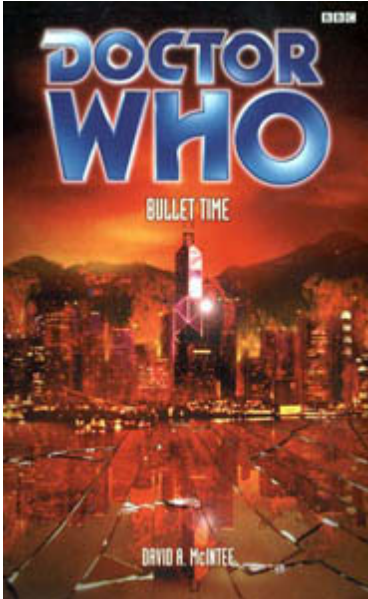


Bullet Time by David A. McIntee



'Whenever truth conflicts with legend, print the legend.' -William Randolph Hearst

I shall not be the cause of disharmony among my sworn
brothers by spreading false rumours about them; if I do I shall
be killed by a myriad of swords' -traditional Triad oath 23.

Prologue

They say that history is written by the victors, but that's not strictly true. History is sometimes written by appointees of the victors, or followers of the victors. Even fans of the victors. Sometimes it's written by those hoping to cash in on the victors. Whichever is the case, it's almost always - at least while the victors are still in control of things - written by people who don't know all the best, juiciest secrets of how the victors got to be that way.

Victor or not, everyone who spoke of it agrees that this story began at five to one, on a mild November night aboard a Ticonderoga-class guided missile cruiser&

The USS Westmoreland's dog watch was usually quiet, even in the red-lit Combat Information Centre. Most of the senior officers would be catching dinner, or doing paperwork, while a few promotion-hopefuls kept an eye on the computers and radar screens. You didn't expect to see much beyond logging in the regular passage of scheduled airliners overhead.

That was usually. On that night, the CinC was bustling when Captain Davis answered the summons to duty. The late call-outs from his cabin had died out a couple of weeks into the cruiser's tour of duty, as her crew got used to the Aegis radar and weapons systems, and to recognising elements that combined into false alarms. That suggested to him that tonight's call was for something more likely to be serious.

Davis exuded an aura of calm as he walked in. Despite the speed with which he had responded to the call, his uniform was perfectly neat. This was all

showmanship on his part; all part of the example that he liked to set to his crew. 'What's all the fuss, lieutenant?'

Lieutenant Jones, the Duty Officer for the night, used a light pen to circle a radar track one of the screens. 'This one, sir. Inbound bogey with no IFF signal, about twelve miles out, altitude three miles.'

'An airliner?' Three to five miles was the usual altitude for commercial flights, and they had certainly tracked enough of them.

Jones shrugged. 'That's what we thought at first, but at fifteen miles uprange she was five miles high. I don't think it's a coincidence that it's descending.'

Davis, like the rest of his crew, doubted that this was anything more than a civilian flight, but he wasn't stupid enough to ignore the possibility that it might not be. 'Have we picked up any comms traffic from them?'

Jones shook his head. 'That's the other thing I don't like about this: they're maintaining a radio blackout. No transmissions to or from them. If it was an airliner, there would always be something.'

'Try and get in touch with them on the local commercial frequencies. Ask for confirmation of the ID and flight plan.' Davis turned to a nearby ensign. 'Get in touch with shore. Have them check civilian schedules, and find out if this track matches any filed flight paths.' He squinted at the radar display. 'How far is the nearest carrier group?'

'Too far, sir. The unknown will get here before an F18 could.' While the ensign worked, Jones was back at the radar track. 'Inbound bogey now ten miles uprange.'

'Any response to our requests for identification?'

'Nothing. Maybe they didn't hear.'

'You kidding?' But, there were rules for these kinds of days. 'Repeat the demand.' Davis stopped himself. 'Repeat the request, for ID. Try every frequency you can think of, civilian and military'

The ensign was back a few moments later. 'Sir, there's no scheduled flight plan on file for any civilian traffic on this course tonight.'

'Keep trying.' Even as he spoke, he willed whomever was flying that thing to respond. He guessed that pretty much everybody else was too, except maybe Hennessy. Hennessy thought Captain Rogers of the Vincennes was a role model. He'd grown up in the white South, being raised on tabloid news. Davis wasn't sure which scared him most.

'Range now seven miles,' someone called out. The CinC was beginning to feel a lot more cramped and oppressive to Davis, though no-one else had entered. 'Come on,' he muttered. 'Even telling us to go to hell would make more sense than this.'

'Six miles. Descending steadily'

Davis nodded to Jones, 'Light them up.' He hoped that the shock of being targeted would prompt some kind of response from the pilot. Within three miles of the ship, any unidentified aircraft would be considered hostile, and could be attacked at the commander's discretion. Davis admitted in his after-action

report that he would rather not have been put in that situation, but nor would he endanger his ship or crew by not responding appropriately.

'Arm a Standard missile.' He went over to the Ensign's station, and picked up a microphone himself. 'Unidentified aircraft, this is Captain Davis of the USS Westmoreland. We have a radar lock on you, and a missile armed. Identify yourself and alter your heading immediately, or we will be forced to fire upon you.'

The seconds passed, until Jones announced, 'No response. Two-and a half miles, altitude decreasing.'

Davis sighed. It was said that war became easier as the distance between killer and killed increased over the centuries, but it didn't feel easy for Davis. Everyone else in the room was as calm as clerk in a bank, working at a spreadsheet instead of a weapons system, but they didn't have to choose whether to kill or not.

'Fire.'

The flash of the rocket launch momentarily lit up the ship, like a cinematic lightning strike. Then it was gone with a roar, and only the radar would indicate that a missile was in flight.

On the radar screen, the missile's track was running true, directly for the unidentified aircraft. The unidentified aircraft's blip wasn't even trying to evade the missile.

Even so, Davis wasn't taking any chances that night. 'Arm a second missile.'

Three miles northeast of the Westmoreland, the missile hit as true as anything ought to, with that amount of development dollars behind it. It rammed home into a gleaming silver expanse of metal, and burst through. The blast blew out a ragged exit wound on the other side of the target, which immediately began to bank, trailing blue fire. The metal began to shake, as it lost flight stability, and plummeted earthwards.

The smaller blip on the screen converged with the larger one in a textbook example, and vanished. Less than a second after the radar screen showed the impact, the larger blip quivered, as if to break into smaller sections, then vanished.

'That's a confirmed kill,' Jones reported. 'Whoever it was has gone down.'

Davis merely nodded, and prayed that his target had indeed been hostile.

Bangkok, March 1997

It was gone noon when Sarah Jane Smith flagged down a taxi on Thanon Prachitapai. The mud-coloured interior felt like an oven and smelled like an old patent-leather shoe. She had to wind the window down even as she was giving the driver directions in badly pronounced Thai straight out of a tourist phrasebook. When the car set off, the open window didn't help much more than psychologically. The wind flooded the car with spices and sweat, fruit and dust, pollution and heated paint. Somehow it managed not to be unpleasant; it was exhilarating rather than repulsive. It was air with character.

The trip to the airport wasn't too unbearable, though the heat made Sarah feel uncharacteristically car-sick. When she got out, it was a blessed relief. The

airport was pretty much like any other she had travelled through over the years; a polished rat-trap filled with hectic, sweaty masses going nowhere fast, and falsely smiling vendors looking to sell them overpriced designer labels before they got there. It was the modern world in a nutshell, with branches all over the globe.

At least Sarah didn't have to exert herself with heavy luggage, as she was there for a strictly local jaunt. She passed through the Don Muang domestic terminal, to the helicopter taxi lounge.

The difference between the hectic main terminal and the lounge mostly seemed to be that the latter was more what she'd call 'executive'. Smart suits and immaculate casual, with nary a rumpled, sweaty tourist in sight. Sarah was less at ease here for some reason; she identified more with the weary tourists than with anyone who was able - or willing - to power-dress for travel before breakfast.

The few people waiting, reading their English-language papers with a fortified morning coffee, were split into two types. The Suits were clearly businessmen - most likely in the tourist industry - waiting for short hops to the resorts or plantations they managed. The uniformity of their business garb made her think of yuppie stormtroopers on a battlefield where nothing was ever quiet on the Exchange front. The rest were like herself: freshly-pressed slacks or combat trousers, baggy shirts, and all with a press pass stuffed somewhere in wallet or handbag.

'Ah, the star in our midst,' someone said as Sarah entered. The Suits all looked up as one, then returned to the financial pages.

'Hardly that,' Sarah protested to the woman who had spoken.

Someone from Singapore TV, if Sarah remembered rightly.

'Modest as well,' a black American man said. He wore a loose casual suit and looked like he worked out now and again without being a fitness junkie. He looked about five years younger than he probably was, if Sarah was any judge. 'Like it or not, you're today's star of the Press Corps.' He handed over a newspaper with a grin that Sarah immediately liked. 'Syndicated worldwide this morning.'

It was a copy of today's Bangkok Post. The headline was 'Sex Tourism Lauanders Golden Triangle Harvest'. Below the bylines that proclaimed some of the publications the article would appear in - the Washington Post, LA Times, Hong Kong Star - was a small stock photo of Sarah with curlier hair and a pink suit. She hadn't expected the photo. Sarah had never sought that kind of physical recognition; she was a journalist, reporter and writer, not a news anchor. If she wanted fame she would have taken up that offer to present Tomorrow's World. 'Probably the worst picture I've ever had taken.'

'Here for the trip to Phanom Rung? Ms Smith?'

'Sarah,' she replied. 'And yes. A piece about the Khmer monuments for Metropolitan. Though why I still bother to write for a magazine whose publisher changes personalities more often than he changes his shirt & Habit, I suppose.'

'I know the type. My name's Tom; Tom Ryder' He offered a hand, and she shook it. 'Going out to take a few pictures for National Geographic' His attention went somewhere beyond her. Looks like you have a great sense of timing.'

"The flight to Phanom Rung,' a voice said behind her, 'will be leaving in twenty minutes.' It was a balding man with a Thai Helo Services ID tag on his blazer.'But the helicopter is ready if anyone needs to board early.'

'Time for one last drink,' Tom said, with an expression that made the line a tempting invitation.

'It's a little early for me, thanks. Actually I'd like to go and get aboard. You never know what stories you might get from the pilots. New leads, places they've been; that kind of thing.' 'I'll catch up with you in twenty minutes, then.' Sarah nodded, and went towards the door to the helipad. The man with the Helo Services ID fell into step with her. 'Welcome aboard, Miss Smith. I trust the flight will be pleasant.' He gestured towards Sarah's ride. It was a red and white executive helicopter, the sort of thing that shuttled Richard Attenborough and company around in Jurassic Park. The pilots were visible through the canopy, doing whatever it was that pilots did before takeoff. 'How many of us are there for this flight? Is it full?' He shook his head. 'Just the six of us today' Sarah stepped aboard. Though the helicopter had looked small from the outside, there was plenty of legroom, and Sarah suspected that it could probably fit in twice as many people. The seats were soft and comfortable, with a large floorspace in the centre. A couple of red parachutes were strapped to the rear bulkhead.

'It looks pretty cosy, actu -' Sarah's words were cut off as the man clamped a chemical-scented pad over Sarah's mouth and nose.

The last thing Sarah remembers of that day is slumping against his chest, and only then noticing that the picture on the ID was of a totally different person from the one wearing it. From then on until she woke up in an ambulance, she knew no more.

Fran a police wiretap:

22/04/97.

13:12 (local time)

"cringing tone>

Respondent: 'What?'

GaUer: 'It's little Erarfa.'

Respondent: 'This had better be important. You're interrupting filming, and these girls charge by the hour.'

Caller: 'We've just acquired the gift you 't«anted.'

Respondent: 'Ah. Where are you?'

Caller: 'Still at the airport. We rave a .. little extra.'

Respondent: 'Extra?'

Caller: 'fn American, looking to unwrap your gift for himself.'

Respondent: 'Who cares? Take him with you. Drop them off where we agreed.*'

Caller: 'CK.'

<hangs up>

To hear Tom tell it, in a Wanchai bar that was trapped in a fifties echo, he was more athletic and resourceful than James Bond, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Jackie Chan put together. To hear him tell it, he was a Hero, and you could hear that capitalisation in his tone. To hear him tell it, you had to endure a half-drunk shout, desperate to be heard over the scratchy voices of the locals playing mah-jong on the dented formica tables.

He had come out of the lounge a couple of minutes after Sarah, bringing her a cold bottle of Coke to try to smooth the way with her. When he reached the chopper, he saw that she seemed to be asleep. Then he noticed the white pad in the attendant's hand, and realised otherwise.

'What are you doing?' he demanded, trying to check Sarah for a pulse, and wishing he was armed. The attendant just swore in Thai, and pulled a gun on him. Tom waded in, trying to disarm the man. Tom was quite strong, and memories of his college boxing days came back unbidden to give him the upper hand. Then something exploded in the back of his head. The next thing Tom knew, he was slumped in a seat next to Sarah, and the chopper was vibrating with the effort of clawing through the air.

Opposite him were the attendant and another man, carrying a Kalashnikov. It didn't take Sherlock Holmes to work out that the Kalashnikov's butt was what had put him down. Sarah was still out cold, and he wondered how long the drug they'd given her would last.

Tom wasn't allowing himself to be scared, of course. He had a damsel in distress to protect, so this was no time to be whimpering. He was pretty fit, had boxed for his college, and had seen some pretty scary things in his time as a photographer in South-East Asia. After the minefields in Cambodia, this wasn't so bad.

'Where are we?' he asked.

'Over the coast,' the attendant answered. 'Don't worry, you're getting off soon.' His expression and laugh didn't inspire any confidence in Tom that the chopper was going to land first.

'Why?'

'You're in the Wrong place at the wrong time. Nothing personal.'

'I meant, why have you kidnapped Miss Smith?'

'She upset somebody she shouldn't.' The attendant prodded Tom's fallen newspaper with his foot, turning the headline towards Tom by way of explanation. 'Anyway' he added, as the engine's pitch changed, 'it's your stop.'

Tom glanced out the window, seeing cloudless sky, and a very distant ocean impossibly far below. The helicopter had taken up a hovering position miles from anywhere, and Tom knew what must be coming next.

The attendant pulled open the large side door, exposing the passenger compartment to chilly air. Then he hauled Sarah out of her seat. Tom tensed to move, thinking that maybe a quick one-two would turn the tables, but the other man jogged his memory with the muzzle of the Kalashnikov.

Sarah groaned as she was manhandled out of the seat. 'Is it time to - Are we

there already?' She asked muzzily.

'Yes,' the attendant said. 'Time to disembark.' He guided her to the door. 'We hope you'll fly with us again sometime.'

Her legs clearly not yet working, Sarah stumbled forward; at the last moment, she woke enough to realise the truth. 'What the -'

'This'll be a warning to others with long noses,' the attendant snapped. Sarah screamed, trying to get further back into the passenger compartment, but she was too groggy to put up much of a fight against the compact attendant.

With a last scream of horror, surely knowing that she was dead, Sarah vanished from Tom's view.

Tom knew that time was paramount. Instead of trying to catch Sarah, as the thugs were prepared for, he headbutted his guard, wrenching the Kalashnikov from his grasp. In under two seconds he tore the parachutes from the bulkhead, and tossed them out the door.

The attendant and copilot were reacting, but with the expectation that he'd try to jump them and get to the cockpit. He doubted anybody would have expected him to go the door's edge voluntarily; not even after he had flung himself backwards into the sky. Their astonished faces in the doorway were a testament to that.

Arcing shoulders-first into free-fall, Tom let rip at the shrinking chopper above, draining the Kalashnikov's magazine in a few heartbeats. With the wind rushing so loudly in his ears, he didn't even hear the gunfire; just felt the weapon judder in his hands, trying to throw him off balance and into a tumble. Every round spent in the shortest of moments, he opened his hands and let the gun spin away.

His last view of the chopper was one of it descending, trailing vapour. Then he was rolling onto his stomach, and letting his arms fall back, to give him more aerodynamic control over his fall.

Ahead and below was the pair of parachutes. Further on was the tiny speck that was Sarah.

Lining himself up carefully, Tom inclined his head, planing towards the parachutes. He opened his arms as he swooped upon them, an ungainly hawk snatching silken rabbits to its breast. It felt more like being brought down by a quarterback when running at full tilt.

For precious moments, he tumbled head over heels, before managing to stabilise himself. Below, the distance between Sarah and himself was widening slightly. Holding onto the parachutes with whitened knuckles, he planed downwards once more.

When Tom caught up with her, and slammed into her, it probably felt like being hit by a car. Worse, it probably felt like being hit by a car on a twisty roller-coaster, as she and the thing that had hit her were now tumbling and spinning nauseatingly.

He was grabbing at her, and she screamed silently, the sound whipped away almost before leaving her throat. Limbs were wrapping around her, as if trying to crawl around her.

He shouted to her to be calm and let him help, but there was no way she could

hear him over the rush of wind. His arms were constricting, and for a moment, she seemed to think he was taking the world's most inopportune moment to touch her up; she flinched instinctively, and he just held tighter.

Then she must have realised he was trying to strap something onto her. She saw the parachute, and forced herself to stop struggling, which he could tell wasn't easy. He was having trouble forcing the two halves of the main buckle together.

Tom grinned as Sarah regained control of her hands, and put them over his, pushing the buckle together until it locked with a click they both felt. Still terrified, she looked for a sign of success in the man's face. He gave her a thumbs-up.

Then he released the grip he had on her with his legs. Judging by her expression, the release was dismaying, not a relief. As they started to part, he grinned, genuinely, and pulled the ripcord, which was now at her shoulder.

There was a rustle like falling trees, and Sarah was hauled upwards out of Tom's view. All he had to do then, was strap on the other parachute, and pull the cord. When he did, a crushing pair of invisible hands grabbed him under the shoulders and lifted him onto a gentle current of air, which deposited him safely to the nearest beach.

Chapter One

Life on the Streets

Hong Kong, April 1997

Lots of people were willing to say they had seen Hong Yi Chung standing at the congee stall opposite a small hairdresser's. Most of them agreed that he was looking cool in his silk shirt, pressed jeans and shoes polished enough to be able to look up girls' skirts. Through the window, Yi Chung could see Emily Ko shampooing some housewife's hair. The girl was slim and had her hair tied with a red ribbon. She carried herself very confidently, and he liked that.

For all his admiration, he ate his rice glumly, wishing he could at least walk in and be a customer for her. But the salon was a ladies' place only, so he had no chance of introducing himself that way.

The car horn he was waiting for sounded from across the street. Ah Fei was waving to him from the car. It was a new one, and Yi Chung didn't know whether it was second-hand or just stolen. He didn't care, either.

'Why don't you just ask her out?' Fei asked. He was shorter than Yi Chung but stockier, with a gap-toothed smile. He was dressed much like Yi Chung, but in a red shirt instead of a green one.

'I can't. I mean, it's a ladies' salon, so I can hardly go in; and what would she think if I followed her home?'

'Then forget her. What's wrong with that girl you're seeing at Auntie Yee's place?'

'She gives me freebies because I sometimes get her stuff. It's not the same thing.' He wanted & He didn't even know what the word was -attachment, belonging? Something like that, anyway. Fun was fun, but it wasn't everything.

Fei grunted, and shook his head. 'It'd be good enough for me.'

Old car or new, the routine was the same: lead-foot it up Nathan Road to Yau Ma Tei to shake down the food-stall owners and building superintendents for their weekly payments.

They took a left turn at Waterloo Road, not daring to cross into Mongkok where others exacted similar tributes. Their first port of call was a small tea house where the owner was waiting deferentially with an envelope. Yi Chung was glad; he wasn't afraid of having to fight, but he preferred it when people showed some respect from the beginning. Either way, it was better than working in a warehouse or an office.

By lunchtime they had collected money from a dozen different businesses, and pounding the pavement was beginning to take its toll on both of them. 'Maybe it's time for lunch,' Fei decided.

'On you?'

'I paid yesterday. It's your turn.'

Yi Chung merely shrugged.

Lunch was a burger with fries, washed down with bottled beer. Yi Chung hardly tasted it; it wasn't worth paying any attention to it. The pair had sat down in a booth facing the door, just in case, but no one they knew had come in. 'Who is that girl anyway?' Fei asked. 'The one at the hairdresser's?'

'Emily Ko. She was at the same school as me, but in a different class.'

'Didn't you try for her then?'

'I was& with someone else/Yi Chung finished his sentence a little too hurriedly. Ah Fei clearly didn't believe him, but neither of them thought it worth mentioning.

'If you've got it that bad, just meet her when she finishes work. There'll always be someone to look after Auntie Yee's girl.'

'You?' Fei's tone had been unmistakable. Yi Chung didn't care for it, suddenly.

Fei shook his head. 'Only if it's free. I've got some standards.'

They sipped their beers, Yi Chung seeing Emily's face, not Fei's, across the table. 'What's next for today?' he asked, once he was sure the subject of Emily was over.

'Back to the car, and down to Jordan Road. Ah Wing hasn't showed up to pay his debts, so Lefty Soh wants us to chop him.'

'How much?'

'Just his hands. Teach him not to steal from his brothers. Lefty's money should help pay for your oath-taking.'

Yi Chung rose. 'OK,' he grinned. He put down his empty beer bottle. It rattled on the table-top until he could place it steadily.

like the backs of so many apartment blocks, this one was tainted with litter and rats and uncollected rubbish. Yi Chung thought for a moment that he was

going to lose the lunch he had so recently devoured, and doubted it would taste any better when taking the reverse course.

Ah Fei had brought a couple of household kitchen cleavers with him, and gave one to Yi Chung. It didn't look that much of a weapon, but could do horrendous damage to anyone hit with it. Yi Chung held it too tightly, following Ah Fei as they went up the grimy stairwell rather than taking the residents' lift.

Ah Fei peered out on to the fifth floor, then led Yi Chung along to a door. Yi Chung's heart raced, though he wasn't sure whether it was the thrill of doing something bad, or the terror of getting caught. He hyperventilated, twitching the cleaver so he'd be ready to use it. He felt that would be good; that way, Ah Fei would see he was one of the boys. As Ah Fei kicked the door open, Yi Chung worked up a yell to scream at Wing to intimidate him.

Yi Chung's enthusiasm for the job evaporated the instant the door burst open.

The room was peaceful enough, but smelt like a mix of chemical lab and abattoir. A chair and a couple of lamps and ornaments in the apartment had been knocked over, but the fact that there was no blood didn't make Yi feel any less queasy.

He'd seen places trashed before, and attended brutal fights and choppings, but he had never smelt anything like that stench before. With the door open, it was dissipating rapidly, but even after it was gone Yi Chung could still smell it. It would haunt him for the rest of his life.

'What the hell?' Both men held their cleavers in shaking hands, moving hesitantly through the flat. It was a familiar sort of place, the wallpaper fashionable a decade ago. In the centre, a large patch of carpet was burnt, and the low coffee table that straddled it had collapsed, its glass surface blackened and bubbled. 'Wing?' Fei called hesitantly.

There was no answer. Nor was there anyone in the kitchen, bathroom or single clothes-strewn bedroom.

'I don't like this,' Yi Chung told his friend.

Fei absently tapped the back of his cleaver against his other hand, not looking any more sure of what to do next than Yi Chung felt. 'If he's not here, we should wait&'

'I think he is here.' Yi Chung pointed to the burnt patch. Some pale, stick-like fragments were mixed with the ash. A closer look showed a blackened signet-ring on the edge of the scorched area. Only then did Yi Chung lose it and run for the bathroom.

'Oh shit, man,' he could hear Fei say. 'Oh, I&'

Yi Chung was less coherent, but at least he could still stand. As he wiped his mouth, he saw something glint under a towel rail. Against his better judgement, he found his hand picking up the object. It was a slim metal box, the size and shape of a large cigarette case, but the metal felt warm, and he could see no joins or hinges. He didn't know anything about precious metals, but knew enough about people to hope that if it had been hidden it might be valuable. At least then he might get something towards the debt he owed Fei and Lefty for initiating him into the gang.

In any case, the shock had got to his hands, which refused to open, and hung on to the new acquisition like a security blanket.

Desperate to spit out the taste and the smell, Yi Chung went back in to Fei on legs that were unsure whether to obey him. 'Let's go.'

'But Lefty Soh&'

'Maybe he changed his mind and sent someone else.' Yi Chung gestured weakly at the scorched remains. 'Someone who torched Wing. Come on.' He wasn't about to wait to see whether Ah Fei would follow him; he just ran.

According to the station's logbooks, it was the next day when Wing's name came to the police's attention. Inspector Katie Siao's was the closest free hand to a telephone in the homicide office of Wong Tai Sin police station when it rang, so she took the call. Kowloon Homicide.'

She slumped into a chair and started scribbling details on a small yellow legal pad. 'What address?' She nodded, though only her fellow officers could see this response to the caller. 'Stay where you are, but don't touch anything. We'll be right there.'

There's no such thing as a private communication line, at least not to the conspiracy-minded, or those whose professions require paranoia if they are to stay ahead of the game. Land-lines can be tapped, any satellite that relays signals can retransmit copies elsewhere and cellular networks can be eavesdropped on by anyone with the right equipment.

The right equipment was arranged in a secure room inside a nondescript two-storey office block in Mongkok. From the outside, it looked innocuous enough - plain walls and darkened windows, with a small parking area. Its workers arrived in typical city-bound small cars, and wore normal shirts and ties.

Only inside did the security measures become apparent: doors that needed a code entered on a keypad to open, cameras everywhere and armed guards in the uniforms of a mixture of nations.

In one darkened room a wide selection of the latest military and scientific communications gear was set up. A man in military fatigues was listening to the general chatter of Hong Kong's communications, while the computers around him sorted through the din in search of important keywords.

It was an American program, originally, designed for the FBI back in the 1980s. If a conversation was innocent it was recorded over, but if the computer picked out a certain number of keywords, the recording would be flagged for attention by a human operator. So, for example, if a conversation included the words 'bomb', 'president,' and 'Wednesday', it would be passed to someone to judge it as a whole. A separate set of machines did the same job on emails.

It was impossible for the man on duty to follow any individual conversation out of the thousands that were streaming past him in so many different languages, but when the computer flagged one for his attention it screened out all the others.

Something chirped, and he picked up a pair of earphones, replaying the latest message the computer thought might be of interest.

He made a note of the elapsed time on a DAT system, and picked up a scrambled walkie-talkie. 'Sir?'

'Go ahead.'

'Possible subject acquisition:

Chapter Two Scene of Hie&

The town was small, with only a couple of hotel bars. Kim was working in the American Bar, in the hope of earning enough to fund some further schooling in Phnom Penh. Some of the girls who had worked there before her had sold themselves as well as drinks, but Kim wasn't into that.

She could almost have changed her mind when it came to the two Australians who were staying this week. They were both a couple of years older than her, and not bad-looking, for white guys. They were also generous tippers, which was good when you were trying to save every penny.

Kim deposited the pair's latest drinks and saw that they were trying to spread a map out on their table. 'Let me help,' she said, and started shifting empty glasses and the ashtray - she'd never seen either of them smoke anyway - onto unattended tables.

Thanks.'

'You're hiking? Backpacking?'

'Yeah,' one replied - she thought his name was Danny. 'We're just trying to work out the best route. This border country is confusing.'

'The border?' Kim didn't like the sound of that. 'Why do you want to go there?'

'Because it's there.' The Australian grinned and she could sense he was waiting for her to laugh, but she didn't know why. He looked vaguely embarrassed. 'Sorry it's a crap cliché. We'd just like to explore a bit, and that way looks like it might be interesting.'

'No,' she said quietly, looking around. 'That way's dangerous.'

'Khmer Rouge, or landmines?' the other Australian asked.

'Neither. Bad things happen up there. People who have stayed here go walking along this path&' She pointed vaguely on their map. '& And never come back.'

The two guys looked amused, but listened. 'Last year, this one guy - a German, I think - went up there. He did come back, but he was& different. like a zombie or something. He didn't remember being here before, and didn't even know his own name.'

'What do you think happened to him?' Danny asked. She could see he wasn't convinced, but at least he wasn't making fun of her.

'Some people say that area is haunted by evil spirits.' Now they laughed. 'Some people,' she repeated hurriedly. 'I don't know. I just say what I heard because I don't want to see you disappear, or come back different.'

'Don't worry,' Danny said cheerfully, 'We can look after ourselves. If these spirits don't bother us, we won't be bothering them.'

It was twilight by the time Inspector Siao actually walked into the apartment. Camera flashlights were popping everywhere, recording the cheap sofa, the TV and VCR, a dropped mug, the charred curtains& Most of all, they were feasting

upon the patch of ashes that bisected the coffee table. White string was pinned out around the latter, delineating its vaguely humanoid shape.

'Take it this is the body?' She couldn't even call it a body. "The remains?' For all its inhuman appearance, Siao still felt vaguely sickened by it.

The uniformed officer who had been guarding the door nodded. 'If it is even a person. We're not sure.'

'Oh, it is.' That was her instinct talking; instinct honed by experience. She could tell when she entered a murder scene, even if nothing outwardly showed. 'I'm sure the forensics will tell us that much.' She patted the officer on the shoulder, seeing him steady a little. 'I've never seen anything like it either. Who found the body this?'

The officer consulted his notebook. "The building's caretaker. He had come in response to a request from the resident - made yesterday -to check the air conditioning. The caretaker found the door ajar, and the apartment empty but in the condition you see.'

'Where's the caretaker now?'

'Downstairs in his flat in the basement. There's a uniform with him; we thought you'd want to speak to him.'

'Right.' Before she spoke with the caretaker, Siao wanted to see the scene for herself. She hated being in places of death, but it was part of the job, and it helped her to get a feel for whatever had happened. Here, unfortunately, the only feeling she got was a strange creeping dread, of a kind normally reserved for the couple of days before her annual physical fitness exam was due.

She knelt by the burnt patch, trying not to breathe in too much of the burnt-pork smell that hovered around it. Forensics types were scraping samples from it and the carpet into test tubes for analysis, but she already knew the results would prove the patch to be human ash. She'd seen it before, and smelt it too, and had never, despite her best efforts, managed to forget it.

Inspector Siao?' The voice was female, but clipped and impersonal; all business and no courtesy. It sounded to Siao like the bureaucrats were coming down to a crime scene for once, and that always meant bad news. When they and political appointees came out into the field, it usually meant the case would be high-profile in the media for some reason. That in turn meant there had best be a quick solution to the case, or else people would get fired to save the aforementioned bureaucrats' pensions.

She straightened with a groan and turned. There were two newcomers, a man and a woman. The man looked Japanese to her, but the woman seemed Chinese, with typically dark hair unlike Siao's red-tinted crop.

Siao got nervous enough in the presence of the police's own SWAT team, or the Royal Navy and Marines personnel who some-times assisted in operations to stop fishermen smuggling illegal immigrants. So she really didn't like the look of the two newcomers. Their plain black combat fatigues were probably simply meant to be restrained and unobtrusive but came over as sinister. And their lack of insignia or rank markings didn't help -their only decoration was on their berets: a winged globe which, on closer inspection, turned out to be the UN symbol.

'I'm Inspector Siao, Hong Kong Police.'

The military types smiled almost convincingly. 'Colonel Tsang,' the woman continued, 'and Lieutenant Nomura, United Nations Intelligence Taskforce.' Tsang handed over some impressive documentation, which didn't ease Siao's mind at all.

'What can I do for UNIT?'

'Actually it's more what can UNIT do for you. This case would appear to be quite unusual, and the new and unusual are within UNIT'S purview.'

'True, but we haven't called you in yet. If we need to, you'll be the first to know.' Siao knew it was too confrontational a reply, but she had to say something while she tried to work out how they had turned up so fast. 'How exactly did you hear of this?'

Tsang was looking down at the greasy ashes. 'On a police scanner.'

"That's not exactly legal. But you must have heard many crime reports; what's so special about this one?' Siao turned, watching as Nomura moved into another room. He was conducting a search, she realised. She suppressed the urge to throw them both out.

'Because,' Tsang admitted with visible reluctance, 'we were on our way here anyway, with a search warrant.' Siao wondered how true that was, despite the officer's performance. Nomura had returned, shaking his head almost imperceptibly.

'What are you looking for here? And don't tell me "that's classified" because I doubt you can make a UN concern outrank a sovereign country's judgement of what's important.'

'Since it's not here, it doesn't matter what it is.'

'Well, then,' Siao replied with equal politeness, 'if it doesn't matter, then there's no reason for you not to tell me.'

The credibility of Tsang's smile lessened visibly. 'It may not be classified, but since its presence or absence might affect the safety of my people in Operations, I'd call it& confidential.'

'SpelledB-U-L-L&?'

'Not at all. It was evidence relating to an ongoing operation in the field.' Tsang handed Siao a business card. 'You can reach me here night or day. I think it might be worthwhile to pool our resources.'

'Once we've completed our investigation here, I'm sure that can be arranged,' Siao agreed politely. She had already decided that the arrangement would depend on some questions being answered. It was probably 50-50 as to whether they would be.

Tsang and Nomura were back in the traffic in their plain saloon before they spoke to each other. Tsang was quite impressed by the stocky detective; she hadn't kowtowed to them as easily as most people did. While admirable, it was a damned nuisance. 'Back to base,' she told Nomura, who was driving. Then she picked up a walkie-talkie with a keypad for scrambling the signal. 'Lotus to Dragon One, come in please.'

'Dragon One here,' a male Australian voice replied. 'How did it go, over?'

'We're not sure. The police are being uncooperative so long as we aren't telling them what the thing is. Don't worry, we'll buy the truth from one of them tonight.'

Chapter Three Silent Services

Although a government services plane had made the first landing at the new Chek Lap Kok airport a couple of months previously, in February, there would be no passenger services there until the summer of 1998. This disappointed Sarah Jane Smith; the approach to Kai Tak airport was one of her least favourite in the world.

A plane coming into Kai Tak took a perilous descent between Hong Kong's skyscrapers, pulled a 90-degree turn to avoid running straight into Diamond Hill, and then tried not to drop off the end of the runway into Kowloon Bay. When this Far East tour was being planned, Sarah had hoped she would be able to avoid that particular set of manoeuvres.

Once she was through customs and immigration, Kai Tak was busier than she remembered; presumably the people who could afford to fly were the ones who were most nervous about the impending handover of rulership. Beijing would be taking back control of the colony from Britain in less than a month. Perhaps because of this, most of the new, increased business seemed, thankfully, to be in flights out, so the queue at customs and immigration had been relatively bearable.

In spite of the lightweight cotton clothes she was wearing, Sarah felt the mugginess of the colony almost immediately. Hong Kong was one of the more humid places on Earth that she had visited in her time and, though she loved its atmosphere and people, the climate left a little to be desired.

The airline had managed not to lose any of her luggage, so she wasted no time in getting out and hailing a taxi to take her to her hotel.

* * *

From where Tom Ryder was sitting, relaxing behind a China Daily on the concourse outside the arrivals point, the pastel-blue trouser suit looked fine on Sarah. The hint of sweatiness just added to the effect, as far as he was concerned. He was glad to see she looked none the worse for wear after her tribulations in Thailand.

She didn't spot him, which was as he had hoped. He was dressed casually in shirt and slacks, and kept a couple of rows of occupied seats between her and him as she headed for the exit. Once she was at the doors, Tom abandoned the paper and rose, his long legs carrying him to another exit door just along from Sarah's.

While Sarah had to signal for a taxi outside, one simply drew up to allow Tom to get in. He opened the door and hopped in so quickly that the car didn't really stop as such, before following Sarah's cab.

Katie Siao sat in her hatchback, trying to tune out the usual protests that were coming in over her mobile phone. 'I can't pick them up, Eddie,' she said quickly, as soon as an opportunity presented itself. 'I'm stuck in traffic in Mongkok, and I've a lot of work to do today.'

'More paperwork?'

'No, well, yes, that too. There's a new case.'

'Murder?' Eddie always liked hearing the gory details. Sometimes she thought that's why he'd married her. But she knew better.

'Ye- Actually, we're not sure yet. That's one of the reasons I'll be late.'

There was a sigh from the other end of the phone. 'You're going to tell me all about it?'

'Yes. Now, you'll pick them up? Put the meter on for the trip, if it makes you feel better.'

'I might. I could dock the fare from their pocket money.'

'Just make sure they do their homework after dinner.'

'OK. Love you.' She'd known he would acquiesce. He always did, and the protests were little other than a game between them.

'And you,' she replied, embarrassed. She switched off the phone quickly.

'And they say you've no heart,' Detective Sergeant Mark Sing chuckled. She hated talking to family when other cops were around, and could already hear Mark imitating her at the station to the rest of the homicide team.

'It's just in safekeeping,' she told him. 'Keep your attention on the road.'

'Don't worry. The Cannonball will be on target and on time, as always.'

'You sound as if you're looking forward to this.'

Mark grinned. 'Given the choice between sitting in on an autopsy and dinner with the family when my sister's round, I'll take the former any day'

Nobody could ever escape the constant thrumming or random popping sounds that filled the cramped spaces of a submarine. After a while, though, you acclimatised and stopped noticing them. Either that or you went stir-crazy and had to be taken off the boat. Nobody wanted that, as it meant a court martial and punishment for weakness, so most of those who went crazy tried to hide it and stick out the tour of duty.

No wonder, Gennady Morozich thought, that the submarine fleet was so screwed up. At least his boat wasn't nuclear-armed, so he didn't have to worry about the crazies starting a world war. Though he thought of the Zhukov as his boat, he wasn't the captain, merely the chief of the boat. Captains came and went, but he was always there.

He squeezed his way into the conn, which wasn't easy for him aboard such a cramped boat, and cast an eye over the depth gauges and pressure gauges at the helm. A tap on his shoulder alerted him to a sunken-eyed, unshaven figure in red coveralls. 'What's up?'

'Don't ask,' Radzinski said, rubbing at his greying hair. 'I was doing the morning walk-through when I started picking up some-thing.' He handed Morozich the Geiger counter. 'Try it.' Morozich switched the detector on, and it clicked, ticking over slowly but steadily. Morozich could feel the eyes of the conn officers on him, and led Radzinski out into a narrow passageway. The ticking accompanied them.

Morozich frowned at the counter. 'Another reactor leak? I thought you and Putov had fixed&'

Radzinski shook his head. 'Whatever it is, it's not a reactor leak. I took this counter through the boat, and the level is the same everywhere; no peaks in any of our vital areas. It must be an outside source.'

Morozich thought hard. He knew as well as anyone that nothing natural could cause such a radiation spike. That left only two alternatives he could think of, both of them bad. 'It must be either a lost warhead or another submarine.'

'There's nothing on sonar,' Radzinski said. 'I checked. If it's another submarine, it must be dead in the water. Either way, it's not one of ours.'

Morozich drummed his fingers on the bulkhead for a moment. 'Do another walk-through, just to double-check, while I wake the captain.' The captain wouldn't appreciate being woken. He valued his sleep as much as anyone.

The two people walking into the morgue could hardly be more different. One short and curvy, with short hair streakily dyed a red shade that wasn't found in nature; the other slim, with a ponytail and his shirt not tucked in.

'You two still not speaking?' the woman asked.

The ponytail shook. 'She still thinks I should be willing to negate those forty-seven outstanding traffic tickets, even though they're all from Lam Tin. And now her kid says he wants to be a cop like Uncle Mark, which is driving her mad. She wants him to be a stockbroker.'

'How old is he?'

'Three, but she's already bought him a calculator for his birthday. Says it's never too early to start learning.' He pushed open a set of double doors, and they walked into the examination room. The pathologist was already there, dictating into a micro-phone hung from the ceiling. The walls were lined with medical equipment and specimen jars, while three chromed tables with raised sides took up most of the space.

'Inspector Siao, Sergeant Sing,' the pathologist acknowledged, his voice muffled by the surgical mask. 'It's not like you to be late:

Traffic,' Sing explained.

The pathologist looked at his watch. 'Oh, I see. Didn't realise it was so late. Rush hour?' Both cops nodded. 'Never mind.' He beckoned them over. As they approached, Siao could see that the table's occupant was a plastic tray with a few bone fragments and ash. The pathologist's mask was there to protect the remains from contamination by him, rather than the other way round.

'Not much to see in this one anyway,' the pathologist continued. 'The lab results tell us this ash used to be a human male, and that the reduction of the body took place at double the temper-ature of a normal crematorium furnace.' Siao and Sing exchanged revolted looks. 'From the bone fragments, we can place the deceased somewhere around the thirty-five to forty-five age range. Beyond that, this could be anybody, and there's no way to tell whether he was alive or dead when he was burned. I'm going to have to record an open verdict on cause of death.'

'No chance of an ID, I suppose?' Siao didn't hold out much hope. She noticed that on this visit Sing was looking more interested than sick. At least that

was a change for the better.

'You're in luck; we should get a DNA match tomorrow. We'll compare it to swabs taken from the drinking vessels and cutlery at the scene, and at least find out whether he was the regular occupant of the apartment. Best we can do, I'm afraid.'

It wasn't much, but Siao hadn't really expected anything. In her experience, there were two main kinds of homicide, and neither of them involved patient detective work leading to an ingenious solution. The majority were spur-of-the-moment things - brawls and crimes of passion - in which the killer was identified almost immediately, and usually gave himself up. Then there were the stone-cold whodunnits, which mostly stayed that way, no matter what. Siao had the sinking feeling that this was going to be one of the latter. 'Was there anything else worth mentioning? Anything at all?'

'If you mean, can I confirm whether it was murder, or suicide, no.' The pathologist stepped away from the table, and removed his mask to reveal a perplexed look on his ageing features. "There's one very puzzling thing. Despite what people think, a crematorium furnace doesn't reduce everything to ashes. Bone and some of the tougher muscles like the heart survive and are crushed to powder afterwards. Whatever happened to this person reduced him to ashes completely. If it had happened in the apartment, the whole building would have gone up in a conflagration you could see for miles.'

Siao nodded slowly. "Then he might have been dumped there after death?' She couldn't understand how or why anyone would have arranged the remains into a humanoid outline, but then, she wasn't a psychopath and surely only such a person could have done this.

'But what about the melted coffee table?' Sing asked.

'Beats me,' the pathologist admitted. 'You're the detectives. I'd suggest you'll just have to go out and detect.'

'Oh & Thank you. I wish I'd thought of that.'

Birthdays always lead to chaos in Hong Kong. Firecrackers exploding from the drainpipes and TV antennae while revellers get drunk at a buffet on the roof of an apartment block. Sometimes it could be hard to find enough room between the pigeon roosts for the plastic garden furniture and beer kegs.

Hong Yi Chung knew just how cramped a city could be, but thanked his lucky stars that at least he lived in a district with some character. He'd have been driven stir-crazy if he'd had to put up with living in one of the impersonal new towns over at North Point or Sai Wan Ho. At least in Tsim Sha Tsui, there was a street culture that had had time to develop.

His father had already drunk himself to sleep, and his mother was busy in the kitchen, but there were plenty of friends and relatives around to help him party. The only person missing was Emily Ko, whom he had been admiring earlier.

When Yi Chung had been growing up in Kowloon, Sally Fung was the prettiest girl in the apartment block.

Even as Sally had gone from being a girl to being a woman, she would potter around the central courtyard in no more than panties and a short T-shirt, seemingly oblivious of the effect this had on the local boys. Yi Chung had

never quite managed to ask her on a date, and she had since moved to work in an office in Singapore, but she had remained somewhere in his subconscious as the baseline for his judgement of female beauty.

Which brought him back to Emily Ko. Emily Ko didn't exactly look like Sally but she had the same bearing and attitude, as far as Yi Chung could tell from a respectful distance.

To hell with the birthday, he decided. He would do what Ah Fei suggested, and go and meet her as she left work. He was sure the worst she could do was say no to a request for a date.

'It's at times like this,' Captain Kutzov said, 'that I wish they could put portholes and lights on the boat.' Morozich loomed over both him and Radzinski as they gathered around the chart table in the conn. Radzinski had spread a print-out of the morning's radiation readings over the table. Kutzov had also acquired a chart of the sea floor for this area, and the latest set of sonar scans. The sonar had shown no other vessels in the area, but had highlighted a discrepancy between a region of the sea floor and its representation on the chart.

'We could send out a diver with a camera on an umbilical,' Radzinski suggested.

Morozich shook his head. 'Haven't got one long enough.'

'A camcorder, then,' the captain decided. 'You can seal one up so it's waterproof?'

Morozich thought about it. 'I think so, but what good would that do?'

'If it's another boat, someone aboard could at least tap on the hull in Morse. If there are fellow submariners trapped, we have to let them know we can send for help. Even if they're Americans.'

Everyone nodded slowly. As with fighter pilots, there was an unwritten rule that submariners were all brothers, regardless of which navy they served in.

'All right,' Morozich agreed. 'Get Lermontov kitted out,' he told Radzinski.

Ah Fei would be tried for racketeering in 1998. At the trial, he would speak of this time only briefly. He himself could take or leave the violence inherent in being a Triad footsoldier, a 49, he would say, but Yi Chung sometimes worried him. Yi Chung was so eager to advance up the ranks.

When Fei and Yi Chung had found that something - not some-owe, as he had made sure he put in his testimony - had beaten them to Wing, he had thought for a moment that Yi Chung might attack a neighbour, or even Fei himself, to make sure everyone knew he was tough.

