes, trying to gauge how much, if anything, the Doctor remembered of what had happened to him the last time they were together. But the Doctor's bright blue-green eyes were giving nothing away. 'Yeah,' he agreed, 'I suspect we have.'

Sheff looked up with interest as the Doctor and his two companions returned to the bar. The bloke looked a bit sour-faced, as if the reunion hadn't gone quite to plan, and the woman looked a bit dazed, as if she were not quite sure what was going on. Sheff knew how they felt: spending any amount of time with the Doctor seemed to have that effect on everyone.

As they headed for the exit, the Doctor stopped for a quiet word with Sheff.

'The solicitors will deal with the paperwork in the morning, but essentially, as of now, this is all yours.'

'Thanks.' It seemed inadequate, but what more could he say? 'I'll try to make sure it doesn't go under,' he added.

'Good. I'll stop by to collect my things in a day or two,' the Doctor told him with characteristic vagueness.

Sheff nodded, still taken aback at the surprises of the day.

'Going away for a bit?' he asked, as the Doctor started off to catch up with his friends, who were waiting for him at the door.

'Hopefully,' answered the Doctor.

'Anywhere in mind?' he asked politely.

'Not particularly,' muttered the Doctor, partly to himself. Sheff wasn't sure he heard the rest of the Doctor's answer. In fact he was sure he hadn't, but it sounded something like, 'Anywhere will do. As long as it's off this planet.'

Sheff watched the man go and shook his head. He used to think that the clientele of the Bar Galactic were strange, but none of them had anything on this guy. The Doctor was totally and completely weird.



# Interlude

## Alien

In the cold, airless, unimaginably vast emptiness of deep space, at the edge of the solar system that is home to Planet Earth, a fleet of alien battleships lurked, moving in perfect formation towards their latest target.

This was the Kulan invasion fleet, a collection of rugged, battle-scarred hulks built to traverse the huge distances between inhabited worlds and packed with deadly firepower. It was not a pretty sight. Each of the giant craft bristled with gun ports and other weaponry, grimy from a dozen intense conflicts and years of deep-space travel.

Inside the ships the majority of the crew, the marines and invasion troops, were held in cryogenic suspension pending their deployment to take another world for the Kulan Empire. A skeleton crew of officers and technicians ran the ships, rotating themselves through month-long periods of deep sleep to avoid the mind-numbing boredom of sub-light-speed travel.

The Kulan were humanoid – paler than humans and twin-hearted. Aggressive, but not overtly militaristic, the Kulan, as a species, were devoted to economic warfare. Having long ago exhausted the natural resources of their own home system, they now engaged in commercial takeovers of other planets – usually hostile takeovers, hence the use of a battle fleet.

On the bridge of the leading battleship, Fleet Commander Koy'Guin regarded the image on his screen: the pretty blue-green planet that was to be their next target. Potential target, he corrected himself. Preliminary scans had indicated a mineral-rich world with a Level 6 technology, not exactly a push-over but relatively easy prey. If the Council of Three approved the invasion.

Koy'Guin turned to his Security Chief, Hak'et. 'Any word from the advance scouting party?'

Hak'et shook his head. Nothing had been heard from the evaluation team since they had entered Earth atmosphere nearly three Earth years ago. The scuttlebutt around the fleet was that the evaluation team was now considered MIA and that the Council of Three would rule the invasion as uneconomic and

abort if they did not make contact within the next few days. It was not a feeling that Koy'Guin shared. If Kulan blood had been spilled on that innocent-looking planet, then those deaths must be avenged, and the people of Earth would pay the price.

# Chapter Seven

## Gremlins

The next morning was bright and crisp, one of those February dawns that allow a glimpse of a spring still eight or more weeks off. The sky was clear and blue; the slight wind had just a hint of bite and the light frost made the ground crunch as they trod.

Running with the Doctor on this lovely February morning, Anji could almost forget that she'd seen a man – or possibly an alien – killed just two days ago and that her boyfriend had been kidnapped by the killers. It was something about her companion, the mysterious Doctor.

He was easy-going, she decided. It was the sort of vague namby-pamby description given to colleagues at work who had slipped off the fast track or had sent their careers into some kind of cul-de-sac, the sort of damning with faint praise that career-minded individuals like Anji Kapoor would hate to see appear on the annual staff assessment. Nevertheless, it seemed both appropriate and affirmative when applied to the Doctor.

She looked at him now as they crossed the park. She'd insisted on going on her morning run – Carl, her personal trainer, had told her that she had to make up for her weekend of excess by doubling her normal training routine. The Doctor had asked to accompany her. Annoyingly, he had kept pace with her the whole way along her regular route, even on the uphill section and through the park, where she moved up a gear to a sprint. He was wearing his regular clothes – not even running shoes – and had failed to break into a sweat or begin to lose his breath. Infuriating, and in anyone else a cause of major irritation, but with the Doctor, the easy-going Doctor, it was hard to get that frustrated.

Nice, she thought, he's easy-going and nice. In theory, that should have made him about as interesting as one of Dave's spotty Internet-lurking UFO-lovers but, in practice, it made him fascinating. He seemed genuinely interested in everything and everyone he met, and kept reassuring her that they would get to the bottom of Dave's kidnapping.

After the run she showered and changed and, to her amazement, when she emerged from her room, she found that the Doctor had performed some kind of minor miracle in her kitchen and produced a full breakfast.

As she tucked into the bacon and eggs she asked him how exactly they were going to check out Tyler's project. 'I mean, do we just roll up at the front door and ask to see him?' she asked, trying to keep the sarcasm out of her voice.

He looked over at her, his bright blue-green eyes sparkling like champagne. 'Why not?'

And, put like that, it seemed the most reasonable and obvious answer.

By nine o'clock they were heading out of London on the A40 West Way, up the flyover from Paddington, out over Ladbroke Grove, past the BBC's buildings at White City and out to the suburbs. Anji always found it a delight to drive in this direction in the rush hour – the solid streams of traffic creeping along, at hardly any speed at all going into town, while she motored along at a steady sixty. Before they knew it, they were passing the Hanger Lane gyratory and then Perivale with the green swathe of Horsenden Hill looming above it.

The Doctor glanced over as if recognising it and remembering something.

'You know this area?' Anji asked.

The Doctor shook his head, seeming puzzled by his errant memory. 'I don't think so. Maybe I visited here once. Or maybe I knew someone from here.' He paused, as if trying to remember and failing. 'It's no good. I just get something vague about cats.'

He shrugged and Anji let it drop.

She wondered what had happened to his memory – Fitz had told her he'd suffered some kind of loss and a shock at the same time but she'd failed to get any details from him. It didn't seem to have affected the man's personality: he was warm and funny and full of interesting stories, most of them incredible but made likely by his telling. In some ways he reminded her of her father, as he had been when she was growing up, when she had still been his little girl, rather than the obstinate, opinionated, difficult young woman he felt she had developed into. Anji's father had been everything to her in those early years: a protector, a magician, a storyteller... It was a shame he could hardly bring himself to speak to her now. Perhaps, she thought, that was why she had so readily put her trust in this mysterious Doctor, because he had instantly reminded her of her father. She hoped the Doctor wouldn't let her down, as he had.

The A40 had now become the M40 and she allowed her little Mercedes A-Class to go a little faster, edging past the speed limit to settle at around eighty. Keep it sensible and the police wouldn't hassle her – it was the boy racers hitting a ton and more who would trigger any speed traps. She grinned to herself. It was so typical of her strategy for dealing with most things: push beyond the boundaries but only so far; push the envelope but don't break it.

The Doctor glanced at the clock on the dashboard and wondered out loud how Fitz was doing.

'I rather like Belgium, you know,' he said conversationally. 'Gets a terrible press most of the time but it's a lovely little country.'

'Have you been there often?' she asked politely.

He thought for a moment, accessing that patchy memory of his, apparently successfully on this occasion. 'Once or twice,' he replied after a bit. 'Helped out King Baudouin once with a sticky situation. Nearly had a disaster with the opening of the Atomium.'

Anji gave him a sideways look. 'But the Atomium opened over forty years ago.'

He nodded. 'I'm older than I look,' he explained simply.

Or nuttier, thought Anji, her confidence in him suddenly beginning to slip away. As if to mirror her thoughts, she became aware of a few dark storm clouds on the horizon, hanging over Oxford.

By the time they reached the heavily secured gates to the massive complex that was Tyler's Oxfordshire base, it was raining heavily. The site had clearly once been a military installation, now sold into private hands. Barbed wire that looked as if it had been there since World War Two was now joined by state-of-the-art electric fencing, remote video cameras spotted along the perimeter at regular intervals and the guardhouse at the main gate upgraded with the latest in bulletproof glass and defensive technology.

'Doesn't look particularly friendly,' muttered Anji as she pulled up on the road a little short of the main entrance. 'Somehow I don't think they welcome visits from the public.'

'We're not the public, are we?' replied the Doctor with a smile. 'Drive up to the gate, please.'

Anji raised her eyebrows, clearly thinking that it would be a waste of time, but did as she was asked. As they reached the barrier she lowered her window with a press of a button. Facing her was a small TV screen and speaker grille, allowing her to see the security guard sitting safe – and dry – inside the old

guardhouse. Trying to ignore the raindrops now infiltrating her car, she turned to the Doctor, only to find that he was already leaning across her to address the guard.

'You're expecting us? Doctor John Smith, my assistant Anji Kapoor.'

On the little black-and-white screen Anji could see the guard consult a list, then shake his head. 'Sorry, mate – not according to this.'

The Doctor looked peeved, as if he couldn't believe the oversight.

'You'd better check again. I'm a specialist in rocket systems; Mr Tyler is expecting me at ten.'

The guard did not look convinced but reached for the phone and dialled a number. Inside the car Anji turned on the Doctor.

'What's the point of that?' she hissed. 'We're not in Tyler's diary, are we?'

'Aren't we?' he replied, eyes twinkling again.

On the screen the guard put down the phone and made a poor attempt to look apologetic.

'I'm sorry sir, madam, there does seem to have been a... clerical error. We weren't informed of your meeting. Please proceed to the blue car park; you'll find Mr Tyler's offices in the Aldrin Building.'

The barrier in front of the car slowly rose and Anji found herself putting the car into gear and driving forward.

'Are you going to explain that?' she asked as she followed the signs to the blue car park.

'Do I have to?' The Doctor was grinning now, clearly enjoying her confusion.

'Yes. I think you do. Why were we in the diary when he checked?'

'Because we have an appointment, of course.'

Anji pulled into a parking space and switched off the engine. 'I think you have to do better than that,' she demanded as he opened the door and got out. She joined him, noting in passing that the rain was now no more than a fine drizzle.

'This way, I think,' he indicated, leading towards the nearest large building, which was labelled **LOVELL BUILDING**.

Anji shook her head. 'He said our meeting was in the Aldrin Building,' she complained to his disappearing back. She started to run to catch up with him.

'Just because we have an appointment doesn't mean we have to keep it,' said the Doctor with another of his little grins. He opened the door for her with a flourish and she stepped through into the delightfully dry interior. He led the way down the nearest corridor, peaking into the glass viewports set in all the doors as he passed.

Anji kept pace with him, not sure where they were going or how they'd got in.

'The physical security here is second to none but their cyberspace security is sadly flawed. I hacked into the Tyler Corporation admin system this morning while you were taking a shower and set up our meeting,' he suddenly explained, much to Anji's horror.

'You used my computer to hack from? That's a criminal offence,' she replied, not liking what she was hearing. 'I could go to jail.'

'Only if you get caught,' said the Doctor with a smile, 'which you won't. I know what I'm doing.'

He swung open the next door, stopping suddenly when he saw a trio of white-coated technicians working at what looked to Anji like a big boy's chemistry set.

'Sorry, gentlemen, wrong room,' apologised the Doctor, ushering Anji back into the corridor.

'What are we looking for, Doctor?' she asked, beginning to doubt he had a plan at all.

'Information,' he replied simply. He opened another door and this time took Anji into what appeared to be an unoccupied office. The naked desk and empty in-trays made it look as if it were waiting for them. There was a computer on the desk and the Doctor immediately sat down and booted it up.

'If you're such a great hacker, why couldn't you do this from home – if you just want information?'

The Doctor didn't pause in his attempt to find the log-on password but carried on typing multiple variations of letters.

'The administrative computer system was one thing – what I'm trying to access is the heart of the Planet Hopper operation, the schematics of the spaceship, records of its design and development, every top-secret detail – it's not just going to roll over and tell me, is it?'

As if to mock his words, the screen suddenly burst into life as he succeeded in gaining access to the central server.

'You did it.' Anji was impressed.

'Didn't I mention that I was a genius?'

With any other man this might have sounded arrogant, but with the Doctor Anji just found it endearing. She hoped his genius would lead them to finding Dave safely. She found herself wondering again if she was doing the right thing – if she'd gone to the police would they have found Dave by now? Probably not if there were aliens involved. *If* there were aliens involved. Anji noted, with some surprise, that she now seemed to be taking the possibility seriously.

What was happening to her? It must be something about being in the company of people like Fitz and the Doctor. Compared with them Dave's vague 'Well, there must be something out there' attitude to the possibility of alien life forms seemed relatively normal. Anji doubted somehow that she could ever be as matter-of-fact about the idea as Fitz and the Doctor, but she was now at least open to the possibility of alien involvement. That weird handgun had certainly looked more like a prop from one of Dave's sci-fi films than any real gun she had ever seen. She wondered in passing where it had got to.

'This is interesting.' The Doctor, stabbing enthusiastically at the screen, jerked Anji back into the here and now. She looked but the data displayed meant nothing to her.

'Perhaps you could translate?' she asked. 'Screens of financial data I can read with my eyes closed; this science stuff is another language.'

'This is the basic design data on this Planet Hopper that Tyler has been developing. And it's clear to me that the basic technology involved here is far in advance of the current level of technological development you humans have reached.'

Anji decided to let the 'you humans' go for the moment, and concentrated on the gist of the Doctor's point.

'You mean Tyler's been getting help. From...?' She hesitated, not quite believing she was about to say what she was about to say. 'From aliens?'

'Aliens. Or time travellers,' said the Doctor. 'Someone with a technical knowledge beyond Earth at the start of the twenty-first century. But it's not a technology I recognise.' He smiled. 'Of course, with the state of my memory right now, that doesn't mean much, does it?'

Suddenly an alarm sound filled the air. Anji whirled round, convinced that she was about to be arrested.

'Sounds like we've been discovered,' she said, heading for the door. 'Come on.'

The Doctor was still sitting at the desk, tapping into the keyboard.

'I don't think that's a security alarm,' he explained.

'OK – so it's a fire alarm. We still need to get out of here.'

The Doctor found what he was looking for on the screen and leaped to his feet.

'It's coming from the testing area – this way.'

The Doctor ran out of the room and off down the corridor, away from the entrance to the building. Anji ran after him, wondering where the hell they were going now.



The testing area was a huge hangar adjacent to the Lovell Building. The building was dominated by the huge wide shape of the Planet Hopper craft, similar in shape to the familiar American space shuttle but slightly more bulbous in design, giving it a froglike appearance. That's obviously why it's called 'Planet Hopper', Anji mused.

Here the alarm sounded more loudly and a number of technicians were running around the craft trying to get the emergency bulkhead doors to operate. The Doctor and Anji ran into the hangar and tried to work out what was going on. There was clearly some problem with the spacecraft itself. The Doctor caught the attention of one of the technicians.

'What's the problem?'

'We were running a flight simulation and a fire broke out inside the craft.' The technician looked at the Doctor quizzically. 'Who are you?'

'A consultant,' he answered vaguely. 'How many inside?'

'Three. But the emergency systems have gone down. We can't put out the fire and we can't blow the hatches. The entire control system is locking us out.'

'Show me.' The Doctor spoke with such authority and conviction that the technician found himself taking him directly to the side room from which the simulation was being run. Anji followed him.

'More computers,' she complained, seeing the banks of screens and keyboards.

The Doctor sat down in the nearest wheeled chair and scooted along the row of monitors, taking in the data from each screen as he passed. Then he put out a hand to stop his progress and began typing furiously.

'Is there anything I can do?' Anji asked, wanting to help. If he says make a cup of tea, however, I'll brain him, she thought.

'Yes. Sit here and read off the figures that come up in that box, please.' The Doctor relinquished his chair and moved to another console. Anji took up her position and began intoning the ever-changing figures.

'I thought so,' muttered the Doctor, looking at his new screen. 'A slight time delay between units.' He looked up at the men and women who staffed the room, who were all watching him interestedly. 'I believe you have a bug in your system – a malignant one.'

The Doctor turned back to the console and began typing again. Anji was still reeling off numbers. 'You can stop that now, Anji,' he told her.

She came over to join him. 'What are you doing?'

'Trying to isolate the intruder in the system. It's a piece of semi-intelligent code.'

'Like a software agent?' she asked.

'Exactly. Although in this case more of a software saboteur. If I can lure it into an area of the System that can be isolated, I might be able to remove it.'

Anji watched as the Doctor worked. She turned to the nearest technician.

'How much oxygen do they have in there?'

The technician shrugged. 'Not enough. If we don't get those doors blown in the next minute or so, it'll be too late.'

The Doctor was on his feet.

'Recordable DVD?' he asked a woman sitting at an adjacent desk.

She frowned for a second, then pointed to a console near the back of the room.

'Over there, we use it to save all the test data.'

'Excellent.' The Doctor vaulted the second row of consoles and headed for the recording unit. He found a blank DVD and put it into the machine.

'Anji, double-click on that mouse now.' Anji did as she was instructed and a second later was shocked as the Doctor let out an uncharacteristic cry of triumph.

'Yes. Gotcha!'

All around the room the locked screens were flickering back into life. The men and women of the test team resumed their places.

'All systems back on line.'

'Fire defences activated.'

'Emergency evacuation initiated.'

'Firing bulkhead doors.'

The Doctor led Anji out of the cacophony and back towards the stricken spaceship. Explosive charges on the doors detonated, sending the doors flying, and a moment later three spacesuited figures emerged from the smoky interior.

The lead astronaut was clearly being told by an aide of the Doctor's role in averting the disaster. The Doctor and Anji waited patiently as he walked towards them, fiddling with the clasps on his helmet as he came. He stopped when he reached them, removing the headgear, revealing the world-famous features of Arthur Tyler.

'I understand I owe you my life. Who are you? And what the hell are you doing here in a secure area?'

'I'm the Doctor and this is Anji. We're here to help. You seem to be having some problems... with this alien technology you're trying to use.'

Arthur Tyler III met the Doctor's gaze coolly and nodded. 'Perhaps we should talk...'

He indicated to them to follow him.

‘And perhaps you could explain what just happened,’ added Anji, hopefully. ‘If it’s not too much trouble.’

‘I told you – there was an alien software agent sabotaging the systems, but I’ve isolated it on that DVD and removed it.’

Tyler nodded. ‘A Kulan agent, I suppose.’

‘Kulan?’ asked the Doctor.

‘The aliens who’ve been helping me. Not all of them are as interested in co-operation as their colleagues.’

‘I think you’d better explain what’s been going on,’ said the Doctor. ‘Then we can see how I can help you.’

‘But who are you?’ insisted Tyler.

‘When it comes to aliens and space travel I’m something of an expert,’ declared the Doctor. ‘At least I used to be...’

Tyler shot Anji a look. ‘Is this guy on the level or totally nuts?’

Anji could only shrug in response. She was beginning to think the answer was ‘Both’.

## Chapter Eight

### For Your Eyes Only

According to the people in the tourist information centre, the area to the south-west of the city centre was where the majority of the various power bases of the European Commission could be found, with different buildings for its often competing directorates. Many other European and international organisations also made their homes in the area, since it was the perfect place to ensure effective lobbying of either the Commission or the Council of Ministers. It was also the location, as Fitz had learned from the nice lady at the tourist booth, of the Belgian offices of the ITI Corporation.

A short Metro ride from the centre of the city brought him to a station called Schuman, from which Fitz emerged eating a chocolate-coated waffle, to find himself at a roundabout. Apparently roundabouts were quite rare in Belgium and from what Fitz had seen of the local driving habits he could see why – the average Belgian apparently happier to drive in a straight line, no matter who or what might be in their way, rather than have the inconvenience of having to steer in a circle. Consulting the curious local version of an A-to-Z – a thick handbook whose map pages were so small that you had hardly begun to walk before you needed to turn the page – Fitz took a side street away from the EC offices, past a clutch of Indian restaurants (must be here for the Brits, he thought as he passed) and behind the giant and futuristic Berlaymont building.

According to his guide book the Berlaymont building had been constructed in the 1970s to house the European Commission but in the 1990s it had been found to be full of dangerous asbestos and had been evacuated. Since then it had been wrapped in plastic, waiting for the asbestos to be safely removed. So far it had been closed for getting on for ten years and most people at the Commission considered it a long-running joke that it would be reopening 'soon'.

Fitz almost missed the street he was looking for. The street sign was in Flemish – Stevinstraat – and he had to look twice to see the French translation, Rue Stevin. The ITI offices were housed in an old-looking building of four storeys. A café on the street corner opposite offered a good view and Fitz sat

down and ordered a coffee while he planned his move.

On the street, the darkened window of a BMW opened with a quiet electronic hum. A completely bald man looked out of the window and seemed to regard Fitz with interested eyes. He spoke into a small hand-held radio. 'Control? I may be on to something.'

Unsure whether the man was referring to him, Fitz returned nervously to his efforts to improve the taste of his coffee with copious amounts of sugar. But then a shadow fell over him, and he looked up to find the bald man standing next to him. He was about Fitz's age, and, although the baldness gave his head a severe look, his clothes made him out to be very nonthreatening: a parka-style overcoat liberally decorated with badges, some with what appeared to be TV-programme logos, some with catchphrases and other symbols.

'You're watching that place too, aren't you?' the stranger stated simply. Fitz could hardly deny it, so he shrugged, vaguely acknowledging the truth without actually stating it.

'Me too,' continued the man, taking a seat at Fitz's table. He shot out a hand in greeting. 'Paul Fisher. I guess you're with Star Watch too.'

Fitz took the hand and shook it, thinking furiously. Star Watch – that was the convention that Dave had wanted to go to, wasn't it?

'Fitz. Just call me Fitz,' he said by way of an introduction. 'Is that your name? Just Fitz?' Fisher asked with a laugh.

Fitz shrugged and tried to look mysterious. 'It's a kind of code name. I'm a sort of... agent,' he confessed.

Fisher seemed almost amused by this statement. 'Travel, estate or secret?' he asked, smiling broadly.

'You were right the first time – I'm with Star Watch,' Fitz explained. 'A friend of mine went to take a closer look at this mob,' Fitz jabbed his thumb in the direction of the ITI building. 'But he never came back.'

'I'm not surprised,' replied Fisher. 'You do know what's going on in there?'

Fitz had to confess his ignorance. Fisher looked round in a paranoid fashion before continuing. 'Aliens. I'm convinced of it. There are alien beings from another planet inside that building.'

Fitz pretended to be sceptical. 'Aliens! Over there, right now?'

Fisher nodded, seriously. 'You want me to prove it?'

'How would you do that?'

'We'll get inside – take a look around... Are you up for that?'

Fitz smiled to himself – here was a bit of luck. He needed a way in and someone was offering to help him to find it. He told Fisher that he was, indeed,

‘up for that’ and went to pay for his coffee.

While Fitz was gone, Fisher fiddled with a badge he had on his coat lapel. ‘Testing, testing. Control. Are you receiving sound and vision? Over,’ he whispered into the button. In his ear a voice confirmed that both were being received just fine. Fitz returned.

‘Come on, then, Fitz – let’s do some breaking and entering.’

When Fitz had seen some furniture being delivered on his earlier visit to Belgium, using one of the mobile external lifts that seemed so popular in this city, he had thought that the whole operation had looked distinctly unsafe.

The lifts didn’t look any better from his current position, either. Some people had been moving out of the building adjacent to ITI and Fisher had persuaded the removal men to allow them to borrow the lift for a moment to take the pair of them up to the roof. As they rose, Fitz felt a real sense of vertigo. With hardly anything to hang on to he was convinced that one shudder would be all that was required to send him hurtling to his doom. He recalled watching the would-be assassin fall from the Atomium and shivered.

Fisher noticed and grinned. ‘It is a bit chilly up here, eh?’ he commented.

Fitz was too scared to attempt a witty retort.

On Fisher’s lapel, the micro-camera continued to record everything. On the ground a base station hidden in Fisher’s car received the signals from the camera and stored them digitally before sending them on to a secret destination.

In a darkened room the American who preferred to be called Control watched the raw footage as it came in.

Fitz and Fisher had reached the relative safety of the adjacent building’s roof. It was a short scramble, and a jump of a few inches, to gain access to the roof of the target building.

‘Now what?’ asked Fitz. ‘If we head in there –’ he indicated the doorways to the interior – ‘surely we’ll set off an alarm.’

‘Not necessarily.’ Fisher went to the door and ran a small wandlike device over it. ‘Not alarmed,’ he explained. ‘Probably don’t expect visitors to come in from the roof.’

Using a credit card, Fisher forced the lock and opened the door. Fitz frowned: for a UFO freak this guy was doing a pretty good impression of a secret agent.

Fitz shrugged. Maybe he'd watched too many spy films. He followed Fisher inside the building.

The doorway led to a small stairwell that took them down into the top level of the building. Although old-looking from the outside, the interior of the building seemed to be from a different century. The corridors were brightly lit and sterile-looking. Fisher and Fitz moved along, past rooms that seemed to have airlocks rather than doors.

Suddenly Fitz heard a noise that made him stop in his tracks. A low moaning coming from one of the rooms.

'Fisher – wait. Did you hear that?'

Fisher stopped and listened. For a moment Fitz thought he must have imagined the sound – but then it came again: a human male, moaning in pain. Fisher nodded and indicated one of the nearby doors. Fisher produced a lock-pick and started working at the door.

'Unusual toy,' commented Fitz.

'Mail order. From an ad in an American UFO magazine,' explained Fisher completing his task. 'There!'

Fisher opened the door and he and Fitz entered the room. It looked like a hospital room: clinically clean, it contained a wheelchair, an armchair and a hospital-style bed. The origin of the moaning was immediately apparent – on the bed lay Dave, shivering and shaking. Some medical monitoring equipment was on a trolley to one side of the bed. The dials and readouts flashed happily but meant nothing to Fitz, who was more taken by the sight of Dave.

'Dave!' Fitz was delighted to see him – for Anji's sake as much as anything. He rushed over to the bedside. Up close, Fitz could see that Dave was in a bad way, clearly quite ill. His wrist was a mass of scratches, some red with dried blood. Dave's eyes were fluttering. Fitz wasn't sure if he was aware of their entrance or not.

'Dave – can you hear me?'

Fitz looked over at Fisher, who had taken up a lookout position at the door. Fisher shrugged.

'We have to get him out of here.'

'In that state?' Fisher didn't seem to believe it possible.

'Fitz... ' Fitz spun round. Dave seemed to have come round a little. 'Hey, man, thanks for coming for me.'

'Least I could do. What happened to you?'

A little of Dave's old enthusiasm seemed to be rekindled as he spoke.

'There are aliens. They're called the Kulan. One of those blokes who shot at us is one. They're here helping Dudoin. . .'

Fisher, seeming fascinated by this talk of aliens, had abandoned his post at the door and joined Fitz at Dave's side.

'Go on – this is fascinating.'

Dave looked up at Fisher suspiciously.

'Who's the Patrick Stewart lookalike?' he asked Fitz.

'A friend,' Fitz answered, hoping that he was right.

Meanwhile, inside the darkened room from which he liked to run operations, Control leaned forward to examine the images from his operative's hidden camera. In close detail.

The young man Fitz had called Dave was clearly suffering from some kind of infection. Some alien infection. This was exactly why he had wanted Fisher on the case. Alien activity on his planet was something Control always wanted to know about. He allowed himself a small smile: at least on this occasion there appeared to be no interference from the damned UNIT people. Control was sick and tired of UNIT's attempts to have an exclusive hold on all things alien.

He whispered into the microphone set into his desktop.

'Get the infected man out of there,' he ordered, coming to a decision.

Fitz looked up suddenly. He could hear footsteps in the corridor. He looked over at the door, which was still wide open. Fisher managed to get into position behind the door in a couple of quick steps but there was no time and nowhere to hide for Fitz.

One of the humanoid aliens appeared in the doorway and stepped into the room. Fisher raised an arm, ready to bring down a fist on the back of the alien's neck.

'No – wait!' Dave could see the imminent attack.

The alien, warned of the danger, turned and stepped clear of Fisher, backing towards the bed.

'It's OK – he's a friend,' explained Dave. 'His name is Sa'Motta.' Dave turned to the alien. 'These are more friends – Fitz and. . .'

'Paul Fisher,' offered Fisher.

The alien called Sa'Motta put a hand to Dave's forehead. 'How are you Dave? Any better?' he asked, in a concerned tone.

'The pain comes and goes.' Dave shrugged.



Fitz took the opportunity to take a good look at the alien. Sa'Motta did look distinctly different from humans. The skin colour was light and seemed almost translucent under the strong lights. The shape of his facial features was slightly odd, too: the eyes too wide and too narrow; the ears a little too large for the head. At a quick glance he could pass for human but from this distance there was no doubt that this was indeed a creature from another planet.

Fisher was also looking at the alien, making sure that his lapel camera was pointing in the right direction. Whoever these aliens were, they were responsible for the advanced energy weapon that he had retrieved from the girl's hotel room. Control was very interested to find out who the aliens were and what they were doing on the planet.

'Who are you? What are you doing on this planet?' he demanded. To his surprise the alien sighed heavily.

'Trying to get home,' Sa'Motta said simply.

Dave looked at his alien friend. 'Tell 'em what you told me,' he suggested.

Sa'Motta nodded and closed the door before coming back and sitting on the bed. Fisher and Fitz made themselves comfortable on the floor.

'We are the Kulan. I am part of an advance evaluation squad.'

'Evaluating what?' asked Fisher suspiciously.

'The suitability of this planet for invasion.' This wasn't something Fisher wanted to hear. His expression must have betrayed his thoughts. 'Don't worry, after three years on this miserable planet I've come to the conclusion that it is not suitable.'

'How kind. And does your word count for anything with your bosses?' enquired Fisher sarcastically.

'Who knows?' Sa'Motta sounded quite depressed. 'Our scout ship left the battle fleet nearly four years ago; but we encountered unexpected hazards passing through a belt of meteorites and suffered a terrible crash landing. Over half the squad died on impact.'

'What happened to the ship?' asked Fitz.

'Completely destroyed. We had no way to contact the fleet and no way to rendezvous with them. The survivors decided that we should attempt to conclude our mission despite the accident. We learned that humans had just begun to explore near space and decided that one of these primitive craft would have to serve our purposes.'

'So why not hijack an American or Russian rocket?' asked Fitz.

‘With our limited numbers? It didn’t seem possible. But when our researchers found people developing private spacecraft we realised that we could use them. We came to the man called Dudoin and offered our aid. He was only too happy to have it.’

‘That’s why Dudoin’s suddenly caught up with Tyler’s mob,’ explained Dave helpfully.

‘But recently a few of us have begun to question our plan. Fray’kon, the highest-ranking military survivor from the evaluation team, has appointed himself leader of our small band. It is his plan to contact the fleet and recommend that the invasion goes ahead. Some of us have decided to rebel against that decision. We secretly made contact with Dudoin’s rival, Tyler, and offered him *our* support.’ Sa’Motta sighed again. ‘We hoped we could assist Tyler to the point that he could launch first, with us on board, so that we could put a counterargument to our leaders and, of course, enable ourselves to go home.’

Fitz was nodding. ‘So who was the guy Dave saw killed. Was he one of your side or the other lot?’

‘Menhira was my colleague. He was taking some important biodata to Tyler but he was discovered. Fray’kon hunted him down like some wild animal.’

Suddenly, Dave was beginning to shake again.

‘And what about Dave? Why is he ill?’ asked Fitz.

Sa’Motta looked embarrassed. ‘I’m afraid that is an accidental side effect. To safeguard the data he was carrying he injected it into Dave. It’s a mutating agent. A prototype. Designed to change human DNA to enable humans to operate Kulan control systems directly.’

Sa’Motta looked over at Dave, shaking and pale on the bed.

‘As I said, an unfortunate side effect. One that I fear will be fatal.’

Fitz seemed horrified. He looked across at Dave, who seemed sanguine about the whole thing. ‘The way I feel right now, dying seems like quite a good idea!’ Dave joked weakly.

‘Maybe the Doctor can help,’ suggested Fitz.

The alien shrugged. ‘I suspect that my position here is becoming untenable. I am already under suspicion. Fray’kon and Dudoin are nearly ready to launch their craft. If we are to avoid many deaths we must act quickly.’

‘Can’t we put some kind of spanner in the works?’ asked Fitz. Sa’Motta looked puzzled. ‘Sorry,’ added Fitz. ‘I mean some sort of sabotage.’

Sa’Motta shook his head. ‘Security around the ship is too tight. Our best strategy is to get Dave and the information carried in his body to Tyler. I will come with you,’ he offered.

Fitz looked at Fisher, who shrugged.

'If I am discovered I will be killed. At least if I go with you now I may survive to see my home again,' the alien explained.

'OK, how do we get out?' said Fitz. 'The way we came in?'

Fisher shrugged and glanced over at Dave, who now looked worse than ever. 'I'm not sure your friend here is up to that.'

But Sa'Motta grabbed the wheelchair, and, after carefully taking the monitoring devices from Dave's wrists and chest, they bundled him into it. Sa'Motta's plan was simple – act as if they were doing nothing out of the ordinary, make their way to the main entrance and then run. Fisher hadn't liked the suggestion, but when Fitz challenged him to come up with another idea he had failed. Decision made, they set off towards the lifts, trying to act for all the world as if they belonged in the building.

