



There's a new exhibition at Tate Modern –
'The Tomorrow Windows'.

The concept is simple: look through a Tomorrow Window and you'll see into the future. You'll get 'The Gist of Things to Come'. According to the press pack, the Tomorrow Windows exhibition will bring about an end to war and suffering.

Which is why someone decides to blow it up.

Investigating this act of wanton vandalism, the Doctor, Fitz and Trix visit an Astral Flower, the show-world of Utopia and Gadrahadraddon – the most haunted planet in the galaxy. They face the sinister Cecces, the gratuitously violent Vorshagg, the miniscule Micron and the enigmatic Poozle. And they encounter the doomsday monks of Shardybarn, the warmongers of Valuensis, the politicians of Minuea and the killer cars of Estebol.

They also spend about half an hour in Lewisham.

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

The Tomorrow Windows

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For Douglas Adams

Prologue

The Story of Easter

Imagine you are on an island. The ocean lazes out before you, a stretch of glass-glinting blue, The sky is clear and the overhead sun bakes your skin. Palm trees rustle in the breeze and the grass plains ripple like a second sea.

The people of the island are thriving. The trees offer syrup, the ground provides cane and the ocean provides porpoise. You gaze out over the cliff-drop and watch as a canoe lunges on to the beach. Its crew leap out, shouting, hauling the vessel and their laden nets. Around them, children run and splash in excitement.

The islanders' huts rest in the shade of forest. There are barely half a dozen buildings, constructed of woven-together wood, fragile but functional.

Time passes. Over the years, the population grows. Huts become villages and palm trees are felled. Squinting out to sea, you make out twenty boats or more.

Black clouds thicken on the horizon. The wind snatches at your cheeks. Thunder grumbles and cracks. Day turns to night and the ocean seethes like a snake nest. Waves explode into foam and boats smash upon the rocks. Crops are ripped from the earth. Huts fold and collapse.

The day after the hurricane, the people of the island decide to build a god.

It takes them many months to carve the god. It has the face of an islander, with almond eyes and narrow cheeks. To bring the god to the cliff top, the islanders lop down more trees and create runways, the statue trundling upon trunks slick with sap. More trunks lever the statue on to its platform. The ingenuity of the engineering is awe-inspiring.

More years pass, and another cold breeze snaps against your skin. Another death-black cloud scrubs out the sun. The seas rip and crash. More canoes are lost, more fishermen, more huts, more crops.

The islanders realise their folly. Their god has not failed them – they have failed their god. To make amends, they must build a second god.

Night becomes day becomes years and the statue is joined by another, and another and another. They appear, popping into existence along the cliff, one by one. They stand in a silent chorus, each facing the rising sun.

Still the storms come. The islanders split into opposing tribes, each blaming the others for their gods' failure. Each faction creates its own god, and another and another. Each one is bigger than the last and requires more resources.

More trees are felled. The quarry is hollowed out.

Your attention turns inland, and you are surprised to see that where once there was forest there now stand a few skeletal palms. The huts that remain are battered. The people's bodies are wasted, their skin seeping with disease.

Another year passes and the forest is reduced to one lone tree. The other palms have been cut down, to repair the huts, to replace the lost canoes, to trundle yet more gods to the cliffs. The people have become desperate. They weave canoes of grass and reed but they prove too fragile. Without the shelter of the forest, the village is abandoned.

The tribes split and split again, and wars rage. They fight and what they kill they cannibalise. You hear a crackling fire and smell sweet roast. Glistening meat is scraped from a charred skull and devoured.

A blink of an eye and the final tree has vanished. Where did it go? To forge spears, to transport a god, to build a canoe? You stare in disbelief. Surely it should have been obvious that by destroying the forest, they were destroying their means of food, of shelter, of survival, of escape, of salvation? What madness must have possessed them?

The tribes fight until there are few left. And those that remain turn their anger on their gods. They smash out the eyes, demolish the platforms, they topple the statues. The island that remains is scorched and barren.

You stand and stare out to sea where two hundred statues once stood. Now the idols are half buried among the grasses that ripple. The islanders have gone.

Now stop imagining. You are on an island.

Gadrahadrakon

Astrabel Zar caterpillared his way out of his sleeping bag and clicked on his torch. He sat upright, his head scraping against canvas, tugged on his jeans and laced up his boots. Bottles tinkled as he crawled to the flap. The sound disturbed his snoring companion, Sheabley McMung, but as Sheabley had spent the evening necking *Absynthzo* like a gill-glott, he responded merely by moaning an indignant burst of song.

Astrabel had also been gill-glutting the *Absynthzo*. It had seemed very agreeable at the time but now a difference of opinion had arisen. His mouth felt like the inside of a vacuum-cleaner and his brain had delegated all responsibilities to his bladder because it seemed the more lucid part of his anatomy. It knew what it wanted, and it wanted it now.

He struggled out into the grim blackness. Above him, cumulonimbus steamrolled across the sky like apocalyptic icebergs. Thunder tolled. Astrabel clambered to his feet and waved his torch around him. Its wraithlike glow illuminated a gloopy trail down to the ruins. Astrabel closed the tent, buttoned his coat and tripped over a guy-rope.

It hadn't been his idea to come here for a holiday.

He'd only said 'yes' to Zoberly Chesterfield because he couldn't make no' sounds in the vicinity of her cleavage. She was irresistible – cherry lips, a habit of laughing at everything she said and breasts that seemed to be formulating an escape attempt from her brassiere. The next thing Astrabel knew, he'd landed face down in a puddle of mud with half a tent around his left leg.

Disentangling himself, Astrabel ambled down the path, following the dancing halo of his torchlight. He was busting, but he wouldn't be able to relax if he was within sight of the camp. He felt like he was being watched. So instead, he waded through the bracken and ducked beneath the dead trees. And all the time, he did his best to ignore the grey ghosts that drifted around him.

The path toppled into the columnated ruins of an abbey and Astrabel half slipped, half plunged down the steps. The monastery walls had

crumbled, leaving high archways.

The question as to why anyone should come to Gadrahadraddon for a holiday weighed upon Astrabel's thoughts. He remembered leafing through a brochure:

'Gadrahadraddon – The most haunted planet in the galaxy.'

It certainly was haunted. In the derelict central hall, Astrabel found himself amid a congregation of ghosts. They were composed of thin mist, one moment coalescing into recognisable bodies and faces, the next rippling away like reflections in a pebble-struck pool. They opened and closed their mouths, but made no sound.

Astrabel watched the figures. A family in pseudo-Victoriana whooshed by. A man cloaked in funereal black lifted a box camera. Three fat businessmen appeared for an instant, and then a breeze caught them – and they dispersed, their bodies swirling through each other. The planet was a Damogran Circus of ghosts, thousands of them, flitting in and out of existence as though reality were a double-exposed film.

To begin with, it had been very unnerving. Astrabel had used up several jmegs on photos of Sheabley and Zoberly pulling mock-terrified expressions as the phantoms passed through them. After a week, though, and the wind, and the cold and the rain, Astrabel was bloody sick of the ghosts. They never *did* anything. They just floated about, chatting silently among themselves.

Astrabel gripped his torch and made his way down to the crypt. The most well-preserved part of the ruin, it offered shelter from the storm. The thunder faded as Astrabel stepped into the cobweb-draped darkness.

Thankfully, there were no ghosts here. Astrabel pocketed his torch, unbuttoned his trousers and, with a thankful groan, began to empty his bladder against the wall. A liquid not far removed from *Absynthzo* pitter-pattered upon stone.

Relieved of distractions, Astrabel's mind wandered through the events of the past months. He remembered sitting his Theoretical Ultraphysics exam. Sixteen hours of reading questions where he only understood one word in four.

As he shook away the last drops, Astrabel's thoughts turned to the future. He didn't have one. His life would, he decided, be a bitter journey to an unmourned grave.

Astrabel zipped up, turned to go, and his life changed for ever.

Froom-Upon-Harpwick

The bastards were all sitting down. Prubert Gastridge swore under his breath as he took his bow. Under the spotlight his forehead prickled and droplets dripped to the stage. He counted to three and heaved himself upright, dabbed his eyebrows with his handkerchief and beamed at the audience. Their applause rang in his ears, a roaring, whooping monster of sound. Sod that, thought Prubert, I deserve a standing ovation.

He'd given them everything tonight. He'd finessed every finesse. He had nuances coming out of his ears. Every gland he possessed had served the performance. It had been the best Captain Hook of his career.

Prubert's thoughts turned, as always, to the bottle of *Lochmoff's Ultra-blend* that would be waiting for him in his dressing room. After a couple of glasses, he wouldn't be capable of either receiving or giving a standing ovation.

Down came the curtain and down came Prubert's smile. This was hardly the acme of his career, was it? Panto. Bloody *Peter Pan*. Bloody *Peter Pan* at the *Princess Shevaun*. A theatre that could do with a complete renovation or, even better, a wrecking ball. *Peter Pan* at the end of a star-pier in orbit around the seaside resort of Froom-Upon-Harpwick. Seaside resort? Hospice, more like.

'Did you see that wobbly on the front row?' gasped Tinkerbelle to everyone in particular. 'Eyes glued to me knicks. Thought he was going to have a coronary.'

'Don't say that,' muttered Smee. 'Makes a change when we *don't* have any casualties. Once we came back after the interval to half a house.'

Prubert followed Peter down the bulb-lit corridor to their dressing rooms. As she closed her door, she shot Prubert a black look for gazing at her undercarriage during her flight to Neverland. Prubert gave her his most affable smile. He had no notion of her name. Apparently she'd appeared in a soap opera from one of the Antipodean systems. For her, this would be as good as it got. 'Gather ye photo spreads while ye may.' In a few years her looks would fade and she'd discover she had nothing to

fall back on except her voluminous backside. The backside that had once opened doors for her wouldn't be able to make it through doorways.

Prubert was on the way down, he just didn't know how much further he had to fall. He'd been in the holo-movies. He was Vargo, king of the Buzzardmen, in *Zap Daniel*. He still got letters about it.

Vargo had been his big hit, if wearing a Viking helmet, giant wings and leather codpiece constituted a success. Some of his lines from *Zap* had been sampled in a recent chart hit by Pakafroon Wabster and he'd been obliged to reprise them for the panto. They always brought the house down, though it had taken some contrivance to work 'What do you mean, Daniel's *not dead?*' into *Peter Pan*. They'd had to call the crocodile Daniel.

There it was, the *Lochmoff's*. Prubert secured his dressing-room door, unscrewed his hook, degirded his pantaloons, tossed aside his wig and poured himself a generous double.

Through the bottom of the tumbler, Prubert noticed an envelope on his dressing table. Green handwriting and an Outer Spiral Arm postmark. He leaned back into his chair and inspected the envelope's contents. A letter from the president of the *Zap Daniel Information Service*. Did he want to go to their convention? Not for that money. Did he want to reprise his role in a series of *Vargo* spin-off audios? No – he'd done a commentary for the *Zap Daniel H-DVD*, hadn't that been enough?

It was only his voice-over work that kept Prubert in alimony. He'd spent months in that booth, eulogising over everything from *Stena Hoverbouts* to *Algol Gold* credit cards. He'd voiced Zagreus for that interactive cartoon thing, and narrated *The Dalek War – In Colour*.

Prubert screwed up the letter. Letter, let me introduce you to bin. Bin, letter. Letter, bin. *Lochmoff's*, glass.

His best work was still ahead of him. He had so much more to give. He wanted the big roles; huge, weighty parts that required presence, vigour. And lots of shouting. He might not have been the greatest actor of his generation, but he was undoubtedly the loudest.

Prubert heard a rap at the door. He slid his tumbler behind a photo and lit a cigarette. 'Enter.'

It was his agent. An inane little man that put Prubert in mind of a dog he'd like to kick. He stroked the back of Prubert's chair. 'Pru, tonight you were divine!'

'I know I bloody was. I was *superb*.' Prubert's eyes did not move from his tired, grease-faced reflection. 'Drinky?'

'Too kind, but no.' His agent glanced around the room. It was a nervous tic he'd developed from years spent looking for someone more important to talk to.

'Then what,' said Prubert, picking up his Lochmoff's tumbler, 'do you want?'

'I have been approached by someone who requires your services...'

'Really?'

'Really.'

Prubert considered. 'I won't crawl out of my coffin for less than twenty thousand.'

'A hundred thousand.'

Prubert's flabber was gasted. 'A year?'

'A month.'

Prubert doubled up and coughed. He could retire on that sort of money. 'A month? What the hell's mother's teeth is it?'

'It's an... unconventional role. But very substantial.'

'Big part, is it?'

'Biggest.'

'Meaty?'

'Bratwurst.'

'Does it involve -'

'Shouting?' said his agent. 'Lots of it. Nothing but. It's shouting, shouting, shouting. Shouting till the Dryrths come home.'

Prubert swung his chair round. 'Tell me more.'

Shardybarn

The crowflies flocked like a swirling cape in the twilight. Twin suns wobbled on the horizon, setting alight the flowing seams of cloud and casting an auburn glow across the outhouses. Distant bells pealed.

The market bristled with life. Grunts rotated on spits, their meat crisp and sweaty. Traders announced their Grunt-hide boots, Grunt-hair jerkins and Grunt-calf soups. Ruddy women wielded baskets of smoked Grunt. Children played Grunt rides. Mandolinists crooned Grunt ballads. Men spat chobacco and gambled on Grunt fights.

His heart heavy with anticipation, Moop picked his way through the crowd, past stalls draped with tapestries of Grunt hunts, past tasselled Grunt-shaped cushions and past flagons of Grunt wine. The wine wasn't actually made out of Grunt, but had been called Grunt wine to avoid confusion.

Today was the day of the marriage fetê, where he would choose, wed and eventually meet his wife. He was at the most fertile point in his cycle, and knew that if he did not bed a bride tonight, it would be another five long years before he would again be potent. Five long, solitary, embarrassing years.

Moop worked as a Grunt herd and spent much of the year in the hills with his flock. Up there, the skies were of clearest russet and trees puffed out pollen to sweeten the air. Moop would sit outside his hut and carve intricately detailed Grunt horns.

Mostly, though, he would watch the Grunts. Grunts were squat, grey animals covered in matted hair. They stood upon six stumpy legs, listing from side to side as they walked. They communicated through a succession of bleats, snorts and ground-shaking flatulence.

All Moop had ever known was peace and contentment. The name of his world was Shardybarn, which meant, in the ancient tongue of the Grunt fathers, 'the presumption that tomorrow will be as glorious as today'.

He approached the wedding rostrum. It consisted of a raised stage, a

wooden partition in its centre. During the service, he would sit to one side of the partition and his three potential brides would be seated to the other. After a series of questions, he would select his bride, and the marriage ceremony would be conducted in front of the whole village. There would be applause and the hooting of intricately detailed Grunt horns. Then he would be allowed first to see the two women he could have wed before finally greeting his wife. They would feast upon fatted Grunt before departing to the laychamber of the local inn.

Something odd was happening above the stage. The clouds whirled like eddies in a stream and rolled back as a coruscating beam punctured the sky. Thunder cracked and the light grew in intensity.

A tremendous, rasping storm rose up out of nowhere. Moop covered his ears and fell, screaming, to his knees. The other villagers did likewise. Grunts stomped and defecated in panic. Market stalls clattered in the wind. Moop felt as though his head was being squeezed by a vice.

The storm dispersed and there was the sweetest, most fragile music Moop had ever heard. A melody so poignant, it brought tears to his eyes.

Moop lifted his head. A golden light filled the square and a shape coalesced in front of him, six feet off the ground. Dust motes sparkled around it like jewels. It was a man, seated upon a throne of sapphire.

The being had an oversized, near-spherical head. It rotated to reveal four faces, one on each side. One face had tufted ears, feathers and a long beak.

It spoke with the voice of a hundred men, its words reverberating in the stillness. 'I am your god!'

The villagers shuffled nervously among themselves.

Moop's stomach trembled. 'Our... what?'

'Your god! Your creator!' boomed the being. 'I demand worship!'

'Worship?'

The being raised one arm and a ball of lightning surged from its fingertips. The wedding stage ripped into flame and then, in less time than a blink, vanished.

'Worship!' repeated the being.

'Um... ' said Moop. 'And how do we go about that, exactly?'

The being lifted its arm again and fired a burst of lightning at the village inn.

'You know... ' said the being. '*Worship!*'

Moop shook his head. 'I'm afraid we've never worshipped anyone before. What should we do, oh... "god"?'

The being sighed. 'You must prostrate yourselves before me. Crave my indulgence. Beg my wisdom.'

Moop nodded, trying to remember each of these. If only he had some paper.

‘You must obey me above all things. And you must give me tribute.’

‘Tribute?’

‘Tribute!’ hollered the being. ‘You must give me that which you prize most highly!’

There was a second pause as the villagers discussed this development. Then one of their number stepped forward.

‘Do you like Grunt?’

Chapter 1

The Museum of the Future

The paving stones baked in the June sunset. He gazed out across the shimmering waters of the Thames. He recognised St Paul's, but not the skeletal footbridge extending to its steps. To his left, he could see the Telecom Tower. To his right, a gherkin-shaped tower of gleaming glass. That's new, he thought.

The embankment swarmed with tourists – colourfully backpacked school parties, unwieldy Americans, families of identically dressed Japanese. Above them towered a redbrick building, a single chimney halfway along its facade. Fitz remembered it as Bankside power station. Now the walls had been scrubbed and windows in the roof reflected the sun's glare.

'Tate Modern,' breathed the Doctor as he joined Fitz. He grinned up at the building as though it were his own work.

Fitz had decided to stick with his usual ensemble of jeans, jacket and black T-shirt. The look was, he felt, a classic. Trix, however, had squeezed herself into something very 2004 – hipsters and a neon-pink skinnyrib that revealed her stomach and delineated everything that it didn't expose. She'd even restyled her hair – chestnut, curly, with shoulder-length extensions.

The Doctor's sole concession to the twenty-first century had been to leave his frock coat behind. Nevertheless, in his burgundy waistcoat and cravat, he still looked as though he might at any moment challenge the poet Shelley to a duel.

Fitz considered asking the Doctor why they were here, but he already had his answer. A banner hung from one side of the former power station, announcing, '*The Tomorrow Windows – Gala Opening*'.

Trix thumbed through a *Metro*. 'It's VIPs only.'

'Exactly.' The Doctor strode towards the side entrance. Fitz and Trix

had to jog to keep pace. 'You can be my guests!'

'We don't exactly have invites.'

'Invitations? I'm a Very Important Person, Fitz! You don't need an invitation when you move in the celebrated circles I move in.' The Doctor whirled in a celebrated circle then resumed his march. 'Don't worry – I have friends in very high places.'

And we are here, why?' asked a doubtful Trix.

The Doctor halted and took her *Metro*. He read, 'The Tomorrow Windows offer visitors a chance to see into the future.' He returned it with a flourish.

'So you think, what, they are the result of alien know-how?'

'Precisely, Fitz. Such expertise is beyond current Earth technology. Humans won't be at that stage for... well, I don't think they'll ever reach that stage, the concepts involved exceed the limits of their comprehension.'

'Oh. So someone from outer space has decided to hold an exhibition at the Tate Modern? Right?'

'It's the only logical explanation.' The Doctor had reached the red carpet. Ahead of them were men and women in formal evening wear. Fitz felt conspicuously casual. 'And it's "Tate Modern", not "the Tate Modern". No definite article.'

'There is another possibility,' said Trix, folding her arms.

'There is?'

'It could all be a big rip-off.'

'Oh.' The Doctor considered. 'That is a possibility, yes. But, oh, wouldn't that be *terribly* disappointing?'

'It'd be a relief to know that Earth wasn't being interfered with by extraterrestrials,' suggested Fitz.

'No no no,' protested the Doctor. 'I want to meet aliens!'

'What do you mean, you don't know who I am?'

The slablike security guard ran a hand over his scalp. 'That, sir, is the problem. You're not on the list.'

'But I'm the Doctor!'

'If you will stand aside –' The guard ushered forward three dinner-jacketed men. They were about the same age as Fitz, and equally unshaven and unkempt. Probably pop stars – they were the only ones who could get away with it. 'Yes?'

One of the men flicked away a casual cigarette. 'James, Albarn, Rowntree.' The security guard nodded them through.

'Is there a problem?' asked a nasal estuary accent. Fitz turned. A narrow-eyed man in his fifties had joined them. He had the convivial air

of someone determined to enjoy themselves no matter what the bad news.

The Doctor recognised him. 'Ken!'

'Doctor,' said the man. 'Pleasant to see you again. Are you having trouble?' He addressed the security guard. 'Don't worry, they're with me.'

The guard unhitched the rope to allow the Doctor, Fitz, Trix and Ken into the building. 'Through here.' The guard indicated the metal-detector arch.

'Oh, yes, of course,' said the Doctor. He patted his pockets, dropped his sonic screwdriver, a radiation detector, a scrawl-covered manuscript, an A-Z of Hitchemus, a ball of string, a disposable camera, two AA batteries, some loose change from various colony worlds and a half-eaten apple into the plastic tray and walked backwards through the arch, arms above his head. It gave no response. Fitz and Trix followed.

'It's unavoidable.' Ken watched as the Doctor restored the contents of the tray to his capacious trouser pockets, then clipped a laminate to his lapel and conducted them inside. 'After nine-eleven, you understand...'

'Can't be too careful. Quite right, yes.'

They entered a high-roofed hall that had once housed the power station's turbines. Some of the ducting remained. The air was deliciously cool. Two hundred or so people occupied the floor, small-talking and burbling overearnestly, as though trying to conceal their excitement.

This wasn't the first gala opening that Fitz had attended that year. Earlier, at the end of January, he'd been sent by the Doctor to investigate the *Institute of Anthropology*, just round the corner from the British Museum. That occasion had ended memorably, and rather disastrously, with a crystalline skeleton from the end of time coming to life and terrorising the guests. Fitz noticed that some of those guests were here. Those guests subjected Fitz, Trix and the Doctor to stiff, disapproving glares.

Fitz collected a narrow-necked glass of champagne from a waitress. Trix took one for herself, while the Doctor helped himself to a glossy brochure.

'So you know each other, then?' said Fitz between sips.

'The Doctor has helped me a few times in the past,' explained Ken.

'Well, not you particularly,' corrected the Doctor. 'I'm strictly apolitical. Never get involved in local politics.'

'The Doctor has done a lot for London.' Ken corrected. 'There was that time with the Ice Warriors landing in Trafalgar Square. And that business in Penge back in the eighties with – what were they called?'

'The Voords! With two 'o's.'

'With two 'o's, of course. And before that, the Yeti on the underground... The dinosaurs in St James's Park... The shop-window dummies in Ealing Broadway...'

'Was that me?' The Doctor seemed puzzled but delighted.

'Who else would it be?'

'Well, indeed,' the Doctor breezed. 'I'm sorry, I've been dreadfully remiss. This is my friend Fitz Kreiner –' Ken grasped Fitz's hand and shook it. 'And this is my other companion, Beatrix MacMillan –'

'Mr Livingstone, I presume?' said Trix. Ken Livingstone smiled the tight-lipped smile of someone who had heard that joke before.

'So, said the Doctor. 'Sorted out the buses yet?'

'Ah, Doctor –'

'Ken, we had a deal. I defeat the invasions from outer space, you get the buses running on time!'

Ken checked his watch and turned to the stage that had been erected at one end of the hall. 'Look, they've got me doing a speech, but maybe later...?'

'I'd like that. And good luck. I'm sure you'll... bring the house down.'

Ken beamed at Fitz and Trix, and then edged through the throng to the stage. Fitz turned back to see that the Doctor was already skimming through his brochure, lost in concentration, tutting at passages that irritated him.

Fitz drained his champagne. 'So, what's the verdict?'

'The concept behind these Tomorrow Windows seems simple enough,' muttered the Doctor. 'You know how quantum events are affected by observation? The uncertainty principle?'

'I understand the principle of uncertainty,' said Fitz. 'Go on.'

'Well, if you're seeing into the future, then that future itself is shaped by your observation, yes?'

'Keep on going,' said Fitz. 'I'm following you. From a distance. hut I'm following you.'

'If you want to see into next week, the window will show you that; if you want to see next year, next century... However, what you actually *see*, well, this is where it gets interesting.'

'I thought it might,' Fitz muttered. He glanced around. The hall was filling up. Some of the women – well, he didn't recognise them, but presumably they were actresses. They had perfect smiles, flawless skin, and physiques that defied the laws of gravity.

Fitz noticed the Doctor had been talking. 'What was that?'

'You see, Fitz, the future, inherently, is uncertain. The universe is a complex system...beats of butterfly wings creating hurricanes and so

forth. But,' the Doctor decided to take a flute of champagne from a waitress after all, 'most butterflies don't create hurricanes. Just think how bad the weather would be if they did! No, in fact, the vast majority of choices don't make the slightest hit of difference. Otherwise time travel would be...patently absurd.'

'So what do these windows show you?' asked Trix

'The most probable outcome based on current knowledge If you look into tomorrow, the image will be relatively precise. But if you look into next year, the picture will be...*blurry*, and so on as you go further into the future, though you'll still receive an impression of...what did they call it?' The Doctor flicked through the programme and winced. ' "*The Gist of Things to Come*".'

'Now we come to the clever part. If you can see into the future you can make decisions based on information *from* that future! It's what theoretical physicists would term a "free lunch", and what is, in layman's terms, a "reductive causal loop". Forearmed with the knowledge of the consequences, you can make sure you opt for the *optimum* course! The windows,' the Doctor drained his glass, ' "accentuate the positive".'

'Oh.' Fitz leaned unenthusiastically against the wall. 'That's nice.'

'According to the brochure, with these "Tomorrow Windows" humanity will be able to...preclude every disaster. World leaders can make policies based on what the effects will be ten, twenty years down the line...and thus the Windows will bring about an end to war, to famine, to terrorism, to pollution. Even to inaccurate weather forecasts.'

'And this is a bad thing?' Trix had to raise her voice over the music piped out over the public address.

The Doctor considered. 'Well, it's not *bad* bad. But it's interference in mankind's destiny. Tampering with a planet's development is...irresponsible.'

'You're just annoyed it's someone else doing it.'

'So who do you think is behind all this?' said Fitz.

The Doctor showed him the photograph on the back cover of the programme. A round-faced man in his forties beamed manically, his close curly brown hair receding, his chin adorned with a goatee beard. His eyes were wide and the photograph blurred, as though he'd been caught by surprise. He wore an ill-fitting suit, a check waistcoat and a scarlet cravat. He was the very cliché of English eccentricity. 'Charlton Mackerel, billionaire philanthropist and the exhibition's sponsor.'

'What do you plan to do? Ask him if he's from another planet?' said Trix as the music increased in volume.

'Yes!' the Doctor shouted back. 'But first, I'd like to take a look at one of these Tomorrow Windows.'

'The exhibition's upstairs.' Fitz helped himself to a canapé offered by a passing waitress. 'It's not open yet.'

'Then we shall have a sneak preview. Fitz, you come with me. Trix, Trix... can you keep an eye on things here?'

Trix shrugged a reluctant 'OK'.

'You shouldn't have any trouble blending in... Pretend to be a footballer's wife or something!'

Trix searched the crowd for a familiar face. Stephen Hawking was here with one of his sons. Jeremy Paxman and Ian Hislop shared a joke. Michael Grade had accosted one of the waitresses and was helping himself to two glasses, steering through the assembly like a shark in search of prey.

Get into character, Trix. She would be a conceptual artist from Eastern Europe. Her work would consist of black-and-white films about cutting off her hair.

A man frowned at her, as though trying to remember something. 'It is you, isn't it? From that group?'

Or, thought Trix, she could be that girl from that group.

'I was devastated when you split up.'

'Yes. We thought we'd quit while we were ahead.'

'Very wise. So what are you doing now?'

'Trying to break into weather forecasting.'

'Excellent. Because we'll always have weather, won't we? Though if these Tomorrow Windows do what they say... ha! You know, when I got the invite I thought it was a Bill Gates launch thing! But all this is terrific.'

'So what do you do?' said Trix, not because she was interested, but because it seemed the polite thing to say.

'I'm the Shadow Education Secretary,' said the man. 'If you'll excuse me -' He'd seen somebody whose hand he had to shake. Trix watched him go, then examined the crowd for other famous faces. Salman Rushdie, Ricky Gervais, Joanne Rowling, Bill Bailey, Stephen Fry, Richard Curtis, Ben Elton -

'Excuse me -' muttered an uncomfortable young man. He was completely out of place - his T-shirt was unwashed, unironed and untucked and sported a faded military design. John Lennon spectacles perched upon his nose. As he talked, he glanced from side to side, as though worried about being spotted. He had wide, large eyes, like an excited rabbit.

'Hiya,' said Trix. 'And you're...?'

'Martin!' he said. Trix tried to place his accent. 'Those two men you were speaking to... um, you know, are you with them?'

'No. I'm with me.'

'Oh. Good. Wow! So... ' There was a long can't-think-of-anything-to-say pause. 'What do you do?'

Trix sipped her champagne. Who would she be now? An Eastern European conceptual artist? A former member of a girl group? No. Too obvious.

Trix said, 'Save planets'

'Wow. Me too!' Martin grinned.

He was obviously trying to chat her up, but claiming to have 'saving planets' in common was a bit of a stretch. Trix frowned. 'What?'

'It's a bit *embarrassing*,' Martin glanced around again to check no one was listening. 'You see, I'm from another galaxy!'

'Yeah... I bet you say that to all the girls.'

The more expensive the food, the less sure you were what it actually *was*. Fitz studied his canapé in the gloom of the corridor. The squidgy contents could be either mushroom, or crab, or cheese. Whatever it was, it was delicious. Fitz brushed the crumbs from his lips and followed the Doctor through a pair of glass doors.

Their footsteps scuffed eerily in the emptiness. The gallery rooms were unlit, lending the artwork a sinister countenance. One room was filled with a vast, monochrome canvas, the paint hurled to form skulls. Another room had been furnished to resemble a chemist's shop. Eventually, the Doctor sonic-screwdrivered open another pair of glass doors and they found themselves in a long room painted a uniform white. Three of the walls were lined with six panes of glass, each the size of a full-length mirror.

Fitz peered into one of the panes. He could make out his own reflection, his tired eyes, his tangle of hair. 'They're just sheets of glass!'

'Yes,' said the Doctor, thwarted, before spotting a plug socket surrounded by cables. 'No, wait a moment, they haven't been turned on.'

The Doctor pressed a switch and a low, powerful throbbing filled the air.

Fitz turned to his reflection and shuddered. The man that looked back still had the tired eyes but was now completely bald. As Fitz blinked, the man blinked and his lips parted to reveal a toothless mouth.

Is this my future, thought Fitz? I don't want this. I won't allow this to happen. I want –

The image shifted to be replaced by a man in an evening jacket. Beside him stood a beautiful, olive-skinned woman young enough to be his daughter. In a chest-hugging wedding dress. Maybe, Fitz hoped, she wasn't his daughter.

The picture softened to nothing. Somewhat unsettled, Fitz approached the Doctor. In front of him, the glass showed nothing but eddying mist.

The Doctor lifted his chin. 'Show me... my future.'

The fog cleared to reveal a dark chamber, the only light the red of a digital countdown clock. Then the image was replaced with a concrete world of motorways. A man with powdery skin, his body covered in implants and callipers, revolved in a wheelchair. A flower drifted through space, its petals unfurling towards an auburn sun –

'Yes, yes. Further forward,' urged the Doctor. The picture flitted like a fast-forwarded film, the images flickering by so rapidly it was impossible to make out individual scenes.

Abruptly the image changed to a ruined city, the buildings silhouetted against billowing flames. A flying saucer soared overhead, its body revolving around it. Squat machines in gunmetal grey glided through the rubble, their eyestalks scanning from left to right.

The picture changed again. An artist scraped oils on to a canvas, his model smiling enigmatically. Men in skullcaps, robes and large, rounded collars gathered in a cathedral of turquoise. A robot spider, fifty yards tall, advanced upon a medieval castle as flaming arrows streaked through the sky. A figure with the head of a yellow-horned bull emerged from a sphere –

A planet exploded in a silent flash. A listless-looking man sat on a sofa beside a girl in a red dress in an unconvincing medieval dungeon. An aristocrat with a high forehead and devilish, shadow-sunken eyes sucked on an asthma inhaler. A man in a cream suit strolled through Regent's Park, his long hair swept back, his nose bent, his chin held imperiously high. A kindly-faced old gentleman in an astrakhan hat potted in a junkyard, chuckling. A short, impudent-looking man, his ginger hair in disarray, plucked fluff from the collar of his afghan coat. A stockily built figure in a crushed velvet suit and eyeliner stared arrogantly into the distance. A scruffy student with unruly, curly hair shrugged and smiled an apologetic, lopsided smile. A stranger stood alone on a sand dune, his hair scraped into a ponytail, his cloak flapping batlike in the wind –

The picture drifted. Sometimes it seemed to settle upon one face and then another. Sometimes the figures merged like a double-exposed photograph. Sometimes other men appeared, each one in pseudo-Edwardian dress –

Then it solidified into one, final figure. A wiry man with a gaunt, hawklike face, piercing, pale grey-blue eyes and a thin, prominent nose. His lips were set into an almost cruel, almost arrogant smile. He had an air of determination, as though withholding a righteous fury. As though facing down the most terrible monsters.

Then he turned to the Doctor and his expression softened into a broad, welcoming grin, as if to say, 'This is what you've got to look forward to.'

'How are you enjoying my little exhibition?' announced a voice from the other end of the room. It was an educated voice with a Scots burr, the voice of a lawyer or doctor. Fitz turned to see Charlton Mackerel flanked by two security guards.

In real life, Charlton was an even more unprepossessing figure. He looked as though he had been inflated to fill his suit and they had forgotten to stop pumping. His waistcoat combined all the colours of the rainbow in a manner substantially less restrained than a rainbow.

He padded over to the plug socket, and switched off the Windows.

'Like Scrooge, having seen the future, I shall mend my ways,' said the Doctor. ' "And Tiny Tim, who did *not* die"... '

Charlton turned to Fitz. 'How about you? Did you like it?'

'Oh yeah. Changed my world.'

'They're great fun, aren't they?' Charlton's eyes glittered with new-train-set enthusiasm. 'Humanity shall be saved from themselves, right – and do you know who by? Me!'

'So... er,' said Fitz, 'what planet are you from, then?'

'Frantige Two. Very outer spiral, back-of-beyondy, you probably haven't heard of it!'

'So it's quiet there?'

'As quiet as a little, shy mouse. By the time we get the films, they're already out on H-DVD. Small population, a billion, everybody knows everybody else.'

'What's it like?'

Martin adjusted his spectacles. 'Oh, boring. Nothing's changed for thousands of years. It has that small-town mentality, but on a planetary scale. I go back there to visit the oldies sometimes, not as often as I should, but after a week of it you're gasping for a bit of pollution.' Martin's eyes bulged when he laughed.

Another waitress swung by and Trix exchanged her glass for another, filled. She sat down on the stage beside Martin. 'So what was the last planet you saved, Martin?'

'Well, I don't actually *save* them, on my own, single-handedly, as-it-were-so-to-speak. I'm a member of Galactic Heritage! You might have heard of them?'

'I might not.'

'What we do is – ha! – we try to prevent big business from destroying our heritage! Because, you know, there are a lot of planets threatened by unscrupulous development.'

'So what are you doing here?'

'Well, Earth has loads of heritage – wars, plagues, people getting stabbed in the back with penknives...but Charlton Mackerel, you see, wants to end to all that. With the Tomorrow Windows, there won't *be* any more history.'

'You sound like the Doctor,' Trix muttered. Martin's jaw dropped and he began to choke.

'You know *the* Doctor?'

Trix backed away. 'Yes.'

'Oh wow! Oh wow! Oh wow! Oh mother wow and three little baby wows!'

'You've heard of him?'

'Heard of him? The Doctor? Heard of him? He's completely a complete hero of mine. When it comes to saving planets from spooky-alien-tentacles stuff, the Doctor is *so* "da man".'

Trix waited for Martin to stop hyperventilating before mentioning, 'I travel with him.'

'No *way*? You do the saving-planets stuff with him?'

'Yes. It's a thing we like to do.'

Martin could not have boggled more.

'In fact,' whispered Trix. 'That was him I was with just now.'

Martin's eyes widened even further with an idea. 'Hey, I know...' He paused. 'Sorry, I don't even know your name.'

'Trix.'

'Trixie Trix, would you like to see something totally wild?'

'Totally wild, eh?' Trix finished her champagne. 'Sounds promising.'

'So you think you're helping Earth?' said the Doctor, holding open the glass double doors for Fitz, Charlton and the two security guards.

'Absolutely! The Tomorrow Windows will deliver mankind from folly!' Charlton placed his hands proudly in his waistcoat pockets and delivered the dopey wide-eyed-confidence expression from the brochure.

'What about free will?'

'People can still choose how to act, Doctor. They'll just... have a better idea of what they're doing, that's all!'

'Come on, *come on.*' Fitz could hear the edge in the Doctor's voice. He strode around the gallery, pretending to be absorbed in the paintings. 'That's not going to happen, is it? Everyone will always do the right thing, won't they?'

Charlton stroked his beard. 'What's wrong with that?'

The Doctor halted. 'Because without free will, there can be no achievements, no surprises, no responsibility. Just things turning out nice again all the time.'

'Right, now then, Doctor, consider the alternative. What if –'

'The alternative, Charlton, is that whatever mistakes humanity makes, they will be their *own* mistakes. Mankind will *learn*, and it can't do that if it can flick to the back of the book and look up the answers.'

'I wish I shared your faith, Doctor, I really do,' said Charlton as they started moving again. 'Unfortunately, experience shows a tendency for mankind *not* to act in its best interests.'

'What you're doing is... meddling,' breathed the Doctor. 'It's the most well-intentioned, the best possible meddling you could hope for, but it's still meddling.'

'I can't just stand by and do nothing, can I?' They reached the elevator. The doors slid open and Charlton waved for them to step inside. 'And I won't allow anyone to stop me.'

Fitz knew a threat when he heard one. 'What?'

'If you will excuse me.' Charlton paused, his gaze lingering on the Doctor. 'We can continue our *chat* later, if you like.'

The stairwell was deserted, the chatter of the crowd muffled by a set of fire doors. 'Go on then,' said Trix. 'Amaze me.'

Martin dug into one of his jeans pockets and retrieved a chrome bar about four inches long with a button set into one side.

'A door handle? You're amazing me with a door handle.'

'Watch!' Martin held the handle out in front of him at waist height. He gripped it as though he were about to open an imaginary sliding door and pressed the button on the handle with his thumb.

A vertical crack appeared in mid air to the left of the handle, extending down to the floor. The crack twinkled like a thread of silver. Martin pulled the handle sharply to the right and light streamed in through the crack as it suddenly widened to a rectangle, three feet across and six feet high. A door.

Trix was impressed. She walked around the rectangle and it narrowed until it was invisible, only to reappear when she returned to the other side. Peering into it, she could see a brightly lit chamber, with metal walls reinforced by a triangular pattern of struts.

'My pad!' Martin indicated that she should enter.

Trix looked at him. 'OK. But if you try anything, it's a knee in the groin.'

Martin stepped after her and heaved the door shut. It vanished into thin air.

'She's just popped out, with a friend,' repeated the waitress.

The Doctor handed the Waitress a folded five-pound note. 'Thanks, most helpful.'

'What friend?' shouted Fitz over the hullabaloo. The turbine hall heaved with celebrities, artists and journalists, all buzzing with anticipation and free alcohol.

The Doctor shushed Fitz and pointed towards the stage. A hush flowed across the chamber, fragments of conversation falling away as guests cleared their throats.

Charlton mounted the podium, his chest puffed out. The man the Doctor had spoken to earlier, Ken, sat to one side, scribbling on an envelope. Behind him was a vast screen, five metres high, on which The Tomorrow Windows logo rotated in three dimensions. The logo was replaced by a close-up of Charlton's face.

'Good evening, ladies and gentlemen,' Charlton's cultured tones echoed through the public address system, 'and welcome to The Tomorrow Windows!' He raised one arm with a theatrical flourish. 'I'm really... moved to see so many of you here. So many important statesmen, ambassadors, artists and –' he looked over the gathered celebrities, his expression crestfallen with disappointment, '... opinion formers. I hope you will find this exhibition leaves you... reinvigorated with a new sense of purpose!'

The crowd applauded hesitantly.

'But I don't expect you to believe me for a minute – oh no! – so, here to say a few words – and hopefully only a few! – may I present, right, your good friend and mine, the Mayor of London... Mr Ken Livingstone!'

This time the applause included whoops. Ken took the podium and beamed at the audience as though they were old friends.

'Good evening, and thanks to Charlton for inviting me to speak to you, tonight. I must confess to being rather sceptical about these Tomorrow

Windows and I wonder whether we have all been dragged here for the sake of a rather desperate publicity stunt. That's certainly why I'm here.'

The audience laughed in agreement.

'The Tomorrow Windows, I'm told, will allow us to see into the future. As a politician, I'll find this particularly useful, because then I'll know what I'm going to achieve before I write my manifesto. So much easier than doing it the other way round. And we will also be able to find out who wins the next General Election, though we hardly need to look into a, look into a, look into a...'

The Doctor frowned. Something wasn't quite right.

Ken remained on the stage, smiling at the crowd, his face perfectly motionless. He did not blink or breathe. Instead, he gave a short mechanical whirring, like a video recorder about to eject a tape, and a hairline fracture appeared down the centre of his face.

Then, with a sharp click, his head split in two, revealing a jumbled collection of wires, valves and electric circuits. All that remained of his features were two fake-looking eyeballs that peered to the left and right.

In the centre of the circuits nestled a cylinder of metal. As the assembled celebrities watched in disbelieving horror, the top of the tube opened and a smaller tube emerged.

Realisation dawned for the Doctor. 'An electron bomb.'

'A what?' said Fitz.

'Ken's a bomb!' yelled the Doctor at the top of his voice. 'The Mayor of London is about to explode! Everybody get out, fast!'

The crowd did not need telling twice. The hall echoed with screams as people surged towards the exits, hurling aside the sculptures and information plaques. Somebody set off the fire alarm and a high-pitched wail added to the chaos.

The Doctor, meanwhile, forced his way through the crowd to the stage, ignoring the startled cries and questions. Fitz hauled himself up on to the stage after him and together they approached the motionless figure of Ken Livingstone. Or, at least, a figure with the body of Ken Livingstone and the head of a primed explosive.

'What is it?' said Fitz.

The Doctor examined the tangled cat's cradle of wires and circuits. 'An android duplicate of the former member for Brent East –'

'No, Doctor,' said Fitz. 'What's an electron bomb?'

'Extraterrestrial in origin. Used in the Varlon-Hyspero wars.' The Doctor dug into one of his pockets and withdrew his sonic screwdriver. He aimed it at the top of the tube, his expression locked in concentration. 'It will destroy everything within a half-mile radius.'

'Then – hello! – shouldn't we be getting out of here?' Fitz gazed out into the hall. The last of the security guards disappeared through the main entrance, leaving the floor covered in broken glass and discarded programmes. There was no sign of that Mackerel fellow either.

'There's a chance...' The Doctor activated his sonic screwdriver, and, with a whine, one of the screws holding the bomb together began to revolve. He withdrew two wires. 'Which one is it? The red or the blue?'

'You can never remember anything when it's really important.'

'The blue.' The Doctor tugged the wire free.

The top of the bomb-tube opened up to reveal, like a Russian Doll, another tube.

The Doctor sucked his teeth. 'Whoopsadaisy.'

'"Whoopsadaisy"?' said Fitz. 'You can't defuse it?'

'Oh, easily,' the Doctor said. 'In about fifteen minutes. Unfortunately, it's going to detonate in five. So we should... run!'

Fitz jumped off the stage, half tumbling to the ground, a pain shooting through his ankle, and sprinted for the main exit. As he reached the door, he doubled up for breath.

'Come on!' The Doctor grasped Fitz by the shoulders and heaved him out of the building and into the sudden coolness of the evening. The embankment was deserted, the crowd having made their way across the bridge to St Paul's.

Fitz looked at the Doctor, the Doctor looked at Fitz, and they raced for the bridge. Fitz lurched up the first ramp, dragging himself along by the handrails. The Doctor was ahead of him now, waving him on –

Finding himself on the bridge, Fitz took a lungful of air, and staggered towards the familiar shape of the cathedral.

And, as he collapsed on the concrete steps, there was a blast of oven-hot air and an ear-shattering burst of thunder. The ground thudded and shook beneath his feet.

Fitz looked back. A cloud of dust had enveloped Tate Modern, expanding outwards like a rolling waterfall. Slowly, inexorably, the tower toppled forward, the brickwork fragmenting from the bottom up, smashing through the Millennium Bridge and sending a series of girders and struts crashing into the Thames.

And where Tate Modern had stood there was now nothing but smoke and rubble.

Chapter 2

Two-Dimensional Villains

Huw Edwards clears his throat and finds his place on the autocue. 'And more on the destruction of Tate Modern. No terrorist groups have claimed responsibility. Due to a last-minute evacuation of the building, there appear to have been no casualties. A government –'

A blue menu bar appears at the bottom of the screen, and '3' is selected.

A reporter stands in front of a tape cordon, microphone in hand. Behind him, fire workers clamber over the rubble, their torches flaring through the dust. '– back to the studio, John.'

John Suchet turns back to the camera, pauses, then moves on. 'And now other developments. Ken Livingstone, believed to have been a casualty of the Tate Modern attack, has been found alive and unharmed in the London Mayor's office in City Hall. Police believe he was locked –'

John Suchet shrinks to a small, white dot.

'I can't believe you get cable,' said Trix, returning the remote control to the coffee table. She stretched back on the sofa, shifting magazines.

Martin stopped shoving T-shirts into his linen basket and looked up at Trix. 'That's satellite. I only get the free channels, I don't bother with the others. Waste of money.'

It was a typical student flat. Heaps of books, thumbed novels and academic journals lined the shelves. A few pot plants withered on the mantelpiece beside a smouldering joss stick. Blu-tac stains dotted the bulging wallpaper. Trix recognised the usual student posters – a seven-pronged leaf, Eric Cartman saying 'Respect My Authoritaaah', polarised Beatles and that one of the London Underground map with the names changed. In fact, the only thing out of the ordinary was the view from the window – a blue galaxy of untwinkling stars.

When Trix had stepped through the 'tele-door', she'd expected to find

herself on a sophisticated spacecraft. Instead, she'd emerged into a corridor where Martin was fumbling with a Yale lock. After much apologising, Martin had forced the door open, dislodging a pile of pizza delivery leaflets.

'I mean, here we are,' Trix drew up her feet beneath her, 'however many light years from Earth –'

'Oh right! Wow, yeah.' Martin cleared a space on the table, shifting various remote controls, coasters and a Radio Times. 'It comes through some sort of tachyon-ether relay. I would explain it, but I don't understand it, it's all very... spacey. Would tea be OK?'

'Tea would be OK.'

Martin disappeared into the kitchen. Trix could hear the rattle of cutlery. 'Aldebaran Instant? Or Metalupitan Grey?'

'Whatever. So this is where you live?'

Martin leaned against the door jamb, tea-towelling two *Simpson* mugs. 'Yeah! Most students stay in these things. Enviro-podules. A man comes round once a week to replenish the oxygen. The oxygen man, I call him.' The electric kettle clicked off with a gurgle and a snap.

'What do you study?'

'I don't, if I can help it!' Martin handed Trix a mug, and sank into an armchair, shifting aside a pile of *FHMs*. Leaning across the armrest, he slid a CD into his stereo and some Moby drifted out of the speakers.

'Too busy blowing up art galleries?'

'You saw the news. No one got killed. I just locked the Ken bloke in his office and made an android doppelgänger. Non-violent protest. Right-on! Power to the people!'

'You don't think that's a bit extreme?' Trix sipped her tea. It was sweet and strong. The world relaxed around her.

Martin stood up and paced across the room. He drummed his fingers on a shelf and pursed his lips, as though withholding anger. 'Ask yourself, Trixie Trix *why* does Mackerel want to put an end to history? Because he wants to see Earth sold on to a multigalactic, that's why!'

'You're one-hundred per cent sure about this?'

Martin sifted through a pile of art books and dug out a leaflet. He presented it to Trix as though it made his case for him. 'Super-sure. Double-sure with sure topping. Undeveloped worlds are protected, you see. They can't be built on, not when there's an indigenous culture.'

Trix examined the leaflet. It had been published by the Galactic Heritage Foundation and comprised a guide to 'listed' planets. The typeface was smudgy and laid out like a parish newsletter or student paper.

'I've "handed back the reins of history" to mankind,' proclaimed Martin, his eyes wide.

Trix tried not to laugh. He was so serious, his feelings would be hurt. 'Is that from your leaflet?'

'Yeah.' Martin snatched back the leaflet. 'That's my mission.'

Trix took another sip of tea and let her head fall back on a cushion. Outside, the galaxy calmly drifted. She looked at Martin. This idealistic puppy-dog routine had to be an act. No one could be that naive. She would let him think she believed him. Find out what he was really up to. 'And that's what the Galactic Heritage Foundation do?'

'No, they're more into preventing the trade in green-world sites, that sort of thing. And leafleting, they do a lot of quite powerful leafleting.'

'But you –'

'You've got to take direct action – like the Doctor would do!'

Trix felt sleepy and nuzzled her cheek into a cushion. The music seemed to waft over her. 'Yes, like the Doctor.'

'Tell me more about him. It's so amazing to meet, like, his companion! What's it like? Have you ever met K9?'

Trix rubbed her forehead, trying to keep her eyes open. 'He's a mysterious traveller in time and space,' she said with mock reverence. 'Always defeats the bad guy.'

She found that Martin was stroking her hair. His fingers brushed the back of her neck and she shivered.

'You cold?' he asked.

Trix nodded. 'Put a blanket over me, I'll be fine.'

Martin had already found a sheet and lowered it over her legs. She wrapped herself up in it.

'You read my mind,' she said, slipping into a warm, comfortable sleep.

'So,' Fitz said, placing a lemonade and a bitter on the table and squeezing into the seat opposite the Doctor, 'what the doodah's diddleys happened back there?'

The Doctor listened to the Sugababes thudding out of the pub jukebox. 'It seems, Fitz, I was not alone in my disapprobation of Mackerel's Tomorrow Windows.'

'Bit drastic, though, wasn't it? Blowing it up?'

'It was, I believe, a warning.'

'Some warning! People could've been killed –'

'That bomb could've exploded instantaneously. No. whoever it was, they gave people a chance to get away. They wanted people to be *scared*.'

'Well, they succeeded,' said Fitz. Outside on the Peter's Hill steps they had watched the remains of the Millennium Bridge crash into the Thames. The blast cloud had collapsed, coating everything, faces, clothes, the pavement, in pinkish-grey powder. The survivors had sat dumbstruck, unable to comprehend what they had just witnessed. 'Someone from outer space too;

'If there's one thing I dislike more than people interfering with planets, it's other people preventing people interfering with planets.'

'Muscling in on your territory?' Fitz twisted open a bag of crisps. The Falcon was beginning to fill up with other refugees from Tate Modern, brushing the ash from their clothes. People were smiling to show their Dunkirk spirit.

'Amateurs doing the work of professionals.' The Doctor frowned at his lemonade. 'There is something going on here, Fitz. Something I don't like one bit.'

'How's your lemonade?'

'Flat,' said the Doctor. 'Let's go.'

Speckles of rain flitted between the street lamps turning the ash that covered the ground to sludge. Yellow tape circumscribed the streets leading to St Paul's. Police cars lined the streets, their blue lights pulsing.

The Doctor retrieved the gallery programme from his jacket and tapped the back cover. 'Charlton Mackerel...'

'What a name.' Fitz dug his hands into his pockets. 'Amazed anyone thought he was from Earth.'

As they walked through the cathedral gardens, Fitz spotted the reassuring shape of a police box, waiting in the shadows. Some of the exhibition guests remained by the cathedral, giving statements to policemen in luminous yellow jackets. Radio intercoms crackled. A TV crew wrapped their camera in a bin-liner bag to protect it from the rain.

'The warning was not for us,' said the Doctor, 'It was for him.'

Fitz halted. 'Doctor. You do think Trix got out OK?'

The Doctor gazed upwards. The smoke from Tate Modern continued to snake across the starless sky. 'I don't know. I hope so.'

'Where do you think she is? The TARDIS?'

'Unlikely. I have the only key. No, she will, I daresay, turn up. If not, then... ' The Doctor trailed off.

They walked without speaking for some minutes, passing a huddle of blankets in one of the shop doorways. Things have changed, thought Fitz. Returning to Earth still felt like coming home, but now with the wrong

music, the wrong logos. Occasionally he would spot something he half-recognised, and the strangeness of the world would rush over him anew. Where did he belong? People define their lives by their jobs, their homes, their families. Fitz had none of those.

Something scuttled across the pavement. A cat? 'Doctor -' said Fitz.

The street remained empty. Cartons and blue-striped bags rolled in the gutter. Puddles shivered. And some horizontal lines flickered, ten or so yards away, at about knee-height.

Fitz blinked, thinking it was his eyes, but the lines became a wave of static, like tracking interference on a video tape. The line thickened, rolling up and down. And a monochrome image shimmered within it. It was a man in a dark, long-tailed suit. Like a pall-bearer.

The Doctor edged away, gesturing for Fitz to do the same.

'What is it?' said Fitz, swallowing.

'Absolutely no idea,' breathed the Doctor, his voice rising in fear. 'That's what frightens me.'

The shape moved towards them. It did not walk, it floated, as though superimposed upon reality, and as it floated it twisted in a series of jerks. Sections of it degraded into blocks of squares.

It had no face. Fitz could make out the dark hole of a mouth, and the hollows where the eyes should be, but it had a grainy, blurred quality.

Terror trickled down Fitz's spine. Turn and run, he thought. Any second now, what I'm going to do is turn and run. Turn and run, turn and run.

'Fitz,' said the Doctor, and Fitz turned. The way was blocked by another of the creatures. Another ghoul dressed for a funeral. As it cast no shadow, it was difficult to gauge its distance, but it was growing closer.

'Now what?' Fitz glanced back at the first of the creatures. Its movement was graceful, dreamlike. Nightmarelike.

'Hello, I'm the Doctor, I'm... nice.' Still backing away, the Doctor gave the creature a hopeful grin. In response it, hissed with static.

'I don't think they're friendly, Doctor.'

'No, nor do I. Oh well, live and hope, live and hope...'

A handbrake screech rang out followed by the sloshing of wheels. The Doctor grabbed Fitz's wrist, pulling him back on to the pavement. A Mercedes Sedan, flat and sleek, scrunched to a halt beside them.

Keeping his eyes on the approaching creature, the Doctor yanked open the passenger-seat door and leapt in. Fitz dived after him, slamming the door. The car lurched forward and Fitz tumbled back into his seat.

The creature was in front of them. The car accelerated towards it until Fitz could make out the serrated edges caused by its low resolution. Its

eyes and jaw widened in amusement, or rage, or fear.

At the last moment, the driver heaved the car on to the opposite pavement, and, to Fitz's amazement, the creature narrowed to nothing. It was like a cardboard cut-out, impossibly thin. Only as they passed it did the creature reappear, back-to-front. Then their car rounded a corner and it disappeared from view.

'You're taking us to Charlton Mackerel?' the Doctor said to the driver. 'You work for him, I presume.'

The man in the driver's seat had dark skin, scarred by acne. He nodded.

Fitz checked the rear window and shuddered. Three, no four of the creatures drifted along the road behind them.

'They're behind us,' Fitz reported.

'I know,' said the Doctor, without turning round.

'But... they're all flat.'

'No, Fitz. Two-dimensional.'

Fitz stared at the creatures. They became fuzzy, transparent and dissolved from sight. He was left watching empty tarmac rushing away into the night.

'Why does your employer want us?' the Doctor asked the driver.

'Ask him yourself.' They swerved into a tunnel and dipped down a ramp into an underground garage. The wail of brakes echoed in the gloom as they halted outside a lift.

Fitz climbed out of the car and waited as the Doctor pressed the lift button.

'Floor fifteen,' said their driver, rummaging through the glove compartment.

The Doctor said, 'Thanks for the lift... You're not coming with us?'

By way of an answer, the driver clunked a cartridge into the handle of a machine rifle. 'I have work.'

'Right. Yes,' said the Doctor. 'Good luck.' The lift doors clattered open, spreading an orange glow across the garage.

At the far end of the garage a mist snaked down the ramp. Out of the mist appeared three of the juddering black-and-white creatures. They hovered through the chamber as though suspended on wires. They crackled like untuned radios.

The Doctor jumped into the lift, and Fitz stabbed the 'fifteen' button.

From within his car, the driver fired at the creatures. The echo of each shot clapped back from the darkness.

At last the lift doors shuttered and Fitz felt the floor press against his feet.