On Yi Chung's birthday, though, Ah Fei had felt sure his fellow 49 would be in cheerier mood.

He bounded lightly on to the roof of Yi Chung's apartment building, bearing a giftwrapped bottle which he hoped he and Yi would drain later in the evening. It would make up for the obvious disappointment Yi Chung had shown at not being able to chop Wing. He was surprised to find Yi Chung already gone. 'Where's Yi?' he asked another guest.

'Gone to see some girl.'

"That tart at Auntie Yee's?" Fei assumed.

The man shook his head. 'Some hairdresser, I think.'

'I see &' Fei was surprised, but pleased, that Yi Chung seemed to be taking his advice. 'Tell him I called, OK?' He remembered the present and was disappointed they wouldn't be sharing it that night. 'Oh, and give him this.'

Imagine your eyes on one side of thin glass, looking at lightless waters on the other side. Feeling it around you, supporting you, but also engulfing and swallowing you. Hearing only the blood rushing in your ears, and your ragged breathing.

Fish appear briefly, startled, in your torchlight, then are gone as completely as if they had never been. You hope there are no sharks in these waters; it's deep, and it's night, and it's too dark to even see one before you're halfway down its throat.

The jury-rigged dial on a Geiger counter shows you the direction to swim in, and the rebreather jamming your mouth stops you complaining about heading towards a radiation source.

Then, suddenly, your knees are in soft sand, and clouds of it rise into the darkness as you steady yourself. Your breathing jolts, sure the sand will choke you, even when you know it can't, and you almost lose the rebreather that keeps you alive down here.

It takes a few moments to recover yourself, but soon you start making your way again. There's a rock at the edge of the torchlight, and you head towards it, being careful not to disturb the sand. You wish you had a shark billy or spear gun just in case, but the torch, counter and camcorder attached to your belt are burden enough.

As you near the rock, those black doubts and fears resurface in your mind like warning triangular fins. The rock is not a lone object, like so many others around you, but just part of a larger surface. It's smooth, like metal. Unlike metal, it is bright, shining, not corroded or coated with underwater life. It's as if only the image is really there, and you can't help but touch it. You don't want to; you're afraid it's radioactive, but you have to know that it's really there.

Your fingers slide off, as if it's oiled.

Watching the diver's videotape, certain that those feelings must have assailed Lermontov, Morozich shuddered. Whatever the thing displayed on the glass surface of the TV monitor before his eyes actually was, it wasn't a submarine. A submarine would be black and rough, encrusted with life, Or yellow or white, if it was a civilian scientific craft.

In fact, Morozich couldn't think of anything that wouldn't be teeming with barnacles and suchlike, after being sunk for a while. Not anything made by man or nature, anyway.

'What the hell is it?' he whispered.

'I have no idea,' Kutzov admitted. 'Some kind of lava flow, perhaps. Liquid ore being forced up through a fault?' He poured himself another tiny cup from the ward-room's samovar, without taking his eyes off the TV screen showing the video footage.

'It wasn't hot out there,' Lermontov said. At least not in the ordinary way.'

'We don't know how long it's been cooling,' Kutzov pointed out. 'The thing could have appeared weeks ago, or years.'

'There's something else.' Lermontov carefully unwrapped a piece of oilcloth to reveal a sparkly clean shard of silver metal. 'I picked up this.'

'It polished up nice, but apart from that, what&?'

'I haven't polished it,' Lermontov interrupted. 'It came like that; totally clean and non-corroded.' They all stared at the metal. 'It's also very light. Here.' He handed it round, and Morozich was impressed; the metal weighed almost nothing. It was more like plastic or polystyrene, than solid metal.

Kutzov had developed a calculating expression. 'An ore like this could be valuable&' The others looked at him. 'Non-corrodable, light, flexible. Just the sort of new discovery that's worth a fortune in hard currency.'

'Then we're going to report this?' Morozich asked. It was tempting, and he could foresee buying his way out of the navy and into a luxury yacht in the West, but something made him uneasy. He was sure this needed more thought. Of course, usually it was when most thought was required that the least thinking was actually done.

'Yes,' Kutzov answered with finality. 'Make for periscope depth.'

Chapter Four H Jungle Our There

lieutenant Fiona Clark sat stewing in the one bar in Ban Lung, wishing she'd signed on to some service that didn't supply spec-ops teams to UNIT-SEA. It wasn't the jungle, or the wildlife, or the mission that she couldn't stand; it was the beer in this remote nowhere. She couldn't get a decent off-duty beer within a hundred miles, and all her current haunt served was piss-warm Miller.

She was fairly sure she had managed to disguise her military appearance, largely by keeping the combat trousers and wearing a baggy T-shirt and bandanna. That seemed to be de rigueur for backpackers in this region, and made her blend in as well as any white woman could.

Her superior, just entering the bar, had more of a problem blending in. It didn't matter how hard he tried, but Major Russell Barry could never quite get the hang of looking like a civilian backpacker. For all that he had changed into blue jeans and a cotton shirt, he stood, talked and moved like a soldier out of uniform. Neither too lean nor overly muscled, he was fit, despite the greying hair and salt-and-pepper stubble.

The pair nodded to each other. 'Any likely subjects today?' Barry asked softly.

'Maybe.' Clark inclined her head in the direction of a corner table. There, a couple of guys with the look of hardened backpackers were poring over a map, using their empty glasses as paperweights, in spite of the waitress's attempts to clear them away.

The bar was full of such people, but most of them were more relaxed and probably about to head back towards civilisation. The map suggested that these two were about to go even further off the beaten track. Either that, Clark thought, or they were even more desperate for a better beer than she was.

Barry glanced over, not looking as if he was glancing over, and called to the bar girl for a beer. 'You could be right,' he said to Clark. 'They definitely look like they're planning to head off the beaten track sometime soon. Of course, knowing our luck, nothing'll happen&'

'But you want us to keep an eye on them anyway.'

Barry nodded. 'like the float on a fishing line. Go wake Tranh, and see if he can predict their likely route. Then have Gibson and Harris shadow them.'

'Right, sir.' Clark drained her beer with a grimace, then left, mulling over how she would describe the two subjects to Gibson and Harris.

waking to sudden, full alertness without any of the disorientation that usually accompanies the emergence from sleep - it is a strange feeling, yet perversely normal. He can almost feel himself thinking that he isn't thinking about it.

Then he's passing along metal tubes and through solid walls. Others are in file with him, gravitating towards a central point. Ahead is a transposition arch - and he knows that and is comfort-able with it, without knowing what it is or what the word means. The wall by his hand extrudes a weapon. It's unfamiliar, but clearly designed to shoot people. His fingertips are charging it, totally familiar with the procedure, as he steps through the transposition arch.

There is a glare of bright sunlight in his eyes, and it isn't white or gold, but blue. He stares, momentarily astonished by its beauty, and something flits across it.

Then the blue resolves itself into the sky between the tree tops far overhead, and the sun is its normal yellow-white. At that point Tranh realises he is truly awake.

* * *

Clark stopped shaking Tranh's shoulder when the man coughed himself awake. He had fallen asleep in a rocking chair on the verandah of the small hotel the UNIT team had booked.

like most people in the area, he wasn't large and wore simple clothes that were probably a few years old. 'I'm sorry,' he said, 'I didn't realise I'd fallen asleep&'

'Luckily it was me that was sent to wake you,' Clark replied. 'Come on, there's still coffee in the pot.' She led Tranh through and up the worn stairs of the cramped hotel. The first room on the left had been converted into the ops room, with maps and satellite photos pinned to the walls, and scrambled communications equipment ranged around.

Gibson and Harris, both skinheaded white men who seemed to have been produced from some cloning factory, were already there, chatting over the coffee-pot in a manner more genial than their thuggish appearance suggested. Harris handed Tranh a coffee. 'Sorry mate, but you missed breakfast.'

'And lunch,' Gibson added. 'But we kept the coffee warm.'

'Thank you,' Tranh said gratefully, giving them a slight neck-bow. Clark had to admit that though Tranh might be a bit laid-back, he was polite with it. Better still, he really knew his stuff.

'Are we going somewhere today?' Tranh asked.

'They are,' Clark told him, 'but we're not.' She looked at Gibson and Harris. 'Two good subjects are preparing to leave town for parts unknown. We want you to predict where they might be going. Then you two will get ahead of them and shadow them. If they have a rendezvous like the others, we'll need a full report.'

'Perhaps they are returning to the city?' Tranh suggested.

Clark shook her head. 'They were looking at maps, clearly looking for routes they haven't seen before. They definitely weren't preparing to retrace their journey'

Tranh nodded thoughtfully, and turned to study the largest-scale map of the area. Clark traced a finger over the whole area of Kratie, before pausing over a crater lake. 'From the way they were pointing at their map, it looked like they were interested in this area.'

Tranh nodded. 'Then this would be their likely route.' He stabbed a place on the map with his index finger. 'This place has good walking paths and opportunities for safe shelter.'

'Helluva bit close to the Laotian border,' Gibson muttered.

'Yeah,' Clark wasn't really surprised. The sort of thing they expected to find tended to happen on a border. That way, each government could pass the buck on to the other. 'Figures. OK, now you know where you're going. Take enough kit for, say, three days in the field.' Gibson and Harris were already out the door. Clark grinned approvingly.

Yi Chung ignored the annoyed looks of shoppers and commuters as he paced around outside the hairdresser's. He tried to keep out of sight, though he wasn't sure if this would simply make him seem more suspicious, and thus less attractive.

It was a dilemma he hadn't considered, but suddenly just about everything worried him. If Emily Ko said yes to a date, surely his life would be changing for the better, and change should never be entered into lightly.

He suddenly knew she would say no. She wasn't Sally Fung, wasn't likely to be as amenable as Auntie Yee's girls, and probably had more sense than to take up with a wise guy like him.

As quickly as he thought that, he reminded himself that he was young and handsome, and that nobody could resist the charms of a young, handsome wise guy. As his emotions continued to yo-yo, he kept pounding the pavement back and forth as if trying to wear a hole in it.

His pacing was stopped by a painful impact and he rocked back on his heels, just managing to stay upright. That was more than could be said for the girl he had just blindly walked into. Embarrassed and guilty, he bent to help her up. He was already trying to apologise, but only gibberish seemed to be coming out. Giving up on speech, he took her hand and lifted her to her feet.

It was Emily Ko, and his heart sank. He had wanted to meet her, but this wasn't exactly what he'd had in mind. 'I'm sorry,' he stammered. 'I was just'

She slapped him in the chest. 'You were just not paying attention. Probably

thinking too much about what trouble you want to get into next. I know your type - Fei Jai,' she sniffed dismissively.

Yi Chung cringed inwardly. He was proud of his determination to back down to no man, but harsh words from a pretty girl made him wish he'd never been born. 'Actually, I was waiting for you.'

'For me? Why?' She gave him a look that said she knew exactly why, and what he could do with himself rather than with her.

'I wanted& I mean, I just&' That look was still there, more frightening to him than a knife in a rival 49's hand. He recognised that he had reached the stage where any attempt to make things better would just make them worse/'Sorry' He stepped aside with a weak smile, and she brushed past him.

Yi Chung felt like a helpless child again. Nothing was going right for him today. The only consolation he could draw was that no one who knew him had seen his loss of face. He would tell anyone who asked that she turned out not to be his type, or something. Anyone except Ah Fei, of course.

He set off for home, but stopped immediately. His foot had come down on something lying on the pavement. It was a small wallet with some money and Emily Ko's ID and credit cards in it. The cash was tempting: only a couple of hundred dollars, but every little helped. He had plenty of time to pay for his initiation, as a percentage came out of every deal he made, but it wouldn't hurt to clear it quickly. He wondered whether this was good luck or bad. There was only one way to find out.

Though most people in civilised countries take it for granted, their freedom is a wonderful thing. For the first time in more than a dozen years, Kurt Williams and Danny Taylor had been enjoying the particular freedom that comes with no longer having to attend classes.

Both of them had been accepted by Australian universities, and this was their gap year. They were taking time off before their friendship, which had grown throughout high school, was interrupted by having to live near campuses on opposite sides of the country. This was a year to themselves, and they intended to use it and enjoy it to its fullest.

Of course, such luxuries never come cheap so they had made a deal with a publisher to finance their free year by writing a backpacker's guide to Cambodia. The assignment had been easy to get, not least because relatively few other people wished to go there while there were so few guidebooks. Those that did tended to stick closely to Phnom Penh and Angkor, and there were already enough guides to those places.

As the sun reached its peak, the pair found a suitable clearing in which to rest, and began to set up a small fire for a midday meal. For all that their packs were designed to spread the load evenly, it was a relief to shuck them.

Kurt slipped off into the bushes while Danny prepared a brew-up. When he returned, the smell of coffee was most welcome. 'Don't know what the locals were complaining about,' Danny said. 'There are no mines up here, and no rebels.'

Kurt sniffed disdainfully. 'Didn't that girl you were talking to say something about the place being haunted? Spirits and demons, and all that crap.'

'They probably just get earthlights or something.' Danny could see Kurt wasn't following him. 'You know, like swamp gas, but generated by little fault

lines.'

'Do you have to bring geology into everything?'

'You don't like talking shop?'

'You don't see me talking about building walls. Save it for class, man.'

'Whatever' The coffee-pot was ready, and Danny poured himself a cup.'Still, the locals could be right about one thing - there could be animals out here.'

'It's the jungle,' Kurt pointed out. 'Of course there are bloody animals.'

'No, you know what I mean. Dangerous animals. Tigers or bears or something.'

Kurt shook his head slowly. 'Don't think so, mate. Not here. Snakes, though&'

Danny shivered. He hated wriggling things. 'Don't remind me. Snakes don't make ambushes, though, do they?'

'No, why?'

Danny didn't really want to answer, because it sounded paranoid and cliched, but: 'I got this feeling, you know, like we're being watched.' Kurt merely groaned.

Gibson couldn't hear what the two youths were saying, but he could see them clearly through his field glasses. "That them?" Harris asked beside him.

'Yeah. Taking a tea-break.'

'Lucky bloody them.' Gibson sympathised entirely with his companion. He and Harris couldn't risk a brew-up for fear of discovery. The two subjects might be unarmed, but you never knew for sure and there was always the chance of others being out here, equally well hidden.

'I know what it is,' Danny said, suddenly. Kurt loved the guy, but at times like this he wished he'd never met him. "The birds.'

'What birds?' Kurt couldn't hear a sound, and he wondered if Danny was now hearing things. They shouldn't have tried that locally blended grass.

'Exactly. I mean, this is the jungle, right. I hear animal calls, but there should be bird calls and there aren't.'

'Yeah&' Now that Danny mentioned it, that was a bit weird.

'Maybe they don't fly here.' Kurt's voice trailed off; he knew how stupid that sounded. He couldn't think of any reason why birds wouldn't fly in an area. Not unless the weather was too bad or something.'Ah, I dunno, I'm not an ornithologist.'

'Never mind the bloody birds,' Danny said, hushed.'Look.'

Kurt followed the line of Danny's finger, into the bushes. At first, he couldn't see anything except the pattern of leaves and shadows. Then he realised that there were two adjacent patches of total darkness in spite of the afternoon sunlight - close enough and identical enough to be eyes, but animal eyes reflected light at their centres and Kurt saw no green or red glow.'It's just shadows.'

'There's another one.' Danny pointed, and Kurt saw another pair of whatever it was that he refused to think of as eyes.'And another.'

Though Kurt had no time for local superstitions, and was sure the area was safe from dangerous animals and the Khmer Rouge, he did feel a sudden instinct to get away. 'Come on.' He scooped up his backpack, not stopping to buckle it on properly, and started off along the narrow trail.'Let's get the hell&'

They were upon the men without warning. Small, cool and hairless. Thin but powerful fingers tore at their packs. At first, Kurt thought they were some kind of bare monkey, but then he realised their skin was shaded in green and black and that the patterns flowed like oil on water as the things moved.

That was when he began to scream.

Gibson and Harris watched, but didn't interfere. Any attempt to muscle in on the action would give away their position and jeopardise the mission.

Besides, they had already known they might see something like this.

Major Barry and Captain Clark were sitting on opposite sides of a Monopoly board, and Clark was winning. Barry had never been particularly into games, but she seemed to be an old hand at this one. Fishing was more his kind of hobby, and he would much rather have been waiting for news by the river-bank than in the hotel ops room.

The scrambled radio crackled into life and Barry was on his feet instantly, not least because it saved him from going bankrupt in the game.'Ops, go ahead.'

'Ops, this is Steward.' It sounded like Harris, though the signal degradation caused by scrambling made it difficult to be really sure. 'We can confirm the subjects have rendezvoused with the targets. Repeat: we can confirm the subjects have rendezvoused with the targets. And that's putting it mildly' Now Barry could hear the slight shake in Harris's voice, and wondered just what sort of rendezvous he and Gibson had seen.

He was already focusing on the large-scale map. As far as he was concerned it was time for business. 'Understood. Meet us at the coordinates Captain Clark gave you. We're en route.'

'Coordinates confirmed.'

'Good work, guys. Out.' Barry motioned to Clark and the others who were sitting in the room with books or cards.'No rest for the wicked. Hansen, you maintain this op centre; everybody else, time to get out of civvies and back into BDUs for a nice little field trip.'

Yi Chung's courage came and went like the passing of the tides, but by the minute rather than twice a day. Would Emily be grateful, or think he had stolen the wallet to stalk her, or would she simply be polite? Would she even be in, or would he be faced by a mother, sibling, lover?

Staring at the door to the apartment listed on her identity card, he still hadn't decided whether the wallet was good luck or bad. Though he wished it otherwise, he knew there was only one way to find out.

He straightened the collar of his silk shirt and pressed the doorbell button. He heard neither chime nor footsteps but the door was opened promptly, and by

Emily herself.

Some people are beautiful when angry, but not Emily Ko. Yi Chung knew she was a vision of loveliness when calm, but her disdainful expression made her look like a maiden aunt who'd smelt something bad. 'You?' She looked nervous when she recognised him. Though that wasn't the reaction he wanted, part of him was proud at the fear and respect he could inspire. He tried not to show that part on his face.

'You dropped this,' he said, offering up the wallet. 'When you fell.' She looked at him and he felt she was looking through him. He was glad he hadn't picked her pocket for the wallet, because he knew with a sudden certainty that she would have seen it in his eyes if he had.

Her face softened, becoming prettier. 'I see.' She took the wallet and checked its contents. 'Thank you.'

'I didn't take anything. I'm not a thief.'

'What are you, then?'

That was a difficult one to answer honestly. He couldn't say 'protection racketeer' or 'drug dealer'. 'I work at the docks.' It was the truth, at least on paper and as far as the tax office was concerned. He hadn't actually done a day's work in over a month, but he wasn't going to tell her that. 'Perhaps I could tell you all about it later.'

She smiled very slightly. It was only a slight smile, but to Yi Chung it was a beam of hope. 'Later? What makes you think we'll see each other again?'

'I was just going to ask you if we might. At a karaoke bar, or a movie.'

'I can't sing.'

'Neither can I.' He wondered what movies were on right now, as this looked like being the only option left. If she didn't like movies, then he was due a knock-back.

'Then I won't feel like I stand out at a karaoke bar.'

Yi Chung blinked in the middle of his mental film-reviewing. 'A karaoke bar?'

'That was one of the choices offered,' she reminded him.

'I mean & You're saying yes?' He cringed inside at the thought of how that must have sounded.

'You sound surprised.'

'I am.' He cringed again. 'I mean, I hoped you would.'

'Meet me outside at eight o'clock.'

He wanted to shout for joy. This was better than any of the presents he'd got at his birthday party. 'Eight it is.' He tried to think of a way to leave with a handy goodbye phrase that would leave her wanting more, but couldn't. Instead, he backed off with a nervous smile until she shut the door.

Yi Chung knew his luck was changing. But, at this point, he still thought the change was for the better.

Chapter Five Being Careful Out There

The UNIT records covering Major Barry's team quickly fell victim to the military love of silence and shadows. According to unclassified files of other missions at UNIT-SEA's Singapore head-quarters, a standard team in the field would consist of eight or ten people. Most of them would carry Heckler-Koch MP-5s, and at least one would be armed with a sniper rifle. All would wear lightweight body armour and carry a Beretta 92F automatic pistol as a back-up. The team would also be equipped with a GPS system for navigation, a scrambled satellite communications unit and at least one laptop computer.

There were undoubtedly variations between individual teams, but what those differences might be is something that can only be imagined, at least by anyone not of the right security-clearance level to find out.

Though he would never say any such thing out loud, Barry was quite relieved to find Gibson and Harris waiting, in good health, at the rendezvous point. From there on, the team made good progress northwards, but were careful not to go quite as far as the route that the backpackers Gibson and Harris had been following. Instead, they turned east, towards the Vietnamese border.

Eventually, on a forested slope, Tranh held up a hand to halt them. To everyone's surprise, a road cut across the jungle ahead. It was just a scar of mud winding round the hill, but Tranh looked troubled to see it. 'What's up?' Barry asked.

Tranh made a shushing gesture, and led the team along the roadside and up a small ridge. There was plenty of activity in the clearing below. A large swathe of jungle had been bulldozed to make room for covered cutting-benches and a couple of Portakabins. The few trucks were rusting relics of the Vietnam war, but the Kalashnikovs carried by the guards all seemed to be in good condition. 'Loggers.'

'Loggers?' Barry didn't see what was wrong with that.

'Illegals,' Tranh explained. 'Khmer Rouge sympathisers, and they don't like visitors.'

Clark frowned. 'I thought this area was free from Khmer activity. There shouldn't be any north of Kratie.'

'These are simply criminals. They carry out illegal logging to raise money for the Khmer Rouge. We should go round, and try to avoid them.'

'Absolutely.' Barry hesitated. Something light green had caught his eye and he dodged instinctively. Clark's machete took the hanuman snake in mid-strike, cutting it in half. Barry winced at the sight, and kicked the business end away. 'Ah, hell. Doesn't Tsang know how much I bloody hate the jungle?'

Clark shrugged. 'Maybe she knows you're not going to be having too much fun to get on with the mission. You'll have noticed how we never get assigned to guard the wine cellars of five-star colonial hotels.'

'Life's a bitch,' Barry grumbled.

'No, life's a politician, because at least you know where you stand with a bitch.'

Barry looked at the remains of the snake, then at the logging camp. 'Do we

really want to go round this place?'

Clark blinked. 'What do you mean?'

'Loggers have logging camps, right? That makes for a ready-made fire base, with shelter and room for choppers to come in. Everybody stays the hell away from logging roads, so that makes it a ready-made, built-in, psychological defence against wandering locals.'

Clark gazed at him levelly. 'And it has doors to keep the snakes out?'

'Yeah,' Barry admitted. 'I have to admit, I'm not seeing a down-side on this one.'

The evening news was usually Sarah's main TV choice of the evening, but as soon as her own face flashed up on the screen, she switched it off. The trouble at Bangkok was old news to her; now that the relevant people had been arrested, she just wanted to forget all about it for a while. Coming so close to death wasn't conducive to either relaxation or to concentrating on work. She also hated being in the public eye. If she had wanted to be famous she would have become an actress, not a journalist.

Since she had efficiently transferred her clothes from luggage to wardrobe when she arrived, she didn't have much reason to hang around in her hotel room.

like most modern hotels, the Win's was almost a community unto itself. Shops, restaurants, gyms, pools & Large hotels are the same the world over: the only difference is the currency you tip the staff in, and even for this, the US dollar is universally accepted. 'Hotel' is now a country without statehood, simultaneously existing in many geographical locations, where you can stay inside the walls and never venture out into the foreign lands beyond.

You could, if you had no sense of adventure.

Sarah had never been such a person. She was curious to see what had changed in Hong Kong in recent years, and what hadn't. She'd go in search of a more adventurous dinner outside.

There is no such thing as a free lunch and even a Triad footsoldier had to work, after a fashion. You didn't make money by just sitting around, and making money was important to Yi Chung. Without money, there could be no nice apartment, nice clothes, fast cars or fast women.

Money may not buy happiness, but Yi Chung didn't mind so long as he could rent the feeling for a while.

Head buzzing with the sort of excitement that was only ever produced in backstreet labs, Yi Chung headed for the Win's Hotel. It was a mild evening, he'd have money in his pocket within moments and he would soon pick up Emily for their date. What more could he want?

He found Ah Fei already waiting for him in the mock-1930s lobby of Win's. 'Where have you been, birthday boy?' Fei demanded, not too sharply.

'Making a date.' Yi Chung grinned.

Fei studied his expression closely. 'Not that one from the hairdresser's & ?'

'Emily.' Yi Chung nodded happily. 'Her name's Emily'

'Whatever. You missed the bottle I brought for you, but your uncle's keeping it safe.'

'Hey, thanks.'

'Come on, the kitchen staff's payments are due.' Yi Chung nodded, happy. This should go smoothly and without any risk of violence. Where restaurants and kitchen staff were concerned, making sure they paid their protection money was simple: the Triad owned the farms that produced the more specialised ingredients and could use them as leverage. Yi Chung hoped the bosses never realised that if they simply added the price of protection to the wholesale price of the ingredients, they'd get paid with no complaints, with no need for the likes of himself to get a cut for doing the job of collecting the payment.

The kitchen was insanely busy, and it was a wonder the scurrying cooks and waiters didn't either wreck the place or get scalded. A podgy chef was on his way over as soon as they entered. 'No. No. No. You can't come in here.'

Yi Chung gestured at the room. 'Hey, we are already in. You might as well agree to see us. It's pay-day'

'The Tao Te Lung expect payment on time,' Fei added.

Yi Chung was distracted by a nearby plate of hors d'oeuvres, and picked up a couple to tide him over until dinner time. 'You got the money, or do our little farms forget about you?' he asked. 'It'd be embarrassing if you had no fresh water chestnuts or bean sprouts for tomorrow's lunch.'

'It's in my office.' The chef led the pair to a small cubby-hole at the back of the kitchen, and slapped an envelope into Fei's hand. He did it almost hard enough for it to be an assault. Fei pushed him aside with a warning glare and he and Yi Chung left.

Before they reached the public areas of the hotel, Fei extracted his and Yi Chung's cut of the payment. 'Here. Take her somewhere nice so she sees you again.'

'That's very kind.'

'No, I'm just sick of hearing you complain about not having a steady girlfriend.' They both laughed, and Fei left through a side door. Yi Chung suspected he was probably going to gamble his cut in the hotel's own casino as usual.

Yi Chung had a spring in his step as he waltzed out of the kitchen and across the polished lobby. People were trying not to stare, and that made him laugh. Some Japanese were smirking as they noticed him, while a white woman simply shook her head as if tired. He didn't know why she should have that reaction and slowed for a minute. He had seen her somewhere before, but couldn't place her.

She had auburn hair and was wearing a pastel suit. It would come to him eventually. Until then, what difference did one more gwailo tourist among millions make?

The DNA results from the forensics lab confirmed that the ashes in Wing's apartment belonged to him.

Neither Inspector Siao nor Sergeant Sing were surprised at that. Both were

dismayed because it meant they now had to figure out how he had got into that state, and whether it was by accident or design.

It didn't help that the arson division had already been able to confirm that there had been no fire in the room, and that the case therefore had nothing to do with them. Sing slammed the door as they left the arson office. 'Half-witted sons of bitches: Siao could read on his face that most of his anger was down to arson having firmly dumped the case on them, when Sing wanted to dump it on arson.

'Wash your mouth out,' she snapped. After all, she didn't take that kind of language from her own kids. He looked sour. 'If there was no fire, somebody dumped the remains in the apartment,' Siao said. 'At best, that means somebody tampered with a death scene elsewhere. More likely they were involved in it.*

'I guess so.' Sing cheered up at the thought. Siao thought he enjoyed a juicy homicide too much for comfort, but he probably had his reasons. 'And at least there's good physical evidence, and no eyewitnesses,' he added.

Heading for the station car park, Siao had to agree. Ten eye-witnesses seeing the same thing would tell you ten different things, especially after they'd had time to listen to gossip and let their minds fill in the blanks. Physical evidence was a lot less confusing.

'Where are we going?' Sing asked.

'Back to Wing's apartment. Last time, we were looking for what might have happened there. This time, I want to see what evidence there might be of visitors.'

'After fifty cops and reporters have been through? You'll be matching flat-footed bootprints for a month.' Sing was trying so hard to be scornful, but he wasn't very good at it. Siao couldn't help smiling.

'At least I want to have a feel for the place. Work out some things, maybe re-enact visits.'

Yi Chung was still on a coke buzz, helped by a shower and a change into his favourite shirt and aftershave. He could almost feel Emily's hands all over him, but was let down to see he still had some time before he had to leave.

As if it had called out to him, his eyes fell on the box he had taken from Wing's apartment. It was sitting invitingly on a small telephone table next to his leather sofa. He still didn't know what was in it, but it was something worth hiding. Jewellery perhaps, or maybe Wing's private stash.

He had a few minutes, so he dropped into the sofa and started to examine the box. It didn't have any seams that he could see, or catches. It was like an old puzzle box, except made of some kind of shiny metal. He couldn't feel any indentations or marks that might help him open it. Just as his patience and enthusiasm were running out he felt something give way under his thumb.

Nothing had opened, and the box looked no different, but he was sure he had felt it, like pressing a button. His enthusiasm returned, but the clock had beaten him; it was time to go and pick Emily up. ,

He made to toss the box on to the sofa, but changed his mind and slipped it carefully into an inside pocket, beside a thick roll of twenties and fifties. This would be a showy night; he wanted everyone to see he was well-heeled and generous. That would earn him respect.

Whispers, shadows, cool breezes. The room was a theatre for those things that just appeared on the periphery of the senses. There was nothing that could be directly looked at, or heard or felt.

Not until a new whisper joined the others, and was noticed by the room's sole occupant. 'Activation of unit rho-seventeen, on stand-by mode.'

'Triangulate,' came the reply.

'Triangulating. Unit is moving.'

'Despatch a recovery team. Vector them in when rho-seventeen is still.'

Police-warning ribbons crossed Wing's door; a gift, wrapped for the authorised recipient only. Sing didn't even consciously notice them as he ripped them aside and put a key in the door. He did notice that the door was already unlocked, and it shouldn't have been.

Sing pushed it open with a sigh. Typical bloody uniform, not even bothering to lock the door when they taped it up.

Siao stopped him from entering, a hand on his shoulder and a finger on her lips. He recognised why immediately. It was one of those things you can't put a finger on, but it happens anyway. It was not the kind of silence that is the absence of noise, but that somehow-different silence which signifies the cessation of noise you just missed hearing.

Someone was inside the apartment. Sing would stake his pension on it. He read Siao's expression, agreeing, and drew his revolver. She mouthed a one-two-three, and they burst into the flat.

The little entrance hall was empty, so they moved into the living room expecting either a fight or a surrender at any moment. The room was undisturbed. Sing glanced into the bathroom, while Siao popped her head into the kitchen. The sound of the door slamming startled both of them.

The sofa had been moved slightly. Even as Sing bolted for the door, he realised someone had hidden behind it until their backs were turned. Heart pounding with nerves and excitement, he yanked the door open and swung into the corridor.

The stairwell door was flapping, and footsteps clattered down the stairs beyond it. Sing loped to the stairwell in the hope of catching up before their source got out of the line of sight. He just caught a glimpse of a cream blur: a linen or cotton suit, light-weight and pale against the sun.

He vaulted the banisters onto the next flight of stairs, but too late; there was no sign of the person. He kept going down.

Cannonball Siao thought for a horrible moment that she was going to have a heart attack. She knew she wasn't fast enough to race down the stairs, and dashed for the lift instead. The gods were on her side, the door opening as she reached it.

She didn't register breaking a nail when stabbing the button for the basement. The lift juddered downwards, taking what seemed like forever. She fidgeted, trying to will the thing to go faster.

The doors opened on to a grimy basement, a lair for off-duty cleaning

equipment and janitorial paraphernalia.

Ignoring the stench of unemptied Hoover bags, Siao ran for the stairwell and headed up towards the ground floor.

Sure enough, she reached the ground floor just as the intruder was descending from above. It was a small white man in a pale suit, carrying an umbrella with a red handle in the shape of a question mark. He froze, unable to get past Siao. In a moment, Sing dropped down after him, red-faced and panting.

"That's far enough," Siao told the intruder. The man seemed to have relaxed, or at least resigned himself to the situation. "What were you doing in a crime scene?"

"Investigating, Inspector Siao." She wondered how the hell he knew her name. Perhaps it was a sign of guilt - a criminal might well want to memorise the names and faces of cops he might encounter, and she'd been in the papers once or twice over the years. "Now, I really must hurry. There are so many things to do, and so few hours per day on this planet."

Siao blinked, and exchanged a look with Sing. She saw in his eyes that he had the same impression as her: they had a lunatic here. The questions everyone was asking about what would change when Beijing took over seemed to be bringing them out of the woodwork. Or maybe it was causing them. "We're all busy. You're going to have to come to the station with us, and-"

"No," the man said firmly. He had some kind of accent she couldn't quite place. "I will explain myself to you and your authorities at the right time, but that isn't now." He took in a deep breath and seemed to grow larger, though he was still at her height. "You will let me pass," he said, and she could feel the truth in his words. "You will not follow me." Somehow he was past her, and making for the exit. He paused and Siao waited for his next pronouncement, somehow unable to move. "You might want to have this door fingerprinted," he suggested in a more normal voice. Then he pushed the door open with his umbrella handle, and was gone.

Siao looked back up at Sing, and only then realised she could actually move. She leapt to the door and through it. There was no sign of anyone.

"What the hell happened there?" Sing asked.

Siao opened her mouth to respond, but couldn't think of anything he'd believe. What was she supposed to say? That the guy had hypnotised her or something? "I don't know. But when we see him again, I'm going to find out."

"You think we will see him again?"

"We will if I have anything to do with it." Chasing cranks and lunatics wasn't why she had joined the police but if that was her duty, then so be it. Besides, curiosity had always been a failing of hers.

"What now?"

"Now we do what he suggested. Get a fingerprint tech down to examine this door. Perhaps he used his hands on it to get in."

Sing nodded and stepped aside to get a better signal on his mobile phone. Siao looked around the apartment block's back yard, wishing there was something there that would help. "Who are you?" she whispered to herself.

Chapter Six Speaking Louder Than Words

The part of her job that Sarah least liked was the photography side. She was quite happy to take pictures, but there was a big difference between holiday snaps and publishable work good enough to accompany a decent story. Given the choice, she'd have preferred to work with a dedicated photographer, but costs usually ruled that out. Even when one could be afforded, she was reluctant to put anyone else in the kind of danger she sometimes faced. The sorts of stories she chased weren't the safest in the world, and often involved going undercover or visiting war zones.

She was also still angry that her picture had been published with her last story. Not only had it led to that unpleasantness in Thailand, but it would prevent her from posing as anyone else for an investigation, at least in the near future. There were so many stories she wanted to do, and now some of them were beyond her reach, because the people she would want to investigate subtly would know who she was and not let her near.

That shouldn't be a problem this afternoon. Her appointment had been made before she left England - to visit a thriving business and find out how they thought, or hoped, the impending handover of the colony to China would affect them.

For some reason, the news agency had set up an appointment with a company called Pimms Shipping. It was an import-export business, the kind that ought to be most concerned with how trade and customs laws might change. Sarah had never heard of it before, and couldn't find its stock listed in the financial papers.

Judging by the building she was trying to photograph from the edge of the car park, the company must have been doing pretty well. The Pimms Building was an even more impressive creation than the nearby Bond Centre. Its base was a sprawling, open-plan, five-storey business centre plated in mirrored glass. From the roof, a hollow twelve-storey tower rose. It wasn't the biggest building in the city, but it was striking.

It also wouldn't sit still in the viewfinder, and Sarah wished she'd brought some kind of tripod. After a moment, she put the camera on top of a nearby Mercedes.

The car started screeching, but she managed to ignore it long enough to get a steady shot. Then she stuffed the camera into her bag and hurried away from the disturbed vehicle before anyone came to investigate.

The building looked even more impressive when she entered the reception area. The tower was circular and each floor had a ring corridor with one layer of rooms on each side. A conical glass roof covered the central shaft. Unusually, most of the mirrored glass was on the inside of the tower, positioned in such a way as to reflect sunlight into the inner rooms on each floor.

Trying not to stare, Sarah smiled politely at the suited man behind the reception desk. He looked more like a presidential bodyguard than a receptionist. 'Ah & good afternoon. My name's Sarah Jane Smith. I have an appointment for a press interview with Mr Pendragon.'

The man consulted a monitor on the desk. 'Of course. CGN news agency?' Sarah nodded. 'I'll notify Mr Pendragon that you're here. Our press relations manager will be down in a moment. Please have a seat.' He indicated the comfortable seats, accompanied by a scattering of magazines, which were dotted around the reception area.

'Thank you.' Sarah took a seat. The magazines were the usual out-of-date selection, though she recognised a recent one that featured her Thai sex tourism article. She settled for trying to find one that had a Garfield strip.

Before she found one, a slim man of medium height approached, wearing a cream Hugo Boss suit. He was, perhaps, in his early thirties. He had a slightly baby-faced look, yet was handsome, with a slight wave to his hair. 'Good morning, Miss Smith. I'm Yue Hwa.' His cheeks bulged when he smiled, suggesting that the smile was a little too wide. 'Mr Pendragon will be busy for a few more minutes, but I can show you around on our way to his office.'

'That's very kind,' Sarah said politely. It never hurt to be pleasant. She followed Yue Hwa into the central area of the building.

At the heart of the business centre, a stone garden brought calm to the ground floor. Above zigzagged the walkways of four storeys of mezzanines holding staff cafeterias, a fitness centre and some open lecture areas. Above, the tower, crowned with glass, was like a fifty-foot-calibre gun barrel pointing to the heavens.

'Impressive, isn't it?' Yue Hwa asked, almost reading Sarah's mind.

'Very,' she agreed. 'Another of Paul Rudolf's?'

Yue Hwa nodded. 'You've clearly done your homework, Miss Smith. I'd venture to say it's a superior building to the Bond Centre, but I'm biased, of course.'

'Don't worry, you'd be right.'

'Thank you. Mr Pendragon commissioned it, and specifically requested the tower to be light-efficient.'

'He cares for the environment? Recycling and so on?'

Yue Hwa smiled inscrutably. 'Being Scots, he doesn't like spending more money on light bulbs than is absolutely necessary.' He led her through the public reception areas of the business centre to the stone garden.

Sarah halted in disbelief, trying to decide whether what she felt was wonder, happiness or horror before she let it show on her face. Sitting to one side of the stone garden, amidst some swirls of pebbles which had been carefully arranged around it, was 'The TARDIS.'

'I'm sorry?'

'Oh, er&' Until Yue Hwa had reacted, Sarah hadn't even been aware that she'd spoken. 'The police box,' she admitted, embar-rassed. 'It just reminded me of something, that's all.'

Yue Hwa nodded sagely. She could tell this was just to put her at her ease, to save face. 'It's part of Mr Pendragon's art collection. He admired the simple strength of its design on a visit to London, and bought this one for his collection when the boxes were decommissioned.'

'Has he lived out here for long?'

'He doesn't really live here as such, Yue Hwa admitted. 'He comes and goes, taking care of his enterprises around the world.' They had reached a cluster of glass lifts and Yue Hwa moved to one that had no buttons, only a keyhole.

He turned a key in it, and the doors opened.

Through long experience, Sarah had developed some little talent for knowing when she was being watched or stared at. This time, it felt decidedly uncomfortable, not just the usual annoyance one might get from workers on a building site.

She turned, before entering the lift, to see another business-suited man standing in the doorway of an office suite. He was about the same age and build as Yue Hwa, but with a thinner, more angular face, large ears and a more formal haircut. He had the expression of someone wondering by what right she was there.

'Looks like not everyone is as welcoming.'

"That's Tse Hung," Yue Hwa said, without needing to look round. 'Head of Security. His job requires him to be more cautious and suspicious of people, which can be quite stressful.' The explanation was strangely unconvincing, but Sarah didn't challenge it. Better to think about it later.

There was no sensation of movement in the lift. She could see through the glass that it was rising, the stone garden dropping away, but didn't feel the usual lurch in her stomach. 'This is a very smooth lift,' she said admiringly.

Yue Hwa nodded. 'Our lifts are state-of-the-art. Everything is.'

'You wouldn't happen to know what the secret is?' It was definitely something that should be universal. Whatever it was,

Sarah was glad of it.

He shook his head. 'They're just the best money can buy'

The doors opened on to a room that was part modern office and part Victorian university study-room. Leather-bound books lined the panelled walls, and a few fine oil paintings added just the right amount of decoration. The indirect lighting and LCD monitors dotted among them managed to be not too intrusive. Sarah liked the room immediately.

Her half-hearted suspicions about the company president were dispelled as soon as he entered the room. There was no sign of a beaky nose or Edwardian taste in clothing; in fact, the little man reminded her of Peter Falk as Columbo: a dishevelled face, almost unkempt dark hair, yet piercing and perceptive eyes. He wore a tweed suit and a blood-red waistcoat. The effect was vaguely Edwardian, if casual.

'Miss Smith.' He greeted her, sounding genuinely happy to meet her, in a slightly nasal Scottish accent. 'It's such a pleasure to see you.' Was there an unspoken 'again' or was it her imagination? Seeing the police box must have teased her mind more than she thought. 'Please take a seat.' He indicated one of two plush leather chairs, next to a small table with a sherry decanter and glasses.

As Sarah sat, he turned to Yue Hwa. 'Oh, Yue Hwa. Are you taking care of that?' Yue Hwa nodded. 'Good, I'll see you shortly, then.'

Pendragon sat next to Sarah, beaming, with a twinkle in his eye. 'Now what brings you to my neck of the woods? I'd have thought trade stories would be far too tame and dull for someone who usually exposes arms dealers and drug peddlers.'

'Oh, not dull,' Sarah replied. 'Just different. A nice change of pace.'

'Ah, a change is as good as the rest&'

'Something like that.' She couldn't help smiling, though she had no idea how seriously he was taking this. 'The effects that Hong Kong's handover to China will have on global business is impor-tant, especially post-Tiananmen.'

'Oh, I don't think there's any need to worry. I'm sure the Chinese realise that Hong Kong is a valuable resource for tourism and the importation of hard currency&'

Yue Hwa took the lift down to Tse Hung's office. The Smith girl seemed harmless enough, though he recognised in her the deter-mination that had so upset the Thai porn lord who had tried to have her killed a few days back. She had the sort of air that made him wish he didn't have any guilty secrets.

Tse Hung looked up from his desk as Yue Hwa entered. Yue Hwa was half-surprised to see him actually sitting at it. 'We need to know about the component that Wing took,' Yue Hwa said.

Tse Hung leant back. 'The UNIT people are still watching Wing's apartment. That can only mean they don't have the box yet.'

'If UNIT don't have it, then what about the cops?'

Tse Hung shook his head. 'The cops searched the place thoroughly, but there was nothing. We've got enough cops on the books - if they'd found it, we'd have heard by now.'

'Unless your bribed officers are not quite as bribed as you'd like them to be?'

'Oh, they are,' Tse Hung insisted.

'What about our own people?'

'The Tao Te Lung are utterly trustworthy,' Tse Hung snapped. His reaction was instinctive, though, and didn't stop him from immediately thinking about the possibility of betrayal. His subor-dinates were criminals, after all, and there were always people who put ambition above loyalty.

'I suppose it's just possible,' he admitted reluctantly. And, if true, he'd deal with the offending party himself. It would be a personal betrayal, losing him face.

'Who was at Wing's apartment?'

Tse Hung's mental card file flipped over madly. He had so much to keep track of. 'Lefty Soh, the pak tsz sin for us in Kowloon.' Soh was essentially an accountant, fiddling the finances and in charge of gathering protection money. 'He sent a couple of his 49s, I'm not sure who.' 'Then find out. Perhaps one of them has it.'

It had been a good interview, considering. Big business wasn't really Sarah's forte, but Pendragon had made things clear and simple. However, he hadn't explained how or why his company came to be on her itinerary to start with. She wondered why, but didn't ask as it would make her look foolish.

At any rate, he didn't seem bothered by the upcoming change-over of government. Many people were worried, and were making arrangements to move their businesses elsewhere, but Pendragon was quite sanguine about the whole thing.

She couldn't help feeling that it was almost as if - and she wouldn't put this in her story - he somehow already knew how things would turn out. Almost as if, for him, it was something that had happened long ago.

That was impossible, so she smiled politely, enjoying his company, and planned to research his business in the news-cuttings archives later.

When the interview was over, Sarah left the building, studiously resisting an urge to look back. There was something about the little Scotsman that seemed both familiar and worryingly alien, yet she couldn't put her finger on it. It wasn't just a hunch, or her instinct as an experienced journalist, but something else. On such a simple assignment, she could really do without such a nuisance.

There was an MTR station only a hundred yards down the road, where she could catch a commuter train back to the vicinity of her hotel. Sarah headed for it, not yet aware that every step she took was being frozen in time and immortalised in glossy prints.

Hoping the shots would come out well, Tom Ryder packed the camera into its case on the passenger seat. He kept one eye to the scope, watching Sarah. He knew he should already be gone, his job done, but something about her kept him in place until she vanished from sight.

That night he would dream of her, her face taking the place of that of his last girlfriend, in memories of distant nights. When he woke, he would be angry with himself for letting his subconscious do that to him.