They reached the lifts without incident and Fitz began to think that they might actually succeed in leaving without anyone noticing. The lift doors opened to reveal two Kulan. Sa'Motta nodded at them formally and joined them in the lift. Fitz was pushing Dave in the wheelchair, and Fisher followed him. The doors dosed almost without a sound and the lift began to descend.

Fitz tapped his foot nervously. The two Kulan began to speak in their own language. It was a harsh, grating sound that made the Flemish Fitz had heard around Brussels sound positively melodic. He wondered what it was they were saying. He glanced over at Sa'Motta, who seemed completely unconcerned. After what seemed an age the lift stopped moving and the doors opened.

They stepped out into the reception area. They had to pass a large wooden reception desk and then it was a short couple of yards to the automatic doors and freedom. Sa'Motta gestured for Fitz to move aside to let the two Kulan pass. As they disappeared into another corridor, Fitz breathed a sigh of relief. It really looked like they were going to make it.

But, just as Fitz was thinking this, the alarms sounded.

Suddenly the entire area was chaos; a brace of security men appeared from nowhere and a metal shutter began to descend over the automatic doors. Sa'Motta urged them back the way they had come, leading them past the lifts and into the heart of the ground floor of the building. One of the security men produced a weapon – one of the alien handguns that Fitz had seen before. He dived at Sa'Motta and pushed him out of the line of fire. They fell against a door, which opened under their combined weight, and Fitz found himself falling down a concrete stairwell. He tried to curl up, bringing his knees up and his head in, to avoid major injury and bounced like a misshapen ball down

the stairs until finally he reached the bottom, where he lay breathless for a moment before Sa'Motta arrived in a similar fashion and landed on top of him.

In the corridor Fitz and Sa'Motta had just left, Fisher and Dave were cornered by the two armed security men. Fisher looked around quickly, trying to weigh up his chances. The only possible escape route was through the door Sa'Motta and Fitz had found by accident.

The two security men didn't seem too trigger-happy – in fact, as they got closer to apprehending them, they seemed to be relaxing slightly. Fisher noted that their grip on the guns had eased. He steadied himself, waited for the right moment and then – when the nearer guard was almost upon him – he acted. He lunged forward, grabbed the guy's gun arm and, setting his feet, yanked him in a judo throw over his shoulder into the path of his colleague. Without pausing in his motion he dived and rolled towards the door but, even as he came out of his roll and stretched out his right hand to push open the door, the second security man had raised his gun and fired.

At the bottom of the stairwell, Sa'Motta and Fitz had just managed to help each other to their feet. They looked up as the door they had come through banged open and Fisher's body – what was left of it – came flying through. It landed with a stomach-turning squelch. Fitz felt himself retching but was distracted from actually being sick by Sa'Motta pulling him through another doorway into an underground car park.

At the far end of the car park, a ramp led up towards daylight. Fitz and Sa'Motta ran towards it, not daring to look behind them. To their amazement, there were no further signs of pursuit, nor were the doors blocked. They emerged on to one of the many cobbled backstreets of the city, and carried on running. They finally stopped when they reached a small park, collapsing on to a bench to regain their breath.

Sa'Motta looked completely crestfallen.

'That did not go as well as it could have,' he said, sadly.

For a moment Fitz could only nod. Although they had escaped, freedom had come at a high price: Dave was still held by Dudoin's people and Fisher had been killed.

'I guess we revert to Plan B – get you to Tyler and hope we can get his spacecraft into contact with your people first. . . ' suggested Fitz.

Sa'Motta nodded. 'I fear that is our only option.'

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Inside the ITI building, the alien leader Fray'kon was being briefed on the escape by members of Dudoin's security team.

'Sa'Motta sides with the rebel faction! I should have guessed.'

Dudoin looked over at him, concerned. 'Will this problem cause a delay?'

The alien shook his head firmly. 'There will be no delay. The loss of a traitor will not impede our preparations and we still hold the infected human.' He thought for a moment before continuing. 'Sa'Motta will pay for his betrayal – in due course. I will enjoy exacting revenge personally, when the time comes.' The alien smiled cruelly, obviously anticipating the violence to come.

Dudoin watched him, apprehensively. Occasionally, just occasionally, he wondered if his deal with the Kulan was some kind of Faustian affair. The Kulan – especially Fray'kon – seemed a bloodthirsty race, and sometimes Dudoin wondered what their motives for helping him really were. Fray'kon had explained that they were merely shipwrecked explorers, who needed to get back into space to contact their mothership. Dudoin had been prepared to go along with that notion – indeed he probably would have done anything, at least at the time, to get his own spacecraft into space. In the last few weeks, however, he had begun to wonder: what might happen when the rest of the world learned of the existence of extraterrestrial life? The only certainty, as far as Dudoin was concerned, was that anyone with a head start into the space-travel industry would clean up; the future really was in the stars and Dudoin would be leading humankind to them. If the Kulan did have another agenda, he had convinced himself that they could be dealt with.

In the darkened bunker inside his organisation's Belgian headquarters, Control was briefing his local Offensive Action Team – OAT. On a screen, video stills taken from Agent Fisher's final broadcast were displayed, clearly showing two beings: the alien, the one called Sa'Motta, and the human agent, Fitz.

'The alien may be innocent but this man. . .' Control tapped an angry finger at the image of Fitz. 'This man I want to speak to. Fisher was a good agent. I want to know he died for a good reason. And he mentioned the Doctor. God help us if he's involved in this mess. Find me this guy Fitz and bring him to me.'

The OAT team – six hardened agents – nodded.

'I want him alive – but not necessarily in one piece. Do you understand?'

Agent Williams, the commander of the OAT, nodded. The others grunted their agreement, the ghost of a smile playing around the mouths of one or two of them.

'Get on to it,' ordered Control simply.

Dismissed, the team trooped out, leaving Control alone with his thoughts. He pressed a button on his desk and summoned his PA. Stacey slipped into the room, notepad at the ready, as usual.

'Stacey, arrange for a standard Lost In Action to be sent to Fisher's widow, arrange full payment of service pension and get the boys back home to organise the funeral.'

He sighed. The procedure might be routine but he still hated it every single time Agents died – it was inevitable given the line of work – but the loss was felt, even at the top of the command chain. Control would shed no tears for his fallen agent but he would have his revenge, on someone, somewhere. And right now the limey Fitz – who seemed to know the damned Doctor – was first up at bat.

# Chapter Nine

## Weird Science

Anji was amazed at how quickly things had changed. One moment she and the Doctor had been intruders, breaking and entering to spy on the Tyler camp, and now they were embraced as friends and colleagues. She'd known some silver-tongued men in her time but the Doctor seemed to have the gift of the gab to a greater degree than anyone else she'd ever met. Tyler had apparently fallen under his spell as quickly as she had. In fact, it had seemed to come as a relief to Tyler, to be finally able to talk to someone about what he had been doing.

The alien dissidents, led by a creature named Menhira, had first made contact with Tyler six months earlier. At first he had been sceptical, but when Menhira had made himself available for an independent medical, Tyler had found himself unable to argue with the results. He had then listened to Menhira's story with a more open mind.

Tyler's reaction had been one of total awe and a conviction that his lifelong dream of travel in space seemed suddenly much closer. When Menhira had explained the urgency of the need to get word to the rest of the fleet, before Fray'kon could put his case, Tyler had been only too happy to accept Menhira's offer of help.

The Doctor interjected at this point in Tyler's story. Wasn't Tyler being a bit selfish? If the alien had been telling the truth there was an alien battle fleet lurking in deep space heading for Earth, prepared to invade and conquer the planet. Shouldn't Tyler at least have considered contacting the world's leaders? The Doctor mentioned that he had heard of a clandestine UN-backed organisation that dealt with this kind of thing.

Tyler smiled. Of course he had considered it; in fact he'd come close to doing just that. But when he subjected the idea to further study, he realised how futile it would be.

'Even if I'd managed to avoid being thrown into some kind of maximum-security mental institution, what effect do you think the news would have on

the general populace? The fallout would be immense. In economic terms alone it would probably cause chaos,' Tyler explained carefully.

Anji found herself agreeing. The delicate balance of international economics depended on predicted and predictable behaviour: patterns of supply and demand, growth and recession. The announcement of an unexpected, unprecedented factor like the arrival in the solar system of an alien invasion force would throw the whole system into disarray. 'There'd be no futures market if suddenly people were doubting there'd be a future!' she joked.

Anji had realised then that she had crossed some kind of invisible borderline: moving from the rational scepticism she had always aspired to into some kind of new universe where anything was possible. Her boyfriend had been kidnapped by aliens! It was a headline from an issue of the *Sunday Sport* but now she was taking it seriously. Partly it was down to the involvement of Tyler, a man whose well-documented achievements gave him some credibility, but mostly Anji was persuaded by the calm certainty of the strange individual known only as the Doctor. A man who, by his own admission, knew as little about himself as she did.

He seemed much more at home here, among the scientists and engineers, than he had in the bar-café where she had first met him. There he had been a fish out of water, playing the part of a bar owner without any great conviction, a hollow sketch of a real man. Now, discussing the obscure details of a dozen different scientific disciplines with the air of one who was familiar with the most arcane and complex elements of each, he seemed more complete, more alive. Faced with the hybrid rocket blueprints that combined Kulan and human technology, the Doctor's erratic memory problems seemed to fade away, putting him on an equal footing with Tyler's people. No doubt a few resented his involvement, feeling that their six-month head start on him in getting to grips with the new science should count for something, but most welcomed him for what he clearly was, a fellow scientist.

Tyler had asked the Doctor to apply his obvious expertise to the problems they were having with the Planet Hopper's control systems. The Doctor had been delighted to be asked and had thrown himself into the work with evident enthusiasm, seeming to forget Anji and her own concerns. Thankfully, Tyler had been more considerate and, leaving the Doctor to talk technobabble with his new friends, had taken Anji off for lunch.

Over a meal that far exceeded in quality anything she had seen in the so-called gastronomic capital of Europe, Anji had told the American her story.



Tyler had been horrified to hear of Dave's kidnap and the implication that his old friend Dudoin was somehow responsible for it. They were eating in the tenniscourt-sized office Tyler occupied, attended only by the giant black American who had been introduced to her as 'Marshall'.

Anji looked at the two portraits that hung over Tyler's desk. They both showed men of about Tyler's age and the family resemblance was too great to ignore. She nodded in their direction. 'Illustrious ancestors?' she asked.

Tyler smiled. 'My father and my grandfather.'

'Good-looking men,' she commented. 'It must run in the family.'

Tyler sighed, unexpectedly. 'Many things do,' he muttered.

Anji was surprised at his reaction. 'Your father must be very proud of you,' she suggested.

'I hope so, wherever he is,' Tyler replied. She frowned and he continued: 'He died when I was quite young. Apparently longevity does not run in the family. That's why I'm always in such a hurry,' he joked, hiding a serious undertone. 'I'm never quite sure how long I'm going to have.'

Anji wasn't sure how to respond to this and was relieved when Tyler summoned his bodyguard and aide over with a nod of his head. 'Marshall, first of all send word to Raymond and thank him for this meal, excellent as always. Then get me a video link to Dudoin, wherever he is. I want to talk to him face to face.'

Marshall nodded and disappeared. Less than a minute later the phone on the giant desk rang and a wall-mounted TV screen flickered into life.

On the screen Dudoin – looking much the same as in his frequent television interviews – appeared. Anji was impressed at the speed with which contact had been made, forgetting that the pair were old college friends.

'Dudoin, you old bastard. Sorry to hear about the speed trial,' said Tyler, a neutral expression on his face.

'A setback but we will recover. The record will fall.'

'No doubt, no doubt. But aren't you going to be a little busy? What with this imminent launch?'

Dudoin laughed. 'You heard about that?'

'Of course. But we'll still be there first, you know.'

Dudoin's expression hardened. 'We'll see.'

There was a pause. Anji watched the two men carefully. There was much more than just the verbal conversation going on between them – a lot of history, she thought, between these two, not all of it resolved.

‘Is there a particular reason for this call? Or are you just phoning to score a few points?’ asked the Frenchman after a while.

Now it was Tyler’s turn to become more serious. ‘Actually, there was a reason other than simply social. I wanted to talk to you about a young Brit I believe you may have... encountered. A man called Dave Young?’

Anji watched carefully but there was not a flicker of doubt on the Frenchman’s face as he answered. ‘No. I have never heard that name,’ he stated firmly.

‘That’s a shame. I had it on good authority that you would know exactly where the gentleman could be found?’

‘Then you have been misinformed. Brussels is a big city. People go missing there every day...’ suggested the Frenchman with a Gallic shrug.

‘You’re right, of course. I’ll take no more of your precious time than Pierre-Yves. See you in orbit!’

‘I look forward to watching your launch – from space.’ Dudoin reached forward and switched off the video link.

As the screen faded to static and then turned itself off, Anji looked over at Tyler to see what he had made of the conversation.

‘You never mentioned Brussels...’ she began, but she didn’t need to finish her sentence. Tyler was already nodding in agreement.

‘But he did.’ Tyler sighed. ‘I didn’t want to believe it...’ He shook his head. ‘You don’t get to be Pierre-Yves or me without being a little ruthless. It’s inevitable, it comes with the territory, but there are limits. Things I wouldn’t do to get things to fall my way. Kidnapping is one of them.’

Anji snorted. ‘Shame your friend doesn’t feel the same way.’

‘You were right not to bother with the local police. No doubt Dudoin will have paid them off.’

Anji laughed cynically. ‘Corrupt policemen. How Continental!’

Tyler looked over at her sadly. ‘One thing I’ve learned is that contrary to what people try to tell you, money can buy anything, anyone.’

Although she tended to agree with this notion as a matter of course, Anji found herself thinking that she may have found the exception that would prove the rule: the Doctor. Somehow she couldn’t imagine that he would have a price. Of course, the Doctor *had* money – he’d apparently bought the lease of the St Louis’ bar outright, in cash – so the point was slightly academic, but Anji was certain that the Doctor would be exactly the same person, in character and action, whether he had money or not. Most of Anji’s friends and colleagues

were almost totally motivated by money and its acquisition; she suspected that they would find the Doctor almost incomprehensibly alien.

As for herself, she wasn't sure what she was motivated by any more. When she had first gone into the City it had been the challenge of the job itself and the financial benefits had been a secondary issue, but as her career progressed the challenges had become easier and the money had become a more important motivation. Recently that had begun to change: she still enjoyed not having to worry about money, but there were limits to how much you could get from just *owning* things. She wasn't sure where these thoughts were taking her – perhaps she needed some time out from her career, time to reassess what was important in her life. She'd kept all this from Dave of course, with his erratic acting career the two of them depended on her regular income.

Tyler was obviously still thinking about his videophone encounter with his old friend. 'At least we can be assured of one thing – Dudoin will ensure that your boyfriend is well treated. I can be certain of that. He might be a bastard – but he is civilised.'

Anji hardly heard him. Thinking about Dave had unleashed a tidal wave of guilt which threatened to engulf her. She was shocked to realise that for hours she had hardly spared a thought for Dave: all she seemed to be doing was thinking about the Doctor. What was happening to her? She realised that it must be some kind of coping mechanism. She was worried about Dave, of course, but it was a situation she could do little about. Fitz had been dispatched to check out Dudoin – with any luck he would return soon with positive news about Dave's whereabouts. In the meantime there was no point in wasting energy worrying and speculating.

As to her apparent fascination with the Doctor – that was easily explained. He was, quite simply, a fascinating man. It wasn't as if she was falling in love with him for Christ's sake – he was just not her type for a start. But she was finding him a stimulating and intriguing companion; somehow she was happy to spend time with him and listen to him. She was sure Dave would feel the same way; the Doctor seemed to have universal appeal.

Dr Sharon Jones wanted to take the man who called himself simply 'the Doctor' and introduce him bodily to the large waste-disposal unit situated in the corner of the lab. Not that she was given to thoughts of murder as a matter of course – in fact she abhorred violence in all forms – but the man was asking for it. Not only did he insist on calling her Sharon as if he'd known her for years, rather than the respectful 'Dr Jones' which she had fought so many battles for, but now

he sailed into her workgroup as a 'special consultant' and had staged a virtual coup, asking new questions and turning their carefully constructed work plan on its head.

She watched now as he went through the design specs again with her team. *Her* team: three men and two women, some of the finest minds in their field, whom she had forged into a cohesive unit, who called her Dr Jones because she commanded their respect, not out of fear. Her team, who were now fawning over this stranger, and hanging on his every word. Sharon was jealous – she could admit that – and the worst thing, the absolute killer, was that she found herself sharing her team's fascination. Damn him! The Doctor really did seem to understand what was going on as well as, if not better than, she did.

Tyler came to join them, accompanied by the pretty Asian woman Sharon assumed to be the Doctor's assistant. Sharon checked herself angrily – why on Earth should she of all people make an assumption like that. Institutional sexism, she figured, cross at herself for falling into the trap she'd spent most of her professional life accusing others of doing.

Anji took in the scene with experienced eyes. The woman she was being introduced to, a Dr Sharon Jones, was obviously the line manager of this group of scientists, but seeing the way she looked at both Tyler and the Doctor, Anji got the impression that she had some unresolved gender issues. Anji wasn't entirely surprised – she'd always assumed that the world of science was probably terminally old-fashioned and riddled with all sorts of prejudice. At least in her world – the banking and financial-services sector – such simplistic thinking was a thing of the past. At least she liked to think so. She'd certainly lost out on a recent application for a promotion to a younger, male candidate, but that hadn't been about her sex, had it?

Anji tuned in to the Doctor's report to Tyler of his findings.

'The basic problem you have is not with the alien modifications to the fuel-injection mechanism, or their retuning of the engines: the area of difficulty is the control system they have installed.'

Dr Jones was nodding in agreement. 'That's pretty much the conclusion we were coming to, anyway, Arthur. . . .' An implicit 'before you assigned this interloper to work on the problem' hung in the air before she finished her sentence. 'It's almost impossible for a human to use.'

Anji frowned. 'But the Kulan are human-shaped: they've got fingers, hands, arms. It's not like they've got suckers at the end of their arms, is it?'

The Doctor shot her an odd look as if a fleeting but vague thought had suddenly surfaced briefly in his erratic memory before sinking again without trace.

‘The Kulan don’t use physical controls – they operate their craft by mental energy,’ the Doctor explained. ‘Unfortunately, the human brain – although remarkable in many ways – is not compatible. It’s like trying to get an American-format VHS to work on a British VCR.’

This Anji could understand. A year living in the States had been full of such frustrations: her PAL tapes from home utterly useless on the Boston-purchased NTSC machine.

Tyler pitched in to the discussion. ‘Menhira was aware of the problem and thought they had a solution. They developed a DNA mutation agent – a serum that could induce minor changes in human DNA to enable us to operate Kulan control systems.’

The Doctor frowned. ‘That sounds highly dangerous.’

Dr Jones agreed. ‘Why on Earth haven’t you mentioned this before?’

‘Until the serum arrived I didn’t think we should make any assumptions,’ Tyler explained. ‘And I had faith in you and your team to find an alternative.’

‘I assume the serum has not arrived, then,’ said the Doctor.

Tyler nodded. ‘Menhira was meant to be bringing it himself but never made it out of Brussels. Your friends Dave and Fitz intercepted his package but that was taken when Dave was –’

‘That’s assuming the serum was in the package,’ speculated the Doctor. ‘Fitz told me Dave was bitten by an insect on his wrist the night he found that package.’

Anji nodded. ‘It came up quite red. And itched like hell, he said.’

‘Odd time of year for biting insects, even allowing for global warming,’ continued the Doctor. ‘I think Menhira, knowing that he was dying, made Dave a human carrier for the serum.’

Tyler looked grim. ‘Then we have even more reason to want to recover Mr Young.’ He turned to Anji with an apologetic look. ‘Not that we had no reason before of course.’

But Anji wasn’t paying attention to their discussion any longer. She had wandered a short distance away and was looking at some computer screens and consoles.

‘Doctor, should this be happening?’ she asked suddenly. The Doctor hurried over to examine the screen she was indicating. It was a systems monitor for the Planet Hopper and various readouts were flashing red.

‘No, I think not,’ he answered.

Dr Jones was already typing enquiries at the adjacent console. ‘The electrical systems are shutting themselves down. What the hell. . . ?’

The Doctor clicked his fingers. ‘The Kulan computer agent!’

Tyler frowned. ‘I thought you had removed it from the system.’

‘I did. Completely flushed it out. But I didn’t think that it might have left post-dated commands in the system. Shut everything down – now.’

Suddenly the room was full of frantic activity as Dr Jones and her team struggled to do what the Doctor had asked.

The Doctor was running towards the spaceship, Tyler and Anji at his heels.

‘I assume there are self-contained computer systems in the craft itself,’ he said as he ran.

‘Of course,’ Tyler. replied, keeping pace. ‘You think the alien agent will have sabotaged them?’

‘It’s what I would ha-’ the Doctor began, but didn’t get to finish his sentence as a huge explosion rocked the hangar.

The Doctor, Tyler and Anji took cover behind some monitoring equipment as secondary detonations went off inside the ship. Heavy black smoke billowed out from the Planet Hopper. Anji coughed and allowed Tyler to help her to her feet. The trio stumbled towards the nearest exit and emerged into fresh air, still spluttering.

The Doctor looked over at Tyler apologetically.

‘I’m sorry. I fear my oversight may have cost you dear,’ he admitted, ruefully.

A look of grim determination came over Tyler’s face. He shook his head firmly. ‘There’s no way I’m going to throw in the towel quite yet,’ he declared. ‘Let’s wait and see exactly what the damage is first.’

It took a matter of minutes for Tyler’s safety team to extinguish the fires inside the Planet Hopper, but it was four hours before Dr Jones could make a preliminary report on the extent of the damage. She joined Tyler, Anji and the Doctor in Tyler’s office.

‘The good news is that the ship’s body is structurally sound and the damage easily repairable. The engines were untouched and although one fuel tank was ruptured it can be replaced.’ She hesitated.

‘And the bad news?’ prompted Tyler.

Dr Jones looked grim-faced. ‘The control system is fried, totally.’

‘But can it be repaired?’

‘We barely understand how it works, Arthur. We were beginning to get some of the basic principles but we’re not up to rebuilding it. Not without help.’

Tyler frowned. 'Doctor?'

'Given time I might be able to get somewhere, with Dr Jones's help of course.' Sharon flicked a grateful smile at him, obviously appreciating the gesture. 'My problem is that biotechnology is not exactly my field.'

'What is your field?' asked Dr Jones.

'I'm not entirely sure,' answered the Doctor honestly and simply. Dr Jones frowned. 'But biotechnology isn't it.'

Tyler stood up. 'There is one person I can think of. Probably the world's greatest biotechnologist lives here in Oxford. I've been trying to get her on board for weeks but she just won't take my calls.'

The Doctor smiled. 'Perhaps I should have a word. I can be very persuasive.' Anji smiled, too: the Doctor may not think he knew much about himself and his past but he seemed to be quite aware of his strengths.

'Thank you,' said Tyler. 'Anything you could do to help would be appreciated. The woman in question is Dr Christine Holland.'

Suddenly it all fell into place for Anji. She'd read about the three of them in some Sunday supplement years ago, and had forgotten until now the connection. Holland, Dudoin and Tyler: three rising stars who had graduated together and who had managed to capture the imagination of the world with the enactment of one of the oldest love stories imaginable – the eternal triangle. If she remembered correctly it had been Dudoin who had won the battle and married Christine Holland. The marriage had been short-lived but the damage to the friendship between Holland and Tyler must have been great. No wonder she hadn't been answering his calls. Anji looked at the Doctor and wondered if there might be limits to his powers of persuasion after all.

# Chapter Ten

## Phase IV

Christine often joked that her office resembled a living argument for chaos theory but, in truth, although there appeared to be no order to the placement of papers, files and books on the various surfaces, there was a subtle and complex sense to the apparent randomness of it all. At least that was what Christine told people. Those who knew better – like Beverly, the secretary she shared with two other lecturers – would dismiss such excuses; if there was a subtle and complex filing system going on in the constant mess that Christine attempted to work in, then it was a system unknown to even Christine herself.

When it came down to it, however, the chaos wasn't ever a problem for her – it was just *finding* things that got frustrating. If only you knew in advance which things you were going to be looking for later in the week you would never misplace them, mused Christine as she displaced another pile of student essays, searching for the single sheet of fax paper on which she had scribbled a reference that she now needed. She had already come across three different versions of her Christmas list, none of which matched what she had actually managed to buy for her friends and family in a frantic last-minute shop on Christmas Eve. She really must make an effort to start earlier this year, thought Christine, ignoring the evidence from the earliest of the lists that she had found, whose August 2000 dateline suggested that she had made a similar promise to herself last year.

Sensing another presence in the room, Christine whirled round. She'd been a bit on edge for a few days; despite her determination to ignore the sudden interest that Pierre-Yves was showing in Pippa, and the barrage of phone calls from Tyler. She'd found the reappearance in her life of two such significant men from her past, unsettling. The person standing in the door, however, was benign, female and wore an amused expression. Christine relaxed.

'Looking for something, Professor?' asked Beverly, trying not to laugh.

'What gave you that idea?' Christine smiled back, then lurched forward as a pile of unmarked essays began to slip and tumble towards a smaller pile of



marked ones. Her outstretched hands only managed to accelerate the motion and the essays flew away from her, creating a small lake of paperwork in the corner of the room. 'Just doing some filing,' she joked.

Christine frowned, seeing that Beverly was holding a sheet of fax paper in her hand. 'Is that. . .?' she began but stopped as her secretary began nodding.

'You asked me to look after it this morning,' explained Beverly. Christine took the offered piece of paper with grateful thanks and checked the reference. 'You know, this would be a lot easier if I could read my own writing.' She looked up at Beverly as a thought struck her. 'How many today?'

'Four calls, three faxes. He's a very persistent man,' answered Beverly knowing exactly what she was asking about. Arthur Tyler's attempts to make contact with Christine were beginning to take up more and more of her time.

'He always was,' muttered Christine, slightly wistfully as she remembered an earlier somehow more innocent game of cat and mouse that they had played years ago. 'Keep fielding those calls,' she ordered, recalling her resolve to keep her shields raised.

Beverly tried to ignore the paperwork, which seemed to be moving towards her feet like an incoming tide. 'You know it's three-thirty. . .'

'Is it really? How time flies.' Christine was making further notes on the fax, barely aware of what Beverley was saying to her.

'Shouldn't you be on your way to get Pippa? Or shall I send a cab to get her?'

Mention of her daughter managed to bring Christine out of her train of thought. 'Oh, god, Pippa – is it really that late?'

'I'll call the taxi company,' said Beverly, making the decision for her boss.

'No, wait,' interrupted Christine. 'I'll go. I promised Pip I'd pick her up myself this week. She had three different cab drivers last week – it's not right. . .'

Christine got to her feet, dislodging another pile of books, and headed for the door. She looked back at the mess that was her room. 'I don't suppose. . .'

Beverly gave her a long-suffering look. 'I'll try to have a little tidy-up before I go tonight.'

'Thanks.' Christine smiled, grateful as ever for such an understanding secretary.

'Just don't expect to find anything where you left it.'

Christine laughed and went. Beverly scanned the room with a look of despair. Where on Earth to start?

Leonie Sutcliffe sighed. The problem was definitely one of casting and it had been one of her own making. Paul Hudson was a delightful child in many

ways, intelligent and sharp but not, sadly, particularly imaginative. Casting him in such a leading role had been an error. He just couldn't seem to grasp the essentials.

'Paul, remember, the world through the wardrobe is cold, much colder than the room in the house. Perhaps you could try shivering,' she suggested, trying to keep the impatience out of her voice.

'But it's warm in here,' replied the youthful actor, with a frown.

Leonie was saved from further debate about the scene by the appearance at the door of the hall of a parent.

'Mrs Sutcliffe, Mrs Sutcliffe,' a chorus of voices alerted her to the new arrival.

'Try running the scene again,' she instructed her actors. 'And remember: it's cold in Narnia.' She crossed the hall from the stage rapidly to meet the woman, whom she now recognised as Pippa Holland's mother, at the door.

'Mrs Holland? But Pippa's already gone home. . . ' she began and instantly regretted it as a look of pure paranoid fear came over the woman's face. Leonie had always found Christine Holland a formidable, if slightly erratic, parent, with very strong ideas about her child's education, but this nervy, twitchy woman was a stranger to her.

'Did a taxi come for her after all, then?' asked Christine trying to make sense of the situation.

'No, I don't think so.' Leonie frowned, trying to remember what she had seen earlier in the afternoon. 'I think it might have been her uncle. She's been talking about him for days. It must be very exciting to have someone like Arthur Tyler as an uncle.'

Christine's voice was cold and distant as she replied. 'Oh yes, very exciting.' She muttered a few words of thanks on auto-pilot and left as quickly as she had come. Leonie watched her go, a nagging doubt telling her that something was wrong. But the girl couldn't have come to any harm with her uncle, could she? Her teacher's radar alerted her to a presence at her elbow and she looked down to see little Josh Wakerley gazing up at her.

'Yes, Josh?' she prompted.

'That was Pippa's mum wasn't it?' the boy asked. Leonie told her that it was indeed. 'Did you tell her that the man who picked her up had a French accent?'

Christine drove home in an angry state of mind, breaking at least three traffic laws in the space of a five-mile journey. Luckily there were no policemen about to impose any penalty for her transgressions. Given the mood that Christine was in, the luck was probably with the policemen. She couldn't believe that

Tyler could have stooped so low as to use her own daughter as a way to get to her. Whatever he wanted from her, however desperate he was, he had no right to involve Pippa like this.

She pulled up at her house with a furious squeal of tyres and marched inside.

‘Pippa,’ she called hopefully already alarmed at the silence that had greeted her when she had opened the front door. No television on in the lounge, no Steps or S Club 7 blaring from upstairs, no snack-making debris in the kitchen – no sign at all that a child was at home. ‘Pippa!’ she shouted again, with less expectation. There was no reply.

Now a cold dread clutched at Christine’s heart. What if it had not been Tyler? What if someone else had taken Pippa? The logical part of her brain was already assembling arguments against such a conclusion: Pippa was too sensible a girl to go off with a stranger and she had a mobile phone for use in emergencies. But her emotional response to her daughter’s disappearance was overwhelming her intellect. She slumped on the sofa, tears beginning to form in her eyes. Oh, God, she thought, I’ve brought this on myself. I’m never there when I should be. It’s my fault.

The tears came, and for a moment she gave in to them, letting the emotion flow. Then she stopped suddenly as a thought struck her again in a different light: Pippa had a mobile phone! Christine jumped up and ran to the kitchen, hoping that her disorganisation had not extended to a failure to make any note of the mobile number. To her relief she found that Pippa had written the number herself on the wipeboard in the kitchen. Thanking goodness for her sensible child, Christine dialled the number and was astonished when her ex-husband answered the phone.

‘Pierre-Yves?’ she uttered, gobsmacked.

‘Chrissy? Did you see our note?’ Christine scanned the room and now – only now, of course, after the agony, the worry and the tears – she saw a sheet of paper stuffed into the fruit bowl on the sideboard. She just hadn’t seen it before – but then the fruit bowl was not part of her domain, being stocked by Pippa every weekend after their weekly expedition to Tesco.

She scan-read the note even while berating Pierre-Yves. ‘How dare you just turn up and take Pippa like that? Without telling me?’

The note read, ‘Dad’s taking me for a surprise holiday. He says you can come too. Please ask Mrs Jennings to pop in to feed the fish. Love, Pip.’ It was all printed in a jolly font on her laser printer upstairs. Ever since Pippa had been given her own computer she had preferred it to old-fashioned pen and paper for any kind of written communication. ‘Writing is so twentieth-century!’ she

would insist if Christine dared to suggest she should practise her handwriting.

'I'm sorry. I wanted to see my daughter. . . ' explained the Frenchman.

'Where is she?' demanded Christine coldly.

'With me – here in Brussels,' he answered as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. Christine's anger reached new heights.

'You've taken her out of the country? You're in breach of the custody agreement.'

Despite the call being merely a phone call without any kind of video link, Christine could just see the shrug that preceded Pierre-Yves's reply.

'I have sent my private plane back to Birmingham Airport to collect you; you can be here in a matter of hours. Pippa is excited to have a holiday and she really wants –' He paused and corrected himself. '*We* really want you to join us.'

'You should have asked. . . ' Christine countered.

'There's a car due at your house any minute with instructions to take you directly to the plane. I'll see you for supper. . . ' continued her ex-husband, as if discussing a plan made together weeks ago. The gall of the man was breathtaking. To her astonishment, Christine nevertheless found herself agreeing to go.

The plane landed at Zaventem Airport, a few miles to the east of Brussels, exactly two hours and thirty-two minutes after Christine had walked out of her house with a hurriedly packed overnight bag. During the journey, both by car and plane, she had changed her mind at least a dozen times about how to react when she met Dudoin again.

Her first instinct was to smack the man in the face and then maybe to lay about his nether regions with a few well-aimed kicks. It had been at least five years since they had met in the flesh but she was fairly sure that she would remember his most vulnerable points. Attractive though this scenario was, it was compromised by the almost certain knowledge that such an assault would be witnessed by Pippa. Although Christine had explained to her daughter about the breakdown of the marriage, and the reasons for the divorce, Pierre-Yves was still the girl's father, and she did have some kind of relationship with him. Seeing her mother beating seven shades of hell out of him would probably be a bit traumatic for her.

She'd considered alternatives, such as taking advantage of his money, having a damn good holiday and then taking Pippa home before launching legal action to prevent him ever having access again. In the end, as the plane had come

down low over the flat farming land to the north of the Belgian capital, she had decided to play it by ear. Make sure her daughter was well and happy and then decide what to do.

As she walked into the arrivals hall she spotted a driver holding a handwritten sign with her name on it and a few minutes later she was being driven in another limousine into the city itself.