'Doctor, what's going on?'

'I have no idea.'

'Worth asking.'

'Yes, always worth asking, Fitz.' The Doctor attempted a smile as the lift halted and opened on to a sparse, modern office. The reception desk was unmanned.

'Here,' said the Doctor, dashing to a plaque screwed on a wooden door. *Charlton Mackerel*.

Charlton's office consisted of a large desk holding an iMac. A window dominated the far wall granting a panorama of the London night. Fitz could see Canary Wharf and Tower Bridge, both picked out in pools of light. He could make out the red and white rives of traffic and, in the distance, the hills and skyscrapers silhouetted against the blue sky.

'Great view, isn't it?' sighed Charlton Mackerel. 'I'll miss it, you know. London. England. Earth... ' He walked forward from behind Fitz. 'Righty-ho. Time we made our exit.'

'Our exit?' said Fitz. There was a rattle of gunfire – and the chink of shattering glass. Fitz heard boots running past as torchlight flashed from the corridor outside.

'Look.' Charlton pointed towards the window.

All over London, there were dozens of small, fluttering phantoms. Each one floating over the streets, the parks, the towers. Fitz spotted one about a hundred yards away. It was another of the pall-bearers, its body a wash of static, its face a misshapen smear. It spun as it ascended, as though scanning its surroundings.

Fitz watched the creatures drift across the city, each one strangely unreal, like a poorly superimposed special effect.

'What are they?' said Fitz, shaken.

'This isn't really the time,' muttered Charlton, holding a door handle in his right hand. He pressed a button on the handle and pulled to the right, and a doorway slid out of thin air. Opening on to what appeared to be a spaceship corridor.

Charlton gestured that they should step through. The Doctor approached the door, and hopped through it. 'How clever.' He grinned back from the other side of the doorway.

'Fitz, your turn,' said Charlton, and Fitz apprehensively circled the doorway. From side-on, it was so thin it was invisible. A rectangle sliced into reality.

Hands in pockets, Fitz stepped through the door.

It was some sort of spacecraft. Hexagonal struts covered the walls of a long, straight passage that curved uphill in both directions. Portholes

looked out on to the swirling clouds of a gas giant.

Looking back through the tele-door he watched as one of the funeral creatures drifted into the office, its smudge-face searching to the left and right –

Then Charlton stepped through the door and swung it shut. The office remained visible through the glass door, the image wobbling as though underwater. As the creature approached the door the office faded to nothing.

Charlton stepped back from the tele-door and wiped his face down with his handkerchief. He clutched his chest with relief and announced, 'Welcome to my secret base!'

'You all right?' I feel a wool blanket against my cheek and a dryness in the corners of my eyes. As I struggle upright, a hangover stabs me in the back of the head.

Sod sod soddington.

'I'm alive,' I say. 'Everything else is To Be Confirmed. Where am I?' My sight clears to reveal a widescreen TV set and Des and Mel. I take the coffee mug from Martin and clasp it. 'I didn't realise I was so drunk last night.'

'Don't worry, you didn't do anything shocking.'

'I remember...'. A sequence of images tumble through my mind. The party at Tate Modern. Martin. The tele-door. In fact, I can remember everything except getting drunk.

'Sleep OK?'

'I suppose I must've done.' The coffee tastes bitter – instant, probably supermarket's own brand – and I return it to the table. 'Bathroom?'

Martin indicates a side door. 'Through there.'

I swing my legs forward and drag myself upright. My bra clasp is digging into my back. Steadying myself against a bookshelf, I stumble to the bathroom, tug on the light cord and bolt the door.

Who am I today? My reflection in the mirror peers back at me. Her nose is too pointy, as always, her lipstick has cracked and her eyebrows need plucking.

Today I am Beatrix MacMillan. Companion of the Doctor, renowned do-er of good.

After going to the loo, I scrub my face, brush my teeth and locate some aspirin in the bathroom cabinet, which I gulp down with a handful of water. All the time I'm thinking about the Doctor and Fitz, and how they'll be worried about me. Well, Fitz will, because he spends his whole time

failing to not stare at my bottom. The Doctor, though, will be too busy being Bohemian. Too busy caring about everybody but me.

'You look... better,' says Martin when I return. He's flicking through a *Mutters Spinal (West) A-Z*.

'Checking stuff?'

'Sort of. I'm trying to work out where Mackerel will go next.'

'Sorry?'

'Earth's not the only vulnerable planet.' Martin smiles up at me. 'You want to get back to the Doctor and Fitz?'

I nod. 'They worry.'

Martin leads me to the hallway and unlocks the front door. It's a short walk to the landing and the tele-door. Martin taps a sequence into the keypad. 'You found the aspirin?'

'Don't seem to be having much effect.' I examine the glass of the tele-door where an image is bobbing to the surface. A gloomy, medieval village, the street a mass of churned mud.

'Where are we going?' I ask.

'I'm taking you to the Doctor.'

Fitz marmaladed his toast and popped it into his mouth. After a night's sleep, a dean shave and shower, he'd joined the Doctor and Charlton for breakfast. They sat around a table in what appeared to be the dining lounge of a forties hotel, all brass piping and Art Deco lamps. Only the window overlooking the gas giant spoiled the illusion.

On the way from Fitz's cabin, Charlton had given him a brief tour of the station. He'd explained that it resembled a spinning top, about a mile in diameter. The centrifugal effect created the 'gravity'. Apparently it had been built as a research station several centuries ago, but had since been abandoned. Charlton had purchased it and paid for it to be renovated, for use as his 'secret Bond villain lair', as Fitz had put it.

'So, Mr Mackerel,' said the Doctor, draining his orange juice. 'What are you up to?'

'I'm not only interested in Earth,' said Charlton. This morning he was decked out in a mustard-coloured safari suit and a floral waistcoat. 'There are other worlds at a similar point of crisis. On the brink of destruction. On the very...'

'— edge of disaster?' The Doctor dipped a toast soldier into his egg. 'And you're giving them a nudge in the right direction?'

'A small, helpful proddy-proddington,' admitted Charlton.

'I didn't notice Earth being at a moment of crisis,' said Fitz.

That's rather, um, the point. Nevertheless, it probably won't survive the next century.'

'Really?'

'You humans create dreadful, appalling weapons, right? It's really annoying. More and more of you die in more and more unpleasant wars.' Charlton teaspooned some milk into his coffee. 'You know why these conflicts arise? Diminishing resources, political differences, racial differences, religious differences... how trivial can you get? And there is disease, and starvation, and the environment falling to bits...'

'I don't disagree.' The Doctor sipped his orange juice. 'But humans are ingenious. They will find solutions.'

'On past form, Doctor, humans are more interested in hitting each other painfully with rocks.'

'If they fail, then so be it. They gave it their best shot.'

'Their best shot?' Charlton laughed. 'Come on, Doctor, they couldn't do much worse!'

'In which case,' the Doctor observed, 'why save them?'

'Because of all that *potential*,' Charlton said. 'Humans *can* be great when they put their minds to it! Dickens, Bach, Michelangelo, Shikibu, Newton, Marie -'

'Who?' said Fitz.

'...Curie, Chekhov, Darwin, Adams...' Charlton reached into his jacket pocket and withdrew a leaflet. Its cover read, Galactic Heritage Foundation. 'Earth, right, has been designated a Galactic Heritage site!'

'A Galactic Heritage site?' The Doctor almost choked on the last of his boiled egg.

Charlton nodded. 'For worlds of particular scientific or historic interest.'

'Ah.' The Doctor glanced through the leaflet, reading the list of names. 'Varb, Vidow, Kootanoot, Gidi, Earth, Arkmic, Shardybarn, Ulclar, Biblios, Terjowar, Wabbab, Dido, Phoenix, Prum, Gallifr -'

'- and these planets are all under threat?' interrupted Fitz.

'I'm afraid so, yes. Gutting, isn't it?'

'And it's your mission to save them?'

'Seemed like a good idea at the time.'

The Doctor patted a napkin across his lips and stood up. 'So, how many worlds have you saved so far?'

'How many?'

'Yes, with your Tomorrow Windows. Come on, Charlton Mackerel. How many worlds have you saved?'

'You want actual figures?'

'You can round up.'

Charlton coughed with embarrassment. 'None.'

Fitz laughed. 'None!'

'Earth was my first go!' protested Charlton.

'I see,' smiled the Doctor.

'Saving planets is trickier than I'd thought,' admitted Charlton. 'Which is why I want your help.'

'Speaking as someone who's done a bit of planet-saving, I think the problem with your approach is, on the whole, that it's rubbish,' said Fitz as they strode along the station corridor. Storms whirled through the windows on one side, while on the other side lay blackness tipped with stars.

'I considered just telling them what they should do, but they wouldn't listen to me,' said Charlton.

'I know what you mean.' Fitz wasn't sure whether the Doctor was sympathising with Charlton or humouring him. 'Take Earth. Humanity has a pretty good idea of what the future holds, but that knowledge rarely... informs their actions.'

'Yes,' said Charlton. 'That's it! That's why I'm using the Tomorrow Windows, because –'

'– they add a certain... immediacy!' grinned the Doctor.

'Exactly!' Charlton waved a hand over a sensor, and a door swished open.

They entered a workshop, the floor strewn with loops of cable, the air pungent with solder. A dozen or so men and women in baggy orange overalls sat at benches working on sheets of flat, clear glass. They smoothed the glass, polished it, passed beams of light through it and scrutinised it under microscopes.

Fitz peered over a technician's shoulder at a computer screen filled with green numbers. 'So, on all these threatened planets, you're going to set up galleries?'

'Sometimes something more... portable is required.' He passed Fitz the oval of glass. Fitz studied its foggy depths before handing it back. 'A mini-Tomorrow Window.'

'So what do you need me for?' said the Doctor.

'It seems someone's trying to stop me.'

'We noticed,' said Fitz. 'What were those things that came after us, again?'

'Cececs.'

Fitz narrowed his eyes. 'You seem to know an awful lot about them.'

'You think I'd kill my own people as a ruse to get your trust?'

'Well, it's been done before,' said Fitz.

They left the laboratory and went to an area with six tele-doors. Charlton tapped a sequence of numbers into the keypad beside one door and an image formed in the glass. Thunderclouds loomed over bleak moorland, the scrub bristling in a savage wind.

The Doctor said, 'So where are we off to now, Mr Mackerel?'

'Another... endangered world. I hope it will persuade you to join me in my quest.' Charlton collected a duffel coat and scarf from a nearby locker. He pulled on the coat, wound on the scarf and swung the tele-door open.

'When you say endangered,' said Fitz, 'how endangered?'

'Oh, in about four hours it'll be completely destroyed.'

Valuensis

The camels stamped their feet as though impatient for the coming conflict. The tribes had convened within the ferns and waterpines of the oasis and sat, huddled, around their spitting fires.

The outer rings of the sun submerged themselves beneath the horizon and Tydran returned to drink Fyrwater with his fathers. The Fyrwater burned his throat but caused his blood to pound in anticipation of the trials ahead.

A hand pressed upon his shoulder. Tydran took a last gulp, gathered up his robes and tramped to the central clearing.

The Jhander tribe stood in wait, their eyes glinting in the flame-light.

'Who will be your champion?' barked their chief.

Tydran stepped into the duel circle. 'I am the Khali champion.'

One of the Jhander tribe joined him in the circle. 'I am the Jhander champion.'

'Then let the duel begin!'

Immediately each member of the Khali tribe pulled a set of bongos out of their robes and struck up a rapid rhythm.

The Jhander tribe did likewise, shaking their maracas.

Tydran took a deep breath and began to rotate his right foot into the sand, twisting it to and fro. Then, hands on hips, he gyrated his midriff.

His opponent had chosen a less obvious gambit. He shook his body while outstretching one arm and bringing it back over his head in a wave motion before repeating the action with his other arm.

Tydran knew he would have to come up with something audacious. He outstretched his right arm in a dramatic pointing gesture, above and to the right, his left hand on his hips. Then he pointed to the ground to his left.

There was an intake of awestruck breath. The eyes of the Jhander tribe widened in fear.

In desperation Tydran's opponent made a series of gestures, as though describing the dimensions of first a big box, and then a little box, but it

was too late. Tydran crouched and started to move his knees together and apart while crossing and uncrossing his arms over them.

The Jhander tribe fell silent. They knew when they were beaten.

Tydran strode to the centre of the circle. As he raised his hands, a wind rose from nowhere and a golden, shimmering shaft beamed down from the night sky, illuminating a figure seated upon a throne of sapphire.

Its head revolved to reveal the face of a camel.

The figure's voice made the ground tremble. 'I am your god!'

Tydran squinted at the figure. 'Hello?'

'You have a conflict between your tribes?'

'Well, yes,' said Tydran. 'But we've sorted it out now –'

'I shall help you resolve it!'

'Oh,' said Tydran. 'That's nice.'

The figure rose from its throne, reached into a belt-pouch and withdrew a knife. It was a knife unlike any Tydran had ever seen. So long, so thin, it would be quite useless for carving. 'You shall use this to settle your dispute.'

'What?'

The figure looked around. 'Use this to settle your dispute!'

'You mean,' said Tydran, 'we should have an eating competition?'

'No,' sighed the figure.

The Jhander champion stepped forward. 'We have a contest to see who can throw it the furthest?'

'No.'

One of Tydran's fathers said, 'Maybe if we painted a target on a tree –'

'No,' said the figure. 'What you do is, you stick it in your enemy!'

'You do what?' said Tydran.

'You take this sword,' the figure told them. 'And you kill them with it.'

'Kill our enemies? Are you sure? Seems a bit drastic.'

The figure's shoulders sagged. 'What do you normally do?'

'Well, normally we have a bit of a dance –'

'There shall be no more dancing here!'

A hesitant Tydran took the knife. 'Well, if you're sure... ' He looked at the Jhander champion, and took an uncertain step forward.

As one, the Khali tribe slapped at their bongos.

'What are you doing?' said the figure.

The bongos halted, embarrassed.

'We always have music when we're having a duel,' explained Tydran.

'Not any more you don't.' The figure turned its camel-face upon Tydran. 'Well, what are you waiting for?'

Tydran gulped and, screwing up his face, aimed the point of the knife at the champion's chest and shoved. The skin burst surprisingly easily and its contents were pulpy and wet, like a riverfruit. The champion's eyes widened as he fell backwards into the sand.

Tydran looked at the knife, shocked. It was coated in blood. As it dripped on to his hand he felt its warmth and stickiness. Tydran dropped the knife and staggered back, staring wide-eyed at the body. What had he done?

'That's it,' said the figure. 'You're getting the hang of it now.'

Chapter 3

Only God Can Save Us Now

The town is a ruin, the buildings hollowed-out hulks. Roofs lie open to the relentless downpour, their timbers exposed like ribcages. The only sounds are the rap of hail upon my canvas shelter and the buzz of electric cables.

Yes, this place is as miserable as I feel.

Martin returns, his spectacles smeared, his hair plastered to his forehead. He has with him two locals, a man and a woman, cloaked in filthy sacks.

'Our transport!' Martin announces, wide-eyed like a terrier that's been at the coffee, indicating a wooden cart dragged behind a creature about the size of a cow. Its snout probes at the muck as it lolls forward upon six stumps. 'You're not impressed?'

I'm too cold and tired and pissed-off to complain. 'It'll do.' I squelch my way over to the cart and climb in. The locals join me and gather up the reins. 'Couldn't you have tele-doored us a bit nearer wherever it is?'

'Better to arrive incognito, less disruption,' says Martin as he swings himself on to the back of the tumbril. The woman tugs the reins and the cart jolts forward.

A few seconds later, for no apparent reason, the local man claps his hands on his cheeks. Slap, slap. He grimaces in pain as each strike reawakens old bruises. His companion then passes him the reins and repeats the ritual.

I stare at them, wondering why they're doing it.

'Self-pummelling,' says Martin, as if in response to my unspoken question. 'The people of this world believe they are guilty of the sin of being born.'

'That's... original. And they hurt themselves as a penance?'

'No. Just to make themselves feel even more bad about it,' grins Martin. 'They'll then proceed with mutual pummelling.'

'Why?'

'As a penance for the indulgence of self-pummelling.'

The two villagers begin to slap each other on the cheeks. Like some sort of mad, sado-masochistic Benny Hill routine. I'd laugh if it wasn't so pathetic. Once finished, the man offers me an upturned palm. I notice that he's missing his little finger.

'No, I'm all right,' I say. 'Feel bad enough already.' Though a few slaps here and there might help to warm me up a bit.

Martin laughs.

'What is it?'

'Nothing, sorry, nothing.' Martin covers his giggling mouth. 'Private joke.'

The cart steers through a twisted iron gate and the mud beneath our wheels gives way to cobbles. Looking into the sky, I see dirigibles trapped in searchlights and tethered to pylons. Like something from the Blitz.

The town is a clutter of terraced buildings, their plaster cracked, their windows shuttered. We pass more villagers, huddling into their robes, splashing through the downpour and slapping their cheeks. Oddly, they are all missing their little fingers too. Several are moving in the same direction as us, holding spark-dripping flambeaux.

'Where are we heading for, again?' I ask.

Martin points, and as he does, lightning illuminates the cloud-laden sky. Rising over the rooftops is the silhouette of an immense, daunting edifice.

My first impression is that it's a monument, because it portrays a figure seated upon a high-backed throne. Although its features have eroded, I can make out a beard and two blank eyes. One arm rests in its lap, the other points into the distance.

As we draw closer, however, I realise that it's not merely a statue. There are steep, arched, doorways set into its base and slit windows flickering with flame. Gargoyles perch upon its parapets and rainwater cascades down its walls.

It's a vast cathedral, more than twenty storeys tall, carved into the image of a god.

Another lightning flash illuminates it, catching its features. It seems to come to life, its expression fierce in condemnation, its mouth open in mid-shout.

'The church of the great prophet Moop,' Martin announces.

'In about four hours?' said Fitz, shivering. His boots squelched as he picked his way through the brambles.

He'd been on some lousy planets in his time, but this one took the biscuit. Fetid moor stretched away into the night in every direction, its monotony broken by jagged, black crags surfacing from its depths like, well, jagged, black craggy sea creatures or something. Brooks of steaming mud slapped and gulped. 'You leave these things a bit to the last minute, don't you?'

Charlton trudged behind Fitz. 'It's a last-ditch attempt.'

'Often the best approach,' agreed the Doctor. 'Why waste time, when you can do it all in a mad rush?'

They were heading for a dome-shaped structure exposed upon a hummock. At first Fitz had thought it some sort of lookout post, as it would have an unbroken view for a dozen miles in every direction. As they drew nearer, Fitz realised the building was watching them approach. One side of it had been built into the likeness of a camel's head.

'It's fascinating, isn't it?' shouted the Doctor over the howl of the wind.

Fitz followed with less enthusiasm. 'Very.'

The steps wound around the hill. Each side of the structure had the face of an animal, fuzzed with lichen but still recognisable. There was the beady-eyed face of an eagle, or parrot, and the face of a terrier, its jaws open as though expecting a ball to be thrown. And, strangest of all, a gasping fish.

They reached the shelter of the doorway. As Fitz and Charlton recovered their breath, the Doctor gazed out across the wasteland, the breeze ruffling his mane of hair. His lips curled into an aloof smile but his eyes were filled with sadness. 'Some sort of iconographic warning,' he observed. 'Designed to deter the unwary traveller.'

'You don't say,' said Fitz. 'So not a Wimpy bar?'

The Doctor looked at Fitz, not getting the joke, then pulled a small, flashing device from his coat pocket. The device stuttered as the Doctor circled, holding it before him like a wand. 'The level of radiation is rather high.'

'Radiation?' Fitz huddled into the doorway beside the Doctor. It was a relief to be out of the wind and the rain, but his ears felt raw from the cold. 'Will we be OK?'

'As long as we're not here for more than four hours,' said the Doctor. 'Why have you brought us here, Charlton?'

'Right. Well, it's like this, you see. I've been monitoring this world's... prospects, using the Tomorrow Windows, of course. I think you should go inside, and see for yourself.'

The hinges of the door squeaked. Fitz followed the Doctor into the building. It consisted of one chamber that smelled of rotten wood. The

Doctor held his radiation detector in front of him, its clicks becoming a whirr.

Fitz approached a pile of bricks that had been left in the centre of the room. Half buried in the rubble was a cylinder surrounded by a nest of wires, capacitors and valves. A cable was plugged into the base of the cylinder.

Fitz tapped his fingers against the cylinder. 'What is it?'

The Doctor crouched beside him. 'A nuclear bomb.'

Fitz jumped back with a start. 'Titting hell! A nuclear bomb?'

'Yes.' The Doctor tested the connections by tugging at the wires. 'All it needs is a detonation signal and...'

Fitz tried not to panic, even though panic would be both the rational and emotional response. 'Wouldn't elsewhere be a good place to be, then?'

The Doctor turned to Charlton. 'By the look of it, this bomb contains about ten *megatons*' worth of enriched plutonium. It will cause... unimaginable devastation. I suppose you want me to disable it?'

Charlton said nothing.

'Of course I *can*, but I'm not sure I should. Not until I know who put it here, and why. Besides, this bomb alone is not enough to blow up a whole world... and any interference with the connection will be noticed by whoever's at the other end of this wire.' The Doctor indicated the power cable. 'What sort of person leaves a nuclear bomb unguarded? I mean, it's just shoddy, what is the universe coming to -'

There was a series of thuds from the doorway. Fitz turned to see three figures, each dressed in robes, each with its face hidden by a cowl. They each levelled a machine gun.

'Ah,' said the Doctor. 'That's more like it.'

We are not the only tumbrel moving along the street – we are part of a stream of pilgrims, all progressing at the sluggish pace of the cow-creatures. Ahead of us lie the double doors of the cathedral.

The statue dominates the sky. Craning my neck, I can see the underside of the outstretched arm. The rain drains off the elbow, dropletting down directly on to us.

'So that's Moop, is it?' I ask.

'No, no,' says Martin. 'The great prophet Moop, right, is the one who spoke to their god!'

'So everyone worships the big shouty bloke?'

'He shall return, he will,' mutters the woman holding the reins to our cow-creature. I've learnt that her name is Tunt, and the man is her husband, Fim.

'What?'

'He shall return, he will,' Tunt repeats. 'God shall return. So it was spaken unto Moop, so mote it be.'

'He promised, he did,' agrees Fim. 'He said if we rejected sin, if our faith was pure, and our devotion was absolute, then he'd come back, he would.'

'Oh. That's nice,' I say. I've heard this sort of thing before, usually just before I close my front door. 'Have you been waiting long?'

'A thousand years, innit?' says Tunt.

'And you're expecting him back, when?'

Fim turns to me. 'In about three hours.'

'Three *hours*?'

'So it was spaken unto Moop, so mote it be.'

'You're absolutely sure about this?'

'Oh yes,' says Tunt. 'He's definitely coming back, he is. To deliver us unto salvation.'

'I admire your faith.' We move through the double doors into a sudden darkness.

'Faith?' says Tunt as though it's an unfamiliar word. 'It is not a question of faith. It's guaranteed, it is.'

Our cart jerks to a halt in a crowded, brazier-lit hall. Around us, the sack-robed figures are gathering and kneeling. Martin helps me off the cart.

'What if he doesn't turn up?' I ask.

'He will.' Tunt is implacable. 'So it was spaken...'

'...unto Moop, so mote it be, I get it,' I say. 'He's coming back to save you all?'

'Oh yes.'

'Well, you must all be very excited.'

Tunt and Fim smile at me, then slap each other about the face.

Martin approaches a stooped, white-haired, saggy-lipped old man who is ushering people in and handing out battered prayer books. His robes are less grubby than the rest, so presumably he's in charge.

'Hello,' says Martin. The white-haired man inspects Martin as though he's something he has scraped off a sandal. 'We're expected. Can you take us to see the Low Priest?'

The white-haired man frowns. 'You wish to pay homage to Jadrack the Pitiful?'

'Jadrack?'

'The Pitiful, yes.'

Martin nods. The white-haired man hands his prayer books to a colleague, sighs like a reluctant butler and conducts us through the throng. 'I am the Not-Quite-As-Low Priest Grigbsy. I shall take you to him.'

'The Low Priest?' I say. 'You sure you don't mean the High Priest?'

'No, the Low Priest is the one in charge, yeah?' says Martin, wide-eyed with excitement. 'They call him that because he's the most humble, most reverent priest of the lot.'

'I thought we were here to see the Doctor and Fitz?'

Martin grins at me. 'They'll turn up.'

'How can you be sure?' I say, feeling a growing unease. Something terrible is going to happen.

'Trust me.' Martin rummages in his jacket pocket and hands me a Galactic Heritage leaflet. 'Shardybarn. Look it up...'

The Doctor flicked through the leaflet. 'A Grade 1 listed planet,' he observed. 'A "pastoral world of outstanding natural tranquillity".'

The thud of the engines caused Fitz's seat to vibrate. Oil lamps swinging like pendulums illuminated the cabin of the airship. Three figures in grimy robes sat guard, each with a gun across its lap like a Capuchin gangster. Their cowls had been drawn back to reveal shaven heads dotted in sores.

Fitz peered out of the window, holding his breath to avoid clouding the glass. Far beneath them, the moorland gave way to a village and the buildings clustered together to form a town. Smoke swelled from chimneys. Pylons formed a wire lattice over the higgledy-piggledy bustle of rooftops.

At regular intervals, there was a domed building like the one they had visited. Each one kept watch over its surroundings with four animal faces.

Not much outstanding natural tranquillity, thought Fitz. 'Bit out of date,' he said.

'Yes.' The Doctor folded the leaflet, re-creased it and returned it to Charlton. 'Pollution, poor diet... Something has gone wrong here, Fitz.'

One of their guards rubbed his palms together and slapped his face. His two comrades joined in. It was like some sort of overenthusiastic German folk dance.

'I wish they wouldn't do that.' The Doctor shuffled in his seat to address Charlton. 'How long do we have left now?'

Charlton sneaked a glance at the mini-Tomorrow Window concealed inside his coat. 'About three hours.'

'You're sure about this?' checked Fitz.

Charlton nodded.

'Because,' continued Fitz, 'you didn't predict Tate Modern blown up –'
'The worl' will not end,' stated one of the guards. His voice was deep and ladled with a thick, country accent.

'What?' said the Doctor.

'The worl' will not end. God'll return and save us.'

'A little faith is a wonderful thing, but you can't expect miracles –'

'Yer, we can,' gruffed another of the guards.

'Our science deacons 'ave made sure,' said the first guard. 'The Low Priest Jadrack 'ave found a way.'

' "Science deacons"? "Low Priest"?' said the Doctor 'Who's in charge here, on this planet of yours?'

'Low Priest Jadrack. He be in charge.'

'And everyone obeys him, absolutely?'

The guards nodded as though the answer were obvious.

'A theocracy...' breathed the Doctor. 'A fundamentalist, totalitarian theocracy! Well, that explains a great deal.'

The engines sputtered and Fitz's seat sank beneath him. They were descending.

'Oh my giddy goodness, will you take a look at that!' exclaimed Charlton.

The Doctor and Fitz leaned forward, polishing the condensation from the windows for a clearer view. The first ruddy streaks of dawn were driving through the clouds. Twin suns cast an orange glow over the city, and over a vast building, that was in the form of an angry bearded man sitting on a throne.

Fitz turned to the Doctor for a reaction. The Doctor was wincing as though trying to remember something.

It's the most awful noise I've ever heard. A constant, nerve-scraping wail.

The nursery is filled with row upon row of babies. Each one is wriggling inside a filthy incubator. Each one is grasping helplessly at the air. Each one is missing its two little fingers.

The function of the room is obvious. The babies have been brought here to die.

I can't look away. My eyes mist. Play a role, Trix. Be someone else, someone who can deal with this.

'The wrong-borns,' snaps Grigbsy. He steers Martin and I back into the corridor. After climbing another stairwell, we are now somewhere within the giant figure itself. Tapestries adorn the walls, depicting a man upon a throne shooting flame from his outstretched hand.

'The "wrong-born"?'

'When god came unto Moop, and he spake unto him, he did say that we should take a bit more notice of the heavens, for they have an influence upon our lives.'

'You mean, astrology?' says Martin.

'Indeed. Our god told Moop that the date of a child's birth would affect its nature.'

I begin to understand. 'You mean, those babies in there were –'

'Born on the wrong day, yes,' says Grigbsy. 'They would grow up to become thieves and murderers. They are evil and, alas, must die.'

'Astrology isn't like that,' I protest. 'It's just a bit of fun. You're not supposed to take it seriously.'

Grigbsy halts. 'It is not a "bit of fun". Our god spake unto Moop, and Moop did take what he spake very seriously. Not for nothing was Moop known as Moop the Very Serious... As well as Moop the Pedantic, and Moop the Somewhat Literal-Minded.'

'Killing babies, that's a bit... extreme!'

'He was also known as Moop the Extreme... though there is some dissent about the exact translation. Some claim he is Moop the Prone to Exaggeration... ' Grigbsy looks puzzled. 'How can you know of astrology, and yet not follow it to its logical conclusions?'

'That's because we don't really *believe* –'

Martin shushes me with alarm. 'Don't say that, Trixie Trix,' he whispers. 'On Shardybarn, scepticism is a capital offence.'

'We live our lives in concord with the stars.' Grigbsy raises his eyes to the heavens, or rather, the ceiling. 'It is regrettable that some are disadvantaged, but our lives are predetermined by our birthdates.' He smiles a thin, humourless smile. 'Those of us born on descension day become Low Priests.'

'And the fingers,' I ask. 'What about the fingers?'

'Why do we remove them, you mean?' The question amuses Grigbsy. 'Because only god is perfect. And just to make absolutely sure there can be no misunderstanding on that issue, we deliberately render ourselves imperfect.'

'But that's... ' I can't express my revulsion, '...barbaric.'

'It's their custom,' whispers Martin. 'You should respect their indigenous customs...'

'Sod their indigenous customs!'

Grigbsy swallows some silence before speaking. 'It is a simple procedure, and rarely fatal. We are not savages – we use special pliers. Two fingers are a small price to pay to enter the empire of heaven.'

'Look at you! You're starving to death, your city's falling to bits... and you murder and mutilate your children. Can't you see what you're doing is wrong?'

'It would not be a sacrifice if it did not beget hardship. The greater the hardship is, the more justifiable the sacrifice. Besides,' Grigbsy adds, 'there will always be more children. We have developed artificial fertilisation.'

'Artificial?'

'The menfolk of our world are only... potent for a few days every five years. We like to think it makes us more pious.'

I consider making a comment about them working out their sexual frustrations, but think better of it. Martin giggles again.

Without another word being spoken, we ascend another set of stairs. I can't forget what I've seen, but I can restrain my anger. Sometimes I'm furious with Grigbsy, sometimes with this whole world.

We emerge into a high-ceilinged hall, buttressed by trunks of marble. At the far end of the hall stand a pair of double doors, defended by two surly-faced monks.

After exchanging some hurried mutters with the monks, Grigbsy returns to speak to Martin and me. 'I'm afraid Low Priest Jadrack is busy right now. He has been submitting himself to an intense programme of self-abuse, plus it seems there are some prisoners due for interrogation, and of course there is the apocalypse to bring about. However, he says he will try to fit you in as soon as possible.'

'That would be smashing,' says Martin.

Grigbsy's smile tightens. 'If you could please linger in the vestibule...'

We are directed to a bare room to one side of the double doors. Lavender sack-cloth robes hang along one wall. There is another door, presumably leading into Jadrack's chamber, from which is emanating an energetic hammering sound and a series of yelps, gasps and groans.

'You must excuse me, I have a congregation to berate.' Grigbsy bows and closes the door behind him. Martin takes a place on the low bench, patting the space beside him.

'We can talk about it,' he says. 'I'm sure if you listen...'

I can't bear to talk to him. Instead, I open the door and peer back into the chamber.

Three cowed figures bearing machine guns escort in the prisoners.

The prisoners are the Doctor and Fitz, and the man from the brochure, Charlton Mackerel.

'Low Priest Jadrack will see you now.' The large double doors swung open of their own accord as Fitz, the Doctor and Charlton approached.

Their captors followed.

Fitz had expected a grand chamber, draped in curtains, with flaming braziers.

Instead there was near-darkness and a naked, skinny man in his eighties who was beating himself about the head with a short plank of wood.

'Won't. Be. A. Minute,' gasped the skinny man between thwacks. 'Haven't. Quite. Finished!' His cheeks were raw and bruised. His bones were so devoid of flesh that he had the appearance of a medical diagram.

The Doctor moved to help, but a prod of a rifle advised him against it.

The skinny man bashed himself on either side of the skull with such force Fitz was worried he would knock himself out. Then he halted, panting but cheerful, and padded over to a basin and splashed himself. 'Give me a second.'

As his eyes adjusted to the gloom, Fitz could make out a foul-looking mattress and a table. A squat metal box hummed to itself in the centre of the floor. Beneath its blank screen ran a series of clunky knobs and switches. A cable slithered to a socket in the wall.

Something about the box worried the Doctor. Fitz noticed that he couldn't take his eyes off it.

'Would you like something to eat?' The skinny man scrubbed himself down with a towel and wound it around his waist. As he did, Fitz realised that while their guards had been missing their little fingers, this man had had all of his fingers removed, save for his thumbs and index fingers. It made his hands look like claws.

'Sorry?' said Fitz.

'Something to eat?'

'Yes,' said the Doctor. 'That would be delightful. I'm the Doctor. Low Priest Jadrack, is it?' He offered the priest a handshake.

The man refused, opting instead to slap his cheeks. 'Please, do come in, come in!' He waved to one of the guards with his two-fingered hand. 'Grunt soup, if you will.'

Fitz didn't like the sound of that. 'Soup made out of... Grunt?'

'Ah, here we are. Lovely!' said Jadrack as a cowed guard brought in four bowls of steaming, milky soup. Jadrack handed them out. 'Nothing quite like it, is there?' He then upturned his bowl, pouring its contents over the floor.

'You don't want us to... drink it?' sputtered Fitz.

'You don't *drink* it,' admonished Jadrack. 'That would be sacrilege! None may sup the sacred soup of the Grunt!'

Fitz was even more confused. The Doctor held his bowl out before him and, as Jadrack had done, emptied its contents on to the floor. Charlton

followed suit, and Fitz, feeling ridiculous, let his soup slop away.

'Grunt soup was the favoured dish of the great prophet Moop,' explained Jadrack. 'So we declared it sacred and, therefore, forbidden.'

'Shame,' said Fitz. 'It comes so highly recommended.'

Jadrack stepped aside to allow in a guard with a mop. 'The only slight problem is that, before god turned up, Grunt was pretty much our staple diet.'

'You must have other things to eat,' said the Doctor.

'Oh, yes. Weeds, moss, crowflies. And besides, self-denial feeds the soul.' Jadrack paused for contemplation. 'Not for a thousand years have we savoured Grunt soup. One can scarcely wonder at its flavour...'

'What happened a thousand years ago?' the Doctor asked. 'You say god... turned up? That's quite... remarkable.'

'I'm supposed to be interrogating you,' snapped Jadrack, but then softened. 'However, it is *such* a good story... and it will be to your edification, I am sure. I do so like to edify.'

'Please do.'

Jadrack took a deep breath. 'Moop, of course, was not always a great prophet. Before god arrived, no one even knew what a great prophet *was*. Moop was a humble Grunt herder, son of Droon the Grunt herder, son of Praddle the Grunt herder, son of Larbgroodle... I'll abridge. One day, god arrived upon a throne of shimmering green – or blue, gospels differ – and commanded that we worship him. In return, he promised that he would return and save us.'

'And he... hasn't come back?' said the Doctor, smiling.

'Not yet. Between you and me, we're pretty tired of waiting. All this time we've been worshipping him, and living according to the stars... and nothing. While our belief has never wavered, we are... impatient.'

'Understandable,' said Fitz.

'Which is when I had an idea. God said he would return and save us, so I thought, "Jadrack, how can I get him to come back now?" What was needed, I realised, was there to be something for God to save us *from!* A situation where his divine intervention was required! Then he would *have* to come back, wouldn't he?'

'Your logic is impeccable.' The Doctor leant against the door arch and gave a 'please continue' gesture.

'And so I had the science deacons build this.' Jadrack indicated the humming metal box. 'Do you know what it does?'

'I think you're going to confirm my very nasty suspicions...'

'This,' Jadrack announced, 'begins a countdown of one hour in duration. It has been specially designed so that when that countdown has been

started, it cannot be stopped. After that hour, it will send an electric pulse down this wire,' he pointed to the cable, 'to the bombs which are situated across this planet's surface. I believe you were captured in one of my bomb shrines.'

The Doctor, Fitz couldn't help but notice, was no longer smiling.

Jadrack continued. 'They have been positioned so that if they detonate, there will not be a single living thing left alive.'

'I notice you say "if". Not "when",' said the Doctor.

'Ah. That is because, you see, god will step in and *prevent* the bombs from exploding!'

'You're creating an "only god can save us now" situation?'

'You have a gift for *précis*, Doctor. Yes. So what do you think?'

'He's stark staring bonkers,' Fitz whispered to the Doctor.

'I know, Fitz,' whispered the Doctor. 'Unfortunately, on this planet, that's relatively sane.' He turned back to Jadrack. 'I can only spot one snag. What if, for some reason, god *doesn't* turn up?'

'But he will,' said Jadrack with utter conviction.

The Doctor shook his head. 'What if... what if he judges that you are not worthy?'

'Then we shall die for our sins.'

'What if he's busy?'

'God has excellent time-management skills.'

'What if,' Fitz interrupted, 'god doesn't actually bloody exist?'

Jadrack looked mortified. 'But he does!'

'You're taking a massive gamble!' Fitz laughed in exasperation. 'You might blow yourselves up for no reason!'

'Then,' said Jadrack, 'we would be better off dead than living in a godless universe. However, I do not doubt god for one instant. I have complete confidence in his reliability.'

'And you intend to prove it?'

'It will be the ultimate expression of faith! To say to god, "we are prepared to martyr our world in your name". How can he possibly resist?'

'What if,' said Fitz, 'he's a non-interventionist god?'

'Non-interventionist gods don't tend to turn up on thrones of green – or blue – and spake unto shepherds, do they?' Jadrack folded his arms.

'No, I suppose not,' admitted Fitz.

'Right... If you will allow me.' Charlton extracted the mini-Tomorrow Window from the confines of his jacket and presented it to Jadrack.

'What is this?' The scrawny man peered at the glass doubtfully. 'A gift?'

'It's a special... window, your high- your lowness,' explained Charlton. 'It allows you to see into the future.'

Jadrack examined it. Frowning, he turned it upside down.

'It shows,' continued Charlton, 'that Shardybarn will very soon be reduced to a radioactive wilderness. Please, your lowness, reconsider before it's too late.'

Jadrack hurled the Window to the corner of the room, shattering it. 'No! No! That's not true! God will save us...' His features twisted into a sneer of rage. 'It's as I thought... you have been sent to test my faith! You think you can tempt me away from the true course... you are devils!'

'Said your plan was rubbish,' muttered Fitz to Charlton.

'Guards, kill them!' yelled Jadrack. The guards clicked the safety-catches of their rifles and raised them. 'No, wait! I have a... better idea. Lock them up. *God* will deal with them later!' His body shaking with anger, Jadrack crouched down beside his electronic box and began to flick the switches.

The Doctor stepped forward. 'Jadrack, wait -'

Jadrack worked his way along the front of the box, twisting each knob in turn with his clawlike hands. 'No. Let the final countdown commence -'

'Let's be reasonable about this -'

'No more listening!' spat Jadrack. 'Guards, if the Doctor moves, kill him. And him,' he pointed at Fitz, 'and him,' he pointed at Charlton. Jadrack flicked a final switch, and some digital numerals appeared on the box's screen. Their red glow lent the room a sinister, womblike appearance.

The clock read 59.59.

'The end is nigh!' Jadrack announced, his eyes glistening with insanity. 'God has been *summoned!*'

At the door, I listen as the Doctor, Fitz and Charlton Mackerel are marched out of Jadrack's room. A door slams after them, and all I can hear is a faint clicking and Jadrack's demented giggling.

Martin has overheard the conversation too. He ruffles a hand through his hair and adjusts his spectacles. 'Well, that's that then. Nothing more to be done here.'

I can't believe what I'm hearing. 'Nothing to be done? He's blowing up the planet!'

'Trixie Trix, don't you see, that's his choice to make? We must respect these people's beliefs, however strange they may seem to us.'

'I said, *Martin*, "he's blowing up the planet!"'

'We can't impose our western spiral arm values on to these people. This is a Grade 1 listed planet.'

'Well, it won't be for much longer.'

'There's nothing we can do. This is not a "right and wrong" situation.'

I put my hands over my face. I can't forget the image of the nursery. 'How can you *say* that?'

'How they treat their children is their own business. We can't get involved.'

Of all the condescending, apologist crap! 'Won't Galactic Heritage mind this planet being reduced to a cinder?'

'If it's by the actions of its own inhabitants, there's nothing they can do.' Martin reaches out a hand. He thinks he's comforting me. 'I'm sorry.'

'Get lost.'

Martin looks at me with his wide, doleful eyes, then reaches into his pocket. He holds the tele-door handle in front of him and slides it open, creating a rectangle in mid air.

'You don't want to come with me?' he says.

'I'm going to find the Doctor.'

Martin steps through the door. 'I'll see you again.'

'No you won't.'

'I'm not the villain here, you know.' Martin slides the door shut. It vanishes.

' "Don't take that, it's valuable"?' muttered Fitz. 'They wouldn't have taken it if you hadn't said that!'

Before being placed in the cell, the guards had ordered the Doctor, Fitz and Charlton to empty their pockets. One by one, the Doctor's eccentric belongings had accumulated on the table, the guards examining them. Only when Charlton refused to give up the handle to his tele-door had they become suspicious.

Charlton sat on the bench, pretending the floor was of great interest. 'I'm new at this. Not my fault.'

The Doctor paced about the dank room. 'We have to find some way of stopping the countdown.'

'So you're with me?' Charlton's head lifted. 'You agree, we should prevent these planets being destroyed?'

'I think it's obvious that you need our help.'

'I'll say' muttered Fitz. 'Did you really think your mini-Window thing would convince him? Unbelievable.'

'Fitz, I'm sure Charlton is aware of the shortcomings of his approach.'

Some people are, I'm afraid, not open to argument. No matter how persuasive. Like ostriches, they stick their heads in the sand.'

'Ostriches don't actually do that,' said Charlton.

'Venusian ones do.' The Doctor grinned. 'What a peculiar thing to remember... The metal seas of Venus...'

'*Meanwhile,*' said Fitz, 'this planet is about to explode and we're locked up. How are we gonna get out?'

'Yes.' The Doctor sat down beside Charlton. 'There is the rather insoluble problem of the locked door.'

They remained in silence for a few moments before Charlton spoke. 'Couldn't we escape, I don't know, through a ventilation shaft?'

The Doctor sighed and said to Charlton, 'There isn't a ventilation shaft.' He pointed to the ceiling, where there wasn't a ventilation shaft.

'Oh,' said Charlton. 'Good point. Right. *Righty-ho*. Er... maybe if we scraped away at the wall, we could tunnel out?'

'An excellent suggestion. Though one that fails to take into account the fact that we only have half an hour.'

'Well, you think of something! You're the experts!'

Keys rattled and the cell door swung open to reveal a robed figure, its face hidden beneath its hood.

'Maybe we could overpower him... ' whispered Charlton.

'I don't think that will be necessary.' The Doctor lifted the guard's cowl. 'Hello, Trix. You can't imagine how pleased I am to see you.'

Trix gave the Doctor a mock-smug pout. 'I thought I'd rescue you, for a change.'

Fitz hugged her. 'I thought you might be dead -'

'Good for you that I'm not,' she said.

'Trix,' said the Doctor, 'are there any guards out there?'

'No, they've all gone off to some big service. Apart from the one I knocked unconscious. He's not going anywhere.'

'Excellent.' The Doctor patted her arms and strode to the door. 'Now, we need to somehow stop the countdown.'

'Didn't he say once it had been started it couldn't be halted?' said Fitz as he followed the Doctor into the corridor. At the end of the corridor was the guard room, where a robed figure lay slumped across his desk.

'Well, yes, but we have to try.' The Doctor spotted the basket, upturned it over the desk, and tossed Charlton his tele-door handle. 'Look after it, Charlton. It's valuable.' He returned his sonic screwdriver and radiation detector to his pockets. 'Now... I think we should get something to eat!'

Jadrack was whacking himself on the bottom when the Doctor strode into

his chamber, followed by Trix, Fitz and Charlton. He halted indignantly, dropping his plank of wood. 'What are you –'

'Hello,' said the Doctor. 'I've come to save the world.'

Jadrack scuttled over to his detonator and draped himself over it. 'No! I won't let you!'

'Get away from the box, Jadrack.'

'Never!'

The Doctor sighed, and nodded to his companions. At his signal, they each held up the bowls they had brought from the kitchens. Each one contained a steamy, milky liquid.

'What –' sputtered Jadrack.

'Grunt soup,' said the Doctor. 'Unless you do exactly as I say, my friends are going to start drinking it.'

'But it is forbidden!'

'Fitz,' cued the Doctor. Fitz filled a spoon and raised it to his lips.

'No!' Jadrack released the box and straightened up.

'Move into the corner,' the Doctor ordered him. 'Any sudden movements and it's *hors d'oeuvres*. My friends here are very hungry and once they've started they won't stop until they've licked the bowls clean.'

'None may sup the sacred soup!' Jadrack protested as he backed away, his body quivering with anger.

'Stay there.' The Doctor crouched down beside the detonator, tugging back his cuffs. 'If you try anything, we've brought you some too. You look like you could do with a good square meal...'

Fitz handed Trix his bowl, and rushed to the Doctor's side. The clock now read 02.23. They didn't have much time left.

The Doctor sonic-unscrewed the last of the screws holding the detonator's lid, and Fitz jammed his fingers into the gap. The lid slid off with a clatter.

The box contained dusty, cobweb-coated wires. The digital clock wasn't even connected to anything.

'I'm afraid I wasn't entirely honest with you earlier,' boasted Jadrack from the corner of the room, 'when I said that it sent an electric pulse down the wire at the *end* of the hour. I mean, if that were the case, it would be possible for us to save ourselves by unplugging the timer, wouldn't it?'

'What?' The Doctor gasped.

'We wouldn't need a miracle. God would see through our deceit, and wouldn't have to return.'

The Doctor was staring at Jadrack, appalled.

'So instead,' Jadrack bragged, 'the electric pulse was sent down the wire when the countdown *started*. The timer delay mechanism is at the

other end, where the bombs are! And, as there are several thousand of them spread out over the planet's surface, it is impossible to deactivate them all! Unless,' he added hopefully, 'you are god?'

Fitz glanced at the clock. It was now 01.10. 'Doctor –'

The Doctor straightened up, rubbing his lips. 'It seems there is nothing we can do. This world is... doomed.'

'No, it isn't,' muttered Jadrack petulantly

01.00

'Can't you, I don't know, reverse the polarity?' said Trix.

'I'm afraid that wouldn't do any good.' The Doctor gave her a hug, then released her. 'We must leave. Charlton?'

Charlton nodded and slid open a tele-door. Through it appeared the research station corridor.

Fitz took Trix's hand as they stepped through the tele-door.

'That's right, go!' spat Jadrack. 'Good riddance.'

The Doctor hesitated in the tele-doorway. 'You stupid, stupid fools,' he said, and the door slid shut, vanishing into thin air.

00.30

Grigbsy sprinted into the chamber and bowed before Jadrack, clasping his knees as he recovered his breath.

'What is it? Has god returned?' asked Jadrack. 'Has he come back?' Grigbsy shook his head. 'No sign yet.' He looked up at Jadrack. 'He's cutting it a bit fine, isn't he?'

00.20

'God is testing our faith,' said Jadrack. 'We must not doubt him.'

'I realise that.' Grigbsy noticed the discarded bowls of soup on the floor. 'But there's only a few seconds left...'

00.10

'God will come.' Jadrack closed his eyes.

'I'm just saying, it would be nice if he didn't have to leave it to the last possible moment.'

00.05

'He will be here. Any time in the next... two seconds –'

A blinding white light filled the room, banishing all shadows, and Jadrack gasped. Grigbsy turned, expecting to meet his maker, and as he turned, his skin boiled from his face. The blast transformed Jadrack, and the cathedral of the holy prophet Moop, and the town in which it stood, to a fine radioactive dust.

Gnomis

The lavatory wall was swaying so Astrabel put out a hand to steady it.

He shook, zipped and ambled over to the basins. As he washed his hands, his eyes drifted up to the man opposite him in the mirror. He resembled his father, but fatter, his cheeks blushing with burst veins.

When had he grown old? The years had passed so quickly. It had been good, though. The flamboyant meals. The *Award for Outstanding Ingenuity*. The *Life/Time Achievement Award*. The uproarious weddings, the entertaining divorces, the gratifying funerals. The *Award for Most Envied Git*.

He had more money than he knew how to spend, and the more he tried to get rid of it, the more it kept coming back. He'd drunk the finest *Frux Jeune* and tasted the most expensive women. He'd insulted President Drim Larbolla, he'd goosed Triffany Swimsmet and snubbed several minor pontiffs. He'd danced like a madman and puked like a goat.

He was at the top of his profession. He'd straddled it like a giant, the water of... something beneath his feet. The water of progress. Where was he again? He was at the top of his profession. He had been single-handedly responsible for every scientific breakthrough of the last forty years. He was respected among his peers, and they hated him for it, and Astrabel loved being hated for it because he hated his peers, and they knew he loved being hated for it and that just made them hate him for it even more.

Implications of Reductive Casual Loops? That was one of his. *Probability N-forms?* Knocked off in an afternoon. *Interstitial Time Induction?* Still in the bestseller lists and being adapted as a musical.

Yes, he'd had a good life.

Except he was a complete fraud.

He knew almost nothing about Theoretical Ultraphysics, and had only passed the exam on the second attempt. Ever since, he'd bluffed his way through his career. He blagged his way through lectures, just reading out the notes, refusing to answer questions afterwards.

His feet skidded as he headed for the door, and he grabbed the hand dryer for support. He could hear his heartbeat in his ears. He didn't have long left.

He had one last thing to do before he died.

Straightening his shirt, Astrabel returned to the party. Banners proclaiming '*Happy Retirement Astrabel Zar*' were suspended over his friends, family and colleagues. The Professor for Specious Inference, Grath Fuggl, gave Astrabel a flute of champagne and a look of pure hatred.

Astrabel wove his way over to his wife, Zoberly Chesterfield. How he loved her. She was as beautiful today as the day he'd first set eyes upon her. The plastic surgery had been worth every penny. Her breasts were still formulating their imminent escape attempt.

Astrabel kissed her, half on her mouth, half on her cheek. 'Have to go.' 'Go?'

'Booked a flight,' he said. 'First class. To Gadrahadra... to Gadrahadradon. First class.'

'But, Bel darling, why leave now?'

Astrabel attempted to tap the side of his nose and missed. 'It was on Gadraha... it was there tha' it all happened. It *all happened*. When I was a student. You were there.'

'I remember.' She smiled. '“The most haunted planet in the galaxy”.' 'Thassawun.'

'Darling,' she led him out of the bustle of the party, 'I've been speaking with Dr McBrummity, and he thinks... this trip might be too much for you.'

'I know,' said Astrabel. 'I have to go. Crucial importance.' His eyes drifted up her body, lingering upon her curves. 'I shall miss you.' His eyes reached her face. 'Goodbye.'

Her lips parted in protest. Astrabel kissed them and turned for the door. 'If I don't come back... look after everything. And marry again. Marry Sheabley... he's waited for you for forty years. You'll be happy.' Astrabel gave Zoberly one last smile, then walked out the door.

Chapter 4

Future Plans

Charlton Mackerel was in his early teens when he realised there was something fundamentally wrong with the universe. It was, he felt, incompetent. Not that gravity, magnetism and so on did a bad job. Rather, the problem lay with the people. People were, he realised, rubbish.

It was so *annoying*. Charlton would spend long, restless nights mulling over his thoughts. He waded through the history books, and discovered that history was about people being rubbish. They made mistakes – often for the best possible intentions, often with the most mitigating excuses – but nevertheless they were stupid, lazy, and selfish, and got things wrong.

Charlton turned his attention to current affairs and was equally appalled. The people in charge not only made mistakes, but made the additional mistake of not admitting they made mistakes. They declared wars for reasons that made no sense, but which no one noticed made no sense until after the war had finished. And the more mistakes the people in charge made, the less they admitted to them. All adolescents go through this stage. Some become cynical. Some join societies. Some distract themselves with drugs and sex. Some listen to miserable music. Some particularly nauseating adolescents even write whole novels about it.

Charlton Mackerel was different. He decided he would *do* something.

One thing he'd learned from studying history was that he had not been the first person to realise that people were rubbish. However, everyone before him had made the mistake of believing that because people were rubbish, they needed to be told what to do. That struck Charlton as being a particularly rubbish thing to do.

No, he would be different. He would help people to help themselves. He would not tell them what to do, he would ask them what they wanted.

It was, he realised, very, very simple. So why was it so difficult?

Charlton grew up, and found himself in university, but he never for-

got his dream. He listened to miserable but worthy music, joined some miserable but worthy societies, and went to parties where he met some miserable but worthy girls.

Two important things happened to Charlton at university. It would've been three but none of the girls were interested.

Firstly, he enrolled in the Galactic Heritage society. He'd leafed through one of their leaflets and been gobsmacked.

Secondly, he discovered the secret of the Tomorrow Windows.

Who is Beatrix MacMillan?

The hot pattering of the shower makes my skin tingle. All of the misery of Shardybarn swirls down the plughole. I feel the water upon my forehead, my eyelids. I step from the shower, collect a towel, and face myself in the mirror. Who do I see?

I see Triksie, the little girl. She was the girl who cried alone at night, listening for the squeak of floorboard. The girl who loved her father, who hated him. The girl who gathered conkers and took long walks along scrunching-leaf lanes. She was the girl who argued with her father. The girl who sat by her father's bedside, listening to his breathing become hoarse.

That's not true.

I see Nat, the girl who grew up in Cambridge, who used to cycle alongside her mother. I remember the jingle of the bicycle bell. She studied at the university, English literature, all picnics and winding staircases. I remember my friend, Philly, and how we would argue into the night. I remember hugging her the time she was called downstairs to answer the phone.

That's all lies too.

Who else do I see? I see Mac, the girl who bunked off school at sixteen, smoking joints and drinking snakebite. She was the girl who spent every afternoon in the town precinct. Mac became an addict, and worse. She broke into houses. Stealing anything, videos, jewellery, anything. Until one night she found somebody home, and made a fatal mistake.

I remember how it felt as I heard the wail of police sirens.

I remember my mother in the hospital waiting room, her eyes filled with tears. Of shame, of anger, I can't remember. I can remember every moment of that dark, winding journey back from Oxford, every song on the radio, the headlights upon the vicarage gate.

My mother was never the same again. She never let it affect her. She died the following year. She's still alive. She remarried. She's in care. I never knew my parents.

I can't remember which story I'm supposed to tell. Remind me. Which parts did you believe?

I've spent so long trying not to remember, sometimes I can almost forget.

It's for me to decide who I am. I make up the back-stories, I play the role. On the inside looking out, I don't know who I am – but isn't everyone like that?

Fitz sat in the dining room, waiting for the others, gazing out of the window at the rippling candyfloss clouds. He depressed the top of the cafetière and poured himself some coffee.

A full-length Tomorrow Window had been placed against one wall. Fitz lounged back, watching it, considering another glimpse into his future. He'd seen himself getting married.

He'd seen his future wife. Tanned skin, hazel eyes and a 34DD chest. She'd been smiling a smile that Fitz could imagine falling in love with.

Or maybe he'd seen his daughter's wedding. No, too weird, don't go there. Though if she was the daughter, the mother must've been pretty hot.

He was half tempted to take another look. What if he didn't see her this time? What if he saw the decrepit, forlorn, you've-turned-into-your-own-grandfather Fitz? What if he saw someone else? The windows, after all, only showed what was most likely to happen, they didn't show how to get there.

OK, he could do it as a process of elimination. 'Window, window, on the wall, if I leave the Doctor on the next planet, will I get the babe at all? No? OK, what about the next planet? The planet after that?'

Fitz studied the glass pane, studied his own reflection. What he'd seen made him feel...unsure. Ironic, wasn't it? A vision of the future that makes you uncertain of your future.

He knew what made him nervous – he'd been given something to look forward to. That had been one thing that his life had lacked all the time he'd been with the Doctor. He'd been living for the moment so long he'd forgotten to think beyond it. He'd never spared a thought about what he would be doing in a year's time, in ten years' time.

How do you go back, though? How do you adjust from saving planets to saving reward points? It would drive you mad, you'd always be regretting what you'd left behind, wouldn't you?