From Pendragon's office, Pendragon and Yue Hwa had also watched Sarah leave.

'She seems intelligent,' Yue Hwa said. 'A good friend, or a dangerous enemy.'

'Sometimes they're one and the same thing. You know what these girls are like - never just take a hint and stay out of the way' Pendragon sighed, presumably not realising that Yue Hwa didn't know what 'these girls' were like after all. 'Keep an eye on her.'

'As you wish,' Yue Hwa said with a nod, 'Doctor.'

Anyone who knew her would vouch that Captain Fiona Clark paid exactly the right amount of attention to Major Barry's briefing, and kept the rest of her mind on how to disagree with his plan. She was like that. Their mission was covert and although taking the logging camp would make things more comfortable, it was unnecessary and a distraction.

It was also the sort of thing that started trouble with local factions.

Clark was too professional to let her doubts show in front of the other troops, or allow them to get in the way of doing the job properly, but they were there nonetheless.

As the sounds of radios and a satellite TV channel wafted thinly from the loggers' huts, the UNIT team closed in on the camp. Though noise carried further in the dark, the sounds of the jungle were mostly loud enough to mask any rustling or rattling of equipment.

There were only half a dozen men on guard - civilians or crooks with some basic training; no competition for Clark and the others.

The procedure was one they'd trained for many times, so Clark hoped it would be simple. She knew better, really. The instructors and fellow students in the training programme didn't have AK74s with live ammo. Even the most stoned of amateurs could hit something if he let off a burst from one of those.

No misgivings could stop her going about things as she was trained to do. That's what the training did; made the way you did things instinctive.

It was a piece of cake. First they hit the guards with tasers from twenty feet behind. Two thin wires carried about 30,000 volts from the taser handset to the electrodes, which had just been shot into the victim. Nobody stayed standing when the charge kicked in, and it screwed up the vocal cords so there was no scream either. While the guards were stunned, they were disarmed, and finally woke up to a gun at the head. Plastic ties quickly secured the prisoners' wrists.

It didn't take more than a minute to strip the logging camp of its guards, and all without a sound. Speed was security, or so went the litany.

The first Pranh Due knew of the attack was when the invaders' machine guns opened up. Suspecting a clampdown by those wimps in the government, he sounded the alarm immediately, calling the men out to fight.

They wouldn't be able to do much with their axes and chainsaws, against the army's automatic weapons, but they would show they were made of sterner stuff than those who hid behind their guns.

As soon as the loggers got out of their huts, thunderflashes were going off, blinding them to the attacking force. Due saw that its members were mostly white, with UN flashes on their uniforms.

'Western Imperialists' was a cliched insult, but Due wasn't trying to be original. He grabbed a rusting flare pistol and aimed it at the nearest westerner. Before he could fire, something exploded nearby and knocked him into temporary oblivion.

Colonel Tsang hated paperwork, but at her level of service, there seemed to be few other duties. There were reports for UNIT-SEA in Singapore, reports for UNIT-HQ in Geneva, press releases, analyses for future references& The list was endless and boring.

Sometimes she wished she had gone back to civilian life when her compulsory tour in the People's Army was over, but what else could she have done? She knew nothing about farming -gardening was another matter, though - and didn't want to work in a shop or be an office girl.

So she had stayed on. Eventually she was seconded to UNIT-SEA and, to her chagrin, ended up as a penpusher after all.

The bright side was that it gave her time to think and consider the plans and orders she would issue. She could also cover herself in advance, thanks to all that experience with the thrice-damned paperwork.

She supposed it could be worse. She could be out in that jungle like Barry, and not be able to fly home to her grandchildren at weekends.

Right now, she was in conference with Nomura and a couple of adjutants, going over the minutes of various meetings that still had loose ends to tie up.
'What about scientific advisers?'

'Wildthyme is on vacation,' Nomura said, 'and you know how the Americans are about loaning people out.'

'Couldn't we borrow MI6's Time Lord?'

'I asked. They said, "How the hell did you know about that?" Eventually I gathered he's on assignment on the Russian/Afghan border'

Tsang scored off another line on the minutes. 'I'm not happy about this. We need someone who understands the way these creatures think.'

'As soon as one becomes available&' Nomura's voice trailed off helplessly. There wasn't much else he could do. "There is some good news - we've identified the two people who entered Wing's apartment at the time of the theft.'

'Who are they?'

'Two Triad 49s. We've covertly searched both their apartments, with no luck. We did find various other pieces of incriminating evidence that might be useful as leverage if we bring them in.'

'And how will that look to the local police? The fewer people who have any idea what we know, the better.' One of the office phones rang and Tsang picked it up. 'Go.'

'Message from Dragon One, Colonel.'

'Put them on.'

"This is Dragon One, over.' Major Barry's voice came through strongly.

'I hear you, Dragon One.'

'We've established a base camp outside the perimeter of the affected zone. It's a logging camp, so we should be able to use it as a staging post and land choppers here. I've also got prisoners for transport out.' Tsang groaned inwardly. Now she had to find a way to keep the prisoners incommunicado for however long Barry's mission took, without anyone finding out about such an illegal action. She'd deal with Barry when he got back.

'Understood. We'll be in touch when a courier is ready. Out.' She hung up the phone, and looked at the others. 'Get me that box. Now.'

It had been a good night; almost better than Yi Chung had hoped. He and Emily Ko had eaten well, danced and drank, and now he was showing her around the south side of the island where they could put the car's top down and enjoy the night air.

Below the hillside, the lights of the little built-up areas around Stanley Bay clustered like jewels. 'This is nice,' Emily said.

Yi Chung agreed, and pulled the car off the road. The night was clear, and there was little sign of the city's bustle. It was just quiet coastal countryside, where they wouldn't be disturbed as they kissed.

Just as Yi Chung had begun to unbutton Emily's blouse someone pressed one of reality's buttons, and switched on a blinding UFO thirty feet above them. A shaft of solid light pinned the car to the tarmac, like a moth to a collector's board.

They both screamed and Yi Chung tried to start the car, without success. The engine was utterly lifeless. The light seemed to thicken and build up outside the car like floodwaters. He kept trying the engine, knowing it wouldn't work but too terrified to think of anything else to do.

The night had fallen completely silent, the distant traffic sounds muted out of existence. The only remaining sound was a hum of whispers, and this seemed as much at the edge of the mind as at the edge of hearing. Just when Yi Chung thought he and Emily couldn't be more scared, shapes began to coalesce beside the car doors.

They were vague and indistinct, but being so unknown just made them more terrifying. They were emaciated figures, their vague limbs reaching out with the fluidity of coiling snakes.

Their flesh pressed against the car windows, trying the doors. Yi had locked the car, but any relief he felt faded when wiry fingers somehow caught hold of the windows and started forcing them down.

Then headlights flashed in the rear-view mirror, and the light and figures snapped out of existence. A truck rumbled past the car, startling Yi and Emily almost out of their skins.

Yi gunned the engine, which sprang to life this time. Gulping in deep breaths, he sped in the direction of the Central District. 'Look,' Emily whispered. Yi Chung risked a glance in the direction she indicated. Above, a silver flash shot off to the southwest.

It didn't look like a plane to Yi Chung, and there was no sound of a helicopter. 'Take me back to the city,' Emily said, sharply. Yi Chung looked at her, feeling like a kicked puppy. 'Please, before they come back.'

The idea that they might was enough to convince Yi Chung that he also desired the safety of a crowded city.

Chapter Seven K H Confidential

It had been a long weekend for Borisovich, but making money always came before making whoopee. It was midweek, but being able to pick and choose when to show up for work was a privi-lege of being the boss.

The office was a converted furniture-maker's workshop on an industrial estate on the south side of Moscow. It was roughly halfway between the old Olympic village and the docks.

From the outside, it was a total dump. Even a tramp would balk at passing through it, which was just the way Borisovich liked it. The interior was a cheesy bar/bordello mix with some backroom labs and a Georgian restaurant tucked away in back. His own office was above and behind the stage so he could keep an eye on things, especially the strippers.

This early in the morning, there were no strippers, so his PC had his full attention. The lesbian hardcore screen saver disappeared as he logged on to collect the weekend's e-mails.

There was the usual bunch of crap: spams, minor business deals that could wait, a warning of a forthcoming raid on one of his premises nearer the city centre. The last one caught his interest:

From: Lung Tau<dragon@pimms.com>

Tb: recipients list

Subject: prospecting

Date: Monday 14 April 1997, 03:16

Just a quick shopping list. We're in the market for certain new types of ores, which might be discovered, or have been discovered in the recent past.

Properties of the desired ores include a complete lack of corrosion, regardless of environmental situation. Also a flexibility not usually seen in metal. Top prices will be paid as usual.

Captain Clark rapped on the door of the room Barry had appropriated for himself the previous night, and entered when he called. Major Barry was picking at a meagre breakfast culled from the loggers' supplies, and poring over some maps. 'What's up, Captain?' He seemed cheerful enough, and she hated to be the one to break that mood.

'I wanted to talk to you about taking this camp last night.'

He pushed a mug of coffee towards her. 'What about it? It went off without a hitch.'

'Yes sir, it did, and I'm glad to see that everyone did their job properly. Except that we should never have done it.'

Barry leant back and ran a hand over his flat-top. 'And why not?'

'This is supposed to be a covert mission - it just needed one of the loggers to get away, or get a call out, and we'd be blown. Also, we don't know whether this place is monitored. It was an unnecessary risk of the team's lives before even reaching our target area, and it was a waste of ammunition and resources.'

'Is that all?' He looked and sounded distinctly less happy now.

'For now, yes.'

'Good. It was my call, and I made it for good reasons. No resources have been wasted, because we now have a firebase close enough to our target area, which can be resupplied by helicopter.'

'And the unnecessary risk?'

Barry's glower darkened, and she knew she had him there. Being put on the defensive always made him stumpy. 'Are you afraid of taking a few risks?' he asked. 'No pain, no gain.'

'I'm not afraid of taking any risks to complete the mission. But this place has no bearing on the mission. It just gives us more comfortable beds. Purely personal gain.'

'You're welcome to take a tent out and sleep in the mud if you want. Perhaps

your principles should insist on it - if they're as solid as they seem to be.'

Clark couldn't answer. She sure as hell wasn't going out to sleep in the mud when she now had a bed in one of the huts.

'Exactly,' Barry said smugly. 'Dismissed, Captain.'

Yi Chung had never voluntarily walked into a police station in his life. He'd been in them often enough, just never willingly. Now he was standing outside Wong Tai Sin station, trying to build up the courage to go in. His libido kept reminding him of last night's frustration. Emily had insisted on leaving him in the street and going home. He couldn't really blame her, after that thing. The only good side was that she had been too freaked out by it to realise how much he had been freaked out.

It must have been really freaky, he realised, to drive him to go to the cops. He had no idea what they could do about it, but maybe this had happened to other people. Yi Chung wouldn't wish such weirdness on anyone. It was one thing to chop someone who had crossed you; that was just normal business. Flying saucers were something else, and surely more important than any cop/Triad differences.

Steeling himself, feeling both responsible and horribly stupid, Yi Chung went in. A weary-looking desk sergeant greeted him. 'What do you want?'

'I want to report a...' He couldn't even bring himself to say it.

'A what? Theft? Murder?'

'I want to report a UFO.'

The sergeant looked at him. 'A UFO? Is this a joke? Making fun of the cops as a bit of light relief from selling heroin?'

Yi Chung had expected this, but felt crushed all the same. 'I'm serious. I was with Emily Ko from the Goldilocks Hair Salon. We both saw it. It stopped our car -' He stopped as the desk sergeant held up a hand.

'All right. I'll bring a statement form and you can make a written statement. OK?'

Yi Chung nodded enthusiastically. He wanted to warn people about this, but he was beginning to hurt, and needed to get home and take something for it. 'Yes, thank you.' He grinned.

Yue Hwa woke with the same start every day, Qi Wang Chuan's face fading with the rest of the usual dream. The dream used to haunt him and make him pray for deliverance, but after a few months, it was merely an irritation. By now, it had simply become part of his routine, and he had already put it out of his mind by the time he had showered.

On the way to the Pimms Building, he called Tse Hung from his car. 'It's Yue Hwa. Did you get anything from Lefty Soh?'

'Yes,' Tse Hung replied. 'Apparently he sent a Hong Yi Chung and Ah Fei to Wing's apartment on the pretext of settling a gambling debt.'

'Then they didn't know about the box?'

'Lefty assumed Wing would be so scared, he'd hand it over. He didn't want to

tempt them by mentioning how much we want it. They may not have taken it, but I'm having their apartments watched anyway. I'll question them personally when they show up.' Tse Hung sounded pleased at the prospect, but Yue Hwa ignored this.

Tse Hung seemed to be under the impression that violence was good for business. Others disagreed. Yue Hwa just accepted that it happened, but otherwise it was as uninteresting as any of life's other mundanities.

Katie Siao could never stomach breakfast until she'd been awake for at least a couple of hours. Unfortunately, she tended to wake half an hour before she needed to punch in at the station. With no breakfast to fuel her, she'd scrounge whatever was to hand in the canteen. That done, she'd make her way to her desk in the squad room to see what joys awaited her.

The top sheet this morning was a note of an address for a known associate of the late Wing. It was a lead she and Sing hadn't encountered yet, but was probably not too important. She'd still visit the address later.

Shaking her head, Siao took it down to the uniformed squad room, where the desk sergeant was relaxing after the end of his shift. She waved the paper in his face. 'Why did this come up to homicide?'

'We ran the complainant's name and got a record off him. He's a known associate of Wing, the guy whose death you're investigating.'

Siao nodded slowly. She doubted this imaginative youth could possibly have killed Wing. 'So, who is this guy?'

'Yi Chung? A Fei Jai; a wide boy. Nobody important.'

'So, what he wants to cut a deal for something?' It wasn't the first time. Most Triads valued making a quick profit over every-thing else, but enough of them valued their skins more. Also, the cops were, perversely, a weapon in the Triads' arsenal: now and again a member of one gang would sell out a member of another to the cops, as routine turf-war business. Nobody sold out members of their own gangs, of course.

'No!' Siao could tell when someone was trying not to say something that would damage their credibility, and she could smell this one coming a mile off.

'He claims a UFO just tried to abduct him and his companion.'

'Girlfriend?'

The sergeant made a so-so gesture. 'Apparently it was their first date.'

'And probably their last.' Siao closed her eyes resignedly. 'A UFO?'

'Yes!' He looked at his notes. 'A "glowing silver disc" according to his statement. Apparently it flew off towards Lantau Island.'

Siao was silent for a moment, hoping the sergeant would assume she was intelligently reviewing the facts, and wouldn't realise that she had no idea how to handle a UFO report. This was far outside her normal purview, and she didn't even watch The X Files. Most likely the pair had been high or drunk, but she didn't think it could hurt to ask around. If any unidentified objects were flying around, then it followed that the airport would be a good place to start.

'Get someone to call air traffic control at both Kai Tak and Chek Lap Kok and see whether anything they handled fits the location and time. If it doesn't, then get hold of Cheung Chau radar station and ask if they picked anything up.'

'And if they did?'

'They won't have; there's no such thing as flying saucers.' She had another thought, and tossed the report back. 'I've got a better idea. UNIT were on the prowl looking for co-operation. This is the kind of thing they're into, isn't it? Let them waste their time on it.'

Siao had already forgotten the report by the time the door closed after her on her way out of the room.

Tse Hung sat in the nursing home's parking area for several long minutes, steeling himself for one of the most difficult parts of his regular weekly routine. It didn't help that Bonnie never came with him. She had visited once, proclaimed it a 'zombie farm' and never returned.

The home was on a hillside overlooking Repulse Bay, and Tse Hung found the name strangely appropriate. The atmosphere and medicinal odour of the place did repulse him somewhere deep down. He tried not to show it, or even to let the feeling take hold in his consciousness, but he knew it was there.

He locked the car and went inside. Everything was clean, the staff were friendly and the decor was fresh. None of it helped, as far as Tse Hung was concerned. His view was that you always knew that the smell of disinfectant and air freshener was there to cover the scents of vomit, stale sweat, dead skin, and incontinence.

The magazines in the public areas and the TVs tuned to news channels reminded him of a small airport. It was a departure lounge, certainly, for those with whom fate had caught up. Part of Tse Hung's problem with the home was that he hated to see people who had probably led good lives reduced to being looked after. The other part was that he wondered how long it would be before fate hooked him, and reeled him into such a place.

He signed in the visitors' book and went on through to a disturbingly clean and sterile bedroom containing an old man smoking a pipe. He was wearing simple black trousers and a blue shirt, and was watching the racing on TV. The air freshener was stronger than usual, and Tse Hung hesitated at the door. 'Hello, Father,' he said.

The old man looked round. 'Hello.' He squinted. 'I know you, don't I?' The same as ever.

'It's me, Tse Hung. Your son.'

The old man brightened. 'Tse Hung!'

'I brought you some things. A couple of books, CDs of your favourite music. And...' He looked around staggily, making a show of checking whether anyone was watching. 'Good Scotch.' He put the bag with the things on to a spare chair.

'Thanks, son.' The old man peered through the door. 'Isn't your mother with you? Or is she still not speaking to me?' Tse Hung didn't let his father see the internal wince he felt.

His mother had died four years ago. What was he supposed to do? lie and make

the old man think his wife didn't love him? Or remind him of the truth and break his heart, knowing that he'd have forgotten by tomorrow? What would his father view as true anyway? What he was told, or what his brain held to be true?

'There were visitors,' Tse Hung told him. 'She couldn't get away, but she said she'd come and see you tomorrow.' It hurt to do that, but by tomorrow his father would have forgotten anyway. It seemed like the answer that would hurt him least.

'I see. Well, at least you're here. How are you getting along?'

'The company is doing well. Trade is good, and we're ready to start issuing shares soon.'

'Good, good.' The old man clapped Tse Hung weakly on the shoulder. 'You'll make your fortune soon, you know.'

'That's the idea,' Tse Hung admitted.

One of the shirt-sleeved technicians rapped on Tsang's office door. 'Colonel, we've received a report from the Hong Kong police - a UFO sighting from last night. Attempted abduction, according to the witness.'

Tsang was immediately interested. 'Does it match any of the anomalous radar returns?'

'Yes, sir. 1.14 a.m. The witness saw it fly off in the direction of Lantau Island, but we tracked it further.'

'Same as the others?'

'Yes, sir.'

'That's the fourth this week. What are they up to?'

'Perhaps we'd know more if we knew who they were,' the technician ventured.

Tsang snorted. 'Only one person seems to know that, and he's not telling us.'

After an hour or so, Tse Hung was ready to leave the nursing home. Actually, he'd have been ready to leave after five seconds but his duty to his family wouldn't permit less than an hour.

He went straight to the duty manager's office. It was plusher than any of the residents' rooms, which irritated Tse Hung. People - not least himself - paid high prices to have family members looked after as well as possible. The manager was in, filling out a form of some kind. Paperwork instead of treatment, that wasn't what Tse Hung was paying for.

'The resident in room 12,' he said, walking up to the desk. The rake-thin, bespectacled manager looked up. 'He was sick today?' The extra air freshener had been like a neon sign pointing to the fact.

'Your father, isn't he? Yes, he was. Something in the breakfast didn't agree with him.'

'Ah.' Tse Hung nodded understandingly. He grabbed the manager's hair, and bounced his face off the desk a couple of times. The manager looked at the form, more aghast that his precious paperwork had been stained than that he

was bleeding. Tse Hung slapped him. 'I pay for him to be well cared for.' He hunkered down until he was at eye level with the slumped manager. 'If this happens again, I will have your hands cut off.' A pause for the words to sink in. 'Do you understand me?'

The manager nodded frantically. 'Yes, yes.'

'Good.' Tse Hung straightened and walked out, pausing by the door. 'Maybe you should redo that form. Contracts don't need to be written in blood these days.'

Even someone like Yi Chung could only listen to a ringing tone for just so long before giving up on the hope that his call would be answered. It took a lot to get him down and stop him smiling, but he was getting there now.

No more Emily for him. Even he could see that.

All because of this cursed UFO. Perhaps if he could find out why this had happened to him, he could cope with it.

He couldn't really blame the cops for not listening; they were on opposite sides, after all. Fei or any of the other brothers would just laugh and say he'd been using too much of his own wares. He might even think they were right if it hadn't been for Emily seeing it too.

Despondent, he paused at a news stall to buy a top-up card for the mobile he'd been using. The vision of the auburn-haired white woman from Win's Hotel popped into his head unbidden. He didn't know why. Then he realised he was looking at her now: a small photo in a paper from earlier in the week.

He snatched the newspaper up, skimming the story of an attempted hit in Bangkok. According to the paper, she was some kind of investigative journalist - and he now knew where she was staying.

The papers were often full of implausible and improbable stories, including UFOs, so perhaps this journalist would listen to him. Better still, he realised cheerily, he might even come out ahead on the deal and make some money from his story.

Feeling better, he returned to his car and headed for Win's.

The days when gangsters operated out of nightclubs or hotels were long since over. The cops had got wise to that. Now criminals like Tse Hung had offices, and went to work from nine 'til five, before returning home to prepare for a night out on the town.

Tse Hung had a public office in the Pimms Building, with a private room inside where he wasn't to be disturbed except by others of equal rank. This morning, a man was sitting waiting for him when he came out of his still more private sanctum. Tse Hung hadn't heard the door open or close, and suspected Chiu hadn't bothered to use it.

Chiu seemed Chinese at first glance, but his hair was barely light enough to call brown, and his eyes were blue, almost violet.

'Mr Chiu,' Tse Hung greeted him, no more politely than was absolutely necessary. There was something unnerving about Chiu. He seemed to look into you or through you, rather than at you. His colour always seemed a little off too. Not in the sense that he was ill or of a different ethnic group, but just not quite as it should be.

'Tse Hung, I came to report that we tracked the box to the southern side of the island.'

'Did you identify the thief?'

'No. There were two humans in the vehicle. We are uncertain which of them possessed it. We attempted to hold them for search and interrogation, but'

'But?' Tse Hung poured himself a fine Japanese Scotch from a decanter. He didn't offer Chiu any.

'The attempt was interrupted. We can't allow ourselves to be seen, so -'

'So you aborted the mission.'

'Yes.'

Tse Hung took a shot of whisky, keeping his thoughts to himself. Booze simultaneously blurred things and made them clear to him. 'Using your people was obviously a mistake. Leave this one to me. There's a cop who owes me a favour.'

Chiu didn't look very happy about that, but was too polite to say anything. That was fine by Tse Hung. When Chiu left, Tse Hung used his key to the private lift and headed up to Pendragon's lair.

These days, greeting his boss with a respectful 'Dai lo' felt ever stranger to Tse Hung. It just didn't feel right treating a white man as an elder in his brotherhood. Those were the wishes of the late Uncle Tang, so he did.

But it still felt strange every day.

'Ah,' Pendragon exclaimed. 'Tse Hung. What can I do for you this morning?'

'I had a visit from our friend Chiu. It seems he tried to take the box back last night, but failed.'

'Failed? That's not like him. He and his people are usually the very souls of efficiency in things like that.'

'Apparently they were interrupted, and he didn't want witnesses.' Tse Hung smiled, knowing this would make Chiu look bad. 'Oh, on a related note, I sweated the names of the probable thieves out of Lefty Soh, but -'

'Yes, I know,' Pendragon said sourly, pacing around his desk. 'There's nothing in either Fei or Yi Chung's apartments, and the police haven't found anything at Wing's place. In fact they returned to search it again yesterday.'

'That's right.' Tse Hung frowned. 'But if I'm only just reporting this to you now? What was going on here? Pendragon had secrets like everybody else, but why should he keep this information confidential and waste Tse Hung's time?'

'How do I know?' Pendragon smiled secretively. 'I have my ways.'

'Right.' The only explanation that sprung to Tse Hung's mind was that Pendragon didn't trust him. That Pendragon had already arranged to have someone else do his job. That inevitably Tse Hung would become superfluous, and a liability quickly thereafter.

He didn't let any of this show on his face. Instead, he nodded politely and left for his other duties.

Summoned by a phone message from reception, Sarah Jane Smith entered the lobby, looking around for this mysterious person who wanted to meet her yet wouldn't give a name.

She was sceptical of the somewhat cloak-and-dagger approach, but a little mystery always set her heart racing. Surprise was vitality. The foyer was moderately peaceful, and she didn't see any familiar faces.

A young man in flashy casual clothes rose from a seat with a big grin, and approached with an outstretched hand. 'Miss Smith?'

'Yes?'

'I hope I wasn't disturbing you. I'm Hong Yi Chung. I had the receptionist call your room.'

'They told me you were quite eager to see me. What could be so urgent?' She could guess. She was a journalist, and this guy was obviously a bit of a wide boy. He probably hoped to sell her a story. It wasn't an unusual approach.

'I have a story to tell. No charge - I just want to find someone who'll listen to it. And someone to believe me.' Sarah was intrigued, though she'd heard such lines before. 'And I wanted to show you something; ask if you had any idea about it.' He took a slim metal box from his pocket. 'What do you make of this?'

Sarah took it, feeling the strangely smooth, warm metal under her fingertips. 'Cigarette case? Some kind of jewellery case?' She tried to open it, but there were no seams or hinges.

'I don't think so.' He took the box from her and shook it silently. 'There's nothing inside. But somebody wants it back badly enough to & Well, badly enough to do whatever it is that things in flying saucers do.'

Sarah's attention was caught in spite of herself. 'Flying saucers?' She tried not to sound too interested. Once people found out she believed in extraterrestrial life, they often spun obvious tall tales to waste her time, in the hope of getting their pictures in the paper. Occasionally, though, some of those tales were true - and those were usually the ones she didn't write up, preferring to keep them for private research or to notify UNIT.

But this man seemed genuine enough and she wanted to be approachable, rather than dismissive or insulting, to someone who might actually need someone to listen to him.

Besides, she'd seen enough alien technology in her time to recognise that there was something not right with the box. Maybe it was the material, but she instinctively recognised that it was something not made on Earth. 'Put that safely away,' she said, 'and follow me.'

Yi Chung felt as if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. It looked like Sarah believed him. He was surprised at how much of a relief that could be. Things were looking up, and he felt a bit more like his old self. If Emily would just agree to a second date later, he was sure he'd really be back to normal.

Sarah escorted him to a lift and up to her junior suite. She had a harbour-

view lounge-space two steps down from the bed area. A floor-to-ceiling window looked out over the water. There was a small bar in one corner and a closed door leading to the bathroom.

Yi Chung did a double-take when he saw what was lying on the chair nearest the window, but he didn't believe his eyes. He picked up the Kevlar vest, which was about as discreet as such a thing could be. He recognised it as the kind designed to be worn under a coat or jacket, rather than the bulkier flak jacket he sometimes saw the cops wearing. 'I didn't realise fashion stores dealt in these.'

Sarah took it from him, shoving it into a drawer. 'Until somebody draws up a code of practice for critics, I find it's sometimes handy.' She moved to the bar and started mixing fruit juices. 'Now& why don't you tell me this story of yours?'

Yi Chung quickly summarised his visit to Wing's apartment -albeit claiming he was visiting a friend - and the flying saucer and its accompanying strange figures. It was difficult to start with, but he found he could speak more easily as he went on. Partly it was because he was talking to a pretty woman, partly it was because he was talking to someone whose expression suggested she took him seriously, and partly because it just felt better to talk about it.

"What makes you so sure the UFO you saw had anything to do with this box?'

In truth, Yi Chung wasn't sure how he knew. He felt it instinctively. He'd seen lots of precious-metal items, invariably stolen, but had never seen anything quite like this. 'It did something, before the UFO. I was trying to open it, and something clicked. It didn't open, but it was some kind of switch.'

'I didn't see any buttons on it.'

'No, the metal itself moved, changed. I don't know what happened inside, but afterwards, this UFO came, and.

'Tried to abduct you.'

'Yes.'

Sarah drained the last of her fruit punch. 'I'm not Mulder or Scully, you know. But your story sounds interesting.' She smiled, and brightened Yi Chung considerably. 'First, can you show me where you found this box?' 'Absolutely' Yi Chung replied.

A small lamp began to flash on a bank of monitors. The man watching them pressed an intercom button. 'Colonel, you'd better get in here.'

Colonel Tsang was in the room in a second or two. 'What is it?'

The man punched up a view of Wing's apartment building on one of his monitors. It was a slightly distorted image, taken from somewhere high, across the street, and showed the main entrance to the building. 'Somebody just used our late friend's key to get into the apartment block.'

'Visitors. About time.' Tsang watched with a smile as a Chinese man and western woman slipped into the apartment. 'Just like getting a fruit nicely ripe - you just give it time. Anybody we know?'

The others shook their heads. 'The woman looks familiar, but&'

'All right. Get the clearest image you can, and see if you can find a matching identification for them.'

The man played with his bank of computers for a few minutes. On the central monitor, the images zoomed in, freeze-framing the intruders at the most appropriate moments. On neighbouring monitors, the frozen faces sat on one side of the screen while a stream of ID photos blurred past on the other. In a few minutes, both flows stopped and the faces were matched to ones on file.

'We've got IDs on both the intruders. The male's a 49, named Hong Yi Chung. He's got some previous convictions: membership of a street gang, that sort of thing.'

'Triad?'

'Absolutely. No evidence, of course, but it's practically written on his face. There's another interesting thing - that fax we got from the HK about a UFO sighting& It was this guy who made the statement. He claimed it tried to abduct him last night.'

'I'll bet. The woman?'

'Oh, we've got a star here. Sarah Jane Smith, would you believe?'

Tsang knew the name, of course. Most people in UNIT did. "The journalist? Just published that thing about the Golden Triangle lords using porn to launder their money?'

'The very same. It gets better: she used to be attached to UNIT-UK.'

'Yes& And still on the reserve contact list.' Nobody ever really left UNIT, unless they were physically and mentally unable to contribute anything.

'Should we pick them up?'

'Yes. Bring them in for& a chat.'

Chapter Eight The Devil You Know

Some roaches tried to look innocent in a Bart Simpson 'I didn't do it' way when Yi Chung switched on the light in Wing's apartment. Then they bolted. Yi Chung showed Sarah the small room, indicating where the remains ofWing, and the box, had been found.

Sarah could still make out a body-shaped stain on the carpet. 'It looks some kind of SHC&'

'SHC?'

'Spontaneous human combustion. You sometimes see stories about it in the papers - people who were burnt to ashes, yet the chairs they were sitting in were barely scorched.'

Yi Chung shuddered.'That sounds hideous.'A chopping he could understand; at least that was fairly quick.'What could cause it?'

'Nobody knows. Maybe it's a natural phenomenon. Or maybe it was done to him&'

'Could it come back?'

'Oh, I don't think so. But I'm not a scientist; Sarah frowned. 'Still, if that box of yours does have something to do with aliens, perhaps they have the technology to do this. Some kind of heat ray, like in The War of the Worlds'

Yi Chung looked around, fear rising in him again. He hated being afraid, and maybe that was why he was afraid so often. If only the things that were bothering him were something tangible; something he could chop or shoot. Something he could teach a much-deserved lesson. 'Let's get out of here.'

He headed for the door, leaving Sarah to catch him up. If she wanted to stay, she could stay alone. He wasn't going to risk his skin just to tell a story. She fell into step with him as he headed for the exit. 'Can I see that box again?'

Yi Chung hesitated, but then handed it to her. 'Don't play with it. I don't want it to attract those& things, again.'

'Believe me, I don't fancy meeting them either,' Sarah reassured him. She was still looking at the box, turning it over in her hands, when they all but walked right into a group of suited men who were waiting at the building's main door.

'That's them,' someone said, and the men lunged forward.

Yi Chung lashed out at the nearest, kicking him and pushing him away. 'Cops! Run!' he yelled. He pushed his way through the human blockade with a flurry of kicks and punches. His legs were already going into overdrive before he realised Sarah still had the box. He stopped, cursing himself, and turned. A man was running towards him, while Sarah and the other man had disappeared.

Yi Chung swore, suddenly certain that the whole thing had been a trap, and that Sarah had just played along to steal the box from him. Fine, he decided, let her be abducted by aliens. No fence could pay him enough to take shit like that anyway.

He kept running.

Sarah ran without even knowing why. Experience had taught her that it was usually best to run first and rationalise later. If the pursuers were friendly, one could always contact them again later.

She dashed through unfamiliar streets, barely dodging congee stalls and caged chickens, resisting the urge to shout at the population whose meanderings blocked her flight path.

She risked a glance back and saw no sign of pursuit. She slowed. If those men were cops, as Yi Chung had thought, then presumably they were after him. She couldn't say she was surprised; his story seemed genuine, but he was obviously not a law-abiding citizen. She'd met his type on the streets of enough cities to spot a petty gangster a mile off.

Relaxing to catch her breath, she tried to get her bearings; she had no idea where she was, beyond that she was somewhere in Yau Ma Tei. In the distance, she could just make out a flash of green that might be a park. Then a hand grabbed her shoulder firmly. She reacted instinctively against this potential bag-snatch or indecent assault, trying to jab the man's groin with her elbow. He was prepared for that, and twisted aside easily.

'Please come with me, Miss Smith,' he said. 'Don't make a scene.'

She looked round at him. He looked Japanese rather than Chinese, and now she saw the tiny earpiece plugged into his left ear and the bulge under his left armpit. Whoever he was, he wasn't a mugger or rapist.

If he was some kind of government agent or police officer, she knew righteous indignation was a far more effective technique than flight or fight. 'What is this about? Why were you chasing me? I mean, I'm a journalist in pursuit of a story, and suddenly there are you gorillas chasing me, and fighting, and -'

He flashed a photo ID card with a too-familiar winged-globe symbol on it. 'lieutenant Nomura, UNIT-SEA.'

'UNIT&?'

'South-East Asia.'

Sarah's anger subsided. She had always had a friendly relationship with UNIT and didn't want to spoil that. 'Why didn't you just say who you were?'

Nomura smiled politely. 'I tried to, but your fast friend pre-empted it. We came to ask if you'd come to our office. Some things have been happening lately that we might be able to share information on.' ^

Mark Sing looked up at the decaying apartment block in Kowloon. 'This is Yi Chung's place?'

One of the two uniformed officers with him nodded. 'He lives on the fourth floor.'

'Cool.' He checked his revolver. 'This guy's a suspect in murder and arson, so take no chances. You know what I mean?' They nodded.

Steeling himself, Sing began walking towards the apartment building's lobby. A car horn halted him, and he turned to see Cannonball Siao's little two-door pulling up.

She bounded up to them as a descending airliner blacked out the sun for a few seconds. 'What are you doing here?' she asked when the noise receded.

'The results came back from the prints we took at Wing's apartment. A Fei Jai with a prior record who lives here broke into the flat.'

'Why didn't you call me?'

'I tried, but the buildings are too high around here to get a good cellular signal. How about you? What brings you here?'

'Same as you. It gets worse - it's the same guy who made that UFO report.'

Sing grunted. 'Probably trying to lay the groundwork for pleading diminished responsibility or insanity, just in case.' He put his gun away. 'Well, no time like the present.'

They rode up in the lift together and easily found Yi Chung's apartment. There was no reply to their knocks. 'Got a warrant?' Siao asked.

'No.' Sing could see them losing their quarry because of devotion to the book.

'He could be injured, I suppose,' Siao said after a moment. 'Is that gas I

smell?'

Sing grinned. 'It could be.'

'On three.'

Sing nodded, one-two-three, then kicked the door open. The place was empty. 'What now?'

'Now we see if he's got a car.'

Nomura had been polite but firm, and Sarah had no illusions that the invitation to chat was one that couldn't be refused without either string-pulling from on high, or a fight. All things considered, it was easier to go along with him. Besides, she'd just heard about a UFO sighting and attempted abduction, so she doubted UNIT'S interest could be a coincidence. She might find out something of interest. To her surprise, Yi Chung's little problem was becoming worth following up.

UNIT were operating out of a small office block in Mongkok. It was fairly nondescript, and she had the impression they had simply rented it for a while. As far as she knew, UNIT-SEA's headquarters were in Singapore.

Spartan though the place was, it was kept clean and quite secure: only one door in and out, with a guard inside and a coded keypad outside. It had the feel of any small business office in any city; all open space, desks with PCs and a few soft seats in reception for visitors.

A Chinese woman, around the same age as Sarah, was waiting when they were allowed in. She wore simple fatigues that could belong to half the militaries in the world, with UNIT shoulder flashes and a photo ID tag. 'A pleasure to meet you at last, Miss Smith,' she said politely. Sarah could see that she was hard behind the politeness, and that this was someone not to cross. 'I'm Colonel Tsang. I'm pleased you could spare us the time to come and chat. I know you must be very busy&'

'That's all right,' Sarah told her. 'One of the pleasures of being freelance is the ability to take time off whenever it suits.'

'Of course.' Tsang led Sarah through to a small office and ordered some refreshments to be brought in.

'Why did you ask to see me anyway?' Sarah asked. 'I haven't worked with UNIT in a couple of years.'

'Just an informal chat. We're always willing to listen to experienced advice, and when we saw you were in town we felt it might be worth checking in. Just keeping in touch, so to speak. Also, we were wondering what you knew of the Doctor's business.'

Sarah was surprised, to say the least. 'The Doctor? I haven't seen him in ages.'

'But you spoke to him today. At the Pimms Building.'

'What?' Sarah hadn't met the Doctor there. Not as far as she knew anyway. 'Yes, he calls himself Pendragon.'

Yi Chung hadn't stopped running until he hit Kowloon Park Drive. Any sign of pursuit was long gone, and so were his hopes of meeting up with Sarah. He had

no doubt they had taken her off, willingly or otherwise.

He stopped, bent almost double, and leant on a lamppost to get his breath back. His fear was abating, replaced by a rush of exhilaration. He had cheated fate, and it felt so cool.

Less cool was the fact that he had run so far. When he checked Ms bearings, he realised he'd have to catch a bus or taxi just to get back to where he'd left his car.

Siao and Sing had parted from the uniformed cops and were now squeezed into Siao's car, waiting for a sighting of Yi Chung's car.

They had spent ages waiting for a reply from some filing clerk who was checking the database of driving licences in Hong Kong. Eventually, the clerk had turned up a driving licence for Yi Chung, and a licence number for his car. Siao then put the number out over the airwaves.

After about twenty minutes, a call came through that the car had been found, parked off Jordan Road.

When Yi Chung got back to his car, he wasn't thinking about dates or girlfriends. His frantic look told everybody in the vicinity that he was thinking only of his own skin.

He set off and headed south towards Austin Road. He knew that if the cops had made him they would be waiting at his apartment. There was no sense in going there. Instead, he'd try to find Ah Fei. Fei had connections, and could surely get him to safety for a while. He could go to Macao or Taiwan, and lie low.

It was not to be. He realised that when a police car popped out in front of him as he tried to go through the crossroads at Chatham Road South. His car broadsided it, and his air bag exploded into his face so fast that he didn't see a second police car come up in his mirror. That one stopped too late and rammed his tail.

Car horns were blaring, and people were shouting, but Yi Chung couldn't make sense of any of it. His head was pounding too much, and he wasn't sure if it was the shock of the impact, or his uppers wearing off. Either way, he had to get out of the trap he was in.

The air bag pinned him to his seat, but a slash from a butterfly knife put paid to that.

Sing stamped on the brake just in time to avoid adding a fourth car to the pile-up. 'What the hell?!' Siao exclaimed. Sing neither knew nor cared what had happened, but was glad they'd found their man.

Uniformed cops were staggering out from the damaged cars as Siao and Sing exited theirs. 'Police,' Siao yelled over the sounds of car horns. 'Come out of the car with your hands up.'

In response, there was a loud bang and cops and bystanders alike hit the tarmac. 'He's shooting at us,' a voice called out. Sing had already worked that one out. He drew his own revolver and started firing back. By the time he loosed his second shot, the other cops were starting to join in.

Yi Chung breathed easier when the air bag popped and was no longer crushing his chest. He had reached for the door handle to get out when the car started banging, hit by gunshots.

The cops were trying to kill him. Yi Chung wasn't too surprised, but he would have thought they'd have arrested him first and arranged an accident at the station, rather than do it in front of so many witnesses. Maybe they were practising for being more authoritarian when Beijing took over.

He reached into the glove compartment where there was a mini-Uzi, and started shooting through the windscreen at the cops from the broadsided car in front of him.

Yi Chung's one advantage was that police forces the world over are trained in defensive shooting - firing from cover and not taking risks. He was therefore free to engage in offensive shooting. He floored the accelerator, pushing the wrecked police car away, then reversed into the one behind. His head snapped around painfully as the back of his car imploded, but the police car came off worse. It rolled backwards, causing the cops sheltering behind it to break cover.

Yi Chung let rip at them, hitting at least one. He couldn't tell whether the cop was dead or not, and wasn't stupid enough to get out and check.

If he could move both police cars just a little further, he realised, he could zigzag back out into the traffic and make a run for it.

Sing fired his last shots into Yi Chung's car door, then dropped behind his own car boot, out of ammunition. Siao joined him, ducking bullets. 'I'm out,' he said.

'Me too.' They peered round and saw Yi Chung's rear wheels spin. 'He might get away yet,' Siao said.

'Shit.' Sing thought hard. Yi Chung was mostly concentrating on the uniformed cops who were blocking his escape. He might be able to get over there, and then what, he asked himself? He had nothing left to fight with, and he wasn't stupid enough to take on a man with a machine gun unarmed.

Siao reached into the car to retrieve a half-litre cola bottle, and drained it. 'I hope more back-up arrives soon.'

'Quick, give me that.' Sing took the bottle from her and popped open the boot of the car. From somewhere inside, he pulled out a thin rubber tube. Then he opened the car's filler cap, stuck the tube into it, and began to suck on the tube.

He barely managed to let go of the tube before the petrol hit his tongue. Drinking the stuff would be a quick and painful way to go, which he'd prefer to avoid. Instead, he directed the new flow into the cola bottle. When he had enough he swirled it around and stuffed a silk handkerchief into it.

He was sorry to lose that as it was a present from a girl, but he knew that needs must. He took a lighter from his pocket. 'Wish me luck.'

Then he was off, praying to Kwan Chai - ironically the patron god of both policemen and Triads - that Yi Chung wouldn't see him.

He was unlucky. Shots sparked off the road and shattered a shop window behind him, forcing him to bend painfully low. Then gunfire from the other cops drew Yi Chung's attention just long enough for Sing to pop up from behind a neighbouring car, light the handkerchief and toss it in through Yi Chung's shattered windscreen.

It burst and splashed, burning liquid spattering throughout the car. Yi Chung tumbled backwards out of the door, screaming, and dropped his gun. He rolled away as the car really began to burn, and stood up shakily.

A volley of shots took him in the chest and back as he tried to beat out the flames on his trouser leg.

The leg that was on fire kept twitching after he was dead, but only Siao felt sick at the sight and smell. Everybody else was fine, because at least they weren't the ones burning.

Borisovich liked to conduct business in the restaurant. Partly it was because he enjoyed food and drink, but there was also the added advantage of the tables. Sitting at a table meant that concealing a weapon was easier for him than it was for his visitors - who in any case were searched when they came in -and also meant there was a barrier between him and them.

To offset the barrier, he played the good host, supplying visitors with drinks and snacks, so that the table setting looked more natural.

He had already seen a couple of pimps and dealers this morning, but his latest visitor was different. He was a naval officer, still in uniform, though he seemed to have had no time to shave. 'What can I do for you, Lieutenant?'

'Morozich. Actually, it's more what I can do for you.'

'Go on.' Borisovich was always willing to listen to business offers.

'I have something that my comrades and I think might be valuable.' The officer put a briefcase on the table. Borisovich grimaced, half expecting it to go off. However, Morozich simply opened it and took out a piece of metal. 'We found this, and figured it might be worth something.'

Borisovich almost laughed, and was within a hair's breadth of throwing the lieutenant out with a good kicking for wasting his time. Then he remembered the e-mail from the other day. This metal certainly fitted the description of what was wanted. 'Tell me more' he suggested slowly.

The deal with the naval officer had gone well, and now Borisovich returned to his office and his PC. He brought up the e-mail from Lung Tau, and hit 'reply to author'.

Fran: grizzly<grizzly@domovoi.ru> To: Lung Tau <dragon@pimms.com> Subject: Re: prospecting Date: Wednesday, 16 April 1997 13:12 Lung Tau<draaon@pimms coro> writes:

> Just a quick shopping list. We're in the market for certain new types of ores

> which might be discovered, or have been discovered in the recent past.

> Properties of the desired ores include a complete lack of corrosion regardless

> of environmental situation. Also a flexibility not usually seen in metal.

> Ttp prices will be paid as usual

Have something that might interest you. Found by a traveller.

Package includes ore sample, plus coordinates and video of source. Reserve price US\$250,000.

Meet at the usual place?

That done, and the mail sent, Borisovich sat back and picked up the phone. 'Irina? Get me a flight to Hong Kong for tomorrow; business class.'

The Doctor.

It was a name Sarah hadn't heard in a long time, but never forgot. His shadow remained on her no matter what. Wherever she went, sooner or later she would meet someone who knew him, or had met him, or had heard of him and wanted to know what he was really like.

Images rose unbidden in her mind. Other places and other times; creatures of wonder, creatures of horror. Freedom and terror. Half-remembered joys, and half-forgotten nightmares; the gaps filled by appropriate obfuscation and illusion, all hung on just enough truth to be the past of a life.