When she walked into the cool open space that served as Dudoin's office, the first thing she noticed was the absence of her daughter. Dudoin entered from a second door, followed by a very odd-looking pale man.

'Where's Pippa?' demanded Christine, instantly.

'Safe – but at home. Back in the UK. Some friends of mine are looking after her,' he told her. 'I had them take her to the local McDonald's to get her out of the way and I'm afraid we wrote that note,' he explained, indicating the pale man.

'What?' Christine looked as if she was about to explode.

Dudoin hurried to contain her fury. 'It was the only way to ensure that you came.'

'How dare you?'

'I need your help – and I'm afraid this was the only way to guarantee your co-operation.'

Christine couldn't believe the man's audacity. 'You've kidnapped your own child!'

'It was my only option – a man is dying.'

'What are you talking about?' Christine was intrigued despite her anger.

It took Dudoin almost two hours to explain. For Christine these were two of the most exciting hours of her life. It was one thing to be told that there definitely were other intelligent life forms in the universe; it was something else again to be introduced to an alien and to have a conversation. Christine was fascinated by Fray'kon and by the similarities between his alien physiognomy and human make-up. The alien had explained that the bipedal humanoid form was by far the most common shape for life. Despite her concern for Pippa, Christine found herself wanting to make a study of the Kulan. Sensing her interest, Dudoin finally began to tell her about Dave.

'A mutating agent has infected his body, rewriting his human DNA to incorporate elements of Kulan DNA,' he explained. Christine was both astonished and horrified. 'And this man volunteered to do this?'

Dudoin looked a little embarrassed. 'Not exactly – there was an accident. . . And now there appears to be some problem with the assimilation – his immune

system is resisting the change. Unless you can help him, he will die.'

Christine thought for a moment. Everything Dudoin had done suggested that she should just turn and walk away, and yet the chance to work side by side with the aliens was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Dudoin watched as his ex-wife pondered what he had told her.

'I want to know that Pippa is safe – and I want to see her as soon as possible. And I want to see this victim. Then, and only then, will I give you an answer.'

Dudoin tried not to smile. He knew he had got her. He arranged for her to see Dave right away.

After Christine had been led away, Dudoin turned to Fray'kon.

'She will do it.'

'Good. We will need humans to crew the ship – there are not enough of us.'

Dudoin smiled. This was the key factor for him in his alliance with the Kulan – they needed him as much as he needed them. But once he had got into space... then the balance of need would shift.

Dudoin hadn't really thought beyond getting into space. The threat of the Kulan invasion fleet seemed abstract to say the least. Dudoin had dealt with only a handful of the aliens – fewer than half a dozen – and they didn't seem to be particularly aggressive. As far as Dudoin was concerned, it was somebody else's problem. All that mattered to him was to get into space. No price was too high, even if the planet did fall to the Kulan. They were welcome to planet Earth – he would have the stars.

With Christine on board, Dudoin thought his dream was closer than ever. Within days he would be in space. Nothing else mattered. Nothing.

Christine was shocked when she was introduced to Dave Young. His skin had begun to take on the hue of Kulan skin and his eyes were changing shape, too. He was barely conscious. Dudoin had installed state-of-the-art medical monitoring equipment and Christine immediately began studying the read-outs. It was clear that Dave was in a bad way. His entire body was beginning to shut down. Unless Christine could reverse the damage within the next twenty-four hours, there was no doubt that he would die. Christine set to work.

# Chapter Eleven

## The Fugitive

Fitz was wet, very wet. Drenched, in fact.

It appeared that Belgium enjoyed the same climate as England, which at this time of the year meant rain – and lots of it. The downpour had been sudden and had come completely without warning. Sa’Motta and Fitz had managed to get away from the immediate vicinity of the ITI building, but then the heavens had opened and they had been forced to take shelter in a small café. That had been two hours ago; in that time the storm had ebbed and flowed, sometimes heavier, sometimes lighter, but never actually stopping. Finally Fitz had decided that they couldn’t afford to wait any longer if they were to get back to Gare Midi and catch a Eurostar train back tonight. So the pair of them had emerged into the rain and headed for the nearest Metro station. As if it had been waiting for them, the rain started to come down even heavier than it had earlier, huge raindrops hitting the wet paving stones so hard that the splashes from the ground soaked their trousers as fast as the rain soaked their upper bodies. Within thirty seconds of leaving the café Fitz was out of breath and soaked through.

Beside him, Sa’Motta didn’t look at all perturbed. Perhaps the Kulan home planet was constantly wet, Fitz speculated, as he took his life in his hands and dashed across a main road. His feet skidded on the wet tarmac and he nearly found himself head-butting a tram trundling down the middle of the road.

In spite of the efforts of a few mad local drivers who seemed to think that the downpour was an invitation to increase their speed and ignore pedestrians, they managed to reach the Metro station and, dripping profusely, descended the slippery steps in search of a train. An electronic display showed that they would have a five-minute wait. Fitz looked up and down the platform but there were no empty seats. A wind whistled through the train tunnel, making him shiver in his wet clothes. Once again, Sa’Motta didn’t seem to notice.

At Gare Midi, a trio of Control’s agents waited patiently at carefully selected

observation points. From these positions the trio were able to watch every entrance to the station. Control had also dispatched a team to watch the departures hall at Zaventem Airport, but he was fairly confident that Fitz would attempt to get back to England by train. The agents had strict instructions – capture Fitz and bring him in for questioning. They were licensed to use whatever level of force was required – the only restriction was that they should try, insofar as possible, to avoid actually killing him. That could wait until after he answered a few questions.

Williams, Kruse and Murphy were old hands at this sort of mission: they'd followed and abducted targets all over the world, and didn't expect this one to give them much trouble. Williams had once partnered Fisher, and had more than enough personal motivation to bring in a man suspected of having been involved in his death. His concealed earpiece crackled as Murphy reported in from the ticket hall.

'Visual acquired.'

Williams spoke into the tiny microphone embedded in the collar of his jacket.

'Copy you, M. Fall in behind target.'

In the ticketing hall, Murphy moved forward and pretended to study a timetable notice. He listened as Fitz ordered his ticket, wincing as the man behaved like so many of his countrymen in a foreign country, speaking his own language with slow and precise pronunciation but very loud. The agent had to muffle a laugh when the Eurostar employee answered Fitz's enquiry in perfect and scarcely-accented English. The target paid cash for two tickets to London Waterloo, confirming Control's hunch about their destination.

While Fitz was purchasing their tickets, Sa'Motta was looking around the station, curiously. The Kulan had tried to keep a low profile while on the planet and had avoided being out in the open. After the crash landing, which had all but destroyed their spacecraft, they had been forced to make a gruelling journey across Continental Europe, from the forests of Norway, which had both cushioned and concealed their arrival, down to Austria, then Holland and finally Belgium. Here they stopped and took stock of their situation. Despite the loss of the spacecraft, Fray'kon was determined that they should complete their mission. Others, led by Menhira, had argued that they should just concentrate on getting back to the fleet. Fray'kon won the argument but accepted Menhira's point of view, so, after a few days researching the current level of space-travel technology on the planet, they had come up with the notion of aiding Dudoin.

Since then the Kulan advance party had spent almost all of their time secreted



within the various buildings owned by ITI in the Belgian capital, their contact with the human members of Dudoin's team strictly limited and monitored. Out here, in the bustling heart of one of the city's busiest stations, Sa'Motta was seeing more humans at one time than he ever had before. He found it slightly unsettling. His gaze landed on a man looking at a nearby timetable. There was nothing unique or odd about the man – he was of average height, dressed simply, short tidy hair receding at the front – and yet, somehow, his averageness seemed a little contrived, a little too perfect. Sa'Motta frowned, concentrating. His hearing was sharper than human hearing, and he could just make out a faint murmuring voice, apparently coming from inside the man's ear.

The man with the talking ear looked up and stared directly at Sa'Motta. Nonchalantly, the man looked away, appeared to gain what he wanted from the timetable, and began to walk in the opposite direction.

Fitz came up to Sa'Motta, clutching the tickets.

'What's the problem?' he asked.

'I think we are being watched,' explained Sa'Motta simply and indicated the man now walking rapidly away from them.

Fitz said he could see nothing suspicious about the man, but was willing to go along with Sa'Motta's instincts. 'Come on, then, let's get out of here.'

Fitz headed off towards the main concourse, dragging Sa'Motta with him. 'Who do you think they are?' he asked as they walked briskly. 'People from ITI?'

'I don't think so,' answered Sa'Motta, skidding to a sudden stop. Fitz turned quickly. 'Now what?' he demanded. Sa'Motta just nodded in the direction they were now heading. 'I think there's another one.'

Fitz looked round and saw a large, powerfully-built woman, dressed as casually as the man who had been watching them. She looked up from her magazine and caught his eye for a moment. Fitz looked for another exit.

'This way!' Fitz cried, leading Sa'Motta towards a stairwell, which seemed to lead to another level of the station, and, hopefully, freedom.

Behind the retreating pair, Agent Kruse dropped her magazine and began to run after them, speaking into her concealed microphone as she set off.

'Targets alerted and running.'

'Stay with them, Kruse – we'll join you,' answered Williams, a whisper in her ear.

Fitz and Sa'Motta took the stairs two at a time. Fitz was already getting a

tightness in his chest – why was his life one long chase? he wondered. What the hell was he really running from? Deciding that this was perhaps not the best time for a philosophical investigation into the direction his life had taken, Fitz concentrated solely on running.

They emerged on to the streets of Brussels, finding themselves in a part of the city that looked much less prosperous than the shopping and eating sectors he had seen previously. Here were old buildings, poorly maintained and covered with the fading paintwork of ancient advertising slogans. Fitz and Sa'Motta ran past badly-lit 24-hour food stores and ethnic 'supermarkets' through narrow curling streets, paved with rough cobblestones.

They reached a major junction, one that was complicated by tramlines and multiple traffic lights. Ignoring the furious horn blasts of offended motorists, the fugitives skipped across the road and darted between the slow-moving trams to reach safety.

Behind them Agent Kruse continued her pursuit, running with an easy grace and pacing herself for a long haul. She was content to keep the targets in sight rather than attempt to catch them herself, obeying her orders to the letter. She traversed the difficult junction without incident, even stopping to allow a tram to pass. When her view cleared, the two fugitives were still in sight – exactly as she had calculated. She allowed herself a small smile of satisfaction – these two were not only unfit but clearly not too bright. Kruse had already seen at least four places where she was certain *she* could have given pursuers the slip. The fact that her quarry hadn't taken advantage of these spots, which suggested that they hadn't recognised them as such, made her think that the chase would be concluded sooner rather than later. Assuming her male colleagues managed to get their fingers out, that was.

Kruse's team leader, Agent Williams, and her partner, Agent Murphy, had headed in another direction, towards the station's car park. There they had retrieved one of the many cars Control had placed at various points in the city for use by his agents. With Agent Williams at the wheel, the car had screeched off into the night.

Fitz rounded a corner and spotted an alleyway a few yards away – a chance to escape? He pulled the alien into the alley and they hurried down it as fast as the low light level allowed. Twenty yards into the blackness, Fitz came across a doorway which allowed them to duck out of sight. Fitz edged his head back

around the corner, watching the narrow slit of street-light-bright road. After a few moments the woman who had been following them came into view. She paused for a moment and then looked down the alley. Fitz jerked his head back into the doorway, hoping the sudden movement would be missed in the darkness.

After a few seconds he dared another look and found that the woman had gone. Fitz slumped down to a crouching position, next to Sa'Motta, who was already sitting on the floor, ignoring the unpleasant smelling collection of rubbish that half filled the doorway.

'Now what?' asked the alien, exhausted and unhappy.

Fitz was not at all sure he had an answer. He wished the Doctor was with him. He wished the TARDIS would just materialise right here, right now – in this rain-sodden alley in Brussels – and that the Doctor would whisk him away to somewhere nicer, brighter and, please, God, drier. He wished things could get back to how they used to be, before... Fitz frowned. Before what? Something weird was happening to his mind now. That was all he needed. Everything that had happened recently, the apocalyptic events on the Doctor's homeworld, was all becoming a bit hazy, unreal...

Fitz shivered – and not merely because he was cold and wet. Something odd was happening to his memory. Had the Doctor really destroyed his own homeworld? Fitz shook his head, unsure. All he did know was that person or persons unknown were chasing him, presumably with ill intent. That at least felt familiar. Small comfort that is, thought Fitz, bitterly.

'We keep running, of course,' he answered Sa'Motta finally. 'What else?'

With a heavy sigh Fitz got to his feet and began to walk off further down the alley. Within a few moments he had disappeared into the darkness. Sa'Motta slowly stood up and started to follow him.

Agent Williams drove slowly down the cobbled street, trying not to think about what the road surface was doing to the suspension of the car. He was getting weary of Belgium and its quaint old-fashioned ways. He hoped his next assignment was to some country that had managed to find its way to the twenty-first century – one that had worked out that roads should be flat.

He glanced over at Agent Murphy, who was frowning at a compact laptop computer. Murphy gave the machine a thump.

'Damn this operating system – it keeps crashing.'

'I told Control not to use something off the shelf,' Williams retorted.

‘Well he should have taken your advice – this is a pile of shit.’ The machine beeped at him as it rebooted and displayed a map of the city. ‘At last.’ A moving blip showed Agent Kruse’s position. ‘Take a left here.’

Williams yanked at the wheel and pulled the car into the narrow street Murphy had indicated. As the headlights moved up they picked out Fitz emerging from his alley. Seeing the car, Fitz began to run and crashed straight into the waiting arms of Agent Kruse, who immediately pinned one of his arms behind his back. With her free hand she produced a small hypodermic and injected the target with a fast-acting anaesthetic. The car pulled up and Murphy leaped out to help his colleague manhandle the now comatose Fitz into the car.

‘What about the other one?’ asked Kruse.

‘This is the one Control wanted,’ said Williams curtly. ‘But take another look round – see if you can get any trace of him. I’ll send Harvey and his team over from the airport to assist. But don’t sweat it, eh? We’ve got the main target.’

With a nod of agreement, Kruse moved away from the car and waved as Williams drove off.

From the shadows of the alleyway, Sa’Motta had been watching all of this – not daring to move for fear of being spotted. He felt he should do something: the man Fitz had saved his life earlier; there was a debt to be settled.

Moving with extreme caution Sa’Motta bent down and picked up a piece of broken packing case that littered the alley at his feet and weighed it in his hand. Heavy enough to do some damage to one of these weak humans, he was sure. He froze as the female approached the alley. Silently, he drew himself back into the shadows.

Agent Kruse frowned. Had she seen something move in the alley? Logically, the other target was probably still somewhere in that narrow passageway. She knew she should wait for Harvey and his team to cross the city and join her but she was wet and cold and more than a little pissed off with Williams for giving her this assignment. Why couldn’t Murphy have done the running? She was beginning to think Williams was never going to forgive her for the cock-up in Brazil. As if that had been entirely her fault. How was she meant to have known that the car she’d wrecked was the Ambassador’s personal vehicle?

Kruse walked into the alley, her mind buzzing with righteous indignation over her relationship – or lack of one – with her team leader. Perhaps it was because of this that she failed to notice the thick piece of wood descending at speed towards the back of her head until it was too late. Or perhaps her

attacker had moved with a grace, speed and efficiency that made it impossible for anyone to have seen him in time. Whatever the reason, the outcome was inescapable. The wood connected with her head with a sickening crack and Kruse pitched forward into the darkness, her head suddenly and violently cleared of all thoughts.

Sa'Motta bent to inspect the damage. Curse the humans for having soft skulls – he hadn't meant to inflict life-threatening injuries, just to render her unconscious. But the sticky caved-in mess at the back of her head suggested that he had slightly overachieved. To his relief, a closer examination revealed that she was still breathing. He searched her pockets, relieving her of a handheld computer and some communication devices. Sa'Motta got to his feet and hurried away, stopping only to use the woman's own mobile phone to call the local medical services.

A few minutes later Sa'Motta watched from a place of concealment as a pair of paramedics attended the scene. He saw the woman placed carefully on a stretcher and taken away in the ambulance, the siren screaming and its blue light reflecting off of the rain-wet cobblestones. Satisfied that his victim would be receiving medical care, Sa'Motta turned his attention to her belongings, hoping to find some clue as to where Fitz might have been taken – and by whom.

## Chapter Twelve

### Deliverance

Not for the first time since she had met him, Anji wondered just who this man who called himself the Doctor really was. He seemed to have a chameleon-like ability to transform himself into completely different people. When they had first joined Tyler earlier that morning – although it seemed to Anji to have been days ago rather than hours – the Doctor had come over all Enthusiastic Scientist, but now he seemed to have morphed into Avenging Action Hero.

The Doctor had been as good as his word to Tyler and had spent a good hour trying to get to speak to Christine Holland on the telephone. He'd tried her home number, her mobile number and half a dozen people at her college in Oxford, but the nearest he had come to actually speaking to the elusive Professor Holland herself was a long chat with her secretary, Beverly. Anji had watched, fascinated, as the Doctor underwent another transformation before her eyes and become Concerned Friend. Despite the Doctor's charm, he had failed to get any firm information from the loyal Beverly, merely a promise to pass on his message and an assurance that the professor had been perfectly all right when Beverly last saw her.

When the Doctor put the phone down he had immediately leaped up and grabbed his coat. 'If Mohammed won't come to the mountain, then the mountain must go to Mohammed,' he declared, adding, 'As I once said to –' He stopped abruptly, a puzzled frown on his face. 'Napoleon?' he concluded after a beat, clearly not quite believing what he had said himself. 'That can't be right, can it?' He looked at Anji, as if she could provide an explanation.

'Before you lost your memory in this accident,' she speculated, an idea suddenly hitting her, 'you don't suppose you might have been an actor?'

'An actor!' He seized upon the idea with wild enthusiasm. 'An actor!' he repeated, clearly liking the idea. 'Yes, that might explain it. One minute a crotchety old man, a quick make-up and costume change, and then a comic little man with a flute. . . Yes, perhaps you're right.'

Anji smiled, pleased to have helped, but the Doctor's grasshopper mind was already leaping back to the task in hand.

'We must go and find this Christine Holland. She doesn't live too far out of Oxford – we can be there in half an hour. Are you coming?'

Anji found that she had to run to keep up with him, literally and metaphorically. It was annoying but also invigorating – and even fun. She caught up with him in the car park, noting that he was heading for her car.

'Would you like me to drive?' she asked.

'It would make my day,' he said, a smile lightening up his features. Anji couldn't help smiling back.

The Doctor had failed to take into account Anji's driving ability and the Mercedes pulled up in the road outside Christine Holland's house twenty-three minutes exactly after leaving Tyler's base.

'You're not going to lecture me about speeding, I hope?' Anji asked, seeing the expression on his face.

'Speed?' he replied, an odd look on his face. 'Fifty miles an hour isn't exactly escape velocity, is it?'

'Escape velocity?' she asked, not sure what he was talking about.

'The speed you need to reach to break free of Earth's gravitational pull – what a craft like Tyler's needs to do to reach Earth orbit. Seven miles a second.' A faraway look was in his eyes. 'The price of freedom.'

Anji sighed – the Doctor's mood shifts were beginning to get to her. She tried to direct him back to the matter in hand.

'Shall we just go and ring the doorbell?' she prompted.

'What?' The Doctor shook himself out of his reverie. 'No, I don't think so. Let's just watch for a while, shall we?'

From Action Hero to Inaction Hero, thought Anji. What is the problem with him?

The Doctor tapped her arm and pointed.

'Take a look at the upstairs window on the left.' Anji looked but couldn't see anything significant.

'What am I looking at?' she asked.

'Judging from the posters on the wall I'd say that was the daughter's room, wouldn't you?'

Anji looked again and this time could just make out a Steps poster on the wall. She doubted the professor was the type to put posters of pop stars up.

'So what?' she said, bluntly.

‘There’s a reflection on the ceiling – I think it’s from a computer screen.’

Anji got what he was driving at. ‘The little girl’s at home!’

The Doctor nodded. ‘And if she’s at home you’d expect the mother to be, but there’s something wrong.’ He indicated the driveway where two cars were parked. ‘Have you ever delivered pizza?’

The question completely flummoxed Anji. Twenty minutes later she found herself walking up to the front door carrying a large box of pizza, courtesy of a Dominos the Doctor had spotted earlier as they drove passed the nearby shopping centre.

‘I thought you were the actor,’ she’d said, when he explained the plan.

He’d grinned, obviously still liking the idea as an explanation for his strange bursts of odd memories. The possibility that he was recalling lines and moments from characters and plays seemed to please him. The Doctor told Anji, however, that this was one performance that he would prefer someone else to give – and she was top of the casting list.

‘Two cars suggests a visitor – I want to know who’s in there with the professor. It’s possible that she’s being prevented from answering the phone.’

Anji thought this was paranoid thinking at best: there was no real evidence to suggest any such scenario but the Doctor had been persuasive. ‘At least we can eat the pizza afterwards,’ he’d joked. ‘Aren’t you hungry?’

The problem, Anji now realised, was that she *was* hungry, very hungry. Lunch with Tyler seemed a very long time ago. The smell of the pizza was doing terrible things to her stomach, making it growl with anticipation. As she rang the doorbell she found herself hoping that no one would answer, just to enable her to take the pizza right back to the car to eat.

Much to her chagrin the door opened. The man who answered was attractive – in a muscle-bound kind of way – fair haired but not much taller than Anji. Which made him quite short by most people’s standards. He did not seem to be pleased to see Anji. ‘We did not order food,’ he said with a hint of a French accent.

Anji frowned, and tried to adopt the lazy-speaking tones of the brain-dead youths who always delivered her take-out pizzas.

‘Number 48,’ she said checking the numbers on the wall next – to the door just before speaking. ‘That’s what it says on the order.’

‘Then there has been a mistake.’

Anji wondered how long she was meant to keep this up. The Doctor had just told her to see who answered the door and to keep them talking for a moment



or two. She thrust a piece of paper towards him – a piece of notepaper ripped from her Filofax – and showed him her own scrawl.

‘See look ’ere.’ She pointed at the writing and translated for him. ‘Large pizza with extra pepperoni, onions, peppers and olives. Number 48 Cumberland. All right.’

She winced at her own performance. Maybe she was overdoing it a bit – she sounded like a refugee from *EastEnders*; if she wasn’t careful she’d be calling him ‘Bruv’ and telling him it was ‘sorted’.

The man shrugged. A second man, darker than the first, joined his colleague at the door. ‘It is paid for, yes?’ he asked in a much stronger French accent. Not expecting this, Anji just nodded and to her astonishment the man took the pizza from her. ‘Thank you. Good night,’ he said politely and the two Frenchmen withdrew and closed the door. Anji walked back to the car in a daze. That had not gone well: a crushingly awful piece of acting, and she’d lost the pizza as well. Her mood did not improve when she got back to the car and discovered that the Doctor had disappeared. She looked back at the house and saw that the curtains in the girl’s room were billowing out into the night where a window was now wide open.

The Doctor held his hands out stretched, trying not to panic the little girl as he climbed down from her window.

‘Don’t scream. I’m a friend.’

The little girl who was sitting at her computer desk gave him a long cool look.

‘Friends don’t usually climb through my window,’ she said calmly. The Doctor smiled. He liked children: they were more straightforward than adults, more direct, blunt, even; it was a quality he admired.

‘They do when their friends are being held prisoner in their own house,’ he said. ‘That is what is happening here, isn’t it?’

The girl nodded. ‘I think so. I wasn’t sure at first. They’re people my father sent. They say I’ve got to stay inside for safety and I mustn’t call anyone.’

‘And is your mother here?’

Pippa shook her head. ‘She had to go away. That’s why my dad’s friends are looking after me,’ she said, looking doubtful. ‘But I don’t think I believe them any more.’ To the Doctor’s surprise and delight the girl jumped up from her computer and crossed the room to him, extending her hand.

‘I’m Pippa Holland. Pleased to meet you...’

‘Doctor. Just call me Doctor,’ he said.

‘Pleased to meet you, Doctor.’

He shook her hand. ‘Pleased to meet you. I don’t think your mum would want you to be here with those men. I know your father sent them – but they’re here to keep you prisoner.’

‘But why?’ Pippa demanded.

‘I don’t know yet. Maybe to force your mother to do something for him, I’m not sure. But your Uncle Arthur sent me to find you. I think I should take you to him, don’t you?’

Pippa considered. ‘There is something odd about these men. I don’t like them.’ The Doctor nodded, pleased. ‘But my mum always says I should be careful about strangers. . .’ she continued.

‘I’m not a stranger: I’m the Doctor,’ said the Doctor indignantly.

‘I’ll need to talk to my uncle,’ Pippa decided.

The Doctor frowned. ‘Do you have a phone in here?’

Pippa shook her head. ‘Who needs a phone? I’ve got my computer and I’m linked to the Web.’ Pippa indicated the mic by her computer with a sigh, convinced, no doubt, that the Doctor was one of those sad grown-ups who hadn’t quite managed to get into the twenty-first century yet.

In the car, Anji was drumming her fingers on the dashboard, bored and hungry. She was just considering driving back to the Dominos on her own when her mobile rang. She answered it and heard the Doctor’s voice.

‘Give me two minutes, then make some kind of a diversion. I need to bring Pippa out without our French friends knowing,’ he said before ringing off abruptly.

She got out, of the car and considered the possibilities for causing a diversion. She could return to her earlier role and claim that the pizza wasn’t in fact paid for. She didn’t think that was a good idea. Drive the car into the glass porch? No, that would just send her car insurance premiums from a laughable level to an obscene one. She looked at the house and noticed that it had an alarm system from a well-known security company. She could see that the system was operational: a tiny blinking light showed that it was active. She started searching for something that she could use to set it off. A little way down the street a skip sat on the pavement outside a house that was having an extension built. In the skip Anji found a good sized house brick – perfect.

She went back to the professor’s house and checked her watch. Two minutes were just about up. She checked that there was no one around, took aim and hurled the brick at the porch, certain that it would contain the weakest glass.

With a satisfying tinkle of broken glass the porch all but collapsed in on itself and seconds later the wail of an alarm sounded. Anji grinned – she hadn't done anything so wantonly destructive for years. The front door burst open and the darker Frenchman appeared. He scanned the driveway but could see no sign of anyone who could have attacked the house. From her place of concealment behind the hedge Anji could just make out the frantic efforts of the other man who was trying – and failing – to turn off the alarm.

Inside the house the Doctor beckoned Pippa to follow him down the stairs, which took them directly into the large wooden-floored lounge. The siren was still sounding. The Doctor checked that both of Dudoin's men were out of sight and led Pippa through the kitchen and out into the back garden.

At the front of the house Anji wondered what she should do next. Should she wait in the car? Before she could speculate further, the Doctor and a young girl Anji assumed to be the professor's daughter appeared around the side of the house. Anji ran to the car and started the engine. Moments later the Doctor and Pippa came out through the gates just as Anji was reversing the car to rendezvous with them. Suddenly the alarm was silenced. The Doctor bundled Pippa into the car. Hearing angry French cries coming from the direction of the house, Anji jerked the car out of reverse and roared off into the night.

In her rear-view mirror Anji could see that the two Frenchman had emerged from the gardens too late to get a good look at her or her car. She flashed through an amber traffic light and took the fastest road back to Tyler's base. In the back, Pippa and the Doctor were getting their breath back, both looking flushed with the excitement.

'Well done, Anji – nice diversion,' said the Doctor finally. Anji smiled, pleased at the compliment. She drove on.

If Anji had been a little bit troubled at the idea of taking a young girl away from her own home in such a fashion – and she did have a few doubts – her mind was soon set to rest when she saw the way Pippa reacted when she met up with her uncle. In the car the girl had been a bit tense; with the adrenalin rush of the escape fading, Anji had begun to wonder whether she had been right to listen to Arthur Tyler and to trust the Doctor. When Pippa saw her uncle, however, she was suddenly a happy, laughing eight-year-old.

It didn't take them long to decide that the Doctor's guess had probably been right. Dudoin had been holding Pippa as a kind of hostage to force Christine

to work for him. When the Doctor heard about Christine's area of speciality it had all fallen into place. Pippa, although tired and emotional, had stayed with the adults as they had eaten (much to Anji's relief) and talked through the situation. Pippa just wanted to know one thing: Where was her mother now?

Tyler shrugged. 'We can't say for certain, honey, but the best bet is that she's with your dad over in Belgium.'

'So why don't we go and get them?' asked the girl simply.

Tyler gave her a reassuring smile. 'I think that's exactly what we'll do – first thing tomorrow. Now why don't you get some sleep? It's been a long day.'

Pippa allowed one of Tyler's aides to lead her away to a guest bedroom. Tyler seemed to notice that the Doctor was looking troubled.

'Problem?'

The Doctor shrugged. 'Too many missing people: first Dave, then Pippa's mother, and we've had no word from Fitz, either. I think young Pippa is right – we need to get over to Brussels and get them all back. All of them,' he repeated, looking at Anji. 'Don't think I've forgotten Dave.'

Anji smiled gratefully. Throughout all the excitement of the day there had not been a moment when she hadn't been worrying, at least in the back of her mind, about her missing boyfriend. 'Neither had I,' she said, looking grim. 'I just hope that he's all right.'

'I'm sure he is,' muttered the Doctor, but Anji couldn't hear a great deal of conviction in his voice.

Dave Young lay sweating and shivering on his bed. Christine Holland watched him through a glass panel in the wall of the room. She had done everything she could to make the man comfortable but, although eminent in her field, she was not medically trained and could do little more.

She heard footsteps and caught a whiff of an all-too-familiar cologne. She didn't need to look to know that Dudoin had joined her.

'We did not intend for this to happen,' he stated quietly. Christine was not in the mood for an argument but, as usual, Pierre-Yves knew all the right buttons to press to get a response.

'An alien race conducting DNA experiments on a human abductee!' she retorted. 'It's a science-fiction myth. Something that's meant to happen on flying saucers, not in an office block in Brussels!'

'It wasn't meant to happen like this.'

'That's no excuse and you know it.'

Dudoin tried again. ‘We need to be able to operate the Kulan controls; they have a low level of something akin to telepathy. I was hoping you might find a way to replicate the effect.’

Despite herself, Christine found her scientific curiosity engaged. ‘Direct mental control? I’ve done some theoretical work on something along those lines. . .’

‘Working with the Kulan you could test that theory. With your groundwork and their technology. . .’

Christine turned and looked at him. ‘OK, I’ll talk to the Kulan. See if such a thing would be possible. But on one condition.’ He waited, knowing exactly what it would be. ‘Release Pippa. And bring her to me here.’

Dudoin nodded. ‘Of course. I have already made the arrangements – she will be here in the morning. . .’

Christine looked at him, trying to judge whether she could still trust this man. He seemed plausible enough.

‘I am truly sorry that I involved her at all,’ he was saying, looking at her earnestly. ‘It was an error of judgement. I just knew I needed to get you here, for you to see all this. I knew you’d want to be involved.’

She felt her old passion for her work beginning to fire up inside her. At college she’d been as ambitious as both Tyler and Dudoin – perhaps even more so – but somewhere along the way her drive had disappeared. For a long time she had thought it was gone for good but now, with the tantalising chance to work with alien partners, she realised that the old hunger, the fire in the belly, was still there.

‘Can I start now?’ she asked, anxious to get into the detail of the problem. Dudoin tried not to show his delight too obviously. ‘Fray’kon and his people are entirely at your disposal.’ He led Christine away down the corridor, leaving Dave unobserved.

# Chapter Thirteen

## First Contact

Fitz was exhausted. He wasn't sure who these people were but he knew that he didn't like them. He'd been questioned by two of them – both American. CIA, perhaps? Not that Fitz cared who they were. He just wanted them to stop asking him bloody questions. Now.

The two didn't even have the decency to do the normal thing and play soft cop/hard cop with him: they were both being equally difficult. He'd asked for a cup of tea but had received a glass of water instead. Foreign water with bubbles in it, the sort that always reminded Fitz of the effect you got if you didn't get all the washing-up liquid off a glass before filling it.

'Look, I'm really sorry about your mate Fisher. I had no idea he was a spook.'

Williams and Murphy exchanged a look that seemed to say: What's with this guy? Some of his vocabulary is forty years out of date.

'A spy. A secret agent. Whatever you call yourselves,' Fitz explained. 'I just thought he was someone who shared an interest in aliens.'

'Tell us about the aliens again,' said the senior of the two interrogators, the one who had given his name as Williams.

Fitz sighed. 'What's to tell? Aliens kidnapped my friend. We thought he might be being held in the ITI building and when we broke in we found him. But we got discovered trying to break out. But you know all this.'

He looked at their blank faces.

'Tell us about the Doctor.'

Fitz looked up. 'The transcript of your raid on the ITI building clearly shows you making a reference to "the Doctor". A character our organisation has some experience of.'

'You're friends of the Doctor?' Fitz felt hopeful. Maybe he had been holding a get-out-of-jail card all along.

'Not exactly friends,' Williams said with a certain firmness. 'He and his associates at the UN, the so-called Intelligence Taskforce, have often proved to be a thorn in our sides.'

Hell, thought Fitz, just my luck to find people who actually know of the Doctor but don't like him.

Sa'Motta had studied the palmtop computer, which he had liberated from the female agent, and, after taking a few hours to crack the security encryption, had been able to unlock all its secrets. Not that there were many of them but, nevertheless, he had been delighted to discover that the American organisation had a Brussels HQ situated a few miles south of the city in the town of Waterloo.

Here, at the site of Napoleon's historic defeat by Wellington, a large man-made pyramid had been built from which tourists could look out over the battlefield. On top of the pyramid, admired by the many thousands of tourists who visit it weekly, there was a massive statue of a lion. Below the pyramid, unknown save to a few senior members of the Belgian government, was a state-of-the-art underground bunker, housing the European HQ of the very secretive Alien Intelligence branch of the CIA headed by the man codenamed Control.