That was what Fitz had always thought, but now he realised that he was wrong.

One day, maybe soon, he would get a life.

He'd seen a world destroyed. Not for the first time – in the last few months, though it had seemed like over a year, he'd seen multiple Earths, multiple universes erased from history. Of course, he'd saved worlds too, but somehow, that never made up for what he'd lost. The Doctor always had the nagging feeling he was in deficit. Indeed, it was that feeling that drove him on. He was seeking... redemption.

Shardybarn had unnerved him. He didn't like being *powerless*. There was always a way if you searched hard enough, always a way.

Is it failure when you can't hope to succeed?

One must never lose hope. Hope is the greatest gift of all. Hope is the spirit that drives on every living thing. The belief that tomorrow will be better.

Shardybarn. He knew the translation. 'The presumption that tomorrow will be as glorious as today.' Not, unfortunately, always.

He stretched out on the bed, his hands behind his head. Not sleeping.

He'd accomplished so much, he'd brought about so much good. He had defeated monsters and the monstrous... Sabbath, Silver, Ferran, the Kandyman...

The Doctor twinged with momentary embarrassment. He'd always preferred Jelly Babies to liquorice Allsorts, but... no, his memory must be playing tricks on him again.

Recovered and refreshed, Fitz, the Doctor, Trix and Charlton reconvened in the dining room. Coffee and digestives were provided. Fitz slouched back in his chair balanced upon two legs, the Doctor opposite. Charlton occupied the head of the table, stirring cream into his coffee. Trix remained at the window, gazing out into the eddying, cotton-wool mist.

'What happened to Shardybarn,' the Doctor said, 'must not happen again. We were in a situation where we could achieve *nothing*.'

'I thought –'

The Doctor cut Charlton dead. 'You thought... you, Charlton Mackerel, have been very, very stupid indeed.'

'What d'you mean?'

'Fitz made an astute observation earlier.'

'I did?' said Fitz. 'I mean, which one? I make so many.'

'He asked why you didn't know Tate Modern would be destroyed. After all, you can predict the future. *So why didn't you see it coming?*'

Charlton looked around. 'I've been a little stupid, haven't I?'

'Yes, you have. After all, you have some idea of the potential of the Tomorrow Windows, don't you?'

'What?' Fitz didn't follow.

'The Doctor's right,' admitted Charlton, scratching his beard. 'I have...used them in the past. That's how I got all this.' He indicated the table, the carpet and the windows. 'I'm not a really clever person, you see. I used the Windows to make some investments, right? And I became a, well, whoops! A billionaire.'

Fitz asked, 'Didn't anyone get suspicious? Someone having no idea what they're doing ending up immensely rich?'

'Apparently it happens all the time. Anyway, I didn't always get it right.'

'Oh, you made mistakes to cover your tracks?'

'No,' said Charlton. 'It's just that sometimes I got confused. I did say I wasn't very clever.'

'Exactly,' said the Doctor. 'No one would ever suspect!' He held out a hand to Charlton. 'Do you have that leaflet? The Galactic thingummy la-la?'

Charlton passed him the Galactic Heritage Foundation booklet. The Doctor flitted through it.

'...Shardybarn, Verd, Ijij, Vymto, Shalakor, Zom, Pergoss, Varb, Ranx, Flamvolt, Galli—'

Fitz sputtered on his coffee. The Doctor looked up at him bemusedly and continued. 'All these worlds are "listed",' he said. 'And they're all under threat. Correct?'

'Correct —' Charlton began.

'Doesn't that strike you as something of a coincidence?'

'No. They wouldn't be protected otherwise, would they?'

'Or is it the other way round?' The Doctor returned the leaflet. 'What about worlds not included?'

'Worlds not designated heritage sites?' said Charlton. 'They can be developed, sold...no restrictions, really.'

'I see.' The Doctor examined his reflection in the Tomorrow Window 'You know these devices of yours are absurdly unhelpful. They only tell you what *will* happen, not what you should do to prevent it.' The Doctor cleared his throat. 'What is the next planet on your "to save" list, Charlton?'

'Ah,' brightened Charlton. 'It's a bit interesting, actually...hang on a tickington.' He darted over to a side door. A few moments later he reappeared, wheeling before him a widescreen television and video recorder on a trolley.

Charlton plugged in the equipment and collected a remote control. 'I taped a documentary about it off cable.'

Estebol

It was the day of the great race. A fresh frost made the track sparkle in the mountain air. Spectators patted their mittens and puffed out vapour, hugging their fluffy, pup-skin parkas. Cheeks were flushed and eyebrows snow-flecked.

The sleighs pulled up to the start line. Pena breathed slowly, keeping her thoughts clear, downplaying any nerves. In front, her six pups sniffed and yapped. They seemed to scent the excitement, their black-bead eyes wide, their whiskers a-twitch.

The final sleigh drew up, driven by Dela, Pena's main rival. Dela was breathtaking – about twenty, pale blonde, firm-breasted and with eyes like shards of ice. She noticed Pena's attention and smiled.

The audience fell silent as the Starter strode to the start line. She raised one hand, shouting, 'Go!'

Pena rattled her leash and her pups yelped into action. In unison, they heaved themselves forwards, swiping the snow away behind them.

Maintaining her concentration, Pena glanced across at her competitors. Fran was a couple of inches ahead, while Tilly had stalled, her pups snapping among themselves.

The spectators strolled alongside the race, crouching down to check the distances between the sleighs. One of them chattered as she walked, 'And now it's Dela, Pena, Fran, Bobo and Slub, Slub coming up on the outside, Tilly way behind...and Bobo's put on a spurt! Dela, Pena, Slub falling back, Dela, Pena gaining ground...'

Pena's sleigh reached walking pace and drew level with Dela's. Then her pups began to bleat. At the ten-yard point, she drew the sleigh to a stop and signalled to her team.

Her team, six women in thick fur-skin coats, rushed over to her. They picked up the exhausted pups, winding up their reins, and replaced them with six fresh specimens. They handed Pena the leashes and her sleigh inched forwards once more.

The changeover had cost her about a yard. Dela was ahead, but would

have to take a pup-stop before the end of the race.

A shaft of magical light pierced the sky and a figure appeared on the track ahead.

Pena halted her sleigh. The other competitors followed suit. The spectators held back, waiting by the side of the road.

The figure had a top-heavy, bulky shape, and rested upon a throne of sparkling sapphire. 'I am your god!' it boomed.

'Hello?' Pena dismounted her sleigh. 'Can I help you?'

The figure slammed two massive hands upon its armrests and heaved itself to its feet. As it did, its head revolved to reveal the face of a pup. 'I have observed your mode of transport and have found it deficient!' it thundered. 'I shall help you build better vehicles.'

'Actually, we don't need better vehicles -'

'What if you wish to travel to the next town?'

'I like it here,' said Pena. 'This is where all my friends live.'

'Just supposing you did.'

'I'd walk.'

'What if there wasn't time to walk?'

Pena frowned. 'I'd leave earlier.'

'You shall build better vehicles!' The ground shook.

'Right...' said Pena, glancing to her competitor. They stared at her expectantly. 'And how are we going to do that?'

As she spoke, the air glittered by the figure's side, and a large, white board appeared out of nowhere.

The figure flipped over the top sheet of paper on the board, to reveal a complex diagram.

'Let me explain to you,' it said, 'the principles behind the internal combustion engine.'

Chapter 5

The One-Second War

'Valuensis today is a planet in the clammy grip of decline. The inhabitants spent much of the last millennia locked in a power struggle until only two nations remained. They are the Gabaks and the Aztales, located in underground cities upon opposite sides of the globe.'

The picture cuts to a gloomy, cylindrical tunnel. An escalator trundles up into the blackness. Fat worms of ducting droop from the roof.

The people glide upwards, their features sliding in and out of shadow. Their skin has a powdery texture, as though a sudden wind might reduce them to dust.

Each has been afflicted in some manner. One has a bandaged head, its mouth and eyes little more than slits. Another has an accordion-like iron lung upon its chest. One has its Jaws wired into place, pins piercing its cheeks. Most have robotic limbs, consisting of bare rods of steel.

They are motionless, unbreathing. It's like a parade of the dead.

'Where is everyone?' said Fitz. The tele-door had brought them to a cavernous concrete-walled shaft. At its centre a series of escalators and lifts clanked their way up and down between levels.

Oddly, there were television sets fixed upon brackets throughout the chamber. As one, they played flickering static.

'At home? At work? At play?' The Doctor prowled along the balustrade and peered downwards. Fitz joined him at the railing. Below them, escalators rolled away into the darkness. Fitz could smell the fumes of underground furnaces.

'And this is the Gabak city?' Trix said. 'Looks like Westminster tube.'

The Doctor nodded. 'The same patterns repeat themselves...'

Something scalding shot up Fitz's left leg. He yelped and stepped back, surrounded by a cloud. 'Arse!'

'Careful, Fitz,' said the Doctor. Fitz looked at where he'd been standing. The floor contained several vents. 'I think it's all steam-powered. Furnaces down below, the steam rises, driving turbines. . . Isambard would've loved this!'

Fitz rubbed his leg. 'Yeah, great. And this place blows up when?'

'Four hours,' said Charlton.

'So which way?' said Fitz. 'Where's your Tomorrow Window gallery? Up or down?'

'Up.' Charlton directed them to a nearby escalator. As Fitz stepped on, the chamber dropped away around him. 'It's been open for about a week, but it hasn't –'

A dull clang interrupted Charlton's words, and Fitz cannoned into Trix's backside as the escalator halted. 'What the –'

With a grinding wrench, the gears of the escalator shifted into reverse.

As Fitz looked to the Doctor for an explanation, a deafening howl rose out of nowhere. It grew to a shriek before falling, like the wail of a distraught creature. 'An air raid!'

Charlton gawped. 'What should we do?'

The Doctor waved them all off the escalator. 'We need to get as deep as possible. . . they must have shelters.' He dashed to a lift, wrenched the doors open, and jumped inside, reaching out to help Trix and Charlton over the threshold.

Fitz was about to join them when he spotted something moving in one of the passageways. It scuttled into the half-light, carried upon eight legs.

It paused, its antennae bristling. It had a head, of sorts, comprising of a hemisphere with an electric headlight fixed upon either side. The lights captured Fitz in their glare. The hydraulic tubing that surrounded the creature's legs tensed as it lifted its forelegs, opening and closing its pincers.

'Doc–' Fitz turned to enter the lift, but the doors clattered shut and the Doctor, Trix and Charlton dropped away.

Fitz reached for the lift button, and the universe paused.

With a stomach-rumbling rumble, the ground shook, knocking Fitz off his feet. He landed on his knees, his palms scuffing against the concrete floor.

Metal screeched against metal. Fitz felt some grit patter upon him. Above him, up the elevator shaft, a thick grey cloud was surging downwards. Rubble cascaded from the walls as they cracked. Steam sprayed from ruptured pipes.

Shielding his eyes, Fitz staggered to his feet. As the cloud hit, the air turned hot and dry, like a desert wind, and dust caught in his throat.

Ahead, he could make out the headlamps of the spider-robot. They swivelled, creating beams in the smog, like lighthouse lights. Fitz stumbled towards what he thought was a passageway.

The ground shuddered again, and Fitz felt himself drop.

'But Valuensis wasn't always like this. A thousand years ago, the planet was occupied by nomadic tribes, and was, in many ways, idyllic.'

Healthy, sun-bronzed men and women squint into the dawn, the desert breeze ruffling their hair and their robes of hide. Each holds what appears to be a musical instrument – bongo drums, castanets, and a ukulele.

One of them limbers up, stretching his muscles and touching his toes.

The people did not know of war or aggression, and instead settled their conflicts through ritualistic dance contests...'

Charlton couldn't find anything to hang on to. Outside, on the other side of the mesh, he watched the concrete bulwarks rush past.

Cables squeaked overhead. He could see them, snaking up into the darkness, twisting and swinging back and forth.

The Doctor also looked upwards. 'Squat!'

'What?' said Charlton.

'Bend your knees!' yelled the Doctor, crouching. Beside him the young girl, Trix, adopted the same position. Charlton bent his legs –

The lift slammed into the ground and the floor slammed into Charlton's feet. He collapsed forward, gasping with pain, clutching his thighs. He stumbled against the door, but before he could lean against it, the Doctor had shouldered it open. 'Quick!'

As he lurched, moaning, out of the lift, Charlton looked up. The cables above them seemed to writhe in mid air, unfurling from the darkness, coiling themselves like a viper about to attack. A second later, and they stabbed into the roof of the lift, smashing it amid a spray of sparks.

'Through here!' the Doctor shouted, indicating a reinforced bulkhead door. Charlton found himself slipping down some stairs into darkness. The Doctor's and Trix's footsteps clattered after him.

The door slammed shut with a hiss of steam.

Charlton caught his breath. Breathing in, he could taste antiseptic.

The flame in a gas lamp puffed into life and threw its light across the other inhabitants of the shelter. Some lay on mattresses and stretchers. Some crouched, some reclined against the walls. They were as still as mannequins, as though switched off. Each one stared ahead.

They were the people from the video. Bandaged faces with eye and mouth sockets. Artificial limbs of stainless steel. Tubes taped to their

death-white skin.

As one, they turned to face the new arrivals.

Fitz awoke to find his eyes streaming. He blinked to clear his vision, which made no difference, and he realised he was surrounded by smoke. As he breathed in, his lungs burned. He dug into a pocket and located a handkerchief and, pressing it over his mouth, crawled into the swirling gloom.

Somehow, in the confusion, he had lost a shoe.

Oh god, Fitz thought. Why does this sort of thing keep on happening to me?

He struggled forward, not sure where he was going. Through his narrowed eyes he could make out the two headlamps of one of the robot creatures. Its motors whirred as its head rotated, searching, scanning.

Something gripped Fitz's shoulder as tight as a vice.

'Come on.' The voice had a electronic rasp. 'The Octobots... are everywhere -'

'The what?' said Fitz, before he realised. Oct, eight. Bot, robot. The spider things.

The voice continued in monotone. 'We must... get away -'

Fitz could make out the shape of a man, his arms and legs replaced with robotic limbs. Fitz then realised the hand that gripped him consisted of little more than a pincer.

'Who are you?' Fitz glanced back the way he'd crawled. The Octobot approached a burning cable and, with a whoosh, foam spurted from its head. It shuffled its body from side to side as it doused.

'My name... is Tadek.' Face to face, Fitz realised his companion was maybe twenty years old. He wore a startled expression, his eyebrows permanently raised. 'We must move.'

'OK, OK, OK,' said Fitz. 'One question, first. Why?'

'The Octobots... are after me. They think... I am a dissenter.'

Fitz brushed dirt from his jacket. 'Are you?'

'Yes, but that is not the point. The point is... I know how it was destroyed.'

'How what was destroyed?'

The television lit the faces of the Gabaks. They sat in huddled groups, their lips parted. It was almost, thought Charlton, as if they were gaining nourishment from it.

The eyes of the man on the screen were hidden beneath bandages. His fingers traced across Braille. 'The Aztale bombing raid destroyed section

four of level double-green. Teriats are warned to stay away for their own safety. The section is now prohibited. Octobots will attend to repairs.'

Charlton shared a worried glance with Trix.

'Gabak forces...have managed to repel the cowardly Aztale attack... All Aztale forces were defeated. There were no Gabak casualties.'

In unison, the Gabaks gave a moaning cheer.

'In other news... Gabak forces are now only a few hours from the Aztale stronghold of Terranaton. The Aztales... are offering only token resistance, with many of their soldiers abandoning their posts. There have been no Gabak casualties.'

There was another low cheer. Charlton looked around. None of the Gabaks had reacted to their presence since they had arrived.

The screen switched to a juddery image of boxlike tanks advancing through a desert, their gun turrets swivelling.

'We have received a broadcast from the Aztale leader. However, we believe it to be some months old so it is probable that he may have died in the meantime. The broadcast... shows him skulking in his nuclear bunker.'

'Are they going to tell us what he *said*?' muttered Trix.

'He reiterated his lies about the progress of the war. According to him... Aztale forces have already defeated the attack upon Terranaton!'

As one, the Gabaks in the shelter jeered. It was automatic.

'Meanwhile, a statement has been released by our courageous leader, Galvakis... from the safety of his nuclear bunker.'

The picture cut to a decrepit man, his neck held in a brace, a breathing unit wired into his chest. 'Teriats of Gabak! We must remain united. We are suffering, yes, but this must not weaken our resolve to defeat the Aztale evil. We must not fear, because we are fighting a war against fear itself. Remember, teriats of Gabak! Suffering makes us strong!'

The teriats of Gabak cheered, 'Suffering makes us strong!'

The Doctor held his radiation detector at arms' length and checked the readings. He tapped the detector, rattled it, then turned to Charlton and Trix. 'Something very wrong is happening here.'

On the screen, Galvakis announced, 'Unity makes us free!'

'Unity makes us free!' rasped the man on television.

Fitz had slowed to a jog as they made their way along another passage. Pipes chugged overhead and cables slithered along the sides of the floor.

And televisions flickered every few yards. 'Very Orwellian,' muttered Fitz, checking behind them for the spider-things.

He halted and doubled up to regain his breath. Tadek had maintained a terrific pace, despite his injuries. The guy had robot arms and legs, for

goodness' sake. Maybe that was why he didn't seem to get tired.

Tadek strode back to Fitz. 'I do not... understand the cultural reference.'

'Orwell. Bloke I met, wrote a book about double-think. War is peace, love is hate.' Fitz remembered the Penguin paperback. It had a single, staring eye on the front. 'Why are there TVs everywhere, anyway?'

'So that the teriats can be kept informed of the war effort.'

'Yes, but...'

'The teriats become troubled if they miss... any of the rolling news coverage.'

'Don't they ever show anything else? Sports, music, soap operas? Sit-coms about the amusing adventures of rag-and-bone men?'

'There is nothing apart from the war.'

'That's a bit overkilly.'

'We need to be constantly reminded that it is... the cause of our... predicament.'

'Your predicament? You mean your... injuries?'

'The result of "nuclear carbonates" in the air. The after-effects of an Aztale attack, many centuries ago. You will... soon develop similar symptoms, Fitz.'

'Oh.' He turned back to the television. 'Ta, mate.'

A clanking sound disturbed him. Fitz looked down the corridor, to see eight long, spindly shadow-legs scampering across the floor. The shadows vanished, then reappeared.

An Octobot, approaching.

'Finally. I have heard reports of growing dissent. Remember, dissenters intend to undermine our way of life. Their opposition to the war gives comfort to the evil Aztales. The dissenters are not only apologists for the enemy... they *support* the enemy. Indeed, we have reason to believe many of them are terrorists... acting for the Aztales!'

'So I remind you, teriats of Gabak, of your duty to eradicate all dissent, and support your government in all things.'

The people in the shelter cheered. Those that could raise their hands in a salute did so. 'Unity makes us free!'

'We must eradicate the Aztales!' yelled Galvakis.

'Eradicate!' shouted the Gabaks, their voices humming like chainsaws. 'Eradicate! Eradicate! ERADICATE!'

They had climbed stairwell after stairwell, rising through the bleak city, darting along corridor after corridor, cobwebs fluttering in the wind. Now

the televisions and gas lamps were dead. No one had been here for centuries.

His chest aching, Fitz slumped against the wall. 'I see what you mean,' he muttered, ' "Eradicate all dissent". Lot of you dissenters, are there?'

Tadek shook his head. 'I do...not know of any others. Our leaders claim there are many, but I believe that is to make the teriats suspicious of each other.'

'Yeah – why spy on the people, when you can get them to spy on each other?'

'It also provides a scapegoat. What cannot be blamed upon the Aztales can be...blamed on their "sympathisers".'

'You're not a sympathiser?'

'I know nothing of the Aztales beyond what we are told. For all I know, their way of life may be better.'

'It's not impossible.'

'We are...not born. We are constructed. Our flesh is grown from cell cultures. We are programmed to obey from birth. We labour in the recycling foundries. We cheer on the endless war. We die. Nothing ever changes.'

'You're right, it couldn't be much worse, fair enough to you.'

'We fight...in the name of freedom when we are slaves.' Tadek turned away. 'When I am caught, I will be eradicated.'

'Why, if it's not a stupid question?'

Tadek looked away. 'I visited the Tomorrow Windows. I...wondered whether there would ever be an end to the destruction.'

'And?'

'It exploded.'

'They have a habit of doing that.' Fitz laughed.

'This conduit is four floors above the Tomorrow Window gallery. Does that not strike you as strange?'

Fitz could only shrug. His shins had pins-and-needles, so he dragged himself upright and massaged some feeling back. 'Why have we come up here?'

'Because...no one else does. We are near the surface of our planet. These levels are prohibited.'

'Because?' Fitz asked, not sure he wanted to hear the answer.

'The level of radiation. According to our leaders, visiting this place is certain death.'

Fitz realised. Tadek had brought them here to die. Controlling his anger and panic and fear, Fitz inhaled. Oddly, the air did not taste poi-

sonous. In fact, it seemed fresh, much fresher than it had done down below.

His eyes drifted across the corridor, to where a cobweb shivered in the breeze.

'Tadek,' Fitz began, 'those spider things aren't affected by radiation, are they?'

'No. They are... machines.'

'So we need to keep on moving,' Fitz felt his way along the corridor, keeping one arm outstretched ahead of him. His fingers hit a horizontal bar, damp with condensation. He fumbled upwards, and found another bar, and another. Feeling a mixture of elation and fear, he gripped the ladder, making sure it held fast.

Above him was a shaft and, at the very top, a crack of light and a grille.

A whirring sound caused him to jump. Fitz turned to see Tadek standing behind him.

'Climb,' said Fitz. 'We're going to the surface.'

The television shows a grim wilderness. Thunderclouds are smeared across the sky. Sandbags lie heaped against rubble. The mud has been rutted into islands crested with snow and between the islands there is a misty ocean of ice.

Corpses are draped across barbed wire.. Their helmets hang by their neckstraps. Snow gathers on their uniforms, collecting on their eyes and in their blue-lipped mouths.

'The last battle of Valuensis. Six hundred years ago, an all-out nuclear exchange between the Aztales and the Gabaks rendered the surface of their planet uninhabitable.'

'Doctor,' whispered Trix. 'What about Fitz?'

The Doctor considered and sighed. 'He has a habit of surviving. Usually. You're right, we should find him.' He stood, straightening his cuffs. 'Charlton?'

As Charlton followed them up the steps to the door, a short, imperious twiddle of trumpet drew the Doctor's attention back to the television. The picture cleared to reveal the blind newsreader once more.

'Gabak forces have held the city of Terranaton. There were no Gabak casualties.' The screen cut a juddery image of a line of tanks, their gun barrels swivelling.

After a disappointed glance at the screen, the Doctor dug out his sonic screwdriver and attempted to unlock the doorway. He failed. 'It's still secured... but I thought the attack was over? No all-clear?' He drummed

his hands on the door, and shouted across the room, 'While we're all here, how about a sing-song?'

The Gabaks turned their indignant faces towards him.

' "It's a long way to Tipperary..." ' The Doctor bounced down into the shelter. 'Except, you don't have any idea what I'm talking about. You're just going through the motions.'

'Doctor -' hissed Trix.

'You've forgotten, haven't you?'

An old woman lifted her face. 'What have we forgotten?'

The Doctor addressed the gathered crowd. 'What are you fighting *for*?'

'The Aztales... are evil.'

'Evil? Are they? That's convenient. The enemy so often are. So *simple*, so much easier than trying to understand them -'

'They are not like us,' said the woman. 'They are...hideous to look upon.'

'Are they? How many of you have seen an Aztale?' The Doctor raised his eyebrows, expecting a response that never came. 'Come on, one of you must have. Surely? No?'

The Gabaks did not reply.

'You've been at war so long you've forgotten *why*!'

'We are fighting them,' repeated the old woman, 'because they are evil.'

'And I'm sure they eat their boiled eggs the wrong way up too.' The Doctor jogged back up the steps to Charlton and Trix.

The old woman lifted a quivering finger. 'He is... a dissenter!'

The other Gabaks fixed the Doctor with their inhuman, unblinking eyes. 'He is a dissenter. He must be eradicated.'

'Eradicate!' another shouted, and another. 'Eradicate! Eradicate!'

'Good grief, how embarrassing,' muttered the Doctor.

The bulkhead door lifted with a grinding screech to reveal three robots, each with two headlights fixed upon either side of its head, each balanced upon eight long legs.

'Ah.' The Doctor smiled at the robots as though greeting a maiden aunt. 'You're here to take us to your leader.'

'Come on,' urged Fitz, craning his neck. Above him, on the ladder, Tadek reached the grille. It creaked and groaned as he shoved it. Splinters of light grew, picking out falling rust.

Tadek's breathing became short. He heaved again.

Fitz looked down to avoid getting dust in his eyes. It collected in his hair and in the back of his collar. Looking down the shaft, into the steam,

he could see a grey circle. The circle flashed and two headlights appeared through the mist.

An Octobot. Fitz watched as it scrambled up the shaft after them, its body jerking as it climbed, its legs jammed against the walls.

'Come on!' yelled Fitz. Tadek gasped and the grille swung open, and daylight splashed into the shaft. Blinded, Fitz dragged himself up the ladder.

Reaching the top, he toppled out, scrabbling over a low wall and collapsing into something wet. 'Close the hatch! Close it!' he gasped, and he heard, to his relief, the grille being scraped back into place.

With a dozen blinks, Fitz's eyes adjusted. He was lying on his back, and a clear sky was spread above him. Birdsong, he could hear birdsong. He could smell heather. Somewhere water splashed. The wind stroked his cheek and ruffled his hair, before shifting to the trees, where the leaves shushed.

He had been right. He had been bloody right! Fitz felt like laughing. He rolled on to his side. The vent they had emerged from lay within the ruins of a building. Moss had smothered the brickwork, grass tufting through the cracks. Beyond lay the rubble of a city.

Tadek stared at the trees. 'I do not understand.'

Fitz pulled himself to his feet. The wet grass soaked through the sock on his left foot. 'The planet got better! There's no radiation. So why you lurk downstairs like little scaredy rabbits, I don't know.'

'We live... in darkness and fear... when above...'

Fitz spotted a brook and half jogged, half hopped over to it. He clasped his hands and brought some water to his lips. It was as chilly as ice. He splashed his face and his hair. 'Come on. You've found sanctuary, and Jenny Agutter didn't even have to get her kit off!'

'We have... been lied to,' said Tadek. 'I understand now. I understand why the gallery had been rigged to explode -'

'What?'

'It was not destroyed by an Aztale attack - if it had, all the levels above it would have been destroyed too. No, it was... the work of our own leaders.'

'You are dissenters. You must be eradicated!' snapped the Gabak with the bandage across his eyes. His hand jabbed at his joystick and his wheelchair jerked forward.

The control bunker had not surprised Charlton. Protected by a series of bulkhead doors, it consisted of a room crammed with television

screens and control banks. Computers spooled tape and illuminated buttons flashed in sequence, though what that signified Charlton had no idea. Gas lamps offered miserly illumination.

The four Gabak leaders were all slumped in wheelchairs, their legs pinned with callipers. They glided around the grubby floor as they ranted, playing follow-my-leader or rotating on the spot.

'Yes, yes, I suppose so,' said the Doctor. He peered down at Galvakis's chair, and noticed a lethal-looking gun barrel that extended from the armrest. 'First, though, we have news...' He nodded to prompt Charlton.

Charlton stepped forward. 'According to my Tomorrow Window... you're going to be killed in about an hour. And a bit.'

'Which is rather surprising,' the Doctor said, folding his arms, 'considering that you're not actually at war.'

'What?' Galvakis shuddered forward. His drooping lips curled into an accusation. 'What do you know?'

'Oh, come now, it's obvious.' The Doctor strode around the room, examining the various screens with detached amusement. 'The gallery destroyed in an Aztale air raid? Charlton, how many levels deep was it?'

'About a dozen -'

'It was blown up by Aztale sympathisers,' snarled a Gabak. 'Terrorists. Enemy agents.'

'You're changing your story?' The Doctor whirled around. 'And that's the other thing. I'm not really one to point out discrepancies, but the continuity in your news broadcasts is *appalling*. One minute you're attacking Terranaton, the next you're defending it. Which is doubly odd, because Terranaton doesn't exist! There are only two cities on this world, the rest were wiped out centuries ago. It's all "library footage"! You could at least have used a different clip for the Aztale army... budget difficulties, no doubt?'

The Gabak leaders did not answer, so the Doctor continued. 'Smoke and mirrors, special effects! You let off a bomb here, a bomb there. A few *loud bangs*, send your people cowering down into their shelters. The Aztales aren't attacking you, you're pretending you're at war... when you're at peace!'

Trix had wandered over to one of the screens. It showed an image of a bearded man upon a throne, radiating light.

'One last thing,' said the Doctor. 'The most awful thing of all. The radiation. There isn't any. However, to maintain the illusion of hardship... you operate upon your people, giving them artificial limbs, iron lungs, voice boxes... when there is nothing wrong with them!'

Charlton felt sick. He looked at the withered creatures in their chairs and gulped.

'We are at war,' buzzed Galvakis, his chair jerking forward once more, forcing the Doctor to back away. This close, Charlton could see that the creature's skin was like melted wax coated in talcum powder. 'We are at war with the Aztales. They must be eradicated! They are the inferior beings! Eradicate! Eradicate!'

The Doctor sighed. 'So show me one.'

Fitz tramped through the forest, Tadek following. The ruins rambled on for mile after mile. Ivy twisted itself through the hulks of abandoned vehicles.

'So peaceful,' said Fitz, teasing his way through the bracken. 'We'll have to go back, though, I'm afraid.'

'Yes, we must... tell them,' said Tadek. 'That this world is now safe –'

Fitz shushed him. He could hear something in the distance. Someone was talking. The words were buried in echo, but it was a man's voice.

'Quick,' urged Fitz, ducking through the ruins, the bushes snagging at his jeans. 'Behind here.'

Tadek joined Fitz behind a rubble wall. Fitz waved to him to keep his head down. The voice drew nearer.

'... Valuensis. As you know, this part of the galaxy is situated on one of the major hyperspace ring-ways, and undeveloped properties in this area are highly sought after...'

Fitz peered over the wall. He intended only to look for a moment, but what he saw made his jaw drop.

The voice came from a man in a sober suit with pinched features and a lopsided mouth. In denial of baldness, his remaining hair had been oiled against his scalp.

'You don't often see one come on the market in as *pristine* condition as this,' he continued, tapping his fingers on his clipboard. 'As you can see, it offers the classic liquid-water-based environment, *resplendent* in carbon-based flora, though that is, of course, an optional fixture...'

He addressed a small tour party that consisted of five or six of the oddest things that Fitz had ever seen. From the way they were being addressed it seemed the things were living beings, but not in any conventional sense.

'The atmosphere is a *delightful* oxygen-nitrogen mix, ideal for most respiration or photosynthesis-based life. The surface gravity is a bracing eleven per second per second ...'

The first one was a mammal. Short, about the same size as a child of eight or nine, its belly threatened to burst from the confines of its tweed jacket. It reminded Fitz of something from *The Wind in the Willows* because it had the head, ridiculously, of a walrus.

Its tusks had cracked and turned yellow, and its beard had grey flecks – possibly a sign of age, Fitz thought, which might also explain the monocle. Its long-whiskered nose sniffed at the air as though it were corked wine.

And yet it had human hands, one of which was dabbing its forehead with a handkerchief.

The clipboard man continued. ‘As I’m sure you’re aware, similar properties in this area tend to fetch around the twenty to thirty million ultrapod mark, and I expect this property to be very much yielding within the upper bracket of that range...’

Behind the walrus loomed a reptile, about a foot taller than Fitz. It did not walk so much as lunge, pouncing at the grass before it with each step. It snorted and for a moment its bulging eyes turned on Fitz.

Given its thrusting horns and its cruel, dripping tongue, Fitz felt relieved when it turned away. As it did, the sunlight picked out a matchbox-sized device on the side of its head.

‘The current... tenants will be vacating the planet forthwithly. The new owners will, very much so, have the opportunity for renovation, terra-reformation, magnetic repolarisation and atmospheric restratification...’

Two bronzed men in togas and armour followed the lizard, their muscles glistening like lacquered mahogany. Their plumed, ornately moulded helmets and kilts made them look like camp parodies of Roman legionaries. They bore between them a gold-braided cushion, held at shoulder-height. Each of their visors had a cyclops eye in the centre.

‘This world does, I’m afraid, have some underlying plate tectonics, so some restructuring of the foundations may be required. If you, however, are concerned about venting, this world has been surveyed for super volcanic ruptures...’

The final two members of the party did not walk. They floated, without any visible signs of effort.

The first appeared to be a sculpture about two feet tall. Its cylindrical shape and pointed peak made it resemble a rocket from a fifties comic. Its metal top and base shone sleekly, while its midriff displayed some green blobs within, floating up and down, wobbling and squishing.

‘The system, as you read in the brochure, otherwise consists of worlds in either the ice or steam belts. However, if you’re planning an extension, there is, of course, always the option of orbital realignment...’

The last of the creatures was, despite the strong competition, the

strangest. Two football-sized growths of thick fur whirled around each other in mid air. Fitz thought the balls might be two creatures fighting, but from the way the clipboard man addressed them, they seemed to comprise one entity.

Fitz jogged along the wall, following the tour party. The man with the clipboard said, out of the blue, 'Now, which of you was asking me about the Van Allen belts?'

'So that's an Aztale, is it?'

Charlton had been ready to recoil in horror at the image on the television screen. Instead, the static cleared to reveal a man with a pallid complexion.

The Doctor sucked his teeth. 'I don't know if you've noticed, but they are *exactly* the same as you –'

'They are not!' shrieked one of the Gabaks. It revolved on the spot. 'They are inferior creatures. They are horribly disfigured, mutated. Impure.'

'You are either blind, or very stupid or, in all probability, both,' said the Doctor. 'In what way are they inferior?'

'They are Aztales!'

'Ridiculous, ridiculous, ridiculous.' The Doctor ruffled his hair and seated himself on the edge of the desk. 'Petty, small-minded. . . I'll never understand why people are so keen to seek out differences among themselves.'

'I still don't get it, though,' said Trix. 'Why pretend to be at war, when you're not?'

'It's the perfect excuse, isn't it? To terrorise their own people –'

'We are at war!' insisted Galvakis.

'Really?' said the Doctor.

Charlton's attention drifted to one of the desks that consisted of a panel with an important-looking red button at its centre.

Galvakis trundled up to the Doctor. 'Though not. . . very much. Our last great battle with the Aztales was over six hundred years ago. There was a massive nuclear exchange.'

'Now we're getting at the truth.'

'Our arms race escalated until we developed the ultimate weapon! An electromagnetic pulse bomb, held in a satellite in geostationary orbit above the Aztale city. When the bomb is detonated, the Aztale people will be eradicated!'

'So what's stopping you, then?'

'The Aztales also developed a... similar weapon. There is a satellite in geostationary orbit above our city which, when detonated, would completely eradicate our people.'

The Doctor seemed amused.

Charlton frowned. 'Why don't you, the Gabaks, just blow up the Aztales first? Before they have a chance to blow you up?'

'At the moment we are broadcasting a radio signal to our bomb via a series of orbital relay satellites,' explained Galvakis. 'Our bomb does not require a signal to activate it. Rather, if there is any interruption in our signal telling it *not* to detonate, it will explode.'

'I see. And the Aztale bomb works on a similar principle.' The Doctor gazed abstractedly at the ceiling. 'So the moment you attack their city, the signal telling their bomb not to explode is cut off, and so it explodes?'

'That is correct.'

'And vice versa,' laughed the Doctor. 'You don't see what you've done, do you? You've stumbled across *peace!* A stalemate, a logical impasse!' The Doctor jumped down to the floor. 'Two great powers, poised to destroy the other... instantaneously! Well, not quite instantaneously. Given the circumference of the world, the height of a geostationary satellite, the time it would take for the radio signals to circumnavigate the globe, there and back... what, a second?'

'Bit risky, isn't it?' said Trix. 'Relying on the signal not being disrupted?'

'The signal is controlled from within this bunker,' stated Galvakis. 'Our duty is to see that it is not interrupted.'

'From here?' The Doctor pointed to the red button. 'You should label it, you know. One thing I've noticed, alien races rarely label buttons –'

'Do not move!' Galvakis's gun throbbed into life.

The Doctor backed away from the button, raising his hands. His sonic screwdriver was held in one of them. 'One second away from mutually assured destruction. At any instant,' the Doctor paused for dramatic effect, 'the slightest interference, and it's the end of the world, in the time it takes for a tick to tock.'

'Doctor,' Charlton said. 'How are they going to be killed by an electromagnetic pulse? That would only affect computers and stuff, right?'

'Good point,' said Trix.

The Doctor nodded. 'You're right... unless... unless things are much more *horrible* than I had previously imagined.'

Fitz followed the tour party through the grassy ruins. Tadek kept behind him. They had slipped out of earshot of the clipboard man, but from their

vantage point, hidden in the leaves of a bush, Fitz could make out his gestures. The clipboard man bowed like a singer completing a performance, and turned to lead on once more.

Due to his lack of a shoe, Fitz slipped on a fallen branch. It snapped, the sound abruptly sharp in the silence. It disturbed some birds in a nearby tree. The thud of their wings filled the air.

The clipboard man halted, squinting in Fitz's direction. 'Hello?' The walrus-creature turned, as did the lizard. The sculpture and the two footballs hovered. The two legionaries halted, their cushion held aloft between them.

Fitz motioned to Tadek to hide. 'What is it?' said Tadek, following Fitz's gaze.

Fitz stared at the clipboard man, and back at Tadek. 'You don't see them?'

'See what?'

'Never mind.' Fitz indicated that Tadek should remain in the shadows. 'Wait.'

'Can I assist you?' The clipboard man peered at Fitz, his peer becoming a suspicious frown. 'You're not of this world, are you?'

'No, I -'

'Then what, may I ask, in expectation of a supremely fine answer, are you *doing* here?'

'Well -' Fitz tried to look as though he wasn't thinking of something to say.

'Well?'

'I'm sorry I'm...late,' Fitz said at last. 'Held up in traffic. Hope I haven't missed anything -'

The clipboard man peered at him through disingenuous eyes. 'You're a buyer?'

'That's it, right.'

'You don't resemble the *typical* purchaser.'

'I'm a representative, of...of somebody else. A third party that wishes to remain anonymous.'

The various members of the tour party reacted with consternation. The walrus sputtered into its handkerchief. The sculpture floated over to Fitz as though inspecting him - Fitz tried to avoid looking at it, it reminded him too much of a lava lamp. He also tried to avoid the gaze of the two baby-oiled legionaries with the cushion.

'A third party?' growled the lizard.

Fitz waggled a 'keep down' with his finger to Tadek, hoping he would remain out of sight. 'An extremely wealthy third party. Very interested

in... planets. It's a... hobby of theirs.'

'A collector?' The clipboard man's frown dissolved. 'Magnificent, magnificent. Well, I'm glad you made it. I'm afraid I wasn't informed, it's all been a madhouse, what with one thing, and another hot on its tail... can I have your name?'

Fitz tried to think of something but couldn't. 'Fitz Kreiner.'

'Good to have you here. *Resplendent*. Please, join us. The tour is, I'm afraid, almost over, but if you have any queries, do, do feel free to inter-

'-rupt,' said Fitz. 'Sorry, it was all a bit last-minute for me too. You're...?'

'Dittero,' said the clipboard man. 'Dittero Shandy. It is my pleasure to represent the owner of this property.'

'Who is...?'

'I'm afraid,' said Dittero, 'they also wish to remain incognito. I'm sure you, naturally, will understand.'

'What about the, er, Gabaks?'

'They're not the owners!' Dittero laughed. 'They're merely the... residents. No, the rights to this... property reside very much with another party altogether.'

'Got you,' said Fitz.

'The news delights me. I'm delighted to have "got you". The word to express my emotion is "delight". Now, if you would care to follow, I -'

'One more thing.'

Dittero halted, his grip on his clipboard tightening. 'Of course, yes?'

'These other guys.' Fitz indicated the walrus, lizard, the lava lamp and the airborne testicles. 'Who are they? I have to report back to my boss, he's... interested in rival bidders.'

Dittero exhaled in irritation. 'Naturally, naturally. This,' he indicated the walrus, 'is Nimbit.'

Nimbit's moustache bristled as he eyed Fitz through his monocle. 'Delighted,' he said ripely, like a country squire.

'Like the suit,' said Fitz.

Nimbit bowed, and handkerchiefed the sweat from his forehead. He stooped, as though under some great weight.

Dittero waved at the lizard. 'This is Vorshagg.'

'Hi,' Fitz smiled at the lizard. It scowled back, its tongue slavering.

'Poozle of the Varble,' continued Dittero, indicating the levitating lava lamp.

'What?'

Dittero tapped his fingers on his clipboard. 'Poozle. Of the Varble. Of the planet... Mim.'

The lava lamp floated over to Fitz. 'Greetings!' it announced, its voice high-pitched and tinny. As it spoke, its midriff section – the part with the floating globules – flashed on and off, almost in time with the words. Having greeted Fitz, it hovered away.

'Poozle, Varble, planet Mim,' said Fitz. 'Right. Next?'

'And over here we have?' Dittero gestured towards the two floating balls.

'We have?' asked Fitz, waiting for the name.

'That's right.'

'Sorry,' blinked Fitz. 'What?'

'We have...?' Dittero pulled a quizzical expression, as though that explained everything.

'Yes. Who is it?'

Dittero looked perplexed, then said, '... is what it's called.'

'No, I'm sorry, but you've lost me.'

'My name,' the two balls speeded to a point a yard over Fitz's head, 'is?'

'Is?'

'That is... almost correct, darling dear.' The voice seemed to come from one, or other, of the balls. It had an effeminate, prim, schoolmistressey manner. 'My name does not correspond to your primitive modes of communication.'

'No?'

'Instead, it's signified by a change in the tone of voice. A slight increase in pitch for the final syllable, which for you would usually indicate an element of doubt.'

'What?' said Fitz.

'I can see it's difficult, darling dear,' said the balls, 'but you're getting there.'

'Hang on.' Fitz had to cover his eyes as the balls moved against the sun. 'Your name Is... and I just say something with a question at the end?'

'Precisely,' said the balls. 'That is my name.'

'That's... unusual.'

'Indeed. Uniquely so,' said Dittero, leading Fitz to one side. 'We tend to call it "question intonation" to avoid confusion. It's best not to make too many enquiries when it's around, or it will think you're calling its name.'

'Bizarre.'

Dittero ushered Fitz over to the two legionaries, and indicated their cushion. 'And here,' he said, with a flourish, 'is the Fabulous Micron.'

'Micron?'

'The very *Fabulous Micron*. Of the seven systems.'

Fitz stared at the cushion. There was nothing there, except a small glass hemisphere. 'Where is he?'

'Ah,' said Dittero. 'I'm afraid you're unfamiliar with the Micron race. They face certain... challenges of scale. The Fabulous Micron is approximately one millimetre high.' He handed Fitz a magnifying glass. 'Try not to get any sun on him.'

Fitz held the glass over the hemisphere. In the centre of the dome stood a figure, rather like a man but with chitinous insect limbs. It lifted a microphone to its lips.

'The Fabulous Micron is pleased to meet you,' gruffed one of the attendants, his finger to his ear.

Fitz almost dropped the glass in surprise. 'Er... Hello.'

'The Fabulous Micron is one of the wealthiest creatures in the galaxy,' Dittero advised.

Fitz returned the magnifying glass to Dittero. Feeling rather foolish, he gave a small wave to the hemisphere.

'So now you have met us,' said Dittero, 'would you care to introduce us to your... *associate*?'

'My associate?'

Dittero indicated, and Fitz turned. Tadek had emerged from cover. 'What is... it, Fitz?'

Fitz licked his lips, running possible explanations through his mind.

'Ah-ha,' said Dittero. 'It's one of the natives.'

'He can't see you -' Fitz said.

'Of course not. We're projecting an indiscernability field.' Dittero reached into his jacket pocket and withdrew a tubular device which he pointed at Tadek. It clicked.

Tadek's mouth sagged open and he gave a choking stutter. His eyes widened as he stumbled, his pincers swiping at the air. He fell forward on to his face.

'What have you done?' Fitz said. 'You've killed him -'

Dittero was taken aback. 'Killed him? Oh, very much *no*, no. After all, it's not as if he was alive to begin with, is it?'

'What d'you mean, Doctor, "more horrible than I had previously imagined"?' Charlton asked, not sure he wanted to hear the answer.

The Doctor strode into the centre of the Gabak circle, the Gabak wheelchairs shifting to face him. 'It all makes an awful kind of sense. Six hundred years, you say, since your all-out war?'

'Yes,' said Galvakis.

The Doctor's hands remained raised, his sonic screwdriver held at his fingertips. 'Now, a nuclear war would lead to death and devastation on a scale unimaginable... A civilisation would have to take drastic action to survive. I'm very much afraid that's what they did.'

'What did they do?' Trix sighed.

'The flesh is weak, susceptible to disease, law and order breaks down... so they began to change their natures. Am I right? Did you start with the minds or the hearts?'

'The process was rapid,' said Galvakis. 'Borne by necessity.'

'Necessity, of course it was, of course. You *replaced* the hearts, you replaced the minds'

'But they're still people, right?' said Charlton.

'Oh no' said the Doctor. 'The people *died*. What lived on was something else –'

At that moment, the Doctor activated his sonic screwdriver. It made no sound, but the Gabaks, in unison, coughed and gurgled. Their bodies slumped forwards, like dead dolls.

'... something else entirely,' breathed the Doctor, crouching beside Galvakis's chair.

'What have you done?' said Trix.

'An electromagnetic pulse. It's scrambled their circuits. Temporarily.' The Doctor tugged back his coat sleeves and examined Galvakis's head, reaching but not touching the white, powdery scalp.

'Circuits?'

'They are machines, Trix. Machines! Unable to see beyond the war, the only thing they have ever known. Stuck, forever, doomed to re-enact the darkest days of a nuclear conflict. We were wrong, Charlton. There's no one here left to save.' The Doctor trailed a delicate finger down the side of Galvakis's lifeless neck.

'So why don't they look like robots, then?' said Trix, hands on hips, her head leaning to one side.

'At first, I thought the artificial limbs were the modifications, but they're not. It's the *flesh* that is the modification. Dead, artificial skin and muscle tissue concealing...'

The Doctor pinched the side of Galvakis's chin. The flesh flaked away like dry rubber. Beneath lay a metal jaw, studded with rivets, the teeth horribly bare.

'They are corpses,' continued the Doctor, pulling away more of the skin covering and throwing it to the floor. He uncovered Galvakis's left eye, connected to a bunch of flex. 'Puppets.'

'Why, though?' said Trix. 'Why do they look like –'

'People? Because they're unable to break the pattern. They are stuck in the image of what they once were. Hence the "radiation injuries". They don't remember a time before that. What we are seeing are... recreations, *parodies* of the people of this city who died six hundred years ago.'

'And the Aztales,' said Charlton, 'are the same?'

'A parallel evolution. Robots against robots. They're no more alive than those giant spider things. The ultimate product of war. No joy, no hope. Just endless *fear*.'

'Except it's not endless, is it?' said Charlton, checking his portable Tomorrow Window. It showed him the occupants of the shelter. standing motionless, their eyes fixed ahead. Then the picture blurred, one image shifting over another.

It showed the air-raid shelter suffocated with smoke. The orange throb of a fire illuminated the faces of the prone Gabaks. Their flesh began to melt. It shrivelled and crisped, like ancient paper. Flames licked away the flesh to reveal the leering robot skulls beneath.

Charlton returned the Window to the safety of his jacket. 'Something is gonna happen. In about ten minutes.'

The Doctor gave him a grave look. 'Yes. We should leave. But first... Fitz. We must find Fitz.'

'How?' said Trix.

The Doctor adjusted his sonic screwdriver. Their lungs rattling, the four Gabaks lifted themselves back up in their seats, their tongues tracing across their lips. Galvakis's face remained half exposed, his jaw clamping up and down.

'Galvakis,' said the Doctor. 'You haven't seen a friend of mine, by any chance? He would have been upstairs when your bomb went off, if that jogs any memories?'

Galvakis said, 'The Octobots gave chase but he escaped.'

'He's alive!' exclaimed Trix.

The Doctor rubbed his lips. 'Right, right. We need to -'

A siren sounded at ear-splitting volume. The wail rose in pitch to a shriek.

Charlton exchanged terrified glances with Trix and the Doctor. 'What?' he asked, but he couldn't hear himself

The Gabaks each gripped their joysticks and propelled themselves over to their control desks.

'We're under attack!' shouted the Doctor, putting his arms around Trix's and Charlton's shoulders.

'What?' yelled Charlton. 'I thought the Aztales...'

'Not the Aztales.' The Doctor shook his head. 'Something else.'

Charlton looked back at the monitor screens. One showed an empty corridor, the lower portion of the picture flickering. Static scrolled up and down.

Except the static wasn't part of the picture.

A shape formed. A blurred figure in a black suit composed of pixels, its face white, its mouth and eyes shadows. It grew until its face filled the screen. Its features were streaked with interference.

The other screens showed more of the creatures fuzzing into existence, drifting through the deserted corridors of the Gabak city.

'Cececs,' gasped Charlton. 'Shit! What are they doing here?'

'I think they intend to end the world...' said the Doctor.

There was a grinding screech from overhead and the bulkhead door clattered shut. They were trapped.

As the door muffled the siren, Charlton heard a hiss of static. His spine shivered as he turned to the source of the noise. In the corner of the control room, amid some rolling interference, a creature took shape.

Dittero checked his watch. 'Time we were elsewhere. If you will care to follow me back to Utopia, refreshments will, of course, be *naturally* provided.'

Dittero had his hand in his jacket, and withdrew it holding a door handle. He held it out in front of him, pressed a button on the handle and slid open a door in mid air. Beyond the door shimmered a beach of golden sand. Fronds shivered in the breeze. Ocean glinted. White plaster buildings basked on the quayside. Female laughter played in the air.

'Paradise,' said Fitz.

'Utopia,' Dittero corrected. 'Our show-planet. One of Welwyn's finest. A real *classic*.' He beckoned the tour party through the tele-door. The walrus, Nimbit, was first, followed by Question Intonation, and Vorshagg. Micron's attendants were next. Poozle hovered at Dittero's shoulder as the estate agent tapped his clipboard.

'I can't leave,' said Fitz. 'I need to find my friends.'

'You have associates here? More "representatives"?'

'Somewhere here, yes.'

Dittero examined his watch. 'How inconvenient. If we're delayed now that puts out the schedule for the whole day.'

'Leave the door open for me -'

'I'm afraid that would prove imprudent. This whole area will be rendered uninhabitable in a few seconds' time.'

'What?'

'Some dispute among the current tenants... which will, we are expecting, cause them to vacate the property.'

Fitz rubbed his forehead. 'My friends are down there –'

'I'll tell you what I can do.' Dittero reached into his jacket and recovered the tubular device. He tapped a series of buttons on its surface, examining the flashing display.

'What are you doing?'

'This device locates any non-terrestrial life forms. All indigenous traces are keyed out, so it should be able to – ah-ha! *Magnificent.*' He checked the readings. 'Got them.'

'Where are they?'

'About four hundred yards down and in something of a pickle.'

'So what do we do now?'

'What you do now, Mr Kreiner, is you place your trust in me.'

'Doctor –' said Charlton.

The Doctor nodded. He had seen the figure forming. It rotated, becoming flat when it was side-on. Its body jittered between states, its resolution blocky and jagged.

Its black eye-spaces turned on Charlton. He backed away, the Doctor's hand on his sleeve guiding him into the corner.

'So that's a Ceccec,' said Trix.

'Yes,' whispered the Doctor. Charlton flattened himself against the wall beside Trix. 'And it's here for a reason.'

The Gabaks trained their gun barrels upon the Ceccec. 'You are an enemy of the Gabaks,' spat Galvakis. 'You must be eradicated!'

The other Gabaks joined in the chant. 'Eradicate! Eradicate! Eradicate!'

The Ceccec floated over to the desk with the red button. It did not touch the floor, moving as though superimposed.

Then the Gabaks fired. Each of their guns shot a narrow, ice-blue ray.

Each ray slammed into the desk. For an instant, all was brilliant, inverted whiteness, then the unit exploded into a thousand blazing fragments.

Charlton looked at the Doctor. The unit sending the signal had been destroyed –

– the signal to the Gabak satellite on the other side of the world would stop –

– detonating the electromagnetic pulse bomb –

– the pulse bomb would destroy the Aztale city –

– the signal from the Aztales to their satellite would stop –

– detonating their electromagnetic pulse bomb –

– and, in the second it took the Doctor to look back at Charlton, the effect of the bomb was felt. Each of the monitors blasted outwards. The control desks were ripped apart as every circuit and every transistor blew. The gas lamps toppled from their brackets, spilling their flame. The overhead pipes grumbled and hissed.

The Ceccec vanished, shrinking to a dot like a switched-off television.

The Gabaks slumped forward in their seats, fumes pumping from their bodies. Their chair batteries melted and the flex of their wires dripped. Their faces tightened and, as the flesh roasted, the skin crept back to reveal metal skulls.

Galvakis twisted towards the Doctor. ‘The Aztales have been eradicated!’ he snarled. ‘We have –’

The circuits inside his skull blew.

‘– won,’ finished the Doctor.

A creaking came from above. It sounded as though the ceiling might be about to collapse. Charlton’s stomach sank.

The bunker thickened with smoke. The control panels continued to whip out plumes of sparks. Monitors crackled with fire. Steaming water dribbled from the pipes and seeped across the floor.

‘Doctor,’ said Trix. ‘We have –’

A door slid open in thin air, revealing a tranquil beach and Fitz spread-eagled upon a deckchair, a lime-coloured drink in one hand. He waved to them. ‘My turn to rescue you!’

Charlton felt the Doctor’s hand on his arm, and he allowed himself to be dragged through the tele-door. Trix followed.

And the roof of the bunker collapsed with a deafening crash.

‘So, in many ways, the experience of Valuensis is a salutary tale. My name has been Deg Kerrigan. Goodnight.’

Minuea

They had once been great ships, ploughing the bejewelled ocean. Hulks of timber, studded with iron, their sails swollen with the breeze.

They had once been great ships, echoing to the thud of cannon, the rumbling of barrels and the whack of sword upon sword. Sailors had thrust themselves up the rigging, sinews bulging, dirks clenched in teeth.

They had once been great ships, reeking of tar, toil and goats, rolling ever forward, a caw of gullbatrosses in their wake.

Now they were no longer ships. They were cities.

Pirate cities!

As the seas had risen, the lubber-towns had tumbled beneath the waves. Their inhabitants had fled to the mountains, but still the seas surged ever forward. In desperation, they built huge arks laden with grain and livestock. And, as the last spires were lost to the froth, a hundred or more such vessels sailed forth, in search of land, in search of the day when the seas would recede.

They were rich pickings for the pirates.

The lubbers didn't know the ways of the sea. The fools! Their ships had raised anchor unarmed – they had no cannon. As naked as babes! And they were sluggardly – no match for the fast and sleek pirate caravels.

Pigboy Caroon, the first mate of the *Thieving Bastard*, reminisced as he watched from the crow's-nest. He could still hear the crack of gunpowder and the women's screams. The bodies somersaulting overboard, their guts scraped out of their chests. The sea had writhed with oily, razor-toothed creatures – the porphins, the snapes and the snoogles.

He could still remember the celebrations. The lashings of rum and the lashings of the prisoners. The hornpipes, the dances, and the shanties. Long shanties, recounting sagas and legendary pirates and epic battles. Some of the shanties had lasted days. Indeed, many of the shanties went on for longer than the battles they described. Some even incurred more casualties.

But the shanties had dried up with the rum. The arks were becoming

scarce, so the captain of the *Bastard*, Emmanuel Bloater, had ordered that they should try to conserve what remained. Rather than sink the lubber-ships, they would be lashed together, to form one great vessel. A city at sea!

Now the *Bastard* was dwarfed by the dozen boats that clustered around it. Mooring ropes hung in a lattice between them, creaking. Gangplanks rattled under boots.

The sea-city, still called the *Thieving Bastard* sailed but slowly. The breeze tugged at the hundreds of improvised sails that hung between the boats like washing-lines.

The order had been given to catch the wind. Ahead, little more than a dot in the haze of the horizon, Caroon had spotted another pirate city, consisting of three or four boats. That was two days ago. They'd given chase, gaining maybe two hundred yards a day.

Caroon looked up. The pirate moon hung in the evening sky. They called it the pirate moon, though it was no use for navigation. It had first appeared in the skies twenty years ago, and had increased in size with each passing month. Tonight it resembled a lopsided crescent – it was rarely the same shape two days running. According to their astrologer, the pirate moon would soon leave their skies forever. As the arrival of the moon had coincided with the rise of the oceans, many hoped that its departure would herald the return of land.