The TARDIS.'

'What?' Tsang asked, startling Sarah out of her reverie.

'At the Pimms Building, there was a police box. For a moment I thought it was the TARDIS, but they told me it was an antique box collected as an artwork.'

'It'd be a major coincidence if it was.'

People who had heard of him and wanted to know what he was really like & Sarah understood that Tsang filled this category. 'You've never met him, have you?'

'No,' Tsang admitted. 'But I've read every file that exists in the UNIT archives.'

'It's not quite the same thing. Files don't show you the mix of madness and genius, wit and stubbornness, humanity and other-ness & The files don't make you laugh or make you cry, excite you or frustrate you & Sarah realised Tsang was looking at her in mystification. 'What I'm trying to say is that he's quite a handful to work with, but he always gets things set right in the end.'

'That, at least, I can believe.' Tsang frowned. 'Didn't you know he was here? Isn't that why you came?'

'No, I didn't & I wonder why he didn't say anything? He must have known who I was & A thought occurred to her, which explained everything. 'Of course, he must be an earlier Doctor than I knew. He must not have met me yet!'

That must be it. Why else would he ignore her and not reminisce about old times? Why else would he even lie about who he was? No, it must be an earlier Doctor.

Tsang seemed taken aback. The Doctor's multiple life spans affected some people that way. 'I know the files said he changed, and travelled through time, but I - ' She broke off. 'Did Geneva send you? Or UNIT-UK?'

Sarah shook her head. 'Of course not. Why should they? I'm on a working tour for a news agency, writing a series of articles relevant to the Far East on a global -'

'We have reason to suspect an alien presence in Hong Kong,' Tsang interrupted. 'We had also requested that Geneva send us someone with a little more experience of such things.'

'You said the Doctor was here. Surely he's working with you.'

'Unfortunately not. The Doctor's situation here in Hong Kong is somewhat unusual, even by his standards.'

'He's in trouble, you mean.' Sarah continued before Tsang could answer. 'I wish I could say I was surprised, but he always had a talent for getting himself into a hole.' She smiled, remembering the good old days. 'You need help to get him out?'

'Yes,' Tsang said guardedly, in a way that immediately made Sarah's heart sink. Bad news was coming, and she could feel it; but what could she do other than play out the scene she had been brought here to play? Tsang's performance was just that, Sarah was sure: a performance, and more of one than most people played in public. 'That's about right.'

'Then of course I'll help.' The Doctor had been her best friend for several years. How could she not help?

'Firstly, we're looking for a box your friend Yi Chung might have. He took it from -'

'This box?' Tsang's eyes widened as Sarah put it on the desk.

'It certainly feels like some sort of alien technology,' Sarah continued, 'but nothing I've seen. You really ought to just ask the Doctor. I mean, even if he hasn't met me yet, he's still always the same man - a friend of humanity, never cruel or cowardly.'

Something flitted across Tsang's face. If she hadn't known better, Sarah would have called it sympathy, or maybe even sadness. 'You really don't know the trouble he's in this time, do you?'

Sarah shook her head. 'What trouble?' she asked anxiously. 'Is he in some kind of danger?' If he was, the sooner she got involved, the better. She couldn't let the Doctor, of all people, stay in trouble. He'd saved her too many times for her not to feel obligated to return the favour.

'It's not that kind of trouble. The Pimms Import-Export Company is the front - and legitimate commercial arm - for the Tao Te Lung. That's a Triad, Miss Smith, with interests including drugs, arms smuggling and illegal immigrants.'

Sarah tried not to take this in. She knew where Tsang must be heading, but didn't want to hear it. It was impossible, she told herself. 'Pendragon means Head of the Dragon,' she said slowly. 'Leader of a war band.'

'Tao Te Lung means Way of the Dragon.'

'It's not a coincidence, is it?' Sarah asked, in a very small voice, feeling very alone.

'No. In Chinese, Head of the Dragon is lung tau. That's also a colloquial name for the Shan Chu of a Triad. The Doctor is the top man in the Tao Te Lung. He runs it.'

Chapter Nine Bfldfell0s

Yi Chung's car smouldered on the crossroads while cops bustled around it. They were keeping everybody well back from the overdone wreckage, letting the fire and ambulance crews pull out the roasting corpse and get it loaded for its trip to the morgue.

Yue Hwa didn't look at the wreck or the body. He'd seen enough of them before to know what they'd be like, so they held no interest for him.

The bystanders were a different matter. Some of diem looked as if they were enjoying the show, while others were angry. However they tried to hide it, he could see they were all shocked and scared by what had happened. He knew they were because he'd seen those expressions before.

It was the expression he'd seen on the faces in the crowd after those who could get out of Tiananmen Square had done so. They had all worn that expression then: defiant, surprised and utterly stunned.

Here in Hong Kong, nobody expected such a brutal shoot-out in the middle of their shopping trip. Back in Beijing, people had expected some kind of clampdown but not the tanks.

For once, Yue Hwa was glad he was separated from his wife and son. Eight years ago, the shock and strain had been too much for their relationship. It wasn't one specific thing, just the stress of trying to decide how far was too far when both partners had similar political views but different scales of measurement.

Yue Hwa knew a sight like this would have had his wife wanting to return to Guangzhou if she'd been living in Hong

Kong with him. Maybe he had changed, because he almost regretted still being here himself.

If given the choice, he'd have stayed in the office, but there was always a chance that the box Yi Chung had stolen was still here. If it was, he could always get a cop to sell it to him. It was a revolting idea, but if it was the only way to get things done&

Sarah Jane Smith, a stranger in the strange land of Hotel.

The huge window of her suite had one of the most stunning night-time views in the world, but she didn't see it. There was no room in her thoughts for shimmering lights on the harbourside. Her mind was on the Doctor, and on Pendragon.

The Doctor couldn't be running a Triad. That was a given; she knew him better than she knew almost anyone else, and maybe better than anyone else knew him. She knew he was never cruel or cowardly, never greedy or anything like any gangster she'd ever heard of.

So something else must be going on.

She opened a notepad and started scribbling things down as they came to her, in the hope that it would all make sense if she worked with the data. She wrote by hand, feeling that something so personal and troubling shouldn't be entrusted to something as impersonal as a laptop.

The Doctor was Pendragon. Pendragon ran the Tao Te Lung. He didn't acknowledge

her. But how had the company got on her itinerary anyway? She had never heard of it, and had assumed that the news agency had accepted a backhander to slip it in. The Doctor's presence, though, changed things. He must have at least known she was coming.

She scored that off. He was probably responsible for inviting her. He wanted her there, yet didn't acknowledge her. He knew she was curious and dedicated. He knew she wouldn't give up. If he didn't talk to her, it was because he couldn't. He was in trouble, trapped in his apparent position. Her excitement grew as she realised he must have arranged for her to see him so that she could help to free him from whatever he'd got into.

Sarah's heart sank; she was assuming too much. Her appointment with him could still just as easily have been a business deal between a PR consultant for the company and her news agency. Her arrival could have been a surprise, even a shock, to him.

How could you get trapped into being the boss of a gang anyway? You could get trapped by upbringing or circumstance, but only if you had to live in that society. A man with a TARDIS couldn't be trapped into being a gang boss.

Freedom of choice meant he had had a choice.

She couldn't believe it, but had nothing else to believe. Numbed, she realised there was something familiar on the TV opposite. It was Yi Chung's car, in flames, with armed cops milling around. Shakily, she found the remote and turned on the sound. 'Road South today. The dead man, Hong Yi Chung, was being sought for questioning in connection with the death of a Mr Wing earlier in the week. On the stock market today -' Sarah tuned the rest of it out.

Yi Chung dead? She had realised he was a street gangster, but couldn't help wondering whether or not that was what had got him killed. He had already feared for his life over Wing and the box, and perhaps he was right to do so. Maybe he died for that box.

The Doctor retreated temporarily to the back of her mind. Two people had died in probable connection with the box she'd given to UNIT, and she decided she wasn't going to be a third.

In an alternate hotel continuum, Tom Ryder.

He had been following Sarah all day, observing her movements and piecing together a profile of her. He liked her already. Apart from the first impression he had gained in Bangkok, he had her pegged down for determination and bravery. He liked that. In fact, he had pretty much decided that he would have liked to be a part of her life even if it wasn't part of his job.

He had unwound from his working day with a relaxing work-out in the rooftop gym, then returned to his room and ordered a steak dinner from room service. His partner, George, was already asleep on his bed. He had also been working, though Tom always claimed to willingly take on the lion's share himself, and evidently it had tired him out.

When Tom turned on the TV he found an English-language news channel so that he could catch up on the rest of the day's events.

His meal arrived and he ate it in front of the TV. Most of the news was the usual stream of death and distress, until a familiar name came up: Hong Yi Chung. Tom paid more attention from then on; that was the guy in whose company Sarah had spent most of the day.

Tom sucked the juices from the steak he was chewing, but spat out the grey meat. It was a habit from his boxing days, to keep him in protein without putting on too much weight. He wasn't expecting trouble - at least he told himself he wasn't - but for some reason he just felt like he ought to be getting into shape. Just in case.

'What is the meaning of that atrocity?' Pendragon demanded, jabbing a finger at the huge widescreen TV in the boardroom. Only he, Yue Hwa and Tse Hung were present at the table, clustered at one end of it in the darkened room. On the screen, Yi Chung's car was caught in a moment of frozen time, the tape of the evening news interrupted in mid-flame.

'The situation is in hand,' Tse Hung said reassuringly. 'The thief, Ah Yi, won't be troubling us any more.'

Pendragon looked as if he wanted to strike him down on the spot with lightning but, as long experience had taught Tse Hung to expect, he did nothing except talk. Tse Hung still hadn't decided whether he thought Pendragon was capable of actually doing anything, especially anything that would get his hands dirty. 'Why did you deliberately ignore my instructions to avoid bloodshed?'

Tse Hung hated the way Pendragon sometimes got like this. It made him angry, and anger made him speak unwisely. 'Sometimes it isn't practical to be merciful.' He bit off the rest of what he intended to say, knowing it would just worsen the situation and eventually lose him face. 'Besides, it wasn't my doing: the police tried to arrest him. He fought back and they had to defend themselves.'

'They "had no choice", I suppose,' Pendragon suggested, his voice dripping with disgust.

'I'm not exactly one to support the police, am I?' Tse Hung pointed out. 'As it happens, it was at a fairly crowded crossroads - Austin Road and Chatham Road South. They tried to block his car in and arrest him, but he rammed them and started shooting. It's all over the evening news.'

Pendragon looked questioningly at Yue Hwa. If Tse Hung didn't know better, he'd think it was a search for approval. 'It's true,' Yue Hwa said. 'At least, it's true that he had a shoot-out with the police and that it's all over the news.'

Pendragon looked away, clearly not impressed with the explanations. Tse Hung found him a mystery, impossible to predict. He prided himself on knowing what those around him would do or say next - it made it easier to stay alive and wealthy - but Pendragon frustrated him at every turn.

He wondered why on Earth Uncle Tang had ever appointed Pendragon to head the organisation when he retired. Maybe it was because this unpredictability and frustration would extend to the police when they tried to do anything. Maybe it was because Uncle Tang had Alzheimer's and didn't know what the hell he was doing. Occasionally Tse Hung suspected that Uncle Tang might even have done it just to annoy him, knowing that answering to a gwailo would rankle enough with him to be revenge for some past misdemeanour. Tse Hung wouldn't put it past the old goat.

Pendragon had turned back, looking tired. 'I don't suppose he had the box on him at the time?'

'It wasn't at the site,' Yue Hwa answered. 'The cops just might have it, but we

bought the list of evidence recovered from the car from a cop. No sign of it.'

'Then it's lost& which means UNIT probably have it.' Pendragon sounded disturbed, though it was often hard to tell with him. The guy was damn well inscrutable.

'There's one other possibility,' Tse Hung said. 'Yi Chung spoke to a reporter before his death. He may have told her about it, or even handed it over.'

'What reporter?'

'Some Englishwoman. I've never seen her bef&' He frowned, a memory scratching outside the door. 'I have seen her before: here in this building. She had an appointment with you.' Now there was a coincidence, Tse Hung thought.

'Miss Smith?'

'Yes! I'm sure it was her. I only caught a glimpse, but I'd swear to it.' An unlikely coincidence, and therefore unlikely to be coin-cidence. 'We should kill the Englishwoman.'

'No,' Pendragon snapped. 'No more killing. It's bad for business; even Al Capone once admitted that.'

Tse Hung couldn't argue with that. Nevertheless Pendragon needed pushing, as always/Then we'll give her a traditional scare; teach her a lesson.'

'That's fine,' Pendragon agreed, his features shifting in a way that usually meant he was already thinking about something else and hopefully losing track of the conversation that was ending.

Tse Hung hesitated, wondering if Pendragon actually knew what was meant by the traditional scare. He decided probably not; the gwailo would never have agreed to it otherwise. 'I'll see to it in the morning.' He rose. He had to get changed before his night out.

'Why not tonight?' Yue Hwa asked. 'You have a date?'

'Yes.' Tse Hung grinned. 'With the Waking Bears.'

* * *

The helicopters came in low enough to shake the treetops, and spiralled into the centre of the logging camp. Both machines wore the colours and markings of UNTAC, which had adminis-tered the country before the 1993 elections. There were plenty of such choppers left in Cambodia, and they didn't attract undue attention.

The helicopters kicked up a storm of dust and woodchips which almost blinded Barry. He ducked under the spinning rotor-tips to greet the courier who was jumping from the first chopper. The man, wearing plain coveralls marked with the insignia of a UN mine-clearing team, had a briefcase chained to his wrist.

'Welcome to the final frontier,' Barry greeted him.

'Huh?'

Barry pointed to the ridge to the northeast. 'There be dragons. You got my order?'

'It took some string-pulling, but yeah.' The courier unlocked the briefcase and withdrew a slim silver box with no obvious seams or markings. 'Here you go. Hope you know what you're doing with it.'

'Yeah, me too.' Barry hoped he sounded like he was joking.

'Why the second chopper?' the courier asked.

Barry pointed back towards one of the Portakabins, from which Clark and Gibson were escorting the prisoners. The prisoners' hands were bound with pull-through plastic ties, but they still looked dangerous and the UNIT troops kept their fingers on their triggers. 'We've got some passengers for you. Illegal loggers, raising money for the Khmer Rouge. Their camp here is a little home from home. The only problem is it doesn't have cable.'

The courier smiled sympathetically. 'It's a jungle out here.'

'Yeah. Keep these prisoners incommunicado until after Tsang hears from us. I don't want any leaks.'

The Club Shanghai was - and still is - an art deco pastiche of a 1930s-style Shanghai nightclub. The entrance is a black marble moongate which leads into a complex filled with panelled screen walls. The mirrors are etched with sinuous dragons of good fortune.

Tse Hung found it all a bit much. It followed the fashion set by the China Club, but without that club's subtlety or heart. It was more for tourists, and for those too unfashionable to know that being an Anglophile was out in favour of being a Sinophile.

The decor was even in sufficiently dubious taste to include a cabinet full of natural sex-enhancing remedies and potions. It was exactly the sort of place the Waking Bears would think of as the epitome of the exotic East. On the other hand, Tse Hung was sufficiently respected here for half a dozen people to rush over to pay the cover charge when they saw him enter.

Pausing only to buy a ludicrously expensive cognac, he scanned the room for the Russian he was due to meet. It wasn't hard to spot him: in a room full of casual evening-wear and cheong-sams, he and his entourage were the only ones in leather jackets, jeans and white trainers. Tse Hung would have thought they were rich enough to have better fashion sense.

The Russian, Borisovich, was already sitting, his table populated by empty shot glasses. Tse Hung put his briefcase between his ankles and spread his arms as one of the bodyguards patted him down.

'Zdorova', Borisovich said, rising to hug Tse Hung expansively when the bodyguard nodded to him. 'Davai vizhirayem', he added, making an 'OK' gesture with his thumb and forefinger and flicking at the side of his throat.

'Please, I think English would be better'

'Chevo? Shto eta bled'zayazik't Davaipo Russki'. The Russian smirked. This was the kind of game Tse Hung wearied of. Borisovich thought that being the one to decide on the language they spoke would somehow give him more face. Worse, it meant Tse Hung had to play back in the silly boys' game.

'Look, you don't speak Chinese, and I don't speak Russian -'

'Ah kulturno poprasit nel'zya, yop't'yaV'

That was more than enough for Tse Hung, but he wasn't about to lose face by letting the Russian take the lead in these negotiations. 'Ho. Met sik-gong yingwok-wa. Net sik in sik guangdong-wcO. MoT

Borisovich looked dismayed, then irritated. 'I have decided,' he announced, half-covering his irritation, 'that we should speak English.'

There were only a few people on the late shift in the homicide office, and they were all out on jobs, so Siao had the communal office space to herself for a while. Some skeleton keys had enabled her to pay an unscheduled visit to the personnel department and find some reading material for the evening.

It was usually considered bad form to read someone else's file, but sometimes it was desirable or even necessary. It had been one of those nights when you go looking for something you don't want to find, like probing a grumbling tooth.

Mark Sing's file was interesting reading. In only a few minutes of skimming it, Siao had found that he had twice been discovered on the fringes of corruption investigations, but on both occasions had escaped being brought up on charges by the ICAC. She wondered how he had managed that, and could think of only two answers. One was that he was honest and innocent - in which case, why would his name have come up twice? The other was disappointing and disturbing.

She closed her eyes, and rested her head on her knuckles. Why did it have to be him? She liked him, and they made a good team. Now she had suspicions about him, which meant she would have to be more careful in what she said and did in his presence. If she couldn't trust him, they wouldn't be a team, but she could hardly just come out and say, 'I saw this in your file, could you explain it& ?'

It would be a terrible thing to ruin an effective team, but sometimes one or another member of a team made that inevitable. At times like this, she wished she'd just stayed home with Eddie and helped her kids with their homework. Forsaking loved ones for the greater good was one thing, but there was no merit in forsaking them for something that could only cause more stress and pain.

Overwhelmingly, she needed her husband's arms around her at that moment. It was a call that couldn't be resisted. She opened her eyes and lifted the file folder to close it. Then her eyes fell on something that didn't make a difference to how she felt, but was a curious coincidence.

There had been a UFO sighting near Sing's home several months ago -reported by someone else. He had never mentioned it, and she wasn't surprised. With the world's largest air force only a few miles away, she would expect some extra overflights before Beijing took over. It wasn't quite sabre-rattling, but it was a message she fully expected.

She closed the file, and put it back in the personnel department. It was time to go home, love her family and wait until tomorrow to decide what to do about Mark Sing.

Chiu looked out over Hong Kong from the rooftop where he sat. From below, the sugary nothingness of the local pop scene washed over him, but he hardly felt it. Where music should be a glorious storm carrying the listener through sea and sky, the local Cantopop was the exhalation of some insects in a garden.

The lights of the Central District across the harbour were bright and beautiful. The light pollution from them cast a glow over the few high clouds. It was just light enough to make out the shape of Hong Kong Peak looming above the metropolis.

The city, mountain and ethereal sky reminded Chiu of many places he had seen in his lifetime. Good places and bad. A mountain where he composed his finest concerto to date. A city where he was wounded by disruptor-fire from a building that should have been targeted before the ground troops landed.

On a pad, he idly - almost unconsciously - began scribbling notes, stanzas, bars & All on separate files on the clipboard he held. It wasn't just the place, but the attitude and atmosphere of its people that inspired him.

He would write them something. A wordless song. Something haunting and emotive, yet uplifting; in the end, a tribute. It was always possible that none of his people would ever hear it but he would feel better for creating it.

Chiu paused, thinking of the tone of the piece he had started to compose. Haunting, emotive and uplifting. Such a tone would also fit his own people: victims who fought back, made something of themselves, then learnt when to let go and be free.

He would make this a song worthy of performance in the great Amphitheatre of M'Khrosh at home. At least, it would be worthy of being played there if the place still existed. Chiu could already hear the song in his head, fully formed; it would be not just an honour, but relaxing, to bask in the glow of the swollen red sun and listen to that new theme.

But the amphitheatre didn't exist, and neither did a homeworld for him. Chiu felt momentarily heavier, weighed down by sadness.

He stood up, saving the files and switching off the clipboard. He shouldn't be here indulging in personal pleasures. He was on duty every moment of every day, and should know better than to let his thoughts wander. That led only to the pleasant becoming unpleasant, and relaxation becoming depression. Leave that to the humans.

Mark Sing watched Siao leave the police station. She should have finished her shift hours ago, but seemed to have something important to do. He wasn't surprised; he had noticed a shift in her attitude after they met at Yi Chung's apartment. He wasn't sure what had caused it, but he could guess.

He knew she was checking up on him in his file, and knew he shouldn't take it badly that she was doing what she thought was right, but it still felt wrong. He knew she'd have seen the reference to the ICAC corruption investigations he'd got caught up in, but doubted she'd listen to him if he tried to explain. Even if he wanted to try, that was.

Sing knew from long experience that there were situations, usually ones that involved certain personality types, in which anything done in an attempt to make things better will just make them worse.

To his sorrow, this was one of them.

Borisovich had been downing double vodkas as if the distillery was going to be nuked in five minutes, but with deceptively little apparent effect. Tse Hung and the Russians had withdrawn to a more private booth, away from the 'chuppies' and period-costumed waiters.

'Your e-mail said you have something we might be interested in,' Tse Hung said.

The Russian Mafia tended to think of themselves as macho businessmen, great at making money and ruling their domains. People who were a little more objective viewed them more like wide-boys with more bravado than sense, and even less experience. Where the Triads were virtually a secret government that had been running an underground population for centuries, the Russian mob were the Trotter brothers with Kalashnikovs and rocket launchers.

Tse Hung didn't like them that much but they had their uses, and they were still a young criminal market. The snakeheads -illegal migrant smugglers - dealt with them more often than he did, but he had a few contacts just in case.

Borisovich nodded with a big grin. "The word is out that the Tao Te Lung is in the market for rare mineralogical and metallurgical samples.'

'Within certain parameters, yes.' Pendragon's parameters, of course. He had specified some months ago that should certain samples come up, either legally or otherwise, they were to be acquired. Tse Hung didn't know why, but he knew it had something to do with Chiu and his experiments.

'We know. A few days ago, one of our submarines discovered something on the seabed. They managed to pull a sample from it, which matches your requirements.'

'We'd want to buy more than a sample.'

'Of course. Which is why, when the submarine officers decided to make a little profit, they agreed to include video footage and a chart showing the precise location of the deposit.'

Tse Hung carefully kept his expression neutral. 'Interesting. Did you bring it?'

Borisovich snapped his fingers, and one of his bodyguards put a briefcase on the table. Borisovich opened it. 'As you see.'

Tse Hung lifted out the piece of metal. It certainly was metal -smooth and hard - yet it wasn't cold to the touch, and it was flexible. It almost flowed. Tse Hung had never seen anything like it, but it certainly seemed to be what Pendragon was after. How unfortunate for Pendragon that he had found it first. He put the metal back and reached for the chart.

The case's lid almost took his fingers off as it slammed. The Russian pulled it back slightly. 'We agreed a price.'

'Of course.' Tse Hung put his own briefcase on the table, opened it and turned it to face the Russian. The Russian pulled it to his side of the table happily, entranced by the sight of the money inside. All US dollars, accepted worldwide, not Hong Kong dollars.

His expression changed for the worse when Tse Hung shot him twice through the case's lid, with the pistol he had lifted out when he opened it. Another handful of shots took care of the dumbfounded Russian bodyguard, who hadn't dared to check the case when he searched Tse Hung.

A couple of bar hops dragged the bodies away, while Tse Hung closed both

briefcases and left with them.

Chapter Ten Earlü Warning System

ACTRESS'S TWO-HOUR ORDEAL

A spokesperson for actress Sabrina Tso has revealed the reason for her having missed several days' filming on the TV soap opera, Pearl of the Orient. She has spent the last few days being interviewed by police after an abduction on Monday.

Ms Tso was kidnapped from her apartment late on Monday night, and taken to an undisclosed location where, it is reported, she was sexually assaulted by several members of a Triad street gang. She was dumped from their car in the early morning of Tuesday, after a two-hour ordeal.

Although no further details have been released as yet, we understand that the assault relates to Ms Tso's recent much-publicised refusal to appear in a Triad-financed Category III production. It is believed that the attack was a warning, intended to pressure her into signing a contract&

The Doctor slapped the newspaper onto Yue Hwa's desk. 'Did someone in this organisation do this?' he asked, quiet and dangerous.

'No.' Yue Hwa shook his head. 'I thought you might like to see it.' 'I don't like any of this,' the Doctor snapped back. 'Neither do I,' Yue Hwa said reassuringly. At least, he hoped it was reassuring. He didn't fear the Doctor, but nor did he want to get on the little man's bad side. The Doctor wouldn't kill him or be violent, but there was something about him that made Yue Hwa wary. There was an unspoken threat, not to health or life, but perhaps to the soul, about the Doctor these days.

"Then what, exactly, is the point you're so nervously dancing around?"

Yue Hwa tapped the picture of Sabrina Tso on the crumpled paper. "This is the traditional Triad way of bringing a woman round to their way of thinking. I thought that might interest you."

The Doctor's expression cleared; it was now more shocked than threatening. "A traditional scare?"

'Exactly.' Yue Hwa looked around to make sure no one was near his office. He wasn't comfortable taking this kind of action, interfering in normal business, but& He wasn't blind. He could see the Doctor liked the Smith woman. And, in truth, he was even less comfortable with this 'traditional scare' than with almost anything else.

"This is what Tse Hung plans for that journalist.' He didn't feel the need to suggest the Doctor do something about it. That was a given.

The Doctor grimaced. 'If I order against it, I'll lose their respect and then all that I've worked for here could be jeopardised& I should never have invited -' He stopped. 'I will not let this happen. And this conversation never happened either.'

'Of course not.' Yue Hwa felt greatly relieved.

Tse Hung was tired by the time he parked in the driveway of his villa. It was modern, overlooking the burgeoning developments under way at Repulse Bay - and only five minutes from his father's nursing home -but it was quiet and

relaxing. Sometimes he just needed to be away from people, to recharge his social batteries, and having a house in what passed for Hong Kong's countryside made that so much easier.

He liked to go out at nights and involve himself in every level of the Tao Te Lung's business but, while he considered himself above the law of the land, he knew he wasn't above the physical laws of nature. Sooner or later, any stimulant would cease to do any good and weariness would catch up with you.

The villa nurtured him and protected him, keeping him sane. It was one of the few things he had acquired legally, albeit paid for in untraceable cash. His parents would never have approved of his association with a Triad, so he wanted to be sure there was one thing somewhere in his life that was done right. One thing in his life that was done properly made him feel a lot easier about all the things that weren't.

He had chosen to make his home that one thing because home was most important to his family. Tse Hung's father had never quite earned enough to buy his own home, and drummed into him the instinct and desire to do so. With the house being all legal, he felt his parents would be proud of his achievement.

Bonnie Ling was already asleep when he got to bed. She was curled up in a vastly oversized T-shirt designed for bloated western tourists, and nothing else. The sight was exciting to him, but she looked so peaceful that he decided not to wake her. In any case, he was asleep as soon as the side of his head settled on to the pillow.

Yue Hwa watched from across the street as the Doctor went into the Win's Hotel. He knew he shouldn't be doing this, but he hadn't gone into this business to hurt people. Most people hadn't, in fact. They got into it to get rich without working in a boring dead-end job; hurting people usually came later, to protect their investment.

Little groups of suspicious-looking young men walking purpose-fully in and out of hotels and restaurants were common enough to be recognised for what they were. For all that, no bellhop was going to risk his own skin by trying to turn them away, no matter how obviously they had no legal business there.

Fei had been given a chance to redeem himself, and that's just what he intended to do. He and three others strutted into the Win's Hotel. Two of them had cleavers under their jackets, one had a switchblade and Fei himself had a pistol in his waistband. Fei didn't imagine they would need the weapons in this case, but they were always good for a scare.

The three with him were on their first real criminal outing, all over-eager and boasting about how great it was going to be. He hadn't bothered to mention that their victim was a harm-less middle-aged woman. The middle-aged weren't his type, but he had to regain face and respect somehow and this would do it.

He decided he would probably settle for keeping guard while the others had what fun they could with her. That was what he went on to claim at his trial, anyway.

As they waited for the lift, Fei let his mind wander a little. He wondered what had really happened to Yi Chung. He would have loved this, Fei was sure. Age wouldn't matter to a tomcat like Yi Chung. They all drew their weapons as the lift rose.

When the ascent was completed Fei and the others stepped out of the lift. Almost immediately a red hook caught his wrist, immobilising his gun hand.

'That's enough,' a firm Celtic voice said.

Fei saw that the hook was an umbrella handle in the shape of a question mark. A small man in a cream suit and battered panama hat was at the other end of it. Fei tried to pull his arm free, but the gwailo kept turning and twisting the umbrella like some kind of kung fu man-catcher, so it always held him steady. 'She's not for you,' the newcomer said. There was an unspoken threat behind his words, though Fei doubted such a small gwailo could make good on it.

'Get out of my way, gwailo, or I'll blast you,' Fei snarled. He finally managed to free his arm from the umbrella, and took aim between the foreigner's eyes. 'I mean it.'

The gwailo didn't bat an eyelid. 'I don't think you will. You're not a killer.'

'No? What the hell was this?'

'No. You're a businessman.'

Fei could feel the situation twisting around him and tried to steady it with tough words. 'Wrong, I'm a soldier. A soldier who follows orders.'

'Ah&' The little white man nodded with faux understanding. 'A soldier who makes war on unarmed women?' he asked scornfully. Fei had had enough, and thumbed back the hammer on his gun.

The little gwailo moved suddenly, thrusting his fingertip into the gun's muzzle. 'There. You're disarmed. What now?'

Fei blinked. He was rapidly becoming more and more convinced that this guy was a psycho. 'I pull this trigger, you lose your hand.'

'Maybe. But the gun will explode from the pressure and be useless. Then where will you be? Unarmed& Defenceless& Impotent&' Fei shivered. What if the guy was right? The gwailo could be wounded, but if Fei was disarmed and the little man then pulled an Uzi with his other hand& If he was the sort of psycho he was beginning to sound like, he could be capable of just that kind of thing.

'Leave,' the little man growled, and Fei could feel his force of will pushing with the word. 'Leave now.' What the hell, Fei thought. The Smith woman wasn't going anywhere so he could always come back tomorrow.

A door behind the gwailo opened a crack, and Fei saw a gun muzzle in a dark hand. Maybe the guy wasn't so crazy after all, if he had muscle to back him up.

With that thought in mind, it was a lot easier to pull the gun back and turn and run.

The Doctor watched Fei and his companions run back to the lift. When he was satisfied they weren't going to come straight back he allowed himself a small smile, and moved down to the door of Sarah's suite. He opened it, without a key, and slipped in quietly.

Tom Ryder watched him from a neighbouring room. He had the door open just wide enough to see through the crack. When the Doctor went inside, Tom emerged and waited for him.

The Doctor re-emerged after a moment, looking stressed in Tom's opinion.

'Doctor& whatever, I presume?'

The Doctor looked surprised. 'You seem to have the advantage of me.'

'I've read your file. Well, one of them anyway' Tom gestured towards the lift. 'Saved me a lot of trouble.' He opened his jacket to let the Doctor see the butt of the Desert Eagle he was carrying. "Them too.'

The Doctor smiled, though Tom was sure it was falsely. "Then I'm glad to have been of help. You aren't with them, I take it?' He indicated the way the Triad thugs had gone.

'No. I'm& a friend of Sarah's.' He hoped so, anyway.

'Ah, what a small world. So am I.'

'I know.' Tom looked into the suite through the still-open door. All was in darkness. 'At least I hope so, if you're going to visit sleeping women unannounced.'

'I didn't want to wake her, but I wanted to see that she's all right.' Tom could understand that. He had the same instinct himself.

'She is all right, isn't she?'

'I assume so,' the Doctor said coyly. 'But until she comes back, I couldn't really be sure.'

Tom blinked. 'She's not there?' He pushed past the Doctor, taking a quick tour through the darkened suite. The bed was empty, undisturbed since the housekeeping staff had made it. 'Where is she?' He hoped she wasn't in trouble, but his fears were eased by the fact that the Triad goons had come to her suite. If they'd got at her elsewhere, or kidnapped her, they wouldn't have bothered coming there afterwards.

'I don't know' The Doctor sounded as concerned as Tom felt. There were compensations, Tom decided. For one thing, he had the Doctor to himself, and a good chance to get a few answers from him.

Tom turned. 'I'd have thought you'd be the one with -' There was no one there. Tom sighed. Back to Plan A, he told himself.

Sarah was perched on a rented motor scooter, taking yet more pictures of the Pimms Building using infra-red film and special night lenses. This time, rather than concentrating on how impres-sive the place was, she was using a longer lens, focusing in on the building's doorways, hoping to catch Pendragon - the Doctor, if that's who he was - entering or leaving.

A part of her mind tried to point out that, nearing the big five-oh, she was perhaps getting a bit old for this cloak-and-dagger stuff. She should have kids at university by now, if her friends and neighbours were to be believed.

She was determined to ignore those thoughts. They were obvi-ously just trying to lure her away from this boring photography bit. She looked back through the viewfinder, and struck gold.

The Doctor was just walking into the building. She took a few quick snaps before he disappeared. A few moments later, there was a brief display of rhythmic yellow flashes. Though Sarah was out of earshot, she could hear the TARDIS's peculiar sound in her head, and knew the police box was no longer in

the stone garden.

Tse Hung woke to the sound of the shower that adjoined the bathroom. It stopped after a few moments and Bonnie emerged, glistening. It was a better sight to wake up to than any sunrise.

'You're awake,' she said, noticing his interest. 'I didn't hear you come in.'

'You were asleep,' he explained, 'and you looked so beautiful that I couldn't bring myself to disturb you.'

She nodded slowly, and smiled weakly. 'It's a shame. I spent most of the night trying to think of a way to tell you, but I guess I fell asleep before I got the chance.'

This did not bode well to Tse Hung's ears. 'Tell me what?'

'I'm leaving. You. The business. The life I've got myself into over the last couple of years.'

At first Tse Hung couldn't believe his ears. Moments flashed through his mind - meeting her for the first time, arranging for her to sing at a club, making love on Hong Kong Peak, setting up accounting books for her. The more he thought about them, the more he just remembered the sex, and the more he realised that he didn't really feel anything - either for her, or about her decision.

What he did have feelings about was the investment she represented. He had put a lot of money into buying recording sessions for her and keeping her earnings out of the tax collectors' hands. His cut of her more personal fees offered to businessmen.

She was still waiting for an answer and she looked frightened, probably due to some bad response from a rejected lover in the past. 'It's all right,' he said. 'Can you afford to buy yourself out?'

She hesitated, but started to nod. She was probably trying to protect someone, he decided. She had met someone who cared enough for her to put up the money. 'There's someone else? Someone who&'

'Someone who loves me.' She sat down. 'I don't have a problem with you or us, but neither of us loves the other, do we?'

Tse Hung shook his head. 'Tell him to bring fifteen thousand dollars to me at the Club Shanghai tonight. Then you're free, and I wish both of you well in your life together.'

'That's it?' she asked, disbelievingly. 'That's all you've got to say?'

'What else should I say? Neither of us loved the other. It's been fun at times, but in the end, it's just business.'

Business inspires the same feelings in businessmen, whether they deal in stocks and shares, hookers and drugs or pirated software and hot cars. It was simple - get the job done, get the money and don't get caught.

The very words Tse Hung lived by. The very reason he wasn't bothered by Bonnie leaving. He wasn't bothered at all. In fact, he'd spent the whole drive to the Pimms Building revelling in how not bothered he was, and how it meant nothing to him that she was ditching their cosy arrangement for some guy with a clean

rapsheet.

Fei and three other 49s were waiting for him in his office when he arrived. They didn't look happy or comfortable, and that set alarm bells ringing in Tse Hung's head. 'Well? Did you enjoy yourselves?' Tse Hung asked.

The 49s hesitated, looking at each other more as though they were nervous sheep than thugs who've just demonstrated their false courage with a forced gangbang. 'They were expecting us.'

"They? Who?"

'Two men. A black guy with a gun, and this little white guy with an umbrella.'

Tse Hung turned slowly, his drinking hand trembling. "This gwaio with the umbrella & what did he look like?"

'A white suit. Silly hat. He had an accent - Scottish or Irish, maybe.' A Scots accent. Tse Hung knew there must be more than one such person in Hong Kong at any given moment, but how many were small, carried an umbrella and knew these fools were going to abduct the girl? He could only think of one.

He took a photo from his desk drawer, and put it face up so they could see it. 'Is this the man?' They nodded enthusiastically, averring that it was.

'All right. Get out.' They complied, undoubtedly glad to be leaving alive. Tse Hung lifted the photo of Pendragon, and crushed it slowly.

There was blood, and there was fire. No matter how far or fast he ran. Yue Hwa couldn't get away from the heat and the screaming. Screaming and the ringing of a telephone.

Yue Hwa woke up with an indrawn gasp, shaking like a leaf. When his heartbeat had settled, he lowered himself back on the sweat-soaked bed. Tradition had it that dreams were messages, while modern science said they were the mind's way of sorting through memories of both real events and fictions viewed or read. Yue Hwa didn't remember much of his dreams, just enough to know that he fervently hoped that, if they were memories, they were memories of fictions. If he had done any of the things his dreams suggested, he would surely have remembered, for they would haunt his every waking moment as well as his sleeping ones.

Or so he hoped. He had heard that the mind could repress memories and bury them so deeply that only the subconscious could recover them. And he had been involved in some less-than-pleasant duties during his life. Perhaps the dreams were messages that he didn't know himself as well as he might?

He shivered, despite the humidity. It was just as well there was no one he could ask about all this; he didn't think he'd want to know the answers anyway.

The phone was still ringing, and he picked it up once his hand had stopped shaking. 'Who is it?'

'It's Tse Hung. Meet me at the Shanghai Club. It's important.'

'What's this about?' It was unusual for Tse Hung to use a land-line, which could be more easily tapped. It must be very important indeed.

'I can't tell you. Meet me in half an hour'

The Shanghai Club wasn't open this early, of course, but such rules didn't apply to people like Tse Hung and Yue Hwa. Not if the club's owners wanted to keep it unburnt.

Yue Hwa was cautious as he entered the bar. He knew about Borisovich's death and wondered if Tse Hung had planned the same thing for him. He couldn't think what might have made Tse Hung make such a decision, but then, victims often didn't.

A few staff were mopping the floor and polishing the furnish-ings. Only Tse Hung was seated at the bar, with two drinks already set up. Yue Hwa perched on a stool beside him. 'What's this about?'

'You know the Englishwoman we wanted to warn off?'

'Yes.'

'My men were intercepted before they could teach her that lesson. Two men were there - a black man with a gun, and' Tse Hung paused to break a popper into his glass and drain it. '&Pendragon.'

'Pendragon?' Yue Hwa's face was a mask of disbelief. 'How&? Why?' That would answer a great many things.

'I don't know, but the men I sent to deal with the Englishwoman identified him from a photo as the man who stopped them. He's going behind my back over this box thing, and now he's covertly interfering in my execution of his own orders. Why would he do that? I can only think of one reason - he doesn't trust me. He wants rid of me, and he's putting my replacements in place.'

'I can't believe that.'

'You better damn believe it; we came up together. If he's got it in for me, then he'll also have it in for you. We're of equal rank. If he gets rid of one of us, he must get rid of both. That's why I can trust you enough to talk about this. We're in it together.'

'Maybe he just changed his mind about the girl?'

Tse Hung scowled. "Then he's weak as well.'

Yue Hwa took a few moments to sip his drink. 'What are you suggesting? That we go up against him? Turn him in? Chop him?'

'I haven't decided yet. But we've got to do something.' He looked Yue Hwa in the eye. 'And soon.'

Chapter Eleven Seeking Here. Seeking There&

There was a slight fizzing sound from somewhere high above and a bird fell, stunned, into the undergrowth.

Major Russell Barry looked closer, and saw that although the lower and middle branches of the trees were waving gently in the breeze, the very top branches were splayed out and still. They looked as if they were either pressed against something or trapped in glass.

Barry hated the jungle; it shows in all the files and reports about this particular mission. He hated most countryside. It was one thing to engage in

urban warfare, where you only had to worry about the enemy, but quite another to have to watch out for wild animals and snakes or whatever as well. As far as he was concerned, the outdoors was for camping and fishing, not for warfare.

Maybe he just felt out of sorts because he knew so little about the area he was leading his team into. The trees were thinning out, the ground was beginning to slope into a wide depression. He still couldn't see what was more than a couple of hundred yards ahead, and raised a hand to halt the group's march. They were quite close to where the bird had fallen.

Tranh scooped up a stone and threw it on ahead. Its flight was curtailed abruptly and it fell to the ground. He looked nervous. Barry clapped a hand on his shoulder, half-expecting the guide to start complaining about magic or sorcery. 'All right, this is as far as we go for now.'

Captain Clark signalled to the others to rest. 'Palmer, get your gear set up.' The group obeyed and Palmer brought out a laptop and a small receiving dish. 'What was that with the stone?' Clark asked.

'Magic?' Tranh asked.

'Some kind of force field,' Barry corrected him.

'You've heard of Clarke's Law?' Tranh asked. 'I can call it magic if I want to.' Barry didn't trust himself to reply.

Instead, he pointed to the depression ahead, a natural bowl. 'That's our objective,' he said. He didn't sound too enamoured of it. 'We've got a few aerial and satellite photos, but&'

The group gathered round, looking at the reconnaissance photos he was spreading out. All of them - even the images from satellites that should be able to read a newspaper from orbit - showed a blurred circular area about five miles across. There was no way to tell what should be there.

Barry liked a challenge all right, but this one just made him too nervous. No clear satellite photos, no intelligence reports from inside the target area, no way to overfly it& It was stupid to try and mount an operation with no information about either the opposition or the location, but what else could he do?

All things considered, he would most definitely rather be fishing in the creek near his home. 'As you can see, we've no idea what's in there.'

'What do we know?' Clark asked.

Barry tossed the photos aside. 'We know that these UFOs have been commuting between this masked zone and Hong Kong. We know they're the only things that can get into the zone. We know they've tried to abduct at least one person in Hong Kong and that they've got contacts with the Triads, and we know their traffic is increasing as the handover of Hong Kong to China approaches. It seems reasonable to assume they're ferrying something, but we don't know what or in which direction.'

'Could this have anything to do with the handover?'

'It'd be a hell of a coincidence otherwise. We don't know for sure, but for safety's sake, it's best if we assume some disruption of the handover is intended.' He moved over to where Palmer was looking over her electronic gear.

'Jules.'

Palmer nodded, switching on her laptop computer. In a moment, she had brought up a series of waveforms. "These are the signals recorded so far. As you can see they're all different, but as far as we can tell from the radar traffic, they only have two ships.'

"Then the pattern's a code that's changed daily, not a ship ID transponder code.'

'It looks that way.' She brought up another waveform and enlarged its window. 'I've had the computer look for any pattern in the changes from day to day. There does seem to be a progression and, if correct, this will be the next code.'

Barry grinned; she was great. 'Then it looks like we wait.'

light always crept into a young bachelor's living space, as if it was afraid of what it might step in. With the rest of his family out, Yi Chung's apartment was equally intimidating to the chink of light that spilled in from the hall when Sarah jimmed the lock and pushed the door open.

She wasn't comfortable with this kind of criminality - at least not in a person's space, it would be different if it was a corporate building - but sometimes these things had to be done. Sneaking into places - she refused to think of it as breaking and entering - wasn't the kind of thing to mention as a source of information in an article. It was more the sort of thing that would come out much later, when one couldn't be taken to task for it but needed to seek understanding and forgiveness. Conscience was a bug-bear, but also a good friend.

Someone had killed Yi Chung, and she couldn't help thinking it might have been because of his contact with her. Or possibly he was killed as a precursor to killing her. Either way, there was safety in finding out who did it and why. That meant finding out more about him, and that in turn meant sneaking in. It was a hideous Nancy Drew kind of phrase, but it made what she was doing a lot more bearable.

The apartment wasn't that different from any western inner-city flat, except that it didn't have garish 1970s wallpaper and the food in the kitchen was very different.

It was drawers that interested Sarah. Drawers were where most people kept documents like letters and pay slips, and were where she was most likely to find out where Yi Chung had worked.

She had a suspicion that she already knew, but had no way to be certain. More accurately, she had no other way to be certain.

It didn't take long to find the relevant papers: a wage slip from the Pimms Import-Export Company (Kwai Chung). She wondered what the bracketed words meant, but had no time to ponder them here. The word Pimms was all she needed to know. Directly or indirectly Yi Chung worked for the Doctor - if it was really the Doctor. And that meant the Doctor was involved, however distantly, in his death.

Tse Hung was in two minds as to how this meeting might go. Normally he knew at the start of the day what sort of mood he'd be in, but some days he just winged it. At least, so he told himself. Usually this indecision masked waiting for a justification to be in a bad mood. Something usually came along

when he was like this.

Just in case, he had borrowed a small car from the company's pool of stolen cars, and parked a couple of streets down from his destination.