Sa'Motta thought it probable that this was where Fitz had been taken. So he simply hailed one of the many taxis idly waiting around Care Midi, and asked to be driven there.

Krzysztof Szemplinski had decided to give up being a taxi driver – as soon as possible. He had qualifications, after all, and back home he was a doctor, so he shouldn't have to put up with all the lunatics who seemed to pile into his car night after night. And now he had a punter who wanted to visit a tourist attraction in the dead of night. What was wrong with these people?

Krzysztof pointed out to his odd-looking customer that the monument, and the museums, would be closed at this time of day and, because it was outside Brussels, he would have to pay a premium fare. The lunatic had merely replied that he didn't mind. Taking him at his word Krzysztof had tacked on an extra couple of thousand francs to the fare when he came to ask for it, assuming correctly that the stranger with the odd-shaped eyes had no real idea of the local currency.

Leaving the odd passenger on the dark and quiet street next to the monument, Szemplinski drove off back towards the city, laughing at the odd behaviour of tourists. Maybe he would stick around. Lunatic passengers could be profitable.

Sa'Motta watched the taxi drive off into the darkness and, once he was certain that he was alone, he wandered over to study the monument. At this time

of night the pyramid was unattended and it took no time at all for Sa'Motta to use his lock-picking device to open the padlock and access the monument compound. On the far side of the hill he found the entrance he was looking for: a simple wooden door, that looked as if it led to a store cupboard, save for the very discreet electronic keypad lock.

Sa'Motta had considered banging on the door and announcing himself: 'Hey, I'm the intelligent life from outer space that you've been looking for. Can I come in?' Although this notion was entertaining – and it had kept Sa'Motta amused for most of the cab journey – the stolen palmtop had given him other options, not least the opportunity to just open the door and walk in. Using the date-specific code he had found in one of the files, Sa'Motta entered six digits and was delighted when the door sprang open with an electronic click. Inside the door was a lift with only one directional option – down. Sa'Motta pressed the button.

Fitz was exhausted. He'd been probed, poked and grilled for hours and now he had been left in a tiny cell, with the traditional concrete slab as a bed, to await 'further debriefing'. Fitz was past caring what they were going to do with him. All he wanted to do was sleep. Even if the only place to sleep was as cold and uninviting as a slab of granite.

Fitz lay down and closed his weary eyes.

Inside Control's personal operations room, Agent Williams stood behind his boss's chair watching the images on the screens over his shoulder. Control was smiling as one hidden security camera showed the alien in the lift.

'Shall we take him?' asked Williams. Control shook his head. 'He did put Agent Kruse in hospital,' continued Williams defiantly.

'We do not act out of revenge, Williams, you know that.' Control was firm.

On the screen the alien stepped out of the lift into a brightly lit corridor. He started to walk.

'Besides,' continued Control as they watched, 'he could have killed her. He could have left her where she fell. Instead he made sure she got medical attention. This... creature is no killer,' he concluded.

Williams merely grunted. As far as he was concerned the alien had attacked one of his team, even if you discounted their personal relationship, and therefore he should pay.

The screens showed that the alien had reached the cell holding Fitz. Control and Williams watched, in fascination, as the alien lock-picking device was used



to open the door.

‘Remind me to have electronic locks fitted throughout the base, Williams,’ Control muttered dryly.

Fitz stirred as he heard the door opening.

‘Don’t tell me it’s morning already,’ he started to complain. ‘Or is this one of those deals where you wake me up in the middle of the night to start questioning me again?’

Fitz rubbed his eyes, tiredly.

‘It’s me, Sa’Motta,’ whispered the alien.

Fitz tried to shake his head back to wakefulness. ‘What on earth are you doing here?’

Sa’Motta looked a little coy. ‘I’ve come to rescue you. Or, at least, that’s the plan.’

The word rescue acted like a verbal bucket of cold water: suddenly Fitz was fully alert. ‘Rescue? Brilliant.’

Sa’Motta checked that the corridor was clear and then led Fitz back down towards the lift.

In the operations centre Control and Williams watched as the pair entered the lift and Sa’Motta pressed the button for the exit.

‘Is everything prepared upstairs?’ asked Control.

‘All in hand,’ assured Williams, confidently.

In the road that ran through the small cluster of buildings that lurked behind the monument, Murphy sat in one of the Agency’s many cars, waiting. He’d just had word from Williams in his ear that the escapees were on their way.

Murphy looked up as a dented BMW pulled up outside the museum and its single occupant got out to look at the opening times, leaving the car engine running and the door open.

Murphy looked over towards the monument enclosure and saw Sa’Motta and Fitz coming out.

The driver of the BMW was now walking towards the large circular building that housed a massive 360-degree circular painting of the battle known as the *Panorama de la Bataille*. He passed Sa’Motta and Fitz just as they were emerging and didn’t give them a second glance. Fitz spotted the car with its engine running and looked to see where the driver was. He nodded to Sa’Motta and the pair of them ran across and jumped into the car.

As they sped off, the driver turned and waved his fist at them. Murphy laughed to himself.

'I don't think Carter's Angry Motorist is going to win any Oscars,' he reported to Control.

'Just get after them, Murphy, and make it look good,' Control ordered, testily. Murphy sighed and started up his own car to begin the token pursuit.

Inside the BMW Fitz was elated. The automatic transmission made the car a breeze to drive and, despite its slightly battered appearance, it was quite luxurious inside.

'What a stroke of luck!' he exclaimed, not stopping to think exactly how incredibly easy their escape had been.

Sa'Motta agreed. 'It seems fate is with us.'

Fitz guided the car on to the main route back towards the capital. 'We'll get to the city, then abandon the car.' Fitz concentrated on the road ahead. 'Is there any sign of anyone following us?' he asked.

Sa'Motta turned to study the road behind them. 'No. Wait, yes, there's something coming really fast,' he reported.

'Hold on to your seat, then,' Fitz warned, as he floored the accelerator and the car shot forward.

Murphy increased his speed, looking for an opportunity to make the 'mistake' Control had ordered. The BMW suddenly pulled over without indicating and took an exit off to the left. Murphy didn't have to do much in the way of play-acting – he yanked his wheel and shot off in the same direction, wobbling horrendously. Using every vestige of his excellent driving skills, Murphy contrived to make it look as if he had lost control while veering towards a concrete bridge support. Applying the brakes expertly, at the last possible moment, he let his car crash into the support.

Fitz saw everything in his rear-view mirror.

'Yes!' he exclaimed, banging the steering wheel with the palm of his hands. 'Gotcha!'

The BMW hurtled down the road towards the city and, once more, the Eurostar terminal.

Murphy managed to kick open his door and stagger away from the wreck of his car. Control was talking to him but he had a terrible headache and couldn't concentrate.

‘Well done. Excellent job.’ Control was saying. Murphy shook his head, trying to clear it. What kind of a stupid job asked you to crash cars for a living? He should have stayed in the Marines. At least there he just got shot at occasionally. Murphy sat down heavily at the side of the road and waited to be picked up.

Williams checked some readouts and reported to Control.

‘All the devices, both audio and video, are fully functional. Currently our man is three kilometres from the Eurostar station.’

‘Excellent,’ said Control, pleased with the operation. ‘Perhaps this time we’ll get to the bottom of this alien incursion before damn UNIT gets its mucky fingers all over it.’ Control sat back in his seat. ‘I’m not having another foul-up like that business with the Jex and the Canavitchi,’ he declared with passion. ‘This time UNIT wear the red faces.’

## Chapter Fourteen

### Short Circuit

Dudoin was delighted. In a few short hours Christine had managed to bridge the gap between his team of top scientists and the alien technology of the Kulan. Only Christine had possessed the vision and imagination to take the possibilities offered by the Kulan and make them realities.

‘If only you had been working here from the outset, we might already be in space,’ he said with an ironic grin.

Christine couldn’t help but be flattered by his praise. It had been an incredible period of intensive work and the result – a rather bizarre looking device that looked like a rugby cap infected with electrodes – was no more than a working prototype which could and would be refined in due course. It was therefore understandable that she was rather taken aback when Dudoin announced that he would test it himself, in a real flight, within twenty-four hours.

‘But it’s not nearly ready for that,’ she argued. ‘This is really just a mock-up.’

Dudoin insisted, however, pointing out that this was a race: a contest in which days could count. He immediately set his team the task of making duplicates of the device. Christine tried to dissuade him from what she considered to be a foolhardy course of action.

‘It’s not safe, Pierre-Yves,’ she said, in the conciliatory tone she had used in the last desperate days of their marriage, in an attempt to prevent his savage bursts of unpredictable anger.

He merely shrugged his shoulders, in that annoying and all-too-familiar way he had. ‘What is?’

Despairing, Christine had turned to Fray’kon, the leader of the aliens, hoping that he might support her position. ‘You tell him,’ she asked him. ‘He won’t listen to me!’

Fray’kon, however, completely let her down. ‘I think if Pierre-Yves wishes to do this, he should. The Kulan do not believe in hesitating when the time for action is upon us.’

God save me from aliens with high levels of machismo, she thought to herself. 'Well don't come crying to me when it all goes wrong,' she told them bluntly, shaking her head in disbelief.

She stalked off to go over the helmet control system again. If Dudoin was determined to go ahead with a flight she had to make sure she had done everything she could to make her contribution work properly.

Fray'kon watched Christine go, his head on one side. 'Are all human females this irrational?'

Dudoin nodded a little sadly. 'In my experience, yes.'

Fray'kon felt his eyes narrow. To him this behaviour was just further evidence – not that he needed any further proof – that the human race wouldn't be missed when they were gone. The sooner he could get into space and make his report to his superiors, the sooner the invasion could go ahead and this irritating race could be removed from the planet.

Fitz woke with a start, wondering where the hell he was and why his neck ached. Then he remembered: they'd spotted people who looked as if they might be Agency operatives lurking near the Eurostar station and had decided to find an alternative route back to England. Fitz had claimed that he could remember the route that he and Anji had taken, and after a couple of frustrating hours touring some of the lesser-known parts of the Belgian capital they had finally chanced upon the E40 motorway. By this time both of the fugitives were feeling more than a little tired; the excitements of the day were beginning to catch up with them. When they had reached a service station not far from Ostend, Fitz had pulled off the road. They had both tried to get some sleep – Sa'Motta curled up on the back seat, Fitz leaning back in the driver's position.

That had been eight hours ago. Now dawn was breaking and Fitz noted with regret that the Continental dawn chorus was no quieter than the English one. To add insult to injury, at least two of the avian choristers had deposited little messages of luck on their windscreen during the night. Fitz got out of the car and stretched. It had been a stormy night but now it was clear and the cloudless sky promised a respite from the relentless rain. Fitz shivered in the early-morning chill, climbed back inside the car and stared at the two spots of bird crap splattered across the windscreen in front of him.

He glanced up at the rear-view mirror and saw that Sa'Motta was still fast asleep. Fitz turned on the car radio, hoping for some entertainment. He did not find any. He spent a minute or two listening to some weird Dutch stuff, found a

station that seemed entirely given over to German songs that his father used to sing to him as a child, and then finally, thankfully, an English-speaking voice, more precisely a BBC voice. It was something called Radio 4 and appeared to be the contemporary version of the Home Service that Fitz had once known.

Travelling with the Doctor, Fitz rarely got to listen to radio: most places they went had far more sophisticated entertainment media, almost always with a visual element. Fitz had forgotten the simple pleasures of radio. He sighed, remembering the eternally distant childhood days sitting round a radiogram the size of a small trunk listening to the comic antics of the Glums in *Take it From Here*, and the adventures of Dick Barton every evening. It all seemed so long ago, almost as if it had happened to another person.

He thought about all the things that had happened to him since he had first walked into the TARDIS, the adventures all over the galaxy, right up until... And again he found his memory stumbling. He'd been travelling with the Doctor... He struggled. There was a woman, red hair, strange name... Compassion, that had been it. The three of them had been travelling – no, running, hiding. But hiding from whom? Something terrible, he was sure, but what the hell was it? Fitz frowned, searching his memory for the answer. They'd come to Earth. It had been sometime in the past, England of course, somewhere in the eighteenth century and then... It all seemed so vague. He remembered that they had ended up on the Doctor's homeworld, and everything had gone pear-shaped big time, and the Doctor had been forced to destroy his own people. Was that possible? It felt like a dream, or a nightmare. Fitz couldn't believe that it had really happened. He shook his head, alarmed at the way his memory seemed to be coming and going. In a while he'd probably forget that he'd forgotten anything. He was meant to be the one helping the Doctor with his memory loss – what good would he be now?

A voice on the radio brought him back to the real world with a thump. The calm, precise tones of the BBC newsreader announced that Pierre-Yves Dudoin was planning to launch his experimental spacecraft – the Star Dart – today. A shuffling from the back seat announced that Sa'Motta was now also awake and he expressed his own surprise at how quickly Dudoin had managed to complete his preparations.

'I thought the failure of the mutation agent to safely alter human DNA would delay the launch – somehow he must have found an alternative way to enable you humans to operate Kulan control systems.'

Fitz looked at Sa'Motta and asked a question he feared he already knew the answer to. 'What happens if your mate Fray'kon does get up into space with

Dudoin today?’

Sa’Motta looked grim. ‘Once he is in space he can meet up with the battle fleet. He will make his recommendations to our ruling council.’

‘And he will recommend invasion?’

Sa’Motta nodded. ‘Without any one to put up any arguments against the idea, he will get his way. No doubt accusing humankind of crimes committed against the Kulan advance party while we were here. Fray’kon will be very persuasive.’

‘What will happen then?’ asked Fitz, fearfully.

Sa’Motta shrugged. ‘The inevitable. The fleet will launch nuclear strikes at the main population centres; Fray’kon has been drawing up a detailed invasion plan almost from the day we crashed. By this evening your cities will be in flames and most of your people will be dead.’ The matter-of-fact tone made his words seem harsher. As if sensing this, he added lamely, ‘I am sorry.’

Fitz was horrified – the idea that a single communication could unleash destruction and death on such a scale was awful. There had to be something they could do. Fitz feared that returning to the Doctor would be a waste of valuable time – he was here with Sa’Motta, he would have to do something about the threat himself. Somehow he and Sa’Motta had to stop that launch.

‘Where’s the launch site?’ he demanded, coming to a decision.

In Oxford, the announcement on the *Today* programme that Dudoin intended to launch his Star Dart later today came as an equal shock to Tyler and his guests. It didn’t require much deduction to work out what had changed to enable Dudoin to advance his plans like this: Christine Holland. Breakfast turned into an ad hoc strategy meeting.

‘If we can get to Christine and explain that Pippa is safe I’m sure she’ll withdraw her co-operation,’ suggested Tyler. ‘He went to such lengths to get her, I doubt he can launch without her.’

‘Perhaps.’ The Doctor was eating his bacon and eggs with enthusiasm. Anji watched him curiously – he seemed to eat a lot but there didn’t seem to be much fat on the man. She thought he must have an amazing metabolism. ‘I think we should certainly try to stop that launch. It might be the only way to stop an alien invasion. Any word from Fitz yet?’

Anji shook her head. She’d given him her mobile number as a point of contact but thus far he hadn’t managed to call. She hoped he was all right. She was depending on him for some positive news of Dave, too. She was beginning to

think she might never see her boyfriend again. She fingered her name-chain, the present she received from him without his knowing.

‘Where is Dudoin’s launch site?’ asked the Doctor. ‘North Africa?’

Tyler shook his head. ‘Both he and I wanted to launch our spacecraft from closer to home. It makes for tighter launch windows the further we are from the equator, but at least we don’t have to shift all our equipment halfway round the world.’

Anji was amazed. ‘You expect to launch a spacecraft from England?’

Tyler nodded. ‘That’s where our project is based. I own quite a bit of land; building my own launch facility wasn’t a problem.’

‘And Dudoin?’ prompted the Doctor, reminding Tyler of his original enquiry.

‘He has a similar facility on the Belgian coast. I think he cut some kind of deal with the Belgian government – no doubt highly illegal. Anyhow, he got a chunk of land on the coast for peanuts and plans to launch from there.’

‘How close to the sea?’ asked the Doctor.

‘As far as I know, actually on the coast itself. Why?’ replied a confused Tyler.

The Doctor smiled. ‘In my experience it’s very hard to keep a stretch of coastline secure. Unless you mine it, and Pierre-Yves might be a very dangerous man but I can’t see him resorting to that.’

Anji was following the Doctor’s thinking. ‘You mean it might be the weakest point in the perimeter?’

‘Exactly,’ the Doctor nodded with enthusiasm. ‘I don’t suppose you’ve got a boat?’ he added, looking across at Tyler.

Christine couldn’t help but feel a certain excitement when she saw the Star Dart for the first time. It was a magnificent craft, sleeker and somehow sexier than the NASA shuttle. She’d been shown pictures of it, and a rather cute model, but nothing prepared her for the real full-scale thing, standing proudly in the launch gantry. Pierre-Yves showed her around the craft like a proud father displaying a successful offspring. It brought Christine’s thoughts back to the early days of their marriage, when things had been right, when their careers had interested each other rather than been a cause of jealousy. And then Pippa had come along. Had Pierre-Yves ever loved his daughter the way he clearly loved this spaceship? Christine remembered the first day they had taken Pippa home from the hospital, the way Pierre-Yves had held his tiny daughter in his arms and rocked her to sleep in the Ikea rocking chair; yes, he had loved his daughter and his wife once. But that had been a long time ago.



Seeing him again for the first time in so many years, Christine was surprised to see remnants of the man she had originally married, the man she had fallen in love with. She had thought he had gone for good; there had certainly been no sign of him at the end of the marriage, when it was all lawyers and legal technobabble. Today he was almost his old student self, bubbling with enthusiasm and ideas – a wild, attractive, overachieving schoolboy. Christine reminded herself that he had always been an irresponsible entrepreneur, never stopping to think of the human cost of his endeavours – like poor Dave Young. Like Pippa and herself, Young was a victim of Dudoin's self-interest.

As they drove back to the launch facility she asked him again when Pippa would be joining them. He promised her that she was on her way, and that she would be with them before the launch. Christine's doubts returned, pushing aside all the positive thoughts she had been having about her ex-husband. At the end of the day, she reminded herself, he is always going to be the bastard I divorced as well as the man I married, and the latter would always eclipse his former self.

Marshall Spear was devoutly loyal to Arthur Tyler – with good reason. His football career had come to an abrupt and violent stop one frozen December Sunday at Rich Stadium, when a late block had sent him crashing to the turf. The local fans had cheered at first, celebrating yet another devastating defensive hit, but as Marshall remained prone the cheers had faded away. Even the most rabid and partisan gridiron fan hated to see a serious injury on the field. His own team, the Oilers, were well out of their depth in the cold of Buffalo. In their home city of Houston they played in an indoor stadium with artificial turf, so the icy cold rawness of the Bills' home stadium was almost inconceivably alien to them. The injury had been serious; the game had been stopped for fifteen minutes while specialist bracing equipment was located and brought to the scene. Finally, after much discussion, Marshall had been carefully lifted on to a stretcher and driven from the field on a converted golf buggy, to respectful applause. He had never played a down since. In fact, had it not been for Arthur Tyler, he might not have walked again.

Tyler had been an Oilers fan since his failed attempts to join the NASA programme – coming close once or twice to having purchased the football team, having reached that level of personal income at which the collection of a sporting franchise was almost a hobby. When Spear had fallen Tyler had taken a personal interest in his recovery, even covering the medical bills when the athlete's medical insurance ran out. When Marshall did walk again – after eigh-

teen long gruelling months – it came as a surprise to no one, except Marshall himself, that Tyler had offered him a job.

For all of this, and much more, Spear was prepared to do anything for his boss, with one exception: he didn't do boats. It wasn't that he had anything against boats per se, and he was quite happy to follow his boss on to a yacht safely tied up in a harbour on the Med for a drinks party or a reception, but it was when the boat wasn't tied up that Spear had a problem. He liked his horizons to be horizontal, and he liked concepts like 'up' and 'down' to be constants, not constantly changing. In short, when it came to sea legs, Marshall Spear was wheeling along on stumps. It wasn't that he couldn't find them, more a case that he just didn't have any. And Tyler knew and understood this and never asked him to go anywhere near a boat that may actually put to sea, for which kindness Spear was very grateful.

Unfortunately, no one had told the Doctor about this unwritten clause in Spear's contract. When Spear had heard that the Doctor, Tyler and the woman Anji intended to breach Dudoin's security and stop the launch of the Space Dart by some form of direct action, he had known instantly that he couldn't let Tyler do this without him. Which gave him an awful decision to make – having to choose between his loyalty to Tyler and his own frailties. It was, of course, a no-brainer. Which was why he was standing on the deck of Tyler's motorboat, his rich brown skin transformed – or so he felt – to a bizarre shade of green, sipping gingerly from a glass of water. He looked back towards the White Cliffs of Dover, and wished that the damn things would start acting like the humongous chunks of chalk he'd always been led to believe they were and stop jumping up and down like kids on a bouncy castle.

Spear wasn't the only one feeling queasy; Anji had never really liked boats, which had been one of the reasons she was glad of the Channel Tunnel, and today the English Channel seemed particularly choppy. Even Tyler, a self-confessed sailing enthusiast, thought it was a bit rough. Only the Doctor, it seemed, was unaware of their boat pitching and tossing about in all directions. He stood at the prow, a pair of state-of-the-art binoculars apparently super-glued to his eyes. The sea spray must have been soaking him, but he appeared to be completely oblivious to it.

By the time they had reached the Belgian coast the sea was much calmer. They abandoned the motorboat and transferred to a large inflatable dinghy, from which they intended to make their landing. Marshall Spear, looking much happier now that dry land was once again in sight, rowed them into shore,

his powerful arms propelling them swiftly to the nearest beach. Tyler passed a small padded envelope to Anji and asked her to hold on to it.

‘What is it?’ she asked.

‘Something I need to return to Pierre-Yves,’ he replied enigmatically.

Anji stuffed the package into her coat pocket.

As Tyler had explained, the ITI launch facility had been built alongside the beaches, and as the Doctor had speculated there was little in the way of security along the seashore. A handful of small towels topped by automatically operated video cameras appeared to be the sum total of the security, and these were separated by such large distances as to be useless. Keeping low to the ground, the Doctor’s party were able to cross the perimeter and gain access to the heart of the facility without any trouble.

The Doctor was fascinated to find that there was no launch tower. Instead there was a two-mile stretch of what appeared to be an enclosed railway line. Tyler explained that the ITI craft was designed to use a new application of an old technology – magnetic induction – as one of its primary power sources.

‘The Star Dart is propelled by a series of alternating magnets, creating rapid acceleration,’ he elaborated. ‘It reaches take-off speed and is shot out of the end of the launch strip like a bullet from a gun. Then conventional turbocharged jets cut in, boosting the craft’s momentum and taking it to –’

‘Escape velocity,’ finished the Doctor, in an impressed whisper.

‘Exactly. The magnetic-induction idea’s been around for ages but its application on this scale was years away until the Kulan arrived.’ Tyler grinned ruefully. ‘My ship’s just a next-generation shuttle. I have to hand it to Pierre-Yves: at least his design was trying something new.’

‘Shame we can’t let the launch go ahead,’ said the Doctor sadly. ‘I’d like to see the Star Dart fly.’

‘Perhaps when we’ve dealt with the Kulan problem, eh?’ suggested Tyler.

The Doctor nodded.

Anji had been studying the cluster of buildings through the binoculars. ‘Looks like the main action is in that building at the start of the launchway,’ she said, pointing to the largest of the buildings, a two-storey flat-roofed structure.

Marshall returned from his exploratory recce. ‘There’s a security presence but mostly focused on the main access from the road,’ he reported. ‘The buildings themselves are accessed by swipe cards.’

He held up a credit-card-sized piece of plastic. ‘I ran into a guy who loaned me one.’ Anji laughed; she suspected anyone that Marshall Spear ran into would not be getting up for a while. She wasn’t normally comfortable with the

idea of such casual violence but the giant bodyguard was such a lovely man that she found it difficult to see him in such an aggressive light. She felt much safer in his company. He was a physical counterpoint to the Doctor: being with Spear gave her a sense of physical safety; being with the Doctor gave her a sense of a more general wellbeing. She felt that the Doctor would make things right, or at least do everything he could to bring about that state. She was worried about Dave but trusted this strange Doctor to do all he could to find him.

Christine was getting nervous: two hours until launch and there was still no sign of her daughter. She went looking for Dudoin, intending to have it out with him once and for all. She was determined to postpone the launch until she had seen Pippa. However, Dudoin was nowhere to be found. Failing to locate him anywhere in the launch-control buildings, she decided to try the ship itself. Here she found Fray'kon and one of the other aliens, making an adjustment to the control-helmet device she had installed on the craft for Dudoin to use.

'What are you doing?' she demanded. She felt very proprietorial when it came to her work, and was instantly suspicious of anyone interfering with it.

The Kulan looked up and regarded her with his strange shaped eyes, coolly. For the first time Christine got a real sense of the creature's alienness. Their humanoid appearance gave the impression that they were not much different from humans, and their easy assimilation of certain Earth languages and elements of body language only served to confirm the illusion. But these were intelligent life forms from a world incomprehensibly alien to Christine, and she felt a sudden cold stab of fear as she realised how vulnerable she was in this enclosed space with two unknown and unknowable aliens.

'Your design is very... accomplished,' said Fray'kon eventually, and somehow patronisingly. 'We were just seeing if we could help refine the feedback loops. We don't want to – how do you say it? – fry Monsieur Dudoin's brain, do we?'

Christine shivered. The words had sounded hollow, as if Fray'kon's real intent was quite the opposite, but before she could say anything in return Dudoin himself had joined them.

'Ah, there you are,' he said as he entered the Dart's cramped cabin. 'Last-minute checks, Christine?'

She nodded. 'I just wanted to look over the control unit again.'

'No need for that,' interjected Fray'kon quickly. 'My technician and I have just gone over it – everything is in perfect working order.'

‘There you go, Chrissy – your work is done,’ beamed the Frenchman.

‘And your side of the bargain? Where is Pippa?’ Dudoin hesitated. ‘Have you been lying to me?’ demanded Christine angrily. ‘I told you I won’t allow this ship to launch until I see Pippa.’

Suddenly she found herself being held firmly by Fray’kon.

‘I’m afraid we cannot allow you to compromise our mission,’ he informed her gravely.

‘He’s right,’ agreed Dudoin. ‘I’m sorry.’

He looked over at Fray’kon. ‘Secure her in the medical centre – she can watch the launch from there.’

Fray’kon started to bundle Christine away.

‘Don’t trust him, Pierre-Yves – he has his own agenda. . .’ she warned him, but Dudoin showed no sign of having heard.

Dudoin sat in the pilot’s chair, and reached out to run his fingers over the controls. This was going to be better than breaking any speed record: this was going to be the ultimate adrenalin rush. In less than two hours’ time he was going into space – on the fast track.

Fitz and Sa’Motta sat in their stolen car and considered their options. They had reached the launch site half an hour ago and had been examining the possibilities for gaining access to the complex ever since. In short, they didn’t appear to have any. The site was protected by a combination of electric fences, barbed wire and high walls; climbing over at any point would be nigh on impossible even if they could persuade the many video cameras that were trained on the perimeter to look the other way. Without some kind of industrial tunnelling equipment – which the BMW seemed to be sadly lacking – going under the fence didn’t seem to be an option. Short of dropping in from a convenient balloon, helicopter or dirigible – which didn’t seem likely to Fitz – the only other possibilities were the two gates. The first of these consisted of huge metallic doors through which juggernauts and other supply vehicles could pass; the other gate was a slightly more conventional security-cabin-and-entrance-barrier affair.

After thirty minutes of debate they had got no further than Fitz’s original and, at the time, less-than-serious suggestion: ‘Why don’t we just drive at the bloody thing at speed and break through?’ Now Sa’Motta asked him the same question, in all seriousness, and Fitz couldn’t think of a single reason why they shouldn’t. It wasn’t as if the car was theirs, after all. Fitz knew that the more he

thought about it the less likely he was to carry out the mad idea. He powered up the engine and put the car into gear.

He started driving down the approach road towards the entrance, gathering speed rapidly. He could see that the two guards in the security cabin had already seen him and were gesticulating furiously. Fitz tried to remember whether the police carried firearms in this country. He thought they did but then realised that these were private security guards not police – there was no way that these guys would be armed. He kept his foot on the accelerator and tried to ignore the gunlike objects that had appeared in the hands of the two guards. The first shots were warnings – ping-pong off the bodywork of the car without causing any damage – and Fitz, managed to ignore them, albeit with a great effort of will.

The car must be doing over a hundred miles an hour by now, thought Fitz, and the vibrations from the roughly surfaced road were shaking them like seeds in a child's rain-maker. The two guards were taking more careful aim. Fitz bit his lip to stop himself screaming and floored the accelerator. The windscreen suddenly spider-webbed, depriving him of a clear view, and then, before he had a moment to react to the loss of forward vision, there was an almighty crash as the barrier shattered on impact and the BMW careered into the inner complex of the ITI launch site.

Sa'Motta covered his arm with Fitz's coat and knocked the now opaque windscreen clear, allowing Fitz to see and avoid – with a violent tug of the wheel – a large brick building. The suddenness of the manoeuvre, combined with the effect of a flat front offside tyre – the legacy of the second guard's marksmanship – caused Fitz to lose all control of the still-speeding car. He tried desperately to regain control but to no avail, and moments later the car burst through the glass foyer of one building and then out through another plate-glass window, scattering a selection of height-of-fashion sofas and armchairs in all directions, before finally coming to rest against a fountain.

Shaken and, Fitz regretted to have to admit to himself, more than a little stirred, the pair of them managed to kick open their respective doors and fall to the ground – or, more accurately in Fitz's case, into the ornamental pool in which the BMW now challenged the fountain to be the more prominent feature. Sa'Motta dragged the soaking and exhausted Fitz out of the water, and the pair of them ran off, looking for cover.

Elsewhere, the Doctor's party had managed to take advantage of the unexplained commotion at the main gate and had slipped unseen into the largest of

the buildings. Trying to maintain the air of people who belonged in the place rather than intruders bent on sabotage, they began to explore. The complex had its own independent electricity generators, but they were well guarded. 'We need to find something else, some other way to sabotage the launch,' the Doctor said. A Tannoy announcement told them that launch was now ninety minutes away.

Suddenly Anji cried out in shock. 'My God, Dave!' she screamed. She was looking through a thick glass observation port into the intensive-care medical unit where Dave was lying. Anji was both relieved that he was alive and horrified to see the state he was in.

'What have they done to him?' she asked, watching his pale twitching body.

The Doctor had joined her now. 'You've got to help him,' she insisted.

The Doctor looked grave. 'I'm not sure what we can do in the short term. We really must stop that launch.'

Anji grabbed him by the lapels and pulled him round to look at her. 'You promised me. Dave is why we're here,' she reminded him, and made for the door of the room.

'Yes, yes, yes, I know,' replied the Doctor, looking pained and following her. 'But we have to look at the bigger picture. You know what we're dealing with here. Dave's condition is serious – I can see that – but if we don't stop Dudoin taking Fray'kon into space it could be billions of people who will die.'

Anji bit her lip. She wanted to agree with the Doctor – his logic was inescapable – but the sight of Dave looking so ill was more than she could take. Something had to be done – but what? Anji suddenly felt very alone and out of her depth. All this nonsense about alien beings and threatened invasions was too ridiculous for words. How had she got into this situation? Who were these people?

The moment was broken by the return of Tyler and Spear, now in the company of an attractive woman who was talking animatedly with Arthur. Spear winked at Anji.

'Pippa's mom,' Spear explained, rubbing his knuckles. 'Had to persuade a couple of Dudoin's guards to let her out.' Anji almost felt sorry for the poor guards.

She looked at Christine Holland again, and could see the family resemblance to Pippa. Christine was clearly briefing Tyler about what was happening. Anji turned back to the Doctor and saw the anguish in his face. He looked her in the eyes, his pupils almost hypnotically reassuring her.

'I won't let him die, I promise,' he told her solemnly.

She found herself nodding in agreement. Christine and Tyler had now joined them at Dave's bedside. Tyler introduced his old friend, who explained how she had been coerced into helping Dudoin. Anji was relieved and grateful to hear how Christine had done all that she could to help Dave. The Doctor was most interested in the control device that Christine had managed to put together.

'How does it work?' he asked. 'Some kind of telepathic amplifier?'

Christine nodded. 'How could you know that?' she asked, surprised at the accuracy of his guess.

The Doctor looked embarrassed. 'Sorry – I just had a hunch that the Kulan used a form of low-level telepathy to operate their technology.'

Christine looked at him with what Anji took to be a degree of respect. 'You're a very astute man, Doctor. I must say I'm finding this a little difficult. For me, the idea of telepathy has always been just the other side of the lunatic divide.'

Anji was puzzled. 'Lunatic divide?' she asked.

'The line between the possible and the ridiculous; the cutting edge which divides the amazing potential of scientific innovation from the whole palate of fantasy science: telepathy, the paranormal, ley lines and all the other nonsense,' explained Christine with a smile.

Anji understood exactly what she meant: it was a line in the sand that had always stood between her and Dave, a line she had managed to cross for ever in the last forty-eight hours. Somehow being on the other side of that line in the company of the Doctor didn't seem so bad.

The discussion turned to tactics. How could the five of them stop the launch? Christine told them everything she had discovered about the Star Dart and its systems. To keep the weight of the craft to a minimum, much of the computer power used by the ship was housed at the launch base itself rather than in the actual Star Dart – Tyler and Spear were of the opinion that this formed the project's Achilles' heel.

'Wreck those computers and Dudoin can't launch,' Tyler insisted. Marshall Spear agreed. The Doctor, however, was shaking his head.

'It's rather clumsy and, anyway, I've a better idea. Why don't I use one of Christine's control headsets and override Dudoin's commands?' he suggested. 'I can simply shut down the ship's systems and prevent the launch without having to do any physical damage.'