Caroon returned his attention to their prey. To his trained eye, something was odd. The pirate city had grown larger. As though it had set a course directly towards them –

Lifting his eye-scope, Caroon peered closer and scanned to the left. Another pirate city. And another. And another.

Caroon grabbed a rope and swung himself out of the crow's-nest. The rope unravelled and he dropped to the deck with a thump.

The crew halted in their work. Emmanuel Bloater strode towards Caroon and spat. His lips drew back to reveal the stubs of teeth.

'Cap'n,' gasped Caroon. 'They be a-comin' for us!'

'What be you sayin', young Pigboy?'

'They be a-comin' for us, cap'n. Four of 'em!'

'The measly curs!' shouted Bloater, hurling his words across the deck like the bodies of his victims. 'Men, we'll be eating yellow bellies a'for sun-up!'

'We bain't be turnin' tail, cap'n?' ventured Caroon.

'Nay, boy,' snarled Bloater. 'We bain't be turnin' tail, we bain't be no giddyng toadies. We be *pirates*, and the smell of blood be... ' he faltered, searching for a simile, 'in the blood! There'll be killin' a-plenty tonight!'

He thrust his sword into the air and hurrah-ed. His crew hurrah-ed in response.

It was at that point that a shaft of pure, twinkling light decided to plunge down from the sky and illuminate a small round section of the deck. Within the glow, a figure appeared. A muscular man seated upon a throne of the most fantastic jewels Caroon had ever seen.

'I am your god!' bellowed the figure.

Bloater gave a noise somewhere between a cough and a laugh. 'Nay,' he gruffed. 'I be the cap'n 'ere.'

The figure's head revolved to reveal the face of a fish. 'I *be*?'

Bloater brandished his cutlass. 'I. Be. Cap'n. 'Ere!'

The figure let out a patronising sigh. 'For goodness' sake, if you're going to speak in the present tense all the time, at least use the proper construction. "I *am* the captain here".'

'Nay,' said Bloater. 'I be.'

'I *am*.'

'I *be*,' repeated Bloater.

The figure raised one arm towards Bloater and a bolt of fire flowed from its fingertips. The air shimmered around the captain and he froze, his mouth gawping in surprise.

'Your *captain*,' enunciated the figure, 'has just given you the order to attack. He intends to lead you all to a certain death!'

The crew looked at each other, then at their immobile captain, then back at the figure. 'Aye!' 'That he be!'

' "*Yes he is*", not "*that he be*"!' said the figure. 'There is another way. You don't have to follow his orders. You can decide among yourselves!'

'Eh?'

'You each say whether you want to fight or flee, and whichever side has the most people in favour, is what you decide to do.'

'You mean,' said Caroon. 'We be choosin—'

'Yes.'

'I bain't be sure 'bout that,' said one of the pirates. 'I thinks the cap'n should decide.'

'Aye,' said another. 'After all, he be in charge. He 'as the qualifications.'

'An' the experience!' said another. 'I be the bloke that deans the goat. I bain't be thinkin' I should 'ave a say in the 'portant stuff. I be as ignorant as a pig!'

'I likes followin' orders!' said another pirate. 'I bain't want to waste me time 'avin' to think up the orders too. Tha' be the cap'n's job!'

'If it's all same to you,' Caroon addressed the figure. 'We'd sooner we sticks as we are. We thinks decidin' best be left to them tha's in charge,

rather than the likes o' us, 'cos we just be arguin' all the time, bain't we, boys?'

'Aye! Always arguin' 'bout somethin'.'

'Never agree.'

'Aye. Ver' true. Never agree on anythin',' they concurred.

'This is not a difficult concept to grasp,' said the figure. 'It means you all have an influence in your own destiny.'

The crew glanced among themselves. 'Not sure I likes the sound o' that. Can't all be cap'n, can we? That be mutiny.'

'We *likes* the cap'n,' Caroon explained. 'He's never let us down... 'cept that time he led us into battle when the cannons wasn't workin'.'

'An' that time when we was all under the scurvy an' he rationed the rum.'

'An' that time he had us flogged for singing that shanty-medley.'

'An' that time when he made us fight the giant squid.'

'An' said it wasn't poisonous when it was.'

'I'm going to give you one more chance,' said the figure, pointing its gloved fingers at the mast. 'Either you pay attention, or... I be going to sink the bloody boat!'

Chapter 6

Changing Planets

The sea strokes up and down the glistening sand. Its gush and draw soothes my ears, and I nestle into the deckchair, the fibres warm against my shoulders. Through my sunglasses I watch the ocean twinkle. Laughter rings in my ears.

Apart from me, Fitz, the Doctor, Charlton and a short, chubby robot called Zwee, not a soul is in sight. The villas that shoulder up against the promenade are deserted. They're not the source of the laughter.

No, the short chubby robot called Zwee has assured us, the sound comes from hidden speakers. He mutters in an electronic sing-song as he trundles back and forth, handing out refreshments, erecting windbreaks and umbrellas.

'The sound is merely to create the right ambience, sir,' continues Zwee as Fitz helps himself to another pina colada. For some reason, Fitz is wearing a brand new pair of shoes. 'Would you like to change it?'

'What are the options?' asks the Doctor. In deference to the heat, he has taken off his waistcoat. Fitz is bare-chested and Charlton's *The Darkness* T-shirt stretches across his mound of belly.

'Options include,' pipes Zwee ' "tropical paradise", "loco in Acapulco", "surfin' safari", "Weston-Super-Mare" and "D-Day".'

'D-Day?' says Charlton.

'The profoundest delight to indulge you, sir.'

An explosion rattles my orange juice. Chub-chubs echo across the sky. Men bark orders in American accents. Aeroplanes scream. Gunfire rattles.

'Zwee,' shouts the Doctor. 'Can we have it on "mute"?''

'An absolute pleasure to cater to your wishes, sir.'

The battle cuts off, leaving nothing. No bird song. Not even the sound of the ocean.

We've been lying on this beach all afternoon. Waited on hand and foot, with nothing to do but wait.

Boring, I know. But if I lie back and close my eyes, I could get used to it. My legs begin to tingle in the heat.

But it's not quite perfect. The wind has grown brisk. Sand is being whisked across the beach and bites into my skin.

'Zwee,' I say. I notice that Fitz's drinks table is about to be upended. It shakes, throwing off its drink, and flaps away. 'Can we have a little less wind?'

'The sheerest bliss to administer unto your desires, ma'am.' Zwee's two red-light eyes flash and he retrieves a remote control from one of his receptacles. He points it at the horizon and clicks.

Nothing happens, so he lifts it higher and clicks again.

The wind falls and there is stillness.

Zwee trundles over to me and presents me with the remote control. 'This controls the weather,' he explains. 'Just point it at the horizon.'

'Like this?'

'A bit higher, ma'am,' coughs Zwee. 'Weak signal. The batteries are low.'

'Excuse me,' says Fitz. 'Another drink over here, please.'

Zwee turns. 'Certainly, sir. Few activities would afford me greater satisfaction.' He reaches into one of his compartments to collect a filled cocktail glass, complete with loop-the-loop straw and umbrella.

'Thanks.' Fitz sips and lounges back.

'And for me,' adds Charlton. 'No cherry this time.'

'This place really is perfection,' says the Doctor.

'It is Utopia, sir,' says Zwee as he shakes Charlton's cocktail.

The Doctor seems uncomfortable. He pulls himself to his feet. 'Nice place for a holiday, but I wouldn't want to live here.'

As he speaks, I notice something odd. It's the acoustics. His voice sounds dead, almost as though we were indoors.

'Utopia...' continues the Doctor. 'And this is a designer planet, you say?'

'Calculated to facilitate your every satisfaction, sir.'

'I see.' The Doctor pokes the remote control at the horizon. The sky turns a shade of deep orange, streaked with heavy, black clouds.

He flicks it again, and the sky becomes a gaudy shade of pink, then a sinister, soupy green. Then black, dotted with stars and ringed planets.

'Sorry,' says the Doctor, handing the remote control back to Zwee. 'How do you get it to change back?'

After delivering Charlton his drink, Zwee taps a finger on the remote, and we are back beneath a clear blue sky

‘So anything can be changed?’ said the Doctor.

‘Within reason, yes, sir. The buoyancy afforded by the sea, for instance, will allow even the inexperienced swimmer –’

‘What temperature is the sea at?’

‘A refreshing twenty degrees, sir. It can be altered, but bear in mind it can take several hours for changes to take effect.’

‘Won’t that annoy the sea life?’

‘There is none, sir. The water is pure of all pollutants.’

The Doctor crouches and taps Zwee’s head, as though he were a child. ‘Life, Zwee, is not a pollutant.’ He pats his knees, rises and squints out to sea. ‘So no fishing, then?’

‘The ocean can be stocked with artificial marine life for sporting purposes, sir, graded at several levels of difficulty, from novice to –’

‘That won’t be necessary.’

‘Don’t knock it, Doctor,’ says Fitz, sipping. He’s developing a fixed, dopey grin. ‘I want... a sandcastle. Zwee, build me a sandcastle.’

‘Nothing would give me more transcendent and life-affirming joy,’ says Zwee. From another of his compartments he recovers a bucket and spade, and he trundles down to dig up some damp sand.

‘Try not to take advantage,’ mutters the Doctor. ‘Or take anything else, for that matter. There might be a reckoning.’

Fitz laughs and drinks. I watch Zwee return from the beach to clump his first bucket-shape of sand at Fitz’s feet. ‘Did you have any particular castle in mind, sir? I was thinking European, medieval, something rococo –’

‘Surprise me, Zwee. Oh, and thanks for the shoes...’

Zwee gives a series of high-pitched beeps. ‘Excuse me. I have a message for you, sirs and ma’am. It is from Mister Dittero Shandy. He wishes me to inform you that if you would care to join him in the auction suite, proceedings are due to commence.’

Fitz drags himself out of his chair. As the Doctor helps Charlton out of his chair he asks Zwee for directions.

‘Inshore, the grand hotel, you can’t miss it. Straight up the steps. If you get lost, ask a Zwee.’

‘Thanks.’ The Doctor blocks my sun. ‘Trix?’

‘I’ll be along in a minute.’ I sip my drink. ‘Just need to work on my tan.’

‘Your tan?’ says the Doctor. ‘Well, be... careful. This place may not be everything it says in the brochure.’

It seemed somehow unfinished, thought Fitz. Like a movie set. The stone buildings were whitewashed, without a trace of damp or erosion. Shutters blanked out every window and every door had been painted a vivid colour – letterbox red, navy blue, banana yellow.

The street wound narrowly uphill. The Doctor led the way, leaning into the incline. Charlton struggled himself upward, muttering between gasps.

They were alone, save for the Zwee robots. Like little motorised wheelie-bins, they bumbled their way across the cobbles, spraying on extra coats of whitewash, or scrubbing doorsteps.

It was eerie – although there was no one to be seen, the ambient noise kept on playing. So as they walked past the boarded-up shops and cafés, they could hear muted laughter, the clink of glass, pealing bells and the snort of horses pulling juddering carts. After a few minutes the tape fell silent, only to begin again. It was like they were moving through a town of ghosts.

Catching his breath, Fitz looked back down over the bay. In the distance lay a harbour, enclosed by its breakwater, and beyond, a lighthouse. The pink roofs of the town continued into the distance, scattering themselves over rolling hills.

Soon they reached a pair of gates, opening on to a plush lawn, tended by Zwees and watered by roving fountains. Abstract sculptures littered the grounds like the forgotten executive toys of a giant – silver baubles, springs and helixes. And in the middle, flanked by palms, a colonial palace baked lazily in the afternoon sun.

Every surface had been decorated. Statues gestured within every cranny and upon every balcony. It towered five storeys high, its summit a dome of twinkling glass.

A vast, ammonite-spiral staircase swirled them up into the main entrance. The Doctor leading the way, they passed through the regal entrance and into the cool, dark interior.

It was silent, save for their footsteps upon marble. Potted plants lent the hall an earthy smell. An unoccupied desk took up one wall, behind which lay compartments for post. Full-length mirrors filled the remaining space, showing reflections of paintings that were not in the room itself.

Someone had stuck a paper sign on the wall with an arrow. Upon it had been felt-tipped:

Auction Suite – This Way

The arrow directed them to a pair of high double doors. The Doctor shoved them aside. ‘Hello?’

The conference room was surprisingly frugal. Moulded plastic chairs

surrounded a table. The table offered a variety of drinks, plastic folders and a slide projector, which projected an oblong on to the far wall.

They were all here. Nimbit slouched in his chair, dabbing at his monocle with his handkerchief. The two bronzed guards sat to one side, the cushion holding the small glass dome of the Fabulous Micron resting on the table before them. Vorshagg preferred to pace back and forth, its tail lashing from side to side. Poozle floated an inch above the table, his globules distending and bubbling and Question Intonation, the two furry, brown footballs, bobbed above an empty chair.

'*Magnificent*, we are all here, at last,' said Dittero Shandy, strolling into the room, clipboard clasped. He waved Fitz, the Doctor and Charlton into the three vacant chairs. The Doctor beamed and helped himself to a custard cream.

'I trust we're all refreshed...' Dittero continued, moving into the projector beam. 'Let me introduce myself. I'm Dittero Shandy. We are being *delighted* by the *radiant* company of the Fabulous Micron,' he indicated the cushion, 'Vorshagg, Poozle, Nimbit and,' he adopted a quizzical, surprised expression.

The Doctor nodded at each of the delegates as though they were old friends.

'And we have been joined by another bidder, Mr Fitz Kreiner, with his assistants -'

'The Doctor,' said Fitz. 'And Charlton Mackerel.'

Dittero clasped his hands. '*Resplendent*. Now, we all know why we are here, so let's get straight on to business with no more beating-around-the-bushness. I represent the owner of the delightful property known as Valuensis -' He clicked a button on a hand-held device and a slide clicked into place. It showed an emerald sphere smothered in swirling white.

'Valuensis,' repeated Dittero. 'The property is, as you all know, in a highly desirable system, with good access for the hyperspatial ring-route, and represents a unique opportunity. It has recently been vacated by its previous tenants, and is in prime condition for... improvement. The level of background radiation is minimal, much of the mineral and fossil wealth lies unexploited, and,' he turned to Nimbit, 'I can guarantee that the Van Allen belts are in *superb* working order.'

The Doctor coughed. Dittero responded with raised eyebrows. 'Yes, Mr... Doctor?'

'You said the previous tenants had vacated the property... would I be right in saying it's no longer under the protection of Galactic Heritage?'

'You presume accurately, Doctor.'

'Excellent. Don't want them sticking their oars in, eh?'

'The Foundation's influence only extends to those worlds with indigenous, *sentient* life,' Dittero explained. 'While some vestigial life does remain on Valuensis, I can assure you that it does not fall within any conservation remit, and is, therefore, very much an optional feature.'

'An optional feature? What are the other options?'

'I was getting to that.' Dittero clucked in irritation. 'We have obtained the services, the exclusive services, I should add, of the galaxy's most renowned planetary terraformist. Whatever your desire, he shall make it reality. Every style, every taste is catered for. He is, in a word, an artist.'

Dittero exhaled as though awaiting applause. His speech had taken on a rapturous, rhythmic quality. Fitz feared he might burst into song.

'We can change the gravity, the poles, the atmospheric strata. We can change the geology, the tectonics, the composition of the mantle.'

As Dittero spoke, the projection changed to a purple-pink view of pyramids, the desert wobbling in the heat. They saw a lush, dribbling jungle. They saw a placid ocean, dotted with icebergs sculpted into the shapes of extremely voluptuous, and extremely naked, young women.

'We can move mountains and forge lakes. We can shift the orbit, the axis, the tilt. We can change the length of days and years, the order of the seasons –'

Smocked villagers scythed fields of wheat. Skyscrapers glinted. The puddles of a quarry splashed. A flat world, its surface divided into a chessboard, was littered with spongelike boulders, each casting a square shadow.

'Anything is possible. The only limit is your imagination... and your credit rating.' Dittero laughed at his own joke.

'And we get to choose the colour scheme?' The Doctor rose to his feet and circled the table. The other delegates turned to watch him, Nimbit shifting in his chair with the effort. Vorshagg grunted, disgruntled. 'Something in burgundy, perhaps. Toulouse Lautrec-y. I do love *gothic*, don't you?'

Dittero stared at the Doctor like a disappointed teacher. 'If you had read the brochure, you would know that we offer a wide variety of colour schemes.'

'You have a chart?' said the Doctor. 'How delightfully mundane.'

'Mundane is an adjective seldom used to describe the work of Welwyn Borr,' snapped Dittero. 'Seldom, in the sense of "never".' Dittero's eyes circled the room. 'If we are all ready –'

'One more question,' said the Doctor.

'Yes?'

'This decorator who does up the planets...'

'He is no mere *decorator*.'

'If I ask him nicely... would he put them back how he found them?'

The delegates shifted nervously. Nimbit's moustache bristled. Question Intonation backed away. Even Vorshagg stopped slaving.

'A "retro" approach,' mused Dittero. 'Not his *milieu*, but he's nothing if not... flexible. Now. Shall we commence the bidding? Currency is Arcturan ultra-pods, Glissian roubles or Warriemilli francs. All major credit cards accepted.'

The Doctor returned to his chair and enjoyed another custard cream. He then offered the plate to Fitz, Charlton and Poozle.

Dittero retrieved a gavel from his jacket pocket. 'Let us start at one million ultra-pods. Do I hear one million?'

Fitz looked at Vorshagg. Vorshagg's lizard eyes stared back, displeased. Fitz turned to Nimbit, who peered through his monocle at Question Intonation. Question Intonation drifted upwards, as though embarrassed. One of Micron's legionaries held a finger to his ear, but shook his head.

'This is a highly desirable world! No?' Dittero sighed. 'Do I hear half a million Arcturan ultra-pods? Half a million?'

An uncomfortable silence hung over the table.

The Doctor raised one hand. 'Half a million.'

The first I hear of them is a voice carried along the breeze. Then it gets lost among the birdsong and slap of the sea.

I lift my sunglasses. Zweek is putting the finishing touches to his castle. It features a dozen turrets, a drawbridge and moat. All it's missing is a Sleeping Beauty.

The voice drifts by again. A man, tall, in a swashbuckler's shirt and pantaloons is striding along the beach towards me. He's accompanied by two Zweeks, one holding a television camera, the other a boom microphone.

He's not my type. There's handsome, and there's Mills and Boon, and this guy is Mills and Boon. Perfect white teeth, a mane of hair and, oh God, he's spotted me.

He gives a wide wave. 'Hello-ah!'

I wave back with my fingers as he bounds up to my deckchair. 'My desperate darling,' he says. 'Has anyone told you, you are fascinating and a wonder to behold?'

'Loads.'

He laughs, too long and too loud. 'Welwyn Borr, madam. At your,' he unrolls one arm downwards like a musketeer, 'service.' He gives the

Zwee with the camera a flirtatious smirk. 'The female cannot resist Welwyn Borr's irresistible charms. She is like warm jelly in his hands!'

I lean forward. 'What?'

'For the camera, dear,' he says, out of the corner of his mouth, 'for the camera!'

'What are they doing?' I rummage down beside my chair for my T-shirt.

'They're making a documentary.'

'About?'

'About?' Welwyn's eyes widen. 'About *me!*'

I tug my T-shirt over my chest. 'Why?'

'Why?' Welwyn considers. 'I'm the worlds' leading terraformer. I've won awards. *Which Planet's* sentient being of the month? *Globe Collector*, best buy two years running? *Total Worlds'* "top fifty most influential people in terraforming"? You must have heard of me.'

'No. Who are they making the documentary for?'

'For me,' says Welwyn. 'It's important that my life is recorded for posterity. For future generations to enjoy.'

'And not just for you?'

'No. But it would be awful if I said something witty, and it wasn't preserved, wouldn't it?'

'So you never watch this... documentary you're making?'

'Oh no,' he laughs. 'I never watch myself.' Pause. 'Well, sometimes. Who wouldn't? I mean, come on! I'm *ravishing!*'

The conversation is losing momentum. Welwyn fixes upon Zwee's sandcastle. 'Beautiful,' he says. 'I used to build sandcastles, you know. As a boy.'

'Really?'

'Could never get them to stay up, though. Tide trouble.' He falls silent then mutters to the Zwee with the camera, 'File under "biographical insight". "The early years". "Formative experiences". "Building towards the dream".'

I pull on my jeans. 'So what does a terraformer do, then, to win awards?'

He indicates the beach. 'This is one of mine. Utopia. But it's more of a show-planet... very *safe*. Very middle-of-the-road. Would you like to see some of my other worlds?'

Nimbit's Story

'Pull!'

Quaff, resplendent in his herringbone hunting jacket, levelled his shotgun. His monocled eye squinted through the crosshairs. They drifted across the tree tops, over the roof of the groundsman's cottage, and up into the dear blue –

Clear blue, except for a flapping silhouette –

He squeezed the trigger and gave the damn, stinking beast two good, hard blasts. The recoil of the gun thudded into Quaff's shoulder.

The creature continued its arc, its arms and legs flailing in desperation, the wind ruffling its long, orange fur. It gave a terrified, drawn-out howl –

Bullseye! The urang monkey exploded in a ball of flame. Caught the blinder by his toe!

The hounds yapped and tugged at their leashes. Quaff gave the houndsman the nod, and the hounds were released to bounce among the bracken, chasing each other's tails, sniffing out the remains of the urang.

Quaff dug into his jacket for some chobacco. He patted it into his pipe, and lit it, sucking in a lungful of Harbinger of Doom. This was the life, he thought. Bright clear autumn day. Leaves scrunching underfoot. Bonfires. Low gravity, seven sec per sec, very relaxing. Frosty bite to the air – brought the blood to the blubber, as the saying goes.

And monkeys being catapulted into the air. 'Pull!'

Urang shooting was a grand sport. The creatures were vermin – you had to get rid of them somehow. Some pansy-livered reprobates suggested using poison, but that would be going soft. You had to talk to the blinders in the only language they understood. Fire them into the air and shoot at them.

The latest monkey arced overhead, back-peddalling with its legs as though it might develop the power of flight.

No such luck! Quaff pulled the trigger and the monkey exploded. The hounds yapped in delight as charred limbs rained from the sky.

What the pansy-livered reprobates didn't understand, you see, was the nature of sport. If you poisoned the monkeys, they'd just crawl around a bit and die. Where would be the fun in that? No, they had to be rounded up and shoved into

catapults. That was sport.

Quaff noticed his son approaching. The little blinder's skin still speckled with pink. As he breasted the summit of the hill, he dropped his monocle. Damn fool boy.

'Pull!' Blam! Monkey.

'Hello, Father,' said Nimbit. 'You're in homicidal fettle today.'

'Damn straight I am. Never miss a shoot if I can help it. What do you want, young fruit?'

The young walrus wiped his moustache. 'You asked for me, Father?'

'Did I? Pull! I did?' A monkey exploded. 'I did. Wanted you to take a look at all this.'

'All this?'

Quaff gestured to indicate the expansive hills, the hedgerows, the wood. The snapping bonfires. The hounds bouncing about as though in slow motion. The manor house rising out of the mist. The struggling monkey being manhandled into a catapult.

'Didn't come easy, y'know,' said Quaff breaking his rifle. 'Had to sweat for it. Damn hard, too.'

'Yes, Father.'

'Interplanetary property speculation. Noblest profession of them all, son. Buy low, sell high. Only way.'

'Yes, Father.'

'Buy high, sell low – recipe for disaster.'

'Yes, Father.'

Quaff turned to his only offspring. 'D'you know what I started with, Nimbit, d'you?'

'Nothing?'

'Didn't have a bean to rub together. Made me the freakish walrus-human hybrid I am today.' Quaff sucked in some more chobacco. 'Been thinking a lot about your inheritance.'

'My inheritance, Father?'

'Keen on you to follow in the old progenitor's footsteps. I started with nothing and ended up with all this. So that's what I'm giving you.'

'What?' Nimbit was shocked 'All this?'

'No,' said Quaff. 'Nothing.'

'What?'

'Thought I'd give you the same opportunity I had. Go out into the world, son, and make something of yourself, because what you are at the moment is, quite frankly, unacceptable. No,' Quaff lifted his rifle, 'when I die, I've made arrangements to have all my wealth destroyed in a pointless explosion. After all, can't take it with you. Pull!'

'Thank you, Father,' said Nimbit.

'Now sod off,' said Quaff and shot another monkey.

'The bidding stands at twelve million Arcturan ultra-pods. Do I hear thirteen?'

Charlton glanced about the room. Despite his disapproval of the trade in planets, he was enjoying himself.

The bidding was between Micron and Nimbit. The walrus creature kept on clearing its throat and taking sips of water. It noticed Charlton's attention and glared at him through its monocle.

It was, of course, impossible to gauge Micron's mood. All that occurred at that end of the table was that one of the attendants would listen *to* his earphone with an expression of intense concentration. Then he would nod and fold his muscular arms.

Vorshagg had made one bid but had given up. The creature snarled at nothing in particular, its tongue lolling its way along its teeth. Charlton noticed the white box attached to the side of its head, and wondered what purpose it served.

Poozle remained silent – in fact, Charlton realised, he hadn't spoken a word since they'd entered – and Question Intonation merely buzzed about the ceiling giving supercilious snorts, as though it had never been interested in bidding for Valuensis in the first place.

'Do I hear any more?' said Dittero with an expectant smile.

The Doctor sat upright. He wagged his fingers, as though about to bid, but then decided against it. He looked left and right, left and right, as though in deep thought, then thought better of it and helped himself to another biscuit.

'Th-th-thirteen,' stammered Nimbit. He cleared his throat. 'Thirteen. Thirteen million Arcturan ultra-pods.'

'Thirteen, with Nimbit.'

'Fourteen,' piped Poozle from out of nowhere. All eyes, monocles and eyeless furry balls turned towards the glass cylinder. 'Fourteen *mirrion!*'

'Fifteen,' struggled Nimbit.

'Sixteen!'

As Poozle spoke, the Doctor gazed at the creature, then over at Dittero, who was drumming his fingers on his clipboard. The Doctor's lips drew back into a grin.

'Seventeen.'

The delegates' attention turned back to Poozle. Charlton watched as one globule distended itself and floated upwards.

There was a tapping from the other end of the table. Charlton looked across. One of Micron's attendants waited until he had the attention of the whole room before speaking. 'Twenty.'

'Twenty-one,' croaked Nimbit.

Question Intonation squealed in excitement. It was a very annoying alien, thought Charlton. It always had to be the centre of attention.

The Doctor turned to Dittero. Dittero was fiddling with his clipboard. The Doctor watched him, amusement and curiosity twinkling in his eyes.

'May I make a lequest?' said Poozle.

'Yes?' said Dittero, raising a palm to indicate he wasn't addressing Question Intonation.

'I wish to lequest an adjournment,' said the cylinder. 'While I check with my financial backers.'

'This is most atypical... ' began Dittero.

'No adjournment!' The Doctor grinned like a child at the theatre. 'It was just getting exciting!'

'If the majority of... *participating* bidders wish to agree to an adjournment, then it may proceed. What is the will of the Fabulous Micron?'

One of Micron's attendants listened to his earphone. 'The Fabulous Micron assents.'

'Nimbit?'

Nimbit fidgeted in his chair, his forehead glistening. 'If you wish.'

'Then may I *posit* we reconvene, here, in one hour?' said Dittero, tapping upon his clipboard. Poozle levitated itself over to the main doors and disappeared from the room.

'One hour,' growled Vorshagg, its tail thumping at the ground.

Charlton followed the Doctor and Fitz over to the door. They waited until Question Intonation had passed, then Fitz said, 'What was that?'

The Doctor gave a mock-puzzled look. 'What?'

'All that "can we have an adjournment" stuff.'

'Oh,' said the Doctor. 'I imagine someone wasn't happy with the way things were going.' He dug his hands in his pockets and bounced on his heels. 'Now, stretch legs, I think.'

Nimbit heaved his way up the stairs to his room, gasping with the effort. The gravity on Utopia was far too strong. His legs felt as though they were made of lead.

At last he reached his door, swipe-carded the lock and stumbled inside. He let the card drop to the floor and rested against the wall, catching his breath and dabbing his cheeks with his handkerchief.

He was almost there! Despite the pain in his lungs and the thud of his heart, Nimbit was thrilled. Valuensis would be his! He could go up to twenty-five Arcturan ultra-pods. More than Micron or Poozle could afford, he felt sure.

And he knew something they didn't. He had been leaked the details of a major hyperspatial route that was planned to link through the Valuensis system. Property prices in the area would rocket. He would be able to name his own price. And he could name some very high prices indeed.

Father would be proud, thought Nimbit. If he hadn't died in that unfortunate shooting accident twenty years ago. It was twenty years since the funeral. Twenty years since the ceremonial detonation of the manor house.

It had been a struggle. Nimbit had invested his life savings in a minor planet. Six months later, it crashed into a minor sun, and Nimbit had turned to drink. In his befuddled stupor, Nimbit gambled the insurance money on a part-share in the marsh moon of Bhaxis.

That proved to be the turning point. When a super volcano chain erupted on Bhaxis, the planet's population was forced to evacuate to the marsh moon. Nimbit had named some very high prices that day, too.

He hauled himself over to the door. Beside the light switch was a unit that controlled the suite's gravity. He revolved the dial to 'five sec per sec'.

It would take a while for the de-grav to take effect. Nimbit staggered over to the bed and flopped on to his back. This ten sec-per-sec was unbearable.

The other delegates were a strange bunch, thought Nimbit. Fitz, the Doctor and that other chap – they didn't seem the type for property speculation at all. Question Intonation seemed intent on winding everyone up rather than bidding. Micron was full of himself, which wasn't very much. And as for Poozle...

The crushing sensation on Nimbit's chest increased. Odd, he thought. Maybe it was his body playing tricks on him. He could hear his blood swilling through his ears. He shifted on the bed to get more comfortable, and realised his suit was clammy with cold sweat.

Nimbit took shallower breaths. Each movement was painful.

The gravity...he would have to readjust it. Wheezing in frustration, Nimbit attempted to lift himself upright, but found he was stuck to the bed. No matter how much he strained, he couldn't budge.

Nimbit tried to reach for the room service button, but he couldn't raise his hand from the pillow. It felt as though it weighed a hundred pounds.

The walrus turned his eyes upwards once more. The ceiling was pressing down on him. Crushing him...

Vorshagg's Story

The Vorshagg race has been the victim of a cruel misapprehension.

The misapprehension arose when the first explorers arrived on Vorshagg. They stepped out of their shuttle, their recording devices at the ready, and found themselves in the middle of what appeared to be a civil war. The buildings were hollow shells. Smoke clouds wafted through streets piled with rubble and corpses. The ground quaked with the crump of distant explosions.

The survey team took one look at the city and decided to leave. Unfortunately their arrival had not gone unnoticed and they found to their horror that they were surrounded by twenty tall, thickly built lizards with serrated teeth and dagger-like horns. They barely had time to send out a radio message before the lizards gouged out their stomachs and chewed off their heads.

The radio message consisted of two and a half words.

'Don't come heaaaaaargh!'

For many years, the Vorshagg race was a byword for all that was bad-tempered and cruel. Other explorers did visit their world, hoping to make names for themselves – and nature documentaries – and a few survived to tell the tale of how they had encountered the Vorshagg and were now leading full and active lives despite the loss of their limbs.

The info-texts all told the same story. The Vorshagg were sadistic and callous. They killed for pleasure.

The Galactic Council could not stand by. Neighbouring planets felt threatened. Peace-keeping forces were deployed on Vorshagg to put an end to the hostilities. The Vorshagg stopped fighting among themselves and ripped the peace-keeping forces limb-from-limb.

It was not until the great naturalist and evolutionary biologist Himbert J. Himbert studied the Vorshagg race that the truth emerged.

The Vorshagg race had been the victims of anthropomorphism. Their behaviour was being judged from the perspective of races that had adopted non-adversarial cultures. The Vorshagg were not barbarians. They had a rich heritage dating back thousands of years. They were intelligent, reasoning beings.

They just also happened to be incredibly violent.

It was how their society functioned. To the Vorshagg, gratuitous and unwarranted violent acts were as natural as eating or sleeping. They would attack any living thing that came within striking distance out of pure instinct. Their whole society had been founded on the idea not of co-operation, but of attempting to rip each other's heads off.

A lion mauling a gazelle may seem cruel, but lions are not capable of cruelty. That is simply how they are. And while the Vorshagg may seem vicious, ill-humoured and ferocious to the bystander – particular to the bystander who has unexpectedly been deprived of his torso – the Vorshagg do not mean it personally.

Himbert also pointed out that, while it may seem that the Vorshagg were fighting each other for no reason, they actually had a highly organised society which functioned in terms of them fighting each other.

The most significant development in understanding the Vorshagg arrived with the de-aggrifier. This device, when secured to the left frontal lobe of the Vorshagg brain, would limit their belligerent tendencies and would, in effect, render them harmless. With the de-aggrifier, the Vorshagg subject would be incapable of harming any living creature. The instinct would remain, but the ability would not.

The introduction of the de-aggrifier meant that it was possible for Vorshagg ambassadors to forge relations with other worlds without simultaneously attempting to gnaw their faces off. This, in turn, led to greater understanding, with the Vorshagg being inducted into the Galactic Council. The ceremony was a proud moment for the entire Vorshagg race, and was only marred when a malfunction of the de-aggrifier belonging to the Vorshagg diplomat caused it to eat the delegate from Largolan Beta.

'The problem with Mother Nature,' says Welwyn, sweeping a hand through his hair, 'is that she's a cack-handed amateur. So unimaginative! Such a narrow palette!' Using a tele-door handle he slides open a rectangle of another planet. 'I mean, how boring to have trees and clouds and rivers all the time. How tiresome to have to rely on glaciation and tectonics for your mountains...'

Through the door I can see fine, white sand and clumps of grass waving in the slow-motion breeze. There are the ruins of some sort of Greek temple. Strange birds wheel through the alien sky. The sky has a peculiar wobbling quality, punctured by shifting beams of light.

'It's called Xanadu,' says Welwyn. 'Word of warning. When you step through, take deep breaths and don't panic.' He grips my wrist and leads me through the door.

It's like stepping into a warm shower. My clothes become damp and cling to my skin. My hair sticks to my scalp and my eyes sting. Worst of all, as I breathe in the air it feels gulpy and sluggish. I snort and choke.

Welwyn won't let go off my hand. I can hear him speaking, though his voice sounds muffled, all the treble removed. *'Slow. You'll get used to it.'*

I cough and a stream of bubbles pops out of my mouth. As I draw in another breath, I get a cramp in my chest. The air here is thick. I can feel it sluicing down my throat. It's like a liquid –

We're underwater. Oh my god, I'm going to drown –

Welwyn closes the door and grins. Bubbles are popping out of his mouth too. He gives a final cough and beams, drinking in the air, his hands on hips. He exhales, as though to show me it's safe to breathe.

I feel some tight, painful bubbles squeeze up through my windpipe. It's like belching. Then I take in more of the air, and realise – we're underwater, but this stuff we're floating around in... it's breathable.

'A special form of water I've developed,' explains Welwyn, his hair drifting about him like an anemone. *'Ultra-oxygenated and one-third density. Your lungs, which are now saturated, can absorb the oxygen content as easily as from the atmosphere. Of course, you'll find it takes a bit more effort to breathe as your lungs aren't used to shifting liquid around, but you'll get used to it.'*

I'm about to speak but find my mouth filling with water. I swallow a little, and let the rest flow out of my lips with the last of the bubbles.

We're at the bottom of a shallow ocean. The grass that I had thought was undulating in the breeze is being stirred by the currents. The soft sand underfoot puffs up into clouds as I step forward. It takes more effort to walk, as I have to push myself forward by shoving my feet into the ground, and sweep my hands behind me in a kind of breast stroke.

Welwyn helps to steady me as the currents tug at my legs. It's a giddy feeling. I feel as though I'm about to laugh.

I look up. Above us is the surface of the ocean. Sunlight glints through the greeny-blue waves. Beyond the waves, a brilliant sun twinkles.

And the birds... what I had taken for birds are fish. They sparkle in a multitude of garish colours. Bright blues and yellows and reds, decorated in stripes. They glide about, beating their way through the air with their fins. They swarm together, forming a curtain of shimmering colour before dissolving into a confusion of a thousand, darting jewels.

'It's beautiful.' My voice is muffled. This water-air doesn't carry sound very well. *'I've never seen anything like it.'*

'My underwater kingdom!' bubbles Welwyn. He releases my hand, kicks at the ground and floats upwards, pushing at the air on either side. He lands in the ruined temple.

It's a sunken Acropolis, the columns toppled like giant's dominoes, the Aphrodite statues eroded. Half of the building is lost beneath the snowfall

of sand. It's naff, really naff, but I can't help falling for it.

My feet leave the ground and I'm drifting over the rippling grass. I kick to propel myself forward, pushing at the water – air? – with my hands to keep myself afloat.

Welwyn is ahead of me. The grass gives way to coral of the most vivid colours. Fronds and tubes and gnarled, coiling bushes. Ribbed chimneys with dandelion branches. Reefs like intricate sculptures.

'You designed all this?'

Welwyn nods and points upward. The shoal of jewels twists to form another curtain before scattering among the coral. I spot the cause of their alarm – a ray, drifting towards them, its wing flapping languidly.

'Don't get too close to the coral,' shouts Welwyn. 'Some of them are poisonous. Give you a nasty rash.'

I allow myself to drift towards what appears to be a series of upside-down waterfalls. As I float closer I realise they're vents in the ground, each releasing a cascade of bubbles.

'What are these?'

Welwyn brushes his hair from his eyes. 'Ah. Ignore them. They're here to oxygenate the water.'

'It needs oxygenating?'

'Haven't managed to find a way of making it self-regulating. Temporary measure.'

Clustered around the base of each of the vents are piles of what look like dried-up plimsolls. They're the rotten remains of fish, their ribs like spindles, their skin hanging in flakes.

'What about these?'

'Ah. The ecosystem isn't viable either. Yet. We have to ship in a new load of bio-engineered life every couple of days.'

'You mean they die?'

'I haven't quite worked out the specifics of the food chain, so they starve to death. Or...'

'Or?'

Welwyn looks at his watch. 'We should be going.'

'Or?'

'This special water we're breathing,' he says. 'It's mildly carcinogenic.'

'Carcinogenic?'

'Mildly. The equivalent of smoking a cigarette. Every minute. It's absolutely safe, so long as you don't hang around.'

'You mean this whole place is *toxic*?' I stare back at the gorgeous, multi-coloured coral. 'It's all dying?'

'Temporarily. As soon as we find a way of making it viable –' He falls silent. 'I think I'll show you somewhere else.'

The Doctor leaned on the balcony, staring out across the bay, the ocean glimmering in the blue of his eyes. The thin lines of a smile were traced on the corners of his lips. He was lost in thought. His favourite place in which to be lost.

Dittero rested his elbows on the balcony beside him. 'Doctor.'

'Dittero Shandy.' The Doctor continued to gaze at the sea. 'This... racket you're involved in...'

'Racket?'

'Come on, Dittero. Your... employer happens to own Valuensis. But he can't get anyone to buy it, because it's listed... until the Gabaks and the Aztalas decide to blow each other to bits and suddenly you have a prime piece of real estate on your hands. Sure to fetch an... astronomical figure, if you'll excuse the pun.'

'Coincidence.'

'I don't believe in coincidence. What other planets do you have on offer?'

'Shardybarn. Venfou. Vij. Flamvolt. Iwa. Ellteeda. Quarxis. Centros. Ulcorn, Unlyo, Varb, Puxatornee, Vona, Kambalana Minor, Monbel, Terangh, Tigus, Minuea, Gallifr-'

'All of which were, until recently, listed by Galactic Heritage?'

'Many still are, Doctor.'

'For how much longer, I wonder? How much longer before they go the way of Valuensis... there suddenly seem to be an awful lot of armaged-dons.' He stopped to consider. 'Armageddi? I really should know the plural.'

'Coincidence.'

'If you say so, Dittero. But coincidences, in my experience, rarely happen by coincidence. There's usually someone behind the scenes, pulling the strings. You just have to watch the scenery...and eventually it will give way.'

'You have a suspicious nature.'

'It's a suspicious universe. All these worlds happen to be located in highly desirable parts of the galaxy. Your employer is rather fortunate in his investments, isn't he?'

'You might say that.'

'I would, Dittero Shandy. He's going to make a killing.'

Question Intonation's Story

Himbert J. Himbert recently propounded an interesting theory regarding the race known as 'question intonation'. He proposed the idea that these creatures, which consist of two floating balls, had evolved from a single organism which, at some point in its development, had bifurcated.

My learned colleague is, with the greatest respect, a nincompoop. In this paper I intend to put forward my own alternative explanation for the nature of the 'QI' race. An explanation which, I believe, will withstand the rigour of scientific scrutiny. Unlike those of Himbert J. Himbert.

Firstly, the creatures' physiology They consist of two sacs, each approximately thirty centimetres in diameter, covered in a coarse, matted fibre. The two spheres are not connected, yet remain in close proximity – never parting by more than two metres.

The spheres display a form of sympathetic motion. When the creature is at rest, both sacs hover. However, when agitated, the sacs will oscillate while exhibiting a greater degree of revolution.

The explanation for their weightlessness is simple enough. Each sac contains the gas hydrogen in approximately the same proportion that carbon-based life forms contain liquid water. Thus, in standard atmospheric density they float. They appear to regulate their altitude by a process of spontaneous hydrogen absorption and release.

Upon dissection, one discovers that each sac contains a web of membranes, analogous to the Terran brain. What is unusual, however, is that the brain within each sac fulfils a different function. One sac will control motor functions and dictate the creature's emotional responses, the other contains the creature's reason. This can be demonstrated by the process of destroying one of the sacs and observing the behaviour of the remainder.

The fact that the two sacs are mutually dependent does raise the question of how they communicate. It is my belief they do so through electromagnetic pulses. Certainly they become disorientated when a lead sheet is placed between them, and they play merry havoc with video recorders.

My colleague Himbert J. Himbert proposes that these creatures originally con-

sisted of a single entity which, at some point in its history, diverged into two. After all, the allocation of functions between the two sacs is analogous to the left and right lobes of our own brains.

However, it is my theory that the creatures are an example of gender reunification. We are all aware of the process whereby a single-cell organism will split into two sexes, each acting as a function of the other.

As there can be a divergence, so there can be a convergence. When male and female creatures unite they often develop a form of gestalt or 'common mind'. They no longer act for the purpose of the individual. Indeed, superficially, they resemble a single being. They enjoy the same things, pay their bills together and finish each others' sentences.

The 'question intonation' creatures, I would suggest, were at one point divided into two genders, each resembling a floating, furry ball – each equipped with an entirely self-sufficient brain. However, their increased dependency upon their partners meant that in areas where one gender was superior, the other gender's abilities would waste away.

Of course, this does raise the question of how the creatures reproduce. I believe that an exchange of partners occurs at the creatures' famously well-attended discotheques. However, as they operate an extremely strict door policy, I have been unable to make any observations in the field.

One final issue remains, however. Why have the creatures chosen to name themselves after a mode of speech? It has, after all, created much difficulty and confusion.

It is my firmly held belief that they do it to be annoying.

The Doctor appeared in the doorway, a cup of tea in hand, and spotted Fitz and Charlton. He joined them at the table, sinking elegantly into his chair.

'If we are ready –' said Dittero. 'The bidding for Valuensis stood at twenty-one million...'

At the end of the table, the Fabulous Micron's two guards kept watch over Micron's cushion. To their left was Vorshagg, scratching his tail and snorting with irritation. To their right was Poozle, levitating and glowing bright green. And above them were the two balls of Question Intonation.

There was no sign of Nimbit. Dittero gave a displeased frown. 'It seems we are *sans* a delegate.'

Fitz shivered. The hairs on his wrists prickled. Looking out of the narrow windows, he saw the gardens sinking into gloom. Thunderclouds unfurled themselves across the sky.

One of Micron's delegates raised a finger. 'The Fabulous Micron requests that the auction recommence at once.'

'Of course, naturally. *Naturalismo*,' said Dittero, rotating his clipboard nervously in his hands. 'If there are no objections –'

The Doctor clinked his teacup into his saucer.

'Doctor?'

'It seems to me,' the Doctor said, 'that it would be impolite to continue without our friend Nimbit. He *is* the current highest bidder, after all. And you do want Valuensis to fetch the highest possible price, don't you?'

An uncomfortable smile wormed its way across Dittero's lips. 'You make a good point, Doctor. However, we do have a considerable number of properties to get through, time is pressing, and so –'

The Doctor talked to the floor. 'Zwee?'

Fitz peered down. A Zwee trundled over to the Doctor's chair. 'May I be of service, sir?'

'The delegate Nimbit,' said the Doctor. 'Location?'

'The delegate Nimbit, sir, is in his suite.'

'Have you told him we're about to kick off?'

'It troubles me to inform you that the delegate Nimbit is proving most unresponsive.'

'Unresponsive?' The Doctor drained the last of his tea, napkinned his lips and rose to his feet. 'I think that foul play may be afoot.'

I'm drowning. I double up, my hands on my knees, heaving. With an agonising choke the remains of the oxygenated water finds its way out of my windpipe. I spit it out and gasp in a lungful of air.

It stinks. The air tastes of stale sweat. But at least it's air.

I'm ringing wet, my hair plastered against my scalp, my skin goosepimpling. My feet are sinking into something soft and squelchy. A tepid breeze makes me shiver.

Welwyn closes the tele-door behind us. 'Sorry,' he says. 'Takes a bit of getting used to.'

'You're mad,' I sputter. 'You're bloody mad. Where are we?'

'Another of my worlds.' He sighs. 'Unusual commission, this one.'

'Unusual?' We're in a dark, swampy forest. The ground is lost beneath a soup of mist. Moss-covered boulders poke out of the murk. The trees are covered in scales that glisten with trickling sap. Muslin webs drape themselves from the branches and shiver like ghosts. 'What is this place?'

Before he can answer, the ground shudders, knocking me to my knees. My palms land flat on the quivering, furry ground. It's warm and sticky.

'It's a gaia sphere.' Welwyn wanders about, admiring his own handiwork. In the distance, bats skitter.

I pull my hands away from the ground. They're caked in spongy brown fungus. I peel it away from my fingers. 'A what?'

'It's alive,' says Welwyn. 'This whole world is one... organism.'

Now I've got the fungus on my knees. 'What's that smell?'

'Yes.' Welwyn winces. 'Something I hadn't accounted for.'

'Hadn't accounted for what?'

'Puberty.'

'Puberty?'

'It had a lovely complexion, before.' Welwyn grips a branch and swings his way over to me. 'And now it's –'

'A nauseating adolescent?'

'Unexpected things are beginning to grow,' Welwyn drags his foot out of a sticky pool. 'It's all a bit disgusting.'

'And this brown stuff?'

'It's also developed an infection. Poor hygiene.'

My eyes are watering with the stench of month-old milk. As I look around, I realise this place is rotting before my eyes. The scales of the trees are peeling away like wallpaper. I say, 'Don't tell me – another thing you have to sort out?'

Welwyn nods.

'Do all of your planets have these problems?'

'No,' says Welwyn. 'That's merely a rumour.'

'And you said Mother Nature was the cack-handed amateur?'

His face crumples. 'It's not my fault, Trix. I'm only the designer. Nothing was ever proved.'

'What was never proved?'

His puppy-dog eyes beg forgiveness. I could almost feel sorry for him. 'One of my clients specified six moons. One for each of his wives. Unfortunately they kept on banging into each other.'

'The wives?'

'The moons.'

'And he sued you?'

'I settled out of court. He had proof of negligence.'

'And this was a one-off?'

'Then there was the planet where the atmosphere... fell off. And the one that accidentally went into an ice age.' He swallows. 'But I've never been found guilty.'

'Why not?'

'I settle out of court,' he sighs. 'That's why I'm taking all these jobs on for Dittero. If it wasn't for him... You don't understand. I'm a *celebrity*, you know. I get *letters*. I have a reputation to maintain!'

I pat his shoulders. 'Geniuses are always tortured.'

'You really think so?'

'And sometimes they deserve to be. No, that last world we went to wasn't bad. I mean, apart from it giving you cancer and all the dead fish, it was very pretty.'

'Yes, it was, wasn't it?'

'Come on,' I smile at him. 'Let's get back to Utopia and dry off.'

Welwyn holds out the door handle and pulls. A door opens in thin air and I bundle myself, shivering, through it.

Aaargh.

It's freezing cold and the beach is in darkness. The tide lashes at the shore in anger, washing away the sand to reveal the concrete beneath. Thunder booms.

Worst of all, it's raining. My shoulders sag under the weight of the downpour of sharp pebbles.

'Oh bugger,' says Welwyn. 'Weather must be on the blink again.'

The Doctor stood at Nimbit's door, enjoying the attention. Fitz slouched against the wall, his hands in his jeans. Outside, the storm drummed on the windows, water sloshing against the panes.

Vorshagg grunted as it heaved itself up the remaining stairs and joined Question Intonation, Poozle, Dittero and the two baby-oiled legionaries holding the Fabulous Micron's cushion.

'What do you think's happened?' asked Charlton.

The Doctor examined the locked door. He rapped it from top to bottom then dug out his sonic screwdriver. He held it over the lock and the lock clicked like an alarm clock being wound up.

The door swung open with a squeak.

As one, the delegates shifted to get a better look.

There was something on the bed.

Upon the sheets lay a black, lumpy puddle dressed in tweed. Parts of it had seeped on to the floor. It glistened like jelly.

Vorshagg attempted to enter the room, but the Doctor shouted, 'Stop! Nobody move!'

'What is it?' said Fitz.

'Everyone move away from the door.' The Doctor waved the assembled aliens back, then retrieved a tennis ball from his coat pocket. He bounced it on the floor. Then, taking a step back, he under-armed it into Nimbit's room.

As soon as the ball passed over the threshold, it slammed into the ground with a clump. Then the ball flattened itself to the carpet, leaving a

round, yellow circle.

'As I thought,' said the Doctor grimly. 'The gravity has been increased. Nimbit, it seems, has been squashed to death.' He crouched down to speak to the attendant Zwee. 'Can you turn off the power supply to this suite?'

The Zwee nodded, too mortified to speak, and trundled away.

'Oh my dear,' muttered Question Intonation, its voice a flustered squawk. 'Oh dear. What a dreadful accident. How appalling, how awful. Squished!'

Despite everything, Fitz couldn't help wishing Question Intonation would just shut up.

The Doctor shook his head. 'No accident. Somebody tampered with the gravity settings.'

Micron's Story

'We shall not be intimidated.'

'We refuse to be intimidated'

'We shall never submit to intimidation.'

'We will not give an inch!'

'We are the Micron!'

'The Great, the Huge, the Mighty Micron!'

The four great leaders of the Micron Domination Council had gathered in their council chamber. The stark, severe room contained a circular table with a chair at each point of the compass. The occupant of each chair was caught in a spotlight, its smooth chitinous insect limbs glistening like armour. Beyond the spotlights, all was darkness.

The Fabulous Micron watched his three superiors. Opposite, at North, was the Extraordinary Micron. Extraordinary was elderly, his exo-skeleton tarnished. Resentment and bitterness was all that kept him alive.

To the Fabulous Micron's left sat the Influential Micron. The only female member of the council, she was laden with over a hundred pulsating Micron eggs. Fabulous found that rather attractive and had some difficulty avoiding her gaze. Members of the Domination Council did not fertilise each other. It was frowned upon.

And at East was the leader of the Micron, the Unbelievably Fantastic Micron. They were the same age – Fabulous and Unbelievably Fantastic had first met at college, when Unbelievably Fantastic was the president of the debating society and was known as Rather Promising.

It was a Thursday. The day the Micron convened to discuss their imminent conquest of the known universe.

'All other species are inferior!' yelled Unbelievably Fantastic, slamming a fist into the table. 'They must yield to the might of the Micron!'

'They must be made to suffer' hissed Influential. As she leaned forward, her eggs caught the light. The Fabulous Micron's stomach twisted with arousal. 'They must beg for mercy. They shall be our slaves!'

'One day,' said Extraordinary, his voice embittered with age, 'they will see our

power! They will bow down before us!

'It is our destiny,' said Unbelievably Fantastic. 'Our destiny, to rule the cosmos!'

The Fabulous Micron cleared his throat. Six hemispherical eyes turned towards him. 'Yes?'

'I was just wondering,' said Fabulous, 'how we intend to...er...do this?'

'What?' roared Extraordinary 'I've never heard such...insubordination.'

Fabulous swallowed his nerves. 'It's just that we meet here, every Thursday, and discuss what we're going to do when we've taken over the universe. Which is good, I'm not knocking it or anything, it's just that I thought maybe we should first decide how we're going to go about achieving it.'

If Unbelievably Fantastic had had the capacity to narrow his eyes, he would have narrowed them. 'You mean,' he said, 'how we're going to take over the universe and subjugate all inferior races to our will?'

Fabulous nodded. 'Thought we could put together a working party. A plan of action.' He was tempted to add, 'rather than sitting around shouting.'

The problem was that the entire Micron race was in denial.

They did not have an inferiority complex, and the fact that they were only one millimetre tall had nothing to do with their low self-esteem. The reason they gave themselves such hyperbolic titles was because they were the most powerful race in the universe, and not because they had anything to prove.

The truth was, they did feel intimidated. Oh, they had material wealth, and technology, and a sophisticated culture. In many ways, they were superior to other species – while the lifespan of a Micron was brief lasting only two or three years, they experienced time proportionately quicker, meaning that other races seemed sluggish and dull-witted.

The truth was, they just wanted to be bigger.

'The thing is,' purred Influential – oh god, thought Fabulous, she's purring now – 'the thing is, in terms of military influence, we are somewhat...'

Nobody wanted to say the words. But nevertheless 'diminutive', 'insignificant' and 'puny' made themselves known.

'I have a plan,' said Fabulous. 'That does not involve us going to war.'

Six hemispherical eyes regarded him doubtfully. He continued, 'What we may lack in terms of physical size –' he had said the unthinkable – 'we more than make up for in terms of economic muscle. I suggest, rather than trying to conquer the known universe... we buy it!'

'Are you sure we should?'

Dittero placed himself in the beam of the slide projector. Valuensis rippled over his features. 'We have an awful lot of planets to get through. The,' he wetted his lips, 'demise of delegate Nimbit is, naturally regrettable,

but that should not throw out our schedule.' He pronounced 'demise' to rhyme with 'chemise'.

'And the fact that one of us is a homicidal, walrus-flattening maniac,' said Fitz, 'doesn't bother you?'

'On the contrary' said Dittero, tight-lipped. 'It very much concerns me. However, we should not allow ourselves to succumb to *intimidation*...'

Both of Micron's attendants glanced fearfully at his cushion.

'Well, it's all right with me, darling dears,' trilled Question Intonation. 'I wasn't too bothered about Valuensis, anyway. Not really the circumference I was after.'

Vorshagg scowled, and growled, 'We should continue. In honour of Nimbit. He died the death of a quisling. He should have died in an act of wanton carnage.' It was the longest speech anyone had heard Vorshagg make. Fitz thought it was intended as some sort of tribute.

'Poozle?'

'We should ploed!' said Poozle.

'Right.' Dittero tapped his fingers on his clipboard. 'Now, with no more interruptions -'

The door creaked open and two dishevelled figures staggered in.

Trix and a tall handsome man in a buccaneer's outfit were creating two puddles. The handsome man had a perm like a drowned poodle.

'Welwyn Borr!' announced Dittero. 'You've elected to join us. So *munificent*.' He smiled at the delegates. 'Our *resplendent* designer.' And Miss MacMillan, of course, of coursington. If you would care to join your colleagues -'

Trix caught the towel that Dittero tossed at her. Rubbing herself down, she walked over to the radiator beside Fitz and leaned against it. Fitz checked to see whether her clothes were see-through then turned back to the table.

Dittero waited for Welwyn to take his chair. 'Now, when we left the bidding, it stood at twenty-one million. Do I hear any advance?'

Poozle flashed as it spoke. 'Twenty-two mirrion!'

Thunder rumbled and hail pelted the windows. Fitz shivered.

One of Micron's legionaries pounded the table. 'Forty million.'

The room took a gasp of breath. Dittero open and closed his mouth like a surprised guppy. 'Forty?'

The attendant nodded.

'Forty million Arcturan ultra-pods... Do I hear any advance?'

Fitz glanced about the room. Everyone else was glancing about the room.

'Going once, going twice.' The gavel tapped the table. 'Gone, to the Fabulous Micron, for forty million Arcturan ultra-pods.'

The Doctor gave a slow hand-clap. He seemed surprised when no one else joined in.