As he crossed the road to the Club Shanghai, someone slammed into him, but he managed to stay on his feet. It was a kid, running full tilt from an angry shopkeeper.

The kid looked pissed off rather than scared. He tried to punch Tse Hung, but got a backhanded cuff for his trouble. The attempt gave the shopkeeper time to reach them. 'Thanks,' he said. 'This little bastard just grabbed a handful of CDs.'

'Hand them back,' Tse Hung told the kid. Trapped between two adults, and with his pride stung as much as his face, the thief obeyed. 'You shouldn't steal - you'll end up in jail.'

'So?' The boy broke free from Tse Hung's grip and ran.

For a moment Tse Hung felt dislocated in time, remembering a uniformed cop telling him much the same thing twenty years ago. The cop had lectured him that crime did not pay, and Tse Hung used to laugh at this when he remembered it.

He didn't laugh so much now. Not because he thought what the cop had said was true, but because what crime had paid him he had had to earn, with as much hard work as if he had stayed on the straight and narrow.

In fact, if anything, it took more effort to maintain his criminal lifestyle these days. It wasn't just making the money, but staying ahead of competitors, cops and ambitious underlings. If he knew how to be anything else, he would have retired a decade ago and gone into legitimate business.

The Pimms world of steel and glass was a long way from his father's herbal surgery, and not just as the crow flies.

Yue Hwa couldn't imagine the sons - or daughters - of Pimms employees enjoying their school holidays in the office car park, or ogling the filing cabinets. He had spent many happy summers being amazed by the mysteries of his father's shelves. They had been full of little bags of spices and powders, and topped with dusty jars containing & containing things he probably could never have identified.

It would have been nice to have followed in his father's foot-steps, but university had got in the way and then Tiananmen changed the direction of his life for ever. After that day, he knew what he wanted - no, had - to do.

Sometimes, though, he still envisioned himself back in that little village shop.

He knocked on the door of the Doctor's office suite, hoping he was in. The TARDIS was in the stone garden, so he probably was. 'Come in,' came a cheerful call.

Yue Hwa entered to find the Doctor and Chiu skimming through some map sheets. 'I just wanted to ask how it went last night.'

The Doctor looked up, then to Chiu and back to Yue Hwa. 'It went well.'

Tse Hung couldn't believe the guy who was stealing Bonnie away from him: a merchant banker. At least she was maintaining her taste in wealthy men, but the man was a computer nerd, probably happier playing on an N64 than in a smoky mah-jong game with good hard cash at stake.

Tse Hung refused to think of him as a man at all, in fact. He was a boy with more money than sense. Tse Hung downed another shot of whisky and reminded himself that some of that money would now be his. He shouldn't even be having these feelings; he was simply going to transfer a capital investment to another owner.

Feelings implied love, and if he was going to fall in love it wouldn't be with a hooker he had bought. His mother would spin in her grave if ever something like that happened. And his father would probably disown him and refuse to let him visit again.

And yet&

The man saw him, and recognised Tse Hung's interest. That meant it was time to introduce himself. 'You have the money?' he asked.

'Yes.' The guy could barely disguise his sneer. He probably had some moral objection to paying for sex, or love, or whatever. Tse Hung sympathised entirely, but had no moral objection to selling anything. He was just a businessman who met demand. 'Here's your blood money.' The man tossed a thick envelope on to the table between them.

'This is just business,' Tse Hung pointed out.

'Not to me. But if this is what it takes to get her away from the likes of you'

Tse Hung laughed. "The likes of me?" His laughter faded, along with his good mood. 'Is that why you want her? Just to take what was once mine? I suppose that's a form of flattery.'

"Then I didn't make myself clear.'

Tse Hung sighed, and punched the guy off his chair. He wasn't sure whether he was defending Bonnie's honour, or his own, or just letting off steam from conflicting emotions. Either way, it felt good, and he could almost see Pendragon being the one bleeding on the floor.

'Jealous?' the man asked.

Tse Hung kicked him in the groin, then realised that, yes, he was. To his surprise, he would miss Bonnie. A lot. He had other mis-tresses, but it just wasn't the same with them, and would be even less so now. But the deal was done and she certainly wouldn't have any more to do with him. 'Mistreat her and I will have you killed.'

Without waiting for an answer, Tse Hung turned and walked out of both the club and Bonnie's life.

'Do you know exactly where this refers to?' Sarah passed the pay-slip she had stolen from Yi Chung's apartment across to Colonel Tsang. She had dropped in on the covert UNIT building without warning, thinking that if they were interested in her presence they might at least have something to offer.

'Of course; Pimms are a shipping company. They own a whole patch of Kwai Chung

container port. This slip suggests the owner worked there.'

Sarah nodded. 'If anyone was smuggling anything through Hong Kong, that'd be a good transfer point, wouldn't it?'

'I'd say so.'

'I think that might make an interesting angle for my next story about concerns leading up to the handover. I mean, policing and the way the container terminal is run must be something that might be looked at by a new government.' She smiled, she hoped endearingly.

'Miss Smith,' Tsang replied, 'I've been gardening during all my off-duty time since I joined up. I know horse shit when I smell it. We're all on the same team here; if you have something to ask, just ask it'

'Then&' Sarah became more serious, and more earnest. 'Could you arrange with the port authority for me to look around, and get a feel for the place?'

Tsang smiled slowly. 'I think some help in various ways could be arranged.' The colonel led Sarah through the converted office block and into a central courtyard that served as the station's car pool. There was a large Mercedes sedan, and some chunky four-wheel-drive types, but most of the cars were thoroughly innocuous little two-door hatchbacks.

'We can't exactly put you on a retainer, of course,' Tsang was saying, 'but if you need a car while you're in Hong Kong, just help yourself.'

Sarah was flattered, but also suspicious. No doubt all the cars had some kind of beacon fitted so that they could be tracked at all times. If this was the Brigadier, back at UNIT-UK, she wouldn't have any problem with that, but it wasn't.

'Thank you, Colonel, but& if we were out in the countryside, I'd accept, but here in the city, the public transport is good enough for me not to need it.'

Tsang accepted the decision gracefully. 'Of course. I just wouldn't feel like a good host if I didn't make the offer.'

'Oh don't worry - you're treating me well. In fact I almost feel at home, UNIT-wise, if you see what I mean.'

Tsang nodded with a smile. 'It's UNIT-SEA's pleasure to co-operate with members of other UNIT -'

'Colonel Tsang?' Nomura was calling her from the corridor.

'Yes, Lieutenant?' She moved towards him, a couple of steps from Sarah.

Nomura kept his voice low and private, but Sarah could still make him out. 'It's the Cortez Project, a conference call. They'll need your input.'

Tsang breathed slowly, and glanced back at Sarah. 'All right. See to Miss Smith - give her whatever assistance she requires.' She took a half-step back to Sarah. 'I hope you'll forgive my rudeness, but I have to go now. Lieutenant Nomura will see that you're sorted out with anything you need.'

'I understand,' Sarah told her. Inside, her curiosity had been piqued.

Barry could feel it making the hairs on his neck twitch. It was like the

thickening air that preceded a thunderstorm, only more so. The treetops rustled, disturbed by something passing close to them.

Then a wide swathe of the sky rippled and a polished steel disc, maybe forty feet across, was hovering there.

It remained for a moment, silent and stationary, then resumed its flight, descending towards somewhere beyond the trees. Barry ignored it and instead knelt beside Palmer. 'Did you get it?'

She nodded, indicating the laptop. A new waveform was making its way across the screen as the software decoded it. It was identical to the prediction the machine had made earlier. 'You're good,' he told her.

'You said that last night as well.'

'You were good then too.' He glanced around, making sure no one else had heard that. 'Can you give us another prediction?'

'Absolutely' In a second, a new waveform slid on screen. "There we go.'

He handed her the metal box that had been belatedly delivered to him. 'Program this transponder with that sequence. We're going in.'

Chapter Twelve Proof Denies Faith

Kwai Chung container terminal is the largest in the world. The expanse of freight containers is as large and mechanistic as a decent-sized new town. Containers of myriad different colours are piled several storeys high in batches that cover the floor space of city blocks. Streets run between large batches, and alleys further subdivide them. You could probably house all Britain's homeless in the place, with plenty of room left over.

The port authority's press spokesman had driven Sarah around it, explaining how the place worked and reeling off statistics like a professor of mathematics. Much of the information had been dull, much had been interesting, and Sarah had taken enough notes to write a genuine article. She was pleased with that; a little extra income never hurt.

When they got back to the gatehouse complex and offices, Sarah was glad to stretch her legs. She put on her best doe-eyed smile. 'Look, you've been awfully helpful, and I know I've got enough material for a good story, but'

'If there's anything else I can do for you' the spokesman offered magnanimously. Like most Chinese officials, he obviously took the view that giving people what they wanted gained him face.

'Well, it might be a little naughty, but do you think I could have a walk round? Just to really appreciate the scale of the place.'

The spokesman hesitated. 'I'm not sure. Obviously this is a customs area and security is very important'

'I can hardly steal anything with this' She indicated her small handbag 'and it would be very good publicity for you.'

'Well'

'Oh, thanks ever so much,' she grinned disarmingly. 'I'll be very careful.' Then she hurried round the nearest corner before he could refuse. There were

no sounds of pursuit so she thought that he was probably in favour of allowing her to walk. She was also sure he'd have someone follow her to keep an eye on her, but didn't mind. She appreciated the necessity of maintaining security in a customs area, and had no intention of breaking any laws.

Which wasn't to say breaking the law might not become necessary anyway. She took a folded paper from her handbag. It was a crude map, drawn by one of Tsang's people, indicating the location of the Pimms area of the terminal. Orienting herself almost instantly, she started walking in earnest.

Music of a sort was in the air as the flight surgeon entered Chiu's workspace. The sound was a passable, if flat, impression of a vocal harmony. Chiu made an adjustment on his clipboard, and the sound changed slightly. "The computer can never quite generate the equivalent quality of a live vocal performance," the flight surgeon whispered. "But it is enough to know when a composition is working."

Chiu nodded and switched off the sound. "Do you compose, when you're off duty?" he asked.

"No. I sculpt, for preference. But I have not been off duty since -"

"I know. As ranking officer of this expedition, I have been neglecting my duties."

"In what way?" As far as the flight surgeon could tell Chiu had been an exemplary leader, making sure everything was done as efficiently and effectively as possible.

"I have overlooked the element of motivation. Morale. Off-duty periods are as important as on-duty ones. Without them, we cannot refresh our minds. I'll be issuing a new duty schedule to take that into account."

"As you command." The flight surgeon paused. "I came to report that the new subjects are ready for determination."

"Good." Chiu stood. He wasn't tall, but he almost towered over his delicate companion. "Let us begin."

There was a strange sound in the air; it made Kurt feel sad, yet cleansed. Strangely, it reminded him of a Clannad song his girl-friend liked.

He had no idea how long it had been since he was taken from the hiking trail. He had no idea how long it had taken him to remember his own name. All Kurt knew was that someone was examining him.

Perhaps he'd been injured? Attacked by an animal?

Kurt couldn't quite see the people who were examining him. He wasn't even sure they were people. They moved too silently and delicately to be human. The half of him that wanted to see who they were was having a drawn-out duel with the half that didn't want to know. There was a stuck record in his head, repeating the same notes of fear over and over again.

Kurt tried to shake the things off; it felt like there were two of them trying to roll him over. He caught a glimpse of Danny, under attack from another two at least. Danny was screaming too, and Kurt felt horrified, enraged and sick that he couldn't reach Danny to help him.

Something tore on his back, and there was a touch of hideously smooth fingers,

like cool, dry worms, then an icy pain. The things still didn't let go; instead, their hands quickly disappeared into the "wounds they had made, softening and merging with Kurt's ribs and spine. There, the bone shifted and fused with the new material, changing into something utterly different.

He couldn't exactly feel this physically but he could see the same thing happening to Danny, and worked out that it was happening to him too. There wasn't what would ordinarily be called pain, but there was enough of a disturbing sensation of unnatural movement to make him screech. Then it was gone, the strange sensation faded to a dull buzzing in his back and the wounds sealed up with a faint pop.

Kurt lay, shuddering, for several minutes, trying to work out whether what had just happened had actually happened, and, if so, what he was supposed to do about it.

He got up, though he hadn't consciously intended to do so, and then he and Danny were walking. They looked at each other, but found they couldn't talk. Then Kurt tried to stop walking, and couldn't.

The worst thing was he couldn't even scream now. He tried and tried but all he could do was&

Gasped for breath. The ceiling of their hostel bedroom in Ban Lung stared back at Kurt and Danny. A cockroach in the corner seemed to be mocking them for falling for a practical joke that would never have fooled anyone with its intellect.

Kurt tried to feel his back, searching for wounds. There was nothing, of course, and as the nightmare faded he quickly forgot why he had woken in terror.

The jungle is neutral, it was once said. Major Barry had never believed that. Neutrality meant not getting involved, but the jungle opened new fronts against all who would fight within range of its actions.

It was noisy, secretive and brutal. There was good reason why bad situations were described as 'a jungle out there'. It was all threat with none of the peace of the desert, the imposing aloofness of the mountains.

Barry couldn't objectively say why he felt this way about the jungle, and he would certainly never let his feelings interfere with the mission, but it was something that constantly gnawed at him. And he resented the fact that it could make him appear weak in front of others.

If it had been up to him, he'd have raced cars for a living and bought a good fishing boat from the profits. But, after he had raced a few cars that didn't belong to him, a judge who knew his father had given him a choice: join the cops, the military or the convict population. Most of the time, Barry felt he had made the right decision, but out here he wished he could change his mind.

It didn't matter too much, though; he knew that in a day or two he'd be back in Hong Kong, proud of having completed a mission - or maybe he'd be dead. Either way, the jungle wouldn't be bothering him any more.

'Jungle' was itself something of a misnomer here. There was humid rainforest, yes, but there was also lots of brush and meadow in the valleys. People built settlements there - farming villages, trading posts, terrorist training camps, whatever.

When you saw the shapes of buildings, you never knew which kind of settlement you had found, so you had to be careful. With that in mind, Barry slowed his group as the thatched roofs of a few wooden huts came into sight.

They watched the buildings through binoculars. It all looked harmless enough: a hill tribe village with a couple of modern concrete blockhouses attached. A sole Coca-Cola sign was the only hint that the place belonged to the twentieth century.

There was, strangely, no sign of life. Normally there would be a few people out in the small fields, and maybe a child crying, but here there was only stillness.

'You know this place?' Barry asked Tranh.

Tranh nodded. 'It is a farming village. Poor, but not starving.' He looked and sounded distracted. 'I've never seen it this empty.'

'Why would it be this empty?'

Tranh shook his head, his expression showed he was clearly baffled. 'I do not know. They should be here.'

Barry grimaced. He didn't like this at all. Some members of UNIT-US he'd met had been in Vietnam and spoken of places like this. They were always traps. He reminded himself that they weren't in Vietnam, and that the war had been over for a quarter of a century. 'OK, we'll go in and take a look round. Keep 'em peeled, but no firing unless fired upon. Everybody got that?' There was a chorus of muffled agreements. 'Let's go.'

The Pimms company's containers covered an area the size of a large railway station. They were quite plain, with the company name and no logo. Sarah found that unusual - most companies liked to draw attention to themselves with a logo. It was as if these containers were meant to be inconspicuous.

Sarah examined the doors of the nearest container. At first she thought they were locked, but the bolts and locks were in fact moulded into the metal body. These doors could never be opened, and that was a puzzle to her. What good was a container that you couldn't load or unload? Stranger still, all the containers were like that. It was paradoxical. Unless, she thought, the containers weren't supposed to move. So many of them welded together would form quite a large building.

To her surprise a padlock was facing her, and she stopped. There was a door after all. It didn't take long for her to pick the lock and slip inside. The interior was that of a simple cargo container, but the far end had no wall. Instead, it opened on to another container, then another.

Her heart thudding in her chest, fearful of discovery, Sarah was happier than she had been for days. There was terror and caution, guilt and curiosity; the magical sensation of doing something illicit.

There was nothing wrong with getting the job done to pay the bills, but striking out on a new exploration was always better. Ever since she had been a child, the thing Sarah enjoyed most in life was poking her nose into the darkest hidden corners, to make sense of why they were hidden away.

From the third container there were openings to left and right, into areas piled high with crates. Sarah, drawn by that insatiable need to know, went into the left-hand area. She tentatively tried to move the nearest crate. She

could, but it was heavy.

Terrified that someone would walk in on her at any moment, Sarah still never thought of leaving. She looked around until she found a crowbar and then attacked the nearest crate. It wasn't easy to be strong and silent but, somehow, she was managing it.

The crate she had opened appeared to be full of toy cars; not exactly the stuff criminal empires were made of, though they could be unsafe fakes. She wanted to dig deeper, and started to do so literally. The toys were on a pallet which she could lift up. Underneath were compact machine guns which consisted of lots of little curves crammed onto the front of a large stock - a type she didn't recognise.

Another crate proved to be full of Kalashnikovs, while another was stocked with various kinds of pistol. She was undoubtedly standing beside tens or even hundreds of thousands of pounds worth of arms that were being smuggled either into or out of the country. Digging her camera out of her bag, she took some snaps of these illicit goods before putting the lids back on the crates.

There was a sound of clanking and footsteps approaching. Suddenly recognising the trap she was caught in, Sarah hunkered down behind the crates as the footsteps passed by. The buzz of an alarm suggested it was time to leave, but when she reached the door of the first container she discovered it had been locked again - and the padlock was outside.

Not letting herself regret being where she was, she noticed a chink of light deeper in the steel complex. It proved to be a gap between two containers, presumably for ventilation, which led to a small enclosed space under open sky. Fortunately there was junk on the ground and she could use it to try climbing up through the gap.

But there wasn't enough. She couldn't get quite far enough, and couldn't pull herself up on to the container roof. She might have no choice but to give herself up and hope to bluff her way out.

Then a hand appeared over the edge, dark-skinned and offering salvation. Sarah took it, not particularly caring whose it was, and allowed herself to be pulled up.

'If I had less taste, I could make some comment about how we must stop meeting like this.' At first Sarah couldn't place the face, but then she remembered the fuss at Bangkok airport.

'Tom?'

'The one and only.' He smiled.

'What are you doing here?'

'Saving your ass. Again.' There was no rancour in his tone, and Sarah could almost hear him thinking about the quality of her ass and whether it was worth saving.

'Thanks, then,' she said weakly, unsure how she was supposed to respond.

'That's OK. What are you doing sneaking around here, anyway?'

'I don't have to justify myself to you,' Sarah said defensively. Having said this, it felt to her as if they were old spouses squabbling. She had only met

him once before, but already their lives were dovetailing in a way that made her feel like they'd known each other for years.

It was an entirely false notion, probably derived from the nostalgic feeling of being in danger while partnered with a man, but it was strangely enjoyable. And she did like his smile. 'I'm trying to gather information on a murdered man, who used to work here.'

'Yi Chung?' he asked. As she frowned, he added 'I watch the TV news when I'm not saving women from a fate worse than death.' Sarah wasn't convinced for a moment.

'Look,' she told him, 'I am grateful for you pulling me up here, but you really should get out now. You could be in danger if you stay.'

'I believe that really should be my line.'

'Welcome to the 1990s.' A deep series of vibrations and clangs precluded further conversation. Both of them were too busy staring at the centre of the Pimms container group.

The roofs of several containers slid aside, like that of a secret base in a Bond movie. Through the gap, Sarah could see a wide concrete floor and overall-garbed men. It was like a hangar rather than the interiors or contents of half-a-dozen steel containers, and she found herself listening out for the beat of helicopter rotors.

She was so absorbed in listening that she barely noticed the thickening of the air around her. It was like the onset of a massive lightning strike, but there was no sign of clouds in the sky. It passed, making her hair stand on end, and then the pseudo-hangar below was suddenly full.

A solid disc of shining metal, the size of a Learjet, had shimmered into visibility a few feet above the floor, and settled on landing gear that Sarah couldn't see. 'Holy & what the hell is that?' Tom whispered.

'A flying saucer.' Sarah hoped he would shut up and let her concentrate on getting some good shots of this.

Aliens?'

Sarah paused. There was something in the way Tom said the word that tripped alarm bells in her head. It wasn't incredulous or scornful, or eager and amazed. He had sounded very matter-of-fact. Almost knowledgeable, in fact.

'Very likely,' she said finally. 'But I don't recognise the ship.'

That got him. 'What?'

'Let's just say I've seen some very strange things in my time.' She raised the camera to her eye as the Doctor walked into view ahead of a fork-lift laden with crates. 'There he is &'

A doorway irised open on the side of the ship, and a short ramp descended. A strange man emerged, Chinese but blonde, with startlingly violet eyes more epicanthic than was natural.

'Mr Chiu,' the Doctor greeted him. 'How was your flight?'

'You have flown in one of our skiffs before, have you not?'

'Once or twice, a long time ago.'

'Well, it was like that.'

The Triad men hefted the crates of machine guns Sarah had seen earlier, and began taking them into the ship. Another pair had brought out a crate filled with tightly wrapped white bundles. Through the viewfinder of Sarah's camera, they looked too much like packages of drugs to be anything else. 'Buy drugs with guns, or guns with drugs,' she said. 'It's a simple enough equation; payment in kind.' Sarah nodded. She'd seen it in half the countries of the world. 'Except for one thing: why would a race who can build a ship like that want something as simple as machine guns? Surely they'd have disruptors, or particle beams or kinetic-energy weapons.'

'Maybe they're collectors.' She glared at him. 'I mean it,' Tom went on. 'People nowadays collect firearms from the Old West or World War Two. Maybe this is the same thing.'

If you really believe that, there's a bridge in London I'd like to sell you.'

In the nearest corner, directly below Sarah and Tom, the Doctor was peering through a microscope. He occasionally paused to consult a detailed CGI display of a molecular structure in a small globe that hovered by his side. 'Excellent,' he said to Chiu. 'Precisely according to specifications, and fairly indistinguishable from normal purity unless you absolutely know what you're looking for.'

'It was nothing. A simple diagnostic test for our processing techniques.'

'If we weren't working together, that'd worry me greatly' 'But we are working together, so there is no need to fear.' Once the Triad men had carried the drugs out of sight, the Doctor gave Chiu a smile. 'Well done. I have to admit I'm no actor, but these performances are going rather well.' 'Are they necessary?'

'They are if we're to keep everything in balance.' 'These humans are frivolous and unpredictable. That makes them unreliable, and makes it inefficient to waste time and effort on them. We have more pressing practical concerns. You have not yet completed your side of the bargain, and are behind schedule.'

'These things take time,' the Doctor snapped. 'Even for a Time Lord, things can take time.'

'Time we may not have. We have already detected blue-shifted gravitational anomalies. If those are wave fronts, then we have little time if things are to be completed the way we intended. The Gallifreyan technology you are supplying will make the difference. One way or the other.'

The Doctor turned away crossly. 'Even Gallifreyan technology has its limits. It still needs to be maintained, charged, taken care of and looked after. It's very finicky if it doesn't like the treatment it gets.'

Sarah could hardly believe her ears: the Doctor trading in drugs and guns, giving technology to aliens? Could someone change so much, even over several lifetimes? Below, the saucer was begin-ning to hum, and faded from sight. She could, however, feel the displacement of the air as it rose past her face.

Chiu suddenly looked upwards. 'We have visitors. The human female, Smith, and a male.'

For a moment, Chiu's eyes locked on to Sarah's, and it felt as if he were grabbing at her soul. Then alarms started ringing and Chiu raised a transparent weapon.

Sarah pulled Tom away an instant before the edge of the container dissolved in a molten spray. 'Time to go.' They ran, taking care not to fall off the container roofs. Sarah soon found it painful going. She was getting too old for this, and regretted having to learn that fact the hard way.

The Doctor pushed Chiu's disruptor aside and turned the alarm off. 'Let her go,' he called to the 49s who were milling around with cleavers and pistols. 'If you kill her, people will know she found something here anyway' Chiu put away his disruptor. 'Allowing the human female to leave is a tactical error. She should be eliminated, or at least be taken to the plantation for processing.'

'No,' the Doctor snapped.

Chiu regarded him carefully. 'You seem keen for her to live. That is understandable. But what harm can there be in processing her?'

'The human brain is a complex and delicate -'

"There should be no secrets or lies between allies, Time Lord. What else is a team based on but mutual trust and respect?' Chiu paused. 'More likely, you are concerned that we would gain access to memories of your actions that you don't wish us to have. We have noticed you are efficient at protecting your own secrets. It's an admirable ability, therefore we offer you the option of terminating her. That way, both our secrets remain safe.'

'She may be a lead to the transponder,' the Doctor pointed out. 'If she's dead, or loses her memory of it, we might never get it back.'

Chiu followed him into the next section of the container building. 'The threat she presents outweighs any potential value she has. If she reveals our presence and operations to the authorities, the loss of a single transponder would be meaningless by comparison to the security breach that would cause. She is a clear and present danger to the security of my people and to this organisation.'

'I can deal with her,' the Doctor snarled. Even Chiu hesitated at his voice.

'If she reveals what she has seen here, all our plans will have been for nothing. That threat must be eliminated immediately'

'I agree. But, my militaristic friend, there are other ways to silence people than resorting to violence. "Poets can but warn, therefore a true poet must be truthful".'

'One of your leaders?'

'Wilfred Owen. A poet in this planet's First World War. Her voice as a reporter is her only weapon against us; if we ensure that no one will ever listen to that voice, she can't harm us. It's a typical

Triad strategy which works against the police, so there's no reason why it shouldn't be equally effective here.' 'That would not guarantee that she cannot talk.' 'No, but it guarantees that no one will act upon her words if she does.' Chiu considered this. 'Very well, but we will be monitoring the

situation at all times. If your tactics fail, we will kill her.'

Chapter Thirteen Lost Gleaming

Tom had a car waiting, of course. Sarah wasn't surprised to see that it was a sporty convertible. He seemed like the type of man who'd go for that sort of thing. In a few minutes, they were putting safe distance between themselves and Kwai Chung.

'That was an impressive rescue in Thailand,' Sarah said when she'd got her breath back. 'I was sure I was dead.'

'We all have our hobbies.'

'And what's yours? Navy SEAL?'

He laughed. 'Actually I came to Hong Kong to try to find work as a stuntman.'

'Oh, I see.' Sarah nodded with an exaggerated look of understanding. 'And it was just my good luck that you were there with handy skills.'

'Something like that.' They both knew he was talking nonsense, but somehow it didn't matter to Sarah. It just seemed right for him.

'You don't work for UNIT - Tsang was surprised to find me here. American & CIA?'

He shook his head. 'I'd like to think I have better ability and more taste.'

'DEA then.' It seemed reasonable; the path he had followed was characterised by a drug trail.

'Guilty as charged.'

She mulled that over. It wasn't entirely surprising, given all that had happened lately. To have the strangest feeling that our meeting wasn't a coincidence.'

'Well & no,' he admitted.

'I supposed it's obvious you've been following me, but & on orders, or out of interest?'

'Some of both. I was sent to see what sort of hornet's nest you stirred up, and to protect you from getting stung in the process.'

'Why is the Drug Enforcement Administration interested in me?' She hesitated. 'Or perhaps I should be asking, why are the DEA interested in this trip I'm making? Or have you been following me for years?'

Tom shook his head. 'Just this tour. We knew that your itinerary took you to the Pimms Import-Export Company and, knowing that investigative journalists are nosy by definition.

'You hoped I'd find a way to discover a few things you couldn't?'

'Well, if I rolled up and said, "DEA, can I have an interview and a tour?" I doubt I'd have got very far, especially outside my jurisdiction.' He pulled up at the Mandarin Oriental hotel. 'We have a suite here; a safe house, if you like.'

'Suite' was an understatement - Tom and his group had taken over a whole wing of one floor. He took her to a plush room. "This room's spare. You can have it; the Tao Te Lung have already tried your old hotel room, so I wouldn't advise going back there. We'll send someone for your luggage.'

'Whatever you say.' Sarah was too tired, and trying too hard to understand what had happened to the Doctor, to want to argue. She suspected she might have a few choice words with Tom later, though; she didn't like being followed around.

She kicked off her shoes and collapsed back into a chair. 'What a relief,' she said with feeling. Tom knelt beside her, and took hold of a foot to massage. Sarah grinned and stretched like a cat. "That's helping. Are you a professional or is it just a fetish?'

'I used to be a bit of an athlete at college. Believe me, I know exactly how much every muscle in the human body can hurt, and a few things about how to try to stop the pain. But in your case I'll kiss it better if you think it'll help.'

'Right now, I feel as if only a regeneration would help&'

'A what?'

She shook her head. 'Nothing. Never mind. Whatever you're doing, it's helping.'

"That's what I'm here for.'

'To help me?' That seemed unlikely. It was probably more the other way round.

'Well, to make sure you don't get yourself killed, or worse.'

Sarah merely smiled, and dozed off as the stress of the day feded.

The reports filed with Singapore HQ had all said the village was truly deserted, and there was only a faint breeze, passing along the streets or making use of the doors. Clark shivered despite the heat; she could imagine too many horrors waiting for them, all based on her favourite Manga cartoons. Sometimes an imagination was a bloody nuisance.

The silence was the worst. Normally the countryside in South-East Asia was alive with the sounds of unseen animals and exotic birds, but here, the air was utterly dead. The cooking fires were cold and grey, unused for some time but recent enough for the ashes to look like ashes. Clark didn't understand it at all.

The troop had split up somewhat, pairs investigating each building. They had confirmed the village's lack of population and were now gathered in the largest home.

'Anything?' Major Barry asked.

'It's like a ghost town in a theme park. There's nothing here at all.'

'Tranh said it was occupied recently&' Barry looked around and Clark realised she didn't see Tranh either. 'Where is Tranh?' Everyone exchanged puzzled glances.

Barry exited the house, Clark falling into step beside him. They could now see Tranh's back. He was standing alone just inside the tree line. 'Of all the times for the guy to need to take a leak&'

Tranh didn't turn as they approached, and Clark could see that his hands were hanging by his sides, which put paid to Barry's theory. She began to get an uncomfortable feeling of dread as they neared him. She had no idea why, but she instinctively knew that things were about to go awry.

Her intuition seemed to be correct. Tranh was standing, staring unseeingly ahead and whispering in some tongue Clark couldn't quite make out. It wasn't the local lingo, though, of that she was certain. 'Tranh!' Barry snapped, without effect.

Barry and Clark took turns waving their hands in front of Tranh's eyes. He didn't react. However, when he finished whispering, he suddenly jumped, as if they had materialised in front of him. 'Major, Captain& what are you doing here?'

'What are you doing here?' Barry shot back at him. 'And who were you talking to?'

'Talking?'

'Whispering,' Clark corrected.

'He must have a wire, and maybe a throat mike,' Barry said, in a tone that suggested he wished he had searched the guy every morning to be sure he was trustworthy. For once his paranoia looked to Clark like being right. He started to frisk Tranh.

'If you weren't talking, what were you doing?' Clark asked the guide.

Tranh didn't look too sure of the answer. 'I was remembering. In a dream.'

'A dream, right,' Barry echoed sceptically. 'No wire. Damn. So, what was so important for you to remember?'

'The war. I remember the bombing. Especially when I dream& I remember the noise, and the screams. I remember running as the ground shakes, but I fall, and cannot get away. I look up to the sky, looking for American planes. But the sun is blue, the sky is blood-red and the clouds and smoke are as black as charred meat.

'Then shining steel descends to the treetops, filling the sky from horizon to horizon, and when I look to the side there are other silver knives cutting through the burning sky. The air buzzes, and it feels as if the world is about to be crushed underfoot. The earth shakes, and turns to water, and suddenly I am falling into the darkness&

'Then I wake up, and& I know that the American bombing did not happen that way. I know that nothing like that has happened to me. But I know it is too real not to be true.'

Barry didn't reply to that. Instead he took Captain Clark a few steps away. 'What do you think?'

'The Golden Triangle isn't exactly a million miles from here. I think he's out of his skuE.' She looked back at the guide. 'Then again, "silver knives" in the sky& I suppose he could mean some kind of alien ship.' She sounded embarrassed

even to suggest it, though both of them had been on secondment to UNIT long enough to know that these things did exist.

'Shit.' Barry stepped back to Tranh. 'OK, you were in a dream. Did somebody want you to dream? Make you dream?'

Tranh's face cleared, surprise following understanding across his face like phases of the moon. 'Yes. I think so. There was a voice& I had to tell it my thoughts.'

'Whose voice? And what thoughts?'

'I& I cannot tell you. With no dream, I cannot tell you.'

'No dream?' Barry was incredulous. 'You need to be seeing things to answer questions? Just tell me. We're not going to hold it against you if you've been coerced by this& voice.'

'I can't,' Tranh wailed. I -'

'Look, how hard can it be, ferchrissakes?' Barry demanded. 'Just tell us. If you're worried about somebody hearing& Who the hell's going to tell on you out here?' He shifted his foot, and Clark was suddenly sure he was about to prompt the guide's memory with a kick.

She stepped between the major and Tranh. 'Sir, I know this is important, but maybe you oughtn't to be so hard on the guy. I think maybe he really can't tell us. It looks like he wants to, but something's stopping him. Some kind of brainwashing, maybe.'

Barry turned away, throwing up his hands in disgust. 'Brainwashing? For& What is this, the bloody Manchurian Candidate?'

'Why not?' Clark suggested. 'It wouldn't be the first time. Drugs, post-hypnotic suggestion, parasitic symbiotes& There are plenty of possibilities.'

'Oh, thanks, that's a really cheerful thought.' Barry kicked at a small lizard. It dodged easily. 'I mean, how long has this guy been selling us out? He's our bloody guide, for Christ's sake; he's probably been leading us away from the target for the whole bloody trip.'

If they'd really been off course, the GPS tracker would have shown it. They both knew Barry's comment was just talk, so Clark didn't correct him. Barry turned back towards the guide. 'Dammit, just tell me. You need a voice, try mine.' He glanced at Clark. 'Pentothal.'

Clark hesitated, then handed him a syringe from her first-aid kit. It wasn't standard issue, but questioning in the field was necessary often enough to justify breaking the rules. New and unusual threats demanded new and unusual answers.

Barry shot Tranh up with the Pentothal. 'You're dreaming. This is all one big nightmare and part of it is my questioning you.'

'There was a voice. I had to tell -' Suddenly the guide began to wail. The screams then ended, cut off in a choking rasp and his eyes bulged. Tranh dropped to his knees, his fingers twitching.

'Shit! He's having a seizure or something.' Clark's conscience went into overdrive: Tranh must be having some kind of reaction to the drug. Barry knelt

and grabbed his shoulders. 'How the hell do I bring him out of this?'

'I'm not sure you can. I think it's anaphylactic shock against the Pentothal.' The guide's left hand was clawing at his neck, and his eyes were filled with terror. It looked to Clark like he was a prisoner stuck in a condemned cell, but the cell was his body. Then she noticed that the skin on the guide's neck was starting to redden and blister. 'Look out!' She pulled Barry aside as the guide finally toppled over, engulfed in an infernal red glow.

The glow flared up, spreading in a literal flash as Tranh fell. It was over so quickly that only a few charred bone fragments actually hit the ground, while ash floated gently in the breeze before settling.

The two UNIT officers were stunned, incapable of speaking or doing anything other than grimace at the smell left behind. 'Jesus Christ!' Clark finally exclaimed. 'That wasn't anaphylactic shock!'

'Some kind of self-destruct implant,' Barry told her. 'Probably remote-triggered to keep him from spilling his guts to us.' He was calming down pretty quickly, but then gagged and snorted. 'Bloody hell, that stinks.' He led Clark away from the smouldering remains.

Clark was disgusted, but remained sensible enough to think about how this affected the mission. 'If he's been selling us out all along, shouldn't we abort?'

Barry took a few deep breaths. 'I wish. There's nothing else we can do but go ahead with it.'

Clark didn't think that was a good idea, but wasn't going to press it. Not until her stomach was settled enough to take the stress. 'What do we tell the others about him?' Nobody would be likely to believe the truth, and most of the alternatives would lead to a court martial.

Barry thought for a moment. 'We tell them he ran, and had too much of a head start for us to catch him. That way everybody understands that our cover might be gone, but they won't think we shot the useless bastard and then invented a crazy story about spontaneous combustion to cover our asses.'

Chapter Fourteen Every Silver Lining Has II Cloud

Tom loved the exotic East; that oozed out of every pore and underlined every word he spoke. The way he described it, it's the World of Suzie Wong redux. Hash-scented bars, willing women, tranquil islands and a gun-toting Yellow Peril under every palm tree or congee stall. Either his father told Tom a lot of tall tales when he returned from Vietnam, or he had seen The Man with the Golden Gun a few times too often.

He was enjoying Sarah's company and took her to dinner after her afternoon doze. They ate at the Luk Yu, ignoring the staff as much as the staff ignored them. It was the best dinner in Hong Kong, and everyone played the game perfectly, neither staff nor customers losing face.

Tom had arranged a table with a modicum of privacy, though it wasn't a truly private booth. Nobody could really "overhear conversations against the noise of the patrons anyway. Sarah seemed to have been amused by the photo on Tom's ID. 'I thought passport photos were bad, but&'

Tom grinned. "They've got nothing on government IDs. If I stay with the DEA until retirement, they'll probably still have the same file photo. I imagine

you know the feeling.'

'I don't know what you mean.' She played the game quite well, as he expected. No wonder he liked her.

I mean, civilian liaison to UNIT-UK, and personal attache to their special scientific adviser. Never actually a member of UNIT, but on their reserve list as civilian staff.' By now he sounded as if he was reciting from an official file, as indeed he was. Joined the headquarters staff in 1978, for four years assisting the special scientific adviser known only as "the Doctor". Subsequently returned to investigative journalism, had a couple of sci-fi novels published and occasionally returned to assist UNIT. Stop me if you've heard any of this before.'

'You seem to have done your homework.' She was keeping calm and collected; he was glad they weren't playing poker.

'Unlike certain of my colleagues, I prefer to do my own research rather than rely on what other analysts tell me.'

"Then this isn't simply a date. I didn't think so, somehow.' She attacked the fish on her plate, cutting it up perhaps slightly more enthusiastically than was needed.

'Disappointed?' He could but hope.

'Maybe.'

Tom was glad to hear that. He had no problem keeping business and pleasure separate, but it was nice when one followed the other. "Well, it seems I ought to mend my ways. Actually, I'd hoped to engage your assistance.'

'In what?'

'Your friend the Doctor seems to have got himself into trouble. That was him at Kwai Chung, wasn't it? If it wasn't, then the guy had a twin brother.

'Yes.' Sarah was no longer looking at Tom, but at something in the past. 'But I can't believe he's turned as bad as UNIT think he has. He just isn't that kind of person.'

'All right, all right.' Tom raised his hands slightly in surrender. 'Let's say he's a good man, running some kind of master plan to save the world again. I don't know him, so I guess anything's possible. But either way, he's managed to get himself involved with this Triad. Maybe he's trapped in it, a prisoner. Either way we still need to bring down this smuggling network.'

'And what does that have to do with me?'

'We'd like you to give us information - the Doctor's habits, and especially anything you learned about the set-up at the Pimms Building.'

'So you can arrest him?'

'So we can get him out of trouble.' By whatever means necessary.

"That doesn't sound like why the DEA would send you here.'

'It isn't. I was sent to arrest him.'

'Why the change?'

Tom stared into his glass for a moment, and grinned faintly. He could tell she knew the reason why. But he had to say something in keeping with the game. 'That's classified. I could tell you, but then I'd have to kill you.'

When he and Clark walked back into the village's main building without Tranh, Barry could feel a lot of questioning eyes on him. When you get that sort of reception, you feel guilty, even if you've nothing to be guilty about.

Barry put down his gun and sat on the floor. 'OK,' he began, 'we've lost Tranh.'

'Lost?' Gibson asked.

'He& ah& ran. He got into the trees and disappeared,' Barry heard himself say. Then he saw that everyone was still looking, awaiting an answer, and realised he hadn't spoken aloud. He had never lied to anyone under his command, because inaccurate information - no matter what the reason - got people killed. He wasn't about to start now.

'Tranh's dead,' he said. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Clark look surprised, then relax a little. 'He was trying to run, but we caught him and asked him why. In the process he& Well, he just collapsed and burnt up into nothing. I've never seen anything like it -it was as if a Thermite pack went off inside him. Some kind of implanted bomb thing, I guess.' He tried to gauge the group's opinions; judge whether any of them thought he had offed Tranh personally. It didn't look like they thought that, but you could never be sure. 'You can check our guns if you want, they haven't been fired.'

'It's all right, sir,' Harris said. 'Why did he run?'

'We don't know. Maybe he was just spooked by this place. Whatever the reason, we suspect that whoever implanted the& whatever it was, has been monitoring him, or maybe even getting messages from him. We have to assume that our cover is blown, and that whoever's in the blind zone knows to expect visitors.'

Police forces the world over played up the usefulness of finger-prints in the hope of dissuading the more nervous, would-be criminals from indulging their illegal desires.

In fact, only about 10 per cent of latent prints recovered from a crime ever have any bearing on tracking down the person who left them. You'll rarely - if ever - hear a cop admit to that.

The prints left on the side door to Wing's apartment were unusual in that they had provided a good match. They were almost a work of artistry, as crisp and clear as if someone had deliberately placed them to be found and appreciated as a facet of his personality.

Which is why the lab technician who processed them remembered that set so clearly, out of the hundreds of prints he checked every day. They were beautiful, and of course he remembered calling Mark Sing to tell him the good news.

He didn't remember calling Katie Siao, which was surprising, because she was so well-known and liked at the station. At least, it was surprising to the lab technician, who assumed he must have simply forgotten to notify her.

It wasn't as surprising to Mark Sing, who took the technician's puzzlement as

confirmation of his suspicion that he hadn't called her.

Sing thanked the lab tech, and walked back out to his car. Cannonball Siao had lied to him. She had lied about why she had come to Yi Chung's apartment, and he wished he didn't know that.

* * *

The next morning, Tom Ryder told George that he was feeling on top of the world when he escorted Sarah back to the Mandarin Oriental. Neither Tom nor Sarah realised how many hours had passed as they chatted in the restaurant. He regaled her with tales of his time in the DEA, busting crack houses and tracking inter-national smugglers. In turn, she told him about some of her time with the Doctor. The travels she described were unbelievable but, given her tone and the files he'd read, he believed every word.

He had discreetly led the conversation to find out whether she was spoken for. He didn't want to take their relationship beyond the purely businesslike if she was. Thankfully she wasn't. It sounded to him almost as if no mere Earthman could live up to the Doctor in her eyes, but she seemed to like him enough, so maybe he was mistaken. Or maybe the Doctor's change of habits had really got to her.

It didn't matter; all he knew was their evening had gone well, both professionally and personally.

Sarah's luggage had been transferred by the time they returned to the floor the DEA team occupied. 'I guess this is it for tonight,' Tom told her when they reached her door. 'I'm glad to have finally got to know you a little better than just pulling you out of the frying pan.'

'Me too,' she agreed. She opened her door, and hesitated. 'I have some photos of the Pimms Building. If they'd be of any use&'

'Every little helps.' She led him into the room. 'Help yourself to a drink from the minibar. Your company's paying for it, after all.'

Tom agreed wholeheartedly with that sentiment. Work wouldn't be so much fun without an expense account to abuse. While he poured himself some scotch, Sarah dug the photos out of a bag. They were black-and-white 8 x 10 glossies, showing the entrances and exits to the Pimms Building. All the security cameras and alarms were shown in crisp detail.

'Useful?'

'Extremely.' Tom agreed. He spotted some colour shots poking out of the corner of the bag, and reached past her to get at them. They weren't quite in reach, and he was about to say, 'Excuse me', when he became acutely aware that she wasn't moving, and that her breasts were pressing against him.

Maybe, he told the eagerly listening George, it was the atmosphere of the exotic East, or maybe the release of tension. Either way, almost before they knew it, he and Sarah were naked, warm mouths and gentle fingertips exploring in the darkness.

Tom didn't mind admitting that it was wonderful.

The new dawn found Fiona Clark packing her gear, just like every-body else in the logging camp. They had walked back through the night from the deserted village. They had got back in time to have about two hours' sleep.

The game stopped now, and the real work began. Barry had already contacted Tsang for a pick-up, and Julie Palmer was busy fiddling with the silver box that had been delivered to them.

When Clark was done she took a roll-call of the troop. Everyone was ready and packed, as efficiently as she'd expected. Only Palmer was missing, and Clark could see her working in the cockpit of a Blackhawk that had arrived a few minutes earlier.

Barry was hanging around her like a sick puppy, and Clark despaired for him. The guy was old enough to damn well know better. She just hoped his crush didn't get the rest of them killed.

Nobody was going to waste any more time thinking about that, however. Everybody had their job to do; there were no lone heroes here like you saw in the movies. Without the rest of the team, even the best of the soldiers wasn't much use.

They boarded the Blackhawk in silence, each concentrating on what he or she would do when they got to where they were going. As everyone strapped themselves in, Barry jerked a thumb at the silver box which was now wired up to the instrument panel. 'We don't know exactly what's inside the blind area we skirted earlier. If our computers are correct, this transponder should allow this helo to pass through the perimeter. We'll make a fast flyover to get the lay of the land, then be inserted at an LZ I'll designate. Any questions?' There were none. 'Good.' He patted the pilot's shoulder. 'Let's go.'