Christine warned that the only headset she had access to was her original prototype, and she couldn't guarantee that it would be powerful enough to override the commands from within the ship.



‘Then we’ll have to boost its power output,’ said the Doctor simply. ‘Take me to the lab.’

Fitz and Sa’Motta were still running. Just for a change, thought Fitz, it might be nice not to have to run everywhere. Would it be too much just to have a rest now and again? Even James Bond got to sit on his arse in a casino once every movie. Sa’Motta dragged him into another building and then into an office. Unfortunately, the office was occupied and a dozen female computer operators demanded to know who they were in a handful of languages. After raising his hands and apologising profusely, Fitz followed Sa’Motta through the room and out of a door at the far end. A cry alerted them to the fact that they had succeeded in running right back into the path of the trio of uniformed security guards who had been pursuing them since the crash.

Fitz looked around. They had managed to find their way into some kind of storage depot. Racks of supplies formed a maze of twenty-foot-high passageways. Fitz started pulling packages from the nearest shelves, making a makeshift barrier in the passageway behind him. Hearing the guards approaching, Fitz abandoned his attempt to slow the pursuit and started running again. Sa’Motta was already some way ahead. A gunshot pinged off of a nearby shelving unit. Great, thought Fitz, now they’re shooting at me too. He wasn’t having a great day.

Inside the Star Dart, Dudoin sat in the command chair and tried to remain calm. This was his moment – at last he was going to get into space. And weeks ahead of his old rival. That made the achievement even more satisfying. Across the cabin Fray’kon’s right-hand man, if that was the right phrase, was making final adjustments to the navigational plan. Dudoin privately thought most of the Kulan looked the same – he had never bothered to learn most of their names. This one, thin and dour-looking, had been with him in the desert for his attempt at the land-speed record. At least Dudoin thought he had. It was hard to be sure with the Kulan. Dudoin gave the Kulan an encouraging smile, but got nothing in return.

The third and final seat remained empty, but not for long. Fray’kon, his alien face as emotionless as always, entered the craft.

‘Ready to rock and roll?’ the Frenchman asked his alien collaborator.

Fray’kon showed no sign of either understanding or misunderstanding the colloquialism. ‘Launch in fifteen minutes. All systems are functioning normally,’ he reported.

Dudoin acknowledged the report with a simple nod. He fixed the control helmet to his head and lowered the arm, which placed the small glass screen in front of his right eye. He activated the device and winced as the tiny lasers hit his eye. The device had been refined by the Kulan scientists but it was still quite painful to use. Nevertheless he had insisted on operating the launch controls himself, whatever the level of discomfort.

‘Are the rest of your team on board?’ he asked Fray’kon. The cabin only contained only three seats but a payload capsule containing seating for the remainder of the Kulan party had been fitted in the cargo hold.

Fray’kon nodded. ‘All is ready,’ he answered simply, ‘at last.’

The scream was the most horrible sound Anji had ever heard being made by a human being. If the Doctor was, in fact, human. At this moment, however, any doubts she may have had on that score were far from the surface. The cry of agony being emitted from the Doctor’s throat may have seemed inhuman but that only seemed to confirm his essential humanity. Anji turned to Christine.

‘Can’t you do something?’ she demanded. Christine looked appalled and shook her head silently. The Doctor fell to his knees, his hands jerking spasmodically, as if the extra power being pulsed into the control helmet was in fact running through his limbs directly.

‘If I try to disconnect him now it could be fatal,’ explained Christine.

Anji watched in mute horror as the Doctor staggered to his feet. Speaking with great effort he instructed them not to interfere.

‘I – think I can do this... The pain is... irritating but... bearable,’ he stuttered, faltering as new waves of agony hit him. Ignoring his order, Anji led him to a chair and with a weak wave of acknowledgement the Doctor allowed her to sit him down.

He looked her in the eye. ‘This is so strange, almost familiar... I have this flash memory of some kind of crown of thorns...’ The Doctor seemed fascinated at the sudden memory. Anji shook him violently – this was no time for some kind of Christ fantasy. ‘Doctor, can you stop the launch?’ she demanded.

She seemed to have reached him. ‘Yes, I think I can,’ he answered.

Anji looked around and saw that Tyler and Spear were in deep discussion on an alternative option. Leaving Christine to keep an eye on the Doctor, Anji joined the men. ‘Direct sabotage of the computer room might have a similar effect,’ Tyler was saying. Spear nodded in agreement.

‘Surely that will be guarded,’ Anji interjected.

Spear shrugged. 'Let's hope not by anything I can't handle.' Anji looked over at the Doctor, who convulsed and then fell to the floor, unconscious. Christine Holland bent to attend to him. Anji turned back to Tyler and Spear. 'I'll come with you,' she told them. They looked as if they might want to argue, so she didn't give them the chance. 'I might as well do something,' she offered by way of explanation, before leading the way out into the corridor.

Inside the cramped cockpit of the Star Dart, Dudoin was struggling to comprehend a number of contradictory readings from certain key systems. The data from the computers inside the craft was showing alarmingly different readings on numerous key issues which Dudoin needed to resolve before a safe launch could be undertaken. He communicated his concerns with his launch-control team, who immediately suggested that the countdown should be put on hold. Dudoin didn't hesitate: he told them that he had everything under control and that he was go for launch. Then, hoping that the medical telemetry wasn't giving too much away about his real feelings, he started to concentrate on solving the problems.

As Dudoin worked furiously at the controls he was unaware of the changes to the atmosphere inside the craft. Before falling unconscious the Doctor had reset the atmospheric controls to slowly increase the oxygen content of the air. The Doctor had done this for two reasons: first, he suspected, correctly, that an atmosphere with a greater oxygen content would be too rich for the aliens and would render them unconscious; second, he had hoped that the new mix would set off an automatic warning system that would shut down the whole craft. What the Doctor had not realised, however, was that no such fail-safe existed.

Just for a change Fitz was not running. Instead, he was climbing. Fitz wasn't sure, however, that this was much of an improvement. In fact, as he clambered up the metallic shelving, hauling his aching (and perhaps just a touch overweight) body up on to another level, he was rapidly coming to the conclusion that climbing was something he could definitely do with less of in his life.

It had been Sa'Motta who had come up with the idea of trying to escape vertically. Apparently the Kulan were quite keen on recreational mountaineering back in their home system. As they began their climb Sa'Motta confessed that sometimes members of evaluation teams actually recommended planets

for colonisation purely on the strength of the mountain ranges that they discovered and the potential climbing to be had. Fitz had never been a big fan of the Alps but now he positively hated them.

'I guess Fray'kon must really rate our mountains then,' he commented bitterly.

Sa'Motta had laughed. 'Fray'kon wouldn't give a geh'muda seed for the mountains of Earth! He wasn't even interested in the economic case we made against invading the planet. All he cares about is military opportunism. There's strategic value in this mud ball.'

Sa'Motta had managed to imbue the term 'strategic value' with a degree of contempt Fitz wouldn't have believed possible. Conversely, he had made 'mud ball' sound like a term of affection. Fitz and Sa'Motta had by now managed to reach a height of about fifteen feet. The guards had not bothered to start climbing after them, but preferred to remain on the ground taking the occasional pot shots at the intruders. Fitz was slightly worried that their failure to follow suggested that their escape was merely a temporary situation and they were running, or, more correctly, climbing into a dead end.

'Why strategic value?' he asked, gasping for breath as he hauled himself on to another shelf, dislodging a few boxes of electrical components, which hit the ground a few seconds later without producing any extra value by way of knocking out one of the guards.

Sa'Motta shrugged. 'There are a number of races with military interests in this sector: the interminable Rutan-Sontaran conflict has often spilled over this way and rumour has it that the Daleks have been active in the area as well. If you ask me it's strange that the planet hasn't been invaded by a dozen races.'

Fitz found himself grinning: he suspected he knew the reason for that – Earth has its own cosmic protector in the Doctor. Thinking of the Doctor spurred Fitz on to greater efforts; he and Sa'Motta still had this launch to sabotage. Sa'Motta had found a skylight through which they could access the roof of the building. Fitz allowed his alien companion to help him climb through into the open air, to continue their mission.

Dudoin had a first-rate security team but at the end of the day they were still only a security team, not, as the saying goes, rocket scientists. They were good at their jobs – excellent, in fact – but they were only security guards, hired for their muscle, aggression and determination rather than for their intelligence. Given the dramatic and unexpected arrival of two intruders, during the final stages of the countdown to the launch of the Star Dart, they were more inter-

ested in tracking down and capturing the uninvited guests than in protecting the vital areas of the mission-control complex from less obvious threats.

So it was thanks to mysterious intruders elsewhere in the complex that Anji and her two companions found a grand total of one guard on duty at the entrance to the area that housed the mission computers. Feeling like a character from a spy movie, Anji wandered up to the guy, asked him an innocent question and tried not to wince too early as Spear crept up unseen and, with a single blow to the neck, induced a state of complete unconsciousness in the poor man. Tyler and Anji then dragged the guard into a storage cupboard, where they left him.

Hurrying into the room filled with the massive computer servers dedicated to running the entire Star Dart project, they found Spear removing a fire axe from an emergency cabinet.

‘That’s a bit crude, isn’t it, Marshall?’ commented Tyler. Spear hesitated. Anji guessed from Tyler’s tone that he had an alternative in mind. ‘Anji, do you have that package I asked you to carry?’

Anji nodded and pulled out the small padded envelope Tyler had asked her to hold on to for him during the Channel crossing. Tyler took the package with a grateful smile and withdrew what appeared to be a CD jewel case.

Anji frowned. ‘A CD?’ she asked, not following.

Tyler shook his head. ‘DVD. Recordable.’ Suddenly Anji cottoned on as to what it was.

‘The Kulan software agent that the Doctor trapped!’ she exclaimed.

Tyler nodded. ‘If it really is semi-intelligent, like the Doctor claimed, it should treat any computer system it encounters with the same contempt. Dudoin was happy to send it into my computers; now I’ll return the favour.’

He slotted the disc into a drive and sat at a console, and quickly deactivated the operating system’s maze of firewalls to ensure that the software agent had access to the whole network.

Anji and Spear exchanged smiles – everything had gone rather smoothly. Anji put the feelings into words. ‘Well that was rather easy. Now what?’ she asked.

Tyler shrugged. ‘We wait for this little critter to do its worst.’

‘Is that all?’ asked Anji, a little incredulously. ‘Just sit and wait for something to go wrong?’

She had hardly finished speaking when there was a tremendous crash and a shower of plaster and glass from the high ceiling of the room. Then, to their amazement, two figures joined the debris falling to the floor – two humanoid figures who fell like lead weights, bouncing off the higher computer stacks and

managing to reach the floor in a dishevelled state but, miraculously, apparently without any broken limbs.

Anji was amazed and delighted to see that one of the figures staggering to his feet was Fitz. He was equally surprised and pleased to see her – feelings that were instantly joined by a look of guilt.

‘Anji, about Dave –’ he began, but she waved him into silence.

‘It’s OK, I’ve seen him, he’s here. . .’ she explained.

‘We’ve got to stop this launch,’ continued Fitz, determinedly. ‘The Kulan plan –’

Again Anji stopped him mid-stream. ‘We know, we’re on to it. It’s all in hand,’ she told him.

Sa’Motta got to his feet, looking shaken but essentially unharmed. Fitz looked around and seemed about to ask Anji a question. But before he could, the doors at either end of the computer room were flung open and four of the efficient, hard-working, but not overly bright security guards surrounded them with a clichéd, but nonetheless effective, cry of ‘Nobody move!’

Dudoin was beginning, just beginning, to lose his cool. Nothing was going right. The two Kulan had lost consciousness; radio contact with the control room had failed and the controls were refusing to respond to his attempts to operate them.

He refused to believe that his dream was about to become a nightmare; no matter what happened he *was* going into space. Concentrating on operating Christine’s control helmet, he was only peripherally aware of a twitch of movement from Fray’kon. Regaining consciousness, the alien leader seemed to sense the danger that he was in and dragged himself out of his seat. Weakened by the oxygen-rich atmosphere, he fell to the floor but with an enormous effort of willpower he began to crawl towards the exit. Although his point of focus was still elsewhere, Dudoin reacted to the movement.

‘Fray’kon, where the hell are you going?’ he demanded, but the alien was already opening the hatch and pulling himself out. The hatch banged closed again, locking Dudoin inside with the remaining unconscious Kulan.

‘Fray’kon!’ Dudoin screamed, but his alien collaborator could no longer hear him. Inside the craft’s cockpit all manner of chaos was erupting.

Systems were blowing, pressure gauges exploding, circuit boards overheating. Sparks were beginning to appear. Normally this would not have been a particular problem: the fire-control systems were second to none, with fail-safes and

backups ad infinitum. However, the sabotaging software Tyler had introduced into his servers had managed to take all of these fire guards off line.

The inevitable happened within seconds: a spark that led to a flame that became an inferno very quickly in the oxygen-rich cabin. Dudoin never stood a chance.

In the last seconds of his life, knowing that his dream was about to go up in smoke – literally – he activated every radio circuit he could and broadcast a final message to his old friend and rival.

‘Tyler, I know you’re behind this. You may have stopped me but you’ll never get there yourself. The Kulan will stop you. The Kulan will stop you all!’ The rant ended in a scream of agony and then all that came through the speakers within the compound was the muted crackle of flames.

# Interlude

## Aliens

It was another fine clear February night in Springs, Ohio – no winter rain, no howling wind, no weather worthy of special comment at all. But for the third time in as many days Corey Hammond found himself unable to sleep. Corey was thirteen, and of an age where thinking about himself and his place in the universe was becoming a major obsession alongside the outbreak of yellow-headed zits that was spreading across the lower part of his face, the gaps in his collection of *Aliens* comics and the fact that he was the only guy in his class who didn't have a girlfriend, unless you counted Alice, which he didn't on account of (a) her living next door and (b) her being able to trounce him at *Doom*, which didn't seem to be very girlfriend-like behaviour at all.

The latest thing to strike fear and worry into his young heart was a report on one of the cable channels about asteroids and the threat they posed to life on the planet. Apparently asteroids of all sizes hurtled through deep space all the time, some no bigger than golf balls but some the size of the moon and bigger. And although most of these intergalactic bumper cars would disintegrate on hitting a planetary atmosphere, others didn't, and every year dozens reached the ground intact.

Corey had watched in horror as the guy on the TV had explained that major strikes had happened in the past. The speaker – some English professor from some British university, so Corey presumed that he must have known what he was talking about – told his cable audience that it had been just such a random asteroid strike that had wiped out the dinosaurs. Corey knew from *Jurassic Park* that the dinosaurs had been destroyed sixty-five million years ago, which was a hell of a long time to go without being hit by another piece of space debris of equal size. The way Corey saw it Earth couldn't expect to keep getting away with it for much longer.

So, for the third night running, Corey had found himself lying in his bed unable to sleep. Eventually, as he had done the previous nights, he had hauled himself out of bed and padded over to the telescope he had managed to per-



suade his parents to give him for his last birthday. Then his overwhelming interest had been to prepare himself for a career with NASA, but that aspiration had soon blown over and for months the telescope had remained in a closet. When he had suddenly erected it earlier in the week, his parents had been delighted – it had not been a cheap purchase and in fact they were still paying for it, so they were pleased to see it finally being put to use. If they had known that Corey had spent the best part of the early hours of every morning since then watching the skies for any sign of imminent doom they might have been less happy.

Corey sat on the floor of his bedroom looking out at the darkness of space. He was familiar enough with the various landmarks of the sky: the North Star, the major constellations, the visible planets such as Mars. He was training the telescope on Mars when he saw it. Something, something big enough to be seen, moving slowly but regularly. Corey blinked and rubbed his tired eyes. He looked again – yes, it was definitely there. But what the hell was it? There was no way it was a comet or an asteroid: the motion was too regular, too controlled. Could it have been some kind of spacecraft? Corey rushed to his computer, booted it and logged on. Moments later he was spinning through the official NASA websites, confirming what his memory had already told him – there were no NASA probes or survey craft in that area at the present time. So what had he seen?

Corey returned to his telescope, but to his frustration the thing – whatever it was – had gone. Had he imagined it all? Unsettled, Corey went back to bed and fell into a fitful sleep, disturbed by strange and vivid nightmares. If he had known the truth of what he had seen he would probably never have slept again.

The Kulan fleet passed the fourth planet of the system and made their final course adjustments, entering into a high orbit of the blazing red planet. On the bridge Koy'Guin offered a silent prayer of thanks to the Ra'korth, the Kulan god of war, as the fleet returned to full-shield status. During the precision subwarp manoeuvres they had been briefly utterly exposed. It had been a calculated risk: the chances of any kind of surveillance from the target planet being directed at the precise spot at which the Kulan fleet were vulnerable were infinitesimally small. Nevertheless, the renewal of the shields, hiding them from any eyes, human or electronic, that Earth might direct at them was a moment of relief for the warrior chief.

Now it was a question of waiting. The continued silence from the evaluation

team remained a matter of concern but there was still some time before they would be officially declared lost. Already the two arms of the Kulan command system had begun to argue their positions should that unhappy situation come to pass. Predictably, the economists were leaning towards a cautious approach: any invasion, no matter what the level of resistance, was costly and, without definitive knowledge of the economic value of the planet being attacked, there was no guarantee that such an invasion would actually be profitable. The military took an alternative view: they were here, they were armed, they were ready for action, so why not let them do their job? As yet the mission commanders, the Council of Three, had said nothing on the subject.

The Council was made up of a member from each discipline with the third place taken by a priest from the Kulan religious order. This particular trio were all new to this fleet, the previous leaders having died along with half of the invasion force in an ill-advised attack on a Chelonian colony. Koy'Guin had lost many friends in that action and several members of his own family. Family was important to the Kulan and Koy'Guin was determined to avenge their deaths by succeeding in taking another planet in their memory. He had no intention of letting the current target – the third planet from this star – become another might-have-been. To that end he had placed his own cousin, Fray'kon, in the evaluation team as the leader of the military presence. He trusted that his cousin would ensure that the team came to the right decision: Earth *would* be invaded.

The Kulan security chief, Hak'et, approached the brooding Koy'Guin cautiously. His leader appeared not to have noticed him arrive, and did not acknowledge him. He just carried on looking at the viewscreen showing the huge red planet that they were now orbiting. Hak'et considered shuffling to attract his attention but thought better of it: the Kulan war chief was well known for his short and volatile temper. Instead, he stood and observed patiently.

After a long period of silence Koy'Guin spoke, without taking his eyes from the image of the planet. 'Legends tell of a great race of warriors that came from this planet,' he said, with reverence.

Hak'et knew this but decided it might be wiser to let his leader lecture him on the subject.

'What happened to them?' he asked, hoping that this was the right prompt.

'They were wiped out. Exterminated. Their empire crumbled, their conquests forgotten.' Koy'Guin turned to look at his strategist. 'The historians tell us nothing lasts: races emerge, develop space travel, spread through local

space, colonise, invade, build empires and then some kind of entropy sets in and they fall to dust. But the historians are wrong. Nothing is forgotten: the *great* races of the galaxy leave their mark for eternity to view. The Kulan must do the same.'

Hak'et looked at his leader with respect. He had never heard him speak so passionately. He knew Koy'Guin's family had all but been wiped out in recent campaigns, but he had never realised how desperate he was to avenge those failures.

Koy'Guin was staring at the red planet again, lost in his thoughts. Hak'et wondered what had really happened to the warrior race that had lived there. The stories about them were frustratingly vague in detail. Had they ever attacked the neighbouring planet? And if they had, why had they failed? Hak'et decided to study the records, if he found the time. It may become important.

Thousands of miles away Corey Hammond tossed and turned in his bed dreaming of aliens with glowing eyes and silver skin emerging from spinning saucers like Chevrolet hubcaps. And woke screaming.

# Chapter Fifteen

## Countdown

It all seemed to make sense now, but at the time it had been chaos. Anji could now look back on the events of the last couple of days with a sense of detachment. At the time of what the media called ‘the accident’, Anji, Tyler, Fitz, Sa’Motta and Spear were being herded by the efficient but none-too-bright security guards into a holding cell. TV monitors were fitted throughout the complex, so as soon as the fire broke out in the Space Dart the prisoners were aware of it. They had pleaded with their captors to be allowed to help but it was clear even as they spoke that there was little that could be done.

After that it had become confusing: sirens had sounded, emergency vehicles raced to the stricken craft, people were running in all directions, shouting orders and requests in a dozen languages. At some point Christine and the Doctor had been brought to them, the latter suffering from a monster headache but otherwise unharmed.

Tyler demanded the right to make a phone call, which was granted, and a short while later officials from the American Embassy arrived to arrange for their release.

They had reached Tyler’s Oxford base three hours later. That had been two days ago and they had immediately gone into an informal debriefing on what had happened in Belgium. The Doctor had been horrified to discover that the net result of their sabotage had been to cause so many deaths.

‘No one could have foreseen that result,’ Tyler reassured him. ‘It was an accident.’

‘Maybe.’ The Doctor was not so easily mollified.

Fitz was pleased to see that the Doctor appeared to be feeling more himself. He’d taken Fitz aside during the flight home and asked about his adventures in Brussels. Fitz had told him everything that had happened, right up to the point at which he and Sa’Motta had decided to try to stop the launch of the Star Dart themselves. The Doctor had told him that he had done the right thing, which

made Fitz feel a bit better about his failure to rescue Dave. At least Dave was now getting expert care courtesy of Arthur Tyler's personal medical team.

Right now the Doctor was still worrying over the deaths that had resulted from their sabotage.

'How many Kulan died?' he asked Sa'Motta.

'Five,' replied Sa'Motta grimly. 'All of the remaining members of our evaluation team. I believe I am the last of my race still alive on your planet.'

'How long have we got before your invasion fleet reach us?' asked a concerned Tyler.

'They will already be in place, within striking distance.' Sa'Motta stated simply.

'What?' Spear spoke for all of them. 'How in the hell can that happen?'

Sa'Motta shrugged. 'We have the technology to hide our ships from enemy sensors. Until we move we will be invisible, and when we make that move it will be too late.'

'But I thought the invasion was dependent on hearing from your "evaluation team",' Anji said. 'What happens if you don't report?' asked Anji.

'They will make a decision based on long-distance intelligence,' answered Sa'Motta.

'They're gonna decide whether to invade or not based on our TV broadcasts?' joked Spear. 'We are so screwed!'

Anji laughed but the rest of the group were more sombre.

'If we can get you to your people can you persuade them not to invade?' asked Tyler.

Sa'Motta nodded. 'I think so.'

'Then we'll have to get you there.' Tyler was decisive and his tone allowed no further argument. He turned to the Doctor. 'Doctor will you aid us?'

The Doctor answered Tyler with a nod. 'Of course. Anything I can do to help.'

Sa'Motta gave the Doctor a small wafer, about half the size of a standard credit card. 'Data?' asked the Doctor, in a tone that suggested it to be a rhetorical question.

The alien nodded. 'My report. A copy for you to keep safe. If something should happen to me. . . ' He did not need to finish his sentence.

'Don't worry,' replied the Doctor with a reassuring smile, 'It won't come to that – but thank you for having such faith in me.'

Sa'Motta smiled. 'I suspect it would not be the first time you have shouldered such a responsibility.'

The Doctor looked at him curiously. ‘Do you know me?’

‘Only by reputation,’ replied the alien, mysteriously.

It was clear that the Doctor would like to pursue this conversation but Christine had rejoined them at that point and they had moved on to discuss the practicalities of launching Tyler’s craft in days rather than weeks.

Fitz was watching the exchange with some concern. He was still not sure exactly how much the Doctor was remembering about himself. In fact he was not sure about a lot of things – his own recent memory included. He’d managed to snatch a brief private word with the Doctor, which had amounted to an agreement to defer their own debriefing until later. The only problem, as far as Fitz was concerned, was that with every passing minute he seemed to know less about the Doctor himself; by the time they got to have a full discussion he wouldn’t know much more than the Doctor seemed to. Perhaps, when he got the chance, he should try to write some key things down, while he still could.

In the secret underground facility beneath the Waterloo monument in Belgium the data from the audio and visual bugs Control’s men had planted on Fitz was monitored around the clock. Unfortunately for Control, the bugs had been fixed to Fitz’s jacket, on the assumption that it was the one item of clothing that he would be most likely to wear for a number of days. What Control had not allowed for, however, was an unexpected turn in the weather, bringing unseasonably mild conditions, which meant that for most of the previous twenty-four hours Control’s agents had been watching and hearing images that would make paint drying look interesting, as the micro-cameras recorded the empty room that Fitz had been assigned to sleep in.

Undeterred, Control maintained the surveillance. He was determined not to give ground on this one: he wanted to get his hands on the aliens before UNIT got their sticky mitts on them. Control had little time for the interfering ways of UNIT and was convinced that his people were better placed, better informed and better trained to handle any First Contact scenarios.

After the chaos that had ended Dudoin’s attempt to launch, the number of aliens on the planet was reduced to one – the individual called Sa’Motta. Control wanted to take Sa’Motta at the earliest possible opportunity.

‘Williams, get your team to the UK. Liaise with Kent’s people and prepare for an incursion,’ Control ordered. Williams nodded. He was pleased to be getting out of Belgium, even if it was only for a short mission. Shame that it had to be England, though: all that warm beer and those strange accents. Still, at least

they spoke the right language. Williams realised that Control was still talking to him, a serious expression on his face.

‘The bottom line is that the alien does not get to leave the planet. Understand?’

‘Completely,’ affirmed Williams.

Control stood up, signalling the end of the briefing. Williams took his cue and left, leaving Control looking as determined as ever. Williams shared his boss’s contempt for UNIT and was looking forward to pulling a fast one on them.

Christine had been reunited with Pippa as soon as she reached England and, knowing that her daughter was safe, she had been happy to add her time and energy to Tyler’s effort. Anji was amazed at the change that had come over the scientist. On the journey back from France they had chatted and Anji had been fascinated to hear the older woman’s story.

Anji was both surprised and angered when Christine explained how she had walked away from her career to raise her child. It wasn’t that she considered herself any kind of card-carrying feminist – Anji just wasn’t into sexual politics – but it offended her that this brilliantly intelligent woman had found herself forced to make such a career decision just because of her sex. Dudoin hadn’t even considered making such a sacrifice himself, had he? And although Tyler was a very different kettle of fish, Anji couldn’t imagine that he would have done anything different if Pippa had been his child. It was the kind of institutional and unconscious sexism that frustrated Anji, and, although she was aware that she was a good few years from being ready to even contemplate having children herself, it was a source of some concern.

Despite her history, Christine had become a different woman once she had started working with Tyler’s team back in Oxford. She had seemed to undergo some kind of regeneration, rediscovering within herself the scientist hungry to find practical solutions to problems rather than the teacher prepared to set academic problems for her students. After the first couple of hours of technical gobbledegook and technobabble, Anji had decided she could add little to the discussion. She had made her excuses and left.

Anji took the opportunity to return home, to shower, to collect a change of clothes and to call the office to explain her absence from work. However, she was home for only a couple of hours before she found herself driving back up the M40 to Tyler’s base. She wasn’t entirely sure why. She told herself that it was because of Dave, now installed in Tyler’s medical facility; but she knew that

it was more than that. She had crossed into another world over the weekend – a world inhabited by people like Fitz and the Doctor, people who could take the existence of aliens and the threat of invasion from space seriously. Having made that transition, she wasn't sure how to make the journey back. It had become evident when she'd spoken to her boss on the phone.

'It's Dave,' she had explained. 'He fell ill at the weekend, and I think I should be with him.'

Her boss, a bearlike giant of a man called Darren, whose massive bulk belied a truly gentle nature, had laughed. 'Playing Florence Nightingale? Doesn't sound like you, Anj. You're not exactly cut out for tea and sympathy, are you?'

Anji had bristled, annoyed at his perception of her. She wasn't that cold, was she?

'Actually, it's quite serious – he's in a coma,' she had continued, feeling a bit guilty at embarrassing her friend like this. She heard the change in his voice – where before he had been joking, now he was serious.

'I am sorry, Anj, I didn't realise. Look take whatever time you need, we'll expect you when we see you...'

Anji had replaced the phone in its charging unit, grabbed her bag and set off immediately back towards Oxford, not just to get back to Dave's bedside but also to get back to the Doctor and Fitz and the race to avert an invasion. She wondered if she should have said something to Darren – but what *could* she have said? Liquidate your assets – the Kulan are coming? He'd have thought she was mad. Perhaps she was, she thought. Perhaps it was all some paranoid fantasy. Maybe this was all one very weird dream, brought on by some strange reaction to mussels in a creamy sauce. Any moment now she would wake up next to Dave in her Brussels hotel room and proceed to tell her boyfriend her really bizarre dream.

No, she decided as she passed the M25, gridlocked as usual on its approach to Heathrow, having gone back over everything that had happened to her in the last couple of days she couldn't escape the fact that this was definitely reality, much as she might wish it otherwise. Aliens, space travel, kidnappings... It was all too real and she could talk to no one about it except the few people working hard in Oxfordshire to resolve the situation.

Anji floored the accelerator and sped away from her old life towards the future.

Tyler and Spear were in the gym working out when the call came that they had been waiting for. Without stopping to shower and change, the pair jogged



directly over to join the launch crew in the main control room. There they found Tyler's project leader, Chris Green, along with Sa'Motta, Christine and the Doctor.

Green, a dour shaven-headed Northerner, had a tight-lipped smile on his face, which for him was the equivalent of a full Cheshire Cat grin.

'We're ready,' Green announced. 'Thanks to the input from these three –' he nodded at the Doctor, Christine and Sa'Motta – 'we can launch today.'

Christine hastened to qualify his words. 'All we've done is to fine-tune what you had already achieved.' Green shrugged.

'Let's not get bogged down in mutual appreciation, huh?' suggested Tyler. 'The thing is you've done a great job, all of you.'

'We've installed a version of my control unit which Sa'Motta will operate,' Christine told them. 'He'll have full navigational control.'

The Doctor stepped forward. 'I wondered if I might ask a favour.'

Tyler was surprised. 'If it's something within my power, of course.'

'I'd like to travel with you,' the Doctor said, simply.

'Of course,' replied Tyler without hesitation. 'I was going to insist.' He smiled. 'After all you've done, I thought it only fair. I've been assuming that the crew would be you and I, Sa'Motta of course, and Marshall.'

Fitz, who had been lurking nearby trying to get a drink out of a recalcitrant coffee machine, spoke up. 'Is there room for one more?'

The Doctor started to explain that it wasn't necessary, but Fitz insisted on coming, too. He didn't want to let the Doctor out of his sight. For all Fitz knew the Doctor might have fitted some kind of warp drive to the thing, and intended to head off for deep space at the first opportunity. As far as Fitz was concerned it would be safer for everybody if he kept the Doctor with him at all times.

Tyler agreed that there was room for one other passenger, but he had been hoping that Christine might like to take the final seat. Christine shook her head vigorously.

'No thank you, I've no intention of leaving Pippa alone again quite so soon,' she explained. 'I'll watch your flight from here, thank you very much.'

Tyler decided that they should plan to launch later that day and suggested that they all take a couple of hours' R and R before gathering for the big moment. Christine immediately set off to spend some time with her daughter; Tyler and Spear returned to the gym and Fitz opted to get some sleep.

The Doctor was still in the main control room, as was Sa'Motta. He turned to the Kulan.

‘Just a few hours now and you’ll be back with your people,’ he said, a little wistfully.

Sa’Motta looked into his blue-green eyes and sensed a great sadness within. ‘I think you would like the same thing,’ he suggested. The Doctor frowned. ‘But I am with my people, aren’t I?’

‘You tell me,’ said Sa’Motta. ‘Do you really think you belong here, on this little planet?’ He let the question hang in the air for a moment before adding, ‘I don’t.’

Sa’Motta watched as the Doctor turned the idea in his mind. He knew that the Doctor was suffering some kind of memory loss, that he had no idea where or when in the cosmos he really came from, but Sa’Motta was certain of one thing: the Doctor was not a simple native of this planet. In spite of his erratic memory the Doctor knew things that only someone who had travelled beyond this star system could know.

The Doctor shrugged and then spoke in a confessional tone. ‘I know so little and yet. . .’ He trailed off, then seemed to come to a decision. ‘I can remember with clarity the events of the last one hundred and thirteen years, but before that – nothing,’ he confessed.

‘Are ordinary humans here so long-lived?’ asked Sa’Motta.

‘No, they’re not.’ The Doctor flashed a grin. ‘And they tend to show the passage of time more than this.’ He indicated his unlined face. ‘I’ve not aged a day in over a hundred years.’

He paused and looked over in the direction of the mission control consoles and the large screen showing the Planet Hopper waiting on its launch pad.

‘That’s why I have to get up there, into space. I’m sure I belong there. I’m sure I’ll find some answer out there.’

Sa’Motta patted him on the shoulder, in the reassuring way he had seen humans treat each other.

‘I am sure you will, too,’ he told the Doctor.

It had been a long time since Fray’kon had operated alone on an alien and hostile planet: back in his early adulthood when he had first taken orders as a Kulan warrior. As his career had developed and he had risen through the ranks he had found that he had moved further and further from actual combat: where once he had encountered and killed aliens face to face, now he merely gave commands that allowed others to kill at his will; where once he would feel the life force ebb from a foe as he withdrew his hunting knife, now he had to watch as a missile hurtled through space and devastated some alien craft,

killing thousands of invisible enemies. Fray'kon realised now what he had been missing.

Alone, without any backup, he had escaped from the ITI site and made his way to the neighbouring country called the United Kingdom. So far he had achieved this while killing only two of the locals, but the kills had been childishly easy, the humans being so pathetically unable to defend themselves. Fray'kon knew that he had to get on board the rival spacecraft, the one being developed by the human called Tyler. He hoped to take his revenge on the traitor Sa'Motta, and on the interfering locals who had aided him, but first he had to get into space and contact the fleet. The invasion *must* go ahead. The spineless humans must be removed from the face of the planet.