Micron's attendant handed Dittero a credit card. Dittero wiped it on his sleeve and slid it through a hand-held reader. The reader chirped. '*Magnificent*. This is wonderful. Do you know whether the Fabulous Micron wants the property as seen, or intends to make some adjustments?'

The legionary beside the cushion listened to his earphone, placing one finger on his earlobe. 'He requests that the atmosphere be changed to methane. The Glorious Micron race prefer it. They say it's less smelly.'

'Delightful – make yourselves at home!' Dittero glanced to Welwyn. 'Shouldn't be too hard to achieve, should it?'

Welwyn Borr examined his cuticles. 'No. Fine.'

'Anything else?'

'The Fabulous Micron requests that Valuensis be moved closer to its sun, and that its orbital period be extended by six months.'

'I think we can do that.'

'He also requests that the continents be made a bit more symmetrical.'

'All very much within Welwyn's scope, I'm sure.'

'Can I make a suggestion?' said the Doctor. 'Have some fjords. They give a lovely baroque feel to a continent. Or so I've been told.'

Glowing at the Doctor, Dittero returned the credit card to Micron's attendant with a receipt. 'Valuensis, one proud owner. An undiluted pleasure doing business with you.'

Thunder thrashed outside. One of the windows wrenched itself open with a smash, its curtain billowing across the room.

Dittero was embarrassed. 'It seems Utopia is not quite living up to its name. I suggest we move on forthwith to the next planet on the agenda, if no one has any objectingtons?'

The delegates assented.

'*Magnificent*. Now... ' he trailed off as he consulted his clipboard. 'Ah. A *delightful* property this. Left Mutter's spiral arm. Easy access to Proxima Centauri. If you'd care to follow me...?'

Dittero drew open a tele-door. A rectangle of daylight appeared in the dimly lit conference room.

The Doctor rose from his seat and, followed by Trix, still scrubbing her hair, they approached the door. Behind them stood Vorshagg, Micron's two attendants, Poozle and Question Intonation hovering not far behind.

Taking one look back at the conference room, Fitz followed Dittero through the tele-door, across countless miles of space and on to Lewisham

High Street.

Poozle's Story

Poozle's story is, I'm afraid, far too strange to relate.

Space

Astrabel poured his complementary champagne into the glass and emptied it into his mouth. Fine bubbles tickled his tongue. He raised a finger for another. One more wouldn't kill him.

His thick, padded chair absorbed the vibrations of the interstellar shuttle. He allowed himself to sink into its comfort and gave an involuntary sigh.

What a way to go. First class.

The compartment lighting had been dimmed. His half-dozen fellow passengers snored in their seats, stewardesses draping blankets over their bodies before withdrawing to their orange-lit cabin.

Astrabel couldn't sleep. He hadn't slept since his retirement party three days ago. He could feel the sag of the bags under his eyes. His chin prickled with stubble. He'd have a sleep, wash and shave when they landed on Gdrahadradon, but that was still two days away.

God, he missed Zoberly. He missed her warmth. Her affection. Her astonishing breasts. The taste of her lips. Lips he would never taste again. Lips he had never deserved.

Guilt? That's what happens after three days without sleep, you start asking questions. Did I deserve those awards? Should I have passed off those scientific breakthroughs as my own work? Did I do the right thing?

Astrabel examined his champagne glass and watched the bubbles form, rise and pop. Of course he had done the right thing. Those scientific breakthroughs would've happened anyway, he just made sure they happened earlier. And if people wanted to give him the credit, then he was glad to take it. No, he had done right.

Because, if he hadn't, he wouldn't have had Zoberly and his life wouldn't have been worth living.

It wasn't guilt that was stopping him from sleeping. It was the excitement. An excitement mixed with fear, and dread. He was about to do the last thing he would ever do.

Astrabel pressed a button in his armrest and a landscape shimmered

on the back of the seat in front. The brightness of the in-flight channel made his eyes wince. He'd find something to watch. Something interesting enough to stop him thinking, but not so interesting as to keep him awake.

Zap Daniel. Some rubbish sci-fi movie from centuries ago. That would do.

Play movie.

Astrabel inserted the earphones and the thump-thump theme tune began. Guitar chords chimed out. 'Zap! Zap Daniel – hero of the galaxy!'

He must have dozed off, because the next thing he saw was the city of the Buzzardmen. Zap Daniel had been left for dead after his spaceship had crashed on the ice moon Frigidarium. The Buzzardmen were beginning their ceremony of mourning, when the news came through that Zap Daniel was alive and well and heading for the imperial city of Mang.

The picture cut to Vargo, the leader of the Buzzardmen. Seated in his throne, resplendent in his codpiece, wings and Viking helmet. He slammed down his hands on the armrests and hauled himself to his feet, and bellowed, in his deep, powerful bellow, 'What do you mean, Daniel's *not dead?*'

A memory stirred in the back of Astrabel's consciousness. A long-forgotten jigsaw piece slotted into place.

It was him. It was the same man.

Astrabel was still gripping the armrests when the stewardess approached. She looked at him, concern written across her orange-lit features, 'Excuse me, sir. Are you all right?'

Astrabel nodded. 'Bad dream.'

'You look like you've just seen a ghost.'

'Yes,' said Astrabel. 'Yes, I think I just have.'

Chapter 7

Mostly Worthless

‘“Earth”?’ Welwyn’s nostrils flare in disgust. ‘Not very spacey. We’ll have to change it.’

‘What do you suggest?’ I ask.

‘Planets with Ks always do well. Vs are good, too. We want something that says, “this is a modern, up-and-coming planet. A planet that’s going places”.’

‘How about, er... Kevin?’

‘There’s already a Kevin in the fifth galaxy. Someone sneaked ahead of us with that one, I’m afraid.’ Welwyn casts an expert eye around him, squinting at the dismal concrete shopping centre and the litter-strewn street. According to the town clock it’s six in the evening, but it’s still clear, pale daylight. Shoppers bustle past, oblivious to our presence. They even steer their prams and tartan trolleys around us, as though avoiding an invisible obstacle.

An *indiscernability field*, it’s called. It’s also the reason the shoppers can’t see the two floating brown testicles – sorry, Question Intonation – or the pissed-off lizard, or the lava lamp with the speech impediment. Or the gold-braided cushion held by two bodybuilders, like something off *So Graham Norton*. And there’s Dittero Shandy, tapping on his clipboard. The Doctor and Fitz wander away from the group, pretending to be interested buyers.

Welwyn starts making camera-shapes with his hands. He examines the Boots chemist through the lens. ‘We need something that captures the ethos. Something zeity-geisty.’

‘What’s so wrong with Earth?’

‘Do you realise how many Earths there are? Every race, first thing they think of, name the planet after what they’re standing on. It’s always “Ground” this or “Rock” that. Though I did visit a “Shagpile” once.’

It's unnerving, being back on Earth. It's so mundane, the families shopping, the school kids skulking on the benches listening to tshht-tshht on their Discmans. The blue-striped plastic bags and taped-up bus shelters. The posters for *The Return Of The King* on DVD and *Jerry Springer – The Opera*.

I'm like a ghost that has returned to watch life going on without her. I catch snatches of conversation as people walk by. I can even hear Will Young's new single from inside Burger King.

The newspaper racks are still shouting about the explosion at Tate Modern. Some headlines are blaming Al Qaeda. Others are asking why the government didn't know about it in advance. Ironic, given what were due to be unveiled that evening. *Private Eye* has a picture of Ken Livingstone, under the words *Oh my god – They've killed Kenny!*

Meanwhile the tabloids have found naked polaroids of one of the *Big Brother* inmates. Some things never change.

It all seems so small, so provincial. A rock-pool existence, oblivious to the ocean. . . no, kill that metaphor.

I never thought I'd get homesick. I'm Trix MacMillan, I have no home, no family, no history. I'm whoever I want to be.

Dittero neared the end of his spiel. Again, Fitz had the feeling the estate agent was liable to burst into song. He'd already managed a couple of key changes.

'So there you have it. Earth. The present occupants have neglected it somewhat, so we are not expecting very much in the way of residual mineral wealth. The ozone layer has been run down and the accumulation of greenhouse gases is liable to induce some sort of climate change – probably hotter, but one never knows with these things! There are also isotope brown-spots and compromised biodiversity. Nothing, of course, that Welwyn can't fix, but certainly beyond the capacity of the current inhabitants.'

The Doctor muttered to Charlton, 'Haven't I heard this somewhere before?'

Dittero raised a finger. 'Did you have a question, Doctor?'

The Doctor gave Dittero an unnervingly wide smile. 'I was just wondering. When are the present tenants due to vacate the property?'

'Shortly.'

'Shortly? That's a bit vague, isn't it?'

Vorshagg grunted in agreement. It was disconcerting, thought Fitz, to have a seven-foot lizard standing in the middle of a busy street and for no one to notice. Then again, they probably all thought it was some reality-TV prank.

Then he remembered Tadek, from the city of the Gabaks. He hadn't been able to see the delegates either.

'How long are we looking at? Ten years? Twenty?'

'The inhabitants seem inescapably set upon the path to self-destruction,' said Dittero. 'Though the manner in which they will achieve it still remains to be decided. There is ecological collapse, economic collapse, collapse of social order. War, of course – humans have made huge advances in that field, you name it, they'll fight about it. Fossil fuel, religion, their skin pigmentation, how they share the money out...'

' "How trivial can you get?"' The Doctor glanced meaningfully at Charlton. ' "Disease, and starvation, the environment falling to bits..."' He switched his attention back to Dittero. 'Your prediction, it's by no means a certainty, is it?'

'Oh, it very much *is*,' said Dittero. 'In fact, it's rather a surprise they've lasted as long as they have. According to most estimates, they should have made themselves extinct forty years ago.'

'Precisely. You don't know for sure. Humans have, if nothing else, a keen sense of self-preservation. And if they don't save themselves - someone else might.'

'I can't imagine who. I mean, the present occupants are a thankless bunch, aren't they? What have they achieved?'

'Loads.' Charlton faced Dittero. 'There's Dickens, right, and Newton –'

'And the Golden Gate Bridge,' added Fitz. 'And St Paul's. And the Beatles, though not the solo stuff.'

'And Puccini, and Keats,' breathed the Doctor. 'Elvis. Freud. Shakespeare.'

'Marilyn Monroe,' suggested Fitz. 'Tony Hancock. Peter Sellers, though he went off a bit during the seventies –'

'Botticelli,' said Charlton. 'Michelangelo. Monet...'

'And Rolf Harris!' exclaimed the Doctor. 'No other planet in the known galaxy has produced a Rolf Harris!'

'Yes. Well. It's not *vastly* impressive, is it?' said Dittero. 'Compared to the warp-poets of Dronid, the Apostles of Garb, or the... prophets of Hawalion.'

The Doctor stepped aside to allow a woman laden with shopping and a pushchair to walk past. 'So why is it listed by Galactic Heritage then?'

'It's only Grade 4.'

'Grade 4?' the Doctor asked.

'Grade 1,' Charlton informed them, 'is for sites of great universal interest – Teredekethon, Kandor, Anima Persis, Veln, Exxilon –'

'While Grade 2 is for sites which are still significant, but –'

'How many grades are there?' interrupted Fitz.

'Four,' admitted Charlton.

'So we're bottom?'

'No, not *bottom*. It's still better than not being listed at all. Earth is included for a very important reason.' Dittero Shandy smiled. 'In the eighth century the third princess Tabetha of Cerrenis Minor once spent a weekend here.'

There was an embarrassed silence. Or, at least, the delegates stopped talking. The traffic of Lewisham continued to bustle around them. A car thumped out some bass-heavy garage.

'A weekend?' said Charlton. 'That's quite long.'

'Sorry,' said Fitz. 'That's *it*?'

Dittero nodded. 'She spent weekends on quite a few planets. According to historical records, she didn't like this one. Found it *gauche*.'

'Gauche? Where did she stay?'

'Here. The terran settlement of "Lewisham".'

'So that's why you brought us here,' surmised the Doctor.

'Precisely,' said Dittero. 'At least this place has some heritage. The rest of the planet is a... cultural abyss.'

'So why, then, should any of us want to buy it?'

'You're not buying it for the fixtures and fittings! We're looking at a complete top-to-bottom terra-regeneration. What is significant about this planet is its *location*.'

'And it has a nice moon,' added Question Intonation.

'Ooh,' said Welwyn as he joined them in a swish of crushed velvet, followed by Trix. 'A moon! What's it called?'

'They call it, "the moon",' Dittero answered.

'Well,' said Welwyn. 'We'll have to change *that* for a start.'

'What if I were to tell you,' said the Doctor, not just addressing Dittero but all the delegates, 'that I had seen Earth's future? That it not only survived, but prospered?'

Dittero was unmoved. 'Seems rather unlikely.'

'What would Earth be worth then? It would still be under the protection of Galactic Heritage – they may even make it Grade 3! You wouldn't be able to develop it, or sell it. You would be the proud owner of a white elephant.' He noticed Vorshagg looking puzzled. 'No offence.'

'White elephant? That is what you think, Doctor,' exuded Dittero. 'However, probability forecasts –'

'Have been wrong before. I *have* seen the future,' the Doctor said. 'Which means I make very wise investments.'

'Oh.' Dittero said. 'You have a magic looking-glass, do you?'

'Something like that, yes.'

'And we are supposed to take your word for it?'

'Ask your friends here,' the Doctor replied. 'Ask them if they're interested in buying the Earth now.'

Question Intonation whirled as though it would rather be elsewhere. Vorshagg swiped at the pavement with his spiked tail. One of the Micron's legionaries checked his earphone and shook his head.

Only Poozle remained upbeat. 'I want to purchase the Earth!'

Dittero turned back to the Doctor. 'You see;

The Doctor grinned a checkmate grin. 'You're not going to get a very good price with only one bidder. No one else is interested, Dittero. It's a *bad buy*.'

Dittero gave a light cough, opened a tele-door and said, 'As we seem to be wasting our time here, I advise we return to Utopia.'

The Doctor beckoned to Fitz for his attention. Welwyn, Dittero and the delegates made their way through the tele-door, Question Intonation voicing some theories regarding albino pachyderms.

'What is it?' whispered Fitz. The Doctor looked around as though he had something he didn't want to share with the rest of the group. 'I want you to go with them,' he said, nodding and smiling at Vorshagg. 'Find out who killed our walrus friend.'

'While you...?'

'Trix, Charlton and I have other matters to attend to.'

'Sorry? What other matters?'

'Finding Nimbit's murderer will provide part of the jigsaw. We need to find the other parts before we can –'

'– see the big picture?' suggested Trig.

'You want me to do the whole Colonel Plum in the study with the bent piping business?' said Fitz.

'It's Colonel Mustard, but yes.'

The Doctor was up to something. He was playing one of those games where you only found out what the rules were afterwards, after he'd broken them. 'How will I find you?'

'We'll find you,' said the Doctor.

A cough from the doorway made Fitz turn. It was Dittero. 'If you and your colleagues are *quite* ready...?'

'Just coming,' said Fitz. 'My, er, assistants have other business to attend to, elsewhere. Bit of stuff that needs sorting out. You know how it is.'

'I have absolutely no conception of "how it is",' said Dittero, 'but as I also have no interest, it *immaterial*.'

Fitz walked back through the tele-door, and abruptly he was inside the conference room and Lewisham High Street occupied a rectangle behind him.

'Fitz,' called the Doctor. 'Good luck. And remember – it's always the one you least suspect.'

The cocktail lounge had an immaculate, just-unwrapped look. Plush leather chairs, spot-lit tables, steps rising up to semi-circular booths. There were partition fences of pine and heavy-leafed pot plants.

Fitz approached the large, reptilian shadow hunched on a barstool.

Vorshagg weighed a tumbler in its hand. It seemed unaware of Fitz's presence, its attention fixed on the reflections that danced within the glass.

'Hiya,' said Fitz, sliding himself on to the next barstool. A Zwee behind the bar turned towards him while polishing a schooner. Fitz said, in his best Humphrey Bogart, 'Bourbon for me, and the same again for my scaly friend.'

Vorshagg turned to Fitz, its two bulging snake eyes emerging from the gloom. 'You're wasting your time.'

'What?'

'I couldn't have killed Nimbit.' Vorshagg tossed the contents of its glass over its tongue. 'Even though I wanted to.'

'So you admit you had a motive?'

The snake eyes narrowed. 'A motive?'

'He was a rival bidder.'

Vorshagg snorted. 'You humans are always suspicious. Not all races are as devious as you.'

Fitz watched the Zwee clink some ice into his bourbon. He collected it and sipped. 'And you're not, I suppose?'

'The Vorshagg are... direct.'

'So you're not in competition with Poozle, and Micron –'

'I'm not as wealthy as the Micron. I'm wasting my time'

'But you said you wanted Nimbit dead?'

Vorshagg gave another snort, this time of laughter. 'Of course I wanted Nimbit dead. I want *everyone* dead. I want you dead. I want that estate agent dead. Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to slaughter you all.'

Fitz edged away from Vorshagg as the lizard continued, 'I can picture myself doing it. I could break your back with one flick of my tail. Or grip your neck in my teeth and make your vertebrae snap, one by one. Or lift you with one claw and hurl you across this room so hard your guts would be *mash*.'

Fitz swallowed. 'Right. You're in touch with your anger. Like that' 'I'm imagining it right now. I'm imagining sticking my teeth into your craw and scraping away at your bones.'

'You're completely, completely innocent. Of everything. Never doubted you. Forget I asked.'

'But I *can't*,' snarled Vorshagg. It indicated the white box on the side of its skull. 'Because of this.'

'And that's a –'

'De-aggrifier. While I can still dream of calamity and mayhem, I can't make those dreams reality.'

'I see. You mean that box is like a control unit?'

'Sometimes I think it does control me,' admitted Vorshagg. 'Do you know what it's like, to have the desire to inflict pain, but to be unable to carry it out?'

'Haven't been there myself,' said Fitz.

'I could not have killed Nimbit. Because this device,' he scraped a claw across the surface of the plastic box, 'prohibits me from *any violent action*.'

'Must be a bummer.'

'It is,' said Vorshagg. It collected its drink from the Zwee and raised it in toast to Fitz. 'Thanks for the drink, human.'

'Don't mention it.'

'You are...unusually...sympathetic. Most beings fear the Vorshagg. They think we are... "evil".' A bead of phlegm dripped from Vorshagg's tongue. Fitz made the great effort of not watching it dribble on to the bar.

'No, you're just misunderstood, I can see that.'

'Do I frighten you, Fitz?' Vorshagg leaned forward. Fitz could feel the creature's hot, reptile-house breath upon his face. He could see its rows of gnarled, jagged teeth.

'You scare the living shits out of me, mate.'

Vorshagg smiled. 'Thanks. That makes me feel better. I have underestimated you, Mr Kreiner.'

'Ta.'

'I would still smash your body into a pulp if I could, though.'

'Don't mention it,' said Fitz. 'Please, don't mention it. The point is, it's part of who you are, and that's beautiful.'

I'm looking out of the window of my cabin. Outside lie a million stars, constant dots in the blackness. As the research station rotates, the stars rise up, out of view.

I've no idea where I am. According to Charlton, it's important that the location of the research station remains a secret. There are people opposed

to his work and he's paranoid about them finding his hideout.

We're all keeping secrets. I haven't told the Doctor about Martin, but it's become one of those 'unsaid' things. He won't ask, so I won't tell him, so he won't ask. Instead he just looks at me as though I've disappointed him.

What's really annoying, though, is the way that he sees through the disguises. Always has done. Not just the make-up and wigs, the other disguise. He looks straight through the Trix MacMillan disguise and sees me. The real me.

Shift of focus, and I'm no longer looking at the constellations, I'm looking at the Doctor, who has materialised behind me.

'Don't knock,' I say.

'I did knock,' he replies. 'Your mind must have been occupied.'

'I was about to go to sleep.'

I can't, though, because he's sitting on my bed.

'We need to go over the last three days,' he says. 'Valuensis, Shardy-barn. There was something they had in common.'

'Apart from blowing up?'

'Apart, as you say, from blowing up.'

'They both worshipped sacred soup. Except on Valuensis.'

The Doctor's one of those people who you're never sure whether they get jokes or not. It takes him too long to smile. 'There's something... I remember seeing, a long time ago. Or reading. Or a piece of music.'

'This is good, we're narrowing it down.'

The Doctor stands and paces up and down the room. My cabin is only about five metres long, so it doesn't take him long. He halts and holds up a hand to the wall. 'Trix, your role in this situation is to come up with a chance remark that jogs my memory and provides the vital flash of inspiration.'

'Sorry.'

He sighs. ' "Sorry" isn't going to jog very much, is it?'

'I'm not in a jogging mood.' I shrug, sitting down on the bed.

'No, no. I had hoped that by talking the problem through, I might distract myself enough... ' The Doctor's mouth creeps into a broad, delighted grin. He steps over to me and grips my shoulders. 'That's it! A *flash* of inspiration... or a *zap!*'

Fitz had been drinking, so the fire alarm going off wasn't good news.

He stumbled out of bed, stumbled into his jeans and T-shirt, stumbled into his bedside table and stumbled into the hallway. Where was he?

He blinked. The planet Utopia. The hotel. He was here pretending to be an intergalactic property speculator while uncovering a murder mystery.

Oh, why couldn't Trix be here? It would be completely her cup of tea. And then she would have been the one woken up in the middle of the night by an ear-splitting whine.

Fitz made his way down the corridor, patting one wall with one hand. The emergency lights had come on, lending everything a sick greenish hue. Even the leaf patterns on the carpet seemed sinister.

One of the doors opened as he passed it and two furry balls flew out. 'What's going on, Fitz, darling dear?' they yelped.

Fitz mumbled something about fire alarms. His voice wasn't quite working.

'Fire! No! No!' Question Intonation whirled in mid air, then zoomed down the corridor, bobbing this way and that, desperate for a way out.

The alarm stopped. 'Not a fire,' announced a voice from behind Fitz's back.

'What?'

Dittero Shandy, in striped pyjamas, stood at the base of the stairs, ever-present clipboard in hand. 'That was an intruder alarm. The fire alarm is a semitone higher.'

'Unless it's faulty,' said Fitz.

Vorshagg emerged from its suite, one claw on its de-aggrifier. blinked as its eyes adjusted to the green semi-darkness. 'An intruder alarm?'

'It came from... ' Dittero looked flustered, 'delegate Poozle's room.'

'Where's that?' said Fitz.

Question Intonation whizzed over to Fitz. He realised that the alien had assumed he had addressed the question to it. 'It's upstairs,' said the balls. 'Room twenty-one.'

Fitz headed for the stairs. Dittero waited for Fitz to lead the way. Vorshagg and Question Intonation followed a cautious distance behind.

Nobody spoke as they reached the third floor. Fitz pushed open the door leading to the corridor, then checked the numbers on each of the doors. Nineteen. Twenty.

Twenty-one.

Fitz took in a deep breath. He heard Dittero take in a deep breath behind him. He could hear the estate agent's fingers tapping upon his clipboard.

He reached out and pushed at the door. It swung open.

Fitz expected to see another figure smeared across the bed. Instead, he saw Poozle, floating above the bed, its green light illuminating the room.

'Murder!' it announced. 'Someone is trying to kill me!'

'I don't see the point of this.'

The Doctor draws the blinds and clicks a videotape into the recorder. Some tracking appears on the television screen. He watches it for a moment, then fast-forwards.

I pull up a chair. My eyelids are tired, my nose is snuffly and my body is complaining that it's not in bed.

'A film I watched, many years ago. On its original release, I was very excited, I remember queuing. I'm not sure who was with me – young girl, and a lad from the Navy, I think.'

'Fascinating.'

The Doctor grins. 'It's a classic of the genre. It's not very good, but it's a classic.'

'What is it?'

'We'll watch the whole thing later, there's just one bit I want to show you.'

'And then I can go to sleep?'

'You can try, but after what I'm about to show you, you might not be able to.'

The Doctor levels the remote control like a duelling pistol and hits the 'play' button. The machine whirrs.

The television shows a cheap black-and-white set, consisting of some arched doorways and a wall unit with some switches on it. Men in posing pouches with giant wings attached to their backs are having a conversation.

'Where did you find this?' I ask.

'In Charlton's collection,' whispers the Doctor. 'I thought he might be the science-fiction type.' He adjusts the volume.

The guy with giant wings on the right is a messenger. Apparently someone they thought had been killed by his rocket hitting a moon isn't dead after all, and is, in fact, heading for the Imperial city of Mang.

I glance at the Doctor. He's enraptured, his lips slightly apart. He notices I'm watching him, and indicates for me to look at the screen.

One of the guys with giant wings walks into another set. In the centre of the room is a throne, its back to the camera.

'Lord Vargo, leader of the Buzzardmen,' says the guy with wings. 'I bring great news. Zap Daniel did not die on the ice moon of Frigidarium. He is, as I speak, heading in a war rocket to the Imperial palace.'

The picture cuts to the occupant of the throne. He's a heavily built man, with puffy cheeks buried in a beard. He has an intense, angry expression

and seems to be wearing some sort of Viking helmet.

He slams his hands down on the armrests and heaves himself to his feet. 'What do you mean,' he huffs, '*Daniel's not dead?*'

I can't believe my eyes.

It's him. I've seen him before.

On a monitor screen on Valuensis. As a giant statue, hundreds of feet high, on Shardybarn.

It's the same man.

Chapter 8

Autogeddon

The sheer, enveloping blackness of space. A miasma of stars hangs frozen in the darkness. In the distance, a sun burns a flaming red.

Closer, there is a small, grey sphere. It approaches as all around remains motionless. The sunlight reflects off the sphere, like a polished billiard ball.

Details emerge. The sphere is covered in streaks of cloud. The smoggy grey clouds are blurred, their edges diffusing into trails. The circle of sunlight slides over the clouds as though they are as smooth as glass.

The planet grows larger. The clouds become more complex, finessed with rills and fronds. Gaps emerge. The gaps are gunmetal grey.

The grey is not uniform. The slate is engraved with an intricate pattern of lines. There are no oceans or mountains on this world. No white poles or golden atolls. No splashes of green. There is just an unending grid.

The clouds become diaphanous and whizz by like ghosts as the surface expands. The cross-weave of lines becomes more meticulous, each delineating blocks of grey, which in turn divide into smaller grids, which in turn delineate more blocks of grey.

There are smaller clouds. Thick, oily smog hangs over the cities like a polluted river. More interlaced lines have been engraved into the ground. The lines cross over each other, or twine together like multi-flex cables.

The cities are a uniform mass of squares – the flat roofs of skyscrapers. Each is dotted with vents and looks like a printed circuit board.

But this place is no machine. It's alive. The channels between the skyscrapers are veins, pumping the fluid into the capillaries.

There are rivers of red and white. Gleaming streams made up of a hundred cells, all flowing at the same speed. Some of the dots trickle off down small channels. Others join.

Roads. This is a world of roads.

The rivers of red are the tail lights. The rivers of white are the headlights.

The vehicles are tarnished with soot and smeared with grime. A cloud emanates from each exhaust pipe. Only their lamps break through the murk.

Not all are moving. These roads were once much wider but the edges have become dogged with stationary vehicles. They occupy the outside lanes, three or four lanes thick. Like fatty deposits in veins, the roads are being gradually choked with the burnt-out carcasses of cars.

There is a constant rumbling. Horns bleat across the darkness in a sombre, never-ending dirge.

Concrete pillars raise concrete overpasses and saffron lights illuminate deep, snaking tunnels. Verges are dusted with ash, accumulated from the fumes. There is shattered glass on the tarmac. No grass grows. There is only gravel.

The traffic thunders on.

This is the planet Estebol.

From the perspective of the Fabulous Micron, the delegates' speech was deep, lethargic and symptomatic of their slow thought processes. They were, the Fabulous Micron thought, inferior to the Micron race in all respects. Except one.

Within his dome, upon his cushion borne by his two attendants, the Micron was provided with a padded chair and control desk. A microphone relayed his instructions to the earpieces of his attendants. Of course, his speech had to be slowed down so that the stupid creatures could understand it, just as their protracted rumblings had to be sped up so that they were comprehensible to the superior Micron brain.

Also on his control panel were two monitor screens, each displaying the view from the cameras fitted to the front of each of his attendant's helmets. He could observe everything that was going on. He could even look down and see his protective dome on his gold-braided cushion.

The monitors were essential, because from within the dome it was impossible to make out the outside world. Micron could see the bronzed blurs that were his two attendants, but beyond that everything was viewed through a fog. It was a myopic existence. That slow-moving grey cloud would be Dittero Shandy, and that green mist would be Vorshagg.

Micron watched Dittero, the estate agent, and waited for his conversation to be accelerated to within his hearing range. It meant that the words were out of sync with the pictures, which irritated the Micron, but couldn't be helped.

'Poozle is refusing to leave his room,' said Dittero, his face filling one monitor. The other monitor shifted to take in the conference room, before focusing on Fitz.

'Did he say what happened?'

'He says his door was forced open and a laser bolt was fired.'

'Did anyone hear it?'

The monitor took in Vorshagg, Question Intonation and Micron's other attendant. They gave no reply.

'So we only have Poozle's word for it,' surmised Fitz. 'Then what?'

'Fortunately Poozle was protected by a counter-magnetic field,' said Dittero. 'He activated the intruder alarm and his attacker fled in surprise.'

'I suppose that's why they call it an intruder alarm.'

Micron laughed, not with Fitz but at him. These creatures were so dull and obvious. This whole auction was a charade – they all must know that the Fabulous Micron would be able to outbid them all.

Micron leaned back in his chair, sniggering. Soon they would see the might of the Micron!

Vorshagg blinked at the breaking sun. Streaks of orange and red set the clouds aflame. He loathed it. The gravel path crunched beneath his feet, and around him fountains tinkled and gushed. The air smelled of freshly cut grass. Vorshagg loathed that too.

He yearned for the scent of blood, the slicing of flesh, the crack of bone beneath his teeth.

Instead he was taking a walk in the sunshine with the human, Fitz.

'It's textbook stuff,' said Fitz. 'It must be Poozle. It happens in all the Agatha Christie's. The number one rule – whoever it is who fakes an attack on themselves, they're the murderer.'

'That is your deduction?' How Vorshagg wished to flay away the skin from the foolish human's face and lick at the tender flesh beneath. He could do it now, all he would need to do was + De-Aggrifier Activated + ...continue walking.

'Well, it's the number two rule. The number one rule is that your murderer is the most famous guest star. Which makes sense, you're not going to kill off Elizabeth Taylor in the first act, are you?'

'The Vorshagg know little of the celebrity Elizabeth Taylor.'

'There's only one problem,' said Fitz, halting. In front of them, a Zwee robot clipped a topiary hedge. The small, metal creature filled Vorshagg with loathing. He longed to smash it beneath his feet. All he would have to do was + De-Aggrifier Activated + ...leave it to its work.

'What is... the problem?' said Vorshagg.

'The other number one rule,' said Fitz. 'It's always the one you least suspect. So if Poozle is the top suspect, that rules him out.'

'I don't follow your logic. 'Vorshagg stared at Fitz, and pictured the flesh bursting as he squeezed the human's neck. He tensed the muscles in his arm and + De-Aggrifier Activated + ... relaxed them.

'This is a whodunnit, mate,' said Fitz, 'logic doesn't enter into it.'

The air-conditioning in the lobby bar wafted through Question Intonation's fur. It drifted closer, enjoying the fresh, cool wind. Lovely, lovely!

'So what you're saying,' said the human somewhere from near the ground, 'is that it could be anyone, Question Intonation.'

Humans were funny things, thought Question Intonation. It must feel odd, being glued to the ground all the time. Like rocks or plants. Poor darlings, they would never know the thrill of whizzing about the sky, your body whirling and dancing, the world rushing around you in a delightful blur. No wonder they were so tetchy all the time.

'Anyone could get a Zwee to reprogram the gravity unit in Nimbit's room,' said Question Intonation. 'It would be easy-peasy.' It drifted above the human's head and revolved suggestively around him.

'But,' said the human, 'wouldn't the Zwee be able to tell on them, Question Intonation.'

Question Intonation hummed in thought. It was in two minds about the answer. 'It would, dear,' it said. 'Except the atmospheric storm has scrambled their memories, the poor darlings.'

'Convenient.'

Question Intonation levitated in agreement.

'So what about you, Question Intonation,' said the human. 'Did you want Nimbit dead, Question Intonation.'

'Oh no,' said Question Intonation. 'Awful business. I mean, the poor creature. Imagine getting squished! Makes me feel all funny thinking about it.'

'You have one less rival.'

'Not really,' said Question Intonation. 'I'm not here for the auction. I'm here for another pur-' It stopped itself. It had said too much. 'What purpose, Question Intonation.'

'Bored now.' Question Intonation bobbed over to the doors. 'But I think Poozle is here for the same reason...'

Welwyn admired his reflection in the mirror. Beautiful. He twitched his neck, wafting his wavy hair. Beautiful. He tugged his cuffs into place, trying out different poses.

Hand on chin, raised eyebrows. *Quizzical.*

Arms folded, frown. *Brooding.*

Hand resting on wall above head height, upper lip pouting. *Casual.*

Behind his reflection appeared a sceptical Mr Kreiner. 'Busy?'

'One is always busy, when one *creates,*' said Welwyn. 'Even when one is not in the process of creating, one is,' he breathed out, 'a creation.'

'Sorry, I thought you were just admiring yourself in the mirror.' 'What's not to admire?'

Fitz nodded incredulously. 'Right. I have some questions.'

Welwyn turned away from his reflection and struck his hands upon his hips. *Debonair.* 'Yes?'

'The thunderstorm last night. You know it erased the Zwees' memories?'

'No,' said Welwyn.

'No?'

'Well... yes. It's not the first time it's happened, you see. The weather has been playing up, and last time we had a storm... all the Zwees went haywire.'

'Who would've known about this?'

'I don't know. Everyone, I suppose. It happened during the auction for Shardybarn, before you arrived. Why d'you ask?'

Fitz placed one hand against the wall above his head. 'I'm wondering what caused the storm.'

'You don't think it was a malfunction?'

'No. I think someone wanted it to look like a malfunction. Because, after all, that's what everyone would assume -'

Welwyn was hurt. 'That's not fair, it's a temporary problem -'

Fitz shook his head. 'You misunderstand me. What I think is, your weather control system was working perfectly.'

'Oh. Welwyn's hurt eased. 'Good. Yes.'

'Someone deliberately created the storm, to wipe the memory of the Zweek that tampered with Nimbit's gravity.'

'I see. Gosh. How desperately cunning.'

'So, is there any way of finding out who did it?'

'Yes,' said Welwyn. 'Each instruction to the weather biosphere computer triggers an error message, which is logged.'

'Is it supposed to do that?'

'No.' Welwyn reached into his pocket. 'But, fortunately for you, it does.' He held the weather remote control and punched in his pass code to the Utopia biosphere computer. 'Ah. Here we are.' He gasped.

'What is it?'

'You were right. The storm last night... it was deliberate!' Fitz smiled. 'So who did it?' Welwyn scrolled down to the last error message. 'A Zwee.'

'So the Zwee that was instructed to create the storm would also forget who had given it the order,' concluded Fitz.

Dittero didn't like Fitz's line of questioning. He also didn't like the odour emanating from the remains on Nimbit's bed. Six Zwees attended to the gloopy mess, scraping the lumps into dustpans. As each pan was filled, they decanted the jelly into a bucket. Other Zwees sprayed foam on to the carpet and scrubbed away the stains.

'What's gonna happen to... him?' said Fitz.

'The remains will be transported back to the nearest relative for burial, cremation or deep-space disposal,' said Dittero.

'What a way to go.' Fitz turned to Dittero. 'What do you make of the delegates? Odd bunch, aren't they?'

'It is not for me to say,' said Dittero, one hand smoothing his hair.

'There's Vorshagg,' said Fitz. 'Seems harmless, thanks to the chip in his brain if nothing else. And there's Micron. He seems a bit too big for his boots.'

'The Micron are a... proud race,' Dittero said diplomatically. The smell in this room was rather too much. He pressed a handkerchief over his mouth and retreated to the door.

'Then there's Question Intonation,' said Fitz, following him. 'Who is, well, annoying.'

'I would not venture such an opinion, Mr Kreiner.' Dittero stepped out into the corridor.

'And Poozle,' said Fitz, closing the door behind them. 'Who doesn't seem to be much of anything.'

'The Varble are... inscrutable.'

'He's still refusing to leave his room.'

'After last night's attack, very much understandable,' Dittero reminded him.

'Yes,' shrugged Fitz. 'If he was attacked... Did you believe all that stuff about the magnetic fields?'

'I naturally have no reason to impugn his veracity.'

'I don't know. I was wondering... whether Poozle is really here for the auction?'

'What on Utopia do you mean?' snapped Dittero.

'Whether he has some other agenda?'

'Mr Kreiner, you seem to forget that, unlike your good self, Poozle has been an active participant in the bidding.'

'Good point,' said Fitz.

'Speaking of which,' said Dittero, drumming his fingers on his clipboard. 'We have another planet on the schedule –'

'Another one?'

'Yes. One I can *guarantee* will be vacated shortly. Estebol.'

Fitz's breath clouded in the chilly air. He zipped up his jacket for warmth. The air stank of petrol fumes and smouldering rubber. Rain spattered.

The tele-door hung in the air by the roadside on an expanse of cracked tarmac. The light of the amber street lamp only extended a few yards into the night. On the other side of a steel wire fence lay the shadows of a building site. In the rubble, something furry slithered. Rats.

In one direction, the road disappeared into fog. In the other, it plunged into a tunnel illuminated by neon tubes, each surrounded by a blurry halo. Night wind blasted out of the tunnel. The fence shivered in response, creating a ringing, jangling rustle. It wasn't the only one shivering.

Dittero closed the tele-door and pocketed the handle, and led the group into the gloom. Fitz didn't want to lose them. As he walked, his new shoes scrunched on broken glass.

Nobody spoke. Fitz could hear distant traffic, an ever-present background rumble.

Beyond the wire fence, the building site became a playground of scaffolding. Fitz glanced up, and his stomach twisted with vertigo. Looming over the street were tower blocks – impossibly high, sheer edifices of concrete.

Glancing back the way they had come, Fitz could see the windows of the high-rise apartments were boarded up. The paintwork was streaked and scarred.

Due to the fog, they didn't notice the wreck until they had stumbled into it. A car had veered off the road and smashed into the crash barrier, lodging itself against the fence, its body tilted at forty-five degrees. The windshield had shattered inwards, forming a spider's web of glimmering fractures, and the headlights had been knocked out. The bonnet was dented, a twisted, deformed snarl of chromium.

Despite himself, Fitz peered inside. The interior had been consumed by flame, the seats reduced to clumps of padding.

Wedged into the driver's seat was a corpse. A skeleton, or near enough, it was coated in a glistening tarlike substance. It clutched the steering

wheel in its talons and stared ahead with eyeless sockets. It turned to Fitz and smiled in delight.

Fitz stared, jumping back, banging his head on the door frame. He gulped in horror as the skeleton collapsed on to its front. Its back was nothing more than a ribcage protruding through the charred remains of its clothes.

Fitz put a hand over his mouth. Poozle and Question Intonation floated away and Vorshagg hissed, creating a cloud of displeasure.

'What is it?' said Fitz. 'What happened here?'

Before anyone could answer, there was a rattling, grinding roar. A stark white light flashed over the delegates, casting long shadows over the wasteground beyond the fence.

Fitz shielded his eyes as two brilliant beams of light emerged from the tunnel. The creature gave another roar and its tyres squealed.

Dittero coughed and backed away from the wreck. The others followed suit.

The car crunched down the gears and halted beside the burnt-out wreck. Its lamps illuminated the broken remains, the frosted windows, the leering corpse. It was almost as if it was examining it.

Fitz jumped out of the way as the new car smashed into the broken car, jamming it against the fence. The fence protested with a loud clatter.

Tyres squealed again, and the car backed away. Again it shunted forward, nudging at the wreck, rocking it back and forth, scraping along its side.

Fitz watched in horror. He couldn't make out anything apart from the glare of the headlamps. He couldn't see any driver.

There was another roar, and another pair of lamps emerged from the tunnel. And another.

The first car finished investigating the wreck and screeched backwards in frustration. Its two companions handbraked in the road. Then, in unison, they revved themselves into a frenzy, slipped their clutches and charged.

All of their lights were shining on Fitz. They were heading straight for him. They were going to kill him.

Half blinded, Fitz turned. The fence had been torn apart by the wrecked car, and a hole of blackness offered a way through to the wasteground. Fitz dived for it, his jacket snagging on the mesh, and he tripped through, stumbling across the rocky ground.

Six copies of his shadow slithered over the rubble in front of him. The shadows cast by the cars' headlights. Fitz turned. Their six slanted eyes watched him. Then, with a shriek of anger, they shoved at the fence.

'Down!'

Fitz tried to work out where the female voice had come from, but all he could make out were the nightmares of buildings. As he looked around, his feet twisted beneath him and he tripped knee-first on to the ground.

From behind him, from the cars, he heard the fence collapse with a crash. The cars' engines whined. Tyres screeched.

And then there was a long, heavy boom. A flash of firelight lit up the waste ground. The ground shuddered.

Ignoring the pain in his hands, Fitz dragged himself to his feet, staggering forward as he looked back.

The three cars were alight. Thick plumes of smoke billowed out of their collapsed windscreens. Flames crackled across the chromium surfaces like a mass of cobras. The sizzling air lifted fluttering pieces of plastic. Their headlights died.

Debris began to rain on Fitz and he tugged his jacket collar upwards and over his head. He picked his way forward, hobbling over uneven bricks that see-sawed under his feet.

He wasn't alone. Three figures ran towards him, their boots thumping. Fitz's sight was still streaked with after-images, but as they cleared, he could make out faces – frightened, pale faces with long, tangled blonde hair.

They could see him. He must have slipped outside the indiscernability field.

'I think,' said Fitz, 'you've just saved my life.'

There was always a bunch of rebels, thought Fitz. He clasped the plastic beaker in his hands and sipped at the brackish liquid. At least it was warm, which was more than could be said for the warehouse they used as a hideout.

A portable gas fire threw a glow over their surroundings. Cardboard boxes, food packets and engine parts littered the floor. The ceiling was a confusion of ducts and girders, all cocooned in cobwebs.

There were five in the group. All girls. Thin to the point of malnourishment. He could see the blue veins in the temples of the girl closest to him.

Fitz found her rather attractive. Obviously she was in a bad way – her hair had been cropped rather than washed – but she had an air of resilience, of determination.

All of the women wore thick padded overalls. For the insulation, Fitz guessed.

Fitz passed round the drink and tried to make himself more comfortable on the packing crate. 'So what happened;

The woman beside Fitz, whose name was Kera, brushed some straggles of hair from her forehead. 'This planet wasn't always like it is now. Once there were no buildings, no motorways. No concrete or steel.'

Fitz listened, his mind half elsewhere. They were all girls. What had happened to all the blokes? Presumably they didn't need men to reproduce. They did it some other way.

'Then something changed,' said Kera.

'Tell him,' urged another of the girls. Fitz squinted at her. She couldn't be much over fifteen. She still had puppy-fat cheeks. Her thick-browed eyes glittered.

'There was a discovery. The internal combustion engine.'

'The what?' said Fitz. He lifted his palms and breathed on them for warmth.

'I forgot,' said Kera. 'You're from another planet. The internal –'

'No,' said Fitz. 'I've heard of it. It's the thing inside cars, the engine. Carburettors and spark plugs and stuff.'

'Everything changed. We developed... vehicles. Automobiles.'

'I've seen them,' said Fitz. 'Why did you blow them up?'

Kera looked away, her eyes watering. 'We relied upon them. We needed them to commute, to transport our food...'

'Right...'

'As the population of Estebol increased, so did the number of automobiles. If only we'd known then...'

Kera sighed. 'The people needed cities, the automobiles needed roads.'

'Soon,' the fifteen-year-old added, 'there was nothing but cities and roads.'

'The whole planet's surface,' muttered Kera. 'Everywhere, concrete and tarmac. And still the number of automobiles increased. The people who didn't work in the refineries worked on the assembly lines...'

'So you were big on cars, then?' said Fitz.

'It didn't happen overnight.' There was no trace of emotion in Kera's voice. 'The cities and roads took centuries to build. That's why nobody noticed until it was too late.'

'Noticed what?'

'The atmosphere of our world had changed. It was no longer suitable for humans. The levels of carbon monoxide and lead... we grew sick. Our children were stillborn, or deformed. We were dying out. We were living our lives *for* the automobiles. We would spend every waking hour building them, servicing them, *feeding* them. And, as the years passed, we

would spend more and more time inside the automobiles, driving to and from work. And that's when we realised.'

She fell silent. None of the other girls spoke.

Fitz looked around expectantly. The warehouse seemed to have grown suddenly colder and darker. 'Realised what?'

'Estebol was no longer our world,' said Kera. 'It was *theirs*. The cars had taken over.'

They made their way down the stairwell. The eldest girl led the group, followed by the youngest, then Kera, Fitz and one more.

Fitz paused at a window and looked through the shards that remained in the frame. He could see out across the grim city. Opposite, another high-rise loomed out of the smog. In the distance there were more skyscrapers, all blank and grey. And below were rivers of red and white.

'You're the only ones left?' said Fitz.

Kera nodded. 'The number of humans... it looks like we're reaching the terminal point.'

'The end?'

'As we need the automobiles, so they need us.'

'What, to drive them?'

Kera swiped a hair from her high, pale forehead. 'Not just that. The automobiles depend upon us to build them, to repair them, to fuel them. If we die, they die.'

'You talk about them as though they're alive.'

The whole group looked at him as if he were mad.

'Oh, they're alive, Fitz,' said Kera. 'As alive as anything here.'

'Yes, but they can't think, can they?' Fitz shivered. His jacket wasn't enough to keep out the cold. 'Can they?'

'It's hard to explain,' said Kera. 'When people get behind the wheel...'

'They're taken over,' said the fifteen-year-old.

'They become part of the automobile,' agreed Kera. 'They're no longer one of us, but... one of them. They forget.'

'Forget what?' Fitz said.

'They forget they were ever human.'

Fitz sat down on the stairs. 'So what you're saying is, they get into the cars, and the cars... possess them?'

Kera patted his shoulder. 'That's it. You've got it.'

Fitz rubbed his forehead. He felt nauseous, but then, that could be because of the pollution. 'The people in the cars,' he asked, 'why don't they just get out?'

'Once someone is part of an automobile, they're lost,' said Kera. 'There is no going back.'

'So,' said Fitz, slapping his knees, 'what are you doing about it?'

'We're fighting back,' said Kera. 'The automobiles' fuel... it makes excellent explosives. We use it against them!'

Fitz had expected more. 'That's it?'

'That is all we can do. We are trying to save our world.'

'I know.' Fitz looked at Kera, and the other girls, and the hope in their eyes. But what if their world was past saving?

Dittero had been right. Estebol would soon be a vacated property. If there were no people left, there would be nobody to drive the cars. The fuel would run out and they would all die, not with a bang, but with the stutter of an exhausted motor engine.

These girls, they weren't fighting to save their world, they were fighting to make it end *sooner*. They were trying to put it out of its misery.

Kera's head tilted to one side as she examined him. 'You know – there is something strange about you...'

'Is there?' Fitz laughed nervously. 'What?'

'Your voice... and your,' she looked at his chest, his chin, and then his crotch, 'body.'

'Ah, yeah, well,' Fitz smiled, 'that's because I'm a bloke.'

'A bloke?' said Kera. 'What is... a bloke?'

'Ah,' said Fitz, embarrassed. 'It's kind of hard to explain.'

The concrete flyover stretched above the expressway. The arctic cold reminded Fitz of his trek through Siberia. He took shallow breaths. God knows what this atmosphere was doing to him. If only he had some sort of filter to breathe through – on this planet, smoking was probably the healthy option.

Kera halted and waved the others to her side. Fitz squeezed into the gap between the crash barrier and the wall. His foot sank into an icy puddle.

Resting his elbows on the wall, hugging his jacket around him, Fitz peered out across the motorway, the wind making his eyes sting.

The only colour came from the steep lamps and the lights of the cars that streamed beneath them. The congested traffic created a constant, doleful rumble.

Not all of the cars were moving, however. On the outside lanes Fitz could make out parked cars. There were hundreds of abandoned, scorched-out wrecks.

Kera unzipped a holdall and passed Fitz a petrol can. He caught a sickly whiff of petrol. Kera then passed out more cans among her group. Damp rags had been twisted into the spouts.

'What, are we playing pooh sticks?' joked Fitz. He couldn't make out Kera's expression. At least, not until she clicked a cigarette lighter and her features appeared in its orange light. She shielded the flame from the rain and held it away from the can.

A screech cut through the darkness. At one end of the bridge, two headlights rose out of the fog. The beams picked out the rain, spattering into puddles.

Fitz looked back the other way. Another set of headlamps halted. They had been discovered. They were trapped.

'Now!' screamed Kera, holding out the lighter. One by one, the women dipped their fuses into the flame until they caught alight. The material burned quickly, dripping soggy lumps of smouldering fabric.

Fitz threw away his petrol can and climbed back over the barrier. He felt horribly sick. His head span with fear.

The cars were approaching from either side of the overpass. Their tyres sloshed in the rain. They twisted, left and right.

The girls pitched their petrol bombs over the wall and on to the traffic below. Fitz couldn't see the result. He only heard the heart-thudding roar and the screech of traffic. Metal screamed. Explosions thundered. Glass shattered. There was the ear-splitting scrape and rattle of car against concrete.

A fireball blossomed, unrolling from the wreckage below like a mushroom, hurling sharp, smoking debris high into the air.

Kera was already handing out more bombs.

To Fitz, it sounded as though the traffic below was screaming in pain. He backed away, away from the chaos. His legs protested, his joints locked with the cold.

As they neared their prey the two approaching cars swerved more violently. Fitz could see the girls' faces caught in the headlights. They had never seemed so pale, so deathlike.

Fitz turned and scrambled away from the girls, debris raining all about him. He dragged himself on to the opposite wall of the bridge.

Looking down, there was a sheer drop of sixty feet.

He turned back. The two cars slammed into the barrier.

Fitz wished he'd looked away.

The barrier buckled inwards, crushing the girls. Their bodies flailed like crash-test dummies. Then the cars ploughed on through the barrier, smashing into the concrete. The wall collapsed and the cars' engines

shrieked as they flew off the bridge, diving into the inferno below.

In response, another fireball ploughed up into the sky. Fitz felt the rush of hot wind upon his face. His skin prickled. He hovered for a moment, unsure what to do.

There was nothing left of them. He was alone.

He dropped to his knees and crawled off the wall. He could barely stand, his legs were shaking so much.

So he ran.

How many hours had passed, Fitz didn't know. His first priority had been to get off the road. Once off the bridge, he had swung himself over a crash barrier and dropped six feet on to the walkway below. Then he had kept on running.

The city had been the same wherever he went. A square of amber-lit roads intersected at the corner of every block. Everywhere there were the same neglected buildings and faded billboards. He soon lost all sense of direction, but he couldn't stop, he couldn't turn back. He had to get away.

He found shelter in a boarded-up doorway. He doubled up and coughed up phlegm, which was a relief because he'd thought he was going to vomit. He stayed like that until the pain subsided and he could stamp some feeling back into his feet. Then, his hands on his knees, he lifted his gaze.

Rain dripped from above. The street was empty. Boarded-up shops ran the length of the road, some scrawled with graffiti, others pasted with sodden posters.

Something slithered along the ground nearby. It was about the size of a rat, but it had a terrier-like face. It twitched, as though disturbed, and darted away.

There was the screech of rubber on tarmac. Seconds later, the shop opposite was picked out in a shifting glare. The windows that still had glass reflected the two slit eyes as they swept their beams across the road.

Fitz ducked out of sight and shoved at the door. The lock clattered. He shouldered the wood again and the rotten timber gave way. He crawled through the hole, and into the nothingness.

He waited for a moment. The light flared outside, then died away. The car gave a screech and was gone.

The smell here was different – a hospital smell of bleach and disinfectant.

Fitz ventured deeper into the building. His footsteps clinked in the gloom – he guessed from the acoustics that he was in a corridor. He kept one hand ahead, patting his way along the wall. The bricks had been

smoothed over with paint. The wall stopped and Fitz felt his way down some steps.

Fitz didn't know why, but he had to keep on going. His fingers fumbled upon something familiar. It was a metal box, a wire running from its base. He decided to risk it. The room flickered into electric light.

It was a factory floor.

The room was vast – another deserted warehouse building – with a high ceiling supported by steel pillars. The remaining bulbs illuminated abandoned, rusted machines and a conveyor belt. Workbenches, pigeon-hole units and huge metal drums cluttered the hall. Everything was draped in cobwebs as thick as sheets.

Fitz recognised it from documentary films – an assembly line. As the cars moved along the conveyor belt, the workers would add to the chassis, lowering in an engine on a chain, bolting on doors and so forth.

But this assembly line didn't make cars.

It had been halted in mid production. So the objects on the conveyor were incomplete, at the various stages of construction.

Overhead, dangling from hooks, frosted with mould, were dozens of human arms. Bloodless like frozen meat. Each had the shoulder bone exposed, revealing the gristle and flesh.

Behind them, there was a forest of legs, suspended from the ceiling like stalactites.

The metal drums contained not machine parts, but hands, each severed at the wrist bone. The workbenches on either side of the conveyor belt were littered with unfinished sections of arm, leg and neck.

Looking at the conveyor belt, Fitz could follow each step of the process. They would begin with the torso. Then the lower limbs would be attached, followed by the arms and hands. And then. . .

Something Kera had said to him clicked in Fitz's mind. He could hear her voice.

'The levels of carbon monoxide and lead. . . we grew sick. Our children were stillborn, or deformed. We were dying out.'

So the people of Estebol had found a new way to reproduce.

Fitz staggered out into the night, and this time he was sick.

He had to get away. Before the cars found him.

The wind grew in strength. Fitz wished he'd had some of the insulation coats the girls had been wearing. They'd keep out the cold. And hide the joins.

Fitz forced himself to move. Every movement made his limbs ache and his bruises throb. The road was slick with water, the rain churning

the puddles.

Lights moved in the windows. Fitz ducked behind a street lamp as he heard the wail of an approaching engine. He kept out of sight as the first car sluiced past.

The second car, giving chase, skidded. Fitz watched as it slid across the road, its wheels gushing up sprays, its body in a spin. It slammed sideways into the wall and halted. Its lights dimmed and its engine died.

Looking left and right, Fitz crossed the road, his body stooped and each step a splash. As he came closer to the car, he slowed.

He had to get away.

Fitz approached the driver's door.

Inside was a woman, as gaunt and pale as Kera had been. She had a slit in the centre of her forehead that dribbled blood. From the way her head was lolling, Fitz knew her neck had broken.

Taking one last look round, Fitz forced open the door. The driver's body flopped into the road. Fitz lifted her legs free of the car, clambered inside and slammed the door shut.

The rumble of the city died away. He was alone, safe, in silence. He leaned back into the warm leatherette.

Everything was different, and yet familiar. Fitz let his fingers rest upon the steering wheel. It felt good. He let his fingers slide around its circumference.

Fitz twisted the key in the ignition. The engine turned over. He squashed the accelerator pedal and the revs built up. The outside street was illuminated as the headlamps came to life.

He would be safe in a car. They would never catch him here.

He examined the controls. There was everything he needed.

'They become part of the automobile. They're no longer one of us, but... one of them.'

He gripped the gear stick and jammed it into reverse. Slipping the clutch, he reversed the car into the road. Then he twisted the wheel and floored the accelerator.

As the car jerked forward, Fitz relaxed. Warm air from the engine blasted out of the vents. He scrubbed the condensation from the windows and switched on the wipers. The spots of rain on the windscreen were smeared away.

'They forget they were ever human.'

Outside, high-rise apartments slid by, one identical building after another. Fitz followed the line of street lamps, the amber glows appearing as a chain of floating lanterns that detached itself, piece by piece, as he approached.

The dashboard grew lighter. Fitz checked his rear-view mirror. A car was following him. Then its headlamps flared as it turned off down a side street.

It was the perfect place to hide.

'The people in the cars, why don't they just get out?'

'Once someone is part of an automobile, they're lost.'

Fitz laughed, as he followed the curve of the road up on to the motorway.

The car was taking him where it wanted to go.

Ahead were the red tail lights. He followed them. He could follow them forever. He would never have to stop. He would never have to leave the car. All he needed to do was drive.

'There is no going back.'

'Mr Kreiner,' said Dittero, leaning forward to tap him on the shoulder. 'It's time we returned to Utopia.'

Fitz kept his hands on the wheel and his eyes on the road. He changed up a gear. The rocking of the car made his head nod.

'Mr Kreiner.' Dittero prodded him on the shoulder again. 'We must leave.'

'No.' Fitz's voice was low and slurred. 'I'm *driving*.' His gaze remained fixed on the trail of red lights ahead.

Dittero shifted forward to speak in Fitz's ear. 'You must come...'