It had been a silent and tense breakfast for Cannonball Siao. Eddie had the day off and was looking forward to taking their kids to the park. He wasn't happy that Katie couldn't get up much enthusiasm for talking about that plan rather than what Mark Sing was up to.

After less than ten minutes at the breakfast table Cannonball walked out. She loved her husband and her kids, but wished they could understand how much of a problem this was for all of them. Sing could screw up her children's schooling, and Eddie didn't seem to follow that at all.

She ran into Sing on her own doorstep. He was about to ring the bell and looked hungover. When she noticed the two uniformed officers with him, she knew she was in trouble.

'Cannonball&'

'Don't apologise,' she told him. 'Just get on with it. You have to. Just as I have to afford my kids' school fees.'

'I know. But when we added those fees to the house, we found you were living outside your means. That's an indictable offence for a cop. I'm a member of the Independent Committee Against Corruption, and I've no choice but to put you under arrest and serve you this warrant to search your house.'

Sarah had spent a peaceful night at the Mandarin Oriental. She wasn't sure whether she trusted Tom's intentions where the Doctor, the Triad, or herself were concerned. Trust or not, there had seemed to be no harm in handing him a set of photos of the Pimms Building when he gave her a goodnight peck on the cheek at her door last night.

She called down to reception for breakfast and a paper - it was on the DEA's

bill, after all - and showered away the previous day's aches and pains. When the knock came at the door, she pulled on one of the hotel's complimentary robes to answer it. The bell-boy gave her a strange look and, stranger still, didn't wait to hint for a tip. :

Perhaps the world was coming to some sort of sense, she wondered, as she took the breakfast tray inside. The folded paper had a photo of her - a more recent one this time - on the front cover. She was moderately puzzled; the next article wasn't due to be printed until the weekend. Somebody local had probably decided to jump the gun in order to capitalise on the fact that she was staying in town. It was annoying, and confusing to the readers, but it happened. She had been paid, so she didn't much care whether they printed the thing early, late or not at all.

She sat cross-legged on the bed, and started to nibble at her cornflakes. As she ate, she spread the paper out on the bed beside her.

Her appetite died as surely as if she herself had passed away.

INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST SEES SPACEMEN Investigative journalist Sarah Jane Smith, whose articles have been syndicated in this and other newspapers across the globe, has been exposed as a pawn of governments in the tug-of-war over UFO information.

Leaks in the British Ministry of Defence have suggested that Ms Smith, 48, has made many reports of UFOs to the organisation over the past two decades. Not only that, but she has claimed to have travelled to other planets and once said that her science-fiction novels are actually true.

It is said that Ms Smith was actually a member of UNIT, a body dedicated to investigating new and unusual threats to mankind. Although the organisation itself refuses to comment on past or present members, a Dr John Smith, who says he once

worked with her, has provided us with photocopies of several documents which prove her involvement.

The Internet is currently rife with arguments between those conspiracy theorists who believe she is a government stooge whose articles cannot be trusted, and those sceptics who feel she is inventing cases simply as publicity stunts, to carve a share in the lucrative gold-embossed Fortean market.

Newspapers across the globe have been dropping her syndicated articles in response, though Graham Hancock and a few others have been quoted as saying that it would be criminal if this great crusader were sidelined because she dares to defy convention.

Stunned, moving on autopilot, Sarah walked out onto her balcony and looked across the city.

Some would have called the morning's weather calm or peaceful, but Sarah could only call it Dead. If the world was truly alive, a breeze ought to blow the lies off the paper. Even whipping the sheets away, out of her view, would be enough to hint that there was breath and movement.

Here she was, in the heart of one of the most densely populated cities on Earth, and she felt more alone and left out than she ever had before. Someone once said that being alone in a crowd was the worst kind of loneliness, and now Sarah knew what they meant.

Dr John Smith. The Doctor. Her Doctor. Who else knew her history so well? No one at UNIT had accompanied her on those trips. They didn't know what she'd seen and what she'd done while she was away on her travels with the Doctor. They might have been told, or deduced these things, but none of them knew. Only the Doctor and herself really knew all the little details.

Which meant only the Doctor could be behind this story.

Chapter Fifteen | Line Hustle tan

As the unmarked Blackhawk neared the perimeter of the blanked-out zone, everyone aboard held his or her breath. Though they had been assured of the transponder's importance and efficiency, Barry didn't trust it or the self-proclaimed experts back in Hong Kong any further than he could fly by flapping his arms.

He half-expected a jarring halt and painful fiery death at any second as the helo drew closer and closer to the point where even the birds couldn't fly in or out. At the last moment, he closed his eyes.

He opened them again, as the trees thinned below and the land became rolling curves in a large natural bowl. Up ahead he could make out a large white building. As they overflew it, he could see it was some kind of old plantation house, probably dating from the French colonial period.

Barry didn't want the unmarked Blackhawk to land, and make itself vulnerable, so it descended until its landing wheels were about a metre from the ground, and his team hopped off. Under his orders, it was banking to head back the way it had come almost before the last man had hit the ground.

When he was younger, and under arrest for taking part in a street brawl that left a gambling welcher dead, a cop had asked Tse Hung why he lived the life he did. Tse Hung had told him, in all seriousness, that he didn't see why he should take a regular job when it was so much easier to make money by crime. If there were such a thing as time travel, he now thought, he would go back a decade and laugh in his younger self's face.

Crime did pay all right, but it wasn't the lazy option he had imagined. As he rose up through the ranks and gained power and respect, so he also gained responsibility. It was subtle and insidious, and by the time he realised what was happening it was too late to back out. Between getting others to do his dirty work so that it couldn't be traced back to him, keeping them from becoming too ambitious, dealing with rivals and making sure all the accounts balanced out as far as the tax office was concerned, being a high-level gangster proved to require more hard work than most civilian jobs. Maybe it was the added requirement of staying a living gangster that made it so hard.

There were times when Tse Hung almost wished he had a normal job, but those were rare, scattered moments, and he soon reminded himself that the money and the freedom of his lifestyle were worth the effort.

He stopped in at Yue Hwa's office on the way to his own. Yue Hwa was busy printing off some sheets for the day's board meeting. 'Did you think about what we discussed?' Tse Hung asked him.

'You mean at the Shanghai Club?'

'Yes. The restructuring that might be needed.'

Yue Hwa nodded slowly. 'I've thought about it. It might just come to that.'

"Then you agree?"

'When the time comes, I'll be ready.'

Tse Hung smiled, relieved. He'd have hated to have to kill a friend. He had relatively few, but those he had he valued highly. Quality was far more important than quantity. As with anything rare, a glut of friends merely lessened their value, and Tse Hung would never want the value of his to diminish.

Barry wrote in his report that, through binoculars from the tree line, the old plantation house looked peaceful enough. Its three storeys were clearly never the cleanest in South-East Asia, but had clearly remained in use. In the jungle, unused buildings didn't stay very recognisable for long; the humidity and the plants saw to that.

It was brick-built, with a wooden verandah along all four walls which were interrupted only by the porticoed front door. Elsewhere, French windows opened on to the verandah. To the right was a small barn whose door was closed, while a vehicle shed had a rusting tractor sitting in the open doorway.

They rushed the house from different directions, Barry constantly expecting something to go wrong and his troop to start dropping. In the end, they reached the house safely. They gathered round the front door and windows. 'On three' Clark tossed in a flash-bang and the troop burst into the house.

The interior was dim with little light penetrating the old faded curtains. The rooms through which Barry passed still retained their old worn furniture, which had sat unused for decades. In a creepy way it reminded him of his grandmother's house when his family settled on it like vultures to divide up her possessions after her death. Of all the things he could have remembered, it was a cruel God that picked that memory for him.

He gestured silently for the troop to spread out through the house in pairs, one soldier always covering the other. The dust of decades made the light from their gun-mounted torches look like cheap laser effects in a sci-fi B movie.

The main staircase leading upwards was creaky and led to rooms with bare floorboards and skeletal bedsteads that hadn't seen mattresses or sheets since Captain Kirk was a brand-new character.

Below stairs, the house's original cellar had been considerably expanded. Openings had been knocked through the walls of the old scullery, and metal stairwells descended into more recently excavated chambers - all empty.

"The house is clear and secure," Clark said. In spite of the dis-appointment that would show in his report, Barry had to agree.

What was the point of all the secrecy? Why blot out an empty house from the satellites? Unless 'They must have been on to us. Tranh must have given them time to pack up and get out.'

Clark sniffed. 'I dunno about that - there's no sign that this place has been used in years. Air America probably did all this digging in the 1970s. Don't ask me why the UFOs come here, though.'

'I suppose they could be using the house as a navigational aid' That made sense to Barry. The house could be a reference point to enter and leave orbit.

'We can't just leave here with nothing,' he said. 'Let's gather some forensic samples, photograph the place & see whether we can make anything of it later.' Maybe they'd find some hokey secret passage or something. Then at least the trip would have been worth it. There was nothing worse than going through hardship for nothing.

Yue Hwa had left the meeting to refill the coffee-pot, or so he had told the others. Outside in the corridor he turned, watching to see whether anyone was approaching close enough to hear his words as he whispered into something in his hand. 'I can handle him. When the time comes, everything will be taken care of, as planned.'

He looked round, through the glass into the boardroom, listening to the reply. The Doctor was there, going over some kind of report with Tse Hung and a couple of other suits. 'No, he doesn't suspect a thing.'

Mark Sing oversaw the forensics officers and civilian technicians as they combed through Siao's home. The one he really felt sorry for was Cannonball's husband Eddie, who was glaring at him in between trying to comfort his daughters.

Sing hadn't wanted this, but he couldn't let the corruption just go. Not even for the sake of Siao's family. In the long run, this would help Eddie and the kids, but he knew they'd never realise that in a million years. Looking at the children, he knew they were another pair who'd be brought up to hate cops. They'd probably be brought up to hate him.

'Sir.' One of the searchers was calling to him from the door to the family garage. 'You'd better see this.' Sing followed him through. The man led him to a small locker tucked away in a corner. Inside were a large plastic pack of white powder and some empty Pimms envelopes. Sing groaned inwardly. Siao was finished. There was no way this could be for personal consumption only. She might not be dealing, but at least she was a courier.

Tom flung the newspapers on to the bed, accusing headlines staring up from every corner. 'Look at these! Just look at them! You're not going to tell me that none of this matters to you; that it doesn't crush your guts and make you want to kill the bastard who did it?'

Sarah crushed up one of the newspapers, unsure whether she wanted to scream in anguish, or hurl the paper as a prelude to smashing everything she could.

'You must hate him,' Tom said softly. He was close enough for her to feel the words brush her ear. 'I can barely imagine how this must feel to you. Your best friend. Your closest friend. Your & How much you must hate him.'

Sarah pulled away from him, dropping the crushed story. 'That's the worst thing,' Sarah said. 'I can't. I know I should, and I try to, but all that happens is that I feel hurt and dismay & And I miss the friend I used to have. I suppose that makes me some kind of idiot.'

Tom sighed and stepped over to her. 'I would say,' he corrected gently, 'that it makes you a good person. Better than me: I would hate him.' He sat on the end of the bed. 'You say the Doctor was your friend. Well, it looks like someone changed his mind. Now, he's not the only one with good connections in the media.'

'Are you trying to offer me some kind of bribe?'

'It would be more accurately called an inducement. Think about it: you clear

your name, get a top-line contract with a global group of your choice&'

'Get revenge?' That was what people did in these circumstances, wasn't it? They hit back and hoped that if it didn't make them feel better, it at least made their victim feel as bad as they did.

'I wouldn't necessarily want to be the one to say it, but if you feel that way - and I know I sure as hell would - then, yes.'

Sarah wasn't sure whether she felt that way. Revenge sounded too much like the sort of thing people talked about on Oprah, where jilted lovers cut up each others' suits. More than anything else, she just wanted today to go away and leave her in peace. She had been looking forward to exploring the city like any other tourist, and now there was no hope of enjoying that.

If the Doctor was willing to go that far, he must really have changed. She knew that when he regenerated it meant the death of the person he had been; a sense of loss was only natural. But the Doctor's replacement personae had always been on a similar base, not some sort of evil pod-person.

On the other hand, regenerations did go wrong and perhaps his latest one had too. His brain must have been scrambled. Maybe he still needed help - protection from himself and his own actions.

If nothing else, this was a sign that UNIT and the DEA were right. Someone with the Doctor's knowledge and abilities could be an exceptional danger. One she didn't want to face, but had to. One she would face.

She had to do something, take a positive step of some kind and here was one being offered on a plate. The reward didn't matter, but if it meant setting things right, then it'd be worth it.

'All right,' she said slowly. 'I'll do it.'

The TARDIS crunched into solidity a few yards from the plantation house's vehicle shed. The Doctor, looking grimmer than usual, emerged and went into the house.

The interior was dim, with little light penetrating the faded curtains. The rooms through which the Doctor passed still retained their old, worn furniture, which had sat unused for decades. In spite of that, the rooms were pristine, with not a speck of dust to be seen anywhere.

The main staircase leading upwards was blocked off by a plastic and chrome door, which had a clear airtight seal around it. The upstairs rooms were where the pharmacology labs operated 24/7, and they had to be kept scrupulously clean so as not to contaminate the mixtures being prepared.

The whole of the upper floor in the plantation house had been turned into a makeshift chemical lab. In one section, resin bubbled in large pans over gas burners, while another contained complex arrays of tubes and beakers, all tended by blonde men and women.

Below stairs, the house's original cellar had been considerably expanded. Openings had been knocked through the walls of the old scullery, and metal stairwells descended into more recently excavated chambers.

Dim but unfriendly blue lights showed through the grillwork floors. In each metallic burrow, glowing spheres - some displaying images - hovered at chest height. Consoles of black metal stood like open petals, while crystal and

metal edges of unknown apparatus sat coldly at the limit of vision. This was Chiu's office; a work-place he had no emotional attachment to, but a practical need to occupy.

'It's done,' the Doctor said darkly. 'Don't worry about Miss Smith any more.'

'Good.' Chiu led the Doctor deeper. 'We have a problem.'

'You assured me there wouldn't be any. You gave your word -'

'It's not of our doing.' They went past a small room, where diminutive, half-seen figures were disassembling the machine guns and feeding the parts into furnaces. Ingots of metal were coming out the other end.

At the heart of the web of tunnels was a mostly empty room with a seal set into the floor. Flowing script spiralled into infinity on the seal. Cloaking the ceiling was a huge holographic projection of the Earth's continents. Beads of light moved all over it, tracking objects sensed in orbit.

In the midst of it all was a small grey creature in military-style coveralls, eyes closed in rapture as it listened to the music of the spheres. It was the Astrographer. Who would have thought he would be so necessary on a planet's surface?

'We're sensing what may be gravitational wavefronts, blue-shifted,' the Astrographer told the Doctor, opening his glistening black eyes.

'Show him,' Chiu said.

The Astrographer moved a hand and the indoor heavens spun dizzily. A flattened electric-blue oval was pulsing gently. 'We must complete operations as quickly as possible,' Chiu said. The blue oval grew, resolving itself into three separate signals.

The Doctor looked worried, though it was hard for Chiu to tell. Human facial expressions were hard enough to judge. 'Are those what I think they are?'

'They're too far out to be certain, but I think so. Battleships, on their way here.'

Chapter Sixteen Dining on fishes

Under a groundsheet in the Cambodian humidity, Palmer's back was searingly hot against Barry's when he woke. In spite of that he had broken out in a cold sweat, and shook slightly. The feeling faded once he remembered where he was. The logging camp had never been too hospitable, but he hadn't thought of it as being so disturbing before.

He pulled on trousers and boots, and went out into the pre-dawn half-light for a cigar. Fiona Clark was already out there, scanning the treetops and cleaning her shotgun. 'Looking for something?'

'I dunno,' she admitted. 'I just felt like& Well, I couldn't sleep anyway. You neither?'

'Think I had a nightmare. It's nothing, just the release of tension from the mission.' He lit his cigar, and looked at the reddening sky. 'Shepherd's hut's on fire.'

'Well, I didn't do it.' They both grinned.

Mark Sing was in the lab within mere seconds of the call, saying the test results on the powder found in Siao's house were ready. A lab technician was waiting with a file folder and the bag of powder. 'Here you go. Full results on this shit.'

'This is, what? Heroin? Cocaine?'

'No, this is real shit.'

Sing was impressed, in the way drivers might be impressed by a bad accident they pass. 'Pure, then?'

'No, I mean this shit is shit shit, not good shit. It's some kind of opiate-derived heroin substitute, with its narcotic abilities severely curtailed. The effects would be very mild and not addictive. In fact, this shit would probably wean you off&' The technician's voice trailed off and he blinked. 'That's a new one on me.'

'Doesn't surprise me,' Sing said.

'It doesn't?'

'Think about it. The Triads want to create addiction to boost their profits, but if your customers die on you, they stop giving you money. If you can control their addiction to the point of curing it, you can trap them in longer cycles of addiction and cure over and over again.'

'Ingenious.'

'Obscene,' Sing corrected him.

'Yeah, but&'

But?'

'This isn't actually a narcotic, and technically it isn't illegal.'

Sing felt as if the lab technician had started speaking some foreign language he didn't understand, but at the same time a small weight was lifted from him. It soon settled back; the inevitable for Siao was only delayed. 'It's not?'

'Nobody's seen anything like this, so there's no law to cover it. It wouldn't be addictive and wouldn't -'

'So she's a courier of a harmless placebo for the Tao Te Lung?'

'Yes.'

Sing closed his eyes. What was he supposed to do now? He'd blown his cover as an ICAC investigator for nothing. Maybe that was the idea: the whole thing was a plot to flush him out.

He didn't really believe that. He wondered if Siao knew what she was really ferrying. Not that it would matter to the board of inquiry. Intent was all that counted there. She was a criminal by intent and choice, and the forensics couldn't change that.

The Doctor's desk was covered with newspapers, all featuring Sarah's face, while he himself had his eyes closed to all of them. 'They won't go away, no

matter how hard I concentrate,' he grumbled.

'I suppose not,' Yue Hwa agreed. At times like this, he wished he had followed his father's wishes and been a herbalist. Perhaps then he might know how to help his partner in crime.

Yue Hwa had many skills and abilities, honed by years of training and experience, but there was nothing in him that made it easier to bear the times when none of those skills and abilities could help someone. He had chosen his path to help people, yet so often it didn't work out that way. 'Sometimes we have to do things that are contrary to the way we see ourselves. Either we're hypocrites, or those things take effort to live with,' he said.

'I didn't want to do it this way.'

'You can still set it right.'

'Can I?'

"That's up to her. When the person you hurt is a friend, the damage done can be worse than when you hurt an enemy. An enemy expects it, but a friend& Perhaps you should sleep on it.'

The Doctor opened his eyes, and Yue Hwa thought he almost saw distant stars in them. 'I see the faces of every death I'm responsible for every time I sleep. Every enemy, every friend I've lost, every innocent I've failed to save. So I stopped sleeping. I imagine you know what I'm talking about.'

'Something of it,' Yue Hwa admitted. 'But I see only one face.' He could see it now: Qi Wang Chuan, gunned down in his own bakery, the flour portraying him as a ghost even before he drowned in the blood from his wounds. He wasn't the first man Yue Hwa had killed, and might not be the last, but he was the one who affected him most. 'Soon someone will see our faces in their nightmares, if we're not careful,' he said. 'Maybe even a friend.'

'You think we're living on borrowed time?'

Yue Hwa shook his head. 'More like& bullet time.' In the time it had taken the first bullet to fly from his hand to Wang's chest, Yue Hwa's life had been turned inside out, and he sensed the Doctor had probably had that experience, many times over.

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The Hercules wasn't the most luxurious airliner ever built, but it was reliable and got Major Barry's team back to Hong Kong in one piece. Tsang and Nomura were waiting with a small fleet of Discoveries, and greeted them with a sanguine attitude to the mission's lack of gain.

Barry felt that Tsang was unusually quiet, and wasn't sure whether this was a good or bad sign. He hoped like hell that it wasn't a sign she'd uncovered anything about him and Julie Palmer. UNIT officers might be cut a certain slack, but there were still some taboos common to any country's military.

While Clark and the others were diverted to the local UNIT field office for debriefing, Tsang and Nomura took Barry to her more private office. 'All this effort, and nothing to show for it,' Tsang remarked. 'Did you search thoroughly?'

'We took a camcorder through the house, took lots of environ-mental samples,

but there was nothing.' Barry knew it didn't make sense, but he believed the evidence of his own eyes.

'Yet radar-tracking reports the daily flights are continuing. Always the same pattern, from the blind zone in Cambodia to Hong Kong and back.'

'I'm not saying they aren't happening. We think they're using the house we found as a navigational point without having actually set up a base.'

Tsang looked doubtful. 'I suppose it's possible, but then why blind us to that area? Why do backpackers vanish there? They must have something to hide.'

Barry agreed totally. He wasn't beaten yet, but he recognised when a point was lost. 'Oh, they've got something to hide, all right, but I think we've been looking at it from the wrong angle.'

'How so?'

'We know the blind zone is one end of the chain, but there's another end.'

'The Tao Te Lung?'

'They're the ones who had the transponder before you got it. There must be a connection. If we can get access to their files they must have some record of what's what.'

Tsang frowned. 'We had a source on the inside, but she's disappeared&'

'Who?' It didn't matter that much, and Barry didn't expect it to be anyone he knew, but he liked to show some interest in things. Tsang's response was to drop some photos on to the desk. 'Who's the skirt?'

'Sarah Jane Smith. An English journalist.' Their wary expressions mirrored each other.

'Journo? She looks familiar somehow. TV?'

'Metropolitan magazine, among other things. She's with some news agency these days. You probably recognise her from archive reports; she used to be a civilian attache to UNIT-UK back in the late seventies.'

Barry did indeed remember. 'Cool.' He tossed the pictures back. 'But if she's disappeared she's no bloody use to me.'

Tsang sat back. 'We don't have time to cultivate another -'

'Then we won't bother our asses finding another stoolie. These Triad boys have a front company. That's going to be full of computers and all we need is to get Palmer at their database.'

How?'

Barry grinned, seeing the chance to redeem himself with a good score. 'Leave that to me.'

Chapter Seventeen Entering and Breaking

The Pimms Building was as peaceful as a mouse's home on the night before Christmas.

The computers on the tech floor whispered to themselves and soft indirect lighting allowed the occasional security guard to navigate the silent corridors. Only the reception hall on the ground floor was brightly lit, and that merely let the guards on the desk read their comic books more comfortably.

The Doctor sat alone under a reading lamp in Tse Hung's private office, skimming through the files on Tse Hung's PC. They were encrypted, but easy to get into. Whatever he was looking for could not have been there because he soon switched the computer off and moved around the room, tapping at the walls.

Helicopter traffic wasn't that rare in the skies, so one more chop-per wasn't going to attract any attention. Even so, Major Barry had made sure the Nighthawk he'd requisitioned was as muffled and stealthy as possible. He saw no point in taking unnecessary risks.

Accompanying him were Clark and eight other troopers. As per the orders he had filed, they were all wearing black combats, tac-vests and silenced pistols. He'd been told that silenced subguns wouldn't be available for a few days, so had decided to make do with what they had.

The chopper stayed relatively high over the city, since radar avoidance wasn't an issue, and zeroed in on the Pimms Building.

The traffic around the base of the Pimms Building wasn't too busy at this time of night, and none of it was tempted to stop by the sight of a middling-sized white truck sitting to one side of the complex.

Tom Ryder jumped out of the cab rubbing his hands. He was dressed casually, but all in black. A pistol was secured on his hip, but he doubted he would need it for a simple breaking and entering like this.

George and half-a-dozen others emerged from the back of the truck. 'You all know the plan?' George asked. Everybody nodded. 'Good. I've done some research. Their security isn't up to much: a few private cops with six-shooters. We can evade them or put them on ice, then take what we want without waiting.'

Tom nodded slowly but approvingly. 'Good. The sooner this is over with, the sooner I get back to my vacation.' He took in the size of the edifice. It was as big as anything in New York or LA, but nothing a guy like him couldn't handle.

Giving the order by hand signal, he had his men put a ladder up to one of the first-floor windows, out of sight of the lobby and its attendant guards. Leading by example, he scrambled up the ladder armed with a suction cup and glass cutter. Tonight he was the world's greatest cat burglar, not a gunman.

The Doctor paused, stopped in his search by a hollow sound. He was standing in front of a drinks cabinet with shelves of glasses above it. It took only a moment for his fingers to find the switch that made the cabinet and shelves slip aside.

Through the opening he saw a large plush sofa with cushions scattered around and what looked like a bra stuffed down the back. An empty whisky bottle was lying beside a couple of empty glasses, while a pile of video cassettes with lurid pornographic covers was balanced beside a wide-screen TV. The place smelt of sweat and pheromones. The Doctor shook his head. 'If your behaviour at work mattered, Tse Hung, I'd fire you&'

There was only one picture on the wall - a large print of dolphins leaping from the sea - and the Doctor found the safe behind that.

To Barry's surprise there was no helipad on the roof. He had thought high-fliers like the Tao Te Lung would flaunt their wealth by having choppers around the place.

It didn't matter; all the soldiers were trained to rappel down. As they slid roofwards on silent ropes, Barry leant between the pilot and copilot. 'Stay in hover. Hopefully we'll exit at ground level, but just in case'

'Roger that.'

The lobby guards had been easily dealt with - they were nice and co-operative when held at gunpoint. They'd then been disarmed, secured with their own handcuffs and locked in a cupboard.

Tom was pleased. So far everything was cool: no violence, no trouble, just getting the job done. He hopped over the security desk to where a bank of monitors showed views from the building's CCTV. He wasn't interested in those, though, but wanted a floor plan.

A few keystrokes on the desk's PC terminal brought up the information he wanted: the master drives for the company's computers were in the north quarter of the upper mezzanine level.

The Doctor's skills as a safecracker hadn't deserted him. He had opened Tse Hung's wall safe quite quickly. It contained the usual stuff: some bonds, a few thousand dollars in cash, a couple more porno tapes & And a briefcase, which the Doctor pulled out.

He took it back to Tse Hung's regular private office, and breathed more easily there. The case wasn't locked, so he sat down and opened it.

Inside the briefcase was a small lump of metal, blackened on one side and bright silver on the other. The Doctor lifted it out. 'Ah & I wondered when you'd show up.'

Though it was metal it was warm to the touch, like plastic, and he could easily compress it into a ball. He put the ball on the desk then slapped it. Immediately, the metal flopped out into a sheet of thin foil. There were purple hieroglyphs of some kind along one edge. The Doctor smiled, and put the foil sheet back in the briefcase.

Next he took out the other item in the case: a large folded piece of Earthly paper. It wasn't a set of texts or letters but a naval chart, with handwritten markings. 'Cyrillic?'

Barry's team had encountered only two guards on patrol on their way down from the roof. Neither had done more than crap their pants when faced with ten armed paramilitaries, which amused Barry. He didn't think much of these wannabe rentacops.

Both of them had said there were only about a dozen security guards, and had also kindly supplied the location of the main computer suite. Since then, they'd been handcuffed to the railing in the stairwell that led to the roof.

Fully confident that things were going well, Barry led his team down towards the mezzanine levels.

After only two crashes and one porn entrance site demanding money, the Doctor had managed to get on to an Internet site with geographical and cartographical data. Hi-res images of the world's seas flashed past as he tried to find a match for the Russian naval chart.

On the PC screen an image of the globe had zoomed into the Persian Gulf. Further tweaks of the search parameters narrowed things down to the northern end. 'Of course,' the Doctor mut-tered. 'I should have been looking there from the start.'

He saved the page to a floppy disk, then shut down the PC and returned the briefcase and its contents to the wall safe in the other room. Then he turned the lights off and left Tse Hung's office suite.

He halted immediately, hearing footsteps approaching. For a moment he stepped back but then he stopped himself. 'I own this place&' He marched out firmly, towards the oncoming steps.

The security guard almost jumped out of his skin, when the Doctor bumped into him. 'I'm sorry, Mr Pendragon. I -'

'Don't worry, Ah Yuen. I should have finished work hours ago, but& no rest for the wicked.'

Yuen smiled weakly. Some bosses were a lot less considerate of their employees than this one, and he was still half-expecting to be fired. He bent down to pick up the disk Mr Pendragon had dropped, and handed it back to him. 'I should have been more attentive,' he said. He realised instantly that this was the wrong thing to say: a guard being inattentive was useless and therefore soon out of a job.

Mr Pendragon seemed to understand what he meant, though. His eyes twinkled as he smiled. 'I know what you mean. Have you been on duty long?'

'Since five.'

Mr Pendragon made a silent, 'Ah.' 'Then you probably need some coffee and food by now. Go down and get some, and that's an order.' To Yuen's astonishment, Mr Pendragon pressed a few dollars for the snack into his hand. 'Off you go.'

Yuen bowed, still not sure whether this was some kind of lull before firing him. Either way, Mr Pendragon had a point; he was ravenous.

Mr Pendragon departed with a small wave, heading back to his own office. Yuen watched him go, then made straight for the nearest vending machine.

The lights were still on in the mezzanine, turning the stone garden below into a pale pool. They also suggested that people worked there and in the computer suite at all hours. Major Barry swept the area with his gunsight, but didn't see anyone. Perhaps the lights were for the benefit of the guards on patrol, or maybe there was a late shift only on some nights. Hell, for all he knew, maybe some dopey tech had just forgot to turn the lights off.

'Palmer.' He gestured towards the computer suite and she moved into it. She pulled a packet of disks and DATs from inside her tac-vest. Barry followed, leaving Clark to set up everyone else in a defensive posture.

Barry relaxed somewhat and patted Palmer on the shoulder. 'You know what we're here for, Jules?'

'Yeah. Any data on the aliens will probably be in Pendragon's personal files. Shouldn't take long to get in.'

'Good.'

"The only problem will be if he's been smart enough to keep it all in a separate drive, not linked to the main set-up.'

'Well, if he has, we'll find his office from here.' Barry hesitated before leaving. He didn't want to leave. 'Carry on.'

Tom Ryder and his team had moved up the stairs in pairs, leapfrogging each other. The lifts could be stopped or ambushed by an alert guard, and so couldn't be trusted. As in any building, the stairwells weren't worth describing, but Tom was impressed when he came out on the uppermost of the mezzanine levels.

The four-storey drop to the stone garden was illuminated like a terrarium, and the tower above rose to a dizzying glass disc.

The computer suite occupied the north quarter of the level, and he approached the glass partitions carefully.

He and his half-dozen accomplices were spreading out through the suite before they realised someone was sitting at one of the terminals. Expectation at first clad the figure in a dark business suit, but Tom realised she was actually in some kind of paramilitary combat gear.

She looked up at that instant and her mouth moved silently. Immediately, more intruders started entering the suite of glass-partitioned offices from the far side.

Tom was baffled, but could see that their information about the guards was wrong. The Tao Te Lung's security team obviously had a SWAT unit and he or one of his companions had triggered some alarm.

Security guard Yuen rolled up the wrapper of his third fruit-and-nut bar and dropped it into the empty paper cup his second coffee had come in. The computer-staff canteen wasn't that welcoming when empty. It was bland and sterile like a hospital waiting room, and the sooner Yuen was out of it the more comfortable he'd be.

He crumpled the cup, arcing it straight into a bin. It bounced out. He cursed and shoved it back in. Brushing crumbs off his uniform, he wandered back out to resume patrol.

The minute he stepped through the door back into the main computer suite he thought he had fallen asleep and was dreaming.

Two groups of dark intruders were scattered throughout the set of offices, with all kinds of automatic weapons trained on each other. Rapid breaths and the smell of sweat filled the area.

Yuen drew his revolver, unsure who to point it at. One lot looked like they might be a cop SWAT team and he had no idea about the others. His gun wavered around more or less at random while he tried to work out what to say or do.

A couple of armed intruders from each group swung their weapons to cover him, and Yuen found himself suddenly terrified. He could hardly hold his gun

steady. 'Who are you? You're all under arrest!' The loudness of his voice startled him - he had been expecting to manage a strangled squeak at best. 'Put down your guns.'

Nobody moved.

'I said put down your guns!' He hoped they would. He could hardly take them all on with a six-shooter, and wasn't stupid enough to try. He had no idea what to do next. 'Please! Put dow-'

The Doctor fished in a pocket for the key to his private lift to the ground level. The TARDIS key was next to it on the ring, and he kept it in his hand. The lift took a few moments to reach him and chimed when it arrived.

Before the Doctor could step into it, he heard the unmistakable sound of a gunshot from along the corridor. Forgetting the lift, he started towards the mezzanine.

Major Barry just wanted to keep things calm. The guard and the other intruders made for a tricky situation where a lot of people could get hurt, and that was the last thing he wanted.

The guard had shouted to them to put down their guns. If it were only his own team he'd have done so, but he daren't give that order when he didn't know how the other guys would react.

It took some effort of will not to comply with the guard's orders, and he thought of asking the other intruders to join him in obeying them.

Then the guard's throat exploded in red, the colour of the gun-shot that filled the computer suite. Barry looked for the source and saw one of the other intruders, back near the door they had come in through, turn his gun towards the UNIT team.

A gun with a smoking muzzle.

A willingness to kill, which was now being turned against his people.

Then it was too late to back down.

Tom just wanted to keep things calm. A quiet B and E, grab the data he wanted and get out. The other intruders made that more problematic, but it was the guard who really screwed things up. Tom could see how easily this could all turn sour, and that was the last thing he wanted.

The guard had shouted to them to put down their guns. If it was up to him, he'd have done so, but he couldn't do that when a group of paramilitaries - terrorists? - with automatic weapons were breathing down his neck.

Then the guard's throat burst in a red summer bloom.

For an instant Tom felt a moment of supreme calm; his blink was a frame holding a cluttered picture in eternal grace. With a bang, the moment was gone as completely as if it had never been, and the air was ripped to shreds in a roar of automatic gunfire and flying metal.

Tom leapt for cover, firing in the general direction of the enemy as rapidly as his index finger would flex. You didn't dodge bullets; they moved too fast. But everyone in the building saw it as bullet-dodging when they bolted in the hope that their enemies couldn't shoot straight. And indeed they couldn't, as

they couldn't aim properly while darting around.

Major Barry raced for the protection of a tiled pillar while Clark laid down suppressing fire. 'Who the hell are they?' he asked, when he got his breath back. 'Intelligence said the building was guarded by a handful of college kids with six-shooters, not a SWAT team.'

'Intelligence couldn't find their asses with both hands, you know that.' Clark thumbed new shells into her shotgun. 'It's prob-ably the usual crap - somebody was told something by somebody who said he knew somebody who saw what was going on, and automatically assumed it must be true. Next thing you know, he's convinced everybody even though he was never there to see anything. Bloody pillock. I wonder if it's too late to get a transfer to the UNIT marching band.'

'You create it, and I'll make sure Tsang transfers both of us.' He motioned to a couple of men on the far side of the mezzanine, indicating for them to go round and outflank the opposition. 'We'll make up the percussion section.' He rolled out, opening up with three-round bursts, while Clark blasted chunks of plaster from the walls above the enemy's heads.

Tom covered his head with his arms to protect himself from flying plaster and glass. Whoever these people were - and it seemed obvious to him they must be security - they were pinning him and his team down for a reason, probably a flanking movement.

What surprised him most was the sophistication of the weapons. He had expected the building's guards to have pistols and maybe a shotgun, but this lot were armed to the teeth with the latest military hardware. Something was seriously wrong, but he had no idea whether he would survive long enough to find out what it could be.

Out of the corner of his eye, Tom saw someone pull the pin on a grenade and start to swing it towards him. He scrambled backwards, as if he could outrun it, firing instinctively. An explo-sion split the air, shredding the thrower, and Tom belatedly realised he'd hit the grenade instead of the man.

The two guards the UNIT team had chained up were in the unlit stairwell that led from the lift-maintenance floor above the pent-house to the roof. They had been cuffed to the railing with their hands behind their backs, but they weren't taking it calmly.

Both men had been struggling violently against their bonds, hoping against hope that something other than their wrists would give.

One of them finally got lucky, not by managing to pull free but by getting his shoe off. He had been almost paranoid about being locked into his handcuffs ever since the practical joke the other guards had played on him as an initiation rite. Since that embarrassing day, he'd kept a spare key in his shoe.

He slid the shoe across to the other guard who managed to flip it into the air with a kick. The first guard twisted aside as the shoe hit the rail, and the key dropped into his hands. In a moment, he was free.

The second guard gestured with a flick of his head. 'Get onto the roof and use your mobile phone. See if you can get hold of Tse Hung or Yue Hwa. Tell them what's happening.'

It was nightmarish, not a bullet ballet.

Says UNIT'S Sergeant Gibson: 'At first, it was just like training at the killing house: acquire targets, get the job done and watch your mates' backs. But once people got hit& I'd never seen a dead body before. I mean, I'd seen a lot of fights, and people cut and smashed, but not dead. When he falls against me I'm, like, knocked down. It was like getting hit by a side of beef. Then I realise that that's blood on my face, and in my clothes, and he's not breathing. I mean, I'd know if he was, because we were all shaking with every breath, and there was nothing from him. Just nothing. Then I got as far away from him as I could, because I didn't want a dead guy touching me.'

Another debriefing went: 'The weirdest thing was, I couldn't hear a thing. Don't get me wrong. The place was noisy as hell -guns, explosions, screaming and dying - but& I dunno, it was like the whole thing was so loud you just didn't register it as sound any more.'

Tom Ryder told it his own way, on his taped debriefing. 'Jesus, why couldn't they have just kept the hell out of the way? We could all have walked right out of there, if they had any damn sense. I mean, better them than me, but& Half of me says the bastards deserved it, but the rest of me just wishes I hadn't had to do some of those things.'

Tom had run a gauntlet of flying lead trying to get at the com-puter with the disk in it. It would contain all the data he wanted. Why else would these others be there, if not to either remove the evidence or steal it for themselves? Either way, that disk had to become his.

Glass walls and plaster partitions exploded into dust. Monitors burst with big enough pops to make them breakdance on their desks. Gunmen ducked and leapt, slid and ran, all the while releasing hell from their hands.

Then, in the midst of it all, somehow audible even over the gunfire, the Doctor's bellow cut across the battleground. 'STOP!'

The UNIT pilot had kept the Blackhawk orbiting the Pimms Building as instructed, waiting for a signal from the major or Captain Clark.

So far there had been no radio traffic, but now he noticed movement on the roof. He couldn't tell who it was, but it looked like a man in uniform. Assuming it was one of the team in need of pick-up, the pilot started swinging around.

The silence - apart from the crackle of flames and the hiss of the sprinklers - was sudden and shocking. The Doctor was standing in the centre of the mezzanine, near the lifts, wreathed in smoke. "There has been enough fighting! Put your toys away and let me explain things to you.'

Tom had to admire his bravery. The guy was walking out of the smoke and fires like some Old Testament prophet, heedless of the fact that either side might want to blow him to hell. No wonder Sarah thought so highly of him.

Russell Barry nodded in silent satisfaction. The Doctor had chosen the wrong side this time. The choice probably wasn't deliberate, but it wasn't up to him to judge the man. Either way, he was a security risk.

'No, Doctor. Your operation here is being closed down. Don't make us think you've finally changed sides.'

'There are no sides,' the Doctor snapped back. 'Just right and wrong, and if you want to call those sides then I suspect we're all on the same side.'

'Speak for yourself. We're not the ones consorting with hostile aliens or running Triad gangs. We're not running drugs or guns. Can you say the same?'

'I can explain the situation to you. Typical human, always making snap judgements without knowing the full facts. Can't you people just grow up?'

'Arrogance will get you nowhere, Doctor.'

The guard was dialling frantically, but not getting through. To his annoyance and embarrassment the illuminated display on the phone told him it was out of credit. He was searching in his pocket for a credit card to top up the phone when the down-draught from a swooping helicopter knocked him flat.

When he picked himself up, all but giving up on trying to work out what was happening to him, he saw the chopper hovering a few feet above the gravelled roof. A man in flying gear was framed in the side door, beckoning to him.

The guard thought that perhaps someone else on duty had sounded the alarm and this was a police chopper. He ran and leapt to catch a rope that hung from its door.

He heard a 'What the hell -' from above, and realised that the man who had beckoned was now looking startled. He'd obviously been expecting someone else. By now the chopper had side-slipped away from the building, and the guard hung on over a drop of several hundred feet to the ground.

'It's one of the guards,' the copilot yelled from the door. The pilot cursed and immediately started swinging the helicopter around. This helped the uniformed security guard who had only managed to climb halfway up the abseil rope. The pitch rolled him in through the door of the chopper and he knocked the copilot flying.

The copilot came to rest against the back of his seat, firing his pistol back into the passenger cabin, but the guard was sliding around so much because of the chopper's tilting that hitting him was impossible.

The pilot tilted the helicopter's nose forward just as the guard lunged and slammed into the copilot, grappling with him for the gun. The gun went off again, but the guard deflected the copilot's arm and this time blood erupted from the pilot's chest.

'Shit!' the copilot yelled. He tried to regain control, but the pilot had slumped onto his own controls and the helicopter simply flipped. Neither the copilot nor the guard had time to try to escape as the rotor blades slashed into the building's roof.

'Oh shit,' Julie Palmer muttered, surely echoing the sentiments of everyone who was looking up at that moment.

UNIT'S helicopter had finally given up its attempt to stay airborne. The rotor-tips hit first, smashing through the roof of the tower and sending glass fragments scything downwards. Then the fuselage was through, and the whole ceiling had turned into a storm of razor-edged rain.

The wrecked helicopter plunged down through the tower, its spinning rotors creating an indoor tornado that burst mirrored windows as it spiralled around. When the chopper reached the mezzanine levels it managed to drag Clark, screaming, over the edge to follow it down. Palmer managed to hang on, but could feel her fingers slipping.

With a painful rip her fingernails gave way, and her heart thudded into her throat as she lurched down. Then something locked round her wrist, almost pulling her arm out of its socket.

It was the Doctor, lying on the floor with both hands around her wrist. 'Hold on,' he grimaced. Too terrified to think of anything else anyway, Palmer let him haul her up, pulling her ankles clear just in time as a rotor flashed past within an inch of them.

When the Nighthawk hit the stone garden an instant before

Clark, it smashed through into the service areas in the basement, and imploded in a tangled heap. The building juddered to its very roots as the helicopter was swallowed whole by a growing dragon of igniting fuel, and the tower became a chimney for Clark's crematorium.

'Arrest him,' Barry shouted, but Palmer's mind wasn't back on her job yet. She was just too glad to be alive.

"Thank you,' she managed to say.

The Doctor tipped his hat and grinned. 'My pleasure.' His expression became more serious. 'Tell Colonel Tsang that she needn't worry. This will all be over soon.'

'What?' But he was departing.

'Doctor, you're under arrest. Stop or I shoot,' Barry yelled. The Doctor kept going. Barry started shooting from across the floor, and the Doctor started running.

The Doctor vaulted the stairs, descending rapidly. Barry and a couple of other soldiers who had followed his lead in opening fire dashed to the edge, waiting for the Doctor to re-emerge on the ground floor.

They laid down concentrated fire when he appeared, churning up the stone garden as the Doctor bolted across it, bullets nipping at his heels.

Then he was inside the police box in the far corner. A second later, it began to emit a strange trumpeting and faded from sight.

Terrified, pumped up with adrenaline, Russell Barry was jumpy and unpredictable, his instincts operating far faster than his thought processes. So the Doctor had run away. Well, that was fine with him. Unfortunately the gunshots had reignited the firefight.

It was only a matter of time before the UNIT forces won. He knew that because they were trained for it. He didn't know who the others were, but they clearly weren't a military force trained in special weapons and tactics.

When a head wearing a black Balaclava landed beside him, he pushed his pistol muzzle into the mystery' man's throat, and almost gagged as his own throat received a similar threat. He kept his eyes locked on the other man's, watching for a flicker that might indicate a trigger being pulled. From this angle, he couldn't see the man's hand and watch the tendons on his finger.

Not daring to breathe, the two men lay at arms' length, their bodies stretched out in opposite directions.

'Who are you?' Barry asked carefully.

'Who the hell are you?' was the only reply. The accent was American, and Barry realised that the eyelids he could see through the Balaclava were dark. This man was black, not Chinese. Maybe he wasn't one of the building's guards after all. Curiouser and curiouser, Barry thought.

'You're not the building's guard,' he said.

'Neither are you.'

A heartbeat of searching for a way out alive. 'Cops?'

'Not exactly' The pressure on Barry's throat never wavered, and he had no intention of moving his own pistol. 'You?' the man asked.

'Not exactly. UNIT'

'You're with UNIT?' The mask was unreadable, and then Barry heard the slight creak of a pistol's hammer being eased down. The mystery man held his gun clearly away. 'Perhaps we've been working on the same case from opposite ends. Tom Ryder, CIA.'

Barry thought he should have guessed. He took his pistol away from Tom's throat and breathed a lot more easily. 'Only the CIA would be so bloody stupid.' He and Tom issued ceasefire orders on their throat-mikes at the same time.

'We're not the ones who came in armed for Desert Storm II.' Tom stood as the gunfire fell silent.

'We're the ones who came prepared for anything, up to and including an extraterrestrial military force.'

'You're not serious?'

Barry sighed. 'We seem to be the only ones who are.'