He had reached Tyler's Oxfordshire base a few hours after Tyler and his group and had set up an observation point. The security around the base was intense and Fray'kon knew that a subtle approach would be needed. Operating alone, he could not risk bringing attention to his presence. After watching all the approaches to the base Fray'kon realised that his best option was to gain one of the swipe cards base personnel used to access the main pedestrian entrance. Fray'kon watched the coming and going of the various shifts, looking for a suitable target, and finally spotted a likely-looking possibility.

Miles Gorman was tired. Actually he was more than that: he was knackered. A computer programmer, he had just finished an intense last-minute rewrite of some of the control code for the Planet Hopper, repairing damage that had been done by the sabotaging ITI agent. Gorman had worked until he thought his eyes would melt, spurred on by the sight of everyone else on his team doing the same thing. The word had come through that the ship had to launch as soon as possible and every department on the project was working flat out to make that happen. Gorman wasn't quite sure what the hurry was: after the horrible tragedy that had befallen Dudoin surely the race was won; whether they launched today or next week they would still be the first. Tyler apparently thought otherwise. The double overtime that was being paid helped them stay focused, although for Gorman and most of his colleagues the project itself was the main motivation, not the financial rewards. Right now, however, the only reward Gorman wanted was a nice hot shower and eight hours' solid sleep. Or maybe ten.

Gorman ran his ID card through the reader and the computer acknowledged his exit from the base and logged it in its memory. The metal gate opened and Gorman walked out into the Oxfordshire countryside. Inside the complex

he had lost all sense of time and had been slightly surprised to find that it was daylight. In fact with the bright sunshine and the relatively mild wind it felt more like a spring morning than early February. Gorman wondered for a moment if he'd been locked in the computer lab for a couple of months rather than a couple of days.

Gorman's digs were a short walk away in the next village. As he started down the lane he contemplated the idea of adding a quick pint to his list of immediate requirements. The Dog and Duck was conveniently on his route, after all. Before he could come to any conclusion a jogger emerging from the woods about fifty yards in front of him surprised him.

The jogger was wearing odd dark clothing and a long coat, quite the wrong thing for any kind of exercise, Gorman thought. Perhaps he's not a jogger at all, perhaps he's running away from something. As the man got closer he could see that there was something strange about his face: the colour of his skin was unnaturally pale and his features seemed oddly proportioned. Suddenly the man was almost upon him and Gorman suddenly got a feeling that the man was *not* planning to run past him. The man reached for something under his coat and Gorman began to turn away, but it was too late: the stranger was flying into him, knocking him off his feet, and something cold and sharp was driving into his chest. As he fell to the ground Gorman looked down and saw the hilt of a savage-looking knife protruding from his shirt. He fell heavily, knocking his head on the tarmac, and his vision blurred. He blinked rapidly, and saw the dark shape of his attacker leaning in and then a silver flash wet with thick red blood – his blood – as the weapon was pulled from his chest with an ugly ripping sound.

And then blackness descended and Gorman felt and knew no more.

Fray'kon quickly pulled the corpse into the woods out of sight of the road. Moving quickly, he searched the man's pockets, and took his wallet and some cash. Checking that he had the ID that he needed, he tipped the corpse into a hole he had dug earlier. He cleaned his hunting knife on some leaves, which he then dropped into the makeshift grave, and then carefully filled in the hole and covered his tracks the best he could. Fray'kon moved off without a backward glance at the now invisible last resting place of Miles Gorman.

Anji was sitting with Dave when the Doctor and Sa'Motta.

'How is he?' the Doctor asked kindly.

‘He seems a little better, like he’s sleeping,’ she told him. The Doctor checked the readings on the various monitors that Dave was hooked up to. He smiled. ‘It looks like you’re right. He’s on the mend,’ he confirmed.

‘Will he be. . . normal?’ Anji asked, concerned. ‘I thought his DNA had been altered. Won’t that cause problems?’ In her head she added a query about his ability to conceive but she didn’t allow herself to voice that thought. It came as a shock to her that it was even an issue. This was something she would have to give some thought to.

Sa’Motta chose to answer her question. ‘I think he will be unharmed in the long term.’ He came over and looked down at the sleeping man. ‘He should never have reacted like this in the first place. Most humans wouldn’t have.’

‘Trust Dave to be different,’ Anji laughed.

‘Actually, he is,’ the Doctor threw in.

Anji was confused. ‘I’m sorry?’

The Doctor sat down next to her to explain. ‘We checked Dave’s DNA and it appears it already contained some alien elements *before* he was infected with the Kulan agent.’

‘What? Are you suggesting my boyfriend is an alien?’ Anji heard herself and laughed. ‘God, that sounds like some awful B-movie title. One of Dave’s obscure “classics” the rest of us have never heard of.’

‘I’m coming to the conclusion that this planet has had more alien encounters than you might like to think, Anji,’ the Doctor told her.

Anji shook her head, trying to clear it. ‘Last week if you’d told me that, I’d have thought you a complete loony. . .’ she began before tailing off.

‘And this week?’ asked the Doctor.

‘This week. . . I don’t know. I just don’t know. . .’

‘That’s my Anji,’ added a new voice. ‘Scully to the bitter end!’

‘Dave!’ Anji exclaimed, hugging her now conscious boyfriend. ‘You’re OK?’

Dave pulled himself up to a sitting position and grinned at them. ‘Yeah, just great. A little tired but OK, really.’

Anji just beamed at him, a thousand different things to tell him running through her mind all at once. ‘I got your present,’ she told him, showing him the name-chain round her neck.

‘Happy anniversary.’ He smiled and kissed her.

‘It is now,’ she told him.

Out of the corner of her eye, Anji saw the Doctor nod at Sa’Motta and then the pair withdraw from the room.

Dave grinned at Anji. ‘So what’s been happening?’

Anji took a deep breath and began to tell him.

Williams didn't like Kent – the county or the man. Although Control's offshoot of the CIA was an international organisation, Americans dominated the command structure; the small operation based in London was one of the exceptions that proved the rule. James Kent was an Englishman, one of those know-it-all types who think that an education at an English public school and a spell in the British Army prepared you for anything the universe could throw at you. Williams had worked with Kent before, chasing crop circles in the boring county that shared Kent's name, and he hadn't enjoyed the experience at all. As far as he was concerned James Kent would have been better off with that boy-scout outfit UNIT, but he knew better than to raise this with Control. Whatever his shortcomings when it came to personality – and there were many – Kent seemed to have Control's complete confidence and Williams knew better than to try to second-guess Control.

Kent had already done most of the preparation work by the time Williams and his colleagues had arrived. An operations room was decorated with annotated maps and aerial photographs, and a large model of the Tyler launch complex had been constructed in the middle of the conference table. Williams asked if a cover story had been developed for their action.

Kent nodded. 'Of course. You chaps are after a dangerous German spy, known to be infiltrating Tyler's operation. The British authorities are all on board and will support any action we take.'

'German?' queried Williams, with a hint of disbelief.

'You know us Brits – can't ever forget the war. Mention it's a German that you're after and our people will fall over backwards to let you at him,' explained Kent.

Williams shrugged, unconvinced, but it was not his place to question the cover story further; his task was to make sure the raid was successful.

'Have you formulated a plan of action, sir?' he asked respectfully.

'Not exactly – just a few ideas to run up the flagpole. Thought it might be best to wait for you chaps to join us.'

An underling ran up to Kent waving a sheet of fax paper. Kent took the sheet and consulted it, then looked up at Williams with new urgency.

'Latest from your surveillance,' he reported. 'Looks like Tyler's planning to launch within the next two hours.'

Fitz reluctantly shrugged off his coat. 'I can't believe we have to wear stupid

spacesuits – I thought this was the twenty-first century,’ he complained.

The Doctor helped him into the bulky suit. ‘It’s a safety precaution, that’s all.’

Fitz wasn’t mollified. ‘We never needed spacesuits in the TARDIS,’ he muttered.

‘The TARDIS,’ echoed the Doctor, but Fitz couldn’t tell if it was an exclamation or a question. Surely the Doctor hadn’t forgotten the TARDIS. The old fear returned, suddenly stronger than ever before. How much of the Doctor’s performance was just that – an act?

‘Your space-time machine, remember? We travel in it through space and time. Without spacesuits!’ he added.

‘Through space and time,’ repeated the Doctor in the same ambiguous manner. ‘Yes, of course. How could I forget that?’

The Doctor seemed to come to his senses and buckled up Fitz’s suit. ‘Well, not all ships are as advanced as the TARDIS, eh? So we have to make allowances.’

Tyler and Marshall joined them, both already wearing the specially designed suits. Sa’Motta followed them, also in a spacesuit.

‘Hey, how come you don’t have to wear a suit?’ demanded Fitz, realising that the Doctor was still in his everyday clothes.

‘I’m just about to change – I’ll see you on board, OK?’

Fitz wasn’t happy about leaving the Doctor. ‘You are coming, aren’t you?’

‘Just try to stop me!’ replied the Doctor with a smile.

Tyler led the way towards the minibus waiting to take them to the launch pad.

The Doctor opened a locker and took out one of the spacesuits and started to undo his cravat.

Dave finished tying his trainers and stood up. Anji smiled at him and took his hand. ‘Arthur says we can watch the launch from the main mission-control room,’ she told him.

‘Cool,’ replied Dave. ‘But I wish I was going with them.’

Anji was annoyed and dropped his hand. ‘Haven’t you been in enough danger recently?’ she asked him angrily.

‘Sorry, Anji, but I’m not being reckless or foolhardy: I just want to see this thing through,’ Dave pleaded. ‘I mean, if Fitz and the Doctor are going why can’t I?’

Anji shook her head in disbelief. ‘You’ve only just come out of a life-threatening coma. And the first thing you want to do is to jump into an experimental space rocket? You’re mad.’

‘Come on, Anji, why don’t we both go?’ he suggested cheekily. ‘You said you wanted a trip to somewhere more exotic than Brussels!’

‘I meant somewhere on Earth, not in orbit around it!’ retorted Anji.

‘OK, OK, no need to shout. Christ, I think I was better off when I was in a coma!’

Even as he spoke the words he knew that they were a mistake. It was a classic light-the-blue-touch-paper moment, and now there was no stopping the fireworks. Fury flashed in Anji’s eyes.

‘Maybe you were. And maybe I shouldn’t have wasted my time worrying about you.’

Anji turned on her heels and ran out of the room, slamming the door as she went.

Dave felt awful. How had the conversation deteriorated that quickly? One minute she’d been delighted to see him awake and well and the next they were fighting worse than ever. And yet Anji hadn’t exactly torn him to shreds, had she? In fact as she ran off he thought he’d seen tears in her eyes. Dave tried to remember their post-row discussions in the past. It was always *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* territory; something about men reacting to a problem on a practical level while women needed emotional support. But Anji wasn’t an emotional sort of woman, was she? She was hard-nosed, no-nonsense, all that stuff; that was what made her good at her job: she was so determinedly unemotional about it. At least she seemed to be. But Dave knew better: he’d been closer to her, more intimate with her, than anyone else in her life these past few years. He knew that underneath the professional veneer she was still a vulnerable human being, with emotional needs like any other man or woman. And he’d had completely forgotten them. What must Anji have been through in the last few days, while Dave was so completely out of it? She must have been out of her head with worry. No wonder she got all teary when he suggested going with Tyler into space.

Dave hurried off to try to find Anji and repair the damage. He realised now how much he loved her and he knew that he had to tell her as soon as he could.

The personnel computer registered that Miles Gorman reentered the complex at 15:21, just three hours after he had logged out after a massive thirty-six-hour shift. The software that maintained the security systems was top-of-the-range and state-of-the-art, but it was also a good deal more stupid than a human being. A human being faced with that data might just question it – surely



Mr Gorman would be needing more than a few hours' rest after a session like that – but the computer just accepted the facts without question and recorded them. The close-circuit camera moved automatically to capture Miles Gorman's face as he passed through the opened barrier but the image went directly to a video tape, rather than through any recognition software, so the fact that Miles Gorman no longer looked much like the photograph on his ID pass went unnoticed.

Fray'kon moved into the complex with confidence, looking for the means to get to the spacecraft without attracting any more attention. Television screens in the corridors relayed details of the countdown and Fray'kon noted that the ship was due to take off in less than an hour. He hurried on, nodding politely at people he passed, as if he'd been seeing them every day for weeks. No one questioned him, no one stopped him, confirming Fray'kon's belief that the human race were very stupid.

On the whole planet there were probably only a hundred beings who had encountered Fray'kon face to face, so the chances of anyone recognising him for who he was were very small. Sa'Motta would spot him in an instant, but he was betting that Sa'Motta would already be on board the spacecraft awaiting the launch. In addition, in Fray'kon's experience the humans found it difficult to tell one of his race from another, a theory that was confirmed as he walked purposefully through the building and one or two of the staff passed him and said, 'Hi, Sa'Motta.' It therefore came as quite a shock when he heard a human voice crying out his name.

'Fray'kon!'

The alien warrior spun around and found that he had managed to walk past one of the few humans on the planet who knew him by name – the unfortunate creature who had been injected with the DNA-altering agent. Fray'kon reached for his hunting knife.

Dave realised his mistake as soon as he made it. As with his relationship with Anji, he seemed to be cursed with a fatal ability to speak before engaging his brain. Of all the things to do when spotting an alien who shouldn't be in the complex, shouting out his name was probably not number one. Fray'kon was turning towards him, an evil-looking bladed weapon in his hand. Terrific, thought Dave, I would have to pick on the manic alien with a blade fetish. Dave turned and ran.

He turned a corner and ran full pelt into Anji. They both fell backwards, sliding along the polished floor like fallen ice skaters. Anji looked as if she didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

'I thought making up was meant to be the fun bit; can we try again without the violence?' she asked him, smiling.

'I think violence might still be on the agenda,' he muttered, helping her to her feet. 'Run.'

He started off again, dragging her by the hand. 'Why are we running?' she asked, confused.

'To get away from him... ' Dave gestured behind them. Anji looked back. 'His name's Fray'kon,' explained Dave. 'And he's one of the less pleasant Kulan.'

Dave ushered Anji through a pair of swing doors and then doubled back down a stairwell. They ducked into a cupboard, which was full of cleaning materials. Dave pushed Anji into a corner against a pair of mops and motioned her to keep quiet. Keeping the door ever so slightly ajar, he peeked out but could see no sign of Fray'kon.

'Stay here,' he told Anji in a commanding whisper. 'I'll check that we've lost him.'

'What's he doing here?' asked Anji.

'Shall I ask him?' replied Dave, with a hint of sarcasm.

'We must tell the Doctor,' insisted Anji. 'Come on, we'll go together.'

Anji stepped forward and eased the door open. She poked her head out into the corridor but there was no sign of Fray'kon. 'All clear,' she told Dave, and holding his hand she led him out of the cleaners' cupboard.

Inside the cabin of the Planet Hopper all was ready. Sa'Motta, Fitz, Spear and Tyler all sat in their cushioned seats, alone with their thoughts, the silence broken only by the babble of voices from the control room as the final checks were made.

Sa'Motta was nervous: despite the work they had done to improve the basic technology of the ship it was still a much more primitive craft compared with those of the Kulan Fleet. The accident that had consumed Dudoin's craft also weighed heavily on Sa'Motta's mind. Like any space traveller, Sa'Motta had a healthy fear of fire inside a spacecraft. He'd known too many ships lost to a simple interior fire. At the same time he was relieved to know that soon he would be leaving this planet; the time he had been marooned here seemed to have gone on for ever. During that time he had come to respect and like the human race – the locals he had met had generally been friendly, helpful and

kind. He was determined that the planned invasion should be called off; he just hoped the Council of Three would listen to him.

Fitz was also nervous, not about the imminent journey into space but more about the continued absence of the Doctor. Radio contact with the control room had established that the Doctor had left the suiting-up area but since then he had apparently disappeared. Fitz wondered what the hell he was up to; he couldn't believe the Doctor would willingly fail to show up for his precious ride into space. What could possibly have gone wrong? He remembered that Sa'Motta had speculated that Fray'kon may have survived the inferno that engulfed the Star Dart – could Fray'kon have infiltrated the launch complex?

Marshall Spear swallowed hard and tried to keep his heartbeat somewhere near normal. He was not a man who was easily made afraid; in fact he had been known in the NFL as fearless for the way he threw himself into blocks and tackles with apparent disregard for his own safety.

Space travel was something new to him, however, and he was worried that it might share certain characteristics with sea travel. What worried him most of all was the fact that if he was to become sick he would find it rather difficult to stick his head over the side and barf.

Arthur Tyler was excited. He was enjoying every moment of this, a dream he had cherished for so many years. The fact that he was sharing this historic trip with a member of an alien race who may or may not shortly be attempting to invade the planet was less important than actually achieving the goal of reaching space in his own vehicle. Not that he didn't care about the planet's future – he cared very much – but right now – he couldn't think about anything other than the fulfilment of his long-held ambition: to go into space. He hoped those bastards at NASA were watching.

Chris Green's calm and unemotional voice came through from mission control, confirming that all systems were go for a launch. The countdown clicked into the final fifteen minutes. Fitz looked over at the digital clock readout as the Doctor's time began to run out. Where on Earth was he?

The Doctor was walking the almost deserted corridors of the complex looking for Anji. The complex felt empty because everyone was either at their desk

working towards the launch or packed into the main mission control, to cheer on their boss. The Doctor was wearing his spacesuit and carrying the helmet.

Anji and Dave came skittering around a corner and almost collided with him.

'Shouldn't you be on that spaceship?' asked Anji, surprised to see him.

'Yes yes yes, but so should Dave... I just realised the implications of the DNA analysis we did.'

'See, I told you I should go,' Dave said, grinning.

'Don't start that again,' Anji told him sternly. She turned to the Doctor. 'What do you mean?' she asked.

'Dave's the best argument we have for the Kulan not to wipe out humankind. You see, the reason the DNA-converting agent wouldn't work is that there were traces of alien DNA in Dave in the first place,' explained the Doctor.

'You said that before.' Anji frowned. 'But what difference does that make?'

'But it's not just alien DNA – that's what I missed the first time – it was Kulan DNA.'

Dave was nodding. 'I get it – like the Minbari thing.'

Both the Doctor and Anji looked at him. 'What?' they said in unison.

'*Babylon 5*,' he explained. 'These aliens called off their war with Earth because they found that their souls were being reborn in humans.'

'I could never get into that show,' muttered the Doctor. 'All that business about godlike aliens disguised as angels. How unlikely! But then I've never really rated TV science fiction since they got rid of *Nightshade*...' He shook his head and returned to the subject in hand. 'Nevertheless the principle is the same: Dave here is evidence that the Kulan would be wiping out an offshoot of their own race; I'm sure they will call off the invasion if they can just examine Dave.'

'I'm up for it,' said Dave, enthusiastically.

Anji shrugged. 'Who can argue with destiny.'

The Doctor gestured for Dave to come with him. 'Come on then, we've got a spaceship to catch.'

Anji suddenly realised that they'd completely forgotten about the other Kulan. But before she could say anything, she felt a presence behind her and was grabbed around the neck by a powerful arm. She didn't need to look back to know that it was the alien. A jagged-edged knife was held at her throat. She noticed that it was covered with blood.

'Stop!' the Kulan shouted after the retreating figures.

Down the corridor the Doctor and Dave stopped and turned. 'Fray'kon!' shouted Dave. They both looked on, horrified, as they saw the Kulan holding

Anji hostage. A nearby monitor showed that the countdown had reached ten minutes.

Fray'kon spoke directly to the Doctor. 'I want your spacesuit, and your place on that ship.'

Dave looked at the Doctor, who shook his head sadly.

'OK, Fray'kon – whatever you say. Just let the woman go,' the Doctor said, speaking clearly and precisely.

The alien laughed. 'Do you think I'm a fool? Remove the spacesuit.'

The Doctor did as he was asked, as quickly as he could. The Kulan warrior pushed Anji forward. 'Pick up the suit and walk forward,' he ordered. 'Try anything clever and I'll gut you.'

Control's troops hit all three entrances to the complex at exactly 1530 hours; controlled explosions took out each security gate and three identical black people-movers sailed through before the smoke had cleared from the blasts. At the same time three further units broached the high perimeter walls and accessed the site, taking out CCTV cameras with a localised EMF pulse generator.

Leaving men to secure each exit, Williams and his people pressed on into the buildings, shutting down the telephone and computer communications systems as they went. Forty-five seconds after the initial incursion, Williams entered mission control and ordered a stop to all activity. The room fell silent save for the electronic burbling of the many computers and consoles. The countdown clock continued to tick down.

'Perhaps I didn't make myself clear: I want this countdown stopped – *now!*' barked Williams, and fired a single warning shot into the floor. An angry Chris Green leaned into a nearby microphone and addressed the crew of the Hopper.

'Hopper, this is mission control. We have a problem – we are no go for launch. That is no go for launch.'

Inside the Planet Hopper cabin the four would-be astronauts exchanged glances, and checked their own readouts.

'There's no technical problem,' commented Sa'Motta.

'Sounded to me like someone fired a shot in there,' offered Spear.

Tyler nodded and, reaching across to his communications console, he flipped a series of switches. 'Oh dear,' he said deadpan, 'We appear to have lost contact with mission control.'

Mission control was no longer silent: a raucous, angry static sound filled the air.

‘What the hell is that?’ demanded Williams.

Green shrugged. ‘There’s some kind of fault with the ship’s radio. All telemetry is down, our computer link went west when your people shut down our network and now the radio’s on the blink, too.’ Green tried not to smile as he passed on the news. ‘There’s no way to contact them now. . .’

Williams looked over at the countdown dock, now at about four minutes to launch.

‘Shut off the countdown, then,’ he ordered.

‘Sure, if it’ll make you feel better,’ Green answered. ‘But it won’t stop them launching. We passed full control over to the ship right about the time you people walked in here.’ He looked the intruder in the eye and smiled. ‘There’s no going back.’

Inside the Planet Hopper Tyler was making the same point to his three fellow travellers. ‘It’s up to us now and I say we go. Do you all agree?’

All three affirmed that they should go, with only Fitz adding a rider to the effect that they still lacked one passenger. ‘We should wait for the Doctor,’ he insisted.

‘Then he’d better get here soon,’ said Tyler. ‘Or it’ll be too late.’

Dave was finding that driving the small bus was very different from driving his beloved, but far from new, Mini. With an agonising crunch of gears, he had managed to get the bus moving and was now approaching the launch gantry.

In the back of the bus Fray’kon sat with his hostage, while the Doctor sat awkwardly in the middle of the vehicle, waiting for Fray’kon to release his hold on Anji. However, for the moment the alien’s hunting knife remained dangerously close to Anji’s throat.

The Doctor glanced around, looking for some opportunity to alter the situation in their favour. Dave watched in his rear-view mirror, and, seeing the Doctor’s readiness, he suddenly swerved violently. All of his passengers were thrown about like clothes in a tumble dryer. The Doctor recovered first and made a leap in the direction of the alien’s knife, which had fallen to the floor, but before he had covered half the distance Fray’kon was there, his hand curling round the knife’s handle. Fray’kon recovered his position and returned the blade to its threatening position.

‘Open the door,’ Fray’kon ordered. ‘Now! Or I’ll spill her blood all over this vehicle.’

Dave did as he was urged. The doors flapped open and suddenly Fray'kon's leg kicked out, catching the Doctor on the chest. The Doctor fell backwards, down the steps and out of the still moving bus. Dave could only watch with horror as the Doctor hit the concrete surface of the road and lay still. The prone figure didn't move at all as the image of it receded in Dave's mirror.

Anji looked at Dave, her eyes imploring him not to do anything else foolish or brave. Fray'kon sat Anji in the back of the bus and began climbing into the spacesuit.

Dave pulled up at the base of the tower. 'Last call for space,' he joked, but Anji could see the fear in his eyes. She watched in horror as Fray'kon moved swiftly forward to stand behind Dave. Later she would remember it happening too fast to recall the details but now the events unfurled as if in slow motion. Fray'kon brought up the hunting knife. Anji called out a warning, but her cry of 'Dave!' seemed to hang in the air as Fray'kon thrust the knife forward, through the chair Dave was sitting on and deep into the unsuspecting body of its occupant. Anji watched as her boyfriend's body convulsed, skewered to his seat by the alien's knife. He tried to speak but could only grunt, before blood began to run out of his mouth and he began to lose consciousness.

For Anji things seemed to snap back into normal time. Fray'kon was out of the bus and running for the tower before Anji could even move. She stumbled down the bus to reach Dave but it was clear that it was too late to do anything for him: Dave's blood was everywhere.

'Dave,' she began, her voice shaking with emotion.

'No,' he gasped. 'No... time. When... rockets fire this bus will... will fry. Get out of... here now. Run.' She could see that he was trying to be brave but his eyes gave away the terrible pain and fear he felt.

'But..' Anji found she couldn't move. She couldn't believe what was happening. It was a nightmare, a complete nightmare.

Somehow, Dave mustered the strength to say, through gritted teeth, 'For once in... your life don't... bloody argue,' he insisted. 'Go!'

Anji managed to get her legs to move and jumped from the bus, still looking at her dying boyfriend as she backed away from it. 'Love you,' he mouthed at her. 'You too!' she shouted, then turned and sprinted away, tears filling her eyes. She ran blindly, wildly, hating herself for leaving him but knowing she had no choice.

Inside the spacecraft the four members of the crew heard the clang as the hatch

closed below them. Fitz breathed a sigh of relief. The Doctor had made it with seconds to spare. Tyler watched the countdown clock as it reached the final twenty seconds.

'Right, gentlemen,' he announced, 'get ready for the ride of your lives.'

Spear closed his eyes and tried to convince himself that this was just the latest thing in thrill rides. Sa'Motta concentrated on the navigational controls, tuning himself into the control helmet. Fitz bit his lip and hoped the g-forces wouldn't be too painful. Tyler grinned broadly and hit the manual launch control.

And the powerful rocket engines throbbed into life.

Dave's eyes flickered open for one last time and he saw the rockets on the base of the Planet Hopper fire into life. What a view! he thought, and then died as the flames from the engines reached the bus which then exploded.

The force of the explosion knocked Anji to the ground. She guessed it was the bus and not the rocket that had exploded, but she didn't dare look back to see. All she wanted to do was to melt into the tarmac and never move again. But suddenly strong hands were helping her to her feet, a pair of intense blue-green eyes were looking into hers, and a powerful but kindly voice was telling her to run. And she ran for her life, hand in hand with the stranger called the Doctor, while behind her the rocket ship called the Planet Hopper broke free of its launch gantry and slowly but surely headed for space.



## Chapter Sixteen

# The Time Machine

Williams had watched the spaceship tearing into the afternoon sky and realised that they had failed in their prime objective. Immediately he ordered his people to withdraw. They left without a word of apology as quickly as they had arrived, leaving Tyler's staff bemused and stunned at what had happened. In the days that followed official complaints would be made, diplomatic phone lines would buzz with angry denials and counterclaims and, eventually, the whole incident would be classified, noted, filed and forgotten. For the moment, however, Williams and Kent were being hauled over the coals by Control for letting the alien get off the planet.

Although Control didn't know it, one alien was still stranded on Earth: the Doctor. He and Anji had managed to reach some cover and had watched, exhausted, as the spaceship had disappeared into the sky on a billowing blanket of smoke. Anji told the Doctor what had happened to Dave, her voice breaking as she heard herself say the words.

'I'm so sorry,' said the Doctor.

'Thank you,' replied Anji automatically, almost unaware that she had spoken.

The Doctor helped Anji to her feet and they walked back into the main building.

Inside mission control some kind of normality was re-establishing itself. With the spacecraft in flight the various specialists had their monitoring to do, and the desks were filled with people busy doing their small part to keep the mission going. A quiet, professional hum filled the room. From a commanding position on a raised platform at the back of the room Chris Green oversaw the entire operation. When the Doctor and Anji entered the room they were ushered over to join Green, who was more than a little surprised to see the Doctor.

'Aren't you meant to be on that thing?' he asked, pointing at the giant

viewscreen, which showed the rapidly disappearing view of the Planet Hopper.

‘Someone jumped the queue,’ replied the Doctor, dryly. ‘You’d better let Tyler know he’s got a stowaway.’

Green shook his head. ‘No can do. We’re in complete communication black out.’

The Doctor frowned. ‘Until they reach orbit?’

‘Until Tyler reactivates his end of the system. He switched us off when our visitors arrived,’ explained Green. ‘I guess he figured that if he didn’t hear the order to stop the launch then he wouldn’t have to,’ he speculated.

Suddenly Anji found her legs going wobbly and she staggered. The Doctor was quickly at her side, helping her to a seat. ‘You’ve had quite a shock. I think maybe we should get you home,’ he suggested.

Feeling quite weak, Anji nodded. She just wanted to get away from here, away from the place where Dave had... died. Angry with herself for caring, angry at Dave for dying, angry at the world for everything, she began to cry.

One of Tyler’s aides arranged for a car and driver to take Anji back to London. The Doctor opted to go with her.

‘Is there a number we can get you on when Tyler makes contact?’ asked Green.

The Doctor shook his head, almost uninterestedly. ‘I’ll call you,’ he offered vaguely.

Anji scribbled a number on a piece of paper. ‘My mobile,’ she explained. ‘I always carry it.’

Green took the note and returned to his post, as Anji and the Doctor left without a backward glance.

It seemed to be a long drive to London, a drive during which neither the Doctor or Anji said more than a few words. Anji snuggled into the corner of the rear seat, alternately dozing and sobbing, exhausted emotionally and physically from the events of the past few days. The Doctor sat next to her, unsure how to comfort her. Outside, night had fallen, so by the time they pulled up at Anji’s flat it was dark. Anji had entered the flat on autopilot, indicated a sofa the Doctor could sleep on and disappeared into her own room.

The Doctor lay on the sofa, fully dressed, and tried to sleep, but his mind was racing. Today he’d come close to getting off this planet – close but not close enough. Although his memory stubbornly refused to let out its secrets, he

knew instinctively that his rightful place was somewhere out there, if only he could get there.

Fitz was the key. Fitz had known him before. . . before whatever accident or trauma had robbed him of his self-knowledge. But Fitz was in the spacecraft leaving the planet and he was stuck here. If only there was another way to get into space, but the Doctor had run out of options. He'd reached the end of the line. Eventually, feeling terribly despondent, he fell into a fitful sleep, and endured a sequence of dreams full of strange monsters and ghouls from the unreachable depths of his mind.

Anji woke up and for a brief joyful moment forgot the horrors of the previous day. Then she registered Dave's absence and the memory hit her like a physical blow to her stomach. Mustering all her willpower, she managed to get out of bed and into the blessed relief of the shower. She stood under the almost-too-hot water for longer than was strictly necessary, trying to wash away her weariness, her anger and her depression. She dressed quickly and breakfasted on orange juice and cereal, before allowing herself to think properly about what she would do next.

It was only after she had washed up the breakfast things and opened the curtains in the lounge that she realised that the Doctor had disappeared. She'd hardly been awake when she had suggested that he stay the night on the sofa, and she'd not given him a second thought so far this morning. Where the hell could he have gone?

Anji sat down with a pad of paper and tried to work out her best plan of action. She could go to work, but she didn't think she could concentrate on anything much while Tyler's space mission was still unresolved. She could go back to Oxford to see what would happen first hand, but without the Doctor she felt she had no place there.

Perhaps she should find the Doctor. He knew what was going on better than anyone. At the back of her mind Anji knew that she also had to deal with the reality of Dave's death, to let his family know, to arrange some kind of burial. But right now she couldn't face that. No, she decided, the best thing to do right now was find the Doctor. But where in a city the size of London could he be?

Sheff woke feeling like death. His mouth felt like an overfull ashtray, his eyes were refusing to focus and there was a loud banging in his head. Sheff rubbed his eyes and looked around. The bar was a mess. There was no way they'd be opening at eleven. The banging persisted. He got to his feet intending to

seek out some aspirin but as he crossed the room he realised that the banging was coming from the entrance doors. He pulled back the bolts and admitted a fit-looking Asian girl with a vaguely familiar face.

‘Is the Doctor here?’ she asked earnestly.

Sheff coughed to clear his throat and attempted to reply, but his first try produced little more than a croak. He tried again.

‘I don’t know,’ he confessed. ‘We had a bit of a session last night. If he came back to the flat I don’t know that I’d have seen him.’

‘Can I come in and look?’ she persisted.

Sheff remembered now that the girl had been with the Doctor when he left the other night. He felt a little bit embarrassed at the state of his bar but sensed that she wasn’t interested in anything other than the Doctor. ‘Sure, come on in.’ He waved her through in the direction of the passage that led to the stairs.

‘It’s OK – I know the way,’ she said and hurried through.

Sheff watched her go and wondered why the Doctor had come back. Had he perhaps changed his mind? He decided that he had better get the bar into some kind of shape and started to clear some tables.

Anji found the Doctor in the room with the bizarre police-box wardrobe. He was sitting at his desk, looking grim-faced and defeated.

‘You could have left a note,’ she began.

‘I didn’t know what to say.’ He shrugged. In the short time she had known him, Anji had not seen him as low as this: he seemed to have lost a vital spark; some inner energy had gone.

‘So what happens now?’ she asked.

The Doctor shrugged again. ‘Tyler’s spacecraft will reach orbit; Sa’Motta will make contact with his people and they’ll make their decision. If they invade I expect we’ll know about it soon enough.’

‘But what about Fray’kon? If he’s on board he could do anything. He might already have killed them all.’ Anji couldn’t believe the lack of response she was getting; it was almost as if the Doctor didn’t care any more. ‘Did you hear me? Fitz’s life could be in danger.’

The anger was sudden and unexpected.