'Need... concentrate,' mumbled Fitz. 'Driving. Leave 'lone.'

'I'm sorry,' said Dittero, 'but I... require your attendance.'

'Belong here,' said Fitz, as though talking in his sleep. 'Safe...'

Dittero squeezed himself over to the right-hand side of the rear seat. He held out the tele-door handle and placed it against the passenger door. Holding down the activation button, he slid it to the right, and a rectangle opened up in the side of the car – a rectangle opening on to the conference room on Utopia.

Even for someone as used to tele-door travel as Dittero, it was disconcerting to look through the side of a moving car and out into an enclosed, brightly lit room. Where, by rights, there should have been darkness and street lamps, there was a desk surrounded by moulded plastic chairs.

Dittero dragged himself backwards through the door. One moment he was sliding himself across a leatherette seat, the next he was sliding over a carpet. His feet still remained inside the car while the rest of his body was in the conference room.

Grabbing a table leg, Dittero pulled himself upright. He tapped a sequence of keys on his tele-door control. Each button bleeped.

The car interior inside the tele-door slid to the left. It was as though a camera, looking into the car, was panning to the right. It kept on moving, taking in the rear of Fitz's seat, then Fitz himself.

Dittero reached in through the tele-door, grabbing Fitz's collar with his left hand and his elbow with his right.

Fitz's fingers remained fast on the wheel. Dittero heaved and Fitz's hands slipped free and together they piled backwards, flying back through the tele-door and landing on the conference room carpet.

Fitz blinked as though waking from a nightmare. 'What happened?'

The Zwees had tended to Fitz's injuries. He had lain in bed in his room while the robots pottered about him, dabbing cotton wool on his bruises, winding bandages on his cuts and fetching him a variety of soothing drinks. They sprayed something on his feet which brought the feeling back, and offered him a variety of pills to improve his mood, mental acuity and memory. Only when a Zwee offered him post-traumatic counselling did Fitz draw the line. The only counselling he needed was the sort that came with a straw, olive and umbrella.

He didn't remember much about Estebol. It was like trying to piece together a dream. The more he thought about it, the more clouded the memories became.

The place had been affecting him, he decided. It had been a kind of hysteria in the air. He didn't know whether or not the cars were really alive and possessing people. What was important was that Kera and the others had believed it. For them it had been a living nightmare.

Fitz slipped in and out of consciousness. The starched sheets felt so refreshing against his cheeks. He dreamed fitfully, and in his dreams he returned to Estebol, running through endless rain-drenched streets.

When Fitz awoke again, he found his bruises had evaporated and his scars had been reduced to pale lines. The pain had gone and he felt relaxed, refreshed, confident.

It was, his bedside clock told him, about eight in the evening. He pulled on his jeans and shirt, and made his way downstairs to the cocktail lounge.

They were waiting for him. Welwyn looked up as he entered and offered him a sympathetic smile. Vorshagg bared its teeth, the closest to a smile it could manage. Poozle rested on a table, bubbling greenly. Micron's two legionaries sat with the cushion between them. And Dittero approached, clipboard in hand, offering him a firm handshake. 'How are you feeling, Mr Kreiner? Fully recovered from your ordeal?'

Fitz nodded, disconcerted.

‘I’ve delayed the auction until you were sufficiently recuperated. If you would care to come through to the conference room, we can commence...’ Dittero walked to the door, expecting the others to follow.

Fitz realised what was missing. He had grown used to seeing two furry balls bobbing about in mid air above their heads.

‘Question Intonation?’ said Fitz. ‘What’s happened to Question Intonation?’

Dittero’s smile tightened as he selected his words. ‘I regret to inform you, Mr Kreiner, that unfortunately, the delegate known as Question Intonation has been somewhat... murdered.’

Chapter 9

Going Postal

'What do you mean, he's not dead?'

'I mean he's alive, Doctor! Prubert Gastridge is alive.'

'Prubert Gastridge – he's the guy who's the king of the eagle-people, right?'

'Buzzardmen, Trix. Buzzardmen. This is *important*.'

'Sorry. Eagle-people, Buzzardmen, he had bloody great wings strapped to his back, all the same to me.'

'Charlton, *Zap Daniel* was filmed centuries ago. When Prubert Gastridge was strapping on his... bloody great wings, Aethelred the Unready was the King of England.'

'I suppose you met him, didn't you?'

'Prubert Gastridge? No, Trix, it's always been a regret of mine –'

'No, Aethelred the Unready.'

'I did, as a matter of fact, yes. And despite his name, you could drop in on him at a moment's notice and he wouldn't mind a bit. No...but Prubert Gastridge! He was *fantastic*. What I wouldn't have given, just to have gone over old times with him, got his autograph...'

'Asked him how they strapped him into those wings –'

'...asked him how they strap- never mind that. He was a boyhood hero of mine. Well, if I'd seen the film during my boyhood he would've been. And now I'll never get the chance to tell him how great he was.'

'That's what I've been trying to tell you, Doctor. He's *not dead*.'

'Charlton, *Zap Daniel* was made a thousand years ago. How many humanoid races live for that long?'

'There's the Meons. The VI'harb. The pseudo-terrans of Frantige Two. The tedious hermits of Quixote Minor, you know, they've been rumoured to live for...'

'Yes, but Prubert wasn't a Meon or a VI'harb. He was from Paragrol, and Paragrolli have the same lifespan as Earth humans –'

'Yeah, right, Doctor, but –'

'After all, the director of *Zap Daniel*, Hinkle B. Tawdry, died at the time of the Battle of Hastings! I remember his obituary'

'That's sort of my point, though. Do you remember ever seeing an obituary for Prubert Gastridge?'

'Well, no, but I'm a busy man, you can't expect me to check every obituary column in the galaxy. It would be morbid.'

'I've looked, yeah? There's never been one published.'

'Oh. That's a shame. He did such a lot of great work. I mean, not just Vargo in *Zap Daniel*, but the classics. His Captain Hook brought the house down.'

'Hang on, Doctor. This guy was around before Peter Pan was written...?'

'Trix, you wouldn't believe how many of Earth's great works of literature have been influenced by alien cultures.'

'Peter Pan?'

'I'm not saying J.M. Barrie didn't have a creative role, but the plot does bear certain similarities to a story written by Dilvpod Tentacle several millennia earlier.'

'What, you're saying that an alien landed on Earth, gave Barrie a copy of Dilvpod's book and said, "Why not copy all this out"?''

'That would seem the likeliest explanation, yes, Trix.'

'Don't aliens have better things to do than go round interfering with the cultures of planets?'

'You'd be surprised. Anyway, my point was... Prubert Gastridge was a *great* actor.'

'Who's not dead'

'Why do you keep saying that, Charlton?'

'I did a google on the sub-ethernet. Prubert was born in the Galactic Year 1400, right?'

'Yes...'

'And portrayed Vargo in the classic *Zap Daniel*, filmed in Galactic Year 1443...'

'Of course.'

'So how come he was guest of honour at *ZapCon* in 1547?'

'What?'

'Doctor, wouldn't that make him a hundred and forty-seven?'

'But that's not all. Right! He also turned up at *BuzzardFest Thirty-Eight*. Ninety-one years later, in 1638.'

What?’

‘Then, after another ninety-one years, there’s *An Audience with Vargo*. Then, a hundred and eight-two years later, he does *Prubert Gastridge – A Celebration*. Another ninety-one years, and he’s guesting on *Quark and Sun*.’

‘Charlton, if what you’re saying is true...’

‘After that, he does some more conventions, a signing session for the re-release of the Pakafroon Wabster single... each one ninety-one years after the last, almost to the day, right up until his last appearance in the Galactic Year 2366.’

‘What is the current Galactic Year, Charlton?’

‘2475...’

‘Ninety-one years! It looks as though Prubert Gastridge is due for a revival.’

‘Doctor, how can he still be alive, what, a thousand years after he was leading his eagle-people in an attack of the Imperial city of Mango?’

‘Good question, Trix. Evidently the clue is in the fact that he’s only appearing roughly *once every century*. Charlton, do you have any of these holo-TV appearances on tape?’

‘I have *Prubert Gastridge – A Tribute* somewhere, I think.’

‘What did he look like?’

‘Well, they’ve got him wearing the wings, the Viking helmet and the posing pouch, and he walks on and shouts, “What do you mean, Daniel’s not dead?” Bit demeaning, really’

‘No, I mean, how *old* did he look’

‘Sixty-ish.’

‘As I thought. Charlton, I want you to get me a complete list of all planetary bodies with an orbital cycle of ninety-one years, all businesses offering cryogenic preservation facilities, I need to cross-reference –’

‘Don’t think that’ll be necessary, Doctor.’

‘Why not?’

‘I just looked him up in the phone book.’

‘Charlton, you astonish me... do you think we can visit him?’

‘Don’t see why not.’

‘Excellent! Trix, we’re going to meet Vargo, king of the Buzzardmen!’

‘Do you think he’s still got the wings?’

I’ve never seen the Doctor so excited. He’s grinning like a kid at Christmas, his nose almost touching the shuttle window. His breath frosts the glass, so he wipes it with his sleeve, never taking his eyes off the view. ‘It’s... beyond imagination.’

At Charlton's suggestion, we've tele-doored to the nearest orbital station and booked a flight. We're the only ones in the first-class cabin, surrounded by fifty or so beige chairs. Sunlight streams in through the portholes on the opposite berth, casting a sort of honey-coloured glow. I can feel its warmth upon my cheeks.

Outside our shuttle, suspended in the star-spattered heavens, are hundreds of asteroids. They are craggy and rough-hewn and scarred by meteorite collisions. The sunshine slides over them as they tumble and spin, picking out their ridges and dipping into their craters. According to Charlton they're all about the size of the Earth's moon, but the light is so clear and the detail so perfect, I can imagine reaching out and grabbing one in my hand.

But that isn't the half of it. As they rotate, the heat of the sun warms the surface of the asteroids. Melting the ice.

The Doctor points to one of the spheres.

Its surface splits. Cracks scuttle across its surface like lizards. Chunks of ice float away. The cracks grow, creating a dawdling shower of debris. The rolling icebergs glitter in the sunlight like a chain of diamonds.

More cracks appear, then the crust shatters into a thousand fragments. It exposes a layer of dark, velvety green.

It continues to revolve, shaking off the last of the ice. On one side there is a bulge, probably thousands of miles wide, that tapers to a single point. Around the bulge, the surface is covered in fine fibres.

The bud bursts, splitting into five segments, each peeling back like a tongue. It splays wider, turning to expose its interior to the sun. The segments twist as they open, like the aperture of a camera.

I'm holding my breath.

Within the sphere, there are a million churning fronds. It's a vast anemone, its tentacles undulating. Pods burst open to reveal glorious, glistening flowers, their petals unfolding in delight. I see swollen fruit, ripe and shiny, of a hundred different shapes. Like one of those speeded-up nature documentaries. I watch as shoots snake outwards and blossom, opening up to reveal fleshy blooms.

And tendrils – the whole thing is a writhing mass of tendrils. Slithering out of the belly of the flower and drifting into space like jellyfish tentacles, near-transparent but phosphorescent.

It's gorgeous. The astral flower opens to its fullest extent and becomes a chaos of beauty. The richest reds, the lushest greens, the most delicate whites, the most regal purples, the orangest oranges. Everywhere more petals are unfolding, more buds are popping, and more fruit are inflating.

It sprays out its seeds. Fragile lilac parasols puff out of its body in a cloud and waft away, dissolving to nothing.

Our shuttle pitches once more, and one huge astral flower fills the windows, obscuring our view of the others. It's much closer, so close that I can make it out in perfect detail, but it's probably still tens of thousands of miles away.

As we drop towards its surface, the petals that had seemed so smooth are revealed as being covered in a patchwork of veins and cells. The husks that had contained the seeds are huge, green cathedrals and the tentacles are immense tubers, powerful enough to smash our shuttle.

It teems with life. Flourishes of colour erupt, more stems uncoil themselves. Pulsing lights emanate from millions of dew-drop beads. There are chutes, and funnels, and complex labyrinthine structures like coral.

'The astral flower,' Charlton reads from his guidebook, 'has a life cycle of ninety-one years. Once every ninety-one years, their elliptical orbit takes them close enough to the sun for them to enter the liquid water belt. The ice that has encased them over the previous nine decades melts, and the flower blooms. It's one of the natural wonders of the universe.' Charlton looks up from his guidebook to peer out of the window, as though to check.

Our shuttle rotates so the astral flower is beneath us. I begin to feel the tug of its gravity. We glide forward, through a forest of stems and ribs. I can't shake the feeling that we're underwater, even though I know outside there is the vacuum of space.

'The period of wakefulness is relatively brief, lasting no more than a year. During that time the astral flower reproduces, photosynthesises and gains nourishment from dark matter that will have fallen into its gravity well.'

More intricacies emerge. The corals are themselves covered in smaller organisms, something between a sea-urchin and a pumpkin. And below us, there is a fine mist.

'The astral flowers are believed to have developed from a variety of interplanetary fauna – there are well-documented cases of planets where the foliage extends out of the atmosphere to geo-stationary altitudes, and where seed propagation has occurred between orbital bodies. However, the origin of the astral flowers, which now only exist within the Galactic Heritage protected solar system of Sirius Omega, is thought to be long-since lost to the mists of time.'

We descend through the fog. Below us, I can make out sloshing water. And beneath that, there is a layer of permafrost, in which more of the flower's foliage is embedded. As the frost melts, more shoots thrust

themselves eagerly into the light.

'The astral flower is frozen during its long period away from the sun, and preserves itself by a chemical it secretes into the surrounding ice. This chemical provides almost perfect cryogenic storage, meaning that it can be used to keep alive any creatures held within the ice. This is why many astral flowers are now used as retirement homes for the elderly.'

After the shuttle docked, Charlton, Trix and the Doctor made their way out of it through a sliding door, along a floral-printed corridor, and into an arrivals lounge decorated with chintzy statues of gormless cupids, muscular Greek heroes and Botticelli Venuses perched in clams. Something rather like Bach played in the background.

The lounge bustled with activity, staff collecting luggage from carousels, laughing and exchanging toothpaste-billboard smiles. The nurses and doctors had an efficient manner, reflected in their austere, mushroom-coloured gowns. Cleaners wiped the windows and pushed about machines that dried the damp carpets. The mood was one of business as usual. People were here to do a job, not admire the scenery.

Charlton, however, could admire the scenery. He wandered over to the observation window, his jaw dropping with each squashy step. He stared out over the surface of the flower. His heart sang.

The Centre for Posterity had been constructed in the middle of what appeared to be a mangrove swamp. It was as though they had been shrunk down to a microscopic size, everything was now so massive. Stems were impossibly high towers and petals were the size of flapball pitches. The water lapped and splashed in a slow-motion but exaggerated manner due to the low gravity. That was, the low gravity outside the base – inside the base, the gravity had been enhanced to the standard ten sec per sec.

Charlton watched as shafts of sunlight plunged through the canopy and illuminated the drizzle. The water level receded further, revealing straggly, coiled-up tendrils and roots.

He thumbed through his battered copy of *The Galactic Heritage Foundation Space Travellers' Guide*. At the back, it indexed all the planets and moons protected by the Galactic Heritage Foundation. Sirius Omega was the only instance of them awarding Grade 1 status to a whole system. And looking out of the window, Charlton could understand why.

It looked just like the photo.

Of course, the idea of building cryogenic storage centres in the flowers didn't quite tally with the Foundation's policy of non-development. However, as the centres were being used to preserve heritage of a differ-

ent kind, it had been felt that the rule demanded an exception. It was a complete coincidence that many of the residents were some of the Foundation's most generous benefactors.

To think he was part of the Galactic Heritage Foundation. This was what he was fighting for. It was moments like these that made it all worthwhile.

'Prubert *Gastridge*,' the Doctor's voice cut across the lounge. 'We're here to see Prubert Gastridge. Vargo, King of the Buzzardmen?'

Charlton joined the Doctor and Trix at the reception desk. The Doctor was drumming his fingers on the plastic while reading the '*Welcome to the Centre for Posterity*' board.

'Any luck?'

The receptionist, a lime-coloured girl with a snub nose and dreadlocks, went to check something on her computer. Her fingernails clicked on the keyboard. 'We've pretended to be relatives,' said the Doctor. 'Distant... descendants. We're looking up grandpa!'

Right...

'People don't tend to get the same visitors twice,' said Trix.

The receptionist returned and gave an automatic smile. At least, the muscles in the corners of her mouth tightened. 'He's awaiting revivification. If you would like to come this way –' She indicated a sliding door.

Exchanging wary glances, Charlton, the Doctor and Trix followed the receptionist through the maze of corridors. She had a prim way of walking that reminded Charlton of an android.

As they progressed further into the base, they passed some of the residents. They were like zombies. They hobbled behind zimmer frames, every step an effort, their rheumy eyes blinking in the brightness. They wore check-patterned flannelette pyjamas and carpet slippers.

Charlton noticed the residents were all heading in the same direction – the salon. Each of the residents had scabby, corkscrew-like fingernails and a shock of white hair. The men stooped under the weight of their beards and some of the old women had feathery moustaches.

After some minutes, the receptionist brought them to a sliding door that opened on to what seemed to be a cavern. Beneath them, much of the chamber was lost in darkness. A few phosphor lamps had been arranged in a fairy ring, casting an organic green hue.

Charlton's breath misted. The air was sharp with the cold. He followed the receptionist down the metal staircase, his fingers sticking to the frost-covered handrails.

Water dripped from the ceiling in large, icy plops. Charlton felt one land in his hair and trickle down the back of his neck like a slug. He

arched his shoulders as he shivered.

The chamber echoed to the gush of an underground stream. Water seeped down the walls, which Charlton realised consisted of a fibrous substance covered in pale veins, like dock leaves. There was also that dock-leaf smell.

Charlton looked up warily for any more streams of droplets. The roof was a mass of capillaries and plate cells. And, looking down, there was a criss-cross of inclined gutters leading to a central grille to drain away the water. Beneath the grille, a river rushed.

Charlton shivered, partly from the cold, partly from the blobs of icy water that splattered in his hair, and partly from the eerie atmosphere. Despite the fleshy smell, this place was a tomb. The walls were divided into alcoves, some still blocked up with ice. The receptionist directed them towards an alcove where the ice had started to thaw, its surface becoming smooth and wet.

Inside the ice Charlton could make out scratches and bubbles. And, half hidden in the gloom, there was the shape of a man. It looked like a corpse in checked flannel pyjamas.

The receptionist dinked some buttons in the keypad on the wall beside the man. An LED began to count down the seconds. Other lights flashed self-importantly.

The corpse stood bolt upright, his eyes and mouth wide open as though shouting. His hair had grown into a wild tangle and his beard was spiky with frost, but Charlton knew at once who it was.

‘Prubert Gastridge,’ said Trix.

‘It’s amazing what you find at the bottom of your deep freeze,’ observed the Doctor. ‘Old lollies, fish fingers and thousand-year-old film stars.’

‘How did it die?’

‘We don’t know, for sure,’ said Dittero.

It was like a furry deflated football. Fitz touched it – the first time he had come into physical contact with Question Intonation – and ran his fingers through the coarse hair. The surface beneath was spongelike and rubbery.

Question Intonation had been annoying, yes. It had been one of those most irritating aliens Fitz had ever encountered. But he would’ve preferred the irritation to seeing it like this.

‘What do you mean, you don’t know for sure?’ said Fitz.

‘He means,’ snarled Vorshagg. ‘We know *why* Question Intonation died. We just don’t know how they did it.’

Fitz straightened up. 'What?'

'Question Intonation consisted of two spheres,' said Dittero from the other side of the sun lounge, Poozle floating at his side. 'Each dependent upon the other for survival.' The lounge glinted with the sunset, shadows rising among the tropical ferns. The warm air smelled rich and fresh and greenhousey.

'Right,' said Fitz. 'So where's the other one?'

'There lies very much the rub,' Dittero answered. 'We remain unappraised of that information.'

'You don't know?'

'We've had the Zwees doing a complete top-to-bottom environment scan, but it seems to have vanished.'

'So without it, this half died. And presumably, wherever the other half is, it's dead too?'

'One can only presume.' Dittero collected his clipboard from the table.

'When did all this happen?'

'While you were on Estebol. The delegates adjourned to their suites, while I endeavoured to locate your good self.'

'You were on your own when this happened?'

Dittero nodded.

'Vorshagg?'

The lizard stamped its feet. 'I was alone.'

'Poozle?'

'I was arone,' chirped the cylinder.

And I suppose Micron and Welwyn were too... So we have lots o motives, and no alibis.'

'Motives?' Dittero disapproved.

'Oh come on, it's obvious, isn't it?' said Fitz. 'The less competition the better. Am I right or am I right? Get your rivals out of the way am you've got yourself one tidy bargain,' he turned and pointed, 'haven't you, Poozle?'

The lava lamp hovered uneasily but did not reply.

'This is murder, gentlemen. Plain and simple,' said Fitz. Except it wasn't. He still had no idea who the murderer was.

That said, he'd already guessed how Question Intonation had been killed. That had been the easy part. He even had a good idea why.

Fitz smiled back at Dittero. 'When's the auction for Estebol kicking off?'

'Yes, we should ploceed!' agreed Poozle.

'I think we are ready to commence, if you are,' Dittero said. 'I'll instruct the Zwees to summon everyone.'

Fitz decided he would use the auction as an opportunity to observe the other delegates. See if they did something which gave them away. It was vital he didn't draw attention to himself.

'Sold, for seventy-seven million Arcturan ultra-pods, to Mr Fitz Kreiner!'

Fitz felt as though he'd walked naked into somebody else's wedding. His skin flushed. His stomach twisted with vertigo.

How had he got here? That was the question that needed a very good answer. He had gone into the room with the intention of keeping a low profile. He had taken the chair at the back, as Vorshagg had stomped over to the one closest to the projection screen and the Micron's two legionaries had placed their cushion on the table. He had not said a word as Dittero smarmed in accompanied by the floating Poozle. He had barely acknowledged Welwyn as he flounced into the room, turned round a chair and sat in it.

The bidding for Estebol started at one million ultra-pods, with Vorshagg. Then Micron took it up to ten, then Poozle up to eleven. They alternated, Poozle shrieking out its bid in a high-pitched electric drone, Micron instructing one of his attendants to lift a single bronzed, manicured finger.

Fitz had expected the bidding to peak at about forty million – the same as Valuensis – but Poozle kept on upping the ante, and Micron's attendant kept on lifting his finger.

The room was stuffy. Fitz nodded to a Zwee, who refilled his glass with mineral water.

'Seventy-six, with the Fabulous Micron,' Dittero announced, absent-mindedly drumming his fingers on his clipboard.

Fitz placed the tumbler to his lips and sipped. The water went down the wrong way.

'Is that a bid I hear from the back?'

Fitz tried to say no, but all that emerged was a gurgle. As he hunched over the table, coughing, his head nodded up and down.

'Seventy-seven...' Hostility crept into Dittero's tone. '...with Mr Kreiner. Do I hear any other bids?'

Fitz couldn't hear if there were any other bids. He was too busy choking.

'No other bids? Fabulous Micron?'

Patting his chest, Fitz regained his breath and turned to the Micron's attendants. They gazed back at him with faces of steel.

'Fabulous Micron?' repeated Dittero.

The attendants folded their bulging arms.

'Going.' Dittero left a long pause. 'Going... is the Fabulous Micron sure it doesn't want to place a bid?'

The attendants both shook their heads.

'Going,' Dittero repeated. 'Going... ' He held his gavel above the table and winced. 'Gone!'

'I didn't mean to buy it,' Fitz protested. 'It was an accident.'

Dittero's eyes narrowed. 'You're not in possession of sufficient funds?'

'I was choking!'

'I regret to inform you, Mr Kreiner, that a verbal contract is binding. Unless you find seventy-seven million Arcturan ultra-pods within the next hour, I will naturally be left with no alternative but to take serious measures.' The threat was laced with arsenic. 'Extremely serious measures'

Fitz staggered back to his seat. What he needed right now was drink. He drained the glass of *Koolspring Mountain Water* and refilled it from the jug.

'I believe,' said Dittero, 'that brings the day's proceedings to a close. We shall reconvene after breakfast. Good evening, gentlemen.' He strode to the door, where he paused to glower at Fitz. 'One hour,' he snapped, and left.

Vorshagg heaved its way over to Fitz. 'You have my sympathies human,' it growled. 'I would put you out of your misery, but... ' I indicated the box attached to its head.

'Yeah, I know,' said Fitz. 'Thanks for the thought.'

Vorshagg stomped out of the room, his tail thudding against the carpet.

Welwyn rose from his chair and offered Fitz a handshake. Fitz refused the offer. 'Mr Kreiner,' smiled Welwyn. 'If there are any modifications you wish to make to Estebol, I would be only too happy to oblige. Maybe Italian renaissance meets... neo-Aretian mock gothic? Or something retro-futuristic, perhaps?'

'Thanks, mate,' said Fitz, 'but get lost, eh?'

Welwyn swept back his hair and flounced out of the room with swish of crushed velvet.

Fitz turned to Poozle. 'I don't suppose you'd be interested in taking it off my hands, would you? Seventy-seven million ultra-pods?'

The rocket-shaped alien did not reply.

'One careful owner? And several million careless ones...'

Still no answer.

'You know you want to. You bid seventy-five for it, two more won't make any difference. It could be yours.'

Poozle levitated from the table and drifted out of the room.

'Sod you then,' Fitz shifted to look at the only other remaining occupants of the room. Micron's two attendants remained seated upon either side of his cushion.

One of the legionaries coughed. 'Mr Kreiner?'

'Yeah?'

'The Fabulous Micron is prepared to make you an offer for Estebol.'

'Really?'

'Seventy-seven million Arcturan ultra-pods.'

Fitz couldn't believe his luck. 'Seventy-seven?'

The attendant held one finger to his ear, listened to whatever instructions the Fabulous Micron related, and nodded. 'Seventy-seven.'

'Well, I'm not sure,' said Fitz. 'I've grown quite attached to it, you know, up-and-coming area... I was thinking maybe... eighty?'

'The Fabulous Micron says you can either take it or leave it,' said the attendant. 'That's his final offer.'

'I'll take it,' Fitz hurriedly replied.

The water cooler glubbles as I fill my paper cup. I offer it to Prubert, who gives it a tentative sip. 'Haven't got any *Lochmoff's*, have you?'

'I'm afraid not,' says the Doctor. 'I don't think they make it any more.'

For a thousand-year-old, Prubert's not looking too bad. He's aged since *Zap Daniel* – there are strands of grey at the temples and some blood-shotness to the eyes – but he remains an imposing figure, about six foot eight tall.

'They never make anything any more. It's all *new* nowadays.' He blinks, puzzled and sad at the same time. 'Are you really my descendants?'

The Doctor brushes some dust from the padded chair opposite before sitting down. 'You don't get many visitors?'

'Oh, I used to. In the old days. I met my great-grandchildren!' He smiles, remembering. 'They were quite keen to hear my stories. Then the time after that, it was my... my great-great-great-great-grandchildren, I think. They weren't so interested. They just wanted to see a dinosaur.'

He doesn't speak with the Vargo boom. Years of tobacco and whisky have made his voice husky.

I sit beside Charlton. 'And after that?'

He gives me an affectionate smile. 'They lost interest. I must be very dull. I don't keep up with current things, you see.'

'No, no, I can see that would be difficult,' agrees the Doctor.

'To begin with, it was all a fun game! We'd go to sleep, wake up ninety years later. They'd be shouting, "tell us the news!" And it was exciting,

hearing about who had fought wars with who, all the technological developments, the new films. We were time travellers, voyaging into the future!

'But after a while, you stop caring. They change the names of things without telling you. You ask, "whatever happened to so-and-so" and they don't know what you're talking about.' Rubbing his freshly trimmed beard, Prubert squints out of the window of the Relatives Room. 'Pretty,' he says, acknowledging the view. 'The only thing that never changes. Except the people, of course. We're all the same.' He glances at the corridor outside where an old woman is thrusting a walking frame before her. Her skin is as gnarled as a walnut and her hair is like candyfloss. 'All right, Hectrin?'

The old woman smiles at Prubert before clink-clinking her way further down the corridor.

'That's Hectrin. Known her for about five hundred years. Or five years, depending on how you look at it. She's planning to stay here until – in her words – "the universe tidies up its act".'

Another old lady wobbles past.

'And that's Gardlian. She was here before me. Had herself frozen because she didn't want her husband getting his hands on her life insurance. Her husband's in the next Astral Flower along.

'Where was I?' Prubert returns to his theme. 'Things changing! It all blurs into one. History repeats itself – that's why it's so boring. "Oh, we've changed all the names back." And you know another thing? Everyone thinks they're living at the most important, exciting point in history. I tell them, "that's what they thought a hundred years ago, and they were wrong then!"'

He leans over to look at me. His breath is fetid. 'You get a different perspective, you see. Gives you a chance to see what's insignificant, and what's important.'

'And what's important?' I ask.

He gives a sputtering laugh, and shouts, 'Bugger all!'

'Ah,' says the Doctor.

'That's what I've discovered. It's *all* insignificant. All the wars, all the great achievements, and *particularly* all the politicians. None of it matters, because in a hundred years there'll be something equally bad along to replace it.'

'I notice you've been keeping up your profile, though,' says the Doctor. 'Doing chat shows...'

'This place doesn't come cheap. When you wake up you never know what inflation's done to your bank balance. Still get royalties, *Zap Daniel*

and all that, but it's money for pins. So I have to air this carcass and do the circuit. Nostalgia, that's all I'm good for. Archaeology, more like!

'And you do conventions?' prompts Charlton. He's been keeping very quiet, but keeping his eyes fixed on Prubert.

'Yes.' Prubert clears his throat. 'Every now and then I wake up and suddenly I'm fashionable again! It's good, I suppose, that people are interested. It's a kind of immortality. Better than this kind.' He examines his gnarled fingers. 'What they want, you see, is to *remember* me. They don't want me as I am now, they want me as I was then. I must be such a disappointment. Still, keeps me in antifreeze! Speaking of which, you haven't got anything to drink?'

'No. So, you remember the old days?' asks the Doctor.

'Ha!' Prubert jabs a finger at the Doctor and coughs. 'I've worked you out!'

'What?'

'You've come to get me to talk about *Zap Daniel*. "Was it hard, getting strapped into those Wings?" "What were you thinking when you launched the attack on the Imperial City of Mang?" I don't know why they ask. They've got the answers written down for them already, in their magazines. They only want me to say what they've already heard!'

'We're not –' I attempt to interrupt.

'Knew you weren't my descendants. I think they must've all died out, otherwise they'd be touching me for an inheritance. Serves them right.' He looks at the Doctor expectantly. 'So where is it then? Your tape recorder?'

'I'm afraid I've neglected to bring one,' says the Doctor.

'Well, that's no bloody good is it! First you forget the *Lochmoff's*, then –'

'We're not fans,' I say.

'Not *fans*?' He leans back in his seat, pulling up the sleeves of his pyjamas to scratch the backs of his arms.

'Though, while we're here... ' The Doctor retrieves a notebook from one of his pockets. He presents it to Prubert with a fountain pen. 'If you wouldn't mind making it out to, "The Doctor"...?'

Prubert scribbles into the book. As he flicks through the pages, I catch glimpses of other names. Winston. Conan Doyle. Emiline. John, Paul, George, Pete and Stu. And two Nelsons.

Prubert returns the book to a grinning Doctor. 'So what did you want –'

Charlton ahems. He's holding out an autograph book of his own.

Prubert takes it and scrawls his signature. 'There you... go'

Good grief. Now Charlton's got a camera out. 'If you could...'

The Doctor leaps across to sit beside Prubert. I smile as Charlton lines up the camera. About a minute later, when my smile has become a grimace, he takes the photo. 'And one more thing,' says Charlton.

'Yes?'

'You don't think you could, just once, for me...'

'You want me to say the line?'

Charlton nods. 'If you don't want to that's fine, but -'

Prubert clears his throat and inhales, his chest rising. Then, for a moment, we are back in the world of *Zap Daniel*, as he bellows, to the fullest extent of his voice, 'What do you mean, Daniel's *not dead*?'

The Doctor applauds, grinning like an idiot. Then he remembers why we are here. He stands.

'Prubert Gastridge,' he announces, 'We're here to talk to you about something else. About... Shardybarn and Valuensis...'

Prubert lifts his overgrown eyebrows as though begging forgiveness. 'I knew you'd come,' he says. His eyes glisten with tears. 'I'm sorry. I'm so terribly, terribly sorry.'

'We need you to tell us everything,' says the Doctor.

'I was in a bad way. I didn't know what I was doing! It wasn't my idea.' Prubert holds his head in his hands. 'You must believe me!'

The Doctor gazes down at him pityingly. 'Tell us.'

'In a way, I'm glad.' Prubert wipes his face on his sleeve. 'You don't know what it's been like, living with it. *Knowing*.'

'Knowing what, Prubert?'

'I didn't realise, not to begin with... ' He rubs the corners of his eyes. 'Are they still there? Shardybarn? Valuensis?'

The Doctor shakes his head.

'It was just another role... ' Prubert hauls himself out of his seat. 'I'll tell you anything you want. It seems my past has caught up with -'

A jangling screech interrupts him. I swap an alarmed glance with Charlton.

The bell continues. I have to shout to be heard. 'What's happening?'

'Security alarm.' The Doctor pulls open the door, and peers into the passageway. The coast is clear, so we all follow him out. Seconds later, two nurses shove past us.

The alarm is even louder here. 'Where are we going?'

The Doctor hesitates, not sure which way to run. He raises his hand, instructing us to wait. Someone is coming.

It's the old woman with the walking frame. Hectrin.

Another figure slides into view behind her. It's a shimmering force in black and white with a white, skull-like face and a pallbearer's suit. It

floats towards us surrounded by a hail of static.

A Ceccec.

The Doctor backs towards us. I watch in horror as the Ceccec looms over the old woman. She knows it's behind her, she's staggering as fast as she can, but she can barely manage walking pace.

There is a fizzling snap, and the old woman's body becomes a serrated blur. She flickers and a crackling line scrolls up and down her body. She collapses on to her knees, throwing aside her frame. For a moment I think she's alive, as she's put out her hands to break her fall, but then she slumps, dead, her body steaming.

The Ceccec glides over the electrocuted corpse. It casts no shadow, so it's impossible to guess its distance, but it's getting bigger, so it's getting nearer.

The Doctor shouts, 'We have to get back to the docking bay, Trix! Before these things kill everyone in sight.'

Another sliding door separates and we're back in the arrivals lounge. Prubert is the first through the doors, showing a surprising turn of speed. Charlton follows, then halts. As I see what he's seeing, I halt too.

The Ceccecs are already here, hovering over a mist of static. They lift their arms in welcome as they drift over the smashed cherubs and Davids and the bodies of their victims.

Some still remain in their chairs, slumped forward. Others are piled on the floor. There are wispy-haired patients, and receptionists, and medics and cleaners. Steam hisses from the bodies.

The Doctor guides me towards the shuttle bay. There is no time to wait, no time to absorb the shock. We have to move.

The Ceccecs are in no hurry. One glides over to the reception desk. The receptionist's computer bursts into flame. The Ceccec does not seem concerned as the fire catches, slithering up the walls.

We're through the door. Another couple of corridors, and we'll be back in the shuttle.

Fitz needed some night air. He walked through the gardens, past the spotlit sculptures, past the fountains. The air was fragrant and crickets chirruped. Or, thought Fitz, they were playing the crickets chirruping tape.

OK, so, list of suspects. There was Vorshagg. Vorshagg could easily be the murderer. In fact, it would probably like nothing better than to have killed the lot of them. And it had a motive – it was the least well-off of the delegates, it would benefit from putting the competition out of action.

The Fabulous Micron? Fitz wasn't sure about him. The two attendants were receiving instructions, but were they from the Micron? Maybe there wasn't a Micron at all, and they were taking orders from somebody else?

Fitz walked up the ammonite-shell steps to the hotel. Welwyn Borr. Although not part-

Fitz suddenly found himself caught in a flurry of silk. Something rammed him in the back of the shoulder and knocked him to the ground. He landed sharply in the gravel.

Someone was panting in his ear, and he had hair in his face.

Something crashed to the ground by Fitz's feet.

Gasping, Fitz pulled himself upright. One of the statues from the hotel rooftop lay in pieces a few yards away. Fitz stared at it. If he'd not been thrown on to his back, it would've flattened him. He would be dead.

The pile of velvet and silk by his side groaned and sat up. 'Are you all right?'

Fitz nodded and helped him to his feet 'You... you saved my life.'

'I saw the statue, I... 'Welwyn was trembling. 'Didn't realise I had it in me!'

Fitz looked at him suspiciously. Yes, Welwyn had saved his life – or had he just set it up to look like that? It always happened in the books, the villain pretends to save the detective from certain death.

Or had someone else pushed the statue? It could've been any of the delegates. Vorshagg could've done it, it didn't constitute physical violence. Micron could've ordered his attendants to do it, Poozle could have instructed a Zwee... Welwyn could've have instructed a Zwee.

'I've never saved anyone's life before,' said Welwyn. 'If only my camera Zwee had been here...'

Fitz glanced up at the roof of the hotel. Squinting, he spotted the gap in the row of statues. There was nobody there. 'Did you see who it was?'

Welwyn shook his head.

'What were you doing out here?' Fitz asked. 'Were you following me?'

'No,' said Welwyn. 'I mean... yes.'

'Why?'

'I thought you might have decided, what you wanted doing to Estebol.'

'Sold it, I'm afraid.' Fitz shoved open the hotel door and went into the lobby. Whatever was going on, one thing was clear. They were out to get him, which meant he must be getting close.

Fitz was shaken, but not stirred.

His lungs bursting, Charlton staggered down the floral-patterned corridor and into the shuttle airlock. The Doctor held out a hand to help Prubert

and Trix inside.

There was a bleep-bleeping as the Doctor attacked the airlock keypad. Before entering the airlock, Trix hesitated, looking back.

A medic appeared at the end of the corridor. She had panic in her eyes. Behind her, floating with a melancholic, unhurried grace, was a Ceccec. It raised its hands.

The Doctor finished with the keypad and reached for Trix. 'Come on!' he shouted. 'Get inside'

Trix glared back him. 'We can't leave them!'

'If we stay they're all dead,' the Doctor shouted over the alarm. 'If we go they may have a slim chance.'

'That's running away!'

'No,' the Doctor said. 'Not if we take the bad guys with us'

There was the hiss of hydraulics. Trix took the Doctor's hand, and he heaved her into the airlock and into his arms.

The doors slid shut, silencing the alarm. The airlock doors were made of glass, so Charlton could still see the nurse. And she could still see them.

There was a flash, and she staggered forward clutching her stomach, smoke pumping from her sleeves and collar.

Charlton reached into his pocket, and felt the familiar curve of the tele-door handle. Keeping a grip on the handle, he followed the Doctor, Trix and Prubert into the shuttle cockpit.

The Doctor leapt into the pilot's chair and surveyed the rows of dials and switches. A moment later, his hands darted over the controls, pressing buttons and adjusting switches. Indicator lights clicked into life.

Trix took the co-pilot seat. 'Where are we going?'

The Doctor opened an overhead compartment and reset a row of toggles. The shuttle's engines sputtered and growled. 'As far away as possible.'

'And then?' asked Prubert.

'And then,' the Doctor wrapped his hands around the control joystick, 'hopefully Charlton will use his tele-door to get us out of here.'

Charlton retrieved the handle from his pocket. 'Why didn't we use it before?' said Trix.

'If, as I believe, the Ceccecs are after us, we have to draw them away from the Centre for Posterity...'

The Doctor squeezed the throttle, and Charlton reeled against the wall at the back of the cockpit as the shuttle rotated. Through the windscreen the grey, pipe-covered walls of the base dropped from view. The ship tilted to one side, and a riot of whizzing colour filled the windows.

Charlton clutched a wall-handle as the shuttle's engines rose to an ear-splitting whine. The Doctor remained calm, tapping dials, unconcerned by the leaf stem that filled the windscreen in terrifying detail. Charlton guessed it was only a few metres away. And swinging closer.

'A spiral ascent,' muttered the Doctor to himself 'Should be the safest way out. Trix, everyone, strap yourselves in. This might be bumpy. I haven't driven one of these before.'

'You've never driven one of these before?'

'Look on the bright side, Charlton! I've never crashed one before, either!'

Outside, the stem span away in a blur as the shuttle banked to the right. Charlton felt they were falling. Looking out of the side window, Charlton could see where the shuttle's shadow bobbed over the waves.

And there was the Centre for Posterity. It was surprisingly small, making Charlton realise how far and how rapidly they had ascended –

There was whiteness.

– and the centre had gone, replaced by a billowing fireball. The fireball surged upwards, scorching away the foliage around it, turning the leaves to ash.

The shockwave hit. The shuttle shuddered and Charlton felt several clangs beneath his feet. For an instant they were weightless and falling.

The view outside dropped away to reveal the undersides of petals and leaves and the spinning starlit blackness of space.

Charlton felt the wall press into his back. The shuttle accelerated, hard. His cheeks dragged themselves back to his ears and he felt as though he was at the bottom of a long, dark shaft.

The petals and flowers and tendrils and leaves whooshed by.

The Doctor cut the engines and the universe relaxed. Outside, the stars drifted by in a whirl, then came to a halt. Charlton felt no pressure against his back. No weight at all.

The Doctor swung the joystick to the left, rotating the craft until they were looking back at the astral flower.

It was dying. Its leaves shrivelled away to ash, the buds bursting and becoming smoking husks. Fire slithered across its surface, gorging itself and dancing in glee. Thick, ugly smoke poured out of the fractures in its crust.

No one spoke. No one could find the words.

The flower imploded, collapsing like a bonfire, sending out scuttles of orange sparks. Smouldering debris erupted from its belly, streaking across empty space to impact with the other astral flowers. Igniting them –

One by one, they exploded into flame. Orange, molten glows appeared on each of the spheres, and grew.

Chapter 10

The Selfish Memes

I find Prubert examining his reflection in a Tomorrow Window in one of the research station's storage rooms. He doesn't notice I'm here – his eyes are brooding upon his own image. He strokes his beard with an air of thwarted ambition. He's found a dressing gown from somewhere, but beneath that he's still in his check-patterned pyjamas and slippers.

'We had get-togethers, you know,' he says, without turning. 'All fossils together! It was nice to wake up to familiar faces. Impossible snobs, the lot of them, of course, but they were the nearest thing I had to friends.'

I nod sympathetically.

'They understood what it was like, and now they've gone too. Just like everyone else. The way of all flesh. I'm a man out of my time. Should've died a thousand years ago, but still I mangle on. Not for much longer, though, eh?'

'No?'

'Looks like I'll be eking the rest of my natural in whatever Zoddorsaken year this is. Can't even get a decent drink!' He smiles at me, then returns to his reflection.

'It's a Tomorrow Window,' I explain.

'New thing, is it?'

'You look into it and see your future.'

Prubert peers into the glass. 'Seems I haven't got one.'

'No, it's not switched on,' I explain, indicating the wall-plug. I crouch down to turn it on.

'Don't bother,' says Prubert. 'Not interested.'

'Don't say that –'

'I don't think I want immortality any more.'

'Why did you freeze yourself in the first place then?'

'Not sure,' he replies. 'I think a part of me knew that one day I would be called to confess my sins. Ha!'

'Speaking of which, the Doctor says to tell you that if you're ready, he's in the dining lounge –'

Prubert gathers his dressing gown about him. 'That's all I want now – redemption. Then I might forgive myself.'

'Forgive yourself for what?'

Prubert looked around the lounge, as though seeking help. His eyes flicked from Charlton, to the Doctor, to Trix, to the window that overlooked the gas giant, then back to his coffee.

'It was all a long time ago,' he creaked. 'Not sure I remember details.'

'Long ago for us,' said the Doctor, pulling up the chair opposite. 'But only a dozen or so years for you.'

'Yes. Yes!' Prubert cleared his throat. 'It all began back in 1450, I think it was. I hadn't seen much work since *Zap Daniel*. Typecasting, everyone thought of me as Vargo, king of the Buzzardmen, didn't want to know! Ended up treading the boards at some ghastly end-of-the-pier dive in Froom-Upon-Harpwick. Summer season, panto, summer season, panto. I gave a very good Captain Hook.'

The Doctor grinned in agreement. 'Oh, one of the best.'

'I was in a bad way, though. No lucre, no prospects. Shames me to say, I was drinking the odd drop. Can't remember if I had a wife, maybe she left me... I was washed-up, washed-up and hung out to dry. Then along came this part.'

'What part?' said the Doctor.

'A hundred thousand a month, they offered me! Back then, that was a tidy sum. Several tidy sums! Keep the wolves at bay. Take the wolves out to dinner if you liked! They told me that the part would involve dressing up, and –'

'– shouting?' said the Doctor.

'Lots of it. Booming oratory was required!' He inspected his coffee. 'You don't have anything stronger?'

The Doctor shook his head. 'Who offered you this part?'

'Never did find out. It all came through my agent. Inane little creep. Dead now, of course. Which I suppose is some comfort.' He gazed into the middle distance. 'Mine not to reason why, mine just to say the lines.'

'What did the role entail?'

'It was an unusual thing. Kind of a cameo. It involved travelling around the galaxy and "buzzing" all these undeveloped worlds. We were given a whole list!'

'We?'

'I had a pilot, and a dresser, and a special-effects boy. Don't know what happened to them. . . What I had to do was transmat down to these primitive civilisations in this turquoise chair – don't know what happened to the chair – and deliver this speech.' Prubert looked embarrassed.

'What sort of speech, Prubert?'

A sort of an "I am your god" speech.'

'"I am your god"?''

'It was very...*glam*. I'd appear in a golden shaft of light, amid much rushing of wind. And there'd be a tape playing, some choral stuff. I had these gloves that could release fireballs, just like that.' Prubert demonstrated, pointing with one hand. 'Whoosh! Bang! *Marvellous* fun!'

'You *pretended* to be a god?' said the Doctor.

'I made the part my own! And then I'd give them a pep-talk about something or other. Apparently they were all at a critical stage in their development, and my advice would help steer them on to the right course.'

'On to the right course?' stuttered Charlton in disbelief.

'I'd introduce them to concepts like, er, organised religion. Or the internal combustion engine. Or daytime television, or the cult of celebrity. Give them the benefit of a little know-how and send them on their way.'

'Who decided what you would tell them?' asked the Doctor.

'We were given instructions. A list of planets and a list of what to say. All very specific, we weren't to go off-script.'

'Off-script! Good grief! You were interfering with planets' destinies, you... old fool!' said Charlton.

Prubert's lips wobbled. 'I was told it would be *educational*. Give them a head start. Influence for good.'

The Doctor raised his eyebrows. 'That's what you believed?'

'To begin with, yes. Until they had me giving talks about other things. War. Genetic modification. Capitalism. Racial intolerance. Blame culture. Tabloid journalism. Text messaging.' Prubert's face crumpled. 'I went along with it, I didn't *know*. It seemed harmless enough.'

'How many did you do?' the Doctor muttered. '*How many?*'

'Lost count,' said Prubert. 'A hundred, maybe more. We were at it for a good year or so. Two a day, sometimes.'

'Doctor,' said Trix. 'I don't get it. Why were they doing this?'

The Doctor drummed his fingers on the table. 'Come on, Trix. You know *why*. You've seen the end results.'

'What, you mean they introduced these ideas to the cultures, so that a thousand-odd years later, they'd blow themselves up?'

The Doctor nodded.

'No way. That's absurd.'

'No,' said Prubert. The Doctor's right. That was our job. To introduce selfish memes.'

'Selfish memes?' said Trix. 'What are they?'

'A meme,' said the Doctor, 'is a unit of cultural transmission. A term coined by Richard Dawkins. It's a... concept that propagates itself within a culture by a process of imitation. Like a tune, or how you tie shoelaces, marriage, language or wearing a hat. The idea gets passed on from person to person, spreading, transmitting, and, in a sense, *evolving*.'

'An idea evolves?'

'Evolution is adaptation by a process of extinction, and the same applies to concepts, yes? For instance, you have the idea of "monarchy". Now, we don't know when kings were invented, probably thousands of years ago. The point is, the idea caught on, and soon every country had one. Some had different types – khans or chieftains or emperors – as the meme *adapted* itself to the local situation. And, as time marched on, so the idea of a monarchy changed, dying out in some places, adapting to survive in others.'

'Got you,' said Trix. 'So a meme is like an idea?'

'Yes,' said the Doctor. 'Those memes that spread their influence widely tend to be the most successful. Memes are in competition, and some are stronger than others – the trousers meme is gradually driving the kilt meme to extinction.'

'Because of its adaptability,' Charlton added helpfully.

'Is there going to be a point at the end of this?' said Trix.

The Doctor gave her a dark look. 'What *Prubert* has been doing, however, has been introducing a certain of *type* of meme into the planet's meme pools.'

'Meme pools?'

'Cultures. This type of meme is highly successful, transmits itself widely, and ultimately dominates the whole culture to the expense of *all other influences*. The selfish meme.'

Prubert's face crumpled. 'What have I done? How many people have I killed?' He fell forward wretchedly.

The Doctor watched him through dismissive eyes. 'Billions, Prubert. Billions. You have condemned whole worlds to suffering. You have brought war where there was peace and fear where there was innocence.'

Prubert was shaking with grief. 'It wasn't me! I was playing a part!'

'Doctor,' said Trix. 'I think you should lay off him a bit.'

'Lay off him?' The Doctor rose from his seat, walked over to the window and gazed out into space. 'Do you have any idea what this... *idiot*

has done? Valuensis, Shardybarn, goodness knows how many more – if he hadn't visited them, they would still be here now!

'Yeah, I know,' said Trix. 'But lay off him.'

'It's not really his fault, Doctor,' said Charlton. 'After all, if he hadn't done it, they would have got someone else.'

'That's no excuse,' the Doctor snapped.

'It's true though, isn't it?' said Charlton. 'I mean, right, they just got Prubert because he was the best man for the job? The best actor they could get.'

Prubert's face lifted. 'You really think so?'

'I'm sure you were very convincing,' Charlton told him.

'I was,' Prubert agreed, rubbing away the tears. 'They worshipped me and everything. I was *adored!*'

'I know they *worshipped* you,' said the Doctor, returning to the table and leaning over Prubert. He slammed his hands on the table. 'We saw the temples!'

'Temples?'

'On Shardybarn,' Trix explained, 'they had cathedrals built in your image.'

'Did they?' said Prubert delightedly.

'Yes,' said the Doctor. 'You, on your throne, pointing.'

'Are they still there?'

The Doctor shook his head. 'All gone, I'm afraid. Blew themselves up trying to persuade you to do an encore...'

'Oh. That's a pity.'

'Yes, it *is*, isn't it?' said the Doctor sharply.

'One thing I don't get, though,' said Charlton. 'On Shardybarn we also saw these temples for a god with four faces... I think one was dog, another was a fish?'

'Ah, yes' Prubert sighed. 'I had to wear this mask. You wouldn't believe how hot it got. I had to drink through a straw. And sweat, must've lost two stone. It was quite impressive, in the right light, if you didn't look too closely.'

'King Vargo wasn't impressive enough?' said the Doctor.

'That's what I said!' Prubert agreed. 'I didn't see why I had to wear it either, but they did insist! They said it was of crucial importance to the role. I said I saw the role differently. They said it didn't matter if I saw it differently.' He licked his lips. 'After a while, though, I stopped bothering with it. I'd wear it when I first arrived – make a grand entrance -then after a few minutes I'd slip it off.'

'Prubert Gastridge, you are an egomaniac.' The Doctor's features softened into a grin. 'Fortunately. If you'd kept the mask on, we'd never have known it was you.'

'It's always nice to be recognised,' said Prubert.

The Doctor took the chair beside him. 'You wouldn't be able to remember the names of the planets you went to?'

'The names?' Prubert winced. 'Don't think so. There were such lot. If I saw a list I might recognise some -'

'A list, a list, a list... ' The Doctor held out a hand to Charlton. 'Do you have that Galactic Heritage leaflet?'

Charlton nodded and passed the Doctor the leaflet. The Doctor smoothed it open on the table in front of Prubert. 'Do these ring any bells?'

Prubert squinted at the paper. 'Shardybarn, Valuensis, Kootanoot, Darp, Diqdarl, Prum... ' His eyes darted down the page in astonishment. '...Perfugium, Zazz, Estebol, Rethgil, Huldraa, Minuea, Aighin, Tyza, Earth... ' He trailed an incredulous finger over the last names. '...Flamvolt, Zil, Oelid, Stavromula, Ryrus, Boojus Five, Wabbab, Ijj., it's them. All of them! All the planets I visited!'

'All planets listed by Galactic Heritage!' exclaimed Charlton.

The Doctor took the leaflet and creased it flat between his thumb and forefinger. 'Now, isn't that a coincidence?'

Time for the Hercule Poirot scene, thought Fitz. The suspects had gathered in the conference room and it was time for the denouement. The moment when everything would fall into place. He hoped.

Dittero was sliding a laminate on to the overhead projector when Fitz strode into the projector light. Shielding his eyes, Fitz unplugged the projector. 'Excuse me,' he said. 'I have something to say.'

Around the table, each of the delegates started in surprise. Well, Vorshagg and Welwyn started, and Micron's two attendants raised their chins, but Poozle merely hovered.

'We have a murderer in our midst,' said Fitz, flicking on the ceiling lights. 'Someone here killed Nimbit and Question Intonation... and I think it's time we found out who.'

'Of course, Mr Kreiner,' said Dittero with a sarcastic tut. 'We have all the time in the world. Please, *enlighten* us. And then maybe we can proceed with the auction?'

'OK.' Fitz gathered his thoughts. 'I'll take you through my thought processes. I'll begin with... er... Nimbit.'

'Now, I'm asking myself, why would anyone want to kill Nimbit? The crucial moment, I think, occurred during the bidding for Valuensis. Nim-

bit was winning, if you remember... until Poozle requested an adjournment. Why? The reason's obvious. Somebody didn't want Nimbit to win. Why not just bid against him though? Maybe the person couldn't afford to – Nimbit was desperate to buy Valuensis, after all. Something they hadn't accounted for, you see.'

'That wasn't the reason why Nimbit died, though. He was always going to be murdered. Not because of anything he'd done. Just because it was part of the grand plan.'

Fitz paused to sip a glass of water. 'Next, Question Intonation. Before Questiony was murdered, it said to me that it wasn't here for the auction, it was here for some other reason. It was working for someone – or something – and when they wanted to dispose of its services, they disposed of it, too.'

'But how did they do it?' asked Welwyn. 'Where did the other ball go?'

'I should've thought you'd have got that! Whoever it was working for requested a meeting, but then told Question Intonation they were still concerned about being overheard. They would have to go somewhere else...'

'Another planet?' breathed Welwyn.

'Right, so they open a tele-door, wait until one half of Question Intonation has passed through –'

'– and close the tele-door,' grunted Vorshagg.

'Gosh, though,' said Welwyn. 'That's really awful.'

'Yes,' Dittero agreed. 'A *ghastly* way to go. If the two halves are separated –'

'– they both expire,' said Fitz. 'So, anyway, those are the murders. Now, the suspects. Who could have done this, who wanted the competition dead, who couldn't afford the high prices the planets were fetching...?' He pointed. 'Vorshagg!'

The lizard rose to its feet. 'How dare you!'

'Wait' Fitz held up a palm. 'Vorshagg is, as we all know, an extremely vicious creature. Killing is its second nature.'

Vorshagg's eyes narrowed. 'Don't think you can get round me with flattery.'

'Our Vorshagg, though, has been fitted with a de-aggrifier. Meaning he's incapable of violent action. So he couldn't have killed anyone, could he? Or could he? Two things worried me. Firstly, that the murders were executed in a way that might not constitute violence –'

Vorshagg growled. 'My de-aggrifier forbids any action which may cause harm to another, even inadvertently.'

'Yes,' said Fitz. 'Secondly, I thought that maybe it was a malfunction. Maybe the thunderstorm that affected the Zwees also affected the de-aggrifier? But no, because we were with Vorshagg at the time; if the de-aggrifier had de-activated, he would have killed us all.'

Vorshagg nodded. 'I certainly would.'

'Anyway, Vorshagg couldn't be the murderer, for one simple reason. The concept of premeditated murder is completely alien to the Vorshagg race. You see, they are *gratuitously* violent. They never kill for a *reason*. So I'm sorry, Vorshagg, but much as you'd like to be, you're not the murderer.'

Vorshagg sat down sullenly.

'No, it's not Vorshagg,' Fitz turned and pointed, 'is it... Welwyn?'

The designer's mouth opened and closed like an aghast fish. 'Wh-what?'

'The problem I had with you is that whoever our murderer is, they are highly efficient with an attention to detail. Which rather rules you out.'