Chapter Eighteen True Colours of a Hero

Flames gave an extra boost to the pre-dawn light as Tse Hung watched the firefighters trying to control and contain the blaze at the Pimms' Building.

'I can think of no music that would soothe a heart burned by these fires,' Chiu said.

Tse Hung was surprised to hear the ersatz Chinese say something like that. Normally he was taciturn and businesslike, displaying no soul. The remark wasn't much of a silver lining, but Tse Hung would take it. Besides, only Chiu could transport goods the way the Tao Te Lung had been doing. Without him, there would be less profit.

'I didn't know you liked music'

'My people are more than just warriors, though my liking for music derives from its power.'

'Power?' Tse Hung couldn't imagine Cantopop having power.

'Power comes from the energy inherent in the tension between two opposing

balances. Melody and counterpoint, for example. Or slow and fast beats.'

That Tse Hung did understand. 'Yin and Yang. Everything in life follows that principle,' he said. Chiu looked at him, and he felt vaguely like a specimen in a jar. 'When undying love and unending hatred are in balance,' Tse Hung continued, 'then one is most powerful. Love or hate alone isn't enough & It needs both.'

'Or neither. That too is a perfect balance.'

'For you, perhaps. But I'm only human, and we're stuck with them.'

* * *

Yue Hwa woke from the dream again, Qi Wang Chuan lading away to nothing.

He had been notified of the disaster at the Pimms Building by phone overnight, but knew there was nothing he could do at the scene until the fires had been put out.

By the time he arrived at the building firemen, cops and para-medics were crawling through it like maggots in a corpse. He shivered at the sight. He had always known his way of life entailed a certain amount of risk to health and to conscience, but he had never envisioned anything like this.

He had put so much time and effort into this organisation, but something like this could kill it before that effort paid dividends. No one would want to join a Triad that had been hit so hard by its enemies, and even if they did, so much of the record had gone they would spend months trying to work out what it was worth. It had all been such a waste.

Yue Hwa slumped. What did he have now?

Tse Hung was there, looking furious and exhausted. He had probably come to the building in the middle of the night, as soon as he heard what was going on. Give him his due, he certainly paid attention and put in a lot of hours for his ill-gotten gains.

Yue Hwa went over to him. 'Has anyone determined what happened?'

'Two lots of armed men broke in and had a firefight. Then the chopper used by one lot crashed. Shot down maybe, we don't know.' Tse Hung sounded as numbed as Yue Hwa felt.

'What about Pendragon?'

Tse Hung snorted dismissively. 'He's at his cottage. He hasn't said much about this. Personally I doubt he has any idea what to say. Neither do I.'

Yue Hwa wished he could admit the same thing, but people would be looking to him. 'We still have shipments to make. If nothing else, making them will prove we're strong enough to withstand anything.' He crooked his neck to look into Tse Hung's eyes. They seemed lifeless. 'Are you OK?' 'I'll let you know.'

No one knows how much of the alien technology would have remained at the plantation house, but it's doubtful that the owners would have wanted any of it to fall into the hands of even the most advanced terrestrial nations.

Chiu was certainly not one to abandon valuable equipment to primitives who might prove to be a threat to himself or his force. Lack of technology didn't

indicate a lack of intelligence or ability.

One of the technicians came over to him. 'We have hacked into the computers of every military force on the planet, and only one set of communications traffic matches the circumstances of the crash.'

Chiu brought up the relevant data on a wall.

'Records pertaining to the actions of a USS Westmoreland, a vessel of the United States Navy's Pacific Fleet,' the technician told him.

'Then we were shot down&'

'Communications logs show the Qe'shaal was perceived as a threat.'

Chiu nodded. 'Understandable. Humans are quick to make such decisions. Include this information in the skiff's computers. We will need to upload as and when we are able to log on to the Comnet.'

'As you command,' the technician acknowledged.

Only someone like Pendragon could have set up residence in a place like this, Tse Hung thought to himself. The slopes of Sunset Peak belonged to a different world in a different time, especially after the crowded ferry from Hong Kong to Lantau Island. If he didn't know better, he'd have said the whole population was coming out for a weekend trip to the beaches on the island.

But now it was easy enough to forget the crowds. A couple of hours' walking up a steep and winding trail from the town of Pui O, and suddenly he was in the Alps of a bygone age. True, the view was of the island and the coast rather than snowcapped mountains, but the bells on the grazing cows were real enough.

In another half-hour or so he came to a small stone cottage set aside from the main path, with a view overlooking Silver Mine Bay to the northeast.

It was sandstone with a red tiled roof. The police box that used to stand in the Pimms Building's stone garden now stood a few feet away in the shelter of some trees. Tse Hung wondered if the aliens had brought it there. A few wisps of smoke were drifting up from the chimney of the cottage, so someone was in. Tse Hung was glad of that. He would have hated to have made this trip for nothing.

Pendragon looked round as Tse Hung entered. 'Ah. You're just in time for yum chal

"Thank you, dai-k>: It always paid to be civil. Though respect had to be earned, there was never any doubt in Tse Hung's mind that Pendragon had earned it. He still didn't like him, but it showed that Pendragon and himself were a better class of enemy. He also felt it never hurt to be respectful of the dead.

'Now, I imagine you've come to tell me how the clean-up is going at Pimms?'

Tse Hung nodded. 'The building is ruined. The Tao Te Lung will lose a lot of face, thanks to that.'

'Face can always be regained, lives can't. At least it's over for now. Our otherworldly colleagues are ready to leave - no thanks to you.'

'What?' This was unexpected. Tse Hung had assumed the aliens couldn't leave

without the materials he had bought from the Russians -or that they at least needed to know their source.

'The chart you bought from the Russians. Did you really think I wouldn't know?'

So, Pendragon had indeed been spying on him. It was just as he suspected.'You're not taking the aliens away from me.'

Pendragon glared at him. "They weren't here for you, but they've made you rich - financially, if not in your heart.'

'I'm not ready to retire yet. There's more money to be made from these creatures. They do well to carry our trade goods in their stealth ships as it is; with more of them we could corner the snakeheads' market.'

'It's too late. We're leaving.'

'No:

'What?' Pendragon looked shocked, and annoyed.

'I'm not going to let you just walk off with the geese that lay the golden eggs.' Tse Hung snapped his fingers and Ah Fei and a couple of other men who had accompanied him burst into the cottage. All were aiming guns at Pendragon's head. 'Time to start streamlining for business in the new millennium.'

'You have no idea what you're doing,' Pendragon said warningly. Tse Hung had to admire his courage. He rose and approached Pendragon, careful not to get between him and the guns.

'I'm getting rid of a traitor to the brotherhood. If you had let the Englishwoman be killed, the Pimms Building would not have been a battleground. We lost good men there as well as face, and now our enemies have struck at our heart. All because of your cowardice and betrayal!'

'Do you know your old Triad oaths?' Pendragon demanded. Oath 31: "I must not take advantage of the Hung fraternity so that I may oppress or take violent or unreasonable advantage of others; I must be content and honest. If I break this oath I will be killed by five thunderbolts".'

Tse Hung drew a cleaver from his jacket and hefted it. 'You like tradition, don't you? Perhaps you also remember this one: "I must not conspire with outsiders to cheat my sworn brothers&" He suddenly lashed out with a foot, kicking Pendragon in the chest so that he thudded back into a chair.

'Have I missed anything?'

Tse Hung looked up, annoyed at the interruption. It was Yue Hwa.

'Just me dispensing justice to this traitorous gwailo who has screwed us both over. When he's gone, we'll get Uncle Jackie to adjudicate which of us takes which position in the Tao Te Lung.'

'Then I'm just in time.'

Yue Hwa sounded relieved as he came over. Tse Hung waved to the gun-toting 49s to relax. This was another friend.

'If I missed this, I could never forgive myself,' Yue Hwa said.

Tse Hung nodded understandingly. 'Don't worry. He's not going to cause any more deaths.'

He swung the cleaver at Pendragon's head. When Yue Hwa blocked it and kicked it out of his hand, it took a moment for the event to sink in. In that moment, Yue Hwa sidekicked Fei clean out the door and scooped up his gun. The other 49s dropped their weapons.

Years of teamwork vanished from Tse Hung's head, as illusory as dreams of flight. 'What the hell? You're sticking with that gwailo son of a bitch? You side with traitors?'

Yue Hwa shook his head. 'That depends on who the traitor is.'

'Is that your twisted definition of loyalty?' Tse Hung was horrified.

'You seem,' Pendragon said, 'to be under a misapprehension about who works for who in the Tao Te Lung.'

'What?' Tse Hung looked from him to Yue Hwa. 'You're not trying to say he runs it?'

Yue Hwa smiled. 'I don't know if 'runs' is the right word. Baits, perhaps. The Tao Te Lung is a trap for up-and-coming godfathers.'

'Then you're -'

'Major Yue Hwa. Public Security Bureau. The Doctor here has been assisting us for some time.' Uniformed cops were now swarming into the cottage. 'Raids are taking place all over Hong Kong. My government would like to start its reign with an immediate drop in crime, and this sting operation will go a long way towards achieving that.'

'And the aliens?'

'Needed a collaborating organisation to hide them,' the Doctor said with a smile. 'The two necessities dovetail rather nicely.'

'What went wrong?' Sarah asked when Tom came back. He was bruised and tired, but otherwise unharmed.

'Ah, it was nothing,' he said, but she could see something in his eyes that was very weary and quite shocked. She decided not to push it.

'UNIT was going in at the same time. A guard got shot, and that sparked a firefight. They got the data from the Pimms computers, but we have a common ally in you. So we're working together.'

Sarah was delighted. If both UNIT and the DEA were working together, she need have no fears about whether either of them were the good guys or not. Things were starting to look up.

It was a small office, little more than an untidy anteroom of the homicide office, but it was all his. Mark Sing of the Independent Committee Against Corruption leant back in his chair while Katie Siao tried to avoid his gaze. He was half-glad of that as it proved she recognised her guilt, and half-disappointed that she wouldn't see in his eyes how much he hated taking this role.

He still hadn't decided whether he should let her go, on account of the stuff in her house not being illegal, or charge her with something because of the clear intent she had. If it was anyone else - anyone who didn't have two kids to support - he wouldn't hesitate to take them down.

'What am I supposed to do with you, Cannonball?' he asked.

'Charge me and fire me.' She didn't smile at the pun. She probably didn't even recognise it. 'You have to, if you're honest.'

'Honesty and justice aren't always the same thing.' He wished he could think of something in the situation that proved this. Before he could, there was a knock at the door. Probably a uniform with Siao's personal effects. 'Come in.'

Sing couldn't think of a thing to say when he saw the pair who came into his office. One was Yue Hwa, a high-up in the Tao Te Lung. The other was the little white guy from Wing's apartment building. Before he could demand an explanation, the white guy was talking.

'I'm the Doctor, and this is Major Yue Hwa, of mainland China's Public Security Bureau.' Sing and Siao both remained silent, too surprised to answer yet.

Yue Hwa handed across a wallet with ID inside it. 'Inspector Siao has been co-operating with the PSB in a cross-border sting operation.' Siao looked as surprised as Sing to hear this.

'I've had no paperwork -' Sing started to say.

'Of course you have,' the Doctor interrupted. 'You'll find it in your in-tray somewhere.'

Sing stared at him for a moment then sifted through his in-tray. Sure enough, there was an unopened manila envelope. He opened it and pulled out a sheaf of papers. It was all there, dated several weeks ago: Siao was seconded undercover to trap Tse Hung and other members of the Tao Te Lung. Everything was in order and signed by the highest officials. 'Why didn't you say anything about this when we arrested you?' he asked her.

'She was under strict orders not to,' the Doctor replied. 'There was no telling how far the criminals' influence extended. Even the ICAC couldn't be trusted.'

Sing bristled at that. 'I've never been on the take -'

'I didn't mean to suggest you had,' the Doctor said hurriedly. 'But what if someone who had seen her statement in the files, or if they overheard you speaking to Inspector Siao?'

Sing's anger subsided a little. It was a sensible attitude to take. 'All right, but I'll be studying those papers very carefully'

'Of course. Now, if I may speak to Inspector Siao alone for a moment&' The Doctor led her through the door.

Siao was surprised to hear of her heroic co-operation. 'What was all that about?' she asked, as soon as she and the Doctor were out of earshot.

'About not punishing people for foolish misjudgements.'

'But those papers are forged, surely? This will just make me look worse -'

'No, they're genuine. My friend Yue Hwa and I had to pull some strings to arrange it& ' he smiled faintly '& or we will have to, rather, but they are completely genuine.' His face grew more sombre. 'You've been given a second chance. Don't make the same mistake again.'

Chapter Nineteen The Only Hoq To Be Sure

Analysing computer data was a laborious task that tended to give Sarah a headache. Perhaps it was simply a game for younger eyes, though hers were surely not old. She considered that for a moment then amended the thought.

Julie Palmer was sitting amidst an array of PCs and monitors, casting her young eyes over the reams of data that were scrolling past. Tsang, Barry and Tom sat around her, sipping coffee, hi Tom's case, sipping coffee laced with whisky.

'So far there's nothing that gives us a clue to where the aliens are.' She frowned. 'Hang on&'

A photo of Major Barry was on-screen. Biographical data was scrolling past it. Barry leant forward, mouth agape in a most unmilitary fashion. 'What the hell?'

'It goes all the way back to your childhood, sir. This isn't even a copy of a UNIT record, it's an all-new file.'

'If they know about me, who else do they know about? Can you search for other files like this one?'

'Easily.'

This time the TAKDIS materialised inside the plantation house. The Doctor found Chiu supervising the loading of metal blocks into one of two ships. 'Ready to leave?' he asked.

'Almost. There is not enough room for everything, so we will place charges to demolecularise the remaining technology at this site. The house and its environment will not be harmed.'

Good.'

'I am leaving immediately. We will pick up a few remaining crew members in Hong Kong, then proceed to the crash site.'

'I'll join you there soon.' The Doctor hesitated, not unlike Columbo before a 'one more thing'. 'What did you do with the UNIT team who penetrated the area?'

Palmer's fingers were typing furiously but her expression suggested they were doing so independently of her brain. She looked quite disturbed. 'There are new files on Gibson, myself, Captain Clark& Everyone on the field team.'

'Only the field team?' Sarah asked. She thought she could see where this was leading.

'Yes, there's no mention of yourself or Colonel Tsang&'

Sarah nodded slowly. 'Then they must have known only you. They must have made some kind of contact with you.'

'Tranh,' Barry said slowly. 'He was selling us out, reporting our positions&'

Sarah shook her head. 'No. He couldn't have told them all this stuff about your pasts, could he?' She didn't wait for an answer. She had seen species before who could read people's minds, or extract data from the brain by mechanical or chemical means. It was obvious that this was what had happened to Barry and his group. 'They can only have got this data from you. That means they must have made you forget that they got it, and replaced the memory with the memory of an empty house.'

'Oh shit,' Barry said. He slumped into a chair. Sarah suspected that when this - the ultimate existentialist's nightmare - hit him, he'd be hiding under a table.

'Roger that,' Tsang agreed.

As Chiu described it, they had immobilised the Blackhawk before it could dust off from delivering its human cargo. Had the team been deposited back at the camp without the chopper pilots believing they had flown them, the deception would be uncovered quickly. A disruptor crossfire had pacified the humans before they ever reached the house.

"They were stunned as they approached. We added their pool of knowledge to our own, and then erased the incident from their minds. They returned to base safely, believing they found nothing here.'

"That's very magnanimous of you.'

'Simple practicality, Doctor. If we eliminated them their superiors would know there was a threat here. This way the threat assessment will at least be delayed.'

'Humans may be short-sighted and vicious at times,' the Doctor pointed out, 'but they have some of the most brilliant minds in the universe. They will eventually work out that the team's memory is false.'

'Yes,' Chiu admitted. 'However, operations here are complete. The delay will allow us to decommission this location, and withdraw from it before the Cortez Project can act.'

'I hope so -' The Doctor frowned. 'Before who can act?'

Barry followed Tsang when she left the computer room. The idea that other people could rewrite his memory was just too horrifying to think about. How could he trust his knowledge of anything? People's personalities developed out of experience and memory, so what if he wasn't even who he thought he was? The whole thing was starting to give him a migraine.

Tsang went into her office and picked up the phone. 'Get me the Clancy, code white.' She cradled the phone between shoulder and jaw as she waited to be connected. 'As soon as the Blackhawk returned from dropping you off at your LZ, I had the alien transponder recoded, just in case it was needed for another trip.'

'I'm ready to try again,' Barry lied. In truth, he'd rather that he never left his house again. 'If at first you don't succeed, and all that. Where is it now?'

'Aboard USS Clancy:

Barry squinted at her. 'What bloody good is that? I can't get to -' 'It's being fitted onto a Tomahawk. Low-yield tac-nuke: two-and-a-half kilotons.' She got an answer on the phone. "This is Chair. Authorisation to fire is granted.'

The sea a few miles outside Cambodian territorial waters was calm that day as the Spruance-class destroyer Clancy aligned herself into the wind. Alarms rang as a missile-launch tube was opened.

The side of the ship was obscured by a billowing cloud of smoke as a Tomahawk cruise missile punched its way into the sky. Its small wings were deployed soon afterwards and it began to hurtle inland.

Tse Hung had calmed himself down as the uniformed cops led him and the 49s away from the Doctor's cottage, and drove him back to a police launch moored at a jetty in Silver Mine Bay.

As they approached the launch he manoeuvred himself into the lead position so that he would go aboard first. As soon as his uniformed escort was on board he made his move. He headbutted the cop, knocking him over the side, and kicked the throttle lever on to full.

The launch began to struggle against its mooring rope which Tse Hung cut with a switchblade. By the time the other cops got their guns drawn to fire, he was free and clear.

He wasn't stupid enough to think this was the be-all and end-all of his escape. The police would circulate his description and he'd soon be picked up. He just had to make sure he got picked up by authorities who suited him.

The Tomahawk hit the roof of the plantation house neatly, and exploded within. The nuclear charge was small but it was enough to vaporise the building instantaneously. Metal, aliens, drugs and one 40-foot saucer were ripped apart at the atomic level.

Everything for half a mile in every direction died almost instantly.

'Target destroyed,' a UNIT signals corporal reported. Tsang and Barry grinned at each other. They were back in the computer room, still searching for clues to the aliens' whereabouts.

'Destroyed?' Sarah echoed. 'What do you mean?'

'A low-yield tactical nuclear strike on the aliens' base was authorised,' Tsang told her.

Sarah was horrified. 'Nuked it? Is that what UNIT has come to these days? Murdering sentient beings just because they come from somewhere a little more foreign than most?'

'Nonsense, Sarah. You've worked with UNIT-UK; you know that lethal force is a necessary option only used in the last resort.'

'And what do you call a last resort? Being metal? Having reptilian skin, or two hearts? Having pointed ears in a public place?'

Tsang gritted her teeth. 'I mean when there is a clear and present danger to national, international or planetary security. You have to trim the thorn

bushes now and again if you want a safe garden.'

'If that's how you see your duty, then UNIT is no longer an "Intelligence Taskforce" - it's a death squad, plain and simple.' Sarah stormed out, slamming the door behind her.

Tom followed her.'Sarah, they did what they felt was necessary.'

'Necessary in what way? Surely we'd stopped the aliens interfering in the handover - even if that's what they intended to do.'

'Had we? So long as they were in that base and wouldn't allow us to make contact, they were a threat. Why else would they hide themselves? Why else wipe the UNIT team's memories?'

'You're as bad as the others.' As disappointing too, but she didn't say that aloud.

'No. Believe me, I'm as upset with the destruction as you are. Those aliens clearly had stealth technology way above and beyond anything we have today, and to simply destroy that is&

dumb.' He did sound genuinely angry, Sarah had to admit. But whether because of the destruction or the loss of the technology, she was less sure.

"Their technology? Is that all you can think about? What about the local people there, or the wildlife, or the fact that an American nuclear bomb has just been dropped very close to the Vietnamese border? Don't those things worry you just a little?'

This time, she saw the mask move into place an instant before he said, 'Of course they do'. This time she saw that he was being economical with, if not the truth, his own feelings.

The Doctor had returned to the Pimms Building, and was surveying the damage inside it. Yue Hwa found him on the floor that his and Tse Hung's offices were on. 'All the king's horses and all the king's men have really got their work cut out for them today,' the Doctor said.

"That's putting it mildly.' Yue Hwa looked around, saddened, but in a way relieved. The pretence he had been maintaining was a curse on him, but now he didn't have to bother so much. It was all over, whatever happened. It wasn't the ending he'd have wanted, but at least it was case closed.

'Is there anything you need from here?' the Doctor asked.

'Yes, from my office.' The two men entered the room. There was water damage to the furniture and papers, from the sprinklers, but nothing seemed to have been burned. Yue Hwa moved a small drinks cabinet aside, revealing his office safe set into the wall. From it, he drew a small photo frame.

To his eternal relief, the pictures within were undamaged. They were of a reasonably average woman and a baby. The photos were all he cared about in his office. The rest could burn as far as he was concerned.

'Your wife and son&' the Doctor said understanding^.

'Ex-wife by now, I imagine,' Yue Hwa corrected him. 'I haven't seen either of them for two years.' The Doctor didn't say anything, but Yue Hwa could sense what was probably disapproval. Or maybe he was just imagining it because he

disapproved of himself.

Yue Hwa hadn't been there when Lai Ching was informed he wouldn't be coming back, but - from what he'd been told, and what he knew of her -he felt he could picture how the day had gone.

The PSB deputation would have been made up of two people, a man and a woman. They'd have told her about his abandoned car near the border with Hong Kong. They'd have theorised about how he had probably sneaked across on foot, or stowed away in a truck. How he'd disappeared without trace.

Lai Ching would have cried a little, but not too much. They got on all right but they weren't really that close anymore. It was one of those stay-together-for-the-sake-of-the-child marriages. Add in a healthy dose of not wanting to mortify either family by splitting, and you had a less than heavenly match.

But neither of them abused the other, and there was still love, however stale.

There would have been few tears from Lai Ching, but at least they would have been genuine ones. After a year, perhaps she'd have had him declared legally dead. He certainly didn't see her waiting in the hope that he'd return, especially if she thought he'd simply run away.

If he could have told her anything else, he would have, but the story she was told was the best one he could think of that would have the desired effect. It was the best story keep her out of danger.

If anyone knew he had a wife and child, they could use them against him. He wouldn't jeopardise his mission that way, and neither could he have put his family in such a position. So he had to run out on them instead. He doubted that anyone would ever believe it was for their own good.

"These things will work themselves out," the Doctor said, drawing Yue Hwa back to the present and the ruin.

"I wish I could be certain of that," Yue Hwa whispered. Such things were beyond the knowledge of men.

"You can," the Doctor assured him.

Inside the computer room, the signalman re-entered, rather more subdued. "Radar-tracking picked up two signals leaving the target a few minutes before the nuke hit. We may have got their base, but we haven't got all of them."

Tsang cursed. "Where were they going?"

"They visited Hong Kong, but one left again. We don't know where they're going. At least, we're not sure."

"Not sure?"

"There's a man outside who says he worked for the Doctor. He says he knows where the aliens are going, and wants to make a deal."

Chapter Twenty The Cortez Factor

The engines of the Hercules were already running when the pair of Discoveries pulled up nearby at a runway at Chek Lap Kok. Sarah was in the lead car with Tsang, Barry and Tom. Tse Hung, Gibson and Harris were in the second vehicle.

Although the airport wasn't yet officially open, Sarah could see it ought to be a great improvement on Kai Tak when it was ready. She wondered how long UNIT had been using the place for covert flights. 'Can we trust this Tse Hung?' she asked. Frankly, she doubted she could trust anyone associated with the situation she was in.

'We can trust his desire to screw the Doctor over,' Tom said. "The Triads have a certain way of looking at things.'

In response to a ground crewman's direction, Barry slowly guided the Discovery up the tail ramp until locking clamps grasped its wheels inside the cargo bay. They exited the vehicle as the second Discovery followed them in, and headed through to a small passenger section.

'How long a flight will this be?' Tsang asked.

'It's about nine hours to Riyadh,' Barry answered. "Then another couple of hours to get to the coordinates Tse Hung gave us. Their saucers are a lot faster of course; we might not be in time to prevent them doing whatever it is they want to do.'

Tsang grimaced. 'It's a damn shame Tse Hung doesn't know that. Still, I've managed to get the Americans to have a ship take up position over the coordinates he gave us.'

Sarah harrumphed.

f * "

This isn't over,' the Doctor told Yue Hwa. They were standing in the remains of the Pimms Building, eyeing the damage. 'Our other conspirators -'

'Are leaving Hong Kong. They're no longer my problem.' Yue Hwa didn't meet the Doctor's eye and the Doctor jerked round, trying to catch his gaze.

"They're everyone's problem, whether the rest of the population of this planet knows it or not. They still need help to get their ship repowered. They need our help. You can't just abandon them.'

Their eyes locked. 'I couldn't, if it was up to me. But I have new orders from Beijing. When the People's Government takes over Hong Kong they'd like to have an immediate reduction in the organised crime problem. They don't want their new capital of capitalism to go the way of Moscow.'

'If we don't finish what we started, their capital of capitalism, and all their other cities, will end up going the way of Hiroshima or Pompeü, let alone Moscow.'

'I've tried to tell them that.'

"Then tell them they're fools!' The Doctor tossed his hat to the floor. He looked at it with a regretful expression. 'Anger. Always ends up damaging only what you care about.' He lifted the hat with the tip of his umbrella and put it back on. He sighed and turned back to Yue Hwa, his mood seeming to flip over completely. 'I think we just need to tell Beijing what they need to hear.'

'And that would be& ?'

'If we don't fulfil our obligations to our extraterrestrial friends, the

Americans will probably get to them first, and grab both them and their technology. Now, will Beijing really want the Americans to have access to all manner of wonderful alien weapons, which are centuries in advance of anything anyone on Earth has now?'

When Yue Hwa put down the phone after passing the Doctor's question along to his superiors, his ear was almost burning. 'Well?' the Doctor asked eagerly.

"They want to know why I'm not already at Kharg Island. I'm editing that sentence, of course. There were a lot of rude words in it.' He sighed. 'All right, how do we get there?'

The Doctor looked at his thumb. 'We hitch a lift.'

Just as Sarah had been in years past, Yue Hwa was impressed by the way the Doctor made such miracles seem so casual. Over the past few months, he had become accustomed to the truth of alien life, but he had a long way to go before it could ever become a casual thing.

Sarah would have told him that it never became a casual thing; not really. A lot of people who had met the Doctor or other aliens acted as if they took a casual view, but they were fooling no one, least of all themselves.

The flying saucer's transparent floor made the trip dizzying as the blurred desert zoomed underfoot.

'How long?' Yue Hwa asked. He lifted his eyes to the ceiling. There was no sense of motion in the circular flight deck, and the view of a plain metal roof was a lot easier on the stomach.

'Perhaps five minutes,' Chiu replied. 'I assure you that I am as keen as you to complete this journey. Though I have further to go.'

'It isn't easy being separated from those at home,' Yue Hwa said understandingly.

For a moment it seemed that Chiu was going to say something touching, but then he merely nodded.

'Being a stranger in a strange land isn't the easiest subject to talk about,' the Doctor said softly to Yue Hwa. 'He understands that just as much as you and I do.'

Yue Hwa stepped back and lowered his voice. 'Does Chiu have a family at home? Someone to miss, or to be missed by?'

'Not in the way you mean,' Chiu said clearly, before the Doctor could answer. 'But there are those who would care, if that is the right word.'

* * *

The land around Prince Sultan AFB on the outskirts of Riyadh is flat and largely featureless. If it weren't for the occasional distant building, you'd almost think it was an outpost on some lifeless uninhabited planet.

The impression is misleading, of course; the desert teems with life, and Riyadh is the capital of one of the richest states on Earth.

Major Barry felt a lot more comfortable here than he had in the jungle. It was hotter in the desert, but not as stultifyingly humid. He didn't feel quite as

filthy as he had in Cambodia and, as far as he was concerned, that was enough to make the place worth visiting.

Tsang - who was in the passenger seat of the jeep he had borrowed -had arranged billets, food and showers at the base, but had forbidden any discussion of operations, even among themselves. One of UNIT'S EC-130 airborne HQs was already on site in a distant corner of the dispersal field, and that was the only place where any of them felt safe to talk.

The Smith woman was approaching the Hercules as Barry pulled up in the jeep. 'Need a lift? The fun chat can't start till we get there anyway'

'Thanks,' Sarah answered, with great relief. 'It's a longer walk than I thought.' She got aboard and Barry cruised over to the plane and parked a few yards from the tail ramp. 'What are we going to be discussing?' she asked.

Barry smiled apologetically, regretting that he had to draw his pistol on Sarah. 'The Cortez Project.'

A small office was set into the front of the Hercules, just behind the cockpit. 'Wait outside,' Tsang told Barry. He closed the door, and Sarah felt she was being locked in with a tigress. Or a black widow.

A tray of refreshments had been left on the desk for them and Tsang began helping herself to an iced tea. Sarah stuck with the more trustworthy option of the coffee-pot and a couple of sugars.

'Do you know your history?' Tsang asked.

'I did an A level,' Sarah answered. 'I don't know if that quite qualifies.'

Tsang sipped at her iced tea. 'When Cortez landed in South America in the sixteenth century, he burnt his ships, so that his men would have to integrate with their new environment or die.

'In human history, every time two cultures or societies at unequal stages of technical advancement have met, it has led to the demise of the less advanced culture, the prime example being when the Europeans began exploiting the New World.'

'Starting with Cortez&'

'Correct.' Tsang smiled. 'By definition, any alien race that comes to this planet must be more advanced than us. That makes them a clear and present danger to human society itself'

'You can't be saying that every race in the universe wants to conquer the Earth! Surely there are a lot of visitors who have rules about non-interference -'

'Oh, spare me the Star Trek crap! I'm talking about the real world; the real galaxy. I've been in UNIT a long time, and just about every set of extraterrestrials I've so much as read a file on has turned out be hostile. The few - the very few - who weren't actively hostile have turned out to be naturally inimical to human life, and so would be a threat even without intending it. When Cortez brought Europeans to the New World en masse they didn't just conquer and plunder, of course; they brought a new religion and all the laws that were based on it. They brought syphilis and plague& Even following the dictum of "make love, not war" still brought about massive damage. Think how much more damage an alien incursion may cause.

'Say they bring a cure for cancer or the aging gene - then maybe we'd become sterile as a result. Or run out of food and water.'

'So you think it's safer just to kill them.' Sarah was repelled. Prejudging a potential event was bad enough, but to use it as an excuse for murder&

'That's right. Safer for all of us.' Tsang leant forward imploringly.

'We must not allow any of these civilisations to endanger our own existence. If we can hide from them, fine. But if they come here, it's them or us.'

Sarah felt a desperate need for fresh air, but there was the guard outside& She could always try to throttle Tsang for her insane views, but doubted she'd get very far in that line. It wasn't just the nature of Tsang's lecture that had disturbed her. She knew it must mean she was in danger. Tsang would never have told her all this stuff if she was just going to let Sarah walk right out of here.'And the Cortez Project is the scheme to prevent this& disaster?'

Tsang nodded, apparently pleased.'The Cortez Project is a group of people who understand the threat we face, and are willing to do what's necessary to deal with it. UNIT, as you know, was formed to deal with "new and unusual threats" to mankind. Most people, even within UNIT, think that should refer only to outright hostile visitors. Those of us who know our history can see that this isn't the case; that any contact is a threat. The Cortez Factor, if you like.'

'Then this isn't UNIT policy?' That was a relief.

'Unfortunately, not yet. The Cortez Project runs within UNIT, without the knowledge of the secretary-general or the defence ministries of any of the member countries. We'd like you, as an attached member of UNIT-UK, to join us.'

'Why me?' Sarah managed to make it sound like a calm and reasonable question, which wasn't how she felt.

'In your time with UNIT-UK and with the Doctor you've seen for yourself how much of a threat this planet faces. Your file makes it clear you've been involved in several events in which the destruction of humanity itself was a direct possibility.'

'And if I refuse this offer, I wake up next to a horse's head?' Tsang merely looked baffled at that. 'I mean, you'd hardly let me walk out of here, knowing all this, if I refuse.'

Tsang didn't stoop to confirming the threat. Neither woman needed to be so obvious. She didn't deny the assumption either. 'You're ideal,' Tsang said quietly. 'You're experienced, you have contacts and you know the dangers - even from your former friend, the Doctor. Look at him now: a gangster collaborating with alien infiltrators. If that doesn't prove the Cortez Factor, I don't what does.'

Chiu's ship had come to rest on a concrete dockside that jutted out into an almost unnaturally blue sea. At first Yue Hwa wondered why the saucer didn't attract further attention, but when he disembarked he found that it wasn't there to be seen. Only a faint haze in the air betrayed its presence.

He and the Doctor helped Chiu and his people carry several crates and boxes out of the ship and across to a black submarine moored at the dock.

'Welcome aboard.' The captain greeted them in a thick Russian accent. He waved to a couple of sailors to help with the cargo.

None of them could believe how cramped the interior of the submarine was. Yue Hwa had once spent a week staying in a Japanese 'capsule hotel', where the room was a cocoon little larger than his body. The living quarters aboard the Zhukov were worse still, like a capsule hotel designed for children, and slept several men in each bunk.

As soon as one man went on duty another took his bunk, through three or four shifts. The beds were always body-warm. Yue Hwa thought he'd go crazy in such a situation. He was a country boy at heart, and found it depressing enough living in an apartment in a crowded city, but this was a living hell.

Even Chiu looked surprised by the lack of room. 'This is an inefficient design,' he noted. 'It will cause friction among the crew, reduce morale and thus impair combat efficiency. You should change it,' he told Captain Kutzov. 'You can find the coordinates again?'

'Easily,' Kutzov boasted proudly. 'My navigator is best in fleet.'

One of the Russians came and said something to the captain. He looked up. 'Well, we're past the point of no return now. Welcome to Iraqi territorial waters.'

'You say that as if it's a bad thing,' Yue Hwa said dryly.

The captain looked at him. 'This will not be easy. The Americans keep a carrier battle group in the area at all times, to help enforce UN no-fly zones. Where there are American aircraft carriers, there are Aegis cruisers, and more anti-submarine helicopters than there are fleas on dog. Sooner or later they will find us.'

'What? You're trained to hide underwater, surely? Run silent, run deep?'

The captain nodded. 'Sure. But Persian Gulf is coastal waters only. It is never deeper than, oh, one hundred metres. Not deep enough to hide for long.'

Sarah had thought that travelling in the TARDIS was confusing for her body clock, but that form of time travel was nothing like as draining as making several east-west trips over several time zones in a matter of a few days.

Hours ago she had stopped trying to work out what time it was in London, and settled for the determined idea that it was bedtime. Unfortunately, the sun was not yet at its zenith in Saudi Arabia and she knew she wouldn't be able to sleep.

She was wrong, as so many travellers are, and slept through the two-hour helicopter journey out to the USS Westmoreland.

Sarah liked Captain Davis almost instantly, and a lot more than she liked Tsang or Barry. The last two both had goals involving victory, whatever that was, whereas Davis's goal was clearly the survival of his men. He reminded her slightly of her father too.

'How goes the day, Captain?' Tsang asked when they were all shown into the wardroom.

'Tolerable, Colonel,' Davis answered steadily. 'Now, what can I do for you ladies and gentlemen?'

'We'd like to harness your ASW equipment and techniques. Our mission is directed against a target currently sitting on the seabed directly below us -'

'What? Do you mean to say you've a rogue submarine out there?'

Tsang made a placating gesture. 'No. We have a downed vessel out there and we would rather it was not recovered by the people currently intending to use it. The problem is they may already be in the process of salvaging it.'

Davis shook his head. 'We'd have noticed any salvage operation going on here, Colonel. Fact of the matter is, there hasn't been anything bigger than a twenty-foot patrol boat out here all day'

"There will be,' Sarah put in. 'You'll know it when you see it.'

'Captain,' the intercom burst into life, 'sonar. Contact reported at three thousand yards.'

'Contact?'

'We're running it on the computer now& Sound signature is probable Victor III.'

Echoing pings rippled though the Zhukov. 'Well,' Kutzov said fatalistically, 'I told you.' He nodded to another officer. 'Periscope depth.' He raised the periscope as the submarine shallowed and peered through it. 'American cruiser& Shit.'

Chiu turned to his attendant and whispered something in his own language. "The surface vessel will be our biggest problem. The threat must be neutralised before anything else is done.'

The captain folded his arms. 'My government said to take you to these coordinates, but I will not go to war for you.'

"That will not be necessary'

"There are hundreds, thousands of people on that ship.'

'We mean them no harm. It will be necessary for us to take control of their flight-director area and command and control systems for a short period of time: until the Qe'shaal 's opera-tional stability is assured and air supremacy established.'

The Russian captain snorted. 'If you think the Americans will let you, you're crazy'

"Then we will give them no choice,' Chiu told him. He tapped the side of his neck. 'Phoshaph siwo-roch. Nis'n qo wahlth'. He looked back to the captain. 'Consider it done.'

Ctiapfef Tienenri|-One Face l*o Face

Crewmen on the Westmoreland's deck ducked as something swept past, the air rippling. The ship was knocked cold and never even saw what had hit it.

In the CinC, every monitor and read-out went dark. Lights failed throughout the ship as fuses overloaded. Navigation, communi-cations and weapons systems went down. All control systems for the ship's gas turbines failed

simultaneously.

Ordinarily this would have meant panic, but here, the crew's reactions were silenced almost as quickly as their ship had been. A sickening wave of energy spread through the steel warren below decks, knocking people to the floor. Men and women simply tumbled into limp heaps wherever they were.

The ship was dead in the water.

Above the flight deck, two silver discs coalesced out of the blue sky. A moment later, figures stepped out of temporary red hazes in the cruiser's most vital areas.

Sarah woke retching, not even remembering that she had lost consciousness. In a way she was glad to retch, as it suggested that the past few days were no more than a fevered dream. She had probably picked up some kind of food poisoning from a roadside stall in Bangkok, and generated the week's events as an allegory for what her weakened body was going through. Then she opened her eyes.

She was lying on a ship's deck. A few dozen yards away, a submarine had surfaced, and two saucers like the one she had seen at the container terminal were hovering above it. Worst of all, she was looking into the eyes of something totally alien.

It superficially resembled the things she'd seen in Close Encounters and The X Files, only it was more horrifying. On the screen you knew the faces were masks over humans. Here, the underlying bone structure was utterly different. The black eyes seemed to be little bottle universes rather than orbs for seeing -complete voids which were uncomfortable to look at.

'Do not be afraid,' it said. 'You have not been permanently damaged.' She sat up and saw there were a few more of them around. They all wore some kind of uniform coverall and carried crystalline weapons.

'What&?' She could hardly get the words out, and pulled herself together. 'What have you done?'

'It was necessary to render this vessel inoperative before UNIT'S Cortez Project members could harm themselves or others. The Time Lord will explain to you.'

'The Doctor?'

'Yes.' The alien indicated the submarine. 'I will take you to him.'

Tom kicked at the bulkhead door but it was steel and only hurt his foot. He, George, Tse Hung and the others had woken in captivity. He didn't know where Tsang and the rest of the UNIT team were. There was no sound of engines and he suspected they were at anchor, or adrift.

The aliens who had taken over the ship had dragged Sarah off. Tom didn't know why, but didn't imagine it was to do anything good. Torture and interrogation, probably. Maybe brainwashing, like what happened to Barry and the others. It was a damned shame as far as he was concerned.

His spirits weren't dampened, though. He had a damsel in distress to rescue, bad guys to dispose of and the world to save. Life just didn't get more fun than that, or so he proclaimed to anyone who'd listen to his stories.

Regardless of whether the situation was an action hero's dream or a working man's nightmare, Tom had no real idea how to do any of those things.

'If anyone has any ideas, now's the time.'

Tse Hung sat on a bunk. 'Undying love and unending hate& We should be powerful indeed.'

'What?'

'Do you drink, Mr Ryder?'

Tom wondered what that had to do with anything. 'Yeah, so?'

'I think I should like a drink.'

'Help yourself.' Someone had relieved Tom of his pistol while he was out cold, but he still had his hip flask and passed it to Tse Hung. 'Southern Comfort - the rare stuff; 87 per cent for export only'

Tse Hung took a slug. 'Thank you.' Then he hopped from the bed and tipped the booze out next to the door.

'What the hell?' Tom snatched the flask back and threw a punch at Tse Hung. It would have floored a boxer under Marquis of Queensberry rules, but Tse Hung blocked it and sent Tom spinning into a corner with a twist of his arm.

'Our captors have left us only one way out - the door - but that also means they have only one way in.'

Tom picked himself up, angry, but getting his priorities right. 'I see what you're getting at.' It was a hell of a waste of good booze, but the sacrifice was in a good cause. Then he and the others started yelling. They brought the house down with screams and the sound of crashing furniture and, sure enough, the door opened. '

One of the little grey aliens raised his weapon but Tse Hung's match got there first. The booze ignited and the alien writhed in squealing pain. Tom snatched its weapon. He didn't know what it was, but it had a crystalline barrel, a curved handgrip and a trigger button. That was good enough for him.

A red haze - she had been through enough transmats to recognise the similarity - swept Sarah from the deck of the Westmoreland to that of the Zhukov. A hatch was open in front of her, leading down from the sail into the conn.

She stood at the hatch for a few moments. Partly, she wanted to catch her breath, but she also wanted to be sure about what she was doing. The golden rule of any story investigation was never to search unless you were sure you wanted to know the answer. In truth, if the Doctor was a criminal who had used her, she wouldn't like to know it for sure. The chance that he was still her friend was both a source of reassurance and a monkey on her back, driving her to possible pain.

She climbed down to where he was. He was wearing a sleeve-less question-mark pullover, and the expression of a child caught in some less-than-serious naughtiness: outwardly slightly nervous, but with evident cheerfulness and delight underneath.

He reminded her of Granville from Open All Hours, but he was the Doctor all right.

She slapped him, in the face and he didn't flinch.

'Does that make you feel better?'

'No.' Unfortunately it didn't. She hadn't really expected it to, but one never knew until one tried.

'Good. Violence shouldn't make people feel better.' He smiled disarmingly. 'You're just in time for tea.' She saw that he had laid out a small tray on the chart table. 'Dim sum; he said. 'A most agreeable way of having lunch. like life: enjoy what's good for you and share the rest with friends.'

'Have you still got any?' He hesitated as he served up the steaming dishes. 'I'm sorry,' she said. "That was maybe a little uncalled for.'

'Maybe.'

The truth was, Sarah had sought him out with the intention of saying something. Only now that she had found him she couldn't think of a thing to say that wasn't aggressive, defensive, self-pitying or vengeful. 'It was you behind that newspaper article, wasn't it? Or some lackey in the company's PR department. Yue Hwa, I suppose.'

'I cannot tell a lie,' the Doctor said. "Well, I can, but what would be the point today? Yes, I arranged that.'

Sarah slumped, the scent of strong sweet tea and hot bread no longer attractive to her. Don't look if you don't want to find. She should have listened to herself. 'How could you? After all the time we've known each other, all the travelling and all the times we've worked on the same team?'

'I had to,' the Doctor insisted, his face contorted with what he probably hoped looked sufficiently like guilt. 'It was the only way to make sure you couldn't spill the beans.' He sighed. 'We had to stop you from talking, at least from talking effectively. The others intended to kill you so, to save your life, I had to make it impossible for you to successfully spread the information you had discovered. That was the only way I could think of doing that.'

Sarah stared blankly at him. It was a feeble and obvious excuse. It also had the ring of truth, but that didn't make it any easier to stomach. She shook her head. 'You're not the Doctor I knew.'

'Perhaps you never knew the Doctor,' he snapped back. 'How can a member of one species really know how a member of another species' mind works, or how they think or feel? You've no frame of reference: you can only make assumptions and have beliefs. And without a common frame of reference, those are most likely to be utterly wrong.' He sighed. 'But not always.'

He sat opposite her, looking at her over the meal. 'I needed your help, but I couldn't let you know this because it would put you in danger. I hoped that if I put the Pimms Company on your itinerary, you'd work out for yourself that something was wrong.'

'I did. And when I did, you know what happened. Am I supposed to believe that it was for my own good?'

'Yes. I had a plan, but it's all starting to fall apart.' The Doctor grimaced as if in physical pain. 'There are just too many variables, even for me. I had

to keep control of everything somehow, and that meant trying to achieve mutually exclusive goals: secrecy and exposition, help and distancing&'

Sarah began to cease hearing the words. Justification of some-thing that couldn't really be justified - at least on a personal level -always felt the same, whatever the words used. The Doctor seemed to have turned to the dark side and become like the Master. He was obsessed with control and his own divine judgement about what was right and what should be allowed.

'I need your help.'

That shook Sarah out of her fugue.

'What?'

"That's why I arranged for you to visit me in the first place. But the time wasn't right, and too many things had to be sorted out first. I had three different groups to manage, all with mutually exclusive goals and intentions, and then UNIT and the local police interfering. Typical humans. But if any of those groups crossed each other, or if UNIT or the police unbalanced them, the result would be disastrous.'