‘Do you think I don’t know that? But what can I do?’ The Doctor waved an angry arm, pointing up at the ceiling. ‘It’s all happening up there and we’re stuck down here. There’s nothing we can do. We’re spectators now. All we can do is wait.’

The Doctor slumped back in his seat.

Anji shook her head. 'Bollocks.'

The Doctor looked up, amused despite his mood. 'I'm sorry?'

Anji looked at him with a firm expression, the one she saved for investors who'd suffered major losses.

'You heard me. You're talking bollocks. The man Fitz described to me wouldn't just give up like this. There must be something you can do.'

The Doctor just shook his head sadly, his anger already evaporated. 'Not from here. I need to be where the action is. What do you suggest I do? Hitchhike into space?'

Anji shrugged, unable to answer. Then she remembered something.

'Didn't Fitz say you used to travel together... in some kind of spacecraft?' At the time she had thought Fitz was joking, but after the events of the past few days it now seemed possible that he'd been telling the truth.

The Doctor frowned. 'Yes, yes, yes... some kind of space-time ship.' He looked over at the police box standing in the corner. Anji followed his gaze.

'That thing?'

The Doctor stood up and walked over to the blue box, reaching out to touch its wooden surface. From within there was an almost inaudible hum. Anji joined him.

'Touch it,' he demanded, suddenly wide-eyed. 'It feels...'

'Alive?' said Anji, as she felt the slight vibration for herself. 'But what is it?'

'Shall we take a look?' suggested the Doctor, a degree of animation returning to his face. He pulled a key from his pocket and placed it in the lock. Anji thought he looked like a schoolboy about to open a Christmas present. There was anticipation in his eyes, excitement and hope. Somehow it was addictive. She felt herself holding her breath.

The Doctor turned the key and for a split second Anji felt disappointed. There was a horrible feeling of anticlimax as the door opened to reveal a dark interior that she would expect of a box this size – but then she realised that there was more darkness than seemed strictly possible.

The Doctor stepped into the darkness and Anji followed, immediately sensing that she had entered something bigger than the box. She felt as if she had walked into some cavern-like space, cold and vast.

The Doctor was already an impossible step or two ahead of her. Anji realised that the darkness was becoming less complete: there was a slight glow of light appearing but no obvious source. She stepped forward to stand next to the Doctor, who was looking around him in mute fascination. She noted that his

eyes were blazing with a strange inner light, as if whatever was happening around them was affecting him also.

A brighter light appeared in front of them, brighter than anything else, making Anji put a protective hand in front of her eyes. She watched through the slits of her fingers as a shape appeared in the light, a mass of something that was slowly but surely growing into something more definite – a mushroom-shaped table.

The darkness was almost completely gone now, and walls were forming from thin air around them, giving the void some form. The walls were decorated with roundels, and appeared to be made of a pale wood. The room that was being defined was basically round and at regular intervals there were arches leading into other areas.

The mushroom-shaped table became a more solid object: it was now six-sided with a glass column in the centre of it, within which resided strange glass tubes. Anji watched, amazed, as dials and buttons and switches were extruded from the smooth surfaces of the mushroom, giving it the appearance of a control panel.

Anji realised that the echoing silence that had greeted them when the door had first opened had been replaced by an electronic hum, which seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere at the same time. It was melodic and soothing, a sound that somehow belonged in this strange place.

The Doctor stepped forward towards the control console. A spring-mounted monitor screen had appeared from the impossibly high ceiling, which had also just formed. The Doctor reached out a hand and as if in answer a red-knobbed lever materialised directly under his palm. The Doctor grabbed the lever and pulled.

Anji looked round and saw that the portal they had come through had become two thick, roundel-decorated doors, which were now closing. They were set up three small stairs, on the opposite side of the room from a pair of wooden doors that led to. . . who knew what? There were four arches, two on each side, leading to massive alcoves. In one Anji could see a mass of filing cabinets and chests, in another shelves of books, ancient and modern, in another some kind of kitchen, in the last a mad professor's laboratory complete with test tubes and Bunsen burners.

Anji looked across to the Doctor, who was grinning broadly – the grin of a man returning home after a long absence. She was glad that he was there: if she'd witnessed this on her own she would have doubted her sanity. Finally, the Doctor spoke, his voice full of awe and joy and astonishment.

'It's bigger on the inside than the outside,' he exclaimed.

Anji tried to play it cool, as if this sort of thing happened every day. 'Yeah, I noticed that,' she replied. 'But what is it?'

'My home, my Ship, my...' the Doctor struggled to remember. 'My TARDIS!' he said triumphantly.

'But what's that when it's at home?' asked Anji, still finding it difficult to believe her eyes. 'Some kind of theatrical illusion?'

'It's a space-time craft of course,' the Doctor stated with conviction.

'Of course.' Anji was beginning to think she had lost her mind – this was all getting too silly. Everything she'd been through since running into Fitz in Brussels had been pretty strange but this new experience had taken the weirdness factor to a new level. Although she was finding it all rather incredible she was sensible enough not to panic. Her best bet for survival, she decided, was to accept it all at face value and to try to make some sense of it later. She took a deep breath, calmed herself down and tried to act as if everything was completely normal.

She looked round and saw that the Doctor was exploring this room with the strange console in it. On one side of the room, between two of the arches, a sofa had materialised. The Doctor was sitting on it experimentally, checking its bounciness. Next to the sofa a bust of Napoleon stood on a short plinth. The Doctor jumped up and patted the Emperor's hat, then ducked into the alcove that was filled with chests and began pulling open drawers at random.

'Paper, mercury, postcards, a yo-yo,' he announced as he found various things. 'Oh, look at this!' he exclaimed, pulling out what looked to Anji like a piece of a dentist's armoury. The Doctor found a control on the device and activated it, causing it to emit a buzzing sound. The Doctor wandered over to the console and used the silver device to adjust some instrument.

'I thought that looked a bit loose,' he muttered before pocketing the tool.

He popped through another arch into the laboratory and examined some of the equipment. Anji watched him with some amusement. He looked more than ever like an overgrown schoolkid with a new toy. While he was looking at the scientific stuff she walked through the opposite arch into the book-filled area. She gasped, as it became clear that it was much larger than she could have guessed looking in from the console room. It looked like some kind of optical illusion, with shelving disappearing into the far distance. She took a glance at some of the books on the nearest shelves – ancient dusty tomes that would not have looked out of place in a stately home – placed side by side with large, modern coffee-table books. Paperbacks were stuffed at random throughout the

collection. There appeared to be no order whatsoever. Anji had once dated a librarian when she'd been a student; poor Marcus would have had a fit if he was faced with this level of disorganisation.

Anji came out of the reference room to find that back in the console room the Doctor's exploration had reached the closed double doors set in the wall opposite the external doors. As she approached him he flung the doors open, revealing a long corridor that seemed to go on for miles. Like the console room the walls of the corridor were decorated with roundels, and appeared to give access to countless more rooms, containing who knew what? Somewhere in the distance the corridor reached a junction, where it branched off in three directions. At various points staircases led off both upwards and downwards to unseen areas. The ship was impossibly, magnificently, unknowably *huge*.

'Shall we explore?' He looked at Anji with a wide smile.

'Explore? I thought this was your ship?' replied Anji suspiciously.

'It is. But I've not seen it for so very long... Things have changed...' explained the Doctor.

'But you can operate it?' Anji persisted.

'Of course.' The Doctor seemed to be a bit defensive but Anji was prepared to let it go. She tried to get his attention back to the matter in hand.

'Then surely our priority is getting "out there", isn't it?' she pointed out. 'To get where the action is?'

The Doctor shut the double doors and returned to the console. 'You're right of course. We have work to do.'

Anji breathed a sigh of relief, and watched him carefully as he studied the controls. Although he seemed to have totally recovered from his depression she was still not entirely sure he knew what he was doing. For all his claims to be at home he had seemed as surprised as she had by what had happened when they'd walked through the door.

'A short hop into earth orbit,' announced the Doctor and pushed his sleeves up like a concert pianist before a performance. Anji wondered who he was talking to – the ship itself perhaps. The Doctor set some controls and then reached for a large lever.

'Shouldn't I find some kind of seat?' asked Anji.

'Oh, I don't think so,' replied the Doctor and pulled the control.

Anji wasn't sure that he had answered her with total confidence but gave it little thought. An amazing cacophony filled the room as the ship's engines came to life. The glass column in the centre of the control console began to move up and down and the noise of the engines seemed to match the movement, rising



and falling in pitch in perfect rhythm. The sound built in volume, seeming to groan with effort. But despite the noise there was no sense of movement, no shaking, no clue that they had gone anywhere. Anji wondered if this was normal and looked across at the Doctor for reassurance, but he was lost to the moment, his eyes blazing with a wild, almost animal joy.

Even without the mammoth hangover the noise would have been intolerable, thought Sheff as he climbed the stairs. It sounded as if a herd of asthmatic elephants were trapped in the Doctor's office. Sheff flung open the door to see what the hell was going on. To his amazement the room was empty: no sign of the Doctor or the Asian girl he'd sent up earlier. The noise was louder here and seemed to be coming from the direction of the Doctor's peculiar blue box. The light on the top of the box was flashing in time with the waves of noise and the box itself was fading in colour. No, Sheff corrected himself, it wasn't the colour that was fading: it was the box itself. He could begin to see the corner of the room behind the box, or, more precisely, *through* it. Before his disbelieving eyes the box completely vanished into thin air, leaving nothing but a square mark on the carpet and a final echo of the incredible elephantine trumpeting.

Sheff shook his head and crossed to where the box had been, but it was no illusion: the corner of the room was now completely empty. Sheff didn't know exactly what combination of drink and drugs last night had contributed to this frighteningly lifelike delusion, but he was sure he'd never indulge again. He sank to the floor and closed his eyes and tried to pretend it had never happened.

Anji sat at the farmhouse pine table and sipped at her tea. The Doctor was busy making a fresh pot at the worktop. From this angle she could have been in a kitchen in some house in the country – the window even gave the illusion of looking out over a beautifully landscaped garden – but if she turned her head and looked back through the archway she could see back into the strange futuristic console room and watch the glass dome as it pumped away rhythmically.

'Nice kitchen,' she commented.

'Yes. Redecorated well, hasn't she?' replied the Doctor.

'Who?' asked Anji, confused again.

'The TARDIS,' explained the Doctor. 'She's been repairing herself, rebuilding, regenerating and redecorating. I think she's done a wonderful job, don't you?'

‘Are you suggesting that the ship is sentient?’ Even after everything she had seen today, Anji wasn’t prepared to believe that.

‘No, not exactly. But she is my oldest friend, my first companion. All I have left of. . .’ He hesitated.

‘What?’ prompted Anji.

‘Home,’ he concluded. ‘Wherever that is.’

Anji looked at him, sensing a sadness beneath his good humour. ‘You’ve no idea where that might be?’

He shook his head, his long hair brushing his shoulders. She’d have to talk to him about getting it cut or wearing it in a pigtail or something.

‘This is a ship that travels in space and time; home could be anywhere, any time. Perhaps I’m from the future. . .’ he speculated.

Anji glanced round at the amazing craft she was sitting in. ‘That might make sense,’ she commented.

The Doctor continued his theory. ‘Perhaps I’m an exile from the forty-ninth century.’

Anji frowned as a thought hit her. ‘Do you think someone might have deliberately taken your memory? Think of the things we can do in the way of brain surgery now – in the future anything might be possible.’

‘But why would anyone want to take my past from me?’ he wondered. ‘Maybe Fitz will know.’

Mention of Fitz reminded Anji of the Kulan threat. ‘How long will this journey take?’ she asked.

The Doctor shrugged and looked a bit vague. ‘I’m not really sure,’ he confessed.

Anji frowned. She expected a better answer than that. She looked over at the console and noted that the glass tube was slowing. A more muted version of the take-off sound began to fill the room.

‘Looks like we’ve arrived,’ announced the Doctor.

Anji finished her tea and got up. ‘But where, exactly?’

The Doctor crossed to the console and checked some readings, then reached for the door control. ‘Let’s find out,’ he suggested.

‘Hold on – isn’t there any way to find out what’s out there before we go through those doors?’ Anji pointed to the TV monitor hanging on its springs. ‘Does this ship have CCTV?’

The Doctor nodded and tried to find the control to activate the scanner, flicking a few switches at random. Suddenly the screen flickered into life. It showed

a dark hold, marked with alien calligraphy. Whatever it was it was certainly not the Doctor's office above the St Louis' Bar.

'Is that where we are now?' asked Anji seeking some confirmation.

'Looks fairly quiet, doesn't it?'

'But I thought we were going to try to catch up with Fitz in the Planet Hopper?'

'The TARDIS has brought us here for a reason, Anji. Have some faith in the old girl. I think this is probably one of the Kulan ships.'

'One of the invasion fleet!' Anji was more than slightly appalled. If he was right, this madman had taken them into the heart of the enemy.

'Perhaps you'd better wait here while I take a little look around,' suggested the Doctor. 'Don't touch anything.' Without a backward glance he bounded up the stairs and exited, closing the doors behind him.

Suddenly alone, Anji looked around her nervously. Touch anything? No way, she thought: anything could happen. She wandered back into the kitchen. At least she felt able to make a cup of tea. She filled the kettle and tried to pretend she wasn't hiding on an alien spacecraft that was about to invade her planet.

# Chapter Seventeen

## The Hidden

Fitz had never had much time for roller coasters: hurling your body around at speed in various directions had never appealed as entertainment. He had once ridden something called the Wall of Death at a fair. That had been a circular wheel-mounted room in which you stood with your back to the wall while it rotated at great speeds until it reached its maximum velocity, at which point the floor dropped away, leaving you pinned to the walls like a fly on flypaper. That experience had been the nearest he had come to feeling anything like the g-force he felt during the ascent of the Planet Hopper, and, to be honest, it didn't come anywhere close.

The launch seemed to go on for ever, although the onboard chronometer showed that it had been a matter of minutes rather than the hours it felt like. At first Fitz had thought something had gone wrong: the ship's violent vibrations seemed to threaten its structural integrity, but a glance over at Tyler had shown no sign of concern on their captain's face. Slowly the rocket had pulled free of the gantry and headed for the sky. As the ship climbed the g-force exerted on the crew grew. Fitz felt as if he was being pulled back into his seat by a planet reluctant to see him go. He could feel the skin on his face stretch taut – the ultimate in instant plastic surgery. For a second or two he actually blacked out and then – suddenly and without warning – it was over and they were free of Mother Earth's grasp.

Weightlessness was not a new experience to Fitz – he had his escapades with the Doctor to thank for that – so while Marshall Spear floated around like an out-of-control barrage balloon, Fitz was able to move around the cabin with a deep-sea diver's ease. Fitz noticed that Spear was in quite a bad way.

'I think you should take a lie down,' he suggested. Looking pale and wan, Spear was only too happy to concur. Fitz took him through to the sleeping quarters and helped him secure himself in one of the sleeping cots with the Velcro fastening straps. 'Try to grab a few winks,' Fitz said sympathetically. 'You'll feel better in a while.'

The big guy grinned bravely. 'I'll feel better when I weigh something again,' he growled.

Tyler looked over at Sa'Motta who seemed relieved to finally be off planet Earth. 'Have you tried making contact?' he asked.

Sa'Motta nodded. 'But I've had no reply as yet. The main fleet will probably be in the shadow of the nearest planet, so I've made contact with a communications beacon, which should relay my message when the fleet are next in its range.'

Tyler looked over at his own communications equipment. 'I wonder if I should risk opening up radio contact with base.'

'What do you think was going on down there?' asked the alien.

'I'm not sure but it didn't sound friendly. I thought I heard an American voice. Perhaps NASA dropped by to enforce their monopoly,' he postulated. 'It was certainly someone trying to stop the flight and it's a little too late for that now.'

In the cargo hold of the Planet Hopper, Fray'kon regained consciousness. Without a secure seat for take-off he had been thrown around during the launch and had sustained a nasty head injury. Fray'kon dabbed a cautious hand at the wound, and found it wet with purple-red blood. He felt a little dizzy but it was nothing that he couldn't handle. Once he had nearly lost an arm in a battle and had then marched for three days through hostile jungle to reach his base camp and medical attention. Fray'kon was not going to let a minor scratch hinder his activities. He was more annoyed at the loss of his hunting knife, which he had been forced to leave buried in the back of that human. Although trained to kill with his bare hands, Fray'kon preferred to use a weapon and he set about looking for something that he might be able to use in combat. He may have damaged himself slightly but the next Kulan blood to be spilled would be that of the traitor Sa'Motta.

Weakened by the injury but determined not to fail in his mission, Fray'kon located the crew lockers and inside the one labelled TYLER he found just what he needed: a Swiss Army knife. He checked the blade – not as sharp as his hunting knife but it would do. He pocketed the weapon and continued his exploration of the ship.

He looked out of the nearest porthole and located the transmitter array. As he had expected, it was located at the side of the craft, well away from the engines. He traced back the connections and saw that the wiring to the transmitters

passed through the cargo bay to reach the cockpit, making them vulnerable to sabotage. Fray'kon began lifting panels, looking for the wiring that enabled the crew to contact their base. While working with Dudoin he had been privy to all the data the Frenchman's spies had managed to accrue about Tyler's ship. At one point they had seen a complete computerised blueprint of the Planet Hopper and Fray'kon had made a point of memorising the most salient details. With that knowledge he was soon able to locate the communications cables he was looking for.

Using his new-found weapon he hacked through the wires. Now that he had cut the crew off from contact with the planet, he could complete his plan. First he would deal with the traitorous Sa'Motta and then he would take command of the ship.

Tyler flicked switches in alarm. One moment he had been talking to Chris Green in mission control and the next the whole system had gone dead. He checked and rechecked his readings but nothing appeared to be wrong with his equipment.

Sa'Motta had also spotted the systems failure. 'Everything's fine in here – but nothing's reaching the transmitter.'

'That's not possible,' Tyler swore angrily. Although the final preparations had been rushed he had been sure that every safeguard and systems check had been completed in full – how could such a vital system just fail like this?

Fitz popped his head through the hatch from the sleeping area. 'Problem?' he asked, sensing the tension in the air.

Tyler explained what had just happened: how he had reactivated communications only to have them suddenly cut off again without explanation.

'Loose wiring?' suggested Fitz.

'It seems unlikely.' Tyler was troubled but he couldn't put a finger on exactly what it was that was worrying him. The communications problem was a worry but there was something else, some other factor he had ignored. Suddenly it came to him.

'Where's your friend the Doctor? Shouldn't he have come through by now?'

Fitz shrugged. 'Knowing the Doctor he's probably sitting in front of a porthole counting the stars. I'll go and find him, shall I?'

'I think that might be a good idea,' Tyler agreed.

Sa'Motta climbed out of his chair. 'I'll go and check the radio transmitters. If there's a fault it's going to prevent me hearing from my people, and I don't think we can afford any delay in doing that.'

Tyler nodded in agreement. 'Let me know if I can do anything,' he said.

Sa'Motta pulled himself through the hatch and followed Fitz down into the rest of the ship. Outside the cockpit was a long tube known as the central corridor. It had exits on all sides to the galley and the various sleeping areas. At the end of the cabin there were further hatches to the cargo bay and the stores.

The Planet Hopper was not a large vehicle, but it did have much more space inside it than a NASA space shuttle – room enough for Fray'kon to find himself a dark corner as a place of concealment when he heard approaching voices. Someone entered the cargo bay.

'Doctor!' a voice called. It was the human, Fitz.

'Perhaps he did not make it aboard,' another voice suggested. The traitor, Sa'Motta.

'Someone did – we heard the door slam, didn't we?' Fitz pointed out.

Sa'Motta shrugged. 'He can't be far away, then. Perhaps he lost consciousness in the ascent?'

Fray'kon could see Sa'Motta now as he moved forward towards a trailing severed cable, floating in the zero gravity.

'Fitz!' Sa'Motta called, but then from his dark corner of the cargo bay Fray'kon made his move, brandishing a small but deadly knife. Sa'Motta had no time to react further before Fray'kon had slit his throat, releasing a wave of blood, which formed bubbles and floated away.

Fitz turned from the area in which he was looking for the Doctor and saw Fray'kon, a nasty-looking wound to his head, pushing Sa'Motta's lifeless body away from him.

Fitz pulled himself back through the hatch to the next compartment and hurried 'up' the corridor towards the cockpit. Metal grab bars at regular intervals allowed him to haul himself along at considerable speed.

'Tyler!' he shouted, 'Fray'kon's on board. He just killed Sa'Motta!'

Lying in his cot, Marshall Spear heard Fitz's shout and became alert in an instant. A hostile was on board and their friendly alien had been killed. Now Tyler and Fitz were in danger and Spear wasn't going to allow space sickness to stop him doing his job.

With a supreme effort of will he pulled himself from the bunk and entered the main corridor of the ship just as Fitz flashed past him. Seconds later the

alien was there, and Spear was able to surprise him. He pushed himself away from the hatch, and grabbed the Kulan from behind, locking his arms behind his back.

Fitz shot into the cockpit head first, like a circus performer fired from a canon, and found Tyler waiting for him.

‘Can we secure this entrance?’ he asked, breathlessly.

Tyler shook his head. ‘Where’s Marshall?’ he demanded.

‘Back there.’ Fitz indicated the corridor behind him.

Tyler joined him at the hatch and they watched as Marshall wrestled with Fray’kon. There was nothing they could do to help him; there was no room for a third party in the struggle.

On Earth the contest would have been over in seconds. The alien warrior was strong and powerfully built but he was a lightweight compared with the ex-NFL star. In space the zero gravity was proving an equaliser, if not giving Fray’kon an actual advantage. It was clear that he had fought in such conditions before; however, for Spear this was as alien a territory as the wilds of Buffalo had been for his Texan teammates.

Marshall had had the advantage of surprise and had secured the alien in an armlock but he had been unable to maintain the hold as he found himself bouncing off the walls. Fray’kon broke free and used the walls to launch himself back at Spear, knocking the big black man backwards. The alien had dropped the Swiss Army knife at Marshall’s first attack and now it floated just out of the reach of both combatants.

Fitz leaned into the passageway and stretched out his arm, trying to reach out and grab the knife he’d seen drop from Fray’kon’s hand, but a sudden wild kick from the Kulan caught him in the face and he fell back inside the cockpit.

Fitz scrambled back to his viewing position and found that the knife had apparently vanished. Fitz asked Tyler if he had seen who had retrieved it but the American just shook his head.

Spear hauled his assailant close and began thumping the alien’s head against the nearest wall again and again. The deep cut to Fray’kon’s head that Fitz had noticed in the cargo hold began to bleed afresh. Spear seemed to sense the opportunity to end the fight but it was Fray’kon who made the final move, thrusting his right arm up, ripping through Spear’s neck with the Swiss Army knife. Human and Kulan blood filled the corridor in bubbles, and both Tyler



and Fitz had to turn away from the carnage. Spear gave out an unholy scream, which was cut short as blood choked his voice.

Fray'kon roared with victory and slashed away at the dying Spear with the knife, cutting him again and again in a blood-frenzy.

Tyler staggered back to the controls. Fitz watched him, amazed. 'What the hell are you doing?' he asked.

'Taking us back down,' replied the American. 'Can you hold him off for thirty seconds?'

'What with? A few jokes and a song? Haven't you got any weapons in here?' Fitz was desperate but there was absolutely nothing in sight that he could use to defend himself.

Fitz realised that the sounds of the struggle in the corridor had abated: either Fray'kon had been as badly injured as Spear, or any moment he would be making an appearance in the cockpit looking for victim number three. The sudden silence was worse than that frantic grunting that had accompanied the fight.

'Sorry this was meant to be a peace mission – I didn't want to come out here armed to the teeth!' Tyler explained tersely as he concentrated on overriding the programmed flight plan. 'Can you see what's happening out there?'

Reluctantly, Fitz poked his head through the circular hatch that led to the main corridor. He could see Marshall Spear's lifeless body floating in a cloud of blood bubbles but there was no sign of Fray'kon at all.

'Oh, terrific,' muttered Fitz to himself. And then he remembered that in zero gravity there is no such thing as up and down in any absolute terms and craned his head to look up. To his horror he found himself looking straight into the inverted blood-stained face of Fray'kon. Fitz tried to back away but it was too late: Fray'kon grabbed him with one powerful arm and hauled him out of the hatch. With his free hand he applied the Swiss Army knife to Fitz's neck.

Fray'kon let himself float down from his hiding position, keeping the point of the knife biting into Fitz's flesh all the time. He kicked out at the back of Fitz's knees and pushed him into the cockpit.

Tyler didn't look up from his controls. 'Well, did you find him?'

'In a manner of speaking,' answered Fitz bitterly.

Tyler turned round and saw the situation. Fray'kon, his blood-covered face looking like something out of a nightmare, was holding Fitz at knifepoint; it would take the smallest movement on the alien's part to kill his hostage.

Tyler, realising that the game was up, said, 'Let me guess: you want me to fly to Cuba?'

Just point this thing in the direction of the planet you call Mars, Earthman. I want to rejoin my people.'

Fitz tried to be brave. 'Hey, don't risk the world on my behalf.'

Tyler shook his head solemnly. 'Too many people have already died. Dave, Marshall, Sa'Motta. . . Your friend the Doctor?' He looked at Fray'kon for confirmation.

The alien just shrugged. 'I left him on the ground. He wasn't moving. If I didn't kill him your engines did when you launched,' he stated casually.

Fitz had been in a cold state of fear ever since he had been captured, but this latest news just made it worse. No Doctor, no future, he figured. Maybe he'd be better off if Tyler was to let the alien cut his throat.

Tyler, however, was obviously not prepared to have another death on his conscience. 'Setting course for Mars,' he announced.

Fitz tried to calm himself down. At least while they remained alive there was still hope. And still a possibility that Sa'Motta's and Spear's deaths would not have occurred for nothing.

Tyler was preparing to fire the manoeuvring rockets, but before he could complete the action the entire ship lurched violently. 'What the hell?' he began.

'Turbulence?' suggested Fitz.

'Outside the atmosphere? I don't think so, son.' Tyler studied his instruments in amazement. 'We're moving out of orbit,' he announced. 'But I don't know how. . .'

Fray'kon began to laugh, a loud ugly sound, a laugh of a victor. 'It is the Kulan fleet of course. I believe this vessel has just become the first ship to be captured in the glorious Kulan invasion of the planet Earth.'

Tyler and Fitz exchanged looks. It appeared that they – and the rest of the human race – had run out of time.

# Chapter Eighteen

## Strange Invaders

Hak'et had supervised the capture of the human's spaceship personally. It had been relatively simple to lock on to the craft and to bring it into one of the cavernous hangars in the base of their battle cruiser. The news that Koy'Guin's cousin, Fray'kon, was on board was an unexpected bonus. Hak'et had elected to be there in person to greet the returning hero.

The human space vehicle was dwarfed in the hangar. Surrounded by a squadron of short-range fighter craft, it looked like a child's toy compared with the massive war machines of the Kulan. A squad of warriors had surrounded the craft and were waiting for Hak'et's arrival before attempting to open the spaceship. Fray'kon must have been watching from within, because as soon as Hak'et reached the craft the hatch popped open and the long-lost Kulan warrior ushered two humans out. A cheer broke out as Fray'kon appeared in the hatch and saluted his people.

Hak'et sent a quartet of warriors to take the two humans to a holding cell and stepped forward to greet Fray'kon in person.

'Welcome home,' he said.

'It's good to be back,' confessed Fray'kon. 'But I have much to report which should not wait. Have the Council been alerted?'

'They await you now,' Hak'et told him. 'Will your report recommend invasion?' he asked, unable to contain his curiosity.

Fray'kon looked grave as he answered. 'Ten Kulan were sent to Earth, only I have returned. The humans killed all of the rest of the party. They are savages, primitives; they do not inhabit that world: they infest it. We shall burn them from the face of the planet.'

Hak'et led Fray'kon out of the hangar and towards the council chamber. The sooner he could persuade the Council of Three of the facts, the sooner the invasion could begin.

The Kulan battleship was vast but underpopulated. The majority of the inva-

sion force still slept in their cryogenic bunks, and the TARDIS had no trouble finding a quiet place to materialise. The dying strains of the time machine's engines left the cavernous hold as silent as it had been before its arrival. The blue telephone-box exterior sat partly in shadow in a corner of the service corridor and after a few moments the door opened and the Doctor stepped out cautiously.

He looked back at the police box, so clearly out of place in this location, and yet somehow so right. He patted the shell affectionately as he closed the door behind him. His memory was still as erratic as ever but he knew with every fibre of his body that he had done this before, many times. Arriving somewhere in the TARDIS, stepping out to find who knew what – this had been part of his life for so long, he was sure of it. He could recall one hundred and thirteen years of existence on planet Earth, over a century in which he had never grown a day older, and he was certain that he had lived as many years again, if not more, before that. And in that time, currently lost to his memory, this was what he had done time and time again: explored the cosmos from a space-time craft disguised as a police box. He may not know where he came from or why or how, but he knew that this was *who* he was, and he was happy to be back. Feeling more himself – whoever he was – than he had for years, the Doctor set off to explore wherever it was that the TARDIS had brought him.

Perhaps he was out of practice, perhaps he was just unlucky, but he got no further than the second corridor before a trio of armed Kulan warriors appeared from nowhere and ordered him to stop. Despite the obvious danger, the Doctor couldn't help smiling.

'Take me to your leader,' he said through barely suppressed laughter.

The Kulan ignored his laughter, probably assuming him to be some kind of congenital idiot, and led him away.

The Kulan Council of Three were operating in fairly reduced circumstances. Back home the council chambers were grandiose affairs, with huge intricately carved benches, public galleries and dramatic lighting. Council meetings were broadcast throughout the Kulan Empire and were considered by many to be the best entertainment available. Here on the flagship of the fleet things were organised with a different priority: space was given over to military needs – stores, hardware, training facilities, cryogenic chambers for the foot soldiers. The Council of Three had to make do with a converted briefing room and sat on hard chairs behind plain desks. Nevertheless the Three still commanded respect: they were, after all, the final arbiters as to whether an invasion would

go ahead or not.

The military representative was General-Commander Rama'ge (retired), a veteran of five successful invasions, who had lost a leg on the battlefield in one legendary campaign and still taken the planet. Rama'ge was considered a hard-nosed military man through and through. He was new to this fleet and it was generally agreed that he could be relied upon to vote for invasion. A female Kulan named Gothran represented the economists. little was known about her, save of course for her familial connections, which linked her directly to one of the oldest and most respected Kulan families. Although she was chiefly a number-cruncher, rumour had it that she had argued in the Kulan Congress that the massive cost of maintaining the invasion fleets could be justified only if they continued to take new planets into the Empire, an attitude that suggested that she might be more sympathetic to voting for an invasion than against one. The Kulan who were circulating these rumours took heart from the fact that the target planet had obviously reached a sufficient level of technology to have some basic space-travel capability, suggesting a certain level of mineral and economic richness to the planet.

The final vote lay with the religious representative, a monk named Brother Fa'man, whose well-known weaknesses of the flesh laid him wide open to blackmail. The only remaining question regarding his vote was which of the opposing forces had the more incriminating evidence against him. Given Fa'man's breadth of sinning, across a number of worlds, the betting in the ranks was that it would be a close thing.

Fa'man, Gothran and Rama'ge were waiting for Fray'kon with a great sense of anticipation. The failure of the evaluation team to report before now had meant that the trio had been stuck here light years from the homeworld for three times as long as they had anticipated, and they wanted to go home. Whatever evidence Fray'kon would present, the trio had agreed on one thing: their decision would be made quickly.

Fray'kon entered the room and stood before the Council, head bent low.

Fa'man shuffled uncomfortably in his seat. 'I think we can dispense with the normal formalities, Commander Fray'kon. We just want to hear your report.'

Gothran coughed and intervened. 'I understand that the rest of the evaluation team are dead.' Fray'kon nodded. 'And did Economist Sa'Motta manage to compile a report?' she asked.

Fray'kon shook his head gravely. 'I'm very sorry ma'am, Economist Sa'Motta was the first of our party to be viciously murdered by the humans.' He noted

without smiling that his words had the expected result on the faces of the Council.

'I can and shall submit my report but I can summarise it in a few words. The humans are a barbaric and violent people, who have stumbled to a level of technological sophistication that outstrips their social maturity. They are disorganised primitives who fight among themselves constantly. Their world is rich with mineral wealth, which they have failed to manage, and they occupy a potentially strategic position between a number of major powers in this part of the galaxy. The planet would be an asset to the Kulan Empire, with great military and economic value. For these reasons alone I would recommend invasion.'

Fray'kon paused and looked each member of the Council in the eye in turn before continuing. 'But there is another reason to go ahead and take this miserable planet: revenge. The humans brutally and violently killed every member of the evaluation team. In order to escape from the planet we were forced to aid some of their spacecraft engineers; the humans took our knowledge, our aid, and then killed our people in cold blood.'

Fray'kon reached into a pocket of his tunic and produced his report: a data-rich sliver of encoded metal. 'Everything is detailed in full in my report but I urge you to make your decision quickly: the humans should be wiped from the face of the planet.'

The Council had dismissed Fray'kon and begun to study the report. Fa'man looked at his colleagues.

'Is there any point in reading every word of this?' he asked. 'I think the commander made his case quite eloquently.'

'There seems to be little reason not to order the invasion,' replied Rama'ge.

Only Gothran hesitated. 'My only concern is that we have heard not a single word from any other perspective.'

'Your economists died before they could compile a report,' Rampage pointed out.

'Nevertheless, we should make a decision based on more than the word of one individual.' Gothran saw Rama'ge bristle at the implied criticism of his warrior and added, 'Not that I have any doubts of the veracity of the commander's report.'

Fa'man suggested a compromise and ordered an attendant to fetch one of the captured humans.

Fitz and Tyler had been thrown into a holding cell somewhere deep in the

bowels of the ship. It was cold, metallic and featureless and yet somehow very familiar. Tyler wandered around the room, looking without success for a possibility of escape. Fitz sat down heavily on the floor and closed his eyes.