Welwyn continued his aghast fish impersonation. 'I am an award-winning artist -'

'Oh, come on!' said Fitz. 'I wouldn't trust you to rewire a plug, nevet mind a whole planet! In fact, the only thing that points to Welwyn being the murderer is that he saved my life. Turns out he's not a complete incompetent after all.'

'Thanks,' Welwyn said. 'That's very generous of you.'

'Word of advice, mate. Stop messing with planets, it's not really your forte, is it?' said Fitz. 'I'll give you some pointers, after I've identified the murderer... the Fabulous Micron!'

All eyes turned to the polished glass dome upon its gold-braided cushion and its two accompanying legionaries.

'Now, if there's one thing you can say about the Micron, it's that they have an... inferiority complex. I guess it's what makes them so successful. Because, after all, Fabulous here is rich, right? So why would he need to knock out the competition?'

One of the legionaries placed a finger to his ear. 'The Fabulous Micron denies any wrongdoing.'

'You know, for a while I didn't even believe there was a Fabulous Micron. I mean, all I've seen of him is a teeny-tiny fella in a glass dome. Maybe he didn't exist, and it was just you two guys camping it up?'

'The Fabulous Micron wishes to assure those present that he is also present.'

'Which got me thinking,' said Fitz. 'Maybe someone other than the Micron was telling you what to do. I mean, how would we tell? Maybe Vorshagg's de-aggrifier also worked as a transmitter, and could send out

instructions? But of course that's not the case, it would be ridiculous, wouldn't it... ' he halted and pointed, 'Poozle!'

The cylinder did not reply.

'Now, right from the beginning I've had my suspicions about Poozle here. He doesn't talk much, but maybe that's normal for the Varble, I don't know. Then there was that "attack" in his room – not a very subtle double-bluff, I'm afraid.'

Poozle still did not say anything.

'Keeping quiet? I'm not surprised. The only time you're chatty is when you're bidding in the auctions. You keep on upping the price, and yet you never win, do you? It must be very frustrating to be Poozle of the Varble.'

'You think Poozle was the murderer?' said Welwyn.

'I did,' said Fitz. 'But you know what they say, it's always the one you least suspect, and Poozle here was a bit too suspicious. And, I'm afraid, it couldn't have been Poozle, for one simple reason. There's no such thing as a Varble!'

'What?' sputtered Vorshagg.

'The Fabulous Micron says, "No such thing as a Varble?"'

'I don't get it,' said Welwyn.

'I remembered something I'd noticed when I first saw Poozle of the Varble. You see, Poozle isn't an alien that resembles a lava lamp. It *is* just a lava lamp.'

'We heard him talk!' protested Vorshagg. 'And he floats –'

'A lava lamp fitted with a voice synthesiser and some levitation gubbins,' Fitz explained, 'but still, basically, a lava lamp! No, it wasn't Vorshagg that was being operated by remote control, or Micron's chums. It was *Poozle*.'

The lava lamp bubbled. Fitz peered into its green depths.

'Nothing to say for yourself? You do surprise me.'

Welwyn blinked in thought. 'Why was he bidding in the auction, then?'

'Yes,' said Vorshagg. 'What would a lava lamp want with a planet?'

'Yes,' said one of the legionaries. 'The Fabulous Micron wishes to know also.'

'It didn't want a planet. Or at least, the person controlling it didn't want Poozle to end up with one. That's why it didn't bid against me when I bought Estebol. It's here for one reason only.'

'And what's that?' said Dittero.

'The mistake I made,' said Fitz, 'was assuming that the murderer wanted to get the planets cheaply. But that's not what's happened, is it? The prices have gone up!'

He was on the home straight. 'Remember when we were on Earth, and Poozle had the chance of buying it? There wasn't an auction, because *you're not going to get a very good price with only one bidder*. Poozle wasn't here to bid for *himself* – he was here to bid against the Micron!'

Welwyn stared at Poozle in disbelief. 'Poozle... a *stooge*?'

'Question Intonation told me he thought he was here for the same reason as Poozle. You see, Question Intonation never had any interest in buying a planet. It was only here to *annoy* us... to increase the antagonism – to make Micron shell out that little bit more!

'So why did Nimbit and Question Intonation die? To make us think that one of us was prepared to kill to get their hands on a planet. And because the Fabulous Micron refuses to be *intimidated*, it ends up paying over the odds. Classic reverse psychology.'

'You mean, they put the frighteners on?' said Vorshagg.

'Ten points, that lizard,' said Fitz. 'Another odd thing. People were being murdered... and yet the auction carried on as normal. I mean, come on, it's all a bit suss, isn't it? Unless the auction was the whole *raison d'être* of the murders...'

Vorshagg leaned forward. 'Why was *I* invited here?'

'All we've heard about is how desirable all these worlds are, how valuable they are, how they are absolute bargains. And yet, what, only half a dozen of us turn up for the auction? Looks bad, doesn't it, if you can't even manage any of the decent monsters – where are the Daleks, the Wrarth Warriors, the Krargs – all you can get is the c-list! I mean, come on – I've never heard of any of you before!

'That's why you're here, Vorshagg. I'm sure that's why I was accepted so easily, too. To make up the numbers. Because if the Fabulous Micron suspected that it was *the only bidder*, it might not be so willing to fork out the readies.'

'You mean,' said Welwyn, 'this whole thing was for the Micron's benefit?'

Fitz nodded. 'This whole thing has been a set-up, organised by our friend, estate agent and murderer, Dittero Shandy.'

'Really?' A smile insinuated itself on to Dittero's lips and he rose, clasping his clipboard to his chest.

'One last thing. When I was trying to work out how someone might control Vorshagg or Micron's bodyguards, I was thinking – where could have they hidden the remote control? And then it struck me. Here we are, with all this high-technology around us, and you're still using a *clipboard*.'

'What?'

'I don't think I've seen you write on it once. You just tap it with your fingers. Is that how you make Poozle speak?'

'Try it yourself,' snapped Dittero as he threw the clipboard across the table at Fitz. Fitz caught it, and –

– and saw what Dittero had concealed beneath the clipboard. The stubby laser pistol swung in his direction.

'You don't mean... ' Welwyn was aghast. 'It was *you!*'

'Welwyn, not only are you stupid... ' said Dittero, 'you are... well, actually stupid is all you are.'

'The Fabulous Micron wishes to express his disapprobation.'

'Oh, does he?' said Dittero. 'Well you can tell his minisculeness, his credit card payments have cleared, so frankly I don't care. Oh, and he's an *insignificant* little insect with delusions of grandeur. That should get his back up.'

Fitz backed into the corner. Glancing down at the clipboard, he noticed a cross-hair grid printed on the front sheet.

'The *Fabulous* Micron!' Dittero laughed. 'I've picked out more impressive life forms from between my toes.'

Vorshagg rose to its feet with a roar of self-righteousness. 'Dittero Shandy!'

Dittero levelled his pistol at the reptile. 'And the all-powerful Vorshagg. So dangerous, so terrifying, so *impotent*. While I, on the other hand, am perfectly capable of killing... ' Dittero swung his gun back towards Fitz, '...*any* of you.'

'Why d'you do it?' said Fitz. Using his left hand, hidden by the clipboard, he ran a finger across the grid. Behind Dittero, Poozle rose from the table.

'I had to get the highest possible price by *any means necessary*,' said Dittero. 'I *am* an estate agent!'

'Right,' humoured Fitz. 'And a very good one. Not totally sure about your current approach, though... ' Poozle halted in mid air. Fitz slid his finger to the left, and Poozle glided towards the back of Dittero's head...

The Micron's attendants rose. 'The Fabulous Micron wishes –'

'Oh, I've had it up to here with the Fabulous bloody Micron,' sighed Dittero as he pointed his gun at the attendants and fired, twice. Laser bolts screeched out of the barrel and thudded into each of the legionaries. They slithered to the floor, their corpses steaming.

'Micron wishes to say this, Micron wishes to say that,' spat Dittero in a mock nasal voice. 'God, I *hate* fussy buyers.' He aimed the gun at the cushion. It exploded into flame. The fire grew, then shrank, as though the film had been reversed, and disappeared, taking the cushion with it.

Poozle was now only a few inches above Dittero's head. Fitz tapped his finger, trying to make the lava lamp drop, but instead it rose.

'There's only one thing worse than fussy buyers,' sneered Dittero, searching for another victim. 'You know what they are, Welwyn? Incompetent bloody decorators.'

Welwyn barely had time to stand before the blaster was pointing in his direction. The laser bolt struck Welwyn in the chest and sent him staggering across the floor. He stumbled over a chair and landed on his backside.

Confused, he gawped at the smouldering wound in his belly. 'I...I...' he sputtered. 'This is... a great loss -'

Dittero fired again. The bolt ripped into Welwyn's chest.

'I die,' Welwyn croaked. 'I leave behind me a legacy...of genius. The universe shall be a... much duller,' blood dribbled out of his mouth, 'place...without me.' He attempted a rueful smile. 'If only my camera Zwee were here -' He slumped to the floor.

'And another thing I hate,' said Dittero, 'is people who are too clever for their own good.' He levelled the pistol at Fitz. 'Mr Kreiner, you have put out my whole schedule.'

Fitz tapped the clipboard. He looked up at Poozle, hoping for it to plunge on to Dittero's head and knock him unconscious. Instead, the lava lamp said, 'Gleetings!'

Dittero swung upwards and blasted at the lava lamp. It whooshed across the room and smashed into the far wall.

Vorshagg gave a terrible growl and lunged at Dittero.

Startled, Dittero fired at Vorshagg. He missed the reptile's face, catching it on the side of its skull. On the de-aggrifier. The casing broke open to reveal spitting circuits and wires.

Vorshagg swiped the remains of the de-aggrifier away and dragged in a joyous lungful of air. It bellowed with delight. Then its jaws dropped open, revealing cluttered rows of teeth and a slick tongue. 'I...can...KILL!'

Dittero fired again. The laser bolt scorched Vorshagg's chest, but the lizard did not stop. Dittero backed away, heading for the door. Vorshagg hurled aside the chairs in its path, hissing and gnashing and slashing.

Fitz didn't move. He didn't want Vorshagg to notice him.

Dittero reached the door and, shaking with fear, dashed into the corridor. With a roar, Vorshagg lurched after him.

Fitz waited until its stomps had died away, then he let the clipboard slip from his fingers. Around him the conference room was in disarray - smashed chairs, chunks torn out of the table, the remains of Poozle slithering down one wall. And the charred corpses of Welwyn and Micron's

two bronzed, well-muscled attendants.

This sort of thing never happened to Hercule Poirot.

'I'm just saying, Doctor, it seems a lot of trouble.'

'Quite the opposite, Trix. You pick up a planet listed by the Galactic Heritage Foundation – as it can't be developed, it is; to all intents and purposes, worthless...'

'Not worthless,' protests Charlton from behind us.

'In economic terms, I mean.' The Doctor sweeps impatiently along the corridor. We pass three of Charlton's employees in their baggy orange overalls.

'Oh. Right.'

'And then,' the Doctor continues, 'you season with selfish memes, leave on simmer and wait until it's boiled away. And you're left with a prime piece of real estate.'

'Wouldn't it be easier to invade?' I suggest. 'Or use a space plague?'

'No,' explains Charlton, 'because you'd never get planning permission. You have to make it look like the population have brought their extinction upon themselves.'

'I get it,' I say. 'It's all a big scam.'

'The biggest,' sighs the Doctor. 'Countless lives lost... all in the name of property speculation.'

'Who do you think's behind it?' I say as we arrive at the area with the tele-doors.

The Doctor looks at me curiously. 'You haven't any idea?'

I shrug. I can't think of anyone who would fit the bill. 'Dittero Shandy?'

'No, no, no, he was representing someone else.'

'Who d'you think that is, then?'

The Doctor frowns. 'I don't think I know them yet.' He gazes into my eyes. 'But I think they know of me.'

'Who's the egomaniac now?' mutters Prubert as he joins us.

The Doctor grins. 'Right. Charlton, what's the next planet on the list?'

'My list?'

'Your list. Of planets to save.'

Charlton digs out his leaflet. 'Well, there are several. Omspi, Q'ell, Dramor, Minuea...'

'Minuea,' says the Doctor. 'I know, let's go to Minuea.'

'... then Kreiner revealed the whole thing had been a set-up,' jabbered Dittero into his mobile phone as he ran down the cobbled street. Ahead, the

town dipped away to reveal the sandy shore and bejewelled ocean. '...no, the auction couldn't resume, the circumstances...'

The voice at the other end of the phone interrupted. Dittero dug a handkerchief out of his pocket with his free hand as he listened. 'Yes, extraordinary circumstances. *Extra-ordinarily* extraordinary. I had no alternative...'

The voice shouted at him.

'Yes. All except Kreiner, and the Vorshagg beast...'

As the voice replied, Dittero moved the phone from ear to ear 'I did my best. You can't ask more than that. My options were extremely limited. Your instructions were -'

Something darted among the pink slates and chimney stacks.

'...well, that's *why* I've called you. What should I do now?'

The voice gave instructions.

'*Minuea*? What would I want... sorry, master. Tele-door, certainly.' Dittero returned the mobile to its original ear. '...for Kreiner? Are you... No, I'm not disagreeing, master -'

A cool shadow fell across Dittero's face as a seven-foot-tall homicidal lizard dropped on top of him.

The trail of dented and smashed Zwees and doors torn from their hinges had led Fitz from the hotel and down the steep, narrow street to the sea. His pace slowed as he spotted a familiar green shape lying across the cobbles.

Vorshagg wasn't moving. It wasn't even breathing.

Fitz edged closer, ready to run at the slightest sign of movement, but Vorshagg remained still. Sooty smoke rose from its chest. As Fitz walked around it, he saw a laser bolt wound etched upon its belly. The skin had been ripped open to expose soft, pink meat.

Fitz leaned against a wall and exhaled. He'd grown to like Vorshagg. OK, so the lizard had wanted to bite his head off, but it hadn't meant it *personally*. At least it had died in an act of senseless violence – it would've appreciated that.

A few yards further down the street a tele-door hovered.

He had nothing to lose. Fitz jumped through it.

Charlton taps a sequence into the tele-door keypad, and the tele-door opens to reveal a brick-walled alleyway.

'So here we go,' I say. 'Another apocalypse. Another moribund dystopia. Another... world condemned to oblivion.'

The Doctor grins and steps through the door. I follow.

We're in a narrow side street, at the end of which I can see the glare of daylight. Charlton and Prubert join us and the tele-door swooshes shut.

As we emerge in the sunshine, there is the blare of Dixieland. Xylophones chime and snare drums tattoo. A resounding cheer wells up from nowhere.

The street overflows with people waving red, white and silver flags. Everyone wears bright, flamboyant costumes and claps and jiggles in time to the music.

We're in the middle of a carnival.

And smack in the path of a mob of trombone-wielding majorettes.

[planet's name]

He must have seen a hundred worlds. Everywhere there were the same unpleasant peasants, with absurd accents and squat, leathery creatures that smelled of dung. Everywhere there were the same boggy hills, or frosted tundra, or rippling deserts. The desert ones were the worst. He'd be sweating away inside his costume while the locals debated the best way to put up a tent.

And not a decent drink to be had anywhere.

There was one place where he'd tried the wine – Grunt wine – which was like vinegar with the consistency of tar. Some days he could still feel it on his teeth. On another world the foaming mead had turned out to be squid ink and he'd been forced to vomit to get rid of the aftertaste. And after drinking the fire-water on a desert world and discovering that it had originated in the bladder of a squat, leathery creature called a Fyr, he'd sworn off anything that didn't come in a vacu-sealed carton.

Prubert needed a decent drink. For the last six months he'd been stuck inside a cramped, foul-smelling spaceship with only his dresser, the pilot and the special-effects boy for company. His dresser had resisted his advances on day one of the mission and the atmosphere between them was now as frosted as the tundra world of Shibshed. The other two were no bloody use either. The pilot spent all the time on the phone to his girlfriend and the special-effects boy couldn't string together a word, let alone a sentence.

What had happened to him? He'd been playing to audiences of gawping cretins for too long. At first it had been a challenge, winning over a new crowd every night, putting down the hecklers. He couldn't deny that he had enjoyed the adoration – particularly when they sacrificed squat, leathery creatures in his honour. The bowing and scraping and averting of eyes had begun to wear a bit thin, though. And it had been rather embarrassing on that planet where they had insisted on eating gravel all the time.

He was getting lazy, that's what it was. His performance had stag-

nated. He'd tried approaching the role in different ways to keep himself interested, but the lines had lost their meaning. One time he'd played it camp, all hands-on-hips. Not a titter. The problem was, whatever he did, the audiences just lapped it up. It was as if they'd never seen anything so impressive before in their lives. Which was true, but he'd started taking it for granted. Particularly on that world where he'd died then come back to life as an encore. That had been milking it.

Prubert sat in the sullen half-light, his feet against the vibrating hull. He'd already donned his flowing robes. They were starting to fray but no one would ever notice. On the other side of the berth, his dresser glowered at him icily from behind her *Inferno magazine*.

He'd appeared in *Inferno*, back in the pre-Vargo days. They'd snapped him emerging from a premiere, all puffy-eyed and bleary with drink. Great days. He'd even had a photo-spread, back when he was dating that famous actress. It had had been such a long time ago, back when he was offered the meaty parts – huge, weighty roles that required stagecraft and skill. And shouting. Lots of shouting.

What next for Prubert Gastridge, though? He'd been out of circulation for half a year what would he return to? Summer season in Froom-Upon-Harpwick? Or back to the voice-over booth to extol the virtues of *Megara Direct* and *Tersuran Airfresh*?

Prubert thumbed through his magazine. With the money he'd earned in the last six months, he could retire. Give it all up. His eyes drifted down to an article about a place called the Centre for Posterity.

The engines dropped to a rumble and the front shutters whirred open to reveal the latest world. As he hauled himself to his feet, Prubert gave it the once-over. It was another of those blue misty ones.

Prubert's throne awaited him in the teleport booth. It sorely needed a lick of paint to cover its dents and scratches. The special-effects boy had swathed it in bubble wrap and tinsel – it looked shoddy, but with the right lighting, it would be indistinguishable from magic.

And there was the papier-mâché mask, with its special revolving mechanism. Prubert inspected it. The parrot, or whatever it was supposed to be, had shed most of its feathers. Maybe he'd give the mask a miss this time.

The subetha-printer chattered and Prubert collected the day's orders. He ran his eyes idly down the list of things he would have to teach the natives. All pretty straightforward stuff. Prubert preferred not to think about *why* he was being asked to do this. Ours is not to wonder why, ours is merely to get the lines out and try not to bump into the scenery.

'So, what's this place like?' Prubert took to his throne. Time to get into

character. It was difficult to feel godlike, though, with all the teleporting.

The pilot placed his hand over the mouthpiece of his phone. 'What?'

'This place? What's it like?'

The pilot whispered into his phone, 'Sorry, gottago, loveyoulots,' then checked his instruments. 'Pretty standard. Biped, humanoid. About so high.'

Prubert tried to get comfortable. He wished he could have a cushion, but the special-effects boy wouldn't permit it. Not after that time he'd stood up with it still attached to his backside. 'What's the name of this place then?'

'Oh, it's another of those really dull, unimaginative ones...' said the pilot. 'One thing that might be of interest to you, though.'

'Yes?' said Prubert.

'The natives have developed a process of alcohol fermentation and distillation. Sensors indicate a large number of... dedicated drinking establishments.'

'At last,' breathed Prubert. 'At last!'

He was going to enjoy this one.

Chapter 11

Election Day

Jasmine filled the air. It was sickly sweet. Fitz walked down the avenue, the clinkle of wind chimes the only sound. Privet hedges enclosed identical detached houses with identical detached lawns. Sprinklers whirled like ballerinas. Fitz had been expecting the usual rounds of giant spiderbots and pseudo-sentient automobiles and genocidal high priests, but instead, he'd found suburbia.

There was no sign of Dittero.

The road climbed the prow of a hill, affording Fitz a view over the neighbourhood. Identical houses stretched in every direction along perpendicular avenues. Fitz boggled. Imagine coming home drunk, you'd never find the right house.

Fitz searched for some sort of landmark. And he found it, so far away that it wobbled in the haze. Some sort of tower, as high as a skyscraper but tapering to a point. It would be something to head for, at least.

It was then Fitz noticed there was something very wrong with the sky.

The Doctor frowned through the binoculars. 'Now that is worrying.'

Charlton joined the Doctor on the summit of the knoll and followed his gaze. He didn't need the binoculars.

A vast pale moon loomed overhead. Charlton could make out every detail. A thousand craters pockmarked its surface, each surrounded by an icing-sugar impact-spray. Along the fault lines of the crust rose veinlike ridges. Oddly, the moon wasn't spherical. It was more like a thrown-together ball of clay.

The air was so clear the moon seemed no more distant than the town houses across the street. Only the fact that it was faint in the azure sky made Charlton realise how far away it must be, and how huge it must be.

'Worrying?' said Trix, arriving with three icy drinks. She had to pick

her way through the other people who had gathered on the embankment to watch the procession.

The Doctor squinted for a few more seconds, then took his drink and slurped the straw. 'Given the likely *mass* of that moon, and the gravity of this planet,' he jumped up and down, 'it's too close for comfort.'

Charlton's attention returned to the carnival. Red, white and silver bunting fluttered from street lamps. People jostled together on the pavements cheering, their faces trouble-free. Others hung out of windows or perched on balconies. Vendors wended through the crowd handing out burgers. The air sizzled.

The houses of the town were squashed together, with narrow timber facades and washboard-shuttered windows. Many were double galleries, like wedding cakes. Each had been painted a different pastel colour.

'Of course,' said the Doctor, half-shouting over the bustle and the oompah, 'I'm not sure it is a moon at all. More probably a minor planet.'

Trix handed Charlton his drink while making a, 'just ignore him' face. Charlton sipped his drink. It tasted of raspberries and fizzed.

'I wouldn't be surprised if there was some disruption to sea levels,' said the Doctor, peering through the binoculars. 'Something that size is bound to have a tidal influence.' The large, sweaty woman at his side tapped him on the elbow. He returned her binoculars with a grin. 'Thanks.'

'They're for looking at the procession,' the woman told him.

'Oh. Thanks.'

'Why don't you enjoy yourself?' said Trix. 'Everyone seems to be having a good time.'

A brisk snare-drum roll announced the arrival of a brass band, flanked by girls in diaphanous butterfly skirts and shimmering head-dresses. Behind them marched a group of boys in striped blazers and boaters carrying placards. Each placard had the same image, the face of a chubby-faced man wearing a benevolent grin. Below each grin were the words, *Vote Winkitt – The Voice Of Experience*.

'We're not here to have a good time,' said the Doctor. 'We're here to save the world.'

'Maybe it doesn't need saving?' said Trix.

'Maybe they don't realise they need saving?'

With a trill of flutes, another band materialised. Majorettes in furry Sergeant Pepper uniforms twirled batons and goose-stepped. Behind the majorettes came a parade of cheerleaders, shaking shivering pom-poms that reminded Charlton of Question Intonation. The cheerleaders elicited hearty shouts of approval and a flurry of flag waving.

They were followed by another troupe of men with banners, this time featuring a smooth-faced young man with Golden Age of Cinema looks. Beneath him were the words *Vote Pewt – Sweep In A New Broom*.

Despite himself, Charlton began to shake his waist in time to the music. He received encouraging glances from the people around him, families with perfect teeth and glistening complexions. Someone handed him a glossy leaflet. *Winkitt – The People's President*.

'What d'you think this is all in aid of?' said Trix.

The Doctor handed her a leaflet. It featured another photo of the Matinee Idol, with the words, '*Pewt – He's One Of Us*'. 'I think,' he said, 'this is a... party political broadcast.'

Gasping for breath, Prubert Gastridge joined them on the mound, and collapsed on to his backside.

The Doctor sat beside him, Charlton and Trix joining him on the other side. 'Is there anything you recognise? Anything at all?' the Doctor asked.

Prubert looked around through squinted eyes. 'Nothing,' he said. 'Except that.' He pointed to the moon.

'That was here a thousand years ago?'

'Not so big then,' said Prubert between gasps. 'They called it the "pirate moon". All this was sea.'

'Which meme did you introduce?' The Doctor offered Prubert one of the raspberry drinks. 'Can you remember?'

'Democracy,' said Prubert.

'Well, they all seem quite happy,' said Trix. 'Maybe it wasn't so bad.'

'You think?'

'They're not trying to blow themselves up, are they? You're sure it was this planet you came to, and not somewhere else?'

By way of an answer, Prubert pointed.

A large carnival float turned the corner to join the procession. It consisted of a figure upon a throne the size of a house. The figure swayed back and forth under the weight of its beard. It was also pointing, and its mouth was an 'O'.

'Not a bad likeness,' said Prubert. 'Flattering, really...'

'Flattering?' said the Doctor incredulously.

'That's not my beard, though,' Prubert observed. 'Do you think I should tell them, get them to re-do it?'

'Prubert, you have interfered with a planet's destiny, and all you can think about is whether they've got your beard right?'

'I'm just saying, that's all,' said Prubert. 'If I'm their messiah, they'd probably like to get it right.'

'Prubert, you're not the messiah, you're a very –' The Doctor's words were drowned out by a mew of feedback. Charlton looked up at the various loudspeakers attached to the street lamps. They chimed a jingle.

'Electors of Minuea,' boomed a voice, each word reverberating in the summery atmosphere. 'We proudly present, the father of democracy, the divine entity from beyond the stars...'

Prubert shifted forward to get a better look.

'...founder of our civilisation... Poobar Gasidge!'

The audience whooped and cheered. Garlands were tossed.

Prubert's jawed dropped. '*Poobar?*'

Trix laughed. 'Will you be signing autographs later, Poobar?'

Prubert muttered something about consonantal shift.

The Doctor shook his head in disbelief. 'You told them your *name?*'

'Didn't think it would do any harm,' Prubert said defensively.

'You're unbelievable,' said the Doctor. 'You are simply unbelievable.'

'*They* thought me rather convincing,' Prubert retorted. 'They thought I was a god. Still think I am! In a way, it's the ultimate accolade.' Before he could say any more, the speakers squawked with feedback once more.

Charlton looked back at the carnival where, above the effigy of Prubert, a hologram shimmered. The image blurred back and forth, finding its focus. The crowds fell silent as they shifted to better vantage points.

The hologram resolved itself into the features of a lugubrious man, his nose aquiline, his eyebrows disdainful. 'Welcome to the presidential debate. I'm Pax Hummellium. With me in the studio we have both the candidates – Jarkle Winkitt, current president of Minuea, hoping to secure an eleventh term...'

The hologram cut to the chubby-faced man from the posters.

'...and to my right, the leader of the opposition, Dreylon Pewt.'

Dreylon Pewt swept back his hair. He looked immaculate, and knew it.

'...and let's move straight to our first question. The lady in the front row'

The lady in the front row raised her hand. For some reason, she was staring at the ceiling, and then she realised people would see her staring at the ceiling and she hastily examined her piece of paper. 'My question to the candidates is, what do they intend to do about public services?'

'Jarkle Winkitt?' said Pax.

'My record speaks for itself. A ten per cent increase in investment, through efficiency savings brought about by the introduction of management targets.'

'Dreylon?'

'I'm afraid Jarkle's record does indeed speak for itself. Under his administration, investment has, in fact, fallen by ten per cent, because of the bureaucracy of introducing management targets.'

'Jarkle?'

'Let me clarify. We stand for improvements to public services and the reduction of taxes. If the opposition were in power, public services would be compromised and taxes would need to increase dramatically.'

'Dreylon?'

'In contrast to the current regime, we will offer value for money, with lower taxes and better public services. This government has, in fact, increased taxes and reduced spending on public services.'

'So, a clear difference there,' said the presenter. 'Our next questioner, Professor Brimble Wantige...'

The camera cut to a bespectacled man in an elbow-patched corduroy jacket. His hair and beard were untroubled by scissors. He cleared his throat. 'I would like to ask the candidates... what are you going to do about the moon?'

'The moon?' said Dreylon.

'It's gonna crash into Minuea in twenty-two years' time,' said the corduroy man. 'What do you intend to do about it?'

Dreylon sleeked his hair. 'Our policy on the *potential* catastrophic collision with the moon is diamond clear. We are not prepared to waste public money on preventing something that very well may not happen.'

Jarkle nodded. 'As I see it, this whole moon thing is still up in the air...'

The corduroy man quivered with anger. 'It *will* happen. I can prove it.'

'Yes, well, that's your opinion,' Dreylon said. 'Whereas I am of the opinion that it might not.'

'I've calculated the orbital trajectories,' the man shouted. 'It's a fact!'

'I could say that my opinion was a *fact* too,' Dreylon sneered. 'The point is, we live in a democracy, which means that my opinion is as good as yours.'

'I'm in agreement with Dreylon on this,' said Jarkle. 'You are entitled to believe that we are going to collide with the moon, just as we are entitled to believe that it *won't*.'

The man stood up and removed his glasses. 'Look, there's no doubt about this, every scientist agrees...'

'Scientists? What do *scientists* know?' said Dreylon. 'They're always scaremongering about something...'

'We haven't made it up,' the man shouted. 'It's going to happen! It's going to hit us! We're all gonna die!'

'Or maybe it *won't*. Dreylon dripped condescension. 'You may hold that view, and I respect you for holding it, but you must respect our views too.'

'Everyone's beliefs hold equal weight – that is the point of democracy, after all,' said Jarkle.

'And besides,' said Dreylon, 'who knows where we'll be in twenty-two years' time? Let's cross that bridge when we come to it.'

'You won't have a bloody bridge when you come to it!' the man shouted. 'If you don't act now it will be too late –'

'I think the candidates have answered the question,' Pax interrupted. 'If we may move on, others have questions...'

Fitz followed the debate on the screen set into the dashboard of the hover-car. His driver grunted with disapproval each time Dreylon spoke.

Fitz had been grateful when the hover-car had thrummed into sight, and even more grateful when it had offered him a lift. Given how much the driver was perspiring, he was grateful for the air-conditioning.

Outside, identical suburbs slid past as though on a loop. Occasionally another hover-car would float by, its engines droning like a contented bee.

Fitz redirected the air vents so they ruffled his hair, and noticed a sticker. *Winkitt – The One You Can Trust*. 'You don't think much of Dreylon, then?'

The driver shook his head. 'Some of us have long memories, even if he hasn't.'

'What do you mean?'

The driver pointed a podgy finger. The rocket loomed on the horizon. It was still some miles away and shimmering in the haze, but Fitz could make out scaffolding. 'That was his lot's idea. Great bleedin' waste of money.'

'What is it?'

'A missile. They started it twelve years ago. When there was all that stuff in the news, 'bout how we're gonna crash into the moon.'

'Like the guy in the audience was saying...'

'So the government – Dreylon's lot – thought up this pie-brained scheme, they'd build a missile, fire it at the moon.'

'Why "pie-brained"?''

'You know how much that thing cost? The taxes we had to pay – I've two kids and a mortgage to support!'

The hover-car swung to one side as a large, oblong vehicle swerved in front of them. It was covered in fluttering bunting, jiggling balloons and rosettes.

Fitz decided to change the subject. 'What's that?'

'A battle bus.'

Shit, thought Fitz. They have killer vehicles on this planet too.

The building skulked on the outskirts of the town. The neighbourhood was unkempt, with grass nudging through gaps in the paving. Charlton followed Trix and the Doctor up the overgrown path to the building. Paint crumbled from its plank work and the roof had tooth gaps in its tiling.

The doorbell rang at the Doctor's finger, and he took a step back. The door swung open a couple of inches and a horn-rimmed eye peered out from the shadows. 'What?'

The Doctor smiled. 'Hello, I'm the Doctor, these are my friends, Beatrix MacMillan, Charlton Mackerel –'

'What do you want?' said the eye.

'We're here to see the professor,' said the Doctor. 'Professor Brimble Wantige.'

'The Professor isn't at home.'

'We saw you on television,' said the Doctor. 'Can we talk?'

'I'm not interested. Bye-bye.' The door closed.

The Doctor sighed, and turned away. Then he said, loudly, 'An increasingly eccentric orbital ellipse, with Minuea as one of the focal points. It's currently at the point of periapsis. You'll need to deflect it tangentially at the point of apoapsis.'

The door swung open. 'You understand orbital trajectories?'

'We believe you, Brimble. We're here to help.'

The door squeaked open to reveal the corduroy man. He blinked at the sunlight and patted his hair into place. 'Come in, come in,' he said, glancing about as though wary of being seen. 'I've just got back myself.'

Charlton stepped into the musty hallway. 'You're not expecting visitors?'

'Kids come round to throw stuff, break windows. There's not a lot of respect for scientists. Not after... ' He trailed off as he saw Prubert. 'Don't I know you from somewhere?'

'Yes, I'm –'

'Ah yes,' said the Doctor. This is my friend... Vargo Buzzardman.'

'Vargo what?'

'Buzzardman,' said the Doctor. 'He's come to apologise.'

'For what?'

'The last thousand years,' said the Doctor. 'Cup of tea?'

Wantige returns from the kitchen with a tray and five non-matching mugs. He rattles them on to the ring-stained table by my chair.

The room hasn't been cleaned for years. Sunlight creeps in tentatively through the slats in the windows and picks out dust-smearing bric-a-brac. Books teeter upon every surface, many sandwiching dozens of bookmarks, or other items used as bookmarks. The armchairs are draped in blankets. The walls are high, like a nineteenth-century townhouse, the ceiling lost in the gloom.

I shift some papers out of my seat and place them on the pile by my feet. They are scrawled with calculations.

The Doctor runs an admiring finger over a model rocket on the mantelpiece. 'Impressive.'

'It would've worked,' says Wantige, stirring his tea. 'A controlled nuclear burst on the moon and it would shift to a stable, solar orbit.'

'So what happened?'

'When we first discovered what was going to happen – twelve years ago – the public couldn't get enough of it. Back then I was still at the university. It looked as though something would be done. We had a plan, we had popular support... and then...'

'And then?' I ask.

'Then people realised how much it would cost. It wasn't much, but it would've meant a drop in living standards for a year or so, people wouldn't agree to it.'

'Why not? It would be saving their lives!' says Charlton.

'Yes, well, the thing is, on Minuea, it's difficult to convince people of anything. When we were on the news, the journalists had to give coverage to both sides of the argument, so the more we tried to convince people of our case, the more they had people telling them there was nothing to worry about.'

'What people?' I return my mug to the Olympic-ringed table.

'Astrologers. Holistics. Columnists. People who had no idea what they were talking about.' Wantige looks disappointed as he remembers. 'They told people what they wanted to hear, so they listened... And then the leader of the opposition – Jarkle Winkitt – said that if he were elected, he would abandon the rocket plan.' Wantige sips his tea. 'So that's what the people voted for.'

'But that's madness,' I say.

'People have families to feed, bills to pay. What might happen twenty years down the line seems a long way off.'

'Yet getting nearer all the time.' The Doctor examines the rocket.

'You saw me today...I'm still trying to make people realise. But they say it's only my opinion, and their opinion is equally valid.'

'I see... ' The Doctor pilots the rocket at arms' length around the room.

'But that's not the case, is it? *All opinions aren't equal*. I've devoted my life to astronomy. I've checked all my calculations to the most rigorous standards of proof. And yet my word is worth no more than... anyone else's.'

The Doctor crumples up some paper into a ball and tosses it in the air while flying the rocket into it, making a whooshing noise. 'Blam!' The rocket hits the ball and it lands in the fireplace. 'Sorry,' he says, realising he's the centre of attention. That must be very galling.'

'It's how things work. We have democracy. Everyone has to respect each other's point of view...'

'No matter how ill informed?' says Charlton.

Wantige pauses while the Doctor returns the rocket to the mantelpiece. 'Everyone has an equal voice – no matter how ignorant. I mean, how can that be fair? How can it be?'

'It's not supposed to be fair,' says the Doctor. 'It's supposed to be *representative*. If the people are selfish, stupid and lazy, their leaders will be selfish, stupid and lazy. People don't get the government they need, they get the government they deserve.'

'Exactly,' agrees Wantige. 'I wish there was some other way, some way of forcing people to see sense –'

The Doctor shakes his head. 'Democracy is the worst form of government, except, that is, for all the other forms that have been tried from time to time. You have to find a way to make it work, Professor Wantige.'

'How can we?' Wantige picks at his elbow-patches, which is presumably why he needs elbow-patches. 'All the politicians are interested in is getting votes.'

'Yes, well, that's their job,' says the Doctor. 'How often do you hold elections?'

'Every year. That's why no one can make any long-term decisions.'

'What people need is a real choice.'

'A real choice?' I ask.

'At the moment people can't vote in favour of resuming work on the rocket.'

Wantige laughs. 'What, vote for a drop in the standard of living? You're wasting your time, they'd never go for it.'

'They might, if they were better informed,' says the Doctor. 'Charlton, Trix, I want you to return to Charlton's base. I have an errand for you.'

'Why, what are you going to do?'

'I'm going to break one of my rules,' smiles the Doctor. 'I'm going to get involved in local politics.'

'Did the Doctor say whether he wanted a mini-Tomorrow Window, or a big one?' asks Charlton.

'A big one, I think.' I have to shout over the sputter of Charlton's Tomorrow Window workshop. He seems to have about a dozen employees. They're busy polishing the panes of glass, or cutting them, or taking readings from electroscopes.

Charlton leads me to another door, which takes us to the storeroom. While Charlton wanders about, choosing which Tomorrow Window to take, I close the door behind us. It silences the workshop with a click.

'It'll need a portable power supply,' I add. 'I'm not sure what plugs they use on Minuea...'

Charlton selects a six-foot-high pane of glass and heaves it over to the opposite door.

'Do you want some help with that?'

Charlton nods. As I approach the tilted glass my reflection walks up at me, seemingly from beneath the floor, and looks back at me with catlike eyes.

'These Tomorrow Windows,' I ask. 'How did you find out about them?'

Charlton looks at me as though he has suddenly remembered something. 'It all began when I was at Gnomis university. God, almost thirty years ago! I spent a lot of time listening to miserable but worthy music. Couldn't get a girlfriend.'

'That would be the miserable but worthy music...'

Charlton leans against the wall. 'I was studying Theoretical Ultra-physics. My professor was... odd. In some ways he'd be very efficient – he was prompt at marking papers, and always correct at predicting grades, but during his lectures, right, I don't know, it was as if he was just reading the notes without any clue what they meant! That was pretty common, though, so I didn't think too much of it at the time. It was only later, when I was doing my thesis...'

Charlton burst into the professor's study. The room had none of the creative disarray of the other professors' rooms. The blackboard hadn't seen chalk. The books were lined alphabetically, their spines uncreased. There were no notes, no scrawls. The computer screen-savered.

Charlton's professor looked up. He had been polishing his latest trophy. A little globe for Award For Outstanding Ingenuity. 'Yes? Mackerel, isn't it?'

'Professor.' Charlton brandished a copy of *Scientific Breakthroughs Monthly*. *'Explain this.'*

'It's a magazine.'

Charlton opened the magazine meaningfully at the appropriate page. The article was, *'Inversions In The Hyperspatial Matrix. By Astrabel Zar.'*

'Ah,' said Astrabel. *'You noticed my little piece.'*

Charlton took in a deep breath. *'That's my thesis!'*

'What?' Astrabel stroked one of the photos on his desk with an affectionate finger.

'I've been working on it for two years... and it's under your name!'

Astrabel sighed. *'You don't honestly think I stole it from you, do you?'*

'The first third of the article it's from my notes, verbatim!'

'And the rest?'

Charlton paused. *'The rest... some of it seems to be copied from my working drafts, but the rest... it's based on research I haven't completed yet.'*

'Exactly,' smiled Astrabel. *'There you go.'*

'There are even conclusions from experiments that I haven't started...'

'So how can I have copied it from you? That would be... impossible!'

'Yes, it would. Except it's not the first time this has happened, is it?'

'What?'

'I've checked. Everything you've written has been based on someone else's work that had yet to be published.'

'Maybe I'm just quick off the mark?' Astrabel suggested.

'What about all the times when you marked projects before they'd been handed in? Before they'd been written?' Charlton swallowed. *'I don't know how, but it's the only explanation... you've got a time machine, haven't you?'*

Astrabel grinned. *'I was wondering how long it would take before you guessed the truth. I knew you'd find out, of course. That's why I brought it in this morning to show you.'*

Charlton stared disbelievingly at the six-foot-high sheet of glass. His reflection shared his scepticism. *'What is it?'*

'It's called... a Tomorrow Window.'

'A Tomorrow Window?'

'You look through it and see the future. Next week, next year; next century. Whenever you like, it shows you what will happen.'

'You mean... the future is predetermined? Free will is an illusion?'

Astrabel shook his head. *'It shows the most probable future, based on the present. An extrapolation, if you like.'* He peered into the window. *'Looking into this, you can avoid mistakes. You can forecast events. You can...'*

'... plagiarise scientific papers that haven't been published?'

Astrabel held up his hands. 'Guilty.'

'But that...' Charlton collected his words. *'That's a reductive causal loop! In layman's terms – a free lunch!'*

'I like free lunches,' said Astrabel. *'I eat a lot of them.'*

Charlton rubbed his forehead. 'You mean...all your research, all your breakthroughs...have been because of this?'

Astrabel smiled. 'I don't actually know the first thing about Theoretical Ultraphysics. I only passed the exam by learning the answers beforehand!'

'So that's why you don't answer questions after lectures...'

'I wouldn't have known what you were talking about!' Astrabel laughed.

Charlton looked back at the Tomorrow Window. 'So how does it work?'

'First you must make me a promise.'

'What promise?'

'I was not to reveal the secret of the Tomorrow Windows to... anyone.'

'Why not?'

'He never told me, all he said was –'

'One day, many years from now,' said Astrabel. *'I'll return to Gadrahadraddon. I'll die there. Nothing must prevent that.'*

'What? Gadrahadraddon? Isn't that –'

'"The most haunted planet in the galaxy"? Yes.'

'Why do you want to go there to die?'

Astrabel smiled. 'Because that's where it all started.'

Charlton had never been in a television studio before. They had been told to wait at the back of the set, concealed from the audience by a black drape.

'Any advice before I go on?' asked the Doctor as Trix passed him his freshly laundered waistcoat.

Prubert Gastridge looked the Doctor up and down. 'If I've learnt one thing, it's that projection is important. One must make oneself heard.'

'Right.' The Doctor straightened his shirt. 'Projection.'

'When in doubt, shout,' said Prubert. 'We could do some vocal exercises.'

'If you think so...'

'After me,' Prubert thrust out his chest, raised one arm and bawled at a deafening volume, 'Buzzardmen – attack!'

Charlton stumbled backwards in shock, tripping over some cables. He bumped into the person standing behind him. 'Watch where you're falling, Charlton mate,' said a familiar voice.

Fitz emerged nonchalantly from the shadows.

'Fitz!' The Doctor gripped him by the shoulders. 'What are you doing here?'

'I could ask you the same question,' said Fitz, opening up his jacket to reveal a T-shirt with the Doctor's face on it, together with the words *I'm Voting For The Doctor*.

'I'm glad I can count on your support,' said the Doctor, smiling.

'The Doctor's not doing too well in the polls,' Trix explained.

'Nought point four per cent,' added Charlton by way of clarification.

'Yes, well... ' said the Doctor, 'I'm hoping for a last minute surge. Five minutes is a long time, in politics.'

'Right.' Fitz frowned at Prubert. 'Haven't I seen you before somewhere?'

Prubert cleared his throat. 'You may be aware of my work... Vargo? Hook?'

'No, that's not it,' said Fitz, and then he realised. 'Hang on. Raise your arm for me, like you're pointing into the distance –'

Prubert outstretched his arm and pointed.

'Bloody hell,' exclaimed Fitz, taking a step back. 'It's *you*, isn't it?'

The Doctor nodded. 'It's a small universe.'

From the other side of the partition someone shouted for hush. The studio sank into an anticipatory darkness.

'This takes me back,' whispered Prubert, putting his arm around Trix. 'I did this show once with a little talking fox –'

His anecdote was cut short as the studio dawned.

Charlton peered around the edge of the curtain. The presenter sat in the middle of the presentation console, reading the words that slid up the camera he was addressing. 'Welcome to the second presidential debate. I'm Pax Hummellium.' Having seen him on the hologram, Charlton thought the presenter looked oddly proportioned. His head was too big for his body. 'In the studio we have all of the presidential candidates – including the surprise last-minute candidate, the mysterious Doctor...'

The Doctor stepped out into the light. The audience applauded and he basked. Holo-cameras glided to follow him as he strolled over to the chair between Jarkle and Dreylon. The two politicians slow-clapped as he sat.

'And if we can have our first question... yes, sir.' Pax indicated a man in the audience. The cameras swung towards him.

The man brushed his corduroy jacket and pushed his spectacles up to the bridge of his nose. 'I'd like to know,' said Brimble, 'regarding the moon...'

The audience sighed in disappointment. Pax sucked in air. '...es. I think we've already covered that question...'

The Doctor leaned into his microphone. 'I'd like to answer that question, if I may?'

Pax reluctantly acquiesced.

The Doctor acknowledged the audience with a grin. 'Hello... voters of Minuea. We've already heard the policies of my right honourable friends Winkitt and Pewt... who were, as they are on so many things, in complete agreement. It's a tribute to their skill as politicians that they still manage to disagree, even when they have the same policies!'

The audience gasped in astonishment. Even Pax raised a sardonic eyebrow.

'It's understandable,' continued the Doctor, 'after all, they're trying to appeal to the same constituency – but it seems to me, it rather misses the point of holding elections.'

Another astonished gasp. Dreylon and Jarkle leaned back into their chairs, arms folded.

'You see, democracy is only as meaningful as the choice it offers. Deciding between two identical candidates is no choice at all. Six of one, half a dozen of the other. Tweedledum and Tweedledee. "Anything you can do, I can do better – and I can do anything better than you."'

'I'm here to give you a genuine choice.' The Doctor rose from his seat and strode across the studio floor. 'Your world will collide with its moon in just over twenty years' time. That may seem a long way off, but it's not. You may be retired, your children will have become adults, had children of their own – but all of you, watching this, are going to die.'

The Doctor paused. 'I think that would be a shame. It's a particular shame because, right now, you can do something about it. Professor Wantige's plan is daring, inventive, and *feasible*. However, for it to have a chance of success, you have to get back to work on it. *Today*.'

'I'm not promising you it'll be easy. The next few years will be tough, but you can do it, if you want to. You see, I think the politicians have underestimated you. You're brave, indomitable, you *can* pull together for a common good. And, two decades from now, you'll have the satisfaction of knowing your planet is safe, and that *you* were the ones who saved it. And you will enjoy one of the most spectacular firework displays in the galaxy.'

The audience gave an 'aah', as though a game-show hostess had caressed a washing machine.

'Or you can vote against the rocket,' said the Doctor. 'The choice is yours. He walked over to the six-foot-high pane of glass that had been erected at the rear of the set. 'Of course, I don't expect you to take my word for it. It is, after all, only an *opinion*. But, before I finish, I want to

show you something.'

The Doctor reached down and pressed the switch on the side of the Tomorrow Window. The glass clouded, becoming a drifting blur. The Doctor beckoned the cameras forward.

'This,' he said, 'is a Tomorrow Window. It's like a... television set that shows you the future. Using this window, I could find out the winning lottery numbers for the next hundred years...'

The audience laughed apprehensively.

'I can also find out what Minuea will be like in thirty years' time.'

The Doctor stepped back, and the Tomorrow Window cleared to reveal a nightmare of black, satanic crags. Rivers of lava slithered like fat snakes. The sky was pregnant with swollen clouds of ash. It flashed with lightning.

'This is not a recording,' the Doctor explains. 'This is what *will* happen, if you don't vote in favour of the rocket.'

The image panned to the right, revealing the ruins of a city. Fire licked at hollowed-out hover-cars. Flames raged against the storm.

And there were figures, like buckled sculptures. Rags fluttered from their skeletal forms. Their skin was a shrivelled, charred coating of tar. Skulls stared out from empty sockets, their jaws agape.

'So be it,' said the Doctor. 'The Tomorrow Window is a perfectly accurate gauge of public opinion...'. He turned to Jarkle and Dreylon. It seems one of you will win the election. My *congratulations*. Politicians, always on the fiddle while Rome burns -'

'The people are not as... gullible as you think, Doctor,' sneered Jarkle Winkitt. It will take more than some... *stock footage* to sway public opinion.'

'The people prefer to vote for policies based on the *here and now*,' said Dreylon Pewt. 'They are not intimidated by your doom-mongering.'

'I'm in agreement with Dreylon on this,' said Jarkle. 'What people care about is the money in their pocket and public services. They're not interested in what may or not happen in the *future*.'

The image shifted. It seemed indecisive. For a moment it cleared to reveal the main street of the town, with its narrow, colourful facades and a bustling carnival.

'Hello,' said the Doctor. 'What's this? Some doubt? Some *uncertainty*?'

'More trickery' said Jarkle. 'You're just showing people what you want them to see.'

The window returned to the smoking, crumbling corpses.

The Doctor shook his head. 'No. No, I have no control over what's shown here. What we're seeing is the *future*. And the more persuasive

you are, the more likely it is there won't *be* one.' The Doctor turned to the camera. 'People of Minuea. The future isn't some great... unknowable thing, it's forged in the *here and now*. This is your chance. Tell your leaders that you care about what's going to happen to you.'

The Doctor indicated the Tomorrow Window, and the smoking volcanoes. 'See the future that Jarkle and Dreyton are offering you. Look into the future, and make it the one *you* want it to be.'

The window blurred. The image of the carnival returned briefly, then disappeared into the smoke and soot.

'That's it!' said the Doctor. 'Ask yourselves... how can you make that picture change? How can you make it show what *you* want to see?'

The picture swam again, before focusing upon the carnival. Majorettes stomped and twirled and looked joyously up to the clear blue sky, with not a cloud, or a moon, in sight.

The Doctor gazed into the window and smiled.

'It appears there has been a swing in my direction,' he observed before turning to face the audience. 'The Tomorrow Window predicts that I'll win the election... and your world will flourish.'

There was a cough from Dreyton Pewt. The Doctor turned to him, 'Yes?'

'I would like to give my personal assurance,' said Dreyton, 'that if I were to be elected president, I would *also* give the instruction for work on the missile to recommence. No expense will be spared, all resources will be allocated...'

The Doctor looked at Jarkle Winkitt. 'What about you?'

'If re-elected: said Jarkle, 'I would also give the instruction for the work on the rocket to recommence. And I make that my personal pledge. I guarantee that I will make it my number one priority.'

The audience cheered and applauded. The Doctor lifted his palms to indicate hush.

'It seems that, now both my opponents have... *adopted* my policies, there's no need for me to stand. I therefore wish to withdraw my application.' He gave a short bow. 'Goodnight.'

'Good luck with the rocket, Wantige,' says the Doctor, shaking his hand.

'Thanks again,' says Wantige, releasing his grip on the Doctor's hand. He quivers with excitement, his eyes gleaming, his cheeks shining. He has the gobsmacked expression of someone who can't believe their luck. He takes Prubert's hand, and Charlton's, and Fitz's, even though he's never met him before. Then he kisses me on the cheek before backing towards

the studio door. 'Well, no time to waste. Back to work! Missiles don't build themselves...' He nods to himself, pats his pockets, and hurries away.

'You did it!' says Charlton, a smile exploding across his face. Tears sparkle in his eyes.

The Doctor shakes his head. 'No. You did it, Charlton.'

'I did?'

'It was your plan.'

'It was?'

'Charlton, the Tomorrow Window *worked*. It was the window that persuaded them, not me. It showed them the error of their ways! It –'

' "Delivered them from folly!" proclaims Charlton.

I slide on to the presenter's console. The studio has been cleared, so I'm facing terraces of empty moulded plastic chairs. Close up, the set is surprisingly tatty. The seats are held together with gaffer tape.

'And if Minuea can be saved...' begins the Doctor delightedly.

'...every world that was visited by Prubert,' continues Charlton. 'Every one on the Galactic Heritage list, every world blighted by a selfish meme...'

Prubert has been listening. 'They can all be saved?' he asks, his hopes lifting.

'No. No, not all,' replies the Doctor. 'For some it is already too late, but for those planets that still have a chance... The Tomorrow Windows will show them the way – and where there's a way, there's a will. You can't undo the past but you can give them *the future*.

Charlton rubbed his hands together. 'So that's that, then. We've won!'

'No. No, not until we've discovered who is behind this.' The Doctor looks at me curiously. 'They may have some more tricks up their sleeve.'

'What are you looking at me for me?' I ask.

The Doctor turns away. 'I thought...' he trails off. 'Well, there is one odd thing. All this time, Trix, and you've never explained to us how you ended up on Shardybarn. I can't for the life of me work out how you managed it.'

Fitz gives me a wary look. 'Yeah. Last we knew, you were at Tate Modern... We thought you were dead, Trix –'

Looking at the Doctor and Fitz, I feel myself blushing with anger.

I could tell them everything about Martin. About going back to his bedsit, how he'd been the one responsible for the exploding Ken Livingstone. About how he hadn't cared when the people of Shardybarn blew themselves to pieces.

But why should I tell them? What are they accusing me of?

I'm Beatrix MacMillan. I'm the Grand Duchess. I'm Crystal Devine. I'm Aunt Beatrice, Triksie, Nat, Mac and a hundred others. But they don't know me, not the real me, the *underneath* me. They only know this Trix person, this person I'm pretending to be. This part I'm playing.

I don't have to explain myself. Why should I give a piece of myself away?

The Doctor trains his deep, green eyes upon me. 'You don't have to tell me if you don't want to, Trix. . . I realise it may be difficult –'

The more I think about it, though, the weirder it is. There are dozens of occasions when I could've mentioned it to the Doctor. Maybe it just never came up in conversation. But why haven't I told them?

The Doctor's speaking, but he seems far away. His words are muffled and ring in my ears, as though I'm underwater. 'Please, Trix –'

I want to tell him about Martin. I know I can trust the Doctor. He cares, he's never cruel. He will never think less of me, whatever I say or do.

I rub the side of my head, behind my left ear. There's a sharp, throbbing pain. I close my eyes, and see rotating sparkles.

'Need some air –' I climb off the console and stumble. I feel Fitz, or the Doctor, putting out a hand to support me but I brush them aside and stagger to the side of the studio.

I can't tell them about Martin. I can't.

The Doctor calls after me. I'm in the avenue between the drapes. It's a narrow, dark claustrophobic space. The curtains shift and billow –

A familiar voice speaks. 'Hello, Trixie Trix.'

Pressing my palms against the wall to stop myself from falling, I turn to face a shy-looking young man with John Lennon glasses and wide, excited eyes. His hair is dishevelled and his T-shirt is a *mess*.

Behind him stands the rectangle of a tele-door. Within it, I can see the entrance to his enviro-podule.

Martin takes my hand. 'I've come to take you away from all this.'

'What's up with her?' said Fitz.

The Doctor ran a hand through his hair. 'I'm not *altogether* certain –' he muttered.

'You don't think that Reo thing's still controlling her do you?' said Fitz.

'I don't know,' mused the Doctor. 'No, not Reo. . . I don't think she's being controlled, or possessed. . . But I think possibly someone may have had a similar idea. . .'

Charlton gasped. 'Doctor, look at this –'

Fitz jumped off the desk and hurried over to Charlton, who was staring in horror at the Tomorrow Window.

In the window, the image swilled with fog. Then it cleared to reveal gnarled black crags and snaking lava.

'The future of Minuea,' breathed Charlton. 'It... it's changed back.'

'Yes... yes,' said the Doctor. 'I wonder... what can have happened to alter the course of events –'

'Mr *Kreiner*, so *delightful* to see you...' announced an unctuous voice from the far end of the studio. Fitz looked up, up into the glare of the studio lights at the rear of the audience area. A figure climbed down the stairs, silhouetted in the beams. Fitz recognised the figure instantly.

Dittero Shandy emerged from the light and smiled a malignant, waxy smile. Perspiration had lent his features a smooth, plastic sheen. His suit was dishevelled and sweat-stained. In his right hand, he held a blaster.

'Dittero Shandy –' said the Doctor.

'Doctor. Mr Mackerel. And some other gentleman with a beard.' Dittero indicated Prubert. 'How *resplendent* to make your reacquaintance. I regret to inform you, however, that this reunion shall be brief.' He levelled the blaster at Fitz. Fitz could see the estate agent's finger upon the trigger. He watched as the finger tightened. 'I intend to terminate it, forthwi- forthwi- forthwi-'

Fitz was still alive. Dittero hadn't fired the gun. Instead, he continued to hold it at arm's length, his body frozen like a paused video.

There was a whirr and a hairline fracture appeared down the centre of his face. With a click, his head cleaved into two hollow shells, revealing a nest of circuits, valves and wires. Diodes flashed. All that remained of his face was his eyes, glancing comically from side to side.