In a way the threat of disaster was a relief. If things were as bad as usual, then maybe the Doctor could still be the Doctor. It wouldn't be the first time he had pretended to be cruel or heartless in order to motivate her,-or protect her.

It would be the first time she had known him to actually be cruel and heartless to motivate someone or protect them. Yet it made sense. Her business was rife with people who believed their own press and changed for the worse as a result.

'It was disastrous,' she pointed out. 'Unless you wanted a battle at your building. And it was because you drove me to UNIT and the others.'

'Yes.'

People went from playing devil's advocate to being devils themselves because they lost perspective. Why not the Doctor? He had always had the best of intentions, and Sarah knew what the road to hell was paved with. Or had he? Every time she blinked, her life wasn't just turned upside down, it was outright cartwheeling. 'And you couldn't just have asked? You couldn't just have explained this and asked me to keep shram?'

'I wanted to. Believe me, I wanted to. But it's not just up to me. While I wanted to ask for your help, my erstwhile associates here wanted to kill you so that you couldn't expose their existence. I tried to find the best way to keep you alive.'

His answer was why she had come to see him in the first place, yet now she just wanted to let him burn. 'Why should I help the man who's just tried to kill my career?'

He winced, and she knew she'd stuck a nerve. At least he still had a conscience about these things, or pretended to have one.

'Because forgiveness is a virtue?' he asked. 'Or, if you want to look at it another way, you'd be helping millions of people across the globe. People of all kinds, all creeds& Innocent people in danger.'

Same as always. 'Danger? What kind of danger? No, don't tell me: it's these aliens who've been abducting people.'

'Well, not these aliens, but the reinforcements whom are on their way in a flight of battleships, each one capable of devastating the Earth.'

'Are they intending to disrupt the handover to China? Or even invade China? That's what UNIT think.'

'And what do the Cortez Project think?'

'How did you know about them?'

'From the minds of the members of the UNIT team whom my associates captured.'

'I don't think the Cortez Project care what these aliens are up to. Just being alien and on Earth is enough to mark them for death as far as Tsang's concerned. She's crazy'

'If only that were true,' the Doctor opined. 'Unfortunately it's far too normal a human response.'

'Should I be insulted by that?'

'I've never made the mistake of tarring a whole species with the brush of a few individuals' actions. Or do you think you deserve tarring with the Cortez Project's brush?'

'They offered me a job.'

'I thought they might.'

'I think they've misjudged me.'

'I think so too. I also think that as soon as they realise that you'll be dead.'

'Then I should thank you and your associates, for saving my life.'

They regarded each other for a few long moments.

'Pax?' the Doctor suggested.

'Detente, at least.'

'Good,' he grinned.

'I've missed you.'

'I know.' He looked at his shoes rather sadly. 'At least, I know you've missed a Doctor who's long dead.'

'I try not to think of any of you like that.'

'I wish I could see things that way. I envy you humans that, sometimes.'

'I guessed as much.'

The Doctor took a deep breath. 'Now, down to business. UNIT think only in military terms, of new and unusual threats to mankind, and that's exactly why

I need to keep them out of it. Just trust me -believe me - when I say they've got things the wrong way round. They'll cause the threat, not end it.'

Sarah shook her head.'Oh no, you don't.You're not palming me off with some vague promise of explaining in future. Now, the Triads never admit non-Chinese into their ranks, so either you've had an oriental-looking incarnation or your association isn't a real Triad. Which is it?'

'Why do you always insist on asking these complex questions when there's so little time to explain -'

Just answer the question!. It's only as complex as you want to make it, and if there's little time then make it simple.' The Doctor was taken aback, but he really ought to have known better.

'Originally it was a social help group. When our mutual acquaintances needed a cover organisation to hide from the military and scientists who wanted to exploit them, it seemed ideal.'

'What happened?'

'Humans happened,' the Doctor said, with not a little scorn. 'If I've learnt one thing in all my lives, it's that you can always rely on humans to take something good and beneficial and pervert it into something selfish for their own aggrandisement. Sometimes I wonder why I like them so much.'

Sarah ignored the insult, working it out in her head. 'In other words, it wasn't a criminal Triad, but some of the people who came to work in it turned it into one.'

'Yes,' he scowled. 'Leaving me to spend every waking moment trying to keep a lid on things and prevent their criminal intentions from harming anyone, or UNIT'S paranoia from starting trouble.'

"That can't be easy.'

"That's putting it mildly, Sarah. Your species has a capacity for hatred, back-stabbing and thoughtless selfishness that's among the greatest in the universe.'

Sarah was getting increasingly irritated with his attitude. 'Tar and brush, Doctor.' He looked suitably chastened. 'Well, that might explain your involvement with a Triad, but it still doesn't answer my question about how you came to run it.' Her eyes narrowed as another possibility struck her. 'That's if you do run it.'

He kept an admirable poker face, but she recognised enough of the Doctor she knew to be able to tell when she'd scored a point. 'That's it, isn't it? You don't run this Triad, but for some reason you want people to think you do.'

He smiled faintly. 'And why would I do that?'

'To cover up the involvement of aliens in it. The fact that they're the ones who are running it! Except&' Her confidence in her own judgement faltered.'Except that surely you'd want to expose them and stop them, not hide them?'

'Stop them from doing what?' the Doctor asked simply. 'Things aren't always as you expect.' He looked round. 'There's someone behind you.'

Sarah turned and flinched. Chiu, the man from Kwai Chung, was there, and this time she could clearly see the unnatural violet glow of his eyes. He wasn't human. 'Who are you? What are you?'

'Our intelligence appreciation was correct. You are intelligent and dangerous.'

As compliments from an admiring opponent went, she could have hoped for better. 'And you're evasive. You didn't answer my question.'

'We are refugees, if you like. We came to Earth to recover technology and any remaining personnel from an earlier expedition of several years ago. On our landing approach, however, the ship was damaged. We escaped through transposition arches but the ship crash-landed. We did not know where. That is why we enlisted the Doctor's help to assist us in recovering and repairing the ship, so that we can leave when the technology we came for has been dealt with.'

'Then the Chinese government is hiding you?'

'No,' Chiu said. 'Its members are unaware of our presence. Yue Hwa is not able to report us to them.'

'I don't see why not.'

'How would they react if he were to tell them that some of the people attracted to his covert trap are aliens? They would withdraw him from the operation and send him to a mental hospital.'

'But you can't be absolutely sure of that. Not completely.'

'No, we cannot. So, to make certain, we have placed a block on his mind. He is incapable of discussing us other than as foreign partners in the gang's business.'

Sarah didn't get it. She could think of so many advantages that collaboration with a superpower would offer Chiu and his people. Surely it was self-defeating to avoid them. 'Why? I mean,

China has a space programme, so why not make some kind of deal with them - or with America or Russia or Britain?'

'We did not become involved with any of your planet's governments because we require secrecy.'

Sarah almost laughed. Almost. There was something in his voice that held her back, and made her wonder. 'Oh come on - surely the resources of a major world power could keep you under wraps?'

'You operate from a misunderstanding of the reasons why people keep secrets. Have you ever heard the saying that the only true secrets are the secrets that keep themselves?' Sarah nodded. Governments cannot keep secrets because they try too hard to keep them for the wrong reasons. They do not really keep secrets from rival governments, because those rivals have sufficient resources to send spy satellites to photograph bases from space, or to tap into computers and take what they want.'

'Then why do governments keep things secret?'

'To hide the funding from their own peoples; even their own lobbyists and

supporters. If you support a government because you want it to spend money on hospitals, you do not want to hear that it has actually been spending your money on a new space-borne weapons system. So, it hides that system not from their rivals - who can see it on their satellite photos - but from you. We have long since found that where a secret is used to mislead the accountants, there are always others - perhaps rival supporters of the same government - tracing the money to try to expose the secret. A criminal organisation, on the other hand, must by nature remain secret, simply to survive. Therefore those chasing the money are the rivals, the police, and they do not have the resources, nor are they working from the inside. Our secrets, then, remain our own.'

"That's a very cynical way of looking at things,' Sarah pointed out. She would have expected a human to think that way.

'Yes. But it is one we have come to through experience. We did, many years ago, attempt to form an agreement with one of your planet's leading powers. However, that proved & unwise.'

'And now you're trying to take over again with the help of evil men -'

'No. I will not debate the concepts of good or evil with you, but either way we are not "trying again". We have one mission objective: to leave Earth.'

'To leave?' Sarah was relieved but couldn't see why they had bothered to come in the first place if they just wanted to leave. 'If you didn't want to do anything with Earth, then why did you come here?'

'We did consider your planet a potential subject for absorption when we first discovered it. Since then it has been rejected as a viable or desirable target for annexation. It is strategically un-important and, frankly, would be too much trouble to maintain.' Chiu made a hand motion and several spheres began displaying images.

Sarah didn't recognise all the specific locations or events, but she did recognise them as news footage. Iranian students burning US flags, shocked paramedics at Dunblane Primary School, tracer fire over Baghdad, riots that could be anywhere in the world, authorities in protective suits entering the Tokyo subway, the North Hollywood shoot-out of a couple of months earlier. That was only the beginning.

'If you were a visitor to this world,' Chiu said, 'with a home many light years away, would you want to remain here one moment longer than you had to?'

Sarah didn't answer. She didn't need to; she knew he would be able to read her answer in her face. 'Where's home?'

'I believe the phrase is "that information is on a need-to-know basis", and you do not.' He held up a small crystal, which spun, and Sarah found she suddenly couldn't move, though she had no idea why not. Chiu looked at the Doctor. 'What does she know?'

'She's worked out enough of it. Now that we have her here, we can enter the final phase.'

Chapter Twenty-Two Still Haters

'Switch on the lights,' Kutzov ordered. He looked uncomfortable in the smaller submersible Chiu's people had attached to the hatch of his boat.

The lights turned the void of the viewing screen rigged by the Doctor into a starfield as beautiful as any seen at night. Tiny plankton and grains of sand were illuminated starkly against the blackness. Then a glint of metal emerged from the darkness, curving out of the seabed. What could be seen of it above the sand was as smooth and shiny as a piece of untouched tinfoil.

Half of it was buried, and much of the rest was out of range of the lights, but it seemed to Sarah that it was both oval and humped, like a flattened Coke bottle lying on its side. 'How do we get in?' she asked. 'I don't see an airlock or anything& it must be buried.'

'The entrance is wherever we wish it to be.' Chiu guided the small submersible upwards, barely lifting it over the sunken metal. When it was over a sufficiently flat expanse, he descended until everyone felt the clang of impact. He then took a small device from his pocket, and pressed something on it. There was a strange vibration from the hatch in the floor and Chiu released the submersible's controls.

To Sarah's alarm, the Doctor was already opening the hatch and she flinched at the expected deluge when he pulled it open. Nothing happened, except that the Doctor shone a torch into the sunken gap below.

Chiu slipped around him and dropped into the hole, then reached out a hand to help the others down: first the Doctor, then Sarah and Yue Hwa. 'Welcome aboard the Qe'shaal', he said.

'This is your ship?' Sarah asked.

'Yes.'

'What happened?'

'We weren't sure at first. We thought the ship was struck by lightning, but research proved it was shot down by a naval vessel.'

'Why?'

'Even when not in stealth mode, the ship would give a relatively small radar return for its size. We suspect that those responsible believed the Qe'shaal to be a military aircraft belonging to a rival nation.'

'You don't seem too bothered.' Surely a warrior race would be out for revenge?

Chiu just about smiled. 'That's a perfectly understandable error. These things happen in military circles. The person or persons who fired upon us were correctly doing their duty. Why should we bear them any malice for that? Their act was not out of malice towards us.'

'Would it make a difference if it was out of malice?'

'Yes. Our lack of malice in return would make us superior. Actions should be in pursuit of a definable goal. Anything else is an unacceptable risk and tactically foolish.'

'Do you think of everything in military terms?' It was starting to get annoying as far as Sarah was concerned.

'When on duty, yes.'

'Are you ever off duty?'

'Not while part of an operational unit on a non-allied planet.'

'You mean you've been on duty twenty-four hours a day for -'

'Yes.'

In the tales Tom told later, he didn't know what the alien weapon was, but the few creatures he'd seen since escaping had gone down pretty quickly when shot with it. He just hoped they were dead, not merely stunned like on Star Trek.

Tse Hung had gone straight to the lifeboats and made a getaway. Tom wasn't interested in following the gangster; his first order of business was to get the ship back into navy hands. According to him, Mister Action, he didn't really need the UNIT team members, but he released them anyway as his good deed for the day.

They all then progressed through the ship, taking it back deck by deck. The aliens fell quickly as the humans knew the environment better. The reports made afterwards actually list more dead aliens than the Doctor ever said were in Chiu's crew to start with. If Tom knew that, he didn't care.

He just led the troops through the ship, blasting anything small and grey, and releasing anyone trapped in a locked room. Within half an hour, the ship's crew were free and Tom had ceased to even notice the odour of incinerated aliens.

Even when the Westmoreland was back in navy hands, she was still dead in the water. In the CinC Davis shook his head and tutted. 'Everything's down.'

'How quickly can you be back up and running?' Tsang asked.

'Whatever sort of electromagnetic pulse they used hasn't fried the circuits & Half an hour. It takes at least that to cold-start the engines'

'You're not nuclear-powered?'

'No, Colonel; gas turbines.' Davis sounded proud of the fact. Not a pro-nuclear man, Tom judged. That was a pity; he seemed likeable otherwise.

Pity.'

Colonel?1

Tsang was sounding slightly spaced-out to Tom. He didn't think she was handling this well at all. 'If you had a reactor, we could scuttle the ship and hope to take out the aliens that way.' Tom was acutely aware of several UNIT guns now pointed in the direction of Davis and his sailors. 'As it is, we'll just have to hope we can get things online in time to try depth charges.'

'Colonel, there are more important matters at hand than destroying aliens who aren't aboard this vessel.' 'No, there aren't,' Tsang corrected him.

Everyone was nervous as hell. Yue and company had probably seen too many films in which people wandering round deserted ships walked into something nasty. They should try the position of experience that Sarah had; it was even worse.

Though the interior of the ship was metal, there were no breaks or joins to indicate connections to other rooms. Chiu simply stopped, seemingly at random,

and stepped through the metal. As the others followed him, they found that the walls moulded themselves around their bodies, forming an opening, with a millimetre to spare, that let them through.

Sarah paused to kneel by a dark smear scorched onto the floor. A few pieces of bubbled metal and plastic were welded into the centre of the burn. 'What's this?'

'One of the flight technicians who didn't reach a transposition arch in time,' Chiu replied. He barely spared the burn mark a glance.

Sarah couldn't tear her eyes away even as she recoiled from it. 'That's horrible.' The others were already rounding the next corner and didn't answer.

After passing through several chambers - they seemed to be bubbles within the ship's material, and so couldn't really be called rooms -the party came to a central area.

It was the size of a small office, and divided into little alcoves around a central space. Blank metal bulges protruded from the floor where consoles would normally be positioned, and a cracked pillar linked squat domes in the floor and ceiling.

One of the scientists moved to a featureless extrusion in the wall. As he touched it, the greyness of the natural metal colour dissipated like morning mist and a smooth console display was in its place. 'Internal power relays are functioning.'

'Sit-rep, status,' Chiu demanded softly.

'life support and gravity core nominal. Gravitational waveguide has been ruptured in the crash, as we expected.'

'That shouldn't be too much trouble if we work together,' the Doctor interrupted. 'The technology I've given you should be able to rectify such a minor problem relatively rapidly.' He beamed.

'How rapidly?' Chiu demanded bluntly.

The Doctor waved the question away. 'A matter of a couple of hours.'

'Begin the procedure immediately.' Chiu moved to a sphere lying against the wall and picked it up. He held it carefully in the air and when he took his hand away, it remained there. 'Communications.'

'We are unable to fully link in to the fleet Comnet and transmit our status,' another alien reported, 'but we are receiving trans-missions from local beacons and relay points.'

'Excellent.' Chiu put a palm to the floating sphere, concen-trating. 'I should be able to get an update on the situation offworld.' The sphere came to life, showing stars, glowing symbols and coloured specks. 'Doctor, you had best see this.'

'What is it?' The Doctor hurried over and peered into the sphere. As he watched, Chiu focused it on three red cursors. 'Coming here?'

Three battleships.'

'Looking for you?'

'Yes. We must be spaceborne before they arrive. If not, they will assume the humans have taken hostile action to prevent our return home, and will react accordingly.' The red cursors flicked off and were replaced by three tiny starships - stilettos hurtling Earthwards.

'How far off are they?'

'Less than an hour.'

The Doctor opened up a panel on the reactor. 'We have to get this running before they arrive. Why hasn't it worked? The

Gallifreyan technology I gave you to compress metallic elements should have made those ingots as usable as the element from your own system. We'll have to try temporal acceleration of the compression field.'

The Doctor started fiddling with the technology inside the reactor and Sarah allowed herself a small wistful smile. Technobabble and tinkering; it was almost like old times.

The only difference was that back then, it was her closest friend who did the fiddling.

Tsang had taken Davis's seat for herself, and the gesture didn't go unnoticed. She didn't particularly like to play these games of one-upmanship, but the situation was sufficiently desperate for her to do what was necessary to fulfil her orders.

She had received her orders on the day she had offered Sarah the use of a UNIT car, in a conference call with her superiors in the Cortez Project. 'Destroy the aliens and their technology by any means necessary,' General Kyle had instructed. 'All project members involved in the operation to be considered expendable.'

Tsang liked to imagine that it had been easy enough for Kyle to issue the order when she was safe in Geneva and didn't have to risk her own neck. But though she liked to imagine it that way, Tsang knew in her heart that it almost certainly wasn't the case. She had ordered people to their deaths herself, and it was never easy.

'Any means necessary' It could mean wrecking this ship in the process, and that didn't come easy to Tsang. She didn't particularly fear her own death - she'd just be reborn further round the wheel anyway - but it would be unfortunate to condemn the rest of the ship's crew.

Then again, they knew the risk to life and limb when they signed on.

Davis's executive officer rushed in, out of breath. 'Flash traffic from CINCPAC, forwarded from NORAD.' He handed Davis a print-out.

'Three objects descending from orbit, on course for our position? Missiles?'

'No, sir. They're on an entry path, not a re-entry curve. Whatever they are, they weren't launched from this Earth.'

Davis glared at him. 'If that's meant to be a joke, Commander, this is what I look like when I'm not laughing.'

'Neither am I, sir. Whatever these things are, they don't come from Earth, and

both NORAD and CINCPAC agree on that. And, sir? These vessels - if that's what they are - are several miles long.'

Chapter Twenty-Three Full Contact

Yue Hwa sat beside Sarah, watching as the Doctor, Chiu and the aliens tried to get the damaged ship up and running. His report remarks that of all the people who had been affected by this latest assignment, she was the one he felt most guilty about. In a way, it was Qi Wang Chuan all over again: doing the wrong thing for what he told himself were the right reasons, as if that somehow made it less wrong.

'For what it's worth,' he said, 'I'm sorry. We did our best to keep you out of it, but'

'Your best wasn't good enough. Now I suppose it'll be down to killing off the bad guy.'

'I don't want to kill anyone,' Yue Hwa said plaintively. 'I've seen, and done, some things that made me question the value of taking a life unless it's absolutely a split-second self-defence choice.'

'Tiananmen?' Sarah asked.

He looked at her for a moment, then laughed hollowly. Tiananmen, indeed. He remembered that day well. It was warm and sunny, the sort of day that should be reserved for picnics and young love by a stream. Some of them had treated it that way at the time: couples with placards, taking a break to share a lunch in the fresh air. Love and causes tended to mix in student days, one leading to the other.

It had been Yue Hwa's last year at university and his first serious relationship. He couldn't remember which of them had decided to join in the protests, just that they were both wildly in favour. No one had expected the tanks to be sent in or smoke and tear-gas to corrupt the summer air.

They had both escaped unharmed, but the experience had filled them with doubts and doubt is poison to love and romance. They parted soon after, amicably.

'No. After that. Qi Wang Chuan.'

'What's that?'

'Qi Wang Chuan was a pak tsz sin for a gang of dai huen jai operating out of Guangzhou. He'd been responsible for kidnap-ping and extortion, which hurt the gang boss I was pretending to work for. He sent me to kill Wang. It's not as if he didn't deserve it, but'

'But?'

Yue Hwa had killed a man once before, but that was in the line of duty. It was him or the other man. Qi could have been arrested. He might even have been persuaded to give evidence against the gangster Yue Hwa was spying on, and, thinking of that, Yue Hwa had identified himself as a cop to Qi.

Qi was eager to spare his own skin. Unlike the Mafia's famous code of silence, it wasn't unusual for Triad members to inform on rival gangs. In this respect, the police were just another weapon in the Triad arsenal during turf wars.

It was the pleading face that Yue Hwa saw in his dreams. A man nodding his

assent, agreeing to almost anything if it would keep him alive.

If Qi Chuan lived and turned informer, the Triads would know who had turned him. They would know Yue Hwa was a plant and months of investigation would have been wasted. The gang would have continued their work in the long run, and more innocent lives would be tainted or lost. Yue Hwa had to maintain his cover and no amount of wishful thinking could change that.

As Qi Chuan closed his eyes in thanks that the man facing him would give him a new life, Yue Hwa cocked his pistol and emptied the full clip into his face. He read in the papers the next day that Qi Chuan had to be identified by his tattoos.

He had told himself that it didn't matter too much - the man was a criminal who deserved death. Somehow it didn't feel right. He had killed to support a criminal, and that went against every-thing he thought he had taken the job on for.

'You were right,' he told Sarah. 'We should have asked you directly. Or not involved you at all.'

'Why did you?'

'You're one of the few people the Doctor trusts to do the right thing.'

Sarah felt terrible. She had betrayed the Doctor's trust in her judgement just as much as he had crossed her. She wondered how life had come to be like this.

Suddenly the lights came on brighter than before, with a distinct blue tinge, and a soft rumbling hum filled the air. 'Main power established,' one of the small alien pilots reported. 'Reactor is functioning normally, gravitational waveguide is stable.'

The Doctor leapt to his feet, closed the hatch on the reactor and patted it. 'As good as new. Better, actually.'

'Thank you, Time Lord,' Chiu said. 'We owe you a debt for your assistance.'

'Really?' The Doctor looked askance at him. 'The only thing as bad as owing something, is being owed it.' He left Chiu to monitor the power build-up, and joined Sarah and Yue Hwa. 'Almost time to go.'

'Go?'

'Unless you fancy a very long flight to a very strange place, yes. All of Chiu's people are accounted for, both the half-humans like himself and his genetically engineered pilots, and so is the technology we all want to keep out of human hands.'

'Genetically engineered?'

'Yes. The pilots are modified to withstand tremendous pressures and forces. Why?'

'I was thinking about Major Barry and UNIT,' Sarah said quietly.

'What about Major Barry's UNIT team?'

'According to them, not only were their own memories altered but their guide was working against them. They described him as being brainwashed. And what

about the hikers who disappeared locally?'

"They all turned up again. I doubt that their cases were connected -'

'Doubt? You admit these aliens have been brainwashing people. You admit they're experts at genetic engineering. Isn't it just possible they've been doing other things?'

The Doctor had been growing steadily angrier through this, if Sarah was any judge. He turned on Chiu. 'You were altering the DNA of people?'

'All we have done was for our own security only,' Chiu said. 'It was necessary to have a number of loyal Ph'Sor who would guard against any interference from the planetary authorities or other organisations.'

"That's not a denial.'

"The information is classified on a need-to-know basis,' Chiu snapped, cutting him off.

'If I find any sign of your interference in human culture&'

'Earth is no longer a target, Doctor, and hasn't been for many years. Our own expedition was merely a salvage mission to recover technology left behind previously. You need not fear us.'

Sarah could almost see the Doctor's reply written on his face -he might not need to fear them, but he couldn't trust them either. "Then what happens to those people?'

"They live normal human lives,' Chiu told him. 'Until and unless another incident like this occurs. Then we have a spread of contacts across the globe, who can assist with repairs and keep us out of the authorities' hands.'

Somehow, either through woman's intuition - not that she believed in such a gender-specific thing - or journalistic hunch,

Sarah knew he was lying.

* * *

The Westmoreland's engines started slowly but steadily. Davis looked as relieved as Tom felt. 'What do we do now?'

Tsang had come over to a sonar station. "That alien ship has to surface before it can take off, right?'

Tom nodded.

'So,' Tsang told him, 'we ram it, as soon as it comes up.'

"That'll wreck the whole thing!'

'It'll stop them, in a pretty damn permanent way,' Barry corrected him.

'And what about their technology?' Tom asked. 'If it all gets trashed&'

'I'm sure there'll be wreckage,' Barry pointed out. 'If nothing else, the stuff the ship is made of is something new.' Tom didn't like that at all.

'Look,' Barry told him, 'it's that or they fly off in it and do whatever they want. That way we all lose.'

Tom nodded slowly. It wasn't what he'd been sent here for, but it was better than nothing. 'All right, I'm still in.'

Back aboard the Zhukov, Kutzov looked up as soon as the American ship's sonar sound changed. 'Aspect change,' the sonar officer called out unnecessarily.

'I hear.' Kutzov returned to the periscope.

'Aspect change below us also. It's the& whatever it is. It's moving up.'

Kutzov nodded. 'I think the Americans know as well. They're coming around, building up speed&'

'Captain,' Morozich suggested, 'they're not going to try ramming the thing?'

Kutzov hesitated. It did look that way. What the hell was he supposed to do now? 'Blow tanks two and four, and surface,' he ordered.

'But we'll be right in the path of the American ship,' Morozich protested.

Kutzov nodded. 'I doubt they'll be willing to risk an interna-tional incident, not in these waters.' 'You're not supposed to play chicken 'with cruisers.' 'Fortune favours the foolish, Gennady. Blow tanks two and four, and surface.'

On the Westmoreland's bridge someone called, 'Captain, it's that Victor ID, she's putting herself between us and the UFO.' 'Dammit. Bear starboard. Reverse port screws.'

'They're too late!'

'Shit! Right full rudder, flank speed and sound collision!' Kutzov's order was too late. Even as the collision-warning siren hooted, the Westmoreland's bow cut into the Zhukov just forward of the propeller screws. The cruiser's bow crumpled under the impact, but held. The submarine, however, was batted sideways as if it weighed nothing, and rolled over.

It was like being inside a washing machine: water was scything into the engine room through a huge gash in the pressure hull, while men and anything that wasn't nailed down were bounced around the interior. Screams and floods of water muted the sounds of bones breaking and flesh being crushed.

The central column that filled the heart of the alien ship began to throb and pulse. 'We have achieved flight power,' one of the aliens told Chiu. 'Shields are non-operational.'

'We will require a clear flight path, but have no manoeuvrability below the surface.'

'Can't you outrun the surface vessels?' the Doctor asked.

'No. They are designed for operation in water; the Qe'shaal is not. The surface vessels must be removed from our path.'

The Doctor retrieved his umbrella. "That's my department.' He moved to the flight deck's transposition arch and started inputting coordinates on the panel. 'All ashore who's going ashore,' he exclaimed. 'That means you two.' He beckoned to Sarah and Yue Hwa.

'Where are we going?'

'Back to the Westmoreland. We have to move it away.'

'I'll see to it, Doctor,' Yue Hwa assured him. He led Sarah through the arch.

The Doctor turned back to Chiu and bowed slightly. 'I can't exactly say it's been a pleasure, but it has been interesting,' he said, not unkindly.

'likewise, Time Lord. It has been a mostly efficient exercise.'

'I shall take those words to heart and cherish them,' the Doctor said. 'Have a safe trip home.' He tipped his hat, then stepped backwards through the arch and was gone.

Chiu remained looking at the arch for a moment. The Doctor had made a good ally as much as he had once made a worthy opponent. Either way, he was worth admiring.

'Plot an escape trajectory. Prepare for flight as soon as a take-off path is available.'

How would Sarah have described what happened when the Doctor materialised in the ship's conn? Something like:

All the systems were still inoperative and Yue Hwa was lying at the Doctor's feet. The Doctor immediately knelt, feeling for a pulse. There was one, and Yue Hwa came round groggily.

'Sarah,' the Doctor whispered.

'She's fine, for the moment,' Tom said. He was standing on the far side of the main map table, holding a gun. Sarah was sitting in a chair nearby. 'Why are you helping these aliens to get away with& all they've done? Judging by your DIA file, I'd have thought you'd know better.'

'It's called a conscience.'

'Is that what you call it? A dope-dealing, arms-smuggling, alien collaborator with a conscience. That's a new one on me.'

'Tom,' Sarah said. 'It's not what you think. We've had this all wrong. All of us: you, UNIT and me. The Doctor is a -' She bit off the first few words that came to mind. 'Whatever else he's done, he does have Earth's best interests at heart. Those aliens aren't hostile.' So she hoped anyway. She wondered if even the Doctor knew all they really got up to in Cambodia.

Tom looked at her, swinging his pistol in her direction. 'Oh shit.' His face fell. She felt a pang of sympathy for the hurt she saw in his eyes. It was misplaced, but it looked genuine enough to make her wince. 'They got to you too,' he said.

'What?' Sarah was puzzled for a moment, then it dawned on her: he thought the aliens had brainwashed her too. 'No, it's not like that. They haven't done anything to us.'

'Then you were playing me for a fool all along. Either way& Tom pulled her up from the chair,'&if you and the Doctor are working together now, then you mean something to each other. I got good use out of you before, so why not again?'

Sarah felt mentally violated. 'I thought spying by seduction had gone out with Mata Hari.'

'It wasn't like that -'

'You just admitted you approached me because you wanted me to help you get at the Doctor. You're just a rent boy with a civil service pension.'

'That's why I was around here in the first place. What happened& would have happened, whatever I was doing here.' But his eyes said otherwise. So why was he saying these things?

'Oh,' she grimaced, 'that makes me feel so much better.'

'I just&' He couldn't think fast enough on his feet, not when it came to talking to people. 'I just wondered what you'd be like.'

'I bet you say that to all the girls.' He didn't deny it. Sarah couldn't understand this conversation at all. Unless Tom was trying to make the Doctor think she meant little to him. Little enough to kill her, perhaps?

The Doctor hesitated, looking as anguished as Sarah felt. 'You mustn't prevent the ship from taking off,' he insisted. 'Look outside: those saucers are interplanetary warships. Soon they'll be joined by their big brothers, who're capable of reducing a planet to rubble. Look at them and think what those warships will do if their people are harmed.' He moved to the navigation console. 'If I can give them a flight path&'

. 'Whatever they do, they'll do it anyway,' Tom retorted. "They're way too advanced to be influenced by us. Destroying them before they can react is our only hope of survival. Now step away from those controls.'

Sarah squirmed. She didn't think it could be possible to be more afraid than she already was, but when the cold muzzle moved down her cheek to her jaw, she managed it. She tried to pull away from Tom, testing his strength.

He reeled her back in immediately and shoved the gun into her armpit.

To Sarah's surprise, the Doctor started to lean back, away from the console. She wouldn't have been surprised at either of her other Doctors doing so, but this man had worried her. Unfortunately, leaning back was the worst thing he could have done.

There was only one thing she could do. Nobody, later, could have said whether she had simply reached her limit with Tom and become angry, or whether she was taking the only rational course of action she could, for the best result. Not even her.

Either way, she turned onto the pistol and looked into Tom's eyes. 'Let the Doctor do what must be done. Can't you see that we're all dead otherwise?'

'I can see that you're dead if you don't shut up and the Doctor doesn't do what he's told.' Tom pushed Sarah in front of him again, and called out louder. 'I mean it, Doctor; step away from that console or this bitch is dead.'

'I thought you'd say that,' Sarah said in a small, childlike voice. She looked back over her shoulder to where the Doctor was already lifting his foot to accede to Tom's demand. 'I'm sorry

'I can't forgive you,' she whispered.' Her hands were slipping down, grabbing for the pistol.

'I don't need your forgiveness,' Tom snapped pulling at her shoulder, trying to turn her so that she faced the Doctor.

'I wasn't talking to you.' Sarah's hand closed over his. She could feel the Doctor's horror an instant before he shouted a wordless protestation. She could see Tom realise, too late, that she wasn't trying to twist the gun away or get it off him.

Her hands closed over his, pulling inwards, her thumb pushing on his index finger. Tom's mask of toughness slipped, just for an instant, and she could see a man who'd fallen in love with her start to form the word 'No'.

In the narrow metal confines of the room, the shot was like a cannon blast.

Chapter Twenty-Four III Bad Things&

In those noisy Wanchai bars, you'd have to strain even harder if you wanted to hear Tom tell the end of the story. His voice would drop to a whisper, and you'd think you could see a tear form. But in those smoky places, it's hard to tell.

Tom had tried to pull his hand back, but too late - Sarah was already doubling over.

Then his arms had gone numb from shock and he had no hostage to use for leverage. The Doctor was free to do whatever the hell he wanted, but that didn't matter as much as watching his hopes and dreams die at point-blank range.

He was a Hero, capitalised. He was supposed to win the girl's heart and make love with her at sunset, not shoot her in that heart at touching distance. He would never have pulled the trigger on her. Not on Sarah. But he had to make the Doctor believe he would. The bluff had to be convincing, and that meant Sarah had to believe it too, but only for a little while. He would have explained later.

The gun had fallen from his grip and he had stared at his hand as if it was something supremely alien to him. T didn't mean&'

The Doctor had hooked Tom's hand with his umbrella and pulled him over.'Don't waste your breath.' He squeezed the nerve points at the back of Tom's skull, and the man slumped into unconsciousness.

The statement filed by Yue Hwa at the PSB headquarters in Beijing doesn't mention Tom shooting Sarah. His report skips to after-wards, when he himself recovered consciousness.

'What's happening?' he asked, rising unsteadily to his feet.

'Blood and thunder,' the Doctor told him, though Yue Hwa could see no blood in the room, just Sarah curled on the floor. The Doctor pointed to Tom. 'Handcuff him before someone gets hurt.'

While Yue Hwa handcuffed Tom, the Doctor turned back to the navigation computers, and fiddled with them. He made a little 'argh' sound which drew Yue Hwa back.'Something wrong?'

'I can't take control of the ship from here. We'll need the bridge.'

Yue Hwa grimaced. 'I was under the impression that UNIT were in control there.'

'What about the ship's own crew?'

'Locked in their cabins by the same people who freed them, I should expect.'

'Good.'

'It is?' Yue Hwa couldn't see how.

'Yes. Because it means they'll be all the more keen to help us take their ship back.'

Yue Hwa nodded and followed the Doctor to the infirmary, which was being used as a brig, dragging a mumbling Tom. It took only a few seconds to open the door and explain the situation. Lieutenant Cunningham was the most senior officer present, and the Doctor conferred with him. 'How heavily guarded is the bridge?'

'Two men with MP5s on each door.'

'Trying to rush them would be a slaughter& and we can't outflank them&' The Doctor paced around the small infirmary. 'If the weapons systems are still down, is the CinC guarded?'

'No.'

The Doctor brightened. 'Then the game's afoot.' He hurried down the companionway, following Cunningham's lead to the CinC. Yue Hwa followed, still dragging Tom. The CinC was perilously close to the bridge, but one deck down so Yue Hwa hoped they wouldn't be seen.

'What are you going to do?' Cunningham asked.

'Programme a nuclear missile.'

Cunningham and Yue Hwa exchanged looks. Neither of them could quite believe what they just heard. 'Why -?' Yue Hwa broke off as another sound became audible as they passed a door to the outer deck. The air was not just thickening, but shaking and humming.

'What's that noise?'

'The sound of our failure,' the Doctor said sourly. He moved to the door and pointed upwards, directing everyone to raise their eyes to the heavens. There were a lot of indrawn breaths.

On the bridge everyone also looked up. The glass in the windows was rattling as the sky darkened. Barry suddenly knew what that crazy guide had been talking about.

Impossibly descending through the clouds was an expanse of grey metal that stretched almost from horizon to horizon. A couple of miles along it, a large engine pod of some kind hung down on a boom, and the sea had pulled itself into a bowl to keep away from it. To either side, more vessels were descending.

Yue Hwa had never seen anything like it. No one on Earth had.

The Doctor's expression darkened even further, impossible though that seemed. 'We're too late.' He pursed his lips. 'But never say die.' He followed Cunningham as the young officer led him to the CinC.

The room was filled with radar and weapons systems. Yue Hwa shoved Tom into a darkened corner of the room so that he could both keep an eye on him and watch the Doctor. 'We had an EMP effect,' Cunningham explained. 'It shut everything down. We've got power back, but the weapons systems are all linked through the Aegis radar system. While it's still down, we've no weapons.'

'Congratulations,' the Doctor said absently. He fished in his pockets and eventually brought forth a Swiss Army knife that included a screwdriver. He started attacking the consoles, ripping out circuits boards and cross-wiring things. Yue Hwa didn't understand anything of what he saw, but after a few minutes the Doctor had a console operational.

Yue Hwa leant closer to Cunningham. 'What is that console for?'

'The Tomahawks.' The lieutenant raised his voice so the Doctor could hear. 'You still need two firing keys -'

'No, I don't.'

Cunningham gulped as the Doctor continued. 'This technology is like a slingshot to some of the people I know, and I'm a fast learner' He turned. 'You two go and get some men to watch the bridge. You'll need to take the UNIT people into custody if they surrender, and also stop them trying to storm us here.'

'Right,' the two men agreed. As soon as they were out of the CinC, they heard the door lock behind them.

On the bridge, a monitor suddenly sprang into life, displaying a three-minute countdown.

Tsang and Barry exchanged puzzled looks. 'What the hell is that?' Tsang wondered aloud.

'It's a weapons system display' Davis told her. 'That's a Tomahawk cruise missile countdown.'

Tsang was pleased. 'Someone got it operational. Good. As soon as the aliens take off, we let them have it.'

'And those big ships?'

'The nukes will take care of them too.' Tsang wished she felt as confident as she hoped she sounded.

'Hello.' The Doctor's voice suddenly came over the intercom. 'Colonel Tsang?'

Tsang recovered quickly from the surprise. 'I'm here, Doctor. Perhaps you'd care to give up now that I'm about save us from these aliens. We have weapons systems operational.'

'Ah, a most worrisome threat, with only two minor errata. One: those ships would look at a nuclear strike as we look at a fleabite. Two: actually, I'm the one with the finger on the button.'

'What?' Tsang had an awful feeling that she knew exactly what he meant.

'I'm here in the GinC, with a Tomahawk programmed and ready for launch.'

'Why? Have you seen the right side?'

'You could say that. Would you say you were protecting the world? Your Cortez Project, I mean.'

'Of course.' What did he know of the Cortez Project? Hopefully only what the Smith woman might have told him. She dreaded to think what the aliens might have got from Barry's team's minds. It was another reason why they would have to be destroyed.

'Ah. Because, you see, I was just wondering what certain nations think of certain actions. For example, if a Chinese officer and an Australian one were to hijack an American ship and fire a nuclear missile into the centre of, say, Tehran, what would happen?'

'You're joking?' Tsang's voice was horrified.

'I never joke about weapons. Death is no joking matter. When this missile launches, you'll suffer a level of terrorism unprecedented even on your planet. Alliances forged against you, sanctions, boycotts, bombings&'

'You won't do it. I've read your file, Doctor.' Tsang calmed herself. Perhaps she could yet talk him round, make him see why the visitors to this planet had to be eliminated. If that failed&

She had received training in many things, both from the legitimate UNIT and from the Cortez Project. There had been training in how to resist interrogations and brainwashing. There had been training in how not to give away valuable information. And there had been training in how putting the project first could help delay the natural psychological reactions to implementing those techniques.

She hoped things wouldn't go that far, but if they did& she would put the Cortez Project first. It was vital that the project and its members be protected, for there would always be more visitors to take care of.

The Doctor turned from the weapons console with a look of grim satisfaction on his face. 'Too late. The countdown's already running. Give up control of the bridge or your countries become global pariahs.'

'Sarah told me all about you and your file tells me too. You won't do it.'

'Sarah probably also told you I couldn't be the head of the Tao Te Lung. In thirty seconds you'll know whether she was right.'

On the bridge Tsang and Barry watched the countdown tick past twenty-five& twenty-four& twenty-three&

'All right! Stop the countdown,' Barry yelled.

'Tell your friends to come out unarmed first, and hand the ship back to Captain Davis.'

Davis jumped at the sound of a shot. Barry, looking surprised, slumped to the floor with a hole in his head. Tsang then put down Nomura. Gibson and Harris

turned their guns on her but were too late to save their skins.

Davis was sure he was next but Tsang was more interested in the intercom. 'There are more than just my group, Doctor. You can't stop all of us. We're everywhere.' Then she spat out something that sounded like 'di-lei-mo-ne' and antfblew the side of her head off.

She toppled from the captain's seat, her pistol falling from her hand. :<x

Tom spoke for the first time in several minutes, startling Yue Hwa who had all but forgotten about his prisoner.

'Now about the countdown,' Tom insisted. The numbers were slipping away faster than heartbeats. Seven& six& five& 'Stop it,' he pleaded. 'You can't do this.'

Three& two& one& zero. Tom screamed, 'No!'

There was a sudden raucous silence. No clouds of smoke burst forth from the launching tubes.

'You're right,' the Doctor said, cheery again as he straightened and tipped his hat. 'I couldn't.' His expression grew colder. 'You think might makes right, and that the use of the gun solves any problem. Kill the bad guys, if you can decide who they are. The ability to kill is such great power to you.'

He rounded on Tom with something that wasn't quite a snarl, but was dangerously close to it. 'But you forgot the most impor-tant power that any weapon gives you. Not the ability to kill a man or lay waste to a planet. The greatest power of any weapon is the power not to use it. That's the power that defeated you, and the Cortez Project, today.'

The sea heaved, bulging upwards as the sunken spacecraft broke free of the surface to take flight once more. Sea-water rained across the cruiser's deck as the dulled metal oval stabilised itself.

The Qe'shaal steadied herself then began to bank, curving away out from under the gigantic warships and into an escape trajec-tory. Davis and the others had never seen anything quite like it. Then there was a flash and it was gone.

The three larger alien ships remained stationary, a light cloud dispersing against one of them. They showed no sign of moving, but held station, humming so deeply that Davis could feel it in his bones.

'The& ah& vehicle that just launched is out of radar range,' Lieutenant Cunningham reported.

At the same moment, the pitch of the hum that filled the air deepened. For a moment, Davis was sure that just about anything could happen, almost all of the possible outcomes bad for his ship, his country and his world.

Then the gigantic sword of Damocles that hovered above them began to rise. All three of the gargantuan ships floated upwards as lightly as a child's balloons. In a matter of seconds they had gone, leaving only ruptured clouds in their wake.

'Will they come back?' Davis asked.

The Doctor tilted his head, pondering for the benefit of his audience. 'Not unless you give them reason to.'

Tom awoke in a cell, choking back a scream that wanted to burst out of him. He could still smell Sarah's blood on his hands, or imagined he could, and shivered.

The previous night had been a nightmarish turnabout: his vision misting red as Sarah fell, then a dizzying rush to the ship's infirmary. He remembered no voices, though people were shouting around him. All he heard were the monotones of flat-lining instruments in a room that turned slowly around him.

Then he was here, where he belonged.

And so it was done. All that remained was for the news reports to be edited and the documentaries made. And, of course, books to be written. For once the history would be written not by the victors - whoever they were - but by those who simply remained. None of the stories would be attributed to Sarah Jane Smith.

Epilogue Freedom

Across the street, a hawker was selling little songbirds, their cages decorating an old tree. A few of the birds were sitting in the tree uncaged. The hawker's assistant was stalking them slowly, efficiently scooping them up and transferring them into little cages for the tree.

The Doctor fed little nuts to his songbird.

The Doctor opened the wooden cage happily, gently wooing the songbird out. It sang as it emerged;" took to the air on the sweetest of notes. The Doctor watched it for a moment with an expression that suggested he enjoyed the bird's freedom almost as much as it did.

'I know how it feels,' Sarah said, beside the Doctor. 'Freedom not to look over my shoulder all the time:

'Yes& It all worked out in the end.'

'All?'

'I knew you'd force the renegade UNIT team into the open. I didn't expect them to be so organised, though&'

'Digging up the rest of the Cortez Project will be a long job. Who in UNIT can be trusted?'

'Alistair.'

Sarah grinned. "Well, apart from him - he goes without saying:

'I trust you, for one.'

'Then I'd better work hard to live up to that.'

'You always did, Sarah. No hard feelings about the&?'

'To paraphrase an old TV show, we both love it when a plan comes together.' She stood up. 'I'd better go - my flight to Geneva leaves in two hours.' She smiled, then turned and walked away.

'No goodbyes?' he asked. 'Have you started liking them?' The Doctor shook his head.

The birdseller had worked the same patch for thirty-four years, and had seen this little man a few times lately. He always came to the bird stalls alone, and today was no exception. He called himself 'the Doctor' when he chatted with the birdseller. He bought a bird as usual, and sat down alone as always.

The birdseller watched him for a moment, sitting by himself on his bench. Then the Doctor stood, tipping his hat to his feath-ered friend. 'Goodbye Sarah,' he said. The birdseller hadn't heard him give the birds names before, even though he was a repeat customer.

When the Doctor walked away, he had a little more bounce in his step than he had when he arrived.

Soon after he was gon, the bird settled onto a nice little branch on the tree of cages. Soon it would be fed, and sheltered, until the next person who wished to trade for a moment of song.