‘Do you know, I’ve never been locked up before?’ Tyler said, sitting beside him.

Fitz opened his eyes and looked at his companion. ‘Really? It happens to me all the time.’

Tyler frowned. ‘I wouldn’t have marked you down as a criminal.’

Fitz managed to laugh. ‘I’m not – I’m an intergalactic space hero. Getting thrown in holes like this is part of the job!’

Tyler wasn’t sure how to take this. ‘So you must be quite an expert in escaping, then?’ he suggested.

Fitz shook his head. ‘That is... was the Doctor’s speciality.’

As if on cue the door to the cell opened and a figure was propelled into the room by powerful Kulan arms. The door shut again with a loud metallic clang but Fitz didn’t notice – he was too busy embracing the Doctor in a bear hug.

The Doctor broke free and grinned at Fitz. ‘Did you miss me?’

Anji was beginning to wonder how much longer she was going to have to wait. How long, exactly, was ‘a little look’? Inside the TARDIS Anji was finding it hard to have a sense of passing time. Her watch had stopped just about the time she had crossed the threshold, but she’d had two cups of tea and the pot was now stone-cold so it must be at least an hour since he’d left.

After all the action of the past couple of days Anji was feeling lost without something to do. She was so bored she contemplated exploring this remarkable ship, but feared that if she got lost she might never be found. She wandered around the console room and in and out of the four alcoves, poking around, nosing about, then returned to the scanner. It was frustratingly blank. She tried to remember which controls activated it. She shut her eyes and tried to summon up a mental photograph of the moment: the Doctor had been standing before this panel, he reached out with his right hand... to the top row of switches...

Anji matched the movements she’d seen the Doctor make and then hesitated. What would happen if she pressed the wrong button and the engines started? If the Doctor was right she could end up anywhere in space and time. Alone. Anji shook her head: you *know* this is the right control, you saw him use it, just flick the switch and see what the hell is going on, she told herself.

She pushed up the first switch and, to her relief, the scanner screen came to life, showing her the same corridor she had seen before. There was no sign, however, of the Doctor.

Frustrated, Anji flicked the scanner off again. She couldn't stay here doing nothing for ever. What if the Doctor was in trouble or hurt? Should she go and look for him? She remembered Darren's advice when she had started working for him.

'Just remember, at the end of the day it's gambling. Gambling with other people's money, taking a risk,' he had said. 'But it's not like sitting in a casino sticking with your favourite number or just playing red,' he had added. 'This is about calculated risks, calculations that you have to make. If you've got the balls to keep your head, get on top of the data, and stick by your guns. You'll do fine.'

Anji had taken his advice and acted on it. She'd made sure that she was always fully informed of every possible factor that could affect her investments, going out of her way to track down obscure details of potential changes. And with the confidence that gave her she had made bold and daring decisions that, on average, had paid off. She was damn good at what she did, because fortune favours the bold. And sitting here in the TARDIS – whatever the hell that was meant to stand for – was a long way short of bold.

Coming to a decision, Anji found the red lever that operated the doors and pulled it firmly down. The double doors swung open and she skipped up the three steps and exited without looking back.

'You came here in the TARDIS!' Fitz was amazed and overjoyed. '*Your* TARDIS?'

The Doctor beamed. 'Fully restored and as good as new.' His smile dropped. 'At least I think it is. I can't remember much about the way it used to be...' he confessed.

Fitz wasn't too bothered about the details: the important thing was that the Doctor was alive and he had a TARDIS again, one that wouldn't answer back, as Compassion had. Now all they had to do was escape from the cell they were in and then stop the Kulan invasion – business as usual.

The door opened again and a trio of Kulan warriors were revealed in the doorway. They were led by the high-ranking Kulan who had met the crew of the Planet Hopper, Hak'et.

'You have been summoned by the Council,' said Hak'et, pointing at Tyler. 'Come with us.'



'I demand to see someone in authority,' interjected the Doctor, but he was ignored as the two mute warriors assisted Tyler from the cell. Tyler resisted, pulling free from the Kulan. 'Wait. Let the Doctor come too. He has a message from Sa'Motta.'

'The Council wishes to see just the human commander,' Hak'et told them, and closed the door leaving the Doctor and Fitz alone.

'Well, that didn't go too well. Let's hope Tyler persuades the Council to give me an audience,' commented the Doctor.

The human impressed the Council: Tyler refused to beg or plead but merely stated his case, telling the story of the evaluation team as he knew it, and explaining what had happened to them. The only problem was that this version of events didn't tally at all with Fray'kon's account. The conclusion, therefore, was that either the Terran or the commander had lied.

Fa'man addressed the human. 'You claim this is the truth of what happened?' 'Every word, I swear,' Tyler assured him.

Fa'man exchanged a glance with his two colleagues. 'Are you telling me that our commander has lied about what happened on your planet?'

Tyler nodded. 'Fray'kon killed two of your team himself. I don't fully understand why.'

Rama'ge was on his feet, furious at the casual slander. 'This is outrageous. Kulan do not kill Kulan.'

Tyler held his ground. 'He stabbed Sa'Motta in my spacecraft; take a look inside, the evidence is all there.'

Rama'ge and Gothran started speaking at once, one screaming abuse at the human, the other trying to allow Tyler to speak.

'Silence,' roared Fa'man. The two Kulan councillors sat back in their seats. 'We will examine your ship,' he told Tyler.

'And while you're doing that get my companion, the Doctor, in here; he has a copy of Sa'Motta's evaluation report. I think you should see it, don't you?' suggested Tyler, defiantly.

Anji couldn't quite believe it but the evidence was overwhelming: she really was on an alien spacecraft. The reality was a long way from the bright colours of the TV shows Dave had watched with such enthusiasm. This was more like the warships and submarines of the British Navy: metallic-grey, cold and functional. Only the areas in constant use were lit, and the ship seemed sparsely populated given its size. She found to her surprise that she could read the

signage. It was very weird: she would look at some written Kulan and see strange alien characters and then she'd blink and the letters morphed into English. How was that possible? She remembered some quote Dave had loved about doing six impossible things before breakfast and felt a pang of mourning, knowing that she'd never hear him say it again. I'll just have to do those six impossible things for you, love, she resolved.

She heard a familiar voice from a nearby room. A shiver ran down her spine and she tiptoed closer. She peered into the room. She had been right – it was the alien who had killed Dave: Fray'kon. He was talking to a Kulan technician sitting at a bank of controls. Anji wished she had a weapon to hand. She would have no hesitation in killing the brute from behind – it was all he deserved. Sadly, there was nothing to hand to use as a weapon. Anji slipped into the room and hid behind a bank of what she took to be computers. She edged around the room, keeping in her hiding place, until she could get a good view of what was happening.

'Eject the human spacecraft,' ordered Fray'kon. The technician operated some controls and on a monitor screen Anji could see the Planet Hopper being lifted by invisible arms and carried towards a massive hangar door that was sliding open to reveal the star-speckled backdrop of space. The image cut to another angle, from some point on the surface of the battle cruiser, as Tyler's tiny craft floated free.

'Open up a channel to the fleet,' Fray'kon continued. Anji watched carefully as the Kulan technician operated the communications console. Fray'kon leaned forward to speak into a stalk that clearly contained a microphone.

'The Earth vessel is to be used for target practice. Please allow me the first shot; then fire at will.'

Fray'kon gestured to the technician to move aside, and sat in his seat. 'I can access weapon control from here, can't I?' he asked.

'Of course,' answered the technician, reaching across to operate controls whose purpose Anji could only guess at.

Anji watched as Fray'kon operated some kind of joystick targeting device. On the monitor screen a flashing crosshair zeroed in on the slowly spinning Planet Hopper. Fray'kon thumbed what must have been a launch control because a moment later something streaked through space from the battle cruiser and exploded against the nose of the Earth ship. Seconds later the little craft was hit by a dozen further strikes, from other nearby ships of the fleet, and the little Earth vehicle, which had looked so huge on the launch pad, exploded in a massive fireball.

Fray'kon stood up, obviously pleased with his work, and strode out. Anji watched him go, determined that one way or another he would pay for killing Dave. Making sure that the technician had resumed his seat, she sneaked out of the room. She decided to take the direction that Fray'kon had. She rounded a corner and stopped dead: Fray'kon was talking to another Kulan a few feet away. She ducked back around the corner and strained to hear what was being said.

'The Council wish to see the Doctor. They've been told he carries Sa'Motta's report,' the Kulan was telling Fray'kon.

'Let me take the Doctor to them,' suggested Fray'kon. 'We wouldn't want any harm to come to that report, now, would we?'

The other alien replied, 'Of course. My guards will accompany you to the holding cell and I'll return to the bridge.'

Anji followed Fray'kon and the two Kulan guards as they made their way to the holding cell. She was sure that she heard Fitz's voice as the Doctor was brought out of the cell. She breathed a sigh of relief that he appeared to be unharmed. But for how long, she wondered, as Fray'kon roughly manhandled the Doctor away down the corridor.

Anji waited until the Doctor and his captors had entered a lift and disappeared, then ran across to the cell door. There was no obvious lock or handle – what could the mechanism be? She studied the door carefully – there must be something that allowed access. Then she spotted it: a small lens set into the side of the doorframe. There was a matching lens on the opposite side. There was no visible sign of anything being emitted from within the lenses, but when Anji placed her hand between them she felt a slight tickle and the door slid open. Fitz was obviously delighted to see her. Quickly they compared notes.

Neither of them were convinced that the Doctor would be allowed to give his evidence to the Council.

'The guy who took him away is a killer. I wouldn't trust him further than I could throw him,' Anji said.

'I know, but what do you think we should do?' replied Fitz. 'We're a bit outnumbered.'

'I've got an idea,' Anji told him, 'Come with me.'

She led him back the way she had come, towards the room from which she had seen Fray'kon fire on the Planet Hopper. 'Do you think you can handle one of these people?' she asked as they moved through the ship.

'How do you mean "handle"?' replied Fitz, doubtfully.

'As in render unconscious,' she explained. Then seeing Fitz's expression, she added, 'He didn't look very big.'

Anji and Fitz reached the open doorway.

Anji motioned Fitz to stand to one side, then called out, 'Hey you!' The Kulan technician looked around in surprise. 'I shouldn't be here,' she continued, boldly. 'Do you want to do something about it?'

Fitz heard the Kulan get out of his seat and walk towards her.

'Who are you?' he began, but as he passed through the doorway Fitz hit him with a double-handed chop to the back of the neck. The unfortunate Kulan went down hard but didn't lose consciousness. In fact, to Anji's horror, he started to get up right way.

'Oh bugger!' commented Fitz.

'Hit him again!' ordered Anji, but the Kulan was already staggering to his feet and reaching for a holstered weapon that Anji had failed to notice before.

Acting instinctively, Anji spun on one heel and kicked out with her right foot, catching the Kulan in what she hoped was a sensitive part of his anatomy, right between his legs. Her hunch proved correct as the Kulan let out a grunt of pain and doubled up, allowing Fitz to repeat his neck chop, this time with the desired effect. Fitz and Anji pulled the unconscious technician into the room and dumped him in a corner. Anji relieved him of his weapon and pocketed it.

Fitz looked at Anji with new respect. 'Martial arts?' he asked.

Anji shook her head. 'Rape defence classes at uni. I knew they'd come in handy one day.'

'Now what?' asked Fitz, not having understood a word of her explanation.

Anji operated the door control and closed it. She crossed to the console and sat down, trying to remember what she had seen the technician do earlier.

She operated the control that activated the communications link with the rest of the fleet. She winked at Fitz, then leaned in towards the microphone stalk.

'Kulan fleet, this is a message from the people of Earth. We have taken command of your flagship. Turn around and leave this solar system or we will open fire on you.' She flicked off the microphone and turned to Fitz, who was looking at her open-mouthed.

'They'll never buy that,' he commented.

'Why not? We traders have a saying – fortune favours the bold,' Anji told him with a grin.

'Yeah, and I have a motto, too – don't write cheques you can't cover. They'll see through that in an instant,' he insisted.

'Then I'll just have to give them proof I'm serious,' said Anji, turning back to the console. Repeating the actions she had observed earlier, she brought up what she had taken to be the weapons control system.

On the monitor screen she could see the other ships of the fleet. She operated the joystick and targeted the nearest ship. Perhaps those evenings when Dave had tried to interest her in computer games hadn't been a complete waste of time after all. She hit the fire button and watched as the missile sped across the short distance and exploded against the hull of the Kulan cruiser.

'That should make them think twice,' she told Fitz.

But Fitz was watching the screen with horror as more missiles launched themselves. 'What have you done?' he asked.

Anji looked at the screen, then down at the controls: lights were flashing and more missiles were being activated. 'I just wanted to fire one missile, that's all.' She jabbed at some controls trying to stop the barrage but it was too late. On the screen the ship she had targeted suddenly exploded.

'Oh no,' she gasped, 'I didn't mean. . .' As they continued to look on in horror, explosions ripped the cruiser apart.

Fitz pulled Anji to her feet. 'I think we should get out of here. . .'

'But we should try to stop this.' Anji indicated the screen, where further missiles were hitting new targets.

'It's too late,' said Fitz. 'Take me to the TARDIS, we'll be safe there.'

'What about the Doctor?' asked Anji, allowing Fitz to drag her from the room.

'Don't worry about him, he'll take care of himself.'

Suddenly an explosion rocked the ship, causing Anji and Fitz to stumble and fall.

'What the hell was that?' she asked as they scrambled to their feet.

'At a guess, I'd say that was the rest of the fleet firing back,' replied Fitz. 'Come on. . .'

They ran on, buffeted by further shakes, as the flagship took more hits.

The outbreak of hostilities couldn't have come at a worse time for the Doctor. When he'd arrived in the chamber he had charmed the Council with politeness and reverence and duly offered up the data wafer that Sa'Motta had given him. Unfortunately, they had asked Fray'kon to load the wafer into a reader. The Doctor had watched carefully as Fray'kon had carried out his orders and was not at all surprised when he announced that the wafer was devoid of content.

'He's lying. That isn't the wafer I gave him – he's substituted a blank one,' the Doctor had exclaimed, but the Council were not prepared to believe him. Without Sa'Motta's report the Doctor had fallen back on his own powers of persuasion, and for a moment Tyler had thought his case was being heard. The Doctor argued that the human race was a civilised and essentially peaceful species with great potential, but his position had been severely tested when the first explosion went off.

Fa'man activated the ship's intercom. 'What in the name of Tolmaga the Heretic is happening?' he demanded. On a monitor screen the image of Koy'Guin on the bridge appeared. Behind him they could see the bridge crew frantically trying to regain control.

'We've lost weapons control,' explained Koy'Guin, bitterly. 'Our missiles are firing indiscriminately.'

'How can that be?' asked Fa'man incredulously.

Koy'Guin could only shrug. 'The humans have sabotaged us. I don't know how. But they must pay...'

'Do whatever you have to do. And arrange for our immediate evacuation. Now!' Fa'man screamed, fearing for his own life.

Troopers appeared in the council room and led the three councillors away through a previously concealed exit at the rear. As they left, Fa'man turned back to Fray'kon. 'Tell Koy'Guin, the invasion is authorised.'

The Doctor looked over at Tyler – it was now or never. The exodus by the Council had left just one guard and Fray'kon himself. If they were going to escape they might not get a better opportunity.

Anji pressed the alien weapon she had picked up into Fitz's hand as they ran down yet another corridor. 'Do you think you can use it?' she asked.

Fitz wasn't sure but guessed it wasn't the right time for brutal honesty. 'Sure,' he answered. 'But why will I need it? We're heading for the TARDIS aren't we?'

Anji hurried on ahead on him. 'Not exactly,' she confessed. In fact she had been following the direction in which Fray'kon had taken the Doctor.

They rounded a corner and found two Kulan warriors standing guard outside a room. Fitz raised the alien gun and took aim. The two guards, taken by surprise, were easy targets. Anji ran forward and scooped up one of the guards' weapons, then ran on into the room.

Anji found the Doctor wrestling with Fray'kon while another Kulan warrior was throttling Tyler. She raised her gun and fired. The warrior released his grip on

Tyler's neck and fell to the floor. Anji felt sick – she'd just killed a living creature. Disgusted with her actions, she threw the gun away.

Fitz staggered into the room just as another huge explosion shook the ship; the lights failed and the room was plunged into darkness. After a moment dim-red emergency lighting came on, revealing that the Doctor had managed to break free of Fray'kon.

'His head cracked into the floor when we were hit,' explained the Doctor. Even in the weak emergency lighting Fitz could see that blood was pouring from the re-opened wound on Fray'kon's forehead.

'Accidentally?' asked Fitz, in a strange voice. Just before the lights had gone out he could have sworn that he had seen the Doctor deliberately ram the alien's head into the wall.

'Of course,' said the Doctor meeting his gaze, 'Let's get out of here. Back to the hold.'

Anji helped Tyler to his feet and the four of them ran from the room without looking back at the fallen Fray'kon.

Moments after the humans had left, the body of the giant Kulan warrior twitched and his eyes flickered open. With a great effort he hauled himself to his feet and staggered to the door. In the corridor he saw the escaping humans disappear around a corner and smiled. He knew a much quicker way to reach the hold.

The Kulan fleet was tearing itself apart. The sudden barrage of missiles launched from the flagship had caused more damage than just the loss of one vessel. The missiles had breached the armoury of the cruiser before it was destroyed, unleashing a wave of primed space mines that swept through the fleet like a plague of locusts. The domino effect was terrible, made worse by the fact that the weapons systems of all the fleet ships were slaved to Koy'Guin's battle cruiser. The fleet was made up of ships commissioned and owned by the most powerful and ancient Kulan families – dynasties who could trace ancient feuds back through centuries. Although modern civilised Kulan never killed each other – at least officially – that had not always been the case and the fragile coalition that ruled the Kulan Empire was constantly threatened by outbreaks of familial rivalry. For that reason Koy'Guin had not entirely trusted the commanders of the ships of his fleet and had arranged to control all major offensive weaponry from his own ship, a decision that had made perfect

sense until a young woman from Earth had accidentally activated the global command system and set off Armageddon.

Another huge detonation rocked the ship, blowing out the entire wall of the corridor in front of them. The Doctor pulled Anji back as an emergency barrier fell into place, cutting them off from the hull breach. 'Back this way,' he ordered. 'We'll have to find another route.'

Anji estimated it had taken ten minutes to work their way through the rapidly decaying ship, past numerous fires and explosions, but it had felt much longer. The Doctor seemed to have an instinctive grasp of the layout of the ship and he managed to lead them around each obstacle with ease, finally finding an access shaft that led directly down to the hold where the TARDIS had materialised. Tyler descended first, followed by Anji, then Fitz and finally the Doctor.

Fitz was relieved to see the familiar blue police-box exterior of the TARDIS standing a hundred yards or so away. It seemed like a lot had happened to him since he had last seen it. They began to move down the hold towards it when suddenly something moved in the shadows. The figure stepped into the light and Fitz's heart skipped a beat. It was Fray'kon. He looked a mess, the wound on his head seemed deeper and Fitz fancied he could almost see the alien's exposed skull caked with dried blood. He carried an enormous weapon, the size of his arm, which he brought up to point at them. A sick grin broke out on the alien's face.

Fitz looked down at the tiny gun Anji had given him and discarded it, recognising the alien's superior firepower. He looked round for some cover. A pair of doors was a few feet away to one side, and Fitz realised that Tyler was casually inching his hand towards the door control. Fray'kon showed no sign of firing but began to walk painfully towards them, dragging one leg, which appeared to be broken. Fitz thought the alien must be in terrible pain but he continued to approach – the death-mask grin still on his features. Tyler whispered to the others.

'On three! One, two... ' Tyler whispered, then hit the control and the doors slid open. The four of them dived into the room before Fray'kon could open fire and Tyler quickly resealed the doors.

The hangar they had entered was basically a large warehouse, full of packages and containers, and there appeared to be only one other exit.

'Over there,' Fitz said, pointing, but the Doctor was shaking his head.



‘No no no. That’s an airlock. Our only way out is back the way we came. Find somewhere to hide.’

They scrambled to find a hiding place as the doors opened again and Fray’kon lurched into the hangar.

The four fugitives squeezed behind a tower of boxes. Fray’kon stood in the doorway, looking around slowly.

‘There’s no way out. Give yourselves up now.’

Tyler looked the Doctor in the eye. ‘We’re not all going to make it out of here, but if I hold him off you three might have a chance.’

‘Don’t be a fool –’ started the Doctor.

‘Listen to me,’ interrupted Tyler. ‘It’s for the best. I haven’t got much time, that’s why I was so desperate to get into space. . .’ The three of them looked at him, stunned. ‘I’m dying anyway,’ he confessed.

‘What?’ Fitz said, shocked.

Anji nodded. ‘You said your family were short-lived. . .’

Tyler turned to her and smiled. ‘I’ve known for years that my chances of growing old were slim but last year a routine examination found a tumour. It’s completely inoperable. They couldn’t be sure how long I’d have; so that’s why I threw myself into this space race. First man to pay his own way into space – it’s a kind of immortality, I guess.’

The Doctor looked grim. ‘I can’t let you do this.’

Tyler shook his head. ‘You have to – I need you to get home and get a message to Christine. Tell her that she and Pippa stand to benefit from my estate. I’ve made sure of that. And tell her I love her. That I always did. Make sure she knows.’

‘She knows,’ replied the Doctor softly. ‘She knows.’

But Tyler was no longer with them: he was running into the open space, yelling at the top of his voice.

‘Hey, bozo, you want a piece of me? Come and get me,’ he shouted, and then dashed back into some more cover. Fray’kon edged forward.

Fitz, Anji and the Doctor watched in mute horror as Tyler led the alien slowly but inescapably towards the airlock. ‘Oh, no. . .’ muttered Fitz. The airlock doors opened and Tyler skipped inside.

The Doctor began to usher Anji and Fitz towards the door that led back towards the TARDIS. ‘Come on, now,’ he urged.

As they moved they couldn’t help but glance back at the airlock as Fray’kon staggered inside in pursuit of Tyler. The doors closed with a clang, sealing the alien and Tyler within.

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Fray'kon faced Tyler, weak from loss of blood. He was swaying slightly but still had the strength to bring up his weapon and point it at the human.

'Just you and me now, huh,' gasped Tyler. 'Looks like your pal Pierre-Yves got it wrong. I did make it into space. Big time.' He reached for the control that would open the exterior door. Even as he did so Fray'kon was squeezing the trigger of his weapon. A blast of energy hit Tyler in the chest, knocking him backwards but crucially towards the control. The doors flew open and both Tyler and Fray'kon were pulled into the cold vacuum of space.

The Doctor, Anji and Fitz stumbled towards the TARDIS buffeted by a series of explosions. 'I think this ship's had it,' Fitz shouted above the cacophony of destruction. The Doctor unlocked the door and ushered Anji then Fitz inside. Then with a last sad look back at the crumbling space cruiser the Doctor followed them and shut the door.

The elephantine wheezing and groaning that announced the departure of the TARDIS was inaudible as the lower decks of the battle cruiser collapsed in on themselves. A moment later the vessel broke up and was engulfed in flames.

# Chapter Nineteen

## Mission: Impossible

Anji, Fitz and the Doctor watched as the Kulan fleet was engulfed by a series of massive explosions, destroying all of the ships. It felt like watching some bizarre firework display. Anji shivered, surprised at how detached she felt. The Kulan were dying in terrible numbers, in horrible ways, and all she could feel was relief.

She tried to console herself with the thought that they had been planning to do far worse to the people of Earth, and she recalled what had happened to Spear, Tyler and (of course) Dave and allowed a few tears to fall down her face. She wiped them away quickly, before either of the men could notice.

Fitz only had eyes for the Doctor. All this death, he thought. He looked at the Doctor curiously. The Doctor had never been a violent man: he had always sought to minimise death. And then he had been forced to destroy his home planet, wiping out his entire race. Fitz wondered what that had done to his friend. The amnesia he could understand – the Doctor’s subconscious protecting him from the full horror of what he had done – but what else had changed? Fitz remembered seeing the Doctor grappling with Fray’kon and the sudden, vicious way he had appeared to thrust the alien’s already injured head against the wall. Had that really happened? Had the Doctor become more violent, more callous? Now, watching the deaths of the thousands of Kulan, the Doctor seemed sad rather than angry.

The Doctor shook his head and switched off the scanner. ‘Those who live by the sword . . .’ he commented sadly, failing to complete the quotation.

‘They would have done the same to us,’ Anji growled darkly.

‘Would they?’ The Doctor didn’t seem so sure. ‘Sa’Motta wouldn’t have hurt a fly. He wasn’t the only one of their people to have those views. If I could have just talked to them . . .’ He trailed off again, lost in a world of maybe. He wandered off towards the galley. ‘It shouldn’t have to end with a big bang,’ he muttered.

Fitz watched him carefully – was he talking about this recent adventure or the events on his homeworld? It was hard to be sure.

Anji looked pale. ‘I think I need to rest. . . Is there somewhere to lie down?’

Fitz looked over at the Doctor, who seemed lost in thought. ‘Let’s try through here,’ he suggested, and led Anji through the double doors. The first door in the corridor seemed to be a backless walkthrough wardrobe but the second had revealed a plainly decorated bedroom.

‘It looks like a Travel Lodge room,’ commented Anji before collapsing on the bed, utterly exhausted.

‘Get some sleep,’ Fitz suggested. ‘I’ll go and see how the Doctor is.’

Fitz slipped out of the room and closed the door quietly, but he didn’t think Anji was aware of his going, she seemed ready for instant sleep.

In the corridor Fitz hesitated, wondering whether this might be a good time to explore this newly restored TARDIS, but then he decided he should deal with the most urgent thing: the Doctor. He walked back to the console room, taking time to note the changes in the TARDIS interior. It was strange – familiar and yet very different at the same time. Slightly less Jules Verne, he decided, with just a hint of *Star Trek*.

The Doctor was sitting in the galley area at the big pine table. Fitz stepped through from the console room and had to suppress a laugh. The room was almost an exact copy of the kitchen of the house that the Doctor owned in Kent.

‘There’s tea in the pot,’ said the Doctor.

Fitz poured himself a cup and sat down. ‘This is nice,’ he commented.

‘The tea?’

‘The TARDIS.’

The Doctor looked around as if noticing everything for the first time. ‘Hmm, yes, I suppose it is. Nice to have the old girl back.’

‘We haven’t really had much of a chance to talk, have we?’ Fitz began, tentatively. The Doctor shook his head. ‘So what have you been up to?’ asked Fitz.

The Doctor shrugged. ‘This and that. I’ve been keeping myself busy: living fire, zombies, aliens, the usual thing. . . Mostly I’ve been waiting a long time to see you, to find out who I am. . .’

‘But you know, now, don’t you?’ Fitz’s eyes narrowed. He wasn’t used to not trusting the Doctor but instinctively knew that something was going on here.

'I'm the Doctor, a citizen of the universe. I travel through time and space in my trusty TARDIS and I try to help people. That's about it, isn't it?' The Doctor glanced sideways at Fitz, looking for confirmation but not wanting to admit it.

'That's certainly the Doctor I know.' Fitz smiled at him reassuringly. 'So, it's all come back, has it – your memory?'

The Doctor looked away. 'Some of it.' He stood up and cleared the tea things from the table, crossing to the sink to wash them up. 'Everything before the accident is still a little hazy,' he confessed.

The accident, thought Fitz. That's an interesting phrase for it. He wondered whether the Doctor was telling him the truth. Did he remember anything of what had happened before they had separated? Did he remember his home-world at all, come to that? He decided to test him. 'Nasty business,' he offered vaguely.

'Yes, it was, wasn't it?' The Doctor said, as he finished washing up the mugs. He turned back to look at Fitz while he dried them.

Casually, perhaps too casually, thought Fitz, the Doctor wondered out loud how much *he* remembered of 'the accident'.

'Not a lot,' Fitz said, choosing his words carefully. 'Traffic accident, wasn't it?' Fitz's eyes were on the Doctor like a hawk.

The Doctor just shook his head. 'Yes, I suppose it was. . . . To be honest the details are still a bit vague. . . .' He sat back down and sighed. 'Oh, well, I'm sure it will come back. Like this old ship of mine.' He patted the table affectionately.

Fitz glanced around and decided to try one final test. 'I wonder what Sam would have made of all this. You wouldn't get a Volkswagen Beetle in here now, would you?'

'Sam?' asked the Doctor lightly, as if the answer was on the tip of his tongue but he couldn't quite remember.

'Someone you were travelling with when I met you.'

The Doctor slapped his head. 'Oh, *Sam*. Of course. What a guy, huh? Always tinkering around with that Beetle.'

Fitz felt a familiar sinking feeling. Christ! He really has forgotten everything.

It was sometime later, insofar as time had any meaning within the impossible walls of the TARDIS. The Doctor and Fitz had taken a short exploratory walk around some of the nearest TARDIS corridors and had found a number of bedrooms, storerooms, two swimming pools, a tennis court, a museum and an alarmingly well-fitted-out gym. 'There you go, Fitz, something to keep you

fit,' the Doctor had commented. They hadn't got very far when they heard a distant shout.

Fitz looked at the Doctor. 'I think Anji's woken up.'

They ran back along the corridors towards the console room.

'You could have left a note,' Anji complained, again.

'Sorry, we were just taking a walk,' explained the Doctor.

'Great. And while you were walking have we been moving or are we still floating about among the debris of the Kulan fleet?' she demanded.

'Ah,' the Doctor started. 'Actually, we haven't gone anywhere yet.'

'Well, shouldn't we get under way? We really should pass on Arthur's message to Christine,' she suggested, matter-of-factly.

'Ah... well...'

'What is it?' she demanded, seeing the guilty expression on the Doctor's face.

The Doctor looked embarrassed. 'The thing is my memory is still a little faulty.'

'How faulty?' Anji's eyes narrowed.

'I'm a little rusty on TARDIS navigation... ' confessed the Doctor.

The anger was building in Anji's face. 'But you managed to get us on board the Kulan spaceship without much trouble,' she pointed out.

'More by luck than judgement. And I think the old girl might have helped me there.'

'So get the "old girl" to help you get me back home,' she insisted.

The Doctor crossed to the console and cracked his fingers in preparation. 'OK, here goes, but be warned: we could end up anywhere.'

'Anywhere?' echoed Anji.

'Any when,' added Fitz, helpfully.

Anji shook her head. The pair of them were as bad as each other. 'Let me see if I've got this right,' she stated carefully. 'Inside some old-fashioned police telephone box is a machine the size of a small city that can travel anywhere in space or time, only you haven't got a clue how to steer the thing. So the next time you open those doors – ' she waved at the double doors dramatically – 'we could be looking out on to an alien planet, or the pyramids being built, or God knows what?'

The Doctor and Fitz exchanged looks.

'That's about the size of it,' agreed Fitz.

‘Exciting, isn’t it?’ The Doctor smiled, and something in the warmth of that smile, some overwhelming joy of the moment, melted the anger Anji was feeling. Despite everything, the deaths, the danger, the uncertain future, Anji found herself nodding in agreement. It was exciting. And certainly more exotic than a weekend in Belgium. But she had work to get back to: her career couldn’t be put on hold while she went on a galactic sightseeing trip with these two weirdoes, could it?

‘Look, this is all fantastic, but I have to get home,’ she explained.

‘Of course you do,’ the Doctor agreed. ‘And a simple hop back to where we came from shouldn’t be too hard, should it?’ His hands flew over the controls.

The now familiar sound of the TARDIS engines filled the room and Anji held her breath. Seconds later the glass column in the centre of the console began to slow down again. The engines died away.

‘That was quick,’ she commented.

The Doctor shrugged. ‘Sometimes it is,’ He operated the scanner control.

Anji and Fitz looked up at the scanner. Anji’s eyes narrowed.

The screen showed what appeared to be a prehistoric landscape, quite barren and rocky. It looked ancient, as if the most likely inhabitant would be a dinosaur. Anji was not impressed.

‘That does not look like Soho,’ she said, not afraid to state the obvious.

Fitz thought he knew the answer. ‘Maybe it is Soho, but we’ve got the date wrong.’ He glanced up at the scanner and grinned. ‘By about a million years!’

The Doctor came round to take a look as well.

‘Oh, yes, that does look interesting, doesn’t it?’ he commented, smiling broadly.

‘Doctor!’ Anji exploded.

‘Here we go again,’ said Fitz.

Outside the time machine a shadow fell across the sand in front of the TARDIS as something, or someone, came to investigate this new arrival.

# About the Author

COLIN BRAKE is 38 years old and still not very tall. He spent a number of years as a Script Editor lurking in the BBC Drama Department working on programmes such as *EastEnders* and *Trainer*. He had high hopes of being Andrew Cartmel's successor on *Doctor Who* but in 1989, in an act of desperation, the BBC thwarted this ambition by cancelling the series.

As a freelance television writer Colin has written scripts for *EastEnders*, *Bugs*, *Lucy Sullivan is Getting Married*, *Doctors* and *Family Affairs* and wrote the celebratory book *EastEnders – the First 10 Years*. He contributed a short story to Virgin Publishings' *Decalog 3* but this is his first novel.

Colin lives with his wife Kerry in Didcot, Oxfordshire, along with his two small children Cefn and Kassia and far too many books.



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And a couple of apologies; firstly to Keith Topping and Martin Day who kindly lent me their character Control only to have me give him rather a low-key cameo. No doubt he'll be back on form in a future novel by one of his co-creators!

Also a big apology to Belgium and, in particular, to the city and citizens of Brussels. Contrary to the way they are experienced by some of the characters in *Escape Velocity* Belgium is a lovely country with much to recommend it and Brussels has a very special place in my heart, not least because both of my children were born there.

Finally a word for my good friend Bleddyn Williams: Cranberry.

That about covers it, I think.

Colin Brake  
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