A familiar-looking cylinder telescoped out of the top of the circuitry.

'Shit,' said Fitz. 'It's another one of them!'

'Another one of what?' Prubert asked.

'An electron bomb,' explained Charlton.

The Doctor dug in his pockets and stepped towards the android, brandishing his sonic screwdriver. It gave a high-pitched warble that rose to a tinnitus-inducing squeal. Fitz instinctively covered his ears.

Holding the sonic screwdriver before him like Peter Cushing with a crucifix, the Doctor approached the Dittero robot. His eyes never left the shiny, metal explosive device.

'How long have we got?' said Fitz, one step behind.

The Doctor whispered, 'No time at all.'

'What?'

'There is no timer delay on this one. I'm holding back the detonation signal with the sonic screwdriver, but if I were to switch it off – bang!'

'Well, don't switch it off then.'

'I don't plan to,' said the Doctor, halting in front of the robot.

'Shouldn't we be getting away?' called Prubert from behind them.

'And condemn Minuea to destruction?' The Doctor kept the screwdriver trained upon the circuitry as he reached inside with his other hand. He nudged at the wires with a cautious forger.

'Can you deactivate it?' whispered Fitz.

'I don't think so –'

'It's the red,' said Fitz. 'Not the blue. You tried the blue last time.'

The Doctor withdrew his finger. 'No, no, it's too late...'

'So what can we do?' said Fitz over the whine of the sonic screwdriver.

'We need... a tele-door,' said the Doctor. He lifted his head as he called back to Charlton. 'Charlton, a tele-door!'

'We're not leaving?' said Charlton

'No. We just need to find a dead planet.'

Charlton scuttled up to them, holding his tele-door handle. This isn't a directional tele-door, I'm afraid. It will only take us back to my base.'

The Doctor rubbed the perspiration out of his eyes. 'That's not a great deal of use –'

Keeping his head down so as not to come between the screwdriver and the bomb, Fitz rummaged in the estate agent's pockets. He located Dittero's tele-door handle, retrieved it, and held it before him, as he had seen Charlton do.

He wrenched it to one side and a rectangle slid open in mid air. 'Will this do?' said Fitz. Through the door, he could see the whitewashed street of Utopia sloping down to the glittering emerald sea.

The Doctor glanced at the tele-door. 'Utopia? There's no one there?'

Fitz shook his head. 'Not any more.'

'OK,' said the Doctor. 'Fitz, Charlton, Prubert... If you can lift him through the tele-door...'

Fitz stared at the Doctor in astonishment. The Doctor gave him a hard look. He was being serious. Fitz pulled himself together and ducked down to grab the estate agent's legs. Charlton reached for the outstretched arm, moving in front of the Doctor –

'Careful!' snapped the Doctor through gritted teeth. 'Don't get between me and his head, or it will go off.'

'Sorry,' muttered Charlton, putting his hands around the robot's waist. Fitz gripped it by the ankles and together they tilted the estate agent on to its back. It was surprisingly light, with the centre of gravity at the head. Fitz guessed it was largely hollow.

Fitz edged backwards, keeping his eyes fixed on the android. He felt the ground beneath his feet change from carpet to cobblestones. The heat

of Utopia warmed his back and he could smell salty, sea air.

He looked up. In front of him, Charlton emerged from the tele-door hanging in mid air in the middle of the street.

'Now put it down,' said the Doctor, following them through the door. Fitz placed the robot's feet on to the ground, and Charlton lowered it by the shoulders. 'Watch out,' said the Doctor. 'It is a bomb...'

Charlton placed the robot on the ground and stepped away, wiping his shiny hands. Fitz followed him back through the tele-door and into the studio. Ever so gradually, the Doctor backed into the studio after them.

'OK,' said the Doctor. 'We're going to have to do this quickly.' He nodded to Fitz, and Fitz gripped the tele-door handle. Then, as rapidly and smoothly as he could, he slammed the door shut.

And he was left holding the handle. The tele-door had vanished.

The Doctor switched off the screwdriver. 'There,' he sighed. 'We did it.'

'So it's exploded, then?' said Charlton. 'On Utopia?'

The Doctor nodded. 'But Minuea is safe. We should check the Tomorrow Window just to make sure -'

Static crackled. Something buzzed and spat. Fitz turned around, trying to work out which direction the sound was coming from.

Prubert choked in fear. He was looking up.

Fitz followed his gaze. Above them, among the lights and gantries, was a shimmering mist of white noise. And within the mist, paper-flat figures floated. Each one dressed in black, like an undertaker, with twitching, thin white hands. Each one a distorted blur, a smudged photocopy of a human...

'Cececs,' breathed Fitz.

'Quick.' The Doctor turned to Charlton. 'Open a tele-door -'

'What about Trix?' said Fitz.

'We'll... come back for her later... ' The Doctor looked up fearfully.

Charlton fumbled with the handle, then the familiar orange walls of the research station slid into view. 'What about the Tomorrow Window?'

'Leave it,' said the Doctor, shoving Charlton through the tele-door. 'We have to get away!'

I wait while Martin fumbles with the Yale lock, then follow him into the flat. Pizza leaflets and white envelopes slither across the doormat. The gloomy hallway reeks of joss sticks. As Martin switches on utilities in the kitchen, I make my way to the living room.

It hasn't changed. I pick my way through the precarious heaps of books and over to the sofa. I shift some *FHM* magazines to make some space so

that I can sit down. I'm not going to stay long. No need to make myself comfortable.

Eric Cartman stares down at me from the opposite wall, beside the seven-pronged leaf. Through the window I can see a galaxy of twinkling blue.

Martin returns. He hasn't brought any mugs or coffee. He simply strides to his desk and sits down. 'Could you pass me the remote control?'

It's stuck down the side of the sofa. I pull it out and pass it to him.

Martin doesn't point the remote control at the television. Instead, he aims it at the window. With a whirr, the curtains draw shut.

There is a powerful electronic throbbing, and Martin's desk revolves to reveal a gleaming, angular white console covered in a strangely shaped keyboard with alien symbols. His fingers click familiarly over the keys.

Seconds later, each of the wall posters – Eric Cartman, the Beatles, the marijuana leaf – spins round to be replaced by a computer bank containing whirring, spooling tapes. Indicator lights flash on and off importantly.

And the London Underground map becomes a computer screen, blank except for two green, glowing words:

Enter co-ordinates?

– followed by a flashing cursor.

A sequence of numbers appears. The screen flashes from a chart of a galaxy, to a map of a solar system, to a schematic diagram of a planet. The diagram fills out, to become a clear, photographic image of a gas giant.

I recognise it instantly.

'Yes,' says Martin. 'That's why I brought you here.' He offers me a nervy smile. 'I didn't want you to die. You'll be safe here, with me. You see, Trixie Trix, I'm *on your side*. I always have been.'

The picture on the screen cuts to a space station surrounded by little green pulses. 'And now I know the location of Charlton's base...I can eradicate him once and for all.'

Charlton drew the tele-door shut behind them. 'There,' he announced, 'we're safe.'

'They can't follow us?' said Fitz.

Charlton shook his head. 'The location of this base is a complete secret,' he said confidently.

'I wouldn't be so sure of that,' said Prubert, peering out of one the windows.

Outside, in the vacuum of space, dozens of figures were shimmering into existence. They floated languidly through the nothingness.

More flickered into existence. Each one a hazy, misshapen mass. Each one two-dimensional. Drifting, drifting, their skin as white as bone. Cececs. Hundreds of them.

Chapter 12

The Tomorrow Peephole

Fitz pressed his hands against the glass. 'They followed us?'

'There's no way that can happen,' said Charlton. 'Impossible.'

'Oh, right,' said Fitz. 'Have you told them that?'

The Ceccecs drifted through the vacuum. The way their bodies flickered made them seem to be fluttering, as though in a breeze. Each one was a shifting blur of static. They floated gracefully, their heads turning from side to side. Their clown-white faces were featureless apart from pits for eyes and mouth. Each wore a high-collared black mourning suit.

'What are these... things?' said Prubert.

The Doctor frowned at the blackness. 'Ceccecs,' he muttered. 'Artificial creations. They're being controlled. *Guided.*'

'Guided? By what?'

Before the Doctor could reply, a sharp hiss came from behind them. Fitz turned, a cold shiver skittering down his spine.

It was between them at the tele-doors. The undertaker flickered and interference patterns scrolled across its body. It shimmered like a video image caught between two frames, its arms reaching forwards. It floated upon a mist of tracking lines.

Fitz backed away from the Ceccec, and into Charlton. Charlton look so terrified he might burst into tears. Prubert stared at the creature in fearful awe. Together they edged along the corridor, away from the creature.

The Doctor didn't move. He remained where he was, watching the Ceccec. 'Charlton. Warn your people...'

'What are we going to do?' said Charlton. 'It's blocking our only way out.'

'Somebody wants us dead,' said the Doctor. 'It seems the time for playing games is over.'

The Ceccec gave an angry burst of static and began to float across the floor towards them.

The Doctor sprang into action. 'Run!'

The green flashing dots on the screen are reflected in Martin's spectacles. He bites his lower lip in concentration, his fingers rattling across the buttons and switches. The console bleeps and bloops like an OMD B-side.

'You're going to kill them?' I ask.

Martin nods, clicking something that resembles a space-bar as he frowns at the screen. The screen displays a schematic map of Charlton's space station. A flashing green dot is chasing four flashing green dots, while more green dots collect around the outside, flaring into life like fireflies. 'This has gone on long enough.'

'What about me?'

He stops space-barring and looks at me over his glasses. 'I've saved your life,' he says, as though that answers everything.

'I think "deciding not to kill someone" isn't quite the same thing as saving their life...'

'If you like,' considers Martin, returning to the screen. 'Either way, you owe your continued existence to me. So – be nice.'

I watch him. If I can catch him off guard, maybe I can overpower him. I could creep up behind, grab him around the neck. He seems to be concentrating on the control panel. He won't notice if I –

Martin sighs. 'Don't try anything, Trix.' Without turning round, he opens a drawer and pulls out a futuristic-looking pistol and aims it at my head. 'Resistance is... oh, no, it's really too embarrassing, I can't bring myself to say it.'

I stare at him in amazement. He must have eyes in the back of his head.

'Something like that,' he says. 'I'm afraid I can... see straight through you.' He chuckles to himself, his eyes never leaving the screen.

What does he mean? 'Stop what you're doing. I want to go.'

Martin shrugs. 'Go, if you like.' He rummages one hand across the desk and hands me a scrap of paper. 'The co-ordinates for Charlton's little space-base. You can join them, if you wish. And die at the hands of one of my Ceccecs.' He looks up at me. 'I'd prefer it if you didn't.'

'Why?' I ask. 'What's so special about me?'

Martin smiles at me. 'Many things, Trixie Trix. Many things. You're a very special person, you know. To me you're the most special person in the world. You see, I know you better than you know yourself. I know you *inside out*. I know about all your hopes, your fears. *I have shared your dreams.*'

What the hell is he on about? This is seriously creepy. What does he mean, he knows me inside out?

I back towards to the sofa, my body trembling. I knock over a pile of books and magazines. My throat is dry and I can smell nausea. I climb up on to the sofa, pulling my legs up before me, as though to hide behind them. 'What dreams?'

Martin's eyes don't leave me. 'Who is Beatrix MacMillan? You've worn so many disguises, made up so many backstories, you've forgotten. You've told so many lies and kept so many secrets. You're the Grand Duchess. You're Crystal Devine.'

How the hell does he know about that? That was months ago –

'Triksie, you don't have to explain yourself to me. You don't have to explain anything. You don't have to play a part – I can see through all that! You can be yourself. You see, I already know everything about you. You've hidden away your past so deep I'm not sure if you remember it.'

I pull my legs up tighter to my chest.

'You keep it buried deep, don't you? What happened to your father? You *do* remember what happened to your father?'

I don't remember what happened to my father.

'Yes you do. Daddy's little girl. Do you want me to tell you?'

'No!'

'I could, if you like. In vivid detail. I could describe to you everything you felt that night. Every anxiety you felt on the ride to the hospital. Every word your mother told you with her eyes *filled* with tears. Were those tears of shame, or of anger, I wonder? How is your mother now?'

'I never knew my parents.'

'No, Nat. You've just spent so long trying not to remember. On the inside, looking out. Trying to convince yourself you've forgotten, denying the truth. You don't know who you are any more. But I do.'

I'm not going to admit to anything. 'Do you?'

'I want to know everything about you, Beatrix. I want to know what it feels like to be inside you. I want to know what it feels like to *be* you. To experience the world as you see it. To hear what you hear, to smell what you smell. To feel you breathe. To share your innermost thoughts and desires. Martin looks at me and gives a half-laugh. 'Trix. I *love* you.'

Doctor, where are we running *to*, exactly?'

The Doctor paused at the door to the workshop, allowing the others to catch up. He tapped a finger on the control, and the door slid open. 'In case you hadn't noticed, we're not so much running *to*, Fitz, as running *from*.'

Prubert leaned his bulk against the wall, his chest heaving. Charlton gasped beside him. 'They'll catch us, eventually.'

'Yes, well, hopefully I'll have thought of a plan before then,' muttered the Doctor, ushering them into the workshop.

'What plan?' said Fitz.

'I'm still thinking,' said the Doctor. 'Quick.'

Fitz heard a telltale hissing and crackling coming from behind him. Despite himself, he had to turn to look.

A Ceccec floated down the sloping corridor towards him as though suspended on wires. It moved as solemnly as a pallbearer. A fringe of flickering light surrounded it, like a poorly superimposed special effect. Fitz's eyes hurt to look at it as it flashed. It didn't seem real.

'Come on!' the Doctor shouted into his ear, then he bundled Fitz into the workshop. Fitz had a fleeting impression of another Ceccec, nearer, drifting towards them from the other direction, and then the door tshhhed shut.

'Oh no,' said Charlton's voice. 'Oh no oh no oh no.'

The Ceccecs had already been there. The overhead lights had been smashed and the workshop lay in near darkness. Along one wall rested the Tomorrow Windows, each shattered into impact patterns like ice upon a frozen lake. Instruments sputtered up plumes of sparks and coughed up smoke. Screens scrolled with green numbers or flashed error messages.

Six corpses in orange uniforms slumped over the tables. Steam rose from the bodies. What skin was visible was scalded a livid blood red, covered in below-the-skin bubbles.

Then the smell hit Fitz. It was acrid, like decayed batteries.

'They're dead,' cried Charlton, aghast.

The Doctor seemed unconcerned. He was already at the opposite door. It opened to the blackness of the storeroom. The Doctor peered inside, and then gestured for them to follow. 'Come on!'

'I said,' said Charlton angrily, 'they're *dead*. Don't you care?'

'I'm a Doctor. I care for the living,' said the Doctor, 'which, for the moment, includes us.'

Charlton wouldn't move. He continued to stare, horror-struck, at the bodies of his workers. The Doctor dashed over to him and said, gently, 'Charlton, I'm very sorry. But –'

The door to the corridor crashed open, the lock exploding in a cascade of fizzling cinders, the electric light from outside streaming in. Beyond were two Ceccecs. They paused in the doorway, silhouetted, peering to the left and right as though in amusement, and then floated in.

Martin has some sort of crush on me. Not a crush, an infatuation. An obsession. Something insane and dangerous and twisted. This isn't love. This is hatred that he's got the wrong way round.

He glances at the screen, then gets up from his chair and walks over to me. He's wearing an apologetic expression. He's trying to look vulnerable, trying to make me feel like I'm the guilty one. He's playing games with my mind.

'I know what you're thinking,' he says 'You're thinking I'm coining on a bit strong. I didn't mean to frighten you. I'm not the villain here.'

Oh, yes, you bloody are.

'I think we can make a go of it, though, Trixie Trix,' he continues. 'I really do. We share so much in common.'

'Who are you?' I spit. I don't want to be in the same room as this guy. I don't want to be on the same planet. 'What are you?'

Martin puts his hands up. 'I'm sorry. I forget, you don't know me as well as I know you.'

'You *don't know me*,' I tell him. How can he know me? We've only spent, what, a few hours together? I haven't told him anything about myself.

'I realise it may take time,' says Martin. 'I'm sure that you will grow to love me, when you understand. . . you'll realise that what I want is what's best for you. And what's best for you, I think, in my own silly, mixed-up, romantic way, is for you to be with me.'

He approaches the sofa. I edge away from him, keeping my legs between us, shielding myself with my arms.

'I want you to love me, Trix,' he says.

'Oh,' I say. 'What *I* want is for you to sod off and leave me, and my friends, alone, and crawl back under whatever disgusting rock you emerged from and stay there and die in some drawn-out and painful manner. That's what *I* want.'

Martin laughs, absent-mindedly tapping the pistol in his hand. 'You're wonderful when you're angry.'

'Well, I'm *extremely* wonderful at the moment.'

'Yes,' he agrees, 'you are.'

The guy is clearly mad. He has a gun. I shouldn't be arguing with him, I should be humouring him. I should be telling him what he wants to hear. Making him think he's won me over.

'OK,' I say. 'That's. . . really good of you. Maybe I should give you a chance. Tell me about yourself.'

'I will,' says Martin, pulling up a chair. 'Though it will take more than this to make me believe I've won you over.' He grins. 'What would you like to know?'

'Why are you doing all this, for a start?'

'How old do I look to you?' says Martin.

'I don't know. Twenty-five? Thirty?'

'I'm fourteen thousand years old. I'm from Frantige Two... where we are blessed, or cursed, with extraordinarily protracted lifespans. That's why it's so *dull* there.'

'Hang on, how old did you say you were? Fourteen -'

Martin shakes his head, tapping his gun in his palm. 'That's the point. I'm *fourteen* thousand years old. I should have *done* something with my life by now. I'm at the age when everyone I know is settling down, getting married, getting a mortgage. And yet here I am, still living in *rented accommodation*. Do you have any conception of how *humiliating* that is?'

'No.'

'It's like being a... student. It's embarrassing.'

I thought he was a student. 'Why not get a job?'

Martin snorts. 'Because I discovered a way of becoming vastly wealthy, at very little cost and with very little effort.'

'The selfish memes? That's. your "get rich quick" scheme?'

'Precisely. Though a thousand years is possibly not strictly within the definition of "quick", even for me.'

'So how did you go about it?'

'Back then, there was a booming market in undeveloped worlds. Until the Galactic Heritage Foundation came along. It was like the universe suddenly had a bleeding-heart conscience.' He adopts a wheedling tone. ' "Don't do that, you'll endanger our children's heritage." "Oh, you can't wipe out the inhabitants, they've built some really pretty temples." "Oh, you can't knock through, they've started rubbing the sticks together." *Pathetic*.'

'Right...'

Martin's becoming worked up. 'I saw my opportunity Trix. There were dozens of people who found the planets they'd invested all their money into were, mostly, worthless.'

'Why?'

'They couldn't be developed, that's why! Not while they were on the Galactic Heritage conservation list. No one would take these planets off their hands.'

'Except you?'

'I picked up a hundred or so worlds for next to nothing. Every one on the list...' Martin sifts through some papers on a desk before discovering the Galactic Heritage leaflet. He folds it open with his gun hand. 'Here

we are. Kootanoot, Prum, Acfarr, Tonhic, Hambas, Pluvikerr, Shardybarn, Tinric, Earth... all mine.

'How can you own a planet?'

Martin frowns at me as he stands up. 'Same way you can own anything else. On your planet, people own land, don't they? You pay the money and it's yours to do with as you please. Everything is owned by somebody, Trix.'

'So you *own* Earth?'

'Yes. Only cost me a few thousand Arcturan ultra-pods. The owner, a Navarino time-share salesman, was going through a messy divorce. Threw in the rest of the solar system,' Martin smiles. 'I was doing him a favour.'

'Then you hired Prubert Gastridge to introduce all the selfish memes...'

Martin nods. 'It was a foolproof plan. Foolproof, but unfortunately not actor-proof. He wasn't supposed to take his mask off! It was supposed to look like the civilisations had caused their own downfall, not because they'd been visited by some ... roving ham from outer space!'

'It was a bit suspicious, all these planets having the same god,' I point out.

Martin thumps the wall, exhaling through his teeth. 'Now there's the Doctor, and Charlton with his Tomorrow Windows, going round *saving* all the planets that I'd primed for destruction. Minuea... a thousand years of thumb-twiddling, all for nothing! Bloody do-gooders!'

I've got try to pretend to be sympathetic. 'That must be annoying.'

Martin returns to his desk and bleeps and bleeps some more switches. 'Which is why I have to kill them.'

On the screen four green dots enter a green square.

Fitz fell into the dining room, his heart thudding like a hammer. Like the rest of the station, the room had been plunged into near darkness. The only illumination came from the window, from the candyfloss gas giant.

The Doctor slammed the door shut and locked it with a swipe of his sonic screwdriver. The lock fizzled and exploded. 'Table!'

Fitz ran over and, with Charlton, picked up the dining table. Together they dragged it across the room, tilted it on to one side, and rested it at an acute angle against the door. Fitz piled some chairs against the table while Charlton wheeled the television set over.

It wasn't much of a barricade, thought Fitz. These things didn't seem to have much need for doors, anyway. Still, they had to do something. They couldn't just stand here and wait to die.

'What do we do now?' shouted a sarcastic Prubert from the shadows in the corner of the room. 'We're trapped!'

The Doctor sighed at the barricade. 'This won't hold them.'

'Any ideas yet, Doctor?' said Fitz.

'No,' said the Doctor, his gaze moving over to the window. He sprinted over to the glass and peered outside. 'Of course!' he shouted.

'What?' said Fitz.

'I know how they found the base. It's obvious. Very clever, but also very obvious. You just need to open your eyes...'

'OK,' said Fitz. 'That was preying on my mind too. Now...can we perhaps move on to the more pressing problem of us being about to be killed?'

'It would have really irritated me, if I'd died without knowing.' The Doctor ran a hand through his mane of hair. 'No escape plan yet, I'm afraid.'

On the other side of the window the Cececs whirled like phantoms. As if they knew they were being watched, they began to turn towards the window. They grew, their bodies shimmering like strobes.

There was a crackle of static. Fitz turned. On the other side of the room, something flickered in the gloom.

A flashing fifth dot has joined the other four dots in the square.

'Yes,' says Martin. 'Then, without the Doctor and Charlton and the "Tomorrow Windows"...I can get *on* with my life. I can build another Dittero Shandy. Find some more buyers. Move out of this...dump.' He smiles at me. 'And we can start our future together.'

This guy is completely and utterly mad.

'No, not mad,' he says. 'I merely have a maladjusted value system. Ask yourself, if I were insane, would I have been able to put such a plan into action? Would I have been able to calculate the location of Charlton's base? Would I be able to create the Cececs?'

I'm still thrown by him saying, 'No, not mad'. I hadn't said anything to him about being mad. And, as I think back, it's not the first time he's answered a question before I've asked it. He seems to know what I'm going to say before I say it...he seems to be –

To distract myself, I point at the console. 'You direct the Cececs from this?'

Martin pushes his John Lennon glasses back up his nose and ruffles his untidy hair. 'All generated via block-transfer-computation. Two-dimensional pseudo-forms, low resolution and monochrome to save bandwidth... The compression artefacts are caused by the algorithm...'

I'm not listening to his nerdobabble. Instead, I'm concentrating on the control panel. If I can get to that, maybe I –

No. Mustn't think it. Because as soon as I think it he'll *know*. He knows what I'm thinking. He can –

'Yes, that's right, Trix,' interrupts Martin. 'I can read your mind.'

On the other side of the room, the Ceccec fizzled into being.

'I didn't want to die like this,' said Prubert from somewhere near the floor.

'I didn't want to die at all,' Fitz replied. 'Give me old age and incontinence every time.'

'No,' said Prubert. 'I don't want to die cowering in a corner like a scared otter. I haven't had the chance to make amends. I want to die... *heroically*. Saving the day!'

'Shouting?' suggested the Doctor.

Prubert laughed. 'Yes. I want to go out shouting!'

The Ceccec crackled and whooshed like a malevolent radio and began to slide across the room towards them. Fitz could make out its jagged outline, its delicate, twitching fingers and its paper-flat skull with death-black eyes.

Fitz said, 'Well, take a deep breath then –'

I can't take my eyes off the screen and the green flashing dot.

'Stop!' I shout. 'Martin, please...'

Martin taps some buttons and turns to me. 'Yes?'

'Please, let them go. Don't kill them.'

'Why should I do that?'

'I'll make it worth your while,' I say. I have to stop Martin somehow. No matter what it takes, I have to make him change his mind. 'What do you mean... change my mind?'

I lower my legs from my chest and stand up, placing one hand on my hip. I stand with my shoulders back. 'I said, "I'll make it worth your while".'

Martin's mouth hangs open, his lips wetting as he looks me up and down. Then he becomes suspicious. 'This is just you trying to make me think I've won you over. It's a ruse.'

'It's not a ruse,' I say, as sincerely as I can.

'Don't try to *sound* sincere.' He looks at me through narrowed eyes. 'If you mean it, *think* it.'

'What?'

'*Think* it. If it's the truth.'

I glance away from Martin, at the piles of books. This place is a mess. It smells of rotting socks. And you'll know what I'm thinking?

'Yes, Trixie Trix, I will.'

I return my gaze to Martin. I study his features. I look at his scruffy, untidy mop of brown hair. His innocent, puppyish eyes stare back at me from beneath his spectacles. His sunken, acne-scarred cheeks, marked with stubble. I look at his baggy black T-shirt and his stained, faded jeans.

He's gorgeous.

His eyes widen in excitement. There is something about him, something that makes me want him. He's irresistible. I imagine his arms grasping me, drawing me into him. I picture myself tearing off his shirt.

Martin stands up, delighted, eager.

I stride towards him, gazing at his lips. Those lips I want to kiss. The lips I want to press against my own, so sensitive. Martin knows me, he knows everything about me. I'm safe with him. I'm powerless in his presence.

Martin looks at me. 'You really... feel safe with me?'

I don't need to say a word. Yes, Martin. I feel safe with you. You're right. I think I love you too.

Martin leans towards me, his head tilting. I tilt my head to the other side and part my lips. I'm going to enjoy this. This moment is going to give me so much pleasure. I'm going to give Martin something he will never forget.

I knee him in the testicles.

He doubles up, gasping for breath, clutching himself. He staggers on to the floor. I grab the pistol from the carpet and level it at his face.

Looking at him, I fight the urge to be sick. This pathetic little bastard is inside my head. He can hear what I'm saying. He can hear *this*.

Well, Mr Mind-Reader, listen to this, you disgusting, effluent creep. I would rather die than kiss you. I can think of nothing more revolting than you, your face and your body. You sick, nasty pervert – I think I'll kick you again.

Martin yelps and backs away before I can touch him. Of course – you knew I was going to kick you, didn't you?

One more thing, Mr Mind-Reader. When I take on a role, I don't just 'play a part'. I don't put on a character – I *become* that character. I live, breathe and *think* that character.

You see, I've got so used to pretending to be someone else, it's become second nature.

I still can't come to terms with it. I can't believe it's happened again, so soon after all that Reo stuff. It's getting so that a girl can't call her mind

her own. How long have you been inside my head, Martin? Since Tate Modern? You must have done something to me during my sleep. Was that it, Martin? Was that when you did it?

I point the gun at him. He nods.

Will I kill you? You don't know, do you? But that's only because I haven't decided yet. And then you'll know, the moment before I pull the trigger –

Is this how you get off? Eavesdropping on someone else's thoughts? Looking through their eyes – Jesus, you've been leeching over me in the shower, haven't you? You've been catching my reflection in mirrors. You've seen everything as I've seen it. You've experienced every sensation. Oh, you've been enjoying yourself.

That's why you always knew what I was going to say. That's why you always told me what I wanted to hear. And all the time, you had this hold over me. You knew what I was thinking about you – what I was thinking about the Doctor, about Fitz, about my past. You have stolen every secret. You have stolen *me*.

And I've disgusted myself. The things I had to pretend to think, just to catch you off guard. What I had to pretend to feel.

'You bastard,' I scream at him, and I think it too.

I think you deserve to die, Martin. I can't think of anyone who has deserved to die more than you do right now.

'No!' he pleads, scurrying backwards on his behind.

But I'm not a killer. I turn the pistol towards the control console and squeeze the trigger. It sputters into flame and bursts open, showering the carpet with glowing embers.

The Ceccec flickered. For an instant, Fitz could see through it to the piled-up shadows of the barricade. Then the creature broke up, lines streaking across its surface, rubbing it out of existence. There was a snap, a fizz, and the creature instantly shrank to the size of an overlapping red, green and blue dot. The white dot hung in the air, then faded.

Fitz looked outside. The Ceccecs flitted away one by one, dissolving into the vacuum of space.

I shove open the front door. In front of me there's a short section of brightly lit corridor and, at the end of it, a deactivated tele-door.

I've left Martin curled up on the floor, whimpering. Can you still hear me, Martin? Of course you can. You would have seen yourself through my eyes. You would have heard everything I was thinking about you. Hope you enjoyed it.

But I refuse to feel any fear, or shame, or anger. I've done nothing wrong. I have nothing to hide. I refuse to give him that satisfaction. I refuse to give him the voyeuristic pleasure of seeing me upset.

He hasn't got to me. I'm stronger than this.

He was with me on *Valuensis*, on *Utopia*, in Lewisham, on the *Astral Flower*. . . all this time he's been watching us through my eyes, listening through my ears.

I feel sick to my heart. I'm trembling all over, prickling with heat. I'm sweating profusely and I'm swallowing and breathing to prevent myself from throwing up. I really, really want to throw up.

I dig out the scrap of paper with co-ordinates on and tap them into the keypad by the tele-door. The glass clears to reveal a shadowy room, one wall taken up by a window. And there, on the other side of the door, are Fitz, the Doctor, Prubert and Charlton. I slide open the door.

Charlton had been startled when the tele-door had slid out of mid air in the middle of the room. For one horrible, heart-stopping moment he had thought it was another *Ceccec*. Then Trix had staggered out, a hand to her forehead.

'Trix!' The Doctor ran up to her as the tele-door vanished, holding out his hand to prevent her from collapsing. 'How are you?'

'Doctor,' she looked up at him. 'I'm...bugged.'

'Bugged?' said Fitz.

Trix nodded. 'Something in my brain. He...'. She tried to say a word, but couldn't manage it. 'He can read my mind!'

'Fitz – chair!' said the Doctor, holding Trix by her shoulders. Fitz collected a chair from the barricade and slid it behind Trix. The Doctor eased her into it. 'Who can read your mind, Trix?'

'I can't...'

'It's all right,' said the Doctor. 'If there is a device in your brain it will prevent you from telling us who put it there. Just as it prevented you from telling us how you got from Tate Modern to Shardybarn.'

Trix smiled weakly. 'You guessed?'

The Doctor shook his head. 'I didn't want it to be true. Oh, Trix, Trix, Trix.' He put an arm around her shoulders and kissed the crown of her head. 'Anything I say won't be enough,' he said. 'But I do know you're not going to let this defeat you.' He held her by the shoulders and smiled at her. Then his smile fell as he looked deep into her eyes. 'And whoever *else* is in there,' he snarled, his breathing short with anger. 'There are some things I don't forgive.'

Trix screwed her eyes shut and fell forward, her hands over her ears. 'I don't want him to see. I don't want him to know *anything*.' She sniffed. 'I'm not even going to think.' She spoke slowly. 'I stopped the Ceccecs. I destroyed their control panel thing. You're safe now.'

'You did it?' Fitz watched her with concern.

The Doctor turned to Charlton and Prubert. 'You two – open that door,' he said, indicating the barricade. 'Charlton, get the power back on.'

'We've won –' Charlton began. 'She saved out lives –'

'Celebrations later.' The Doctor placed a hand gently on Trix's forehead, stroking back her hair. She slumped on to her knees, falling asleep.

The Doctor turned to Fitz. 'Some sort of telepathic transmitter implanted in her brain...'

'A what?' said Fitz. 'A telepathic bug?'

The Doctor trailed his fingers through Trix's hair. Then he found something and parted the hair at the nape of her neck.

Fitz leaned forward. It was difficult to see in the gloom, but there was a black square stapled to her skin.

'So that's how they knew where we were,' said Charlton as he dragged the table away from the door. 'That's how they found us on Valuen-sis... and Minuea.'

'And the Astral Flower!' said Prubert, rubbing his beard.

The Doctor nodded. 'And that's how they found us here.'

Charlton let the table drop. 'But Trix... I never told her the co-ordinates –'

'You wouldn't need to, Charlton,' said the Doctor, smoothing Trix's hair back into place. 'All she would need do would be to look out of the window. The constellations –'

'– would reveal the location of the base,' finished Fitz. 'Right.'

'Obvious, but very clever.' The Doctor let go of Trix and put a finger to his lips for silence. 'We must be careful.'

'What? Not to wake her?' said Fitz.

'Yes,' said the Doctor, then he whispered, '*and because someone's listening*.'

When I wake up the Doctor is sitting at my bedside, looking at me with his sleepy, inquisitive eyes. He leans forward and says, 'Trix?'

I pull myself upwards. I'm still fully dressed, but a sheet has been placed over me. 'I was asleep...'

Then the memories flood back and my stomach wrenches. I double up, gasping.

Martin. He did this to me. I must tell the Doctor everything –

The migraine returns with a throb. My vision sparkles.

'Don't try to talk,' he says. 'And don't try to tell me who did this to you. The telepathic transmitter will prevent you from saying their name.'

'Transmitter?' I feel woozy. I can barely keep my eyes open. The nausea remains in my throat. But I'm not going to be sick. I won't give him the satisfaction of seeing me do that. I won't give you that, Martin.

I remember something he said. 'I have shared your dreams.' He has been within me in my sleep. He will have seen stuff even I can't remember. Memories that are so long buried they only come back to me in my dreams.

There's a knock at the door. It's Fitz. 'Hiya,' he says, and that's all he can think to say. He sits down at the end of the bed.

The bedroom is brightly lit. They must've got the power back on. Through a porthole, I can see rising stars. Oh, I remember. The space station is rotating. The centrifugal force provides the artificial gravity.

'Trix,' the Doctor says. 'The device... I can deactivate it. It shouldn't hurt, or cause you any harm, but...'

'...but you thought you'd ask me first?'

'Yes,' he says, holding up his sonic screwdriver. 'With your permission, I can break the telepathic link.'

'Go for it.'

The Doctor places a hand on my back and helps me sit up. Under the Doctor's guidance, Fitz lifts my hair. I feel his fingers tickle the back of my neck and there's a high-pitched warble and –

– Trix felt her migraine lift. She looked around the bedroom, rubbing her eyes. The Doctor switched off the sonic screwdriver, and Fitz gave her a supportive smile.

'You did it?' said Trix.

'No one can hear you now. Your thoughts are your own.'

Thank god for that, thought Trix. She felt liberated. She felt as though sunshine had broken through the thunderclouds. She felt as though she was going to be sick.

And now she could be sick without Martin looking. She got up and staggered to the bathroom, clicking the door behind her.

Two minutes later, Trix splashed cold tap water on to her face and examined her reflection. She smiled at the girl, who smiled back. And it was only her behind those catlike eyes. Her and no one else.

Trix returned to her bedroom to find the Doctor and Fitz waiting for her. 'It was Martin,' she said. 'Someone I met at Tate Modern. Looks about twenty-five but is really fourteen thousand. He's behind it all.'

The Doctor wore a guilty expression. 'Trix. I didn't quite tell you the truth.'

'What?'

'The bug in your brain – I haven't broken the link.'

'What?'

The Doctor held up his hands. 'Don't worry – I've put a block on the transmission. No one can hear what you're thinking. And Martin will believe I have cut you off completely.'

'But you haven't?'

The Doctor brushed a stray hair from his eyes. 'Trix, we need to know what Martin plans to do next.'

'Do next?' Trix plumped herself down on the bed. 'I tricked him and destroyed his Ceccec thing. We've beaten him –'

Fitz gave her nervous smile. 'The Doctor doesn't think so.'

'What?'

The Doctor rubbed his hands. 'I think... it was a little too easy.'

'Easy?' Trix was appalled. 'Easy?'

'Trix,' the Doctor said, 'Martin could read your mind. He could have stopped you from destroying his "Ceccec thing" if he'd wished. He wants us to *think* we've beaten him.'

'You think he's planning something?'

'I don't know for sure. That's why I need your help.'

'What with?'

'The telepathic transmitter in your brain... I can reverse the flow of the signal. Rather than have him listening in on your thoughts, I can, I hope, allow you to listen in on his. It's like... turning a microphone into a speaker.'

Trix didn't like the use of the word 'hope'. 'You want to use this thing, implanted in my head –' She realised she could feel the device pinned to her neck. Presumably while it had been activated it had been telling her not to notice it. 'You want to use it, so I can read Martin's mind?'

The Doctor nodded.

'Can't you do it some other way?' Trix said. The thought of being inside Martin's head revolted her. She imagined it as being some sort of murky, disgusting version of his flat. 'I know, look in a Tomorrow Window ...'

'We thought of that,' said Fitz. He handed her a mini-Tomorrow Window, the size of a hand-mirror. Trix peered into it and saw only glass. She shook it and her reflection quivered.

'It's not working,' she said.

'No,' said the Doctor. 'None of the Tomorrow Windows are. It seems there is something... they cannot predict.'

'That doesn't make sense.'

'I don't claim to understand it, Trix,' said the Doctor. 'But it is connected to Martin, I'm sure, and that's why I need you to do this for me. If you don't want to, then I'll understand, but...'

'I'll do it,' Trix said. She turned her back on him and lifted up her hair. She felt the Doctor's fingers brush against her skin, her spine shivered and the sonic screwdriver warbled –

– jacket on. I step over my leaflet-strewn doormat and lock my door after me. In my hand are a set of co-ordinates scrawled on notepaper.

I miss her. I miss having Trix in the back of my mind. I'd grown used to her. Her consciousness was like a quiet voice, speaking softly in the back of my mind. And now she's gone and left me.

I did love her. Some of the things she thought were so funny. And she was vulnerable, and quirky, and silly. And, deep down, so achingly sad. I've never known anyone so intimately. I've never known what it is like to experience the world through someone else's eyes. To laugh at the jokes they told themselves. It's probably impossible to know someone so well and *not* fall in love with them. She was so alive, so sensual.

If I close my eyes, I can still remember how her clothes felt. I can picture her naked reflection through the mist-covered bathroom mirror. I can taste her lipstick. I can feel the sensitive touch of her fingers against her own body.

I should stop thinking this stuff, it's turning me on.

I arrive at the tele-door, fastening my jacket. I'll need it for Gadrahadrakon. According to the interstellar shuttle flight register, Astrabel Zar is due to arrive in the next few minutes. And then all this will be brought to an end.

Rented accommodation! One day I'll have the wealth I deserve. Then I will be able to buy affection and respect. Everyone who has ever belittled me will be made to suffer. I'll rub my success in their faces. And I'll get Trix back and force her to love me.

I'll force her to love me.

I type the co-ordinates into the keypad by the tele-door. The tele-door clears to show a storm-lashed wilderness of gnarled trees and bracken, and I slide –

Trix could smell burning. She turned to see the Doctor holding a smouldering computer chip in the palm of his hand.

'What happened?' said Trix, running her fingers over her back of her neck. She felt a tender bruise. Her finger came back with blood on it.

'The circuit wasn't designed for reverse calling,' said the Doctor. He disposed of it in one of his pockets. 'Did you find out anything useful?'

Trix told the Doctor everything she'd seen and heard. Everything that Martin had thought. Except for what he'd been thinking about her. No one needed to hear that.

She finished by telling the Doctor about Gadrahadrakon.

'Never heard of it,' said the Doctor.

Fitz shrugged. 'Me neither.'

'"The most haunted planet in the galaxy"?' said Trix.

'Is it?' said the Doctor. 'How do you know that?'

'Charlton told me...'

'So let me get this straight,' said the Doctor, drumming his fingers upon the dining table. 'Astrabel Zar told you he would return to Gadrahadrakon to die. "Because that's where it all started".'

'Yes,' said Charlton.

'And he made you promise not to tell anyone?'

'Yes.'

The Doctor glanced at Trix then Fitz. 'Charlton – you promised not to tell anyone, but you told Trix, and now you've just told me?'

'Yes.'

The Doctor stared at him. 'That's not really sticking to the spirit of the promise, is it?'

'Well,' said Charlton. 'That wasn't the only promise I made...'

Astrabel lifted the photograph from his desk and examined it fondly. 'One more thing,' he said.

'Yes?' said the young Charlton, his mind racing. He couldn't help staring at the Tomorrow Window in the corner of the office. He would be able to do so much with it. He would be able to save planets! He would be a hero!

'At some point, many years from now, you will meet a rather attractive girl –' Charlton smiled to himself 'Excellent! I've always had a bit of trouble –'

Astrabel sighed. 'For Zod's sake, shut up and listen. You will meet an attractive girl with long, curly hair and big eyes. She'll be with a man wearing some sort of waistcoat –'

Charlton's spirits evaporated into a cloud of disappointment.

'– and a young man, a little older than you are now, wearing a T-shirt On that T-shirt will be written the words, "I'm voting for the Doctor".'

'"I'm voting for the Doctor"?''

'Don't ask me what the significance of that is, I don't know. But when you meet these people, if any of them ever asks about the Tomorrow Windows... tell them everything I have just told you.'

'I see,' said the Doctor, striding down the sloping corridor. 'But it's still not clear... why would Astrabel want us to know about Gadrahadraddon?'

'And how would he know about us?' said Fitz, feeling conspicuous in his *'I'm Voting For The Doctor'* T-shirt.

The Doctor took the point. 'And why return to Gadrahadraddon at all? What is there that's so special he has to do? I don't believe he's gone there to kill himself –'

'I've told you all I know,' said Charlton as they arrived at the tele-doors.

'The thing is, when you told it to Trix, you told it to Martin too. And he's on his way to Gadrahadraddon. I don't know what he intends to do... but whatever it is, I intend to stop him. I have a feeling we haven't much time.'

Prubert approached the nearest tele-door. 'So let's go, shall we?'

'Yes.' The Doctor turned to Trix. 'The co-ordinates... can you remember the co-ordinates Martin used?'

Without pausing, Trix punched them into the keypad. It beeped and the tele-door wobbled as an image rose to the surface. It showed a desolate world of heaving, listless bracken and thundering clouds. lightning flashed, illuminating bleached, twisted trees.

'The most haunted planet in the galaxy...' mused the Doctor. He slid open the door and immediately a cold breeze burst into the corridor. He lifted his brow as it ruffled his hair. 'It may be dangerous. Does anyone wish to stay here?'

Everyone shook their heads and muttered, 'no.'

'Come on then. Let's go ghost-hunting!' The Doctor stepped through the door and disappeared into the blackness.

Astrabel Zar hugged himself into his coat as he trudged through the gloopy mud. Gadrahadraddon hadn't changed a bit, the only thing that had changed was Astrabel Zar. Fifty years had passed since he'd been persuaded to come here by Zoberly Chesterfield. Fifty years since he'd gill-glotted *Absynthzo* with Sheabley McMung.

He was now an old, fat, unhealthy man. His chest heaved with the effort of carrying his belly – the result of too many free lunches – and his shoulder protested under the straps of his holdall.

The overcast sky seethed with black, flickering clouds, steamrolling themselves across the night sky like apocalyptic icebergs. Yes, it all was

just as he remembered.

Astrabel followed the dancing wraith of his torchlight, the bracken clutching at his trousers, the gnarled trees reaching for him with skeleton branches.

And around him, undulating in the mist, were the ghosts. Astrabel ignored them. He'd seen enough ghosts the last time he was here.

At last he reached the camp site. It hadn't changed. A dozen or so tents had been erected among the puddles. Astrabel could picture his younger self crawling out of one of the tents, desperate to go to the toilet. He could see the path he had taken, down to the ruined abbey.

The sight of the abbey reminded Astrabel of what he had to do. He checked his watch.

3.24

He was on time. He patted the holdall. He'd checked and double-checked its contents. Everything was prepared.

With a sense of resignation, Astrabel headed down the slope. He'd come this way once before. He would never come this way again.

Astrabel's mind turned to warmer thoughts. He'd had a good life. No, he'd had an astonishing life. Ever since that day on Gadrahadraddon fifty years ago, his life had changed forever. It had changed to a life of success and fortune and Zoberly Chesterfield's voluminous cleavage.

What he had to do now would be a small price to pay.

One thing made him nervous, though. Just like the last time he had been here, he couldn't shake the feeling he was being watched.

Twenty yards or so behind him, Martin watched the shadowy figure shuffling down the steep path towards the monastery. Martin hadn't brought a torch and his coat barely protected him from the bitterness of the night. This planet was like some kind of cod-gothic nightmare.

The phantoms unnerved him. They chattered silently among themselves, wafting through trees and each other. Some were pointing and laughing, but Martin couldn't see the source of their amusement. He didn't like people laughing when he didn't know the joke.

In his left pocket Martin felt the tele-door handle. He would leave as soon as his work was done. He reached into his right pocket, and retrieved his pistol.

He levelled it at the figure, but it was no good. Astrabel was too far away. Anyway, it would be impossible to aim in this wind. He could barely feel the trigger grip in his numb fingers. And he couldn't get a clear shot with all these ghosts in the way.

He would have to get closer.

The sooner he did what he had come here to do, the sooner he could leave. Cursing every icy, sploshy step, Martin headed for the ruin.

Another twenty or so yards behind Martin five figures were disgorged from a door-sized rectangle of light suspended a few feet above the ground.

The Doctor lifted a hand for silence, indicating the figure darting through the near-darkness ahead of them. Trix recognised him. 'It's him, it's Martin.'

The Doctor patted her on the shoulder and indicated for the group to follow. Trix kept close to the Doctor, and as he pushed branches out of the way for her, she held them for Fitz. Fitz in turn held them for Prubert and Charlton.

Trix bumped into the Doctor's back as he halted. He gazed about himself.

'What is it?' whispered Trix.

Then she could see what the Doctor had stopped for. Ahead of them, the mist undulated like a ribbon. And within the mist were hundreds of transparent figures.

The figures wandered about, waving to each other, their mouths opening and closing in soundless speech. Some wore cloaks, or suits in funeral black.

Their route took them through the ghostly figures. Around them, spectral children played chasing games. Elderly couples hobbled. Couples linked arms. See-through tourists took photographs with bulky box cameras.

'I can see why they say it's the most haunted planet in the galaxy,' Fitz said as they entered the camp site.

'It's not haunted,' said the Doctor. 'These aren't ghosts. At least, not ghosts of the past.'

'What do you mean?'

'The atmosphere of this world. . . it's acting as one huge, unfocused Tomorrow Window. Those apparitions. . . they're from *the future*. They're not shadows of Gadrahadrakon past. They're shadows of Gadrahadrakon yet to come!'

Charlton trotted to catch up. 'You mean – on Gadrahadrakon you can see into the future?'

The Doctor grinned. 'Yes. That's what Astrabel Zar did, all those years ago.'

Trix watched Martin slip down some steps towards the columnated ruins of a monastery. She pointed to the Doctor, and they followed.

Fifty years earlier, Astrabel Zar was emptying his bladder against the wall of the crypt. There was a soothing pitter-pattering of liquid against stone.

Astrabel finished, zipped up and turned to go. He dug in his pocket for his torch, and aimed it back at the stairs.

A figure was walking down the steps towards him. The torchlight shone on it like mist, picking out a form but passing through it to illuminate the stone wall.

The figure shuffled towards him. As it came closer, Astrabel could make out its features. It was an overweight man, carrying a bulky holdall.

Astrabel shuddered. The man's face was strangely familiar... it was his *father*. Or, at least, it was a man very much like his father.

The phantom's mouth opened and closed as though saying hello. Then it dropped its bag to the floor and unzipped it. It pulled out a notepad and a pen and wrote a note. It then held the note out so that Astrabel could read it. The handwriting was familiar – it was Astrabel's own handwriting! It read:

It's galactic year 2457

The figure scrawled another note.

Day 201

The figure checked its watch, then wrote again.

3.30 in the morning

Astrabel watched in disbelief. This ghost... it seemed to know he was here.

Hello young Astrabel!

The old man gave a small, friendly wave, before writing once more.

I'm you, in the future.

So that was why the face was familiar – it was him! But, thought Astrabel, what did it mean about 'the future' – How could a ghost be from the future?

Have a good life. I have.

Astrabel felt oddly reassured. His future self had come back in time to say hello. And his future self didn't look too bad. A little overweight, perhaps, and very pale, but that was probably because it was made of mist.

So he would live to be seventy. That was good news. And discover time travel, somehow. Suddenly the future didn't seem so bleak.

Don't forget what you're about to see.

The ghost turned, as though disturbed by a sound from behind it.

A laser beam flickered across the chamber.

The apparition of Astrabel's future self collapsed on to its knees, clutching its stomach. The ghost howled silently in agony, then looked at Astra-

bel, straight into his eyes. For the briefest moment its expression changed to hope before it slumped face-down on the ground.

A young man with spectacles, carrying a laser pistol, strode into the chamber. He kept the gun raised, as though expecting an attack. He levelled it at Astrabel, and Astrabel thought the ghost had spotted him. Then the ghost looked away, and Astrabel remembered that this was not real. This was an echo of the future. Of his future. Of his future death.

The young man stood over the smouldering corpse as though in triumph. His body shook with laughter.

Another figure appeared on the steps behind him. It was a heavily built man with a beard. It appeared to be shouting. Bellowing. Booming. It thrust one arm forward and pointed accusingly. It was like a scene from a melodrama.

The young man fired at the bearded man, striking him on the shoulder. The bearded man recoiled under the blast. He hit the wall, his chest rising and falling, his face wincing as though in great pain, but he did not die.

Four more figures arrived. The young man swung his gun towards them and fired. A laser beam cut through the mist, smashing a ghostly section of wall. Beneath the ghost wall, the real crypt wall remained solid.

Distracted, the young man didn't see the bearded man rushing towards him. By the time he turned back, the bearded man had hurled himself at the young man's pistol. The bearded man's mouth was open, as though he was shouting at the top of his voice –

The mists parted and writhed, and for a moment Astrabel was alone. Then the air wobbled, and the scene reappeared.

The bearded man lay on the ground, motionless. Beside him was the body of the young man. His spectacles had been smashed and his mouth hung open.

Three of the four figures on the stairs made their way down into the crypt. Astrabel couldn't make out the fourth figure – it remained little more than an indistinct shape. Maybe there wasn't even a fourth figure at all.

The other three figures approached. There was a young girl, attractive, with long curly hair. There was a young man, a few years older than Astrabel, in a T-shirt that read *'I'm Voting For The Doctor'*. And there was a man in his forties, wearing some sort of waistcoat.

The man in the waistcoat picked up Old Astrabel's holdall and pulled out half a dozen notebooks. A smile curled across his lips as he examined them. Then he pulled a pen out of his pocket and scribbled a note which he held up for Astrabel.

You might want to get a pen and paper handy.

Astrabel stared at the words uncomprehendingly, then patted his pockets. In the back of his jeans he found a small notebook with a pencil attached. Gripping his torch between his chin and his shoulder, he rested the pad against the crypt wall and prepared to write.

The man in the waistcoat turned over the first page of the first of Old Astrabel's notebooks. The page contained a list of formulae and instructions. And at the top it read,

How to build a Tomorrow Window (and get a free lunch!)

By Astrabel Zar

Epilogue

This Island Earth

Fitz rested his elbows on the wooden table and peered out across the Thames, the breeze ruffling his hair. The sunset glistened on the water. It was all so peaceful. The section of the embankment around Tate Modern had been taped off, so they'd headed back towards London Bridge.

As they'd passed the Globe Theatre, the Doctor had launched into an improbable anecdote about helping Will Shakespeare to write *Hamlet*. However, probably due to the Doctor's foggy memory, the anecdote had also included Leonardo DaVinci, a girl called Vicki, something called the Braxiatel Collection and the Daleks. It had been almost as confusing as the time he'd asked the Doctor if he'd ever been to Atlantis.

At Trix's suggestion, they'd stopped at a pub along the way. The Doctor emerged from The Anchor balancing two pints of lager and a lemonade. The lemonade was for the Doctor, of course. He was driving.

The newspapers were still full of headlines about the explosion at Tate Modern, though there didn't seem to be any more actual news. Apparently the government had launched an enquiry and someone had been evicted from the *Big Brother* household. Life went on, in all its glorious triviality.

Like lager, another glorious triviality. The Doctor placed the glasses on the table and sat down beside Trix.

'How long were we gone for?' Trix asked. 'I've lost track.'

'A week, I think,' said the Doctor.

Fitz savoured his first mouthful of Stella Artois. 'Seems longer.'

'We only travelled in space, not in time,' said the Doctor, 'but we packed quite a lot in.'

Trix brushed her hair out of her eyes. 'So we're done, now?'

The Doctor nodded over his lemonade.

'You're leaving all the other worlds to Charlton?' said Fitz.

The Doctor looked out across the sparkling river. 'He's setting up To-

morrow Windows on all the worlds that Prubert influenced. With Martin out of the way, he should stand a very good chance of success.'

'What about all that stuff you said about the Tomorrow Windows being irresponsible interference, "tampering with a planet's development"...?'

'Charlton's only using the Tomorrow Windows on planets that have already been tampered with. He's correcting someone else's interference. Making amends, just as Prubert wanted.'

'Undoing the damage?' said Trix.

'Providing a second chance. Knowledge of the future can be remarkably effective at concentrating people's minds. I remember saying to Charles Dickens –'

Fitz swallowed another mouthful of lager. 'So I suppose he'll be setting up one on Earth, then? To replace the one at Tate Modern?'

The Doctor shook his head.

'But Prubert said Earth was one of the planets he visited... It was on the list, the – list of protected planets, the Galactic Heritage Foundation! The ones that... ' Fitz reached across the table. 'Have you still got that leaflet?'

The Doctor handed him the crumpled Galactic Heritage Foundation leaflet. Fitz read from the list. 'Here we are. Kootanoot, Bros, Flam-volt... *Earth*. There!'

The Doctor rubbed his nose. 'I asked him about that. He did visit Earth, yes. He had a list of selfish memes ready to go. But when he arrived, he found that humanity seemed to have them all already... so he didn't bother. He just got drunk instead. He said he thought someone else had already got there first...'

'Hang on,' said Trix. 'If Earth already has all these selfish memes... That means it's doomed to destruction, right?'

'I don't know.' The Doctor retrieved a small, hand-mirror-sized object from his waistcoat pocket. 'Charlton gave me this. A mini-Tomorrow Window. Would you like to find out?' He offered it to Fitz.

'No,' said Fitz, shaking his head. 'No way.'

The Doctor offered it to Trix. She held up a hand in refusal.

'Why not?' said the Doctor.

'There are some things you're better off not knowing,' said Fitz.

'If we knew for definite,' said Trix, 'if we knew there was no chance of things turning out all right, then how could you go on living? If there wasn't any hope? And if you knew for certain things would turn out all right, then –'

'– then you might take that for granted?' the Doctor suggested.

‘And anyway, it’s like you said,’ said Fitz. ‘“Mankind can’t *learn* if it can flick to the back of the book and look up the answers.”’

‘Are you sure?’ The Doctor offered the Tomorrow Window to Fitz, then to Trix. ‘No? No.’ The Doctor stood up and walked over to the railings. For a moment he waited there, then he swung his arm in an arc and hurled the mini-Tomorrow Window into the gleaming depths of the Thames.

The Doctor returned to the table. ‘Not that I advocate littering, you understand.’ He finished his lemonade. ‘You were right, Trix. I think there *is* hope, though. The thing is, you see, you don’t really need a Tomorrow Window to see into the future. You just need to pay attention to the past and the present. . . Maybe humanity will save itself, or maybe. . .’

‘– the Earth will be reduced to a radioactive cinder –’ said Fitz.

‘– and then get bought up by an intergalactic property developer?’ said Trix.

The Doctor tapped his fingers on the table impatiently as Fitz and Trix finished their drinks. ‘Come on,’ he said. ‘Let’s get back to the TARDIS.’

As they walked away, Fitz returned to the Galactic Heritage Foundation leaflet, and its list of planets ‘Venmof, Ert Shea, Esto, Arethro, Wabbab, Gallifraxion Four –’ He paused. ‘Gallifraxion Four? It was *Gallifraxion Four* all the time?’

The Doctor and Trix exchanged bewildered glances.

‘That makes sense now,’ said Fitz. ‘For a minute there I thought it was referring to Gallifre-’

Acknowledgements

This book is dedicated to Douglas Adams. It is not, however, intended to be a pastiche of his work. Any imitation of his style would inevitably be a pale one. It is merely a tribute to the person who made me love reading and who inspired me to become a writer. I'm still waiting for the helicopter ride to the top of Mount Everest, though...

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About The Author

JONATHAN MORRIS spends all his time writing situation comedies. One of them is bound to get made, sooner or later.